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# Is Chess Art?

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A standard examination question in Russia: "Is chess sport, art, or science?" We assume the question is confined to young aspiring chess players, but, given the seriousness with which chess is taken in Russia, it might be set for students in any of these three areas. The question is in no sense academic. Grand masters enjoy debating the issue. Anatoly Karpov says "For me it is one, then another, then a third." Then "Today, of course, chess is above all a sport." His reasons are conceptual as well as empirical. "Don't you agree that in any competition on any level, the important question is who wins?"<sup>1</sup> Richard Reti and James Rachels have argued that chess is both a game and art. For them it is an art because it involves "creative activity whose products are worthy of attention for their own sakes." I shall urge that chess is not art.

The Reti-Rachels comparison between the struggle in art and in chess is not very illuminating. Struggles pervade so many of our activities that the concept cannot reveal the nature of any particular activity. True, both chess and art involve a psychological struggle. Shelby Lyman emphasized this when he commented on the second game of the current World Championship. Near the end, both Karpov and Kasparov were under time pressure. Well, Michelangelo was under time pressure while completing the Sistine Chapel. Unlike artists, chess players have opponents. (Rachels does not respect this fact enough.) Perhaps clients, adaptors, and directors fill the opponent's place for art. Does the player's struggle with the constraints of the game correspond to the artist's struggle with his or her medium? The parallel applies to competitive chess. It is ironic that it does not apply where Rachels is on strongest ground, namely, to compositional chess. In any case struggling is not of the essence.

Of the essence is creativity. Both chess and art require the creative or productive imagination. With the word, "creative," used so promiscuously today, someone might charge that this parallel is no more illuminating than the struggle parallel. Jack Glickman offers an immediate reply. His thesis not only gives specificity, but also puts creativity in chess and art on a par in one definite respect. In "Creativity in the Arts," Glickman says "Particulars are made, types created."<sup>2</sup> To use for the most part my own examples, a member of the Sacher family created a type of cake, the "Sacher Torte" Brigitte Bardot created the "Bardot look," and Titian created the "Titian blue." There is a "look" in chess. It is found in the style introduced by Reti, among others. It is hyper-modern chess characterized by a certain indirect-

ness. For example, the fianchetto of the bishop tends to be favored. This style has a certain look. So there is the "hyper-modern look" just as there is the "Bardot look." These are two created types. Moves can also be types. For instance, the Ruy Lopez opening is also a type. Thus in both chess and art we find creativity with respect to the creation of types.

Most philosophers take care to exclude creating such things as a mess or a disturbance by positing the condition that to be considered creative a process must produce something "valuably new." Glickman assumes that "creating *means* producing something valuably new" (italics his). A moment's hesitation: what about Tal's dreaded stare. It depends, in part, on what is included in the game. Finally, in "Creativity in Art," Vincent Tomas insists that a necessary condition for creativity is "critical control."<sup>3</sup> No one doubts this in chess.

C. J. Ducasse distinguishes between ectotelic, endotelic and autotelic activities.<sup>4</sup> His use of these terms is a bit puzzling, but the distinctions are worth making and I will use the terms for my own purposes. Work is ectotelic or heterotelic because the end of the activity is outside it and the steps of the activity are seen as means. Art is autotelic. Its end is "real" because it is "contained" in the activity. The end of art is the objectification of emotion and this is part and parcel of the expressive art-activity. Play is endotelic because its end is a "trumped up one," invented "expressly" to initiate the game. Unlike art, play is not serious for it is not impelled by our innermost being. Yet Ducasse says that "playing chess. . . so long as it is playing could not be a *means* to mating the opponent's king" (italics mine). On the contrary, the moves in a game of chess are means to checkmating the opponent's king. However, and this is very important, chess is not ectotelic. Its goal is not outside the playing. "Endotelic" and "autotelic" are not so far removed in meaning. Chess is autotelic in the sense that the end cannot be attained without the play. Health may be regained without the pill. The sun may melt the snow so that one does not have to shovel the sidewalk. God can say, "Let there be a house!" But the king cannot be checkmated, even by God, without the playing.

Ducasse speaks of the impulse to express as being a categorical imperative. By contrast George Santayana says that art "belongs to the holiday side" of our lives. Perhaps chess, at its best, also belongs to the holiday side of our lives in which case this is the second sense in which chess is autotelic.

