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Stanley Cavell on Games and Language

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ABSTRACT

In this article I aim to explore the 'playful' use of language, primarily emphasized in improvisational practices. While improvisation is associated with abilities such as creativity and imagination, which require the possibility for free action, language practices do not function without being guided by rules. This raises the question of how improvisation can be thought of under rules. By drawing on Stanley Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein, I will demonstrate that the relevance of our forms of life, as opposed to rules, allows for a reevaluation of the scope for improvisational actions without bypassing the 'conventionality' of actions and language. 'Playing' will then be understood not only as a matter of adhering to essential rules but also as guided by rules of competence, which create a space for acting freely. Finally, Cavell's idea of language projection offers a fruitful perspective on the similarities between the improvisation of games and that of language practices.

KEYWORDS

Cavell; forms of life; games; improvisation; rules; Wittgenstein

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1 Ludwig Wittgenstein's late major work, the *Philosophical Investigations*,[1] with its famous concept of language-games (*Sprachspiele*), can be considered the first prominent 'theory' that explicitly links language and games or playing.[2] The analogy to games serves him in multiple ways. A central aspect is that our forms of language use, similar to the group of games, are not characterized by one common feature but rather by a complex network of overlapping similarities among them. He refers to this network as 'family resemblances' (*Familienähnlichkeiten*). Wittgenstein's vision of language is therefore fundamentally anti-essentialist; it emphasizes the multiplicity of language-games and thus an open and expandable conception of how we can use language.

2 Although this open vision is fundamental to the *Philosophical Investigations*, one branch of Wittgensteinian research and interpretation seems to interpret the analogy between language and game very narrowly. It mainly focuses on the idea that our language uses are guided by rules.[3] David Pole, for example, writes about the *Philosophical Investigations*:

3 Broadly the thesis is that language […] consists of a complex set of procedures, which may also be appealed to as rules. Normative notions – rightness, validity, and we may perhaps add truth – are significant inasmuch as there exist standards which we can appeal to and principles we can invoke. But where a new move is first made, a new development takes place, clearly no such standard can be applicable; we have moved beyond existing practice.[4]

4 This narrow focus on rule-orientation by Pole and others leads to a conception of our language practices primarily within the context of (existing) conventions. While it is true that Wittgenstein discusses extensively the relationship between language and rules, does it necessarily follow that everything is determined by rules? Does this ultimately mean that there is no freedom in our language uses beyond established conventions?

* This paper is based on a talk I gave at the Summer School *Variations on How to Play* at the University of Continuing Education Krems on July 6th, 2023. My thanks to the participants for their feedback and questions.

1 Wittgenstein, Ludwig (2009). *Philosophical Investigations* (4th edition). Oxford etc.: Blackwell (originally 1953). In the following quoted as PI following either the paragraph or the page.

2 There exist numerous approaches of how to differentiate between 'game' and 'play/playing' regarding their content, such as concerning the degree of formalization or their respectively predominant aspects. As for Wittgenstein, he only distinguishes them in terms of their (ordinary) linguistic use as a verb and as a noun, but they still refer to the same phenomenon. Hence, I will use 'game' and 'play' synonymously in this paper.

3 Cf. Kripke, Saul (1982). *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press; Baker, Gordon Park, & Hacker, Peter Michael Stephan (1985). Wittgenstein. Rules, Grammar and Necessity. Oxford etc.: Blackwell; Malcolm, Norman (1989). Wittgenstein on Language and Rules. Philosophy. 64(247), 5–28.

4 Pole, David (2013). *The Later Philosophy of Wittgenstein*. London etc.: Bloomsbury, 55f.

5 In this paper, I aim to push back against such a one-dimensional view both of Wittgenstein's conception and of language uses in general. Emphasizing language *practice* and, in this sense, the 'playful' use of language, it seems crucial to me that practices such as improvisation also receive their central place. However, these practices are associated with abilities such as creativity and imagination, which evade a too narrow focus on rules and conventions and require instead the possibility for free action. At the same time, it will become evident that our language practices do not entirely function without rules or are entirely arbitrary. Therefore, the questions arises of how something like improvisation can be thought of *under rules*.[5] Bringing these two aspects together would be a fruitful way to highlight the similarities between games and language.

