Proper Pride and Justice

Having already established in the previous chapter the fact that Jane Austen – very much in the spirit of Aristotle and his “doctrine of the Mean” in tight relation to practical wisdom – cherishes throughout her novels the idea that “every impulse of feeling should be guarded by reason; and […] exertion should always be in proportion to what is required,” (PP 22)[1] it is quite adequate to continue now with a discussion about Pride and Prejudice because, as Gilbert Ryle observes, it is one of the books whose title is “composed of abstract nouns […] and it really is about pride and about the misjudgements that stem from baseless pride, excessive pride, deficient pride, pride in trivial objects and so on.”
In other words, it is a novel which “illustrates the many ways of “missing the target,” the variety of errors avoided by the person of practical wisdom. Avoidance of errors requires judgment, a faculty akin to sense-perception, whereby to appraise the facts of a situation correctly.”[3] Pride and Prejudice explores the different forms excess or defect in pride and in justice may take. And pride and justice represent two themes which are of wide importance in Aristotle’s philosophy as well.

Alasdair MacIntyre points out: “When Aristotle praised justice as the first virtue of political life, he did so in such a way as to suggest that a community which lacks practical agreement on a conception of justice must also lack the necessary basis for political community.”[4] In Jane Austen’s novel, justice is as crucial in a political society, but she presents it in a new light by underlining the astonishing link between justice and pride. As long as the people in a society tend to appreciate vanity more or, the contrary, insincere humility, and to underestimate the value of a person who truly has the reasons for being dignified, they will be led astray by misjudgment and the community will fall into the peril of supporting the wrong kind of people: this is what happens to the Longbourn inhabitants who are not just in their appreciation of Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham, considering the first unduly proud, and the latter exaggeratingly modest and charming.

The essence of the book is rendered most remarkably by Allan Bloom: “There is a delicate balance between the need for self-esteem and the need for the esteem of others, and neither can be sacrificed to the other.”[5] And this self-esteem is to be attained through a proper sort of pride which must be in proportion with the position one possesses on the scale of virtue, while the esteem of others is to be gained by their correct understanding of justice and their ability to judge one’s character appropriately, and not let themselves be blinded by prejudice. This prejudice also, the novel concludes, has its roots in a wrong kind of pride. To use once more the words of Gilbert Ryle: “Jane Austen wrote Pride and Prejudice from an interest in the quite general question what sorts and degrees of pride do, and what sorts and degrees of pride do not go with right thinking and right acting.”[6]

The love story of Fitzwilliam Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet is well known. The fact that it is hindered for a while because of his, as well as her, pride and prejudice is perhaps not as well known. Let us go, therefore, to the particulars of the plot.

Along with the people from Hertfordshire, the reader tends to agree with the fact that Mr. Darcy is unduly proud and most disturbingly vain. However, the same reader may wonder why
Mr. Darcy is at the same time so likable and why Elizabeth, who had passionately exclaimed about him at the beginning of the novel: “He is not at all liked in Hertfordshire. Everybody is disgusted with his pride.” (PP 54), ends up by emphatically and most cordially concluding: “Indeed he has no improper pride. He is perfectly amiable.” (PP 254)

Perhaps the answer is that Jane Austen, again like Aristotle, believed that there is a proper pride, which distinguishes even more the admirable and virtuous people: “Pride, then, seems to be a sort of crown of the excellences [virtues]; for it makes them greater, and it is not found without them. Therefore it is hard to be truly proud; for it is impossible without nobility and goodness of character.”[7]

Now one fault Mr. Darcy is charged with is his haughtiness and the fact that he appears to despise people beneath his social status. Still, there is one character in the book who echoes what Aristotle would have said in such a context as this. Miss Lucas declares:

His pride does not offend me so much as pride often does, because there is an excuse for it. One cannot wonder that so very fine a young man, with family, fortune, everything in his favour, should think highly of himself. If I may so express it, he has a right to be proud. (PP 14)

This is very much in the spirit of what Aristotle observes in his Nicomachean Ethics: “The goods of fortune also are thought to contribute towards pride. For men who are well-born are thought worthy of honour, and so are those who enjoy power or wealth; for they are in a superior position, and everything that has a superiority in something good is held in greater honour.”[8] Aristotle also identifies a right which the proud person has in despising other people: “For the proud man despises justly (since he thinks truly), but the many do so at random.”[9]

But Mr. Darcy proves himself to be superior not merely in what regards his family relations, or his wealth[10] and power – which are entirely blessings of fate, and do not depend on the character of a person as such – but also in his application of the other virtues.

