



Habit and The Contemplative Life

In the previous chapters quite a number of things have been said about virtue: how it confers the truest kind of pleasure, how it is harmonious because it is the middle state between two or more extremes, and how, ultimately, virtue is sure to bring happiness to those who practice it.

This represents Aristotle's, as well as Jane Austen's belief. Yet, while emphasizing the importance of living virtuously in order to gain happiness, Aristotle insists on, and constantly reminds us from time to time throughout the whole of the *Nicomachean Ethics* of the crucial role

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habit plays in achieving this life of virtue.

Aristotle says that although *"it is easier to change a habit than to change one's nature, even habit is hard to change because it is like nature, as Evenus says:*

I say that habit's but long practice, friend,

And this becomes men's nature in the end."[1]

"It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference" concludes Aristotle.

[2]

Jane Austen, likewise, ascribes but little to chance, in what regards the formation of our characters. Of course, she by no means denies the fact that there are some people who are made good by nature, but she seems to believe that whether they remain good when they grow older is no more a matter of fortune, but it depends entirely on the sort of activities they choose to practice as a habit.[3]

Therefore, in this light, it is not necessary that *"they who are good-natured when children, are good-natured when they grow up"* (PP 166) as the housekeeper from Pemberley seems to believe. On the contrary, the example of Mr. Darcy shows us how he might have remained a *"selfish being all his life,"* (PP 248) although he had been *"the sweetest-tempered, most generous-hearted boy in the world,"* (PP 166) because he had been allowed as a child to practice the good principles he had been given in *"pride and conceit."* (PP 248)

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Nor is it enough to merely know what is right in order for a person to become good.[4] Mr. Darcy complains that
“as a child he was taught what was right, but he was not taught to correct his temper.”
(PP 248) and seems to hold this lack of practice responsible for the deficiencies in his later behavior. Elizabeth encompasses the same idea in the following paragraph using her pianoforte performance as an example:

My fingers do not move over this instrument in the masterly manner which I see so many women's do. They have not the same force or rapidity, and do not produce the same expression. But then I have always supposed it to be my own fault – because I would not take the trouble of practising. It is not that I do not believe my fingers as capable as any other woman's of superior execution. (PP 120)

With virtue, it is the same as with the skill of playing the piano: if one wishes to become proficient, then one has to be in the habit of practicing. Knowing the theory will not suffice here, and indeed, few are the arts where perfection can be achieved through idleness.

Jane Austen is very critical about such persons, who have the knowledge, but overlook the practice, and this is particularly evident in characters like Mr. Bennet and his daughter Mary Bennet. Mr. Bennet, for one, is called by David Gallop *“the most notable case of theory dissociated from practice.”* [5] He is witty, intelligent, and an intellectual. It is clear that he is able to discern very well between wisdom and folly, and he understands that he has three *“silly and ignorant”* (PP 4) daughters and a wife *“of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper.”* (PP 4) Yet this makes his situation even more deplorable and unforgivable, because he takes no measures to stop them from exposing themselves and their whole family to ridicule and shame. Even when the evil is done, and Lydia is gone with Wickham, Mr. Bennet shows but little presence of spirit or interest, and the situation is finally mended by the girls' uncle Gardiner and by Mr. Darcy, while the father comforts himself quickly with the words:
“No, Lizzy, let me once in my life feel how much I have been to blame. I am not afraid of being overpowered by the impression. It will pass soon enough.”
(PP 200)

His daughter, Mary, actually takes much after her father, though she is by far not as likable as him. She is rather made to be insufferable. Mary Bennet is ready with a remark for every situation, but her aim is not to make anybody wiser through mentioning pieces of what she read;

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she just boasts with her intellect. David Gallop points out that *“She can draw a pious moral from the plight of the disgraced Lydia, while remaining emotionally untouched by it (PP 193). She borrows a philosopher’s distinction between pride and vanity from a moral text book (PP 14). Yet even as she is defining pride, there is a nice irony in her priding herself upon “the solidity of her reflections.” In her, as in her father, thought and action are pointedly disconnected.”*
[6]

Habit, whether in doing something right, whether in doing something wrong (like Mr. Darcy who considered all the people as inferior and unworthy), or whether in doing nothing (like Mr. Bennet) is of the utmost importance and really *“makes all the difference”* as Aristotle says. Yet Mr. Darcy’s is a minor mistake, because it is not of principle and he is able to correct it when he meets a person worthy of being honoured and admired, in Elizabeth Bennet.

