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PHILOSOPHIZING THE GAME

The Morals of Chess in Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*

Florian Vauleon

Established in 1718, The *Café de la Régence* was the most famous eighteenth-century Parisian chess resort. It was the place where the best chess players could be found as well as all the people wishing to see or learn from the masters, it was “the rendezvous of high-class chess players.”¹ Among its regular customers, one could find Denis Diderot, who, despite chronic financial hardship, always found the necessary six sous to buy coffee, take part in debate, and watch chess games. In 1742 it was at the *Café de la Régence* that Diderot was introduced to a promising young intellectual: Jean-Jacques Rousseau.² Two of the great minds of the century not only met in the most esteemed spot for Parisian chess playing, they also spent hours either playing chess against one another or watching others play. As Diderot was a weaker player, he enjoyed analyzing better players’ strategy more than

¹ Denis Diderot, *Lettres d’Sophie Volland; Textes Publiés d’après les Manuscrits Originaux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), 24: : “le rendez-vous des joueurs d’échecs de la grande classe.”

² Jean Fabre, “Frères Ennemis: Diderot et Jean-Jacques,” *Diderot Studies* 3 (1961):157.

actually playing, and would devote hours of his day to the study of the game. The importance of chess, however, went far beyond that of a simple pastime or leisure activity for Diderot and eventually influenced the logic and rationale of his philosophical discourse. In *Rameau's Nephew*, the importance of the game is not only significant to the overall structure and organization of the dialogue, it also gives new meaning to the logic and strategy behind its author's reasoning and moral philosophy. As Diderot turned chess laws and logic into the source of an analogy, the game became the standard for an innovative moral philosophy that departed from the typical eighteenth-century reliance on nature and reason. This article will show that the game of chess developed into a philosophical weapon that allowed Diderot to disrupt and undermine the claims of knowledge as well as its pretenses to define morality, legitimacy, and appropriate social behaviors.

Not available to the common people who could not afford to buy it, coffee was originally the privilege of the nobles and the affluent bourgeois. Yet no sooner had caf  s opened than coffee became very popular among the lower classes of French society. The commodification of coffee was a significant event as it created new customs, and even modified human temperament. Coffee and caf  s changed and enlivened Parisian life. French historian Jules Michelet argues that, in the eighteenth century, "Paris had become a huge coffee-house filling three hundred caf  s with the public's lively chatter."³ They were numerous, diverse, and offered atmospheres as varied as their clientele. People from all walks of life socialized in caf  s which "catered to all classes of society."⁴ They were the places that would bring the population together, not only to sip coffee, but also to debate, exchange ideas, and socialize. For these reasons, coffee-houses had a considerable impact on Parisian social life and on the publicizing of new ideas.

As caf  s became trendy over the course of the eighteenth-century France, they also promoted the practice of chess. A case in point is the area of the *Palais Royal* which was the intellectual center of the capital and where caf  s could be found on every block. It was a neighborhood where writers and *philosophes* sipped their coffee while debating new ideas and recent publications, but it "gradually became more of a chess than a purely literary resort."⁵ Coffee

³ Jules Michelet, *Histoire de France* (Paris: A. Lacroix, 1877), 17:171: "Paris devient un grand caf  . Trois cents caf  s sont ouverts    la causerie."

⁴ William H. Ukers, *All about Coffee* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1974), 100.

⁵ Walter Hilliard Bidwell, *Eclectic Magazine* (New York: Leavitt, Trow, 1856), 268.

houses were not only at the heart of the propagation of Enlightenment ideals, they also contributed to the extension of chess playing to all social spheres. In fact chess became the epitome of game-playing during the century; it was considered a serious pastime that required a strategic mind and a highly developed power of concentration. Players prided themselves on devising the strategic demise of their opponent and turned the game into a battle of wills.

Among all chess players, François André Danican Philidor was the most prominent figure of the eighteenth century. Philidor is still known today to chess enthusiasts for his groundbreaking theory about the pawn, which he described as the soul of the game. He wrote in the preface to his chess treatise that the pawns "are the very life of this game: They alone form the attack and the defense; on their good or bad situation, depends the gain or loss of each party."⁶ In the egalitarian spirit of the Enlightenment, the pawn, usually considered expendable, turned out to be essential to victory and could even bring down a king. As chess was seen as an effective way of improving the mind, the fascination for the game of chess was especially evident in intellectual milieus. It soon became one of the favorite obsessions of many *philosophes*.

