Scris de Maria Comanescu
Vineri, 19 August 2011 10:38

Untitled document

PRACTICAL WISDOM IN DISCOVERING "THE MEAN"

The ancient Greeks – and also Aristotle – are famous for their ideal of perfection which for them was represented by harmony, order, equilibrium. And they sought these values everywhere and in everything, whether in art, or in political societies, or in the characters of human beings as such.

This continual search for the right proportion has been most suitably termed by Irving Babbitt as the "law of measure" which he sustains, was not crucial for the Greek spirit alone, but also for the classical spirit in general.[1]

Jane Austen is herself true to this spirit when she explores in her novel, Sense and Sensibility, the way in which reason and feeling are best "intertwined,"[2]namely when the latter – which often gets into the peril of running loose and out of control – is marred by reason. By – perhaps without intention, but only incidentally – indirectly making use of what is known as Aristotle's "doctrine of the mean," Jane Austen seeks to describe the portrait of a good person with the best kind of character. In this story it takes the shape of Elinor Dashwood, in other stories, the one of Fanny Price or Anne Eliot. Although these heroines share the attribute of finding the right measure in everything – "from thought, to deed and emotion" – Jane Austen only hints to this quality in what regards Fanny and Anne through their Anne also is praise worthy for the way she manages her hypochondriac sister, Mary, maintaining a proportion between being kind and realistic about the latter's imagined illness (P 28). In Sense and Sensibility, however, she actually focuses precisely on this talent of finding the right proportion in everything, through her heroine, Elinor.

Moreover, being an excellent writer, Jane Austen knows her skill; so, in order to emphasize certain capacities of one character she sometimes introduces another, who lacks those same capacities altogether, or misuses them.[3] And at this point enters stage charming Marianne – who in truth is most charming as Captain Brandon observes (SS 54) – but who, unlike her sister Elinor, does not even take into consideration the possibility of her relating to anything which represents an intermediate state (in what she thinks, or does, and primarily, in what she feels) between two extremes: she wants everything or nothing. And this philosophy of life, she would find blasphemous even to think of changing.

A short discussion of what Aristotle more exactly understands through his "doctrine of the mean" is now appropriate.

Aristotle says, in the first place, that in order to do what is right one has to choose virtue, "for excellence [virtue] makes the aim right."[4] He further on distinguishes between moral and intellectual virtue, the first having to do with the character and the second with the mind.
[5] But in the discussion about "the mean" he is interested in the moral, or character related virtue.
[6] It represents, according to Aristotle, that state which is an intermediate
[7] between a defect and an excess; to clarify this point, he gives the example of what being brave means, and he reaches the conclusion that being brave is a middle state between being a

coward (defect) and being rash (excess).
[8]

However, in discovering where this "middle state" lies – because it is not always simple to identify this, as it depends also a great deal on the person and on the situation or context involved – one needs to possess what Aristotle calls phronesis, or practical wisdom, and which seems to be very similar to what Jane Austen understands by prudence.[9] Aristotle says it is an intellectual virtue, which is most important because it enables us to actually distinguish "the mean," or in other words, what is proper and appropriate to do, think or feel in any situation.[10] By choosing "the mean" we are neither weak, nor exaggerated (for example, in a context in which it is appropriate to feel a certain amount of anger, practical wisdom aims at keeping that anger in proportion with what the facts require).

Aristotle also stresses the idea that practical wisdom is a kind of knowledge, which is not easy to attain, because one has to practice the moral virtues first. So, while practical wisdom helps us act virtuously, acting virtuously at the same time helps us gain practical wisdom.[11] They form thus a complementary pair, which is in itself harmonious, neither of the parties occurring without the other.

