

PRAISE FOR *THE SHINING* HUMAN CEATURE

“Thomas Traherne’s *Centuries of Meditations* is an unparalleled classic of cheery Christian mysticism, much of it animated by Paul’s ecstatic declaration: “All things are yours.” His *Christian Ethics* is less exuberant, but Traherne’s treatise on virtue, happiness, and love—now expertly introduced, edited, and modernized by Colin Redemer—expresses his delight in the goodness of God and creation and his confidence that “All will be included in his bliss.”

—Peter Leithart, *President of the Theopolis Institute*

“Colin Redemer is to be congratulated on making Traherne’s inspiring theology of love accessible to today’s reader. By modernizing spelling, tactfully simplifying syntax and by supplying the occasional judicious footnote to explain difficulties, Redemer has managed to clarify the meaning while preserving the emotional power of Traherne’s style.”

—Richard Willmott, *Chairman of the Traherne Association; author of The Voluble Soul: Traherne’s Poetic Style and Thought* .

“Redemer accomplishes a wonderful feat in both his introduction and his treatment of Traherne’s philosophical and theological meditation on Christian ethics. Tuned to the modern ear, this well-composed presentation advances Traherne’s 17th century voice into today’s living room. If you have ears to hear, you must open this initial volume and listen; Redemer conducts as Traherne sings. I eagerly await the encore of future completed volumes.”

—Daniel T. Haase, *Chair of Christian Formation & Ministry, Wheaton College*

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“The “beauty of virtue” is not something most Protestants think about. But it is the theme of this beautiful treatise written by the seventeenth-century Anglican poet and theologian Thomas Traherne, whose writings are now being discovered as gold suddenly appearing at the bottom of a long-lost cave. Colin Chan Redemer is a masterful writer and translator whose new rendition of Traherne's *Christian Ethics* is a must-read for Anglicans and all Christians who want to "leave elementary doctrine" and go on to "maturity" that relishes the beauty of holiness.”

—Gerald McDermott, *Retired Anglican Chair of Divinity at Beeson Divinity School*

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CHRISTIAN ETHICS VOL. 2

CHRISTIAN ETHICS

OR

*DIVINE MORALITY:
OPENING THE WAY
TO BLESSEDNESS BY THE RULES
OF VIRTUE AND REASON*

by Thomas Traherne

Edited by Colin Chan Redemer

IX: ON WISDOM

1. Knowledge without wisdom, however excellently it may be conceived, is like skill without practice. Whether it is in music, painting, or in any other art, such as government, navigation, preaching, or law, it is altogether vain and fruitless if it is not lived and practiced.¹ For wisdom is that excellent habit of the soul by which we choose the most excellent end of all known ends, and actually execute it by the best means that are conducive to it.

2. It is the greatest folly in the world to know the best of all possible ends and not to embrace it. To choose to embrace it without endeavoring after it is a folly contending with the other for eminence. To choose any means less than the best in order to get there is a new piece of folly altogether. Wisdom pursued must submit to what wisdom requires. For no less

¹ Students of Thomas Aquinas will forgive me but “lived” here is my updating of the term “reduced to act” which is a thoroughly technical scholastic term that always requires extensive explanations. That which is “reduced” is the “potency” (to use the related scholastic term) or “potential in the thing reducing,” and the reduction is a sort of resolution into the thing being itself into what it actually is. As applied to the various arts he is just pointing out that painters who don’t paint are somehow failing. For the origins of the act/potency distinction, see Aristotle’s *Physics*, Book III.1-3, and his *Metaphysics*, Books VII-VIII, as well as Aquinas’s *On the Principles of Nature* and *Commentary on Aristotle’s Physics*.

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than the best of all possible means is required for the acquisition of the best of all possible ends.

3. And by all this we understand that wisdom is not a mere speculation of excellent things. It is a practical habit by which we actually achieve and complete our happiness. For it is impossible for the best of means (when they are used well) to fail. We may grow remiss and suspend our endeavor, which is another kind of folly, and so be diverted from the best of all possible means by some strong temptation. We may cease from using them through our own inconstancy, or yield to some light and easy allurements. Or we could be discouraged by some terrible danger, and thus abandon the best of all ends. But without some such folly it can never be lost.