6 To address this, I will draw on reflections by the American philosopher Stanley Cavell, who offers, one could say, an 'unorthodox' reading of Wittgenstein. In his interpretation, the emphasis on rule-orientation of language fades into the background, while the relevance of our forms of life for our language-games is highlighted.[6] This results in a different understanding of the 'conventionality' of language. Following rules and freedom from rules must be understood as *interconnected*. This allows for a reevaluation of the scope for free, improvisational actions without bypassing the analogy between language and game. Cavell's interpretation of Wittgenstein thus provides an appropriate framework for discovering the playful nature of language in his thought.

7 Wittgenstein introduces the concept of language-game in his *Philosophical Investigations* within various contexts. What is crucial to him is the idea that language is to be understood as an activity, as a practice. This activity is part of a particular form of life to which Wittgenstein refers – very roughly construed – as an intertwining of culture, worldview, action, and language. Thus, speech and the use of words can only be fully understood when non-linguistic activities are also taken into account. In this regard, he writes: "The word 'language-game' is used here to emphasize the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life."[7]

8 Repeatedly, Wittgenstein emphasizes the diversity of language-games. He lists examples such as giving orders, describing an object, thanking someone, forming a hypothe-

5 That improvisation is not to be understood in terms of a lack of preparation or a *creatio ex nihilo*, but rather as intertwined with normativity (i.e., rules), is also argued for by Bertinetto, Alessandro, & Bertram, Georg W. (2020). We Make Up the Rules as We Go Along: Improvisation as an Essential Aspect of Human Practices? In *Open Philosophy*, 3(1), 202–221.

6 Stephen Mulhall provides an exemplary (and also critical) overview of Cavell's various examinations of the concept of rules in Wittgenstein's philosophy. Mulhall, Stephen (2003). Stanley Cavell's Vision of the Normativity of Language: Grammar, Criteria, and Rules. In Richard Eldridge (Ed.), *Stanley Cavell* (79–106). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

7 PI, §23.

sis, cursing about something, and so on. On the one hand, these and other examples illustrate the many different ways in which we can use our language (and in fact do). On the other hand, the disparity of these practices is striking. Wittgenstein does not deny the differences among individual language-games; rather, these differences are almost 'essential' to his concept: Our language uses resemble games insofar as they also do not possess a single common characteristic; language, for Wittgenstein, is non-essentialist.[8]

9 A third parallel between language and games emerges more prominently in the *Philosophical Investigations*: Just as there are rules for games, there are also rules for language-games.[9] For example, in chess, it is regulated that white begins the game, that the bishop can only move diagonally, or that I must say 'j'adoube' before adjusting a piece on the board. Rules of a language-game could be, for instance, that when I say 'I promise to help you move tomorrow', I also intend to keep this promise and that I will indeed be in front of your house tomorrow to help. Just as the rules can vary depending on the game (or even game variants), our language uses have different rules that also allow for a variety of applications.[10]

10 According to Wittgenstein, these views do not lead to the conclusion that everything is everywhere clearly determined by rules, as suggested by Pole. Two aspects are particularly relevant here: Firstly, the non-essentiality of language-games means that the uses of (some? all?) words do not necessarily have to be completely determined by rules. Wittgenstein again employs the analogy of games when he writes: "It [the language-game] is not everywhere bounded by rules; but no more are there any rules for how high one may throw the ball in tennis, or how hard, yet tennis is a game for all that, and has rules too."[11] Here, it is evident that the limitations by rules is at best one that can be drawn, but not one that already exists everywhere. Secondly, if not everything is limited by rules everywhere, this implies that we also cannot assume a definiteness regarding what is guided by rules when. Rules (sometimes) leave doubts and open up free spaces, for example in cases "where we play, and make up the rules as we go along".[12] But despite this openness or the 'lack' of closure by rules, it does not mean that language-games have no rules at all and can proceed entirely arbitrarily.

8 Cf. PI, §65-67. One could argue (and Wittgenstein's alter ego in the *Philosophical Investigations* does so) that precisely this absence is the 'commonality' of our language. However, argumentatively, little is gained by this; it is merely a play on words.
9 Cf. PI, §53.
10 Cf. PI, §54.
11 PI, §68.
12 PI, §83.

11 As an attentive and adept reader of Wittgenstein, Cavell arrives at the same conclusion; he is even puzzled by how one could reach an argument like Pole's, which "is not merely wrong, but misses the fact that Wittgenstein's ideas form a sustained and radical criticism of such views".[13] Cavell's interpretation of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* is original in that it does not simply defend Wittgenstein's 'open' conception of rule-following, but it shifts the focus away from following rules and towards the relationship between language and the world.[14] This shift seems to me to shed light on an understanding of language and games in a very fruitful way by reassessing the relevance of appealing to rules and highlighting Wittgenstein's emphasis on our open space for action.

