

Wittgenstein on using language and playing chess: the breakdown of an analogy, and its consequences

Martin Gustafsson

Åbo Akademi University

1. Introduction

Analogies involving chess are common in central texts of Western philosophy of mathematics, logic and language. We find such analogies in the works of Leibniz, Frege, Saussure, and many others. In Wittgenstein's writings too, reflections on chess appear at crucial junctures in his discussions. In *Philosophical Investigations*, the chess analogy makes its first appearance, among many, in section 31. This is in connection with the discussion of ostensive definitions. Here is the first paragraph of that long section:

When one shews someone the king in chess and says: "This is the king", this does not tell him the use of this piece—unless he already knows the rules of the game up to this last point: the shape of the king. You could imagine his having learnt the rules of the game without ever having been shewn an actual piece. The shape of the chessman corresponds here to the sound or shape of a word.

As the final sentence suggests, a central aspect of Wittgenstein's use of the chess analogy is his comparison between linguistic expressions and chess pieces. In section 108, the emphasis is precisely on this aspect:

The philosophy of logic speaks of sentences and words in exactly the sense in which we speak of them in ordinary life when we say e.g. "Here is a Chinese sentence", or "No, that only looks like writing; it is actually just an ornament" and so on.

We are talking about the spatial and temporal phenomenon of language, not about some non-spatial, non-temporal phantasm. [Note in margin: Only it is possible to be interested in a phenomenon in a variety of ways]. But we talk about it as we do about pieces in chess when we are stating the rules of the game, not describing their physical properties.

The question "What is a word really?" is analogous to "What is a piece in chess?"

This comparison between words and chess pieces played an important role for Wittgenstein already back in 1929-1930. In *Philosophical Remarks*, we find one of the precursors of the just quoted paragraph. There Wittgenstein claims, unreservedly, that "The question 'What is a word?' is *completely* analogous with the question 'What is a chessman?'" (Wittgenstein 1975, II-18; emphasis added). And in December 1929, Waismann recorded Wittgenstein as making the following statement:

[I]t is highly important that I can't tell from looking at the pieces of wood whether they are pawns, bishops, rooks, etc. I can't say: that is a pawn *and* such and such rules hold for this piece. No, it is the rules which *define* this piece: a pawn *is* the sum of rules for

its moves (a square is a piece too), just as in the case of language the rules define the logic of a word. (Wittgenstein 1975, 327-8)

My aim in what follows is to explore Wittgenstein's comparison between words and chess pieces. First, I will try to get hold of the precise sense in which the rules of chess can be said to define the pieces of chess. Then I will consider the extent to which what Wittgenstein calls rules of grammar can play a similar role. As Wittgenstein's deletion of the word "complete" in the *Philosophical Investigations* version of the *Philosophical Remarks* precursor of §108 may be taken to indicate, I shall argue that there is a point at which the analogy between words and chess pieces breaks down. Moreover, I shall argue that this point of breakdown is quite important to identify if one wants to understand the nature of Wittgensteinian grammar. Indeed, the breakdown of the analogy puts the Wittgenstein interpreter at a crossroads where she must choose between two quite different conceptions of what rules of grammar are and what kind of philosophical significance they might have. One of these conceptions is in line with a sort of reading according to which rules of grammar draw the bounds of sense and thereby enable us, as philosophers, to prove the nonsensicality of utterances that transgress those boundaries. The other conception is in line with a quite opposite sort of reading, according to which grammatical rules do not draw the bounds of sense, and thus function quite differently in philosophical investigations. I will argue that what Wittgenstein says about chess and language supports to the second sort of interpretation.

This opposition between two conceptions of grammatical rules is parallel to a much discussed controversy over the notion of logical syntax in the *Tractatus* – a controversy in which so-called "resolute" readers propose a conception of syntax that is similar to the second sort of view of grammar just sketched. Such resolute readers also tend to think that there is continuity in precisely this respect between the Tractarian notion of syntax and Wittgenstein's

later notion of grammar. As James Conant puts it, “[a] proper understanding of this region of Wittgenstein’s thought tells as much against standard readings of his later conception of nonsense (as resulting from violations of grammar) as it does against a standard reading of his early conception (as resulting from violations of logical syntax)” (Conant 1991, 180, n. 139). Even if my focus is on later Wittgenstein, what I say will be congenial to a resolute reading of the *Tractatus*. To clarify this connection, I will relate my discussion to an exchange between Conant, Peter Hacker and Cora Diamond on the notion of logical syntax – an exchange in which Hacker uses the chess analogy to an effect diametrically opposed to Wittgenstein’s own. Or, so I shall argue.

2. Chess Rules and Chess Pieces

At first, the passages from Wittgenstein that I have quoted may appear to make only the commonplace point that, as Newton Garver puts it, Wittgensteinian rules of grammar “are constitutive rather than regulative, in that without them the [rule-governed] acts or actions are not even thinkable” (Garver 1996, 170 n. 23). Or, as Gordon Baker and Peter Hacker put it, rules of grammar have a “definitory aspect”, in that “they generate forms of description and determine the applicability and inapplicability of corresponding (normative) characterizations of behaviour” (Baker and Hacker 1985, 45).

This commonplace observation is all right, as far as it goes. I shall argue, however, that the analogy between chess pieces and words should make us think harder about what, exactly, the “constitutive” character of grammatical rules amount to. For Wittgenstein’s way of drawing the analogy suggests that what the rules constitute are not just the acts or behavior that they govern, but also, somehow, the very units that we employ in linguistic behavior – the words or expressions. Wittgenstein’s suggestion seems to be that in philosophy, it will be useful to treat words, not just as sounds and shapes externally related to their use, but as units

the very identity of which is determined by how they are to be employed. Just as a pawn is a pawn in virtue of its being subject to rules that lay down its permissible moves, so, Wittgenstein seems to be arguing, we can fruitfully treat expressions as owing their very identity to their grammar.

It may seem difficult to understand what would be gained by such a principle of individuation. We may argue, with Hacker, that Wittgenstein's emphasis on the constitutive nature of grammatical rules is primarily directed against a "meaning-body" conception of language use, according to which the rules for the use of an expression are somehow answerable to independently existent meanings. Against such a meaning-body conception, Wittgenstein is said by Hacker to hold that "rules for the use of an expression are *constitutive* of its meaning" (Hacker 2003, 8; original italics). According to Hacker's Wittgenstein, and against the meaning-body conception, meanings do not exist independently of grammatical rules, and, hence, the rules are not answerable to any such pre-existent meanings. However, like in the meaning-body conception, Hacker's Wittgenstein still thinks of the expressions as conceptually separable from their use or meaning: the meaning or use, as laid down by the relevant rules, is conceived as something that gets coupled with separately identifiable expressions. Whereas, on the view I am going to recommend, Wittgenstein is even further removed from the meaning-body conception: he thinks rules of grammar are fruitfully seen as constitutive of the expressions themselves. He is suggesting that there is a philosophically relevant notion of linguistic expression such that expressions *qua* expressions are not identifiable independently of their meaning or use. My aim in what follows is to try to understand what this suggestion amounts to.

I shall approach this issue by looking at some detail into the precise sense in which the rules of chess are constitutive of the chess pieces. Note, to begin with, that the rules of chess involve a peculiar sort of circularity. Consider the rule, "The bishop moves only diagonally."

We cannot give a full explanation of what it is to be a bishop without making reference to this rule. There is no such thing as knowing what a bishop in chess is, without knowing the rule. Someone who tries to deny that a bishop moves only diagonally simply shows that he does not know what he is talking about.

Now consider a puzzle that arises from reflection on this circularity. How can rules that are circular in this sense tell us anything at all about what moves are legal for a particular piece at a particular moment in a particular game of chess? How, at a given moment in a game, can it be settled that *this* particular wooden figurine is to be moved only diagonally? Suppose I move the piece from, say, f4 to e4. Now if bishops are identified in terms of their legal moves, it may seem difficult to understand how the rule could determine that this particular move is illegal. For that seems to require an *independent* identification of the piece as a bishop. Without such independent identification, it seems we could as well conclude that the piece is a rook that is being moved legally.

The worry is that the circularity of the rule makes such independent identification impossible. The very distinction between legal and illegal moves threatens to break down, and, with it, the distinctions we make between different sorts of pieces.¹ The very possibility that a particular object is subject to the rule, “The bishop moves only diagonally,” suddenly seems mysterious.

¹ It may be argued that some moves would still be identifiable as illegal, namely, moves that are not permissible for chess pieces of *any* kind. Thus, suppose you move the piece from c1 to d7. That is an illegal move, no matter what kind of chess piece the piece is. But this argument is flawed. In fact, what is at stake is the very possibility of being a chess piece of any sort. If chess piece identities are determined solely in terms of the range of permissible movements, then it is not just left undecided whether a concrete object is a bishop rather than a knight, pawn, rook, etc.; it is left undecided whether the object is a chess piece at all. Nothing would decide that the move is a move *in chess* (rather than a merely physical move of an object from one square on a wooden board to another.)

To be sure, this puzzle involves a confusion. But it is not so easy to get clear on precisely wherein the confusion consists. Consider, for example, the following attempt to get out of the trouble. It may be argued that there is an independent way of determining that a particular object is going to function as a bishop, namely, by straightforward ostensive stipulation. We simply point at a particular physical object and decide that this object is going to function as bishop. Thus, it may be argued, we do not need to somehow *discover* that a particular wooden figurine is a bishop in order to identify its legal range of moves. Rather, the reason why a particular object is a bishop is simply that we have ascribed to it that role. The rules prescribe how concrete objects are to be moved *given* that we have assigned chess-piece identities to those concrete objects, and such arbitrary assignment does not itself involve following the rules.

To clarify this idea, consider a situation in which we want to play a game of chess but do not have access to an ordinary set of chess pieces. Instead, we draw a chess board in the sand, and collect various objects to be used as pieces: an old shoe, a hat, some bricks, a phonebook, a very heavy golden figurine, and so on and so forth. Before we start playing, we need to assign chess-piece identities to these different objects. Clearly, there are no rules telling us which assignments to make. Perhaps we simply point at the hat and utter the words, “Let’s use this hat as a white bishop.” Our choice is arbitrary. If there are constraints, they are due to factors external to the game itself, such as our personal whims (perhaps we are fanatic royalists who find it repulsive to use an old shoe as a king) or considerations of a practical nature (perhaps the very heavy golden figurine is most conveniently used as a king or a pawn, since those pieces make short and thus not very strenuous moves). Once our stipulations have been made, it seems as if rules such as “The bishop moves only diagonally” are straightforwardly applicable to the relevant individual pieces.

On further thought, however, it becomes clear that this response does not suffice to get rid of our puzzle. To begin with, note that the sort of ostensive preparation just described is in principle superfluous. A piece does not have to be identified in that sort of way before a game starts. This becomes very clear if we imagine a case in which we want to play a game of chess, but have only 31 objects available that are suitable to use as pieces. This need not stop us from playing with 32 pieces. Before we start playing, we may simply agree that there is a bishop on square c1, even if there is no physical object there. That bishop can be moved according to the rules, it can attack other pieces, and so on, even if moving it does not involve moving any physical object. This of course requires that the players have good memory, so that they can remember where the bishop is even if he is (as one might somewhat misleadingly put it) without physical incarnation. However, such practical difficulties do not in any way undermine the point I am making: It is quite possible to play chess without assigning chess piece identities to concrete physical objects.

Indeed, there is such a thing as playing chess without *any* physical pieces or physical board; this is equivalent to both players' playing blindfolded. In such a game, there is no ostensive preparation of the sort described earlier, and yet the game involves all the usual pieces: bishops, knights, pawns, and so on. This shows the function of physical pieces in chess: they are essentially aids to memory. A wooden figurine's being a wooden figurine is inessential to its role in the game. Chess rules are applied to chess pieces, and chess pieces *qua* chess pieces are only accidentally physical. The same is true of the physical chessboard. Its squares *qua* physical squares serve only as aids to memory. So, the whole physical set-up – the physical board and the physical pieces – is, one might say, of purely psychological importance. Everything that is essential to the game can in principle be retained even in the absence of such aids.

It is of course true that a game where both players are blindfolded requires an exchange of physical symbols. The players will have to utter or write down *words*. So, my point is not to deny that playing chess requires some sort of physical medium. It is important, however, that the words used by such chess players do not constitute pieces, in the way a wooden figurine may constitute a particular bishop at a particular point in a game.

So, we are discussing a puzzle about how a “circular” rule such as “The bishop moves only diagonally” can ever be applied to a concrete thing that we might want to use as a piece in a game. Our first answer was that an ostensive preparatory step, where we stipulate that the object is to function a bishop, would solve this problem. But now we realize that this cannot be the fundamental truth about how a chess rule does its work. As the example of blindfold chess shows, playing chess does not require such ostensive preparation.

In fact – and this is a central point – ostensive preparation is superfluous even in a case where we use physical objects as pieces. In such a case, it is enough simply *to place the objects at their starting positions on the board*. By placing a wooden figurine at the square c1, we thereby stipulate that it is the white c1 bishop; by placing an old shoe at e8, we stipulate that it is the black king; by placing a pebble at g2, we stipulate that it is the white g2 pawn; and so on and so forth.

Indeed, this provides the central clue to how a rule such as “The bishop moves only diagonally” can be applied despite its “circular” character. What the applicability of the rule requires is some way of determining that a particular piece is a bishop, other than in terms of its range of permissible movements. If there were no such other means of determination, then the distinction between legal and illegal moves in chess would make no sense. Thus, suppose that the piece whose initial position is c1 has not yet been moved. Now you move it to b3. As was pointed out above, if chess-piece identities were determined only in terms of legal movements, there would not be such a thing as that move’s being illegal rather than legal.

There would be no difference between saying that the piece is a bishop that is being moved illegally, and saying that it is a knight that is being moved legally.

What my discussion shows is that in chess we determine the identity of a concrete piece by reference to *its career in the particular game* we are playing. The initial position of the piece is crucial. If the career started at c1, f1, c8 or f8, the piece is a bishop; if it started at d1 or d8, the piece is a queen; if it started at a1, h1, a8 or h8, the piece is a rook; and so on and so forth. This is why we can say, of the piece whose initial position is c1, that it is a bishop rather than, say, a knight. *Hence* we can apply the rule, “A bishop moves only diagonally,” and thereby determine that the move from c1 to b3 is illegal.

But notice that a piece’s career in a game does not just involve the piece’s starting position. What is required in order to apply rules such as “A bishop moves only diagonally” is not just the principle that bishops start at c1, f1, c8 or f8. After all, the rule is meant to apply also to pieces that have been moved from their initial position. Suppose we decide that a particular brick-stone is going to be used as white bishop, by placing it on the square c1. The game begins, and we make a number of moves with the piece, in accordance with the rule, “A bishop moves only diagonally.” But wait a minute! In applying that rule again, it has to be the case that the piece is *still* a bishop. So, the applicability of the rule requires not only that there are principles which tie chess piece identity to initial position, but also that there are principles for what makes a piece *retain* its chess piece identity throughout the game. What are the relevant criteria of identity here?

Physical continuity is not what matters. I noted earlier that the physical characteristics of chess pieces are arbitrary. Anything might be used as a bishop: a shoe, an old hat, an aspirin pill. One aspect of this arbitrariness is the possibility of arbitrary mid-game replacements of the physical objects we happen to be using as pieces. For example, suppose an eggshell is used as the white king, but, through careless handling, it eventually breaks into

pieces. We wipe the fragments off the board and replace them by another object of our liking, say, a silver dollar coin. So, the eggshell is taken away from the game – but the white king is not. Rather, what happens is that the coin becomes the white king. The coin takes over the eggshell's former chess-piece identity. After the replacement, *that* king is still the particular king whose starting point was e1, even if the coin has never been on that square.

Similarly, suppose we use a very heavy golden figurine as white queen, and a hat as white king. After a while, we realize that using the heavy figurine in this way is very inconvenient, since it makes it cumbersome to perform the queen's characteristically long, sweeping moves. In such a case, we are free to make a simple exchange: the golden figurine is moved to the square where the hat is placed, and then the hat is moved to the figurine's former location. This does not mean that the white queen and the white king change places. Rather, what happens is that the golden figurine takes over the hat's former identity as the white king, and that the hat takes over the figurine's former identity as the white queen. Despite the fact that the figurine and the hat change places, the white queen and the white king remain where they are. The physical moves involved in the exchange are not moves in the game.

This possibility of arbitrary replacement also indicates a sense in which the identity of a chess piece is *not* arbitrary. We are not free to change the identity of a particular chess piece *qua that particular chess piece* at will. We cannot arbitrarily decide that *this* knight is hereafter a rook, or that this queen *qua* queen (and not just *qua* this golden figurine) and this king *qua* king (and not just *qua* this hat) are to exchange their identities. There is one exception, namely, when a pawn reaches the rank furthest from its starting position. It is then to be exchanged for a queen, a rook, a bishop or a knight, at the player's own free choice. But it is of crucial importance to the whole game that this is a special case. If we were free to

change the identity of the pieces on the board at any point in a game, the whole game would immediately collapse.

Let us sum up the conclusions we have reached. Rules that state the permissible movements of chess pieces, such as “A bishop moves only diagonally,” have a circular character. Bishops *are* those pieces in chess that move only diagonally. But then, how can such rules distinguish between legal and illegal moves with respect to a concrete, particular piece? The answer is that we do not determine whether a particular piece is a bishop by determining how it is allowed to move. Rather, determining its permissible movements presupposes some other sort of determination. And what matters here is the piece’s career in the game. If and only if this career can be traced back to an initial position at c1, f1, c8 or f8 (or to a pawn transformation where a pawn was transformed into the piece at hand, and this piece was dubbed a bishop), the piece is a bishop.

3. The Breakdown of the Analogy between Chess Pieces and Words, and Two Possible Conclusions

Now let us return to the issue of linguistic expressions and grammatical rules. I think we can see quite immediately that there is an important difference between the linguistic case and the case of chess. In the linguistic case there is nothing that corresponds to the way in which the career of a piece in a particular game of chess serves to determine that piece’s identity. In a series of moves of the same particular piece in a particular game of chess, it is the same chess piece *token* that is being moved. This is true even in a case where the physical item I use as bishop is exchanged for some other physical item between the moves. As I have pointed out, the relevant notion of the token identity of a chess piece is such that even if the bottle cap I initially use as a bishop is replaced mid-game by a dice, the dice becomes the same (token) bishop as the one I had before.

By contrast, in a series of utterances, one and the same linguistic expression may reoccur – but it is not the same *token* that is reoccurring in the different utterances. Thus, in

- (1) The Nile River is 6670 kilometers long;
- (2) The Nile River is 5464 kilometers long;
- (3) The Nile River is 8935 kilometers long;

the same expression, “The Nile River is ... long”, is being employed. But this only means that the expression gets *repeated* – (2) and (3) involve *new instances* of an expression that is also being used in (1). By contrast, if I first move my bishop from c1 to e3, and then from e3 to g1, and then from g1 to h2, then the second and third moves do not involve any new instance of a bishop. It is the very same instance of a bishop that is being moved all three times.

I think this breakdown of the analogy between linguistic expressions and chess pieces is undeniable and has to be admitted on all sides. The question is what conclusions should be drawn from it. Here I see two main possibilities. One is to conclude that Wittgensteinian grammatical rules do not have the sort of circularity that characterizes a rule such as “A bishop moves only diagonally.” Thus, the conclusion drawn is that grammatical rules regulate the use of expressions understood as entities that are individuated independently of the rules. Very likely, the principle of individuation will be some version of the idea that expressions are individuated according to what Carnap calls their “sign-designs” – roughly, according to their orthographic or acoustic properties. What matters here is not the exact principle of individuation used. The essential thing is that according to this sort of conception, grammatical rules are not constitutive of the expressions whose use they govern, but only of their meaning, to the extent that meaning and legitimate use are identified. This is essentially Hacker’s view.

An apparent advantage of this sort of conception is that it makes grammatical rules retain a normative philosophical potency. Like chess rules, grammatical rules, understood in this sort of way, seem able to decide whether a given linguistic move – a given utterance – is legal or not. In the case of chess rules, their circularity at first made this sort of normative potency seem puzzling, but we resolved the puzzle by pointing out that particular pieces owe their chess piece identity to their career in a particular chess game. The breakdown of the analogy between chess pieces and linguistic expressions shows that this sort of maneuver is not available in the case of language. Hence, in order to save the normative potency of grammatical rules, it seems we have to abandon the idea that grammatical rules are circular in the relevant sense. And this is precisely what we should do, according to this response to the breakdown.

But now we must ask: Is it really an advantage that grammatical rules are conceived as normatively potent? Well, it all depends on what the normativity in question is taken to consist in. That is, it all depends on how the distinction between correct and incorrect utterances is spelled out. Now, what Wittgenstein is primarily concerned with in relation to grammatical rules is the distinction between meaningfulness and nonsensicality. So, if what we are trying to understand is Wittgenstein's conception of grammatical rules, the natural way of spelling out the distinction between correctness and incorrectness would seem to be in terms of the distinction between meaningful and nonsensical utterances. If so, the putative normative potency of grammatical rules will be a matter of their ability to distinguish the meaningful from the nonsensical. In other words, the idea would be this: following the rules is to speak meaningfully, whereas breaking the rules leads to nonsense. And this is indeed the conception we find in Hacker:

Wittgenstein's 'rules of grammar' serve only to *distinguish sense from nonsense*. [...] They *settle what makes sense*, experience settles what is the case. [...] Grammar is a free-floating array of rules for the use of language. It *determines what is a correct use of language*, but is not itself correct or incorrect. (Baker and Hacker 1985, 44 and 43. Original italics.)

The supposed advantage of grammatical rules, conceived in this sort of way, is of course that they seem to provide the philosopher with a very powerful tool. Once he has achieved a perspicuous overview of the grammar of philosophically controversial words, it would seem as if he could assume a position similar to a chess referee and decide when people use the words meaningfully and when they do not. He could do this with respect to the utterances of philosophers, but also with respect to utterances made outside of philosophy, deciding from case to case when the bounds of sense have been transgressed.

The trouble is just that there are considerable problems with this sort of conception. One is the phenomenon of unprecedented, irregular yet immediately intelligible uses of language. For example, consider again the three sentences about the length of the Nile River. We could say that these three sentences are all moves in a "game" which is characterized by a rule to the effect that the slot in the expression 'The Nile River is ... long' is to be filled by a *spatial* length-specification. But now consider:

(4) The Nile River is a fortnight long.

Obviously, (4) is not a move in the game just described. It is not in accordance with the rule that I stated. Does this by itself mean that it is nonsensical? No. In fact it is quite easy to imagine a normal context in which such an utterance would be fully and immediately

intelligible. For example, suppose a group of adventurers are planning a trip with speedboat along various waterways in Africa. If one of them uttered the above sentence he would make himself understood without further ado.

There are countless examples of this sort. Even if I will not try to prove it here, it seems quite plausible to think that *any* grammatical rule proposed to draw a boundary between sense and nonsense can be given counterexamples of this sort. Of course, the importance of such examples is not just to show that alternative language-games with the relevant expressions are possible. No one is denying the possibility of such alternative uses. The important point is that such alternative uses can be intelligible *without prior stipulation*. The interesting cases are ones in which there is no need to formulate a new rule and state that one will now be following that rule rather than the old one.

The possibility of such cases casts doubt on the idea that it would be any real advantage to retain the conception of grammatical rules as having what I have called “normative potency” when it comes to distinguishing between meaningful and nonsensical employments of words. Further doubt arises if one reflects on the notion of philosophical method that is encouraged by such a conception of grammatical rules. It seems that a philosopher who thinks there are rules by reference to which he can decide whether people speak meaningfully or talk nonsense, will make himself vulnerable to a sort of charge that has been frequently leveled against putatively Wittgensteinian philosophers for many decades now; a sort of charge which is of considerable force. What I mean is the sort of charge that Paul Churchland has made against Hacker’s most recent attempt to apply allegedly Wittgensteinian methods to reveal nonsense within recent science. In his review of Hacker’s and Maxwell Bennett’s 2003 book, *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience*, Churchland argues that Hacker’s and Bennett’s criticisms of recent neurological theory

do no more than highlight the independently obvious fact that the new theory violates some of the default conceptions of the average ten-year-old. But where is the crime in this? Why should we make those baseline expectations permanently criterial for the meaningful use of the terms at issue? Were we permanently to cleave to the standards of “conceptual hygiene” thus imposed by [Bennett and Hacker], we would be doomed to only the most trivial of scientific advances. For our conceptual innovations would then be confined to what is currently taken, by the average ten-year-old, to define “the bounds of sense.” (Churchland 2005, 473)

Churchland’s charge is that Hacker and Bennett are simply imposing standards of conceptual hygiene that, if actually implemented, would hinder a sort of spontaneous linguistic imagination that is essential to scientific progress – and, I would add, to our everyday life with language as well. In fact, it seems to me that the vulnerability to this sort of charge is one important explanation of the fact that the sort of putatively Wittgensteinian criticism exemplified by Hacker’s and Bennett’s book is not taken very seriously by most philosophers and scientists. It is, I think, fair to say that Hacker’s and Bennett’s approach is one which fails to enter into genuine dialogue with the people whose language it aims to criticize. And this is no coincidence. For their conception of grammatical rules is such that they think the relevant expressions, the “pieces,” whose use is being investigated can be identified in disregard of the possibility that that use involve a sort of irregular, spontaneous sense-making similar to what I imagined in the case of “The Nile is a fortnight long.”

The interrelated difficulties with such a conception grammatical rules – the difficulty of accommodating deviant yet immediately intelligible uses of language, and the failure to enter into genuine dialogue with people whose language one claims to be able to classify as meaningful or nonsensical – are quite serious. Someone may object, however, that my worries

have so far failed to address the *exegetical* question whether Wittgenstein himself had such a conception of grammatical rules. And that is perfectly true, of course. I am inclined to say that *if* this is Wittgenstein's own conception, then so much the worse for Wittgenstein. However, I do think there are reasons not to ascribe this conception to him. Clearly, the exegetical situation is very complicated, and I cannot even begin to address this complexity here. It is, however, a striking fact that in none of the passages I have found where Wittgenstein uses the analogy between language and chess does he show any sign of wanting to say that grammatical rules do not have the sort of circularity that characterize chess rules. On the contrary, his way of developing the analogy between expressions and chess pieces indicate quite clearly that one thing he does *not* want to abandon is this idea of circularity. His emphasis is always on the importance of seeing the constitutive role of the rules for the very pieces whose use they capture. Such an emphasis would be incomprehensible if his aim with the analogy was instead to argue that grammatical rules are like chess rules in that they allow the philosopher to act as a referee in relation to players of the language game. As we have seen, these two different ways of developing the analogy are simply incompatible. And it is clear that Wittgenstein's interest in the analogy is along the former line: grammatical rules are constitutive not just of linguistic behavior but also of the pieces that get employed in such behavior.

Now this is precisely the second choice one can opt for once one has realized how the analogy between linguistic expressions and chess pieces breaks down. To get clearer about what this second alternative involves, consider again the examples:

- (1) The Nile River is 6670 kilometers long;
- (2) The Nile River is 5464 kilometers long;
- (3) The Nile River is 8935 kilometers long.

Given this second sort of conception of grammatical rules, it is perfectly all right to say that these three sentences are all moves in a “game” which is characterized by a rule to the effect that the slot in the expression “The Nile River is ... long” is to be filled by a spatial length-specification. So far, there is no difference from the first, Hackerian sort of conception. The difference makes its appearance when we are confronted with the sentence

(4) The Nile River is a fortnight long.

Unless “fortnight” has been given some new, spatial sense, uttering this sentence is obviously not to act in accordance with the rule just stated. The Hackerian conception of grammatical rules seems to imply that, in the absence of the explicit and prior formulation of a new rule for the use of the expression “The Nile River is ... long”, such deviance amounts to a transgression of the “bounds of sense.” By contrast, according to the other conception of grammatical rules that I am now trying to explain, the deviant character of the utterance does not by itself justify any such conclusion. An utterance of (4) may fail to make sense; but it may also be immediately intelligible, as in the case of its being uttered among a group of adventurers who are planning to travel along African waterways in speedboat.

So according to this alternative conception of grammatical rules, what a grammatical rule does is (not to prescribe but merely) to *register* one pattern of use among other possible patterns. Such a rule is not something on the basis of which we are allowed to conclude that an utterance that fails to conform to the pattern is nonsensical – even if the utterance involves similarly sounding expressions and is not preceded by any explicit change of rules. The deviant character of the utterance does not show that the utterance is nonsensical. All it shows is that the utterance does not constitute a move in the game specified by the rule. Even if the

words that figure in the deviant utterance look or sound the same as the expressions that figure in utterances that do constitute moves within the game, the words used in the deviant utterances constitute different “pieces” – pieces for which the rule is not in force.

According to this alternative, non-Hackerian conception of grammatical rules, such rules are in this respect similar to the rules of logical syntax in the *Tractatus* – as rules of logical syntax are conceived by so-called resolute readers of early Wittgenstein. Employing the Tractarian distinction between sign and symbol – where the identity of a sign is a matter of its orthography, whereas the identity of a symbol is matter of its meaningful use – Conant writes: “logical syntax is concerned neither with the proscription of combinations of signs nor with the proscription of combinations of symbols. It is not concerned with the proscription of combinations of signs, because Tractarian logical syntax does not treat of (mere) signs; it treats of symbols – and a symbol only has life in the context of a significant proposition. It is not concerned with the proscription of combination of symbols because there is nothing to proscribe – ‘Every possible proposition is legitimately constructed’ (§5.4733)” (Conant 2002, 414). The notion of symbol here is tied to the specifically Tractarian conception that the underlying logic of any meaningful language must have the simple truth-functional form encapsulated in his truth-table notation; hence that notion should not be employed in descriptions of his post-Tractarian views. But the similarity I am interested in is still there: like rules of logical syntax, grammatical rules are not in the business of proscribing anything, since they are constitutive of the very entities whose employment they capture. If what we are interested in is the line between meaningfulness and nonsensicality, breaking a grammatical rule should not be conceived as a transgression of that line. “Breaking” a grammatical rule just means no longer playing the game defined by it.

Hacker tries to ridicule this conception, by arguing that it is

akin to claiming that the pawn in chess cannot be moved three squares at a time, since if one were to move a piece thus, it would not be a pawn – a transcendental argument to prove that one cannot cheat in chess. One *could* speak thus, but would it make any difference? Is it any clearer than the way we ordinarily speak? (Hacker 2003, 16)

As my discussion of the identity of chess pieces has shown, Hacker is here using the analogy in a way that simply does not work. He is ignoring precisely how the analogy must break down. This is somewhat ironic, since Hacker's own conception of grammatical rules can be construed precisely as a response to that breakdown. His response is to retain the normative potency of grammatical rules, at the expense of their capacity to constitute the pieces whose use they govern. The opposite, resolute response is to retain constitutivity at the expense of normative potency.

