

ARISTOTELIAN HAPPINESS IN JANE AUSTEN'S NOVELS

Scris de Maria Comanescu

Vineri, 23 Septembrie 2011 11:47



*"Miss Price all alone!"
Chap. X.*

GOOD FORTUNE AND CONSTANCY

On account of what has already been discussed in the preceding chapters, at least one basically important conclusion might safely be drawn in connection to the way in which Jane Austen and Aristotle regard happiness. Happiness then, according to them both, is something which we make and acquire for ourselves, through the way in which we choose to live our life.

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Aristotle had underlined and thoroughly explained long before Jane Austen the crucial relation between the life of virtue and happiness. Jane Austen, in her turn, built up characters “whose actions are underlain by the general idea that humans have a soul that calms and orders (bodily) desires.”[1] These characters choose to be temperate rather than vicious, because they seek the superior pleasures of virtue. [2] They also believe that virtue represents the single way to happiness.

However, Aristotle reminds more than once in his *Nicomachean Ethics* of the way in which good fortune may influence our achieving happiness: “Yet evidently, as we said, it [happiness] needs the external goods as well; for it is impossible, or not easy, to do noble acts without the proper equipment. In many actions we use friends and riches and political power as instruments; and there are some things the lack of which takes the luster from blessedness, as good birth, satisfactory children, beauty [...]”[3]

As this paragraph renders evident, Aristotle speaks about the elements that do not depend entirely, or sometimes not at all on us (such as beauty, health, wealth, etc.), as “equipment” or instruments which might help us in becoming noble and virtuous. He insists on the fact that without them, it is not impossible, but it may be very hard to achieve perfect happiness. Jane Austen seems to share Aristotle’s point of view in this respect too, because she emphasizes the same idea in a dialogue between Elinor and Marianne Dashwood of *Sense and Sensibility*. Romantic Marianne who cannot decide between extremes exclaims full of pathos:

What have wealth or grandeur to do with happiness? (SS 88)

And prudent Elinor answers, implying that it is complicated to worry about doing the right deeds, when one does not have the means to support one’s family:

‘Grandeur has but little,’ said Elinor, ‘but wealth has much to do with it.’ (SS 88)

Jane Austen does not forget about this element of good fortune in general, but she does not hold it as central for her heroines’ happiness either. Thus, in *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Morland “felt herself in high luck” (NA 11) when introduced for the first time to the amiable Henry Tilney. Also, in *Pride and Prejudice*, chance has much to do with Mr. Darcy’s returning a day early to find Elizabeth visiting his beautiful estate at Pemberley. Through this unexpected meeting, Elizabeth is able nevertheless to realize the fundamental change in Darcy’s manner

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and for the first time to wonder whether he is not a man of important qualities.

Yet the novel where Jane Austen really seems to focus on the part good fortune plays in the pursuit of happiness remains *Persuasion*. Apart from the fact that the whole idea of a sailor character – Captain Wentworth – implies a touch of good luck, because the sea itself is a symbol for the unforeseen and uncontrollable, the plot also indirectly introduces the more delicate and problematic question whether happiness should be left exclusively to the whims of chance.

Captain Wentworth is a man who believes in his luck. The first time he asks Anne Elliot to marry him, he has nothing to offer her but his love and his great hopes for a better future: “He had always been lucky; he knew he should be so still.” (P 20) Anne, advised by Lady Russell, does not accept him. Indeed, later on, he proves to be lucky – the Admiral, his brother-in-law, calls him several times “lucky fellow” (P 46) – but he seems to depend too much upon his luck and to value too little his ability to make his own happiness. His vanity keeps him from approaching Anne a second time, and his whole pursuit of finding another wife is based on luck. Somehow, because of his previous disappointment, he had adopted the principle of Charlotte Lucas from *Pride and Prejudice* that “happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance.” (PP 16) Moreover, every little occurrence he hurries to account to fortune: “Putting all these very extraordinary circumstances together, we must consider it to be the arrangement of Providence that you should not be introduced to your cousin.” (P 75-76) To give chance its due claim is all right, but we are led to believe that Captain Wentworth was rather too eager to leave everything in the hands of Providence.

