

THOMAS TRAHERNE AND THE LOCATION OF INTRINSIC VALUE

Robin Attfield

From Dust I rise
 And out of nothing now awake,
 These Brighter Regions which salute mine Eyes
 A gift from GOD I take.
 The Earth, the Seas, the Light, the Day, the Skies,
 The Sun and Stars are mine; if these I prize,

A Stranger here
 Strange Things doth meet, strange Glories See,
 Strange Treasures lodg'd in this fair World appear,
 Strange all and New to me:
 But that they mine should be, who nothing was,
 That Strangest is of all, yet brought to pass.¹

Thomas Traherne wrote these words in or around the 1660's. His poems and his 'Centuries of Meditation' are full of delight and rapture at the rare and startling beauty of nature and the world of creation: and sometimes he goes further and claims that the whole of nature is his, and he its sole heir. These and other claims of his are hard to square with the orthodoxy of belief to be expected in a seventeenth century Anglican priest, and might even suggest to the reader that the poet is speaking through the mouth of Christ. But this is not so, as the final stanza of his 'The Salutation' (quoted above) discloses. For he there relates that the speaker, who is a stranger to the world, was previously nothing and has awoken "out of nothing": and these words could not at that time be ascribed to Christ. Traherne, then, is speaking with his own voice, as indeed his other works make apparent, and holds that the whole creation is no less than a gift to himself. Indeed, as he tells a friend, in his belief "The End for which you were Created is that by Prizing all that God hath don, you may Enjoy your self and Him in Blessedness".² And such felicity involves valuing rightly the whole of creation including each human self, for which the rest of creation was made.

One of the particular sources of his wonder is the very body which he as an infant received. Traherne does not here write as if he were a disembodied soul which had newly received a body, or as if he could have existed without one: indeed, on his own account, before he received his body he was nothing. Rather he is marvelling that he, and his infant body with him, came into existence, and that the body which is his belongs to him at all, when he might have been nothing. Thus he expresses a strong sense of the contingency of his own existence, as well as of the contingency of each item in creation, together with a sense of wonder thereat.

Many philosophers, when contemplating the same phenomena, have shared Traherne's sense of contingency but not his sense of wonder. The

fact that we exist whether we like it or not is regarded by Existentialists as something which we need to come to terms with: our so-called "Geworfenheit" is even a possible object of resentment. But with Traherne this is not so. How are we to account for the difference? And is Traherne's response to the world around him one which it is in any way reasonable to share?

Perhaps the obvious response at this point is to remark that Traherne was a Christian, however unorthodox, and that accordingly he was obliged to see life and nature as a gift of God, as he does in the poem already quoted. The "logical grammar" of his beliefs, it might be suggested, required belief in the goodness of creation: and to those whose beliefs are differently constituted, his reactions can be no more than a historical curiosity.

Now certainly we need to understand Traherne's beliefs about God in order to make sense of his account of the end of created persons or of his view that each person is the sole heir of creation. Yet nevertheless the suggested critique seems to me to be both theologically and philosophically confused. It is no part of Traherne's theology to impute goodness to creation simply because it has been created by God. Rather God prizes things "according to their value" and "rightly",³ and that is how we should prize them too. Like the Cambridge Platonists, and like Leibniz later in the century, Traherne wanted to praise God for his goodness: but, as they saw, such praise would have been empty if he had been praising God simply for creating whatever he created. Such a theological position, indeed, is compatible with resentment at the way that it has pleased God to arrange things. But Traherne is genuinely delighted by the things which he surveys, and believes that he has genuine grounds for praise and rapture. Things, including his own body, could have been created otherwise, and they might have not been created at all. "Had God created Thee alone", he tells his soul, "He had not been so good as He is".⁴ In fact, though contingent, the natural order is delightful, so much so that, paradoxically enough, he pretends that the very corn in the fields is immortal, wheat "which never should be reap'd nor was ever sown".⁵ This is not the language of a man who is constrained by his beliefs to put a brave and cheerful face on things.

