

Aristotelian and Christian Virtue in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*

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Jane Austen has long been identified as Aristotelian in her sense of ethics, even though we do not know whether Austen ever read any Aristotle. In Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, he calls Jane Austen, “the last great representative of the classical tradition of the virtues” (243). But, as MacIntyre acknowledges, Austen goes beyond Aristotle in her moral philosophy. As C.S. Lewis points out in his essay, “A Note on Jane Austen,” Austen uses deeply theological language to bring her characters into self-knowledge, signifying the fundamentally Christian nature of her ethical position. MacIntyre claims that what makes her such an effective voice in this classical tradition is “her uniting of Christian and Aristotelian themes in a determinate social context” (240). Austen's greatness as a moralist is a major reason why she is heralded for her contributions to literary realism. She is able to perfect that quality that Samuel Johnson assigns to earlier writers of realistic fiction, which is that they convey “the most perfect idea of virtue” (14) while also portraying “life in its true state” (9). The connection between the portrayal of virtue and literary realism is the larger topic that I am working on for my dissertation. For this paper, I am going to keep the scope limited to establishing the case for Austen's Christian brand of Aristotelianism as seen in *Sense and Sensibility*, with the larger significance being its implications for literary realism.

Before I can talk about Austen's novel, however, I need to briefly address some of the salient features of Aristotle's virtue ethics that are relevant to my discussion. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* presents a concept of virtue in terms of human excellence. In other words, for Aristotle, being virtuous is not so much about right conduct as it is about right being. Virtue is about perfecting one's purpose as a human being. He writes of virtue in terms of *telos*, or the end or function for a person. Aristotle writes, “For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor, or an

artist, and, in general, for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the 'well' is thought to reside in the function, so would it seem to be for man, if he has a function" (I.7). And what is the function of a person? According to Aristotle, it is "to be a certain kind of life, and this to be an activity or actions of the soul implying a rational principle" (I.7). Aristotle further explains that the "good" of a person is the "activity of soul in accordance with virtue" (I.7). In other words, Aristotle explains human excellence in terms of virtue.

Virtue comes in two forms for Aristotle: moral virtue and intellectual virtue. When Aristotle talks of moral virtue, that is when his principle of the relative mean becomes important. Moral virtue, as Aristotle defines it, is that which is destroyed by "defect and excess" (II.2). For example, temperance is a virtue because it is a mean between the extremes of self-indulgence and insensibility, and bravery is a virtue because it is the mean between the extremes of cowardice and rashness. What is important to observe here is that the principle of the relative mean does not apply to intellectual virtue. When Aristotle talks of intellectual virtue, he is talking about the highest life for a human—the natural human good. Ordinary people can pursue the moral virtues, and live an ordinary, good life. But in order to achieve the highest life, one must pursue the intellectual virtues, and with these, no moderation is required because excellence ought not to be moderated.

Aristotle's intellectual virtue that is arguably the most important is *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. MacIntyre describes it as "[knowing] how to exercise judgment in particular cases" (154). As such, there is a reciprocity between *phronesis* and the rest of the virtues. As Karen Stohr puts it, "Aristotle held that practical wisdom is necessary for the exercise of the moral virtues and that conversely, the moral virtues are necessary for the exercise of practical wisdom" (379). Thus, although practical wisdom could not exist without the moral virtues, we might also say that practical wisdom governs the exercise of the other virtues. The concept of practical

wisdom is sometimes difficult to grasp given how much it is intertwined with the other virtues. Any discussion of *phronesis* must be grounded in particular circumstances, which is why I am now turning to Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. With the contrasting characters of the Dashwood sisters, Austen provides us with realistic depictions of practical wisdom at work in particular circumstances. And given Austen's Christianity, her version of practical wisdom promotes distinctly Christian virtues which are foreign to Aristotle.

