

Jane Austen: Aspects of Individuality

M.A. Thesis Proposal

English Department, Bar-Ilan University

Submitted by: Orit Naamany

Date: 17.11.09

Advisor: Prof. Jeffrey Perl

I. Aims and General Description

This M.A. thesis aims to define the kind of individuality that Jane Austen portrays, and the kind of individualism that she studies, in four of her novels: *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Persuasion*. Seminal new ideas about individuality and individualism were under widespread discussion in Austen's time. She was born three years before the death of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and her life overlapped with that of Immanuel Kant for twenty-nine of her forty-two years. As a writer of fiction rather than philosophy, Austen's understanding of individualism is embodied in her characters and only to a limited extent in the terms used by philosophers (though sense, sensibility, pride, prejudice, and persuasion are all abstract nouns that theorists of her time did use). I will attempt to "place" Austen's approach in a context that includes moral theorists—Rousseau and Kant in particular, as representing approaches different enough from each other to be thought of as opposed. By plotting correlations between the agendas of Austen and these two theorists, I expect to establish that Austen's individualism is most responsibly elucidated and interpreted in the terms set by Kantian moral philosophy.

I will begin from the premise that, until the eighteenth century, the English had given precedence to social over individual norms and that the rise of individualism in moral thought, and of individuality in human experience, begot a rising tension during Austen's lifetime between "reason" and "sensibility." When the English novel "emerged as a dominant literary form," it emerged unsurprisingly, as Alasdair MacIntyre argues, "with its stress on individual experience" (151). The extent of social authority over the individual's space is a particularly significant theme in Austen's novels, where her main characters operate—often in contrasting pairs—against and within the social sphere to find the right balance between reason and sensibility.

These tendencies exist in the philosophical as well as literary texts of the time. The changes in attitude that Austen expresses and evaluates are found also in writings on individual and social psychology that evince kinds of dissatisfaction with rationalism. However, responses to that dissatisfaction range along a continuum from Rousseau's call for deeper inwardness (and for feelings to serve as the individual's moral guide) to Kant's emphasis on the categorical imperative (and on the rational will as the source of moral law). The categorical imperative, as Charles Taylor argues, is not "defined by any external order... it is not defined by the impulse of nature... either, but only by the nature of reasoning" (364). For Kant, "it is only in acts of obedience to the categorical imperative that we are delivered from the bondage of our own inclinations" (*SHE*, 196). Those "acts of obedience," however, are by no means automatic: the individual must struggle to conceive morality rightly and then struggle to achieve virtue.

Like Rousseau, Austen was concerned with the inner life, but she approached it in way very different from his. Whereas Rousseau was concerned mainly with expression of the passional inner life, Austen, who was more pragmatic and reserved, rejected sentimentality; and, as for the passions, she preferred their moderation through self-command. Her main characters wrestle with their deepest feelings until each attains (when the struggle is successful) a self-discovery that transforms her or his personality in acknowledgment of the claims of reason and discretion. Austen, like Kant, was able to see beyond the absolute claims of contemporary provincial values and represents the rational will in her fiction as the means to individual perfection for her characters.

Austen could read French, as well as some Italian and Latin, but apparently not German; and English translations of Kant's writings on relevant topics did not appear until after her death. If she knew anything of Kantian moral philosophy, it would have been second-hand; yet it does seem that Austen and Kant arrived at comparable

understandings of morality and the individual. Both believed that a strong sense of individuality and the freedom to exercise it could be attained only by living a measured life in consonance with virtues acquired by habit and self-command.

While for Austen and Kant, the good life would not by any means be antisocial, morality is for them no more identical with social convention than it is for Rousseau. If spatially and temporally limited conventions are to be binding on the individual, those conventions must be in line with universal and atemporal moral imperatives that are accessible to the faculty of reason. This criterion is hardly unique to Kant and Austen—there are well-developed precedents for it in Roman stoicism, for instance—but the upshot for Kant and Austen is distinctively aesthetic. It is notable that in Austen’s novels the characters who have interests that might be termed aesthetic are able to make the distinction between social convention and authentic morality, in part because those interests provide a socially acceptable retreat from society where, from a slight distance, individual judgments may be made. In other words, the aesthetic offers access to a perspective more universal than that of any particular society at any particular time. But the capacity for independent judgment offered by the aesthetic—and by an aesthetic appreciation of nature (“the picturesque”) as well—affords the more privileged among Austen’s characters opportunities to locate their own authentic inner worlds. Likewise Kant, in the *Critique of Judgment*, argues that judgments of beauty exercise the same faculty of judgment as that exercised in making moral judgments. And important post-Kantian philosophers (notably, Hannah Arendt, Stanley Cavell, and Robert Pippin) have on this basis viewed aesthetic judgment as a model for moral, political, practical, and cognitive judgments.

