SELF-KNOWLEDGE: THE IMPORTANCE OF REFLECTION

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"Emma sat down to think and be miserable."[1]

Emma Woodhouse, the title character and heroine of Jane Austen's novel *Emma,* spends a considerable amount of time sitting down to think about herself and her actions, an activity that often does produce some miserable feelings. Of course she is not trying to make herself miserable; she is simply trying to know herself better. For Emma, reflection is a tool through which she improves her understanding of herself and the world in which she lives. In the novel, it is to Emma's credit that she is willing to engage in this kind of reflection and take an honest look at herself and her actions, despite the potential unpleasantness. Self-knowledge is worthwhile, even when the process of acquiring it makes us miserable. But what is it about self-knowledge that makes it so valuable? Why is it something we should aim to have? And what role does reflection play in acquiring knowledge of ourselves?

The idea that self-knowledge matters is an ancient one. The command to "know oneself" is reported to have been inscribed in stone at the Temple of Apollo at Delphi.[2] Many philosophical and religious traditions hold that self-knowledge is an essential step on the path to wisdom. The thought is that if we want to know anything at all, we have to start by knowing

[1] Austen, Jane. *Emma.* The Oxford Illustrated Jane Austen, edited by R.W. Chapman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 134.

[2] This temple was also the location of a famous oracle, where the high priestess of the temple (known as the Pythia) would make prophesies. If you are familiar with the Percy Jackson books, you may recall the character of Rachel, who served as an oracle. That is more or less how the oracle at Delphi was supposed to have worked.

ourselves. This is because gaining wisdom often requires being willing to acknowledge and let go of the many pleasant illusions that we create around ourselves, our beliefs, and our actions. Reflection helps enable us to recognize those illusions and rid ourselves of them, making it possible for us to see ourselves and the world more clearly. But as we will see, the kind of reflection that produces self-knowledge isn't quite as simple as just sitting down to think.

The source of Emma's misery is her realization that she has been utterly and totally wrong about something.[3] Like most of us, Emma hates being wrong. In this situation, however, her mistake is not just something that she finds embarrassing or frustrating. It is something that is about to cause a lot of pain to her closest friend, Harriet. Emma has been trying to set up Harriet with the parish vicar or priest, Mr. Elton.[4] Elton is good-looking, charming, reasonably rich, and most importantly, single. Socially speaking, Harriet is a step below Mr. Elton, something that mattered a great deal in that time and place. Emma knows this, but she conveniently ignores it because she enjoys the idea of making this match work. She thus convinces herself that Mr. Elton is so in love with Harriet that he won't mind marrying beneath him. (She also manages to convince Harriet that Mr. Elton is in love with her.) By framing all of Mr. Elton's behavior in terms that support her desired conclusion, Emma immerses them in a narrative in which Mr. Elton will soon propose to Harriet and they will all live happily ever after.

Alas, Emma's narrative is a false one. Mr. Elton is not in love with Harriet and he has no intention of proposing to her. Emma discovers this only when Mr. Elton proposes to *her* instead.

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[3] Even if you have never read *Emma,* you may find that Emma resembles you or someone you know. And if you have seen the movie *Clueless,* you may notice parallels between Emma and Cher, the lead character played by Alicia Silverstone. *Clueless* is actually a deliberate and very clever adaptation of Austen's novel.

[4] In referring to Emma by her first name and Mr. Elton by his full name, I am following Austen's own usage. She calls the characters what Emma would call them, which means that formal names are standardly used except among family and close friends around one's own age and social status. If the novel were written from Mr. Elton's perspective, Emma would be referred to as Miss Woodhouse.

