

Chapter 16

From Charity to the Care of the Self: Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*



Simone Guidi

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have charity,
I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal

(St. Paul, *I Cor*: 13, 1)

Abstract This chapter deals with Thomas Browne's most famous work, *Religio Medici* (written between 1635 and 1640 and published in 1642), and especially with his account of Charity. The first paragraph focuses on Browne's specific account of the relationship between natural and supernatural. This view is inspired by Bacon, Sebunde, and Montaigne, and is crucial to understand the background of Browne's view about the virtue of Charity. The second paragraph is about Browne's specific understanding of Charity, which seems to be a middle stage between the traditional, Scholastic doctrine, and the Kantian idea of moral law, independent from the practical law and the desire of the subject. The third paragraph deals with *Religio Medici*'s reversal of the traditional "order" of Charity, as well as Browne's accounts of abnegation and friendship as an effective way for a charity to the self which meets many aspects of Foucault's ἐπιμέλεια ἑαυτοῦ. The fourth paragraph is about Browne's analogical understanding of medicine and morality, as well as his use of the *meditatio mortis*.

Keywords Virtue ethics · Thomas Browne · Philosophy of charity · Disinterested morality · Care of the self · Spiritual exercises

S. Guidi (✉)

Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, Istituto per il Lessico Intellettuale Europeo e Storia delle Idee (CNR-ILIESI), Rome, Italy

e-mail: simone.guidi@cnr.it

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature
Switzerland AG 2021

J. Braga, M. Santiago de Carvalho (eds.), *Philosophy of Care*, Advancing
Global Bioethics 16, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-75478-5_16

259

16.1 *Religio Medici* and Its Foundational Divorce

Thanks to its originality *Religio Medici* attracted over the centuries the interest of many prominent writers and philosophers, among whom are Robert Boyle, Samuel Coleridge, Virginia Woolf, Carl Gustav Jung, and Jorge Luis Borges. This bestowed on its author, Sir Thomas Browne (1605–1682), the reputation as one of the most fascinating and brilliant writers of Early Modern England, making *Religio Medici* even the paradigm of a popular way of treating religion in England (see Havenstein 1999).

A physician and a philosopher, Browne studied Medicine in Oxford, Padua, Montpellier, and Leiden, spending most of his life and medical career in Norwich, in Norfolk. From there, he gained a considerable reputation as a physician and – in a cultural context which was strongly influenced by Baconism – he became famous as an expert on natural and human history, as well as for the unique cabinet of rarities he built in his house.

As is known, *Religio Medici* has a bizarre editorial history (Post 1985). Written in a first draft in 1635, and then revised from 1638 to 1640, it circulated as a manuscript among Browne’s friends, until it was published without Browne’s authorization in 1642. This forced him to quickly publish a new version in 1643, removing some controversial passages. In 1645, Browne published a second version, just two years before he published another of his most famous works, the *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1647), a large encyclopedic work on natural history, deeply influenced by Francis Bacon (1561–1626).

Placed between the moral treatise and psychological, autobiographical introspection, *Religio Medici* is a masterpiece of erudite eclecticism and a significant case of the impossibility of separating the *Darstellung* and the *Vorstellung*. According to the incisive description by Cadman Seeling (2008: 16), “Browne treats rhetoricity as an arena of symbolic action”. The stage of his Baroque theatre joins together many different writing styles and methodologies (those of medicine, theology, natural science, hermetic alchemic symbolism), as well as Browne’s special taste for the bizarre and for antiquity (see Parry 2008).

According to Conti (2008), the special urgency of *Religio Medici* is that of removing all suspicious about Browne’s morality and orthodoxy, after his studies in the Universities of Padua and Leiden, often associated with heresies and heterodoxies. Nevertheless, we know that the medical profession was often accused of atheism, in accordance with the popular saying: “*Ubi tres Medici, duo Athei*” (“Two out of three doctors are atheists”). This is why in the first lines of his work, Browne excuses his faith from the

Generall scandall of my profession, the naturall course of my studies, the indifferency of my behaviour, and discourse in matters of Religion, neither violently defending one, nor with that common ardour and contention opposing another (Browne 1645: I, I, s. 1).

