

## Reconciling Morality and Judgment in *Pride and Prejudice*

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One of the major themes of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is the relationship between moral goodness and good judgment, particularly insofar as human beings use these faculties to relate to other people.<sup>1</sup> This theme is first indicated by the title of the novel. Pride is a moral fault, that of centering on oneself and not considering others. Prejudice, by contrast, is a fault of judgment: a hasty judgment made before one fully considers the whole of the situation (a pre-judgment). Thus, the title focuses the reader on these two faults and implicitly raises the question of the relationship between morality and judgment. How are these faults related? What does their relationship show about the relationship between the moral faculty and the faculty of judgment? One could easily think of them as opposed to each other; accurate judgment leads one to see others' deficiencies and to have less goodwill towards them. But is there a way in which it is possible for moral goodness and good judgment to complement each other, since they are both inherent human faculties?

In order to explore these questions, this paper will begin by examining morality and judgment separately. This may be done by looking at the characters of Jane and Mr. Bennet. Jane is very good morally, but does not judge others; her character thus exemplifies the moral faculty. Mr. Bennet loves to judge others, but refuses to interact

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<sup>1</sup> As it is a story of the interactions between people, and especially a story of love and marriage, it is unfitting to use *Pride and Prejudice* to consider these faculties abstractly; that is, we are not here exploring how morality might relate a single human to some theoretical natural law, or how judgment might relate a single human to certain philosophical truths, but how multiple humans might relate to each other by means of morality and judgment.

with them on a moral level; he provides an excellent illustration of the faculty of judgment.

First, Jane is often held up as an example of moral goodness. “My dear Jane!” exclaimed Elizabeth, ‘you are too good. Your sweetness and disinterestedness are really angelic” (Austen 127). Elizabeth remarks again near the end of the book, “Till I have your disposition, your goodness, I never can have your happiness” (Austen 330). Indeed, most of these commendations for Jane come from Elizabeth, making it strong praise indeed. As Elizabeth herself says in the same passage as the first quotation, “I only want to think *you* perfect... There are few people whom I really love, and still fewer of whom I think well” (Austen 128).

So what exactly is the nature of Jane’s goodness? The occasion of Elizabeth’s first statement above gives an excellent starting point for this question. Elizabeth and Jane are discussing Mr. Bingley’s sudden departure and Jane’s feelings for him, and Jane takes comfort “that it has not been more than an error of fancy on my side, and that it has done no harm to any one but myself” (Austen 127). Where many would feel resentment upon perceiving that they were the only person hurt in a bad situation, Jane takes comfort in this idea, for she cares more for the happiness of others than for her own happiness. She demonstrates such care in countless other places in the novel, for instance, after she becomes engaged to Mr. Bingley. Her first words on this occasion are, “’Tis too much!... I do not deserve it... to know that what I have to relate will give such pleasure to all my dear family! how shall I bear so much happiness!” (Austen 327) One important reason this marriage makes Jane happy is that it brings happiness to others, as well; in her goodness, she wishes for the happiness of every body, and

particularly her family, and thinks little of happiness for herself.

But Jane's moral goodness is divorced from good judgment. At the same time that Jane desires happiness for others more than for herself, she also thinks more highly of others than she does of herself, even when the others are undeserving. As we see in the previous quotations, she blames only herself when Mr. Bingley suddenly departs; and when she finally becomes engaged, she feels that she does not deserve that happiness. Indeed, she never judges any person badly, and she is often occupied with trying to exonerate all parties involved in bad situations. As Elizabeth exclaims to her, "Oh! you are a great deal too apt, you know, to like people in general. You never see a fault in anybody. All the world are good and agreeable in your eyes. I never heard you speak ill of a human being in my life" (Austen 12).

