The Supreme Good

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I

Lured on, escorted by the sweetest thoughts
I fled the bitter storms of civic life
to lead my soul back to a calmer port;
and so my heart was carried from that life
to this one—free, serene, untroubled—which
retains the little good the world still knows.
To free my feeble nature from the load
that wearies it and stops it flight, I left
the pretty circle of my native walls.
And having reached a pleasant shady glem
within the shadow of that mountain which
in its old age preserves its ancient name,
there, where a verdant laurel cast some shade
below that lovely peak, I found a seat,
my heart untrammeled by a single care.
And over to my left, a limpid spring
poured forth its sweet refreshing stream,
watering the mead that lay in front of me.
Shot through the fresh green grass were brilliant reds
and whites from every kind of bloom, and in
that loveliness I lay my weary body;
as many sweetly smelling fragrances
were there as those the Phoenix gathers up
when she begins to feel the toil of death.
In such a charming place I can't believe
the air is ever turbulent, or that
foul weather or bad luck could cause you harm.
So all alone in that delightful haunt,
content to be in my own company,
surrounded only by my own sweet thoughts,
I gazed out on the land—and then I heard
a bagpipe sounding with such loneliness
the piper’s flock of sheep joined in the dance.
He’d come to take his nap in the cool shade
close by that purring brook, but seeing me
the man was filled with wonder and dismay.
He stopped a moment, then recovering
his courage, with a rustic salutation
he greeted me and so began to speak:
“Tell me, what purpose brings you here? Why have
you left your theaters, your spacious halls
and temples? Why do goat paths please you more?
Pray tell, what do you ponder in these groves?
Diversions, riches, pomp? Perhaps you want
to prize these more by studying our plight?”
And I to him: “I do not know of riches
or honors sweeter than this life of yours—
free of all political intrigue.
Among you happy shepherds and you cowherds
no hatred reigns or wicked treachery,
and in these pastures no ambition grows.
Here one can gain the good and not rouse envy:
your greed has shallow roots and you’re content
delightng in the pleasures of repose.
And here one says just what he means, the tongue
does not oppose the heart—not so with us
where he who lies the best is happiest.
In lucid air like this, no mouth that smiles
conceals a heart that sighs—not so with us
where he is deemed more wise who has more wiles.
With us, who trusts in simple honesty
gets called a fool, while those who nest inside
those walls regard the swindler as a sage,
and friendship’s measured by expediency.
Imagine then how sweet that love must be
which chance alone can sap and vitiate.

How ever can a heart that avarice
afflicts and fills with such outrageous hopes,
or such excessive fears, discover peace?
But dwelling in these mountains, you are not
subjected to confusing, vicious thoughts—
your minds are not obsessed by what’s in vogue.
Sweet fruits appease your hunger, cooling streams
allay your thirst, and all your longings are
fulfilled in harmony with nature’s needs.
In summertime your bed’s a pile of leaves—
in winter there’s dry hay inside a hut
that gives you shelter from the frost and rain.
And though your clothes are not like those sought out
in foreign lands beyond the salty waves,
you’re just as happy wearing shaggy hides.
How sweet your sleep, devoid of any cares,
among these branches where the mutterings
of mountain streams sings answers to your snores.
The sylvan nymphs must often gather round
this charming spring to sing in harmonies
far lowlier than any earthly sound.
To this sweet stream of song, so delicate
and bright, to bagpipe tunes and your own lays,
the nightingale and other birds reply.
And when it happens that two bullocks fight,
you’re no less pleased, I think, than those who watch
the savage sports inside our stadiums.
Then you, as judge, confer the leafy crown
upon the winner, while the loser stands
there, sad, despised, and overcome by shame.
Happy is he whose wants reflect his needs,
but woe to him whose ever-hungry mind
cannot possess the thing it covets most;
our boundless longing never dies but grows,
and growing ranks us all the more: who yearns
the most must always settle for much less.
That man who’s pleased with what he has seems much
more rich to me than he who values what
he doesn’t have above the things he owns.
True wealth is tranquil poverty, so long
as it supplies life’s needs. If you feel rich
or poor, it’s what you’re used to, nothing more.
I’ll never fathom those who praise a man
whose thought reflects what others think, but damn:
a mind content in its autonomy.
Your life, oh shepherd, seems to me the one
that most approaches human peace, if that
can still be found in this, our fallen world.”
The shepherd did not listen any more
but sometimes looked around distractedly
as if to say he longed again to speak.
Heaving a heartfelt sigh, he then began:
“What error makes you think it happy, such
a life, or rather, such a martyrdom?
How can it please you, what you praise? And why,
once having praised it, must you give it up?
Why not secure this peace, then, for yourself?
Why do you veil the truth in such illusions?
If truth you know, take up this truth that so
consumes you, live the life you say you crave.
There’s quite a difference, though, between the thought
and deed: the path that looks so fair at first
may turn out thorny when you take it up.
Is there one thing this life does not make sad?
Like beasts we are exposed to sweltering heat
and cold. And that’s the sweetness we enjoy.
In snowy winter weather, cold and raw,
you’ll sometimes notice on our mantles icy
crystals encasing every tuft of fur.
At times a ruthless wind molests you so
that when you try to hide from it behind
a rock, the savage gale still seeks you out.
Our feather beds are hard-packed earth or stone.
To help restore our strength when we are weak
we eat the food that forest creatures eat.
And when a wolf deprives me of a lamb,
you will not see me suffer less than you
when you have lost some splendid, rich estate.

