

AN ESSAY ON MAN

by Alexander Pope



THE AUTHOR

Alexander Pope (1688-1744), known among his many enemies as the Malignant Dwarf of Twickenham, was born into a Catholic family in the year of the Glorious Revolution. It was not a good time to be a Catholic in England; both the universities and the leading occupations were closed to the precocious young scholar who, despite being virtually self-educated, began producing poetry of high quality while still in his teens. In 1705, at the age of seventeen, Pope contracted a tubercular bone disease that plagued him for the rest of his days, leaving him frail, sickly, hunchbacked, and stunting his growth so that he never surpassed the height of four feet, six inches. His most notable poetic efforts included his *Essay on Criticism* (1711), *The Rape of the Lock* (1715), *The Dunciad* (1728), and *An Essay on Man* (1734). Much of his writing involved vicious attacks on his contemporaries, though his greatest literary accomplishments were his verse translations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, published in 1720 and 1726, respectively. His grotesque appearance and insignificant height prevented him from forming any permanent romantic relationships, but he did form friendships with many of the leading writers of his day, including Swift, Addison, Steele, and even Christian apologist William Warburton. Pope's tubercular condition caught up with him and brought him to the grave shortly after his 56th birthday in 1744.

His *Essay on Man* was initially published anonymously, but when he acknowledged its authorship in 1737, he was roundly condemned for the religious views expressed in it. His exposition of Deism was acceptable neither to the Catholic Church to which he belonged, nor to the Anglican establishment representing those in positions of power. Like many of the thoughtful works of the period, it is a theodicy - an attempt to "justify the ways of God to man"; in other words, the poem attempts to grapple with the problem of evil and provide an acceptable answer to the greatest dilemma ever encountered by the Christian Church. Pope's answer is an unacceptable one - he in essence denies the ultimate reality of evil in the world, and it was rejected even by many Deists, including Voltaire, who, in his novel *Candide*, mocks any who would dare assert that "this is the best of all possible worlds."

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“Together let us beat this ample field,
Try what the open, what the covert yield;
The latent tracts, the giddy heights explore
Of all who blindly creep, or sightless soar;
Eye Nature’s walks, shoot folly as it flies,
And catch the manners living as they rise;
Laugh where we must, be candid where we can;
But vindicate the ways of God to man.” (I, 9-16)

“Hope humbly then; with trembling pinions soar;
Wait the great teacher death; and God adore.” (I, 91-92)

“Hope springs eternal in the human breast:
Man never is, but always to be blest.” (I, 95-96)

“Call imperfection what thou fanciest such,
Say, here He gives too little, there too much:
Destroy all creatures for thy sport or gust,
Yet cry, If man’s unhappy, God’s unjust.” (I, 115-118)

“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.” (I, 289-294)

“Know then thyself, presume not God to scan,
The proper study of mankind is man.” (II, 1-2)

“See! and confess, one comfort still must rise,
‘Tis this, - Though man’s a fool, yet God is wise.” (II, 293-294)

“For forms of government let fools contest;
Whate’er is best administered is best:
For modes of faith let graceless zealots fight;
His can’t be wrong whose life is in the right:
In faith and hope the world will disagree,
But all mankind’s concern is charity:
All must be false that thwart this one great end;
And all of God, that bless mankind or mend.” (III, 303-310)

“The good must merit God’s peculiar care;
But who, but God, can tell us who they are?
One thinks on Calvin Heaven’s own Spirit fell;
Another deems him instrument of hell;
If Calvin feel Heaven’s blessing, or its rod,
This cries, There is, and that, There is no God.” (IV, 135-140)

“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.” (IV, 393-398)

NOTES

Epistle I - Pope begins by noting that man’s knowledge is severely limited, but that he is perfectly designed for his place in the Great Chain of Being. In fact, our happiness depends on our ignorance of the future and the consequent hope we have in God. Seeking knowledge beyond ourselves is prideful, and judging God for the way He has made us is worse. After all, the natural world contains many imperfections and causes great pain to man; why should the world of humanity be any different? We should not seek for perfections we lack, either those possessed by the angels or those belonging to the beasts, for to have either would make us miserable. When man is compared to God’s other creatures, he exceeds the others in no capacity other than reason, which alone makes him the head over the animals. It is, after all, foolish to wish to alter the order of things God has made, since to change the least part would be to destroy the whole. We must, therefore, submit ourselves to God and acknowledge that He has ordered things perfectly, though we may not comprehend His ordering.

