

ON CHESS

“Sweet lord, you play me false.” – Miranda (from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*)

In the last year, chess has grown enormously in popularity following the Netflix series *The Queen’s Gambit*. As our lives have been suspended in lockdowns, ill-health and uncertainty about the future, the chessboard has become a kind of refuge. A space of intelligibility governed by certain simple, causal rules and spatial parameters – two sides, thirty-two pieces, sixty-four squares, and a mere 10^{120} possible moves.

Chess speaks of the dream of reason to master fate. Developed in 6th century India and Persia, perfected in the Islamic Golden Age, and a staple of European intellectual life from the courtly love of medieval knights to the Parisian café-tables of Jean-Paul Sartre and Marcel Duchamp, chess differed from other games like dice or backgammon in its emphasis on free will. Unlike the gambler who chances all on the roll of the die, a somewhat fatalistic resignation to life’s chaos and unexpected bounty, the chess-player ventures using nous and strategy. For that reason, whereas games of luck were largely considered *haram* in Islam, included in a list of games forbidden for Jews by the theologian Maimonides, and frowned-upon by religious authorities in medieval Christendom, chess was exceptional in indicating the rewards of mental striving in a rules-driven universe.

The history of chess and philosophy has yet to be written. And yet the history of the latter is replete with references to the former. Comparisons have been drawn around the power of the mind to master its opponent (Francis Bacon); or its hot-headed, conflictual nature (Hobbes, Montaigne). Some have found allegories in its rules (Saussure, Rawls) or as a mirror of pedagogical learning (Dewey, MacIntyre). There is another Marxist-Hegelian tradition that recognises the game as the actualisation of ideas through dialectical struggle (Emanuel Lasker; Marx and Lenin were aficionados). For Walter Benjamin, the march of history is like a chess game played by the “mechanical Turk”, an automaton with a tiny grandmaster hidden inside. For Wittgenstein, the meaning of words in a language are like pieces of the board. Recent philosophers have used the game to explore artificial intelligence (John Searle, Daniel Dennett, hailing back to Alan Turing, a keen amateur). In between, we find evidence of philosophers habitually, at times obsessively, playing

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(Locke, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hume, Voltaire, Rousseau, Hegel, Bertrand Russell).

There is one tradition that views the game as a precise model for demonstrating causality, even the syllogism. Another, prevalent in medieval Europe, viewed it as encapsulating the divine-ordained, hierarchical social order, with the monarch at the top and the expendable commoners beneath. George Eliot would reintroduce the image of society as a great chessboard in the novel *Felix Holt*. And then there's another tradition, in which the game contains the key to understanding the underlying harmony – or tragedy – of the universe.

Opening

The opening of every game is an exercise in quotation. Every play has been played countless times before (even the “Bongcloud”, in which the king inelegantly squats beside the pawns). The beginner who quickly moves their pieces to the centre of the board, beginning with the king's pawn two spaces, unwittingly enters a universe in which every opening (like this, the familiar king's gambit) or counter-opening (like black's Sicilian defence) has been agonisingly studied and debated.

UNLIKE THE SOLITARY PRODUCTION OF THE ARTWORK, A BEAUTIFUL GAME REQUIRES A PLAY OF INTERLOCKING POSITIONS WITH A GIFTED PARTNER

The Dadaist-painter turned chess master Duchamp once wrote: “Nothing in the world interests me more than finding the right move”. He gradually abandoned the art world, seeking out the company of grandmasters in late-night cafes in a quest to achieve perfection. Unlike the solitary production of the artwork, a beautiful game requires a play of interlocking positions with a gifted partner, out of which unfold its “beautiful problems”.



At times, this fixation with finding the right move, or recalling a wrong one, can enchant the players within a universe more compelling than a collapsing world around them. In “The Chess Players”, the poet and philosopher Fernando Pessoa riffs on the mythic origins of chess, a game supposedly invented by a Persian king who continued to play as his besieged city was overcome by attackers:

Whatever we take from this useless life,
Be it glory or fame,
Love, science, or life itself,
It's worth no more
Than the memory of a well-played game
And a match won
Against a better player.

For as long as the game lasts, it is alive with near-infinite possibilities. And when it's over? “It's nothing in the end”.

In Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, the traveller Marco Polo meets and converses with the great emperor Kublai Khan via the chessboard. At first the game enraptures the great Khan, who glimpses in it the possibilities of understanding the invisible, harmonious web of order that might pervade his sprawling empire. At other times he's despondent:

Each game ends in a gain or a loss: but of what? What were the true stakes? At checkmate, beneath the foot of the king, knocked aside by the winner's hand, a

black or a white square remains. By disembodiment his conquests to reduce them to the essential, Kublai had arrived at the extreme operation: the definitive conquest, of which the empire's multiform treasures were only illusory envelopes. It was reduced to a square of planed wood: nothingness...

A similar sense of tragic futility appears in Samuel Beckett's first novel, *Murphy*, with its vision of an eccentric game played by Mr Endon in a mental institution against the eponymous protagonist. The players are caught in a dance. Neither will take material from the other. Pieces drift around the board, sometimes returning to their original positions. In the play *Endgame*, named after the final, emotionally fraught part of the game, Beckett meditates on the absurdity of a king who, from the start, "knows he is making loud senseless moves", trapped in a game he can never win.

Beckett was tapping into an older tragic perspective, in which human minds are no longer the players but merely the pawns, at the mercy of distant forces. As the scholar and poet Omar Khayyam writes (in Edward FitzGerald's translation, beloved of the Victorians and Pessoa): "Tis all a Chequer-board of nights and days / Where Destiny with men for Pieces plays".

There has long been an enduring appeal to abandon the futile struggle. "Life is like a game of chess", wrote Schopenhauer; "we draw up a plan; but it remains dependent on what in the game the opponent, and in life fate, see fit to do". Perhaps it's best to override



the will that wishes to game. And yet, this withdrawal from the repetition of desire/disappointment is, itself, disappointing. For chess is a passionate game, which lends each moment drama. For while chess is about tactics and openings – the banal Ruy Lopez, the beguiling Pirc/Modern – the game can only take place through a confrontation between two distinct wills.

What is the relationship between the players? For some, no love's lost. "Chess is war over the board", declared Bobby Fischer, the mercurial Cold War grandmaster. "The object is to crush the opponent's mind". This zero-sum approach has been shared by part of that philosophic tradition, through which reason masters others' passions. Within the game, everything is at stake. We might read something into the Manicheism of light versus dark – though in the Persian *chatrang*, emerald battles ruby. There's an allegorical tradition that stages a game between a Knight and Death, ranging from Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* – in which the Knight desperately tries to cheat Death, to no avail – to Moritz Retzsch's Faustian painting *Die Schachspieler*. Consider the 17th century philosopher Thomas Browne in *Religio Medici*: "Thus the Devill playd at Chesse with mee, and yeelding a pawne, thought to gaine a Queen of me, taking advantage of my honest endeavours".

But our earnest Dr Browne protests too much. There is no fair play without foul; no gain of material without duplicity and guile. In another telling of the life-or-death game, this time by Geoffrey Chaucer in *The Book of the Duchess*, the "Man in Black" plays Dame Fortune. At first he despairs at her treachery and guile, but gradually he comes around to admiring her ability to master the same forces he had hoped to exercise. The game becomes less a zero-sum battle, and instead a dance of passionate, cognisant wills.

Middlegame

Earlier, we noted the popularity of chess in Europe since medieval times. Its connection to philosophers included some of the pantheon of early modern philosophy. Some, like Spinoza and Leibniz, pioneered a new kind of deductive philosophy that proceeded from *a priori* premises. But the game was experiencing a sea-change in social meanings. Once associated in medieval courts

with the stratagems of war, by the early modern period chess was increasingly associated with sex and sexual equality. In a highly patriarchal and regimented society, chess became one of the few permissible reasons a gentleman could visit a lady in her chamber.

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In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the magician Prospero conjures up a storm to capture his enemies on an enchanted island, where he has been exiled with his daughter Miranda. By way of magic and cunning, Prospero entraps his enemies – Antonio, his brother who has overthrown him, Alonso, who aided him, and their various hangers-on.

On one level, the play is about memory, the “dark backward and abysm of time” – forcing others to face the repressed. On another, it's about the interplay of what's fair or false. Miranda wonders at the “fowle play” that has brought the strange, god-like men to their island, as Prospero's stratagems lull his adversaries into the semblance of safety on a tropical utopia.