Now, importantly, to recommend the non-Hackerian, "resolute" conception of grammatical rules is not to recommend a theory to the effect that linguistic meaning has no elements that can be appropriately characterized as "normative." The notion of normativity can be given many different senses, and it seems quite plausible that one or more such senses will be important if one wants to understand what is involved in the incredibly complex phenomenon of linguistic meaning. As Cora Diamond has pointed out in a comment on Hacker's criticism of Conant, what resolute readers reject is just what she calls a "strong" notion of correctness – a notion which justifies "an inference from the fact that a sign was used in a way which departs from its hitherto sole 'correct use' (with no stipulations having been made about any other uses) to its having been used incorrectly or in such a way as to give rise to nonsense" (Diamond 2005, 83). We may well find use for some other notion of correctness which allows for a multitude of deviant yet perfectly correct uses of words.

In this connection, it is perhaps also worth pointing out that the conception of grammatical rules that I am recommending does not amount to a Humpty-Dumpty, or “anything goes”, theory of linguistic meaning. All it amounts to, as far as the theory of meaning is concerned, is the purely negative claim that the domain of the meaningful is not delimited by pre-established rules of usage. This point in no way excludes that other useful things can be said about the conditions of meaningful linguistic communication, or about the ways in which new and immediately intelligible uses of old words depend on our earlier commerce with those words. In fact, I take it to be a great advantage of this conception that it can comfortably accommodate those parts of Wittgenstein’s works where he seems engaged *both* in exploring such conditions and dependencies *and* in highlighting the *absence* of rule-governedness. I have in mind parts of Wittgenstein’s work that are explored in different ways by interpreters such as Stanley Cavell and Charles Travis (Cavell 1979, Travis 1989; cf. also Gustafsson 2011).

5. Concluding Remarks

A final worry: At the beginning of this paper, when I started talking about how chess rules are related to the pieces whose use they govern, I noted the “circular” character of the rules; and I said that this circular character was puzzling, since it seemed to make it inexplicable how the rules could play any role at all in actual chess-playing. I solved the puzzle by pointing out that individual chess-pieces owe their identity to their career in the particular game in which they are used. But now, in arguing for the “non-Hackerian” response to the breakdown of the analogy between words and chess pieces, I seem to cheerfully accept precisely the same puzzle, and *without* having anything like the above solution to offer. Indeed, the breakdown of the analogy consisted precisely in the fact that no such solution to the circularity puzzle is available. So, how on earth are grammatical rules, as I conceive them, supposed to play any

role at all? How can they be of any use as philosophical tools? Hacker at least has an explanation of how such rules can be important in philosophy. The conception I am advocating seems to make them utterly impotent, since any invocation of such a circular rule can be met simply with the response that in the particular case at hand the rule is just not in force.

I think this worry takes it for granted that if grammatical rules are to be of any use in philosophy, that use must be of the sort Hacker takes them to have. But what if their function is quite different? What if the philosophical significance of such rules does not lie in their capacity to track a “boundary of sense” that is supposed to be somehow already laid down in everyday linguistic practice? What if their function is instead to be responsive to the structure of *philosophical problems*? As Wittgenstein puts it in *The Blue Book*, the reason why it is philosophically useful to talk of language use in terms of rules is not that real-life linguistic practice is in fact circumscribed by such rules, but that “the puzzles which we try to remove always spring from [an] attitude towards language [as a symbolism used in an exact calculus]” (Wittgenstein 1958, 26). According to Wittgenstein, philosophers tend, as it were, to harden certain features of everyday usage into strict patterns, and then to waver between these aspects in ways that create seemingly irresolvable contradictions. As he puts it in the *Investigations*, we “lay down rules [...] and [...] then when we follow the rules, things do not turn out as we had assumed. [...] we are therefore as it were entangled in our own rules. This entanglement in our rules is what we want to understand” (Wittgenstein 1953, §125).

Philosophical confusions of the sort Wittgenstein is talking about here are not due to the mere transgression of some grammatical rule. Rather, they are due to the tacit hovering between different forms of use – uses that by themselves are perfectly all right. Now my thought is that in order to treat such confusions, grammatical rules can be quite useful, despite – or even precisely because of – their circular character. For the use of these rules in such

cases is not to prescribe particular uses and proscribe others. Indeed, such attempts at prescription and proscription would be counterproductive: for the problem is not that there are correct and incorrect ways of using the relevant words. Rather, the trouble is that two different uses are being conflated – so what we need is to get clear about the differences between them. What we need the rules for is to capture the relevant patterns of use – describe them – and thereby make it clear that the confusion is due to an attempt to play two different games at the same time. This requires entering precisely into the sort of dialogue that Hacker’s conception of grammatical rules seems to prevent, or at least make unnecessary – a dialogue that does not presuppose that the relevant “pieces” and “games” have already been identified, but is genuinely open to the possibility of using language in a multitude of meaningful ways.²

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