

For Harold Veisberg  
with the best regards  
for the greatest service any  
man can render his country

John Alfred Joerg

AN ESSAY ON MAN:

POPE'S DIALOGUE WITH BOLINGBROKE.

John Alfred Joerg, Ph. D.  
Tulane University, 1967

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Chairman: Dr. Aline M. Taylor

The purpose of this dissertation has been to examine Pope's Essay on Man as one half of a dialogue with his deist friend, Lord Bolingbroke. The grounds for assuming the possibility of a dialogue are related to the fact that Pope addressed his poem to Bolingbroke, that Bolingbroke's four so-called deist propositions--that God exists, that He must be worshipped, that piety and virtue are the best form of worship, and that vices and sins must be repented--are abstractions of Christian thought, and that the deist interpretation of the poem is inadequate. Such an interpretation assumes that Pope's principles were derived from Bolingbroke, that Pope was unable to understand those principles, and that as a result the Essay is an incoherent statement of deism. This interpretation leaves much of what Pope says in the poem unexplained, and fails to take into account the relation of the Essay on Man to the rejected Ethic Epistles.

Bolingbroke obviously had something to do with the poem since Pope addressed it to him. Hence, the first step was to re-examine the relation between Pope and Bolingbroke, and their circle of friends. On the one hand, Bolingbroke's philosophical system--while he disclaimed it to be a system--was pretty well formalized before 1723 when he returned to England from his eight years of exile in France. In the "Advertisement" to the Fragments he indicated that his philosophical works were the result of conversations, that the conversations included Pope, Swift, and Arbuthnot, and that his "friends" did not always agree with him. On the other hand, the evidence indicates that Pope was an orthodox Christian, that Pope and Swift held similar philosophical views, and that both disagreed with Bolingbroke.

The second step, then, was to examine the Essay on Man, not as a monologue, but as one half of a dialogue with Bolingbroke. When the poem is seen from this angle, it becomes clear that the deist elements must necessarily be included: Pope is arguing with his deist friend. Thus it is easy to see why Bolingbroke was unsatisfied with the poem: it was not only addressed to him, it was also directed at him. Pope's

argument in the Essay means that there was a difference between his philosophical position and Bolingbroke's. Thus a third step was necessary. When Bolingbroke's Essays on Human Knowledge and the Fragments were examined for their philosophical content in relation to the Essay, it became clear that Pope included the so-called deist elements but enveloped them in a body of thought peculiar to the Christian tradition. It is this body of Christian thought that Bolingbroke rejected in his philosophical works. The differences do not suggest that Pope misunderstood Bolingbroke's position; they show that Pope had a position of his own.

When the Essay is regarded in this light, Pope's thought falls in line with the Aristotelian tradition. Pope argues from the principle of observed effect to efficient cause; he is imbued with the principle of the just relation of function to purpose or end; he understands and shows that happiness or eudaimonia is an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue; he illustrates the doctrine of moral virtue and the golden mean. There are, however, those elements which are foreign to Aristotle's thought, but which are an inherent part of the Christian system, and which find their clearest expression in Thomas Aquinas's Summa theologica. Here the Aristotelian tradition is continued, and is harmonized with the Christian doctrine and tradition. Illuminated by the thought of Thomas Aquinas the Essay on Man can be seen as the coherent system that Pope thought it.

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