Diderot, for one, was an avid chess player. He would play chess on a regular basis and was even listed as one of the subscribers of Philidor's treatise on chess. In his correspondence with Sophie Volland, he revealed that the game was for him an essential daily activity and that he considered it as one fundamental element to the making of a perfect day.⁷ In addition to being a significant and regular occupation, chess was also the topic of serious discussions. Diderot wrote many articles and letters about his friend and French grand chess master Philidor, who later emigrated to London where he earned a living showing off his talent by playing multiple people while blindfolded. The idea of playing several games blindfolded was not only seen as phenomenal, it was also judged as absolute madness. Those who would subject themselves to such an effort were said to put their mental health at stake. In a letter to Philidor written in Paris on 10 April 1782, Diderot urged the master to stop his chess exhibitions. He warned his friend against blindfolded chess

⁶ François Danican Philidor, *Chess Analysed; or, Instructions by which a Perfect Knowledge of this Noble Game May in a Short Time Be Acquired* (London: Printed for J. Nourse, and P. Vaillant, in the Strand, 1750), x.

⁷ Diderot, *Lettres à Sophie Volland*, 105: "Nous dînons. Après le dîner, la partie d'échecs; après la partie d'échecs, la promenade; après la promenade, la retraite; après la retraite, la conversation; après la conversation, le souper; après le souper, encore un peu de conversation; et c'est ainsi que finira une journée innocente et douce, où l'on se sera amusé et occupé, où l'on aura pensé, où l'on se sera instruit, estimé et aimé."

and recommended that he take better care of his well-being. Diderot failed to understand why Philidor would endanger his sanity for a trifling amount of money: "I would have been more inclined to forgive those perilous adventures if they would have been worth five or six hundred guineas but to risk one's reason and talent for nothing that cannot be understood."⁸ Diderot's concerns brought about the idea that chess demanded such a momentous and continuous mental effort that playing several games blindfolded could do serious harm to the intrepid player who ventured to undertake such a challenge. He admitted to sharing his worries about Philidor with chess master Légal. Diderot seemingly gave more clout to his argument by basing it on the opinion of an expert, therefore quoting Légal who remembered: "When I was younger, I decided to play one game of chess without ever looking at the board; at the end of the game, I had such a headache, that it was the first and last time I set out to do that in my life. There is folly in running the risk to go insane out of pride."⁹ Since a single game of chess entails considerable intellectual exertion, several blindfolded, simultaneous games could be equated with a death wish. Diderot's concern sheds light on the esteem that he had for the game of chess and for its required mental powers of concentration.

Diderot's love for the game also led him to consider it in a philosophical light. For him, reasoning was a delightful activity and mind exercising a source of contentment. When describing the concept of pleasure in his *Encyclopédie*, he recognized the duality of pleasures: they could be physical and spiritual. The example he used to support his argument for mental satisfaction was chess:

By watching a chess player focused in himself, unruffled by what he sees or hears, couldn't one think he is taking care of his destiny or the welfare of the state? This very deep meditation aims at the exercise of the mind through the opposition of an ivory piece. It is from this sweet exercise of the mind that emerges the pleasure

⁸ Albert Cahen, *Lettres du XVIIIe Siècle, Lettres Choies de Voltaire, Mme du Deffand, Diderot, Mme Roland, et de Divers Auteurs, Publiées avec une Introduction, des Notices et des Notes* (Paris: Colin, 1913), 286: "Je serais plus disposé à vous pardonner ces essais périlleux si vous eussiez gagné à les faire cinq ou six cents guinées mais risquer sa raison et son talent pour rien, cela ne se conçoit pas."

⁹ Cahen, *Lettres du XVIIIe Siècle*, 286: "Quand j'étais jeune, je m'avais de jouer une seule partie d'échecs sans avoir les yeux sur le damier; et à la fin de cette partie, je me trouvais la tête si fatiguée, que ce fut la première et la dernière fois de ma vie. Il y a de la folie à courir le hasard de devenir fou par vanité."

of refined thoughts, which, following the example of Vigil's shepherdess, hides as much as necessary for anyone to feel the pleasure to find them.¹⁰

For Diderot the exercise of one's intelligence was less a matter of gaining prestige than a satisfying and appropriate way to occupy one's time. Refined thoughts, however, did not come naturally. They demanded an intellectual effort and resulted from a series of reflection. Chess was for that reason perfectly suited for philosophical thinking. It was the ultimate rational game that prepared the mind for discerning and delicate thoughts.