As Emma has never been interested in him and certainly doesn't want to marry him, she is completely taken aback by his proposal. She has no idea how Mr. Elton ever came to the conclusion that she would be willing to marry him. Her shock, confusion, and distress lead her into reflection, which temporarily creates even more misery. Reflection forces her to recognize the illusory nature of the narrative she has created for herself and for Harriet. Since Emma prides herself on her good judgment, she is particularly upset by what she regards as her own failures to pick up on important pieces of information:

> How she could have been so deceived! He protested that that he had never thought seriously of Harriet—never! 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.[5]

Emma is correct about what went wrong. She had taken up the idea that Elton was in love with Harriet and, as she says, made everything bend to it. She does not realize this immediately; it takes some time before she can begin to appreciate her own involvement in the construction and maintenance of the false narrative. Emma comes to see that she had been so caught up in her own version of events that she failed to notice how various incidents and remarks could lend themselves to different interpretations. Behavior that she interpreted as Mr. Elton flirting with Harriet she can now see as Mr. Elton flirting with her instead. And she can also now see her own behavior, which she had meant him to think of as encouraging his relationship with Harriet, as reasonably construed as flirting with him in return.[6]

In thinking about how Emma went wrong, it's useful to divide her mistakes into two categories – epistemic failures and moral failures. Broadly speaking, an epistemic failure is a

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[5] *Emma,* p. 134

[6] Emma had been warned about this by her sister's husband, who correctly read Mr. Elton's intentions and also feared that Emma was accidentally encouraging him. Alas, she paid no attention.

failure relating to knowledge, belief, or judgment. A moral failure is a failure relating to a person's character or values, and the choices that she makes as a result of that character or on the basis of those values. Not all epistemic failures are moral failures. Sometimes we just make mistakes in our reasoning. For instance, I might miss a plane because I misjudged the amount of time it would take me to get to the airport. And not all moral failures are epistemic failures. I might become unreasonably angry at other drivers as I rush to the airport without making any reasoning errors or false judgments about them.

Often, however, epistemic and moral failures are intertwined. Suppose that I blame the other drivers for going too slowly and making me miss my plane. Here I am reasoning badly about the real cause of my lateness, which is the fact that I left for the airport too late. But my desire to put the blame on other drivers in the first place is a moral failure. This moral failure predisposes me to epistemic failures. I draw unwarranted conclusions about other drivers, but the reason I do this is that I am trying to take my problems out on other people rather than accepting responsibility for them myself. Moral failures can lead us into epistemic failures, making it difficult for us to make correct judgments. Moral failures can also make it difficult for us to recognize or admit our epistemic failures. Maybe later, after I have calmed down, I will acknowledge that my lateness was my own fault. Or maybe I will just keep blaming those other drivers because it's more convenient and pleasant than owning up to my mistakes. In that case, I will remain under the influence of that false belief. My ability to reason well about the world is affected by my moral character.

Emma's failures have both epistemic and moral dimensions. She believes that Mr. Elton plans to marry Harriet, a belief that proves to be false. Of course we are not always at fault for having false beliefs, but in Emma's case, she acquires her false beliefs through errors in her

reasoning that she could and should have avoided. She assumes she knows a great deal more about Mr. Elton's desires and motivations than she does. She also takes for granted that she knows what is best for Harriet. With these foundational assumptions in place, she proceeds to "find" evidence that supports her desired conclusion that Mr. Elton is planning to propose to Harriet. As a result, her perceptions and her reasoning get distorted. Whatever Mr. Elton says or does appears to Emma as an expression of his admiration for Harriet. In fact, she is so solidly in the grip of the story she is telling herself that she seems unable to interpret his behavior in any other light.

But it is probably more accurate to say that she is *unwilling* to interpret it in any other light. Emma is a very intelligent and perceptive young woman. She is generally an excellent judge of character and she also has exceptionally good social skills. It's not as though she can't read a room, understand hidden meanings, or pick up on social cues. And indeed, Emma does notice some inconsistencies in her narrative about Mr. Elton's being in love with Harriet. But instead of using them to rethink her judgments, she dismisses them or explains them away. This helps make sense of why she was so caught off guard when he proposed to her instead. She never imagined this scenario unfolding. Still, it does seem like she should have been able to imagine it, even if she didn't.

We might describe Emma as engaged in what philosopher Tamar Gendler calls "imaginative resistance."[7] Imaginative resistance occurs when there is some kind of constraint on our ability to imagine an event or narrative, a constraint that can have a number of origins. Gendler argues that imaginative resistance is sometimes the result of our not wanting to take up a particular perspective on the world. In other words, I resist imagining what I don't want to

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[7] Gendler, Tamar Szabó, "The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 97, no. 2 (2000): 55–81.

imagine. Emma does not want to imagine any version of the narrative that does not end in Mr. Elton and Harriet's marriage. She becomes so attached to that narrative (in part because she is the one who constructed it) that she refuses to imagine alternative narratives, even when those alternative narratives fit the facts better.

