

“Whatever Is, Is Right”:

Understanding Alexander Pope’s View of the Mind, Its Limits, and The Role of Man in the Universe through the Critical Reading and Analysis of Selected Passages from An Essay on Man

In An Essay on Man, Pope sets out to explain his views on “the nature and state of man, with respect to his own system ... [and] with respect to the universal system” (“To the Reader” pg. 501). The selected passages serve as a representative of the text and illustrate how Pope goes about presenting his world view. First, Pope describes his theory on the nature of the mind of man with a discussion of the two forces behind all of human action, namely reason and passion. Next, Pope explains how the reasoning faculty of man is limited in scope, being greater than the reason of some creatures, but undoubtedly lesser than the reason of others. Finally, Pope presents the critical point of his world view when he argues that the limitations on reason, by virtue of being divinely imposed, are inescapable, fortuitous, and most importantly, correct. It is precisely this argument that Pope conveys when he claims, “And, spite of pride, in erring reason’s spite, / One truth is clear, ‘Whatever is, is right’” (1.293-4).

Pope believes that there are two major forces that define human nature, namely self-love and reason. He declares that these forces are neither good nor bad, but instead “works its end, to move or govern all” (2.56). Here, self-love (also referred to as passion) is described as *urging*, whereas reason is described as *restraining*. Therefore, the dichotomy is such: passion represents the forces of human instinct or desire, and reason, the force of logic and restraint. Working in concert or at odds, Pope claims these forces govern all human behavior. Even Pope’s writing style reinforces this theme. With his heavy use of heroic couplets, Pope seems to be using the form of his verse to reinforce the notion of two opposing forces working in concert to further one end. Pope expands on this relationship by asserting that passion is “still stronger” (2.71) than reason. While the meaning of this is not immediately clear, the following lines claim that where passion deals with the present, reason is concerned with “the future and consequence” (2.74).

Though, “Thicker than arguments, temptations throng” (2.75), reason is “at best ... watchful” (2.76). Here, one finds the supporting argument for the initial claim that passion is stronger than reason, namely that instinct and temptation are stronger than logic and argument. The following lines describe how the use of reason makes it stronger and helps it restrain passion. Pope concludes the passage with a major theme, namely, “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...” (2.85-8). The theme, thus, appears to be that like two fools arguing the same point, while passion and reason *appear* to be conflicting, they are actually working together to further the same goal – that of increasing pleasure and decreasing pain. This pleasure, be it wrong or right, is the primary motivation for our actions, and as such “our greatest evil, or our greatest good” (2.92). The interpretation is that neither passion nor reason are inherently good or evil, but their application and resulting effects on man’s behavior can work in man’s favor or against it. Thus, we see one of the major themes of the work in the form of Pope’s attempt to define the human mind. Pope’s theory of the mind appears to be that the mind and behavior are the results of the combined effects of man’s love of *immediate* pleasure, passion, and man’s love of *future* pleasure, reason.

Another major theme of the work is Pope’s view on the limitations of reason and man’s place in the universe. A good example of this begins in passage three which describes man using reason to measure, define, and declare how the world shall work through science. Pope mockingly calls man a “wondrous creature” (2.19) who will “instruct the planets in what orbs to run, / Correct old time, and regulate the sun” (2.21-2). Here, Pope is using his skill for satire to draw attention to what he sees as a prevailing attitude, namely the arrogance of man. To Pope, man seems infatuated with reason to the point where he, at the extreme, believes himself to be the wisest and greatest creature in the universe.

Pope refutes this idea with one of his great analogies which conveys his view on the place on man in the universe. In response to man’s perceived arrogance, Pope replies, “Superior beings, when of late they saw a mortal man unfold all nature’s law, / Admir’d such wisdom in an earthly shape, / And shew’d a Newton as we shew an ape” (2.32-4). The underlying meaning is one of Pope’s greatest points, namely that just as man thinks

himself far more intelligent than an ape, there exist superior beings far more intelligent than man. Pope does not mean to denigrate Newton, or man in general, but instead wishes to use this as an example to illustrate the limits of reason. Man has a developed reason, yes, but man's reason is also limited and has a place in a larger universe where man is above some, and below others. This is confirmed in the following stanza which asks, can the same mind who mapped the movement of a comet map the movements of his own mind? Can he explain where he came from or what will happen when he dies? The answer, of course, is no. Pope concludes with the observation that "what reason weaves, by passion is undone" (2.42). The meaning being that reason alone will achieve certain things, but is ultimately bound by things that man's reason cannot answer. Here, one falls into the domain of instinct or passion, which innocently unwinds the systems created by reason.

