INTRODUCTION

In four verse epistles of modest length published anonymously between February 1733 and January 1734, Alexander Pope revealed yet another aspect of his vast poetic ambition. Having already published a substantial collected poems in 1717, translated Homer, edited Shakespeare, and trumpeted the corruption of contemporary literary and public culture in his Dunciad, Pope writes a philosophical poem. He begins his poem with (nearly) the same avowed purpose as Milton in Paradise Lost, already in Pope’s time the great British religious and national epic: to vindicate (Milton says justify) the ways of God to man. But Pope does not use biblical history—the elevation of the son, the fall of angels, the creation of the world, the fall of the first people—to shape his vindication. Instead he produces a description of man in the abstract in four epistles that he says are a map to the more practically oriented and historically specific poems he was planning, poems on subjects such as the use of riches and taste. Forgoing narrative is one challenge Pope sets himself; another is the ambition of the Essay on Man to synthesize the great diversity of thinking in the allied disciplines with something to say about where humans find themselves in the universe (anthropology, cosmology, metaphysics, moral psychology, physics, theology—just to begin a list). Pope formulates concise statements on central ethical topics, moderating between antagonistic schools of thought. Further, he writes a poem that passes for orthodoxy, even piety, in the terms of eighteenth-century British state religion, while not specifying the Christian revelation in the poem. Indeed, Pope evokes and transforms sources seen as a direct threat to the religious establishment, such as Lucretius’s materialistic poem De rerum natura. Pope does all this in rhyming couplets, sacrificing none of the virtuosity he had already demonstrated in his previous original poems and translations.

An Essay on Man was warmly received—in its anonymous form even by many who were fresh from ugly exchanges with Pope in the
years following his *Dunciad* (1728–29). The *Essay* was imitated and echoed immediately by other poets, in essays on the universe, on the soul of man, on reason, and many other topics. The poem’s reputation was assailed on the publication, and translation into English, of two critical treatises attacking its supposed fatalism by J.-P. de Crousaz in the late 1730s. But this episode provoked a substantial defense of the poem by William Warburton, who later worked with Pope to produce a last authorized text, with extensive notes and commentary, in 1743. In the final years of Pope’s life, and after his death in 1744, translations of the poem in prose and verse, and sometimes its English original, were being read by philosophical luminaries around Europe. Voltaire called it the most beautiful didactic poem ever composed, Rousseau found in it a source of consolation, and Kant quoted it in his *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens*. The poem was standard reading for the central philosophers of the Enlightenment, with figures such as Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, David Hume, and Adam Smith all turning to the poem to help them work through their own presentations of that contrary thing, the Enlightenment human subject: rational, yet sensual and passionate; motivated by an instinct for self-preservation, and yet ineradicably social. The poem’s success is very much a legacy of the scope it gives its readers to see the human in quite radically different ways, as the product of order and design, or the product of chance and evolution.

The poem met with great, though never unmixed, success. It circulated widely among the framers of early state constitutions in America and has, in that context, been called perhaps “the most internalized work of social and political thought of the eighteenth century.” The debates that founded the individual states and their confederation often responded to Pope’s assertion that only fools would contest for forms of government. Politicians continue to find rhetorical uses for the poem. A search of Hansard, the record of British parliamentary speeches, finds the poem recently cited in both houses, by likely candidates (Michael Foot, the Labour leader from 1980 to

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1983 and author of several books, including one on Swift) and less likely (Eric Pickles, communities minister in the coalition government 2010–15), and in the context of debates on establishing a social science research council (because the proper study of mankind is man), energy policy, capital gains tax, life sentences for murder, Wales, and Westminster Council. The poem has been used as a tool for thinking by philosophers and politicians from the middle of the eighteenth century to the present. It has been a practical resource for understanding where humans are placed in the world, what kind of being they are, and what they should do. It has had a palpable role in shaping national and international understandings of human nature, knowledge, and obligations.