4. Possibilities are innumerable, so that nothing less than infinite wisdom can find out that which is absolutely the best. But when infinite wisdom finds out the best of all possible ends, it is an easy thing for wisdom to disclose that end to the knowledge of others, to whom it is able to communicate itself by way of gift and participation.

5. Only God fully comprehends what is the best of all possible ends. But in general it includes all kinds of goods in the highest perfection, infinite varieties and degrees of possibility turned into actuality, all sweetness and beauty, empire, dominion, and power, all riches, pleasures, and honors, victories and triumphs, and possessions. All these will be in it, and nothing possible or desirable will be wanting in it. God alone is the best of all possible ends, who includes all things in himself as the cause, and end. The perfection of his will is his blessedness and glory, and his essence is the only means by which he can attain it. By himself it is that we come unto him, in a manner more fully to be explained afterward. His essence is the best of all possible means, by which he attains himself, and by which he is enjoyed. Our conformity to his essence is our way, by a wise application of our souls to that eternal act which is his end.

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6. It is evident and clear that sweetness and beauty are attributes of the best of all possible ends. Also that these must be infinite in their degree and measure, because only the infinitely congruent is absolutely proper. Now what is infinitely congruent is infinitely sweet and beautiful. What is infinitely desirable is infinitely good, because it is agreeable to that love by which every existence intends itself, and pursues its own sublime happiness.

7. It is easy to conceive how God should be the end of his creatures, but how he should really be his own end is difficult to understand. His creatures are defective, and have something outside themselves to aspire after. But from all eternity, God is infinitely perfect. Being all that he can be, he needs nothing that he can endeavor to attain. But if we consider the nature of wisdom, which is a voluntary act, we may be freed from the despair of understanding the mystery.

8. For of necessity, wisdom must intend itself in its operations, because it becomes wisdom by doing the best of all excellent things. It does them all that it may be wisdom, or be wise in doing them. It implies deliberation and freedom. Being a virtue seated in the will and understanding, it implies a power of knowing, and choosing, and doing all things. It consists not in the power of knowing only, nor in the power of choosing, nor in the power of doing.

9. Nothing else is wisdom, but to choose and do what we know is absolutely most excellent. Wisdom then is founded in the act of doing; nay, it is the act of doing all that is excellent. If it is a free and voluntary act, as it must be (because nothing is wisdom except that which guides itself by counsel freely to a known end which it discerns to be most excellent), it implies in the wise man an ability to abstain from action by choosing to do what he might avoid.

10. If wisdom had neglected to do what is most excellent, it would have turned into folly, because it would have thereby

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lost the most excellent end. But by choosing to do all that was best, it became an act of wisdom. Being most lovely, it chiefly desired to be. And so by choosing and doing the most excellent things, it begot itself, and by itself proceeded to all its operations (which must be infinite, if wisdom be so). Anything less would (if rested in) be infinitely defective.

11. It is evident that riches and pleasures may be infinite, from the nature and extent of space, which is unlimited and endless, from the omnipresence and eternity of God in which there is infinite room for innumerable varieties, and especially from his wisdom and goodness which are infinite treasures. This is also evident from his almighty power, which is able in all parts of his omnipresence and eternity to work without any bound or period, without cessation to work in all places of his dominion at once, and throughout all, his immeasurable power to act, and do what he will. Therefore, God can fill both eternity and time with enjoyments in one instant, every part and particle of which shall be infinitely delightful, because of the vigor of his eternal power in full operation. Thus he is entirely acting in heaven, earth, and hell at the same time. And at all conceivable distances beyond all heavens he is ever acting, because he is willing, decreeing, seeing, and ruling there, and everywhere accomplishing his counsel and pleasure. His essence and his will are both the same. His essence is his act, and his act his pleasure.

12. By exerting his almighty power, God begot that act, which is the means and end of all his endeavors. An act of infinite and eternal wisdom is his blessedness and glory. We must beware of conceiving God to be one thing and his act another, for all his wisdom and goodness, all his blessedness, life, and glory are in the act. By this he became the fountain and the end of all things. He became so freely, and yet was so by his essence from everlasting. For eternity is an infinite length of duration, altogether present in all its parts in a stable manner. It was not wise to fill one part of space with treasures, and

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leave another empty. Common reason will instruct us that it is better to have all spaces full of delights, rather than some few or none. And by his infinite wisdom, he knows how to enjoy what he never needed, and to improve his enjoyments by giving them away.

