

# An Essay on Man

Alexander Pope

*One of the great poets of eighteenth-century England, Pope (1688- 1744) offers in his poem “An Essay on Man,” written in 1733, a characteristic Enlightenment vision of human nature. The following is an excerpt from Epistle II.*

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 reas'ning 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 hurl'd;  
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!

Superior beings, when of late they saw  
A mortal man unfold all Nature's law,  
Admired such wisdom in an earthly shape,  
And show'd a NEWTON as we show an ape.  
Could he, whose rules the rapid comet bind,  
Describe or fix one movement of his mind?  
Who saw its fires here rise, and there descend,  
Explain his own beginning or his end?  
Alas! what wonder! Man's superior part  
Uncheck'd may rise, and climb from art to art;  
But when his own great work is but begun,  
What Reason weaves, by Passion is undone.

Trace Science then, with modesty thy guide;  
First strip off all her equipage of pride;  
Deduct what is but vanity or dress,  
Or learning's luxury, or idleness,  
Or tricks to show the stretch of human brain,  
Mere curious pleasure, or ingenious pain;  
Expunge the whole, or lop th' excrescent parts  
Of all, our vices have created arts;  
Then see how little the remaining sum,  
Which serv'd the past, and must the times to come!