

## BOOK REVIEW

### *Jane Austen's Philosophy of the Virtues*

by Sarah Emsley

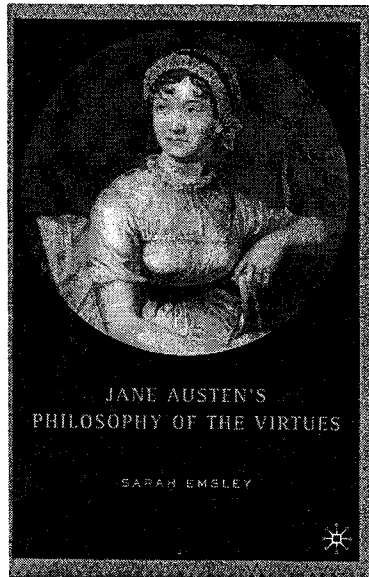
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Reviewed by Michael Giffin



Expository writing is meant to inform the expository reader by focussing on its topic, providing unbiased and accurate facts, and using a scholarly third-person tone. Sarah Emsley, author of *Jane Austen's Philosophy of the Virtues* (2005), teaches expository writing at Harvard. So it is startling to read over 40 first-person references in her first chapter alone: 'I ... suggest, argue, agree, challenge, begin by, think, am concerned to, investigate, assess, believe, have suggested, maintain, quote, analyze, focus, emphasize, and work toward' mingle with 'my ... book, work, argument, and strategy'.

Emsley's goal is commendable. We need to learn more about the world Austen lived in and wrote about. We call this world the Enlightenment, or Age of Reason, familiar to Austen through the prisms of British Empiricism and Georgian Anglicanism. As a true daughter of the Enlightenment, as well as of George and Cassandra, Austen did not have the problem the 20th century had reconciling philosophy with theology or science with religion. Her world was not divided, as the 21st century still is, into distinct secular and sacred spheres. That division came after her with the crisis of belief. Emsley's mission is therefore to 'investigate the philosophical underpinnings' of Austen's fiction rather than 'explicate' their 'didactic lessons'.

Emsley's intention is to demonstrate how the novels 'represent a union of the classical and theological virtues' and 'assess the ways in which Austen draws on, criticises, and remakes' a philosophical tradition. This is a noble intention but she is easily sidetracked and, like many academics in the partisan and political world of the humanities, selective about those she engages with. There are a great many critics she applauds and agrees with; there are a great many critics she acknowledges but disagrees with; there are even a few critics she is obviously aware of but studiously ignores. It would have been better for her exposition had she paid less attention to the opinions of others and spent more time telling her readers what they need to know.

Emsley's methodology chapter begins with a commonplace taught in first-year seminary, 'The theories of ancient [Greek] philosophers with regard to the practice of virtue were adopted and adapted by early Christian thinkers to become part of the theological tradition', and she observes that Austen both 'inherits this tradition' and 'responds to it creatively'. Austen apparently does this by being an Aristotelian for whom 'virtue is a disposition and is chosen, acquired, and practiced through habit ... the process is important ... and there is an end in view'. But according to Emsley virtue is useless to Austen as long as it remains purely theoretical, which is why Mr Bennet should be read as 'one example of the learned man who prefers to contemplate morality in theory, usually with irony and cynicism, rather than to act in a way that is consistent with ethical principles'. Such sentiments are not original and few would argue with them.

Emsley reminds us, as others have before her, that we do not know whether Austen was formally taught this Aristotelian prism or whether it was simply part of the Georgian oxygen she breathed. We do know that after the Georgian period this oxygen changed radically in a variety of ways that add up to the same thing in literature and philosophy and theology: the movement from neoclassicism to romanticism to modernism and beyond; the post-metaphysical interrogation of classical metaphysics, also known as the critique of reason as a verifying calculus; the movement from theism to atheism to agnosticism, etcetera. This radically-different oxygen from the Georgian oxygen Austen, and perhaps Emsley, breathes explains

Emsley's engagement with Alasdair MacIntyre, author of the influential *After Virtue*, who holds opinions about Austen that Emsley simultaneously agrees and disagrees with.

