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PLEASURE AND DUTY

In a discussion either about the works of Aristotle, or those of Jane Austen, I find it crucial that a subject which appears to be so dear to both philosopher and writer – as I am aiming to emphasize further on in this chapter – be mentioned even from the beginning. I am referring, of course, to what Anne Crippen Ruderman has aptly called "the pleasures of virtue" – she has even used this same phrase as a title for her book The Pleasures of Virtue: Political Thought in the Novels of Jane Austen, thus stressing the fact that, when we speak about the virtues and the good life, we must not altogether banish any reference to pleasure.

For who would even imagine happiness without pleasure? {jcomments on}And I have already mentioned in the "Introduction" that the whole of this study is centered round the idea of

happiness. Indeed, Aristotle himself acknowledges happiness as "the best, noblest, and most pleasant thing"[1] and he talks about pleasure in two places – Book I and Book X of his Nicomachean Ethics.

Now "Aristotle's most distinctive and fundamental claim [in the Nicomachean Ethics] is that our ultimate goal [as human beings] is activity in accordance with virtue."[2] And this ultimate goal is what he refers to as happiness or the good life.
[3]

At first, Aristotle's claim may sound extremely radical, because he surely makes a distinction between the life of virtue and the life of pleasure. Apparently, "Aristotle takes a dim view of what he calls the life of pleasure,"[4] which, he underlines, is often erroneously taken for happiness or good by "the vulgar type of people." [5]

However, Aristotle does not agree with opinions of the type expressed by Catherine Morland in Northanger Abbey – and neither does Jane Austen, for that matter, but she had probably observed such a general tendency and criticized it in this scene. Catherine's opinion is, implicitly, that pleasure is necessarily associated with doing something wrong. She cannot imagine, at least at first, that pleasure might also arise when one has taken the right decision. She would much rather think that where there is a feeling of pleasure, a wrong action is the source.[6] That is why she struggles so between keeping and breaking her engagement of going for a walk with her new friend, Miss Tilney. The fact that she is willing to keep it makes her feel unsure and afraid that she might be blinded by her wishes:

Setting her own inclination apart, to have failed a second time in her engagement to Miss Tilney, to have retracted a promise voluntarily made only five minutes before, and on a false pretence too, must have been wrong. She had not been withstanding them [her brother and her other friends who were insisting on her joining them for a drive instead of going for a walk with Miss Tilney] on selfish principles alone, she had not consulted merely her own gratification; […] no, she had attended to what was due to others, and to her own character in their opinion. (NA 64)

Anne Crippen Ruderman explains that "Catherine's distrust of herself comes because her choice coincides with her inclination. She seems to think the safest way to do right is to oppose one's own pleasure – "a sacrifice was always noble," (NA 66) she reflects a bit later."[7]

Catherine "feels greatly relieved by Mr. Allan's approbation of her own conduct," whose "opinion as an unprejudiced person she asks for." (NA 67)

Although Catherine's problem in this particular sequence of Northanger Abbey may seem puerile and unimportant, it all the same illustrates two philosophical issues, which also appear in Jane Austen's later works (Northanger Abbey is considered to be Jane Austen's first major work).

The first one is Catherine's continuous and serious concern with doing what is right. In this respect she is really very Aristotelian.[8]

The second one is the way she regards pleasure. Catherine seems to exclude the possibility of pleasure from a virtuous life. Here, she differs from Aristotle's view.

D. S. Hutchinson explains that "for Aristotle, the paradigm case of pleasure is being aware of something that holds our attention, e.g., listening to good music or understanding an elegant mathematical theorem [for the lover of music and, respectively, for the lover of Mathematics]. […] On Aristotle's analysis, whether a pleasure is good depends entirely on whether the associated activity is good."[9]

So, Aristotle does not concede that pleasure is good or bad taken in itself. It strictly depends upon the activity with which that certain pleasure is connected; and, since the virtues are good, the pleasure one feels when acting virtuously – for the lover of virtue – is also good and sufficient.[10]

Unlike her heroine, Catherine Morland, Jane Austen herself rather seems to believe that the pleasure which adjoins a good action, or the fulfillment of one's duty, is actually the truest pleasure, while the other momentary enjoyments which we sometimes mistake for pleasure are, in fact, vices in disguise that are bound to make us unhappy.[11]

