

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

Post by "Cassius" of February 13, 2022 at 5:30 AM

This discussion (split from here: [What do you mean from the "Golden Mean" of Aristotle?](#)) reminds me of two other recent things that have been in my mind:

(1) i was discussing with someone a new sort of 'self-help' book that the person was reading, which focuses on what I perceive to be psychological self-help techniques geared toward reaching goals. My comment was to ask whether that person had first identified their real goals, as it makes sense to me that it is usually would be appropriate to clarify in one's mind what one's proper goal IS, before launching off into generic goal-achieving activity.

(2) I know I have probably spoken negatively in the past about articles which seem to say that we should not set pleasure or happiness as our goal, but rather something else, and look for pleasure and happiness as side affects rather than going after them directly. I still think negatively of that perspective BUT:

I have always realized that the word "happiness" and even "pleasure" to a degree are conceptual abstractions. The word 'happiness' almost definitely is so, and we find "happiness" being used in totally different ways by different people, so much so that it takes fairly elaborate definition-building to be clear what we're talking about.

"Pleasure" has some of the same issues, but it is a word that also more clearly denotes a "Feeling" - and i think that it is as a feeling that it takes its central role in Epicurean philosophy, as a part of the canon of truth by which we grapple with external reality.

But it's also obvious that "pleasure" is no different from "hedone" or other words in other languages - it too is a concept for which we have to do some mental processing to identify what we mean when we use it.

Epicurus was always clear that the feelings are TWO - pleasure and pain, and that we sometimes choose the pain in order to achieve more pleasure or avoid worse pain. But formulating it that way still requires you to identify in your mind what is pleasurable and what is painful to YOU, and if you don't think through the issues carefully you end up totally wasting your time - or in the words of Torquatus - "Surely no one recoils from or dislikes or avoids pleasure in itself because it is pleasure, but because great pains come upon those who do not know how to follow pleasure rationally."

Here we have to keep in mind that "rationally" doesn't mean using the syllogistic abstract logic detached from reality that Epicurus criticizes, but does mean "sober reasoning, searching out the motives for all choice and avoidance, and banishing mere opinions, to which are due the greatest disturbance of the spirit." (Letter to Menoeceus).

So we need to ask ourselves if we have really soberly reasoned through the details and searched out the motives and ways that we find pleasure and avoid pain in our own personal circumstances. If we have adopted faulty opinions from others, or from teachers, or culture, or religion, or whatever, have we banished those from our thoughts and clearly identified what is going to bring to us OUR greatest pleasure and OUR relief from pain?

I gather that this is probably related to what Smoothiekiwi was talking about earlier. It is totally non-Epicurean to simply and blindly pursue "pleasure" without regard to what the action we engage in ultimately brings to us, and without banishing into the pit the false opinions about the nature of the universe that lead us in the wrong direction.

VS46. Let us utterly drive from us our bad habits, as if they were evil men who have long done us great harm.

That's why it's not good to think of this philosophy as Pleasurism, or Hedonism.

This isn't either of those. This is EPICURUS.

Sung to the tune of [this](#)

Post by "smoothiekiwi" of February 13, 2022 at 6:30 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Well I am not sure we need to pursue it, but what I was trying to focus in on is why what you stated led you to doubt Epicureanism....

Sorry, I've read over it 😊

To be honest, I think that my biggest problem is to accept that there isn't any sort of abstract ideas flying around- universal norms and ideas. Platonism is so deeply anchored in our society that it's incredibly difficult to let it go. That's what I've discovered from Skepticism: I'm full of dogmas, absolute "right and wrong"-s etc. Just today, I had a discussion with my brother, who postulated that it's in the nature of each and every person to become better. And I've noticed that subconsciously, this idea is still in me. To let it go is an incredible amount of work.

And at no moment did I think that the logic behind Epicureanism was bad or faulty- but the inner resistance against "letting it go" was (and is) incredibly strong. Probably that's the reason why so many people still are Christians, although we can now scientifically prove that the Bible is in many parts wrong: it's so, so difficult to let your concepts go with which you've grown up. I'm still very young and had only a few such dogmas; I don't want to imagine how a person 40, 50, 60 years of age must feel when he/she realizes that their life was built on a lie. Its better to still "sit in the cave", to speak of Plato's allegory, than to come out and realize the lie. It's really, really scary.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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I completely agree, it's a good point. But that also means that one stands against much of the society- and for that, it' beneficial to have friends... and I remember that there was a post two days ago about how to make Epicurean friends 😊

I think that such a forum is amazing- I'm very sure that I would run with misconceptions about Epicureanism without this place-, but it still cannot replace real life friends.

Post by “Cassius” of February 13, 2022 at 8:07 AM

[Quote from smoothiekiwi](#)

, but it still cannot replace real life friends.

You are absolutely right, we cannot ever forget that, and so we have to use this place as a start, not an endpoint, and move forward into organizing our local real worlds to find (or make from scratch!) Friends who are Epicureans or at least Epicurean-friendly.

Post by “Don” of February 13, 2022 at 9:01 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I have always realized that the word "happiness" and even "pleasure" to a degree are conceptual abstractions.

From my perspective, the big difference between "pleasure" and, say, "virtue" as the goal is that pleasure is first and primarily a biological reality, then the concept is built in that. Virtue as a concept is built in a foundation of sand at the seashore. There's nothing there. It's a concept on a concept. Pleasure and pain, in contrast, in some form are present in all forms of life down to amoebas and tardigrades. Even plants exhibit some aspect of this. Humans move from this biological imperative of seeking pleasure and avoiding pain for survival to extrapolate mental pleasure and pain, to build concepts on top of this imperative, but there is always that sound foundation upon which those concepts point back to.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

But it's also obvious that "pleasure" is no different from "hedone" or other words in other languages - it too is a concept for which we have to do some mental processing to identify what we mean when we use it

I would be careful about using phrases like "it too is a concept" in this context. It's maybe better to think of words as labels. All languages label reality in different ways, sometimes dividing it up finer or coarser. I'll have to go back again and read Book XXVIII.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

It is totally non-Epicurean to simply and blindly pursue "pleasure" without regard to what the action we engage in ultimately brings to us

Yep. That's the job of the Cyrenaics.

Post by “Kalosyni” of February 13, 2022 at 12:08 PM

I find this thread discussion to be very enjoyable, and important for a correct understanding of Epicureanism. Without thoroughly understanding these issues it will be difficult to begin to create local Epicurean groups. Also, for reasons that come up in Smoothiekiwi post...

[Quote from smoothiekiwi](#)

...biggest problem is to accept that there isn't any sort of abstract ideas flying around-universal norms and ideas. Platonism is so deeply anchored in our society that it's incredibly difficult to let it go....dogmas, absolute "right and wrong"-s etc. Just today, I had a discussion with my brother, who postulated that it's in the nature of each and every person to become better.

Epicureanism exists with it's unique principles and paradigms in the midst of all previous philosophical constructs, and part of the work is sifting through it all to become very clear about what Epicureanism is.

I think it will be difficult to establish local groups. A person must be predisposed to certain traits or habits or predispositions in order to be interested in Epicureanism...and I think that in our given times few people will be drawn toward Epicureanism...but does that mean we should give up? I am still moving forward with hope on this, that it will be possible. And this brings up the question of what sorts of traits/habits/predispositions must be present for a person to be interested in engaging with Epicurean philosophy? (a separate thread for this?).

In the few most recent posts in this thread are important Epicurean ideas, and these ideas need to be collected and put into small books (or zines) which we can give to people that we think possess the traits required for Epicurean philosophy.

Another idea comes up -- the need for "levels" within Epicureanism (a separate thread for this?)

- 1) "Epicureanism lite" - for people with less time or inclination to study
- 2) "Epicureanism engaged" - for people who want to put in serious study
- 3) "Epicurean guardians and guides" - for people who want to maintain the accuracy of the teachings and teach others

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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This is very important to think about. Happiness is always about a "story" that you are telling yourself. And it includes stories about the past and about the future, as well as the present moment. In Epicureanism, it includes ideas about the best way to bring about a happy life, and think we would all be on the same page to say that we know it can't be found in material possessions. But the "stories" we tell ourselves about our level(s) of happiness, are based on experiences that have a feeling tone of either generally pleasureable or generally painful. Of course life is a mix of feelings, but as Epicureans we hold to a goal of mainly pleasureable experiences which we would then label as "happiness".

This morning as I write this, I notice...Oh what a difference a solid good night of sleep makes! As well as a sunny morning with crystal blue skies! But there is still more than these simple pleasures to discover and cultivate in Epicureanism.

Everyone's comments here are so helpful, and for myself I will continue to contemplate these issues of pleasure, pain, happiness, and virtue.

Post by "Don" of February 13, 2022 at 1:15 PM

I'll need to go and read DeWitt's "summum bonum fallacy" (Where is that again?), but here's my take. I've ranted in similar themes before.

To my understanding, *summum bonum* is the Romans' way of translations Greek τέλος into Latin. They're both trying to get at the same thing. Pleasure is the "highest good", the goal, etc. because it is that to which everything else points. It's at the end of the road (τέλος/goal) to which all roads lead. It's the "highest good" because it's at the top of the mountain, Pleasure Point, and the Virtue Trail, the Wisdom Trail, the Name Your Path Trail, all end up trying to get you to pleasure. You are virtuous because it, in the final analysis, brings you pleasure whatever you'll admit it or not. Summum bonum doesn't seem to me to be a value judgment (as in "Pleasure is the *best among equals*"), it's a difference in kind from other things judged "good." It's the good thing to which all other "good things" point. All other "good things" are instrumental in achieving pleasure. Pleasure itself is not instrumental (other than being a necessary component of well-being/ευδαιμονία/happiness).

Post by "Cassius" of February 13, 2022 at 4:00 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2401-from-the-golden-mean-to-tbe-summum-bonum-useful-or-deceptive-frames-of-reference/>

I'll need to go and read DeWitt's "summum bonum fallacy" (Where is that again?),

I thought we already had it here somewhere, but apparently not. That has been remedied:

I had forgotten that DeWitt marshals in support of this argument his interpretation of VS42, so this article places that in issue too. I have always thought that DeWitt's argument on VS42 makes sense, so it will be interesting to get comments on that too.

File

[Epicurus: The Summum Bonum Fallacy](#)



The aim of this article is to show how the lack of a definite article in Latin obliterated the doctrine of Epicurus that life itself and not pleasure is the greatest good.



Cassius

February 13, 2022 at 4:00 PM

Post by “Don” of February 13, 2022 at 7:27 PM

Here are my thoughts on Norman DeWitt’s “Epicurus: The Summum Bonum Fallacy” (1950).

Overall, I’m unimpressed with DeWitt’s aim of using a linguistic quirk between Greek and Latin to make a larger philosophical point. Numerous languages get by with no definite article and can convey as complex and nuanced as any language with a definite article: “Linguists believe the common ancestor of the Indo-European languages, Proto-Indo-European, did not have articles. Most of the languages in this family do not have definite or indefinite articles: there is no article in Latin or Sanskrit, nor in some modern Indo-European languages, such as the families of Slavic languages (except for Bulgarian and Macedonian, which are rather distinctive among the Slavic languages in their grammar, and some Northern Russian dialects[7]), Baltic languages and many Indo-Aryan languages. Although Classical Greek had a definite article (which has survived into Modern Greek and which bears strong functional resemblance to the German definite article, which it is related to), the earlier Homeric Greek used this article largely as a pronoun or demonstrative, whereas the earliest known form of Greek known as Mycenaean Greek did not have any articles. Articles developed independently in several

language families." (Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Article_\(...istic_variation\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Article_(...istic_variation)))

From all I can see, Latin simply translated Greek τέλος into Latin summum bonum as the closest alternative. To compare the two definitions:

Greek: telos: excerpt: "3. Philos., full realization, highest point. ideal"
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...57:entry=te/los>

Latin: summum bonum (summus): excerpt: "H.—Of rank or degree, highest, greatest, loftiest, first, supreme, best, utmost, extreme"
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...60:entry=summus>

I'm curious about his second paragraph where he says that "Epicurus is on record as assuming that "only Greeks are capable of succeeding in philosophy,"" He cites Usener 226 which comes from Clement of Alexandria's Miscellanies, I.15. Here's the full context of that source:

And Plato does not deny that he procured all that is most excellent in philosophy from the barbarians; and he admits that he came into Egypt. Whence, writing in the Phædo that the philosopher can receive aid from all sides, he said: "Great indeed is Greece, O Cebes, in which everywhere there are good men, and many are the races of the barbarians." [128] Thus Plato thinks that some of the barbarians, too, are philosophers. But Epicurus, on the other hand, supposes that only Greeks can philosophise. (1.15.67.1 οὕτως οἴεται ὁ Πλάτων καὶ βαρβάρων φιλοσόφους τινὰς εἶναι, ὁ δὲ Ἐπίκουρος ἔμπαλιν ὑπολαμ1.15.67.2 βάνει μόνους φιλοσοφῆσαι Ἑλλήνας δύνασθαι.) <https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Ante-Nice...lanies: Book 1>

I wonder if this is also connected to the characteristics of the wise one in Diogenes Laertius (DL) X.117 when he talks about other nations: <https://sites.google.com/view/epicurean...lity?authuser=0> DL does not mention Greek or Greeks specifically in that text.

Whether Cicero's statement that "the Latin language is not only not lacking in copiousness but is actually richer than Greek" is more absurd than DeWitt's contention that the lack of an article makes Latin somehow deficient is problematic from a scholar like DeWitt. As I said, I don't find his basic thesis here convincing or compelling.

DeWitt states that "In Greek the practice is to say "the greatest good" and not "the highest good," and to Epicurus "the greatest good" was not pleasure but life itself. In other words, to him the summum bonum was not the telos." This seems to me to be splitting the tiniest of hairs: greatest vs highest. Look at the Greek and Latin definitions above. Both words seem to show up in the definitions of each.

DeWitt also claims that "Epicurus, holding body and soul to be alike corporeal, placed the two on a parity, and one of his definitions of happiness is "a healthy mind in a healthy body."" I had problems with this in his book, Epicurus and His Philosophy, but I can accept that Epicurus held a similar view. But here in this paper, when DeWitt is putting so much stock in the differences

between Latin and Greek, he made me laugh out loud when I read the Footnote 8 (emphasis added):

Footnote says 8 ***Not citable in Greek,*** but demonstrable: cf. Horace Carm.i. 31. 17-19; Juvenal x. 356 mens sana in corpore sano (Epicurean context); Petron. 61 bonam mentem bonamque valetudinem.

And he goes on to cite Latin references for Epicurus's supposedly Greek idea. That just seems sloppy to me.

DeWitt tries to use DL X.126 to substantiate Epicurus's "reason for placing a higher value upon old age as against youth." I don't see that in 126. Instead, 126 seems to express Epicurus's insistence that one is never too old or too young to practice philosophy.

