

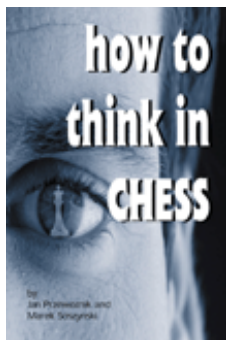


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Confusing the Cat or Ambition, Distraction, Obfuscation

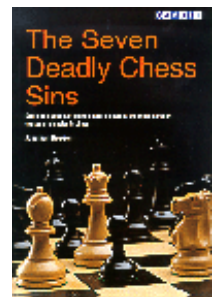
Taylor Kingston

The Seven Deadly Chess Sins, by Jonathan Rowson, 2000 Gambit Publications Ltd., London, paperback, 208 pages, \$24.95

'If seven maids with seven mops swept it for half a year, do you suppose,' the Walrus said, 'that they could get it clear?' Lewis Carroll,
Through the Looking-Glass

The number 7 is a recurring theme in history, mythology, philosophy, religion, literature, and other human pursuits: 7 days of the week, 7 seas, 7 wonders of the world, 7 hills of Rome, 7 sleepers of Ephesus, 7 circles of hell, 7 cities of gold, 7 pillars of wisdom, etc. It was once argued that because there are seven orifices in the human face, there could be only seven planets.

Perhaps because chess is too complex, themes involving seven, or any particular number, have not been common in its literature, whether the topic was good play or bad. Andy Soltis' *Catalog of Chess Mistakes* (1979) described dozens of errors, but rather unsystematically. About 50 years ago Fred Reinfeld wrote a book called *The Nine Bad Moves*, and recently Hans Berliner's *The System* (1999) tried to reduce opening theory to nine principles, but little else comes to mind. However, because chess is such an unforgiving game, with such great potential for error and remorse, it is not surprising that someone would eventually follow medieval Christian theology and subdivide chess guilt into seven categories. The author in this case is Jonathan Rowson of Scotland. For someone only in his early twenties, who just recently gained his GM title in late 1999, this Oxford philosophy student has undertaken a very ambitious task.



All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.
Paul's Epistle to the Romans, 3:23

Just as Thomas Aquinas defined Pride, Covetousness, Lust, Envy, Gluttony, Anger, and Sloth as the seven "capital sins" (i.e. the primary evils from which all lesser evils stemmed), so Rowson has attempted to isolate the major sources of "sin" in chess, by which he means "a misreading of chess reality." In other words "sin" here is simply a synonym for error. This is Rowson's list of sins and some of their symptoms:

- **1. Thinking:** Confusion, pattern limitations, lack of faith in intuition.
- **2. Blinking:** Missing key moments, lack of "trend sensitivity" and "moment sensitivity."
- **3. Wanting:** Attachment to results, carelessness, expectation.
- **4. Materialism:** Miscalculating, lack of dynamism, oversights.
- **5. Egoism:** "Forgetting" the opponent, fear, impracticality.
- **6. Perfectionism:** Time trouble, inappropriate copying.

● **7. Looseness:** “Losing the plot,” drifting.

Having set his theme, Rowson spends the rest of the book attempting to explain at length each type of error more fully, to illustrate them in practical play, and to propose remedies. He is less than fully successful. Though your reviewer makes no pretense of being without sin, some stones will be cast.

Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp ...
Robert Browning

A young man, trying to impress beyond his abilities.
Count Orsini Rosenberg, in the film *Amadeus*



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Like its subject, this is a very problematic book; I can't quite settle on a definite assessment. It is at best a flawed if earnest effort. At worst it is a pretentious, barely mitigated disaster. Recalling another list of seven, “the 7 warning signs of cancer,” I submit that there are warning signs for chess literature. At a first glance certain features of *Sins* stood out: a long bibliography, a large number of epigraphs, and an inconsistent style and vocabulary ranging from bookish macronomata to plebeian slang. That these signs were more than superficial became apparent as I read in earnest.

