

Swarthmore College

## Works

---

Philosophy Faculty Works

Philosophy

---

2018

### "A Danger At Present Unperceived:" Self-Understanding, Imagination, Emotion, And Social Stance in "Emma"

Richard Thomas Eldridge  
Swarthmore College, reldrid1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-philosophy>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

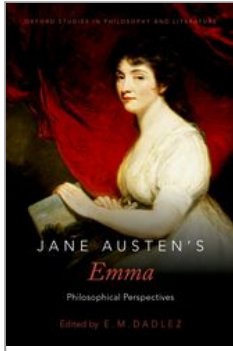
Let us know how access to these works benefits you

---

#### Recommended Citation

Richard Thomas Eldridge. (2018). "A Danger At Present Unperceived:" Self-Understanding, Imagination, Emotion, And Social Stance in "Emma". *Jane Austen's "Emma:" Philosophical Perspectives*. 109-133. DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780190689414.003.0005  
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-philosophy/541>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact [myworks@swarthmore.edu](mailto:myworks@swarthmore.edu).



## Jane Austen's *Emma*: Philosophical Perspectives

E.M. Dadlez

Print publication date: 2018

Print ISBN-13: 9780190689414

Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: October 2018

DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780190689414.001.0001

## “A Danger at Present Unperceived”

Self-Understanding, Imagination, Emotion, and Social Stance in *Emma*

Richard Eldridge

DOI:10.1093/oso/9780190689414.003.0005

### Abstract and Keywords

Philosophers concerned with self-understanding have often conceived of it as either a matter of immediate, unchallengeable introspective awareness or as a matter of gathering evidence about oneself scientifically and impersonally. In contrast, Gilbert Ryle rightly understood self-understanding as knowledge of one's own commitments, desires, beliefs, wishes, and fears—all things that one has some share in forming and can to some extent alter. What Ryle misses or underplays, however, is the extent to which the forming and revising of commitments, desires, beliefs, wishes, and fears are also social processes, as agents-in-information are subject to the gazes, expectations, and evaluations of others. Jane Austen grasped all this very well, and in *Emma* she gives us a picture of Emma's partial, emotion-laden, and socially inflected—but also genuine—achievement of self-understanding from which we might do well to learn.

*Keywords:* self-understanding, introspection, evidence, Ryle, emotion, social, Austen, Wollheim

On the first page of the novel, we are told that Emma Woodhouse, though “handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition,” also suffers from the “real evils” of possessing “the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself.” These evils constitute, we are further told, a “danger . . . at present . . . unperceived” both to her own enjoyments and to the enjoyments of others (5). This danger is then consistently realized throughout the novel, as Emma repeatedly acts out

her dispositions to fantasy and self-centeredness by meddlesomely and ineptly scripting the affairs of others. The catalogue of her errors includes at least her attempt to match Harriett to Mr. Elton, her vanity-feeding insults to Miss Bates on Box Hill, her flirtations with Frank Churchill, her imagining an affair between Jane Fairfax and Mr. Dixon, and her misunderstanding the objects of Harriett’s interest (first Robert Martin, later George Knightley). In each case, what Emma is in fact doing—what her actions objectively mean—is not **(p.110)** what she thinks she is doing, as she mistakenly supposes, variously, that she is being helpful to Harriett, amusing her audience, ferreting out secrets, and so on. Jane Austen herself famously described Emma as “a heroine whom no one but myself will much like.”<sup>1</sup> If for many readers that prediction has turned out to be false, it is nonetheless not easy to say why Emma is, after all, likable. One might suppose that she learns from her errors and so is educated into being a proper grownup with concern for others as well as vivacity, so that she earns her entry into what is supposed to be a happy marriage as the seal of completed maturity. But then it is not quite clear either how Emma changes or how much—her errors are persistent—and it is not clear how any of us ever manage to overcome or to curb persistent tendencies to self-centeredness, vanity, and fantasy. Emma’s character constitutes, then, in its fitful, incomplete, but genuine development, a study in the nature and possibility of self-understanding, for creatures such as us who share her tendencies.

Frequently philosophers have conceived of self-understanding as in one way too easy (and irrelevant to practical life) or in another way too difficult (and alienating from practical life). Within a broadly Cartesian tradition that focuses on occurrent thoughts, emotions, and qualitative states, self-understanding, conceived as a matter of introspective awareness, is too easy. Surely, it seems, I cannot fail to be wrong about what I am currently thinking or feeling (no matter how the world itself is): I am thinking about a dancing pink elephant or experiencing anger or the taste of lemons if and only if I know that I am doing so. Despite appearances, however, this account of self-understanding is open to a number of objections. First, I must know what a claim (publicly assessable as true or false) or anger *at* an insult or the taste *of* a lemon *is* in order to have such forms of awareness, **(p.111)** and in order to know these things I must already know something about what is in fact true or false in the world, what in fact an insult is, and what is in fact a lemon. Absent such kinds of knowledge in general, I am left only with a stream of unstructured sensory inputs that lack clear discursive representational content.<sup>2</sup> Hence introspective knowledge of distinct discursive representational contents cannot be primitive and independent of knowledge of the world, and about the way the world is I can sometimes be wrong. The introspectionist picture of self-understanding mistakenly takes knowledge of discursive representational contents to be automatic and infallible.