[126] The wise man does not deprecate life nor does he fear the cessation of life. The thought of life is no offence to him, nor is the cessation of life regarded as an evil. And even as men choose of food not merely and simply the larger portion, but the more pleasant, so the wise seek to enjoy the time which is most pleasant and not merely that which is longest. And he who admonishes the young to live well and the old to make a good end speaks foolishly, not merely because of the desirableness of life, but because the same exercise at once teaches to live well and to die well. Much worse is he who says that it were good not to be born, but when once one is born to pass with all speed through the gates of Hades.

For those unfamiliar with Maecenas (as I was!), here's his WP entry: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaius_Maecenas?wprov=sfla1

DeWitt then discusses Vatican Saying 42 which is interesting on a number of levels. First of all, there is not agreement on what the Vatican Saying even says or, if it is correct in its transcription from some earlier texts. Here is the actual line from the early 14th century manuscript containing the Vatican Sayings: Vat.gr.1950.pt.2 https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.gr.1950.pt.2/0257

9VpRBDMzhDbIVUZSaQPK8ZWGZacw6oww6G0Ygta0OyY-nP-F6dTg4Arn5wD-UAi2NIWEsUqsJmeYpGxNUsmP

As written it appears to read: ὁ αὐτὸς χρόνος καὶ γενέσεως τοῦ μεγίστου ἀγαθοῦ καὶ ἀπολύσεως

However, some editors/scholars add to the end: ὁ αὐτὸς χρόνος καὶ γενέσεως τοῦ μεγίστου ἀγαθοῦ καὶ ἀπολύσεως <τοῦ κακοῦ>. (e.g., Saint-Andre: <https://monadnock.net/epicurus/vatican-sayings.html>, http://wiki.epicurism.info/Vatican_Saying_42/, and others)

Bailey suggests the reading should be ὁ αὐτὸς χρόνος καὶ γενέσεως τοῦ μεγίστου ἀγαθοῦ καὶ ἀπολαύσεως

DeWitt's translation is "The same span of time embraces both beginning and end of the greatest good." I have problems with his use of the word "embraces". I do not see that within the Greek. The Greek, as it stands, without the added on "evil" is literally something like:

"At the same time, there is both the creation (γενέσεως) of the greatest good and the release/departure (ἀπολύσεως)" That last word is why some scholars advocate for adding on "of the greatest evil" so we would get "release/departure of the greatest evil." But evil isn't in the manuscript.

Bailey's translation is "The greatest blessing is created and enjoyed at the same moment." I have problems with Bailey's use of "blessing."

Bailey cites ἀπολαύσεως "having enjoyment of a thing" instead of ἀπολύσεως "release, deliverance from a thing" which the latter is suggested by Usener and evidently accepted by DeWitt since he cites Bailey in his paper. Neither Bailey nor DeWitt make use of the added <τοῦ κακοῦ> "the [greatest] evil" so it's obviously not needed to make a decent translation. DeWitt's putting so much stock into this saying to bolster his argument is problematic in that there is so much debate and discrepancy among scholars on VS42. It should be clearly stated that many of the Vatican Sayings, including this one, are without context.

ἀπολύσεως <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...Da%29po%2Flusis>

ἀπολαύσεως <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...a%29po%2Flausis>

I can see rationalizations for either translation, DeWitt's or Bailey's.

So, in the end, I can't see any reason for DeWitt to maintain that Epicurus had any "highest good" or telos other than pleasure.

Post by "Cassius" of February 13, 2022 at 7:36 PM

Thanks for this deep analysis!

I'll just leave the point as is at the moment, because I am not nearly as qualified as DeWitt or even Don to parse the Latin and Greek. I will repeat that I do see differences between "good" and "goal" and I can imagine all sorts of confusion arising from those distinctions. I am reminded of the phrase in Book Two of Lucretius - "...GUIDE of life, divine pleasure." (ipsaque deducit dux vitae dia voluptas)

I am particularly not willing to say that I think DeWitt is definitely right, or definitely wrong, because it does appear to me that Epicurus was cautioning against walking around uselessly

harping on the meaning of the good, and I see this as something that other philosophers are harping on rather than Epicurus. The danger to me only comes when we get fixated on the "greatest good" and presume that there is a single answer to that question that fits everyone. I am not sure that Epicurus accepted any real logical framework other than the observation that nature gives us only two signals by which to determine what to choose and what to avoid, and that is pleasure and pain. Torquatus himself seems to say that even in this same On Ends - only a few moments after he had framed the question in this very way.

Is DeWitt correct to say that pleasure and pain have meaning only to the living, so that without life pleasure and pain are of no consequence to us? Certainly I would say that the answer to that is "yes."

Does that make pleasure or life the "highest good?" I am afraid that I think that is a linguistic exercise that is fraught with many dangers. So at least for the moment I consider that to be a question that cannot readily be answered. And I remain uncertain that the question "What is the greatest good?" was a way in which Epicurus himself liked to frame his philosophy.

Post by “Don” of February 13, 2022 at 10:41 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

The danger to me only comes when we get fixated on the "greatest good" and presume that there is a single answer to that question that fits everyone.

I have to disagree with that characterization. There *is* a single answer for everyone's telos/summum bonum: The "greatest good" for everyone is pleasure.

Post by “Cassius” of February 13, 2022 at 11:32 PM

As a categorical answer for philosophical debate, I agree with you. And as a statement of the *guide* of life I would agree even more. But as a practical and discrete definition of "greatest good" that an average person can apply, I don't think that the single word is sufficient to convey the full meaning that Epicurus would convey if he were here to explain it in greater detail. And I am not yet convinced that he would even attempt to do so, beyond providing the example that he then used to show the futility of the Peripatetics efforts.

Also, in discussion tonight on chapter 3 of A Few Days In Athens, Kevin brought up that it was the Stoics who postulated a single unified and unitary good - virtue - which is something that in his view even Aristotle did not do. (Kevin suggested that Aristotle spoke in terms of many goods in Nichomachean Ethics.)

That makes me more concerned than ever that the search for a "greatest good" might not be Epicurean at all, despite Torquatus' framework.

Then there is the question of whether pleasure is a "unity" such that pleasure can be considered singly in a way similar to the way the Stoics considered virtue to be a unity. And that would implicate the PD which refers to "if pleasure could be condensed.....". I am still not confident what that saying means at all, much less whether he is implying an affirmative or negative answer.

I think this question probably has an answer that we can eventually come to terms on, but I am now thinking that being confident would require more knowledge of what the earlier philosopher had done with the issue of single versus multiple goods than I presently have myself.

When I combine the Lucretian reference to pleasure as a guide with what I see in the letter to Menoecus, I see much more foundation for seeing pleasure as the GUIDE than I do for a specific "greatest good" analysis.

Cause frankly I am pretty sure I know what a "guide" is, but I am not at all sure I know what a "greatest good" is.

Post by “Godfrey” of February 14, 2022 at 12:18 AM

If I remember correctly from The Greeks on Pleasure, the earlier philosophers were searching for the most pleasant life, not the greatest good.

Having said that, here are some of my notes from the book that might be pertinent (they're scattered throughout the book as shown by the reference numbers):

8.3.1 Eudoxus of Cnidus (via Aristotle): pleasure is the good because:

- all animals, including men, pursue it, and what all pursue is the good

- all animals and men avoid pain as an evil, and what is opposite of an evil, pleasure, must be good

- pleasure is never for the sake of something else: no one ever asks "why enjoy yourself?"

- if pleasure is added to anything it makes it better.

So at least some philosophers were discussing "the good".

11.3.10 Aristotle is saying that to enjoy something is to bring a telos to the doing: to do it to the full.

13.2.4 Telos is not a decisively purpose word like goal, but it equally means completion or perfection. Aristotle often uses it as actualization of natural potential.

FWIW, I tend to think along similar lines as [Cassius](#), that "the greatest good" is more of a philosophical argument carried on by others. In a materialist universe is it even possible to define a greatest good? For Epicurus I think that it's a functional guide as described in the Canon. But I'm wide open to correction on the issue!

Post by “Don” of February 14, 2022 at 12:19 AM

You posted another reply as I was typing this, but I think this address posts #33 and #35 above...

As I said previously, saying "pleasure is the 'highest good' (summum bonum)" doesn't mean the "best *among equally good things*"; it means the highest, greatest, loftiest, first, supreme, best, utmost, extreme good thing - the one good thing that stands alone; the good thing to which all other good things points. It is the sum of all good things; the summit of all good things.

I sincerely don't understand the hesitancy in this thread. Or the problem that is trying to be solved when it comes to calling pleasure either the "highest good" or the telos or even the guide. I would say pleasure is called the guide because it's the beacon at the summit to which we are trying to get at. It's the North Star by which we steer all our choices and avoidances. It's the goal and the guide.

All the schools of philosophy in ancient Greece were arguing what was the purpose of a human life, what was it all leading up to, what was it for. I don't think Epicurus was any different in that respect. His revolution was in naming pleasure as that to which life pointed. But not Cyrenaic "sex, drugs, and rock n roll" momentary pleasures strung together - not an endless string of drinking parties and festivals - but something deeper and more long-lasting including being able to describe it as the health of the body and the tranquility of the mind. I think that was his revolution: to define pleasure wide enough for everyone to partake of it as the telos/guide/greatest good/The Good/T'agathon/etc.

I know I don't have to quote chapter and verse to many here, but, for the record, here are some pertinent excerpts (at least from my perspective):

PD25 Εἰ μὴ παρὰ πάντα καιρὸν ἐπανοίσεις ἕκαστον τῶν πραττομένων ἐπὶ τὸ τέλος τῆς φύσεως, ἀλλὰ προκαταστρέψεις εἴ τε φυγὴν εἴ τε δίωξιν ποιούμενος εἰς ἄλλό τι, οὐκ ἔσονται σοι τοῖς λόγοις αἱ πράξεις ἀκόλουθοι.

PD25 If at all critical times you do not connect each of your actions to the **natural goal of nature**, [pleasure] but instead turn too soon to some other kind of goal in thinking whether to avoid or pursue something, then your thoughts and your actions will not be in harmony.

Letter to Menoikeus: "The steady contemplation of these things equips one to know how to decide all choice and rejection for *the health of the body and for the tranquility of the mind*, (i.e., the health of both our physical and our mental existence), since this is *the goal (τέλος) of a blessed life*.

Letter to Menoikeus: "we say pleasure is the foundation and **fulfillment**, the beginning and **end** (ἀρχὴν καὶ τέλος) of the blessed life."

Letter to Menoikeus: "one who has rationally determined (ἐπιλελογισμένου) the τέλος of one's natural state." [which is pleasure]

Post by "Cassius" of February 14, 2022 at 7:58 AM

As I wake up this morning I think it is important to address Don's argument about "Why the hesitancy?"

I am sure I have said written many times in the past, and will in the future, that pleasure is the greatest good. So why the hesitancy now?

It's not just a matter of wanting to agree or disagree with DeWitt, that's for sure. I think what we are sensing as we drill down on the question is that we need to figure out why Epicurus seemed to be treating this question carefully, which even Torquatus seems to admit when he said that Epicurus denied the necessity to construct a logical argument that pleasure is good (if that was the point of Torquatus comment).

Something similar seems to run through several questions. How can a thing be judged "good" unless it bring pleasure? Is virtue itself a pleasure, or is it something that brings pleasure?

No one would argue, I think, that the words pleasure and good mean exactly the same thing. They don't. We define pleasure as a feeling (I think) but what is it that tells us that something is "good"? Is there some other quality besides feeling pleasure that defines good? If so what is it?

I think Epicurus would clearly say that [pleasure is the guide of life](#) because we feel it to be so just like we see or hear.

But to say that pleasure is "good" or especially "the greatest good" seems to require some other criteria - almost mystical in nature - which I can see good reasons to be careful about.

Yes it is clear that pleasure is the only thing desirable in and of itself, and if we want to define "good" as desirable in and of itself" then pleasure is not only the highest but the only good. But is that so clearly what we mean by the word "good"?

We have the word guide which is clear. What is added by calling it "good" or calling pain "evil"?

When talking to Plato and Stoics who insist on talking about good, it is natural to answer "pleasure".

But very possibly Epicurus did not want to let THEM set the terms of the debate? And perhaps we should be careful as well?

Post by “Cassius” of February 14, 2022 at 8:05 AM

Another way of stating the issue:

If you are going to ask the question "What is the greatest good?" The answer is "pleasure."

But you also have to consider "Should you be asking that question?"

Post by “Cassius” of February 14, 2022 at 8:21 AM

Just in case someone reading this thread is not thoroughly familiar with these passages that are critical to this conversation:

First Epicurus quoted by Plutarch:

Quote

U423

Plutarch, *That Epicurus actually makes a pleasant life impossible*, 7, p. 1091A: Not only is the basis that they assume for the pleasurable life untrustworthy and insecure, it is quite trivial and paltry as well, inasmuch as their “thing delighted” – their good – is an escape from ills, and they say that they can conceive of no other, and indeed that our nature has no place at all in which to put its good except the place left when its evil is expelled. ... Epicurus too makes a similar statement to the effect that the good is a thing that arises out of your very escape from evil and from your memory and reflection and gratitude that this has happened to you. His words are these: “That which produces a jubilation unsurpassed is the nature of good, if you apply your mind rightly and then stand firm and do not stroll about {a jibe at the Peripatetics}, prating meaninglessly about the good.”

***Ibid.*, 8, p. 1091E:** Thus Epicurus, and Metrodorus too, suppose {that the middle is the summit and the end} when they take the position that escape from ill is the reality and upper limit of the good.

Second Torquatus in Book One of On Ends, implying that he himself (Torquatus) disagrees with Epicurus as to what kind of proof is necessary:

Quote

IX. ‘First, then,’ said he, ‘I shall plead my case on the lines laid down by the founder of our school himself: I shall define the essence and features of the problem before us, not because I imagine you to be unacquainted with them, but with a view to the methodical progress of my speech. The problem before us then is, what is the climax and standard of things good, and this in the opinion of all philosophers must needs be such that we are bound to test all things by it, but the standard itself by nothing. Epicurus places this standard in pleasure, which he lays down to be the supreme good, while pain is the supreme evil; and he founds his proof of this on the following considerations.

[30] Every creature, as soon as it is born, seeks after pleasure and delights therein as in its supreme good, while it recoils from pain as its supreme evil, and banishes that, so far as it can, from its own presence, and this it does while still uncorrupted, and while nature herself prompts unbiased and unaffected decisions. So he says we need no reasoning or debate to shew why pleasure is matter for desire, pain for aversion. These facts he thinks are simply perceived, just as the fact that fire is hot, snow is white, and honey sweet, no one of which facts are we bound to support by elaborate arguments; it is enough merely to draw attention to the fact; and there is a difference between proof

and formal argument on the one hand and a slight hint and direction of the attention on the other; the one process reveals to us mysteries and things under a veil, so to speak; the other enables us to pronounce upon patent and evident facts. Moreover, seeing that if you deprive a man of his senses there is nothing left to him, it is inevitable that nature herself should be the arbiter of what is in accord with or opposed to nature. Now what facts does she grasp or with what facts is her decision to seek or avoid any particular thing concerned, unless the facts of pleasure and pain?