Nor would you suffer more than I although
your loss might seem much greater: small things count
the same for me as great ones do for you.
It’s in these little things that Fortune flaunts
her power over me: withholding them
she brings me misery beyond compare.
So if I lose a wood or earthen pot,
I mourn no less than you would mourn if you
had lost a golden bowl whose worth seems more.
The different values placed on wood and gold
come not from nature but from us who judge
that one’s of precious worth, the other poor.
I love my crock as much as you your bowl,
so Fortune hurts us equally: each pines
for his own pot with like intensity.
The world, I think, agrees that Fortune is
relentless, full of hate: she crucifies
each one of us upon the cross we make.
I’m just a shepherd, but I know this ancient
maxim: with his own life no man’s content—
each thinks the other’s life more fortunate.
I’ll stay where I am destined to remain,
and you, where your own star may summon you.
And we are not alone—all men condemn
their fate, no matter where it stations them.”

My ears, all heedful of his words, were then
attracted to another voice which seized
and bound them with its sweeter harmonies.
I thought that Orpheus was back on earth,
or he whose noble tones had walled up Thebes,
so sweetly did his lyre sound to me.
“Perhaps that Lyre set within the sphere
of the fixed stars fell down from heaven’s realm,” I said.
“The starry sky must miss its constellation;
or maybe, as that ancient sage once taughec,
the transposed soul of one of these was put—
such was his destiny—inside this player."

And while my eye, led on by what my ear
could hear, looked through the boughs and leafy fronds
to find out where such sweetness had its source,
beheld! the eye, the noble mind, the ear,
all in an instant heard and grasped and saw
the one who played, his teaching, and his lyre:
Marsilio of Montecchio,
he in whom heaven poured its every grace
that he might be a mirror to all men;
ever the lover of the sacred muses,
no less is he the lover of true wisdom,
so that the two may never be disjoined.
This man was like a father to us both—
deserving as he was of every homage,
we both stood up, delighted he was there.
And he, no less delighted, halted by
that lovely fountain; settling on a rock,
he left off playing and began to speak:
"I was already tired from my walk;
some gracious god then steered my steps to reach
this place where now I rest and am refreshed.
But first things first: Hail Lauro! Hail Alfeo,
among wise shepherds surely the most wise,
and owing to your age, my worthy father.
Shepherd, I’m not surprised that you are here:
we’ve often met each other at this spring,
and now and then beneath some shady beech.
It does amaze me greatly, though, to find
you, Lauro, on this wooded mountain slope,
not that your presence doesn’t bring me joy.
Who counseled you to leave your native city?
You know the burdens your familial
and civic duties put upon your shoulders."
And I to him: “The things of which you speak
bring on such agony that the mere thought of them enforce me and makes me grieve.

I’ve fled, a while, those vexing public cares
in order to refresh my soul by pondering
the pastoral way of life, a life I envy.
The burden of our life’s unbearable:
though he will disagree, I’d give the palm,
comparing both, to this the pastoral life.
Such was the subject of our argument
until we heard your lyre’s dulcet tones
which put a sudden stop to our dispute.
Now then, since God has granted us your presence,
tell us, which one has strayed from the true path
and if our lives possess authentic good.
But if our lot prevents our knowing good,
then say what sort of life it would adorn,
and if it’s of this world, or is divine.
Each art, each science, every daily act
and choice goes back, it seems, to this same good,
as every stream flows back into the sea.
But you should tell us what this good might be:
since you know what it is, unite this knot
that keeps the heart bound up in such distress."
Marsilio to us: “I must then turn my heart
to where your hearts have turned and are engrossed,
however difficult this task may prove;
the one who grasps the truth can better know
where truth is not than understand what it
might be, wrapped up in such obscurity.
But love will greatly lighten such a load:
to true love you must not refuse a thing,
for they who truly love become as one.
Before all else I’ll say, let none whose soul
is bound and fettered by the senses think
that he will find the true and perfect good.
This law was made by Him who rules supreme,
that mortals, blind and erring, might not fix
their thoughts exclusively upon this world.
Mistaking the true way, their vision of
the good askew, what would these mortals do
were they to think this life might yield the good?
Authentic good is one, no more, no less, and it is kept, it seems, by God, who holds it as a prize for those who've led good lives. Thus overweening men who want to find the good before it's time, endure the fate of those who gather fruit that's still unripe. If they then eat the unripe fruit, it tastes so sour, their teeth are set on edge, whereupon they usually abandon the attempt. Nor do they learn how sweet the fruit becomes: discouraged in their first attempt, they fall more deeply into error day by day. But drawing out this point will bore us all: nor do I wish to share the fate of those who hold that heaven's like a stretched-out pelt. And so I say this good, this precious thing, sought and described by now in many tongues, is treasured up by God in his celestial choir where each and every passion is annulled; yet since so many "goods" are counterfeit, we'll first divide them in the following way: For those who think, there come to mind three kinds of good available to man. And so began the one who could untie this knot. "The first sort Fortune gives and takes away; second are goods that nature gives the body; and third are those encompassed by our soul. The goods that Fortune brings are four in all: dominion, riches, honor, and goodwill (and these last two arouse the same concern). The more dominion spreads, the greater is the fear it breeds, and as it rules more men, so must hostility to it increase. Caesar, it seems, named this the sovereign good, but then he finally saw that greater sway will only make you subject to more men. Next is possession of great wealth, but since this craving's never satisfied, it keeps a man from ever finding any peace.
III