Besides this, Traherne shows a surprising indifference to some of the beliefs which were normally constitutive of seventeenth century Anglican orthodoxy, even when this is taken to include the beliefs of the other "metaphysical poets". Thus there are good grounds for holding that he was a Pelagian and rejected the orthodox doctrine of original sin,⁶ while, when he writes, as he does in his poem 'Wonder', "I nothing in the World did know/But 'twas Divine", he comes close to pantheism. To write thus is not, perhaps to abandon belief in a transcendent God, but it is to believe that all nature partakes of God's divinity, and this in a much stronger sense than orthodoxy normally allowed. This supplies an extra reason for holding that Traherne considered the trees, the skies and the stars

wonderful not just because they were created, but in their own right: and it also suggests that individuals are more free to depart from those beliefs which are supposed to be constitutive of the world-view of the tradition to which they belong than is often allowed by philosophers. Of course, Traherne could draw on a long succession of mystical and heterodox writers, and his ideas were not themselves in all respects a new beginning. Yet he made himself free to arrive at an original conjunction of beliefs: and we should beware of the philosophical view that, granted his religious tradition, the holding of these beliefs by him was inevitable, and of the related view that, granted our different starting point, the holding of them now is foreclosed to ourselves. It is a philosophical confusion, then, to hold that those beliefs which are constitutive of a tradition are not open to revision by those who inherit that tradition: and this applies not only to the beliefs of seventeenth century Anglicans but also to our own.

Traherne, then, believes that there are objective considerations which uphold his high estimate of the value of the seas, the sun and the stars: and it would seem possible, without entering into a discussion of his theological beliefs, to investigate whether his attitudes towards natural objects are ones which we can reasonably share. These attitudes depend, of course, on his belief in the contingency of the qualities and of the existence of the material world and of ourselves: but this is a belief which, as we have seen, many people hold, and one, surely, which, for all that it conjures up the possibility of unimaginably different or empty worlds, is none the less coherent. Traherne himself helps us to begin to imagine such a possibility: "Suppose the Sun were Extinguished: or the Sea were Drie. There would be no Light, no Beauty, no Warmth, no Fruits, no Flowers, no Pleasant Gardens, Feasts, or Prospects. No Wine no Oyl no Bread, no Life, no Motion. Would you not give all the Gold and Silver in the Indies for such a Treasure?"⁷ With not many scientific adjustments, we can easily see what he is getting at.

Consider now the following argument, which may be found variously in the works of Aristotle, John Wisdom and Vernon Pratt, and which is designed to show that there is something of intrinsic value, i.e. of value for no reason beyond itself. So long as there is something, the argument runs, which is extrinsically or instrumentally desirable, then something is intrinsically desirable: for otherwise there would be nothing which gives its value or desirability to that which is extrinsically desirable. Thus as long as there is something which is desirable, either extrinsically or intrinsically, then something is intrinsically desirable. Accordingly anyone who accepts that anything whatever is desirable in any way whatever must accept, if they are consistent, that something is desirable intrinsically, that is, for its own sake and for no reason beyond itself.

Now the force of this argument could be evaded by a certain kind of nihilist, the kind who hold that everything is pointless and futile and that nothing is worthwhile or of value. Their position is a consistent one,

albeit precarious, but if they stick to it they are irremovable. If on the other hand they grant as much as the desirability of arguing against views opposed to their own, they fall into inconsistency and are exposed to the full vigour of the argument: and if they see any advantage in staying alive, they once again concede the vital premise. And anyone other than the consistent nihilist is obliged to go along with the argument.

Some philosophers would at this point contend that what is desirable or of value is merely desirable *to someone* or valued *by someone*, and therefore that the whole argument cryptically concerns not the value of things like trees or conditions like health but the psychological states and preferences of valuers, i.e. of human subjects. But this contention will not stand up to analysis. For when someone values something, they do not regard it as simply valued by themselves. Philosophers who take this line are in no position to supply a satisfactory answer to the question "What do valuers value things *as*?" Thus 'valuable' does not mean 'valued by someone or other', as Traherne recognises when he writes of God prizing "all things according to their value". Rather it means 'that which there is reason to want or aspire to or be glad of or cherish'. Thus Traherne is claiming that there is reason to be glad of the corn-fields, the trees, the skies and the stars, and also of ones own body, soul and faculties. But he would not have claimed intrinsic value for all of these.