When Austen introduces Elinor and Marianne, neither is portrayed as being deficient in either sense or sensibility. The key difference between the sisters lies in Elinor's exercise of sense in the governance of her sensibility. Elinor is described as having “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” (6). From this description, we can see that Elinor is not insensible; rather, she feels very deeply. At the same time, Austen approves of Elinor's knowledge of how to govern those feelings. The way Austen couches this principle in terms of knowledge that can be learned echoes Aristotle. Aristotle views the intellectual virtues (such as practical wisdom) as those which can be acquired through teaching, whereas the moral virtues are acquired through habitual exercise. Thus, the intellect is important for Aristotle because one must be able to be taught the principles of the intellectual virtues. Practical wisdom, however, must be practiced in order to be truly learned, since it is so connected with the exercise of the moral virtues.

In Austen's contrast between Elinor, Marianne, and their mother, we see that Elinor has learned the principle of practical wisdom, and she puts it into effect. Mrs. Dashwood, on the other hand, is ignorant of such an idea, which suggests that she is somewhat deficient in sense—though, not nearly to the extent of some other Austen mothers (for example, Mrs. Bennet). Marianne, however, has “resolved never to be taught” the kind of governance of her sensibility

that Elinor implements. The implication here is that Marianne understands the principle, but she rejects its value and refuses to practice it. She does not reject the principle because of any deficiency in sense. On the contrary, Austen tells us that “Marianne's abilities were, in many respects, quite equal to Elinor's. She was sensible and clever” (6). And yet, for all her sense, we are told that she is “eager in every thing; her sorrows, her joys, could have no moderation. She was generous, amiable, interesting: she was every thing but prudent” (6). Once again, Austen is fairly clear on where she stands with regard to Marianne's lack of prudence. Austen approves of Marianne's exercise of the moral virtues of amiability and generosity, but she seems to stand with Elinor in her concern over “the excess of her sister's sensibility” (6). Austen's portrayal of Marianne's character flaws in terms of excess echo Aristotle's principle of the relative mean. When it comes to the moral virtues, that mean between excess and deficiency is the goal. However, when it comes to something like practical wisdom, there can be no excess because the use of prudential judgment in exercising the moral virtues is always a good.

Austen appears to use Marianne as an opportunity to depict the problem with the theory of moral sentiments, which was a competing moral philosophy that became in vogue in the eighteenth century. According to Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*, the theory of moral sentiments elevated sentiment “because it is in a certain way the touchstone of the morally good. Not because feeling that something is good makes it so, as the projective interpretation holds; but rather because the undistorted, normal feeling is my way of access into the design of things, which is the real constitutive good, determining good and bad” (284). Such a theory abandons that Aristotelian concept of practical wisdom in favor of a search for the normative sentiments about a subject. In Christian articulations of virtue, feelings—or the heart—are often thought to lead a person astray rather than direct toward truth. Marianne exhibits this danger in a conversation with Elinor in which Elinor is rebuking Marianne for her indiscretion in leaving the

company of friends to be gone for hours alone touring the estate of Mr. Willoughby. Marianne defends her actions by saying, “if there had been any real impropriety in what I did, I should have been sensible of it at the time, for we always know when we are acting wrong, and with such a conviction I could have had no pleasure” (52). Marianne fails to see how her feelings could have led her astray, even though Elinor gently pushes her to see how her actions were unwise.

While Marianne is guided by her feelings in the novel, Elinor is guided by that Aristotelian practical wisdom which leads her into virtuous conduct that is the surest means to her own happiness. When Lucy Steele tells Elinor in confidence of her secret engagement to Edward Ferrars, the man Elinor loves, Elinor suffers a great deal. In Austen's world, virtue does not exclude the possibility of suffering, but it does enable Elinor to best support herself amidst her suffering. Elinor readily acknowledges that keeping Lucy's secret must be done not only for the sake of her honor, but also for the sake of her own well-being. Austen writes, “The necessity of concealing from her mother and Marianne, what had been entrusted in confidence to herself, though it obliged her to unceasing exertion, was no aggravation of Elinor's distress. On the contrary it was a relief to her, to be spared the communication of what would give such affliction to them...” (105). Elinor knows that their “tenderness and sorrow must add to her distress” (105), given that she would be spreading her suffering to her mother and sister. Though exertion is painful and makes Elinor very unhappy for a long period of time, Elinor knows that it is the wisest course of action.

