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Man's Place in the "Best of All Possible Worlds": Alexander Pope (1688-1744)

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Introduction

[Alexander Pope](#) deserves special attention in the study of the Second Europe for at least two reasons. First, he stood as the preeminent figure in British poetry during the eighteenth century until the Romantic poets displaced him. On his visit to England, Voltaire commented "I have seen [the portrait] of Mr. Pope in twenty houses." Pope's reputation on the continent was also considerable, thanks in part to Voltaire who became his friend and sang his praises. One might pick a continental figure, according to one's taste in literature, but Pope will do as we attempt to understand the literary side of the Enlightenment. Second, his work Essay on Man, although not his greatest work, sums up wonderfully and compactly the popular sentiments of the age about human nature and man's place in the world. Its purpose is not to preach Deism, as such, but it may be read with a view to understanding the Deist outlook so central to the Second Europe. Pope did aim, however, to teach through this poem. It is a major example of what is called didactic writing. So as we discuss Pope and his work, think about what someone of this era might have thought as he read the Essay on Man.

His Life (1688-1744)

Pope was born in 1688 to a prosperous linen merchant in London. A sickly child, he inherited from his mother a tendency toward what today would be called migraine headaches. As an adolescent he contracted a tubercular infection of the spine which kept him from growing beyond four and a half feet. A friend commented that as an adult he suffered

from headaches four days a week and sickness the other three. A further disability was that he was reared a Roman Catholic which meant that he could not attend school or the universities and had to be tutored. The professions were also closed to him; he could not permanently reside in any town. From early youth he developed a passion for writing poetry and that became his career. His first poems were published in 1709. His first great success was the [Essay on Criticism](#) which came out in 1711. The [Rape of the Lock](#) followed the next year. This work captivated London society and he was lauded as the cleverest poet in England. Like other poets of the age Pope aspired to writing an epic in the classical mode. But he settled instead for translating the [Iliad](#) into English in rhyming couplets (the "heroic couplet" style in vogue in the 18th century). Enough people subscribed to publication (1715-20) to make him a rich man (and the translator of the standard English version for the next 100 years). Using the proceeds he bought an estate at [Twickenham](#) on the Thames (for a view, see [this link](#)) where he spent the rest of his life, writing and enjoying a circle of friends which included John Gay, Matthew Prior, Jonathan Swift, and Lord Bolingbroke. Further works followed, such as the translation of the [Odyssey](#) (1725-26) and [The Dunciad](#) (1728-42), in which he indulged his flair for invective by lumping together his critics and numerous enemies as dunces in the Court of Dullness.

Those who sample Pope's writings, particularly the [Dunciad](#), immediately sense why Pope's enemies called him the "wicked wasp of Twickenham." "Quarrelsome", "deceitful", "mean", and "vain" have been used to describe the man; "vituperative hatreds" and "acid acids", the tone of his writing. Was this because of his physical disability? If so, little wonder. He himself said he had been given "a little crazy carcass in which to live through that long disease his life." We know something of what he endured every day. He needed help with everything. He had to be helped up, laced into a corset to be able to stand, helped to dress, propped up on a cushion while sitting at table, helped to undress and put to bed. The wonder is that he could have been so serenely optimistic in writing in the [Essay on Man](#) "Whatever is, is right." When he died in 1744, he [was buried](#) in St Mary's Church in Twickenham, Middlesex England.

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1. Pope was a combination of contrasts: an optimistic outlook on life and a wicked tongue for his enemies. What do you make of him personally?

Nature and Character of [An Essay on Man](#)

[An Essay on Man](#) appeared in 1733-34. Though not his greatest work, it contains more memorable lines than any of his other works. Indeed, anyone with even a little learning probably remembers and can quote, or almost quote, some of them. They have found the way into even common discourse: as in, for example, "Hope springs eternal in the human breast," or "To err is human; to forgive, divine." (For Pope's famous lines see [this link](#).) The [Essay](#) is a didactic poem in the epic style of the 18th century (i.e., celebrating a noble theme in elevated language). It is composed in heroic couplets (every two lines rhyme). Pope chose verse for two reasons: because he believed that "principles, maxims, or precepts so written, both strike the reader more strongly at first, and are more easily retained by him afterwards;" and because he "could express them more shortly this way than in prose itself..." (The poem is only 652 couplets long.) His aim was to show how man could achieve happiness if he had the proper view of the universe, of himself, and of society. He aimed not for originality but to express the common sense of the matter as any educated person might.

A Reading of the [Essay](#)

The poem consists of four parts, or epistles, each with a different theme.