It is mainly in *Rameau's Nephew*, first published in German in 1805 by Goethe, that Diderot explicitly brings to light the connection between chess and philosophy. While passing his time at the *Café de la Régence* watching chess players, Moi, the *philosophe*, runs into an eccentric character, Lui, whom he has known for a long time and whose name is Jean-Francois Rameau, nephew of the great composer Jean-Philippe Rameau. Surrounded by chess players, the duo proceeds to discuss various subjects while sitting in a coffee-house. Debating the features of great music, Lui is so engrossed in his own reasoning, that he shows absolutely no concern for his surroundings. He relents, wails, complains, and laughs. His loudness and eccentricity contrast with the chess players' concentration but somehow attract and captivate every player's attention. Rameau starts coughing loud enough to shake the café's windows and "throw the chess players off their game."¹¹ All the men "pushing wood" leave their chessboards to gather around him. Even passersby are stopped by the sound and fill up the windows of the café. But Lui does not notice a thing. He is so absorbed by his own narrative that the actual world around him ceases to matter. While one of Moi's favorite hobbies is to watch chess games, he switches his focus and concentrates instead on Lui who becomes not only Moi's but also the chess players' center of interest. The game of chess has switched away from the board and has become the symbolic pat-

¹⁰ Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres complètes de Diderot* (Nendeln, Liechtenstein: Kraus, 1875-1877), 11:297: "À voir un joueur d'échecs concentré en lui-même, et insensible à tout ce qui frappe ses yeux et ses oreilles, ne le croirait-on pas intimement occupé du soin de sa fortune ou du salut de l'état? Ce recueillement si profond a pour objet le plaisir d'exercer l'esprit par l'opposition d'une pièce d'ivoire. C'est de ce doux exercice de l'esprit que naît l'agrément des pensées fines, qui de même que la bergère de Vigil, se cachent autant qu'il le faut pour qu'on ait le plaisir de les trouver."

¹¹ Denis Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew; and, D'Alembert's Dream* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1976), 122.

tern of the dialogue: It is Diderot himself who "will be the chess-player, the *pousse-bois*, moving his figures about like pawns."¹²

Initially in the novel, chess simply serves as background for the meeting of the two characters. But it ends up pervading their entire discussion which turns into a battle of wills. Both *Moi* and *Lui* argue and alternatively present their opinions as chess players who move their pieces. For Ruth P. Thomas, the game serves as a metaphor for the entire dialogue: "chess is the mirror of their roles in society and the mirror of the game of the text."¹³ The exchange of philosophical ideas uses the same strategy as chess: "with its symmetries and conflicts, its doubling and mirrors and oppositions, [the game of chess] explains the relationship between *Moi* and *Lui* and the dialogue itself."¹⁴ In his satire, Diderot presents two characters whose perspective on life, society, and philosophy are antithetical. While "Diderot, in the role of *Moi*, represents the moral, principled individual of society,"¹⁵ his book "is concerned chiefly with the analysis of a completely alienated man, who, at every point, is at war with society."¹⁶ The protagonists defend ideas that are black and white, and stand in radical opposition to one another.

Yet, they manage to reconcile their antagonistic views and engage in a civilized exchange of ideas. Ruth P. Thomas explains how chess serves as model for the two mindsets:

In chess, which is a form of war, the aggressive instinct is channeled into socially acceptable norms through the rules of the game. There is no blood, no violence.... So through the rules of discourse the real conflict in the dialogue between *Moi* and *Lui* becomes socialized and is reduced to a philosophical and aesthetic level.¹⁷

The frame of chess renders the exchange of seemingly incompatible opinions possible and, despite the dissensions, it maintains communication. The discussion turns out to be an intellectual joust played between rule-abiding

¹² Herbert Josephs, *Diderot's Dialogue of Gesture and Language: Le Neveu de Rameau* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969), 127.

¹³ Ruth P. Thomas, "Chess as a Metaphor in *Le Neveu de Rameau*," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 17 (1982): 73.

¹⁴ Thomas, "Chess as a Metaphor," 63.

