

The Difficult Balance

Austen's Oughts: Judgment after Locke and Shaftesbury

By Karen Valihora.
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Review by Jeffrey A. Bell.

One of the dominant intellectual debates of the eighteenth century circled around the issue of determining whether there were ultimate standards, standards of taste, moral standards, and standards of proper conduct and propriety. This debate reached its high water mark with Hume's essay "On the Standard of Taste," but there were numerous other essays and books that broached the same subject, by writers such as Alexander Gerard, Hugh Blair, and others. In her book *Austen's Oughts*, Karen Valihora argues that a proper understanding of Austen's novels needs to begin with a consideration of these eighteenth-century debates. When one finds the use of "oughts" in Jane Austen's novels, for instance, they most typically involve a tension between reconciling the tendencies of first- and third- person perspective, tendencies that are played out in the narrative structure of Austen's novels as well. In particular, what one finds in Austen is an effort to bring, as Valihora puts it, "'what is' into congruence with what ought to be," the "what is" of our understanding and judgments as understood by the empiricist philosophers with how things ought to be relative to the common, shared, and public good.

Central to Valihora's understanding of the potential congruence between what is and what ought to be, and how this in turn is played out in Austen's

novels, is the contrasting manner in which John Locke and Shaftesbury understand our capacity to formulate adequate judgments in light of Lockean empiricism. Shaftesbury knew Locke well—Locke was his personal tutor—but a concern Shaftesbury had with Locke's approach was with how to address the problem of random associations. If our knowledge and the judgments that flow from this are simply the product of the sensations and association of sensations we encounter in experience, then it would seem to be difficult to determine whether there could be any standards that are more than simply the collective associations of each particular individual; and with this we have the beginnings of the debates concerning the standards. In contrast to Locke, Shaftesbury highlights the importance of beauty and harmony in order to account for the fact that we as individuals tend, through polite discourse and discussion, to come to an agreement with others. The importance of polite discourse was exceedingly important to the intellectual figures Valihora discusses, beginning with Shaftesbury but continuing on through Joseph Addison, David Hume, Adam Smith, and Samuel Richardson. Francis Hutcheson, however, is notably absent from Valihora's account. As one who was influenced by Shaftesbury and who, in turn, influenced Hume and Adam Smith (he was Smith's teacher), some attention here would have provided a more complete picture of the eighteenth-century intellectual scene.

In her chapter on Hume, Valihora rightly stresses the significance of moral sympathy. In his own way, this is how Hume is able to reconcile his empiricist philosophy with an account of shared moral standards, standards that are in turn derived from our capacity to identify with the sentiments of others. When Hume discusses the sublime, however, the problem is that it ultimately undermines conventions of society, and hence the shared values they make possible for Hume. In her chapter on Adam Smith, Valihora argues that Adam Smith's notion of the

impartial spectator avoids the problem found in Hume, and it provides for the needed reconciliation between one's individual passions and interests (the first- person perspective) and the judgments that would be expressed by an impartial spectator (third-person perspective), or what Smith calls the "demigod within the breast" in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

Valihora's most significant contribution to our understanding of Austen occurs in her chapter on Sir Joshua Reynolds, whose paintings and lectures delivered during his tenure as president of the Royal Academy served to initiate what has come to be called the picturesque tradition in art. As Valihora describes the influence the picturesque had on Austen, it involves "being able to impose a certain way of seeing," but one, in Austen's hands, that charts "the very fine line . . . between becoming wholly absorbed by an illusory vision that is just an imposition . . . and arriving at a way of seeing that is truly comprehensive, that is sharable with others." It is no coincidence, Valihora points out, that the housekeeper, from *Pride and Prejudice*, who shows Elizabeth the portrait gallery of Darcy's Pemberley estate was named Mrs. Reynolds. With the chapters on Reynolds and her analyses of the "oughts" of *Pride and Prejudice*, Valihora offers a book that places Austen's work solidly within the intellectual climate of the eighteenth century and demonstrates how art, and Austen's art in particular, is able to detail the difficult balance one attains when he can reconcile his personal interests and ways of seeing with a vision that is sharable and beneficial to the public good.

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