"Whatever Fortune holds within her sway,"
the newborn Plato said, addressing us,
"cannot, therefore, be called the perfect good.
That good belonging to the well-formed body
is parcelled out in three essential traits:
robustness, glowing health, and comeliness.
The first two, ravaged by some small complaint,
give up those benefits in which the robust Milo
was once so pleased to see the sovereign good.
But happiness was never found in these.
Nor will there ever be a peaceful port
for mortals born to loveliness and grace.
Herilus placed in these the highest good:
though he embodied every charm, you can't,
for all of that, conclude he was content.
If you are destined to be beautiful,
your beauty will without a doubt prove much
more valuable to others than to you.
Nature confers, and can withdraw, this good,
nor can you place your hopes in it, for it
is like the flower thieving time devours."
Then leaving this idea, he went on,
"Perhaps the good's within our mind, which can't
be reached by others, only by ourselves.
The goods our souls possess when we're alive
have been apportioned by the sages in
two parts, the rational and sensible.
Our reason holds the part that is divine,
the part we share with creatures is the senses,
which we engage in two distinctive ways.
Your senses, first of all, are ordered so
that they perform their duties perfectly,
and, second, they procure for you delights.
In this was Aristippus led astray
by specious reasoning: he aimed too low,
embracing what was bad in both domains.
Some other species are our betters here,
for certain of their senses are more keen
than those of our harassed and tired soul.
The beasts, it seems, should then be happier,
but one must add that keenness of the senses
provokes distaste more often than delight.
More bad exists than good, so most of what
we smell, discern, and taste will rouze disgust.
No good I know can counteract this woe.
Sensual delights create eternal war:
preceded by a lust that wastes the heart,
they're governed and accompanied by doubt,
and followed by regrets when pleasure's fled.
And while these carnal cravings last, the heart,
for arid's sake, will yearn and rage.
For what we drink is only sweet to us
so long as thirst allures and snares the taste.
If it goes out, our pleasure follows suit.
No thing will dare embrace its opposite:
a state where pleasure is suffused with pain
is thus an evil rather than a good.
With that, we will dismiss the sensual
and treat what those with good recall will know
is lovelier, the part that's rational.
Beneath this heading are two different limbs,
the natural and acquired faculties,
and that's how reason is divided up.
The first emerge with life itself—from them
each mortal gets a light and certain seeds
the instant that his soul receives its body.
Memory, boldness, and sagacity
are good or evil instruments depending
on how they're used, with evil ways or good.
Indeed, the more mature they are, the more
they weigh upon the soul if badly used,
which usually is the case in our blind world.
The goods that we acquire in our lives
fall likewise into two specific kinds,*
and so we climbed from one grade to the next,
“the active virtues and the meditative, 78
the second being much more eminent.
With those that are more lowly we’ll begin.
Only the active, moral virtues teach 81
the art of living in the world—they also
serve to prepare us for the other kind.
This was the path of Zeno and his sect, 84
and that of all the Cynic rabble too,
who claimed that our true end was active good.
Nature did not extend to them more light
than this, and what they said was easier
to say, perhaps, than put into effect. 87
These active goods can only be attained,
it seems, through sweat, fatigue, and hard travail;
thus reason holds that they are incomplete.
In practice, temperance and fortitude
are heavy loads to bear: the more these goods
engender pain, the greater they’re esteemed. 90
The aim of every human task, it seems,
is toil—not for toil’s sake, but for
the peace that toil finally brings the soul. 93
It seems, therefore, quite wrong to say that our
true end lies in these goods, which must appeal
to their own pain for benefits they seek.
But why must we continue in this vein?
That One who leads the way to our true end
has given us His word—so follow it. 96
The Magdalen took up the better part,
for each must choose one of two different ways.
The way that Martha chose is fraught with cares
This is the truth that never suffers change:
no mortal can escape its just decree,
and everything opposing it is false. 99
This Martha, as you see, is not the one
to slake our thirst, so long enduring. Only
the water asked for by the woman of
Samaria will do—so drink of that.
Let’s follow Mary, she who sat in peace,
without a care, beside those blessed feet. 102
Like her, the mind in contemplation rests:
when good approaches one who’s in this state,
his only longing is to contemplate. 105
It’s then that one is granted health. But since
some mortals pay this matter scant regard,
it too will be apportioned in three parts.
First, we can contemplate all earthly things
and nature; second, all that’s in the sky;
and third, the realm that lies beyond the stars. 108
Democritus did not transcend the first:
nature, he held, creates by chance all things,
and those to come, and ever keeps this guise.
He claimed that every single thing the world
contains, without exception, was in fact
created from the multitude of atoms.
But since true good is not below the moon,
it can’t reside in contemplating things
that, one by one, decay or come undone. 111
The study of the fair celestial realm
is not, as Anaxagoras the great
had wished it, gladly gazing at the sky
and stars, the sovereign good. A higher good
deprived it of this palm and gathered to
itself the glory of these lesser realms.
And as the sun appears to cloak the stars,
just so this shining radiance, a work
more worthy, puts the lesser in the shade.
The contemplation of what dwells beyond
the stars is worthier, the rarer that
it is—so held exalted Aristotle,
philosopher whom all the world reveres.
Such contemplation, though, is of two kinds:
one that our souls still practice in the flesh,
and one this life of ours can’t give. It seems
that Aristotle placed the highest good
in the first kind, and made no more distinctions.
He said, to those who grasp his writing well,
that happiness must be the exercise
of perfect virtue in a perfect life.
But if true good has two essential parts, 
the one, our will, the other intellect, 
these two together cannot be fulfilled 
because the mind, bound up inside the flesh, 
can never comprehend the good—confined, 
it always yearns to soar to greater heights. 
It's always anxious, filled with ever more 
impassioned longing for the good it lacks: 
through intellect, the mind's confusion grows. 
Accordingly, our intellect and will 
become worn out: thus truth, unblemished, white 
and fair, will never by the soul be found 
while this, our living carcass, weighs it down."

