

Alexander Pope

Of the Nature and State of Man
with respect to Happiness

Epistle IV of “Essay on Man”

(Published:
24th January 1734)

(Opening Sections - One to Five)

I

Oh, happiness, our being's end and aim!
Good, pleasure, ease, content! whate'er thy name:
That something still which prompts the eternal sigh,
For which we bear to live, or dare to die,
Which still so near us, yet beyond us lies,
O'erlooked, seen double, by the fool, and wise.
Plant of celestial seed! if dropped below,
Say, in what mortal soil thou deign'st to grow?
Fair opening to some Court's propitious shine,
Or deep with diamonds in the flaming mine?
Twined with the wreaths Parnassian laurels yield,
Or reaped in iron harvests of the field?
Where grows?—where grows it not? If vain our toil,
We ought to blame the culture, not the soil:
Fixed to no spot is happiness sincere,
'Tis nowhere to be found, or everywhere;
'Tis never to be bought, but always free,
And fled from monarchs, St. John! dwells with thee.

Ask of the learned the way? The learned are blind;
This bids to serve, and that to shun mankind;
Some place the bliss in action, some in ease,
Those call it pleasure, and contentment these;
Some, sunk to beasts, find pleasure end in pain;
Some, swelled to gods, confess even virtue vain;
Or indolent, to each extreme they fall,
To trust in everything, or doubt of all.

Who thus define it, say they more or less
Than this, that happiness is happiness?

II

Take Nature's path, and mad opinions leave;
All states can reach it, and all heads conceive;
Obvious her goods, in no extreme they dwell;
There needs but thinking right, and meaning well;
And mourn our various portions as we please,
Equal is common sense, and common ease.

Remember, man, “the Universal Cause
Acts not by partial, but by general laws;”
And makes what happiness we justly call
Subsist not in the good of one, but all.
There's not a blessing individuals find,
But some way leans and hearkens to the kind:
No bandit fierce, no tyrant mad with pride,
No caverned hermit, rests self-satisfied:
Who most to shun or hate mankind pretend,
Seek an admirer, or would fix a friend:
Abstract what others feel, what others think,
All pleasures sicken, and all glories sink:
Each has his share; and who would more obtain,
Shall find, the pleasure pays not half the pain.

Order is Heaven's first law; and this confest,
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.
Heaven to mankind impartial we confess,
If all are equal in their happiness:
But mutual wants this happiness increase;
All Nature's difference keeps all Nature's peace.
Condition, circumstance is not the thing;
Bliss is the same in subject or in king,
In who obtain defence, or who defend,
In him who is, or him who finds a friend:
Heaven breathes through every member of the whole
One common blessing, as one common soul.
But fortune's gifts if each alike possessed,
And each were equal, must not all contest?
If then to all men happiness was meant,
God in externals could not place content.

Fortune her gifts may variously dispose,
And these be happy called, unhappy those;
But Heaven's just balance equal will appear,
While those are placed in hope, and these in fear:
Nor present good or ill, the joy or curse,
But future views of better or of worse,

Oh, sons of earth! attempt ye still to rise,
By mountains piled on mountains, to the skies,
Heaven still with laughter the vain toil surveys,
And buries madmen in the heaps they raise.

III

Know, all the good that individuals find,
 Or God and Nature meant to mere mankind,
 Reason's whole pleasure, all the joys of sense,
 Lie in three words, health, peace, and competence.
 But health consists with temperance alone;
 And peace, oh, virtue! peace is all thy own.
 The good or bad the gifts of fortune gain;
 But these less taste them, as they worse obtain.
 Say, in pursuit of profit or delight,
 Who risk the most, that take wrong means, or right;
 Of vice or virtue, whether blessed or cursed,
 Which meets contempt, or which compassion first?
 Count all the advantage prosperous vice attains,
 'Tis but what virtue flies from and disdains:
 And grant the bad what happiness they would,
 One they must want, which is, to pass for good.

