

*Proclus on the Good,  
the Just, and the Beautiful*



## *Train of thoughts*

### **Excerpts from the Commentary of Proclus on Plato's First Alcibiades**

Man performs many things for the sake of personal gain, health, and riches and, surveying the good which they contain, abandons the love of justice.	3
Because the just subsists in the soul, the profitable will also be in the soul. Where our good resides, there also we have our being. For, where the form of man is, there also is the perfection of man. In soul therefore is the man, not in body.	4
The desire of the good preserves those by whom it is desired.	4
The good is bound in souls according to the just, through the beautiful which is their medium and bond.	5
The good lives in the gods, the beautiful in intellects, the just in souls.	5
Being–life–intellect is the first triune procession from the ineffable Cause of All. Being is superior to life, and life to intellect.	6
What is just is good and vice versa: the beautiful is their medium and bond. What is just is true and vice versa: for, Justice is Truth.	6
The just maintains order and harmony about the whole soul.	7
Justice is the source of beauty to the soul, and is itself beautiful.	7
The just gives empire to reason, and servitude to the irrational nature.	8
The just is at one and the same time perfect, moderate, bounded, and beautiful.	8
Everything just, therefore, is beautiful.	8
Everything beautiful is good and vice-versa.	9
The beautiful is naturally lovely because it calls others to itself and charms those who can behold it. It agitates souls at first sight while retaining a vestige of divine beauty.	9
Let no one say that the good is above beauty. They both live within us, they are rightly desirable, and can be obtained through love.	10



# Excerpts from the Commentary of Proclus on Plato's First Alcibiades

Translated by Thomas Taylor

When stars are in the quiet skies,  
Then most I pine for thee;  
Bend on me then thy tender eyes,  
As stars look on the sea.  
— Edward Bulwer-Lytton<sup>1</sup>

From T. Taylor. (Tr. & Annot.). *The Works of Plato*. (Vol. I of a set of five volumes & Vol. IX of "The Thomas Taylor Series") Frome: The Prometheus Trust, 1995. Endnote 20, being Taylor's notes and excerpt from his translation of the Commentary of Proclus on Plato's *First Alcibiades*. [Westerink lines 315-30, pp. 197-204; text typographically enhanced with headings placed by the Series Editor.]

*You think as if you had the spirit of divination. Tell me then: Do you say that some just actions are advantageous to the man who performs them, and that some are not so?*<sup>2</sup>

**Man performs many things for the sake of personal gain, health, and riches and, surveying the good which they contain, abandons the love of justice.**

The proposed inquiry concerning things just and profitable, whether they are the same, or are divided from each other according to the diversity of subjects, contributes to the whole of philosophy, and adheres to the whole truth of things. For all ethical discussion and the invention of the end of man depend on this dogma, and the speculation of our essence becomes through this especially apparent. For, if the just is, in reality, the same with the profitable, all these are not separated from each other, our good will consist in virtue alone; and neither will the particulars which are beheld about the body contribute anything as goods to the felicity of human life; nor, by a much greater reason, will things external to the body procure the full perfection of good; but one only good is established in souls themselves, unmingled, pure, immaterial, and is neither filled with corporeal nor with external goods or evils. But if there is something just, as according to Alcibiades there is, but unprofitable, and again something profitable but unjust, then apparent goods, such as health and riches, must necessarily give completion to a happy life. For mankind perform many

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<sup>1</sup> Edward George Earle Lytton Bulwer-Lytton, 1<sup>st</sup> Baron Lytton: *When Stars are in the Quiet Skies*

<sup>2</sup> Plato: *First Alcibiades* 115a

things for the sake of these, and, surveying the good which they contain, abandon the love of justice. And to these, indeed, those who for the sake of what is just despise the flourishing condition of the body, and the acquisition of wealth, appear to act justly, and in a manner laudable, to the multitude, but by no means profitably, because they do not perceive that the profitable is stably seated in the soul herself, but consider it as situated in things scattered, and which have an external subsistence, and are necessary rather than good. But these men give phantasy and sense the precedence to intellect and science.