Emsley believes the question confronting each Austen heroine is 'How should I live my life?' Marriage 'certainly has a great deal to do with the pursuit of happiness' and is a large part of the answer to how the heroine should live her life. Emsley feels it is wrong, though, to view the heroines as fulfilling themselves 'solely or ultimately in marriage'. Evidently, through Aristotle we define happiness 'as a sort of good life and good action' but Emsley suggests Austen is closer to a Kantian reformulation of Aristotle in which 'ethics as necessary actions' has 'little to do with happiness'. Consequently the moral life 'is often achieved only at the expense of happiness'.

According to Emsley, in Austen's representation of the Kantian reworking of Aristotle, 'we are to aim not at happiness ... but at moral dignity', by which she means a heroine's *telos*, or purpose, is not necessarily marriage and can be something other than marriage. But surely this is Emsley's hypothetical attempt to make a virtue of a necessity. Yes, the heroines of the six novels do confront the prospect of a life of moral dignity rather than happiness. Austen is clear that accepting this prospect is a necessary part of their journey into maturity. But Austen also knows her heroines cannot exist on maturity alone, which is why she gives each of them the happiness of a good marriage after their maturity is achieved. Clearly, then, as far as these heroines are concerned, there are no examples among them to demonstrate Emsley's suggestion that Austen separates moral dignity from happiness. What happens in the lives of minor characters is another matter.

It would also be hypothetical to suggest in her own life Austen chose the virtue of a moral life over happiness. Her decisions would have been circumscribed by her limited choices, and by the reality of Georgian life and marriage. If we, now, can choose to remain single (with or without an active sex life), have a career, or live on some form of social welfare, confident our basic needs will be provided somehow, singleness had a very different quality for Georgian women. Leaving aside the philosophy of the virtues for a moment, few had a Mr Darcy to engage with; more

faced the reality of marrying a Mr Collins; most, like Austen herself, died prematurely from diseases now preventable or treatable. We need to account for the virtues among that reality. True, both Elizabeth and Charlotte must ask themselves 'How should I live my life?' but Charlotte is not the heroine of a didactic novel with a happy ending and she is not allowed Elizabeth's journey into maturity with its hard-won but nevertheless fairytale reward of Pemberley.

Emsley tells us Aristotle 'gives some direction about moral education and the development of good judgement' while the Scriptures 'do not offer explicit analysis of methods for making ethical decisions'. We are reminded there is no Hebrew term that corresponds to *virtue* in the Greek sense, and John Barton is quoted to distinguish Hebraic culture from Hellenic culture: 'What the Bible thinks about is not moral progress but *conversion* ... the Hebrew Bible does not operate with any idea that one can grow in virtue ... but sees virtue as something one either has or lacks'. Instead, we are told what we have in the Old Testament narratives is a 'presentation of human beings in all their singularity which has been the subject of several virtue ethicists'. This sounds convincing but there is a great deal to disagree with here. Also, the Scriptures are a unique kind of literature, assembled and redacted from different oral traditions over hundreds of years, written on parchment by scribes long before the printing press. That is just one reason why the Scriptures do not intend to explore the interior lives of characters, or their psychological journeying into the virtues, in the way Austen can as a post-Gutenberg author.

What Emsley proposes, after Coleridge, is that in the Georgian period 'Every man is born an Aristotelian or a Platonist'. While repeating Coleridge may suit Emsley's purpose, the proposal is highly questionable and Coleridge is not an Anglican apologist (just as Barton is not a Moral Theologian). Rather than taking so much for granted, Emsley's treatment of the philosophy of the virtues in Austen would have benefited from a reader-friendly exposition of how Anglicans conducted ethical discourse in the Age of Reason and how this discourse is represented in her novels. Surely it would have been simpler to begin with the dominant ideas of Anglicanism, locate them among Austen's widely-accepted interrogation of neoclassical reason and romantic feeling, and broaden out from there.

