

Summum bonum (Atheist & Bishop podcast)

Post by “Don” of June 24, 2023 at 8:29 AM

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=g5uzJT7EdD4&feature=share7>

I've watched Alex O'Connor's work on YouTube for awhile and came across this episode of his podcast. Y'all are welcome to react to the episode as a whole of you wish, but the Catholic bishop talks about the summum bonum at around 14 or 15 minute mark. His explanation is exactly how I understand the term: keep asking "why?" and the answer at the end is your summum bonum. I can see the answer being "it brings me pleasure" Her didn't, of course. But I thought this was a good explanation of the term summum bonum. Which is why I balk at Dewitt's "life is the greatest good" because it seems a tautology to answer why I do something as "because I'm alive."

Anyway, it's an interesting conversation.

Post by “Cassius” of June 24, 2023 at 9:42 AM

Thanks for the link!

[Quote from Don](#)

Which is why I balk at Dewitt's "life is the greatest good" because it seems a tautology to answer why I do something as "because I'm alive."

That framing of the question may be the most profound passage on the forum today.



I think I will ask [Elli](#) to weigh in on how considering "because I am alive" or "life" may be very relevant to the idea of a "greatest good."

And I bet she might have better quotes / ideas than I have below to explore the issue.

In Epicurean terms, is not "life without pain" so close to "feeling without pain" that "life" = pleasure just like "feeling without pain" = pleasure?

If we are focusing as Epicurus did on the fact that we have an eternity of nothingness before birth and after life, is not our brief opportunity to live and to find

pleasure pretty much synonymous?

Does not "I want to live" mean essentially "I want to experience pleasure" in Epicurean terms?

And if in Epicurean terms "life" is pleasurable, might not DeWitt be onto something by his phrasing? (Once we translate life into pleasure through Epicurus analysis.)

Is the reasoning that Chrysippus was attacking with the hand analogy or Cicero was attacking with the "host pouring wine" analogy really very far from considering "life - in the absence of pain" to be best formulation? Is that very far from Torquatus saying "*I affirm that all who are without pain are in pleasure, and in that the fullest possible!*"

Is considering "being alive" to be the answer to why we do things very far from Nietzsche's formulations about saying "Yes" to life, in which he thinks he needs to go beyond Epicurus because Epicurus isn't "strong" or "forceful" enough about how to live (with which I think we would all here disagree)?

From [Wikipedia](#):

Nietzschean affirmation ([German](#): *Bejahung*) is a concept that has been scholarly identified in the [philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche](#). An example used to describe the concept is a fragment in Nietzsche's [The Will to Power](#):

Quote

Suppose that we said yes to a single moment, then we have not only said yes to ourselves, but to the whole of existence. For nothing stands alone, either in ourselves or in things; and if our soul did but once vibrate and resound with a chord of happiness, then all of eternity was necessary to bring forth this one occurrence—and in this single moment when we said yes, all of eternity was embraced, redeemed, justified and affirmed.

— *Nietzsche, Friedrich, The Will to Power: Selections from the Notebooks of the 1880s* (translated by R. Kevin Hill and Michael A. Scarpitti). Penguin Books, 2017, p. 566^[1]

Opposition to Schopenhauer

[Walter Kaufmann](#) wrote that Nietzsche "celebrates the Greeks who, facing up to the terrors of nature and history, did not seek refuge in "a [Buddhistic](#) negation of the will," as [Schopenhauer](#) did, but instead created [tragedies](#) in which life is affirmed as beautiful in spite of everything."^[2] ^[3] Schopenhauer's negation of the will was a saying "no" to life and to the world, which he judged to be a scene of pain and [evil](#). "[D]irectly against Schopenhauer's place as the ultimate nay-sayer to life, Nietzsche positioned himself as the ultimate yes-sayer..."^[4] Nietzsche's affirmation of life's pain and evil, in opposition to Schopenhauer, resulted from an overflow of life.^[5] Schopenhauer's advocacy of self-denial and negation of life was, according to Nietzsche,

very harmful.[6] For his entire mature life, Nietzsche was concerned with the damage that he thought resulted from Schopenhauerian disgust with life and turning against the world.

Post by “Cassius” of June 24, 2023 at 10:08 AM

And yes that is a good formulation starting at the 14:00 minute mark, to which the ultimate motivation or cause is pretty clear, and which they refuse to accept:

"And for this cause we call pleasure the beginning and end of the blessed life. For we recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good."