Thus we may speculate that it is on behalf of universal or objective moral judgment that Austen enriches the personal space of selected heroines and the

occasional hero, affording them individual access to the beauties of music, poetry, fiction, and picturesque forms of solitude. In *Sense and Sensibility*, for example, Marianne Dashwood is able to live a semiprivate life in the midst of a society she finds dull, insensitive, and unpleasant. At the Middleton home she plays the pianoforte, and at the Palmers's she demonstrates her "knack of finding her way to the library" in search of good literature (313). In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet's "solitary walks" (137) in picturesque surroundings enable and constitute her assertion of a right to privacy for independent contemplation. In this respect, one might well compare Austen's attitude with Rousseau's (*Reveries of a Solitary Walker* is among his famous titles) more than with Kant's. But Austen never permits her heroines to be solitary for long; social obligation knocks soon on their door.

Neither Austen nor Kant wanted individuality to become so assertive that private feeling (or Sensibility) would be elevated above social propriety (or Sense). Indeed, the importance of individuality for ethics is, in Austen's fiction as in Kant's philosophy, that social order is judged only in private by objective and universal moral criteria and only after judgment can be corrected. Thus it is neither existing social norms, nor the moral norms of individuals developed individually, that Kant and Austen seek to define or describe. What they endorse are proper norms, objective norms, which are typically discovered in solitude and then applied and refined in company.

II. Scholarly and Critical Background

How different the approach of Austen (and Kant) is from others on offer in their time will require evaluation of texts in the early modern history of moral thought. This will in turn require my showing how near or far Austen's convenient distinction between Sense and Sensibility is to that often made by intellectual historians between

Enlightenment and Romanticism. Often taught as historical phases or eras, with a dividing date between them around the year 1800, Enlightenment and Romanticism are portrayed in more careful histories—for example, Taylor's *Sources of the Self* and MacIntyre's *A Short History of Ethics*—as milieus in competition throughout most of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

This was a period in which, as Taylor writes, attempts were made conscientiously to bridge divisions “between reason and sensibility” and between individuals and community (384). To take this notion one step further, I will elaborate on MacIntyre's claim that “good cannot simply mean 'what man desires' ” (53). Essentially, MacIntyre distinguishes between a “man of convention”, say, “[a] man who lives in a given state and conforms to its required standards”; and a “creature of nature”, namely, “a man who is...depending upon his own personal and private purposes” (16). MacIntyre's doctrine rests upon the idea that the natural man has no moral standards of his own, and only a compromise between the two opposites will lead the individual towards morality and perfection of the self. To reinforce this point, he proposes an interesting example: “Natural man portrayed Thrasymachean [a wolf] guise has two main characteristics”, he says, “[p]ower and pleasure are his exclusive interests. But to get what he wants this wolf has to wear the sheep clothing of the conventional moral values. His masquerade can only be carried through by putting the conventional moral vocabulary to the service of his private purposes” (18). The message conveyed by this example, functions to my mind, not only as a starting point to understand Jane Austen's perception of individualism, but also as a means to explore its intricate subtleties by means of Rousseau's and Kant's moral theory.