12 Cavell's approach to Wittgenstein commences with Wittgenstein's method in the *Philosophical Investigations*, which Wittgenstein himself refers to as a 'grammatical investigation'.[15] The focus on this form already shifts the view we will have at the end of Wittgenstein's vision of language. A grammatical investigation, according to Cavell, allows us to discover the criteria under which we assert something in our ordinary language when a particular circumstance is present.[16] For example, what criteria do we have when we say that someone has done something 'intentionally', or that someone 'believes' something? Criteria are significant insofar as they demonstrate that we ('we native speakers') agree with each other in the majority of our judgments about the world. Without having (consciously) coordinated with each other, we arrive at the same claims. Cavell understands this background of agreements, to which the criteria refer, as what Wittgenstein refers to as 'rules' or 'conventions'.[17]

13 The existence of almost continuous agreement in our judgments is what fascinates Cavell. Does it then follow from the above that it is rules and conventions that guarantee this agreement? After all, the meaning and use of our words are not 'natural', so something must ensure that we *all* act in this way. Cavell raises the following objection:

13 Cavell, Stanley (1969). *Must We Mean What We Say. A Book of Essays* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 44. In the following quoted as MWM.

14 Cf. MWM, 18. Both Conant and Moi understand this as a central aspect of Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein. Cf. Conant, James (2005). Stanley Cavell's Wittgenstein. *The Harvard Review of Philosophy*, 13(1), 51–64; Moi, Toril (2017). *Revolution of the Ordinary. Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press.

15 PI, §90.

16 This form of 'what we say when' is the basic formula according to which ordinary language philosophy operates in Cavell's work as well as in the works of the later Wittgenstein and Austin. Cf. Cavell, Stanley (1979). *The Claim of Reason. Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. Oxford etc.: Oxford University Press, 19 (in the following quoted as CR) and Laugier, Sandra (2013). *Why We Need Ordinary Language Philosophy*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press.

17 Cf. CR, 30. I will therefore use 'rule' and 'convention' interchangeably.

14 […] and yet no current idea of 'convention' could seem to do the work that words do – there would have to be, we could say, too many conventions in play, one for each shade of each word in each context. We *cannot* have agreed beforehand to all that would be necessary.[18]

15 Cavell's argument is thus that rules alone cannot explain how our language functions in the way we use it; they would have to accomplish too much. Rules and conventions do not provide an *explanation* of how we come to agree in language; rather, they *recognize* the stability of our existing agreements.[19] As Wittgenstein describes it: Our verbal communication, i.e., the sharing of common criteria, is based on "agreement in judgments",[20] which did not come about through agreed-upon rules but through agreement in "form of life".[21]

16 From this perspective on Wittgenstein's philosophy, it is our forms of life that ensure the success of our language practices. Cavell's interpretation suggests that the 'grammar' of language-games does not refer to prescriptive rules that are applied to language and dictate when a rule has been adhered to or broken.[22] Rather, a grammatical investigation allows us to discover our shared forms of life and thus appeals to the community ('this is how we do things'). In this community, we possess shared criteria that are 'guiding' for our language-games, but as Toril Moi rightly points out, "convening criteria is not the same thing as appealing to ‚received' or ‚standard' rules."[23] Criteria point to a different form of normativity that does not appear in the form of imperatives but rather elucidates how something must be done in order to be acknowledged by the community as 'doing x'. In this sense, what grammar exposes is something (quasi-) transcendental.[24]

17 Forms of life are not something we agree upon like conventions, but – as Cavell repeatedly emphasizes – there is agreement in forms of life.[25] This suggests a certain naturalness, which may initially be puzzling. Language-games such as greeting someone or the distinction between lending and gifting may not seem 'natural' but rather would

18 CR, 31.
19 Cf. Laugier (2013), 88.
20 PI, §242.
21 PI, §241.
22 Cf. Conant (2005), 63f and Chase, Greg (2022). "Language-Games" and "Forms of Life". Cavell's Reading of Wittgenstein and its Relevance to Literary Studies. In Greg Chase, Juliet Floyd, & Sandra Laugier (Eds.), *Cavell's Must We Mean What We Say?* at 50 (89–120). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 96f.
23 Moi (2017), 52.
24 Cavell repeatedly points to this similarity between Wittgenstein and Kant, although he does not elaborate on what status Wittgenstein's philosophy could thereby acquire. Cf. MWM, 59f.
25 Cf. CR, 32.

