

## I: THE END OF VIRTUE

1. IT IS the prerogative of human nature to understand itself, and to guide its operations to a known end. This end is forfeit if one lives at random, without considering what is worthy of his endeavors, or fit for his desires.<sup>1</sup>

2. The end is that which crowns the work. This goal inspires the soul with desire, and desire gives rise to a quick and vigorous industry. It is achieved last, but conceived first, in every operation. All means which can be used in the acquisition of it derive their value from its excellence. We are encouraged to use these means only on the account of that end which is reached by them.

3. It is the purpose of moral instruction to teach men the nature of virtue, and to encourage them in the practice of it, by explaining its use and efficacy.

4. The excellence of virtue is what makes it both necessary to happiness and able also to produce it. Its excellence consists in this: virtue is the only means by which happiness can be obtained.

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<sup>1</sup> “End” here and throughout is used as in the ancient Greek sense of *telos*: the ultimate aim or “final cause” of something.

5. Since consideration of the end is what animates us to the use of the means, whoever deals with virtue is right to put the end at the beginning. And further, they should first show the excellence of bliss before they open the nature of virtue. It is a vain thing to discover the means unless the end is desired. Otherwise, no matter how often we are taught or commended to be virtuous, it will have no effect—like a man with wood, a hammer, and nails but no desire to build. For if we despise the end, all our activity is fruitless. It may at best instruct us in the means, but such knowledge is vain. It will produce no good effect in us.

6. Reason is the faculty by which man is able to contemplate his end. It is a singular advantage that privileges him above the beasts. It enables him not only to examine the nature and perfection of his end, but also the justness and fitness of the means used to achieve the end. It also allows him to examine the singular excellence of his first cause, as its glory and goodness appears in his design and contrivance; especially in making man's happiness so complete and perfect.

7. The heathens, who invented the name of “ethics,” fell very short in the knowledge of man's end; but they are worse than heathens who never consider it.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “Heathens” inventing “the name of ethics” is not intended as an insult but rather as a straightforward way of identifying the paternity of the language and the tradition of thinking in which Traherne is engaging. Ethics, in the Greek ἠθικός and pronounced *ethicos*, means “pertaining to character.” The study of human character, its development and its possible malformations, was initially undertaken in ancient Greece among pagan philosophers—most notably Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. The

8. The more excellent the end is, the more prone by nature we are to pursue it, and all the means conducive in getting us there are the more desirable.

9. Reason, which is the formal essence of the soul of man, guides him to desire those things which are absolutely supreme.<sup>3</sup> For it is an eternal property in reason to prefer the better above the worse. He who prefers the worse above the better acts against nature, and swerves from the rule of right reason.

10. Whatever varieties of opinion there are concerning happiness, all conclude and agree in this, that man's ultimate purpose is his perfect happiness. And the more excellent his happiness is, the more ought his soul to be enflamed with the desire of it and inspired with the greater industry.

11. The more perfect his bliss is, the greater is man's crime of despising it. To pursue an infinite and eternal happiness

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systematic study of character was their best guess as to what "the Good" as applied to "the human" would be. Jews needed no such study as they had much more immediate access to the law. Obedience to the law, as conceptualized in terms of ethics, came later as humans reflected on the meaning of the Torah.

<sup>3</sup> "Essence" is a traditional philosophical way of asking about "the whatness" of any given thing. What is it that makes such and such a thing the thing that it is? The use of the term "Form" modifies this slightly to clarify that it is not looking for the essence of a particular being but what is it about the type of being that makes it that type. Form, as related to the beings in question, is distinguished from matter and their "material essence." The formal essence of man has been thought to be our rationality combined with our animality at least as far back as Aristotle, even if he didn't use this exact terminology.

is divine and angelic. To pursue an earthly and sensual happiness is brutish. But to place happiness in anger and envy is demonic: the pleasures of malice are bitter and destructive.

12. To live by accident, and never to pursue any happiness at all is neither angelic, nor brutish, nor demonic, but worse than anything in some respect. It is to act against that which makes us human, and to wage war with our very selves. They who place their ease in carelessness are of all others the greatest enemies and disturbers of themselves.

13. It is madness and folly to pursue the first object that presents itself without a clear idea of happiness. And those who suspect that there is no true happiness and therefore content themselves in the enjoyment of low things are pitiable. Such people are common. The disputations concerning the nature of happiness argue its existence.<sup>4</sup> And we must cease to be men before we can extinguish the desire of being happy. He only is truly generous who aspires to the most perfect blessedness of which God and nature have made him capable.

14. There is great danger in choosing our happiness. And the greater the danger, the greater the watch we should set over our own minds lest we should be seduced and

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<sup>4</sup> Traherne's point in this sentence is that all the great philosophical disputations on happiness (e.g., Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* or, less clearly, Plato's *Phaedo*) argue affirmatively for its existence. Arguments against the existence of happiness have no philosophical pedigree. And those who might argue that happiness (or truth) doesn't exist must always be asked, "Then why are you still arguing?" Those who eat dirt still *eat*.

deceived. Just look at how eager men are in their disputations concerning happiness—this proves the weight of the nature of the theme being examined.

15. Hastiness in grasping an unexamined happiness is the great occasion of all the error about it among the vulgar. They are led, like beasts, by their sense and appetite, without discerning or improving any other faculty. The lip of the cup is anointed with honey, which, as soon as they taste, they drink it up, though the liquor is nothing but gall and poison. They are deluded with a show: instead of pleasure, they rush headlong to their own destruction.