**Because the just subsists in the soul, the profitable will also be in the soul. Where our good resides, there also we have our being. For, where the form of man is, there also is the perfection of man. In soul therefore is the man, not in body.**

Again: if the just is the same with the profitable, according to the assertion of Socrates, then the essence of man will be defined according to the soul herself; but the body will neither be a part of us, nor will give completion to our nature. For, if the body gives completion to the man, the good of the all be human good, and the beautiful will be useless not only to the body but also to the man; but the prerogatives of the parts, and such things as are contrary, will pervade to the nature of the whole, since the whole will be allotted its being in the parts. The passions of the instruments, however, do change the habits of those that use them, though they are often impediments to their energies. So that, if the just is the same with the profitable, where the just is, there also will the profitable be. But the just subsists in the soul, so that the profitable also will be in the soul. But where our good particularly resides, there also we possess our being. For our essence is not one thing, and our perfection according to another, but where the form of man is, there also is the perfection of man. In soul therefore is the man. For every being possesses the good conjoined with its essence; since the first being<sup>1</sup> is for the sake of *the good*, and subsists about *the good*. Where being therefore is to all things, there also well-being resides. But it is impossible for man to be body, and to possess his perfection in something else external to body. It is likewise impossible that man should be both body and soul, and that human good should at the same time be defined according to soul alone.

**The desire of the good preserves those by whom it is desired.**

Further still: the desire of good preserves those by whom it is desired: for, as Socrates says in the *Republic*,<sup>[608e]</sup> good preserves, and evil corrupts everything. If therefore, possessing good in the soul, we also in soul possess our being, the desire of good will be natural to us; but if our good is in soul, but our being consists from body and soul conjoined, it must necessarily happen that we shall desire the corruption of ourselves, if good is immaterial and external to the body. However, as nothing, so neither does he who doubts the truth of this position desire his own destruction. That the proposed inquiry therefore contributes to moral philosophy, and to the invention of the nature of man, is, I think, perfectly apparent.

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<sup>1</sup> *Being*, considered according to its highest subsistence, is the immediate progeny of *The Good*, or the ineffable principle of things. This is evident from the second hypothesis in the *Parmenides*.

**The good is bound in souls according to the just, through the beautiful which is their medium and bond.**

That it also affords wonderful auxiliaries to theology we shall learn, if we call to mind that *the just* contains the whole essence of souls; for, these having their subsistence according to all analogies<sup>1</sup> conformably to justice, it is evident that these distinguish its essence and powers. But, again, *the beautiful* characterizes an intellectual essence. Hence, as Aristotle says,<sup>2</sup> intellect is lovely and desirable; for all things that participate of intellect are beautiful; and matter, which of itself is void of beauty, because it is formless, at the same time that it is invested with figures and forms, receives also the representations of the power of beauty. Lastly, *the good* characterizes the whole of a divine essence. For everything divine according to a divine hyperaxis is good; since the Gods are the causes of being; and if they cause all things to subsist about themselves, they are essentially good, and illuminate all things with good. *The good* therefore is bound in souls according to *the just*, through *the beautiful*; and every order of souls is united to the Gods through intellectual essences as media; so that an incorporeal nature is one and uniform, and the whole of it verges to *the good*; but division is in the images of this nature, which are not able to express primary causes according to their indivisible essence. From these things therefore it is evident that the present demonstration contributes in no small degree to theology, and, as I may say, to the whole of philosophy.

But the whole syllogism which collects that the just is profitable is as follows:

Everything just is beautiful:  
Everything beautiful is good:  
Everything just, therefore, is good.  
But the good is the same with the profitable:  
Everything just, therefore, is profitable.

This syllogism is primarily in the first figure, comprehending the minor in the major terms, and evincing the major terms reciprocating with the minor. For, again, beginning from *the good*, we shall be able to form the same conclusion.

Everything good is beautiful:  
Everything beautiful is just:  
Everything good, therefore, is just.  
But the profitable is the same with the good:  
The just, therefore, is the same with the profitable.

**The good lives in the gods, the beautiful in intellects, the just in souls.**

In the first principles of things, indeed, *the good* is exempt from *the beautiful*, and *the beautiful* is placed above *justice*. For the first of these is prior to intelligibles, established in inaccessible retreats: the second subsists occultly in the first of intelligibles,<sup>3</sup> and more clearly in the extremity of that order:<sup>1</sup> and the third of these subsists

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<sup>1</sup> This will be evident from the *Timæus*.

<sup>2</sup> In the 12<sup>th</sup> book of his *Metaphysics*, to my translation of which I refer the English reader.

