

## Alexander Pope

### Of the Nature and State of Man with respect to the Universe

#### Epistle I of “Essay on Man”

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*Awake, my St. John! 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 flowers 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 unnumbered 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,  
What varied being peoples every star,  
May tell why Heaven 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 confest  
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 reasoning 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 dulness comprehend  
His actions', passions', being's, use and end;  
Why doing, suffering, checked, impelled; and why  
This hour a slave, the next a deity.

Then say not man's imperfect, Heaven 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 to-day 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 to-day,  
Had he thy reason, would he skip and play?  
Pleased to the last, he crops the flowery food,  
And licks the hand just raised to shed his blood.  
Oh, blindness to the future! kindly given,  
That each may fill the circle, marked by Heaven:

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 blest:  
The soul, uneasy and confined from home,  
Rests and expatiates in a life to come.

Lo, the poor Indian! whose untutored 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 given,  
Behind the cloud-topped hill, an humbler heaven;  
Some safer world in depth of woods embraced,  
Some happier island in the watery 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 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;  
If man alone engross not Heaven's high care,  
Alone made perfect here, immortal there:  
Snatch from His hand the balance and the rod,  
Re-judge His justice, be the God of God.  
In pride, in reasoning pride, our error lies;  
All quit their sphere, and rush into the skies.  
Pride still is aiming at the blest 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 the Eternal Cause.

## V

Ask for what end the heavenly bodies shine,  
 Earth for whose use? Pride answers, "'Tis for mine:  
 For me kind Nature wakes her genial power,  
 Suckles each herb, and spreads out every flower;  
 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 general laws;  
 The 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 showers and sunshine, as of man's desires;  
 As much eternal springs and cloudless skies,  
 As men for ever temperate, calm, and wise.  
 If plagues or earthquakes break not Heaven'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 Cæsar's mind,  
 Or turns young Ammon loose to scourge mankind?  
 From pride, from pride, our very reasoning springs;  
 Account for moral, as for natural things:  
 Why charge we heaven 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 general 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 grieved 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 powers of all?  
 Nature to these, without profusion, kind,  
 The proper organs, proper powers 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 Heaven unkind to man, and man alone?  
 Shall he alone, whom rational we call,  
 Be pleased 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 powers 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 given,  
 To inspect a mite, not comprehend the heaven?  
 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 opening ears,  
 And stunned him with the music of the spheres,  
 How would he wish that Heaven had left him still  
 The whispering 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 powers 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 flood,  
 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 poisonous herbs extracts the healing dew?  
 How instinct varies in the grovelling swine,  
 Compared, half-reasoning elephant, with thine!  
 'Twixt that, and reason, what a nice barrier,  
 For ever separate, yet for ever near!  
 Remembrance and reflection how allayed;  
 What thin partitions sense from thought divide:  
 And middle natures, how they long to join,  
 Yet never passed the insuperable line!  
 Without this just gradation, could they be  
 Subjected, these to those, or all to thee?  
 The powers of all subdued by thee alone,  
 Is not thy reason all these powers 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 glass can reach; from Infinite to thee,  
 From thee to nothing. On superior powers  
 Were we to press, inferior might on ours:  
 Or in the full creation leave a void,  
 Where, one step broken, the great scale's destroyed:  
 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 the amazing whole,  
 The least confusion but in one, not all  
 That system only, but the whole must fall.  
 Let earth unbalanced from her orbit fly,  
 Planets and suns run lawless through the sky;  
 Let ruling angels from their spheres be hurled,  
 Being on being wrecked, and world on world;  
 Heaven'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, aspired to be the head?  
 What if the head, the eye, or ear repined  
 To serve mere engines to the ruling mind?  
 Just as absurd for any part to claim  
 To be another, in this general 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, changed through all, and yet in all the same;  
 Great in the earth, as in the ethereal frame;  
 Warms in the sun, refreshes in the breeze,  
 Glows in the stars, and blossoms in the trees,  
 Lives through all life, extends through 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, Heaven 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 Power,  
 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.