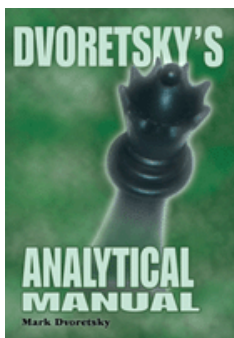




COLUMNISTS

The Instructor

Mark Dvoretsky



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Enriching Your Strategic Arsenal

People are not computers! We cannot find the right moves simply by combing through the variations. We all (some to a greater or lesser degree, whether clearly or subtly) must evaluate the situation as it arises over the board, rely upon positional considerations, bring standard plans to life, and execute familiar strategic techniques.

When we begin to study the game, we learn, with the aid of trainers and/or manuals, the most important chess principles. As our playing strength increases, it becomes ever more difficult to expand the arsenal of strategic knowledge. New ideas are no longer generally known; they are not, as a rule, formalized – that is, not expressed in exact verbal form – in fact, sometimes they contradict one another. For every rule of chess, there are many exceptions, which sometimes turn into rules themselves. They're just more subtle, less obvious.

A chess player grows, first of all, on the basis of the games he has played, his analysis and independent thinking. But his own practical experience is not sufficient: it makes no sense to disparage the tremendously valuable information contained in good books, articles, and annotations to the games of the leading grandmasters. All that matters is that the annotator was competent and honest, that he knew enough to uncover and demonstrate the important general ideas hidden behind the moves and variations.

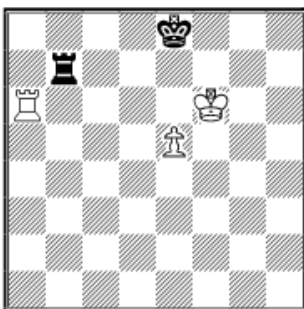
Extracting useful information from chess texts is the theme of the lengthy article I now offer you. The examples we will go through will acquaint you with useful strategic ideas, which may not be generally known. This article consists of two parts. The first part will be a critique, composed of examples of material badly presented, which will disorient the reader, and might actually hinder his development. By contrast, our examination of the games and fragments in the second part is based upon interesting commentaries written at various times by different authors.

I

One obvious and frequently encountered cause of “disinformation” is mistaken analysis. Everybody makes mistakes – what can you do? Sometimes, deeply thought-out judgments and far-reaching conclusions are based upon comparatively simple tactical oversights. The reader who discovers the mistake must consider the instructive episode afresh, sometimes even rethinking the entire concept he has been presented with, even when the presenter is a well-respected authority.

Understandably, such errors are more likely to be found in the writings of under-qualified and/or dishonest authors. And the worst that such authors can do is not even their concrete errors – the trouble is that sometimes, they do not try, or are simply unable correctly to understand and adequately convey to the reader the ideas behind the position.

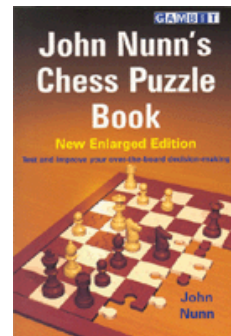
I begin with the simplest examples, taken from endgames. In an interesting book of exercises entitled *John Nunn's Chess Puzzle Book*, the grandmaster reproduces a few fragments from another book published in England, *The Batsford Chess Encyclopedia*, by Nathan Divinsky. Here is one of them:



Divinsky writes:

The correct way to defend is 1...Rb1. Then neither 2.Ra8+ Kd7 nor 2.Ke6 Kf8 (to the short side) 3.Ra8+ Kg7 4.Re8 Ra1 nor 4.Kd6 Kf7 leads to anything for White.

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Nunn asks:

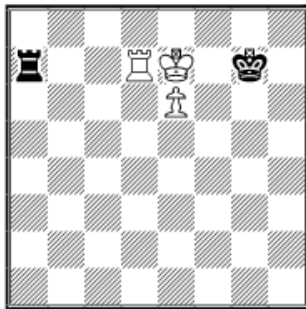
*How many moves in this analysis throw away half a point? There is a section in his book called “Clues,” and for this example, the answer provided is rather mysterious: *The subtleties of R+p vs. R are irrelevant if you can promote your pawn by force.**

The answer: there are three mistaken moves (1...Rb1?, 2.Ke6?, and 4...Kf7?); additionally, two of the three positions Divinsky calls drawn are in fact wins!

Perhaps you are thinking that this kind of thing could only have been written by a very weak player? Hardly!