Austen literary references to what MacIntyre would call “man of convention” seem to begin in her disapproval of outward forms and habits. Austen believes that the

structure of society has a determining effect on formation of character and therefore, one's personality is sacrificed to the uniformity of social norms. For Austen, appearances do not reveal the individual's real nature; they do not correspond to what people really are. In *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, Elizabeth Bennet's first impressions are mistaken. It takes her months of acquaintance with Mr. Darcy to realize that he is the man suited for her. And just like in Elizabeth's case, Marianne Dashwood, is shown to be quite mistaken in her judgment of Colonel Brandon. Rousseau, in the *First Discourse*, would argue that human nature has become corrupted by the influence of civilization. For him, social values have led to the replacement of truth by appearances which conceal behind the mask the authentic human nature. He wishes, therefore, for an ideal world in which "the outward countenance were always the image of the heart's dispositions" (7). Thus, he raises the idea of man's alienation from his original being. In the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau examines the fundamental features of human nature and looking for the primordial feelings which have not been ruined by society. He examines the importance of following one's own innate capacities, rather than the dictates of society; and suggests that the individual can make judgments about the external world instead of being mastered by it (*DoI*, 34). For him, it seems, a man who lives outside himself will never find security and self unity.

Austen uses many of her characters to investigate the boundaries of Romantic sensibility and its consequences in the process of self making. However, her conclusions are quite different from these of Rousseau. Her heroines and sometimes other characters as well, must undergo a powerful journey of self-knowledge; they have to struggle with their passionate nature to achieve virtue, moral wisdom and self unity. Marianne Dashwood, for instance, is made to learn in a very painful way, that unchecked, overdramatized feelings can be a very dangerous thing. Elizabeth Bennet,

on the other hand, eventually comes to a deep-rooted realization of how unjust and blind she has been. And in *Mansfield Park* it is Fanny Price who grows to provide moral base to other characters in the novel. *Persuasion*, according to Tony Tanner, unlike the other novels of Austen, may be regarded as her most radical novel since it is showing her own shift to Romanticism. For him, it "differs quite radically from [Austen's] previous works in that there...her heroines tend to graduate from romance to prudence" (235).

However, I will attempt to prove him wrong by evincing the dominance of rational stabilities in this novel as well.

Given all this, I will demonstrate how by observation and analysis of feelings, Austen gradually leads her characters towards what Kant would call the categorical imperative. Unlike Rousseau, Kant's moral thought deals with subordinating desires to duty. He contends with the question of morality by presenting the principles of the categorical imperative from which morality can be derived. The categorical imperative commands us not to be ruled by our own inclination, but to act only from a dutiful attitude. For Kant, the ultimate purpose of the moral law is not merely individual, but rather social. Its final goal is to achieve a "systematic union of different rational beings through common laws". This union, he believes, would produce eventually harmonious interaction between the members of society.

In *Religion within the limits of Reason Alone*, Kant perceives that the human race has inclination to vice. People have natural tendency to deviate from the moral law in a way that gives their innate desires precedence (*Rel*, 27). Interestingly, he maintains that when we regard our social relationship in a radically individualistic manner, we look on ourselves as isolated from others in an anti social Hobbesian world of hostility. In that world everyone else is regarded as a means to achieve our goals (*Rel*, 22). In *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant provides a further elaboration on the nature of

human morality. "To be happy", he contends, "is necessarily the demand of every rational but finite being and therefore an unavoidable determining ground of its faculty of desire" (*PrR*, 23). But happiness, for Kant, is an idea of the imagination and therefore an "impossible task" (*CJ*, 92). From his perspective, a force that strives towards happiness alone is inclination; but since some of our desires may not be fulfilled, we will have to tame them for the sake of our welfare (*PrR*, 33).

In *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Kant describes the human species as one "that strives, in the face of obstacles to rise out of evil to constant progress towards the good" (*Anhr*, 193). The act of establishing a character requires adopting an "absolute unity of the inner principle of our conduct", and therefore, because no one can avoid making the ultimate choice, no one can have a morally indifferent character (*Anth*, 159-160). Later, in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant meditates on the internal struggle between reason and inclination and becomes convinced that man shows more propensity to listen to his own inclination than to the moral law (*MM*, 379). For these reasons, he characterizes virtue as a moral strength or courage which can be recognized by the obstacles one overcomes that are mostly related with the corruption of our inclinations. Similarly to what is suggested by Kant, Austen's characters achieve their moral virtue and wisdom through experience. Their acknowledgment in the importance of reason is not only an outcome of inner psychological struggle, but also of an active intellectual comprehension by which they direct their future motives and actions.