IV

With dulcet pipe I've set my verse to music, 
without the help of any other god 
than Pan, whose favor has sustained this song— 
that Pan whom every shepherd venerates, 
whose name is feted through Arcadia, 
whose rule is over all that's born and dies. 
But when a light's most bright to mortal eyes 
and at its most intense, it will appear 
to be less visible and more obscure. 
This happens to the soul—like certain beasts 
the soul sees poorly all that is most bright— 
and to our eyes when they observe the sun. 
Just so, that eye inside our mind, because 
it is imperfect, can't distinguish well 
whatever is most plain and manifest. 
No higher can our mortal feet aspire: 
another's needed to discern the way, 
to raise our earthbound spirit to the sky. 
Let her come forth, the mighty Thunderer's daughter, 
who issued from his head without a mother; 
let her extend her hand to my base mind.

May she inflame my will with holy love, 
illuminate my mind with such a light 
as he would need who longs to speak of God. 
And since this sacred goddess has no mother, 
let our intelligence be purged of matter, 
and separate itself from all that's flesh. 
Let her reveal the true and certain path, 
let her be to my intellect a sun, 
dispelling darkness and perplexity. 
But now, my Muse, invoked by me so often 
but feeling she's been cast aside, laments, 
and wants to charge me with ingratitude. 
Oh Muse, dictate to me the words and verses 
so that the light provided by Minerva 
will thus be written down as it's revealed. 
If you, Apollo, still do love the chaste 
locks of your much-desired Daphne, help 
then him in whom her lovely name endures, 
and grant to me from your own sacred furor 
not the amount that I myself may need 
but what the subject of my song demands. 
Now let your favor wax, the more my wit 
falls short, that I may show Marsilio's thoughts 
in verse as I perceive them in my mind. 
Marsilio, who looked on us with joy, 
then spoke: "We see, Alfeo father, Lauro, 
my son in years, the good is not found here. 
For while the soul is bound in carnal bonds, 
confined within this prison's gloom, it will 
be always governed by desire and doubt. 
The soul is so wrapped up in error when 
it's body-bound, that it won't know itself 
until its liberation is complete. 
We see, therefore, that once it's severed from 
the flesh, the happy soul experiences 
the consummate attainment of this good. 
So, to reward the virtuous, divine 
justice reserves, as I have said, this palm 
for those who dedicate themselves to God.
The things our soul may contemplate are two, angelic nature or divine. The first of these, however, brings no peace or rest: our intellect, which Nature predisposes to seek the source of every thing that is, will ever run from one cause to the next, and it will never reach repose or peace until it finds the root of every cause that's locked up in the mystery of God. Our will, perforce, is always on the move—it's never sated by a good beyond which it perceives some new and greater joy. It ever longs to reach the perfect good, and only finds repose in God's own light, when you have reached the sovereign good itself. All things find rest in their own cause, and that is God; accordingly it's God, and not the Angels, who imparts this plenteous good. Ispano, Al-Ghazal, and Avicenna esteemed the Angels as the highest good, but the true good is God the beautiful. Yet there are two ways to reflect on God: in one we see Him through our intellect, and come to recognize Him by this means. The second method is to know Him through desire and delight, and so achieve a joyous consummation of our longing. The divine Plato, phoenix to our world, has named the first, the sight of God, "ambrosia." He calls the pleasure of this vision "nectar." Our chaste and lovely soul, then, has two wings, desire and intellect, by which it rises, soaring to sovereign God, beyond the stars, where it will dine on nectar and ambrosia at God's own feast; nor does this everlasting, immense, and sovereign sweetness ever fail. More than ambrosia, nectar is the soul's delight, when it is sunned from the world, and pleasure satisfies it more than sight.