After retiring from many years of service as a high-ranking bureaucrat and going off to live in the USA, grandmaster Nikolai Krogius decided to earn some money by writing an endgame manual. It is true that, in all those years, he had spent no time on chess in general or on the endgame in particular, nor was he interested in either one. “Who cares,” he probably thought, “after all, I was a decent player once. Shouldn’t I be able to pull some endgames out of different endgame manuals, recall a few of my own, and put together my own little book out of the collection?”

Unfortunately, either his memory has failed him, or the grandmaster’s endgame knowledge in the old days wasn’t up to par. He failed even to check his material against the most elementary guidebooks, and the result was a hopeless little book from a methodological standpoint, containing a whole raft of elementary errors. Here are a couple of examples.



1...Ra8!

All other moves, for example 1...Ra6, lose (2.Ke8+ and 3.e7).

Utter bunk! Everybody knows that all rook retreats except 1...Ra6?? lead to a draw. After 2.Ke8+ Kf6! 3.e7 Ke6 4.Kf8 (there’s nothing better), the rook checks on the f-file; only with the rook at a6 is this check impossible.

And here’s what the author has to say about those situations of queen vs. rook and pawn:

With an already advanced non-rook pawn, the stronger side wins because he can drive the king out of his fortress from behind. (There can be drawing possibilities if the pawn is far-advanced.)

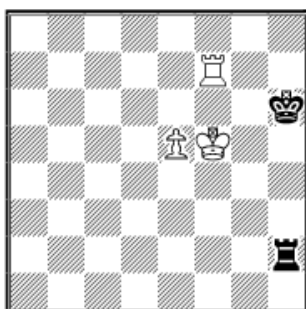
The grandmaster was evidently unaware that this assessment is wrong for positions with a knight pawn.

It would be easy to expect, though very hard to track, the negative consequences of this sort of “instructivization” upon trusting chess players. Perhaps the following episode will both amuse you and force you to think a bit about the subject.

In the autumn of 2008, I and Artur Yusupov conducted a joint seminar in Germany for two groups of students: strong players and amateurs. At the session with the amateur group covering endgame theory, I showed the following endgame:

Svidler – Pelletier

Biel 2001



1.?

The black king stands, “correctly,” on the short side. On the other hand, if White could cut him off on the g-file (with 51.Rf7-g8!), this would be completely meaningless, as White could then advance his king and pawn unhindered.

But such moves only work for certain underhanded blitz specialists. Under normal rules of play, the black king cannot be prevented from getting to g6 (or g7). So it’s important to prevent the only effective plan of defense: checks from the long side. With this in mind, the rook must go to the a-file (on the b-file, the rook would be too close to the king and the pawn).

White wins after 51.Ra7! Rf2+ 52.Ke6 Kg6 53.Ra8!, etc.

Peter Svidler played **51.Kf6??** (51.e6?? is also a mistake: 51...Rf2+ 52.Ke5 Rxf7 53.ef Kg7 54.Ke6 Kf8 =) **51...Rf2+ 52.Ke7 Ra2!**

Black’s rook controls the long side, and now the position is drawn.

53.Rf1 Kg6! (not allowing the king to be cut off by 54.Rg1 – now Black is ready to start the side checks) **54.Rd1 Ra7+ 55.Rd7 Ra8 56.Rc7 Kg7 57.e6 Kg6 58.Kd6 Ra6+ 59.Kd7 Ra8 ½-½**

After setting out the pieces on the demonstration board, I asked the group what White should play. One player, no longer young, suggested the same move as in the game: 51.Kf6. I asked what was the basis for his choice, and was floored by his response: to take the opposition! Of course, here his reliance on the opposition was absolutely uncalled for: the point behind that concept is mutual zugzwang, and there’s not a trace of that here!

When I told that story to Yusupov, he noted that many Germans would have given the same response (as he had already found out himself). The reason: the endgame handbook approved by the German Chess Federation insists that the opposition is the most important principle of the endgame, and that you should always strive to take it! Apparently, this handbook was written by a candidate-master, a longtime teacher of chess, who believes that therefore, he knows a lot about it. (This, by the way, is a standard misconception: the lengthy experience of many trainers is definitely not to be confused with successful experience. This is why their recommendations, based on that experience, are so frequently misguided.)

Even absurdities as clear as these are unfortunately not going to be obvious to many readers, in view of their uncritical approach to the material they are studying, or their own insufficient chess qualifications. This makes them even more prone to believe in the assertions and recommendations of famous chess players and trainers, who, one might think, must have analyzed completely what they’re putting forth. But in fact, certainly not everything written by such authors is worthy of attention and study, especially when they are prone to replace concrete descriptions of a game’s actual events with attempts to twist them into some theory or other.

