
Alexander Pope

(1688-1744)

Alexander Pope was born a Catholic in 1688, a bad year for Catholics. In that year Parliament dethroned a Catholic king, James II, and enthroned two Protestants, William and Mary. Parliament also began to enact anti-Catholic laws that affected young Alexander: Catholics, the rabidly Anglican Parliament decreed, were forbidden to live within ten miles of London, they were forbidden to practice their religion openly, and they were forbidden to attend public schools.

But Alexander was a clever lad who learned to read the classics at home (and the classics were the heart of an 18th-century gentleman's education). In fact, he was so clever that he had taught himself Latin and Greek and some French by the time he was twelve. He had also written a play. As an adult, Pope ruefully looked back to his childhood and concluded that he must have been dipped in ink.

Then something dreadful happened. A wild cow slashed open his throat, and he contracted a tubercular infection. He spent the rest of his life a sickly man. He described himself as having a headache "four days in the week" and being "sick as a breeding woman the other three." The tubercular infection also seems to have stunted his growth and slowly twisted his spine. He only grew to 4 feet, 6 inches, and he had a large hump on his back. His face was deformed. The painter Joshua Reynolds described him as having muscles that ran across his cheeks "like small cords."

His enemies called him the Wasp of Twit'nam, partly because of his size, but mostly because he could sting like one. Once, in a snit over the flunkies who surrounded the royal family, Pope imagined that he would put a specially engraved collar on one of the queen's dogs at Kew Gardens, a summer retreat for royalty and their usual entourage of sycophants. One can imagine a young fop picking up the queen's pet, no doubt to compliment the queen on her fine taste in canines, and reading aloud this inscription on the dog's collar:

*I am His highness's dog at Kew
Pray tell me, sir, whose dog are you?*

The Wasp of Twit'nam. No poet ever had a tag that fit him so well.

Pope wrote a little of everything, and almost everything he wrote had ten syllables and five stresses per line—perfect heroic couplets (and no one has ever written them

any better). Pope said that when he was a child he "lisp'd in numbers, for the numbers came." Indeed they did. They flowed out of his pen by the thousands. In couplets he wrote pastorals (Windsor Forest), in couplets he wrote literary criticism (An Essay on Criticism), in couplets he wrote a satiric epic (The Dunciad), in couplets he wrote a mock epic (The Rape of the Lock), and in couplets he wrote a love story (Eloisa to Abelard).

And in couplets he wrote the philosophical work, An Essay on Man, the poem that lies before us. Pope said he might have written it in prose, but chose rhyme instead for two reasons: the "maxims" would strike readers more forcefully, and he could express those maxims more concisely in poetry than in prose.

What he set out to do, as he tells us in line 16, was to "vindicate" the ways of God to man, a paraphrase of what Milton said he was going to do in Paradise Lost. But Pope approached that task from a wider point of view than Milton did. Milton's epic is relentlessly Judeo-Christian; Pope's poem is philosophy wiped almost clean of sectarianism. Pope wrote to the 18th-century gentleman of good sense who was tired of sectarian Christianity. (The Civil Wars, fought in part over religion, were still in memory.) In fact, Christianity is so absent from An Essay on Man that Pope was accused of being a deist, that cold, intellectual, cult-less religion whose God sits in the Heavens paring his nails, oblivious to the human scene below. It's not hard to understand the accusation, however, when Pope wrote lines like these (in Epistle III):

*For modes of Faith, let graceless zealots fight;
His can't be wrong whose life is in the right.*

And when Pope mentions Heaven, it sounds like Mount Olympus, and the Gods act more like Zeus than Jahweh:

*Superior beings, who of late they saw
A mortal man unfold all Nature's law,
Admired such wisdom in an earthly shape,
And shewed a Newton as we shew an ape.*

It's difficult to write philosophy in Christian terms. That's theology. Pope wanted to write philosophy. So he came off looking like a deist.