Perhaps the best example to illustrate this in Jane Austen's novels remains the sad case of Henry Crawford of Mansfield Park, who repents in the end his submitting to the "immediate

pleasures." "Had he done as he intended, and as he knew he ought, by going down to Everingham after his return from Portsmouth, he might have been deciding his own happy destiny."(MP 473) Yet he throws away every possibility of happiness together with the woman he loves (Fanny Price), all for one moment of enjoyment which ruins his reputation forever and "provides for himself no small portion of vexation and regret; vexation that must rise sometimes to self-reproach, and regret to wretchedness […]." (MP 474)

Another similar but more fortunate example is that of Marianne Dashwood of Sense and Sensibility, who realizes soon enough that her "own feelings had prepared her sufferings" (SS 339) and begins right away to reorganize her life from "languid indolence and selfish repining" to "rational employment and virtuous self-control." (SS 336)

On a smaller scale, but also illustrating the idea that by choosing to do what is right we spare ourselves later sorrows, the example of Emma Woodhouse of Emma should be mentioned. The scene is the one in which Emma, for the sake of enjoying what she thought to be a good joke, offends poor Miss Bates, who was not only much older than herself and thus was entitled to more respect, but was also in an inferior financial position which "should have secured [Emma's] compassion" (E 284) rather than her ridicule. However, Emma is not a being without feeling and she suffers for her mockery:

She was vexed beyond what could have been expressed – almost beyond what she could conceal. Never had she felt so agitated, mortified, grieved at any circumstance in her life. She was forcibly struck. (E 284)

Moreover, what to the rest of the party and even to herself – had circumstances been different – may have remained a pleasant day to recollect, Emma considers it:

[…] a morning more completely misspent, more totally bare of rational satisfaction at the time, and more to be abhorred in recollection, than any she had ever passed. (E 285)

Maybe this self-secured regret for wrong actions represents also the reason why Jane Austen never punishes her wicked characters. She just leaves them to that fate which they themselves have chosen and which is in fact, bad enough. For what can be worse than the indefeasible loss of one's happiness?

Anne Crippen Ruderman observes:

Austen, like Aristotle, implies that the pleasures of self-control are the truest pleasures. Wrongdoers in the novels are not punished but rather left to the natural consequences of their actions. Willoughby's "misconduct… brought its own punishment" in the loss of the woman who could have made him happy, but Austen goes on to point out that "he lived to exert, and frequently to enjoy himself. His wife was not always out of humor, nor his home always uncomfortable" (SS 373). Henry Crawford has more "wretchedness" for his actions because, with more sense and feeling than Willoughby, he knows more what he has lost (MP 474). In these cases and others Jane Austen blames the habit of pursuing "immediate pleasure" for the loss of these greater pleasures (MP 473).[12]

In both Aristotle's and Jane Austen's view, true pleasure is that feeling which accompanies "virtuous activity." It is a feeling which naturally appears, when a person has done the right thing. Aristotle implicitly explains what doing the right thing means through his theory of the "function of man," which he concludes to be the "activity of the soul in conformity with excellence [virtue]."[13] From this follows that the pleasures of virtue – which indeed, not seldom imply our sacrificing our desires and momentary enjoyments, as well as whatever may be categorized as excess – are in fact the true pleasures, as they are specific to our nature as human beings.

Jane Austen, in accord with Aristotle's theory, recognizes throughout her novels a certain sense of duty that we should all feel as human beings, to live according to our nature, that is, virtuously – "to govern our inclinations and tempers by that sense of duty which can alone suffice (MP 468)."[14] Moreover, fulfilling this duty is bound to lead us to happiness, and it also constitutes, in her opinion, the most pleasant sort of living.

The determination to act exclusively in pursuit of her own happiness is illustrated in Elizabeth Bennet's remark:

I am resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my opinion constitute my happiness, without reference to you, or to any person so wholly unconnected with me. (PP 241)

She continues, when Lady Catherine reproaches her that in pursuing her happiness she is ready to overlook the principles of duty, honour and gratitude:

Neither duty, nor honour, nor gratitude […] would be violated […] in the present instance. (PP 241)

What Elizabeth implies is that had one of these principles indeed been violated, then she would not have acted for her happiness anymore, but simply for her own selfish interest. Yet she is convinced that she is doing what is right, and although in the present case her happiness incidentally does coincide with her immediate pleasure (that of marrying Mr. Darcy), she is not discouraged, like Catherine Morland, on this ground. On the contrary, she believes it is her duty to act as she thinks best and she does not exclude pleasure from this.