A long bibliography can be an asset; indeed for a major historical work such as Winter's *Capablanca* or Soltis' *Soviet Chess*, extensive research into many sources is obligatory. But my eyebrows rose at seeing Rowson list such non-chess titles as *Zen Flesh*, *Zen Bones*, Capra's *The Tao of Physics*, Damasio's *Descartes' Error*, Hofstadter's *Gödel, Escher and Bach*, and Plato's *Symposium*. Potential assets, if their ideas are relevant, and adeptly integrated into the chess instruction. But in this case the multitude of sources seems to have overwhelmed the author; they are not skillfully handled nor smoothly organized. The result is a Babel of ideas, sometimes more contradictory than complementary, creating more confusion than understanding, not least for Rowson himself, as he admits repeatedly:

“This chapter is a long and difficult journey. I must confess at the outset that clarity is not its defining feature and there are few easy answers or certainties here. I have done my best to keep the reader on board, but since I had difficulty understanding the subject matter myself, lucidity was hard to come by.” (p. 19)

“The stronger the player, the more abstract the visual image. I was excited by this discovery, even though I didn't know what to do with it.” (p. 35)

“Much as I love surrealism, any link with Dada is entirely accidental ... Marcel Duchamp, the great artist who was also a fairly strong chess-player ... described chess as the quintessence of what Dada had intended. There certainly is a lot to be said for the idea that chess is surreal. But I digress.” (p. 50)

“There are some striking parallels with quantum theory in the way of viewing chess outlined above, particularly Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle ... and Bohr's Principle of Complementarity ... but that's way beyond the scope of this book” (p. 84).

“But what good is this? I hear you ask ... I'm actually not sure how useful these ruminations are for your chess” (p. 82). Rowson is not alone in this.

*But I could not tell, had I been Chuang Tzu dreaming I was a butterfly,
or a butterfly dreaming that I was now Chuang Tzu?*
The Book of Chuang Tzu

A squid eating dough in a polyethylene bag is fast and bulbous.
D. Van Vliet

Then there are the epigraphs. I use some here, in emulation of Rowson. Pithy aphorisms, judiciously employed, can serve as useful headings, summaries, or

commentary. In Rowson's case, though, they sit more like large ornaments atop buildings of uncertain stability, ornaments heavy enough that they threaten to topple the structure. Seeing the over-used Chuang Tzu quote gave me forebodings, and it turned out to be only the iceberg's tip. Look at this partial list of Rowson's quotees: Goethe, Seneca, Carl Jung, Soren Kierkegaard, Bertrand Russell, R. D. Laing, St. Teresa of Avila, J. Krishnamurti, Samuel Beckett, Jean-Paul Sartre, Pablo Picasso, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Edward de Bono, Karl Marx, Walt Whitman, Albert Einstein, Winston Churchill, Oscar Wilde, William Blake, B. F. Skinner, and Abraham Maslow. Even with the omission of Axl Rose and Martha Stewart, these are enough intellectual heavyweights to sink the Titanic, let alone a paperback book!

Lay aside life-harming heaviness, and entertain a cheerful disposition.
Shakespeare, *Richard II*

Compounding the heaviness is the terminology. While *Sins* is not so full of opaque polysyllabics as, say, a college sociology text, one wonders at the need, and even more at the utility, of such hefty terms as "ontology," "self-organizing patterning system," "inter-subjectivity," "tension transference," "existential responsibility," "*Selbstgesprach*," etc. Coupled with the weighty epigraphs, the cumulative effect is one of pretentiousness, as if to signify that this is A Serious Work, or as we used to say in the 1960s, A Heavy Rap.

It's hard to tell if Rowson is simply trying too hard and cramming in more material than he can coordinate, or pretending to an erudition he does not possess. In many other parts of the book he sounds like a regular limey bloke, as when he annotates a refused draw offer with "'I don't suppose it would help if I said please? Bugger. I've done it again,' I thought. What a plonker." Yet the net effect of this inconsistent tone is not to make the book more accessible, but to increase the sense of confusion.