Sadder cases than his are described in Mansfield Park though, where Jane Austen really seems to explore the theme of habit, good or bad, as *“a second nature”* and almost impossible to be changed. She again uses the technique of contrast to illustrate how education influences habit, further on how habit influences later behavior, and how in the end that behavior gains or forfeits happiness.

Aristotle insists very much on the idea that *“moral excellence [virtue] is concerned with pleasures and pains; it is on account of pleasure that we do bad things, and on account of pain that we abstain from noble ones. Hence we ought to have been brought up in a particular way from our very youth, as Plato says, so as both to delight in and to be pained by the things we ought; for this is the right education.”*
[7]

In Mansfield Park, Jane Austen focuses especially on different kinds of persons developing different kinds of habits, because they have had a certain kind of education and have been brought up in a particular way.

Fanny Price, the heroine of the novel is taken to Mansfield Park because her own family is poor and numerous. Sir Thomas Bertram, her rich uncle, had offered to help them by raising Fanny in his home with his own children. It was considered to be *“an education for her”* (MP 9) and a great opportunity. However, they never *“put themselves out of their way to secure her comfort”* (MP 12) when she arrived at Mansfield Park, and moreover they treated her as an inferior and

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never stopped wondering at her ignorance, her plain clothes, her lack of taste in music. Her cousins, Maria and Julia, made no efforts to get better acquainted, not to speak of making friends with her (MP 12-13). Still, before too long, her nice cousin Edmund – who perceived in Fanny

“a great desire of doing right”

(MP 15) – took it upon himself to direct her reading by recommending books, to encourage her taste and to correct her judgment, which was an education in itself (MP 21). Edmund was always kind and good to her, and by this he gained Fanny’s eternal gratitude and love. He was the one who, according to her understanding, had improved her mind, and by giving her a horse, also her body. Maybe she did not perceive that it was also the discontent of the others, their haughtiness, and their treating her more as a Cinderella than as a cousin, which had made her habit so enduring, so good, so obedient and yet so determined – it should be observed how Fanny is very obedient as a rule, but when it comes to matters of principle, she does only what she thinks is right: she is decided not to act in the play although she is violently urged (MP 149-150), and she cannot be persuaded to marry Mr. Crawford, although she is even more insistently urged (MP 317-324). Her sufferings had prepared her to be patient, and the scolding of Mrs. Norris, her aunt, and occasionally, of her cousins, had prepared her for a life of self-control and forbearance. She was obliged by these circumstances not to yield to comfort or to desire. And this, although in itself it was not pleasant, made it easier for Fanny to be virtuous. She was able to control her passions, to suffer in silence and to love discretely.

The education Sir Thomas had given Fanny turns out to be, through no merit of his, and in spite of his ideas that she should be treated as to always remember that she is no equal of her cousins (MP 9), much more beneficial for his niece than the prestigious education he had given his own children. His daughters, in opposition to Fanny, are very accomplished in music, dancing, French and geography (MP 16-17). While the stress is laid on memory (MP 17) in bringing them up, such simple principles as *“governing their inclinations and tempers by that sense of duty which can alone suffice”* (MP 468) are overlooked. Even worse, the sense of duty is a distorted concept in their minds, as can be perceived in a paragraph describing Maria Bertram:

Being now in her twenty first year, Maria Bertram was beginning to think matrimony as a duty, and as a marriage with Mr. Rushworth would give her the enjoyment of a larger income than her father’s, as well as ensure her the house in town, which was a prime object, it became, by the same rule of moral obligation, her evident duty to marry Mr. Rushworth if she could. (MP 37-38)

And how could she have regarded the matter otherwise when her own mother, Lady Bertram, promotes this principle exactly:

It is every young woman's duty to accept such a very unexceptionable offer as this. [MP 336]

The same problem occurs in the education of Mary and Henry Crawford. Mary clearly declares that what actually counts in life is to seek financial security:

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

As Gilbert Ryle observes, although *"Henry and Mary Crawford have accomplishments, vitality, wit, artistic tastes and charms, they speak undutifully in public about the unsatisfactory uncle who had brought them up; they resent the unexpected return of Sir Thomas Bertram from Antigua to the bosom of his own family, simply because it puts a stop to their theatricals; and even between brother and sister the relations are cordial rather than intimate."*

[8]