Emma's excessive attachment to her own narratives produces epistemic failures, but its roots lie in a failing that has moral dimensions. Emma is too invested in being right. More specifically, she is too invested in being the person who is right. Everyone enjoys being right, of course, since being wrong is usually not much fun. But for Emma, being right is closely linked with her self-image. She thinks of herself as having excellent judgment and she takes pride in having special insights into other people and their behavior. Being wrong affects her sense of self, giving her a powerful motivation to avoid mistakes. This motivation will prove helpful to her in the end, but it does pose an obstacle to her capacities to understand the world and herself.

Emma certainly has a great deal of self-confidence. That is not a bad thing, of course, and in her case self-confidence is justified. Most of the time, she does get things right. But the fact that Emma is usually right makes it harder for her to recognize and accept being wrong. This is exacerbated by the fact that she is almost always surrounded by people who defer to her. She spends most of her time immersed in a positive feedback loop in which her judgments are constantly affirmed. So it is not terribly surprising that Emma has trouble seeing her mistakes. The only person who ever challenges her judgment is her neighbor (and eventual love interest), George Knightley. Mr. Knightley has plenty of respect for Emma's intelligence, but he is not afraid to tell her when he thinks she is wrong. Sometimes Emma listens to him and sometimes she does not. Whether she listens to him depends on whether the subject is one on which she thinks she has more expertise than him. This is generally a reasonable standard to use when

trying to decide whether to take seriously someone else's opinion. Of course we should pay attention to the perspectives of those who know more than we do and ignore people who are just spouting off their mouths. In Emma's case, however, it backfires because Emma is not always good at assessing her own level of expertise.

This is not an unusual problem. Indeed, according to research in psychology, it is quite common. The phenomenon known as the Dunning-Kruger effect suggests that we are often lousy judges of our own abilities.[8] Experiments have shown that people who aren't particularly good at a task tend to overestimate their performance with respect to it. They don't realize that they're performing badly, like someone doing karaoke who has no idea that they are singing wildly off-key. Nor are they likely to be persuaded by evidence to the contrary. Bad drivers will continue to think they are highly competent, bad singers will continue to think they are headed for Broadway. What the Dunning-Kruger effect implies is that we should not be quick to assume that we are judging our own abilities correctly. If I am a good singer, I'm likely to believe that I'm a good singer. But if I'm a bad singer, I am also likely to believe that I'm a good singer. So how can I know whether I am really a good singer or whether I'm a bad singer with a whole lot of self-confidence?

Emma rarely doubts her own judgments about anything; she just assumes that her take on the world reflects how the world actually is. But it's worth asking whether her self-confidence is serving her well in this situation. After all, her misery after Mr. Elton proposes is due in part to her realization that in this case, her confident reliance on her own assessment of the situation was a huge mistake. Her assessment proved false and so that self-confidence was unwarranted. When she realizes this, she experiences something we might describe as a crisis of self-trust. The

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[8] Kruger, J. and D. Dunning. "Unskilled and Unaware of it: How Difficulties in Recognizing One's Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments."

philosopher Trudy Govier describes self-trust as “the ability to rely on one’s own critical reflection and judgment.”[9] Self-trust means, quite literally, that you trust yourself to make correct judgments and good decisions.

Everyone struggles with self-trust in some way or another. We are all familiar with the experience of being unsure of ourselves and our assessments, wondering if we misunderstood something or whether what we’re thinking about doing is worth the risks. For many people, self-doubt is a constant companion and not a helpful one. As Govier points out, self-trust is important for cultivating independence, self-respect, and autonomy. If we are always second guessing ourselves and our decisions, it can make it difficult to take ownership of our lives. When self-doubt is pervasive in our thinking, it will undermine self-trust and perhaps even our most basic sense of self. On the other hand, self-doubt also has an important role to play in creating and facilitating appropriate self-trust. Carefully applied, self-doubt can lead us to have more confidence in our judgments and our assessments. The challenge is to figure out when self-doubt is contributing to self-trust and when it is damaging it. What is the right amount of self-doubt?

