

# Analysis of "an essay on man"



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The assertion of the first epistle of Pope's "An Essay on Man" is that man has too narrow a perspective to truly understand God's plan, and his goal is to "vindicate the ways of God to man" (Pope 16). The ignorance of man befits his place in the order of creation, and his confusion conceals the harmony of that order. The individual lines of this epistle appear to present a fatalistic universe, devoid of free will, where all things are fated to happen. Although if the work is viewed as a whole, Pope's optimism shows through.

Pope begins by explaining that he can only comment on what can be known by man. "Through worlds unnumbered though the God be known, 'Tis ours to trace him only in our own" (1. 21-22). Even though the universe may hold many worlds, only Earth can be known to man. It is the only frame of reference that Pope could write about, and his audience be made to understand. He advises his readers to put aside their hubris and consider "Is the great chain, that draws all to agree, / And drawn supports, upheld by God or thee?" (1. 33-34). Only after man puts aside his ego and contemplates "the great chain," will he be able to understand his place in God's plan.

By saying, "Then say not man's imperfect, Heaven in fault; / Say rather, man's as perfect as he ought" (2. 69-70), Pope is trying to illustrate that even perceived imperfection is part of the plan. Human imperfection should not be seen as a slight by God, but as a necessity. The epistle also states, "What future bliss, he gives not thee to know, / But gives that hope to be thy blessing now" (3. 93-94), showing that human happiness is dependent on both hope and ignorance of the future. Mankind should not spend all its time trying to guess what God has planned, but merely have faith that life shall work out the way it should.

Pope shows his contempt for man's pride by stating, " Snatch from his hand the balance and the rod,/Redjudge his justice, be the God of God!/In pride, in reasoning pride, our error lies" (4. 121-123). Man is unwise to think that his ability to reason puts him on the same level as God, " And who but wishes to invert the laws/Of order, sins against the Eternal Cause" (4. 129-130). This hubris is what leads to man's unhappiness, because " to reason right is to submit" (5. 164). If God is a perfect being, then man should accept that perfection and not question the direction the universe takes.

By stating, " the first Almighty Cause/Acts not by partial, but by general laws" (5. 145-146), Pope is trying to make his readers understand that humans are not the whole of creation, and creation was not created wholly for them. There is an order to creation, where each position is filled by the correct life form. Man is where he should be in " the great chain" and should not envy the beasts below him or question God above. " The bliss of man [...]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" (6. 189-192). This acceptance of creation is the key to man's happiness, and that happiness is threatened by man's ability to think and reason.

" Where, one step broken, the great scale's destroyed:/From Nature's chain whatever link you strike,/Ten or ten thousandth, breaks the chain alike" (8. 244-246). So if one rises above or falls below their position in God's order, it will destroy the whole of the plan. It then becomes clear that wanting to subvert God's plan, even to the benefit of mankind, is madness. Instead man should come to understand " All are but parts one stupendous whole,/Whose

body Nature is, and God the soul" (9. 265-266). So, one should not fear or doubt, but admit they are powerless and accept their place in creation.

Although Pope's language is harsh and seemingly fatalistic, a critical reading of the first epistle to " An Essay on Man" shows his optimism in God's plan. Pope appears to believe that not only does God have a plan, but that plan serves the best interest of the whole of creation. Just because man has difficulties accepting his place in the plan, does not mean the plan is flawed, merely that man must accept that he is not the sole beneficiary. After all, " One truth is clear: Whatever is, is right" (10. 292).

## **Works Cited**

Pope, Alexander. " An Essay on Man." Eds. Paul Davis, et al. The Bedford Anthology of World Literature. Book 4. Boston: Edford/St. Martin's, 2003. 260-267. Print.