

## Book Review

# Jane Austen, Game Theorist

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*Jane Austen, Game Theorist*  
Michael Suk-Young Chwe  
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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Michael Suk-Young Chwe is an associate professor of political science at the University of California, Los Angeles, whose research interests are in game theory, has written a book about Austen's novels. "Jane Austen, Game Theorist" is an inside look at why people do what they do. The book describes the concepts of choice and preference in Austen's novels. The author analyses how Austen explains strategic thinking, which relates to explanations for human action, such as those involving emotions, habits, rules, social factors, and ideologies. Chwe also considers how Austen discusses Austen discusses the possible pitfalls involved in strategic thinking.

This book basically aims to describe game theory without using complex mathematical equations. The author highlights interesting examples of strategic thinking from Austen's six novels in the lives of her characters, who are ordinary people. He claims that Austen's perspective helps us to see how game theory has diverse and subversive historical roots. Chwe believes that anyone interested in human behaviour should read Austen, because her stories provide real life examples. Chwe emphasizes that Austen's fiction is not about what her characters think, so much as what they think about what other characters think. Their inferences and guesses are crucial because they are attempting to choose the action with the highest payoff. Chwe claims that the characters are preoccupied with "strategic thinking", an idea at the heart of game theory. He tries to show the strategic thinking of game theory in slow-motion detail in Austen's novels.

## 2. AUSTEN'S FOUNDATIONS OF GAME THEORY

The main contribution of this book is its consideration of the five main explanations for cluelessness, defined as the absence of strategic thinking by Austen's characters. Chwe claims that, in Austen's books, cluelessness can result from a lack of natural ability, misinformation, excessive self-reference, status differences and presuming to know another's mind. Chwe explores these explanations for the

decisive blunders of the socially superior characters in Austen's novels, then considers cluelessness through real world examples, and discusses five further explanations for it.

The book approaches Austen's novels with an economic mindset. It concentrates on the choice, opportunity cost, preferences and strategic thinking of Austen's novel characters.

Chwe claims that Austen defines *choice* as a central concern, even an obsession. Austen presents choice as binding: once a choice has been made, the character cannot pretend that s/he did not make it. When Willoughby visits Marianne to seek forgiveness for his choice in *Sense and Sensibility*, it is a portrayal of the theory of bounded rationality (Simon, 1954), which says that people are not always able to obtain all the information they need to make the best possible decision.

Austen highlights the fact that choice making requires understanding of what would have happened had the subject chosen otherwise. In *Persuasion*, when Anna meets Captain Wentworth's friends, Captain Harville and Benwick, she realizes that her life would have been very different if she had not refused Captain Wentworth's original proposal. This is defined as *opportunity cost* in economics (Beeker et al., 1974; Neumann & Friedman, 1978), which explains the cost of an alternative one could have received by taking a certain action.

Chwe observes *revealed preference* in *Pride and Prejudice*. When Jane receives a letter from Mr. Bingley's sister Caroline, Elizabeth applies revealed preferences by saying: "You must decide yourself... If upon mature deliberation, you find that the misery of disoblighing his two sisters is more than equivalent to the happiness of being his wife, I advise you by all means to refuse him." This is defined as a revealed preference (Samuelsen, 1954), which explains that one's preferences can be revealed by their choice habits.

Chwe considers three different terms for *strategic thinking*: "penetration", "foresight" and "sagacity." He explores various examples how Austen have used these three different terms for explaining strategic thinking in her novels. For instance, when Mr. Bennet tells Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*: "Young ladies have great *penetration* in such matters as these; but I think I may defy even your sagacity, to discover the name of your admirer."

### 3. AUSTEN'S COMPETING MODELS

The book introduces conversations from Austen's novels for systematic analysis of a number of game theory principles, such as the distinction between strategic thinking and selfishness; strategic partnership as the best foundation for marriage; making good choices even when overpowered by emotion; and the risk that status consciousness can make one strategically stupid. It thereby analyses how young women learn strategic thinking skills in Austen's six novels. According to Chwe, Austen's male characters are clueless: they do not consider women as having their own preferences and making their own choices. This is illustrated by an example from *Emma*, when Emma says "...A man always imagines a woman to be ready for anybody who asks her".

Chwe gives examples of how emotion can cause bad decision making; how emotion might induce good choice and how self-confidence might result poor choice; and how habit can lead wrong choice. Chwe claims that Austen does not like the effect of habit on behaviour. For instance, Willoughby admits his habits to wealth were the reason behind his marriage with Miss Grey in *Sense and Sensibility*.

The book clearly emphasizes the importance of social factors such as envy, duty, pride, and honour and concludes that even if social factors affect a subject, they should affect only behaviour and not thought processes, which must remain independent. Further, believing too much in one's own strategic ability has its pitfalls, which is illustrated through Austen's characters.

The book explains how Austen seeks to distinguish strategic thinking from selfishness, moralistic notions, economic values and winning inconsequential games. Austen uses card games not to illustrate strategic thinking. Instead, she uses the games to illustrate the common tendency towards excessive decontextualization.

According to Chwe, Austen makes five specific innovations in game theory. He discusses four of them in chapter 9, and one in chapter 12. First, Austen describes how two people become *partners in strategic manipulation*. Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy establish a pattern of working together, despite her dislike of him in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Chwe describes “*strategizing about yourself*” as the Austen’s second innovation, using the example of Anne Elliot waiting inside with her sister and Mrs. Clay for Lady Dalrymple’s carriage because it is raining, and being startled to see Captain Wentworth walking down the street in *Persuasion*. *Preference change* is the Austen’s third innovation, according to Chwe, giving the example of Elizabeth’s changing feeling for Mr. Darcy chronicled through her increasing gratitude to him. Fourth innovation is constancy opposite to the preference change. Anne Elliot keeps her love to Captain Wentworth even she refused her, and Captain Wentworth returns to her after eight year separation in *Persuasion*. Last innovation is various explanations for *cluelessness* in Austen novels, which related to lack of natural ability, social distance, excessive self-reference, presumption, and mind of high- and low-status people.

#### 4. CRITICISM

The book is very well written: the writer’s motivation is set out well, and the presentation and structure are very good. My only minor critical comments in this respect are:

- Chwe might have overvalued Austen as a game theorist. He forcefully and convincingly argues that game theorists can learn a lot from Austen novels; however Jane Austen may have been ‘only’ a strategist, who brings “case studies” to game theorists, but who has not conceptualized game theory. The conversations in the novels are real life examples which happen millions of times daily in real life. This doesn’t mean that everybody is a game theorist.
- It would be useful if Chwe gave more connections between Austen’s competing models with modern game theory. Chwe tries to explain the systematic analysis of game theory principles through Austen’s novels conversations, however the links between Game theory principles and Austen’s novels conversations are explained very weakly.
- Chwe uses six different characters from the novels to explain strategic thinking. Because the book contains many names, those who haven’t actually read Austen may lose interest. It might be helpful if he had shown relationships (examples) using diagrams for the six novels.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

This book is useful for those want to understand game theory precepts in real life without going into the language of mathematics. The author has put effort into organization, and the book is well-documented. Chwe concludes that economic theory was not Austen’s main concern, but since economic theory is not based upon rational choice, she makes advances in this direction. The book was written for a general audience of anyone interested in game theory, and knowledge of game theory is not necessary for understanding this book. Chwe’s book does not teach game theory, however, it is a useful new tool for those interested in materials to explore game theory.

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