Second, this kind of self-knowledge—knowledge of occurrent episodes of thinking, feeling, and sensing—is in any case not central to what we care about when we care about self-knowledge or self-understanding. Quassim Cassam has recently usefully distinguished between *trivial* self-knowledge, including the cases of self-knowledge favored in the introspectionist tradition as well as, for example, your awareness “that you are wearing socks,” and *substantial* self-knowledge, that is, “knowledge of your deepest desires, hopes, and fears, knowledge of your character, emotions, abilities, and values, and knowledge of what makes you happy.”<sup>3</sup> Only this latter, substantial form of self-knowledge, Cassam rightly insists, is what we care about when we care about self-understanding, and it is frequently hard to come by.

In developing his own view, however, Cassam casts self-understanding as both too difficult to come by and too impersonal. Drawing on cases of implicit, unacknowledged bias, but overgeneralizing from them, Cassam argues that substantial **(p.112)** self-knowledge “is normally based on evidence and is inferential.”<sup>4</sup> That is, I must, for example, *infer* from my behavior that I am cowardly, that I desire to eat a peach, or that I love my children. While this view has some plausibility in the case of cowardice, it is less plausible as an account of desiring peaches or loving children. Surely, it can’t be all that difficult to know these things.

Second, the existence of these kinds of facts about oneself is *not* a matter entirely of just how things in the world happen to be, but rather also significantly of what I *decide on* or *set myself* to do. No doubt I sometimes fail in my resolutions, and no doubt I am sometimes unclear about what I have resolved, what I am in fact doing, and what motivates my behavior. But that is not normally the case. In Matthew Boyle’s elegant phrase, the issues of what I have resolved to do, what I am doing, and what I count as my motivations are normally “mine to settle.”<sup>5</sup> It is significantly up to me to *count* my peach-eating urges as reasons for action (thence to eat a peach) and to *count* my children as to be loved (and so to love them). Yes, there is a significant background of feelings and urges that I do not control behind such countings and doings, but I am not wholly or even normally the passive victim of them, as if they hydraulically moved me to act of their own power.<sup>6</sup> Were that so, I would not be the agent I normally am in being responsive to complex norms and in taking responsibility **(p.113)** for what I do (and believe and, in many cases, feel); I would instead be deeply alienated from my own practical life.

Yet while this latter, anti-introspectionist view that emphasizes responsibility for self and for one’s own stances, epistemic and practical, is surely right, it is also easy to overemphasize our volitional power and possibilities of success in agentive navigations of our worlds, come what may.<sup>7</sup> Where, after all, are the boundaries between my normal enough control of my commitments and actions in familiar enough cases and my stumbling in one way or another elsewhere?

What about all the liabilities to which action is vulnerable that J. L. Austin famously noted under the heading of excuses,<sup>8</sup> all the things I do out of inadvertence, negligence, hastiness, self-centered failure of due consideration, or just plain sloppiness?<sup>9</sup> Human agents do sometimes get into trouble, do sometimes fail to take responsibility effectively for their commitments and thus for their actions, and we had better have an account of that as well as an account of rational and volitional powers. Emma’s valetudinarian father, Mr. Woodhouse, for example, is pretty much unable to take any effective action at all; he relies on Emma, especially, to see to the running of the household, while his dependence on others, as Richard Jenkyns has noted, in fact disguises a rapacious manipulativeness. His genuine surface amiability both masks and expresses the unconsciously assumed stance of **(p.114)** “a bloodsucker, fastened upon his daughter’s flesh,”<sup>10</sup> determined to get his own way in matters of food, visits, after-dinner entertainments, and, especially, Emma’s marriage, which he would block at all costs in order to secure his own care. How are we to make sense of cases of alienation from one’s own motivations and actions—their dominating oneself rather than vice versa—such as this?

In his fine article on Jane Austen, Gilbert Ryle notes that Austen offers us

an ample, variegated and many-dimensional vocabulary. Her descriptions of people mention their tempers, habits, dispositions, moods, inclinations, impulses, sentiments, feelings, affections, thoughts, reflections, opinions, principles, prejudices, imaginations, and fancies. Her people have or lack moral sense, sense of duty, good sense, taste, good-breeding, self-command, spirits and good humours; they do or do not regulate their imaginations and discipline their tempers. Her people have or lack knowledge of their own hearts or their own dispositions; they are or are not properly acquainted with themselves; they do or do not practice self-examination and soliloquy.<sup>11</sup>

**(p.115)** This is surely right, and Ryle is correct to dwell on and to praise Austen’s generosity and complex intelligence in eschewing simplistic moralizing and in being concerned with substantial self-knowledge. But Austen’s authorial habits of complex, generous presentation and her overall moral sensibility do not yet explain, however, how a particularly alienated and un-self-knowing character might develop over time. Ryle suggests that “improper solicitude”—Emma’s besetting vice—“is actuated by love of power, jealousy, conceit, sentimentality, and so on,” that it fails to manifest “genuine good will,” with the result that Emma “is not effectively self-critical.”<sup>12</sup> This, too, is surely right. But how do *those* failings arise and develop over time?<sup>13</sup> What sorts of creatures are we in general insofar as we are subject to them, and how might they be overcome, to the extent that they can be?

At one level, the answers to these questions are straightforward. Emma’s absent mother, weak father, and indulgent governess have given her, from childhood on, again “the power of rather having too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself” (5). Her meddling and vanity are curbed both through the interventions of Knightley and through her experience, guided by him, of how she has misunderstood and wronged others. But these answers do not yet capture what one might call the phenomenology, texture, or psychodynamics of the experience of coming to a degree of increased self-understanding that the novel tracks in detail. **(p.116)** In particular, how might one come to have some imperfect, agentive control over one’s actions, so that one is significantly responsible for what one does, while also being alienated from one’s commitments, unresponsive to others, and under the sways of motives that one has not adequately grasped or assessed? How, that is, can one both in some sense know what one is doing and yet also not know? And how, and how far, can one change?