<sup>3</sup> *i.e.* In *being*, the summit of the intelligible order.

uniformly in the first order of intellectuals,<sup>2</sup> and secondarily at the extremity of the intellectual progression of Gods. And, again, *the good* subsists in the Gods, *the beautiful* in intellects, and *the just* in souls. Whence *the just* is indeed *beautiful*, but *not everything beautiful* is *just*. And *everything beautiful* is *good*, but *the fountain of all good* is expanded above *beauty*. And *the just* indeed is *good*, being conjoined with *the good* through *beauty* as the medium; but *the good* is beyond both. Thus also you will find, by looking to the last of things, that the material cause, although it is good, is base, and void of beauty: for it participates indeed of *The One*, but is destitute of form. And a sensible nature possesses indeed a representation of beauty, but not of justice. For, as Socrates says in the *Phædrus* [250b-d]

“There is no splendour of justice and temperance in these sensible similitudes; but beauty has alone this privilege, that it is the most apparent, and the most lovely of all things.”

Hence where *the just* is, there also is *the beautiful*; and where *the beautiful*, there also is *the good*, whether you are willing to look to the first principles, or to the illuminations of them as far as to the last of things. For all things participate of *the good*; for it is the principle of all: but *the beautiful* is alone received by the participants of form; and *the just* by those natures alone that participate of soul. But in the middle centre of all things, such as the soul is, all these are connected with each other, *the good*, *the beautiful*, *the just*. And *the good* of it is *beautiful*, and *the just* is at the same time *beautiful* and *good*.

**Being–life–intellect is the first triune procession from the ineffable Cause of All. Being is superior to life, and life to intellect.**

**What is just is good and vice versa: the beautiful is their medium and bond. What is just is true and vice versa: for, Justice is Truth.**<sup>3</sup>

Nor is the assertion true in this triad only, but also in many other particulars. Thus, for instance, in the principles of things *being* is beyond *life*, and *life* is and *intellect*.<sup>4</sup> And again, in the effects of these, not everything which participates of being participates also of life, nor everything which participates of life participates also of intellect; but, on the contrary, all intellectual natures *live*, and *are*, and *vital* natures partake of *being*. All these however are united with each other in the soul. Hence, *being* in it is *life* and *intellect*; *life* is *intellect* and *essence*; and *intellect* is *essence* and *life*. For there is one simplicity in it, and one subsistence; nor are life and intelligence there adventitious; but its *intellect* is *vital* and *essential*, its *life* is *essentially intellectual*, and its *essence* is *vital* and *intellectual*. All things therefore are everywhere in it, and it is one from all things. According to the same reasoning, therefore, its *good* is

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<sup>1</sup> *i.e.* In intelligible intellect.

<sup>2</sup> *Viz.* In the summit of the intelligible and at the same time intellectual order. See Introduction to *Parmenides*.

<sup>3</sup> [Cf. *Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad* i, iv, 14]

<sup>4</sup> *Being*, *life* and *intellect*, considered according to their highest subsistence, form the intelligible triad, or the first all-perfect procession from the ineffable cause of all, as it is beautifully shown by Proclus in his third book *On the Theology of Plato*. But that *being* is beyond *life*, and *life* beyond *intellect*, is evident from this consideration, that the progressions of superior are more extended than those of inferior causes. Hence, though whatever *lives* has a *being*, and whatever possesses *intellect* *lives*, yet some things have *being* without *life* or *intellect*, and others have *being* and *life* without intellect. And hence, the progressions of *being* are more extended than those of *life*, and of *life* than those of intellect, we conclude that *being* is superior to *life*, and life to intellect.

replete with *beauty* and *justice*; its *beauty* is *perfect* and *good*, and *entirely just*; and *the just* in it is mingled with *beauty* and *good*. The subject indeed is one, but the reasons<sup>1</sup> are different. And again, neither must we consider the identity of those three according to reasons, nor their difference according to the subject; but we must preserve the reasons of them different from each other, and the subject one, because everywhere these three are consubsistent with each other, according to the energies of the soul. For, as the reasons of the virtues are different, but it is one thing which partakes of them all, and it is not possible to participate of justice and be destitute of temperance, or to participate of these without the other virtues; in like manner this triad is united with itself, and everything *good* is at the same time full of *the beautiful*, and *the just*, and each of the latter is introduced in conjunction with the former. Hence Socrates conjoins *the just* with *the good*, through *the beautiful* for this is their medium and bond. But the most beautiful bond, says *Timæus*,<sup>[31c]</sup> is that which makes itself and the things bound eminently one. *The beautiful*, therefore, much more than any other bond collects and unites those two, *the just* and *the good*. And thus much concerning the whole demonstration.