Since loving God in this life merits more than knowing Him, so in the life to come love's flower will procure the fruit of love. I want to prove that love is worthier, and that the soul gets more in life by loving God's grace than by investigating it. In the first place, so scant is human vision that no man gains true consciousness of God: in life is vision, rather, error's source. But that man has a good and perfect will and loves God truly, who denies himself and all that he possesses for His sake. Since he who hates God is more deeply wrong than he who fails to fathom Him at all, so he whose love is greater has more worth. Nature and reason show the truth of this; to make my sense more firm and sure, I've based my proof upon the law of opposites. Love opens up the gates of paradise: the loving soul will never err, whereas the search for knowledge often leads to death. At times the pride of knowledge lifts one's spirit above the earth and veils the eyes: to one like that, God closes Himself off, and hides. He hides from scholars, from the wise, but as the holy tongue itself once stated, Love reveals Him to the eyes of simple men. He who sets out to analyze God's nature does Him no honor in this way—he does the work, perhaps, to glorify himself. But he who grows enamored of His beauty, and gives himself and what he owns to God, to him will God present Himself in turn. The soul that is intent on knowing God consumes much time without much gain—the soul that loves Him well is very soon content. Thus, to conclude from all that has been said, if love is worthier, let no one think that love should not obtain the greater prize.
It's fitting, then, that those who seek to see
should see, but lovers will enjoy their Love
with infinite delight eternally.
Love is an ardent longing and desire.
Love is what must obtain due recompense.
Love is what makes the greater good appear,
as we will show with stronger evidence.

V

So full of sweetness was my heart while I
was hearing him, I felt that I was pulled
up to that Good of which his words did speak.
My soul, enraptured, drew apart. I wondered,
“What, then, must truth itself be like, if I
feel bliss when only hearing talk of it?”
Marsilio, having read my thoughts, then said
to me, “By probing in yourself you’ll sense
which one of these two goods is whole and perfect.
You grasp my words, you’re rather pleased. But one:
that pleasure’s passed, the good you know awakes
a newer, greater sweetness in your heart.
The mind, inflamed in its pursuit, now seeks
possession of the good, but only to
enjoy the good discerned: nor is it for
the sake of knowledge that it craves this pleasure.
And so the understanding, which comes first,
is servant to that good the mind desires.
To those who want to know what end it is
we search for, we can answer: to enjoy
the good that’s first distinguished by our minds.
One can’t give other grounds for joy than joy
for its own sake, which never dies. Nor can
the mind come into any greater good.
There is no pleasure human nature shuns,
yet often we refuse to see what we
consider troublesome or full of cares.

Who merely sees does not invariably
rejoice at what he sees, but he whose mind
feels joy will also see and understand.
And just as torment harms our nature more
than lack of knowledge, so contrariwise
does pleasure benefit us more than knowing.
No truthful judgment will diverge from ours:
if suffering is the primal curse, then joy,
its opposite, must be the final good.
Just as our nature flees from pain per se,
and from whatever seems to lead to it,
as from the very worst of punishments,
so too, the heart desires joy itself
and all that’s pleasurable, and runs to it
as love will hasten to the sovereign good.
And just as one who only sees the good
without desiring it, although he knows
enough to choose the good, cannot be good,
so too, it’s not just contemplating God
but loving Him that makes our soul divine,
for then the soul enjoys what first it knew.
When it’s involved in knowing God, our soul
must cut His vastness down to its own size,
restricting Him within its narrow range.
But loving Him, we amplify the mind
until it reaches His unbounded breadth.
And this is what must be true happiness.
When seeing Him, we only grasp that bit
of boundless might that is inside us, or
that part the soul may see before its eyes.
When loving Him, you love both what you see
and that more ample share of his immense
benevolence the mind has promised you.
However long the soul intently stares
we still will only see as through a fog
the charms of divine infinity.
We love Him with a true and perfect love:
to know God is to drag Him down to earth;
to love Him is to soar up to His height.
The sovereign good to which the mind aspires is happiness, but it won’t find this if it merely meditates and looks on God, because the vision that the seeing soul receives, however focused, always must be bound to something finite and created. And so the soul may not desert its station: if as a force the soul is limited, its actions, too, are small and circumscribed. But once it has escaped these bonds, the soul will only find complete content and rest in objects that possess eternal life. The soul is only avid for the good that yields the God we cannot know. This longing and its fulfillment seem a boundless thing, because, transmuted into God by love, the soul expands beyond that God whom we can only see.” I broke my silence then and said, “Now please explain this matter better, for it confounds my mind, no doubt because of some inherent blindness in my heart.” Marsilio to me: “I’m not surprised some darkness compasses your soul—for that, however, you don’t have to blame yourself. No mortal eye can lift its gaze so high. To help your understanding, though, I’ll use an illustration taken from the senses. “Tasting” and “taste” are terms to be distinguished: the aptitude of savoring is “taste,” while “tasting” is the very act itself. To set these two in motion one requires flavor—to serve them as a common object and cause the first to usher in the second. Taste is the soul’s desire, perfect, pure, aroused by tasting, which is intellect, to savor and enjoy the worthy object. When it has reached this goal, the soul tastes God, enjoying Him with sacred lust, a joy whose flavor tastes of every other good.