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle famously claimed that every virtue is a mean between two extremes of vice.[10] One vice represents an excess whereas the other vice represents a deficiency. Although this claim sometimes gets distorted or given too much weight in discussions of Aristotle, there’s a certain plausibility to it. Here’s the basic idea. As Aristotle sees it, there is such a thing as the appropriate amount of anger to feel in a given situation. The virtuous person will get exactly as angry as the situation requires. She will be very angry when she sees people expressing racist ideas or behaving cruelly. And she will not be very angry when

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[9] Govier, Trudy. *Dilemmas of Trust* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1998), p. 91. In her discussion of self-trust, Govier draws on the work of psychologist Doris Brown.
[10] Aristotle first discusses the mean in Book II, Chapter 6 of his *Nicomachean Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999).

the person in front of her in the self-checkout line has twenty-one items in her cart when there is a twenty item limit. Getting really angry because you are delayed by a few seconds at the grocery store displays the vice of excess anger. On the other hand, *not* getting angry when you are insulted or when someone spouts racist vitriol in your presence shows the vice of deficient anger.

We can say something similar about self-doubt. There is such a thing as having too much self-doubt and also such a thing as having too little. Emma errs on the side of having too little self-doubt. She overestimates her own ability to judge what people are thinking and planning, as well as what would make their lives go well. Other people err on the side of doubting themselves too much, having too little confidence in their abilities and judgments. Now it may seem weird to call excessive self-doubt a vice. After all, the reasons why people don't trust their own judgment aren't necessarily their fault. All kinds of bad things can happen to a person (abuse, for instance, or gaslighting) that can make it difficult for her to develop or maintain self-trust.[11] This is certainly true. But let's set aside the question of whether any of us are to blame for our issues about self-doubt and focus instead on how we can identify and remedy whatever deficiencies or excesses we happen to have. (Keep in mind that it's possible to have both—too little self-doubt in some domains and too much self-doubt in other.)

Govier presents self-trust as a kind of virtue. On her picture, a person who has self-trust regards herself as "basically well intentioned and competent and as able to make reasonable judgments and decisions and carry out reasonable plans of actions."[12] Notice that when described

[11] This is a really serious and important issue, and I don't mean to minimize it. It is much more difficult for some people to cultivate self-trust than others, and the reasons for this are at least partly due to systemic oppression. If you want to read more on this, here are some ideas: Kristie Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing" *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011): 236-257; Kate Abramson, "Turning up the Lights on Gaslighting" *Philosophical Perspectives* 28, no. 1 (2014): 1-30; Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[12] Govier, p. 91

this way, self-trust is inward-facing. By that I mean that it focuses on how we see ourselves and our capacities for judgment. The person with the virtue believes herself to be competent at making decisions and judgments and so she has confidence in those decisions and judgments. But as we've seen with Emma, it's possible to be totally confident and also be totally wrong. So if self-trust really is a virtue, there must be some way of figuring out just how much confidence we should have in making a particular decision or judgment. To put it more dramatically, there must be a way of navigating a safe path between the Scylla of unwarranted self-doubt and the Charybdis of overconfidence.[13]

The 20th century British philosopher Philippa Foot described virtues as corrective, in the sense that they either help us resist temptations to which we are prone or else make up for deficiencies in our natural motivations.[14] If I have the tendency to get unreasonably angry, then cultivating the virtue of appropriate anger would mean learning to control my temper. In a similar way, if I have a tendency to engage in too much self-doubt, then cultivating the virtue of self-trust would mean learning to recognize when I am engaged in self-undermining patterns of thought and when I should have more confidence in my own judgments. Emma's problem, of course, is one of overconfidence. So for her, cultivating the virtue of appropriate self-trust means reining in her natural tendency to think that she is right. This means improving her self-awareness and recognizing when she is likely to make mistakes. It also means being more accepting of the mistakes that she does make. It is lucky for Emma that she has the habit of

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[13] Scylla and Charybdis are mythical hazards on opposite sides of a strait, described by Homer in the *Odyssey*. Scylla is a six-headed monster and Charybdis is a whirlpool. Odysseus and his crew had to get their ship through them without being caught by either.