**The just maintains order and harmony about the whole soul.**

**Justice is the source of beauty to the soul, and is itself beautiful.**

If, however, other demonstrations are requisite of this proposition, which says, Everything just is beautiful, let us make it more evident through many arguments. Since therefore the soul is a multitude, and one part of it is first, another middle, and another last, when do we say that justice is produced in the soul? Is it when the middle, or the last part, endeavours to rule over the better part, or when the first governs the middle, and the middle the last? But, if when the worse rule over the more excellent, the worse will not be naturally such: for that to which dominion belongs is naturally more excellent, and more honourable. If, therefore, it is impossible that the same thing can be naturally better and worse, it is necessary that the just should then be beheld in souls themselves, when that which is best in them governs the whole life, and the middle being in subjection to the better part, has dominion over the last part. For then each of the parts ranks according to its desert, the one governing with royal authority, another acting as a satellite, and another ministering to the powers of the more excellent. The just therefore is naturally distributive of that which is adapted to each of the parts of the soul. It is also the cause to each of performing its proper duty, and of possessing its proper rank, and thus preserves good order about the whole soul. But order and symmetry are naturally beautiful. Justice, therefore, is the source of beauty to the soul, and is itself beautiful.

The just however is twofold; one consisting in contracts, and which regards arithmetical equality, and the other in distributions, and which entirely requires geometric equality. In contracts, therefore, it observes arithmetical equality, that we may not act unjustly by our associate, receiving from him more than is proper; but by fitly distributing unequal things to such as are unequal, it observes geometric equality, so that such as is the difference of persons with respect to each other, such also may be the difference as to worth of the things distributed, to each other. Everything just,

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<sup>1</sup> By reasons here *productive principles* are signified.

therefore, is, as we have said, equal; but everything equal is beautiful. For the unequal is base, and void of symmetry, since it is also incongruous. Everything just, therefore, is beautiful.

**The just gives empire to reason, and servitude to the irrational nature.**

In the third place, beauty no otherwise subsists in bodies, than when form rules over matter; for matter is void of beauty and base; and when form is vanquished by matter, it is filled with baseness, and a privation of form in consequence of becoming similar to the subject nature. If, therefore, in the soul our intellectual part ranks in the order of form, but our irrational part, of matter (for intellect and reason belong to the coordination of bound,<sup>1</sup> but the irrational nature to that of infinity, since it is naturally without measure and indefinite) — this being the case, it necessarily follows that beauty must be perceived in the soul when reason has dominion, and the irrational forms of life are vanquished by reason and prudence. *The just*, indeed, gives empire to reason, and servitude to the irrational nature. For it distributes to each what is fit; dominion to the ruling power, and servile obedience to the ministrant part; since the artificer of the universe subjected to us the irrational nature, and prepared it as a vehicle to our reason. *The just* therefore is naturally beautiful, is the cause of beauty to the soul.

**The just is at one and the same time perfect, moderate, bounded, and beautiful.**

In the fourth place, *the just* is perfect and definite; since the unjust is imperfect and indefinite, wanders infinitely and never stops, and secretly withdraws itself from the boundary of justice. *The just*, therefore, introduces measure and bound to whatever it is present to, and renders all things perfect. Hence it is the source of beauty to the soul: for the beautiful is connate with the perfect the measured, because deformity subsists with the unmeasured and the indefinite. *The just*, therefore, is at one and the same time perfect, moderate, bounded, and beautiful; and these are not naturally separated from each other.

**Everything just, therefore, is beautiful.**

In the fifth place, the demiurgus adorned this universe by justice; for he bound it with the most beautiful of bonds, and rendered it indissoluble through the power of this analogy, which holds all its parts together, and makes it everywhere friendly to itself. But that which is similar to the universe, the most beautiful of things visible, is certainly itself beautiful. *The just*, therefore, is also according to this reasoning beautiful, from the nature of which it is by no means disjoined. — That everything just, therefore, is beautiful, is from hence apparent.

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<sup>1</sup> Bound and infinite, as will be evident from the *Philebus*, are the two highest principles, after the ineffable principle of all.