In the final act, Miranda plays Alonso's son Ferdinand at chess. Prospero has engineered a marriage between them, but is anxious that there should be no sexual play before the event. Deception is signalled:

Miranda: Sweet lord, you play me false.

Ferdinand: No, my dearest love, I would not for the world.

Miranda: Yes, for a score of kingdoms you should wrangle, And I would call it fair play.

Some have suggested that this scene is itself a chessboard, part of a wider arrangement of sixty-four

words arranged in two parts. While unlikely – *The Tempest*, with its splendiferous masques and squalls, is all in the performance – there's an interplay of fair and false throughout. Prospero, the former Duke of Milan, cruelly usurped; his use of cunning and magic to enslave the island's inhabitants (more on that shortly) and conjure a storm to capture his enemies; his arranged betrothal of his one daughter, Miranda, to engineer his restoration, and his anxieties as she falls passionately in love with Ferdinand; and the various machinations by which Antonio, Alonso and their crew navigate the enchanted island. By the close of the play, it's still unclear whether Prospero has won the game fairly. Nonetheless, he reluctantly casts into the sea his magic books.

The role of cunning reflects an emerging attitude to Nature in this period, associated with mastery and dominion. The King James Bible, whose cadences shape centuries of English letters, dictates that “Man” should “subdue” the Earth (Genesis 1:28). The philosopher Francis Bacon is known today for his vision of a new, experiment-grounded form of philosophy by organised scientific societies that anticipated empiricism and the modern university. In *The New Atlantis*, Bacon writes that Nature should be “tormented” to reveal its secrets, in the service of “the Empire of Man”. As Lord Chancellor and Attorney General for James VI and I, during a time of unprecedented colonial expansion in Ireland and the Americas, Bacon made use of torture when interrogating those suspected of treason.

Bacon wrote essays on many subjects. In one, he uses chess to make an instrumental distinction between what is merely passively given, and what can be mastered through art and reason:

[I]n chess, or other games of the like nature, the first rules and laws of the play are merely positive postulates, which ought to be entirely received, not disputed: but the skilful playing of the game is a matter of art and reason.

Perhaps – though a risky stretch – this might be akin to the methods that would torture Nature, like a suspected heretic or hostile native, to disclose its hidden truths.

If one tradition emphasised mastery, another idealised its innocence. In *Of Cannibals*, Montaigne argued that

the “barbarous” Tupinamba people were superior to corrupt Europeans by living closer to Nature’s ideal standard. A similar theme appears in Thomas More’s *Utopia*. It’s taken up by Gonzalo, Antonio’s advisor, in *The Tempest*, as he envisions a return to a pre-civilised, innocent Nature.

All things in common nature should produce
Without sweat or endeavour. Treason, felony,
Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine
Would I not have; but nature should bring forth
Of it own kind all foison, all abundance,
To feed my innocent people.

But immediately Gonzalo is ridiculed by his companions. On this island without sovereignty, he appoints himself king. And who will do the work? Moreover, the play revels in the ways in which Nature is mastered by Prospero’s books, enslaving the sprite Ariel and the monster Caliban (“for without them / He’s but a sot as I am”). *The Tempest*’s postcolonial implications have long been teased out. But notice how Prospero’s language subjectifies as much as it subjects Caliban:

You taught me language, and my profit on’t Is, I know
how to curse. The red plague rid you For learning me
your language

Beneath the utopia, then, is a tableau of slavery, deception and the struggle of enemies to survive at each other’s expense. Beyond false and fair, we are back at the view of chess not as the teacher of syllogisms, or the interlocking moves of lovers, but as a bitter fight to the death, one in which we may never step out of the grim exercise of power.

Let’s review the board. We’ve been trapped – not by the earlier tragic fatalism but by a swashbuckling offensive game, premised in pessimistic assumptions about humanity, like cunning, mastery, the war of all against all (and Hobbes listed chess among “contentious games” like tables, dice, and tennis, that evoke anger and pleasure). This *domination-disposition* reflects the widespread fear, superstition and scarcity of the early modern world. It would find its rationalisation in other quarters: the rational selfishness of Bernard Mandeville and the beehive; the theoretical justification of slavery and (European) piracy in Grotius; the account of “unsocial sociability” in Kant.

