

"The Summum Bonum Fallacy" - General Discussion of DeWitt's Article

Post by "Cassius" of January 22, 2026 at 2:19 PM

We've discussed this article many times in the past, with mixed reviews, but we don't have a separate thread devoted to it. This will serve that purpose. The article itself can be found in our [filebase here](#). The occasion for posting this thread today is in regard to one of the major premises of the work, that the "lack of a definite article" in Latin, and/or other factors, led Cicero to use "summum bonum" in ways that have proved to be misleading.

DeWitt starts off his article *"The aim of this writing 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. It will also be shown how the recovered doctrine serves to explain certain verses of Maecenas."*

DeWitt packs a lot into that first sentence, and the question of whether we should conclude "life itself and not pleasure is the greatest good" is one that would have to examine what exactly is meant by "life itself" and "pleasure" and "greatest" and "good." No doubt anyone who examines each of those words closely will profit from the exercise. But that's not the point I'm going to examine in this post.

What I want to add into our discussion mix on this topic is that DeWitt is not alone in pointing out the difficulties in translating Greek to Latin and how to express "the" - implying highest or greatest or preeminent" vs. "a" - implying "one among many."

The same point was raised and discussed by David Sedley in his article "Inferential Foundations of Epicurean Ethics." In a sentence that will shock some:

"The phrase summum bonum occurs literally hundreds of times in Cicero's philosophical writings, yet it is by no means clear to me what Greek term it could represent. "

Here's the full section from Sedley:

Quote

Now as far as the actual expression *summum bonum* is concerned, there is nothing new or surprising about finding it here. Pleasure was introduced at the outset, back in the Cradle Argument, as the *summum bonum*, and pain as the *summum malum*. The phrase *summum bonum* occurs literally hundreds of times in Cicero's philosophical writings, yet it is by no means clear to me what Greek term it could represent.

Expressions like 'the ultimate good' (to *eschaton tōn agathōn*) and 'the primary good' (to *prōton agathon*) are far too rare in Hellenistic philosophy to account for such frequent occurrence. My own guess is that *summum bonum* is in most cases simply Cicero's rendition of 'the good' (to *agathon*). When one looks through the contexts in which it occurs, the overwhelming majority are ones in which the mere word *bonum* would, in the absence of a Latin definite article, have been ambiguous between 'the good' and 'a good'. For instance in the Cradle Argument, where all animals rejoice in pleasure 'as in the highest good' (*ut summo bono*), a mere 'as in the good' (*ut bono*) would have been indistinguishable from 'as in a good'.²⁸ The addition of *summum* before *bonum* neatly removes the ambiguity.

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

So to close this post I'm not sure that in "The Summum Bonum Fallacy" DeWitt adequately makes his case that we should consider "life" to be "the highest good." To me it's clear that DeWitt is right that Epicurus has vastly expanded the field of what the word "pleasure" covers, but the objection most of us have made in the past is that you need to say something like "all parts of life that are not painful" to adequately specify "the good." Maybe it's possible to collapse that into the dual choice of "life" vs "death," and line that up just like Epicurus lines up atoms vs void and pleasure vs pain.

But regardless of that, the more pressing point is that Sedley and DeWitt agree that there is a major issue involved when we interpret Epicurus through Cicero and potentially other Latin writers. We may well have been locked by the term "highest good" into thinking that Epicurus advocated for some *particular* pleasure as the goal and that there are a larger number of "inferior" pleasures that should be flatly avoided.

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

Note: I unfortunately have to say that Sedley's article referenced above has seven sections. I think the last six sections are generally excellent. However the first section is intended to provide just a brief summary of Epicurean ethics and I find that part very unsatisfying. Sedley states in the first section that he disagrees (or at least he did disagree at the time he wrote this many years ago) with Gosling & Taylor's analysis of kinetic and katestematic pleasure. That means he would also disagree with Emily Austin position in "Living for Pleasure" (Chapter 4 Note 😎 where she wrote:

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

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

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

But the point of THIS thread is to set up discussion of the DeWitt article. I'll set up a separate thread for the Sedley article.

Post by “Joshua” of January 22, 2026 at 8:34 PM

As I mentioned in the other thread, Lucretius himself uses Summum Bonum. It's no good blaming Cicero before one addresses this!

Post by “Cassius” of January 22, 2026 at 9:10 PM

Yes we have two parallel sets of comments. I don't think Sedley is attaching blame. He seems to accept the Latin terminology as valid and a reasonable choice by Cicero.

The trouble is on our end because we read more onto the construction than a Roman would have.