¹⁵ Emily Zants, "Dialogue, Diderot, and the New Novel in France," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 2 (December 1968): 176.

¹⁶ Frederick Artz, *The Enlightenment in France* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1998), 96.

¹⁷ Thomas, "Chess as a Metaphor," 72.

and civilized players. Moi, the *philosophe*, is introduced as a man of reason devoid of prejudice. Even though Rameau is first shown as a social parasite, he attracts "patrons in aristocratic salons with his attitudes, onlookers in the *Café de la Régence* with his acting, and followers in the streets of Paris with his antics."¹⁸ Despite his vices and eccentricity, Rameau has one redeeming quality: his total lack of hypocrisy. He is honest with the *philosophe* and lucid about his own character and actions. He is a philosopher in his own right: he fascinates crowds, discusses art, morality, education and proves himself to be eloquent and well-versed in musical knowledge. By shaking the basis of Moi's values, Rameau enables Diderot to denounce widespread ideas and to voice his doubts about moral philosophy. In *Rameau's Nephew* Diderot shows his "awareness of a reality which refuses to be encompassed by the orderly schemes of philosophy,"¹⁹ and defines a morality that distanced itself from the consensual moral philosophy of his time. He identified the need to consider the complexity and the specificity of the individual, and in that venture, analogy proved to be a very relevant instrument.

For Diderot, scientific progress depended on experimentation, observation and analogical analysis. In *Le Rêve de D'Alembert*, he saw analogical rationality as a valuable scientific and mathematical method: "The analogy in the most compound cases is only a rule of three, which is exercised in the feeling instrument."²⁰ In order to better understand the world, analogies became a relevant and reliable method. Indeed analogies refer to the symbolic ability to pick out patterns, to form concepts that abstract and reify patterns. Though Diderot warned against sophism born from analogical rationality, he nonetheless claimed in the *Encyclopédie* that "the analogy taken from extrinsic resemblance of objects in order to determine their intrinsic similarity is most of the time a reliable rule."²¹ The analogical reasoning shows a mapping of knowledge from one domain (base or source) to another (target). Holyoak and Thagard identified three constraints that must be satisfied by a good analogy:

¹⁸ Paul Metzner, *Crescendo of the Virtuoso: Spectacle, Skill, and Self-Promotion in Paris during the Age of Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 291.

¹⁹ Peter France, *Diderot* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 84.

²⁰ Denis Diderot, *Dialogues* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1971), 37.

²¹ Denis Diderot and Jean d'Alembert, eds., *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985), 1:400: "l'analogie tirée de la ressemblance extérieure des objets, pour en conclure leur ressemblance interne, en est le plus souvent une règle certaine."

First, the mapping between elements of the source and target analogs can be supported by the direct similarity of objects and concepts. Second, the mapping between analogs can also be supported by taking into account their structure, by showing that each element in the source is uniquely and consistently mapped to an element in the target, establishing an isomorphism. Finally, support for an analogy comes from determining that it satisfies its purpose in producing understanding or accomplishment of practical goals.²²

The chess analogy in *Rameau's Nephew* would therefore be deemed valid if (1) the source and the target share common properties—that is if there are some mutual values between chess and moral philosophy; if (2) there is an overall correspondence in structure between the two elements—that is, if the logic of chess can be found in Diderot's moral philosophy; and finally (3) if the analogy is guided by a problem solver's goal.

The morality Diderot criticizes in *Rameau's Nephew* was one of the main tenets championed by most *philosophes*. It was the belief in nature and in the existence of a natural law that was thought to proceed from human reason and to be the framework of a fairer society. As the historian Carl Becker remarks, "to be enlightened was to understand this double truth, that it was not in Holy Writ, but in the great book of nature, open for all mankind to read, that the laws of God had been recorded."²³ Considered useful, necessary, and fair, natural law was a way to promote social welfare and personal well-being and to safeguard humankind from the vices and perversity of culture. Natural law or *morality* as Diderot defined it in the article *Loi Naturelle* of *Encyclopédie* was "built on the essential difference that exists between good and evil."²⁴ All his life, Diderot searched for a judicious definition of universal morality. In his *Réfutation d'Helvétius*, he expressed his frustration at his progress and sarcastically claimed it impossible to establish a morality "without being at the same time an anatomist, a naturalist, a physiologist, and a physician."²⁵

²² Keith James Holyoak and Paul Thagard, *Mental Leaps: Analogy in Creative Thought* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 36–37.