Moreover, this characteristic of Jane's does not simply come from a natural stupidity, for Jane is also credited with good sense. "With *your* good sense, to be so honestly blind to the follies and nonsense of others!" says Elizabeth immediately after the last quotation. What exactly is this good sense, and how does it differ from the good judgment that Jane notably lacks? In a passage on Jane's disappointment of Mr. Bingley, the narrator writes, "... all her good sense, and all her attention to the feelings of her friends, were requisite to check the indulgence of those regrets, which must have been injurious to her own health and their tranquillity" (Austen 214). Here Jane's good sense seems to make her realize that indulging her regrets will do only harm to herself and others. More generally, it can be said that good sense is the faculty of knowing what action is good, or right, or fitting, in a specific situation. Good sense is not so abstract as Mary's sermonizing and "threadbare morality" (Austen 56); Mary is never

credited with good sense. At the same time, neither is it so concrete that Jane sees when others have acted against what good sense dictates, simply by using her own good sense. This action belongs instead to good judgment, which applies good sense to actual people and situations; and good judgment, it seems, Jane does not have.

Why is it that Jane lacks good judgment? Is she naturally incapable of judging well, such that her bad judgments of others are nothing more than mistakes? Or does she willfully refuse to judge well, in order to satisfy the desires of her moral goodness? It is true that Jane herself often uses the language of an inability to judge when thinking about others. “I cannot believe it [that Mr. Bingley’s sisters and friend have influenced his decision to leave Netherfield],” she claims (Austen 129). And again, she writes to Elizabeth of Miss Bingley’s strange behavior during her visit (behavior easily understandable by a supposition of duplicity), “I cannot understand it” (Austen 141). Yet this inability does not necessarily answer the question in favor of the former option, of a natural incapability, for it may be the result of an old habit of refusing to judge; Jane may have refused to judge for so long that she has made herself incapable of judging. In fact, other statements in these two passages seem to point more towards this latter option, of willful refusal.

When Elizabeth presses her opinion that Mr. Bingley was influenced in leaving Netherfield, Jane replies, “Do not distress me by the idea. I am not ashamed of having been mistaken - or, at least, it is slight, it is nothing in comparison of what I should feel in thinking ill of him or his sisters” (Austen 130). Her defense of her own view is not that Elizabeth is wrong, but that it is too painful to think as Elizabeth does; it is quite possible that Jane could judge as Elizabeth does, were she not so set on avoiding the

distress that such judgment would give to her moral goodness. Even clearer is the narrator's description in the later passage of Jane's realization that Miss Bingley does not truly care about her: "the shortness of her stay, and yet more, the alteration of her manner, would allow Jane to *deceive herself* no longer" (Austen 140, emphasis added). If Jane is deceiving herself, then she cannot simply be mistaken. She must ultimately have some idea of the truth, however deeply she has hidden it from herself; and having this idea, her bad judgment must essentially be a willful refusal to judge (though it may also involve an inability to judge as the result of habitual refusal). Thus, moral goodness and good judgment conflict in the attempt to use good sense to contrary ends. The morally good Jane, desiring the happiness of others more than her own, also desires to think better of others than she desires to think of herself; she is thus only willing to apply her good sense to her own actions, and not to the actions of others, in order to refrain from judging others unkindly.

On the other hand, Mr. Bennet, with his good judgment, cares only to exercise that good judgment and easily applies his good sense to others, even when finding fault with someone leads to unkind actions towards that person. Mr. Bennet is a good judge of character.<sup>2</sup> Aside from his judgments on his family, the main example of his good judgment is in regard to Mr. Collins. Upon reading Mr. Collins's first letter, Elizabeth asks whether he can be a sensible man. Mr. Bennet replies, "No, my dear; I think not. I have great hopes of finding him quite the reverse. There is a mixture of servility and

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<sup>2</sup> Possible objections to this claim about the goodness of Mr. Bennet's judgment are, first, his allowing Lydia to go to Brighton, which will be discussed later; and second, his incredulity at Elizabeth wanting to marry Mr. Darcy. This latter example is not an instance of a fault in judgment, but of a lack of all the evidence; as soon as Elizabeth informs him of the events that led to her love for Mr. Darcy, Mr. Bennet is easily reconciled to the match (Austen 357).

self-importance in his letter, which promises well” (Austen 60). This description is striking in how it is echoed by the narrator’s own description after Mr. Collins appears in person. “Mr. Collins was not a sensible man... [He was] altogether a mixture of pride and obsequiousness, self-importance and humility” (Austen 65). Mr. Bennet’s judgment here is exactly right.