be considered as social conventions. However, equating forms of life with social conventions is shortsighted. It is true that forms of life also have a constructed aspect. But it would be wrong to assume that forms of life are solely culturally relative and arbitrary, and that they can be changed simply by authority or resolutions.[26] Such an understanding focuses solely on the "ethnological" or "horizontal sense" of forms of life, as Cavell describes it.[27] In addition, there is also a "biological or vertical sense",28 such as when Wittgenstein speaks of our language-games "as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing"[29], and that our forms of life are "the given".[30] This twofold sense of forms of life shows that the practices associated with them are not 'merely' conventional but also draw from human biology. For example, we owe certain forms of greeting to our upright posture and the hands being freed up as a result. *Forms* of life are simultaneously forms of *life*.

18 Imagining our forms of life as 'merely' conventional would, according to Cavell, imply that these "may as well be changed as not, depending upon some individual or other's taste or decision."[31] The aforementioned naturalness of forms of life does not exclude changeability but rather provides the talk about conventionality with a new profundity. Since many of the conventions have not come about through agreement or contract, changing them would have significant consequences for our lives. They are in a way inherent to human existence; for example, the act of comforting arises from the significance that pain has for humans. A culture that deals with pain differently, by responding with laughter, would appear strange to us (and it raises the question of whether we would still understand what is meant by 'comforting' and 'pain').[32] Claiming that it is a convention to deal with pain in this way (to call *this* 'comforting', as if one could also call anything else by that name) misses the realization that both our actions and our language-games are inseparably intertwined with the reality of our forms of life. The use of a language-game is not subject to arbitrarily changeable conventions but rather shows what a thing is (what we understand it to be as such).[33]

26 Both Chase and Moi discuss this problematic, shortsighted identification of language-games and forms of life as social conventions in cases of the appropriation of Wittgenstein's philosophy by the postmodern tradition. Cf. Chase (2022), 95 and Moi (2017), 54f.

27 Cavell, Stanley (1989). *This New Yet Unapproachable America. Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 41.

28 Ibid.

29 PI, §25.

30 PI, p. 238.

31 CR, 120.

32 Cf. Wittgenstein's comment on the possibility of other traditions being strange in PI, p. 235, as well as Cavell's observation that our world changes when 'other games' are played in MWM, 47

33 For Cavell, this is the essential point of learning and teaching language: we learn the use of words, what a thing is, and the associated forms of life *together*. Cf. CR, 290-302 and MWM, 17f.

19 If we assume, following Cavell, that our forms of life are guiding for our language-games, and if forms of life are not entirely conventional (in the sense of being arbitrarily changeable), does this mean that rules for the use of language are no longer relevant? The answer to this is a clear no. However, in light of Cavell's considerations, it is necessary to understand anew what is meant by the talk of rules here. Rules for language-games do not necessarily take the form of imperatives but can also manifest in statements such as 'We say that one knows something when one has great confidence in it'. In this sense, descriptions can also be considered rules; but they must be *taken* as such. Here, Cavell invokes his appeal to forms of life when he writes: "Statements which describe a language (or a game or an institution) are rules (are binding) if you want to speak that language (play that game, accept that institution); or, rather, *when* you are speaking that language, playing that game, etc."[34] This means that statements are not 'in themselves' rules but must be taken as such within the community. Nothing forbids me from saying that I know something in other cases. But in order to be understood by others, to *actually* play the shared language-game, I must act according to the mentioned rules. Otherwise, what I do and say will not be acknowledged as 'knowing something'. Rules point to shared forms of behavior and forms of life.[35]

20 The rules of our forms of life therefore clarify what it means to perform a certain action. The *fact* that this happens is not prescribed by the rules. So rules are not prescriptive but rather normative for the respective community, or as Rush Rhees calls it: "The rules of grammar are rules of the lives in which there is language."[36] When it is said that the language-games are followed according to rules, it refers to the conditions under which we rightly say something under the appropriate circumstances. They represent a '*should*', not an '*ought*', as Cavell clarifies using Austin's formula 'what we should say when'.[37] A violation of these rules is not comparable to the violation of moral imperatives, which results in rebuke. Rather, not adhering to the rules of language-games ultimately means not (properly) doing something at all.