Elinor's wisdom in this situation also exhibits the Christian idea of putting the needs of others above the needs of the self. Elinor knows that by keeping Lucy's confidence, she is protecting her mother and sister from a painful communication and commiseration in her own suffering. When Edward's engagement to Lucy becomes public knowledge, Elinor is able to

comfort Marianne with the genuine information that she “can think and speak of [the engagement] with little emotion” after months of exerting herself toward that end (197). Because Marianne cannot conceive of acting in a manner contrary to what she feels, she mistakenly assumes that Elinor's self-command must be an indication of a lack of feeling. She wounds Elinor with that assumption, but Elinor's explanation of her own sensibility causes Marianne to consider how selfish her own actions have been. She exclaims to Elinor, “you have made me hate myself for ever...Because your merit cries out upon myself, I have been trying to do it away” (199). Elinor does not intend to inflict further pain upon Marianne with a comparison of their conduct, but Marianne cannot help but see how Elinor's self-command has been the wiser course. While Marianne indulged her sensibility—both in her lack of prudence during her romance with Willoughby as well as in her suffering upon his betrayal—Elinor bore the sufferings of them both. And although their circumstances are not quite analogous because Elinor is supported by the knowledge of Edward's continued goodness, Marianne can see that Elinor's exertion has brought her more contentment than Marianne's self-centered actions.

Marianne's lack of practical wisdom results in near-tragic consequences in the form of a severe illness. However, Austen gives Marianne self-knowledge at the end in order to give her a happy rather than a tragic ending. Marianne confides in Elinor that her near-death illness has made her seriously reflect on her past actions, and she acknowledges that she participated in “a series of imprudence toward [herself], and a want of kindness to others” (262). That want of kindness is frequently on display throughout the novel, because her feelings have been her guide. She now sees that she has unjustly repaid kindness with “ungrateful contempt,” particularly toward Mrs. Jennings. Marianne further confesses: “I saw that my own feelings had prepared my sufferings, and that my want of fortitude under them had almost led me to the grave” (262). In these remarks, we see Austen's moral philosophy that suffering is linked to a lack of virtue—

in this case, fortitude. Elinor and Marianne both suffer, but Marianne's sufferings are increased by her moral failings.

Marianne is not consigned to a tragic fate, however, because this is Jane Austen's world, and Jane Austen's world is, as C.S. Lewis observes, “essentially untragic” because of two important characteristics of her mind. Firstly, Austen's nature is both unexacting (in that her moral standards are not beyond that which anyone can master) and exacting (in that she demands that all master those standards) (Lewis 370). The second characteristic Lewis observes about Austen's mind is “its cheerful moderation,” in that she envisions moderate schemes for happiness in her characters—she is no Utopian (370-71). Lewis observes, “She has, or at least all of her favourite characters have, a hearty relish for what would now be regarded as very modest pleasures” (371). The excesses of sensibility that Marianne sees as so important at the novel's beginning do not actually bring about anything other than excesses of suffering. In contrast with that excess, Austen portrays Christian virtues—practiced in an Aristotelian way—that will lead to a happy life of modest pleasures. MacIntyre observes that Austen's Christian additions to Aristotelianism can be found in the importance she places on amiableness (versus the counterfeit agreeableness that Aristotle prizes), self-knowledge, and constancy. When her characters demonstrate these virtues, they are led into happy endings of modest proportions. By adhering to such modest expectations for her characters, Austen's happy endings are of a realistic nature. She grounds her characters' happiness (or flourishing, or excellence, if we are to use Aristotelian terms) in the reasonable expectations that might come out of marriages founded on virtue, which is a major reason she succeeds at literary realism.

In addition to being a mark of her literary realism, Austen's cheerful moderation is a sign of her Aristotelianism. But we ought not to mistake “moderation” for some kind of settling or half-effort at a virtuous life. Moderation in the Aristotelian sense—and in Austen's sense—is

about avoiding the excess or deficiency of those qualities that would damage human excellence, and therefore, happiness. In Marianne's case, she needed to avoid an excess of ungoverned, irrational sensibility. The sensibility itself is not the problem, given that Elinor herself feels quite deeply. The problem is that Marianne does not govern her sensibility with practical wisdom. In the pursuit of the intellectual virtues, particularly practical wisdom, Austen, like Aristotle, does not desire moderation. Instead, we see Elinor pushing herself to the extreme in attempting to accomplish the self-command and fortitude that she believes to be required of her. Because practical wisdom governs the exercise of those ordinary virtues such as fortitude, there can be no moderation in such an effort.

