

Alexander Pope

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[Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man* \(Wikipedia\)](#), a didactic poem written in four 'epistles', touches somewhat inscrutably on many of the questions we deal with in our discussions here. This poem is well known for two quotations which have passed so far into common usage as to be justly called proverbs. From the first epistle comes the line "*Hope springs eternal in the human breast*", and at the opening of the second epistle is Pope's summary of the main thrust of the poem; "*Know then thyself, presume not God to scan; // The proper study of Mankind is Man.*"

In an essay entitled [Some Thoughts on the Remembering \(and Dismembering\) of Lucretius's *De rerum natura* in Translations, Commentaries, and Philosophical Poems, 1650-1750](#), John Baker writes as follows;

Quote

What Hardie identifies in Milton and Lucretius recalls Miriam Leranbaum's reading and description of Pope's *Essay on Man* as "the reversing of Lucretius" (58).¹⁴ Lucretius's arguments and positions are both contested and rejected, either explicitly and totally, as with Blackmore, or implicitly and partially, as is the case with Pope, but remain present. The two poems can be read as diametrically opposed examples of this imitation-through-opposition strategy. The dismemberment in the sense of outright refutation in Blackmore is systematic and repetitive. In the case of Pope one has the impression that Lucretius is often at the back (or indeed the front) of his mind despite the manifest presence of multiple other sources that have been signaled and discussed by commentators over the years, and that are flagged up in the editions of the *Essay* by Maynard Mack (1950) and, more recently, by Tom Jones (2016). [David B. Morris](#) asserts that "Pope's primary model for *An Essay on Man* was undoubtedly Lucretius," referring to him as "the classical prototype of the philosophical poet" (1984, 156).

Here are some of the relevant excerpts: I will caution readers not to assume that they have understood his views based on the following passages, for as I said, his philosophy is somewhat inscrutable without deeper study. I do not pretend to understand half of what he is saying here myself! Here are the opening lines;

Epistle I

- 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)
 Expatiate 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.

That last line is taken nearly verbatim from [John Milton's *Paradise Lost*](#).

- 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.

This section is interesting. Heaven is hidden from us, but, thinks Pope, we have good reason to hope for it. God sees all - including atoms and worlds made of atoms *hurled into ruin*.

- 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.

In spite of what is to come in this poem, the poet establishes himself as pious in his religious views.

- 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.

Two lines of interest here. The first bears some similarity to this passage from [Tennyson's Lucretius](#);

*The Gods, who haunt
The lucid interspace of world and world,
Where never creeps a cloud, or moves a wind,
Nor ever falls the least white star of morn
Nor ever lowest roll of thunder moans,
Nor sound of human sorrow mounts to mar
Their sacred everlasting calm!*

The second line - "But all subsist by elemental strife" - recalls the Empedoclean view of nature as bound by the competing forces of Love and Strife.

Epistle II

Here are the opening lines of the second epistle, and they summarize the main points of his ethical philosophy. The stoics and the sceptics both come in for some criticism.

- Know, then, thyself, presume not God to scan;
The proper study of mankind is man.
Placed on this isthmus of a middle state,

A being darkly wise, and rudely great:
With too much knowledge for the sceptic side,
With too much weakness for the stoic's pride,
 He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest;
 In doubt to deem himself a god, or beast;
 In doubt his mind or body to prefer;
 Born but to die, and reasoning but to err;
 Alike in ignorance, his reason such,
 Whether he thinks too little, or too much:
 Chaos of thought and passion, all confused;
 Still by himself abused, or disabused;
 Created half to rise, and half to fall;
 Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;
 Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurled:
 The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!
 Go, wondrous creature! mount where science guides,
 Go, measure earth, weigh air, and state the tides;
 Instruct the planets in what orbs to run,
 Correct old time, and regulate the sun;
Go, soar with Plato to th' empyreal sphere,
To the first good, first perfect, and first fair;
 Or tread the mazy round his followers trod*,
 And quitting sense call imitating God;
 As Eastern priests in giddy circles run,
 And turn their heads to imitate the sun.
 Go, teach Eternal Wisdom how to rule—
 Then drop into thyself, and be a fool!

*A reference to the Peripatetics, perhaps? The line about [imitating God](#) smacks of Aristotle.

- Two principles in human nature reign;
 Self-love to urge, and reason, to restrain;
 Nor this a good, nor that a bad we call,
 Each works its end, to move or govern all
 And to their proper operation still,
 Ascribe all good; to their improper, ill.
 Self-love, the spring of motion, acts the soul;
 Reason's comparing balance rules the whole.

Here Pope outlines the two principles which "in human nature reign" - not Empedoclean Love vs Strife, but self-love and reason.