"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."

"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?"

Post by “Don” of June 24, 2023 at 11:01 AM

I don't think you can answer "Why did you do that?" with "Because I'm alive" and have it have any real meaning.

By definition, if you're dead you don't exist; you can't perform any action if you don't exist.

If I say, "Because it gives pleasure" or "it gives me a pleasurable feeling," and you ask why; then I can say "Because of biology and natural selection, etc." but that's gilding the lily to my mind. But biology and natural selection can't be motivating factors. They are the scaffolding that makes my living possible, but they don't answer "why"... Maybe "how." We feel because we're alive. When we're alive, we feel. Our *feelings* answer the why, if we're honest with ourselves.

Post by “Cassius” of June 24, 2023 at 11:26 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

I don't think you can answer "Why did you do that?" with "Because I'm alive" and have it have any real meaning.

I agree that we can't do that today with our current connotations. I think DeWitt is asking, however, whether that was not the direction that Epicurus was going, and once one "thinks like an Epicurean" in equating life in the absence of pain to be pleasure, then equating "being alive" with "pleasurable experience" is a natural association, and a good way to think.

This is one of the paragraphs we recently covered in "the new hedonism" chapter:

Quote

The extension of the name of pleasure to this normal state of being was the major innovation of the new hedonism. It was in the negative form, freedom from pain of body and distress of mind, that it drew the most persistent and vigorous condemnation from adversaries. The contention was that the application of the name of pleasure to this state was unjustified on the ground that two different things were thereby being denominated by one name. Cicero made a great to-do over this argument, but it is really superficial and captious. The fact that the name of pleasure was not customarily applied to the normal or static state did not alter the fact that the name ought to be applied to it; nor that reason justified the application; nor that human beings would be the happier for so reasoning and believing.

Just thinking out loud at the moment but I think this drift of thought is probably the explanation for DeWitt's viewpoint on the summum bonum, and I am not sure he's not right.

Post by “Joshua” of June 24, 2023 at 12:01 PM

Quote

So he,

The master, then by his truth-speaking words,
Purged the breasts of men, and set the bounds
Of lust and terror, and exhibited
The supreme good whither we all endeavour,
And showed the path whereby we might arrive
Thereunto by a little cross-cut straight,
And what of ills in all affairs of mortals
Upsprang and flitted deviously about
(Whether by chance or force), since Nature thus
Had destined.
Display More

I guess the problem at least in Lucretius is that "life itself" does not answer the question of "whither [do] we all endeavor?" Whither? To pleasure.

Post by "Cassius" of June 24, 2023 at 12:34 PM

[Quote from Joshua](#)

Whither? To pleasure

Right and I agree. But if your paradigm is that life (without pain) IS pleasure, then aligning ones perspective in that direction might result in major terminology shifts, such as when the Epicureans continued to use the word "God" to refer to beings that the people of the day construed as most ungodlike.

No doubt, like Cicero said, people don't normally talk that way. But I have to think that in insisting that as to a normal and ordinary "hand," and as to the equation of the pourer to the drinker, that they are all in the state of greatest pleasure, and as to holding dogmatically that all we need to know about someone to say that they are in the greatest pleasure is that they say they are without pain - in those examples something is being telegraphed to us that we may find unintelligible due to our perspectives today, but which indicates a resolution to much that seems puzzling about Epicurus.

Post by “Cassius” of June 24, 2023 at 1:28 PM

My current thinking is that Torquatus' statement that the highest good is pleasure was by the book and correct, and that DeWitt's reformulation of the words is not the best way forward to explain the issue.

However I am thinking that Dewitt is sensing correctly that Epicurus was linking pleasure to life so closely that Dewitt is in fact correct to see that there is an important shift in perspectives going on which Cicero is not explaining. And moving toward "life" is a much more accurate and satisfying way forward rather than obsessing over "katastematic pleasure" or "pleasures of rest."

And that shift is something like --- Since life itself is to be considered pleasurable in so fundamental a way, as the healthy and active functioning of body and mind, it is more faithful to the meaning for us today to think "I am alive and therefore I am going to seize the day and pursue life and pleasure to the fullest" than it is to think "I am alive and today gives me another opportunity to pursue pleasure (if by pleasure we understand ice cream and only indulgence of the senses."