The Supreme Good

The tasting gives us pleasure only when the flavor’s sweet: the soul tastes God by seeing, but only passion gives it deep delight. So we’ll conclude, affirming that our true and sovereign good is that eternal God Whom we all unremittingly pursue, that simple lamb, immaculate and pure, to whom our pilgrim soul now makes its way that it may rest within His blessed hostel. The soul’s most holy bliss is to enjoy this good by means of longing, for desire proceeds from love and leads the soul to God. In Him the soul will taste that sweet delight for which, already, it has yearned so much, a sweetness no created thing can yield. And when the soul loves God, it’s apt that He invest it with His holy love, immerse our mind in His, and grant it endless joy. Love is the just reward of love that’s loved. Love is what gives us everlasting peace. Love is true health, unfailing and complete. The blessed Apostle, witness to the truth, and vessel capable of so much grace, arrived as far as heaven through this love. Love raised him to the third celestial realm, up to the star that fills the world with love, through which his eyes and God’s became as one. Within that sphere God never hides, but there reveals Himself, His holy domicile, His riches vast and inexhaustible. For just above is that bright aperture which shows itself and everything that is, where only God has placed His tabernacle. This prize is kept from us until our soul is sundered from the flesh; nor can my life or yours acquire it in this blind world. But lives like ours within this world include so many evils that ferocious beasts inside some cave lead lives far happier.
The more the eyes of mortals see the good,  
the more they suffer from not having it:  
thus greater knowledge brings us greater woe.

Moreover, all the while we live our lives  
the sum of things we covet ever grows,  
yet beasts want only grass and cooling springs.

Who has the fewest needs is happiest:  
hence man appears least happy in this world,  
where all his life he dreams and vacillates.

But then the prize comes in his second life,  
that one the erring world calls ‘gloomy death,’  
when he attains his bright and joyous end.

And so our life is not this worldly life  
(nor yours, oh shepherd, with its greater calm,  
nor Lauro is it yours, which seems so fair),  
where not one moment of so many can  
be glad (this holds for every mortal life),  
for true delight will always spurn the world.

Since Phoebus seems to sink beneath the Ocean  
and with the setting sun my talk concludes,  
Adieu, Alfeo! Lauro, fare thee well!”

And so he left those lonely slopes, and us  
as well, who though beside a limpid spring,  
were thirsty still to hear his well-wrought speech,  
whose words will never fade in Lethe’s stream.

But then the shepherd said, “’Tis late. I need  
to lead my modest flock back to its fold.

Already Phoebus’s light abandons us,  
so I’ll return to my old drudgery,  
and you, to where your inclinations lead.”

This said, he put his flock in motion,  
whereupon I turned my back to him and, with  
a sluggish step, proceeded on my way.

So each went on to his own dwelling place,  
but as I glowed inside with sacred fire,  
and all my thoughts were sweetly wandering.

Love, who inflames all things, inspired me to sing.
Desire soars, but then the soul becomes lethargic, thinking that its finite passion can never merit everlasting glory.

Oh courage unexampled, high, supreme, may you extend your hand to my limp longing.
Let your compassion heed my misery.

Unwavering hope, oh you my only refuge, direct the heart you call—receive, oh God, the one whom you compel to come to you.

Whom you afflict, give him delight and peace. Make cool the one you cause to burn. My hope is this, for you are perfect happiness.

The fount of every joy, of perfect bliss! I know that you’re unique, and that in you resides whatever rouses our desire.

For if some good or other pleases us, our longing does not seek this good or that, but seeks the Good in them, where lies its peace.

The heart has sought the quality of Good in every thing, the healthful liquor living within itself and spreading through all else.