[31] There are however some of our own school, who want to state these principles with greater refinement, and who say that it is not enough to leave the question of good or evil to the decision of sense, but that thought and reasoning also enable us to understand both that pleasure in itself is matter for desire and that pain is in itself matter for aversion. So they say that there lies in our minds a kind of natural and inbred conception leading us to feel that the one thing is good for us to seek, the other to reject. Others again, with whom I agree, finding that many arguments are alleged by philosophers to prove that pleasure is not to be reckoned among things good nor pain among things evil, judge that we ought not to be too confident about our case, and think that we should lead proof and argue carefully and carry on the debate about pleasure and pain by using the most elaborate reasonings.

Post by “Kalosyni” of February 14, 2022 at 3:22 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

There **is** a single answer for everyone's telos/summum bonum: The "greatest good" for everyone is pleasure.

I don't think that there is one summum bonum for everyone. For some people God is the summum bonum within Christianity and religions (except Buddhism).

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

"the greatest good" is more of a philosophical argument carried on by others. In a materialist universe is it even possible to define a greatest good? For Epicurus I think that it's a functional guide as described in the Canon.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Another way of stating the issue:

If you are going to ask the question "What is the greatest good?" The answer is "pleasure."

But you also have to consider "Should you be asking that question?"

I don't think that trying to prove one type of a "greatest good" as being the best will ever be possible, because it is like saying mashed potatoes are better than baked potatoes. They are both ways to satiate hunger, and some people will prefer the taste of mashed potatoes over baked potatoes.

We have a hunger for happiness. But if nothing seems to satisfy us anymore and mild depression takes hold or mild substance abuse causes health problems, then we need some remedies. (btw...severe cases of these should seek professional help).

God may work as a remedy for some, but for those of us for whom "God is dead" we need something else to focus on as our goal and our summum bonum. Also, the abstract idea of finding perfect flourishing as a summum bonum won't work when circumstances within any human life are so messy...we still must live even when we struggle to meet basic human needs of belonging and acceptance. So Epicureanism provides a way to live and seek happiness when "flourishing" is impossible. We don't have to wait till we are flourishing to be happy...we can seek pleasure right away.

Post by "Scott" of February 14, 2022 at 11:43 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Epicurus seemed to be treating this question carefully, which even Torquatus seems to admit when he said that Epicurus denied the necessity to construct a logical argument that pleasure is good

Yes!

[Quote from Cassius](#)

If you are going to ask the question "What is the greatest good?" The answer is "pleasure."

But you also have to consider "Should you be asking that question?"

Yes!

[Quote from Cassius](#)

We have the word guide which is clear. What is added by calling it "good" or calling pain "evil"?

Yes!

I'm so glad to see this shared out! I couldn't agree more - the "other" philosophers were setting the terms of the discourse. Its like a silly Mad Libs game where Epicurus is kind of forced into filling in the blank, and the only possible Epicurean word that could be suggested is "pleasure", but ...NO! This is a child's game! The "good/greatest good" is just an abstract idea, not a living reality! You're chasing after a ghost! 🤪 😜

Post by “Don” of February 14, 2022 at 11:48 PM

I was initially going to respond point by point to the comments posted in this thread. That, however, was going to take more work than I was willing to put in, but ya'll may recognize where I'm responding to specific points made elsewhere. We may end up breaking this out into a separate thread at some point as it seems we've strayed far from discussing Aristotle's golden mean. That being said, since I promised I'd have more to say, here is my further contribution to this thread.

As I understand it, the major points of contention under discussion include:

- What is actually meant by summum bonum vs telos.
- Can we ask the question "Is there really one "greatest good"?"
- Is there one "greatest good" for everyone?

Feel free to respond if anyone sees there are more. Here are my responses to those three for now:

As I've said, my understanding is that "summum bonum" is simply the Romans' attempt at translating the Greek word τέλος [telos] into Latin. I see this as a reasonable attempt. The telos is the goal, end-point, fulfillment, the end, the highest point, etc. The summum bonum is the highest, greatest, supreme "good." I reject DeWitt's contention that Epicurus said "'the greatest good' was not pleasure but life itself." Of course we can only experience pleasure while alive by definition - by Epicurus's definition even: there is no sensation in death. That being said, living is simply a prerequisite for the practice of philosophy itself.

But let's leave summum bonum for the side for a moment since Epicurus didn't speak or write in Latin. The wording he used was "we say pleasure is the telos" (Letter to Menoikeus) and referred to pleasure as "the good" in one fragment that was in Epicurus's work "On the Telos":

"I know not how I can conceive the good, if I withdraw the pleasures of taste, and withdraw the pleasures of love, and withdraw the pleasures of hearing, and withdraw the pleasurable emotions caused to sight by beautiful form."

In this fragment, he specifically refers to pleasure as αγαθον [tagathon] "the good", the same word used in the 3rd line of the Tetracharmakos: "And the good is easily obtained" again equating "the good" with "pleasure."

This **exact** word - αγαθον [tagathon] - was also used by Aristotle: <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...%3a1999.01.0053>

τάγαθόν οὔ πάντ' ἐφίεται "the Good is That at which all things aim." (Aristot. Nic. Eth. 1094a)

Epicurus is not shying away from a fight by using Aristotle's own word to define what The Good - αγαθον - is. Epicurus is meeting Aristotle on the philosophical field of battle and throwing down the gauntlet of pleasure. "You want to know what The Good is? That at which all things aim? It's pleasure."

It seems to me that Epicurus clearly equates pleasure with "the good" and with the telos - the goal/fulfillment/purpose/end - of a human life. And "the good" αγαθον is "The Good", the good at which all other good things aim as in other goods are only instrumental to αγαθον The Good which is pleasure according to Epicurus.

That's why I contend that there is such a thing as a telos or "the good" (αγαθον). Because Epicurus taught that. There is something that can be called "the good" and it is the telos of a human life. Pleasure is both the goal and the guide **in that** pleasure is the north star by which we guide our own small boat. Pleasure isn't a guide **in** the boat, it's the "guiding light" the beacon to which we steer. If we get off course, we steer back towards the "guide".

This is exactly why I also contend that, yes, there is one telos, one good, The Good, for everyone. We are all humans. Humans - as natural animals - are human before they are Christian or Buddhist or Muslim or Humanist or any other creed or religion. However, the more I think about it, we are also - in many respects and by some definition - Epicureans in that

humans, in our natural state, will steer themselves toward pleasure and recede from pain. Just because someone wants to see "God" as their guide, the reason they want to please God is because this brings them pleasure. They could just cut out the middle-man (or middle-deity, as the case may be) and seek pleasure for itself. So, while there are multiple ways to experience pleasure - pleasant forms, pleasant tastes, the joys of sexual passion, pleasant sounds, etc. - it is pleasure writ large which is the telos - The Good - of every human life whether they admit that to themselves or not.

Post by "Don" of February 14, 2022 at 11:57 PM

[Quote from Scott](#)

The "good/greatest good" is just an abstract idea, not a living reality!

I have to disagree. The Good (ταγαθον) is nothing more than "that to which all things aim." It couldn't be more concrete. Why do people do what they do? To seek pleasure. They can lie to themselves and say they're being virtuous or being responsible or being selfless or being [fill in the blank].... but they're all aiming at pleasure. The feelings are two. Either you're feeling pain or you're feeling pleasure. Pleasure **is** The Good, the Goal, the Guide. All other motives are instrumental in seeking pleasure whether people admit it to themselves or not. They can tie themselves into linguistic and psychological pretzels to convince themselves that they aren't aiming at pleasure - because most/all/many cultures have convinced people that pleasure is bad! Epicurus was one of the only - or maybe the only - person to stand up and tell people that they were fooling themselves... and just to embrace the pursuit of pleasure honestly, rationally, and wisely.

Post by "Scott" of February 14, 2022 at 11:59 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

This is exactly why I also contend that, yes, there is one telos, one good, The Good, for everyone.

I'm all with you, Don, until you capitalize "The Good". In my brain, that starts turning it into something kind of "transcendent". An ideal.

The goal? Yes! The "guide"? Yes! The "good"? Yes! The "Good"? ...ouch

Post by “Don” of February 15, 2022 at 12:04 AM

[Quote from Scott](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

This is exactly why I also contend that, yes, there is one telos, one good, The Good, for everyone.

I'm all with you, Don, until you capitalize "The Good". In my brain, that starts turning it into something kind of "transcendent". An ideal.

The goal? Yes! The "guide"? Yes! The "good"? Yes! The "Good"? ...ouch

LOL! Don't get hung up on the capitalization. There's really no other way in English to graphically emphasize "the cheese stands alone" aspect of pleasure. It's not transcendent woo-woo. It simply means there isn't anything other than pleasure that stands alone. Aristotle or the Stoics be damned with their wisdom and virtue - or - to taunt the bull - Wisdom or Virtue. Name anything else - any other motivation - and ultimately it's going to come down to "you're aiming at pleasure."

Post by “Scott” of February 15, 2022 at 12:15 AM

Ha! I think we pretty much agree, [Don](#) . We're maybe sort of tilting at windmills now!

Post by “Don” of February 15, 2022 at 7:19 AM

Sounds good, [Scott](#) . 😊

That being said, I literally woke up this morning with the following addendum to my "every human" points. One of the characteristics of the wise one is "However, in the end, not every bodily constitution nor every nationality will permit someone to become a sage." ([DL X.117](#)) Evidently, not every human being is constitutionally or in a situation that will give them the ability/opportunity to "become wise." So, *ideally*, every human should be encouraged and able to follow the path that Epicurus laid out since it's based on our nature. However, not everyone is going to be able to. I think that's a problem with the individual's constitution and not inherent in the Garden path itself. Okay, so that's my caveat/addendum to "there is one telos for everyone." There remains one telos for all humans, but not every human will be able or willing to see that or follow it to its end.

Post by "Cassius" of February 15, 2022 at 7:21 AM

Yes we may be tilting windmills so I am not inclined to add much more at the moment, other than that I have never had a good feeling about the Tetrpharmakon and I would not accept its wording as being from Epicurus or authoritative. At very best it is a very loose version of the first PDs, and "God only knows" who wrote it and whether it was written as a good or bad example of Epicurean thought (I understand the associated fragments were substantially targeted at combatting errors, but I gather the context is so lost that it is impossible to tell in what sense the Tet was used.)

At the moment I am resting at the point that all these words are abstractions, with pleasure being the least abstract and most concrete as a feeling, which everyone can sense in themselves. The other words are much more abstract, with Good and Evil being the most abstract, and I suspect that is why Nietzsche wrote a book suggesting we need to go "Beyond" them.

Maybe we should look to the practical result of this:. The choice of a single word helps us debate with Plato and Aristotle, but it doesn't solve our moment by moment need to make decisions, and that is where we look to all forms of pleasure and pain which may result from our actions.

There is no tangible definition of "Good" to which we can refer to make any decision beyond referring to the resulting pleasures, and no tangible definition of evil other than the resulting pains.

Attempting to collapse all of the analysis into "Good" and "Evil" is likely unworkable except as a debating tool, and worse - it can easily serve as a cloak which obscures the natural fact that our only natural guides are pleasure and pain.

Post by “Cassius” of February 15, 2022 at 7:43 AM

Another thought to add: I think DeWitts translation of the same span of time argument makes sense, but not so much his conclusion as to what it means.

VS42. The same span of time embraces both the beginning and the end of the greatest good.

Doesn't Epicurus say that Pleasure is the alpha and Omega of the blessed life, which is a fairly similar statement?

To me, Dewitts translation makes sense as part of the same argument we are having now about "the good.". It's not a statement that life is the greatest good, but that the greatest good (pleasure) takes place only while we are living and isn't an abstraction that is beyond our own lives. To me that's parallel also to the "escape from death" statement which also criticizes harping on "the good."

I would tentatively classify this as another example where DeWitt is going in a better direction than the standard commentators but misses just slightly in his wording of his conclusion.

And I think we are building up a considerable list of references from which the takeaway is that we should be careful about how and when we refer to "good" and "evil."

Given that I think Lucretius was doing his best to be a fundamentalist Epicurean, I'd like to see what we can get from him on this point beyond the already-mentioned "Divine Pleasure Guide Of Life."

At the moment I can't recall whether summum bonum appears in Lucretius at all.

Post by “Eikadistes” of February 15, 2022 at 10:34 AM

Essentially, are we arguing that Seneca's use of "Summum Bonum" (or "highest good") as opposed to another phrase, perhaps the available "Maximum bonum" (or "greatest good") is an indication that Seneca misunderstood a nuanced, yet crucial distinction between "high" and "great"? What leads us to believe that Epicurus recognized such a distinction?

I personally think "Summum" might be a better rendering than "Maximum": the ancient Greek word Epicurus employed to describe the fullness of pure pleasure in KD4 was AKPON, meaning "extreme", "acutest", "intense", "sharpest", "end", with the added connotation of "peak", "highest", and "mountain top". He chose to describe *the limit of pleasure*, not only in terms of a *general* magnitude, but, *specifically*, within the figurative context of "altitude" (i.e. "highest").

That being said, Epicurus is not specific to a single term. There are multiple words in ancient Greek he employed that describe a "magnitude" of pleasure. He uses ΜΕΓΕΘΟΥΣ (KD3) meaning "great", "loudness", "quantitative limit", "maximum", "upper limit", "total power", the "full measurement of greatness", ΠΟΛΛΑΣ (KD4) meaning "much", "many", "often", "might", "great", "strong", ΕΙΛΙΚΡΙΝΕΣΤΑΤΗ (KD14) meaning "great", "abundant", "bountiful", ΚΥΡΙΟΤΑΤΑ (KD16) meaning "essential", "principal", "dominant", "most important", "primary", as in the *Kuriai*, ΜΕΓΙΣΤΑ (KD16) meaning "greatest", ΠΛΕΙΣΤΗΣ (KD17) meaning "most", "greatest", "largest" ... that's just a quick sample of the magnitude-expressing words Epicurus uses. Given this, is there really that big of a difference between "Summum" and "Maximum"?

If Seneca used "Maximo Bonum" (or "loudest pleasure") it could still carry the same meaning of 100%. Epicurus was willing to describe good, full pleasure with ΜΕΓΕΘΟΥΣ, which can connote *the magnitude of audible volume*, instead of ΑΚΡΟΝ, *the magnitude of altitude*, as well as the *general concept of the greatest measurement of a thing*.

OR, is it our suggestion that *any* adjective implying "greatest" is inappropriate to link to the noun meaning "good"?