*I only took the regular course ... the different branches of Arithmetic –
Ambition, Distraction, Uglification, and Derision.*
Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*

I'm a ramblin' guy.
Steve Martin

That Rowson is trying for more than he can manage is also seen in his tendency to become distracted, rambling off on tangents, as we already saw with the Duchamp/Dada digression. In another instance, on page 66 he starts by attempting to redefine the Steinitz/Lasker maxim that the side with the advantage must attack. He then presents an illustrative game, yet after just six moves (1 e4 c6 2 d4 d5 3 Nc3 dxe4 4 Nxe4 Bf5 5 Ng3 Bg6 6 Nf3) he gets sidetracked: "This move-order rarely has any independent significance but it can offer White a promising twist if Black wants to play the lines without ...Nd7. In passing, I offer the following game as an offbeat way to play the white side of the Classical Caro-Kann; it's unlikely to cause Black nightmares, but I think it deserves more attention." This leads to a half-page digression that perhaps would deserve attention in a book on the Caro-Kann, but here only serves to cloud and delay presentation of the idea Rowson started with.

A worse example is this from page 39: "This reminds me of a game I played against Julian Hodgson in which I found a very creative idea that almost had a huge hole but still worked well because of a fairly stunning resource. I'm sorry I can't trace the actual position but I remember Julian congratulating me on the idea and saying he especially liked the fact that he couldn't do X because of Y." Good grief! At least the Caro-Kann digression had actual moves. Eventually Rowson gets to his point, which is that "most calculation is unconscious." Could we not have arrived there more directly?

Such problems seriously detract from the book's instructive value, if only by making it hard to read. But they are more literary than directly chess-related. Now

I'll deal with some of *Sins'* chess aspects as such.

This is a simple game: you hit the ball, you throw the ball, you catch the ball.

Baseball team manager, in the film *Bull Durham*

Sure, understanding today's complex world of the future is like having bees live in your head. But, there they are.

David Ossman, Firesign Theater

My first inkling that Rowson might harbor unsound ideas came with reading "So perhaps the key to improving is to have many different ways of thinking ... In this respect you could apply any of the following: Silman's system of imbalances, Purdy's blunder-avoidance technique, Motwani's acronym-based approach, Kotov's tree of analysis ... and countless other[s]" (p. 23). It is hard to take seriously someone who puts Paul Motwani's rambling twaddle on the same plane as the more disciplined writings of Purdy, Silman or Kotov.

While some of Rowson's recommendations are not so dubious, enough are that the book's instructive value comes into serious question. For example a major theme of the longest chapter, on the sin of "Thinking," is that one should play more intuitively, clear out the restrictive bureaucratic mental cobwebs and, like Luke Skywalker, "go with your feelings," as in this comment by Jon Speelman: "Once loosed from the fetters of playing 'properly', I carried on playing the moves I *wanted* to!". Says Rowson: "We often see the right move very quickly but then look for a way to justify our feeling that this move is the correct one." (p. 48)

Capablanca was known sometimes to have that problem, but I dare say it afflicts most of us very little. For the average player, the problem far more often is that he thinks too little rather than too much. Speaking for myself, in complex positions I rarely "see the right move very quickly" in OTB play. On the other hand, in postal play I can find it often but not quickly; it might take hours or even days of the sort of intense "thinking" Rowson brands as sinful. A grandmaster's "intuition" is based on years of study and experience; to suggest that an amateur without this background can use intuition to avoid mistakes is irresponsible. It's like a rich man telling a pauper that his problems are easily solved, all he needs is money.

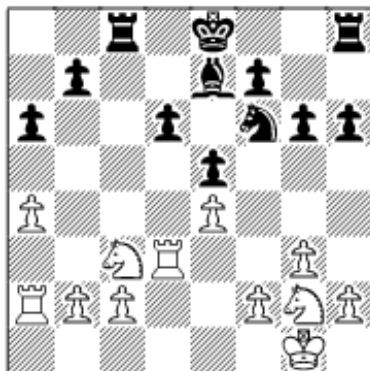
Perhaps intuitively sensing this, Rowson hedges: "McDonald went on to say that 'Every chess-player, weak or strong, has to decide whether as a rule he should trust his intuition when it disagrees with his calculation...' In so far as this is true, **I recommend that you trust your intuition as a rule but you do need both to play chess well so don't make your trust in intuition an excuse for lazy calculation!**" (emphasis added). In other words your feelings are right, except when they're wrong. Bill Clinton on his best day could not have waffled any better.

Rowson later takes waffling to a higher plane. In chapter two, page 75, he states "**There may be some positions where one side is better and worse, depending on whether you look at the position at hand or the direction of the game**" (emphasis in original). The idea that in a chess position I may stand both "better and worse" strikes me as preposterous.