Pope continues to elaborate on this theme of the limits of reason and man's place in the universe in passage four which begins by describing man's life. Man can merely come into existence, look around a maze (the world) for a while, and then die. However, Pope states that the seemingly limited existence is "not without a plan" (1.5). This plan is attributed to God, as is the very faculty of reason that man so treasures. Pope believes that man has a place in the universe ruled by God. He claims, "What can we reason, but from what we know?" (1.18). Here, the point is that reason is powerful, but again limited. Reason is limited in this case not by its inherent, aptitude-attributed limits, but by the limits of our senses and our place. We exist but in this world, and therefore cannot reason about others. We are bound by our senses. Time and time again, Pope comes back to this idea that man is very limited in the overall scheme of the universe, but always makes the distinction that these limits are intended and imposed by God.

However, Pope does not stop by simply declaring reason to be limited. Instead, he argues that having a limited scope of reason and understanding is in fact a good thing and that man should not strive to have the knowledge of God. Pope illustrates this theme via another powerful analogy. Take first, a sheep that is to be killed by a man. The man knows the sheep is to be killed, but the sheep does not, therefore the sheep remains happy. Analogously, man does not know his own fate, but God does. Would man be able to have a moment of pleasure if he were to know his own end? Pope argues that he

would not. Pope writes, “Oh blindness to the future! Kindly giv’n, / That each may fill the circle mark’d by heav’n” (1.85-6). The meaning is that man is granted some peace in not knowing all that there is to know. The following lines examine events from the small to the grand in scale that are all witnessed by God but not by man, the purpose being to illustrate that man cannot and should not wish to assume all of the knowledge of the universe, but instead should be content within his own divinely-imposed sphere of understanding, the afore mentioned “circle marked by heaven” (1.86).

Indeed, the notion of the fortuitousness and correctness of divinely imposed limits is a major theme of the work. Pope claims that that God, being infinite in wisdom, must have created the best system possible for man to exist in. All creatures have varying levels of knowledge and understanding but should take comfort in the fact that since God has infinite wisdom, the world in which they live *is correct as is their place in it*. This idea is reiterated when Pope states that we have a place in the world and that God has given man limitations “of blindness, weakness” (1.284) which is assumed to mean limitations on knowledge and reasoning prowess. Pope then says not to fight these limits, but to submit to them. Why? Because as before, “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” (1.286-8). From conception to death, man is blessed by virtue of his gifts *and* his limitations and is safe in the hands of a benevolent God. Pope concludes by stating that nature is a mystery, that there are chance forces that we cannot understand, and that we may not understand all of discord and harmony of the world, yet it all doesn’t matter. Pope neatly packages his main theme when he claims that, “And, spite of pride, in erring reason’s spite, / One truth is clear, ‘Whatever is, is right’” (1.293-4). This powerful final couplet very eloquently states Pope’s overarching theme and world view in two lines, namely that despite our flawed, limited reasoning and our pride in it, one thing remains certain – the world as it exists is correct. This is a final argument for Pope’s claim that God is infinite in wisdom and has created a world that is right. We may not, and in fact cannot understand it completely, but we should take comfort in that the things we do not know are known by God and that God should be trusted.

Therefore, Pope’s work can be seen to make three major points that are illustrated through the selected passages. First, the mind of man is a sum of the forces of passion

and reason working in concert. Second, reason is limited and these limits are imposed by God. Third, these limits are a blessing and we should take comfort in our place because a wise and benevolent God has created us this way and therefore it must be right. Pope's contribution to scientific poetry can thus be seen as twofold. First, the notion of the mind as a sum of the forces of passion and was explained in an effective and concise way. Second, there was in the past, as there is now, a struggle for reconciling the world of science and reason with that of religion and the supernatural. Pope attempted to provide a possible reconciliation of the two spheres in this work by using the limits of reason as a means for justifying the things we cannot understand and allowing reason and God to purposefully co-exist. This expression of Pope's unifying world view is the major argument so effectively espoused in An Essay on Man.