More mature than Catherine, Elizabeth seems to have understood and live up to the idea that: "To determine what virtue is, it is useful to be on guard against pleasure, while yet a good man finds virtue pleasant."[15] She is one character who cannot be suspected of accepting to marry Mr. Darcy on account of her pleasure in the sense of convenience or financial security, because she had already refused him the first time he had asked for her hand in marriage, refusing at the same time his fortune, and his social status. And she had done this because she loved virtue more than any material convenience. Yet now, when the true merit of Mr. Darcy had been proven, she does not find it outlandish to be accepting both virtue and pleasure at the same time.

In vain does Lady Catherine blame her for being determined to marry her nephew [Mr. Darcy] out of selfish desires; it is Lady Catherine herself who is acting out of selfishness in this case, as she is resolved to have Mr. Darcy as a husband for her own daughter.

However, the subject concerning pleasure and duty is a delicate one and it has many aspects. Because –as has been shown – not even for one moment may we interpret Elizabeth's understanding of duty in Mary Crawford's way – the much disputed character from Mansfield Park and Jane Austen's most superficial one.

Miss Crawford holds that:

> It is everybody's duty to do as well for themselves as they can. (MP 293)

This philosophy refers strictly to pursuing one's own desires (financial in the first place), and it is "implicitly criticized when we see her [Mary Crawford] use it to defend the ambitious but extremely unhappy marriages of her London friends (MP 365)."[16] The same selfishness is to be found also in Mr. Eliot, a character from Persuasion who is also criticized for the fact that for him "'To do the best for himself,' passed as a duty." (P 143). In both cases, Mary Crawford, as well as Mr. Eliot confuse "the best for oneself" as meaning "to do well in marriage, from a financial point of view."

Duty – which for Elizabeth meant sacrificing anything for the sake of virtue – is portrayed in the opinion of these two characters as "what you want it to be."[17] But this brings us back to modern relativism, a trend which is as far away from Jane Austen's world view as possible, as Anne Crippen Ruderman again points out:

Austen rejects the radical individuality that is a premise of modernity. To be sure, her characters have feelings and desires that are personal, and one purpose of propriety is to protect these sentiments from the notice of others. But Austen shows to a surprising degree that it is not one's feelings and desires but rather one's character and actions that most define who one is. Furthermore, virtue has a permanent, objective content that defines what the best sort of character and actions are.[18]

Jane Austen's own opinion about duty is expressed in the words of Mr. Knightely in Emma who says that it is "the one thing which a man can always do, if he chuses." (E 112). Let us look into the context of this affirmation, though: Mr. Knightely is referring here to Frank Churchill who had failed to pay his respects in due time to his new stepmother, as duty and respect for his father would have required of him. So, what Mr. Knightely is in fact criticizing here is exactly this attitude of leisure and submitting to "mere pleasure." (E 112)

Elizabeth Bennet remarks at one moment in what regards her sister's, Lydia, rash marriage that "little of permanent happiness could belong to a couple who were only brought together because their passions were stronger than their virtue" (PP 209)

Both examples show that it depends entirely upon that person to build his or her happiness, by choosing, or failing to choose what is right. By duty Jane Austen understands doing what you must do in order to fulfill your goal as a human being, whatever your inner desires may be. "Austen, like Aristotle, implies that the pleasures of self-control are the truest pleasures."[19]

It should be clear from this account of how virtue and pleasure are described in her novels, that Jane Austen, unlike the modern society, found these two not only compatible, but also she considered pleasure as depending a great deal on and being triggered by virtue. Whereas nowadays' society is inclined to regard pleasure and virtue as excluding one another and to draw an indefeasible line between them. In a similar way, Catherine Morland was drawing an unsurpassable line between pleasure and virtue, although for completely different reasons, as she, in her naivety, was continuously concerned with doing what was right, while people today are continuously concerned with finding the easiest way to feel easy and not worry about anything. Yet Jane Austen found virtue and pleasure perfectly compatible, provided that by pleasure we understand what it really is: not passion or desire or enjoyment (as these render only momentary pleasure, and then bitterness), but a feeling of fulfillment, content, comfort and satisfaction, conferred by the awareness of having done your duty as a human being.[20]

And now, following Aristotle's example, who after having discussed the importance of happiness, and having cleared the problem of pleasure, continues with developing the subject of the virtues as such, focusing at first on the famous "equal," or the "mean," I also am going to proceed with this theme, as it is likewise present in the works of Jane Austen.