13. Infinite and eternal wisdom does not only imply the possibility, but the certain reality and existence of eternal treasures. Where, before you begin to wonder how treasure can be infinite, you should know that God is his own best and most perfect treasure. Treasures are by nature those precious things which are means whereby we acquire our ends, or those things which we most esteem as the sovereign objects of our joy.² God is in both those respects his own wealth, because his essence is the means by which he achieves all his ends, and the sovereign end of all those means by which he uses his wisdom for his ends. “For of him, and through him, and unto him are all things,” as the Scripture witnesses [Rom. 11:36]. Matter is the dreg of nature, and dead without power. Power is the abyss of nature, but void without act. Act is the top and perfection of nature; it is the fullness of power, the fountain and the means of all that is. For by transforming itself into act, power becomes an act and by that act produces and perfects all its works both outward and inward. So it is the means of all its productions, being so infinitely simple and various together,

² “Esteem” appears in this volume over forty times and requires some explanation. The OED actually quotes from Traherne when it explains that a now somewhat archaic usage of this word is to mean “judgment”. This is only somewhat archaic because we still have echoes of this in our word “estimation”. We esteem things which we estimate to be valuable (or if not we hold them in low esteem). In the first volume of this series it appeared at least once in this archaic usage in 2§21 “Perfect righteousness is a full and adequate esteem of all the value that is in things.” I neglected to change the usage there, and regret it. I will try to do so here when the term’s usage is less clear, but in other cases (such as this one) it will remain.

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that nothing but power exerting itself is in the nature of the act by which it is exerted.³

14. All the essence of that act is the complete exertion of eternal power, and yet to it alone we ascribe the original and means of all. It is the cause, and means and end of itself, as well as of other things, which are produced by it for its own sake. For idle power can do nothing. Mere power is neither the cause, nor the means, nor the end of anything. Power that is not idle, but exerted and thoroughly employed, is all act. And this is the cause of all it produces, because they spring from this power exerting itself. And they are the means of all, because by this power exerting itself, they all exist; and they are the end of all, because it did *the all*, that it might not be idle, but be power exerting itself—one glorious act in its full perfection.

³ Traherne is offering basic scholastic distinctions which are familiar to any reader of Thomas Aquinas or Aristotle and relying on them throughout. Therefore a brief digression may help the reader (though this was touched on in footnote 1 in Chapter IX). To explain Act and Potency imagine a kettle on the stove which is actually cold, but could potentially be hot. Change therefore is understood as the actualization of potentials inside things. For change to occur something which is already in act must put the thing which is only potentially in act into act; the man turns the stove on, which heats the kettle and actualizes its potential to be hot. God is pure act which actualizes all of reality. Reality was ever only potential without him. That which is purely potential is not real. In this schema we can also say that form is always actualized since anything that is in *actual* reality. A form could potentially exist here and now, but it cannot potentially be. If it is purely potential then it is *not* a form. Pure form always is, even if it isn't right here in front of me. The opposite of pure form would be pure matter (sometimes referred to by the technical term "prime matter"). Matter as such—matter without form—therefore has no actual existence. It always only exists when joined to a form.

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15. It was an effect of infinite wisdom in which God acquired himself and all his dominion by one act, and prepared his own, and his creatures' blessedness, and made himself and all his kingdom glorious.⁴ But this is scarcely intelligible, because the manner of his life is incomprehensible. We cannot explain how to conceive what the learned constantly affirm, that all eternity is at one time. All that I shall observe in order to explain this mystery is this: that though the world begins and ends with time, yet eternity does immutably include time. And the operations of divine wisdom are various, and exactly fitted to their distinct seasons. Yet all the parts of eternity are filled with operations, which, though they are one in God, are like that of shining in the sun, manifold in effects, just as the beams of the sun shine in their different works among all the creatures.