Everything turns on how wide a definition we can understand the word "Pleasure" to mean. Once we accept that everything which is not painful is pleasurable then we can be understood to refer to Pleasure, but til then steps have to be undertaken to emphasize that life itself is pleasurable.

Post by “Godfrey” of June 24, 2023 at 3:04 PM

Quote from Cassius

And moving toward "life" is a much more accurate and satisfying way forward rather than obsessing over "katastematic pleasure" or "pleasures of rest."

This makes sense to me when you consider that canonic pleasure is the guide to a healthy life. However "life itself," or being alive, often and for many can involve a preponderance of pain over pleasure. Being alive is our greatest gift, moving toward "life" or pleasure seems more in line with the greatest good and I'm not convinced that Epicurus was trying to make that particular leap of reasoning.

However.... If one were to reach the conclusion that "virtue" is the greatest good then the approach might be different. Virtue is an abstract idea. Life is an objective experience. Framed in this way, life is a greater good than any abstract ideal (at least, I assume, for most of us reading this).

Post by "Cassius" of June 24, 2023 at 3:19 PM

Yes the question is best viewed in terms of Don's original formulation

Quote from Don

Which is why I balk at Dewitt's "life is the greatest good" because it seems a tautology to answer why I do something as "because I'm alive."

I see this (I am going to pursue life actively because I am alive) as at the same level of analysis as saying that all animals at birth before they are corrupted pursue pleasure and avoid pain. We are making a generalization and deducing a goal from the fact that all living things are born that way, and while we live and are healthy our natural goal is to continue that way in a state of pleasure. And I really don't know that I think that natural cycles of developing natural and ordinary degrees of hunger or thirst should be considered to be "pain.". Seems to me that these are aspects of normal functioning and only situations where abnormal hunger or thirst develops would really be considered "painful.". That goes along with our earlier discussions where some argue that not every unfulfilled desire is a matter of pain.

Post by "Don" of June 24, 2023 at 5:55 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

And I really don't know that I think that natural cycles of developing natural and ordinary degrees of hunger or thirst should be considered to be "pain.". Seems to me that these are aspects of normal functioning and only situations where abnormal hunger or thirst develops would really be considered "painful.". That goes along with our earlier discussions where some argue that not every unfulfilled desire is a matter of pain.

I'd say by definition that feeling hungry is pain because it's not pleasure to feel hungry... And the feelings are two. In modern neuroscience terms, you either feel positive (pleasure) or negative (pain) affect. It might not be very high arousal in the negative direction if you're just feeling "noshy" but it's negative/pain all the same.

Post by “Cassius” of June 24, 2023 at 7:13 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

I'd say by definition that feeling hungry is pain because it's not pleasure to feel hungry

I doubt there is a way to be sure of this question but for example sitting at dinner for thanksgiving and looking forward to the meal might be something I would consider to be a type of hunger that is pleasure.

However the big point to me is not to get lost in what I see as a detail in application, but to address the reason you posted the thread in the first place.

In the world of people who ask why about the world everyone is going to meet these pointy headed or religious intellectuals who reduce everything to an "uncaused cause" and say that it is a Prime Mover or a God or an Ideal Form, and an Epicurean has to be prepared to push back and call BS and say that there is no reason for such a fantasy, because "nothing comes from nothing" and the rest of the Epicurean physics and Epistemology established with confidence that the universe had no beginning or cause outside itself.

And within that natural universe using the same techniques of observation and reason we conclude that the feeling of pleasure is the positive guide which takes the places of gods or idealism. And if you are the type of person who cares about their logical arguments that pleasure can never be satisfied or completed, then you have Epicurus' explanation that the proper view of pleasure included all types of pain free mental and physical action.

You can then analogize the satisfied and complete life of pleasure as a mechanical engine operating in top condition and performance operating frictionlessly, or a fat and sleek and well kept hog rolling in the mud, or whatever analogy strikes your fancy, so long as it is an analogy of something operating in a healthy way and at peak capacity and without pain.

If you don't have that "healthy operation" analogy as a part of pleasure, then these priests and philosophers will ultimately convince you that Epicurus missed something when you get old or otherwise lose interest in stimulating excitement (sex drugs and rock and roll) .