The problem Pope tried to solve in An Essay on Man was as old as Job: How to justify the behavior of an omnipotent and benevolent God in a world that seems random and cruel. Pope didn't shrink from the task. The 18th-century skeptic asked, "How come that so-called omnipotent and benevolent God didn't give mankind sharper eyesight, like a fly?" Pious Pope had an answer:

*For this plain reason, man is not a fly.
Say what the use, were finer optics giv'n
T'inspect a mite, not comprehend the Heav'n.*

God is reasonable, Pope suggests, and we could find reasonable answers if we just thought hard enough about the problem. The problem, Pope says, lies with man, not God:

*God sends not ill; if rightly understood,
[All] partial Ill is universal Good.*

Once you start with Pope's premises, that's about as good an answer as you're going to get to The Problem. But we'd better stop there. Perhaps you want to see how Pope works all of this out for yourself. So on to An Essay on Man.

k h f

from *An Essay on Man*

Epistle I

Awake, my St. John!¹ leave all meaner things
To low ambition and the pride of kings.
Let us, since life can little more supply
Than just to look about us and to die,
Expatriate free o'er all this scene of man;
A mighty maze! but not without a plan;
A wild, where weeds and flow'rs promiscuous shoot;
Or garden, tempting with forbidden fruit.
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. Say first, of God above or man below,
What can we reason but from what we know?
Of man what see we but his station here,
From which to reason, or to which refer?
Through worlds unnumber'd though the God be known,
'Tis ours to trace him only in our own.
He who through vast immensity can pierce,
See worlds on worlds compose one universe,
Observe how system into system runs,
What other planets circle other suns,

¹ Henry St. John (pronounced Sin-jun) Bolingbroke was Pope's good friend who lived close by Pope's estate at Twickenham.

What varied beings people every star,
 May tell why Heav'n has made us as we are.
 But of this frame, the bearings and the ties,
 The strong connections, nice dependencies,
 Gradations just, has thy pervading soul
 Looked through? or can a part contain the whole?
 Is the great chain that draws all to agree,
 And drawn supports, upheld by God or thee?

II. Presumptuous man! the reason wouldst thou find,
 Why formed so weak, so little, and so blind?
 First, if thou canst, the harder reason guess,
 Why formed no weaker, blinder, and no less!
 Ask of thy Mother Earth why oaks are made
 Taller or stronger than the weeds they shade!
 Or ask of yonder argent fields above
 Why Jove's satellites are less than Jove!

Of systems possible, if 'tis confessed
 That wisdom infinite must form the best,
 Where all must full or not coherent be,
 And all that rises, rise in due degree;
 Then in the scale of reas'ning life 'tis plain
 There must be, somewhere, such a rank as man:
 And all the question (wrangle e'er so long)
 Is only this—if God has placed him wrong.

Respecting man, whatever wrong we call,
 May, must be right, as relative to all.
 In human works, though laboured on with pain,
 A thousand movements scarce one purpose gain;
 In God's, one single can its end produce,
 Yet serves to second too some other use.
 So man, who here seems principal alone,
 Perhaps acts second to some sphere unknown,
 Touches some wheel, or verges to some goal;
 'Tis but a part we see, and not a whole.
 When the proud steed shall know why man restrains
 His fiery course, or drives him o'er the plains;
 When the dull ox, why now he breaks the clod,
 Is now a victim, and now Egypt's God;
 Then shall man's pride and dullness comprehend
 His actions', passions', being's use and end;
 Why doing, suff'ring, checked, impelled; and why
 This hour a slave, the next a deity.

Then say not man's imperfect, Heav'n in fault;
 Say rather man's as perfect as he ought;
 His knowledge measured to his state and place,
 His time a moment, and a point his space.
 If to be perfect in a certain sphere,
 What matter soon or late, or here or there?

The blest today is as completely so
As who began a thousand years ago.

III. Heaven from all creatures hides the book of Fate,
All but the page prescribed, their present state;
From brutes what men, from men what spirits know;
Or who could suffer being here below?
The lamb thy riot dooms to bleed today,
Had he thy reason, would he skip and play?
Pleased to the last, he crops the flow'ry food,
And licks the hand just raised to shed his blood.
Oh blindness to the future! kindly giv'n,
That each may fill the circle marked by Heav'n;
Who sees with equal eye, as God of all,
A hero perish or a sparrow fall,
Atoms or systems into ruin hurled,
And now a bubble burst, and now a world.