Indeed, Mr. Darcy, seen from the right angle, which is not the angle of the Hertfordshire community, has every chance of impersonating what Alasdair MacIntyre considers to be Aristotle’s “Athenian gentleman.”[11] As Anne Crippen Ruderman observes, “Aristotle’s account
of the high-minded man could be seen as a model for Mr. Darcy, and one that is defended by the novel as a whole.”

For Mr. Darcy is interested, like Mr. Knightley of Emma, in the truth more than in anything else, even reputation. Aristotle says that the proud man “must care more for truth than for what people will think.”[13] Thus, he is not concerned primarily with the impression he makes on other people. Hence the disdain Mr. Darcy shows towards the Hertfordshire community’s opinions. He does not seek their approval because he knows he has nothing to reproach himself with, and their dislike of him must be based on false motives. Also, unlike Mr. Bingley’s sisters he is not a man who is given to gossip, “for he will speak neither about himself nor about another, since he cares not to be praised nor for others to be blamed; nor again is he given to praise; and for the same reason he is not an evil speaker, even about his enemies, except from haughtiness.”[14]

That is the reason why until the moment he writes the famous letter to Elizabeth, he does not find it necessary to make Wickham’s character public, and even then, he explains “his dealings with Mr. Wickham” only to her, as a person who is his equal and whose good opinion and honour he courts.

His pose too is in accordance to that of Aristotle’s description of the proud man’s attitude: “a slow step is thought proper to the proud man, a deep voice, and a level utterance;”[16] he is not hurried in whatever he does, from writing letters slowly (PP 32) to “walking in a leisurely manner” (PP 249) he shows a “dignity of countenance.”(PP 172) And Mrs. Gardiner observes that there is “something pleasing about his mouth when he speaks.” (PP 172)

Just as important in sketching Mr. Darcy’s character is the account of him which is supplied by his housekeeper from Pemberley. She says that he is “the best landlord, and the best master” (PP 166) and Elizabeth ascribes due value to these praises through her thoughts:

What praise is more valuable than the praise of an intelligent servant? As a brother, a landlord, a master, she considered how many people’s happiness were in his guardianship! – How much of pleasure or pain it was in his power to bestow! – How much of good or evil must be done by him! Every idea that had been brought forward by the housekeeper was favourable to his character […] (PP 167)

This reminds us of what Aristotle says of the liberal man: “Nor will he neglect his own property, since he wishes by means of this to help others. And he will refrain from giving to anybody and everybody, that he may have something to give to the right people, at the right
time, and where it is noble to do so."[17] To do all these and to keep a household or an estate like Mr. Darcy’s in good order, it is clear that a person needs a distinctive amount of discernment.

The reader might be amused by Elizabeth’s delight in visiting the house and the grounds of Pemberley and finding herself regretting for a moment that she was not “mistress of this place” (PP 164) and again the reader might remain just as perplexed as Jane at Elizabeth’s assertion from the final of the novel that her love for Mr. Darcy dated “from her seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley." (PP 252) Yet Aristotle by no means would take this problem lightly. On the contrary, he holds that the way one’s estate presents itself, tells a lot about its master: whether that person has good or bad taste and so forth: “The magnificent man is like an artist; for he can see what is fitting and spend large sums tastefully.”[18] He adds: “A magnificent man will also furnish his house suitably to his wealth (for even a house is a sort of public ornament), and will spend by preference on those works that are lasting (for these are most beautiful) […]”

So the fact that Pemberley is so wonderful as to charm even critical Elizabeth, does recommend Mr. Darcy as “infinitely superior” (PP 172) as the Gardiners categorize him.