And to this water’s fount the heart makes haste. It seeks and honors this perennial fount, which is diffused in every lowly thing.

Just as the only thing our eye perceives is sun, which shines in everything, so too is there one good alone the world desires.

Therefore, our thirst for this or that, or this and that together, never can be stilled until that other, greater good’s revealed.

Only the fount that drips the sacred liquor allays and slakes our thirst: oh sacred liquor, allay this thirst that weighs upon me so.

Since no thing’s good, except that you, oh Good of every good, invest it with your presence, don’t let us be without you for so long.

Oh primal Mind, without forgetfulness, oh primal Wisdom, deep, sublime, profound, and never sullied by stupidity,
Oh Savior who redeemed the world from hell, oh true retreat, who is the only health, you save each one who’s subject to your rule. Oh Good of goods, and Virtue of each virtue, I know you’ve given me eternal life so that I won’t be baser than the beasts. For your impassioned generosity instills in the mind’s vessel love, through which we can become enamored of your goodness. Likewise, our mind responds to yours, and if we understand, your mind illumines for us those things that are sublime and deep. As both our love and mind come from these two in you, so will the principle of your eternal life infuse our life as well. We live, oh Life, for you. To us you give true cognizance of some immortal things, and over mortal things, the will to rule. First, you awakened life in us, eternal in its response to yours, eternal, changeless, and placed in us before desire or mind. So with these three, each soul in its own way is able to enjoy eternity, is made immortal, made to last forever: the mind, through finding out; the righteous will, through longing; and above all else, the life we live that’s granted us and never dies. Eternity informs the mind and will, which follow life; and thus, before all else, it enters life, which is created first. You will, then, put an end to my distress. Through grace abounding, through the law of our inheritance, our hearts will compass bliss. Give us right now, at least some share of this. Let us enjoy, a little in this life, the certain hope of your benevolence. If you’re unwilling still, because our soul is undeserving still, at least, we beg, show us the open way to our salvation.  

Grant us that you won’t let us be deceived by brief terrestrial allures, or lose what’s sure for what is vain and insecure. While strengthening our heart against the rule of dreadful Fortune and her threat, to which, sometimes, the man who’s so inclined succumbs, show us the kindness of your holy face. Oh Father most indulgent with your sons, May your compassion open wide its arms. Oh ample Good, recrea quos creasti: Help us, for we are born of you alone, almighty Father and most merciful. Only your truth and goodness consummate and slake our thirsty minds and wills, nor do we understand the Cause that fashioned us. Have pity on your sick, infected child, the soul, so far from her celestial homeland, who’s banished to this dark and murky woods. Lift from our heart whatever keeps you distant. Have pity on the grievously longing for our native land, which pierces through our heart. There, where our homeland is, dwells true repose. Where home and father are, the son will rest. There dwells the highest good, abundant, true. In exile there is worry and false good, or rather real and flagrant wickedness. Admit us, then, to your divine assembly. If, then, some good is offered to the heart, we then will live removed from wicked thoughts. The soul will taste a good that is assured when our devout and willing hearts reflect on you. The soul, it seems, attains its good if it directs each of its prayers to you. And should its thought unite with you, it then will rest. So rid us of whatever may distract the soul from thinking such a thought. Release us from our doubt, our coldness, our despair, and let the soul take refuge, then, in faith and hope and loving charity.
so that we’ll never be divorced from you,
oh Life of lives, true Light, the only one
who can illumine every other light.
Without your divine power, guided by
our wits alone, we’ll stray from the true path
and rapidly fall into outer darkness.
Induce our soul, from birth until its term,
to live for you alone—to shine within
your light, when it has passed the final threshold.
May it blaze with joy in you, for it is led
to you, unbounded Goodness, Truth, and Life,
through you, the Way, who guides us to this good.
And make us love your boundless beauty, free
of any care that might the heart torment.
Oh sovereign Good, inciting every mind,
let us enjoy you always, avid yet content.

The Supreme Good

The first version of this long, philosophical poem was composed in 1473–74 and then, according to Martelli 1965a, 1–35, expanded and revised in subsequent years. The work is a primary document for understanding a major turning point in Lorenzo’s life, toward Neoplatonism and the spiritual concerns of his mentor Marsilio Ficino. Like the “Symposium,” the poem was influenced by Dante’s *Comedy*, but here the tone is serious and didactic rather than comic and satiric. Although capitoli 1 and 2 (to line 108) are Lorenzo’s original creation, the other capitoli are largely a verse translation of two letters of Ficino, one on happiness (*De felicitate*) and the other a prayer to God (*Oratio ad Deum theologica*, the basis for capitolo 6). Lorenzo’s original contribution is a lively dispute (*altercatione*) between him, Lauro, and Alfeo, the shepherd, about whether city or country life is more conducive to happiness. Alfeo, though not denying the corruptness of the city, points out to Lauro the bitter hardships of rustic life, thereby subverting Lauro’s rosy view of pastoral existence. Enter Mar- silio, who, Neoplatonically, proceeds to separate the question of happiness or the true good from the material conditions of life. After a long, subtle discourse Marsilio shows the inferiority of various kinds of good and proves that the loving contemplation of God is the only satisfying good: love rather than knowledge of God is the way to happiness. Lauro is then inspired to sing his hymn of praise to God. Though Lorenzo follows Ficino’s prose fairly closely, he does, in the words of Martelli, invest Ficino’s graceful text with a “surprising dramatic intensity” (1965a, 29). Likewise the hymn to God is both more passionate and more soul-searching that the Ficinian original (Sturm 125).