[14] Philippa Foot, "Virtues and Vices" in *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), p. 8.

engaging in self-reflection, because it is primarily through reflection that she develops that self-awareness and acceptance of her own fallibility.

Reflection is a tricky business. It can easily turn into unhelpful and unproductive rumination. It can also reinforce our errors, leading us into even greater certainty that our false beliefs are true. In order for reflection to be useful in cultivating a virtuous form of self-trust, we need to engage in it well, with the right attitude and the right aims. In particular, we have to learn how to wield self-doubt effectively. In order to do that, we have to know enough about ourselves to understand how we operate and where we are likely to go wrong.

Many of the factors that go into our behavior are below our conscious awareness and beyond our immediate control. Seemingly irrelevant facts about our situation, such as whether the smell of freshly baked bread is wafting through the air, can affect what choices we make. Although none of us like to think of ourselves as simply the products of our environments, it would be a mistake to overestimate our ability to recognize and control all our behavior. Human beings are psychologically complex creatures, which means that self-knowledge is hard to come by. Much of the time, we don't know why we do what we do. Moreover, it turns out that we are also good at coming up with explanations for our behavior after the fact. At least sometimes, we tend to look at what we've done and only *then* come up with reasons why we did it. And like Emma, most of us are also fairly good at rationalization and self-deception.

It's worth noting that there may actually be practical benefits to a little self-deception. Psychologist Shelley Taylor's pioneering research indicates that positive illusions about ourselves can improve our well-being.[15] It can certainly help motivate us to achieve goals that

[15] Taylor, Shelley and Jonathon Brown, "Positive Illusions and Well-Being Revisited: Separating Fact from Fiction" *Psychological Bulletin* 116, no. 1 (1994): 21-27.

could seem impossible if we were being more realistic. After all, unless you believe you can do something, you probably won't even try. Taylor's research also indicates that optimism about the future and a sense of control can improve well-being, even in cases where the optimism isn't necessarily warranted and we have less control than we think. Perhaps self-knowledge isn't always such a good thing. Perhaps when it comes to knowing ourselves, ignorance is bliss.

Whether this is true depends on what we mean by bliss and what value we place on self-knowledge and self-trust. These are big questions, and I can only skim the surface here. It seems likely that positive illusions about our abilities and capacities may very well help sustain and maintain self-trust in certain circumstances, like when we're about to take the SAT. But in other cases those positive illusions can end up doing a lot of damage, as Emma learns. Illusions have a way of running up against the facts. The bubble around Emma's false narrative is eventually burst in ways she can't exactly ignore. True, not all false narratives are so easily punctured. People do manage to spend their entire lives deluding themselves about things. But in general, self-delusion is not a promising strategy for building self-trust. When Emma realizes how wrong she has been, her self-trust is shaken. She doubts her own capacities to understand the world. But she is able to take that experience and turn it into something that eventually enhances her self-trust. Once she gets past the initial shock and shame of having messed up so badly, she engages in reflection that helps her understand herself and her motivations better. She then uses her awareness of her mistakes as a tool for building confidence in her future judgments. The self-knowledge she acquires through reflection gives her a stronger basis for virtuous self-trust.

In order for reflection to produce greater self-knowledge, it has to be conducted in the right way and in the frame of mind. There is, as we know, a difference between reflecting on an argument I've had with a friend and rehashing it. In the former case, I am open to new insights

about the causes of the argument and how it played out. In the latter case, I am mostly justifying myself and my anger without really resolving anything. Emma's reflections do include some self-justification. But she eventually moves from that phase into one where she is more open and honest with herself about what transpired and how her own failures contributed to it.