Consequently it is surprising that the poem has not figured more prominently in the productive confrontation of literary and cultural studies with social theory and postwar European philosophy that has left such a strong mark on the university study of literature in the Anglophone world in the last few decades. It is particularly surprising given the close attention Pope’s poem pays to some of the main strands of thought that have emerged or are emerging in this ongoing confrontation. To take just one example, Pope is intrigued by the human-animal distinction, with all ranks in his great chain of being displaying different qualities, yet all subserving one another. His capacity for seeing things from the animal point of view, for imagining the different worlds animals inhabit, has been noted by recent readers such as Laura Brown and Judith Shklar. Pope’s poem is an extended meditation on the limits of human cognition, inasmuch as they shape our interrelation with others—other people primarily, but also other organisms or beings of all kinds. It is an attempt to show what poetry, distinct from all other literary modes, can do to make such thinking real, live, and palpable for its audience; how it can make us feel, across its lines, and across its more elaborate argumentative units, the antagonistic forces that always beset our efforts to understand the human. It is unlikely that these will ever cease to be important commitments for a philosophical literature or for poetry. Attuning ourselves to Pope’s nuance and scope allows us to see the perennial relevance of his poem. I hope in this introduction to make a contribution to that attunement.
An Essay on Man is a philosophical poem. Its readers are divided in various ways, admiring or denigrating its philosophy or its poetry, noting how the one supports or fails to support the other. They have often attempted to sift, to a greater or lesser degree, the poetry from the philosophy, regarding philosophy as a matter of static doctrine, poetry as uncontainable energy. Such an opposition is unnecessary. For one thing, in Pope's time a range of literary forms were acceptable vehicles for philosophizing, including poetry. Further, the classical traditions on which Pope draws so strongly in his Essay combine poetic and philosophic vision: Plato is a writer of fables and a forger of striking images; Lucretius points to his own language as an example of the philosophical doctrines of Epicurus he relates; Boethius alternates prose and verse. In this section I suggest not only that we may take both Pope's philosophy and his poetry seriously, but that his poem instantiates a poetic philosophy, one in which necessity emerges from contingency. The poem, that is, redescribes chance as direction: the particular unfolding of events through history in this way rather than any other imaginable way will be presented as the right way, which, viewed retrospectively and as the way of getting just here, it must be. This interplay of contingency and necessity experienced when the same world is seen from different perspectives forms the imaginative environment of the poem. The Latin poet Claudian, whom Pope had read, opens one of his poems with a sketch of what it feels like to experience the interplay of contingency and necessity:

Oft has this Thought perplex’d my wav’ring Mind,
If Heaven’s great Gods gave heed to Human-kind,
Or, no high Pow’r attending Things so low,
Strange Random Chance rul’d ev’ry Change below.

When my Mind’s Eye did Nature’s Leagues survey,
The Flux and Reflux of the bounded Sea,
The just Vicissitudes of Night and Day;
Amaz’d, convinc’d, I all Things understood
Establish’d by the Counsel of a GOD.

By him the Stars, in order, gild the Skies,
Earth’s different Fruits, in different Seasons, rise.
By His Command, so shines the changeful Moon
With borrow’d Light, and with his own the Sun.

’Tis He, that circ’ling round the Sea did call
The Shore, and in the Centre poiz’d the Ball.
But, when again I cast a curious Eye,
And saw Men’s Deeds in dark Confusion lye;
Saw pious Men perplex’d in impious Times,
While smiling Rogues long flourish’d in their Crimes,
Stagger’d at once, I fault’ring Faith foregoe
Forc’d and forc’d hard against my Will, to go
Into their Sentiments, who boldly say,
The Seeds of Things in whirling Atoms lay,
Whence shuffled Forms, that to New-being start,
Are all by Fortune rul’d, and none by Art.
I thought with them, who or no Gods declare
Or mindless, if there be, of Men they are.

In a preface addressed to Pope, the anonymous translator claims this is the first time Claudian’s Against Rufinus has appeared in English. Attesting to the talents and just fame of Claudian (c. AD 370–404), the preface flatters Pope by proxy. It refers to Rufinus, as a “Prime Minister,” and catalogs the violence and corruption of his rise to political and military power through strategy and manipulation. The portrait of Rufinus is clearly to be applied to Robert Walpole, first minister to George I and George II, to whom Pope attributes a pervasive corrupting influence in several poems of the 1730s. The concluding thought of the opening verse paragraph of Claudian’s poem,

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following on from the passage just quoted, is impressively severe. The doubts that made Claudian teeter between providentialism and materialism are resolved by the killing of Rufinus: that is what persuades him there must be a God after all.

