

# Inferential Foundations of Epicurean Ethics - Article By David Sedley

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

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

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

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

Here's the full section:

Quote

Quote

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

before *bonum* neatly removes the ambiguity.

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

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

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

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

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

*functioning, and those pleasures vary, but do not increase healthy psychological functioning.*  
(emphasis added)

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

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

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### **Post by "Joshua" of January 22, 2026 at 8:30 PM**

How does he respond to Lucretius' use of Summum Bonum in the early lines of Book 6?

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### **Post by "Cassius" of January 22, 2026 at 8:34 PM**

#### [Quote from Joshua](#)

How does he respond to Lucretius' use of Summum Bonum in the early lines of Book 6?

I don't recall that he mentions that. And in fact as I read it he's not really being critical of Cicero's choice to use "summum bonum." I gather what he's saying is that it makes perfect sense in Latin to do it the way Cicero did it.

The problem arises because in our English expectation anything translatable as "highest good" implies "the highest single good among many goods."

I gather Sedley is saying we should not infer that summum bonum is a statement as to one among many things. Rather Sedley is seeing it as a reference to "good" as a class, which is

singular, without implying anything about how many particulars are in that class.

#### Quote

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*).

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### Post by “Cassius” of January 22, 2026 at 8:53 PM

As an aside here Joshua I think we are seeing in going through Tusculan Disputations how important it was to Cicero (and presumably the Stoics) to say that there is only a single good - virtue - and that nothing else is truly good. That allows them to argue that being virtuous is totally within our control and that means that having what is good is totally within our control.

In contrast Sedley argues that Epicurus was approaching ethics like he was approaching physics. This implies Epicurus thought it essential to first and foremost establish that there is a bright line separating good from bad in general, just like there's a sharp distinction between bodies and space. Once you establish a position that there are only two options, you can categorize everything within one of the two options and rule out the existence of anything else (endless "what-aboutism" leading to radical skepticism).

And Sedley observes that in both lines of argument, Epicurus follows up this "either/or" starting point by arguing that other philosophers are wrong in asserting the existence of anything of any nature that falls outside that "either one or the other" structure.

It's pretty easy to see that this has major advantages in defending the senses and opposing radical skepticism. Skeptics are going to reject the analysis anyway, but it gives those of us who accept the legitimacy of the division a very firm starting point for rejection of otherworldliness - leading to the confidence that Cicero dislikes but cites as an Epicurean trait.

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### Post by “Joshua” of January 23, 2026 at 1:15 PM

### Quote

And Sedley observes that in both lines of argument, Epicurus follows up this "either/or" starting point by arguing that other philosophers are wrong in asserting the existence of anything of any nature that falls outside that "either one or the other" structure.

Not only do I reject the Ethical side of this argument except insofar as it is restricted exclusively to pathos, I also notice that this is exactly the kind of absolutism that Cicero employs himself:

### Quote

There is indeed a law, right reason, which is in accordance with nature; existing in all, unchangeable, eternal. Commanding us to do what is right, forbidding us to do what is wrong. It has dominion over good men, but possesses no influence over bad ones. No other law can be substituted for it, no part of it can be taken away, nor can it be abrogated altogether. Neither the people or the senate can absolve from it. It is not one thing at Rome, and another thing at Athens: one thing to-day, and another thing to-morrow; but it is eternal and immutable for all nations and for all time.

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For Justice is one; it binds all human society, and is based on one Law, which is right reason applied to command and prohibition. Whoever knows not this Law, whether it has been recorded in writing anywhere or not, is without Justice.

So I say again, it is no good blaming Cicero for this!

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## Post by "Cassius" of January 23, 2026 at 2:00 PM

Joshua it would probably help people reading along if you could elaborate on these two when you get time:

### [Quote from Joshua](#)

Not only do I reject the Ethical side of this argument except insofar as it is restricted exclusively to pathos, I also notice that this is exactly the kind of absolutism that Cicero employs himself:

At least as I am understanding the discussion, all we are talking about here is that Epicurus held there to be only two feelings, pleasure and pain, and every feeling of every kind falls within one or the other categories. That might be read by some people to be a form of absolutism, but you specifically say that you are not talking about pathos so I don't think you mean to be read as saying that Epicurus was engaging in the kind of absolutism to which we all object.. agree that Cicero is being an absolutist in his (and the Stoics) rankings of good and bad by a criteria other than pleasure and pain.

So it would probably be good to clarify what you mean in referring to "the ethical side of this argument" (?)

#### [Quote from Joshua](#)

So I say again, it is no good blaming Cicero for this!

Again someone may ask what "this" refers to in terms of blaming someone for something.

I don't think Sedley is "blaming" Cicero and in fact he's endorsing his terminology. And if a Latin / Greek scholar like Sedley can say that using "summum bonum" for "the good" is good Latin, then I would not hazard to disagree.