Rowson expands on this concept: "**You need to assess not only [1] the position as it stands, but [2] the position as it has changed and [3] how it is likely to continue to change.**" Lord, I hesitate to contradict a GM, but I submit that the second consideration is irrelevant, and the need for the first and third has long been obvious. Rowson goes on at great length to explain his concept of "trend sensitivity," by which one is supposed to take into account the direction of the recent moves. He uses it to argue that the usual evaluation Informant-style symbols (\pm , \pm , $+ -$) are inadequate, that we need to add ">" and "<" to indicate which way the trend is moving.

His main illustration of this theme is the game Shaw-Rowson, Edinburgh 2000. At

this point



he states “The relevant question for our purposes is, ‘Is White better?’ The answer must surely be yes.” Rowson notes the obvious black disadvantages (backward pawn on open file, bad bishop, weak d5-square), yet his analysis, and the further course of the actual game, show that things are not that simple, that Black has many resources, might well have won, and eventually did draw. After lengthy annotations he concludes “concepts cannot be seen by looking at individual positions but rather at the way they unfold over a (usually) short series of moves. Whereas you assess a single position with a

symbol like \pm you cannot do justice to the conceptual battle with such a crude tool. To do this you need to add the trend aspect and the direction of the game, which is like a barometer of the conceptual battle.”

Either Rowson is unclear, I am obtuse, or he is just putting a new spin on old ideas. On the matter of “the position as it has changed,” countless players and teachers have stressed over the years that, in the midst of a game in progress, what has passed before is objectively unimportant; what matters is what to do *now*. Rowson’s idea of ‘adding the trend aspect’ verges on tautology. He is merely fobbing off as something new the long-established distinction between static and dynamic aspects of a position. Any competent analyst includes both in arriving at an assessment of \pm , \mp , or whatever. Thus in attacking the adequacy of evaluation symbols Rowson is setting up a straw man, and his proposal that we add “>” and “<” is not revolutionary, but redundant. Carrying this idea to its logical extreme, we might see an absurd evaluation like “ $-+ >$ ” meaning “Black has a won game but the trend is favorable to White.”

I have revered always not crude verbosity, but holy simplicity.
St. Jerome

I trust I make myself obscure.
Sir Thomas More, in the film *A Man for All Seasons*

Even when Rowson does make sense he lacks the knack of conveying his ideas with clarity. There is not the same ease of understanding one feels with, say, Chernev, Silman, or Purdy. Compare for example these three quotes:

“Don’t be too puzzled by what the books say about the center. It’s partly nonsense ... Mere number of pawns in the center means nothing ... There is a simple test: *Have I files for my Rooks?* If I have, I am sure to have freedom for my other pieces as well.” — Cecil Purdy, *The Search for Chess Perfection*

“A Knight on the 4th row is as good as a Bishop and is well poised for both attack and defense. A Knight on the 5th row is superior to a Bishop and is a powerful attacking force. A Knight on the 6th row is often a winning advantage.” — Jeremy Silman, *How to Reassess Your Chess*

“Pattern-recognition is not usually a conscious process. There is a difference between ‘feeling’ the right moves from the basis of an unconscious intuitive database and trying to copy a half-remembered position from your memory banks and pasting it on to a new one.” — Rowson

Though all three statements seem more or less true, it’s not hard to decide which is the most obscure and least useful. And even that, abstruse as it is, reads like a Groucho Marx one-liner compared to some of Rowson’s more contrived flights of sophistry:

“Indeed, one of the most significant aspects of [Einstein’s equation] $E=mc^2$ is that it says we need a massive amount of energy to create a little bit of mass ... This may be pushing it too far, but if I’m right to think that the c^2 in chess is best viewed as one (so that material and energy can be viewed as exactly equal) then it reflects the time (initiative) aspect of the game too because the relationship of mass and energy in a given position will depend on one side’s use of the material on the available move, and the prospective response.” (p. 133)

“According to Utterburg, the key concept for understanding the success of Tal’s ‘psychological sacrifices’ is **existential responsibility**. Utterburg argues that the human mind possesses the capacity to understand chess ‘existentially’, i.e. in a manner which defies any objective, well-defined formulation. So in the normal course of things we are ‘existentially responsible’ for the course of the game and feel ourselves, as subjects, to be conscious co-creators of the game and therefore responsible for its outcome.” (p. 154)

I see now that my chess errors stem from misapplication of relativity theory and ignorance of existential philosophy. Dare we call this intellectual bullshit? In addition to his ambition and distraction, now Rowson adds obfuscation, clouding what he should make clear. Tal’s own simple observation that “Minutes of play and years of analysis are not the same thing,” unmentioned by Rowson, will do more for one’s understanding of “psychological sacrifices” than the entire body of existentialist literature.