Traherne did, however, discriminate between the values of different items in creation. His rapture towards creation as a whole was comprehensive only through his explicit suspension of belief in life as it was. "I knew not", he writes, "that there were sins or complaints or laws. I dream'd not of poverties, contentions or vices. All tears and quarrels were hidden from mine eyes." A similar passage is to be found in his poem 'Eden'⁸: and it is only by transporting himself to the garden of Eden that he manages to find all things good. His awareness that he needs to dream some evils away discloses that not everything is in his view rare or glorious.

This being so, what is the basis of his discrimination? We may allow that there must be something which is of intrinsic value, but further argument is needed before claims to have identified it, or to have identified those things which sustain it, are acceptable. The enterprise of defending claims about value can begin with the fact that some states of persons are ones which they have reason to desire, these being states which are good ones for persons as persons to be in. Possession of one's faculties, autonomy of mind and fulfilment in one's work are plausible examples: that they are more than just plausible I have argued elsewhere.⁹ Indeed for species in general, wherever capacities are essential to a species, whether distinctively or not, the ability to exercise that capacity is, I maintain, a good state for a species-member to enjoy.

Essential capacities in a species are ones in the absence of which from most members that species would not be the one which it is: and these essential capacities, of course, include physical ones. This is certainly a point which Traherne could accept: even though he correctly holds that

it is a contingency that he exists and has thus received a body, it does not follow (nor is it true) that it is a contingency that existing persons have bodies. And he certainly did accept that the ability to use our physical senses is good, and hence that the possession of organs allowing of the use of the senses, and also of the abilities to sing and talk, is also good. As he puts it:

My Lims and Members when rightly Prized, are Comparable to the fine Gold; The Topaz of Ethiopia and the Gold of Ophir are not to be compared to them. What Diamonds are Equal to my Eys; What Labyrinths to mine Ears; What gates of Ivory, or Rubie Leaves to the Double Portal of my Lips and Teeth? Is not Sight a Jewel? Is not Hearing a Treasure? Is not Speech a Glory! O my Lord Pardon my Ingratitud and pittie my Dulnes, who am not sensible to these Gifts.¹⁰

Indeed whatever else there is reason to want or cherish, there is reason to want or cherish our faculties and powers, and their physical wherewithal.

Though Traherne does not write of essential capacities, he does write, about the limitlessness of his own Soul, "My Essence was Capacitie", referring to its power to roam up and down the spatial and temporal universe. This power to reason about past, present and future, to form generalisations and to apply them to practical instances is, I have argued elsewhere,¹¹ a genuine essential capacity of humans; and Traherne makes clear in his poem 'My Spirit' his acceptance that its exercise is to be prized as highly as anything else in creation. His Soul is indeed 'An Image of the Deitie', and he can add that it is also 'The only Proper Place or Bower of Bliss'. Here, perhaps, he hypostatizes the soul too much, but he also recognises at the same time the value of those of a persons's powers which allow them to attain 'Bliss' 'Felicity' or 'Enjoyment'. And here we have his notion of a state which it is necessarily good to have, which is desirable for no reason beyond itself, which is complete within itself, and in which the person thus blessed is conscious of its attainment. (Its attainment involves in his view profound changes to one's understanding and attitudes, expressed in a number of Meditations which begin with words such as "You never Enjoy the World aright, till . . .", but his account of the road to Felicity cannot be expounded here.)

Felicity, then, involves certain attitudes, but it also depends on the exercise of one's physical and psychological powers, and is impaired by their neglect or atrophy. As they are constitutive of Felicity, it is reasonable to take Traherne as holding them to be, in his view, of intrinsic rather than of instrumental value. Here, then, is at least part of his account of intrinsic value: and it must be added that so far the account is a reasonable one. For what else is there reason to desire, if the exercise of one's powers is not desirable? Admittedly there may be contingent advantages to blindness, deafness, dulness or even madness: but necessarily these conditions also involve liabilities, and the attainment or recovery of their opposites is necessarily a blessing for persons as persons.