²³ Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932), 51.

²⁴ Diderot and d'Alembert, eds., *L'Encyclopédie*, 9:665: "Elle est fondée sur la différence essentielle qui se trouve entre le bien & le mal."

²⁵ Diderot, "Réfutation d'Helvétius," in *Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Garnier, 1875), 2:322: "C'est qu'il est bien difficile de faire de la bonne métaphysique et de la bonne morale sans être anatomiste, naturaliste, physiologiste et médecin."

Rameau's Nephew echoed Diderot's concern about the difficulty to clearly outline morality and showed "that he no longer felt as secure in his certainties as he once had."²⁶

Discussing how moral standards should be followed on a daily basis, the two characters eventually agree that morality is amenable to change. For Jerrold Seigel, "Rameau made evident the distance between the true inner nature of individuals and the masks they put on in social life."²⁷ Rameau first confesses to playing the pantomime. He admits to occasionally putting on a mask, to acting and pretending to be what others expect him to be so that he can reach his goals. But as he shows remarkable lucidity about his own hypocrisy, he is not fooled by himself nor by others.

Rameau further discusses with the *philosophe* who in society should never have to play that game. For *Moi*, even a king has to put on play in order to seduce his mistresses: "Whoever needs somebody else is necessitous and so takes up a position."²⁸ While *Moi* reconsiders his opinion and comes to the decision that almost everyone is forced to assume a different persona: "Good heavens, what you call the beggars' pantomime is what makes the whole world go round,"²⁹ he adds that only philosophers are spared the necessity to act for they allegedly have and ask for nothing. *Lui* disagrees and argues that such a man is nowhere to be found in the dire conditions of everyday life: "Where does that animal exist? If he has nothing he suffers. If he asks for nothing he won't get anything, and he will go on suffering."³⁰

In a flawed society where vice is rife and hypocrisy rules, everybody has to put on masks, everybody acts a part in order to get what they want. But it is a game that even intellectuals have to play. As Peter Gay has noted: "When wealth, brilliant company, public recognition became ends in themselves, they enslaved men of letters in glittering chains."³¹ Rameau's cultural portrayal of eighteenth-century Paris features a self so alienated and a morality so subjected to social hypocrisy that "all moral values blur and the only truly lucid awareness is of general corruption and perversion."³² As a result,

²⁶ D. J. Adams, "A Diderot Triptych Re-Examined," *Modern Language Review* 76 (1981): 48.

²⁷ Jerrold E. Seigel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 197.

²⁸ Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, 121.

²⁹ Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, 122.

³⁰ Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, 122.

³¹ Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (New York: Norton, 1977), 69.

³² Daniel Brewer, *The Discourse of Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century France: Diderot and the Art of Philosophizing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 245.

a conduct cannot be deemed moral or immoral without taking into account the circumstances in which it takes place.

At the same time as Rameau explains what serves as inspiration for his music, he sheds light on contemporary misconceptions and more specifically on human nature: “no witticisms, epigrams, none of your well-turned thoughts—all that is far too removed from nature.”³³ Moral philosophy departs from true human nature in that it only generates artificial behaviors. Rameau eloquently mocks the propensity of moral principles to define general values with no regards to every day life and its particular situations. For him, they serve to prove everything and its contrary: “Of course, I well know that if you start applying certain general principles of the sort of morality they all preach and nobody practices, it will work out that white is black and black white.”³⁴ Moral principles consequently appear devoid of any actual relevance. And since moral codes have no bearing on real life, they become totally obsolete. Rameau advocates instead philosophical preoccupations that have an immediate impact on daily life.

It is precisely the lesson in pragmatism and the way *Rameau's Nephew* “attacks philosophical matters in a down-to-earth, most un-metaphysical fashion”³⁵ that bear a strong relationship with chess. In the preface to his famous treatise on chess, Philidor recommends that “a player, who, when he has played a Pawn well, can give no Reason for his moving it to such a square, may be compared to a general, who with much practice has little or no theory.”³⁶ Logic and rationale are the essential ingredients of chess strategy. Players must examine every possibility and demonstrate prescience. They must ponder each of their moves, question their strategy and act only if all possibilities have been duly investigated. By itself, a move is insignificant. It becomes meaningful only when it integrates a strategy. It is only valuable when it contributes to a well-thought-out scheme and only gains substance through its usefulness and its contribution to checkmate the adversary. In that respect, the way Philidor conceived and explained chess perfectly adhered to the dialectic of Rameau who submits moral and philosophical principles to the test of everyday human experience.