Perhaps the genesis of this disposition can be used to account for the over-extraction and expropriation of the Anthropocene. But that is not our only move.

GEORGE ELIOT’S PHILOSOPHICAL NOVELS ENGAGE AND RE-ENGAGE THIS PROBLEM OF HUMAN FRAGILITY AND PASSIONATE FREEDOM IN A SEEMINGLY DETERMINED UNIVERSE

We find a very different use of the chessboard in George Eliot’s novel *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Her least-loved one, it uses a hotly contested election in a Victorian market town to explore a deeper conflict of values. On the one side is the idealism of the earnest, working-class reformer Felix Holt; on the other, the opportunism of Harold Transome, a landowner who seek to become MP (and protect his wealth) by appealing to the newly enfranchised workers that he is one of them. The plot is a series of deceptions and reveals: Harold, who surprises many by standing as a dubious “Radical”; Mr Jermyn, his agent, who mismanages his estate and embezzles him; John Johnson, who bribes workers with beer in exchange for voting for Harold; Felix Holt, falsely accused of starting a riot; and Esther Lyon, whose worldviews shift when she discovers her true biological father and right to the Transome estate. No character is as they seem.

Traps work best when players lack the education or training to recognise them. As the character Maurice Christian recalls,

he felt very much like an uninitiated chess-player, who sees that the pieces are in a peculiar position on the board, and might open the way for him to give checkmate, if he only knew how

Alas – even Christian deceives us, having stolen another character’s identity in prison.

Eliot warns against the arrogance of a “mathematical imagination” that attempts to commandeer the passions of others (or one’s own) through a narrow, instrumental understanding of self-interest. Any attempt to play men as merely pawns in one’s own game can easily backfire, as the cynical Mr Jermyn finds out:

He thinks himself sagacious, perhaps, because he trusts no bond except that of self-interest: but the only self-interest he can safely rely on is what seems to be such to the mind he would use or govern. Can he ever be sure of knowing this?

It is not so much that self-interest can misfire; it is rather the arrogance of assuming that a scheming, offensive game will easily outmanoeuvre one’s enemies. Sometimes our own passions – anger, vexation, obsession with winning the next move – can blind us to the wider forces set around us.

George Eliot’s philosophical novels engage and re-engage this problem of human fragility and passionate freedom in a seemingly determined universe. Each

character is moved dexterously across the board, often unaware of the machinations of others until the endgame. Often, the best that they can arrive at is a sympathetic understanding of the lives of others, usually out of a journey of inner growth through struggle. Thus at the end of *Adam Bede*, Eliot’s first novel, the title-character’s experiences of suffering and growing love for Dinah have given him a “sense of enlarged being” and a “fuller life” – a “feeling as gives you a sort o’ liberty”.

Eliot’s meditations on sympathetic knowledge grew out of her work as a translator. Before *Adam Bede*, Eliot had spent two years translating Spinoza’s *Ethics*. This might have become its first English edition, had it not fallen foul of a dispute with the publisher (it has been recently republished in an excellent edition by Clare Carlisle and Princeton University Press).

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza boldly sets out a new naturalistic philosophy in which God is immanent, everything in existence is a manifestation of God’s being or power, and the highest human contentment lies not under the “servitude” of the passions but through the life of reason.



Spinoza took the methods of the Baconian New Science and the Cartesian interest in mind-body relationality and turned them inside out. Spinoza recognised that his philosophy was highly unorthodox, even dangerous to the prevailing religious authorities whose worldview he undermined. He outlined his arguments deductively and geometrically, compelling readers to accept their premises. Yet while the traditional image of Spinoza has often been an aloof, otherworldly lens-grinder, cognising upon a cold universe, the *Ethics* is all about understanding human desires and passions in order to maximise their joyous duration. This is a life not of solitude but lived among others, in circles of friendship and philosophical inquiry through which a truly content, that is, ethical life, might be lived.

But the good which every one who lives according to reason, i.e. who follows virtue, desires for himself, is to understand. Therefore the good which every one who follows virtue desires for himself, he will desire for all human beings.