Aristotle points out in relation to this problem exactly: “To entrust to chance what is greatest and most noble would be a very defective arrangement.”[4] Jane Austen supports this idea and she illustrates moreover, how such a principle of life can make one irresponsible: Captain Wentworth is friendly, too friendly with Louisa Musgrove, and he finally finds himself bound to her by his honour, but not by his affections. Through a lucky chance, he escapes as Louisa falls in love with another.

Aristotle again renders the key to how people should regard good fortune: “Those who say that the victim on the rack or the man who falls into great misfortunes is happy if he is good, are, whether they mean to or not, talking nonsense. Now because we need fortune as well as other things, some people think good fortune the same thing as happiness; but it is not that, for even good fortune itself when in excess is an impediment, and perhaps should then be no longer called good fortune; for its limit is fixed by reference to happiness.”[5] So, as we may observe, Aristotle believes there ought to be a proportion in the way in which we allow ourselves to

depend on good fortune.

Likewise, the whole point of *Persuasion* is not to deny the importance of good fortune in achieving happiness,[6] but to emphasize how much we ourselves can do in order to be happy – no lucky chance would have been required had Captain Wentworth renewed his addresses to Anne, as he ought, when he got his first few thousand pounds.

While misfortune can represent a serious drawback for and may hinder our happiness, it nevertheless shows those persons who possess a noble and generous character. Aristotle remarks on this subject of unlucky events: “Yet even in these nobility shines through, when a man bears with resignation many great misfortunes, not through insensibility to pain but through nobility and greatness of soul.”[7] And although a person who is good but at the same time victim to some wretched circumstances may not be happy, that person however cannot be miserable either: “no blessed man can become miserable; [...] For the man who is truly good and wise, we think, bears all the chances of life becomingly and always makes the best of circumstances [...]” says Aristotle further on. [8]

The same attitude defines heroines like Elinor Dashwood of *Sense and Sensibility*, who finds herself in the more than unpleasant situation of having to share her rival's secret about the man she loves: Lucy Steele had been engaged for a long time to Edward Ferrars (SS 254). Elinor is very unhappy about this but she does not show her sorrow, nor does she allow it to overwhelm her. Fanny Price of *Mansfield Park* is prey to many almost insufferable circumstances, in which she is scolded or offended by her aunts (MP 72, 79, 154) and cousins (MP 123) and even occasionally by her uncle, Sir Thomas (MP 320-321). Yet she does not complain and bears it all with inner strength. Anne Elliot of *Persuasion* is similarly devoid of appreciation and love within her family, but she bears it admirably. Even more, when the man she loves – Captain Wentworth – does not understand her motives for refusing to marry him and leaves her, she remains faithful to him for over eight years.

These are heroines who bear their misfortunes and their suffering well, with nobility and grace. And the fact that they are able to keep their countenance and not collapse under the hardships they go through makes them even more worthy of admiration.

One may very well wonder at this point what, more precisely, makes these characters so strong. And the answer is constancy.

“Without constancy,” Alasdair MacIntyre observes “all the other virtues to some degree lose their point.”[9] These heroines do not merely possess virtue, but they also possess a certain kind of determination to act in accordance to virtue and in no other way. MacIntyre says that “constancy requires a recognition of a particular kind of threat to the integrity of the personality in the peculiarly modern social world,” [10] and indeed we are often surprised by the wonderful capacity of characters like Fanny Price and Anne Elliot to detect immediately where the requirements in a given situation are not well founded, and to renounce their comfort for the sake of their principles. Anne Crippen Ruderman notices that “Austen’s concern with being constant to one’s principles – with “integrity,” a word she sometimes uses – is an example of the way we see her classical outlook as responsive to the conditions of her own time.” [11]