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

Introducerea eseului poate fi citita aici iar primul capitol publicat poate fi citit aici

[1] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1099a25-26.

[2] Michael Pakaluk, Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics: An Introduction, 4.

[3] Aristotle says: "It is correct also in that we identify the end with certain actions and activities; for thus it falls among goods of the soul and not among external goods. Another belief which harmonizes with our account is that the happy man lives well and fares well; for we have practically defined happiness as a sort of living and faring well." (1098b16-20)

[4] D. S. Hutchinson, "Ethics." The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle (Ed. J. Barnes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 211.

[5] Aristotle comments: "To judge from the lives that men lead, most men, and men of the most vulgar type seem (not without some reason) to identify the good, or happiness, with pleasure; which is the reason why they love the life of enjoyment." (1095b14-16)

[6] Aristotle equally criticizes the persons who claim that pleasure is good and the ones who claim that it is "thoroughly bad – some no doubt being persuaded that the facts are so, and others thinking it has a better effect on our life to exhibit pleasure as a bad thing even if it is not; for most people (they think) incline towards it and are the slaves of their pleasures, for which reason they ought to lead them in the opposite direction, since thus they will reach the middle state." (1172b8-1852)

[7] Anne Crippen Ruderman, The Pleasures of Virtue: Political Thought in the Novels of Jane Austen (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995), 40.

[8] Like Aristotle, Catherine believes that "those who act rightly win the noble and good things in

life." (1099a4)

[9] D. S. Hutchinson, "Ethics," 211.

[10] Aristotle says: "Now since activities differ in respect of goodness and badness, and some are worthy to be chosen, others to be avoided, and others neutral, so, too, are the pleasures; for to each activity there is a proper pleasure. The pleasure proper to a worthy activity is good and that proper to an unworthy activity bad;" (1176a3-1858) He goes further: "the lovers of what is noble find pleasant the things that are by nature pleasant; and excellent actions are such, so that these are pleasant for such men as well as in their own nature. Their life, therefore, has no further need of pleasure as a sort of adventitious charm, but has its pleasure in itself (1099a10-14). Aristotle continues – as it will be shown further on – by saying that actually "virtuous activity" is defining for our nature as human beings and that it is inbred for all people to feel the pleasures of virtue.

[11] Aristotle holds the same in the following passage: "In reply to those who bring forward the disgraceful pleasures one may say that these are not pleasant; if things are pleasant to people of vicious constitution, we must not suppose that they are also pleasant to others than these, just as we do not reason so about the things that are wholesome or sweet or bitter to sick people, or ascribe whiteness to the things that seem white to those suffering from a disease of the eye." (1173b31-1855)

[12] Anne Crippen Ruderman, The Pleasures of Virtue, 8.

[13] Aristotle seeks in this passage to find what is specific to human beings, their function. He excludes nutrition and growth, because these are common even to plants as well, then he excludes "the life of perception" as this is common to animals too, and what he is left with is "an active element that has a rational principle." Thus he concludes that "human good turns out to be activity of soul in conformity with excellence, and if there are more than one excellence, in conformity with the best and most complete." (1097b23-1098a16)

[14] The narrator of Mansfield Park relates how Sir Thomas Bertram regrets at the end of the novel the fact that he had not taught his children the importance of these principles.

[15] Anne Crippen Ruderman, The Pleasures of Virtue, 17.

[16] Anne Crippen Ruderman, The Pleasures of Virtue, 4.

[17] Anne Crippen Ruderman, The Pleasures of Virtue, 4.

[18] Anne Crippen Ruderman, The Pleasures of Virtue, 4.

[19] Anne Crippen Ruderman, The Pleasures of Virtue, 8.

[20] A crucial example illustrating this idea is Elinor Dashwood's case in Sense and Sensibility. When asked by Marianne "How have you been supported [in your sorrows]?" Elinor answers "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 254-245) Similar is the case of Anne Eliot of Persuasion, who is supported through her suffering by her being aware that she had always yielded in the first place to what she thought to be her duty. (P 174)