For Spinoza, human excellence comes through living with “all nature as one individual” and understanding how this constitutes our passionate rationality. This kind of rationality, opaque in more recent, scholarly translations, comes to the fore in Eliot’s hands. It emphasises the value of self-acceptance and sympathetic understanding as key to the life of reason.

For so far as we possess intelligence, we desire nothing but what necessarily is, and we can acquiesce in nothing but what is true; and thus in so far as we rightly understand what is true, the effort of the better part of our own nature is in unison with the common order of universal nature.

There’s something wonderful in this epiphany that what separates us from others are merely porous boundaries. Sitting on a train, Fernando Pessoa looked around at all the lives around him, all the people to whom he had said goodbye, and for a moment his sorrowing heart grows “a little larger than the entire universe”.

But the spectator in love is easily beguiled by appearances whose true character may not be what they seem. The serenity of sympathetic openness of characters across Eliot’s novels like Felix Holt, Adam Bede, Maggie Tulliver, Romola de’Bardi or Dorothea Brooke can be

derailed by the consequences of other people’s fears and hostility. At times Eliot herself becomes enchanted by a quasi-Christian ideal of nobility through suffering. This is the lesson of Prospero, who captures his enemies by lulling them into a delicious phantasmagoria. He plays through passions and desires, vividly setting out a bountiful phantasmagoria in which his cheating rivals think they have victory within reach. Each must reckon with the legacy of their earlier mistakes.

THERE’S SOMETHING WONDERFUL IN THIS EPIPHANY THAT WHAT SEPARATES US FROM OTHERS ARE MERELY POROUS BOUNDARIES

It appeared to be a dance of equal, passionate wills; but the band drove the rhythm, and one dancer takes the lead.

Endgame

The final part of the game is the endgame, in which there are few moves left and even fewer pieces. The king, hidden behind the pawns for the most part, now occupies the centre. He attempts to block or flee the opponent’s moves, sometimes wretchedly, sometimes gallantly. A few straggling pawns join him. If one of these can make it to the other side of the board, then the game is transformed. And every pawn dreams of becoming queen.

There is one detail about Spinoza’s life of which even Eliot was unaware. A man of few possessions, found posthumously in his room was a chessboard.

Unlike many contemporaries, Spinoza does not mention the game in his work. And yet the structure of the *Ethics* might itself be approached like a chessboard, in which the initial axioms and definitions determine the rules of the game, and each move proceeds causally by way of

a proposition, each resting strategically upon the earlier moves. Spinoza's somewhat conventional opening, beginning with seemingly-orthodox definitions of God and a form of the ontological argument, soon traps his opponent in a breath-taking monism unacceptable even to his more liberal Christian readers.

Hegel, a keen chess-player, once said that all philosophy must begin from the standpoint of Spinozism. But the trap of Spinozism, as he saw it, was that all the action – from substance to the finite modes – plays out without a player, without a subject who directs or struggles against adversaries along the path (Spinoza's preferred metaphor) to freedom. How can Spinoza, a mortal man, take such a God's-eye view?

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The *Ethics* establishes a game early on against what Spinoza calls prejudice, the natural and inevitable tendency of human beings to form inadequate ideas based on their own limited understandings and desires, out of which emerges superstition, tyranny and the mind's servitude.

Against a long-established melancholic tradition that exalted the futility of reason's attempts to master the passions, and which even viewed human nature as a kind of tragic abomination of Nature, Spinoza insisted that reason, guided rightly in tandem with the passions and desires, could lead to a kind of elusive, victorious freedom ("everything excellent is as difficult as it is rare"). Not one that claws after an afterlife, distracted by the next move, but one which recognises the whole game from the perspective of eternity, *sub specie aeternitatis*. The dancers, the rhythm; the anger

or cunning; each become "lines, surfaces, or solids", through the perspective of another lens – enchanted, passionate matter in motion. The successful player revels in the possibilities of the moment, knowing full well that this moment is not one of spontaneous chance (the chaos of the die) but the productive realisation of a lifetime's striving and reflection which always begins, again, in the middle of play.

And if that doesn't work, one should learn to lose graciously:

[W]hatever may happen to us in opposition to our interest, we shall bear with equanimity if we are conscious that we have done our duty, that our power does not extend so far as to enable us to avoid those evils, and that we are a part of Nature, whose order we obey.

Checkmate.

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