**Everything beautiful is good and vice-versa.**

**The beautiful is naturally lovely because it calls others to itself and charms those who can behold it. It agitates souls at first sight while retaining a vestige of divine beauty.**

The proposition consequent to this, that everything beautiful is good, Socrates extends, but Alcibiades does not admit. This was owing to his considering the beautiful to be beautiful by position, and not by nature. Hence he also grants that *the just* is beautiful; for it is thus considered by the multitude, and separates *the beautiful* from *the good*. For to the former of these he gives a subsistence merely from opinion, asserting that *the beautiful* is the becoming, and what is generally admitted: but to the latter he gives a subsistence according to truth; for he does not say that *the good* is from position. This proposition, therefore, that everything beautiful is good, we shall show to be in every respect true. This then is apparent to everyone, that *the beautiful* is naturally lovely, since last beauty which is borne along in images is lovely, and agitates souls at the first view of it, in consequence of retaining a vestige of divine beauty. For this privilege, says Socrates in the *Phædrus*,<sup>[250d]</sup> beauty alone possesses, to be the most apparent and the most lovely of all things. Indeed, *the beautiful* (το καλον) is naturally lovely, whether it is so denominated *δια το καλειν*, because it *calls* others to itself, or *δια το κηλειν*, because it *charms* those that are able to behold it. Hence also love is said to lead the lover to beauty. But everything lovely is desirable; for love is a robust and vehement desire of something. And whatever loves desires something of which it is indigent. But everything desirable is good, whether it is truly or only apparently good. For many things which are not good are desirable, because they appear as good to those that desire them.<sup>1</sup> It is clearly therefore shown by Socrates, in the *Meno*,<sup>[77b-78b]</sup> that he who knows evil, such as it is in its own nature, cannot desire it. Everything desirable therefore is good; and if it be principally desirable, it will also be principally good. But if it be only apparently desirable, such also will be its good. In short, in each of the terms this is to be added, *viz.* the apparent, or the true. For, if a thing is apparently beautiful, it is also apparently lovely and desirable, and its good is conjoined with beauty of such a kind. But if it is naturally beautiful, it is also naturally lovely and desirable. When then in this case will the desirable be? Shall we say, evil? But it is impossible when known that it should be desirable by any being; for all beings desire good. But there is no desire of evil, nor yet of that which is neither good nor evil; for everything of this kind is performed for the sake of something else, and is not the end of anything. But everything desirable is an end; and, if anything evil is desirable, it must be so because it appears to be good. In like manner, if anything not beautiful is beloved, it is loved because it *appears* to be beautiful. If, therefore, everything beautiful is lovely, but everything lovely is desirable, and everything desirable is good, hence everything beautiful is good. And, reciprocally, everything good is desirable. — This then is immediately evident.

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<sup>1</sup> [ “ . . . . . The beautiful seems right  
By force of beauty, and the feeble wrong  
Because of weakness. . . . . ”

— Elizabeth Barrett Browning: *Aurora Leigh*, Book I]

**Let no one say that the good is above beauty. They both live within us, they are rightly desirable, and can be obtained through love.**

Everything desirable is lovely: for love and desire are directed to the same object; but they differ from each other according to the remission or vehemence of the desire: since Socrates, also in the *Banquet* <sup>[206a]</sup> leads love to *the good* through *the beautiful*, and says that *the good* is lovely, as well as *the beautiful*. If therefore every good is desirable, everything desirable is lovely, and everything lovely is beautiful (for love is proximate to beauty), hence everything good is beautiful. Let no one therefore say that *the good* is above beauty nor that the lovely is twofold; for we do not now discourse concerning the first principles of things, but concerning *the beautiful* and *the good* which are in us. *The good*, therefore, which is in us, is at the same time both desirable and lovely. — Hence we obtain *the good* through love, and a vehement pursuit of it. And if any one directs his attention to himself, he will perfectly perceive that this good excites in us a more efficacious love than sensible beauty. *The good* therefore is beautiful. Hence Diotima, in the *Banquet*,<sup>[210a-211c]</sup> advises lovers to betake themselves, after sensible beauty, to the beauty in actions and studies, in the sciences and virtues, and, having exercised the amatory eye of the soul in these, to ascend from thence to intellect, and the primary and divine beauty which is there. Hence too we say that in these the good of the soul consists. For what is there in us more beautiful than virtue or science? Or what more base than the contraries to these?