Now the whole point of Sense and Sensibility lies in exploring what the proper relation between reason or sense and feeling or sensibility should be. We have Elinor Dashwood – one of Jane Austen's most virtuous characters – who is rather on Aristotle's side in believing that there is a sort of proportion in what one ought to feel and do, which is guarded by reason and good judgment:

Elinor […] possessed a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment, which qualified her, though only nineteen, to be a counsellor of her mother, and enabled her frequently to counteract, to the advantage of them all, that eagerness of mind in Mrs. Dashwood which must generally have led to imprudence. She had an excellent heart; her disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong; but she knew how to govern them: it was a knowledge which her mother had yet to learn, and which one of her sisters [Marianne] had resolved never to be taught. (SS 4-5)

While Elinor seems to possess this kind of knowledge which very much resembles Aristotle's practical wisdom, we find Elinor's sister, Marianne, almost of a radically opposed opinion: she holds, contrary to Elinor, that feelings should be those which ought to govern reason, and

should be masters over what we do; and she does not recognize, at the beginning at least, any problem in her "excess of sensibility" (SS 5):

Marianne's abilities were, in many respects, quite equal to Elinor's. She was sensible and clever, but eager in everything; her sorrows, her joys, could have no moderation. She was generous, amiable, interesting: she was everything but prudent. The resemblance between her and her mother was strikingly great. (SS 5)

Although Elinor and Marianne share a love and respect for virtue, they end up behaving in strikingly different manners, even when involved in similar or identical situations, on account of their difference of opinion precisely in regard with the importance and liberty they ascribe to feeling. Gilbert Ryle observes:

Marianne and Elinor are alike in that their feelings are deep and genuine. The difference is that Marianne lets her joy, anxiety and grief so overwhelm her that she behaves like a person crazed. Elinor keeps her head. She continues to behave as she knows she should behave. She is deeply grieved or worried, but she does not throw to the winds all considerations of duty, prudence, decorum or taste.[12]

There are many instances in the book when Marianne exceeds, in exaltation, what is due to a particular circumstance: even from the beginning of the novel we find her, along with her mother mourning over and over again because of their misfortune of losing their wealth, while Elinor with equal reasons for grief, manages to collect herself and even to convey hope and strength to the others:

They [Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood] encouraged each other now in the violence of their affliction. The agony of grief which overpowered them at first, was voluntarily renewed, was sought for, was created again and again. They gave themselves up wholly to their sorrow, seeking increase of wretchedness in every reflection that could afford it, and resolved against ever admitting consolation in the future. Elinor, too, was deeply afflicted; but still she could struggle, she could exert herself. (SS 5)

Elinor is also the one who finds the right measure of friendliness towards the ridiculous, yet kind Mrs. Jennings, who disgusts Marianne with her incongruous and misplaced jokes up to the point

where Marianne does not even try to be polite anymore. Yet although Mrs. Jennings makes herself sometimes insufferable, she has, as Elinor appreciates, her qualities too, which should be respected:

Elinor, who did justice to Mrs. Jennings's kindness though its effusions were often distressing, and sometimes almost ridiculous, made her those acknowledgements, and returned her those civilities, which her sister could not make or return herself.(SS 186)

It is not only in these matters that Elinor succeeds in "keeping her head" but also in the more delicate matters of the heart. When her chances of ever being reunited with the man she loves, Edward Ferrars, are almost gone forever, she does not despair nor does she let herself be overpowered by pain and grief. She suffers, that is for sure, but she does not put her suffering on display, nor does she find it necessary to torment her family with her wretchedness, since she is perfectly aware that there is nothing they or she can do about it. She knows she has done her duty and that represents comfort and support enough for her ("By feeling that I was doing my duty. […] I have many things to support me. I am not conscious of having provoked the disappointment by any imprudence of my own, and I have borne it as much as possible without spreading it further." (SS 254-5)). Not for Marianne, though, who, when disappointed in love, exhibits her wretchedness and unlike Elinor, she finds it her duty not to pull herself together and to refuse consolation:

Marianne would have thought herself very inexcusable had she been able to sleep at all the first night after parting from Willoughby. She would have been ashamed to look her family in the face next morning, had she not risen from her bed in more need of repose than when she lay down in it. But the feelings which made such composure a disgrace, left her in no danger of incurring it. She was awake the whole night, and she wept the greatest part of it. She got up with an headache, was unable to talk, and unwilling to take any nourishment; giving pain every moment to her mother and sisters, and forbidding all attempt at consolation from either. Her sensibility was potent enough. (SS 80-81)

Moreover, Marianne blames those people who try to suppress their feelings, because she finds them insincere and almost cowards in bending to the hypocritical rules of society. In referring to a somewhat too open discussion with Willoughby on their first meeting, she exclaims ironically:

I have been too much at my ease, too happy, too frank. I have erred against every common-place notion of decorum! I have been open and sincere where I ought to have been

reserved, spiritless, dull, and deceitful. Had I talked only of the weather and the roads, and had I spoken only once in ten minutes this reproach would have been spared. (SS 46)

We may perceive here how Marianne mocks the "petty" rules of society, which for her present no value at all. We are told how she "abhorred all concealment" (SS 51): for her this concealment meant "a disgraceful subjection of reason to common-place and mistaken notions." (SS 51) Therefore she showed all her feelings (even her love for Willoughby, who had not publicly declared his own love for her) without restraint or reserve. She is akin to Mr. Darcy of Pride and Prejudice in not taking into consideration that this forwardness of sentiment may inflict unnecessary pain, injury and offense in certain situations: Mr. Darcy claims that "disguise of every sort is my abhorrence" (PP 131) and he mentions Elizabeth's inferior connections, making her feel miserable.[13] Marianne too, manages rather to hurt Elinor on some occasions through her effusions rather than to mend a tensed atmosphere. (SS 230) Both Mr. Darcy and Marianne bespeak in such contexts as these a lack of practical wisdom in finding the best mean of shielding the feelings of other persons besides their own.

Here as well, Elinor has a much more balanced attitude, because she does not altogether refuse any of the laws of decorum imposed by society – many of which she considers good, and she also expresses some fears for the future of a sister who could maintain such prejudices:

"There are inconveniences attending such feelings as Marianne's, which all the charms of enthusiasm and ignorance of the world cannot atone for. Her systems have all the unfortunate tendency of setting propriety at nought; and a better acquaintance with the world is what I look forward to as her greatest possible advantage." (SS 54)

Yet, at the same time, Elinor is by no means guilty of ever supporting the idea that we should "let ourselves be guided wholly by the opinions of other people." (SS 91) On the contrary, her doctrine is rather that we should be able to discern between what is good and what is bad, this being valid for the rules of society as well.[14] But at the same time she has a "plan of general civility" as Edward Ferrars calls it (SS 91), by which she avoids as much as possible to offend anyone. She herself declares that:

My doctrine has never aimed at the subjection of the understanding. All I have ever attempted to influence has been the behavior. You must not confound my meaning. I am guilty, I confess, of having often wished you to treat our acquaintance in general with greater attention; but when have I advised you to adopt their sentiments or conform to their judgment in serious matters?

(SS 91)

And it is true that Elinor possesses that amount of practical wisdom which enables her to be polite even to vulgar types of characters like Lucy and Anne Steele. (SS 123) It is also true that up to a certain moment, Marianne lacks it. And, as Gilbert Ryle observes, in Jane Austen's novels "there is a prevailing correlation between sense of duty, sense of propriety and aesthetic taste. Most of her people who lack any one of these three, lack the other two as well."[15] This idea is very much in accord with Aristotle's belief that it takes "the best and most complete" virtue to compose human good.
[16] Marianne abounds in aesthetic taste, but she is rather poorly provided in the other two, which puts her very much in the danger of loosing her happiness, for "one swallow does not make a summer."
[17] Jane Austen does not develop any concrete argumentation about why Marianne is wrong in over-exacerbating her sensibility, but she implicitly renders it through the tragic end that Marianne almost reaches because of her romantic ideas, which she summarises herself in the following passage:

I saw that my own feelings had prepared my sufferings, and that my want of fortitude under them had almost led me to my grave. My illness, I knew well, had been entirely brought on by myself, by such negligence of my own health as I felt even at the time to be wrong. Had I died, it would have been self-destruction. (SS 339)

As Karen Stohr puts it, "It is not until the end of the novel that Mrs. Dashwood and Marianne learn to appreciate Elinor's carefully directed emotions and the extent of the effort she has consistently put into maintaining that direction. Indeed, Marianne's eventual character transformation is a vindication of what Elinor has been all along."[18]

Marianne realizes she had been wrong and Elinor right, yet still, as Aristotle reminds us, it is not easy to attain practical wisdom without having constantly practiced the virtues first, and so Marianne makes Elinor smile "to see the same eager fancy which had been leading her [Marianne] to the extreme of languid indolence and selfish repining, now at work in introducing excess into a scheme of such rational employment and virtuous self-control." (SS 336)

The discrepancy between the sisters is up to a point so great that Gilbert Ryle goes as far as to ascertain in the novel an "antagonism between Head and Heart."[19]Maybe Elinor would say that Marianne uses her heart too much and perhaps she would be right; and maybe Marianne

would describe Elinor as "sometimes collapsing into a Head rather loosely buttoned on to a Heart," [20] yet we cannot find another passage in the whole book where Elinor is criticized for using her head, except by Marianne. [21] Jane Austen does not seem to take into consideration this danger of "collapsing into a Head" and therefore the whole point of her novel rather becomes the theme of "combining the best Heart and the best Head in the best person."
[22]

Jane Austen seeks to portray examples of "equilibrium [through Elinor] or else inequilibrium [through Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood, Mrs. Jennings and even occasionally through Edward Ferrars] between judiciousness and feeling."[23]

In Sense and Sensibility Elinor is the prototype of the balanced person – who is also the most virtuous person – and she stands in great contrast, as has been already mentioned, to her sister but also to other characters.[24]

For example, let us consider Mrs. Jennings. She is a woman who has the best intentions and who wishes in the first place to make everyone feel fine. She therefore alludes to all sorts of spicy episodes she does not even know very well from the lives of the persons present, managing instead to embarrass at least half of the company.[25] Her feelings for the others are noble and good – we are at a certain moment quite touched by her motherly feelings towards Marianne, who treats her abominably in return – yet she lacks the practical wisdom Aristotle is talking about in discerning what would indeed be for their benefit.
[26] Her problem is similar to that of Emma Woodhouse of the novel Emma: she does not perceive the answer to the question "Where is the line between Meddling and Helping?"
[27] In the same way Emma intrudes in Harriet Smith's life, so does Mrs. Jennings intrude in the lives of her acquaintances, only in a more vulgar way.

Edward Ferrars is another character in Sense and Sensibility who is, at least for one crucial moment guided by his feelings, rather than his reason. In the course of the novel we are announced, more or less briskly, that Edward had been engaged to be married for a long while to Miss Lucy Steele. He had entered this engagement when he was very young, and we have every reason to believe that, as he grew older, he learnt to regret it. However, that was a moment of over-sentimentality in Edward's life who, moreover, had not a reason in the world to be in such a hurry then in making so important a step. Yet by the time he meets Elinor and falls in love with her, he had already understood how to govern his feelings – although he does not govern them so well as to immediately avoid Elinor when he perceives the danger of their falling

in love with each other – and he is ready to sacrifice his sentiments to his duty for Lucy.

But Jane Austen does not restrict herself in talking about the right measure just to Sense and Sensibility, although here it appears as a central theme.

Catherine Morland of Northanger Abbey goes far beyond the safe limits of imagination in letting herself believe that General Tilney could be the murderer of his wife. She could have spared herself the reproach of Henry Tilney, had she been wise enough to guard her romantic dreams.