But with pleasure viewed in this way the intellectual BS can be beat back and shown to be just the kind of manipulation that Lucretius described it as being in book one of the poem.

Post by “Don” of June 24, 2023 at 7:17 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I think DeWitt is asking, however, whether that was not the direction that Epicurus was going, and once one "thinks like an Epicurean" in equating life in the absence of pain to be pleasure, then equating "being alive" with "pleasurable experience" is a natural association, and a good way to think.

I think DeWitt is just mistaken, especially in light of his "Latin doesn't have a definite article" hobbyhorse in his summum bonum paper. I do not think this was the direction Epicurus was going. It's not "life in the absence of pain = pleasure", it is simply "the absence of the feeling of pain = pleasure" and conversely "the absence of the feeling of pleasure = pain." Adding "life" to the equation doesn't add anything. We have to be alive - we have to exist! - to feel pleasure or pain.

Post by “Don” of June 24, 2023 at 7:22 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I doubt there is a way to be sure of this question but for example sitting at dinner for thanksgiving and looking forward to the meal might be something I would consider to be a type of hunger that is pleasure.

I'd say the anticipation of tucking into the feast is the pleasure, not the feeling of hunger itself.

Post by “Cassius” of June 24, 2023 at 7:32 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

We have to be alive - we have to exist! - to feel pleasure or pain.

And that's exactly why I would say that it makes sense to emphasize the "life" aspect as part of the equation, so that no one gets the idea that pleasure or pain are themselves disembodied forces or god or of nature or ideals that exist apart from the living being.

Post by "Don" of June 24, 2023 at 7:32 PM

I truly and sincerely don't understand the knots into which we tie ourselves in these discussions about the "greatest good," the summum bonum, the telos, etc. To me it's simple and clear as day:

All those terms simply mean "What motivates your actions when you keep asking why you do what you do?" Epicurus answered, correctly in my opinion, pleasure. Pleasure, both in the short term and the long term, motivates all our actions. Full stop. Stoics answered virtue. Epicurus could come back with, why do you act virtuously... Because it brings you pleasure!

All the to'ing and fro'ing befuddles me to no end.

Post by "Cassius" of June 24, 2023 at 7:34 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

All the to'ing and fro'ing befuddles me to no end.

What do you do with that priest in the video when he reaches the "uncaused cause" part of his chain of reasoning, and suggests to you that that is "God?"

I suspect that you have a good answer to that, but I also expect that 95% of the world does not.

Post by "Don" of June 24, 2023 at 7:35 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

We have to be alive - we have to exist! - to feel pleasure or pain.

And that's exactly why I would say that it makes sense to emphasize the "life" aspect as part of the equation, so that no one gets the idea that pleasure or pain are themselves disembodied forces or god or of nature or ideals that exist apart from the living being.

None of this has any meaning for things that don't exist! Pleasure and pain are feelings *of living beings.*

Post by “Don” of June 24, 2023 at 8:12 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

All the to'ing and fro'ing befuddles me to no end.

What do you do with that priest in the video when he reaches the "uncaused cause" part of his chain of reasoning, and suggests to you that that is "God?"

I suspect that you have a good answer to that, but I also expect that 95% of the world does not.

Oh, that? I think he's deluded and indoctrinated and unwilling to honestly assess his preconceived notions. There's no need for an "uncaused cause." As Joshua pointed out in an historical antidote in the last episode of the podcast, there's no need for that notion in physics.

My point is that if you're trying to counter the unmoved mover claim, you've already ceded the argument to them.

I do not believe answering the summum bonum question in any way cedes the field to anyone. I think Epicurus scored the winning goal on that playing field.

Post by “Cassius” of June 24, 2023 at 9:00 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

I think Epicurus scored the winning goal on that playing field.

Yes I think you are right but this is our task - to explain the reasoning to the "hearts in darkness."

Post by “Don” of June 24, 2023 at 9:22 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

I think Epicurus scored the winning goal on that playing field.

Yes I think you are right but this is our task - to explain the reasoning to the "hearts in darkness."

Tell them to turn on the light!

Post by “Joshua” of June 24, 2023 at 9:25 PM

I had almost forgotten that Bishop Barron did a video on *The Swerve* several years ago:

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=RRbpZr3OcWE>

Post by “Don” of June 24, 2023 at 9:54 PM

LOL! He uses an image of Seneca to illustrate Lucretius.