To further sharpen Austen's individualistic worldview, I will additionally draw correlations between the aesthetics embodied in her novels and the aesthetic theory of the philosophers. The differences in the philosophers' perceptions would help me to develop another dimension of inquiry, and formulate a deeper sense of Austen's

individualistic agenda. First, by turning to the aesthetics I hope to illustrate the mediums of solitude, nature, poetry and music as dimensions by which the individual's deepest feelings are captured. To support this argument, I will use two substantial chapters in Taylor's research, "Nature as Source" and "The Expressive Turn", as reference points. Basically, both chapters present the picturesque and aesthetics as a means to evoke the individual's sensibility and authenticity. The first chapter, deals with the gradual release of the natural powers of human beings; and the latter, presents a new understanding by which the "very term 'aesthetic' points us to a mode of experience" (373). Austen, as a novelist, seems to value the purest subtleties of the human soul, and the aesthetics embodied in her novels serves to arouse and elevate the sensibility of her characters in moments of private withdrawal. However, she is still committed to Sense to restrict the emotional fluidity and keep it within the boundaries of Reason. Her literary attempt to reconcile between the two opposites will be examined in accordance with the mediums mentioned above, and will be followed by Rousseau's and Kant's aesthetic approaches as well. Thus, I intend to indicate once again, that even within the private spheres, the reasonable Kantian flavor still seems to prevail. Here, I would exemplify this notion through the medium of poetry: Marianne Dashwood's excessive sensibility and romantic idealism is also viewed through her emotional response to romantic poetry. She is drawn to the poetry of William Cowper and seems to live out her passion even by the way she reads her favorite poems. Marianne's attitude toward poetry seems to correspond with what Rousseau acknowledges in *Essay on the Origin of Language*. From his perspective, primitive languages were used to express man's primary emotions and instincts. Accordingly, he assumes that man has not begun with reasoning but with feelings and man's earliest words were poetical and figurative. For him, only the art which is grounded in nature can achieve solid, durable expression (*Dis*, 281-282).

Austen, however, is well aware of the alluring danger of poetry; she does not believe that idealism of literature will honestly serve her heroines in their practical lives. For the very same reasons, says Laura Penny in "The highest of All Arts: Kant and Poetry", Kant would suggest that the freedom produced by poetry is not absolute and must be limited by the power of taste to prevent deviations from the "imaginary standard" (380). Kant, the same as Austen, discerns the danger embodied in Romantic poetry and expresses his disdain for the Romantic poets "that proclaim themselves beyond the rules, and above common sense" (376). Hence, it is not surprising, that Marianne eventually leaves such imprudent passion behind her when she learns to respect reason and discretion.

III. Chapter Outline

Chapter 1 – Introduction

The introduction will begin with a comprehensive overview of the increasing individualism of eighteenth-century England and its consequences; including references to influential critics such as Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre. I will situate my thesis within the fundamental debate between the subjectivity of the individual mind and practical reasoning and clarify how it contributes to interpret Austen's individualistic worldview. I will also outline my use of moral and aesthetic theory of both Jean Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant, and its relevance to my argument.

Chapter 2 – Austen's Correspondence with the Moral Theory of Rousseau and Kant

In this chapter I will attempt to define Jane Austen's individualistic worldview in relation to Rousseau's and Kant's moral theory. By drawing correlations between the author's perception of sensibility and Rousseau's moral thought I will gradually

illustrate her skepticism toward Romantic sensibility. Although Austen's novels contain sentimental tendencies expressed by her characters, she uses them only as a tool to elucidate the danger and misfortune embodied in one's striving to live his natural impulses. Further, I will use the strong parallels between Austen's perceptive of individualism and Kant's moral views to endorse Austen's inclination toward what Kant would call the categorical imperative. Thus, I intend to show that although Austen seems to value the purest subtleties of the human soul, she is still committed to Sense to restrict the emotional fluidity and keep it within the boundaries of Reason.

*The chapter may be subdivided due to its length and the complexity of the moral theory presented by both philosophers.

Chapter 3 – Extended being – Authenticity and Spaces of Self Discovery.