³³ Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, 105–6.

³⁴ Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, 61.

³⁵ Donal O'Gorman, *Diderot the Satirist* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 58.

³⁶ François Danican Philidor, *Chess Rendered Familiar by Tabular Demonstrations of the Various Positions and Movements* (London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1819), 37.

Pursuing their discussion about moral principles, the two characters go on to debate moral instruction and the best methods to teach morality. After Moi admits teaching morality to his daughter, Lui compares moral to musical lessons. The lessons he teaches his son are imbued with pragmatism, vices, and honesty. Moi praises such an education and stresses its effectiveness: "Certainly with theories of teaching so exactly made to the measure of our society, he would go far, unless prematurely stopped on the road."³⁷ Using a musical metaphor, Rameau touches next on a critical issue and presents an interesting view on what he thinks is essential moral instruction: "These are the dissonances in the social harmony that need skill in placing, leading in to and resolving. Nothing is so dull as a succession of common chords. There must be something arresting, to break up the beam of light and separate it into rays."³⁸ The dissonances he mentions are the diversity of human characters that needs to be preserved. For him, moral universalism creates a very dull and monotonous community. Rejecting this moral standardization, he celebrates instead the moral specificities of the individual. Only the ability to develop children's social skills matters so that they are able to understand the world they live in and avoid shame, dishonor, and trouble with the laws. What Rameau values is a moral instruction that prepares for the games men play in society.

Accordingly, while moral rules have to be taught, they become meaningless if one lives by them alone. They only are a means to an end, which Rameau clearly designates as individual interest. Human nature for him is the ability to adapt to society and to look for what is more beneficial for the individual. He refers to his son—the little brute—in order to support his argument that it is only natural for humans to worry about themselves first:

Every living creature, man not excepted, seeks its own well-being at the expense of whoever is in possession of it, and I am sure that if I just let the little brute go his own way and told him nothing, he would want to be expensively dressed, eat sumptuously, be popular with the men and loved by the women, in fact to gather round him all the pleasures of life.³⁹

In any social setting, humankind would naturally desire the best that society could offer.

³⁷ Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, 111.

³⁸ Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, 111.

³⁹ Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, 112–13.

Lui's comments reflect Diderot's philosophical considerations developed in the *Salons de 1767* where he linked morality to the individual quest for happiness: "Every human being desires his own happiness, and the happiness of one individual can not be the happiness of another. Morality is therefore enclosed in the species...What is a species?...A multitude of individuals organized in the same way."⁴⁰ The foundation of morality is the individual's relationship to the world. As every one aspires for happiness, it is merely personal strategy that is applied in the pursuit of happiness. For Lui, moral instruction should not simply make one's existence easier, it should also serve an hedonist purpose and lead "to all kinds of enjoyment without danger or difficulty."⁴¹ Rameau only values moral principles that are pertinent to human existence and praises the moralists who have turned morals into concrete application: "There is much to be got from them, especially those who have shown morality in action."⁴² Through the character of Rameau, Diderot recognized that human judgment not only proceeded from the particular constraints and opportunities of different sets of circumstances, but also from the individual ability to adapt to the menaces, the pressures, and the uncertainties of their world.

Just as Diderot defended a down-to-earth moral instruction, chess in the eighteenth century was thought to have a direct bearing on everyday life. The necessary dedication to the game was the reason why many authors, thinkers, and politicians celebrated chess as a great teaching tool that would help acquire a better command of one's reason and intelligence. Besides its military and strategic instructional values, it was said to provide moral and psychological instruction. In 1779, Benjamin Franklin, in his article "The Morals of Chess," wrote that:

The Game of Chess is not merely an idle amusement; several very valuable qualities of the mind, useful in the course of human life, are to be acquired and strengthened by it, so as to become habits ready on all occasions; for life is a kind of Chess, in which we have often points to gain, and competitors or adversaries to contend

⁴⁰ Denis Diderot, *Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Hermann, 1976), 6:206: "Tout être tend à son bonheur; et le bonheur d'un être ne peut être le bonheur d'un autre. La morale se renferme donc dans l'enceinte de l'espèce...Qu'est-ce qu'une espèce?...Une multitude d'individus organisés de la même manière...Quoi! L'organisation serait la base de la morale? Je le crois..."