This poem shares the poetico-philosophical realization of the Essay on Man: people who look hard at the world often find their view of the object shifting between aspects, an aspect of order, harmony, and coherence, and an aspect of random variation, chance, and inscrutable causes. The aspects are not perfectly distinct. Claudian does not say that he ceases to see regularity in the ordering of the physical universe; but he thinks that regularity might have emerged by chance rather than direction. He does not doubt observable order, but notes that when he considers the sphere of human actions, and the high incidence of the problem of calamitous virtue (and its sister, the problem of prosperous vice), he takes the moral world as evidence against the benignity, even the existence, of the gods. The resolution of Claudian’s doubts is by a means (revenge killing) that might not appeal to Pope. The standard Christian approach to the problem of calamitous virtue begins with the supposition of a future state of rewards and punishments, rather than with pain meted out to one’s enemies in this world. And a standard Stoic approach to the problem notes that apparent ills cannot really be ills to the truly wise man. But for certain kinds of thinker, among whom I place Pope, neither an assertion that the next world will correct the injustices of this one, nor an insistence that people in this world can free themselves from suffering by detaching themselves from a dependence on external goods, will seem an adequate explanation for the fact that there is benevolent order and suffering. Plotinus, a

4 Fred Parker, Scepticism and Literature: An Essay on Pope, Hume, Sterne, and Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 88, 117, describes the Essay as “Like a photographic double exposure [. . .] scepticism leads to, and terminates in, the intuition of a benign disposing power distinct from and beyond the scope of reason, yet with which the reasoning consciousness can associate itself.”

5 Seneca, I,6: “Injury has as its aim to visit evil upon a person. But wisdom leaves no room for evil, for the only evil it knows is baseness, which cannot enter where virtue and uprightness already abide. Consequently, if there can be no injury without evil, no evil without baseness, and if, moreover, baseness cannot reach a man already possessed by uprightness, then injury does not reach the wise man.”
Christian Platonist writing just over a hundred years before Claudian, presents the problem of calamitous virtue as a real problem, requiring real intellectual work to explain:

As for the disregard of desert—the good afflicted, the unworthy thriving—it is a sound explanation no doubt that to the good nothing is evil and to the evil nothing can be good: still the question remains, why should what essentially offends our nature fall to the good while the wicked enjoy all it demands? How can such an allotment be approved? [ . . . ] Certainly a maker must consider his work as a whole, but none the less he should see to the due ordering of all the parts, especially when these parts have Soul, that is, are Living and Reasoning Beings: the Providence must reach to all the details; its functioning must consist in neglecting no point.6

Taking the shift of aspects between providential and naturalistic views of the world, sharpened by a consideration of apparent moral injustice, as a point of departure for philosophical satire unites Pope and Claudian closely.7 That Pope offers in the Essay an explanation of the interrelation of these two aspects through a sustained examination of the workings of providence in this world is what allies him with Plotinus.

A VERSE ESSAY

The Essay is more inquisitive than expository: there is a real question to be addressed, and the philosophizing voice that produces this poem will make an inquiry into that question, rather than set out a solution already formulated. The Essay is not a work of systematic philosophy, of which the consecutively encountered branches all stem from a stable set of core doctrines. The poem is on the contrary a

6 Plotinus, III.2, 6, pp. 141–42.
7 A. D. Nuttall, Pope’s Essay on Man (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1984), pp. 54, 80, recognizes that there is a philosophical tension in the poem between limited human reason and the complete reason of a rational universe, and that there is a tension in humans themselves, occupying a middle position in the great chain of being that Nuttall identifies with consciousness.
testimony to the experience of thinking and seeing in one way and then another, a testimony to the unfolding of experience and ideas, of consecutive states of belief and understanding. Pope adopts an inquisitive attitude, a style of thinking and writing that brings the feel of certain ideas in the personal experience of the author into play among more theoretical considerations. In this way Pope's Essay is true to the history of the essay as a genre. Essays in the early eighteenth century are inquisitive, with the French model of Michel de Montaigne very much in evidence, and behind Montaigne his Latin and Greek favorites Seneca and Plutarch. These are all writers who accumulate evidence on every side of a question and engage in consecutive consideration of the attractions of now one, now another approach. For these authors, writing an essay does not oblige one to demonstrate a set of core beliefs entirely fixed before the process of writing begins; quite the opposite may be the case. There is equally a tradition of British philosophical essayism and inquiry incorporating canonical philosophers such as Bacon, Locke, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Hume, who combine the inquisitive attitude I am describing with various degrees of systematization. (I will point to connections between Pope's poem and works by these and other authors below.)