"In Persuasion [also] Jane Austen gives us what she would have been surprised to hear was a good rendering of Aristotle's doctrine of the Mean"[28] says Gilbert Ryle in connection with the following passage:

Anne wondered whether it ever occurred to him [Wentworth] to question the justness of his own previous opinion as to the universal felicity and advantage of firmness of character; and whether it might not strike him that like all other qualities of mind it should have its proportions and limits. (P 83)

Anne is the embodiment of a neither too "persuadable temper" nor a too "resolute character," the mean between extreme cases like those of Henrietta – who bends too easily to what other people urge her to do (P 62) – and Louisa – who does only her own will, and never listens to anybody else's advice (P 62).

A keen interest may therefore be perceived in Jane Austen's novels in finding an equilibrium, balance and measure in every action, feeling and thought. Like Aristotle, she seems to consider that state of right proportion – acquired through self-control – as analogous to virtue. Long practice and constancy in virtue confer, according to her opinion as well, the best kind of life and ultimately, happiness. This principle of life is particularly emphasized in characters such as Elinor Dashwood, Fanny Price and Anne Eliot.

However dedicated Jane Austen might appear – in presenting these characters – to the idea that reason should govern feeling, the issues ought not to be confused, as Alasdair MacIntyre

points out: "Morality in Jane Austen is never the mere inhibition and regulation of the passions; although that is how it may appear to those such as Marianne Dashwood who have romantically identified themselves with a ruling passion and who make in a very unHumean way reason the servant of the passions. Morality is rather meant to educate the passions […]"[29]

Other motifs which are common to both Aristotle and Jane Austen, and also, connected to the "doctrine of the mean" are those concerning "proper pride" and "justice." Because they are wide themes, a separate chapter is appropriate for their discussion.

---

[1] Irving Babbitt, in his book Rousseau and Romanticism explains: "Aristotle not only deals positively and experimentally with the natural order and with man so far as he is a part of this order, but he deals in a similar fashion with a side of man that the modern positivist often overlooks. Like all the great Greeks Aristotle recognizes that man is the creature of two laws: he has an ordinary or natural self of impulse and desire and a human self that is known practically as a power of control over impulse and desire. If man is to become human he must not let impulse and desire run wild, but must oppose to everything excessive in his ordinary self, whether in thought or deed or emotion, the law of measure. This insistence on restraint and proportion is rightly taken to be of the essence not merely of the Greek spirit but of the classical spirit in general." (16)

[2] I have borrowed this term to describe the relation between reason and feeling from Anne Crippen Ruderman's work: Love and Marriage in the Novels of Jane Austen: A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Division of Social Sciences in Candidacy for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago, 1990), 32.

[3] Gilbert Ryle is arguing the same idea in his essay "Jane Austen and the Moralists": "Jane Austen's technique is the method of the vintner. She pin-points the exact quality of character in which she is interested, and the exact degree of that quality, by matching it against the same quality in different degrees, against simulations of that quality, against deficiencies of it and against qualities which, though different, are brothers or cousins of that selected quality." (288)

[4] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1144a8.

[5] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1103a8-10, 1103a14-25.

[6] "Therefore excellence [virtue] is a kind of mean, since it aims at what is intermediate." (Nicomachean Ethics 1106b27-28)

[7] Aristotle explains: "By the intermediate in the object I mean that which is equidistant from each of the extremes, which is one and the same for all men; by the intermediate relatively to us that which is neither too much nor too little – and this is not one nor the same for all." (1106a24-1106b7) He continues: "Now excellence [virtue] is concerned with passions, in which excess is a form of failure, and so is defect, while the intermediate is praised and is a form of success; and both these things are characteristics of excellence." (1106b24-27)

[8] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1104a10-27.