It’s not productive to try to get by completely without theory, limiting oneself just to analyzing variations. When we study chess, we are dealing with an enormous number of tremendously varied concrete situations. It’s not possible to absorb and commit to memory this whole chaos, so we isolate from it typical, repeating elements, organize our observations, and convert them into theories, or individual rules – because it is only in such a form that we are capable of understanding such a hugely complex system as chess, and of teaching our own observations to others. So yes – theory is necessary, but it’s important to understand that it is only an instrument for understanding, and certainly not a set of absolute truths, operative under any circumstances.

There are some chess works extant, whose authors propagandize their ideas as “simple systems,” guaranteed to give a player the key to solving any problems over the board. To the eyes of a specialist, such attempts are sacrilegious, even though they can “hoodwink” many an unskilled reader – such is the lure of a panacea that works on every problem.

Take, for example, the books written by grandmaster Iosif Dorfman. Dorfman is a very strong player, with a refined understanding of the game, and a successful trainer. In his works, he attempts to reduce chess to a small selection of simple formulas, asserting that any chess player employing his theory will be able to resolve the problems in a position without much trouble.

Unfortunately, among the examples from his books that I looked into (I couldn’t bring myself to read the rest of them), I was unable to find even one that demonstrated the usefulness of his approach to working out the secrets of a position. To some extent, this was owing to the author’s intellectual dishonesty: he didn’t spend any time looking for games and fragments that would demonstrate his ideas convincingly. On the contrary – he tried to link his theses to an almost randomly selected group of

positions; here, if his conditions exist at all, then they exist only formalistically, and do nothing to help a player make his decision. In order to “convince” his readers, Dorfman presents only the “cooperative” variations, omitting those that cast doubt upon, or even refute, his own logic.

But the main and principle reason why Dorfman’s books fail is because any sort of “universal recipes” can never in fact be universal – they can only be employed in particular circumstances. Rather than attach your formulas to every circumstance in life, you must work them out, find the limits of their application, seek out the exceptions that can sometimes easily become rules themselves, and so forth.

Let me illustrate all this with some concrete examples.

Near the very beginning of the book entitled, *The Method In Chess*, he offers the following conclusion:

There is the crude method, enabling an immediate static evaluation of a position to be obtained:

- analyze whether it is possible for your own position to evolve independently of the opponent’s;

- analyze whether the opponent’s position can evolve independently of your own.

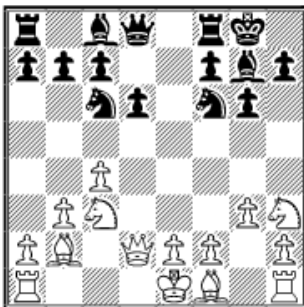
The position which is ready for evolution is statically better.

We’re not going to nitpick over his vocabulary – even though in this context, the use of the word “evolution” brings tears to my eyes. (Many years ago, when I became acquainted with the materials from the chess laboratory run by Vladimir Alatortsev, I was amazed that, in place of the simple word “move,” he always used the expression “goal-directed activity.” Perhaps the author expected, by employing this substitution, to raise the educational level of the text?!)

Dorfman’s theoretical contribution is clarified by an example from one of his own games.

"Murshed – Dorfman
Palma de Majorca 1989

1.d4 d6 2.c4 e5 3.Nc3 ed 4.Qxd4 Nc6 5.Qd2 g6 6.b3 Bg7 7.Bb2 Nf6 8.g3 0-0 9.Nh3



Here on White’s part one can contemplate evolution by Nf4, Bg2 and 0-0. Nothing similar exists for Black. This means that White has a static advantage.

Therefore Black went in for vigorous measures, and a double-edged situation arose after.

9...a5 10.Nf4 a4 11.Nxa4 Ne4 12.Qc1 Nd4 13.Bg2 Re8 14.0-0 Bg4 15.f3 g5

Now, try to apply Dorfman’s “method,” without prejudice, to the position in the diagram. Of course, you will find White’s moves, completing his development, without any trouble. But how are we to understand the assessment that for Black “nothing similar exists.” Don’t moves like Bf5 (or Bg4), Qd7 and Re8 improve his position?

Now imagine that White’s queen knight still stood at b1, or at a3, his pawn on c3, and a black pawn at d5. Here, there would not be the slightest doubt as to Black’s superiority. And yet, as far as possible “evolutions” are concerned, nothing has changed.