Yet even more striking than the accuracy of Mr. Bennet’s judgment is the pleasure that Mr. Collins’s faults bring him. His good judgment often leads him to despise those he judges; and to lessen the pain of that despise, he turns those people into jokes, things to be laughed at. Mocking is his only way of interacting with other people; when not mocking, he spends his time isolated in his library. Yet mocking is hardly a true interaction, for in order to do so, he must internally separate himself from the objects of his ridicule. The closest he gets to really interacting with someone is when he includes Elizabeth in his mocking. For instance, “he listened to [Mr. Collins] with the keenest enjoyment... except in an occasional glance at Elizabeth, requiring no partner in his pleasure” (Austen 64). This is what I mean when I say that Mr. Bennet uses only his faculty of judgment, not his faculty for morality. Just as Jane chooses not to exercise her faculty of judgment, Mr. Bennet chooses not to interact with others on a moral level; the only interactions he desires are those of judgment.

Yet, despite this desire, Mr. Bennet cannot help interacting with others on a moral level; his attempt not to do so only makes his interactions immoral, not amoral. This appears most clearly in his relationship with his wife. Admittedly, upon a first reading, his jokes at her expense simply appear to be humorous, and so they are. But despite their humor, and indeed their truth, they are also inappropriate and a

misdirection of his talents. Mr. Darcy's description of the impropriety of the Bennet family forces Elizabeth to acknowledge her father's faults, his

continual breach of conjugal obligation and decorum which, in exposing his wife to the contempt of her own children, was so highly reprehensible... She had never... been so fully aware of the evils arising from so ill judged a direction of talents; talents which, rightly used, might at least have preserved the respectability of his daughters, even if incapable of enlarging the mind of his wife. (Austen 223)

Though Mrs. Bennet is a foolish person, she is still Mr. Bennet's wife; he has a duty to act towards her with at least a little respect, even if he cannot feel any respect for her. To act disrespectfully towards her, and in front of her children, teaching them by example not to respect their own mother; to engage all his mental talents in mocking his wife, without ever attempting at the very least to teach his children to be more sensible than she is; these are very serious faults in a husband and a father and go against the moral precepts of caring for one's own family.

This lack of care comes to a head in Lydia's running off with Mr. Wickham. Though of course this is not simply Mr. Bennet's fault, he does have some share in the blame, as he himself admits. It was he who allowed Lydia to go to Brighton in the first place, even after hearing Elizabeth's very sensible concerns about the matter. His justification is that "Lydia will never be easy till she has exposed herself in some public place or other, and we can never expect her to do it with so little expense or inconvenience to her family as under the present circumstances" (Austen 217).

Though Mr. Bennet is eventually proved wrong about this, I would contend that his

mistake is not the main problem. As he points out, Lydia is “too poor to be an object of prey to any body” (Austen 218); and when the scandal does happen, several characters expend much mental energy trying to figure out why Mr. Wickham would choose to run off with her at all. No, Mr. Bennet’s judgment is fairly sound. His true problem is his lack of concern as exhibited in the above quotation. Mr. Bennet simply does not care that Lydia may expose herself; as long as he can be as little bothered by it as possible, he will be happy. This attitude is completely unfatherly and goes against all moral precepts of family life. Mr. Bennet ought to care about his own daughter’s character; but he does not, for he has quite distanced himself from such a foolish girl.