If, then, anything is of value, then the exercise of one's powers is so. But can we then stop short, and not recognise the like value in the exercise of the powers of others? For, unless we can discover some relevant difference, we must judge like cases alike. Obviously I do not have the same reason to desire your ability to exercise your powers as I have to desire my own ability to exercise mine: yet if my ability so to do would be good and valuable, so would be yours. Traherne puts the point in theological dress: ". . . as He (God) maketh one, so He maketh evry one the End of the World. . . Souls are Gods Jewels. Evry one of which is worth many Worlds".¹²

It may seem, nevertheless, that the argument here slides from the notion of what there is reason for one agent to desire, cherish or be glad of to that of what there is reason for any agent to cherish, etc.: my own interests, it may be felt, are only *valuable* in the first sense, whereas I am now asked to accept that yours are of value in the second sense. In reply to this objection, I want to maintain that the operative sense of 'valuable' has all along been the second one. Certainly I have special reasons for desiring my own wellbeing, but I have to acknowledge from the start that Felicity is also a good condition for you to be in. If conditions like that are not desirable, then nothing is, whoever is the beneficiary; and whatever brings them about does good, whether it is you acting out of prudence, or me acting out of friendship, or forces beyond the control of either of us. All that the recent argument accomplishes is to bring out that if any one person's welfare is valuable in this sense, so is any other's. The same point can be put in moral terms: thus when we foster other *persons'* wellbeing we do good just as when we foster our own. But this moral truth presupposes that there is value in the good of persons (at least), and if so a value which can be talked about independently of moral considerations.

Indeed the very same argument can readily be extended to whatever has a good, so long as it is comparable to that of persons. Some animals are in many respects closely comparable to most humans, and their own fulfilment would therefore seem to be of intrinsic value, even if to a lesser extent. But Traherne would almost certainly have rejected any such extension of the argument. It is not so much that he would have denied that animals have souls at all, but rather that the kind of soul which, as an Aristotelian, he would have attributed to non-human animals would lack the powers "which are so Great that even to the most learned of men their Greatness is incredible; and so Divine, that they are infinit in Value".¹³ His own belief, unlike that of most of the Old Testament writers, was that (the) "Beasts and Fowls and fishes (were) made for me". Not all seventeenth century Christians adopted an anthropocentric view of the purpose of creation, but Traherne, it must be acknowledged, held that non-human creatures existed not only for man but for himself in particular, as also for each other self. Thus, in his view, the value of non-human organisms is purely instrumental.

But of course Traherne's claims stretch far beyond the value of the

organic. Is it reasonable, we may now ask, to share his belief in the value of air and water, the sun and the stars? Perhaps there is, when they are considered as the objects of human faculties as in 'The Salutation' (and, we might add, of animal faculties in general). Pleasure, as Aristotle said,¹⁴ consists in unimpeded activity performed in appropriate conditions: but the conditions which are appropriate for the exercise of sight are light and objects which allow our perceptual faculties to be brought to bear, whether lofty and sublime like the stars or minute like the animalcules which Traherne's contemporaries were beginning to study through microscopes. If sight is good, then so, other things being equal, are things seen, though not, as Traherne realised, when they bring sorrow or involve blight or corruption. And of objects seen, though human artifacts were absent from Traherne's Eden,¹⁵ it included a multitude of natural objects which at least seemed designed to delight the eye. But even those who reject this theological belief can accept judgments which accord value to such objects of sight so long as they can take delight in their senses, or even rejoice at the delight taken by others.

Traherne himself also employs a distinct argument for the value of the sun and the hydrosphere. It comes just before the passage quoted earlier about what the world would be like without them. "It was His Wisdom made you Need the Sun. It was His Goodness made you need the Sea. Be sensible of what you need, or Enjoy neither. Consider how much you need them. For thence they Derive their Value." Thus the sun and the seas are valuable because of the human needs which they serve. It will now be clear that Traherne does not normally value just anything which happens to have been created, but esteems things because of what he takes to be their merits. All that can be said against this is that the very needs which give the elements their value are ones created by God. But then, human life in *any* recognisable form would involve dependence on some items in the natural environment.

Among the created items which Traherne regards as valuable, then, some are valuable in their own right, such as the physical and spiritual powers of humans, while others, such as light, the seas and the sun are valuable because they enable humans with these powers to live and exercise them. Thus Traherne himself observes, though without using these terms, the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental value. His employment of this distinction is unambiguously anthropocentric, yet the same arguments could admit of the conclusions that some non-human animals are of intrinsic value, having powers comparable to those of humans, and that the elements are of value not only in enabling human needs to be satisfied but also in enabling those of animals to be satisfied too. What is more important is that the same arguments are accessible to ourselves as well, and that they do go a long way towards sustaining his conclusions, modified, perhaps, in the manner just suggested.