Aristotle praises in a passage this quality of the virtues which is “permanence,” and the person who succeeds in being constant in virtue: “For no function of man has so much permanence as excellent [virtuous] activities (these are thought to be more durable even than knowledge), and of these themselves the most valuable are most durable because those who are blessed spend their life most readily and most continuously in these.”[12] Aristotle concludes that this attribute belongs to the happy person. [13]

And it may easily be observed that Jane Austen’s most virtuous characters are also the most constant. Apart from the instances in which their principles are put to trial – as in the case of Fanny Price and her refusal to act in the play – their great capacity for constancy is usually illustrated by Jane Austen through her heroines’ loyalty to their beloved man. It should be remarked however, that this loyalty is considered to be reasonable only when the young man in question is truly meritorious and virtuous himself. Thus, Emma Woodhouse of the novel *Emma* wonders how Jane Fairfax could have remained constant to a scoundrel like Frank Churchill (E 317) and Marianne Dashwood admits that she has to forget Willoughby when she understands the nature of his true character (SS 340).[14]

Alasdair MacIntyre observes with good reason that “constancy is crucial in at least two novels, *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*, in each of which it is a central virtue of the heroine.”[15] And if Fanny Price and Anne Elliot stand apart in one particular aspect, it is in this one, constancy.

Now, C. S. Lewis argues in his essay about Jane Austen that “Neither [Anne nor Fanny] has a confidant; or if Edmund had once been a confidant as well as a hero to Fanny, he progressively ceases to be so.”[16]

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However, although Fanny does notice some failings in Edmund and fears he might be deceiving himself in some situations (MP 160), she does not for one minute cease to love and respect him as much as ever. Knowing what kind of a person Fanny is (rather sacrificing anything than virtue), the fact that she remains constant in her affection for Edmund is a pledge that she had always had confidence in Edmund's virtue and spirit of doing what was right. Therefore, I would much more agree on this point with Richard Whately, who says that Fanny's love for Edmund is so strong that it even gives her the power to reject the continuous urges of Mr. Crawford to marry him: "Fanny is, however, armed against Mr. Crawford by a stronger feeling than even her disapprobation; by a vehement attachment to Edmund." [17] And this attachment could not have been so "vehement" unless Edmund had possessed true merit.

But, however impressive, no example of constancy from all Jane Austen's novels can stand comparison to that of Anne Elliot from *Persuasion*. She is a model of constancy and loyalty.

Anne does not only remain true in her love for Captain Wentworth for over eight years, but she also is perhaps the most dedicated heroine in her pursuit of doing what is right and avoiding any kind of mistake. For what can be more striking than Anne who, after eight years of unhappiness, declares that in fact she cannot blame herself for refusing to marry Captain Wentworth the first time he asked her, because she was young then and she had to listen to the advice of a more experienced friend:

I have been thinking over the past, and trying impartially to judge of the right and wrong, I mean with regard to myself; and I must believe that I was right, much as I suffered from it, that I was perfectly right in being guided by the friend whom you will love better than you do now. To me, she was in the place of a parent. Do not mistake me, however. I am not saying that she did not err in her advice. It was, perhaps, one of those cases in which advice is good or bad only as the event decides; and for myself, I certainly never should, in any circumstance of tolerable similarity, give such advice. But I mean that I was right in submitting to her, and that if I had done otherwise, I should have suffered more in continuing the engagement than I did even in giving it up, because I should have suffered in my conscience. I have now, as far as such a sentiment is allowable in human nature, nothing to reproach myself with; and if I mistake not, a strong sense of duty is no bad part of a woman's portion. (P 176)

Anne's love for truth is most transparent in this passage in which she explores her past actions. Richard Whately explains her position perfectly in the following paragraph: "To disregard the advice of soberminded friends on an important point of conduct, is an imprudence [...]; indeed,

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it is a species of selfishness, if, in listening only to the dictates of passion, a man sacrifices to its gratification the happiness of those most dear to him as well as his own.”[18]

