Playing Games, Following Rules, and Linguistic Activity

Category

Philosophy of Language

Abstract

In this paper I propose that game playing situations may be regarded as involving *agents* standing in the *playing* relation to abstract *games* having (some of) their rules essentially; and I inquire whether linguistic activity can be so regarded as well. Timothy Williamson has argued that it can, and that assertion in particular should be thought of as a move in such a game, governed by the rule *assert only what you know*; but Ishani Maitra has given an argument, based on the thought that we follow no such rule, against the possibility of such an analysis. I defend the Williamsonian proposal by rejecting the account of rule following required by Maitra's argument: playing a game does require that agents follow its rules; but agents do follow a strong rule of assertion in the relevant sense.

Introduction: Language and Games

Consider your favourite game - say, chess, or soccer. When this game is played, a complex social phenomenon occurs, which we describe by saying that people are playing chess, or soccer. Perhaps we can make progress on understanding such phenomena by taking grammatical appearances at face value: in particular, the grammar suggests that in such circumstances there is a *game* G that people play, and that *playing* is a relation between people, or *agents*, and games.[1]

We have a pre-theoretical understanding of what agents are: they are rational beings having both preferences and the ability to make choices amongst possible courses of action. This simple account might need to be refined upon further reflection, but it will serve our present purposes. It will be instructive, however, to ask after the natures of the other elements involved, namely games and the playing relation.

What then are games? We may take games to be abstract objects individuated by their rules, which are accordingly essential to them.[2] Although we ordinarily think that a game like soccer can change its rules, on the view urged here this is not (strictly speaking) true. Rather, when something occurs which, as players of games, we would normally describe as a rule change, as theorists we may regard this as a change in social tradition; members of the society under study cease to be interested in playing one game G, and begin to take interest in another, typically very similar game G', which they proceed to call by the old name.

In claiming that the rules of a game are essential to it we must be careful; arguably, this is not true of *all* of its rules. Some of the rules of a game G tell us what the moves are, and which of them are permissible under what circumstances. Other rules tell us how the score – broadly construed so as to include such information as which inning it is (in baseball or cricket), how much time remains (in

[1] This allows for the possibility that some playing is intransitive, i.e. not the playing *of* anything. Arguably, when children entertain themselves by playing, there is no game that they play.

[2] See Williamson (2000: chapter 11).

soccer or basketball), or whose turn it is (in chess) - changes (in some cases) as a result of the performance of those moves; and ultimately, what it is to win, lose, or draw at G.[3] Rules of the first kind deal principally with the moves of the game: David Lewis (1979) called them *specifications of correct play*; and he called those of the second kind, which are concerned with the game as a whole, *specifications of the kinematics of score*. The rules of these two types will, however, typically be interdependent: which moves are permissible will depend upon what the score is; and what the score is will depend upon which moves have been made, permissibly or impermissibly. Together they comprise the *constitutive* rules of the game G; and it is these rules which are essential to G.[4]

In addition to the constitutive rules of a game G, however, we may also recognize that there are *regulative* rules which concern it. While the former may be stated as indicatives, the latter most naturally take the form of imperatives.[5] Following Lewis (1979) again, we may take the normative regulative rules, or imperatives, to be of two types: *directives concerning score*; and *directives requiring correct play*. In particular, we may say that there is just one directive concerning correct play, namely: *Play correctly!* Similarly, there is only directive concerning score: *Win!*[6] What makes these rules concern G is the fact that they implicitly employ terms defined by the constitutive rules of G. More specifically, we might re-write the regulative rules of G thus: *Make your action correct play in G! Make winning at G the outcome of your action!* These regulative rules of G are not essential to G; rather, they are essential to the *playing* of G.

How exactly are these regulative rules involved in playing a game? What does it take, for any game G, to play G? An initially plausible answer is that in order to play G it is both necessary and sufficient to follow the regulative rules of G. One of the aims of this paper will be to assess this hypothesis.

A second aim will be to investigate whether linguistic phenomena can be profitably regarded as involving a game or games played by conversational participants. Timothy Williamson (2000) has argued that we should adopt this theoretical perspective: in particular, he has claimed that the speech act of assertion, like a move in a game, is governed by a rule which is essential to it. More specifically, Williamson considers the possibility that assertion is governed by a rule with a simple form, namely, that of the C rule:

(CR) One must: assert that p only if p has C.

This rule schema has many instances, but two are of particular interest. The first is the truth rule:

(TR) One must: assert that p only if p is true.