In a nice piece of either influence or dramatic irony, the most useful general philosophical vocabulary for describing Emma’s errors and subsequent development is provided by Ryle in his work on self-understanding.<sup>14</sup> Like Cassam, Ryle focuses on substantial self-knowledge, or what he calls “self-consciousness in [an] enlarged sense”: that is, one’s “estimates of [one’s] own qualities of character and intellect”<sup>15</sup> that require skill and attention to form accurately, well beyond awarenesses of occurrent episodes of qualitative feeling. Like Cassam, Ryle also urges that “the sorts of things that I can find out about myself are the same as the sorts of things that I can find out about other people, and the methods of finding them out are much the same.”<sup>16</sup>

Unlike Cassam, however, Ryle also notes at least five significant, interrelated differences between self-understanding and the understanding of others. (1) Self-understanding develops initially (when it develops) out of self-consciousness in the narrower sense, that is, out of experiences, especially in early adolescence, of embarrassment, anxiety, shyness, and affectation.<sup>17</sup> Hence the pursuit of apt self-understanding cannot be a dispassionate theoretical inquiry. One must confront and evaluate one’s character or personality as it **(p.117)** is already in development, as one feels oneself to fall under the gaze of others, and as one must face up to responsibilities and possibilities for change. (2) “It is notorious,” Ryle observes, “that people deceive themselves about their own motives”; and “there is one class of persons whose qualities and frames of mind are specially difficult to appreciate, namely . . . hypocrites and charlatans, the people who pretend to motives and moods and the people who pretend to abilities, that is, . . . most of us in some stretches of our lives and . . . some of us in most stretches of our lives.”<sup>18</sup> One’s own tendencies specifically to hypocrisy, charlatanry, and pretense must themselves be confronted and worked through. (3) Both pretense and candidness are learned from others. In the development of linguistic competence, ego-identity, and discursively structured point-of-view-

---

having, “normal unstudied talk”<sup>19</sup> and imitation of it come first; a fall into pretense comes second, but is itself required in turn for being forthright as a matter of settled commitment. That is, there is a difference between the natural openness of expression of a young child whose linguistic behavior is less controlled and the specific, controlled sincerity of adult character: “a person could not be honest or candid who had never known insincerity or reticence.”<sup>20</sup> (4) Learning to be forthright specifically involves the internalization of an authority figure and its skills of character assessment. Self-assessment depends upon the assessments of others, carried out by others, that one first imitates and participates in, and then only later comes to understand and to practice upon oneself.<sup>21</sup>

**(p.118)**

At a certain stage the child discovers the trick of directing higher order acts upon his own lower order acts. Having been separately victim and author of jokes, coercions, catechisms, criticisms, and mimics in the inter-personal dealings between others and himself, he finds out how to play both roles at once. He has listened to stories before, and he has told stories before, but now he tells stories to his own enthralled ear. He has been detected in insincerities and he has detected the insincerities of others, but now he applies the techniques of detection to his own insincerities. He finds that he can give orders to himself with such authority that he sometimes obeys them even when reluctant to do so. Self-suasion and self-dissuasion become more or less effective. He learns in adolescence to apply to his own behavior most of those higher order methods of dealing with the young that are regularly practiced by grownups. He is then said to be growing up.<sup>22</sup>

(5) Assessment of one’s own motivations, character, and conduct is in principle never fully completed. The “I” suffers from what Ryle calls “systematic elusiveness,” as we never fully succeed in understanding ourselves. “Self-commentary, self-ridicule, and self-admonition are logically condemned to eternal penultimacy,” insofar as “my commentary on my performances must always be silent about one performance, namely itself.”<sup>23</sup>

To these five points of Ryle’s—the rootedness of self-consciousness in embarrassment and anxiety, the standing possibility of self-deception, forthrightness in avowal and assessment as a skill **(p.119)** learned from others, the role of others as internalized authorities, and the in principle incompleteness of self-assessment—we can add two further points that Richard Wollheim nicely makes. (6) There are typically specific occasioning circumstances for self-assessment. In various ways, the smooth formation of intentions to act on the basis of beliefs and desires and the subsequent smooth carrying out of these intentions can be disrupted. The relevant beliefs and desires may be incoherent,

so that no intention is formed, or an occasion for action is missed, or an intention is executed but no satisfaction results. In such cases, as Wollheim puts it, a “person is required to ask himself a question about his desires and beliefs—a question which would never have arisen in the course of the unreflective life. . . . And this self-interrogation, once it has begun, has no natural termination.”<sup>24</sup> (7) There is a particular danger that one’s self-assessments may be distorted by what Wollheim calls crystallization—the tendency of a disposition to persist by reinforcing itself, as one rationalizes it and shrinks from change, as especially in experiences of “envy, hatred, superstition, and the love of gambling,” though more happily also in love and friendship. In having motivational force, many occurrent emotional states tend “to reinforce the dispositions they manifest.”<sup>25</sup> As a result, change is not easy, and it can require shocks or breakdowns to motivate active and more accurate self-assessment.

