

POPE'S ESSAY ON MAN

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Pope's Essay on Man by Alexander Pope

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ALEXANDER POPE

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ESSAY ON MAN**

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EDITED, WITH ANNOTATIONS &c.

BY THE

REV. JOHN HUNTER, M.A.



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INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS.

[The interest with which the general reader may be expected to peruse Pope's 'Essay on Man,' will, it is hoped, be enhanced by the explanatory and illustrative comments in the present edition. The book, however, is specially designed to promote successful competition at public examinations; and to this end candidates are requested to read carefully the introductory matter as well as the foot-notes.]

1. Much of the 'Essay on Man,' in common with many other of Pope's works, is prose elegantly versified. As an example take lines 43 to 50 of the first Epistle. These are easily convertible into the following plain prose:—

If it is confessed that, of all possible systems, infinite Wisdom must form the best, in which all must be full, or else be incoherent, and all that rises must rise in due gradation, then it is plain that in the scale of reasoning life there must be, somewhere, such a rank as Man; and all the question, how long soever we may wrangle, is only this—whether God has placed him wrong.

A much greater portion of the poem is farther removed from prose by means of inversions, ellipses, contractions, and rhetorical fancies. But occasionally the full spirit of true poetry animates the strain, and presents admirable creations of imaginative force and beauty. This is the case more particularly in the first Epistle, as in the following lines:—

- 99-112. 'Lo, the poor Indian! whose untutored mind,' &c.
 195-204. 'Say what the use, were finer optics given,' &c.
 207-222. 'Far as Creation's ample range extends,' &c.
 267-280. 'All are but parts of one stupendous whole,' &c.

These fine passages are essentially poetical, and are not converted into prose when made to assume prose form. The student should make himself familiar with them.

2. Of the inversions, or transposed phrases, by which Pope so often adds dignity and force to metrical arrangement and rhyme, the following are instances occurring in the first Epistle:—

- Line 21. 'Through worlds unnumbered though the God be known.'
 29. 'But of this frame the bearings and the ties.'
 127. 'Aspiring to be gods if angels fell.'
 178. 'Made for his use all creatures if he call.'
 241. 'On superior powers were we to press.'

3. Of the ellipses occurring in the poem, one of the most frequent is the omission of the participle *being* or *having been*, in the clause of the nominative absolute. The following are examples in the same Epistle:—

- Line 71. 'His knowledge [being] measured to his state and place.'
 131. 'The powers of all [being] subdued by thee alone.'
 147. 'The exceptions [having been] few, some change [having been] since all began.'
 244. 'One step [being] broken, the great scale's destroyed.'
 249. 'The least confusion [being, or happening] but in one.'

4. Our author, in his statement of the Design of this poem, gives two reasons for having chosen rhymed verse rather than prose. 'The one,' he says, 'will appear obvious—that principles, maxims, or precepts so written, both strike the reader more strongly at first, and are more easily retained by him afterwards; the other may seem odd, but it is true. I found I could express them more shortly this way than in prose itself;

and nothing is more certain than that much of the force as well as grace of arguments or instructions depends on their conciseness.' We must notice, however, that his conciseness has in several portions of the Essay been carried too far, sacrificing perspicuity to condensation, and wrapping his thoughts in an obscurity which his commentators have been unable to remove. Nor does his language always bear a strict application of the rules of grammar, or indicate distinctly the designed construction; and in one instance, at least, he fails to perceive that the word necessary to supply his ellipsis is inconsistent with the context.

5. The heroic couplet became in the hands of Pope an exquisitely finished vehicle. Yet there is too much monotony in his pauses, and too frequently a shutting-up of the sense with the couplet. He is also very often negligent of his rhymes; thus we find in place of correct rhymes—*here* and *refer*, *plain* and *man*, *know* and *now*, *rust* and *beast*, *caprice* and *vices*, *drest* and *priest*, *cowd* and *fool*.

6. The 'Essay on Man' is an unfinished poem, with a somewhat inappropriate name. It is rather a *Theodicy*, or *Vindication of the Ways of God to Man*, than an *Essay on Man*. Discussions on Natural Religion, and particularly on the nature and origin of Evil, had been for some time prevalent in society when Pope began the composition of this Essay. He thus sought to adapt himself to the age, but his mind had little aptitude for the subject. From the *Theodicæ* of Leibnitz he drew the main features of the speculative scheme, but it is, in the whole, an eclectic scheme, and a confused one, some parts of it being contradictory to others. On the relation of Pope's Essay to the theory of Leibnitz we quote from the 'Penny Cyclopædia' the following observations:—'Pope and Leibnitz agree in the position, that of all possible systems infinite Wisdom must form the best; but, by the coherency of all, the former understood the *co-existence* of all grades of perfection, from nothing up to Deity,—the latter, that *mutual dependence* of all in the world, by which each single entity is a reason of all others. By the fulness of Creation Leibnitz denied the existence of any gap in the casual order of co-existent things; Pope asserted by it the unbroken series of all degrees

of perfection. The Divine permission of evil Pope referred to the indisposition of the Deity to disturb general by occasional laws. There is consequently evil in the world which the Deity might have got rid of, if He were willing in certain cases to interrupt His general Providence. Consequently, He admits evil in the world which does not contribute to the perfection of the whole. Leibnitz, however, denies that God could remove the existing evil from the world without prejudices to its goodness. He moreover does not admit of the opposition of general and particular Providence, but makes the general law of the Universe to be nothing else than the totality of all special laws.*

7. The 'Essay on Man,' then, is not to be much commended for the ethical doctrines which it asserts. Its chief merit consists in the felicitous manner in which it expresses thought, the vigour and beauty of its sentiment, the subtle propriety of its diction, and the melody of its versification. Pope here deals with the origin of Evil without any acknowledgment of what Christianity has revealed, and, like all who think they have solved that problem, he is the victim of delusive fallacy. He undertook to teach a subject which he had not well learned; but, nevertheless, his poetry has delighted the minds of thousands who could estimate the subject more sagaciously than he. The Essay is to be read as if it were the work of some noble-minded heathen of classical antiquity, and to be studied chiefly on account of its literary excellence.

EXTRACTS
FROM
JOHNSON'S LIFE OF POPE.

1. In 1733 Pope published the first part of what he persuaded himself to think a system of Ethics, under the title of 'An Essay on Man;' which, if his letter to Swift of September 14, 1726, be rightly explained by the commentator, had been eight years under his consideration, and of which he seems to have desired the success with great solicitude. His own name, and that of his friend to whom the work is inscribed, were in the first editions carefully suppressed. Those friends of Pope that were trusted with the secret went about lavishing honours on the new-born poet, and hinting that Pope was never so much in danger from any former rival. To those authors whom he had personally offended, and to those whose opinion the world considered as decisive, and whom he suspected of envy or malevolence, he sent his Essay as a present before publication, that they might defeat their own enmity by praises which they could not afterwards decently retract. While the author was unknown, some, as will always happen, favoured him as an adventurer, and some censured him as an intruder; but all thought him above neglect; the sale increased, and editions were multiplied. The second and third Epistles were published, and Pope was, I believe, more and more suspected of writing them. At last, in 1734, he avowed the fourth, and claimed the honour of a moral poet.