The purpose of attitudinal writing of the sort found in these philosophical essays is not only or merely to expose truths, but to produce dispositions in a readership. The writing will of course have to deal in truth, but the truths it deals in will always be relational: they will be the truths of how certain kinds of creature (people) can reconcile their capacity to understand, at least in part, what is going on around them with their capacity to make choices to behave in one way or another. Joseph Spence, a friend of Pope's who recorded his conversation, and other literary conversation of the time, says that in 1730, when the poem is being composed, “Mr Pope's present design [is] wholly upon


9 Harry M. Solomon, The Rape of the Text: Reading and Misreading Pope's Essay on Man (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), notes of the poem that “we should expect the constative function of language to be ancillary to the directive function.”
human actions, and to reform the mind.” Pope’s inquiry has reforming ambitions, describing actions in order to change minds.

There is an important temporal quality to inquisitive or essayistic writing of the kind Pope attempts in the Essay. It was a commonplace of the poetry of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries that the world changes, that therefore what was the case might not be so any longer, and so some (empirical) truths are temporally successive. Two contradictory statements can both be true of the world, in two or more of its successive states. As John Donne put it, “though some things are not together true, / As, that another is worthiest, and that you: / Yet, to say so, doth not condemne a man, / If when he spoke them, they were both true than.” Pope’s poem, though, is less concerned with the mutability of the world than with the mutability of human judgments. Different views of the world succeed one another in our imagination, and in our rational judgment (if these things are really distinct). One may be inclined to say, on encountering such inconsistent views in Pope’s poem, that he has not thought it through and shows himself more a poet than a philosopher. Or one might say that a convincing, gripping, plausible essay or inquiry has to be true to the temporality of thought, has to recognize that thought happens in particular lives. Those lives are never thought entirely through until they end, and there is no guarantee that their course will represent a continuous progress toward ever greater logical certainty about the nature of the physical and moral world. Readers might very well feel strongly the tension between Pope’s derision for the attempt to see beyond the human position in the scale of created life, in the first epistle of the poem, and his depiction (in the fourth epistle) of a blissful socially integrated universe in which recognized interdependence with others outside ourselves is parsed as love. How can one believe in Epistle I that it is “but a part we see, and not a whole” (I.60), and also in Epistle IV that humans learn “from this union of the rising Whole, / The first,
last purpose of the human soul” (IV.337–38)? The tension is not to be
resolved—it is to be recognized as one of the truths of the vision of
the fourth epistle that it was arrived at by means of the first, and that
the first lives on as an antagonist even as the more systematic vision
is expounded. Such tensions are evident at the local as well as the
general level. “Hope springs eternal in the human breast,” so that
blessings are always in the future. “The soul, uneasy and confin’d
from home, / Rests and expatiates in a life to come” (I.95–98). This
may be a present tense with a future sense: the soul will rest in the
next life. Or it may be a true present tense, suggesting that the soul
now rests in the idea of a better future state. The ambiguity of tense
suggests that people already enjoy those blessings that are possible
only in the next life. The poem captures complex, shifting attitudes
in its local and general organization. If Pope seems to lurch between
thinking all human views of the world are provisional to thinking
that humans are full and conscious agents in the providential scheme,
then the antagonism between the two views should be tempered by a
sense of the strong semantic connection between the provisional (the
forecast) and the providential (the foreseen). The particular literary
mode of Pope’s poem is well suited to expressing the shift of aspects
characteristic of his philosophical attitude.