Oh, blind to truth, and God's whole scheme below,
 Who fancy bliss to vice, to virtue woe!
 Who sees and follows that great scheme the best,
 Best knows the blessing, and will most be blest.
 But fools the good alone unhappy call,
 For ills or accidents that chance to all.
 See Falkland dies, the virtuous and the just!
 See god-like Turenne prostrate on the dust!
 See Sidney bleeds amid the martial strife!
 Was this their virtue, or contempt of life?
 Say, was it virtue, more though Heaven ne'er gave,
 Lamented Digby! sunk thee to the grave?
 Tell me, if virtue made the son expire,
 Why, full of days and honour, lives the sire?
 Why drew Marseilles' good bishop purer breath,
 When Nature sickened, and each gale was death?
 Or why so long (in life if long can be)
 Lent Heaven a parent to the poor and me?

IV

What makes all physical or moral ill?
 There deviates Nature, and here wanders will.
 God sends not ill; if rightly understood,
 Or partial ill is universal good,
 Or change admits, or Nature lets it fall;
 Short, and but rare, till man improved it all.
 We just as wisely might of Heaven complain
 That righteous Abel was destroyed by Cain,
 As that the virtuous son is ill at ease
 When his lewd father gave the dire disease.
 Think we, like some weak prince, the Eternal Cause
 Prone for His favourites to reverse His laws?

Shall burning Etna, if a sage requires,
 Forget to thunder, and recall her fires?
 On air or sea new motions be imprest,
 Oh, blameless Bethel! to relieve thy breast?
 When the loose mountain trembles from on high,
 Shall gravitation cease, if you go by?
 Or some old temple, nodding to its fall,
 For Chartres' head reserve the hanging wall?

V

But still this world (so fitted for the knave)
 Contents us not. A better shall we have?
 A kingdom of the just then let it be:
 But first consider how those just agree.
 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.
 What shocks one part will edify the rest,
 Nor with one system can they all be blest.
 The very best will variously incline,
 And what rewards your virtue, punish mine.
 Whatever is, is right. This world, 'tis true,
 Was made for Caesar—but for Titus too:
 And which more blest? who chained his country, say,
 Or he whose virtue sighed to lose a day?

“But sometimes virtue starves, while vice is fed.”
 What then? Is the reward of virtue bread?
 That, vice may merit, 'tis the price of toil;
 The knave deserves it, when he tills the soil,
 The knave deserves it, when he tempts the main,
 Where folly fights for kings, or dives for gain.
 The good man may be weak, be indolent;
 Nor is his claim to plenty, but content.
 But grant him riches, your demand is o'er?
 “No—shall the good want health, the good want power?”
 Add health, and power, and every earthly thing,
 “Why bounded power? why private? why no king?”
 Nay, why external for internal given?
 Why is not man a god, and earth a heaven?
 Who ask and reason thus, will scarce conceive
 God gives enough, while He has more to give:
 Immense the power, immense were the demand;
 Say, at what part of nature will they stand?

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(Final Two Sections - Six and Seven)

VI

What nothing earthly gives, or can destroy,
The soul's calm sunshine, and the heartfelt joy,
Is virtue's prize: A better would you fix?
Then give humility a coach and six,
Justice a conqueror's sword, or truth a gown,
Or public spirit its great cure, a crown.
Weak, foolish man! will heaven reward us there
With the same trash mad mortals wish for here?
The boy and man an individual makes,
Yet sighest thou now for apples and for cakes?
Go, like the Indian, in another life
Expect thy dog, thy bottle, and thy wife:
As well as dream such trifles are assigned,
As toys and empires, for a God-like mind.
Rewards, that either would to virtue bring
No joy, or be destructive of the thing:
How oft by these at sixty are undone
The virtues of a saint at twenty-one!

To whom can riches give repute or trust,
Content, or pleasure, but the good and just?
Judges and senates have been bought for gold,
Esteem and love were never to be sold.
Oh, fool! to think God hates the worthy mind,
The lover and the love of human kind,
Whose life is healthful, and whose conscience clear,
Because he wants a thousand pounds a year.