Hope humbly then; with trembling pinions soar;
Wait the great teacher, Death, and God adore.
What future bliss he gives not thee to know,
But gives that hope to be thy blessing now.
Hope springs eternal in the human breast;
Man never is, but always to be, blessed.
The soul, uneasy and confin'd from home,
Rests and expatiates in a life to come.

Lo, the poor Indian! whose untutor'd mind
Sees God in clouds, or hears him in the wind;
His soul proud science never taught to stray
Far as the solar walk or milky way;
Yet simple nature to his hope has giv'n,
Behind the cloud-topt hill, an humbler Heav'n,
Some safer world in depth of woods embraced,
Some happier island in the wat'ry waste,
Where slaves once more their native land behold,
No fiends torment, no Christians thirst for gold.
To be, contents his natural desire;
He asks no angel's wing, no seraph's fire;
But thinks, admitted to that equal sky,
His faithful dog shall bear him company.

IV. Go wiser thou! and in thy scale of sense
Weigh thy opinion against Providence;
Call imperfection what thou fancy'st such;
Say, here he gives too little, there too much;
Destroy all creatures for thy sport or gust,²
Yet cry, if man's unhappy, God's unjust;

² appetite

If man alone engross not Heav'n's high care,
 Alone made perfect here, immortal there:
 Snatch from his hand the balance and the rod,
 Rejudge his justice, be the god of God.
 In pride, in reas'ning pride, our error lies;
 All quit their sphere, and rush into the skies!
 Pride still is aiming at the bless'd abodes,
 Men would be angels, angels would be gods.
 Aspiring to be gods, if angels fell,
 Aspiring to be angels, men rebel:
 And who but wishes to invert the laws
 Of order, sins against th' Eternal Cause.

V. Ask for what end the heav'nly bodies shine,
 Earth for whose use—Pride answers, "'Tis for mine!
 For me kind nature wakes her genial pow'r,
 Suckles each herb, and spreads out ev'ry flow'r;
 Annual for me the grape, the rose renew
 The juice nectareous and the balmy dew;
 For me the mine a thousand treasures brings;
 For me health gushes from a thousand springs;
 Seas roll to waft me, suns to light me rise;
 My footstool earth, my canopy the skies."

But errs not nature from this gracious end,
 From burning suns when livid deaths descend,
 When earthquakes swallow, or when tempests sweep
 Towns to one grave, whole nations to the deep?
 "No," 'tis replied, "the first Almighty Cause
 Acts not by partial but by gen'ral laws:
 Th' exceptions few; some change since all began;
 And what created perfect?—Why then man?
 If the great end be human happiness,
 Then nature deviates; and can man do less?
 As much that end a constant course requires
 Of show'rs and sunshine, as of man's desires;
 As much eternal springs and cloudless skies,
 As men forever temp'rate, calm and wise.
 If plagues or earthquakes break not Heav'n's design,
 Why then a Borgia or a Catiline?
 Who knows but He, whose hand the lightning forms,
 Who heaves old ocean, and who wings the storms;
 Pours fierce ambition in a Caesar's mind,
 Or turns young Ammon loose to scourge mankind³,
 From pride, from pride, our very reas'ning springs;

³ Caesar Borgia was an Italian duke notorious for a life of crime; Catiline was a libertine Roman who was a traitor to the state. Ammon is Alexander the Great.

Account for moral as for nat'ral things:
 Why charge we Heav'n in those, in these acquit?
 In both, to reason right is to submit.

Better for us, perhaps, it might appear,
 Were there all harmony, all virtue here;
 That never air or ocean felt the wind;
 That never passion discomposed the mind.
 But all subsists by elemental strife;
 And passions are the elements of life.
 The gen'ral order, since the whole began,
 Is kept in nature, and is kept in man.

VI. What would this man? Now upward will he soar,
 And little less than angel, would be more;
 Now looking downwards, just as griev'd appears
 To want the strength of bulls, the fur of bears.
 Made for his use all creatures if he call,
 Say what their use, had he the pow'rs of all?
 Nature to these without profusion kind,
 The proper organs, proper pow'rs assigned;
 Each seeming want compensated of course,
 Here with degrees of swiftness, there of force;
 All in exact proportion to the state;
 Nothing to add, and nothing to abate.
 Each beast, each insect, happy in its own:
 Is heav'n unkind to man, and man alone?
 Shall he alone, whom rational we call,
 Be pleas'd with nothing if not blessed with all?