Epistle II - Since man is incapable of comprehending the purposes of God, he should concentrate on knowing himself. When he studies humanity, he finds that man is both great and powerless, wise and foolish, and in all ways sadly limited. The essence of human nature involves two principles, self-love and reason; both can be evil or good depending on how they are used, and either one is futile apart from the other. Both, however, are intended for the cultivation of virtue. Though we are drawn to vice, God brings good even from our follies; this is true of individuals and societies, and for those in all conditions of life.

Epistle III - The entire universe is at bottom a single society, within which instinct and reason function for the good of all. Instinct predominates among the beasts, while reason is more central to the life of man. Man in the state of nature operates primarily by instinct, and is thus inferior to man governed by reason. Pope then discusses the origin of good government and true religion from the principle of love, while noting that tyranny and superstition grow out of the principle of fear. True self-love will thus promote social good as well as individual good.

Epistle IV - Happiness is not an individual truth, but a social one, and God intends all to be happy. Because the distribution of worldly good is unequal, happiness cannot depend on these. God, instead, promotes the happiness of all through the distribution of hope and fear. The virtuous man will be happier than the evil man, despite the fact that the wicked sometimes prosper while the righteous suffer. After all, God governs by general rather than particular laws, and we should not expect Him to make exceptions to His laws of Providence for the sake of individuals. In fact, we are not even in a position to judge which men are good and which are not; in any case, however, those who are truly good must also be the happiest of men. Riches, along with honor, fame, nobility, and talent do not coincide with happiness; in fact, those who possess these in greatest quantity are often the most miserable. Virtue, on the other hand, produces true happiness, but only if it is universal in scope and duration. This can only occur when we submit to the order of Providence, for this life and for the life to come.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Compare the treatments of the problem of evil found in Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Man* and Voltaire's *Candide*. How do they differ? How are both related to the Deism of the authors? Is either faithful to the Bible's treatment of the problem of evil, or are both inadequate? If so, how?
2. In what ways is Voltaire's *Candide* a satire on Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Man*? Cite specific quotations from Pope's poem and passages from Voltaire's novella to support your arguments.
3. Suppose that Alexander Pope, the author of *An Essay on Man*, met the protagonist of Voltaire's *Candide* on his farm outside Constantinople. How would Pope explain Candide's experiences? Be sure to cite specifics from both works in answering the question.
4. In Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Man*, how does the poet explain the origins of religion and government? Is his explanation biblical? Why or why not? Assess his explanation using passages from the Bible.
5. Discuss the attitude toward God demonstrated by Alexander Pope in *An Essay on Man*. He constantly recommends humility and submission, but does he practice it? In what ways is his approach to God one of pride?
6. The stated purpose of Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Man* is to "vindicate the ways of God to man." Does he succeed? Evaluate the extent to which his poem is an effective theodicy.

7. Many critics have argued that, in Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Man*, the author made a serious error by choosing verse as the medium for philosophical argumentation. Do you agree? What are the advantages and disadvantages of expressing a philosophical argument through the medium of poetry? Do you think Pope would have done better to have rendered his ideas in the form of prose?

8. At the beginning of the second epistle of Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Man*, Pope states, "Know then thyself, presume not God to scan, / The proper study of mankind is man." Is this sentiment an expression of humanistic arrogance or biblical humility? Support your argument from the poem and from Scripture.