So if there's any "blame" to go around as to "summum bonum," that blame doesn't belong to Cicero or Sedley or Dewitt but to modern confusion. if there's blame to assign, it is to those people who read "highest good" as "highest pleasure" and think that this means there's a specific pleasure that's the highest. That's what I read a lot of people to be doing with "katastematic pleasure" or "tranquility" or even "ataraxia" or "aponia" and that's why object so strongly to reaching those conclusions, which are almost everywhere in modern writing about Epicurus.

I'm reading Sedley's point to be that in using summum bonum Cicero was just intending to translate Epicurus saying essentially "the good is pleasure" in the sense of "the good is pleasure as a class of feelings."

The problem comes when people start reading "summum bonum / highest pleasure" to mean a *particular type of pleasure* when Epicurus has not said that. He's talking about pleasure as a class, not a specific mental or physical pleasure.

Now if there are sections in Cicero where he talks about "summum voluptatem" then that would require further discussion. I wouldn't be surprised if Cicero said exactly that when he debates Torquatus in Book Two of On Ends. But even there I would explain that terminology as referring to "the highest degree of pleasure as a class" or "the highest quantity of pleasure as a class" (as in [PD03](#)) rather than meaning that Epicurus was singling out a *particular* pleasure as the *single best pleasure*.

## Post by “Joshua” of January 23, 2026 at 2:09 PM

### Quote

other philosophers are wrong in asserting the existence of anything of any nature that falls outside that "either one or the other" structure

My point is that when it comes to ethics almost everything falls outside of that structure. This is parallel to atomism only by happenstance; there is no Sith rule-of-two that governs every aspect of Epicureanism, or of nature, or of human life.

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## Post by “Cassius” of January 23, 2026 at 2:15 PM

Oh Ok good catch! I meant my comment only to apply to the issue of dividing all feelings (all good and bad, since there is nothing intrinsically good but pleasure nor bad but pain) into either pleasure or pain.

I would not want anyone to read that more broadly so glad you caught it.

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## Post by “Bryan” of January 24, 2026 at 11:54 PM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

Sedley says flatly that "Katastematic pleasure is the absence of pain."

Both are correct, and it may be more helpful to highlight the similarities in the interpretations.

The "ste" in Katastematic is the same root that gives us "static" in the sense of "standing" or "still" -- and the "kata" is an intensifier! Etymologically the whole word means "*characteristic of thoroughly standing*"

As we have seen, Epicurus does literally say that "Katastematic pleasure is the absence of pain" at *DL 10.136* where he says "Undisturbedness (**ataraxía**) and non-suffering (**aponía**) exist as established (**katastēmatikái**) pleasures, but joy and merriment are seen from movement

through activity."

[Mental] painlessness/non-suffering (**ἡ ἀπονία**) is equated here with a katastematic (established) pleasure.

But this leaves plenty of room to also agree with Austin:

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

katastematic pleasures are sensory pleasures that issue from confidence in one's ability to satisfy one's necessary desires and an awareness of one's healthy psychological functioning

It is helpful to see *painlessness/non-suffering* as referring more to the mind/spirit and less so the body... but, of course, the close connection between the mind and body was never denied by our school in any way.

Consider Plutarch [Non Posse, 1089D]:

*'See then, first of all, what they are doing: transferring either this "non-suffering" or "painlessness" or "stability" back and forth from the body to the soul – then back again from the [soul] into the [body]!'*

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## **Post by “Cassius” of January 25, 2026 at 4:54 AM**

#### [Quote from Bryan](#)

Both are correct, and it may be more helpful to highlight the similarities in the interpretations.

As I read the article that is probably the main takeaway.

Sedley is saying that Epicurus' first focus is on establishing that in physics everything divides into bodies and void, while in ethics the duality is pleasure and pain.

In Physics It is both correct to say that (1) at the highest level of analysis everything is composed of matter and void and (2) the things we see around us differ vastly in all sorts of

details in the way they affect us.

Seeing that everything from a physical perspective resolves into either matter or void is essential to understanding that there is no third supernatural nature. But as essential as that is as a starting point, you then have to figure out how the atoms and void combine in different ways to form different things if you're going to work with physics successfully to see that everything happens naturally.

Seeing that everything from an ethical perspective resolves into either pleasure or pain is essential to understanding that there is no third middle or neutral state and no good and evil outside of pleasure and pain. But as essential as that is as a starting point, you then have to figure out how the pleasures and pains work together in different ways to produce different results if you're going to work with ethics successfully to live happily.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of January 25, 2026 at 2:57 PM**

For anyone interested i am uploading the slides I made for today's Zoom meeting at the address below. I think these excerpts provide some of the key points of the article:

[Zoom of 01-24-26](#)

Sunday Zoom, January 24, 2026

epicurustoday.com

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### **Post by “Cassius” of January 26, 2026 at 9:24 AM**

## **Key Excerpts From "The inferential Foundations of Epicurean Ethics"**

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- This article makes important points about how Epicurus’ position that there are only two feelings (Pleasure and Pain) parallels his argument that there are only two ultimate constituents of the Universe (Atoms and Void)
- The article is divided in the following sections:
  - Outline of Epicurean Ethics
  - The Physics-Ethics Analogy
  - The Basic Division