Honour and shame from no condition rise;
Act well your part, there all the honour lies.
Fortune in men has some small difference made,
One flaunts in rags, one flutters in brocade;
The cobbler aproned, and the parson gowned,
The friar hooded, and the monarch crowned,
"What differ more (you cry) than crown and cowl?"
I'll tell you, friend! a wise man and a fool.
You'll find, if once the monarch acts the monk,
Or, cobbler-like, the parson will be drunk,
Worth makes the man, and want of it, the fellow;
The rest is all but leather or prunella.

Stuck o'er with titles and hung round with strings,
That thou mayest be by kings, or whores of kings.
Boast the pure blood of an illustrious race,
In quiet flow from Lucrece to Lucrece;
But by your fathers' worth if yours you rate,
Count me those only who were good and great.
Go! if your ancient, but ignoble blood
Has crept through scoundrels ever since the flood,
Go! and pretend your family is young;
Nor own, your fathers have been fools so long.
What can ennoble sots, or slaves, or cowards?
Alas! not all the blood of all the Howards.

Look next on greatness; say where greatness lies?
"Where, but among the heroes and the wise?"
Heroes are much the same, the points agreed,
From Macedonia's madman to the Swede;
The whole strange purpose of their lives, to find
Or make, an enemy of all mankind?
Not one looks backward, onward still he goes,
Yet ne'er looks forward farther than his nose.
No less alike the politic and wise;
All sly slow things, with circumspective eyes;
Men in their loose unguarded hours they take,

Not that themselves are wise, but others weak.
But grant that those can conquer, these can cheat;
'Tis phrase absurd to call a villain great:
Who wickedly is wise, or madly brave,
Is but the more a fool, the more a knave.
Who noble ends by noble means obtains,
Or failing, smiles in exile or in chains,
Like good Aurelius let him reign, or bleed
Like Socrates, that man is great indeed.

What's fame? a fancied life in others' breath,
A thing beyond us, even before our death.
Just what you hear, you have, and what's unknown
The same (my Lord) if Tully's, or your own.
All that we feel of it begins and ends
In the small circle of our foes or friends;
To all beside as much an empty shade
An Eugene living, as a Caesar dead;
Alike or when, or where, they shone, or shine,
Or on the Rubicon, or on the Rhine.
A wit's a feather, and a chief a rod;
An honest man's the noblest work of God.
Fame but from death a villain's name can save,
As justice tears his body from the grave;
When what the oblivion better were resigned,
Is hung on high, to poison half mankind.
All fame is foreign, but of true desert;
Plays round the head, but comes not to the heart:
One self-approving hour whole years outweighs
Of stupid starers, and of loud huzzas;
And more true joy Marcellus exiled feels,
Than Cæsar with a senate at his heels.

In parts superior what advantage lies?
Tell (for you can) what is it to be wise?
'Tis but to know how little can be known;
To see all others' faults, and feel our own;
Condemned in business or in arts to drudge,
Without a second or without a judge;
Truths would you teach or save a sinking land,
All fear, none aid you, and few understand.
Painful pre-eminence! yourself to view
Above life's weakness, and its comforts too.

Bring, then, these blessings to a strict account;
Make fair deductions; see to what they mount;

How much of other each is sure to cost;
 How each for other oft is wholly lost;
 How inconsistent greater goods with these;
 How sometimes life is risked, and always ease;
 Think, and if still the things thy envy call,
 Say, would'st thou be the man to whom they fall?
 To sigh for ribands if thou art so silly,
 Mark how they grace Lord Umbra, or Sir Billy:
 Is yellow dirt the passion of thy life?
 Look but on Gripus, or on Gripus' wife;
 If parts allure thee, think how Bacon shined,
 The wisest, brightest, meanest of mankind:
 Or ravished with the whistling of a name,
 See Cromwell; damned to everlasting fame!
 If all, united, thy ambition call,
 From ancient story learn to scorn them all.
 There, in the rich, the honoured, famed, and great,
 See the false scale of happiness complete!
 In hearts of kings, or arms of queens who lay,
 How happy! those to ruin, these betray.
 Mark by what wretched steps their glory grows,
 From dirt and seaweed as proud Venice rose;
 In each how guilt and greatness equal ran,
 And all that raised the hero, sunk the man:
 Now Europe's laurels on their brows behold,
 But stained with blood, or ill exchanged for gold;
 Then see them broke with toils or sunk with ease,
 Or infamous for plundered provinces.
 Oh, wealth ill-fated! which no act of fame
 E'er taught to shine, or sanctified from shame;
 What greater bliss attends their close of life?
 Some greedy minion, or imperious wife.
 The trophied arches, storeyed halls invade
 And haunt their slumbers in the pompous shade.
 Alas! not dazzled with their noontide ray,
 Compute the morn and evening to the day;
 The whole amount of that enormous fame,
 A tale, that blends their glory with their shame!