⁴¹ Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, 113.

⁴² Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, 82.

with, and in which there is a vast variety of good and ill events, that are, in some degree, the effect of prudence, or the want of it.⁴³

According to Franklin, chess as a moral activity served to develop a man's foresight "which looks a little into futurity." Players were also likely to develop a capacity for observing, "which surveys the whole Chess-board, or scene of action." Finally, the game was seen as a valuable teaching tool to protect man from the dangers of rashness and hasty judgment. It would teach "Caution, not to make our moves too hastily."⁴⁴ As a way to gain knowledge, chess acquired a didactic dimension. It had the ability to train one's spirit and direct one's reasoning toward a predetermined end: the defeat of the adversary. John Stewart further argued in his 1790 book entitled *The Revolution of Reason* that "judgment in theory is nothing but the arrangement of ideas, and their various relations, placed in a comparative view or opposition, like pieces on a chess-board, waiting new positions from new movements."⁴⁵ Human judgment was considered man's ability to adapt to new situations with various complexities. As nothing can be taken for granted human reasoning needs to adjust to and analyze different situations through the use of common sense. The morality taught by chess was therefore imbued with the same pragmatism as that defended by Diderot in *Rameau's Nephew*.

The fundamental correlation between the philosophical dialogue and the game lies, however, in the essential and incessant quest for indisputable knowledge. The floating and ever-shifting concept of truth is at the core of the dialectics in the satire and is clear indication of the influence of the game in Diderot's philosophical discourse. Truth in chess could be construed as the laws of the game since it is undeniable that if any player stops abiding by the laws of chess, then he stops engaging in a chess game. German grandmaster Emanuel Lasker, who first became world champion in 1894, however defines truth in chess differently. For him, chess comes down to combinations and "there are still problems to be solved; the whole truth in Chess is not by any means all known yet—fortunately."⁴⁶ The goal in chess is to checkmate the

⁴³ Benjamin Franklin, "The Morals of Chess," in *A Benjamin Franklin Reader* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 290.

⁴⁴ Franklin, "The Morals of Chess," 290.

⁴⁵ John Stewart, *The Revolution of Reason: or the Establishment of the Constitution of Things in Nature, of Man, of Human Intellect, of Moral Truth, of Universal Good* (London: J. Ridgway, 1794), 84.

⁴⁶ Emanuel Lasker, *Lasker's Manual of Chess* (New York: Dover, 1960), 86.

opponent, but there is no definite method or strategy to end a game. The players have to adapt their rationalities to that of their opponents, and modify their strategy according to the positions on the chessboard. Thus, there is no established and official truth in chess. On the whole truth pertains to the countless pathways to victory and has to be rediscovered at every moment.

Bringing chess logic into his philosophical reasoning, Diderot initiates a philosophical game of dialectic confrontation in order to bring out the dangers inherent in reason. Rameau's philosophy sharply contrasts with the ideas of other Parisian intellectuals. Most French intellectuals in the eighteenth century believed that morality was to be rationally defined. Born from reasonable thinking, the consensual moral tenets were what many *philosophes* called natural morality, in sharp contrast to the reigning religious morality, which they saw as arbitrary. Expressing what everybody secretly thinks, Rameau's philosophy comes closer to the truth than any other discourses of his time, as Moi remarks: "In all this there was much that we all think and on which we all act, but which we leave unsaid."⁴⁷ Diderot warns against any fabricated truths and denounces reason's claim to universally define human nature and aspirations as Lui says: "you think that happiness is the same for all. What a strange illusion!"⁴⁸ Rameau's outlook on life and the acknowledgment of all his base habits underline that he is "an extreme expression of the internal paradoxes of the Enlightenment".⁴⁹ his "ranting have the effects of disclosing the pretentiousness of reason and its claim to Truth."⁵⁰ In his satire, Diderot postulates that as soon as anything is labeled true, its authenticity and validity should be questioned.

The dialogue undermines the belief that morality can rationally be defined and promotes instead, as James Schmidt has noted, an individualistic conception of morality: "one's morality is not properly a concern of society at large."⁵¹ Lui's immorality underlines the bias inherent in any moral code and the dangers to conceive morality as a universal norm. No sooner do moral principles become standards than they institutionalize values and produce truth. Moral values cannot become absolute tenets without perverting them-

⁴⁷ Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, 1976), 111.