The poeticalness of Pope’s text is intrinsic to its essayism. Philo-
sophical essays and inquiries in prose have their prosody. That is true
even of the mostly abstract-expository prose of John Locke, for ex-
ample, whose critique of rhetoric as “perfect cheat,” a subversion of
the central or paradigmatic use of language in neutral scientific de-
scription, was so influential in the eighteenth century.13 Such essays
exploit shifts of attitude, turn from the anecdotal to the abstract,
icorporate dialogue or reported speech, launch on encomia or rhap-
sodies, and so on. They may of course use some of the resources of
language that are commonly called poetic: pun, irony, metaphor, the
more or less organized variation of sounds and rhythms within re-
curring patterns of syntax or sentence structure. These features may
become argumentative. An essay in verse will not be categorically
distinct from prose essays on any of these counts, though it may trust
more to such resources. William Warburton indeed suggests that

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13 Locke, III.x.34, p. 508.
Pope has the “Art of converting Poetical Ornaments into Philosophic Reasoning; and of improving a Simile into an Analogical Argument.”14 The lines to which Warburton refers turn not only their imagery to this end, but other resources of the rhyming couplet:

On their own Axis as the Planets run,
Yet make at once their circle round the Sun:
So two consistent motions act the Soul;
And one regards Itself, and one the Whole.

(III.313–16)

Poetic lines, like planets and souls, are subject to two (or more) consistent motions that put them in act. The first couplet cited dedicates one line each to the two planetary motions, one around an axis, the other around the sun; the first line of the second couplet introduces the analogy, the second line divides itself in two, each of its halves representing one of the consistent forces. Distribution of content across the couplets dramatizes the picture of consistent but distinct forces in operation, as do many other features of the lines (such as that between metrical stress on the even syllables and intonational stress on syllables 3, 4, 8, and 10 of line 313).

A verse essay is more likely than its prose sisters to press its prosody upon its reader—its organization into lines of verse, determined by numbers of syllables and potential distributions of stress among them.15 (Even this characteristic resource of poetic language is not strictly peculiar to texts in verse: both Pope and George Berkeley,


one of Pope’s philosophical friends, present segments of Shaftesbury’s writing as blank verse.)16 In addition to the temporal unfolding of argument that one might call prosody in an extended sense, the more restricted sense of prosody will muster stress around lines of verse, and indeed verse paragraphs and epistles, in such a way as to affect materially the argument of the poem. This could hardly be more evident than in the final line of Epistle I, the line perhaps most frequently presented as encapsulating the poem’s philosophy, often by those who find it blandly, unconvincingly optimistic: “One truth is clear, ‘Whatever is, is right’” (I.294).17 The dominant stress in the line can quite naturally be placed on its final syllable to produce an assertion of the evidence of the providential scheme in all that can be observed. Such an assertion might be thought glib. It might also be thought inconsistent with the various kinds of wrong that Pope has spent much time elaborating in the preceding epistle. If, however, one takes that preceding epistle more strongly into account when performing the line, and if one is aware of the strong sense of provisionality coloring the poet’s assertions, the antepenultimate syllable becomes an attractive place to lay the dominant stress. A performance of that kind says that if one can put reason and pride to one side, what there is, no matter how bad it appears to be, is nonetheless right. Pope says this is a clear truth; he does not see the rightness of the world as a concession made only grudgingly, as Plotinus seems to suggest when saying that “even as things are, all is well” (III.2, 17, p. 155; see notes for a longer citation). If readers like Voltaire and Rousseau tended to take Pope as saying that all is well (largely on account of the French translation of the poem), others saw this could not be the case. Lessing and Mendelssohn note the important difference between things being well and things being right, and understand that Pope can only mean the latter because the ills he has acknowledged prevent him from making an unqualified assertion of the former position.18 And this more qualified sense of the rightness

17 For a discussion of the impact typography has on reading this line, see Jones, “Argumentative Emphases,” pp. 55–56.
18 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Moses Mendelssohn, “Pope ein Meta-
of what is, made possible by that alternative stressing of the line, has appealed to more recent readers. For John Sitter “what [Pope] ultimately means by ‘Whatever is, is right’ might be ‘Whatever is, IS.’” One must work through seeing the world as provisional to seeing it as providential, and that work is partly done by the archetypally poetic features of Pope’s text such as its stress. Such turning of the poetic to philosophical ends is in part a response to the pressure placed on rhetoric as a cheat and enemy of philosophy in Britain from the later seventeenth century. Pope is showing that poetry is not always philosophy’s antagonist.