34 MWM, 14.
35 Cf. Moi (2017), 50.
36 Rhees, Rush (1970). *Discussions of Wittgenstein*. London: Routledge, 45. For a commentary an Rhees's statement based on numerous examples, see Diamond, Cora (1989). Rules: Looking in the Right Place. In D. Z. Phillips & Peter Winch (Eds.), Wittgenstein: *Attention to Particulars. Essays in honour of Rush Rhees* (1905-89) (12–34). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
37 Cf. MWM, 19.

21 Following Cavell's understanding of rules, it is now worth exploring the analogy between language and games and examining game rules more closely.[38] The idea of rules sketched so far seems quite restrictive and allows little room for deviation or even creative, improvised behavior. For example, a rules defines what it means to make a move in chess, i.e., a specific practice. This is roughly the understanding of rules that Wittgenstein's grammar draws our attention to: there are certain ways of doing things, and not everything one does is the execution of these practices.[39] So far, the rules of a game would thus *determine* which actions one must perform (and consequently which one may not perform) when playing a game. A violation of these rules leads to sanctions or misunderstanding.

22 Yet, to violate a rule and to play beyond rules are two different things. I am not allowed to move the bishop like the rook. But no rule prohibits me from repeatedly moving the bishop and returning it to its original position. However, after observing this behavior for some time, we would question the player about what they are doing; it doesn't seem to be playing chess. What this points out is the observation that the execution of a game practice not only occurs within a framework of rules (and not everything is determined by them), but it also requires a certain *competence* in playing. For some deviations (even those that violate rules), one might accept a justification or excuse. But the more significant these deviations become, the less one will be inclined to do so; the activity is simply no longer playing this game. These insights align exactly with Cavell's perspective that rules are built upon forms of life: "Then there is some question whether he is competent, not merely at [chess], but at the form of life called 'playing a (competitive) game'."[40]

23 We can conclude from this that what has been referred to as a 'rule' is indeed constitutive of playing a game, but it does not indicate whether a game is played *well*.[41] According to Cavell, however, a certain degree of competence must be present in order to even speak of playing. It is not solely (defining) rules that distinguish a game, but also certain principles and strategies. Only someone who understands the latter would be considered as someone who plays a game. Cavell encapsulates this when he writes: "[…] a certain mastery of the strategy of a game is as essential to being described as *playing*

38 In the following, 'game' always refers to competitive games. Cavell specifies this repeatedly because many of the subsequent theses and arguments are not applicable to all types of games (which follows logically from the observed non-essentiality). For example, in children's games like 'Ring-Around-the-Rosy', it is not defined by rules what constitutes a move, or in games of pure chance, there are only defining rules and no principles and strategies (which clearly shows that Blackjack or Poker are not games of pure chance). CR, 296 and 304.

39 Cf. PI, §199-202.

40 CR, 296.

41 And they are certainly not a measure of what *optimal* behavior would be, as Cavell points out in his reference to Rawls. Cf. CR, 303.

the game as a mastery of its moves is."[42] This thesis is central if we want to understand games in the context of our forms of life. But it also raises some questions: Who decides that someone is 'playing well'? (It doesn't seem to be a referee.) To what extent is it 'mere' incompetence, and when does it stop being playing altogether? Wat kind of actions is it then? Cavell does not provide an explicit answer to these questions.[43]

24 With the emphasis on principles and strategies, we can conceptualize a systematic expansion of the concept of rules. Such a 'systematic' approach is provided by Cavell when he lists the following four types of 'rules': defining rules, regulating rules, principles, maxims.[44] He also adds that these do not fully describe a game. Without claiming completeness of categories of game rules, I would differentiate the various types of rules listed by Cavell as follows: Firstly, there are *conventional rules*, which do not appear among the mentioned types.[45] These refer, for example, to mere convenience but can be changed without altering the essence of a game. In chess, for instance, it is convenient to regulate which player begins the match. However, whether it is white or black does not change the game itself (but it may affect a specific tradition). Furthermore, there are essential rules[46], encompassing defining and regulating rules. Here, we find the strict conception of rules again, determining what must be done. The bishop moves diagonally, if a player touches a piece, they must move it, etc. These kinds of rules define what is considered within and outside of a game. Lastly, we have *rules of competence* such as principles, strategies, and maxims. Developing one's pieces as early as possible or strategically forcing an exchange in a certain position are examples of such rules. Unlike essential rules, rules of competence leave open which strategies one follows, which ones are ignored for specific reasons, or which ones are newly invented.