To a large extent Rachels' argument for chess as art turns on beauty. There are, of course, other aesthetic values, for instance, expressiveness. Furthermore, some philosophers, Tolstoi, Ducasse, and Collingwood, to name only a few, think beauty not essential to art. For different reasons artists today would agree. While we examine Rachels' discussion of playing for beauty, the distinction between

competitive and compositional chess must be kept in mind. Karpov is thinking of competitive or, more specifically, tournament chess when he says "(Actually, playing beautiful chess in the attempt to achieve good results is being seen more and more. . .)" He calls this "irrational." He, himself, will not take any chance on losing even if that chance is "only one in ten." Although he describes Boris Spassky as playing "brilliantly" in a game in which he decided to play for beauty, he calls the game "sad" because Spassky sacrificed the "simple" and "sure" road to victory. In the present context this is ironic, for simplicity is one of Rachels' cardinal beauty-making features. In competitive chess there is always an opponent to be considered. He may not be willing to "pursue beauty as well as points."

It is standard in tournament chess to give a prize for the best game and a prize for the most beautiful game. The second is called the "brilliance prize." The beautiful game must be sound. If a game is very beautiful, but flawed, the judges are extremely reluctant to give it the prize. They will do so, again reluctantly, only if the flaw is very difficult to discover. The beautiful game must be sound as well as beautiful to win the award for the most beautiful game.

Rachels is on firmest ground in compositional chess where there is no opponent. The player sits by himself composing positions for, say, the end game. But these are positions for winning. The aim is to teach. Not only that, grand masters often use positions thus contrived. In fact, the Saavedra theme has been used in tournament chess. The purely aesthetic seems to be secured by Santayana's suggestion that interest in chess is "interest in *formal relations*, as in mathematics or stained glass or arabesques." This gives us chess as an aesthetic object, but, as I shall argue later, it does not give us chess as art. Before I go into the chess-as-aesthetic-object-implies-chess-can-be-art issue, I would like to discuss more parallels between chess and art, both Rachels' and my own.

Rachels' comparison between the delightful surprises afforded by art and chess is suggestive. For one thing, it introduces the crucial phenomenon of expectation in chess and art, especially music. Leonard Meyer has applied information theory to musical expectation. For him greatness in music consists in the amount of information a piece conveys.<sup>5</sup> To use my own example, a steeple chase gives more information than a race between two horses because fewer possibilities are cancelled. Meyer points out that *Twinkle Twinkle, Little Star* yields less information than the theme for Geminiani's *Opus 3, No. 3*. The latter, in turn, gives less information than the theme for Bach's *Prelude and Fugue* for organ. Less informative musical works set up fewer expectations and fewer possibilities. They are likely to be cliché-ridden and offer less resistance to the "musical impulse."

One form of resistance Meyer does not entertain is the surprise

that is totally unexpected as in Rachels' Saavedra example. The phenomenon is fairly rare in music. Nevertheless it does occur in Hayden's works.<sup>6</sup> In *The Creation* there is a long twisting passage which ends in a C-major. The twisting passage symbolizes chaos. The C-major climax represents order. This is unexpected and delightful. It seems "right" both symbolically and musically. A totally unexpected, though perhaps not delightful, surprise occurs when the slow, genteel movement of Hayden's *Surprise Symphony* is interrupted by a loud crash on the dominant. Musically this is logical, but dynamically it is unexpected.

Rachels has overlooked a feature which is essential to art and also found in chess. In fact, these features may be a major source of beauty in chess. In "Towards a Philosophy of Chess," published in this journal, José A. Benardete points out that chess has expressive properties.<sup>7</sup> While he draws parallels between chess and life and I between chess and art, we both employ Nelson Goodman's analysis of expression or, more precisely, expressiveness.<sup>8</sup>

According to Goodman, expressive properties are metaphorically, not literally possessed. To take the standard example, when we say that the music is "sad" we are saying that the piece metaphorically possess the property of being sad. For Goodman, metaphor involves the transfer of a label or labels from one schema or family of labels to an unaccustomed realm of application. Thus 'sad' is transported from the schema of emotion labels usually applied to the human and animal realm to the realm of art, specifically music.

Benardete's examples of metaphorically possessed properties of chess involve many of the central terms used in the game. When we say that White is "attacking" Black, we cannot mean that the player of the white pieces is literally attacking the player of the black pieces. To turn to chess and art, Mikhail Botvinnik, when describing the play of Nigel Short, says that his pieces "dance on the board." The pieces metaphorically possess the property of dancing. Once I was taken completely by surprise by the "sinister" onslaught of my opponent's pawns. Expressive properties afford their own pleasure and can, at times, be called beautiful.