The second is the knowledge rule:

(KR) One must: assert that p only if one knows that p.

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[3] See Dummett (1958) for the claim that a specification of a game will include a classification of end states as , drawing, or losing ones.

[4] If G had different constitutive rules than it has, it would be a different game – i.e. different from G itself; which of course is to say that it couldn't have had different constitutive rules. (See Williamson (2007) for a defence of the claim that *necessarily p* can be defined as *if p were not the case, p would be the case*.)

[5] See Searle (1969) and Lewis (1979).

[6] Or perhaps better: *Prefer winning to drawing, and drawing to losing!* See below for some further discussion.

Williamson argues that assertion is governed by the knowledge rule (KR); it is important to note, however, that if this is so, it is also governed by the truth rule (TR), for knowledge entails truth.[7]

As stated, Williamson's rules seem to be both constitutive and regulative simultaneously; they contain the deontic modal expression "must", which allows them to be formulated in the indicative mood, while at the same time containing (something of) the force of an imperative. But these two components of such rules can be separated from one another; any rule given in the form of the C rule can be rewritten as a constitutive indicative rule (where G is the language game to which assertion belongs):

(C-CON) An assertion that p is correct in G only if p has C.

Together with the directive concerning correct play, *make your action correct in G*, this will be equivalent to the original C rule. For convenience, however, I will often speak, as Williamson does, of the rules in their original formulation as both constitutive and normatively binding.

Ishani Maitra (2011) rejects the view that assertion is a move in a language game. More precisely, if we call a rule having the form of (CR) "strong" just in case what replaces "C" entails that p is true - i.e. just in case the norm it imposes on assertion is at least as strong as the truth rule (TR)[8] – she rejects the view that assertion is essentially governed by a strong rule. We can represent her argument as follows[9]:

i. Playing, and hence making moves in, a game G requires following the rules of G.
ii. Speakers often make assertions without following any truth entailing rule. Therefore,
iii. Assertion does not consist of making a move in a game involving any such strong rule.

This is a powerful argument, and potentially devastating to the view that linguistic activity is rule governed, consisting of making moves in a language game. If Maitra's argument (so construed) is to go through, however, an account of rule following must be provided which makes it plausible both that playing a game is to follow its (regulative) rules, and that assertion does not involve following any strong rule. In the next section I suggest a simple analysis of rule following which I think has the best chance of making both of Maitra's premises come out true; then, in the subsequent section I offer a response to the argument on behalf of the game based theorist of language.

Playing Games and Following Rules: a First Pass

The hypothesis that I would like to consider in this section is that following a rule consists of *intending to conform* to it. If it can be shown both that following rules in this sense is necessary for playing games, and that agents can make assertions without following any truth entailing rule in this sense, then the hypothesis that assertion is a move in a language game is in trouble.

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[7] Williamson also thinks that (KR), unlike (TR), *individuates* assertion: assertion is the only speech act which is (uniquely, constitutively) governed by the knowledge rule. This further claim, however, is not pertinent to our present concerns.

[8] Weiner (2005)argues that assertion is governed by the truth rule (TR); it is unclear whether he intends to be taken as holding that assertion is a move in a language game essentially governed by a constitutive rule.

[9] Doing so, however, requires using the notion of rule following differently than she herself does - see below.

It seems clear that merely conforming to the regulative rules of G is not sufficient for playing G. One can easily imagine a comedy of errors in which, through a sequence of happy circumstances, someone utterly ignorant of the rules of a game G is treated as a hero by virtue of conforming to the rules of G and having therefore been taken as a winner. Arguably, the comedy results from the discrepancy between appearance and reality: the hero appears to the other characters to be very good at playing the game, when in reality (as discerned by the audience[10]) he is not playing the game at all. The claim that in order to play a game one must intend to conform to its rules predicts this result, and thereby explains the source of the comedy.

Nor is it obvious that conforming to the regulative rules of G is necessary for playing G. If the suggestion above is accepted, namely that the directive concerning score for a game G is the simple imperative to win, then clearly, at least one player or team can play a competitive game while failing to conform to all of its regulative rules; for they can do so while failing to win. This might be thought to show that the proposed regulative rule is erroneous; but I think it would be hasty to draw that conclusion on this basis alone. The comedy of errors case above already suggests that, if there is a connection between the regulative rules of a game and playing that game it is intentionally mediated; and in the cases alluded to a moment ago, the losing side does intend to win.

