



THE WAY TO HAPPINESS

Jane Austen's novels are most remarkable through the fact that, at least in certain instances and aspects – the ones I have endeavored to emphasize in the previous chapters – they represent pieces of literature perfectly illustrating great ideas of Aristotelian philosophy. Although it is not at all certain that Jane Austen actually read Aristotle's writings,[1] the way in which she builds her characters and their ideals, makes it as though she could not exemplify more aptly his philosophical concepts, had she purposefully tried.

The first striking resemblance – and the one on which the whole of this work is based – between Jane Austen's novels and Aristotelian thought lies in the importance bestowed on happiness or the good life. Aristotle is famous for his philosophy centered on happiness as the ultimate goal or target aimed at by any human being,[2] and not surprisingly, all of Jane Austen's six novels reach their ending when their main heroines reach and secure their happiness. This only shows that from Jane Austen's perspective the greatest stake in the story

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of one's life is whether one has succeeded in gaining happiness. And like Aristotle, she seems to believe that once achieved, this happiness can hardly be lost again, because in order to have gotten to it one needs to be strong and constant in doing what is right.

[3]

And here, the second great similarity between Jane Austen's novels and Aristotelian philosophy becomes obvious. For her novels imply what Aristotle explicitly says in his *Nicomachean Ethics*: "excellent [virtuous] activities or their opposites are what determine happiness or the reverse." [4] Therefore, all Jane Austen's virtuous characters are ultimately blessed with happiness, while her passionate, whimsical and pleasure-seeking characters seem to bring upon themselves the punishment of wretchedness, at the best, and of an unhappy future.

By adopting this view on man's purpose or goal in life, Jane Austen places herself in the moralist tradition, [5] specifically that initiated by Aristotle. Moreover, in accord with this tradition, the principles promoted in her novels are clearly opposed to the ones supported by the modern society and its philosophy. [6]

First of all, by insisting on happiness as being a matter of merit, that is, the more virtuous one is the more chances of becoming truly happy one has, she gives to the concept of happiness a rather universal and generally shared value. Selfishness, passion, moods, lust (all that may be comprised in Anne Crippen Ruderman's phrase "radical individuality" [7] and which I have called at the beginning relativism) have no standing before Jane Austen. In her view, happiness is not something which can be relatively defined by everybody according to their tastes – for example, Mary Crawford of *Mansfield Park* seemed to identify it with wealth (MP 293) – but something that each person can build for himself or herself, by doing their duty as human beings. And this duty, according to Jane Austen and of course to Aristotle, is to continuously search for what is truly good for them, not just for what appears to be so at certain moments. [8]

The fulfillment of this duty confers in fact the true pleasures of life and perfect happiness. However, the inner character of a person has to be formed in this direction from early youth, because as both Aristotle and Jane Austen underline, habit has an enormous influence on the way in which people develop their later affinity or, on the contrary, disparity to virtue and virtuous activities.

[9]

Secondly, and very much related to the first point, Jane Austen opposes through her ideas what I have called the flight from responsibility. Actually, the kind of life she recommends

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is one full of responsibility, because as happiness represents the most important thing in her characters' lives (PP 241) and as she considers it is within their power to attain it,[10] she not only claims it is every person's responsibility whether he or she is happy or not, but moreover, that it is also a duty to try and obtain happiness, and a violation of duty to pursue any other target than true happiness. Let me stress here the fact that duty, the way Jane Austen presents it, is not something coercive or imposed from the outside. To do one's duty, in her view, means to live according to our nature, that is, virtuously. This represents for both Aristotle and Jane Austen the most pleasant sort of living. Virtue, as presented by Jane Austen, is also not something which must be forced on us by others. It is a means through which – from her perspective and Aristotle's – we are sure to achieve happiness. But it remains for every person to choose virtue or not. Of course, as Jane Austen amply illustrates in her novels – see the case of Henry Crawford of Mansfield Park – not choosing virtue is the same thing as choosing wretchedness.

T.S. Eliot once observed in one of his critical essays: "It is proverbially easier to destroy than to construct." [11] He was of course referring especially to the critics of society, "from Arnold to the present day [who engage in an] attack upon aspects of contemporary society which we all know and dislike."

[12] Apparently this has but little to do with the writings of Jane Austen. Yet it has been my purpose to prove that Jane Austen is a writer who had what T.S. Eliot would have called a "constructive philosophy."