Thus, despite, or rather because of, Mr. Bennet’s attempts to avoid any interactions besides those of judgment, he ends up interacting immorally toward his family. By mocking his wife so constantly, he wrongs not only his wife, but also his children. Morality is so inherent in human actions that the attempt to avoid interacting on a moral level can only lead to immoral, not amoral, behavior. The same can be found in the attempt to avoid all judgment. To return to Jane for a moment, she asserts that she “would wish not to be hasty in censuring any one” (Austen 12). Yet in her very attempt to avoid hasty judgment, Jane hastily judges people to be good, and usually better than they are. Like morality, judgment cannot be avoided altogether; one must judge, either well or badly.

But all this only makes our main question all the more pressing. If neither morality nor judgment can be avoided, the best course would seem to be to try to excel in both. But our examination of the characters of Jane and Mr. Bennet seems to oppose these two faculties to each other. Jane (a morally good person) must shut her



eyes to the faults of others because she wishes to think well of them; and for Mr. Bennet (a person with good judgment), seeing the faults of others only makes him distance himself from them and not care for them at all. What then are we to do? How could it be possible to reconcile these two faculties?

This tension provides an excellent opportunity to turn to the main storyline of the development of Elizabeth's character. One of the most central events of the novel is Elizabeth's realization of her own pride and prejudice with regard to Mr. Darcy. Though the novel's title is often interpreted such that the pride refers to Mr. Darcy and the prejudice to Elizabeth, the division is not actually so clean. When Elizabeth is confronted by the truly blind nature of her judgment (through Mr. Darcy's letter), she characterizes her fault as moral as well as intellectual: "Vanity... has been my folly... Till this moment I never knew myself" (Austen 196). We shall explore this statement more soon, but for now it suffices to note how Elizabeth blames herself for both vanity (which is quite close to pride) and prejudice. Thus, exploring Elizabeth's growth in turning from this double fault should help us understand how it is possible to reconcile moral goodness and good judgment.

Before we explore this change in Elizabeth, let us briefly describe her character before she changes. First, Elizabeth shares with her father a pleasure in judging and ridiculing other people: "She had a lively, playful disposition, which delighted in any thing ridiculous" (Austen 9). At the same time, Elizabeth shows some care for others, unlike her father. When Jane becomes ill after her ride to Netherfield, Elizabeth defies social convention, dirties her dress, and walks three miles by herself to visit Jane, doing exactly what Jane wants (Austen 30); and Elizabeth stays with Jane until her recovery,

even though she despises most of Netherfield's other occupants. Moreover, Elizabeth shows all this care for Jane though she knows Jane's faults; as quoted above, she recognizes how "honestly blind [Jane is] to the follies and nonsense of others" (Austen 12). Similarly, Elizabeth agrees to visit Charlotte at Hunsford, despite her dislike of Mr. Collins and her bad opinion of Charlotte's agreeing to marry him. Finally, we would do well to remember that Elizabeth says of herself, as cited earlier, "There are few people whom I really love, and still fewer of whom I think well" (Austen 128). She thus implies that there are people whom she loves, but of whom she does not think well.

How is Elizabeth able to care for others even when she forms a bad judgment of some quality or action of theirs? What prevents her from simply retreating from them, as Mr. Bennet does from his family? In the examples we have given, Jane and Charlotte are Elizabeth's closest friends, and she does not find fault with everything about them. Much of her care for them probably does come from her good opinion and enjoyment of their company, as they seem to be some of the few people with whom she can hold a serious conversation. "Absence had increased her desire of seeing Charlotte again," despite their disagreement (Austen 143). Elizabeth decides that their faults are small in comparison with their good qualities and chooses to ignore those faults in order to enjoy those good qualities, though this process takes longer in Charlotte's case.

We thus see how Elizabeth can care for Jane and Charlotte, for those with whom she has had a long relationship and whose faults are not as prominent as their good qualities. But most people do not fit into these categories. How can Elizabeth balance her judgment of other people with a moral goodness towards them? For this, we must

turn to Elizabeth's relationships with Mr. Wickham and Mr. Darcy and her realization of her own faults.