Similarly, Aristotle insists upon the activity of “deliberation,” which he renders as most important in taking decisions: “Deliberation is concerned with things that happen in a certain way for the most part, but in which the event is obscure, and with things in which it is indeterminate. We call others to aid us in deliberation on important questions, distrusting ourselves as not being equal to deciding.”[19] Likewise, Aristotle criticizes people like Louisa Musgrove, who is strong headed and he says that such persons will not listen to advice, because they do not want to renounce their passions: “There are some who are apt to abide by their opinion, who are called strong-headed, viz. those who are hard to persuade and are not easily persuaded to change [...]. It is to reason that they refuse to yield, for they do form appetites and many are led by their pleasures.” [20]

In the case of Louisa, her stubbornness cost her an accident in which she might have died – unbending to friendly urges, she used to jump down from the stairs as an amusement. But the whole situation of Louisa’s accident provided another chance for the narrator to emphasize Anne’s constancy in virtue, and her capacity to do the right thing even when taken by surprise. Aristotle again points out how important it is to be brave in sudden alarms, not necessarily in foreseen and previously prepared situations, because this means that courage lies within the inner character of that person.[21] And Anne is “so proper and so capable” (P 81) when the tragedy occurs that it is clear virtue has become for her an instinct and a habit.

Apart from praising and recompensing with happiness the characters who practice virtue for a constancy, Jane Austen criticizes those who are easy-going and changeable. She seems to hold the same opinion about “change” as Aristotle: “But ‘change in all things is sweet,’ as the poet says, because of some vice; for as it is the vicious man that is changeable, so the nature that needs change is vicious; for it is not simple nor good.”[22]

Precisely this sort of reluctance to doing something “for a constancy” (MP 345) is expressed by Henry Crawford of Mansfield Park. In zeal of earnestness he wishes to impress Fanny with his desire for perhaps becoming a preacher in the future, but in fact he gives her unconsciously a better proof of his true nature:

[...] And I do not know that I should be fond of preaching often; now and then, perhaps, once or twice in the spring, after being anxiously expected for half-a-dozen Sundays together; but not

for a constancy; it would not do for a constancy. (MP 345)

This passage shows how Henry Crawford takes the more profound matters of the soul lightly and regards even serious activities like preaching as opportunities for amusement. He is used to vice and to entertainment and his mind is full of those. Not so full though as to make him thoroughly incapable of understanding Fanny's shake of the head (MP 345) by which she wanted to say that, in truth, he was inconstant. Crawford understands all right, because in his following speech to Fanny he stresses exactly those defects which he possesses ("easily swayed by the whim of the moment, easily tempted, easily put aside" (MP 347)) but which he says he does not possess. By proving himself to be the contrary, he boasts, he will gain Fanny's love and hand in marriage. And indeed, he might have won these, had he really done what he ought. But Crawford's problem is that although he is able to understand and even, finally, to suffer for what he lost (MP 472) he cannot put in practice what he knows, because he had had a wrong kind of education and his habits are all vicious. From this point of view Henry Crawford resembles very much Aristotle's "incontinent man" who "knowing that what he does is bad, does it as a result of passion." [23] That is why Crawford cannot restrain from eloping with Maria Bertram.

Yet Aristotle does not blame so much the "incontinent man" as he blames the "self-indulgent man" whom he considers to be even worse. For, he says, "the self-indulgent man, as we said, has no regrets; for he stands by his choice; but any incontinent man is subject to regrets." [24]

And, indeed, the reader of *Mansfield Park* is bound to have some sympathy for Henry Crawford, who regrets his weakness and his losing Fanny:

[...] we may fairly consider a man of sense, like Henry Crawford, to be providing for himself no small portion of vexation and regret; vexation that must rise sometimes to self-reproach, and regret to wretchedness, in having so requited hospitality, so injured family peace, so forfeited his best, most estimable, and endeared acquaintance, and so lost the woman whom he had rationally as well as passionately loved. (MP 474)

While for Frank Churchill of *Emma*, the only feeling with which the reader remains is contempt. Contempt for his behaving like a "villain" as Mr. Knightly calls him (E 327), and still being proud of it (E 362). However the contempt is doubled by disgust for Wickham of *Pride and Prejudice* who has the nerve to come back to Longbourn and behave as though nothing wrong had happened and even try to go on with his lies about Mr. Darcy (PP 220).