Post by "Eikadistes" of February 15, 2022 at 10:39 AM

Is there a good that is equal to or greater than pleasure? If we cannot identify a good that is at least equal to pleasure, then I think we can safely say that pleasure is not just a good, but rather *the* good, the "greatest" good.

Post by "Cassius" of February 15, 2022 at 10:44 AM

[Quote from Nate](#)

OR, is it our suggestion that any adjective implying "greatest" is inappropriate to link to the noun meaning "good"?

Those are very helpful cites. I am thinking that the issue is not so much the adjective but the noun.

In other words IF we could agree on what "good" means, and that there is more than one, then we could pretty well establish that of all of them, pleasure would be at the top.

But are we really clear on what "good" means, and whether there are more than one "goods" or a "single good?" I'm still remembering a comment that Kevin G made recently that the Stoics held Virtue to be a single unified thing, and DeWitt talks as if Epicurus held that perhaps in some way pleasure is unified as well.

I am afraid we are in the middle of a "one and many" argument that is mostly conceptual and difficult to unwind.

So to recap, I doubt the argument is really so much about the "summum" as it is about the "bonum."

It appears to me that Epicurus started with the observation that all living things pursue pleasure and avoid pain, using "feeling" as the guide, but then he was warning against translating that observation into an improper concept of "good." I feel like we are straying into Frances Wright territory too of needing to be careful in moving from an observation to a conclusion. We can "observe" feeling but it is much harder to be sure that what we are observing is "good." In fact, in Frances Wright terms, is "good" only a "theory"?

It is beginning to appear to me that Epicurus was willing to make that step and talk about "good" but that he was warning to be very careful about it. By talking about a highest good we are presuming that a single highest good can be ascertained, and I am not sure that Epicurus held that. Most of us I think would agree that there are many pleasures, and that it is impossible to rank those pleasures on any kind of absolute scale. But doesn't "highest good" tempt us to do just that, unless we are very careful to observe the differences between the word "good" and the word "pleasure"?

Post by "Cassius" of February 15, 2022 at 10:56 AM

[Quote from Nate](#)

Is there a good that is equal to or greater than pleasure? If we cannot identify a good that is at least equal to pleasure, then I think we can safely say that pleasure is not just a good, but rather the good, the "greatest" good.

I think we crossposted and I did not see this initially. I think you're probably right that we cannot identify a "good" higher than pleasure, but now I am concerned that I do not know what "good" really is!

And that reminds us of course of the statement that we would not have the ability to conceive the good without the pleasures of sex etc.....

Diogenes Laertius: [06] They say that he wrote to many other women of pleasure and particularly to Leontion, with whom Metrodorus was also in love; and that in the treatise *On the End of Life* he wrote, 'I know not how I can conceive the good, if I withdraw the pleasures of taste and withdraw the pleasures of love and those of hearing and sight.'

Is that too not a warning from Epicurus to be careful in using the word "good"?

And again - I am not saying we shouldn't use the word "good." What we may have may be similar to the "god" issue where Epicurus uses the same word but vests it with very different attributes and views it in different ways than does the rest of the world.

Post by “Cassius” of February 15, 2022 at 11:13 AM

Although I think she carried this too far, I think we need to consider what Wright said in Chapter 15:

Quote

“I apprehend the difficulties,” observed Leontium, “which embarrass the mind of our young friend. Like most aspirants after knowledge, he has a vague and incorrect idea of what he is pursuing, and still more, of what may be attained. In the schools you have hitherto frequented,” she continued, addressing the youth, “certain images of virtue, vice, truth, knowledge, are presented to the imagination, and these abstract qualities, or we may call them, figurative beings, are made at once the objects of speculation and adoration. A law is laid down, and the feelings and opinions of men are predicated upon it; a theory is built, and all animate and inanimate nature is made to speak in its support; an hypothesis is advanced, and all the mysteries of nature are treated as explained. You have heard of, and studied various systems of philosophy; but real philosophy is opposed to all systems. Her whole business is observation; and the results of that observation constitute all her knowledge. She receives no truths, until she has tested them by experience; she advances no opinions, unsupported by the testimony of facts; she acknowledges no virtue, but that involved in beneficial actions; no vice, but that involved in actions hurtful to ourselves or to others. Above all, she advances no dogmas, — is slow to assert what is, — and calls nothing impossible. The science of philosophy is simply a science of observation, both as regards the world without us, and the world within; and, to advance in it, are requisite only sound senses, well developed and exercised faculties, and a mind free of prejudice. The objects she has in view, as regards the external world, are, first, to see things as they are, and secondly, to examine their structure, to ascertain their properties, and to observe their

relations one to the other. — As respects the world within, or the philosophy of mind, she has in view, first, to examine our sensations, or the impressions of external things on our senses; which operation involves, and is involved in, the examination of those external things themselves: secondly, to trace back to our sensations, the first development of all our faculties; and again, from these sensations, and the exercise of our different faculties as developed by them, to trace the gradual formation of our moral feelings, and of all our other emotions: thirdly, to analyze all these our sensations, thoughts, and emotions, — that is, to examine the qualities of our own internal, sentient matter, with the same, and yet more, closeness of scrutiny, than we have applied to the examination of the matter that is without us: finally, to investigate the justness of our moral feelings, and to weigh the merit and demerit of human actions; which is, in other words, to judge of their tendency to produce good or evil, — to excite pleasurable or painful feelings in ourselves or others. You will observe, therefore, that, both as regards the philosophy of physics, and the philosophy of mind, all is simply a process of investigation. It is a journey of discovery, in which, in the one case, we commission our senses to examine the qualities of that matter, which is around us, and, in the other, endeavor, by attention to the varieties of our consciousness, to gain a knowledge of those qualities of matter which constitute our susceptibilities of thought and feeling.”

Note - this isn't the only deep part -- most all of [Chapter 15](#) is deep and related to this issue.

Post by “Cassius” of February 15, 2022 at 11:20 AM

Note on this passage from Wright:

Maybe I am feeling inadequate, or I want to flatter us in this discussion, or something, but whenever I read that paragraph, and especially now in regard to this current discussion, I see this argument as "DEEP" and very possibly brilliant. It's not something that someone can pick out from a couple of readings of Diogenes Laertius at twenty years old, no matter how smart someone is.

We've been studying Epicurus for quite some time, reading lots of commentators and articles, and I don't think I've seen much anywhere that gets at this issue like she does here. These are not the thoughts of someone who has had only a couple of years of exposure to Epicurus, not unless those were *very* intense years, with some very good people with whom to compare notes.

It seems Frances Wright had access to numbers of relatives and friends who were into materialist philosophy, so maybe we can still yet discover in her circles some other writers who she herself bounced off of to gain some of her insights. And that continues to be my point on this: Yes - All praise to Frances Wright for giving this to us, but I want more of it, and maybe more of it actually exists that we can find in the future.

Post by “Cassius” of February 15, 2022 at 11:44 AM

Just to be clear about Wright, here I think is the heart of what we need to be concerned about:

"...Certain images of virtue, vice, truth, knowledge, are presented to the imagination, and these abstract qualities, or we may call them, figurative beings, are made at once the objects of speculation and adoration. A law is laid down, and the feelings and opinions of men are predicated upon it; a theory is built, and all animate and inanimate nature is made to speak in its support; an hypothesis is advanced, and all the mysteries of nature are treated as explained."

She didn't use the word "good" in this list, but I am thinking this is what we need to avoid doing ourselves with "good" and "evil," so as to avoid being sucked into the games that other schools play when they try to do exactly that.

We're on firm ground when we are discussing pleasure and pain, but much less so in discussing good and evil.

Post by “Scott” of February 15, 2022 at 12:32 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

There remains one telos for all humans, but not every human will be able or willing to see that or follow it to it's end.

Don I want to understand your point here. I agree many persons may not be "willing" to see pleasure as telos, guide and goal [which to me seems obvious] - but by the word "able" do you mean many humans will not have the cognitive CAPACITY to understand? Surely only someone with VERY limited mental ability would have trouble with this. I think the basic thrust of EP with pleasure as goal, it easy to understand. So I'm wondering if I just don't understand your

meaning.

Post by “Cassius” of February 15, 2022 at 1:41 PM

My answer to that question to Don is that some (but not many) don't have the mental capacity to see the full extent of the philosophy. Also it may be a reference to the reality that some people are sickly and die almost from birth, and never develop the capacity through no fault of their own.

And this also touches on "how long do you have to live in order to live a full life?"

But that "full life" is probably another one of those conceptual traps like "the good."

Post by “Don” of February 15, 2022 at 4:28 PM

[Scott](#) : I'd concur with [Cassius](#) 's answer to your question to me 😊 (How's that for a convoluted response!)

I'd also add that some people's political situation (authoritarian) may preclude them from fully engaging in the pursuit of pleasure as their natural telos. They still have that innate birthright. They may just be unable to fully realize it.

Post by “Don” of February 15, 2022 at 10:38 PM

I don't understand the hesitancy to accept the word "good." In the the letter to Menoikeus alone, Epicurus uses "good" (αγαθός (agathos) or a form of it) 16 times, including:

133. He has diligently considered the end (τέλος) fixed by nature, and understands how easily the limit of good things (των αγαθών περας) can be reached and attained, and how either the duration or the intensity of evils is but slight.

134: he believes that no good or evil is dispensed by chance to men so as to make life blessed, though it supplies the starting-point of great good and great evil.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2401-from-the-golden-mean-to-tbe-summum-bonum-useful-or-deceptive-frames-of-reference/>

In fact, the letter ends with the phrase: ἐν ἀθανάτοις ἀγαθοῖς: (live) "in/among eternal goods."

This quote from On Nature, Book 28, seems applicable: "For I do not doubt that you [, Metrodorus,] could cite many cases, from your own past observations, of certain people taking words in various ridiculous senses and indeed in every sense in preference to their actual linguistic meanings, whereas our own usage does not flout linguistic convention, nor do we, alter names with regard to the objects of perception."

It seems to me that the "actual linguistic meaning" of "good", at its most basic, is simply "that which provides pleasure." "Evil" is "that which causes pain."

Post by "Godfrey" of February 16, 2022 at 1:52 AM

Quote from Don

It seems to me that the "actual linguistic meaning" of "good", at its most basic, is simply "that which provides pleasure." "Evil" is "that which causes pain."

I'm pretty sure we can all agree on this.

To me it becomes questionable when it's stated as "the Good", and that seems to be just a philosophical argument which leads down a rabbit hole and is of limited or no practical use. All of the examples in post #37 are "lower case" goods and make sense both practically and philosophically as far as I can tell.

Post by "Godfrey" of February 16, 2022 at 2:14 AM

More goodies from the Letter to Menoikeus:

128. And this is why we say pleasure is the foundation and fulfillment of the blessed life. [129] Because we perceived pleasure as a fundamental good and common to our nature, and so, as a result of this, we begin every choice and rejection against this, judging every good thing by the standard of how that pleasure affects us or how we react to considering experiencing that pleasure. And because pleasure is the fundamental and inborn good, this is why not every pleasure is seized....

To me, "fundamental and inborn" reads as a description of the Canonic faculty and not as "the Good".

130. *Additionally, we believe αὐτάρκεια is a great good.*

132. *And so the foundation of all these and the greatest good is φρόνησις, practical wisdom. On this account, practical wisdom is prized more dearly than philosophy itself....*

130 and 132 are two more uses of good: great good and the greatest good. So pleasure is foundational, fundamental, inborn; self sufficiency is a great good; practical wisdom is the greatest good. Obviously this directly contradicts the assertion that pleasure is the Good, but it doesn't contradict pleasure being foundational, fundamental, inborn, Canonic.

Post by "smoothiekiwi" of February 16, 2022 at 3:01 AM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

So pleasure is foundational, fundamental, inborn; self sufficiency is a great good; practical wisdom is the greatest good

I don't want to interrupt your discussion, but just wanted to throw in that I'm surprised how little of a hedonist (in the modern sense of the world) Epicurus actually was, and how good he understood the human soul. I guess he would be a good psychotherapist today.

Post by "Don" of February 16, 2022 at 7:23 AM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Quote from Don

It seems to me that the "actual linguistic meaning" of "good", at its most basic, is simply "that which provides pleasure." "Evil" is "that which causes pain."

I'm pretty sure we can all agree on this.

Okay, good!



Now, we're getting somewhere. So, as a generic adjective or noun in common speech, we all(?) can agree on this this meaning of good and evil.

Oh, and I have to applaud the use of "goodies" in #39! That was good 😊

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

To me it becomes questionable when it's stated as "the Good", and that seems to be just a philosophical argument which leads down a rabbit hole and is of limited or no practical use. All of the examples in post #37 are "lower case" goods and make sense both practically and philosophically as far as I can tell.

One of the issues then is talking about pleasure as the capital G Good and not just a lower-case g good. The caveat for that is that I don't think there was any way to capitalize Greek in the time period in which we were talking, or Latin in the sense we're capitalizing words for "philosophical" purposes. So, maybe I should quit that. Capitalizing is just a convenient modern shorthand for emphasis. So, no more Good, just good. That still leaves the point of contention of characterizing pleasure as the "greatest good."

I am glad [Godfrey](#) cited "practical wisdom is the greatest good." Do we have problems with that statement? We could also translate it as "practical wisdom is the greatest good thing." You certainly can't have two greatest things. 132e. Τούτων δὲ πάντων ἀρχὴ καὶ τὸ μέγιστον ἀγαθὸν φρόνησις.

"and so the foundation (ἀρχή) of all these and the greatest good (τὸ μέγιστον ἀγαθὸν) is φρόνησις."

Of course, elsewhere Epicurus says:

ἡδονὴν ἀρχὴν καὶ τέλος λέγομεν εἶναι τοῦ μακαρίως ζῆν.

"We say pleasure is the foundation (ἀρχήν) and telos of the blessed life."

So, are there two foundations? Or is practical wisdom just the foundation of our choices and rejections, and pleasure is the foundation of the blessed life?

I'm still limiting it to one work of Epicurus's so as not to be overwhelmed. Within the letter, Epicurus defines pleasure as:

* pleasure is the foundation (ἀρχήν) and telos of the blessed life.