Rowson crowns his discussion of Tal’s “existentialism” with this gem: “It’s like there is a battle for responsibility of an object between the subjects. This reminds me of the Paul McCartney and Michael Jackson song *The Girl is Mine*: ‘no she’s mine’, ... ‘yes she’s mine’, ‘the girl is mine’ ‘I don’t believe it!’. Whatever. Let’s move on.”

Gladly.

To give Rowson his due, not everything he says is so silly or far-fetched. Before he goes overboard with Einstein, his discussion of Materialism, and the need to see chess pieces as energy more than matter, is not bad (though as he admits the idea is more Purdy’s than his). Another idea, “talking with your pieces,” sounds odd but goes back at least to Nimzovitch. Here is an example, in Rowson’s notes to Hodgson-Persson, Erevan Olympiad, 1996.



“In such situations you [Black] may feel uncomfortable generally but it is important to put your finger on the source of the discontent ... Talk to your knight on f8 and he’ll tell you that his hands are tied. You tell him that he’s doing a good job ... and that you need him to stay there, guarding e6 and g6. But of course this conflicts with the desires of the rooks, which would like access to f8 in order to use the half-open f-file ... Talk with your a8-rook. He’ll probably tell that he’s happy where he is, because he wants to ‘cover’ the king by keeping the ...0-0-0 option open ... Your h8-rook is rather less sure of his

dharma because as long as the knight is on f8, the ...0-0-0 option is unavailable. So what can you do? Have a good chat with the guy on h8 and see what you come up with ... **14...Rh7! 15 Qe2 Bh8! 16 Bd2 Rf7!**”. This sort of “conversation” may serve, as Rowson says, “to ‘decomputerify’ [one’s] thoughts and make chess more animated.”

Unfortunately, not enough else in the book has the accessibility and practicality of the above passage. *Sins* fails in two tasks essential for chess instruction: to convey insights clearly, and to present workable methods for improvement. Rowson has

some insights, but as we have seen, too often they are not fully formed, or not expressed clearly. And too often, even when a type of mistake is well-defined, Rowson offers impractical or questionable remedies. For example the suggestion of Persson's that "when you have about fifteen minutes left to make the time control ... you just go for a little run outside to relieve nervous tension" (p. 104) is contrary to the advice of Botvinnik and Kotov about the problems of "peripatetic" play. And in discussing time trouble, Rowson says "All you can really do is be aware of this propensity and consciously try to override it when it seems misplaced." (p. 187). Using conscious effort to overcome most sources of error will leave one like the millipede who could no longer walk once he began to think how he actually did it.

Confusion now hath made his masterpiece.
Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

Years ago the Monty Python comedy troupe performed a delightfully absurd skit, involving a paralyzed cat. It is not dead, but for some reason it stands motionless, unable to move. The cat's owner calls in a veterinarian. His diagnosis: "Your cat badly needs to be confused." He performs a series of utterly ridiculous antics in front of the cat and presto! Puss is shocked out of his paralysis, does a double-take and walks away.

Perhaps under some circumstances one's chess ability can be shocked out of paralysis, like the disciple who attained enlightenment when his Zen master whacked him with a stick. Perhaps clarity can emerge from confusion, as from contemplation of paradoxical *koans*. However I strongly doubt that *The Seven Deadly Chess Sins* can be the instrument of such illumination for most chess players. Rather, its inherent confusion will likely only add to one's own. Unlike Monty Python's antics it seems more likely to induce catatonia than relieve it.

Perhaps Fred Reinfeld was right after all, and there really are Nine Bad Moves. *The Seven Deadly Chess Sins* is strong evidence that to the seven we should add two more: writing this book, and buying it.

 [TOP OF PAGE](#)

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