- Let subtle schoolmen teach these friends (i.e. self-love and reason) to fight,
 More studious to divide than to unite;

And grace and virtue, sense and reason split,
With all the rash dexterity of wit.
Wits, just like fools, at war about a name,
Have full as oft no meaning, or the same.
Self-love and reason to one end aspire,
Pain their aversion, pleasure their desire;
But greedy that, its object would devour,
This taste the honey, and not wound the flower:
Pleasure, or wrong or rightly understood,
Our greatest evil, or our greatest good.

Now things are getting interesting. Pope seems to say here that self-love and reason, the guiding principles of human life, have a common end or telos; **pleasure and the absence of pain**. However, pleasure wrongly understood may well be the greatest evil; it is only pleasure rightly understood which is the greatest good.

- In lazy apathy let stoics boast
Their virtue fixed; 'tis fixed as in a frost;
Contracted all, retiring to the breast;
But strength of mind is exercise, not rest:
The rising tempest puts in act the soul,
Parts it may ravage, but preserves the whole.
On life's vast ocean diversely we sail,
Reason the card (compass card?), but passion is the gale;
Nor God alone in the still calm we find,
He mounts the storm, and walks upon the wind.

Here we have another surprising dig at stoicism.

- Suffice that Reason keep to Nature's road,
Subject, compound them, follow her and God.
Love, hope, and joy, fair pleasure's smiling train,
Hate, fear, and grief, the family of pain,
These mixed with art, and to due bounds confined,
Make and maintain the balance of the mind;
The lights and shades, whose well-accorded strife
Gives all the strength and colour of our life.
Pleasures are ever in our hands or eyes;
And when in act they cease, in prospect rise:
Present to grasp, and future still to find,
The whole employ of body and of mind.
All spread their charms, but charm not all alike;
On different senses different objects strike;
Hence different passions more or less inflame,

As strong or weak, the organs of the frame;

And this passage continues the discussion of pleasure and pain. Also, we there is a line regarding sensation - different objects strike on different senses. This passage is followed by an extended meditation on vice and virtue, which I have skimmed. Read it yourself if you care so much!

Epistle III

Here are the opening lines of the third epistle. Earlier in the poem (in a passage which I did not quote) Pope has laid forth his explanation of the [Great Chain of Being](#), and in this passage he reinforces the general idea. There is also another reference to atoms.

- Here, then, we rest: "The Universal Cause
Acts to one end, but acts by various laws."
In all the madness of superfluous health,
The trim of pride, the impudence of wealth,
Let this great truth be present night and day;
But most be present, if we preach or pray.
Look round our world; behold the chain of love
Combining all below and all above.
See plastic Nature working to this end,
The single atoms each to other tend,
Attract, attracted to, the next in place
Formed and impelled its neighbour to embrace.
See matter next, with various life endued,
Press to one centre still, the general good.
See dying vegetables life sustain,
See life dissolving vegetate again:
All forms that perish other forms supply
(By turns we catch the vital breath, and die),
Like bubbles on the sea of matter borne,
They rise, they break, and to that sea return.
Nothing is foreign: parts relate to whole;
One all-extending, all-preserving soul
Connects each being, greatest with the least;
Made beast in aid of man, and man of beast;
All served, all serving: nothing stands alone;
The chain holds on, and where it ends, unknown.

This next passage stands in profound contrast to Lucretius' understanding of human prehistory;

- Who taught the nations of the field and wood
To shun their poison, and to choose their food?
Prescient, the tides or tempests to withstand,

- Build on the wave, or arch beneath the sand?
 Who made the spider parallels design,
 Sure as Demoivre, without rule or line?
 Who did the stork, Columbus-like, explore
 Heavens not his own, and worlds unknown before?
 Who calls the council, states the certain day,
 Who forms the phalanx, and who points the way?
- III. God in the nature of each being founds
 Its proper bliss, and sets its proper bounds:
 But as He framed a whole, the whole to bless,
 On mutual wants built mutual happiness:
 So from the first, eternal order ran,
 And creature linked to creature, man to man.

While Lucretius held that language, fire, agriculture, and civilization arose gradually out of primitive conditions by human effort alone, Pope believes that God endowed man with the capacity for these things and that nature instructed man in the use of that capacity. I have excerpted only a tiny portion of his argument here, which is rather long and rambling. He ends this epistle with the following couplet; "*Thus God and Nature linked the general frame, // And bade self-love and social be the same.*"

Epistle IV

- 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?

These are the opening lines of the fourth epistle, in which the poet reiterates that 'happiness', also variously called good, or pleasure, is "our being's end and aim". Pleasure or happiness is the telos, but "the learned are blind" and cannot expound on this pleasure or happiness without falling into error. He does come close to explaining himself, however, which is a mercy;

- 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.

Pleasure consists of health, peace, and competence, and each of these rest on virtue. Only fools think that good people are unhappy.

- "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.

^Here we have more on the same theme.

The poet then goes on to explain that wealth, fame, power, etc only really give benefit to the good and wise. He then ends the poem with a prayer.

As a medieval scribe once wrote in the margin of a manuscript, "Now I've written the whole thing. For Christ's sake give me a drink."