As I have already pointed out, beauty is not the only aesthetic value. Furthermore neither rightness and necessity nor simplicity and economy are sufficient conditions for beauty. However, Guy Sircello in his "new theory of beauty" or NTB, as he calls it, provides an avenue which broadens the scope of beauty and may, in a particular case, include these properties.<sup>9</sup>

According to Sircello, it is an empirical fact that when we find something beautiful, we find it beautiful in some respect. To be beautiful is to be beautifully F. One might call this "the adverbial theory of beauty." For instance, Helen's skin is beautiful with respect to its

fairness. Her skin is beautifully fair. The property which renders something beautiful must be a qualitative property which is possessed to a high degree. It cannot be a quantitative property nor, most emphatically, may it be a property of defect such as silliness or the smoothness of a tire. I think that to be "breathtaking" and to preempt attention the PQDs, properties of qualitative degree as Sircello calls them, must be possessed to an usually high degree. This modification allows the theory to elude criticism that reduces the PQDs to a dull "very."

On the basis of NTB we can now say that if rightness or necessity are present in a solution to an extremely high degree, then the solution is beautiful with respect to these PQDs. Correspondingly, if a game has the PQDs of simplicity and economy to an especially high degree then it is beautiful with respect to these PQDs. A game can be beautifully simple. Expressive properties may also be PQDs. My opponent's play was beautifully sinister. That is not a property of defect in chess! In showing that NTB offers resources for beauty in chess, I am not trying to assimilate all aesthetic properties in chess to beauty. After all, a game can simply be simple. Needless to say, art also possesses PQDs.

We will not be in a position to answer the question, "Is chess art?", until we have addressed Rachels' early question about intentions. He wonders whether or not something can be called art if it was not intended to be art. He raises the issue only to dismiss it summarily with the observation that "There are many works now on display in museums that were created by craftsman who gave no thought to "art." This facile move bypasses one of the central issues in aesthetics today. Undeniably, some things which were never intended to be art are used as art. They are framed and enjoyed for their aesthetic properties. Such objects are prized because we take pleasure in the disinterested contemplation of their aesthetic features "for their own sake." But just because a thing is used as art does not imply that it is art.

Unfortunately, there is a tendency today to use the terms, "aesthetic object" and "work of art" interchangeably. This is conceptually misleading. Many, if not most things, can be perceived as aesthetic objects (whether or not it is rewarding to do so in a particular instance is another matter). We can always "bracket" the purely perceptual properties of a thing. For instance we can appreciate the shape of a chair and ignore its function. We can look at the snowflakes to see if they are so large and lasting that a plow will be needed in the morning, or we can appreciate their shape, their whiteness and, the way they glisten under a street lamp. But to take something as an aesthetic object is not to categorize it as art. Most works of art are *ipso facto* aesthetic objects. Aesthetic objects are not *ipso facto* works of

art. That we can enjoy and admire the aesthetic properties of chess does not enable us to claim chess as art.

One might counter with George Dickie's well known "institutional theory of art." Dickie offers the following definition.<sup>10</sup> A work of art is an "artifact" some of the features of which have had "conferred" upon them the status of "candidate for appreciation" by some person or persons acting on behalf of "the artworld." On this definition, can any aesthetic object, which is an artifact, become a work of art? It would seem so. But Dickie's approach can easily lead to the gerrymandering of the concept, art. For instance, why not stamps? I submit that to call chess "art" is, precisely to gerrymander the concept.

#### NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Anatoloy Karpov, *My Best Games*, translated by H. Russell, published by S. Fried, RHM Press, New York 1978, pp. 2-3.
- <sup>2</sup> Jack Glickman, "Creativity in the Arts," in *Philosophy Looks at the Arts*, edited by J. Margolis, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1978, p. 155.
- <sup>3</sup> Vincent Tomas, "Creativity in Art" in *Creativity in the Arts*, edited by V. Tomas, Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, 1964, p. 103.
- <sup>4</sup> C. J. Ducasse, *The Philosophy of Art*, The Dial Press, New York, 1924, pp. 105-112.
- <sup>5</sup> Leonard B. Meyer, "Some Remarks on Value and Greatness in Music" in *Aesthetics Today*, edited by M. Philipson, Meridian Books, New York, 1970, pp. 169-187.
- <sup>6</sup> I am indebted to George Nugent of the Fine Arts Department at Syracuse University for these examples.
- <sup>7</sup> Jose A. Benardete, "Towards a Philosophy of Chess," *Philosophic Exchange*, vol. 2, no. 5, Summer 1978, pp. 58-59.
- <sup>8</sup> Nelson Goodman, *The Language of Art*, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., New York, 1968, Ch. 2, Sec.s 5-6 and 9.
- <sup>9</sup> Guy Sircello, *A New Theory of Beauty*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1975, Sec., 13-15.
- <sup>10</sup> George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1974, p. 34.