16. It is as natural for man to desire happiness as to live and breathe. Sense and instinct carry him to happiness, as well as reason. Only reason should rectify and direct his instinct, inform his sense, and complete his essence by inducing those perfections of which it is capable.

17. Things good in themselves, when they attempt to supplant better things, can become evil. Better things are evil if preferred to the best. This is especially true where the choice of the one hinders the acquisition of the other. For where good, better, and best, are subservient to each other, the one is the better for the others' sake. But where they interfere and oppose each other, the good are bad in comparison to the better, and the better worse than the best. This is why reason cannot assent to any happiness less than the supreme. Such a happiness must be infinite, because the almighty power which made reason active is limitless in its operations. It never rests, except in the production of a glorious act that is infinite in perfection.

18. If happiness is infinite, the loss of happiness is as great. The misery of missing our happiness is intolerable. For (our eyes being open) a loss that is incomprehensible must produce a grief unmeasurable, an anguish as infinite as our damage.

19. Inferior happinesses are but miseries compared with the highest. A penny is good and pleases a beggar in need, but a gold coin is better. An estate of ten thousand pounds a year is better than a gold coin, but our ambition carries us to principalities and empires. An empire is more desirable than a province, and the wider, the richer, the better it is, the more desirable. But the empire of all the earth is a bubble compared to the heavens, and the heavens themselves are less than nothing compared to an infinite dominion.

20. Perfect happiness is not dominion, nor pleasure, nor riches alone, nor learning, nor virtue, nor honor; but all these in perfection. It requires that every soul should be capable of infinite dominion, pleasure, learning, and honor for the full and perfect attainment of it.

21. If all these are infinite and eternal in that happiness which is prepared for man, those actions are of inestimable value by virtue of which his happiness is gained. And it becomes his wisdom and courage to suffer many things for so noble an end, especially if it may in any measure be thereby acquired and enjoyed in this life.

22. The great reason why God has concealed happiness from the knowledge of man is the enhancement of its nature

and value. But that which most conceals it is the corruption of nature. For as we have corrupted, so have we blinded ourselves. Yet we are led by instinct to eagerly thirst after things unknown, remote, and forbidden. The truth is, our palates are spoiled, and our digestion so corrupted that until our nature is purified by a little work, to make happiness known is to expose it to contempt and censure. Happiness is too great and pure for perverted nature.

23. The concealment of an object whets our appetite, and puts an edge upon our endeavors, and this carries a mystery in it. For whereas the maxim is *ignoti nulla cupido*, all love comes in at the eye.<sup>5</sup> We desire an object to which we are blind, and the more blind we are, the more restless. We are touched by an unknown beauty which we never saw, and in the midst of our ignorance are actuated with a tendency which does not abate the value of our virtues, but puts life and energy into our actions.

24. Though highest happiness cannot be perfectly understood (because it is incomprehensible to men on earth), yet we may discern a great deal about it. What we can come to know will serve to meet our instinct, feed our capacity, animate our endeavor, encourage our expectation (to hope for more than we enjoy), enable us to subdue our lusts, support us in temptations, and assist us in overcoming all obstacles.

25. Even if happiness were no more than infinite honors and pleasures, that would be enough to allure us. But the

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<sup>5</sup> “There is no desire for what is unknown,” or “ignorance is bliss.”

idea of a happy ending—the idea that all things can conclude in the best of manners, in communion with God, being full of life, and beauty, and perfection in himself, and having the certain assurance that all will be included in his bliss—this thought is a thing so divine that the very hope of it fills us with comfort here, and to see it realized will be perfect satisfaction hereafter.

26. He that can enjoy all things in the image of God does not need to covet their enjoyment in a baser manner: man was made in God's image that he might live in his likeness.

27. I am not so stoic as to make all happiness consist in mere apathy. Freedom from passion is not the solution, nor is it to give the passions all their liberty. Neither do I persuade you to renounce the advantages of wealth and honor any more than those of beauty and wit. For as a man may be happy without all these, so may he make a happy use of them when he has them. He may be happy with difficulty without them, but easily with them. If not in heaven, yet certainly on earth, the goods of fortune concur to the completion of time-bound happiness, and therefore where they are freely given, they are not to be despised.

28. That which I desire to teach a man is how to make a good use of all the advantages of his birth and breeding. How, in the increase of riches and honors, to be happy in their enjoyment. How to secure himself in the temptations of affluence, and to make a man glorious in himself, and delightful to others in abundance. Or else, if affliction should arise, and the state of affairs change, I would teach how to triumph over adverse fortune, and to be happy



notwithstanding his calamities and how to govern himself in all estates so as to turn them to his own advantage.

29. For though happiness is not absolutely perfect in this world, nor so complete in poverty, as in a great and plentiful estate; you are not to believe that wealth is absolutely necessary. Sometimes it is required to forfeit all for the sake of happiness. Nothing is absolutely necessary to bliss but grace and virtue, though to perfect bliss, ease and honor are absolutely necessary.

30. There are many degrees of blessedness beneath the most supreme. They all are transcendently sweet and delightful. And it sometimes happens that what is most bitter to sense is pleasant to reason.

31. Rather than make shipwreck of a good conscience, we must do as mariners in a storm, and cast our riches overboard for our own preservation. It is better to lose them than ourselves.

32. Virtue is desirable and glorious, because it teaches us through many difficulties in this tempestuous world to sail smoothly, and attain the haven.