In Austen's novels the heroines' privacy is constantly invaded by a dull, demanding society that leaves them little time of their own. Austen who respects and cherishes these rare moments of private withdrawal probably would have agreed with Richard Sennett's assertion in *The Fall of the Public Man*, that "[i]n private, we seek out not a principle but a reflection, that of what our psyches are, what is authentic in our feelings" (4). However, although Austen seems to value the intimate sphere, she is always in a rush to integrate the private, the unique into the social. To reinforce Austen's consistency with the individualistic agenda achieved in the previous chapter, I will point out that the correspondence between the author and philosophers also involves aesthetic perspectives. The aesthetic embodied in Austen's novels contains many references to the beauties of nature, solitude, music and taste for poetry and literature, which also seem to appear in the aesthetic theory of Rousseau and Kant. Thus, by formulating the

similarities between them I will prove again, that even within the private sphere the author's claims are still in favor of the Kantian perspective.

* The chapter may be subdivided.

Chapter 4 – Conclusion

In this chapter I will summarize the conclusions reached in the previous chapters; conclusions by which I was given the freedom to place Jane Austen as a moralist whose heroes and heroines acquire self-unity because they have cultivated moral virtue.

Austen's ultimate achievement is to integrate the private, the authentic into the social.

The author undoubtedly understands that as individuals each share a unique, inner world of thoughts and sentiments. Yet, there is only one external world which all individuals must cohabit. It does not mean that Austen underestimates the value of passion and emotions but, from her point of view, the structure of society is more powerful.

Obviously, she is realistic enough to understand that sensibility must be within the framework of society.

Bibliography

Abrams, M.H. *The Mirror and the Lamp*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971.

Arendt, Hannah. *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

Armstrong, Nancy. *How Novel Think*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

Austen, Jane. *Sense and Sensibility*. London: Penguin Group, 1986.

Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. New York: Bantam Books, 1981.

Austen, Jane. *Mansfield Park*. London: Penguin Group, 1994.

Austen, Jane. *Persuasion*. London: Penguin Group, 1994.

- Brown, Lloyd W. *Bits of Ivory*. North Carolina: Louisiana State University Press, 1973.
- Cavell, Stanley. *Must we mean what we say?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.
- Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic*. New York: Yale University Press, 2000.
- Kant, Immanuel. *The Conflict of the Faculties*. New York: Abaris Books, Inc., 1979.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Anthropology from Pragmatic Point of View*. Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960.
- Kant, Immanuel. *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Glasgow: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1970.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Practical Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Foundation of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Indianapolis: The Bobbs- Merrill Company, Inc., 1976.
- Knox-Shaw, Peter. *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- La Faye, Deirdre. *Jane Austen's Letters*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- La Faye, Deirdre. *Jane Austen: The World of her Novels*. London: Frances Lincoln, 2002.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair, *A Short History of Attics*. London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998.
- Penny, Laura. "The Highest of All the Arts." *Philosophy and Literature* 32(2) (2008): 373-384. MUSE. Bar Ilan University Library, Ramat-Gan. 2 June. 2009. http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/philosophy_and_literature/v032/32.2.penny.html
- Pippin, Robert. "The Significance of Taste: Kant, Aesthetic and Reflective Judgment." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 34 (1996).4: 549-569.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. "Discourse on the Sciences and Arts." *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*. Ed. Victor Gourevitch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. "Essay on the Origin of Languages." *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*. Ed. Victor Gourevitch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Discourses on Inequality*. London: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Emile or On Education*. New York: BasicBooks, 1979.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Reveries of A Solitary*. New York: Lenox Hill Pub., 1971.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *A complete Dictionary of Music*. New York: AMS Press Inc., 1975.

Sennett, Richard. *The Fall of Public Man*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1992.

Taylor, Charles. *The Sources of the Self*. Massachusetts: Harvard university press, 1989.

Tanner, Tony. "In Between: *Persuasion*." *Persuasion*. Ed. Patricia Meyer Spacks, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995. 231-264.

Tomalin, Claire. *Jane Austen: A Life*. London: Penguin Books: 1998.

Wood, Allen W. *Kant's Ethical Thought*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

"Exhaustive Bibliography of English Translations of Kant": <http://www.hkbu.edu.hk/~ppp/fne/bibl.html>, accessed Nov. 21, 2009.