Critics have focused on Emma’s path toward increased self-understanding, noting both its general character and its more specific occasions and contents. Karin Jackson describes the general progress of the novel as a matter of Emma’s movement

**(p.120)**

from delusion to self-recognition, from illusion to reality; numerous images of sight and blindness reinforce this—the lack of sight, the necessity of insight. Emma’s “blindness” to the real nature of Mr. Elton, of Harriet, Robert Martin, Jane Fairfax, Frank Churchill, Mr. Knightley, and of course herself, shows her unknowing errors of judgment, her fundamental lack of self-understanding. She is deceived as to the nature of the world around her, as well as to the nature of her own emotions. When the truth of human situations and feelings is not perceived accurately, disorder and unhappiness result.<sup>26</sup>

George Justice describes the class inflection of Emma’s initial errors, noting she must “unlearn some of the vulgar categorizing of Mrs. Elton—[who cares only about money—] while preserving belief in the value of traditional social relations,” wherein the upper classes, at least, “are judged on the basis of their contribution to the general well-being of the community.”<sup>27</sup> What Emma must learn is a matter of not only content or standards for evaluation, but also of personal style as both object and manner of judgment. She must, as Justice notes, come to see “flirting and gallantry [as] aggressive tricks of the young that mark out their youth,”<sup>28</sup> while also preserving her imagination, spiritedness, and readiness in sympathetic feeling. In general, Emma’s errors are a matter all at once of evaluative standards, misunderstandings of others, and failures of both personal style and self-understanding. As Jackson puts it, “her errors involve not only Harriet, but all the other major characters, including Mr. Knightley, **(p.**



**121)** and most of all, and most unknowingly, herself. The result is chaos and confusion.”<sup>29</sup>

What these apt summary characterizations of Emma’s progress do not yet fully capture, however, are, first, the specific structure of the resistance to self-understanding that haunts Emma’s character and, second, the complex process of confronting and working through this resistance that the novel unfolds.

The core of this resistance is, of course, Emma’s wish to have her own way, coupled with her tendency to generate narratives for both herself and others that will bring about the states of affairs that she takes to be desirable. She has had, after all, the possibility and the habit of “doing just what she liked,” with little in the way of parents or governesses to oppose her, and she has been in daily control of the considerable material resources of Hartfield (5). Joking with Mr. Knightley, she claims to see herself as “a fanciful, troublesome creature,” (9), when in fact her view of herself is that she and only she is in a position to arrange the affairs of others most effectively and benevolently. The very fact that she makes this claim in jest is evidence of how her view of herself as benevolent, imaginative, perceptive, and effective has crystallized, forming a kind of center of her personality.

Hence it is no surprise that, immediately upon meeting the younger, fair, plump, sweet, but somewhat dim Harriet, Emma should resolve: “*She* [Emma] would notice her; she would improve her; she would detach her from bad acquaintance, and introduce her into good society; she would form her opinions and her manners. It would be an interesting, and certainly a very kind undertaking; highly becoming her own situation in life, her leisure, and powers” (20). Harriet is here little more than an occasion for Emma to fantasize about the worth and pleasantness of her own character and **(p.122)** powers.<sup>30</sup> This point about Emma’s tendencies to fantasy and to approving self-regard is reinforced, as we find in the next paragraph that “[w]ith an alacrity beyond the common impulse of a spirit which yet was never indifferent to the credit of doing every thing well and attentively, with the real good-will of a mind delighted with its own ideas, did she [Emma] then do all the honours of the meal, and help and recommend the minced chicken and scalloped oysters with an urgency which she knew would be acceptable to the early hours and civil scruples of their guests” (20). Tellingly, the focus of this description is neither on what Emma does nor on whom (if anyone) she in fact benefits, but rather on Emma’s attitudes and self-satisfactions in her own performance and its style. For Emma at this point, Harriet is less a being of independent worth or interest than she is an occasion for Emma to cultivate her own self-regard: “She [Harriet] would be loved as one to whom she [Emma] could be useful” (21).

Given that Emma’s view of herself as benevolent, imaginative, perceptive, and effective has crystallized, it will not be easy for her to change, especially since she has, as Mr. Knightley observes, “no industry and patience” and, especially, no “subjection of the fancy to the understanding,” having been “always quick and assured” and “mistress of the house . . . ever since she was twelve” (30). Her quickness and self-assurance lead her to fail to appreciate Robert Martin’s merits and suitability for Harriet and to decipher Mr. Elton’s *courtship* riddle but to misunderstand it as directed toward Harriet rather than herself (58). Emma is in fact determined to persist in her mastery of Hartfield and of those around her. She proclaims “very little intention of ever marrying at all,” arguing explicitly that “a single woman, of good fortune, is always respectable” and that “mine is an active, **(p.123)** busy mind with a great many independent resources, and I do not perceive why I should be more in want of employment at forty or fifty than one-and-twenty” (68, 69). When John Knightley suggests that Mr. Elton may be interested in her and that she may inadvertently be encouraging him, she dismisses the thought and walks on “amusing herself in the consideration of the blunders which often arise from a partial knowledge of circumstances, of the mistakes which people of high pretensions to judgment are for ever falling into” (89).