In the first half of the novel, Elizabeth's relationship with Mr. Wickham lacks not only judgment, but also the very basis for judgment: she refuses to distance herself from him. Elizabeth immediately believes everything he says in their first conversation and never removes herself from the situation in order to question his appearance of goodness and his bad account of Mr. Darcy. If she had stepped back for a moment, she would have been able to notice the impropriety of Mr. Wickham sharing so much with a complete stranger and would consequently have questioned the truth of his tale. This is the nature of her (fairly straightforward) fault with regard to judgment. More interesting is her account of why her judgment fails in this way, which places the ultimate blame in a moral fault.

Elizabeth's confession, quoted briefly above, is so revealing that it is worth quoting in full:

"How despicably have I acted!" she cried. - "I, who have prided myself on my discernment! - I, who have valued myself on my abilities! who have often disdained the generous candour of my sister, and gratified my vanity, in useless or blameable distrust. - How humiliating is this discovery! - Yet, how just a humiliation! - Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind. But vanity, not love, has been my folly. - Pleased with the preference of one [Mr. Wickham], and offended by the neglect of the other [Mr. Darcy], on the very beginning of our acquaintance, I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven

reason away, where either were concerned. Till this moment I never knew myself.” (Austen 196)

Elizabeth’s failure to remove herself from the situation which she is judging does indeed lead to a fault in judgment; but it itself is essentially a moral fault, that of pride and vanity. Elizabeth has a high view of herself and her own judgment, so high that she unconsciously tends to favor those who flatter her and to dislike those who refuse to do so. Mr. Wickham singled her out on their first evening together and privileged her alone with his “life-story.” Her pride thus being gratified, she became inclined to judge him well. Mr. Darcy’s slight to her at the first ball, though she joked about it, affected her more than she previously thought. Discussing the incident with Charlotte at the time, she admits to an excuse for his pride and aloofness from her, but does not let that affect her feelings towards him. In a joking echo of her later confession, she says “I could easily forgive *his* pride, if he had not mortified *mine*” (Austen 17).

We may briefly ask why Elizabeth’s important moment of repentance has come later in the book, if, at the very beginning, she already had the presence of mind to see how her pride affected her judgment of Mr. Darcy. The reason for this seems to be the difference in tone between the two confessions. In the earlier one, Elizabeth sees her fault, but makes it into a joke, that is, into an opportunity to exercise the witty judgment of which she is so proud. She is proud of recognizing her pride; she is too focused on the fact that she saw her fault, and thus pays little heed to the fault itself. In the later confession, by contrast, there is no hint of any pride; there Elizabeth is focused on her fault itself and not on her perception of her fault.

To return then to the later confession, Elizabeth’s pride means that she has an

excessively high opinion of herself. This excess causes Elizabeth to make distorted judgments about others, so that she can hold onto her self-regard. In order to hide this error from herself, she must, as she puts it, “court prepossession and ignorance, and drive reason away.” Elizabeth’s pride is thus the opposite of Jane’s goodness, which consistently results in an excessively high opinion of others; yet the two sisters end up sharing a similar fault in judgment, distorting people’s true characters to suit the desires of their (im)morality.

Moreover, this realization of her own faults is central to Elizabeth’s growth, particularly with regard to Mr. Darcy. Most clearly, recognizing her prejudice enables her to look at him from other perspectives than her own, as when she visits Pemberley and sees how his character improves in his own circle. But even more than this, knowing her own faults gives Elizabeth more patience to bear with his faults, a greater basis for forgiveness.

A brief examination of comparable realizations in both Mr. Bennet and Jane will make the importance of Elizabeth’s realization all the more clear. Mr. Bennet recognizes his failure as a father after Lydia runs off with Mr. Wickham. When Elizabeth warns him not to be too hard on himself, he replies, “No, Lizzy, let me once in my life feel how much I have been to blame. I am not afraid of being overpowered by the impression. It will pass away soon enough” (Austen 280). This statement is similar to Elizabeth’s earlier confession insofar as it shows an awareness of his realization of his failure, but focuses too much on this realization rather than the failure itself. Mr. Bennet is so accustomed to judging whatever is around him that he judges not only his failure, but also his own impression of his failure; and he finds that the impression is only

passing. It is endurable only because he will not have to endure it for very long. Yet Mr. Bennet himself makes it easier for this impression to pass away, for in judging the impression, he distances himself from it and does not allow it to remain a part of himself. Mr. Bennet refuses to act in such a way that would make this impression more lasting and improve his character, since he is so mired in his own judgment.