So the education in both the Bertrams' and in the Crawfords' case had been oriented more towards giving them the skill of being pleasant in society and making it easy for them to follow their desires by living a comfortable life. Certainly their habits developed in accordance with the values they had been taught, and they lacked solid principles. Moreover, flattery made them vain and selfish. This is especially emphasized in the case of the Miss Bertrams who are continuously praised by Mrs. Norris, their aunt. Fanny had been spared this for as Mary Crawford points out *"she had been used [more] to deserve praise than to hear it."* (MP 115)

To do him justice, it should be mentioned that Sir Thomas Bertram realizes and regrets the way in which he had brought up his four children, out of which only one turns out well – Edmund, who is very near to going astray himself in marrying Mary Crawford, though. Also, Edmund does not show enough determination to stick to his principles, like Fanny does, when he yields and accepts to act in that frivolous play – *"Was he not deceiving himself?"* (MP 160) wonders even faithful Fanny when she sees him seeking reasons for wanting to act. This was because neither of the Bertrams had been in the habit of doing otherwise than their own will dictated. Sir Thomas *"had meant them to be good, but his cares had been directed to the understanding and manners, not to the disposition."* (MP 468)

This was also the case of Mary and Henry Crawford, who had acquired “London *habits*” (MP 40) meaning that they loved the frivolous, eccentric, rather expensive and vast diversions a big city could offer. They did not even respect the people who had brought them up, which reflects, as Fanny wisely remarks, a great deal upon the aunt and uncle in question (MP 63-64). This kind of education leaves them with serious drawbacks, as Mary Crawford is very materialistic, while Henry Crawford is a notorious flirt. His case is more interesting however, because through him Jane Austen seeks to illustrate how hard it is to change one’s habits, once they are formed. Henry Crawford starts with a desire to flirt with Fanny and ends up by falling himself in love with her. He endeavors to change his superficial and idle character, but fails almost on the first occasion he meets temptation, and elopes with Maria Bertram, who was by then already married to Mr. Rushworth. He lives to regret his failure in gaining Fanny’s hand, which he would have deserved, had he behaved in a virtuous way. (MP 472)

Jane Austen underlines the fact that “*Henry Crawford had been ruined by early independence and bad domestic example*” (MP 472) and Aristotle also insists on how children should be taught and accustomed to doing and loving what is right; and this should be done by rules because when left by themselves, children are not yet mature enough to discern what is in truth beneficial for them.

[9] He concludes:

“The character, then, must somehow be there already with a kinship to excellence [virtue], loving what is noble and hating what is base.”

[10]

Besides naturally being a “*very well-disposed, good-humoured girl*” (MP 9) Fanny’s merit lies in that she had developed the habit of loving what is good and right, and avoiding with any risk what is wrong. The rules she had to obey had been the scolding of her aunt Norris and the very simple life she was obliged to lead. This makes her very different from the other characters of Mansfield Park – who all have difficulties in protecting themselves against evil when it coincides with their desires – yet not so different from other main heroines of Jane Austen’s novels in general. The same persistence in choosing virtue as a habit is to be found from little and immature Catherine Morland of Northanger Abbey – who is very concerned with doing the proper things; see the scene where she asks if it is appropriate to go for a buggy ride (NA 66-67) – to more mature Elizabeth Bennet of Pride and Prejudice and Emma Woodhouse of the novel Emma. Emma is always trying to improve her conduct and regrets heartily when she realizes her mistakes; see the scenes in which she deplores her errors concerning Mr. Elton and Harriet Smith (E 103) or Frank Churchill (E 323), and her blunder concerning Miss Bates (E 284). Nevertheless this persistence is most acute in heroines like Elinor Dashwood of Sense and Sensibility, Anne Elliot of Persuasion and Fanny Price of Mansfield Park; one has the feeling they could not be overpowered by misfortune, so strong is their virtue; they also are Jane Austen’s most mature characters.

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Still, Fanny has something which makes her singular, and on this aspect I would like to focus, as it is related to both habit and the contemplative life, another important Aristotelian theme.

Surely, Fanny is not charming like Elizabeth Bennet (who is "*a mixture of sweetness and archness*" which makes her bewitching (PP 36)) or Emma Woodhouse (even Mr. Knightly concedes the fact that he has "*seldom seen a face or figure more pleasing than her's*" (E 31)).

[11] But, again unlike them,

"Fanny Price commits no errors,"

as C. S. Lewis observes,

[12] and although she has almost nothing else – Mary Crawford says with good reason that Fanny has only Edmund as a friend (MP 301) –

"she has the genuine virtues to protect her."