When Emma learns she is wrong about Elton and that he has in fact been courting her, she admits her error as well as “pain and humiliation,” but she also rationalizes her mistake and fails genuinely to question her own character and powers of judgment: “She looked back as well as she could; but it was all confusion. She had taken up the idea, she supposed, and made everything bend to it. His manners, however, must have been unmarked, wavering, dubious, or she could not have been so misled” (106). Here Emma primarily regards her mistake as, first of all, one of evidential judgment alone, rather than as also a function of the fantasies of authority and effect that have led her into error. She fails genuinely to question her own character, motives, or powers of judgment in general, casting the mistake as a kind of factual error made in light of misleading evidence. Austen’s “she supposed” is an especially nice touch, in indicating that Emma is taking up a theoretical or exterior stance toward her own mistaken judgment, rather than taking responsibility for it as expressing her own genuine but flawed character.<sup>31</sup> While she forms the resolution “of being humble and discreet, and repressing imagination all the rest of her life” (112), she also imagines that carrying out this resolution lies in her immediate power, without any change of basic character **(p.124)** or personality on her part. That she expresses this resolution hyperbolically as binding “all the rest of her life” shows that it and her self-image remain in the grip of a fantasy of superiority. She has, one might say, not yet been genuinely humbled, and her “youth and natural cheerfulness” (109), a good night’s sleep, and her propping up of her image of herself through her fantasy-tinged resolution are enough to restore her spirits, without any fundamental change.

It is, then, no surprise when in Book II Emma continues to judge that Harriet and Robert Martin “must be separated” (147), even after Harriet has revealed her genuine feelings for him awkwardly and in an obvious rush of emotion, recounting to Emma her meeting with his mother and sisters. Moreover, Emma’s fancy is now prompted by Frank Churchill, in whom she finds “nothing to denote him unworthy of the distinguished honour which her imagination had given him; the honour, if not of being really in love with her, of being at least very near it, and saved only by her own indifference” (162). Here Austen blends free indirect discourse, thus involving us in Emma’s train of thought and calling attention to the fact that she sees herself yet again as an agent in awarding honors, with authorial commentary, in hinting via her double-negative and somewhat hyperbolic formulation “nothing to denote him unworthy of the distinguished honours” that there is something amiss in Emma’s course of thought.

Unsurprisingly, Emma then goes on, during a party at the Coles’, not only to take delight in the thought that “she was [Frank’s] object,” but also that “every body must perceive it” (173), thus seeing herself as observed and admired by others for her attractiveness and command, rather than herself attending to and taking responsibility for her character and comportment. That Emma continues to see herself as seen and admired by others is especially marked in her imaginative rehearsal of Frank’s courting her, wherein “the conclusion of every imaginary declaration on her side was that she *refused* him” (206), thus maintaining control of both her inner life and her external relations, **(p.125)** untouched by others and confident in her power. Later, when her own flirtations with Frank have withered, Emma encourages what she misunderstands to be an attachment to Frank on Harriet’s part, continuing to imagine that she might effectively and benevolently manage Harriett’s affairs (268–269).

Emma’s tendencies to self-centered, self-reinforcing fantasy about herself as the admired, benevolent, and effective manager of the affairs of others become explicit and are then explicitly challenged by Knightley at the party on Box Hill, when Emma insults Miss Bates by remarking archly that Miss Bates may have “a difficulty” in producing “only three [dull things] at once” rather than an unlimited number (291). Emma issues this insult in response to Frank’s proposal to the party that they should each (besides Emma and himself) produce “either one thing very clever, be it prose or verse, original or repeated—or two things moderately clever—or three things very dull indeed” (291). About Frank’s proposal and Emma’s reaction to it, Mary Poovey insightfully observes that “the vanity Frank invites reawakens the ‘original narcissism’ of his auditors [—including, especially, Emma—], for implicit in his challenge is the opportunity to imagine, for just a moment, that every thought is as precious to one’s listeners as to oneself, that one is, in short, the centre of a nonjudgmental little universe.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the prompting of narcissistic fantasy is especially strong in Emma, for though she is not herself intended to produce a witty remark, she has already been fantasizing about others noticing and admiring her flirtatious

command over Frank, she is herself to be the judge of whether any remark offered by another is suitably witty, and she is unable to resist the witty jibe at Miss Bates. Though she had just teased Frank about the importance of self-command (290), she here proves entirely unable to exhibit it herself.

**(p.126)** Here Emma’s failures of self-command and benevolent command over others are on full display, to others and to herself. Miss Bates blushes, those who care for her may be supposed to be quietly aghast—Mr. Weston recalls them to the contest, away from Emma’s remark—and, after a short time, Mr. Knightley forcefully reproves her in private. Initially, “Emma recollected, blushed, was sorry, but tried to laugh it off” (294), but after Knightley presses the point and then hands her into her carriage, she finds herself, alone, filled with “anger against herself, mortification, and deep concern. . . . Never had she felt so agitated, mortified, grieved, at any circumstance in her life” (296). She has been forced—by the very figure whose judgment she most values—to confront the falsity, at least on this occasion, of her crystallized image of herself as benevolent, imaginative, perceptive, and effective.

Unsurprisingly, Emma resolves to do better and to call upon Miss Bates the next morning “in the warmth of true contrition” (296). Tellingly, however, she also in doing so imagines “that she might see Mr. Knightley in her way; or, perhaps, he might come in while she were paying her visit” (297). That is, even while she is remorseful, she still wishes to be seen—and especially by Knightley—as in appropriate command of her situation. Nonetheless, Emma does now manage to check her vanity and to retain her self-command. She remains calm and does not interfere as Harriet reveals her interest in marrying Mr. Knightley, despite her own sudden realization that “Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself” (320). With composure, she tells Harriet “that Mr. Knightley is the last man in the world, who would intentionally give any woman the idea of his feeling for her more than he really does,” so that Harriet may have some ground to think that her interest might be reciprocated (323).