On the debate over the priority and relations of the Ficinian and Lauren- tenant texts, see Wadsworth, Rochon 475–543, Kristeller, Martelli 1965a, 1–35, Orvieto 1976, 27–37, and Fubini in *Letters* 1, 496–99, 510–11. For the background to the love-versus-intellect debate that lies behind Ficino’s letter on happiness and capitoli 4 and 5, see Michael J. B. Allen, *Marsilio Ficino: The Philo-.bus Commentary* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975) 35–48. On the influence of capitoli 1 and 2 on Sannazzaro’s *Arcadia*, see Orvieto 1976, 33. I have followed the standard text in Bigi 1965 but have translated the other title, “De summo bono,” rather than “Altercatione.” Chastel’s French and Stange’s German translations were occasionally helpful in interpreting the text.

I.11–12. that mountain, etc.: Mount Giovi, near Lorenzo’s villa at Careggi, meeting place of the Platonic Academy, led by Ficino; the mountain is old and so is its name, Giovi (with a wordplay on youth), which goes back to its youth.

II.5. or be whose noble tones had walled up Thebes: Amphion, the mythical lyre player and King of Thebes, whose sweet music caused the stones to move of their own accord and make themselves into walls.

II.7. that lyre: the lyre of Orpheus, which became, after his death, a constellation.

II.10. that ancient sage: Pythagoras, who believed in the trans- migration of souls (reincarnation).


II.100–102. But drawing out this point, etc.: in other words, I do not want to turn you off by overdoing this analogy (seeking the good too soon/eating unripe fruit), an analogy that might have the same effect as the mildly ridiculous one comparing heaven (the sky) to a stretched-out pelt.
better means of approaching God. See Allen 1975, 35-48, for the historical roots of this controversy.

V.1–93. In this section Lorenzo’s poetic expression of Ficino’s thought is at its most inspired and compelling.

V.93–108. An illustration taken from the senses, etc.: far from helping the reader’s understanding, this confused and confusing analogy does the opposite.

V.124–65. In this section Lorenzo ceases to paraphrase Ficino’s letter but elaborates through his own vivid images the Ficinian theme of the will’s and love’s superiority to intellect.

V.127. The blessed Apostle: Saint Paul, who wrote of having been transported to heaven, see 2 Corinthians 12.1–4.

V.130. The third celestial realm: that is, the planet Venus.

V.136–38. That bright aperture, etc.: the sense, if not the imagery, of these lines is not easy to understand: the bright aperture may be God himself, as in Dante’s vision in the Paradiso 28.13–21, 29.12, 33.87, and/or an aleph or magical point that contains all other points in the cosmos and makes them visible, also a characteristic of Dante’s God.

VI.1–208. This prayer to God is an inspired translation of Ficino’s Oratio ad Deum theologica.

VI.163. recrea quos creasti: revive those whom you have created.


II.148. And he who took goodbye: Augustus Caesar.

III.2. the newborn Plato: that is, Marsilio, translator of Plato into Latin.


III.82–83. Zeno . . . the Cynic rabble: Zeno (c. 300 B.C.) was the founder of Stoic philosophy. He, along with the Cynics, maintained that the exercise of the active virtues was the highest good.

III.103–5. Lorenzo follows here the traditional identification of Mary Magdalen with the contemplative life, favored by Jesus, and Martha with the active life. See the Gospel of Luke 10.38–42.

III.111–12. Cf. the Gospel of John 4.7–15, where the water that prevents the return of thirst is identified with the teachings of Jesus.


III.134. Anaxagoras: ancient Greek philosopher who lived in the fifth century B.C.

IV.19. the mighty Thunderer’s daughter: Minerva, who was born from Jupiter’s head, and thus represents, in Ficinian thought, the contemplative life. Lorenzo now abandons Pan, the more worldly god (4.3–6), as his inspiration and calls on Minerva to help him sing the higher mysteries of contemplation.

IV.37–38. Apollo . . . your much-desired Daphne: Apollo chased the nymph Daphne, who was saved by being changed into a laurel tree. Lorenzo is Lauro, and Lauro is the laurel tree.


IV.88. The divine Plato, phoenix to our world: Plato is like a phoenix because of his uniqueness (Bigi 1965, 74).

IV.82. The rest of Marsilio’s discourse concerns the much-discussed question of whether the will or the intellect is the