[13] She not only promotes a certain way of living well our lives which is very similar to the way in which Aristotle describes the good life, but through the development of her characters, she also illustrates the results of applying, or else, of ignoring this philosophy and these principles.

[14]

Thus, Jane Austen's novels are not primarily a critique of the society in which she lived,[15] neither do they break with tradition, but rather they bring – very much like and in accord with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* – a detailed recipe for a successful life and the achievement of happiness through commitment to the virtues.

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SUMAR:

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[1] I have stated even from the beginning (see the Introduction) that it is not my aim in this work to argue that Jane Austen must have necessarily read Aristotle's writings, but simply to rediscover certain Aristotelian basic concepts in her six major novels – such as the pleasure of being virtuous, moderation (finding the right mean between extremes), practical wisdom, magnanimity or proper pride, justice, habit, friendship (and its many forms), constancy in virtue, the role of good fortune, and last but certainly not least the contemplative life as the supreme pleasure and nearest to perfect happiness. These are all themes which are fundamental in Aristotle's philosophy in *The Nicomachean Ethics*, and it has been my purpose to show that they are fundamental for the principles supported by Jane Austen's novels as well. Also, these concepts are primarily about how to live our life well, or properly; and by sharing them, it follows that Aristotle and Jane Austen had a similar view on the good life or happiness.

[2] See Mortimer J. Adler, *Aristotle for Everybody*: "Living well, or happiness is the ultimate or final end of all our doing in this life – that which we seek for its own sake and for the sake of no

further good beyond it.” (93)

[3] “The attribute in question [permanence], 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)

[4] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1100b9-11.

[5] The traditions which held truth and the virtues as fundamental for living a good life and achieving happiness. Jane Austen clearly does regard the virtues as the basis for happiness. She also indirectly argues for this position, through the way she confers to her virtuous characters the award of happiness, while to the vicious, or not virtuous ones, the pains of unhappiness – it should be mentioned again that Jane Austen does not punish her evil or weak characters, they punish themselves by struggling to pass through life easily and not understanding that this is in fact the harder and ultimately more painful way. In certain instances Jane Austen’s heroes and heroines provide even argumentative passages in favour of the virtues: see for example the instance where Mr. Darcy talks about his vanity as a direct consequence of his being raised with and encouraged in the bad habit of considering himself superior to all other people (PP 248); also see the instance of Marianne Dashwood and her moment of enlightenment, when she realizes she had overlooked the unwritten law of moderation because of her own over-exacerbated feelings and imprudence (SS 339). Gilbert Ryle also insists in his essay “Jane Austen and the Moralists” on the idea that “Jane Austen was a moralist in a thick sense [...] as she wrote partly from a deep interest in some perfectly general, even theoretical questions about human nature and human conduct.” (286)

[6] I have already argued in the Introduction that the modern society’s philosophy may be described by the term relative and by the continuous avoidance of taking upon oneself any serious responsibilities or obligations for fear of becoming committed to a particular sort of behaviour.

[7] Anne Crippen Ruderman, *The Pleasures of Virtue: Political Thought in the Novels of Jane Austen*, 188.

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[8] I have discussed the difference between the true pleasures of life – provided by virtuous activities – and the false momentary pleasures – which usually are in fact passions – in the first chapter of this work.

[9] This is a theme I have developed in the forth chapter; Jane Austen provides many examples of the influence of habit, especially in Mansfield Park. See the case of Henry Crawford who was not able to renounce his vicious ways because he had been too long used to them.

[10] True, Jane Austen accords good fortune its due share, but like Aristotle she does not consider it as supreme master over people's destinies.

[11] T. S. Eliot, "The Humanism of Irving Babbitt," 277.

[12] T. S. Eliot, "The Humanism of Irving Babbitt," 277.

[13] T. S. Eliot mentions in "The Humanism of Irving Babbitt" that "criticism deals with concrete things in our world which we know, and the writer may be merely echoing, in neater phrasing, our own thoughts; whereas construction deals with things hard and unfamiliar." (277)

[14] The main heroines of Jane Austen's novels are usually committed to applying these principles and are rewarded with happiness, while characters like Henry Crawford, or Willoughby ignore them and wind up in thorough unhappiness. (MP 474, SS 324)

[15] Anne Crippen Ruderman says in *The Pleasures of Virtue*: "Austen's perspective could not be described as submissive to society, nor as subversive to it. Her novels describe an unmodern middle ground in which humans do not have to choose complete selfishness (radical individuality) or complete sociability to avoid being split between the two." (188)

{comments on}

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