Caught in contrition and disappointment, Emma finally fully confronts her own qualities of character as she reflects on what she has done:

**(p.127)**

With insufferable vanity had she believed herself in the secret of everybody’s feelings; with unpardonable arrogance proposed to arrange everybody’s destiny. She was proved to have been universally mistaken; and she had not quite done nothing—for she had done mischief. She had brought evil on Harriet, on herself, and she too much feared, on Mr. Knightley. (324)

Anticipating Harriet’s marriage to Mr. Knightley, she then finds that

[t]he only source whence any thing like consolation or composure could be drawn, was in the resolution of her own better conduct, and the hope that, however inferior in spirit and gaiety might be the following and every future winter of her life to the past, it would yet find her more rational, more acquainted with herself, and leave her less to regret when it were gone. (332)

Matters are at last happily resolved only when Emma reveals to Knightley that while she had been flattered by Frank's attentions, she had never really loved him, whereupon Knightley proposes to her, having found, as he puts it, that “one sentiment” on his part—jealousy of Frank—had “probably enlightened him as to the other”—love for Emma (340).

What are we to make of this resolution? Has Emma changed and earned her match with Knightley? And what is the character of that marriage likely to be? Critics have been divided over this issue. There is general agreement that Emma embodies a number of qualities often thought to be interrelated and to be significantly shared among women: imagination, fancy, wit, a desire for male admiration, curiosity, and meddlesomeness. Lacking the possibility of making herself an independent socioeconomic identity apart from marriage or inheritance, her passions and intelligence have been channeled into the domestic and village spheres. As Tony Tanner puts it, in bearing **(p.128)** imaginative energies that she cannot express otherwise, “Emma is a very active fantasist, . . . the central eccentric, who is the potentially most disruptive figure in the society. . . . She is the danger from within—if, that is—society itself is not beginning to seem like the danger from without.”<sup>33</sup> From a traditionalist point of view, then, Emma deserves chastening and requires control, both of which are provided by Mr. Knightley, in order to fit appropriately into the regnant social order. In Alasdair Duckworth's formulation, “Emma in the end chooses society rather than self, an inherited order rather than a spontaneous and improvised existence.”<sup>34</sup> Claudia L. Johnson adds that this choice “implicitly opposes and prefers the orderly, patriarchal, rational, masculine, and, above all, right, to the disorderly, subjectivist, imaginative, feminine, and self-evidently wrong.”<sup>35</sup> Even more sharply, Maaja A. Stewart argues that Emma's “change [from sole mistress of Hartfield to Knightley's wife], like Elizabeth Bennet's, is marked by a loss of wit and autonomy, as she is disciplined to accept the male gaze. Reality, in the form of Austen's inscription of patriarchy in the novel, refuses to yield to Emma's desires as it educates and immobilizes this most independent of heroines firmly in the marriage plot.”<sup>36</sup>

Other readers, however, have seen Emma as maintaining her independence and wit within the framework of the social order, as Mr. Knightley is induced to take up residence at Hartfield after marriage, in order to avoid requiring the querulous Mr. Woodhouse to move. Johnson argues that

(p.129)

the conclusion which seemed tamely and placidly conservative thus takes an unexpected turn, as the guarantor of order himself [—Mr. Knightley—] cedes a considerable portion of the power which custom has allowed him to expect. In moving to Hartfield, Knightley is sharing *her* home, and in placing himself within her domain, Knightley gives his blessing to her rule. Emma assumes her own entitlement to independence and power—power not only over her own destiny, but, what is harder to tolerate, power over the destinies of others—and in doing so she poaches on what is felt to be male turf. . . . In its willingness to explore positive versions of female power, *Emma* is itself an experimental production of authorial independence unlike any of Austen’s other novels.<sup>37</sup>

Patricia Meyer Spacks adds that “Emma has kept herself alive while all around decayed, kept herself alive with the energies of gossip. . . . As a sub-text for the major line of narrative [gossip] supports the imaginative and improvisational, valuing the private, implying the saving energies of female curiosity and female volubility, celebrating the possibility and the importance of a narrative of trivia. It exemplifies the subversive resources of the novel as genre.”<sup>38</sup>

Depending on which reading one favors, then, Emma either subordinates her imaginative energies to the requirements of social life (appropriately or not), or persists in them and retains some control over her affairs. Here the correct things to say are, first, that we just don’t know which is decisively the case; second, that the novel ends by suspending us in this very uncertainty; and third, that Emma’s achievements in self-understanding and in marrying Mr. Knightly are (p.130) best regarded as both genuine and partial.<sup>39</sup> The last sentence of the novel is, “But, in spite of these deficiencies—[viz. Mrs. Elton judged the wedding ‘all extremely shabby, and very inferior to her own’—], the wishes, the hopes, the confidence, the predictions of the small band of true friends who witnessed the ceremony, were fully answered in the perfect happiness of the union” (381). As Poovey aptly notes, this last sentence “has the effect of robbing the future of its potential for change, for its temporal stasis freezes the Knightleys’ marriage in an eternal repetition of their ‘perfect happiness.’”<sup>40</sup> Or perhaps not: for this freeze-frame ending not only stops the dynamics of Emma’s and Knightley’s relationship, but also leaves their happiness slightly qualified. Just who composes “the small band of friends”? —Mrs. and Mr. Weston, perhaps; but how reliable is their judgment? Exactly what were their wishes, hopes, confidence, and predictions? Austen’s art and genius here is to have presented character—that is, virtues and vices—as essentially existing in courses of their change and development, including experiences of humiliation and embarrassment,<sup>41</sup> and then to have cut that development off. This not only forces readers to speculate about the protagonists’ futures and to entertain ambiguities, it also reminds us that character and self-understanding remain

things for which these figures will be responsible, with nothing settled absolutely and with crystallization and emotion always in play.