[13]

C. S. Lewis describes a certain similarity between Anne Elliot of *Persuasion* and Fanny Price. Apart from the fact that neither of them "*commits errors*," they both pertain to a world apart, a world which is detached from the materialistic or physical universe of the other characters. Their pleasures rather seem to be the superior ones of the intellect, if we adopt Aristotle's classification:

"Now sight is superior to touch in purity, and hearing and smell to taste; the pleasures, therefore, are similarly superior, and those of thought superior to these, and within each of the two kinds some are superior to others."

[14] C. S. Lewis

says:

These solitary heroines who make no mistakes have, I believe – or had while she was writing – the author's complete approbation. This is connected with the unusual pattern of Mansfield Park and Persuasion. The heroines stand almost outside, certainly apart from, the world which the novel depicts. It is in it, not in them, that self-deception occurs. They see it, but its victims do not. They do not of course stand voluntarily apart, nor do they willingly accept the role of observers and critics. They are shut out and are compelled to observe: for what they observe, they disapprove.

[15]

Anne Eliot, although surrounded by people of inferior intellect than her own, still is not totally devoid of affection and appreciation – from Lady Russell, from the elder Musgroves (P 32), from Charles Musgrove and even from Louisa Musgrove (P 63). Fanny, on the other hand, has just

Edmund, who when preoccupied with Miss Crawford, too easily overlooks and even forgets his cousin (MP 68-71, 99, 116). She indeed is the involuntary witness of Edmund's misplaced passion for Miss Crawford, of Mr. Crawford's and Maria's flirting (MP 118), of Mr. Rushworth's folly (MP 168), of Miss Crawford's flattery (MP 151), and she always seems to be an outsider whom they prefer to ignore. *"Even physically, we see Fanny alone; perpetually in the East Room with its fireless grate and its touching, ridiculous array of petty treasures [...]."*
[16]

However pitiable her situation may seem, we do not find Fanny ever crying over her fate. She accepts it and her only concern is to feel enough gratitude for what she has: *"Heaven defend me from being ungrateful!"*

(MP 325) Anne Crippen Ruderman says that

"Fanny is interesting not as someone with extraordinary virtue but as someone who takes seriously the possibility that virtue is not so easily known or achieved."

[17] That is why we often encounter Fanny in an attitude of contemplation. She is in the habit of marveling about the order of nature – true, she does not possess the talent of Miss Crawford for socializing, but neither does Miss Crawford possess the ability to wonder at anything *"but herself"*

when walking in a beautiful shrubbery (MP 211) – and of seeking that potential perfect order in harmony by gazing at the stars which through themselves denote the idea of cosmos:

Here's harmony! Here's repose! Here's what may leave all painting and all music behind, and what poetry only can attempt to describe! Here's what may tranquilize every care, and lift the heart to rapture! When I look out on such a night like this, I feel as if there could be neither wickedness nor sorrow in the world; and there certainly would be less of both if the sublimity of Nature were more attended to, and people were carried more out of themselves by contemplating such a scene. (MP 115-116)

Aristotle expresses more or less the same idea about the contemplative activity:

And we think happiness has pleasure mingled with it, but the activity of wisdom is admittedly the pleasantest of excellent [virtuous] activities; at all events philosophy is thought to offer pleasures marvelous for their purity and their enduringness, and it is to be expected that those who know will pass their time more pleasantly than those who inquire. And the self-sufficiency that is spoken of must belong to the contemplative activity.[18]

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It should be observed, however, that Jane Austen implicitly considers that there exists a tight relation between the contemplative life and habit. In other words, she does not seem to believe that contemplation can belong to those who have developed bad and superficial habits, because it involves profundity; and when character is deficient in taking matters seriously, so must be the mind. This is particularly evident in the scene where Mr. Crawford reads aloud from Shakespeare (MP 341). Fanny had already underlined the fact that she and Mr. Crawford were so different in *"nature, education, and habit."* (MP 330) In this episode the opposition is striking, because while Henry Crawford speaks about Shakespeare's plays lightly, considering them easy to understand, Fanny enjoys the way in which a good reading can emphasize the various complex themes of the text. For Crawford the plays clearly represent mere opportunity for acting, not for thinking. We see here how their attitudes are utterly, and moreover, fundamentally opposed: in Aristotelian terms, for Fanny acting represents a means towards a certain goal – that of understanding better a literary work, while for Henry Crawford acting represents a goal in itself. The explanation would be that he used to act as a habit, even in his every-day dealings with people and situations. Fanny on the other hand is not used to treat matters superficially; she is in the habit of seeking deep and serious meaning in everything that surrounds her.