VII

Know, then, this truth (enough for man to know)
 "Virtue alone is happiness below."
 The only point where human bliss stands still,
 And tastes the good without the fall to ill;

Where only merit constant pay receives,
 Is blest in what it takes, and what it gives;
 The joy unequalled, if its end it gain,
 And if it lose, attended with no pain;
 Without satiety, though e'er so blessed,
 And but more relished as the more distressed:
 The broadest mirth unfeeling folly wears,
 Less pleasing far than virtue's very tears:
 Good, from each object, from each place acquired
 For ever exercised, yet never tired;
 Never elated, while one man's oppressed;
 Never dejected while another's blessed;
 And where no wants, no wishes can remain,
 Since but to wish more virtue, is to gain.

See the sole bliss Heaven could on all bestow!
 Which who but feels can taste, but thinks can know:
 Yet poor with fortune, and with learning blind,
 The bad must miss; the good, untaught, will find;
 Slave to no sect, who takes no private road,
 But looks through Nature up to Nature's God;
 Pursues that chain which links the immense design,
 Joins heaven and earth, and mortal and divine;
 Sees, that no being any bliss can know,
 But touches some above, and some below;
 Learns, from this union of the rising whole,
 The first, last purpose of the human soul;
 And knows, where faith, law, morals, all began,
 All end, in love of God, and love of man.

For Him alone, hope leads from goal to goal,
 And opens still, and opens on his soul!
 Till lengthened on to faith, and unconfined,
 It pours the bliss that fills up all the mind
 He sees, why Nature plants in man alone
 Hope of known bliss, and faith in bliss unknown:
 (Nature, whose dictates to no other kind
 Are given in vain, but what they seek they find)
 Wise is her present; she connects in this
 His greatest virtue with his greatest bliss;
 At once his own bright prospect to be blest,
 And strongest motive to assist the rest.

Self-love thus pushed to social, to divine,
 Gives thee to make thy neighbour's blessing thine.
 Is this too little for the boundless heart?

Extend it, let thy enemies have part:
 Grasp the whole worlds of reason, life, and sense,
 In one close system of benevolence:
 Happier as kinder, in whate'er degree,
 And height of bliss but height of charity.

God loves from whole to parts: but human soul
 Must rise from individual to the whole.
 Self-love but serves the virtuous mind to wake,
 As the small pebble stirs the peaceful lake!
 The centre moved, a circle straight succeeds,
 Another still, and still another spreads;
 Friend, parent, neighbour, first it will embrace;
 His country next; and next all human race;
 Wide and more wide, the o'erflowings of the mind
 Take every creature in, of every kind;
 Earth smiles around, with boundless bounty blest,
 And Heaven beholds its image in his breast.

Come, then, my friend! my genius! come along;
 Oh, master of the poet, and the song!
 And while the muse now stoops, or now ascends,
 To man's low passions, or their glorious ends,
 Teach me, like thee, in various nature wise,
 To fall with dignity, with temper rise;
 Formed by thy converse, happily to steer
 From grave to gay, from lively to severe;
 Correct with spirit, eloquent with ease,
 Intent to reason, or polite to please.
 Oh! while along the stream of time thy name
 Expanded flies, and gathers all its fame,
 Say, shall my little bark attendant sail,
 Pursue the triumph, and partake the gale?
 When statesmen, heroes, kings, in dust repose,
 Whose sons shall blush their fathers were thy foes,
 Shall then this verse to future age pretend
 Thou wert my guide, philosopher, and friend?
 That urged by thee, I turned the tuneful art
 From sounds to things, from fancy to the heart;
 From 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.