Besides, there are other cases which suggest that playing a game doesn't require conforming to its rules. For instance, Maitra (2011: 281)imagines a case in which someone is pitched three strikes, but everyone, including the umpire, loses count, and the batter receives another pitch. One of the rules of baseball is violated in this case (in the analysis suggested here, the directive concerning correct play); but Maitra claims, plausibly enough, that the people involved are playing baseball despite this.

Maitra concludes from this case that following the rules (or norms) of G is not necessary for playing G, since "following a norm requires at least conforming to it" (2011: 281). She then goes on to argue that nevertheless *flagrantly* violating the rules of a game is not compatible with playing that game. And from this, together with the fact that speakers sometimes flagrantly violate strong rules such as the truth rule and the knowledge rule while nonetheless making assertions (for instance, when they are obviously lying), she concludes that asserting is not a matter of making a move in a language game involving such strong rules.

Maitra's own account of flagrant rule violation builds in an epistemic component: "a failure to conform to a norm is *flagrant*", she says, "if it is intentional and sufficiently [epistemically] marked" (2011: 282, italics original). However, it might be thought that this epistemic component plays a role only in drawing to the attention of other relevant participants that the violator is not playing the game anymore, i.e. is not engaged in cooperative behaviour. This undermines their motivation to cooperate and to play: yet the epistemic aspect of flagrant rule violation merely provides evidence that the original character is not engaged in the cooperative behaviour of playing a game; it does not constitute that failure. If we remove it from Maitra's definition of a flagrant violation of the rules all that is left is an intentional violation. Plausibly, then, Maitra's purposes are well-served by the suggestion that to follow a rule is simply to intend to conform to it, and that following the rules of a game in this sense is necessary for playing that game.

[10] Of the comedy, not the (depicted) competition!

Before closing this section, I would like to consider two cases, which might be thought to support the hypothesis of this section. First, take the handball committed by Thierry Henry in the World Cup 2010 qualifier against Ireland. In sudden death extra time Henry handled the ball, then passed it to his teammate Gallas, who scored, giving France the victory. Henry intentionally violated the rules of soccer by playing the ball with his hand. Assuming he was rational, the current proposal predicts that Henry was *not* playing soccer at the time of the offence, even if he intended to be *taken* (e.g. by the referee) to be playing the game. Indeed, one might say that this is what cheating consists in: intending to be taken to be playing a game while not in fact playing. The fact that the proposal provides a neat analysis of cheating can be seen as an advantage.

The second case is that of the card game Cheat. In Cheat the object is to get rid of one's cards. There are rules which tell us which cards can be disposed of legitimately in which circumstances; but cards are played face down, and it is permissible to lie about which cards one has played – this is what constitutes the "cheating" which gives the game its name. If one is challenged one must then show the cards one has played; and if one has lied, one must collect all of the cards played in that round. Teenage experiments have revealed that if one deliberately violates *this* rule, the game quickly degenerates, and no one wants to play. Despite its name, one does not play Cheat by cheating.

Prima facie, then, it is plausible that playing a game requires following its rules in the sense of intending (*de rebus*[11]) to conform to them. In the next section, however, I argue that this is not the case; and in so doing I respond to Maitra's argument.

Game Theoretic Alternatives

It is clear that strong rules such as the truth rule (TR) and the knowledge rule (KR) are intentionally violated by liars, who nevertheless make assertions; thus, if following a rule consists of intending to conform to it, asserters do not invariably follow any strong rule. If Maitra's conclusion that making an assertion does not consist of making a move in a language game is to be resisted, the advocate of the game theoretic approach to the study of linguistic activity must deny that rule following, in this sense, is necessary for playing a game.

One way to do this is to accept that playing a game requires following its rules, but to deny that following rules consists of intending to conform to them; that is, one might reject the analysis of rule following suggested in the last section. It appears that Williamson favours this view: "Constitutive rules" such as the knowledge rule (KR), he says, "do not lay down necessary conditions for performing the constituted act" (2000: 240); what follows reveals that he means that *conforming* to the rule is not necessary for performing the act. "Nevertheless," he continues, "some sensitivity to the difference – in both oneself and others – between conforming to the rule and breaking it presumably is a necessary condition of playing the game… or performing the speech act" (2000: 240). Those who display the requisite sensitivity might be said to be *following* the rule. On this approach, following a rule consists in having some kind of knowledge, perhaps tacit, that certain acts, or moves in a game, are governed by, or subject to, that rule. The challenge for those pursuing

[11] If someone unacquainted with either baseball or cricket, though having heard a little about them, were to encounter people playing cricket, she might conjecture that they were playing baseball. If she were to observe for some time, learning the rules, she might join in; yet despite her *de dicto* intention to conform to the rules of baseball, she would be playing cricket.

this strategy will be to spell out the notion of tacit knowledge in such a way that it is plausible that following the rules of a game G in this sense is not only necessary, but also sufficient, for playing G. This is not something that I will attempt here.