**(p.131)** Philosophy typically seeks standing terms for assessment—here for describing and assessing the achievement of self-understanding and worldly success—from its own more dispassionate, spatialized, and generalization-seeking point of view. It offers useful standing terms for assessing which characters understand themselves and their situations and so act well, and which do not. In contrast, Austen’s concern as a novelist for dramatic presentation over time rightly discloses complexities and responsibilities that attach to self-understanding as an ongoing, unclosed, and socially situated process that is suffused with feeling. Her presentation in free indirect discourse of Emma’s streams of thought about herself and others, qualified by adverbial phrases that express ironic authorial evaluations (“highly becoming,” “nothing to denote him unworthy”) show the complexity, temporality, partiality, and elusiveness of self-understanding. Emma has somewhat curbed her tendencies to self-centered vanity and meddlesome plotting—she did not attempt to block Harriet’s interest in Knightley, and she accepts the standing role of a wife—but she also retains her wit and her interest in self-management and the management of others. Philosophers would do well, like Emma, to register the complexities of self-understanding and self-management, without quite abandoning address to them. Even if self-understanding in general has standing appropriate objects or targets (motivations, temperaments, qualities of character, interests, desires, and so on), it is both a social and emotional process that we do not fully control as individuals and something also always to be achieved, as Austen compellingly demonstrates in the figure of Emma. Given the social situations, the emotion-laden characters, and the needs for imaginative narrative rehearsal that may always be structured by crystallized vanity that surround all exercises of agency, there is always a “danger at present unperceived.”<sup>42</sup>

**(p.132)** References

Bibliography references:

Austen-Leigh, James Edward. *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, edited by R. W. Chapman. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967.

Austin, J. L. “A Plea for Excuses.” In Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, 3rd ed., 175–204. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.

Boyle, Matthew. “Critical Study: Cassam on Self-Knowledge for Humans.” *European Journal of Philosophy* 23, no. 2 (June 2015): 337–348.

Cassam, Quassim. *Self-Knowledge for Humans*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Duckworth, Alasdair. *Improvement of the Estate*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971.

Eldridge, Richard. *On Moral Personhood: Philosophy, Literature, Criticism, and Self-Understanding*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Jackson, Karin. “The Dilemma of Emma: Moral, Ethical, and Spiritual Values.” *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal Online* 21, no. 2 (Summer 2000). <http://www.jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol21no2/jackson.html>.

Jenkyns, Richard. *A Fine Brush on Ivory: An Appreciation of Jane Austen*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Johnson, Claudia L. *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

Justice, George. “Introduction.” In *Emma*, edited by George Justice, 4th ed., xvii. New York: W. W. Norton, 2012.

Moran, Richard. *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Poovey, Mary. “The True English Style.” *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal* 5 (1983): 10-12.

Ryle, Gilbert. *The Concept of Mind*. London: Hutchison, 1949.

Ryle, Gilbert. “Jane Austen and the Moralists.” *The Oxford Review*, no. 1, 1966; reprinted in Ryle, *Critical Essays: Collected Papers*, Vol. 1, 286-301. London: Hutchinson, 1971.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press, 1993.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Vol. 1, translated by Alan Sheridan-Smith, rev. ed. London: Verso, 2004.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism is a Humanism*, translated by Carol Macomber. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *La Nauseé*. Paris: Gallimard, 1938.

Scanlon, T. M. *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2000.

Simpson, Richard. “Jane Austen.” *North British Review*, April 1870; reprinted in *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, 249-250, edited by B. S. Southam. London: Routledge, 1968.



**(p.133)** Spacks, Patricia Meyer. *Gossip*. New York: Random House, 1985.

Stewart, Maaja A. *Domestic Relations and Imperial Fictions: Jane Austen's Novels in Eighteenth Century Contexts*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993.

Tanner, Tony. *Jane Austen*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986.

Wollheim, Richard. *The Thread of Life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984.

Notes:

(1.) James Edward Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 159.

(2.) Arguments about the incoherence of introspectionist self-knowledge of thought contents, itself conceived as primitive, immediate, and infallible, are legion, those of Collingwood, Wittgenstein, Austin, Ryle, and Sellars being among the most prominent.

(3.) Quassim Cassam, *Self-Knowledge for Humans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), vii.

(4.) *Ibid.*, viii.

(5.) Matthew Boyle, “Critical Study: Cassam on Self-Knowledge for Humans,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 23, no. 2 (June 2015): 337–348, at 341. Boyle is building on and defending Richard Moran’s work on one’s commitments, including one’s beliefs, as things over which one normally has authority in his *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

(6.) This point is well developed by T. M. Scanlon in *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2000), and it has a long tradition within Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy in the treatment of the relation between *Willkür* (choice) and *Wille* (the moral law, a fundamental norm of rational willing).

(7.) Arguably, this kind of overemphasis appears in Sartre in both *Being and Nothingness* and “Existentialism Is a Humanism,” where Sartre mistakenly holds that something being a reason at all *for me* and a course of life being meaningful *for me* are things that are altogether within my personal power simply to decide.

(8.) See J. L. Austin, “A Plea for Excuses,” in Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 175–204.