[Epistle I](#) takes up the theme of theodicy (the vindication of divine justice), asserting that since God is all good, he must have created the best of all possible worlds. Therefore, "whatever is, is right". The rationale for this optimism is the idea of the Great Chain of Being: that all creation is a structure of beings ranging from angels down to the lowest creature: this hierarchy is complete and continuous. Man's place in the hierarchy is where the rational is combined with the animal. Man is both. If his pride leads him to want to be what he is not, there is trouble. (Although later Pope says that in the great scheme of things individual imbalances balance out, so it doesn't matter what the individual does.) Man must submit and fulfill his potentiality. Creation is perfect and order assured when man does this. Lines 281-294 are worth quoting on this theme:

Cease then, nor ORDER Imperfection name:

Our proper bliss depends on what we blame.

Know thy own point; This kind, this due degree

Of blindness, weakness, Heav'n bestows on thee.

Submit--In this, or any other sphere,

Secure to be as blest as thou canst bear:

Safe in the hand of one disposing Pow'r,

Or in the natal, or the mortal hour.

All Nature is but Art, unknown to thee;

All Chance, Direction, which thou canst not see;

All Discord, Harmony, not understood;

All partial Evil, Universal Good.

And, spite of Pride, in erring Reason's spite,

One truth is clear, "WHATEVER IS, IS RIGHT."

?

1. Really?

2. Pope seems to be saying that Evil does not really exist. Evil only *seems* to exist. If we could see the whole picture (as only God can), we would see that what we call Evil is really perfection. Similarly, what we call Chance is really Order. What we call Discord is really Harmony. Stoics in ancient Greece came up with this philosophic outlook. Pope is assuming it. But do you agree?

[Epistle II](#) turns to human nature, man's makeup. Man is made so that ideally reason rules passion, but this does not happen in everyone. Still, individual imbalances are smoothed out as universal order prevails. Several passages stand out in this epistle.

Lines 1-8:

Know then thyself; presume not God to scan;
The proper study of Mankind is Man.
Placed on this isthmus of a middle state,
A Being darkly wise, and rudely great:
With too much knowledge for the Sceptic side,
With too much weakness for the Stoic's pride,
He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest,
In doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast;

Lines 53-58:

Two principles in human nature reign;
Self-love to urge, and Reason to restrain;
Nor this a good, nor that a bad we call,
Each works its end, to move or govern all:
And to their proper operation still,
Ascribe all Good; to their improper, Ill.

Lines 293-294:

See! And confess, one comfort still must rise,
'Tis this, Though Man's a fool, yet GOD IS WISE.

[Epistle III](#) returns to the Great Chain of Being and restates it in terms of the interdependence of all creation. Each being in its proper sphere fulfills the general Good. Man, as animal, starts with the instinctive element as brutes have, but may rise above it because of his other nature, reason. Brutish self-love may become social love with enlightenment. By social love Pope means social benevolence, supporting others, and finding one's true place in relation to society in a sense of mutual interdependence.

Some noteworthy lines are:

Lines 43-48:

Know, Nature's children all divide her care;
The fur that warms a monarch, warmed a bear.
While Man exclaims, "See all things for my use!"
"See man for mine!" replies a pampered goose:
And just as short of reason He must fall,
Who thinks all made for one, not one for all.

Lines 109-114:

God, in the nature of each being, founds
Its proper bliss, and sets its proper bounds:
But as he framed a Whole, the Whole to bless,

On mutual Wants built mutual Happiness:

So from the first, eternal ORDER ran,

And creature linked to creature, man to man.

[Epistle IV](#) deals with man's happiness which is the fulfillment of his potential. If he acts in keeping with his nature and his place in the order of things, that is, if he is aware, sensitive, humble, socially conscious and benevolent he will achieve happiness. Only virtue, he said, constituted happiness; all else was empty and fleeting.

Some special lines:

Lines 49-52:

ORDER is Heav'ns first law; and this confessed,

Some are, and must be, greater than the rest,

More rich, more wise; but who infers from hence

That such are happier, shocks all common sense.

Lines 67-72:

Fortune her gifts may variously dispose,

And these be happy called, unhappy those;

But Heav'ns just balance will appear,

While those are placed in Hope, and these in Fear:

Not present good or ill, the joy or curse,

But future views of better, or of worse.

Lines 309-310:

Know then this truth (enough for man to know)

"Virtue alone is Happiness below."

?

And you thought it was being rich and famous.

Lines 390-398:

...I turned the tuneful art

From sounds to things, from fancy to the heart;

For Wit's false mirror held up Nature's light;

Showed erring Pride, WHATEVER IS, IS RIGHT;

That REASON, PASSION, answer one great aim;

That true SELF-LOVE and SOCIAL are the same;

That Virtue only makes our Bliss below;

And all our Knowledge is OURSELVES TO KNOW.

From an educated man's view of his place in the world and God's scheme as we see it in Pope, we turn next to John Locke for a look at what the Enlightenment thought about the proper structure of society.