* pleasure is the telos (the end, the fulfillment, the goal)

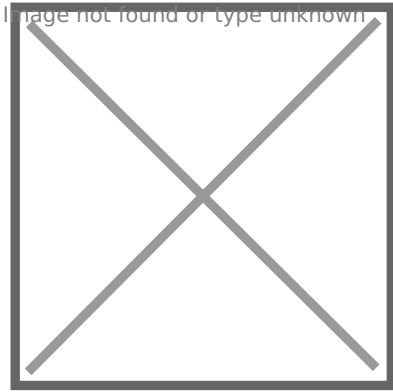
* pleasure is the fundamental and inborn good

Greek: "Καὶ ἐπεὶ πρῶτον ἀγαθὸν τοῦτο καὶ σύμφυτον"

σύμφυτον (symphyton) carries the idea of inborn or "born with"

πρῶτον ἀγαθὸν (prōton agathon), on the other hand, comes very close to the idea of "greatest/highest good" in that prōton is the superlative of proteros and means "first, primary, most superior, foremost-est" <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l...os1&i=1#lexicon>

and



[G4412 - prōton - Strong's Greek Lexicon \(kjv\)](#)

G4412 - πρῶτον prōton, pro'-ton; neuter of as adverb (with or without); firstly (in time, place, order, or importance):—before, at the beginning, chiefly...

www.blueletterbible.org

Translating this literally as "this(pleasure) is both the primary and inborn good (thing)" pulls out that emphasis on pleasure being set apart - primary, superior - as a good thing. *Or* is he saying pleasure is our *first* good thing as in "we are born having this good thing, ie. pleasure"? The Kai... Kai... "both x and y" may be used here to convey that meaning. Hmm. Just thought of that possibility.

PS: πρῶτον is the exact word that Epicurus uses to introduce the first topic in the letter about the gods. I see that also as "primarily, first in rank or importance, something foundational." Some translators just use "First,.. " as number one, number two, in that context, but Epicurus doesn't use any other numbers as if it's an outline. My feeling is that he's using the sense "this is important so I'm telling you this up front!"

Thoughts?

Post by "Scott" of February 16, 2022 at 7:36 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2401-from-the-golden-mean-to-tbe-summun-bonum-useful-or-deceptive-frames-of-reference/>

I don't understand the hesitancy to accept the word "good."

I agree with Don. There's nothing bad about the word good. It may not be the best, but its better than most.

Post by “Cassius” of February 16, 2022 at 8:59 AM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

The quote from Godfrey references this quote from Don It seems to me that the "actual linguistic meaning" of "good", at its most basic, is simply "that which provides pleasure." "Evil" is "that which causes pain." I'm pretty sure we can all agree on this.

To me it becomes questionable when it's stated as "the Good", and that seems to be just a philosophical argument which leads down a rabbit hole and is of limited or no practical use. All of the examples in post #37 are "lower case" goods and make sense both practically and philosophically as far as I can tell.

I'll repeat this more clearly below but it seems to me that the issue is that while WE can agree on this, using Epicurean terminology, this terminology differs greatly from all non-Epicurean terminology and so is very confusing unless we constantly restate our context.

[Quote from smoothiekiwi](#)

surprised how little of a hedonist (in the modern sense of the world)

Yes, another occasion on which I can say "I hate that word" ("hedonist") 😊 this is where Elli's curse on the use of "isms" terminology rings the most true.

[Quote from Don](#)

Okay, good! 😊 Now, we're getting somewhere. So, as a generic adjective or noun in common speech, we all(?) can agree on this this meaning of good and evil.

Again as cited above, WE can, but the rest of the world strongly disagrees. How do we handle that?

[Quote from Don](#)

I am glad Godfrey cited "practical wisdom is the greatest good." Do we have problems with that statement?

Yes it seems like we can line up more than one "greatest good" description from Epicurus. At least this one, and then the one about escape from a deadly peril, seem targeted at a greatest good, then of course we have Torquatus saying that Epicurus held it to be "pleasure." I wonder how many we could come up with, if we tried to list them?

So in terms of getting somewhere can we even regroup far enough back to decide what our goal is here?

1. I think we agree that Epicurus held pleasure to be "good."
2. I don't think we agree whether Epicurus held there to be one or many goods, although it appears that maybe the weight of the evidence is that he held there to be multiple goods?
3. I don't think we agree (do we?) that Epicurus himself used the formulation greatest good (?) Unless we accept what Torquatus wrote we don't have that in Epicurus' own words do we? Something that implies that there are multiple goods and that pleasure is the greatest of them?
4. I think we may agree that Epicurus is using "good" with a different definition than most other philosophers (?)
5. Do we have even a proposal as to how to deal with using Epicurus' definition while acknowledging that the rest of the world uses it differently? In the case of gods we can call them "[Epicurean Gods](#)." Are we suggesting that in this context we need to use the term "Epicurean Good" or "Epicurean Greatest Good" to avoid confusion?

Post by "Godfrey" of February 16, 2022 at 10:41 AM

1. Absolutely!
2. It would appear that he held there to be many, which makes sense to me.
3. He seems to have used "foundational". For me, this is much clearer than "greatest", and ties pleasure to the Canon which is critical to understanding EP.
4. I'm not sure about this one way or the other.
5. "Foundational good" works well for me to describe pleasure, particularly since I feel that it ties it to the Canon. Calling it the Epicurean good does it a disservice in my mind by limiting it.

Foundational can still be universal without getting into the rabbit hole of "greatest".

Post by “SimonC” of February 16, 2022 at 12:47 PM

[Quote from Scott](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

I don't understand the hesitancy to accept the word "good."

I agree with Don. There's nothing bad about the word good. It may not be the best, but its better than most.

I think a danger is that it brings to mind the Platonic uppercase Good. If we are talking about good we must take care to remember that it is not a transcendental form or abstract idea, but just a word describing pleasant things.

Post by “Scott” of February 16, 2022 at 12:53 PM

[Quote from SimonC](#)

I think a danger is that it brings to mind the Platonic uppercase Good

I agree, [SimonC](#) - we do that and we'll end up like those Men in Black trainees ...the "**Best of the Best of the Best!!!**" 😊👍

Post by “Cassius” of February 16, 2022 at 1:21 PM

This thought just occurs to me:

Do we think that Cicero's Torquatus was mistaken to frame the discussion the way he did? If so, do we think;

1) Cicero intentionally or negligently misrepresents the Epicurean argument by doing this?

2) Cicero was accurately reporting the way Epicureans were arguing in 50 BC?

I ask that because if we begin to have a consensus that this form of argument was an error in talking to Cicero (who certainly did not agree with Epicurean definitions) then we might profit from figuring out how this happened.

And in that regard I have more "immortal" words from Norman DeWitt on Cicero's presentation of Epicurean ethics: "I do not believe he could have misrepresented the truth so successfully had he not understood it so completely." (Note - this isn't necessary a reference to this part of Torquatus, but to Cicero's commentary on Epicurus in general.)

MARY N. PORTER PACKER. Cicero's Presentation of Epicurean Ethics. New York, The Columbia University Press, 1938. Pp. 127. Columbia Diss.

This study is most commendable. It is clearly written and well printed, acutely reasoned and amply documented. The treatment confines itself to *De Finibus* I-II and is divided into two chapters: 1. Cicero's Presentation of Epicurean Philosophy in *De Finibus* I. 2. Cicero's Critique of Epicurean Philosophy, Presented in *De Finibus* I and II. Each chapter concludes with a summary, and the text of Epicurus himself is abundantly cited. The conclusion is that Cicero failed "to understand Epicureanism as a consistently unified philosophy (p. 81)," but is acquitted of having been "deliberately and intentionally unfair (p. 119)."

It is only to this acquittal that I take exception. Every debater has the choice of arguing to reveal the truth in its entirety or of arguing to make points. The former method is adapted to the Supreme Court, the latter to a trial by jury. Cicero was a crafty old trial lawyer and he deliberately argued to make points, because he was pleading before a reading audience, which functions like a jury, and his shrewd legal mind had long discerned the vulnerability of Epicureanism before this style of attack. His attitude was that of William J. Bryan toward biological evolution, and his pleadings are comparable to a Scopes trial, but I do not believe he could have misrepresented the truth so successfully had he not understood it completely. In the Scopes trial, the crafty old lawyer was on the opposite side—Clarence Darrow.

NORMAN W. DEWITT.

VICTORIA COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO.

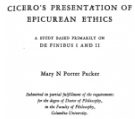
Post by "Cassius" of February 16, 2022 at 1:30 PM

Since all of us have unlimited time to read every possible article on this subject (joke!), here is the Packer article that DeWitt is referencing. I read it when I first found it several years ago, but don't remember much about it. I seem to remember that she questions Torquatus' illustration of the best and worst lives because she thinks that the description of the best life is too active, which is a position I disagree with, so I don't cite the article very often. But it's possible that the

rest of the article touches on the issue that we are discussing here (the manner of presenting arguments about the "greatest good"), so it might be worth re-reading.

File

Cicero's Presentation of Epicurean Ethics - By Mary Porter Packer (1938)



A study based primarily on De Finibus I and II



Cassius

February 16, 2022 at 1:27 PM

Post by “Kalosyni” of February 16, 2022 at 9:07 PM

I just found this paper which may be helpful...feeling too tired to read it tonight, but could be helpful in this discussion thread...

"Cicero as a Source for Epicurus"

by Kyle Tebo

[Cicero as a Source for Epicurus](#)

By Kyle Tebo, Published on 05/01/17
repository.upenn.edu

Post by “Eikadistes” of February 16, 2022 at 9:14 PM

I think it's important to recognize that our suspicion is toward "the form of the good", but not "goodness". (I'm going to *avoid* relying on an upper-case letter to distinguish these concepts because ancient Greek lacked this device).

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2401-from-the-golden-mean-to-tbe-summum-bonum-useful-or-deceptive-frames-of-reference/>

The phrase Η ΤΟΥ ΑΓΑΘΟΥ ΙΔΕΑ or "the form of the good" was used by Plato in *The Republic*, and enthusiastically adopted by Plotinus, the Neo-Platonists, and, much later, the Gnostics. The concept is at the heart of Platonism, so it is fair for anti-Platonists to view any discussion of "good" with (at least) a hint of healthy suspicion.

Of course, ΑΓΑΘΟΣ can be found in pre-Socratic literature, so the Platonists by no means *own* "good".

"Agathos" is an important ancient Greek concept in general (like "telos", "ataraxia", and "eudaimonia"), and not a Platonic concept in particular. Epicurus would have augmented the meaning of "the good" for his own purposes. Personally, in terms of basic, intellectual impressions from words, when I think of "telos", I tend to think of Aristotle's "Final Cause". The same is true of "eudaimonia", which makes me think more of Aristotle's privileging of "functionality" and "excellence". Similarly, when I read "the good", I tend think of Plato, regardless of the context.

But, again, no one *owns* any of these words. They are all common words with meanings that were constantly being augmented to fit the purposes of their employers. Since Plato and Aristotle won the hearts of the philosophers and theologians of the post-Classical period, the languages we inherited champion Platonic and Peripatetic definitions.

As Don found in the *Epistle to Menoikeus*, and as I found in the *Kuriai Doxai*, inflections of ΑΓΑΘΟΣ are used frequently, much moreso, even, than a *key* vocabulary word like "ataraxia", which Epicurus rarely uses. *Not once* does Epicurus use a form of "aponia" in his *Doxai*, but he does use an inflection of "agathos" half a dozen times. This includes at least one use of "good" being preceded by the definite article "the", indicating, explicitly "the good".

Post by “Don” of February 17, 2022 at 12:35 AM

I want to read the papers posted by both [Kalosyni](#) and [Cassius](#) but haven't had a chance yet. I also don't have direct responses to [Cassius](#) 's questions in post #43 yet, but I'd like to address the summum bonum issue directly in *De Finibus*.

Above in post #19, I said summum bonum was the Latin translation of Greek τέλος [telos]. I'm going to amend that to saying summum bonum was the Latin literal translation of Greek αγαθον [tagathon]. Aristototele defines αγαθον as that "at which all things aim." From *Nichomachean Ethics*, Book 1:

"Every art and every investigation, and likewise every practical pursuit or undertaking, seems to aim at some good: hence it has been well said that the Good is That at which all things aim."

(Note: The translator's capitalization, not mine)

Aristotle goes on to explain what he means by *ταγαθον* throughout Book 1:

<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...%20page%3D1094a> Here is an illustrative excerpts:

"If therefore among the ends (*τελος/telos*) at which our actions aim there be one which we will for its own sake, while we will the others only for the sake of this, and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (which would obviously result in a process ad infinitum, so that all desire would be futile and vain), it is clear that this one ultimate End must be the Good, and indeed the Supreme Good. [2] Will not then a knowledge of this Supreme Good be also of great practical importance for the conduct of life?"

That "futile and vain" is significant, because the Greek words there are *kenos* and *mataios* (*κενήν καὶ ματαίαν*). We are *very* familiar with Epicurus using *kenon* to describe actions or desires as "empty." Epicurus also uses *mataios* throughout his extant writings:

VS62. If parents have cause to be angry with their children, of course it is *foolish* (*μάταιον*) to resist, and thus not try to beg for forgiveness. But if they do not have cause and are angry without reason, it is ridiculous to make an appeal to one who is irrationally opposed to hearing such an appeal, and thus not try to convince him by other means in a spirit of good will.

VS65. It is foolish (*μάταιόν*) to ask of the gods that which we can supply for ourselves.

Fragment 445. [We must not blame the body for the greatest evils] nor attribute our troubles to mere circumstance. Instead we seek their cause within the soul: for by giving up every foolish (*ματαίαν*) and fleeting desire we give birth to a confidence perfect in itself.

Menoikeus 125b. "So, the one who says death is to be feared is foolish (*μάταιος*)/at fault..."

Menoikeus 127c. "If, on the other hand (he says so) joking, (he speaks) foolishly (*μάταιος*) [about] things that [do not] allow (for jokes)"

This use of *kenon* and *mataion* in both Aristotle and Epicurus leads me to consider that he might just agree with Aristotle in that our actions would be "foolish and vain" if they are not directed to one chief aim/*telos*/*tagathon*.

Cicero's Torquatus is one of the latter-day Epicureans that believes "elaborate and reasoned argument, and abstruse theoretical discussion" are needed to disprove "why pleasure should not be counted as a good nor pain as an evil", as some philosophers maintained. "Torquatus" states that "The fact is, I think that you [Cicero] are like our friend Triarius, and dislike Epicurus because he has neglected the graces of style that you find in your Plato, Aristotle and Theophrastus. For I can scarcely bring myself to believe that you think his opinions untrue."

So, "Torquatus" is trying to beat Cicero's "Plato, Aristotle, and Theophrastus" by meeting on their philosophical playing field. He's going to show why Epicurus's pleasure meets the criteria for Aristotle's *ταγαθον* or, to give it its Latin translation, *summum bonum*. "Torquatus" is going to show why pleasure is the "Chief Good" and "That at which all things aim."

Below are the occurrences of "summum bonum" (or a form of the phrase) in Book 1 of *De Finibus*. These are the instances spoken by "Torquatus" in his exposition of Epicurus's philosophy.

Section 29 - Torquatus: "We are inquiring, then, what is the final and ultimate Good, which as all philosophers are agreed must be of such a nature as to be the end to which all other things are means, while it is not itself a means to anything else. This Epicurus finds in pleasure; pleasure he holds to be the ****Chief Good****, pain the ***Chief Evil***."