16. It is a natural effect of infinite wisdom to make each of its treasures suitable to its own excellence. And that the wisdom of God has done, by making even the smallest thing in his kingdom infinitely serviceable in its place and station, for the manifesting of his wisdom and goodness, and glory to the eye of a clear beholder. And this he has done by making all his kingdom one entire object, and everything in it a part of that whole, relating to all the innumerable parts, which receive a

⁴ Language about God's inner life is always in danger of heresy when it does anything besides quote from Scripture. But we are not entirely unfamiliar with the idea of God "acquiring himself." "God has set himself apart" by giving himself the name of YHWH, says the *Synopsis of Purer Theology*, 58. I advise readers to generously interpret Traherne here as emphasizing that wisdom is fundamental to God's being which precedes creation. The original seems to offer a branching set of couplets that follow a pattern. It should be read to be saying "God's wisdom made it so that by one act God *both* was, *and* by that same act he created. By the same act he acquired *both* his blessedness *and* that of all his creatures." In this case it still emphasizes that God's wisdom made it possible, but adds that the one-ness of the act resulted in a two-ness of effect.

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beauty from all, and communicate a beauty to all, even to all objects throughout all eternity, while every one among millions of spectators is endued with an endless understanding to see all, and enjoy all in its relations, beauties, and services.

17. I cannot stop to expand on this. So I will illustrate it with a familiar example. No single part of a stately monument is so beautiful out of its place as it is in its place, because if it is seen alone it is not understood. For the beauty that results from all, consists in order and symmetry, which is broken to pieces by any division. He knows nothing as he ought to know who thinks he knows anything without seeing its place and how it relates to God, angels and men, and to all the creatures in earth, heaven, hell, time, and eternity.

18. It is an act of wisdom to prize and enjoy what is by wisdom prepared, and because infinite wisdom includes all wisdom, infinite wisdom at once knows, chooses, does, esteems, and enjoys all that is excellent. It is an act of wisdom to make oneself good and delightful to others, because honor, peace, and friendship are so founded. It is infinite wisdom to become infinitely good and delightful to others, and for that cause to be infinite in bounty. For what is infinitely good is infinitely glorious. And therefore it is that God, needing nothing in himself, gives all things to others. He gives them in enjoying them, he enjoys in giving them, while his goodness delights in the happiness of others, and in being the happiness of others. For by making them great and blessed he magnifies himself; and by replenishing them increases his treasures.

19. However little of this you are able to conceive, you may understand that to be like God is the way to be happy, and that if God has put it in your power to be like him, it is the utmost madness in the world to abuse your power by neglecting his treasures. But it is infinite wisdom by the best of all possible means to embrace and enjoy them, because an infinite end is thereby attained--even God himself, who is thereby made the portion of the soul, and its reward forever.

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20. The best of all possible means through which we can acquire his eternal treasures is to imitate God in our thoughts and actions, to exert our powers after his similitude, and to attain his image, which is after God in knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness [Col. 3:10; Eph. 4:24]. For by knowing all things, as God knows them, we transform our souls into an act of knowledge, most bright and glorious. By loving all things as God loves them, we transform our wills into an act of love, which is most sweet and blessed. We enrich and beautify ourselves with the image of his goodness, while we communicate our souls (in our powers) to all objects in his whole eternity. We magnify ourselves by magnifying him in all his works. We do right to ourselves by doing right to God, and all other things, which as far as we must learn by degrees here on earth, and can never perfectly accomplish the work until it is given us in heaven, it is wisdom to walk in the paths of righteousness as far as we are able, and to do those things here, though small and defective, which he will recompense with a reward so perfect hereafter.

21. If we are ever so happy as to come to heaven, his wisdom shall be our wisdom, his greatness our greatness, his blessedness our blessedness, his glory our glory, all his joys and treasures shall be ours, his life and love ours, and himself ours for evermore.

22. His wisdom is made ours because it is the light in which we shall see light [Ps. 36:9], and so learn to inherit all things [Rev. 21:7]. He is the exemplar and originator of our wisdom, the fountain and pattern of all our joys, the author and inventor of all our delights, the end and sum of all our desires, the means of all our happiness, our very blessedness and glory