All these - Crawford, Frank Churchill, Wickham, and of course, Willoughby too – are characters who have identified, Jane Austen implies, happiness with amusement in the first place; and here, according to her, they have been wrong, even if, as in the case of Wickham, they refuse to admit it.

Aristotle most certainly objects to such a philosophy of life: “Happiness does not lie in amusement; it would, indeed, be strange if the end were amusement, and one were to take trouble and suffer hardship all one’s life in order to amuse oneself.”[25] He concludes that “happiness must be some form of contemplation,” [26] thus praising and giving happiness a metaphysical dimension. This supreme activity, which is much superior to mere pleasure and to any action leading to pleasure or amusement, is shared by God and is attainable by humans only through the constant practice of the virtues.

Jane Austen also appears to give happiness a metaphysical dimension – of course in another way than Aristotle, because after all she was a Christian, although religion is by no means a central theme in her novels. She seems to suggest, especially in *Mansfield Park*, that actually the most complete and perfect happiness does not belong to this world (MP 479).[27] However, a very great deal of this “unearthly” happiness can be achieved through constancy in virtue, as heroines like Anne Eliot amply demonstrate.

Nota Karamazov.ro: Ultimul capitol din eseu va fi publicat saptamana viitoare, vineri

Sumar:

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[1] Anne Crippen Ruderman, *The Pleasures of Virtue*, 123.

[2] In Chapter 1 I have already discussed why the pleasures one finds in living virtuously are considered by Jane Austen to be the superior, and indeed the only true kind of pleasures.

[3] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1099a32-1099b3.

[4] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1099b23-24.

[5] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1153b18-24.

[6] Anne Crippen Ruderman observes in her work *Love and Marriage in the Novels of Jane Austen* the following: "The role of "luck" in the naval successes of Captain Wentworth is insisted upon. Wentworth's merits are rewarded at sea, and Anne's virtues are rewarded in the end with a good husband, but these things are not inevitable but rather owe something to good fortune." (266)

[7] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1100b30-32.

[8] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1100b33-1101a8.

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[9] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 242.

[10] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 242.

[11] Anne Crippen Ruderman, *The Pleasures of Virtue*, 147.

[12] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1100b12-17.

[13] "The attribute in question, then, will belong to the happy man, and he will be happy throughout his life; for always, or by preference to everything else, he will do and contemplate what is excellent [virtuous] and he will bear the chances of life most nobly and altogether decorously, if he is 'truly good' and 'foursquare beyond reproach'." (1100b17-21)

[14] I owe this observation about being constant and loyal to men who possess virtue to Anne Crippen Ruderman, who observes the same in her book *The Pleasures of Virtue*, 147.

[15] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 242.

[16] C. S. Lewis, "A Note on Jane Austen," 29.

[17] Richard Whately, "Modern Novels," 108.

[18] Richard Whately, "Modern Novels," 111.

[19] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1112b7-11.

[20] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1151b5-12.

[21] "Hence also it is thought the mark of a braver man to be fearless and undisturbed in sudden alarms than to be so in those that are foreseen; for it must have proceeded more from a state of character, because less from preparation; for acts that are foreseen may be chosen by calculation or reason, but sudden actions in accordance with one's state of character." (1117a16-21)

[22] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1154b26-31.

[23] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1145b11-16.

[24] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1150b29-60

[25] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1177a1-1859.

[26] Aristotle discusses this: "Now if you take away from the living being action, and still more production, what is left but contemplation? Therefore the activity of God, which surpasses all others in blessedness must be contemplative; and of human activities, therefore, that which is most akin to this must be most of the nature of happiness." (1178b23-1862)

[27] Anne Crippen Ruderman observes the same in *The Pleasures of Virtue*: "Austen seems ultimately to think that the perfection or completeness aimed at by virtue is not available in this life." (122).