

**Kenneth Asher.** *Literature, Ethics, and the Emotions*. Cambridge University Press 2017. 194 pp. \$99.99 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781107185951).

There is an old view of the emotions, going back at least as far as Plato, according to which they are among the main barriers to acting morally. Our emotions pull us this way and that, inattentive to the dictates of reason; accordingly, they need to be managed rather than indulged, and quieted if possible. An equally radical alternative gives pride of place to the emotions. On this sort of view, there is nothing else to say for our moral judgments other than that they are backed by particular feelings. This is the stance of some care ethicists, for whom the ultimate answer to the question, ‘Why should I help this injured person?’ is that I empathize with her.

The truth probably lies between these two extremes, and one attractive proposal—defended at length by Martha Nussbaum—steers between them by highlighting the cognitive dimensions of emotions. According to this neo-Aristotelian view, we don’t need to choose between reason and feeling: our emotions are informed by the results of deliberation (they are ‘cognitively penetrable,’ in the jargon), and on their own, they can be sensitive to features of situations that, on reflection, we see as important, but that we might not judge that way based on detached deliberation. Unlike the Platonic view, this sort of approach emphasizes the importance of reacting in appropriate ways in the appropriate circumstances (the emotions are crucial for virtue), and unlike the views of certain care ethicists, there is ample room for reason to correct the excesses of which emotion is capable.

Nussbaum’s view raises important questions about the role of the arts in ethics, as they tend to be far better at tutoring the emotions than is academic philosophy. She maintains that literature, at least, plays an important role indeed, since we can view literary characters ‘as a warehouse of alternative lives to deepen our moral understanding when sympathetically, but not uncritically regarded’ (11). But how much further can we go? Can this approach be extended to drama? To poetry? To works where the author rejects the idea of a unified self? These are Asher’s questions in *Literature, Ethics, and the Emotions*.

The book begins with a brief introduction to the ways in which recent literary theory has justified not interacting with moral philosophy, followed by a quick overview of the various accounts of the relationship between ethics and the emotions. That discussion sets up what we might consider the main problem of the book. Longinus, who lived in the early centuries of the Common Era, had the view that ‘[g]reat writing does not persuade; it takes the reader out of himself’ (33). If this is indeed the hallmark of literary excellence — and Asher doesn’t contest this—then it might seem to pose a problem for Nussbaum: Asher claims that ‘[if] Nussbaum’s theory is to survive intact, [then sublime] passages of intensely elevated emotion must be shown to have a truth content’ (34).

The thought seems to be this: Nussbaum is committed to saying that literature educates the emotions by communicating propositions about nuances of circumstance, and which responses are and aren’t fitting in them; what’s more, if any part of the work can educate the emotions, it must turn out that the sublime passages can as well. Asher doesn’t explain why we should insist on these interpretations of her position, and it’s worth considering whether there are more modest ways of understanding what Nussbaum is claiming. In any case, if these interpretations are correct, they help us see why there might be a problem of extending Nussbaum’s view to poetry, or to various modernist works. So understood, Nussbaum’s view seems to presuppose literary texts of sufficient length to communicate these complex truths, and a way of thinking about the self where it can acquire the right kinds of emotional habits and respond consistently across varying situations. What happens when the text doesn’t have the relevant features, or share the same way of thinking about a person’s character?

These questions lead to the next four chapters, which explore the work of T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, and George Bernard Shaw. In the chapter on Eliot, Asher argues that despite protestations to the effect that '[p]oetry is not a turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion,' Eliot also held that a shared culture is a kind of manifestation of feelings, and sought to write poems that could be unifying insofar as they inspired a shared response (50). His famous 'objective correlative'— 'a set of objects, situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion'—looks less austere in this light, and Asher argues that Eliot ultimately offers us a glimpse of the way the deeply personal and intersubjective aspects of our lives to be brought together (60).

Asher's chapter on Lawrence focuses on the challenges created by 'his rejection of traditional character' (83): that is, his idea that our emotions aren't responsive to our beliefs, and so can't be controlled or improved by them; for Lawrence, our emotions are the irrational responses of our deepest selves. But through an exploration of *Women in Love*, Asher teases out the way in which Lawrence highlights the perceptual capacities of our emotions. Insofar as our primal selves represent what we ought to be, they can be trusted as guides to what matters morally.

In what is perhaps the most fascinating chapter of the book, Asher essentially argues that we find the limits of literature's relevance to ethics in Virginia Woolf's work. He shows how inscrutable others can be to us in his readings of *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, making attributions of responsibility — and sometimes even agency — extraordinarily difficult. And by the time we get to *The Waves*, Woolf has given up on characters altogether, 'giving us instead minimally fleshed out viewpoints with names' (133). Here, there is little hope of identifying with the other, partly because the other remains inscrutable, but also because the motivation to do so is undermined: it isn't clear why we would even aspire to protect the individuals she creates.

Shaw's writing presents a different sort of challenge to extending Nussbaum's framework. As Asher puts it, 'Shaw is not terribly interested in character, if we take character in the Aristotelian sense of a fixed intertwining of beliefs, emotions, and dispositions that has become, through habituation, a virtual second nature' (150). How, then, can Shaw's plays tutor the emotions? The answer, at least in part, is that lack of interest in—and even stated skepticism about—character doesn't consistently guide his work. Despite his attempts to focus on the ebb and flow of history, or on fairly abstract ideas, Shaw provides us with remarkable scenes of personal and interpersonal anguish. Alternative lives are certainly on display. At the same time, however, Asher is prepared to grant that much of Shaw's work doesn't fit with Nussbaum's project, given his rejection of internal, psychological explanations of events in favor of historical and conceptual ones. It's worth considering, though, whether Nussbaum might be able to accommodate even this. Any plausible account of agency is going to have to fit with the results of the sciences, which seem to have identified a great many external influences on our thoughts and actions. Might Shaw serve as a kind of corrective, balancing our inclination to think that we have complete control over our own behavior?

The book concludes with some hedging: there is no promise that literature will make us moral, and we are certainly free to read it in ways that don't promote moral understanding. Nevertheless, Asher argues, literature retains the potential to 'enlarge our understanding of why [our] interactions are the way they are, and, when we get them right, why this ought to have been so' (180). To appreciate his point, we might draw a distinction between moral education and ethics training. The latter simply instructs us in the appropriate way to behave, whereas the former attempts to sensitize us to the source of considerations that can and should inform our thinking about the moral life. Neither promises that we will actually act appropriately, but unlike ethics training, moral education has value even if we don't: insofar as we value understanding in its own right, we have reason to appreciate the insights that such education can help us achieve. And, as Asher has shown,

we needn't limit ourselves to the kinds of works on which Nussbaum focuses: the sources of moral insight are many and varied, including works that might, at first glance, appear hostile to the project.

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