Browne is a man of faith, even though it is hard to say what is his actual perspective. However, he declares himself a true Christian and a Protestant, as by “the ambition and avarice of Prelates, and the fatal corruption of times”, Christian

religion, has “fallen from its native beauty, that it required the careful and charitable hands of these times to restore it to its primitive integrity” (Browne 1645: 3, I, s. 2). Anglican Protestantism looks indeed to Browne like the most perfect form of Christian faith, even if he does not reject at all the authority of the Roman Church. According to him, the Roman and the English Church conflicted due to historical but not due to moral divergences (Browne 1645: 7–8, I, s. 5).

This perspective encouraged some readers to discuss Browne's possible closeness to the faction of the Laudians (Shuger 2008), the supporters of the English Archbishop William Laud (1573–1645). The core of Laud's reform of Protestantism consists in rejecting Predestination in favor of free will, and so in encompassing the idea of a real possibility of salvation for everyone (against especially the Calvinists). Laudianism was also characterized by a strong emphasis on the liturgical ceremony and the clerical hierarchy, not so differently from Counter-Reformed Catholicism.

However, Browne's religiosity is based especially upon a complex understanding of the relationship between natural and supernatural. From the perspective of natural philosophy, he indeed embraces Bacon's skepticism about metaphysical explanations of nature, as well as his pragmatic natural and epistemological historicism. The latter includes enthusiasm for the model of the arts, instead of believing in metaphysical access to nature. Yet from a theological point of view, he still believes in a Christian-Platonic hierarchy of reality, and, speaking of religion, he is a heterodox Anglican moralist, who often thinks like a theologian.

Hence, Browne's view is a perfect expression of the Baroque chaotic synthesis between the Book of natural philosophy, open to reason, and the Book of supernatural Revelation, which can be grasped by faith. This is ambiguity is very well portrayed by a passage from Section I, 11 of *Religio Medici*:

In my solitary and retired imagination, I remember I am not alone, and therefore forget not to contemplate him and his attributes who is ever with me, especially those two mighty ones, his wisdom and eternity: with the one I recreate, with the other I confound my understanding (Browne 1645: 20, I, s. 11).

For Browne, God himself can therefore be taken twofold. On the one hand, he is pure intellection and wisdom, which is perfectly understandable by the created intellect. On the other hand, his eternity remains, for us, enigmatic. Accordingly, in Section I, 16, Browne retraces the classic topic of the distinction between two books:

there are two Bookes from whence I collect my Divinity; besides that written one of God, another of his servant Nature, that universall and publike Manuscript, that lies expands'd unto the eyes of all (Browne 1645: 20, I, s. 16).

Even though the image of the two books might suggest a direct quote of Galileo's *Assayer*, Browne's reference should rather lead us to other sources. For instance, to Raymond of Sebunde (1385–1436)'s *Natural Theology* (1434–36), made famous in the sixteenth Century especially by Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592)'s *Essays* (as well as by his French translation in 1580):

There are two books given by God to us, that is the Book of the totality of creatures, or the Book of Nature; and the other, that is the Book of the Holy Scripture. The first one was given to Man from the beginning, as the totality of the creatures was created, since each

In introducing death as a *part* of medicine Browne recalls an Epicurean understanding of the *meditare mortem*, already circulating in Later Roman Stoicism:

I will take a loan from Epicurus, who says: "Practise death in advance", or if it is easier to convey his meaning, something like this: "It is a great thing to learn how to die". Perhaps you think it superfluous to learn something that can only be implemented once. This is the very reason we have to practise; we must always learn anything that we cannot test to see if we know it. "Practise death!" (Seneca 2001: 46; *Letters* 26, 8–10).

Following precisely this warning, Browne thinks of death as a form of medicine, not only for the body's sufferings but even for the soul's pains. Accordingly, the corruption that one might be afraid of is not that of body, but rather that of the soul. As Browne explains by another analogy with his personal medical experience, "I can cure the gout or stone in some sooner than Divinity [can cure], Pride, or Avarice in others" and "I can cure vices by Physics, when they remain incurable by Divinity, and shall obey my pills, when they condemn their precepts" (Browne 1645: 158–159, II, s. 9). And such a medical-moral practice intersects again an opportunity for the care of the self, once more as an internal fight with the traces of the Original Sin in us:

...but it is the corruption that I feare within me, not the contagion of commerce without mee. 'Tis that unruly regiment within me, that will destroy me, 'tis I that doe infect my selfe, [...] I feele that originall canker corrode and devour mee, and therefore *Defenda me Dios de me*, Lord deliver mee from my selfe, is a part of my Letany, and the first voice of my retired imaginations (Browne 1645: 160, II, s. 11).

Bibliography

- Aquinas, Thomas. 1888–1906. [ST]. *Summa theologiae cum Supplemento et commentariis Caietani*. In *Sancti Thomae de Aquino Opera Omnia iussu Leonis XIII P. M. Edita*, voll. 4–12, Rome.
- Aristotle. 2004. *Nicomachean ethics*. Trans. and ed. R. Crisp. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bacon, Francis. 1884. *The works of Francis Bacon*. Vol. 1. New York: Worthington.
- Barbour, Red, and Claire Preston. 2008. *Sir Thomas Browne: The world proposed*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Browne, Thomas. 1645. *Religio Medici*. 2nd ed. London: Printed for Andrew Crooke.
- . 1658. *Pseudodoxia epidemica or enquiries into very many received tenets and commonly presumed truths*. 4th ed. London: Printed for Edward Dod.
- Cadman Seelig, Sharon. 2008. 'Speake that I may see thee': *The styles of Sir Thomas Browne*. In Barbour and Preston 2008, 13–35.
- Calasso, Roberto. 2008. *Fisiognomica di Sir Thomas Browne*. In Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*, italian translation by Vittorio Sanna, 11–50. Milano: Adelphi.
- . 2018. *I geroglifici di Sir Thomas Browne*. Milano: Adelphi.
- Conti, Brooke. 2008. *Religio Medici's profession of faith*. In Barbour and Preston 2008, 149–167.
- . 2014. *Confessions of faith in early Modern England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Dunn, William P. 1950. *Thomas Browne. A study in religious philosophy*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press.

- Finch, Jeremiah S. (ed.). 1986. *A catalogue of the libraries of Sir Thomas Browne and Dr. Edward Browne, His son: A facsimile reproduction (Leiden, 1986)*.
- Foucault, Michel. 1986. *The care of the self. Volume 3 of the history of sexuality*, trans. R. Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books.
- . 2005. *The hermeneutics of the subject. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982*. Trans. G. Burchell. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- . 2016. *About the beginning of the hermeneutics of the self. Lectures at Dartmouth College, 1980*. Trans. G. Burchell. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Grant, Patrick. 1985. *Thomas Browne's Religio Medici: Baconian method and the metaphysical cross*. In Id., *Literature and the discover of method in English renaissance*, 102–123. Houndmills: McMillian.
- Hadot, Pierre. 1995. *Philosophy as a way of life. Spiritual exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, Introduction by A. I. Davidson. Trans. M. Chase. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Havenstein, Daniela. 1999. *Democratizing Sir Thomas Browne: Religio medici and its imitations*. Oxford: Clarendon Press/Oxford University Press.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1900a. *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten [GMS]*. In *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- . 1900b. *Kritik der Praktischen Vernunft [KPV]*. In *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- . 1998. *Groundwork of the metaphysics of moral*. Trans. and ed. M. Gregor. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2015. *Critique of Practical Reason*. Trans and ed. M. Gregor (2nd edition, revised). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Montaigne, Michel. 1877. *Essays*. Trans. C. Cotton and ed. W. Carew Hazlitt. London: Reeves and Turner.
- Murphy, Kathryn. 2008. 'A likely story': Plato's Timaeus in the garden of Cyrus. In Barbour and Preston 2008, 242–256.
- Parry, Graham. 2008. *Thomas Browne and the uses of antiquity*. In Barbour and Preston 2008, 63–79.
- Plato. 1953. *Dialogues of Plato. Translated into English, with analyses and introduction by B. Jowett*, 5 vols, 4th ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Post, Jonathan, F. S. 1985. *Browne's Revisions of Religio Medici. Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 25 (1): 145–163.
- Preston, Claire. 2008. 'An incomium of consumptions': A letter to a friend as medical narrative. In Barbour and Preston 2008, 206–221.
- . 2009. *Thomas Browne and the writing of early modern Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sebunde, Raymond. 1434. *Liber naturae sive creaturarum*, in the 1648 edition *Theologia Naturalis sive Liber Creaturarum*, apud Petri Compagnon, Lyon.
- Seneca, Lucius Annaeus. 2001. *Selected letters*. Trans. E. Fantham. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shuger, Debora. 2008. *The Laudian idiot*, In Barbour and Preston 2008, 36–62.
- Silver, Victoria. 2008. *Wonders of the invisible world': The trial of the lowestoft witches*, In Barbour and Preston 2008, 118–145.