Enough has been said about the true character of Mr. Darcy as to allow us to draw the conclusion that one objective which Jane Austen must have had in mind when she wrote this novel was to emphasize the “prejudice in the common view of the proud man. For the negative picture of Mr. Darcy is due more to others’ prejudice than to his pride.”[20]

And one of Jane Austen’s first concerns in this book is to warn against generalized and prejudiced ideas like Mary Bennet’s, who observes (“piquing herself upon the solidity of her reflections” (PP 14)):

Pride […] is a very common failing I believe. By all that I have ever read, I am convinced that it is very common indeed, that human nature is particularly prone to it, and that there are very few of us who do not cherish a feeling of self-complacency on the score of some quality or other, real or imaginary. Vanity and pride are different things, though the words are often used synonymously. A person may be proud without being vain. Pride relates to our opinion of ourselves, vanity to what we would have others think of us. (PP 14)

This would be the common idea about pride and vanity. Jane Austen has the merit of going further on and adding a continuation to it, completing it and giving it a nuance; Mr. Darcy is the
character who actually accomplishes Mary’s discourse, when he says:

Yes, vanity is a weakness indeed. But pride – where there is a real superiority of mind, pride will be always under good regulation. (PP 40)

This kind of proper pride is shown by Anne Eliot of Persuasion, who is pained by the change of home (from Kelwynch Hall, which was an estate according with her family’s social status, to Camden Place, which is a very inferior, plain house in Bath) and by the acquaintances her father and sister seek to make with people much below their rank. In such situations as these, Anne regrets that her father and sister do not have enough pride:

[…] but she [Anne] must sigh that her father should feel no degradation in his change; should see nothing to regret his duties and dignity of the resident landholder; should find so much to be vain of in the littleness of a town; and she must sigh and smile, and wonder too, as Elizabeth threw open the folding doors, boasting of their space, at the possibility of that woman, who had been mistress of Kelwynch Hall, finding extent to be proud of between two walls, perhaps thirty feet asunder. (P 97)

Again this is the nature of Anne’s reflections when she sees her father and sister humbling themselves before unworthy people:

Anne had never seen her father and sister before in contact with nobility, and she must acknowledge herself disappointed. She had hoped better things from their high ideas of their own situation in life, and was reduced to form a wish which she had never foreseen – a wish that they had more pride; […] (P 104-5)

The same sort of dignity and careful choice in making meritorious acquaintances is to be found in Mr. Knightely too, who declares, in this particular instance about Frank Churchill, but it is clearly one of his principles regarding any person at all:

If I find him conversable, I shall be glad of his acquaintance; but if he is only a chattering coxcomb, he will not occupy much of my time or thoughts. (E 115)
Bearing these examples in mind, Mr. Darcy cannot be held guilty anymore for exhibiting too much pride. As his housekeeper concludes: “Some people call him proud […] because he does not rattle away like other young men.” (PP 166)

Moreover, Jane Austen presents Mr. Darcy’s pride as a mean between various extremes: the insufferable vanity of Mr. Collins and the arrogant conceit of his aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh on the one hand, and Mr. Bingley’s excessive modesty on the other hand.

Mr. Collins, under his pretence of humbleness, is actually showing by almost every word or phrase he utters his vanity and his hypocrisy (“his talent of flattering with delicacy” as Mr. Bennet calls it and Mr. Collins is himself flattered at hearing this description of his skill (PP 47)). His very first letter to Mr. Bennet is an eulogy of his merits and an indirect reminder of his future claims on Longbourn estate, and thus of the fact that the family ought to be indebted to him for being willing to marry one of the five daughters in order to help them (PP 43-44). His attitude cannot even stand comparison to that of Mr. Darcy when he confers the Bennet family a benefit: when he finds the pair who had eloped, Lydia Bennet and Wickham, and makes them marry, he endeavors to keep this matter secret, and under no circumstances would he expect thanks and praises. His noble deed becomes known through an accident, and only then does he accept Elizabeth’s gratitude.