Fanny does not have any interest in trivial matters, and however lonely she might find herself from time to time, she does not envy the shallow glamour of her cousins, or more importantly, of Miss Crawford. She does not even stop to wonder whether they might be the truly happy ones. She knows, as well as Mr. Darcy of *Pride and Prejudice*, that being accomplished does not mean just to *"have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages"* (PP 27) and neither to merely *"possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions"* (PP 27) – this is the description provided by Miss Bingley for the accomplished person; yet by it Henry Crawford and Mary Crawford become ideals of accomplishment, and by extension, indeed any good actor. Mr. Darcy however aptly observes that *"to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading,"* (PP 27) delicately implying that those qualities enumerated by Miss Bingley are hardly of primary consequence in portraying a meritorious person.

Like Anne Eliot, Fanny rejoices in her choosing the more superior pleasures of the intellect:

Anne always contemplated them [fashionable and merry Louisa and Henrietta] as some of the happiest creatures of her acquaintance; but still, saved as we all are by some comfortable feeling of superiority from wishing for the possibility of exchange, she would not have given up her own more elegant and cultivated mind for all their enjoyments; [...]. (P 29)

And Jane Austen surely implies throughout her novels that Anne's choice is the right one. Nothing can be compared with the contemplative life. Yet no contemplative ability can be achieved by those who lack the habit of living virtuously.

Virtue, again, also stands at the basis of the truest friendships; so does Aristotle teach us and so does Jane Austen appear to believe too, as may be seen in the next chapter, where I am going to approach friendship as a central theme in a discussion about Aristotelian happiness.

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

[Introducerea eseului](#) [Capitolul 1 Pleasure and Duty](#)[{comments on}](#) [Capitolul 2 Practical Wisdom in Discovering 'The Mean'](#)

[Capitolul 3 Proper Pride and Justice](#)

[1] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1152a27-33.

[2] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1103b24-26.

[3] Aristotle also observes that: "Now some think that we are made good by nature, others by habituation, others by teaching. Nature's part evidently does not depend on us, but as a result of some divine causes is present in those who are truly fortunate; while argument and teaching, we may suspect, are not powerful with all men, but the soul of the student must first have been cultivated by means of habits for noble joy and noble hatred, like earth which is to nourish the seed." (1179b31-1864)

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[4] Aristotle also sustains the idea that it is not enough to know what is good; one needs to do what is good: "Surely, as is said, where there are things to be done the end is not to survey and recognize the various things, but rather to do them; with regard to excellence [virtue], then, it is not enough to know, but we must try and use it, or try any other way there may be of becoming good." (1179b19-1864)

[5] David Gallop, "Jane Austen and the Aristotelian Ethic," 100.

[6] David Gallop, "Jane Austen and the Aristotelian Ethic," 101.

[7] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1104b8-12.

[8] Gilbert Ryle, "Jane Austen and the Moralists," 293.

[9] Aristotle offers the following discussion on this subject: "But it is difficult to get from youth up a right training for excellence [virtue] if one has not been brought up under right laws; for to live temperately and hardily is not pleasant to most people, especially when they are young. For this reason their nurture and occupations should be fixed by law; for they will not be painful when they have become customary. But it is surely not enough that when they are young they should get the right nurture and attention; since they must, even when they are grown up, practice and be habituated to them, we shall need laws for this as well and generally speaking to cover the whole of life; for most people obey necessity rather than argument, and punishments rather than what is noble." (1185a5-1864)

[10] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1179b31-1864.

[11] Alasdair MacIntyre concludes sharply in his *After Virtue*: "Fanny is charmless" (242), while C. S. Lewis comments in his article "A Note on Jane Austen" (*Essays in Criticism* 4 (1954): 359-371) that "We do not even believe in what Jane Austen tells us of her good looks; whenever we are looking at the action through Fanny's eyes, we feel ourselves sharing the consciousness of a plain woman." (29)

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

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

[14] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1176a3-1858.

[15] C. S. Lewis, "A Note on Jane Austen," 30.

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

[17] Anne Crippen Ruderman, *Love and Marriage in the Novels of Jane Austen*, 146.

[18] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1177b26-1860.