25 "[…] *all* categories have to be recognized as relevant in order for the person to be described as playing the game," writes Cavell.[47] With this statement, the sole relevance of essential rules for playing games is rejected in favor of a more comprehensive concept.

42 CR, 306.

43 Cf. CR, 304 and MWM, 27. Here is an attempt to speculate on how Cavell would respond: The community of those who have mastered this form of life and therefore have a voice within it will decide. They can make judgments in an exemplary manner (cf. Cavell's reflections on the voice in *A Pitch of Philosophy*). The line between 'playing poorly' and 'playing at all' is not one that can be drawn sharply (or even definitionally). It will rather be negotiable depending on the case, with both parties initially possessing the same argumentative authority. It would need to be shown that both do not understand the event as a case of 'playing the game'. Something that may not necessarily lead to consensus (cf. MWM, 87-89).

44 CR, 305.

45 But Cavell considers the possibility of such rules in CR, 119f.

46 Maybe the term '*constitutive rules*' would be more suitable to avoid suggesting that such rules describe the essence of games altogether. What such rules provide is solely a distinction between different games, for example, between chess and backgammon (cf. CR, 307). Nevertheless, the other rules are also constitutive for the game, hence my choice of this term.

47 CR, 305.

This seems to me to be one the crucial turns in Cavell's engagement with the concept of rules: A narrow conception of games – and likewise of language-games – solely focuses on essential rules, i.e., on the knowledge of what one must and may do in fact. However, understanding games as a form of life (the form of life we call 'chess' or 'competitive game') means that the skill and command of these practices must also be taken into account. I play chess *factually* (one could also say: *formally*) when I move the pieces correctly. But whether within our forms of life this is recognized as *actual* chess playing goes beyond the mere application of these rules. The difference is also evident, according to Cavell, in that in the first case, rules can only *explain* my actions, but not *justify* them.[48] It is clarified what was done, but only the reference to rules of competence can make intelligible why something was done well or poorly, why it was done in this way and not in another way, why now and not later in the game. To assess this, one must know more than just rules from a rulebook; one must be familiar with an entire form of life.

26 The diverse types of rules impose different demands on one's actions. Adherence to conventional rules demonstrates familiarity with a particular tradition. Essential rules specify what *must* be done. Rules of competence inform us what we *ought to* do; they are in this sense advisory but not binding. Consequently, the latter type of rules also allows for the possibility of acting independently and freely. It is within this context that we can consider a practice like improvisation. Encountering a difficult and new position in a chess game 'forces' me to discard my previous strategy and improvise my next moves. It is noteworthy that in the case of competitive games, the notion of improvisation tends to be negatively connoted. Someone improvises when they lack a predefined plan for their next move. Nevertheless, one can also speak of 'surprising' or 'unexpected' actions, which fall within the same scope of freedom that rules of competence permit. This only shows that the talk of 'improvisation' in the case of competitive games represents an extreme form of free action within rules.[49] Some rules allow for varying degrees of this freedom: I can follow one strategy or another, both have their advantages and disadvantages; a very general principle can be executed in different ways; and if I have forgotten all these rules (or never knew them in the first place), I am left with only improvising under the general aim of the game ('checkmating the king', i.e., winning).

48 MWM, 27, footnote 27.

49 When thinking about forms like improvisational theater or role-playing games, improvisation becomes almost mandatory. Those who do not improvise but adhere strictly to a script and judge other accordingly will not get very far. Here, one would say that the game is not being played (correctly).

27 Two observations arise from this discussion. First, the boundary of the possibility to improvise runs along the line between rules of competence and essential rules. While there is a certain scope for how I play a game *well* (or cunningly, honorably, intimidatingly, etc.), there is no such scope when it comes to playing the game *correctly* (I 'improvise' and move my pieces off the board). This boundary is not clear-cut in every game, especially concerning the status of certain principles and maxims. In such cases, Cavell writes: "Such matters will not be called rules in Rulebooks, yet some experts may *make* them rules and teach them as rules."[50] Within the framework of rules of competence, improvisation is possible, which does not mean that this ability can be applied to everything (and this regardless of the question, whether I can do it).

28 The second observations leads to a realization about the practice of improvisation itself: One improvises (always?) *under* rules. A certain binding framework is required to even speak of 'improvising'; that improvisation takes place under rules is thus part of the grammar of this language-game. The situation mentioned above illustrates this: Making a move off the board (or throwing the pieces across the board onto a square) is not improvising a chess move; it is not a move at all, nothing that we would understand as 'making a move'. Here, someone might be improvising their ability to make people laugh, but in doing so, we have departed from the form of life of playing chess, and other 'rules' apply. At no point we would reach a situation without any 'rules', as long as there is an understanding of shared practices.