The medieval Christians were "properly" curious. 😄

To use the Barron's words: "C'mon, give me a break!" 😄

Thanks for sharing, Joshua!

btw, just because I think he defined what the summum bonum is accurately doesn't imply I agree with anything else he says! A broken clock is right twice a day.

PS.:

Sorry, can't let this go. I also freely admit that it's been quite awhile since I read Greenblatt's book, so this is more a response to Barron than a defense of Greenblatt's work.

Barron brings up Bocaccio's Decameron. This is from Bocaccio's Wikipedia article: "he challenged the arguments of clerical intellectuals who wanted to limit access to classical sources to prevent any moral harm to Christian readers. The revival of classical antiquity became a foundation of the Renaissance, and his defense of the importance of ancient literature was an essential requirement for its development."

"Chaucer's attitudes toward the Church should not be confused with his attitudes toward Christianity. He seems to have respected and admired Christians and to have been one himself, though he also recognised that many people in the church were venal and corrupt." (Wikipedia)

If Barron is dismissive of Greenblatt's thesis, Barron seems a little free and easy with his interpretation of medieval Catholicism, too.

Post by "Joshua" of June 24, 2023 at 11:34 PM

That's one of the more frustrating aspects of the response to Greenblatt's book. They downplay self-flagellation, which admittedly probably was restricted to the real hardliners, but take no account of the persecution of Heretical sects, the torture and murder of apostates, the relish of punishment of the damned in hell, the culture of fear and inquisition, the conversion of "heathens" at the point of a sword, the anti-Jewish pogroms, the hunting and burning of accused witches, and the infamous *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*.

One reviewer actually wrote *this* with a straight face;

Quote

Indeed the Middle Ages are considered Europe's most bookish era, a time when books — Christian, Greek and Roman alike — were accorded near totemic authority. Medieval readers and writers (not just clergy — lay culture was widely influenced by texts and documents, especially following the 10th century) were apt to believe anything they read in an old book just because it was old and from a book.

As if to say that *that* were a sign of literacy. Well I'm sorry, but a literate and literary society does *not* believe something just because they read it in a book. A literate society knows enough about books *not* to take them blindly or at face value. It is only credulity and ignorance and illiteracy that views books as 'totemic'.

But imagine someone saying or writing that in the middle ages--and about one book in particular--and then try pretending that we don't all know what would be done to them.

Well wide of the mark, Bishop.

Quote

His aversion to religion, in the sense usually attached to the term, was of the same kind with that of Lucretius: he regarded it with the feelings due not to a mere mental delusion, but to a great moral evil. He looked upon it as the greatest enemy of morality: first, by setting up factitious excellencies - belief in creeds, devotional feelings, and ceremonies, not connected with the good of human kind - and causing these to be accepted as substitutes for genuine virtue: but above all, by radically vitiating the standard of morals; making it consist in doing the will of a being, on whom it lavishes indeed all the phrases of adulation, but whom in sober truth it depicts as eminently hateful.

-John Stuart Mill, on his father

Post by "Joshua" of June 24, 2023 at 11:38 PM

Quote

Augustine says against the Manichees [Cf. De Civ. Dei xviii, 1]: "In Christ's Church, those are heretics, who hold mischievous and erroneous opinions, and when rebuked that they may think soundly and rightly, offer a stubborn resistance, and, refusing to mend their pernicious and deadly doctrines, persist in defending them."

Quote

I answer that, With regard to heretics two points must be observed: one, on their own side; the other, on the side of the Church. On their own side there is the sin, whereby they deserve not only to be separated from the Church by excommunication, but also to be severed from the world by death. For it is a much graver matter to corrupt the faith which quickens the soul, than to forge money, which supports temporal life. Wherefore if forgers of money and other evil-doers are forthwith condemned to death by the secular authority, much more reason is there for heretics, as soon as they are convicted of heresy, to be not only excommunicated but even put to death.

On the part of the Church, however, there is mercy which looks to the conversion of the wanderer, wherefore she condemns not at once, but "after the first and second admonition," as the Apostle directs: after that, if he is yet stubborn, the Church no longer hoping for his conversion, looks to the salvation of others, by excommunicating him and separating him from the Church, and furthermore delivers him to the secular tribunal to be exterminated thereby from the world by death.

-Thomas Aquinas