Pope chose to compose the Essay in verse for two reasons, the first of which he says is obvious: “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 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.” Any merit of the Essay lies in “steering betwixt the extremes of doctrines seemingly opposite, in passing over terms utterly unintelligible, and in forming a temperate yet not inconsistent, and a short yet not imperfect system of Ethics” (“The Design”). Solomon, The Rape of the Text, p. 119, suggests Cicero as the model for academic moderation in which steering between extreme positions is not regarded as inconsistency. The earlier part (pp. 1–56) of Solomon’s book is given over to a proliferation of nontraditional contexts (chiefly textual analogues) against which to read the Essay, in order to demonstrate its resistance to being situated. David B. Morris, Alexander Pope: The Genius of Sense (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 161, thinks that “The aphoristic style convinces us of a completeness it cannot ultimately deliver.” I am suggesting that aphoristic concision need not be opposed to openness to different positions, and steering betwixt extremes. Joseph Warthon, An Essay on the Genius and Writings of Alexander Pope, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London, 1762–82), II,120, suggests something similar: “If any beauty in this Essay be uncommonly transcendental and peculiar, it is, brevity of diction; which, in a few instances, and those pardonable, have occasioned obscurity.”
its couplets. Its tendency to shift the mood of its address, from exposition (argument) to encouragement to adopt dispositions (instruction) is captured in the assertion of its concision and comprehensibility. Indeed, the poem in its concision tends to elide the distinction between the inclusive and exclusive senses of "or": sometimes statements that are either arguments or instructions are both arguments and instructions—the terms are interchangeable. (There are similar ambiguities on "or" at, e.g., II.35–36 and IV.264. See notes in both places.) The poem habitually intersperses imperative verbs instructing readers to think or act in some particular way in passages of otherwise relatively dispassionate and descriptive moral psychology or epistemology. The common view that the passions are stronger motivations than cold reason, expressed over ten lines (II.67–76), becomes a command:

The action of the stronger to suspend
Reason still use, to Reason still attend:
Attention, habit and experience gains,
Each strengthens Reason, and Self-love restrains.

(II.77–80)

The dominance of the indicative mood has been such that the reader is inclined to assimilate the single imperative into the descriptive scheme, making it seem only natural that we should use our reason to counteract our passions. Pope blends argument and instruction in the poem, and conceives of his versification as one way of achieving that blend. As I have been trying to suggest, the inquisitive or essayistic attitude is one to which shifts of aspect in views of the world (physical or moral) are native. The memorably concise formulations of Pope's couplets—in their variable stress, their argumentative development, their imagistic echoes, and their shifts of tense and mood—capture a shifting of aspects between the provisional and the providential, and, crucially, their interrelation.

EDUCATION

As a Catholic, Pope was excluded from major public schools and the universities. He was educated by priests acting as tutors, then at two
clandestine Catholic schools, at the end of which process, by around his thirteenth year, he would have been drilled in Latin and Greek, and introduced to many of the major classical poets and orators, in fragments in their original language, and in translation. From twelve to twenty Pope immersed himself in poetry, reading the major Greek, Latin, French, Italian, and English authors, sometimes translating or imitating striking passages. At the same time, he read hungrily in his father’s collection of works of religious controversy. As a young man Pope was a precocious friend, and exchanged books, views on poetics, and critiques of works in progress with older men such as William Wycherley, William Walsh, Henry Cromwell, and William Trumbull. (Indeed Pope’s surviving correspondence to 1711–12 consists of little else.) His earlier poems demonstrate an intimate knowledge of ancient and modern poets such as Virgil and Ovid, Boileau and Tassoni. Working on the translation of Homer, published in installments from 1715, would have increased Pope’s familiarity with the classical authors (Hesiod, Herodotus, Plato, Pliny, Plutarch), commentators (Eustathius), and modern literary scholars (such as Anne Dacier) so frequently cited in notes to the translation.