Mr. Collins is a “mixture of servility and self importance,” (PP 44) of “pride and obsequiousness, self-importance and humility” (PP 48) which is transparent in his marriage proposal to Elizabeth. Perhaps in his certitude of being accepted by Elizabeth (when he offers his hand in marriage) on financial and social grounds at least, Mr. Darcy comes nearest to being like Mr. Collins. Yet he does not stoop even for one moment to flattery or servility, and anyhow, what he says about the superiority of his family connections and wealth, he says merely because he believes that the truth, however painful or unimportant it might be, must be told straight-forwardly – of course, he did not realize then that it was so unimportant in the given circumstances. On the contrary, he considered it essential.

Lady Catherine is another character from Pride and Prejudice, who goes far beyond the limits of proper pride. Aristotle calls vain the person “who thinks himself worthy of great things, being unworthy of them.”[21] And exactly one such person is Lady Catherine who rather expects to be treated like a queen – she continuously asks rhetorically “Do you know who I am?” (PP 238) and she “insists on being satisfied” (PP 238) in whatever she chooses to enquire after, as if she is “entitled to know” any person’s “concerns.” (PP 238) But she is no queen, and
she does not even behave like one. She is conceited and selfish, and she expects “to be obliged.” (PP 241) She is not even just, because at the beginning she purposely overlooks that Elizabeth is of “equal” rank with Mr. Darcy, being herself a “gentleman’s daughter.” (PP 239)

Mr. Darcy stands in great contrast not only with his aunt, but also with the other extreme, represented by Mr. Bingley and his excessive modesty. Aristotle comments that “undue humility is more opposed to pride than vanity is; for it is both commoner and worse.” [22] And indeed, it can be worse, especially when “the appearance of humility” hides an “indirect boast,” (PP 33) as Mr. Darcy underlines in what regards Bingley’s carelessness in writing letters. Also, the reader may discover further on that Bingley, despite being a lovable character, has his faults too, faults which Darcy has not: he is a little rash and hurried (we learn this from the episode about writing letters and from his assertion that he “could quit Netherfield in five minutes” (PP 29)). He is “an idle fellow,” he does not make any efforts to enrich his library, while Darcy “cannot comprehend neglect of a family library.” (PP 26) Bingley is too easily persuaded about Jane Bennet’s indifference to him, while Darcy is constant in his affections for Elizabeth (PP 246). Darcy is also “superior in understanding” and “his manners, though well bred, are not inviting” while Bingley “is sure of being liked wherever he appears.” (PP 12) Yet the latter is not considered necessarily an advantage by mature persons like Mr. Knightely who exclaims in contempt about people who can make themselves “universally agreeable” and calls them “insufferable” comparing them to the “practised politician, who reads everybody’s character, and makes everybody’s talents conduce to the display of his own superiority.” (E 115)

Darcy then, although having his faults, possesses a sort of pride which can be understood only by those people who are just and value his merits. This would be one conclusion of Jane Austen’s novel.

The other conclusion is related to the problem of justice of feeling towards other persons. This justice is the one which allows us, according to Jane Austen, to appreciate proper pride when we see it. And justice means to acknowledge what is due to everybody: neither too much nor too little, but that which is in proportion and equal to his or her merits. [23] Therefore, the person who is just is somewhere in between Jane Bennet – who gives too much credit to persons who are not deserving (she is “honestly blind to the follies and nonsense of others” (PP 11)) [24] – and Elizabeth Bennet who is rather too much led by her prejudices, which Jane Austen implies, have their root also in pride. Mr. Knightely would be an ideal of justice, and a mean between the extremes which the two sisters represent, because although he does not flatter himself with this, he has the ability to read people’s characters correctly, justly and without partiality: this is not only true for his relationship with Emma, whom he considers no saint, although he loves her, but also for other instances. For example, he realizes, even before anybody has the least suspicion, that there is more to Frank Churchill’s and Jane Fairfax’s acquaintance than meets the eye (E 264). He is very unlike Elizabeth Bennet in this respect,
who boasts with her passion for “studying character” (PP 29, 65), yet forgets “to be secure of judging properly at first” and is “blinded by prejudice” (PP 65) [25] almost from her very first meeting with Mr. Darcy, and again is too easily taken in by Wickham’s “truth in looks.” (PP 59)

Elizabeth stands in great contrast to Fanny Price of Mansfield Park from the point of view of judging people primarily on account of personal offences or flatteries. Fanny is also a just person, like Mr. Knightely. While Elizabeth dislikes Darcy because he had –unintentionally, it should be added – slighted her, and admires Wickham because he is in fact flattering her with his attentions, in Fanny one can perceive a sense of objective justice: she is not induced to like either Mary or Henry Crawford, in spite of their attentions. She is fair though, and might have changed her opinion and feelings towards Henry Crawford (MP 472), had he been constant and deserved it. As a rule, she does not like or dislike people merely on personal grounds, but according to their merit.