If the ethical prism being presented to us is Aristotelian, to the exclusion of other ethical prisms, is it not necessary for us to hear more about the methodology of natural law, how Austen represents it, and how it has been interrogated after Austen, and 'after virtue', in a similar manner to MacIntyre and those authors who descend from Austen? Also, because Aristotle is not everything, and because the scriptural worldview just might inform the Georgian sense of virtue more than Emsley allows, is it not also necessary to mention the other methodologies Anglicans use to do ethics that are held in a creative tension with natural law? Should not a book on the philosophy of the virtues in the Georgian period provide a plain-English exposition of how the virtues relate to teleology, deontology, utilitarianism and other contemporary ethical prisms? Is this not the basic methodology Emsley's book needs to offer, along with a description of the fundamentally different Platonic and Biblical models of person and why the Enlightenment and Austen focussed on one rather than the other?

One example of this reader's difficulty comes from the chapter on *Northanger Abbey*, where we are told on one page that Catherine Morland 'possesses innate virtue and must learn social propriety' and on another that Catherine 'is innately good, possessor of elements of courage if not quite yet the prudence necessary to cope with the vicious people she encounters in social life'. The first problem is that, since Austen is precise in the way she explores the tension between nature and nurture, and between good and bad parenting, and because she makes a clear distinction between the limits of a formal education and what else is required to form a moral conscience, can we say Catherine is 'innately' anything? As far as Austen is concerned, Catherine was born under the sign of the fall, like all humanity, and while she comes from a good family she needs to mature quickly if she is going to survive in the adult world, and not fall herself, without the protection of her parents. The second problem is that, apart from being titillated by the gothic, is Catherine really imprudent at any stage of the novel? On the contrary, does she not remain remarkably well-focussed on her future good within the parameters of Christian humanism that Austen carefully places around her?

Another example of this reader's difficulty comes from the chapter on *Sense and Sensibility*, where we are told that:

... whereas Elinor's primary support is her own strength, and she offers an example that her sister eventually learns to emulate, Marianne in confessing her faults turns to God for her support, and finds love. She may have been educated partly by Elinor's example of the classical virtues, but if Elinor is a classical heroine (even though she marries a clergyman), and Marianne represents both classical and Christian virtues, perhaps it is Elinor's turn, at the end of the novel, to learn from Marianne, not about sensibility, but about grace ... Forgiveness fills the gap between the mean we aspire to, and the virtue we can achieve on our own. Unlike Elinor, Marianne is prepared to ask for divine grace to make up the difference.

The first problem here is that, because Austen carefully leaves matters of faith outside the text, is there really any textual evidence through which we can invest Marianne with Christian virtues, or a Christian faith, that Elinor lacks? The second problem, related to the first, is can we assume Marianne asks for forgiveness and divine grace that Elinor doesn't also ask for outside the text? It is true Austen specifically sets Marianne up for a fall, and Marianne eventually discovers the painful necessity, in her own words, of living 'by religion, by reason, and by constant employment'. But if we are going to invoke what lies outside the text, is it not Austen's very point that Elinor is already living 'by religion, by reason, and by constant employment' and does not need to learn about Christian virtues from her sister? Religion, reason and constant employment are in fact the largest part of Elinor's coping mechanism. The scene at the centre of the novel is highly instructive, as Austen means it to be: Elinor and Marianne, both unhappy and unfulfilled and unbalanced as tropes for reason and feeling, fall sobbing into each other's arms. Surely we are meant to consider Austen's philosophy of the virtues among their emotions at that pivotal moment.

This book reads like an inadequately supervised doctoral dissertation that was never rewritten and substantively edited on its necessary journey from thesis to book. Emsley's engagement with so many other critics, and whether she agrees and disagrees with them, should have been removed. It would have been good to see a more coherent structure, perhaps one chapter for each virtue that discussed all the characters, or one chapter for each novel that focussed on the heroines and heroes instead of minor characters. What we have instead is porridge.

Any study that attempts to locate Austen in her period is to be welcomed but it is difficult to know what the thesis of *Jane Austen's Philosophy of the Virtues* actually is, and therefore it is hard to judge how well it really works. As Emsley's reading is self-consciously Christian it might appeal to those who feel Austen has been misread by secular academics hostile to or ignorant of western religion. However, the Christian reader deserves more than desultory methodology and convoluted writing. Also, it is never satisfactory when an academic claims to be original but, when a thesis is laid open, and the first-person narrative is removed, one finds the thesis either does not amount to much or has been expressed elsewhere. The expository writer should pay more attention to the needs of the expository reader.