The second possible response is to simply deny that following the rules of a game G is, in any sense, necessary for playing G. According to Don Ross (2011), for instance, game theorists in other domains typically assume that any situation in which "at least one agent can only act to maximize his utility through anticipating… the responses to his actions by one or more other agents is… a *game*" (2011: section 2.2); or better, since games themselves are abstract objects "partly *defined* by the payoffs assigned to the players" (2011: section 2.7, italics original) in the various outcomes of the game, a *game playing situation*. It seems obvious that conversations are game playing situations in this sense: what one gets out of asserting something, for instance, depends upon whether one's audience believes what one says. Moreover, one can be in a game playing situation so construed, and so be playing a game in this sense, without intending to conform to the rules of this game. Indeed, as Ross notes, "[g]ame theory has been fruitfully applied in evolutionary biology, where species and/or genes are treated as players" (2011: section 6) despite not having any intentions at all; it suffices that these "players" have payoffs (defined in terms of reproductive success) as described by the abstract game structure.[12] Finally, one can make sense of the thought that the moves these players make are subject to, or governed by, norms requiring correct play: if a given move (e.g. refusing to cooperate with the police in the prisoner's dilemma) can be shown not to yield the best outcome for a given player on the assumption that other "players" do what yields the best outcome for them, it can be regarded as incorrect; and players ought not to make such moves. This holds even if the players do not, because they cannot, intend to conform to a regulative rule prohibiting such play. Thus, it is necessary, if one plays a game G, that one's actions are *governed* by the regulative rules of G, not that one *intend to conform* to them.

To this it might be objected that playing what we ordinarily think of as a game – a cultural artefact of a certain sort – requires something different than playing what game theorists think of as a game. The reason is that these "artificial" games involve specifications of correct play which do not seem to be reducible to what it is otherwise rational for an agent to do given what he can anticipate other rational agents will do. For instance, why should Henry not play the ball with his hands except that it is against the rules? On the face of it, we do not seem to be able to explain the fact that this act is impermissible by appeal to antecedent distributions of payoffs over possible courses of action as in the "natural" games played, for instance, by genes. But if assertion is governed by a strong, truth entailing C rule, it must be a move in an artificial game; and so performing it, our objector says, will require more than having the relevant payoffs.

But game theory can explain the playing of what I have been calling artificial games: it is because, due to past interaction, people expect each other to tell the truth, or refrain from playing the ball with their hands, that (if they are rational) they penalize those who don't; accordingly, the payoff for an agent in a situation in which he lies, or commits a handball, but is caught are low, and it is rational for him to endeavour to avoid such an outcome. Since this explanation is presented in terms of what is expected, however, it requires treating assertion as a move in a game the playing of which

[12] Here we must abandon the notion of agent suggested in the introduction.

requires following its rules in the sense of having at least tacit knowledge that its moves are governed by those rules.

It remains only to show that the current hypothesis regarding game play can account for the cases which were taken to motivate the alternative proposal of the last section. Our comic hero, however, did not have the payoffs associated with winning the game in which he found himself; nor, therefore, were his actions subject to the normative force of the directive concerning correct play. Since knowledge is factive, he did not tacitly know his actions to be governed by this regulative rule; it follows, on the current proposal, that he was not playing the game. By contrast, Henry seems to have been sensitive, in a pertinent way, to the rules of soccer – for instance, he would likely have accepted a punishment without much protest if it had been awarded against him. His cheating, then, did not consist in his intending to be taken to playing while not playing; it consists rather in intentionally violating the rules, while knowing that they are in force. Finally, one can't play Cheat by persistently cheating, since in doing so one does not exhibit the required sensitivity to its rules.

I suggest, therefore, that the sense in which it is necessary, if one is to play a game such as soccer or chess, that one follow its rules, asserters do follow a strong C rule such as the truth rule (TR) or the knowledge rule (KR); accordingly, we may regard linguistic activity as a form of game play.

Conclusion

I have explored, and defended, the possibility of treating linguistic activity as a kind of game play. In the process I have argued that, in order to play a game, it is not necessary that one intend to conform to its rules. Finally, I have suggested that to follow a rule one must have some tacit knowledge of it, and that rule following so construed is involved in the playing of language games.

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