Section 30 - Torquatus: "...every animal, as soon as it is born, seeks for pleasure, and delights in it as the ****Chief Good****, while it recoils from pain as the Chief Evil,"

Section 42 - Torquatus: "Pleasure and pain moreover supply the motives of desire and of avoidance, and the springs of conduct generally. This being so, it clearly follows that actions are right and praiseworthy only as being a means to the attainment of a life of pleasure. But that which is not itself a means to anything else, but to which all else is a means, is what the Greeks term the *Telos*, the highest, ultimate or final Good. It must therefore be admitted that the ****Chief Good**** is to live agreeably.

"Those who place the Chief Good in virtue alone are beguiled by the glamour of a name..."

Section 55 - Torquatus: "(1) The Ends of Goods and Evils themselves, that is, pleasure and pain, are not open to mistake; where people go wrong is in not knowing what things are productive of pleasure and pain." [NOTE: A variation on *summum bonum*: *finibus bonorum et malorum*]

Section 57 - Torquatus: Notice then how the theory embraces every possible enhancement of life, every aid to the attainment of that ****Chief Good**** which is our object.

quod propositum est, ****summum bonum**** consequamur?

Section 70 - Torquatus: "All these considerations go to prove not only that the theory of friendship is not embarrassed by the identification of the ****Chief Good**** with pleasure, but also that without this no foundation for friendship whatsoever can be found."

I want to specifically look at Section 29's quote. Torquatus says specifically that "all philosophers are agreed [the final and ultimate Good] must be of such a nature as to be the end to which all other things are means, while it is not itself a means to anything else." This is almost a word-for-word translation of Aristotle's definition of *ταγαθον* in *Nicomachean Ethics*. Torquatus's "all philosophers" shows that he's addressing a widespread philosophical idea and attempting to provide an Epicurean answer to "What is the 'final and ultimate Good' [extremum

et ultimum bonorum]?"

Also, in section 42, Torquatus specifically uses the Greek telos and defines the Greek word as "the highest, ultimate or final Good [summum bonorum vel ultimum vel extremum — quod Graeci τέλος nominant] which isn't a bad attempt at a definition, see the LSJ: "full realization, highest point, ideal; the final cause; the chief good" <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...ntry%3Dte%2Flos>

So, referring to pleasure as the Chief Good (yes, I'm capitalizing because the translator did) is addressing a specific philosophical question that "all philosophers" appeared to have asked before, during, and after Epicurus's time. Epicurus's school needed an answer to this, maybe especially for a segment of the school that felt "elaborate and reasoned argument, and abstruse theoretical discussion" were necessary at the period of time Cicero and Philodemus and possibly Zeno of Sidon were writing - and maybe even Epicurus himself in answer to a widespread Greek question articulated even before Epicurus's time by Aristotle. As of my writing this, I don't have a problem with seeing Epicurus maintaining that pleasure is the Chief Good at which all other things point.

Post by "Cassius" of February 17, 2022 at 2:15 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

"Cicero as a Source for Epicurus"

by Kyle Tebo

Kalosyni I read that article and it is directly on point as to Cicero's motives. It does a good job of collecting examples of Cicero's hostility. It does not really go further than that (that he was hostile) however so it doesn't help much with what Epicurus actually held. In fact the article raises an issue that I agree with (that Epicurus probably did not think the sun was only a foot wide) but then (to my reading) did not follow through with more discussion, which I gathered he intended to do.

Regardless, the article is a good summary. I think it leaves unanswered whether Cicero was negligent or malicious, but I think the examples point clearly toward malicious.

Post by "Cassius" of February 17, 2022 at 2:26 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2401-from-the-golden-mean-to-the-summum-bonum-useful-or-deceptive-frames-of-reference/>

Wow Don thanks for the lengthy summary.

Maybe I am jumping to a conclusion too early but it does seem to me that the ultimate issue is still in the area of "What was Epicurus own opinion of discussing an 'ultimate good?'".

He clearly did use similar terms himself. So no one can argue that he did not talk about the subject.

The issue is more a question of what limitations or caveats did he imply in his usage that differs from the other philosophers.

It seems to me that he differs not only in selecting his ultimate good ("pleasure") but in warning against placing too much weight on the discussion.

Like one of the Frances Wright quotes above, it seems to me that the other philosophers we're implying a "magic" to the discussion in that once the proved logically there was an ultimate good, they thought they had actually accomplished something.

I read Epicurus as saying that the exercise really accomplishes very little other than answering the philosophic question that the others insist on asking. Once you have identified "pleasure" as the answer to the logic game, you're still at the very beginning of your analysis of how to act in a particular situation.

Which tells me that Epicurus was much less interested in the application of the logic game than he was in identifying that there is no supernatural god, and no life after death, and no logical magic that answers the truly practical question of how to live. What we are left with is "feeling" in the same generic sense as is any other living animal. Our reasoning ability lets us pursue far more elaborate means of pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain than other animals, but we're ultimately all one big family of life doing the best we can with the time we have.

Post by “Don” of February 17, 2022 at 6:54 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I read Epicurus as saying that the exercise really accomplishes very little other than answering the philosophic question that the others insist on asking. Once you have identified "pleasure" as the answer to the logic game, you're still at the very beginning of your analysis of how to act in a particular situation.

That's exactly the opposite conclusion I'm reaching. I think Epicurus felt the answer one gives to that question "What is the Chief Good?" accomplishes everything. If you're aiming at something other than pleasure, your "conduct of life" is going to be off kilter. To me, it's not a "logic game," it's as practical as it gets for Epicurus in this "problem" that "all philosophers" are expected to answer. Aristotle's and "Torquatus's" definition of the Chief Good is simply "that to which all else points." Basically, why do we do what we as humans do. The telos for Epicurus is related to the chief good, but Aristotle took the idea of the telos to its absurd conclusion: e.g., the telos of the eye is to see. If I remember, Lucretius puts that idea to rest. However, the supreme good/ultimate end has concrete practical application:

Quote from Aristotle

"If therefore among the ends (τελος/telos) at which our actions aim there be one which we will for its own sake, while we will the others only for the sake of this, and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (which would obviously result in a process ad infinitum, so that all desire would be futile and vain), it is clear that this one ultimate End must be the Good, and indeed the Supreme Good. [2] Will not then a knowledge of this Supreme Good be also of great practical importance for the conduct of life?"

One of my reasons for maintaining Epicurus would say there is a supreme good is his distaste for infinite division or regression. Part of Aristotle's definition here is: *if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (which would obviously result in a process ad infinitum, so that all desire would be futile and vain), it is clear that this one ultimate End must be the Good, and indeed the Supreme Good.* It seems to me Epicurus would say, "Okay, so you ask what is it that is the ultimate end of our actions what our conduct of life should steer by? It is pleasure. We choose everything because of pleasure, sometimes pleasure in the moment, sometimes pleasure in the future, but always pleasure. Not virtue. Not wisdom. Not the καλός. I spit on all those unless they bring pleasure." *That* "fact" - that pleasure is the one thing to which all else aims - then underpins all of Epicurus's "conduct of life."

PS: Of course, there are many things which produce pleasure, just as there are many virtuous actions, just as there are many ways to become wise, just as there are many beautiful things (one meaning of καλός. That doesn't negate the fact that we should steer toward pleasure as the chief aim.

Post by "Cassius" of February 17, 2022 at 7:36 AM

I don't know that what Don and I are saying is really that different. The word "pleasure" is just like any other word - it is a placeholder for innumerable numbers of individual pleasures which we have to decide to choose or avoid. It is only one among several starting points for action, which is what I mean as "answering the philosophical question."

Obviously it's tremendously important to do that properly, because the major alternatives are "virtue," "piety," and "logic" (maybe I would add "nothingness" if we want to include certain other viewpoints). And yes I agree that answering that question is tremendously important so as not to associate with the wrong people and so as to know how to answer the question when it comes up. Identifying the greatest good solves those problems for us. It tells us to which school we should belong. And of course that is tremendously important.

But we still arrive at the same point once we identify "Pleasure is the Greatest Good:" because the daily question that has to be answered moment by moment is "What next?"

My view as to why Don and I seem to be dancing around but not appearing to agree is that we don't at this point have the same attitude toward the "role of logic" question. I think Epicurus considered the Platonic / Aristotelian assertions of "logic" to be equally as deadly as the arbitrary assertions of religions, and that he was arguing against both with similar intensity. Even though Plato and Aristotle did believe in their gods, their error was not primarily one of religion - it was the way they were applying their logic. Therefore I think Epicurus saw TWO major enemies of right thinking, religion and improper use of logic, and what I am trying to do is to bring out that side of what he was attacking and what he was saying.

Just as with "gods" and "[all sensations are true](#)" and the subtleties of "absence of pain" (and probably more terms if I thought about it longer) I think that "pleasure" and "greatest good" have to be parsed for their deeper meaning and not taken at face value. Saying "pleasure is the greatest good" in his time was filled with implications that need to be brought and, rather than treated as if that formulation answers every question.

To repeat Wright, in a passage where I think she was right in seeing this in Epicurus:

"In the schools you have hitherto frequented," she continued, addressing the youth, "certain images of virtue, vice, truth, knowledge, are presented to the imagination, and these abstract qualities, or we may call them, figurative beings, are made at once the objects of speculation and adoration. A law is laid down, and the feelings and opinions of men are predicated upon it; a theory is built, and all animate and inanimate nature is made to speak in its support; an hypothesis is advanced, and all the mysteries of nature are treated as explained."

And I don't consider this to be a "fight" in any way between me and Don but an extremely helpful way to get at some issues that I am not sure I previously recognized.

In the past I was criticized (not here) by harping too much on pleasure, and I hope to always continue to be criticized for that because I think that "pleasure" is the ultimate answer to these

questions. But going into it as deeply as we are doing helps us understand (i think) where Plato and Aristotle and the Stoics were wrong and have to be attacked.

They weren't just wrong because they attacked Pleasure, they were wrong in their reasons for attacking it, which involved not just religion but their logic and/or their implications as to their logical analysis of "The Good." They didn't base their attack on Pleasure as "I attack it because Zeus told me so." They based their attack on Pleasure on a logical framework which Epicurus found to be in error.

Post by “Don” of February 17, 2022 at 10:44 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

But we still arrive at the same point once we identify "Pleasure is the Greatest Good:" because the daily question that has to be answered moment by moment is "What next?"

You use that to wisely inform every choice and rejection in the conduct of your life. Pleasure is your North Star, the lighthouse by which to steer your little boat.

Post by “Cassius” of February 17, 2022 at 11:53 AM

I am working to try to catch up on editing this week's podcast and I realize I am doing everyone a disservice by not posting it before we got so far into this conversation. Not that we solved anything in the podcast, but I for one have probably been all over the board between here and in the podcast in trying to focus in on these issues. Will get it up hopefully later today.

Post by “Godfrey” of February 17, 2022 at 1:14 PM

This is a very illuminating discussion! Thanks to both [Don](#) and [Cassius](#) .

First, I reacted to post #53 with total agreement.

Quote from Don



[Quote from Cassius](#) But we still arrive at the same point once we identify "Pleasure is the Greatest Good:" because the daily question that has to be answered moment by moment is "What next?"

You use that to wisely inform every choice and rejection in the conduct of your life. Pleasure is your North Star, the lighthouse by which to steer your little boat

Following up on this quote: whether we define pleasure as the guide (North Star, lighthouse) or greatest good, once one has understood pleasure as foundational they still need to use practical wisdom in making choices and rejections. Once you're sailing to the lighthouse, you need to make wise decisions so you don't sink your little boat, and logic games won't be of much use. I think that's the point Cassius was making and I'm pretty sure we all agree on that.

Post by "Don" of February 17, 2022 at 1:38 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

logic games won't be of much use.

I'm legitimately sorry for being dense, but I'm just not seeing the "logic game" in all this. Steering toward pleasurable experiences should undergird all our choices and rejections. That's Epicurus's answer, as I see it, to the question of "what is that to which everything else points?". We should aim at that goal/telos. That's the definition of the "Greatest Good" - simply that thing that you base your "conduct of life" on. I don't see it as a logic problem or some kind of gotcha question. It seems eminently practical to me, and I think Epicurus's answer makes the most sense of any other possible answer.

Post by "Cassius" of February 17, 2022 at 2:01 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

That's Epicurus's answer, as I see it, to the question of "what is that to which everything else points?"

My answer to that part Don would be that it is not clear to me AT ALL that in an atomistic universe as we understand it to be, that there IS or SHOULD be something "at which everything else points." We *don't* think that in regard to the movement of the atoms through the void, so why should at some other point there be a single goal?

That is a *huge* presumption for the Platonists et al to be making -- that there is a "single good" that makes sense to everyone.

What I am suggesting is that if you come at the world through religion, then you stipulate that "god" sets the terms. But religion isn't the only way, and from the Pythagoreans and their numerology on through to Plato and his world of ideal forms, there is a "logic-based" approach through which you can allegedly conclude that there is a single good.

I'm suggesting that Epicurus rejected *both* approaches.

In religion, it's pretty simple to say "You're wrong because there is no god."

But in "logic-based approaches" it's not so simple to understand what they even are saying, must first decode and refute it.

They are postulating things in their formulas and their syllogisms that have to be questioned lest you be tricked. Is it really self-evident that it makes sense to talk of a single highest good? That's pretty much the question we're debating. If we're all in good faith about the basic fundamentals that there's no supernatural realm then we can presume that no one is trying to pull anything over on us, and we can talk about pleasure being "good." But while we agree on what pleasure is (a feeling) no one has ever defined explicitly what "good" is, and so you get packed into that word various presumptions which are at least potentially at odds with Epicurus. Among them are:

Can something be "good" without it being directly attached to pleasure and pain? The world seems to shout "yes" but I am not sure Epicurus would agree.

Are there in fact then many "goods"?

If so, what makes something good? We say pleasure, but the rest of the world shouts that it's more than that.

We pretty much agree I think that there are many pleasures, but they are unified to an extent because our feeling tells us they are pleasures. But all those many pleasures aren't identical to each other in every respect. Sex is not the same as filing your fingernails.

Are all pleasures equally pleasing? Are all goods equally good? If they are not equal and identical in every respect, can they be ranked?

Is there an absolute ranking to which all can refer, or is it purely personal how to rank them?

All these questions tend to get hidden if we jump to "pleasure is the greatest good" and think that ends the process.

Those are questions enough, but I seem to recall (and I bet someone can remind us) that Plato traps some of his interlocutors in his dialogues by talking about "cookery."

As I understand it (and I may be grossly wrong) he asks questions like we are discussing now, and he asks "How do you know which pleasure (or good) is the greatest?"

And he ends up suggesting that the only way we can know which good is the greatest is through WISDOM.

As a result, you end up concluding that if you have to have wisdom in order to know what is the greatest good. Thus by that reasoning it is wisdom itself, and not any other good that's in the competition, that therefore must be considered to be the greatest good.