Modern philosophical prose (including theology and politics) was clearly an area in which Pope read, even if he did not leave any other particularly concentrated record of that reading than the Essay on Man. Authors such as Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Temple, and Tillotson feature in lists he gives of admirable English prose, as do various more literary authors from Ben Jonson to Joseph Addison. One might say he admired his friends Bolingbroke and Warburton excessively for their philosophical acumen, given their current (low) estimation as philosophers. Yet they were figures Pope thought of as metaphysicians, and Bolingbroke may have guided Pope’s reading as he was composing the Essay on Man. Pope writes on at least one occasion from Bolingbroke’s library (Corr., III,163). Given that Bolingbroke had returned from a decade in exile in France, his library is likely to have been well stocked with French authors, such as Pascal,

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Fénélon, Nicole, Malebranche—writers with whom Pope, as a fellow Catholic, may have had a more immediate relation than some of his contemporaries had.

Identifying consistent intellectual dispositions in anyone is difficult, let alone a poet to whom I have just been attributing an acute sense of the variability of human judgments. But one can see in Pope an insistence on the unity of all true religion, and a deference to the inherited form of religion; a preference for the customary over the (arrogantly) rational or innovative in politics, as in religion; a moderate skepticism with clear allegiances to urbane satirical attitudes; and, crucially, an identification of the self-interested and the sociable in human interaction. Pope is a conservative skeptic for whom custom offers one of the only available witnesses as to what God has in mind for the species in the providential scheme. The following sections will identify certain persistent themes in the Essay that express Pope’s dispositions: love (both desire for something lacked and bliss in its attainment) as a force of the universe; order as the result of love, emergent if seen from a human perspective, imposed if imagined from the divine; rising as the most fit term for the order that emerges necessarily from love; falling (out) as that concatenation of events that surpasses human knowledge and yet is improperly attributed to the divinity—an emergent disorder following from the corruption of the will. All together, these four themes suggest that social love is the mechanism by which humans rise from their fallenness to something as closely resembling order as possible.

LOVE

An Essay on Man is a poem of love: love expressed in the act of creating a world; love for ourselves, in the form of our appetites; love for others, from sexual partners to children to those with whom we constitute a political body. The static, hierarchical image of the chain of being is an important image in the poem, and Epistle I makes clear the severity of the transgression of aspiring to a higher position in the chain (I.233–46). Yet III.7–8 present the chain as a “chain of Love / Combining all below and all above.” The chain understood as love unites all ranks of being in the creation, rather than dividing
them. III.9–14 applies the same principle of love to atomic attraction and the animation of matter (see notes for echoes of Boethius and Chaucer/Dryden). Love of god and love of man are said to be the origin of all religious and political life (III.239–40). How should one understand this love that is at once cosmogenetic, a molecular force, and the basis of political society? Pope is explicit in aligning self-love and social love. These are not antagonistic forces in the poem but forces on a continuum. Self-love is identified most strongly with the passions (II.93), desires for real or seeming goods. Other people are one of the real or seeming goods people desire: “Each loves itself, but not itself alone, / Each sex desires alike, ’till two are one” (III.121–22). Each sex desiring alike nicely blurs the distinction in question: do they desire something that is like themselves, or do they both alike desire something outside of themselves? Is the likeness of their desire a likeness of the object of the desire themselves, or a likeness between the objects of desire (they are alike in desiring something other than the self)? Love of children is self-love at a second remove (III.124); reflections on past obligations and calculations of one’s own future weakness tend to produce care for parents (III.143–46).