[9] Anne Crippen Ruderman identifies in The Pleasures of Virtue Jane Austen's term "prudence" with the virtue called by Aristotle phronesis (63-67). Alasdair MacIntyre in After Virtue tends to associate phronesis with "constancy" in Jane Austen's novels (183).

[10] "Excellence [virtue], then, is a state concerned with choice, lying in a mean relative to us, this being determined by reason and in the way in which the man of practical wisdom would determine it." (Nicomachean Ethics 1106b36-1107a8)

[11] Aristotle concludes: "It is clear, then, from what has been said, that it is not possible to be good in the strict sense without practical wisdom, nor practically wise without moral excellence." (1144b30-1145a6)

[12] Gilbert Ryle, "Jane Austen and the Moralists," 287.

[13] I owe this observation of the similarity between Marianne and Darcy to Sarah Emsley who underlines it in her book Jane Austen's Philosophy of the Virtues(New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 65.

[14] For a better grasp of the general view Elinor's attitude appears to bestow on the rules of society I insert the following quote from Irving Babbitt's book Rousseau and Romanticism: "The conclusion would seem to be that because the good sense and decorum of one time and country do not coincide exactly with those of another time and country, therefore good sense and decorum themselves have in them no universal element, and are entirely implicated in the shifting circumstances of time and place. But behind the ethos of any particular country, that of Greece, for instance, there are, as Antigone perceived, the 'unwritten laws of heaven,' and something of this permanent order is sure to shine through even the most imperfect convention. Though no convention is final, though man and all he establishes are subject to the law of change, it is therefore an infinitely delicate and perilous task to break with convention. One can make this break only in favour of insight; which is much as if one should say that the only thing that may safely be opposed to common sense is a commoner sense, or if one prefers, a common sense that is becoming more and more imaginative. Even so, the wiser the man, one may surmise, the less likely he will be to indulge in a violent and theatrical rupture with his age." (175)

[15] Gilbert Ryle, "Jane Austen and the Moralists," 297.

[16] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1097b22-1098a16.

[17] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1098a17-19.

[18] Karen Stohr, "Practical Wisdom and Moral Imagination in Sense and Sensibility" (Philosophy and Literature 30 (2006): 378- 394), 383.

[19] Gilbert Ryle, "Jane Austen and the Moralists," 287.

[20] Gilbert Ryle, "Jane Austen and the Moralists," 288.

[21] Marianne wonders "how cold and composed" (SS 37) Elinor was when she and Edward were bidding farewell and that in "quitting Norland, cried not as I did. Even now her self command is invariable." (SS 38) In the same way her mother calls her "ungracious" (SS 78) because she doubts Willoughby's intentions towards her sister. In fact she is the only person who is rational enough to realize that there is something wrong with him.

[22] Gilbert Ryle, "Jane Austen and the Moralists," 287.

[23] Gilbert Ryle, "Jane Austen and the Moralists," 288.

[24] Karen Stohr underlines in her essay "Practical Wisdom and Moral Imagination in Sense and Sensibility": "Elinor's behaviour throughout the novel is in sharp contrast to that of Marianne and Mrs. Jennings. Despite being in possession of good moral principles, neither is routinely capable of acting in a way that reflects what they correctly hold to be valuable." (383)

[25] On many occasions she does this: she teases Elinor about her supposed lover's initial (SS 59), she pries into Colonel Brandon's private affairs when he has to leave suddenly for London and she invents all kinds of stories about his "natural daughter." (SS 62-64)

[26] To do her justice, it should be mentioned that when Willoughby's character is made public, she is one of the first who has the good sense to exclude him from her society and to acknowledge his faults. Also we find her on a certain occasion trying hard not to listen to what Elinor and Colonel Brandon were privately talking (SS 273), which shows again that she possessed some amount of good judgment, perhaps not enough, though.

[27] Gilbert Ryle, "Jane Austen and the Moralists," 290.

[28] Gilbert Ryle, "Jane Austen and the Moralists," 296.

[29] Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue, 241.{jcomments on}