⁴⁸ Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, 64.

⁴⁹ Rüdiger Bubner, *The Innovations of Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 154.

⁵⁰ Karlis Racevskis, "Michel Foucault, Rameau's Nephew, and the Question of Identity," in *The Final Foucault*, ed. James Bernauer and David Rasmussen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 25.

⁵¹ James Schmidt, "The Fool's Truth: Diderot, Goethe, and Hegel," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 57 (1996): 628.

selves just as reason can not become an inflexible rule without depraving itself. As reason itself can generate moral corruption, Diderot's dialogue shows that nothing can be taken for granted. The philosophical game of chess not only questions the ethical values of the eighteenth century, it also questions the morality of philosophy itself and shows that even the greatest creed of the Enlightenment proves to be faulty. As there can not be any definite truth, moral philosophy, as construed by Diderot, is the result of perception, learning, and reasoning, and is nothing more than the everlasting quest for knowledge, doomed to constant and unflagging intellectual analysis.

It is then not enough to postulate that "the subject of chess...leads logically into the question of genius, but genius seen especially from the viewpoint of its utility."⁵² The relevance of chess goes further and points to the necessity for moral philosophy to nurture ingenuity. Rameau only tolerates men of genius: "in chess, checkers, poetry, eloquence, music and other nonsense of that kind, what's the use of mediocrity in that sort of things?"⁵³ He furthermore voices his contempt for mediocrity and for a certain "type" of people: those who "walk all crooked down life's road" and "who are equally inept at good or evil."⁵⁴ Like the men on the chessboard, the world is changing, and as situations are never the same, it is crucial to adapt to any type of juncture. And that is only rendered possible by a moral philosophy that let the individuals elaborate, deploy, and execute their own personal strategy. Moral teaching has to facilitate the development of their own games, the awareness of surrounding dangers, and the understanding of the great chessboard of human society. No matter what the rules may be, what truly matters is the ability to play. By providing everyone with the ability to lead their lives the way they intend to, to make the right decision, and most significantly to avoid mediocrity, Diderot's morality is merely what enables humans to make the best of any particular circumstances and to instill their lives with intelligence and sound judgment.

In his satire, Diderot studies the general nature of morals and the specific moral choices made by a person. His dialogue features two antagonistic views that clash with each other in an effort to show that moral philosophy could never reach absolute truth and is very likely to fail in defining universal moral codes suited for everyone. Diderot attacks the propensity of the Enlightenment for considering its assumptions real as well as the claims of

⁵² Donal O'Gorman, *Diderot the Satirist* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 59.

⁵³ Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, 36.

⁵⁴ O'Gorman, *Diderot the Satirist*, 214.

knowledge and its pretenses to have any bearing on everyday life. Instead of asserting certitudes, he acknowledged the need to moral flexibility. Using an analogy between moral philosophy and chess, he shows that morality is the ability to understand and live in the world just as chess skills are the capacity to make sense out of a set of positions and combinations on a chessboard. The art of thinking appears to match the mindset necessary for chess. One has to acquire sufficient discipline to understand the moral codes that rule the world in order to put oneself in the best position. For Diderot moral philosophy should provide abstract thinking with concrete application. It should provide ingenuity, skills, and knowledge in order to help human beings improve their daily lives. In that regard, moral tenets resemble the rules of chess and the way the pieces are allowed to move on a board. One cannot systematically apply the rules and move pieces on a chessboard without considering the specific context. Moves need to be studied and be a relevant addition to the player's tactic. There is no chess game without chess rules just as there is no society without morality. Morality defines what is socially acceptable; it distinguishes between good and evil or between proper and improper conduct. However, without any relation to everyday life, the strict respect of morality becomes irrelevant. One cannot apply a system of morals without depriving everyone of the ability to conduct their lives as they deem best. Just as the chess players are free to develop a strategy of their own, Diderot believed that, as long as they play by the rules, individuals should be free to determine and justify the righteousness of their moral conducts. In this regard, Diderot not only used a narrative informed by chess, he also inserted the conceptual grammar of the game into his philosophical discourse in order to define a more pragmatic and circumstantial moral philosophy inspired by human, social, and cultural experiences.