29 Only by considering *all* of these different rules does a space open up that offers the opportunity for alternative actions and moments of freedom. This circumstance is, according to Cavell, the "special quality" of games, that "within them what we must do is (ideally) completely specified and radically marked off from considerations of what we ought to (or should not) do."[51] The simultaneous existence of essential rules and rules of competence, and their separation from each other at the *same time*, allows for the creation of a space within a game that provides both room for guided action and the possibility for free expression and improvisation. Thus, we arrive at the following vision of games:

50 CR, 308f.
51 CR, 308.

30 It is as though within the prosecution of a game, we are set free to concentrate all of our consciousness and energy on the very human quest for utility and style: if the moves and rules can be *taken for granted*, then we can give ourselves over totally to doing what will win, and win applause. (The idea that freedom is achieved through subjection to the law is fully true to the conduct in games.)[52]

31 Freedom within constraints is the setting in which games take place. Playing is not just the (mere) following of rules, but it also doesn't encompass everything. Now, a difficulty arises when we want to trace back the analogy between language and games: As Chase rightly points out, for Cavell, the comparison not only reveals the similarities between the two practices but also their differences.[53] In chess, there exists a written set of rules that one can consult. This list can be used to resolve discrepancies within the game (though not everything will be resolvable by appealing to rules). On the other hand, our (ordinary) language presents a different scenario, according to Cavell:

32 That everyday language does not, in fact or in essence, depend upon such a structure and conception of rules, and yet that the absence of such a structure in no way impairs its functioning, is what the picture of language drawn in the later philosophy [of Wittgenstein] is about.[54]

33 The comparison serves to open up a field within such phenomena like 'rule-following' can be investigated. Rule orientation means that there are no rules for every possible action, yet one can still speak of something being done correctly or incorrectly. Determining this is done through an appeal to forms of life.

34 If language also does not always adhere to rules, it provides us with a similar framework as games for deviations, moments of freedom, and thus improvisation. Here too, we can find situations in which one 'plays' with language against the 'usual' procedures or uses. Cavell described this as follows:

35 What this calls attention to is the fact that language provides us with ways for [...] speaking in special ways, e.g., for changing the meaning of a word, or for speaking, on *particular occasions*, loosely or personally, or paradoxically, cryptically, metaphorically.[55]

52 Ibid. These considerations seem to me to reflect a similar meaning and significance of play as presented by Schiller in the 15th letter of *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*.
53 Chase (2022), 94.
54 MWM, 45.
55 MWM, 31.

36 Yet even 'speaking strangely' is not something that occurs outside of language-games, i.e., completely without 'rules' – at least not if one wants to be understood. Cavell does not speak of improvisation here but rather refers to the (at first glance) 'free' use of language-games as projection.[56]

37 The idea of projection for Cavell draws from his considerations on Wittgenstein, particularly the thought that the 'correctness' of language-games (which means nothing else than the ability to make oneself intelligible) depends on the respective forms of life. We initially learn language-games in *specific* (which means not in *all*) contexts but are then required to use them in other contexts as well. Cavell refers to this latter use as "our ability to project appropriately".[57] For example, we talk about 'feeding' ducks; we can apply the language-game 'feed' to all kinds of animals. But we can also say that we 'feed the meter' or 'feed the machine' or 'feed his pride'. These are ordinary cases of projection that do not pose any difficulties for us.

38 Projections revolve around the ambiguity or multiple uses of words. This possibility exists precisely because our language is not everywhere determined by rules but always allows for new developments and, in principle, an infinite number of projections. We do not constantly invent new words for such cases but rather use existing ones in a new way, applying them anew to the world. Think here of metaphors or literature and poetry, areas of our language usage where this 'free' handling of words can be taken to extremes, where our language is 'celebrated'.[58] This is what I would like to understand as forms of improvisation, comparable to how it also manifests in games.[59] Some remarks on this:

39 Metaphors are indeed a vivid example of using language outside of the usual patterns, but Cavell distinguishes ordinary language projections from them. In his view, although both stem from the possibility of language itself, he perceives projections

56 But he does so elsewhere, namely in a discussion on Austin's speech act theory. Cf. Cavell, Stanley (2005). *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*. Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 185. To elaborate on the parallels and divergences of Cavell's interpretations of both Wittgenstein and Austin would lead us too far here. Some considerations on the interplay of convention and improvisation in Cavell's reading of Austin can be found in Mills, Philip (2022). Poetic Perlocutions: Poetry after Cavell after Austin. *Philosophical Investigations*, 45(3), 357–372 and Mulhall, Stephen (2006). Suffering a sea change: crisis, catastrophe, and convention in the theory of speech-acts. In Alice Crary & Sanford Shieh (Eds.), Reading Cavell (26–41). London: Routledge.