(9.) To his great credit, Moran does not ignore this topic, as he treats the cases of Fred Vincy in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* and John Lewis in Kingsley Amis’s *That Uncertain Feeling* as instances of (culpable) failure to exercise agentive powers in taking responsibility for one’s commitments—an all too human possibility. Sartre begins to discuss the conditioning of the exercise of agentive powers in his discussion of seriality in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.

(10.) Richard Jenkyns, *A Fine Brush on Ivory: An Appreciation of Jane Austen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 164. Like Emma, Elizabeth Bennet, too, must learn to see through the passive-aggressive manipulateness of her father. See Richard Eldridge, *On Moral Personhood: Philosophy, Literature, Criticism, and Self-Understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 168–172.

(11.) Gilbert Ryle, “Jane Austen and the Moralists,” *The Oxford Review*, no. 1, 1966; reprinted in Ryle, *Critical Essays: Collected Papers*, Vol. 1 (London: Hutchinson, 1971), 286–301, at 299–300. Ryle traces this presentation of fully rounded characters to Austen’s having an Aristotelian moral sensibility, more oriented toward flexible contextual judgments of character than to moral principle, transmitted and modified for a modern English context by Shaftesbury, in contrast with the implacable, intolerant, and implausible moral stance of eighteenth-century English Calvinism, which saw characters as entirely black or entirely white, entirely good or entirely evil, entirely elect or entirely damned.

(12.) *Ibid.*, 291, 297. Ryle’s reference here to the need for “genuine good will” as a *central* virtue suggests both a compatibility with a flexible, naturalized Kantianism and the continuing influence of a broad-minded liberal Christianity in Austen’s views, in addition to the Shaftesburyean Aristotelianism that he otherwise ascribes to her.

(13.) Richard Moran aptly suggests, especially in his discussion of Fred Vincy in *Middlemarch* that taking up a theoretical stance on one’s own commitments and actions is itself motivated by a wish to evade responsibility for them (*Authority and Estrangement*, 188–192). That wish may be a natural one for beings freighted with reflective awareness. But exactly how does it arise and how does it take on force in one’s conduct? Not everyone is as feckless in action as Fred.

(14.) Notoriously, when asked whether he ever read novels, Ryle is reported to have replied, “Oh, yes—all six of them, every year.”

(15.) Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchison, 1949), 157.

(16.) *Ibid.*, 156.

(17.) *Ibid.*

(18.) *Ibid.*, 172.

(19.) Ibid., 182.

(20.) Ibid.

(21.) This is one reason why what contemporary psychology addresses under the heading of impression management, often involving pretense and prejudice, is unavoidable: we judge ourselves initially as others judge us.

(22.) Ibid., 193–194.

(23.) Ibid., 195. In *Nausea*, Sartre similarly criticizes the vain effort “d’attraper le temps par le queue [to catch time by the tail]” (*La Nauseé*, [Paris: Gallimard, 1938], 66), and the difference between self-knowledge, which is always incomplete and open to change, and knowledge of objects is a principal theme of *Being and Nothingness*.

(24.) Richard Wollheim, *The Thread of Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 165–166. Compare also “A person leads his life at a crossroads: at the point where a past that has affected him and a future that lies open meet in the present” (31). The occasion for renewed assessment is when this moment of the crossing of past with future is also a moment of breakdown of smooth and successful action.

(25.) Ibid., 59.

(26.) Karin Jackson, “The Dilemma of Emma: Moral, Ethical, and Spiritual Values,” *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal Online* 21, no. 2 (Summer 2000), <http://www.jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol21no2/jackson.html>.

(27.) George Justice, “Introduction,” in *Emma*, ed. George Justice, 4th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012), xvii.

(28.) Ibid., xxvi.

(29.) Jackson, “The Dilemma of Emma.”

(30.) Here Austen’s use of free indirect discourse puts us inside Emma’s course of reflection, while her formulation “highly becoming” ironically highlights and criticizes Emma’s vanity.

(31.) This passage is another striking example of the use of free indirect discourse for which Austen is justly famous, especially so in *Emma*, a novel about repeatedly compromised efforts at self-understanding.

(32.) Mary Poovey, “The True English Style,” *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal* 5 (1983): 10–12, at 10.

(33.) Tony Tanner, *Jane Austen* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 189.

(34.) Alasdair Duckworth, *Improvement of the Estate* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 148.

(35.) Claudia L. Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 122.

(36.) Maaja A. Stewart, *Domestic Relations and Imperial Fictions: Jane Austen's Novels in Eighteenth Century Contexts* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 141.

(37.) Claudia L. Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*, 143, 125, 126.

(38.) Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (New York: Random House, 1985), 171.

(39.) James Austen-Leigh informs us, when asked about Emma's future, that Jane Austen would reply “that Mr. Woodhouse survived his daughter's marriage, and kept her from settling at Donwell, about two years,” but we do not learn from her reports anything more than this. Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, 119.

(40.) Poovey, 12.

(41.) Richard Simpson usefully notes that Austen “contemplates virtues, not as fixed quantities, or as definable qualities, but as continual struggles and conquests, as progressive states of mind, advancing by repulsing their contraries, or losing ground by being overcome. . . . A character therefore unfolded itself to her . . . as a dramatic sketch, a living history, a composite force, which could exhibit what it was by exhibiting what it did.” Simpson, “Jane Austen,” *North British Review*, April 1870; reprinted in *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, ed. B. S. Southam (London: Routledge, 1968), 249–250.

(42.) Unless, of course, social life becomes systematically and transparently just, with neither need nor occasion for the sort of impression management that is infused with pretense and prejudice—surely not a likely state of affairs.

Access brought to you by: