PLAYING WELL: WITTGENSTEIN'S LANGUAGE-GAMES AND THE ETHICS OF DISCOURSE

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Ludwig Wittgenstein famously compares language to a game, and suggests that language consists of a diverse array of 'language-games', which do not have any essentially common property. The claim that neither language nor games have an essence has been met with resistance. In this paper I address a particular concern raised by Wittgenstein's pupil Rush Rhees regarding the unity of language. I argue that Wittgenstein's game analogy contains within it the means for addressing the distinction between discussion and sophistry that Rhees thinks Wittgenstein misses. This claim emerges from recognizing how Wittgenstein's understanding of games relates to the regular but unregulated activity of non-game play.

1. GAMES AND PLAY

Let me begin by drawing some distinctions. Games are a special case of play. Invariably, we 'play' games, but not all play consists of games. The most obvious difference between games and non-game play is that games are constituted and governed by a more or less rigid and explicit set of rules. John R. Searle (1969: 33f) draws a distinction between constitutive and regulative rules: constitutive rules set up the institution and then the regulative rules lay out what one may, must, or must not do

within that institution.[1] For instance, the constitutive rules of basketball tell us the dimensions of a court, the number of players on a team, the aim of the sport, and so on. Outside the institution of basketball, a basketball court is just a surface of paneled wood and a player is just a person: the constitutive rules establish what Johan Huizinga (1995: 11) calls the 'magic circle' within which the surface of paneled wood becomes a basketball court and the person becomes the player. Regulative rules, on the other hand, place restrictions upon how players can pursue the aim of the game: for instance, a player cannot travel more than two paces after grasping the ball in his or her hands.

This notion of placing restrictions upon players is one part of a tripartite definition presented in Bernard Suits's charming book-length analysis of games, entitled *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia*. According to Suits, games involve (1) a prelusory goal: an aim that can be defined independent of the regulative rules, whether it be to cross the finish line before everyone else, to checkmate the king, or to get the ball into the net more often than the other team; (2) lusory means: restrictions on how players can achieve this goal, whether it be that one must stay within one's lane, move pieces only according to certain rules, or not touch the ball with one's hands; and (3) a lusory attitude: the game is played for the sake of the game itself, and not due to some outside compulsion. Or, in his pithy summation, 'playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles' (Suits 2005: 55).

Suits (and others) take this definition to stand as a knockdown refutation to Wittgenstein's claim that we cannot provide necessary and sufficient conditions for calling something a game. Responding to this challenge directly is not the aim of this paper: for the moment I want to use Suits's definition simply to draw out the distinction between games and non-game play.

Non-game play is not unstructured – even the sort of child's play described as 'unstructured play' can have a surprisingly finicky structure – but this structure is never made explicit, and it is more fluid. Consider the 'platform and tilt' approach to improvised storytelling discussed by Keith Johnstone (1999: 89–100), one of the great developers and acknowledged masters of improvisational theatre. A story evolves by establishing a platform – a relatively stable world, cast of characters, trajectory, and so on – and then tilting this platform: introducing a new element or twist that disrupts the platform. This tilt then stabilizes into a new platform, which can then be tilted, and so on. A platform without tilts quickly becomes boring, and a series of tilts without any

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[1] Stanley Cavell (1979: 305) draws a similar distinction between rules as defining and rules as regulating.

established platforms is disorienting, and also weakens each individual tilt because the tilt has nothing to disrupt. The art of establishing a clear and compelling platform and finding a surprising but appropriate tilt is tremendously complex, and no fixed rules dictate how one must proceed.[2] This sort of play lacks the constitutive or regulative rules of games, sharing with games only what Stanley Cavell (1979: 305) calls principles and maxims of good play.[3] The principles and maxims of improvisation do not direct players toward an already specified prelusory goal, but rather toward the more elusive aesthetic goals of good storytelling.

Not all play has as substantial a narrative element as improvisational theatre, but all play has a rhythm of a sort whose structure bears some resemblance to Johnstone's platforms and tilts. Children's play may shift rapidly in its focus (it may tilt), but at any given moment, the children are fully invested in a particular structured activity (it has a platform). The themes and variations of improvising musicians also bear close resemblance to this structure of platform and tilt. To the extent that a platform has structure, it would presumably be possible for an observer to formulate rules that define the platform, but these rules do not explicitly guide the players, and so the observer could never be certain to have characterized the rules accurately. More importantly, no rules guide the direction of tilts. Some tilts may be habitual or predictable, but the creativity of play derives from the freedom players have not only to play within a given platform but to tilt it. The only restrictions guiding tilts is whether a tilt is taken up by the players and does not bring the play to a halt. The capacity for a tilt to perpetuate play depends as much on the players as it does on the particular tilt. One distinction between games and non-game play is that the rules of a game provide a stable platform – and one that is often explicitly formulated – while the platforms of play are constantly changing through unregulated tilts.

2. GAMES, PLAY AND RULES IN WITTGENSTEIN

Wittgenstein famously compares language to a game, but much of what he says about language would seem to place his conception of language closer to non-game play. He frequently emphasizes that language users do not need to consult or obey rules in order to speak and that our criteria for using words are fluid. Nevertheless, he claims the

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[2] Various theatre and storytelling games impose particular rules on the improvisers. However, precisely by virtue of imposing these rules, the improvisation becomes a game.

[3] Suits (2005: 51 – 2) recognizes these as 'rules of skill'.

analogy with games still holds. Wittgenstein tells us: 'one can also imagine someone's having learnt the game without ever learning or formulating rules' (Wittgenstein 2009a: §31) and returns to this point in §54 of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Several paragraphs later, he claims that games can evolve without anyone ever formulating rules:

> We can easily imagine people amusing themselves in a field by playing with a ball like this: starting various existing games, but playing several without finishing them, and in between throwing the ball aimlessly into the air, chasing one another with the ball, throwing it at one another for a joke, and so on. And now someone says: The whole time they are playing a ball-game and therefore are following definite rules at every throw.

> And is there not also the case where we play, and make up the rules as we go along? And even where we alter them – as we go along. (Wittgenstein 2009a: §83)

One of the guiding themes of *On Certainty* is the mutability of our fundamental rules of thought and language. There, he likens the 'propositions describing [our] world-picture' to the rules of a game, and claims that we need never explicitly learn these rules (Wittgenstein 1975: §95). The following two sections lay out the famous river-bed analogy, whereby Wittgenstein claims that these propositions are subject to gradual change. As early as *Philosophical Grammar*, Wittgenstein acknowledges the fluidity of language: 'If we look at the actual use of a word, what we see is something constantly fluctuating' (Wittgenstein 1980: 77).

This conception of language as fluctuating points to a curious tension in Wittgenstein's use of games as an analogy: Wittgenstein uses both chess and open-ended play as examples when discussing games. The differences between the two are striking. The rules of chess are almost entirely constitutive, and regulative rules play a very small part. Illegal moves in chess are ruled out by the constitutive rules, so regulative rules are not required in the way that they are in sports where players have greater freedom of movement. Regulative rules play the much more limited role of requiring that a player say '*j'adoube*' before adjusting a piece, and so on. Chess clearly appeals to Wittgenstein as a source of analogy because language, like chess, is mostly devoid of regulative rules[4]: my

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[4] Does language have regulative rules? One candidate would be the sorts of obligations undertaken in performative speech acts. In making a promise, I undertake the obligation to keep my promise: keeping promises is a regulative rule of the speech act of promising. J. L. Austin (1975: 18) distinguishes between misfires – where, for instance, I declare a couple married without having the authority to do so – and abuses – where, for instance, I make a promise I have no intention of keeping. Misfires violate the constitutive rules of performative utterances, such that the performative utterance isn't realized. Abuses, on the other

conversation partner does not get a free sentence if I misplace a modifier.[5] By contrast, open-ended play has neither constitutive nor regulative rules, and often has only the most faintly defined aims.

This tension between the two sources of analogy, I suggest, is a consequence of Wittgenstein's understanding of rules, which reveals the boundary between games and non-game play to be more fluid than it might appear. In the sections on rule following in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein suggests that how we follow a rule is a function not just of the rule itself, but also of how we apply the rule in practice. We could imagine a convention according to which we follow a pointing finger not by going in the direction of the outstretched finger, but in the opposite direction, as if following the line from the finger up to the outstretched arm (cf. Wittgenstein 2009a: §85). However, just because alternatives are conceivable, we shouldn't conclude that every act of following a rule involves an interpretation. Such a conclusion leads to a regress: the interpretation is itself a rule – a rule telling us how to follow the original rule – and so itself stands as much in need of interpretation as the original rule.

The regress shows that it is not rules all the way down, so to speak: any rule-governed practice in turn manifests certain regularities that are not themselves governed by rules. Games feature rules in the sense that we sometimes appeal to rules in order to teach a game or to work through disputes, but we almost never need to appeal to a further set of rules that would tell us how and when to appeal to rules. People are able to participate in rule-governed practices together because they already share enough common ground that they are predisposed to following rules in similar ways.

This common ground is both discovered and created. In dealing with others, we come to learn how those others behave, how they react, how and toward what they register interest, surprise, fear, and so on. We learn how to deal with others partly through imitation and partly through finding our own ways of behaving, reacting, and so on. We learn to calibrate ourselves to others by interacting with them. This interaction and calibration does not itself follow any set of rules, since rules only emerge as a consequence of this interaction and calibration. It is unregulated activity that

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hand, violate the regulative rules of performative utterances: if we violate them, the performative utterance is realized, but in a reproachable manner.

[5] Another feature of chess that makes it particularly apt in analogy with language is that it is a perfect information game. Unlike in poker or Battleships, where each player has information that the other lacks, both players in chess see the entire state of play at any given time. With chess as with language, 'nothing is hidden' (Wittgenstein 2009a: §435).

nevertheless gives rise to regularity. In a word, it is play. In playing, we discover and create regularities that come to constitute our social lives as criteria and norms. As Huizinga (1995: 10) remarks, play 'creates order, *is* order'. Our ordered world of criteria and norms is not something we are given, but something we play our way into.

In this respect, the regularity of games is not ultimately founded in their rules, but rather the rules themselves are ultimately founded in the unregulated regularity of play. The difference between a game and the sort of play Wittgenstein imagines in §83 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, then, amounts to no more than this: the play is less regular than the play of a game, and players neither teach nor justify their behaviour by appeal to rules that have already been formulated. Chess does not exhibit the irregularities of open-ended play because any attempt to play differently will be met with an objection from the other player, and that objection appeals to the rules. By contrast, open-ended play has as many irregularities as the players will permit without stopping play in disgust. For Wittgenstein, games are not a totally separate category from play, but rather a more regular form of play whose regularity is maintained by certain agreements, which, in a pinch, can be enforced by an appeal to the rules. The place of rules in a game is not as a fixed foundation that somehow stands outside the play of the game itself, but rather rules are a feature of how games are played: resort to rules is one characteristic of games. To echo Wittgenstein, the regularity of games does not reflect the inexorability of their rules, but rather our inexorability in applying them (cf. Wittgenstein 1978: I §118).

Consider the analogous case with language, and the question of how we determine whether a word is used correctly.[6] For the most part we speak freely with one another, without considering or appealing to the criteria that determine the correct use of our words. We teach others new words or new language-games not by providing them with an exhaustive list of rules, but usually through a series of examples or definitions, or whatever else we think is sufficient to ensure that they will go on as we do. Occasionally disputes or uncertainties may arise about whether we are speaking correctly, and one way of addressing these disputes is to appeal to a dictionary or some other equivalent to a rulebook. To what extent our use of words is regular, and to what extent it is open-ended, depends considerably on the language-game we are playing. Mathematicians tend to be very regular in their use of terminology, whereas discussions of ethics or aesthetics often consist of disputes over the very definitions of the words in use. These differences are not (as is sometimes supposed) due to the greater rigour of mathematics, but rather to the

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[6] We could consider the rule-like nature of language on at least two levels: the vocabulary rules that determine the correct uses words, and the grammatical rules that determine the correct formation of sentences. I will focus here only on the first level.

way that the language-game is played and the nature of the criteria at play. Language-games are diverse, and some exhibit greater regularity than others. All we really want when giving and obeying commands on a building site is that we and our interlocutors behave exactly in accordance with the same regular patterns of behaviour that this language-game normally produces. Certain contexts are unfamiliar enough, or call for sufficient individuality of response that we cannot appeal to any practice with the regularity of a game to guide our response. In such cases, our use of language is more like the open-ended play that invites others to follow along with us and introduce their own variants, and where appeals to rules are at best stubbornly dogmatic.

3. RHEES'S CHALLENGE

Although he is sympathetic to much of Wittgenstein's philosophy, Rush Rhees expresses concern with the notion that language might be composed of a collection of independent and distinct games. While we might be able to speak of different language-games relating to different aspects of our lives, Rhees maintains that these language-games only have the sense that they have because they hang together as part of a unified language. Games lack this essential unity: the sense of chess is not in any important way affected by the way in which it relates to table tennis. For Rhees, the unity of language comes hand in hand with the unity of life: our language-games are connected to the extent that our purposes in playing them are connected, which in turn depends on all the aspects of our lives being connected.

This concern about the unity of language feeds a second concern for Rhees: games do not have a point in the way that language does. Unlike games, language is *about* something. What Rhees (2006) occasionally refers to as 'the reality of language' is closely tied to its capacity to induce learning, understanding, and growth. What we can learn from or through language is not limited by the rules of a game, but only by our own limitations. We might say language is open-ended: it does not itself have a particular subject matter, but is rather the medium in which we can talk about anything.

Rather than consider language in analogy with games, Rhees proposes we use the model of conversation when thinking about language. He does not claim that all language is conversational, or that it consists essentially of conversation, but rather urges that we consider conversation as an important 'centre of variation' (Rhees 1970: 69). Like games, conversations constitute discrete units, bounded in space and time, but unlike games, conversations have repercussions that extend beyond these bounds. The conversations we

have pertain to one another (they have unity) and they have a point (they have reality). In engaging in conversation, we can hope to grow in understanding.

Rhees does not argue for a unifying structure that *must* underlie our diverse practices. The unity of language is not given in advance of our investigation, but is rather a feature of the connections we are able to draw. D. Z. Phillips glosses Rhees's view as follows:

> As in a conversation, the unity of a language is not formal, and what one emphasizes is not the differences between things but how one thing leads to another. But if one asks how one leads to another, the answer will not be, Because they *must*, but rather, Because they *do*. What will count as 'sayable' will depend on how people actually talk to one another. Or, better, that people talk to one another in the ways in which they do, that they make the connections they do, will show what is and what is not 'sayable'. (Phillips 1999: 51)

Although Rhees does not theorize a formal unity, his emphasis on unity separates him from Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein's language-games and objects of comparison highlight not the unappreciated unity but the telling contrast. Wittgenstein remarks on his interest in diversity over unity by contrasting himself with Hegel: 'Hegel seems to me to be always wanting to say that things which look different are really the same. Whereas my interest is in showing that things which look the same are really different' (Drury 1984: 157).[7] For Wittgenstein, our confusions come not from failing to appreciate the deep connectedness of things, but from failing to appreciate their diversity.

Whereas Phillips argues that we find the unity of language in what people *do*, Wittgenstein is keenly sensitive to the possibility that we *might not* find any such unity. This is one of the concerns at play in Wittgenstein's famous parable of the wayward pupil:

> Then we get the pupil to continue one series (say '+ 2') beyond 1000 – and he writes 1000, 1004, 1008, 1012.
> We say to him, 'Look what you're doing!' – He doesn't understand. We say, 'You should have added *two*: look how you began the series!' – He answers, 'Yes, isn't it right? I thought that was how I *had* to do it'. –– Or suppose he pointed to the series and said, 'But I did go on in the same way'. – It would now be no use to say, 'But can't you see. . . ?' – and go over the old explanations and examples for him again. (Wittgenstein 2009a: §185)

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[7] See also Wittgenstein 1976: 15.

The parable of the wayward pupil does not illustrate a global breakdown in communication: the pupil shares enough with the teacher to understand the teacher's language and to have some understanding of the context of the lesson. However, the pupil's sharing some forms of life with the teacher does not prevent a breakdown in the particular case of learning the rule 'Add 2'. In this respect, our forms of life are not unified: if you share this many forms of life with me, it does not follow you will be able to share all my forms of life with me, even in principle. Wittgenstein claims that insisting that other people's feelings are hidden from us in some unreachable sense is nonsense, but adds: 'It is, however, important as regards our considerations that one human being can be a complete enigma to another' (Wittgenstein 2009b: §325). If human beings can be enigmas to one another – either completely or with regard to certain aspects of their lives – then we cannot be confident not just that the things they say *must* all hang together, but even that they *do*.

Wittgenstein may thus be able to dig in his heels and say that language-games *might not* exhibit unity, but Rhees's concern is that, if we conceive of language on analogy with a game, then our language-games *cannot* exhibit unity. In contrasting conversation not just with games, but also with techniques and institutions (two other frequent centres of variation for Wittgenstein), Rhees takes himself to be engaging in Plato's ancient battle against sophistry. If the words we speak are just moves in a game, skilful deployments of a technique, then 'the growth of understanding could only mean the growth of a skill (efficiency, I suppose) or the multiplication of skills' (Rhees 2006: 3) and the only measure of the worth of the words we speak would be their efficacy in achieving the desired ends. If speaking is simply a means to a desired and predetermined end, language becomes a sophistical battlefield, the site where orators spar and determine whose rhetoric wins out. If every conversation already has a prelusory goal, then we can never truly learn from a conversation, since the only conclusion to a conversation will be the result of victory or defeat.

4. SOPHISTRY AND SPOILSPORTS

I think Rhees misplaces the point in characterizing sophistry as treating discussion as simply moves in a game. Playing a game successfully requires coordination and cooperation between players. Rhetorical exchanges between sophists might have many of the characteristics of a game, but presumably what concerns Rhees, as well as Plato, is the challenge sophistry presents to any discussion whatsoever. The challenge that Thrasymachus presents in Book I of the *Republic* is not that he treats as a game what the

others take seriously, but rather that he denies the possibility of taking a discussion of justice seriously in the way that Socrates wants to. As far as Thrasymachus is concerned, justice is unreal: high-minded talk about justice is just empty chatter, and we could excise the word 'justice' from our vocabulary entirely by simply substituting talk about might and power. Rhees presumably has this sort of challenge in mind when he talks about the reality of language.

The contrast between sophistry and philosophy is not one of play and seriousness – that sophists are playing with language whereas philosophers take their words seriously – because play and seriousness are not opposites. In one sense play contrasts with seriousness, but in another sense, seriousness is absolutely essential to play. Huizinga (1995: 5) recognizes this point, and Hans-Georg Gadamer – who acknowledges his debt to Huizinga – links this point to a deeper contrast between sophistry and philosophy: 'seriousness in playing is necessary to make the play wholly play. Someone who doesn't take the game seriously is a spoilsport' (Gadamer 1989: 102). Sophistry is not a matter of playing where others are serious, but rather a matter of playing the spoilsport where others play seriously.

Suits (2005: 60) draws out the following distinction: 'triflers recognize rules but not goals, cheats recognize goals but not rules, players recognize both rules and goals, and spoilsports recognize neither rules nor goals.' Conversations do not have a prelusory goal but they usually have aims, or at least a point: one reason for engaging in conversation, according to Rhees, is so that we can grow in understanding. A sophist both refuses to recognize this goal and denies its very possibility, thereby rejecting the very framework within which these conversations take place: what counts as a pertinent contribution to the conversation, what constitutes a valid argument or objection, and so on. In these respects, a sophist does not resemble a trifler – someone who fails to take the conversation seriously – so much as a spoilsport. (The discursive trifler is closer to the sort of person who engages in what Harry Frankfurt (2005) colourfully describes as 'bullshit' – talk undertaken without any particular concern for its truth and falsity – whereas the cheat relies on specious reasoning or false evidence to win an argument. Unlike the spoilsport/sophist, the cheat is fully invested in the reality of the discussion, but takes illegitimate shortcuts.[8])

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[8] If the "goal" of a conversation is the growth of understanding, does a cheat still recognize that goal if she employs methods, like specious reasoning and false evidence, whose illegitimacy rests on the fact that they do not lead to genuine understanding? I think so, to the extent that the cheat, unlike the spoilsport, still recognizes growth in understanding through the conversation as a worthwhile goal. When we converse, we have all sorts of aims, of which growth in understanding is just one. We are also concerned with the

The games analogy does not license sophistry but rather provides within it the tools for thinking about the distinction between sophistry and philosophy, and it does so more cleanly than Rhees's somewhat vague talk about the reality of language. The analogy between language and games does not deny the reality of language, characterizing all discussion as 'just a game', but rather suggests that language derives its reality from being 'in play' in discussion. One of the distinctions Wittgenstein draws with his games analogy is precisely the distinction of various forms of idling and the preliminary work of defining and naming from actually making a move in a language-game, actually saying something. Conversation falls prey to sophistry not when the people engaged in conversation allow the conversation to move according to the dynamic of play, but precisely on the contrary, when one or more people reject the very grounds for holding the conversation, behaving like spoilsports.

Huizinga remarks that spoilsports draw more ire than cheats because cheats at least allow the game to continue, whereas spoilsports bring everything to a halt: the spoilsport 'must be cast out, for he threatens the existence of the play-community' (Huizinga 1995: 11). However, Huizinga sees in discursive spoilsports more noble possibilities than sophistry:

> In the world of high seriousness, too, the cheat and the hypocrite have always had an easier time of it than the spoil-sports, here called apostates, heretics, innovators, prophets, conscientious objectors, etc. It sometimes happens, however, that the spoil-sports in their turn make a new community with rules of its own. The outlaw, the revolutionary, the cabbalist or member of a secret society, indeed heretics of all kinds are of a highly associative if not sociable disposition, and a certain element of play is prominent in all their doings. (Huizinga 1995: 12)

The sophist and the revolutionary both reject certain operative modes of discourse as unreal, and their criticism often involves rejecting or defining away key terms in these modes of discourse: compare 'Justice is the advantage of the stronger' and 'Property is theft'. Revolutions – whether they be political or intellectual – generally have a positive intent as well: they reject as illegitimate some language-games but seek to establish others in their place.

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impression we are making on our interlocutors, exchanges in status between interlocutors, wanting to respond to the human needs behind the words of our interlocutors, and so on. The aim of impressing others sometimes trumps the aim of growing in understanding, but this latter aim may still be genuine even if it is betrayed.

A discursive spoilsport, then, is not necessarily contemptible. No clear criteria distinguish the sophist from the revolutionary, nor the revolutionary we admire from the revolutionary we condemn. What we should make of a discursive spoilsport is itself a topic for discussion, with its own norms of appropriateness, and its own possibilities for playing the spoilsport, cheat, or trifler. Part of what is under discussion in *Republic* I is how the discussion itself ought to proceed, and while such discussions have a structure – Socrates and Thrasymachus share enough common ground to argue over how much common ground they share – they clearly do not have any hard and fast rules.

One of the difficulties with sophistry is that no clear criteria mark it off from serious discourse, certainly not the criterion that they relate to conversation as a game. Which language-game we are playing, and which language-game we should be playing, is not established in advance, but is rather itself a matter open to debate and discussion. This point, however, requires that we see language-games as fluid and based in play. If we neglect this fundamental element of play in Wittgenstein's language-game analogy, we risk developing a conception of discourse that is indeed subject to Rhees's criticism.[9] By taking play into account, however, I believe Wittgenstein's language-games give us fruitful insight into the nature of the growth in understanding that's possible in language.

5. PLAY AND THE ETHICS OF DISCOURSE

I argued that the distinction between games and non-game play is fluid with regard to Wittgenstein's analogy with language. Some language-games are more regular than others, and we address controversial moves in different language-games in different ways. Someone who fails to obey an order either misunderstands the order or refuses to obey it, and we engage with both of these forms of behaviour, and distinguish one from the other, in familiar ways. In moral discussion, there is a far greater range of possible responses than in the language-game of giving and obeying orders, and far greater fluidity as to whether interlocutors are cooperating with one another. This greater fluidity in the case of moral discussion gives rise to language-games with far less regularity, where the very nature and structure of the language-games are a part of what is in question.

Cavell (1979: 308) claims that games are the sorts of things that can be *played* because what we *must* do is clearly separated from what we *ought* to do. The constitutive and regulative rules are clearly separated from the principles and maxims that make for

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[9] This criticism might apply more effectively to Lewis (1969), who treats linguistic conventions in terms of coordination games.

skilful play, so that there is no room for *akrasia* in games: as soon as we perceive the most expedient means to a particular end, there is no room for questioning whether this is the end we should be pursuing. By contrast, in matters concerning morality, 'What you say you *must* do is not "defined by the practice", for there is no such practice until you make it one, make it *yours*. We might say, such a declaration defines *you*, establishes your position' (Cavell 1979: 309). What I take to be my moral obligations is a part of my moral life. This is a central respect in which morality – and indeed life more generally – lacks the lusory attitude of games: we accept the rules of a game for the sake of playing the game itself, whereas the reasons we accept certain moral claims as binding upon us are themselves subject to moral evaluation. We do not take on moral responsibilities just for the sake of having moral responsibilities.

Morality does not recognize the sharp distinction between rules on the one hand and principles and maxims on the other because no pre-established rules structure moral discussion. Like with open-ended play, the rules we accord ourselves with are themselves open to being played upon and improvised with. We act in accordance with the rules of chess *in order to* play a game of chess. Similarly, we act in accordance with the criteria laid out in a particular language-game *in order to* play that language-game; however, that 'in order to' is not (or not necessarily) justified by appeal to the lusory attitude. Which language-game we should be playing, and why and how, is itself open to debate and question, and this debating and questioning itself takes place in language-games, language-games to which the debating and questioning apply reflexively. To treat our language-games, and the appropriateness of particular language-games to particular circumstances, as already established, misses this crucial point.

