

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