

Michael Chwe interviewed about *Jane Austen, Game Theorist*
January 30, 2012

Hello. We are here to talk about "Jane Austen, Game Theorist," a new book written by Michael Chwe, a political science professor at UCLA.

Thank you.

How did you get interested in Jane Austen?

I saw the movie *Clueless* (with Alicia Silverstone) with my kids a while ago (incidentally, the film includes a scene nearby our house), and *Clueless* was based on Austen's *Emma*. When I read *Emma*, I was surprised to see how much game-theoretic reasoning Austen engaged in. I then read the other novels and began to see how Austen developed a theory of strategic thinking: how people take actions anticipating the actions of others.

What do you mean exactly by strategic thinking?

For example, at the very beginning of *Pride and Prejudice*, Mrs. Bennet sends her daughter Jane off to Netherfield on horseback because she anticipates that because of the rain, Mr. Bingley and Caroline will ask Jane to stay all night, thus increasing Jane's acquaintance with Mr. Bingley. Mrs. Bennet takes an action (having Jane go on horseback) anticipating the action of the Bingleys (they will ask Jane to stay). Strategic thinking is the essence of manipulation, and indeed Elizabeth Bennet calls her mother's action a "good scheme."

Austen's novels are full of manipulation and scheming, aren't they?

Yes, in fact there are over fifty strategic manipulations specifically called "schemes" in her novels. Austen is obsessed with what she calls "penetration" or "foresight": predicting what other people will do in reaction to others (in other words, strategic thinking).

What does this have to do with game theory? What is game theory exactly?

Game theory is the academic specialty which analyzes strategic thinking. One of its founding figures is the mathematician John Nash, portrayed in the movie *A Beautiful Mind*. It is often quite mathematical, and to some degree came out the context of the US-Soviet Cold War. But now it is used quite widely in economics and political science, to understand all sorts of situations in which people, corporations, countries, voters, insurgents, and so forth, act strategically.

So you're saying that Jane Austen and game theory both analyzed strategic thinking?

Yes, but Austen did so a century and a half earlier. Jane Austen was not mathematical, but she was a game theorist: a game theorist who had strategic insights that still go well beyond modern social science.

Hold on. Just because Austen wrote about how people manipulate each other does not mean that she was some sort of scientist or theoretician.

You're right in that strategic thinking is part of everyday life. All the time, we take actions in anticipation of the actions of others: for example, I might hide the chocolates anticipating that my spouse will eat them all otherwise. But Austen takes certain specific theoretical stands that are so similar to those of game theory that it cannot be a coincidence. For example, for Austen, choice is very important. The most important choice, of course, is a woman's choice of whom or whether to marry, and Austen's heroines staunchly defend this choice against all presumption otherwise. Elizabeth Bennet says that Mr. Darcy enjoys his "power of choice." In Austen's novels, when a person's choice is encumbered or pressured by others (for example, Emma's persuading Harriet Smith to not accept the proposal of Robert Martin, or Lady Russell's persuading Anne Elliot to not accept Captain Wentworth in *Persuasion*), it is never a good thing.

And the concept of choice, important to Austen, is important in game theory.

Yes, explaining people's behavior in terms of their choices is the foundation of game theory (and economic theory generally).

Alright, but why should the Austen fan, who already loves the novels just as they are, game theory or not, care about this strategic perspective? What does the Austen fan learn from your book?

First of all, many people (not just me) have noticed that Austen includes many "puzzles" that invite the reader to exercise her strategic thinking. For example, does Mrs. Gardiner intentionally bring Elizabeth Bennet to Pemberley with the hope of running into Mr. Darcy? Similarly, does Mrs. Croft in *Persuasion*, knowing that her brother Captain Wentworth had earlier proposed to Anne Elliot, move into Kellynch Hall, Anne's former home, with the intention of bringing her brother into Anne's vicinity? Austen is trying to teach us to always think strategically.

Also, a strategic sensibility makes us see the characters differently. Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* might seem hopelessly shy and self-effacing, but if you look at her in terms of the choices she makes and what she gets out of them, she is the most hard-core of all Austen's heroines. Of all Austen's heroines, only Fanny makes a decision (refusing Henry Crawford) in the face of the complete opposition of everyone around her. And Fanny wins big time; she gets Edmund Bertram, but at the great expense (even ruin) of the Bertram family and the Crawfords (Henry Crawford, unsecured by Fanny, has an affair with the married Maria Bertram). Austen's point is that even someone as dependent as Fanny can act strategically; by making Fanny seem so quiet and shy, Austen is challenging us to look beyond appearances and see what is really important.

What do you mean when you say that Austen, two hundred years ago, had insights which go beyond modern social science?

For example, Austen extensively analyzed what I call "cluelessness," the absence of strategic thinking (by the way, I got this term from the movie *Clueless*). For example, Lady Catherine de Bourgh makes a surprise visit to Elizabeth Bennet to make her promise not to marry Mr. Darcy, and Elizabeth refuses. Lady Catherine is Mr. Darcy's aunt and wants him to marry her own daughter. Lady Catherine, furious at Elizabeth's refusal to obey her, goes back and tells Mr. Darcy about Elizabeth's insolence and ill-breeding. Mr. Darcy, who was previously rebuffed by Elizabeth, now gains hope because he knows that if Elizabeth still hated him, she would have readily agreed with Lady Catherine. Mr. Darcy therefore proposes again, and all happiness results.

Now Lady Catherine's action is crucial to the plot, and indeed afterward Mr. Darcy expresses gratitude for Lady Catherine's providing crucial "intelligence." Elizabeth was quite skilled strategically, and (although it is not said so outright in the book) perhaps intentionally tried to send a message to Mr. Darcy through Lady Catherine.

But what is most interesting is how clueless Lady Catherine was. She knew that Mr. Darcy liked Elizabeth enough to make their marriage a possibility. So why did she tell Mr. Darcy that Elizabeth refused to promise not to marry him? She should have known that telling Mr. Darcy would give him encouragement. Why did Lady Catherine's action backfire so completely? It is because she was clueless; she did not think that Elizabeth was smart enough to act strategically. She did not even consider the possibility that Elizabeth was manipulating her.

Lady Catherine's cluelessness is related to her higher social status. Austen explores how high-status people have difficulty understanding lower-status people as strategic actors. This insight applies just as well today, for example when the US military goes into Iraq not thinking it necessary to understand Iraqis as strategic actors, and thereby gets easily manipulated.

So do we now have a better appreciation of Austen?

Absolutely. As many have said, Austen was one of the keenest observers of human behavior ever. But her insights about human behavior were not just elegant but systematic, broad and far-reaching enough to be called a theory, a theory that can help us understand many, many things (for example US foreign policy disasters): a theory which today's social scientists and mathematicians would call "game theory."

Thank you!

Thank you very much. It has been such a pleasure.