That language-games can resemble open-ended play in this respect, such that the structure and appropriateness of a language-game is itself subject to variation, opens up the very possibility of moral debate and discussion. If fixed rules strictly delineated our use of moral concepts, applying those concepts would be as automatic as applying concepts in mathematics. If clear criteria fixed whether and when it was acceptable to break a promise, we would never debate the issue. Rhees is right to note that, if language were like a game in that it had unbending rules and principles, discussion would be impossible. Language is more like a game where a part of the game involves deciding what game to play and agreeing upon the rules. Wittgenstein's analogy works at a deeper level: discussion is possible because, like a game, language is something we play.

As a quintessentially serious form of discourse, let us take morality as an example to spell out the close relationship between language and play. Moral discourse, like any discourse, is something we learn. We learn criteria for using the language of morality:

what a promise is, what obligation and responsibility are, what compassion and forgiveness are, and so on. We also learn that the criteria in our moral discourse are themselves subject to debate: we learn that there are various justifiable grounds (and various rhetorical tricks) for calling courageous what someone else calls disobedient, for calling disingenuous what someone else calls sincere. Our moral discourse leaves far more room for debate than, say, our discourse about mathematics. A person who treats morality as consisting of hard-and-fast criteria that are as closed to debate as the criteria for correctly performing multiplication has failed to understand what morality is (or, at best, is unbefriendably doctrinaire).[10] Part of what we learn when we learn the language-games of morality is that one of them is the language-game of moral discussion. Characterizing these interlocking language-games as language-games does not deny them their reality, but rather insists on it. Morality seems false or empty only to those who dissent from the language-games of morality, who play the spoilsport, either out of contempt or out of conviction – or both.

Rhees (2006: 48) remarks that we may teach children to speak by teaching them games, but we are not teaching them simply to go on playing such games. Bearing in mind Stephen Mulhall's gloss on Wittgenstein, that 'play is not only our route into the inheritance of language but also an essential dimension of the language we inherit' (2001: 64), we can see that the games we play with children are linked to our capacity as adults to undertake serious discussion. In learning language through play, we learn that the concepts and criteria we learn are ours to play with. Far from rendering discourse frivolous, this capacity for play makes meaningful discourse possible. If moral questions could be settled by appeal to an absolute and impartial set of criteria, debating them would be a sign of ignorance or idleness. On the contrary, however, the criteria for our moral concepts are established, mutated, and extended precisely through the language-game of moral debate.

Rather than see Wittgenstein's later philosophy either as concerned primarily with the philosophy of language or as concerned with far more than just language, I proposed that Wittgenstein shows that an appropriate concern with language ramifies indefinitely, and that reorienting our thinking about language reorients our thinking in general. Similarly with ethics. I have focused on language-games of moral discourse – and I would insist that some language-games really are explicitly about morality where others are not

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[10] When Wittgenstein describes the predicament of looking for sharp definitions that correspond to our concepts in ethics, he imagines his interlocutor finding she can draw her definitions however she likes: 'Anything – and nothing – is right' (Wittgenstein 2009a: §77). His point here, I take it, is not that all moral discourse is worthless, but that the idea of requiring sharp definitions in moral discourse is worthless.

(I want to mark a difference between language-games of promise-keeping and language-games of grocery shopping) – but ethics pervades life as a whole. Although it enters language-games about promise-keeping in a distinctive and explicit manner, it is also present in language-games about grocery shopping – not just because the questions what we eat and where we buy our food are themselves fraught ethical territory, but because our ethics is an expression of our character as a whole.

I am obviously wading into deep philosophical waters here. I can't possibly hope to defend some of the claims of the previous paragraph here: that would require an entire book. Take them, then, not as an essential part of the overall argument but rather as an acknowledgment that my talk in this section about 'the language-game of moral debate' is not assuming the *opposite* of what I claim in the previous paragraph – that our ethical lives can be neatly cordoned off from our lives as a whole – as well as making one further suggestion: that Wittgenstein's thinking about language is not so different from a certain kind of thinking about ethics. Both are ways of contemplating life as a whole, and its significance.

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