57 CR, 169.

58 Cf. CR, 189.

59 Davide Sparti also associates projections with 'improvisational exercises', but doesn't draw the connection to games. Cf. Sparti, Davide (2023). Projective Imagination. Therapy and Improvisation in Wittgenstein's (and Cavell's) Vision of Language. In Lucilla Guidi (Ed.), *Wittgensteinian Exercises. Aesthetic and Ethical Transformations* (19–44). Paderborn: Brill Fink.

as something that proceeds "naturally", whereas metaphors operate "unnaturally".[60] The breaking-off with established and 'normal' projections distinguishes metaphors. Claiming that feeding things like pride, hope, or resentment is metaphorical would suggest that such uses are less essential for these concepts.

40 This leads to the insight that the ambiguity of words is not inherent to the words themselves, but rather that they *can* have various meanings. For instance, I can use a chair as a ladder. But this does not mean that it is used in this way under all possible circumstances, or that every use is obvious. Regarding projections, this entails that the question of appropriateness always arises. Cavell addresses this, stating: "But though language – what we call language – is tolerant, allows projection, not just any projection will be acceptable […]. An object or activity or event onto or into which a concept is projected, must *invite* or *allow* that projection […]."[61] The tolerance and the freedom afforded by projections are not boundless but must present themselves to us. Variations in our language use are possible, but they are neither random nor arbitrary.

41 This idea relates back to the notion that improvisation can only take place under rules. Our handling of projections cannot be explained by reference to rules, as too much would have to be clarified thereby ('each shade of each word'). What 'regulates' projections and 'decides' on their appropriateness are our forms of life. Only those who are introduced into these can use words in this way and achieve with them what they are intended for: communication. Our forms of life provide us with the framework (the 'rules') within which projections can take place successfully, i.e., so that they are comprehensible to others.[62] Cavell speaks here of a balance that exists in forms of life and our language uses: In both, there is the possibility of an infinite number of projections and the fact that these are not arbitrary. Therefore, forms of life and language-games are characterized by an "outer variance" and an "inner constancy".[63] Mulhall also speaks in this context of Cavell understanding conventions and rules as "flexibly inflexible, possessed of a tolerant intolerance".[64] It is crucial that *both* are necessary, and that one does not assume that on the one hand, there is a fixed order completely monitored by rules, and on the other hand – separate from this – a disorder open to free and varying actions. Nothing else is the insight that improvisation takes place under rules.

60 CR, 190.
61 CR, 182f.
62 And Mulhall is right to question why this kind of normativity should still be called 'rules'. Cf. Mulhall (2006), 40.
63 CR, 185.
64 Mulhall (2006), 32.

42 In conclusion, it can be argued that the idea of improvisation under rules offers another perspective on what Cavell understands as Wittgenstein's vision of language. In a much-cited passage, Cavell explains:

43 We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, sense of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, […] all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls 'forms of life'. Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this.[65]

44 The absence of rules or their 'lack' of assurance does not impede the functioning of language. Rather, it is "a matter of practical mastery" that we can successfully apply our language practices in various situations.[66] Just as it requires 'practical mastery' to be able to play a game well and therefore play it at all. All of this is a question of being introduced to forms of life and understanding these. Forms of life enable a room for maneuver (whether linguistic or playful) that allows for improvised forms, if not even demands them in certain cases. However, this possibility also entails, as Cavell constantly emphasizes, that there is never an absolute guarantee that my actions will be accepted and acknowledged by others as such.[67] What I understand to be an improvised action is not definitively secured by a rule. Whether this action will be comprehensible to others will be determined solely in an exchange about the framework of the action (or the game). Improvisation is thus not anarchy. Instead, it arises from the interaction of guiding rules and individual creativity and imagination, two aspects of our human forms of life.

65 MWM, 48.
66 MWM, 61.
67 CR, 189. Cf. Chase (2022), 97.

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