Humanities 4: Lecture 12

Enlightenment Poetry: Alexander Pope
Outline of Lecture

A. Biography/Historical Context
B. Epistles in Essay on Man
C. Analysis of Epistle I
D. Analysis of Epistle II
E. Comparisons
F. Significance
Alexander Pope

- (1688-1744)
- Catholic, TB at 12, 4’6”, Never married
- Founded Scriblerus Club with Swift & Gay
- Poet, Editor of Shakesp., Translator of Iliad and Odyssey
- “The Essay on Criticism” (heroic couplet), “The Rape of the Lock”
Intellectual Context

- No direct knowledge of Leibniz
- Shaftesbury’s Moralist via St. John Bolingbroke
  - Shaftesbury’s Principle of Harmony and Balance
- Influenced Voltaire (for a while)
Essay on Man: Four Epistles

I. On the Nature and State of Man, with respect to the Universe
II. On the Nature and State of Man, with respect to Himself as Individual
III. On the Nature and State of Man, with respect to Society
IV. On the Nature and State of Man, with respect to Happiness
Epistle I

Intro: Consider the world and see if we can vindicate the ways of God to man
-contrast with Milton’s *Paradise Lost*

I. Epistemic Limitations
- only what we know of this, not other worlds
- no inference from part to whole
- Is envisioned order God’s or man’s?*

II. Our (imperfect) grasp of perfection
- Why not greater? Why not lesser?
- We may not understand how we contribute to perfection of whole.*
Epistle I, cont.

III. Ignorance and Hope
- we are ignorant of future & that is good.
- hope is essential to human life.*

IV-VI. Sources of Error
- Pride and Reason*
- Man is no exception*

VII-IX. The Great Chain of Being*
- creatures are ordered according to their degree of perfection.*
- the order of nature cannot be different.*
Epistle I, cont.

X. Consequences of Proper Understanding
- cease calling order imperfection.
- submit to the security of God’s benevolence
- “Whatever is, is right.”
Epistle II

I. Focus on Man
   - know man, not God.*

II. Two Principles of Human Nature
   - Self-love
   - Reason*
   - several contrasts, but common aim.*

III-IV. The Passions
   - passions can become virtuous, with help.
   - virtue and vice, though different, are in us and unite to promote a single mysterious end.*
Epistle II, cont.

V. Vice
- everyone thinks himself virtuous, not vicious.
- everyone has both virtues and vices to different degrees.

VI. The Usefulness of Vice
- our mutual dependence leads to benefits*
- self-love itself has uses*
Comparisons?

- with Voltaire’s Candide?
- with Leibniz’s Optimism?
- with Hume’s position?
Pope’s Significance

- Artistic expression of broadly Enlightenment perspective
  - Science of man
  - Order to world and man’s place in it
  - Establishment of heroic couplet and artistic standards