In the final pages of *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen describes for her readers just how the passionate and opinionated Marianne could experience the change of heart that results in her marriage to Colonel Brandon. Austen tells us that all of Marianne's friends and family are eager to see the match happen, and then she writes the following:

With such a confederacy against her—with a knowledge so intimate of his goodness—with a conviction of his fond attachment to herself, which at last, though long after it was observable to everybody else—burst on her—what could she do?

Marianne Dashwood was born to an extraordinary fate. She was born to discover the falsehood of her own opinions, and to counteract, by her conduct, her most favourite maxims. She was born to overcome an affection formed so late in life as at seventeen, and with no sentiment superior to strong esteem and lively friendship, voluntarily to give her hand to another!--and *that* other, a man who had suffered no less than herself under the event of a former attachment, whom, two years before, she had considered too old to be married,--and who still sought the constitutional safeguard of a flannel waistcoat!

But so it was. Instead of falling a sacrifice to an irresistible passion, as once she had fondly flattered herself with expecting,--instead of remaining even for ever with her mother, and finding her only pleasures in retirement and study, as afterwards in her more calm and sober judgment she had determined on,--she found herself at nineteen, submitting to new attachments, entering on new duties, placed in a new home, a wife, the mistress of a family, and the patroness of a village. (288)

There are three important points to note about this passage and what it says of Austen's

understanding of virtue and what it does and does not entail. First, Marianne is still Marianne. She does not have to change her essential nature in order to participate in a more excellent life. Some scholars have argued that Marianne's marriage to Colonel Brandon is a betrayal of her romantic nature.¹ However, I think Austen's ironic treatment of Marianne's change of fate indicates that Marianne has not changed her passionate, romantic nature. Marianne's problem was not that she felt so strongly; her problem was in her governance of those feelings. Austen tells us a few lines later that “Marianne could never love by halves; and her whole heart became” Colonel Brandon's in time (288). Marianne has not given up her sensibility; instead, she has exercised prudence in directing her feelings toward a more worthy person.

The second observation from this passage is that part of Marianne's attachment to Colonel Brandon is based on “a knowledge so intimate of his goodness.” Colonel Brandon's virtue is a major reason why he is a viable marriage partner, and Marianne's intimate knowledge of Colonel Brandon's virtue makes him attractive to her and helps bring her into self-knowledge about her own feelings. Marianne has learned that passionate feelings can have a reasonable foundation. In the case of Colonel Brandon, the basis for her new feelings is “a knowledge so intimate of his goodness,” “a conviction of his fond attachment to herself,” and “strong esteem and lively friendship.”

A final point to note out of this passage is that Austen does not seem to find a disconnect between Marianne's sensibility and the reasonableness of her attachment to Colonel Brandon. In other words, Austen's “cheerful moderation,” as Lewis calls it, is not about ridding life of any genuine pleasures. Rather, it is about forming reasonable expectations for happiness—for an excellent life. In Marianne's case, she can expect a realistic portion of happiness because she has entered into a marriage with the romantic-minded Colonel Brandon who shares her sensibility.

¹ I am indebted to Anne Crippen Ruderman's assessment of this critical opinion in her *The Pleasures of Virtue* (79). One notable critic who holds this opinion is Alistair Duckworth.

Colonel Brandon is also a virtuous man, and her attachment to him is based on esteem and friendship. In other words, the relationship between Marianne and Colonel Brandon contains both the requisite natural affinity and the requisite foundation of virtue.

In conclusion, Austen portrays a uniquely Christian version of Aristotelianism in *Sense and Sensibility* in that she bases her characters' flourishing or happiness on their display of practical wisdom as they exercise Christian virtues. In doing thus, Austen creates a novel that succeeds at literary realism because it contains modest expectations for the picture of an excellent life.

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