Nevertheless, turning back to Elizabeth who although criticizes Darcy’s pride without distinguishing at first its suitability, has her own moments of displaying a proper kind of dignity. One such moment is that in which Darcy asks her to marry him the first time. He reproaches her then that “had her pride not been hurt by the honest confession of the scruples that had long prevented his forming any serious design” (PP 131) her answer might have been a positive one. But he is wrong in blaming her, because Elizabeth is defending in fact her true merit – whatever the conduct of the other members of her family, her behavior had always been appropriate, and her social position, although not equal in wealth was equal in rank to his (PP 239); so Darcy had no right to humiliate Elizabeth with complaints about her relations.

Elizabeth had shown the same kind of dignity when Mr. Collins proposed to her, although she was somewhat amused and not a bit concerned with his opinion.[26] She is properly proud too, and full of tact, firm and clear in defending her position in her argument with Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

Actually, as Anne Crippen Ruderman points out “Pride and Prejudice is not so much about Mr. Darcy coming to renounce his pride as about Elizabeth coming to understand it.”[27] She is unable however to do this until the former “has explained himself, not to the world at large but to this Elizabeth whose judgment has become authoritative for him.”[28]
Thus it becomes clear that it is not enough to possess that proper sort of pride and to be just in forming opinions about other people, but that it may also sometimes be necessary to provide an explanation of one’s own conduct, when visible facts are scarce and another person’s good opinion is worth having. Neither too much concern with what the world thinks is good then, but neither too little (as in the case of Mr. Bennet). Allan Bloom argues that in fact this was “Darcy’s real defect.”[29] Mr. Darcy himself ascribes this weakness to his “pride and conceit” which made him “think meanly of all the rest of the world, to wish at least to think meanly of their sense and worth compared with his own.” (PP 248) Of course he would not explain himself to anybody. Through Elizabeth he understands “how insufficient his pretensions of pleasing a woman worthy of being pleased” (PP 249) were; he understands that there are people who deserve his good opinion. Through Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth understands how erroneous her judgment had been.

Thus, Jane Austen seeks to illustrate how the harmony and blending of proper pride and justice are important not merely for the benefit of a social community, but also for human happiness as such.

As Aristotle underlines in his Nicomachean Ethics over and over again that neither of the virtues can be attained without long time practice, a further discussion about habit is therefore necessary.

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

Introducerea eseului

Capitolul 1 Pleasure and Duty
Capitolul 2  Practical Wisdom in Discovering The Mean

[1] These are the words of Mary Bennet of Pride and Prejudice. Although Mary is far from being an ideal of virtue, she sometimes says wise things. She, along with Mr. Bennet, her father, represent examples of characters that contradict the idea that virtue is one and the same thing with knowledge. Jane Austen seems again to be of the same opinion with Aristotle who says in his Nicomachean Ethics: “Socrates thought the excellences were forms of reason (for he thought they were, all of them, forms of knowledge), while we think they involve reason.” (1144b27-29)


[3] David Gallop, “Jane Austen and the Aristotelian Ethic” (Philosophy and Literature 23.1 (1999): 96-109), 102. On the same subject, Aristotle observes: “it is possible to fail in many ways, while to succeed is possible only in one way (for which reason one is easy and the other difficult – to miss the mark easy, to hit it difficult.” (1106b29-34)

[4] Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue, 244.