The relation that all this has to theology can readily be brought out: if Traherne has grounds independent of belief in God for regarding the

furniture of creation as good, there are all the more grounds for praising God, if but God is its Creator. Such praise can be heart-felt praise, for it is not based on the assumption that whatever God makes is good just because he makes it. Rather it is based on the contingent goodness of the actual world, and of the actual existence of those who appreciate it and are enabled by it to exercise their powers.

The bearing of these matters on ecological ethics is more oblique. There will be moral reasons against the befouling of the springs of the enjoyment of sentient creatures by the pollution of earth, air and water, and against any human artifacts which weaken the capacity of the elements to satisfy the needs of these creatures. But, as Traherne realised, there are "poverties, . . . tears and quarrels", and there are also moral reasons for action to overcome them: and this action can conflict with leaving wild nature intact. Unlike Eden, not "Everything" is "at rest, free and immortal". Yet if the claims just made about value are correct, then such interventions need in each case to be justified: for the items we remould are not devoid of value. Their value, however, becomes more apparent if the analogies between human and non-human creatures are pressed much further than Traherne took them.

It is also apparent that there is such a subject as the study of value which can proceed independently of either the study of morality or of religion. Morality presupposes the existence of non-moral values, just as prudence presupposes the existence of non-prudential values. Nor do these values depend for their existence upon that of God. Their study, perhaps, is part of the subject-matter of aesthetics, though even this connection should not be exaggerated, since things can have a value even when they are not being enjoyed. Beyond this I cannot take further the study of value here, beyond the suggestion that Traherne may yet be able to help us by his poetry as well as through his ideas, in seeing the value which natural objects have, and how "inexpressibly rare and delightful and beautiful: spotless and pure and glorious" they can be.

The Skies in their Magnificence,
 The Lively, Lovely Air,
 O how Divine, how soft, how Sweet, how fair!
 The Stars did entertain my Sence;
 And all the Works of GOD so Bright and pure,
 So Rich and Great did seem,
 As if they ever must endure,
 In my Esteem.¹⁶

NOTES

1. Stanzas 5 and 7 of 'The Salutation', from Anne Ridler (ed.) *Thomas Traherne: Poems, Centuries and Three Thanksgivings*, London: Oxford University Press, 1966, at p. 6.
2. 'Centuries', I:12. This extract was italicised by Traherne.

3. 'Centuries', I:13.
4. 'Centuries', I:68.
5. 'Centuries', III:3.
6. Some of these grounds are presented by K.W. Salter, *Thomas Traherne, Mystic and Poet*, London: Edward Arnold, 1964, at pp. 132-34. Others emerge in the course of a discussion to the opposite effect by A.L. Clements, in *The Mystical Poetry of Thomas Traherne*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969, pp. 85-88.
7. 'Centuries' I:46.
8. The passage quoted is from 'Centuries' III:2. The parallel passage is 'Eden', stanzas 2 and 4, Ridler, p. 9.
9. In Robin Attfield, 'On Being Human', *Inquiry*, 17, 1974, 175-92, and 'Work and the Human Essence', *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, I, 1984.
10. 'Centuries' I:66.
11. In 'On Being Human', cited in note 9 (above).
12. 'Centuries', I:15.
13. 'Centuries', I:19. (This is said, of course, about *human* powers).
14. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VII, 1153a 15.
15. Human artifacts, however, are a source of thanksgiving in 'Thanksgivings for the Body' at lines 118-28.
16. Stanza 2 of 'Wonder', Ridler p. 7. The quotation in the last sentence of the text is from 'Centuries', III:2. An ampler account of intrinsic value may be found in *The Ethics of Environmental Concern*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publisher and New York: Columbia U.P., 1983. (An Abbreviated version of this paper, entitled 'Thomas Traherne and Intrinsic Value' is to be found in Edgar Morscher and Rudolf Stranzinger (eds.), *Ethics Foundations, Problems, and Applications, Proceedings of the Fifth International Wittgenstein Symposium*, Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1981, at pp. 97-99.)