- The Division Defended
- The Division's Exhaustiveness
- The Epicurean Good Life
- The Instrumentality of Virtue - Epilogue
- After largely skipping over the first section we'll take a closer look at the details of each section of the argument.
- All of these points are of course only my opinion. I highly recommend reading the whole article so you can judge for yourself

## 1. Outline of Epicurean Ethics

I find this section to be a disappointing start. Much of it is a good standard standard summary of Epicurean ethics. Unfortunately it is written from the point of view of those who assert the importance of the katastematic / kinetic distinction and that Epicurus's ultimate goal was not "Pleasure" but "*Katastematic* Pleasure." I believe this error manifests itself here, where Sedley states that "Katastematic pleasure is abence of pain" rather than "Pleasure is the absence of pain."

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This position causes Sedley to deprecate kinetic pleasures as if the only reason we require them is to produce katastematic pleasure. The obvious problems with this position cause Sedley to have to acknowledge that Epicurus does "*apparently*" consider kinetic pleasures a part of the good life.

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It's not the purposes of this presentation to argue this issue in detail, but it is important to note that Sedley's position conflicts with Gosling & Taylor, who take the position in their detailed treatise "The Greeks On Pleasure" that Epicurus was focused on "Pleasure" as the goal. They argue that any attention to distinguishing kinetic and katastematic pleasure was at best secondary, and that katastematic pleasures are not inherently more important than kinetic ones. The Gosling & Taylor position was expanded at length by Boris [Nikolsky](#) in his article "Epicurus On Pleasure." Emily Austin took sides with Gosling & Taylor in her footnote eight in Chapter 4 of "Living for Pleasure":

Quote

[!quote] *This is a non-specialist text, so I have chosen not to wade into the dispute about katastematic and kinetic pleasures in the body of the text. A specialist will recognize that I am adopting a view roughly in line with Gosling and Taylor (1982) and Arenson (2019). On my reading, katastematic pleasures are sensory pleasures that issue from confidence in one's ability to satisfy one's necessary desires and an*

*awareness of one's healthy psychological functioning; choice-worthy kinetic pleasures are the various pleasures consistent with maintaining healthy functioning, and those pleasures vary, but do not increase healthy psychological functioning.* (emphasis added)

From here we can move on to the reason that his article is so helpful.

## **2. The Physics - Ethics Analogy**

### **A. The Foundations of Epicurean Physics and Epicurean Ethics Are Analogous**

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### **B. In Physics, The Senses Tell Us There Are Bodies And Space**

In physics Epicurus starts off with positions which he can argue to be self evident: that there are bodies and there is space within which the bodies move.

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Epicurus does not attempt to discuss the underlying specific natures of atoms and void until he first establishes that these are the two categories that exclusively exist - that these are the *sole constituents of the universe*.

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### **C. Where Does This Same Procedure Exist? Not In Menoecus, But in Torquatus' Presentation in Cicero's On Ends Book One.**

The letter to Menoecus is a straightforward listing of doctrine, not argument.

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We see that the ethics argument follows the pattern of the physics argument because Torquatus explicitly tells us that Epicurus' *argument* starts with the establishment of the two possibilities - pleasure and pain.

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## **3. The Basic Division**

### **The Good Is Pleasure and The Evil Is Pain**

Epicurus places the *summum bonum* in pleasure and the *summum mallum* in pain.

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**This is not a logical argument based on words but an appeal to the perceptions of the senses.**

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**In His Argument To Establish “Pleasure” As The Goal, Epicurus Specifies Nothing At All About How Individual Creatures Conduct Their Pursuit of Pleasure**

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## **4. The Division Defended**

**Explaining Why Torquatus Says That Later Epicureans Differed As To How To Interpret Epicurus’ Arguments In Light Of His Position That No Argument Is Needed To Establish Pleasure As the Good.**

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## **5. The Division’s Exhaustiveness**

**Any Feeling Which Is Not Painful Is Ipso Facto Pleasant And Vice Versa**

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## **6. The Epicurean Good Life**

**Three Parallel Stages Of Argument**

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**Summum Bonum Means Simply “The Good”**

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## **7. The Instrumentality Of Virtue**

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## **8. Epilogue**

Epicurus' first focus is on establishing that in physics everything divides into bodies and void, while in ethics the duality is pleasure and pain.

In Physics It is both correct to say that (1) at the highest level of analysis everything is composed of matter and void and (2) the things we see around us differ vastly in all sorts of details in the way they affect us.

Seeing that everything from a physical perspective resolves into either matter or void is essential to understanding that there is no third supernatural nature. But as essential as that is as a starting point, you then have to figure out how the atoms and void combine in different ways to form different things if you're going to work with physics successfully to see that everything happens naturally.

Seeing that everything from an ethical perspective resolves into either pleasure or pain is essential to understanding that there is no third middle or neutral state and no good and evil outside of pleasure and pain. But as essential as that is as a starting point, you then have to figure out how the pleasures and pains work together in different ways to produce different results if you're going to work with ethics successfully to live happily.