Unlike either Elizabeth and Mr. Bennet, Jane never has one intense realization of her own faults. She does often admit she is wrong in some particular judgment, but these admissions never progress into insights about her whole character. Moreover, many of these admissions (such as her “mistaken” estimation of Mr. Bingley’s regard) are not based on a true judgment, but merely come from her desire to absolve another person from guilt. She will not examine her whole self, for doing so would force her to examine others as well and judge them more harshly than her morality allows her.

Elizabeth, however, does shift from knowing she was wrong about Mr. Wickham and Mr. Darcy to recognizing that her whole character is vain and prejudiced; and she allows this recognition to stay with her and influence her. While talking to Mr. Darcy after his second proposal to her, she describes how she was ashamed of her previous behavior upon seeing him at Pemberley: “My conscience told me that I deserved no extraordinary politeness” (Austen 349). Even when she receives Mrs. Gardiner’s letter near the close of the novel, Elizabeth still feels a renewal of her previous “humiliation.” “How heartily did she grieve over every ungracious sensation she had ever encouraged, every saucy speech she had ever directed towards him. For herself, she was humbled” (Austen 307).

At the same time, she also tries to restrict Mr. Darcy’s prolonged confession of

his own faults. “We will not quarrel for the greater share of blame annexed to that evening,” said Elizabeth. “The conduct of neither, if strictly examined, will be irreproachable; but since then we have both, I hope, improved in civility” (Austen 347). And again, a few paragraphs later, “But think no more of the letter. The feelings of the person who wrote and the person who received it, are now so widely different what they were then, that every unpleasant circumstance attending it, ought to be forgotten” (Austen 348). In these two statements, Elizabeth seems to be saying something like: “Yes, we were both at fault, but we have both realized that and repented from our faults. We have changed, so let us move on and forget the past.” An important part of her ability to say this is her intense realization of her own faults. Knowing that she shares part of the blame in this whole situation and having felt the pain that knowledge brings, she is better able to sympathize with Mr. Darcy’s similar feelings and to suggest that they forgive each other and forget their misdeeds. Of course, another part of Elizabeth’s forgiveness is the realization that Mr. Darcy has some very admirable qualities, that he is not at all as bad as she was originally prejudiced to think him; but that does not mean that he is perfect, and Elizabeth knows that. Her knowledge of her own faults is what allows her to forgive his remaining imperfections, thus reconciling her judgment of him with her morality and care for him.

Jane fears that if she admits the truth about herself, if she does not always take the blame, then she will have to blame another person and find fault with others. While this is true, it is not the whole story. What Jane does not realize is exactly what Elizabeth comes to learn about the other side of self-knowledge. True self-knowledge illuminates both one’s faults and one’s good qualities; and while knowledge of one’s

good qualities can compel one to see the faults of others, it is the knowledge of one's own faults that allows one to sympathize with others in their faults and forgive them. Self-knowledge is what prevents this forgiveness from being like Mr. Collins's idea of forgiveness. He writes to Mr. Bennet upon Lydia's marriage: ""You ought certainly to forgive them as a Christian, but never to admit them in your sight, or allow their names to be mentioned in your hearing"" (Austen 343). Mr. Collins's hypocritical forgiveness separates the virtuous forgiver from the sinful forgiven person; but self-knowledge puts the two individuals on the same level and allows the forgiver to truly forgive and move past the wrongdoing. Self-knowledge, leading to forgiveness, is thus the key to reconciling morality and judgment; it is what allows us both to recognize the faults of others and to love them despite their faults.



### Work Cited

Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. New York: Knopf, 1991. Print.