The bliss of man (could pride that blessing find)
 Is not to act or think beyond mankind;
 No pow'rs of body or of soul to share,
 But what his nature and his state can bear.
 Why has not man a microscopic eye?
 For this plain reason, man is not a fly.
 Say what the use, were finer optics giv'n,
 T' inspect a mite, not comprehend the Heav'n?
 Or touch, if tremblingly alive all o'er,
 To smart and agonize at every pore?
 Or quick effluvia darting through the brain,
 Die of a rose in aromatic pain?
 If nature thundered in his op'ning ears,
 And stunned him with the music of the spheres,
 How would he wish that Heav'n had left him still
 The whisp'ring zephyr and the purling rill?
 Who finds not Providence all good and wise,
 Alike in what it gives and what denies?

VII. Far as Creation's ample range extends,
 The scale of sensual, mental pow'rs ascends:
 Mark how it mounts to man's imperial race
 From the green myriads in the peopled grass;
 What modes of sight betwixt each wide extreme,
 The mole's dim curtain and the lynx's beam:
 Of smell, the headlong lioness between,
 And hound sagacious on the tainted green:
 Of hearing, from the life that fills the flood⁴
 To that which warbles through the vernal wood:
 The spider's touch, how exquisitely fine!
 Feels at each thread, and lives along the line:
 In the nice bee what sense so subtly true,
 From pois'nous herbs extracts the healing dew?
 How instinct varies in the grov'ling swine,
 Compared, half-reasoning elephant, with thine!
 'Twixt that and reason what a nice barrier!
 Forever sep'rate, yet forever near!
 Rememb'rance and reflection, how allied;
 What thin partitions sense from thought divide:
 And middle natures how they long to join,
 Yet never pass th' insuperable line!
 Without this just gradation could they be
 Subjected, these to those or all to thee?
 The pow'rs of all subdued by thee alone
 Is not thy reason all these pow'rs in one?

VIII. See, through this air, this ocean, and this earth,
 All matter quick, and bursting into birth.
 Above, how high progressive life may go!
 Around, how wide! How deep extend below!
 Vast Chain of Being which from God began,
 Natures ethereal, human, angel, man,
 Beast, bird, fish, insect, what no eye can see,
 No glass⁵ can reach; from infinite to thee,
 From thee to nothing. On superior pow'rs
 Were we to press, inferior might on ours:
 Or in the full creation leave a void,
 Where, one step broken, the great scale's destroy'd:
 From nature's chain whatever link you strike,
 Tenth, or ten thousandth, breaks the chain alike.

And if each system in gradation roll,
 Alike essential to th' amazing whole,
 The least confusion but in one, not all
 That system only, but the whole must fall.

⁴ the ocean

⁵ a microscope

Let earth unbalanced from her orbit fly,
 Planets and suns run lawless through the sky;
 Let ruling angels from their spheres be hurl'd,
 Being on being wreck'd, and world on world;
 Heav'n's whole foundations to their centre nod,
 And nature tremble to the throne of God!
 All this dread order break—for whom? for thee?
 Vile worm!—oh, madness! pride! impiety!

IX. What if the foot, ordained the dust to tread,
 Or hand to toil, aspir'd to be the head?
 What if the head, the eye, or ear repin'd
 To serve mere engines to the ruling mind?
 Just as absurd for any part to claim
 To be another in this gen'ral frame;
 Just as absurd to mourn the tasks or pains
 The great directing Mind of All ordains.

All are but parts of one stupendous whole,
 Whose body nature is, and God the soul;
 That chang'd through all, and yet in all the same,
 Great in the earth as in th' ethereal frame,
 Warms in the sun, refreshes in the breeze,
 Glows in the stars, and blossoms in the trees;
 Lives through all life, extends thro' all extent,
 Spreads undivided, operates unspent;
 Breathes in our soul, informs our mortal part,
 As full, as perfect in a hair as heart;
 As full, as perfect in vile man that mourns,
 As the rapt Seraph that adores and burns.
 To Him no high, no low, no great, no small;
 He fills, he bounds, connects, and equals all.

X. 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 blessed 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.