ARISTOTELIAN HAPPINESS IN JANE AUSTEN’S NOVELS

Scris de Maria Comanescu
Joi, 01 Septembrie 2011 22:37


[10] Alasdair MacIntyre observes in After Virtue that “We learn somewhere in all Jane Austen’s novels about where the money of the main characters comes from.” (239) This is true for Pride and Prejudice too, where we are informed that Mr. Darcy’s fortune was an inheritance from generation after generation, while Mr. Bingley’s “had been acquired by trade” which, in the narrators’ view seems to be a serious drawback. (PP 11) Aristotle too says that: “Those are thought to be more liberal who have not made their wealth but inherited it; for in the first place they have no experience of want, and secondly all men are fonder of their own productions, as are parents and poets.” (1120a45-47)

[11] In After Virtue, Alasdair MacIntyre says that: “For Homer the paradigm of human excellence is the warrior; for Aristotle it is the Athenian gentleman. Indeed according to Aristotle certain virtues are only available to those of great riches and of high social status; there are virtues which are unavailable to the poor man, even if he is a free man.”(182)


[13] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1124b7-1125a12. Aristotle adds here about the proud man: “He also be open in his hate and in his love (for to conceal one’s feelings is a mark of timidity), and must care more for truth than for what people will think, and must speak and act openly; for he is free of speech because he is contemptuous, and he is given to telling the truth […].” This is worthy of comparison to Darcy’s very open admiration of Elizabeth (PP 19, 181)
[14] This is in accord with what Aristotle says about the proud man: “but honour from casual people and on trifling grounds he will utterly despise, since it is not this that he deserves, and dishonour too, since in his case it cannot be just.” (1123b28-1124a20)


[19] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1122a34-1123a18

[20] Anne Crippen Ruderman explains this in the following paragraph in The Pleasures of Virtue: “Mrs. Bennet’s retelling of the “shocking rudeness” of Mr. Darcy at Mr. Bingley’s ball shows “much bitterness of spirit and some exaggeration” (10), and in general his rudeness at this dance is exaggerated (13-14). Mr. Darcy’s insulting comment about Elizabeth is due more to his general unsociability than to contempt for her social status, for as soon as he meets her he makes no secret to his friends of his admiration and is “perfectly indifferent” to the ridicule of Miss Bingley (19, 25, 36). Similarly, the Gardiners discover that the townspeople of Lambton, a village near Pemberley, acknowledge that Mr. Darcy is a liberal man and have nothing to accuse him of but pride, which, even if he did not have it, “would certainly be imputed by the inhabitants of a small market-town, where the family did not visit. (177)”. (100)


Aristotle also says that the just is the equal and the proportional. (1129a27-1129b1, 1131b17-23)

Allan Bloom comments on this theme in Love and Friendship: “The nice Jane Bennet could not be the heroine of one of Jane Austen’s novels precisely because she is too nice. She, in a way that is infuriating to Elizabeth, refuses to recognize the nasty motivations of others and always gives them a favourable gloss. She does not recognize that Bingley’s sisters’ politeness is hypocritical, and that they wish to promote a marriage between Bingley and Darcy’s sister in the ultimate hope that one of them will get Darcy. Austen punishes this genial vice in Jane by providing her with a husband who is a bit too weak and accommodating, not the kind of man who provokes ecstasies of admiration.” (204)

Ironically, Elizabeth falls herself in what she thought to be Darcy’s mistake. He had said once that “his resentment once created was unappeasable.” (PP 65) Elizabeth asks him, not without contempt, whether he “is very cautious to its being created,” not letting himself be “blinded by prejudice” and being “secure of judging properly at first.” (PP 65) While she believes she is dropping him a hint, she does not realize she had fallen long ago in this trap herself, by maintaining a very poor opinion of Darcy and a very good one about Wickham, without actually knowing either too well. Darcy, paradoxically, does not do this mistake.

It should be observed that, in spite of her declared antipathy to Darcy, Elizabeth is nevertheless very concerned with what he thinks about her: “She longed to know what at that moment was passing in his mind; in what manner he thought of her, and whether, in defiance of everything, she was still dear to him.” (PP 169)

Anne Crippen Ruderman, The Pleasures of Virtue, 100.

Allan Bloom, Love and Friendship, 200.

Allan Bloom, Love and Friendship, 200.