Thus far I have mostly been focusing Emma's character flaws, but she also has character strengths. One of her strengths is that she is courageous enough to undertake painful reflection in the first place. She sits down to think even when she knows it will make her miserable. We should not underestimate the importance of this. Many of us deal with our problems by deciding not to think about them. This can be a wise strategy, since overthinking and overanalyzing problems can increase anxiety without producing any clarity. But avoiding reflection on our mistakes because we are afraid of what we might see is likely to undermine self-trust in the end. It's hard to trust a person you don't know, and so unless you know yourself, your self-trust will be resting on a shaky foundation. In order to understand ourselves, we have to be able to expose our full selves to our own inner gaze. We must be willing to take a hard look in the mirror and face unpleasant truths about ourselves that we would rather ignore. In Emma's case, the hard truth that she has to face is that she does not know nearly as much about other people as she thinks she does and moreover, that she does not necessarily know what would make their lives go well. This means that she has to admit her own ignorance, something that most of us find quite painful.[16]

It can be even more painful to expose our full selves to the gaze of others. In one cringe-worthy scene toward the end of the novel, Emma behaves rather cruelly to her neighbor, Miss Bates. When Mr. Knightley calls her out on it, she is mortified and ashamed of herself. Like

[16] Indeed, the citizens of Athens found it so painful to admit to their own ignorance that they executed Socrates for the crime of relentlessly pointing it out to them.

most people, Emma doesn't always react well to criticism in the moment, often getting defensive or dismissive. In this situation, however, she accepts his judgment as a fair assessment of her actions. She manages to avoid engaging in imaginative resistance to the idea that she has been cruel, even though she does not like to admit it. Taking up Knightley's perspective on herself is painful for Emma, but it also enables her to counter it by apologizing to Miss Bates and making amends. In this way, Emma's improved self-understanding empowers her.

This capacity to shift perspectives and see our situation from another point of view is a skill, one that requires cultivation.[17] Emma cultivates this skill over the course of the novel, primarily through her habit of reflection. Emma, of course, needs to correct her tendency to pay too little attention to what other people think. For many of us, the challenge in acquiring virtuous self-trust lies in learning to pay *less* attention to what other people think. We have to find a way to incorporate the perspectives of other people without letting those perspectives take over, swamping our own sense of who we are. It's easy to move too quickly from "this person thinks I am wrong" to "I am wrong," particularly if we are already inclined to doubt our own judgments. Reflection is useful in helping us figure out what to do with the opinions of other people. It puts us in a better position to assess the judgments that others are making about us and decide whether to take those judgments on board or reject them.

Reflection creates distance, something that we often need in order to be able to take in criticism and use it productively. In reflection, we can take a step back from our behavior and view it more openly and less defensively. Reflective distance makes it easier for us to assess the merits of what others have said, as well as their motivations for saying it. We are more able to tell the difference between an actual criticism and an offhand comment, or the difference

[17] For more on the importance of being able to shift perspectives, see Valerie Tiberius, "Wisdom and Perspective." *The Journal of Philosophy* 52, no. 4 (April, 2005): 163-182

between a snide remark and a helpful suggestion. Reflection helps us give proper weight to the judgment of people we trust and discount the judgment of people who don't know us or on whom we shouldn't depend. Reflection also helps us recognize and admit patterns in our own behavior that we might not otherwise see. What this means is that over time, the habit of reflection improves our ability to incorporate the perspectives of other people in our self-understanding effectively. We can combine their insights with our own in order to know ourselves better. And the better we know ourselves, the more we can trust ourselves.

Emma's path to self-knowledge is not always a smooth one, nor is it complete at the end of the novel. Like most of us, she has a long way to go before she truly knows herself. Perhaps she never will. But reflection enables her to see herself more clearly. She comes to recognize both the errors in her reasoning and the flaws in her character, as well as the relationship between them. This helps her cultivate the self-trust she needs to make good judgments and relate well to other people. In the end, her improved self-knowledge enables her to be more open to new possibilities and engage in better relationships. Sitting down to think does sometimes make Emma miserable, but the alternative would be worse. Even when it is painful to acquire, self-knowledge brings with it the kind of happiness that is worth having.[18]

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[18] Kim Garcher and Melissa Shew provided helpful comments on this essay. I am also grateful to my daughter, Julia Nonnenkamp, for her advice on it.