Desire is, then, at the center of the religious and social order of the poem, and it was even more clearly so in earlier drafts, given the evidence of the two surviving manuscripts (the earlier Morgan Library Manuscript, the later Houghton Library Manuscript, cited here as MLM and HLM). In a note that Maynard Mack identifies as the prose beginnings of later verse (LGA 192–93), Pope presents desire as evidence for the immortality of the soul: “1 Happiness ye End of Man. God implants ye desire in all mankind, & he shows not ye End wthout ye Means, wch is Virtue 2 He implants further a desire of Immortality wch at least proves he wd have us think of & expect it, & he gives no desire appetit in vain to any Creature As God plainly gave this Hope or instinct, it is plain Man should entertain it” (LGA

22 Charles Taylor contends, in Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 275, that “the chain of love for Pope is rather that interconnection of mutual service which the things in this world of harmonious functions render to each other.”
...288–99). No desire is vain; desires and appetites are near synonymous. Epistle III asserts that human social organization follows from the divine command to people that they observe and imitate the social organization evident in the animal world.23 Small states grow up, and join through love or fear (III.201–2). Both manuscripts of the poem at this point contain lines that do not make it into print, and which identify want as the only basis for contention between members of any species. The deleted passage concludes that “half the cause of Contest was remov’d, / When Beauty could be kind to all who lov’d” (see notes). It is hard to parse the euphemism here, but Pope is imagining a world in which there is no dispute between males for the satisfaction of sexual desire, either because there is a sufficiently large female population to accommodate all the males, or because there are no restrictions on, or reprisals for, liberty in sexual couplings. Social harmony can sometimes seem an abstraction in the poem, but one aspect of it is our being the sufficient gratification of one another’s desires, in a sexual sense.

Gratification can be called bliss. “Bliss” is one of Pope’s most frequent terms for the good any creature might experience, particularly that which is most appropriate to it (the formula “proper bliss” is found at I.282 and III.110). At IV.341–60 “bliss” is the term used for ultimate human happiness, the known pleasures for which we hope, the unknown pleasures in which we have faith, the self-instantiating pleasure of virtue, and the love of all other creatures and the creator, a love also called charity. Bliss is a pleasure, the gratification of a desire to be most fully what one is.24 Bliss is paired with blessings: hope of future bliss is a present blessing (I.93–94). (Though the ety-

23 Courtney Weiss Smith, *Empiricist Devotions: Science, Religion, and Poetry in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), p. 149, suggests that the desires God has given to different creatures are a non-contingent foundation for social institutions, so that “people ought to look closely at nature as they try to realize God’s will in their institutions.”

ologies of “bliss” and “bless” are distinct, they become confused in English from the sixteenth century, and it seems likely that Pope associated them semantically.) Bliss is breathed through all ranks of people as “One common blessing, as one common soul” (IV.57–62). Being in the world as one should be is presented as a pleasure.

Pope explains the difference between human and divine love as a contrast of movements from individual to whole or from whole to individual. The outward movement of human love is compared to the ripples caused by a pebble dropped in a lake: “Wide and more wide, 'th'overflowings of the mind / Take 'ev'ry creature in, of 'ev'ry kind; / Earth smiles around, with boundless bounty blest, / And Heav'n beholds its image in his breast” (IV.369–72). In the manuscript versions of these lines “Heav'n pleas'd beholds its Image in his Breast” (LGA 282–83, 396–97). In the printed text the person who loves from individual to whole remains an image of heaven, and is seen to be so; but the pleasure heaven takes in seeing its own image is erased. The suggestion that God’s love is comparable to human desire may have been unorthodox: desire results from lack, but lack is imperfection and therefore incompatible with God. Augustine, for example, says that God loves humans, but compares the relationship to that between light and the objects upon which it shines—light does not need those objects to be light. But one can perhaps see in the manuscript line a trace of Pope’s thinking of desire as a fundamental force in the universe, a force that unites God and people, a force that is not qualitatively distinct whether directed toward ourselves or toward others.


26 David B. Morris, “Pope and the Arts of Pleasure,” in *The Enduring Legacy: Alexander Pope Tercentenary Essays*, ed. by G. S. Rousseau and Pat Rogers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 95–117 (pp. 107–12), describes Pope’s “double perspective” on pleasure, in which “pleasure is the energy (rational as well as passionate) which drives us irresistibly towards virtue or towards vice,” and yet in which there is “a blankness or emptiness inherent in pleasure, undermining every enjoyment.” Nuttall, *Pope’s Essay on Man*, p. 265, also notices an oscillation between perspectives in which bliss is real and in which it is to be seen through. To my mind, bliss and love sound out more than blankness in the Essay.

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