(And that's the analogy to "cookery" -- the cook must know how to combine the elements in order to produce the best result in the food that is eventually to be served.)

I am concerned that that what I am arguing is going to sound like "nominalism" -- which I understand to mean that words have absolutely no meaning except what we give them, with the presumption that everything is totally relative in life and no certainty is possible in anything. I don't mean to be arguing that. But to a certain degree it is true that words are just symbols that we assign in our human brains, and that process of assembling symbols seems to me to be the "opinion" part of the thought process, which Epicurus held is preceded (and guided or tested by) the three canonical faculties, including pleasure and pain. So ultimately I think Epicurus was stressing that the feeling of pleasure is the only ultimate guide, but that as soon as we translate any of this into "opinions" we have to be on the lookout for errors.

So to repeat something I've asserted already, I think we are always on firm ground when we talk about the feeling of pleasure as being the guide of life. But when we talk about happiness or "good and evil" and other higher-level concepts, it looks to me like Epicurus was saying something like "Yes use those words because you have to, but be careful how you use them and be careful what you're admitting when you use them."

I want us to at least get to the point where we can clearly articulate the issues involved. We're getting closer, but I am not sure we are quite there yet. However I think we will get there.

One way to make progress would be if we were all clear on what Epicurus was warning about in his "don't walk about uselessly talking about the good" statement, and also what Torquatus is talking about when he said that Epicurus didn't hold that logical argument was necessary to establish that pleasure is desirable. We ought to at least be able to agree that he was warning about *something* and be able to articulate what he was warning about.

Post by “Don” of February 17, 2022 at 3:05 PM

Wow That's a lot to work through. For now...

[Quote from Cassius](#)

We *don't* think that in regard to the movement of the atoms through the void, so why should at some other point there be a single goal?

Atoms don't have free will. Humans do. Therefore, humans can decide to what goal they wish to direct themselves. Is there a goal other than pleasure that you would suggest?

I want to ask more questions about your post, but I'll leave it at that to get/keep the ball rolling.

Post by “Cassius” of February 17, 2022 at 3:25 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

Is there a goal other than pleasure that you would suggest?

Not ME! 😊 But there are a lots of other philosophers who would beg to differ, and they insist on arguing on "logic" grounds for other goals.

Post by “Don” of February 17, 2022 at 3:34 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

Is there a goal other than pleasure that you would suggest?

Not ME! 😊 But there are a lots of other philosophers who would beg to differ, and they insist on arguing on "logic" grounds for other goals.

Ah! But Epicurus based his answer on nature (babes and animals), not devious logic. So, my first inclination is to say "Who cares what the other philosophers argue?" I think that's what he meant about needlessly prattling on about the Good. His argument was "look to nature." That'll tell you what the Chief Good is.

Post by “Cassius” of February 17, 2022 at 5:18 PM

Finally I have got the latest Lucretius Today posted and anyone who has braved the length of this thread so far will want to catch it at some point. It doesn't solve any of the issues raised here but might articulate them differently. I wonder how many ways I contradicted myself between there and here after questioning from Don! All he had to have done was appeared with us on the podcast and we'd have cleared all this up last weekend! 😊

Post

[RE: Episode One Hundred Nine - The Epicurean View of Friendship](#)

Episode 109 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. In this week's episode we discuss the Epicurean View of Friendship:

[speaker.com/episode/48777070](https://www.speaker.com/episode/48777070)



Cassius

February 17, 2022 at 5:13 PM

Post by “Eikadistes” of February 17, 2022 at 5:19 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2401-from-the-golden-mean-to-tbe-summum-bonum-useful-or-deceptive-frames-of-reference/>

I found a number of descriptive, albeit conflicting accounts of the "highest good". In *Epicureanism* (2009), author Tim O'Keefe titles his eleventh chapter "Pleasure, the highest good". He explains, "For almost all Greek philosophers of the time, the fundamental questions of ethics were (i) what is the highest good and (ii) how do you attain it, with the highest good being what is desirable for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else. Epicurus declares pleasure to be the highest good" (107). He goes on, "Epicurus' ethics operates within the framework articulated by Aristotle, a framework that systematizes the ethical thinking of Aristotle's predecessors and was accepted by almost all later Greek philosophers. The central question of ethics is: what is the highest good? The good of something is its telos, its goal or purpose. This teleological analysis of the good extends quite widely; we can ask what the good is, not only of human life, but also of actions, artefacts, crafts such as medicine and so on. And in each case, we discover the item's good by discovering its goal or purpose" (111).

Sharples makes an interesting observation in *Stoics, Epicureans, and Sceptics* (1996) in proposing that "virtue will still, however, derive its *value* from pleasure, which is the sole good, rather than constituting an independent good" (93). Later, he observes, "The second of these views can be understood in terms of pleasure as the sole good [...] if the claim that friends come to be loved for their own sake rather than for advantage is interpreted simply as asserting that friendship ceases to be purely an instrumental good and becomes pleasant in itself" (119). So, here we have an author who supposes that pleasure is the *only* good, rather than being the greatest among many.

The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism (2009) makes that claim that it is indeed the "highest good". "The good is the end to which all other things are means, and never itself a means to an end (*Fin.* I.9). To discover what this end is, we ought to look at what creatures actually *do* pursue as the ultimate end of all of their actions, and this is to attain pleasure and avoid pain (*Fin.* I.30). [...] When Epicurus explain why pleasure is to be regarded as the highest good (*Ep. Men.* 129), he appeals to 'feeling' (*pathos*) as the yardstick for decision about what to choose. [...] Similarly, Epicurus calls pleasure the 'first and congenital' good (*Ep. Men.* 129)" (174).

The Routledge Handbook of Hellenistic Philosophy (2020) notes that "any experience of freedom from pain coincides with the highest good: 'pleasure exists everywhere, and for the entire time it lasts, there is no suffering either of body or of mind or both'" (KD3). Citing *De Fin.* 1.3 he quotes, "As soon as each animal is born, it seeks pleasure and rejoices in it as the highest good, and reject pain as the greatest bad thing, driving it away from itself as effectively as it can; and it does this while it is still not corrupted, while the judgment of nature herself is unperverted and sound." Later, they write, "Epicureans had in mind in identifying aponia and ataraxia as the highest good" and "Like almost all ancient ethicists, Epicurus is a eudaimonist, holding that the highest good is eudaimonia, or happiness. He is also a hedonist, because he identifies the happy life with the pleasant life: only pleasure is intrinsically good, and only pain is intrinsically bad".

Post by “Cassius” of February 17, 2022 at 6:39 PM

Nate thanks for that info! If anyone has not read the article by [Nikolsky](#) on the kinetic katastematic distinction, this would be a good time.

The premise of that article, which I believe is persuasively argued, is that later writers were forcing Epicurus improperly into their own paradigms, and that seeing this error explains much confusion.

It is easy to argue that that is what is going on here - that Cicero and later writers through today are insisting on viewing Epicurus through the paradigms of hostile and incompatible philosophic frameworks, and that this leads to major errors.

Remember too that in addition to [Nikolsky](#) that probably the longest and most detailed work on the topic, *The Greeks on Pleasure* by Gosling and Taylor, reaches much the same conclusion and was the foundation for Nikolskys conclusions.

Post by “Eikadistes” of February 17, 2022 at 8:44 PM

Where do we fit the following phrase from *Ep. Men.* into this discussion?

"...ΤΟ ΜΕΓΙΣΤΟΝ ΑΓΑΘΟΝ ΦΡΟΝΗΣΙΣ..."

Epicurus then compares ΦΡΟΝΗΣΙΣ against the "other virtues", therein linking the concepts of ΑΓΑΘΟΝ with ΑΡΕΤΑΙ.

Post by “Don” of February 17, 2022 at 8:59 PM

[Quote from Nate](#)

Where do we fit the following phrase from *Ep. Men.* into this discussion?

"...ΤΟ ΜΕΓΙΣΤΟΝ ΑΓΑΘΟΝ ΦΡΟΝΗΣΙΣ..."

Epicurus then compares ΦΡΟΝΗΣΙΣ against the "other virtues", therein linking the concepts of ΑΓΑΘΟΝ with ΑΡΕΤΑΙ.

Good question. How do you parse his calling "practical wisdom" as the "greatest good" in light of this thread so far?

Post by “Godfrey” of February 17, 2022 at 9:18 PM

[Don](#) I need to come clean on a bias I've got: I tend to contrast Epicurus with Cicero. I'm coming to value Cicero much more based on the podcast discussions, but I still don't trust the crafty old lawyer. Knowing that, I see that I'm writing my comments about the good in order to contrast what I see to be Epicurus' point of view with what I see as Cicero sending us down a rabbit hole filled with logic games.

Your project of translating Epicurus is extremely helpful in this regard and is helping all of us hone in on what exactly Epicurus was saying, at least given the fragmentary nature of what we have to work with. For me, Epicurus' system and particularly his Canon is really the important thing for living his philosophy. In this regard, the place of pleasure within his system is the important thing; trying to figure out if one thing or another is "The Greatest Good" is extraneous to that.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Sex is not the same as filing your fingernails.

This quote probably belongs at the top of our home page! Or perhaps in a collection of The Tao of Cassius 😊

Post by “Cassius” of February 17, 2022 at 9:46 PM

In regard to "the same thing"....

When i was editing the podcast this afternoon I became pretty dissatisfied with some of my formulations on "the same thing." I know that we can talk in categories and hierarchies as well, and that pleasure could be in the category of good or virtue, or virtue in the category of

pleasure or good, or whatever, so I don't mean to obsess over whether pleasure and virtue and good are entirely the same thing in every respect.

But if they are not the same thing in every respect, but they share something, then we need to be clear about what it is they share, and what that thing is, and describe that thing in a way that makes clear that it isn't either a "Platonic ideal" or an "essence" in Aristotelian terms.

So to get back to sex and filing fingernails, they certainly are not the same thing in every respect, and what they share in common is probably describable only as "a feeling of pleasure." However does that answer whether there are two pleasures, or is it more proper to say two activities that "bring a feeling of pleasure." Is the "feeling" part of those two things really exactly the same though? We might call both feelings pleasure, but I have a hard time believing that both things are identical in every respect. They seem to me to differ at least in intensity, and maybe even in time or other qualities.

This is that vexing "one and many" issue, or "universals" issue. I am not ever sure that we are clear on what Epicurus' position was on whether "universals" exist, or whether he held that there are only discrete experiences which we choose to call by the same names.

I tend to think that Epicurus did not believe in "universals" as having any kind of independent existence apart of the atoms and void involved, so when we start talking about something as High-level (or so it appears to me) as "good" then we really need to understand what it is that unifies "things that are good."

Plato and Aristotle clearly had views of what makes something "good" that differ dramatically from Epicurus, and on their framework it made perfect senses that there are ideals or essences that unify all "Goods" into the category of "good."

But does it make sense to say that Epicurus held anything to be good at all unless it is directly associated with bringing pleasure or avoiding pain? Is Frances Wright correct that we (speaking as Epicureans to Epicureans) can boil all this down to very simple statements that there is nothing good but pleasure, and nothing bad (or evil) except pain?

I'm probably not advancing the ball in this post but I wanted to note that I realize that there are different perspectives in looking at things, and just because two things like virtue and pleasure cannot be dissociated from each other, which seems to be the point of PD5, does not mean that they are themselves identical. (Or at least I don't think at this moment that it does!)

Post by "Cassius" of February 17, 2022 at 9:52 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

How do you parse his calling "practical wisdom" as the "greatest good"

I could definitely see this observation as part of the whole list of examples we are assembling that indicate that Epicurus was challenging conventional non-Epicurean notions of the greatest good.

It seems possible that he was not just in contrasting Pleasure vs Virtue vs Piety as concepts, but emphasizing that what's important (practical wisdom) is much more a moment to moment process than some kind of state that falls under normal "greatest good" terms.

Post by "Eikadistes" of February 17, 2022 at 10:32 PM



Post by "Eikadistes" of February 17, 2022 at 10:40 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

Good question. How do you parse his calling "practical wisdom" as the "greatest good" in light of this thread so far?

At this point, I can summarize my position as follows:

"It's all good." 😎

Post by “Godfrey” of February 18, 2022 at 2:14 AM

Contemplating sex and filing fingernails: my latest take on [PD09](#) is that Epicurus is saying that all pleasures are the same, they only differ in intensity, duration and location.

Not to get too sidetracked, but there are some hilarious videos online of dogs getting their nails cut... I won't post them here though 😊

Post by “Cassius” of February 18, 2022 at 6:39 AM

As I wake up this morning it strikes me as potentially obvious at least from our modern biological point of view that all pleasures are the same in at least (1) the way we define them as pleasure and (2) in the biological way that the sensation registers within our brains. What I mean there is, and I am not up on modern terminology, is that whatever the electro-chemical process is by which or minds recognize pleasure, that electro-chemical process likely functions in the same way for all pleasures. So in that sense the way in which we perceive pleasures internally likely IS pretty much the same for all pleasures. Is **that** what Epicurus was talking about?

Post by “Don” of February 18, 2022 at 7:02 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Is **that** what Epicurus was talking about?

Yes.

Post by “Cassius” of February 18, 2022 at 7:33 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

Yes.

Well if it is, that is what we need to work to explain, and we haven't even cracked the book on beginning to describe a tentative elaboration on that, or on what its implications are, or on how something very real and concrete relates to something abstract and conceptual like a "greatest good."

Post by “Eikadistes” of February 18, 2022 at 10:52 AM

After reflection, I'm inclined to see "the Good" as an evaluative statement that expresses a measurement of the magnitude of pleasure. On a scale of 0% to 100%, we might describe "the highest good" as those actions which most reliably facilitate the cultivation of maximum pleasure. Therein, "the Good" is *not* necessarily pleasure, *itself* (since pleasure is elsewhere defined as the goal of life), but rather, an evaluation of the means by which that goal is achieved.

Contrasting Epicurus "good" with Plato's might be helpful. Plato's *Form of the Good* reads to me like a contemporary description of God the Father (I am reminded that C. S. Lewis ends his *Chronicles of Narnia* with a character, having been resurrected, exclaiming "It's all in Plato, all in Plato.") The *Form of the Good* is supreme, existing beyond space and time, the origin of knowledge against which all forms can be compared to define their identity and agency.

This sort of *a priori*, transcendental knowledge provides a juxtaposition against Epicurus' *preconceptions*. Whereas the preconceptions are mental impressions that come from nature, the *Form of the Good* is the foundation of reality from which nature gains its (lessened) identity. The *Form of the Good* is the only thing that can be said to truly exist; the identities of the daily forms we experience are defined according to their relationship with the *Form of the Good*.

Contrary to the descriptions from the scholars I cited earlier, pleasure cannot be the only good, because Epicurus directly identifies prudence as the "highest good", as well as comparing "goods" to "virtues", so that leads me to believe that Epicurus recognized a host of goods, each of which can be measured against the others according to which one most reliably and successfully provides the means by which the goal of life (which is definitely pleasure) is achieved.

... but he does also identify pleasure as another *good*, and pleasure is definitely not a *virtue*.

It may behoove us to distinguish between "good" things, like dogs, sunshine, and pleasure versus "the Good(s)", a category of natural virtues which include prudence and wisdom. The adjectival employment of "good" is used by Epicurus as a functional descriptor to express approval; it is also used as a noun in reference to (as I read it) an evaluation of the efficacy of an action to produce the goal of pleasure.

Post by “Don” of February 18, 2022 at 11:11 AM

Thanks for that, @Nate . That's some good food for thought.

Along similar lines, I'm thinking that pleasure is the good that stands alone, it is the guide/telos/ταγαθον. Other "good things" are *instrumental* goods in helping us get to that goal of pleasure, in greater and lesser degrees ([Cassius](#) 's toenail clipping vs sex). I'm still working on these thoughts, but that's where I'm heading.

Post by “Kalosyni” of February 18, 2022 at 12:03 PM

Regarding the telos, etc. So certain philosophers wanted to have things so neat and tidy...did Epicurus want things neat and tidy too? (or was this just a tactic of the opposing schools to say Epicurus' ideas were "not right").

Or because he was basing his thinking on the material world did he then see a messy quality to the world?

My questions here could be due to a "post-philosophical" way of thinking...going beyond "cooking with a set recipe" to "using the ingredients on hand" so basically that would mean that sometimes wisdom is a primary tool for making choices and other times pleasure works best as the primary tool for making choices... and sometimes both wisdom and pleasure at the same time. And as for defining the abstractions of good, highest good, pleasure, etc.... If we are forced to set aside "black and white" thinking...then we use "shades of gray...meaning that we must always base things in observable specific situations. There won't be one rule or correct way that can be referred to...so that means that sometimes we don't choose the immediate pleasure at hand, but instead wait for a future pleasure which will be much more fulfilling. But we must see that we are all "cooking without a recipe and using what we have on hand" as we navigate through life.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

whatever the electro-chemical process is by which our minds recognize pleasure, that electro-chemical process likely functions in the same way for all pleasures. So in that sense the way in which we perceive pleasures internally likely IS pretty much the same for all pleasures

I'm not sure we perceive all pleasures in the same way...because of the mix of serotonin, dopamine, endorphines, oxytocin, and they each act differently within the brain. So for peak happiness it would be good to pursue activities that trigger each of these chemicals. So just like there are "four food groups" that we should eat from for good health. Then there are these "four brain health groups" that give optimum happiness.

This is a good article:

[The Importance of Happiness Chemicals | nib](#)

Serotonin, dopamine, endorphins and oxytocin are happiness chemicals that have a huge impact on how we feel each day. Dr Michela Sorensen takes us through the...

www.nib.com.au

Post by "Don" of February 18, 2022 at 12:20 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

sometimes wisdom is a primary tool for making choices and other times pleasure works best as the primary tool for making choices... and sometimes both wisdom and pleasure at the same time

From my perspective, wisdom (practical wisdom/phronesis) is always subservient to pleasure. We use wisdom to pursue pleasure, to make choices on immediate pleasure or postponing pleasure. Pleasure is always the goal. Wisdom is a means to get there.

Post by "Kalosyni" of February 18, 2022 at 1:07 PM

Further thoughts on "post-philosophy"...

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2401-from-the-golden-mean-to-the-summum-bonum-useful-or-deceptive-frames-of-reference/>

If we can't or don't want to agree on exact definitions of words (because of several reasons) then how do we do philosophy?

1) We can't agree because certain words themselves are too abstract, and to give an exact definition will mean that we are no longer "doing philosophy" and instead we are now in the realm of psychology/self-help...which personally I am okay with that. But there will not be one "right way"...and I am okay with that too.

2) If we want to agree on one definition that will force us into trying to find the "right" answer or one "right" formula. Do we really think that there is always one right answer to everything?

So I would suggest that the best way out of this conundrum is to accept that we need to move toward a more open-ended way of approaching the world. This is not skepticism, because we can say given the assertion A... then if you do B or if you do C, then there is a likelihood that W, X, Y, or Z will result. The results are not infinite. They are dependent on the inputs. We can be certain that something will result from our actions, and there may be a higher likelihood of one result over the other, but sometimes we won't be able to know until we take action (so you have to choose based purely on which option has the greatest anticipated pleasure without depending on reason). In Buddhism there is a phrase called "skillful means" and we can learn from our previous experiences. You could then analyze backward and ask: "When do the best results happen? What causes the best results in decision making?"

On the flip side of what I just said about there not being one right way...is that as Epicureans we could take specific stands on things, as to which things in life bring the best pleasure and as well as the most pleasure over the longest time...so that would be: don't do such and such, but instead do X Y Z.

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.

Post by "Scott" of February 18, 2022 at 7:17 PM

[Quote from Nate](#)

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 don't know as much as you do about this, @Nate (and [Don](#) ...and many others in this forum!) but I would hope the above is correct regarding Epicurus. Trying to lock down a term like "Summum Bonum" / "Greatest Good" or "The Most Important Thing" etc is something that doesn't resonate with what I "feel" from Epicurus and EP. Even the term pleasure is referencing something with variation and nuance beyond what that word can capture. It is possible to focus too much on terminology. I mean I realize one has to be clear, but one can also spend too much time on it. At the end of the day, it seems to me the EP life should be measured by its practical results in a person, not in the beauty or consistency of its philosophical terminology or even its rationality .

Post by “Cassius” of February 18, 2022 at 7:43 PM

I have been really tied up today and not able to keep up so trying to do that now. At the moment my primary thought is:

I really like [Post #83](#)

Post by “Scott” of February 18, 2022 at 7:45 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I really like Post #83

ME TOO! 👍 👍

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 τᾶγαθὸν 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 τᾶγαθὸν itself within that Greek cultural milieu and why it was so widespread. Epicurus couldn't conceive of τᾶγαθὸν "without the joys of taste, of sex, of hearing, and without the pleasing motions caused by the sight of bodies and forms." τᾶγαθὸν 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.

Post by “Eikadistes” of February 19, 2022 at 10:49 AM

To my knowledge, *ΤΑΓΑΘΟΝ* is not found in the texts of early Ionian philosophers (whom De Witt identifies as being a philosophical inspiration for Epicurus), and Democritus rarely uses *ΤΑΓΑΘΟΝ* in favor of the abundant *ΤΑΓΑΘΑ* or "the goods" (<https://philarchive.org/archive/PACTCO-8v1>). Where we cannot find many instances of *ΤΑΓΑΘΟΝ* in Epicurean writings, and their older cousins, we find an abundance of the word in the writings of his contemporary and earlier opponents.

I did just notice that Epicurus only refers to *ΦΡΟΝΗΣΙΣ* as "the greatest good", but never as "the good", "the first good" or "The Good" which he explicitly uses elsewhere to reserve for "pleasure". So, I think I see what you mean, [Don](#).

Post by “Cassius” of February 19, 2022 at 11:05 AM

I agree with most of what is written above, but one additional point I would include is that the Latin authorities were much closer to the Greek language and to the Epicurean texts than we will ever be (as to both).

So when we know that someone like Lucretius is trying to be faithful, I think their interpretations are entitled to great deference, even to the extent of considering them to have much more expertise than our own efforts to grasp the Greek.

Post by “Don” of February 19, 2022 at 11:21 AM

[Quote from Nate](#)

(<https://philarchive.org/archive/PACTCO-8v1>).

That's the exact article I uncovered, too 😊

I find the brief exposition of Democritus's philosophy in that paper to be an interesting precursor to, or to dimly presage, Epicurus's own.

Post by “Don” of February 19, 2022 at 11:33 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I agree with most of what is written above, but one additional point I would include is that the Latin authorities were much closer to the Greek language and to the Epicurean texts than we will ever be (as to both).

I can respect where you're coming from, but it's still a secondary filter with their own cultural assumptions coloring the interpretation.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

So when we know that someone like Lucretius is trying to be faithful, I think their interpretations are entitled to great deference, even to the extent of considering them to have much more expertise than our own efforts to grasp the Greek.

One issue with Lucretius is that we know virtually nothing about the person. Where did study? Did he just have access to Epicurus's *On Nature* and some letters and teach himself (granted, as we do!) or did he learn his Epicurean philosophy from an authoritative teacher of the school itself? I've seen some papers that argue he was unaware of some contemporary Epicurean thought.

As far as deference, my preference would be - wherever possible - to compare two Greek sources to see how they're using terms and concepts either in comparison or contrast. But

again, I respect where you're coming from, but the Latin authors - especially Cicero - are still one step removed from the original sources. There's some evidence that Cicero used Philodemus for the Torquatus material. In which case, I'm going back to Philodemus and see where he can illuminate Cicero, not the other way around.

PS... I should say that it's not that I don't think the Latin sources are important! By Zeus, we have so few sources to begin with! But I am saying that, for me, defence will always be given to Greek sources. De Rerum Natura is priceless, *but* I want to squeeze everything I can out of every scrap of Lucretius's *sources* especially Epicurus's On Nature. That's why I'm trying to translate the texts in Les Epicuriens that I haven't been able to find anywhere else. Granted, it's like reading a description of the reflection of the Moon in the pond through sunglasses (fancy designer French sunglasses) but it's all I got 😎

Post by “Cassius” of February 19, 2022 at 12:17 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

but it's all I got

I think I am going to suggest to the podcast team that our next stop after we finish Torquatus in the next couple of weeks will be to go back to Epicurus' own letters, Herodotus, Pythocles, and Menoecus, in that order.

Especially Herodotus I don't think we have given nearly the attention it deserves, and we are much better equipped to do that now after going through the last two years of podcasting.

Post by “Don” of February 19, 2022 at 12:45 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

go back to Epicurus' own letters, Herodotus, Pythocles, and Menoecus, in that order.

Sounds interesting. And definitely in that order! Maybe I'll rejoin in 2024 when you get to Menoikeus 😊

Post by “Cassius” of February 19, 2022 at 2:17 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

Maybe I'll rejoin in 2024 when you get to Menoikeus 😊

I am not so optimistic we will get there that quickly!

Post by “Cassius” of February 19, 2022 at 2:19 PM

Ok in less than an hour I will have the third zoom meeting on A Few Days In Athens up and I will post it here. Most of that discussion turned out to revolve around issues similar to what we are discussing here. I don't add much myself that you haven't heard already, but Kevin Guilfooy (the philosopher teacher) has some interesting comments on one and many goods, comparing Epicurus view of the highest good to the Stoics, etc. I am sorry I did not get this posted earlier! Unfortunately this week I had to produce three separate productions, and I am finding that two is about my productive limit.

Post by “Cassius” of February 19, 2022 at 3:02 PM

The discussion from Chapter Three where Kevin (who is a philosophy professor) touches on some of the issues we are discussing in this thread.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q93EcRrYd10>

Post by “Cassius” of February 19, 2022 at 11:10 PM

I wonder if we can begin to summarize practical takeaways from this thread. Would they include something like the following?

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2401-from-the-golden-mean-to-the-summa-bonum-useful-or-deceptive-frames-of-reference/>

1 I think most or all of us are unimpressed that the idea of a golden mean is very helpful for much of anything, and it is likely more of a harmful oversimplification than a help.

2 To the extent that someone asks us to explain what was Epicurus' position on "the greatest good," would the explanation start with a statement that "greatest good was not Epicurus' preferred formulation, which instead was _____." (?)

3 That to the extent "greatest good" is taken to imply that there are multiple independent goods that can be ranked, Epicurus' viewpoint was distinctively that:

A. In order to be classified as good a thing must produce pleasure / remove pain, and

B. That these pleasures and pains are both bodily and mental so we are talking about an innumerable variety of pleasures and pains, not just immediate bodily sensations, and

C. That any ranking of pleasures and pains is substantially personal and contextual and although generalizations can be made (i.e., being boiled in oil is very unpleasant for most people) there is no final list that is absolute for everyone, and

D. That there are an innumerable number of things that are instrumental in producing pleasure, including the classical virtues and many other things. While there is no absolute ranking of these, Epicurus specially noted that among the most important are friendship and prudence.

If this is way off let's keep working and try again and see where we can improve it.

Post by "Scott" of February 20, 2022 at 7:15 AM

To all contributors to this thread (including [Kalosyni](#) and [Godfrey](#), but most especially [Don](#), @Nate & [Cassius](#) 😞 I'm going to delete this post after leaving it up long enough for you to read it, because I'm not adding anything of substance here and I don't want to clutter things up. I only wanted a way to say I continue to be **deeply** impressed and am **SUPER** excited to see where this thread has been going! It "feels" like Epicurus is really being uncovered and his voice is becoming possible to hear even though he must speak to us through the accumulated dust of so many centuries and translations and a whirling dervish of individuals and idioms and tropes and cultural paradigms. This is the kind of detective work that the academy should be doing but it seems that to date has been done so much less than is needed, and I just can't imagine how you do this level of work - and keep up your "day jobs"!!! 😊 😊 😊 Thank you so much for all your incredibly valuable contributions to understanding EP in this thread (AND in

all the others!). This is such a significant and insightful philosophy with such potential to add sanity to the world, and it's so very unfortunate that besides the great sense of satisfaction you must enjoy from this work, there is no other award you earn more than some trophy icons in the EF! 😞 😞 😞

I just can't thank enough. I wish there were a glorious host of supernatural angels to applaud from heaven! 😊

Bowing low,

-S

Post by “Cassius” of February 20, 2022 at 8:27 AM

Other than the credit being more than we deserve, I'd be happy to see you leave a version of that up, as it does provide encouragement to everyone to continue.

Also, what you are describing is very close to the reason we started the forum in the first place. The academics don't have the motivation to restore a practical understanding of Epicurus that laymen (those who are not experts in philosophy) can understand. At very best most of the academics are eclectic and just looking to add a few twists to their existing paradigms. In any case, their primary goal is not "popularization" of the philosophy.

I think giving Epicurus a chance requires a complete review of all the basics with fresh eyes, and that more than anything else I think is why Norman DeWitt set the model for the approach. We may differ with him on some details, but he was the first and most effective major modern academic writer to devote his career to Epicurus and try to present his entire philosophy accurately but also sympathetically to a wider audience. I don't think anyone yet has surpassed him or even tried to duplicate what he produced in "Epicurus And His Philosophy."

What we are doing in threads like this is picking up where he left off, updating it with the latest discoveries, and fine tuning some of his interpretations.

The next step after that is harnessing the technology to create true online cooperative "schools," and then extend that into real-world events and relationships. I use the plural because I think we'll have lots of people doing something similar as time goes by, but they need the formulations and other raw materials that we are working on here. This forum germinated from relationships formed on Facebook, and from this forum and what we can develop here and elsewhere lots more is possible.