Any commentator who was not laboring under the need to propagandize for his own theories would have given different – and more acceptable – explanations.

If White developed his pieces unhindered, his position would become preferable, thanks to his space advantage and control of the advance-post

at d5 on an open file. (Apropos of this, in Aron Nimzovich's classic monograph, *My System*, in Chapter 2, which is written about open lines, the very first diagram in Section B, "Advance-Post," illustrates this type of situation.)

But he has fallen behind in development, and Black should exploit this factor by immediately getting active operations underway, one way or another.

This assessment is based upon standard ideas and evaluations, known to most players, and may be executed over the board with relative ease. It's harder to choose a concrete means of displaying activity. Dorfman gives no explanation whatever for his moves, thus indicating to the reader that these are the best moves – or in any case, strong enough. But the position at which the text of the game is cut off is clearly the apotheosis of Black's strategy, especially since it is marked with its own diagram.



1.?

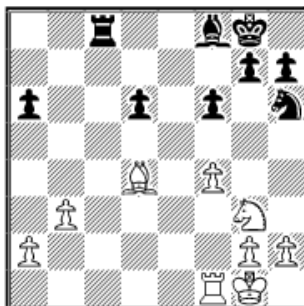
If the reader were to think about this position, then he would probably find the move 16.Rd1! (in the actual game, White played the weaker 16.e3?! Nxf3+ 17.Bxf3 Bxf3 18.Rxf3 gf+/-). Now Black is bound to lose material. 16...c5 17.Bxd4 Bxd4+ 18.Rxd4 cd 19.Nd5 is hopeless. And on 16...gf, White could reply either with 17.Rxd4 Bxd4+ 18.Bxd4, or with 17.Bxd4 fg 18.fe – in either case, White would have an overwhelming advantage.

What does this mean? Was Dorfman's logic faulty, or did he execute his aggressive strategy inaccurately? The author gives no answer. As for myself, I can only note that, after 9...a5 10.Nf4, Black in some games has successfully tried 10...Ne5 11.Bg2, and only now 11...a4.

Think now: does this example, presented as the author has done in his book, have even the slightest instructional value? The author has, in fact, merely declared his ideas, but done nothing to show them in action.

But in fact, the conception that Dorfman poorly formulated and illustrated does have definite practical significance. It doesn't happen often, but we do sometimes encounter situations that at first glance appear unclear, where one side can strengthen his position by means of natural moves, while the other side cannot. In such cases, it's important to spot the gathering strategic danger in time, and to find concrete resources that can redirect this unfavorable tendency. The following fragment, taken from my book, *School of Chess Excellence 2 – Tactical Play*, the chapter entitled, "The Psychology of Defense," might serve as a decent example of this theme.

Dvoretsky – Khachaturov
Moscow 1972



1...?

I shall cite myself (with some editing):

I thought that the game would end with a repetition of moves: 23...Rc2 24.Rf2 Rc1+ 25.Rf1 Rc2. However, Andrey Khachaturov played differently.

23...d5!

After the move made by my opponent I, fortunately, immediately sensed that I stood worse. Black is intending 24...Bd6 (tying the rook to the defense of the f4-pawn) and only then 25...Rc2. The activity of this rook

will enable him either to win a pawn, or, after attacking the bishop at d4, to begin advancing his passed d-pawn. For the moment the white knight has no right to leave the g3 square, since it is unfavorable to allow the enemy knight to go to f5. And the latter, on the other hand, may in some cases also go to g4, as for example in the variations 24.Rb1 Rc2 25.Rb2 Rc1+ 26.Kf2 Ng4+ or 24.Rd1 Rc2 25.Be3? Ng4.

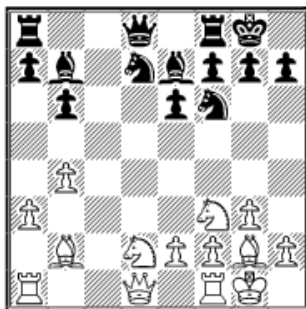
At the board I did not find a reliable plan of defense, and, realizing that 'approximate' play move by move might lead White to disaster, after twenty minutes' thought I decided on a rather risky pawn sacrifice.

You can find out what White actually played in my book. There also, in the chapter entitled "Into The Storm," you will also find other examples of this theme.

Once again, back to Dorfman.

Let us use this method in the following position.

Botvinnik – Donner
Amsterdam 1963



1.?

This is a critical moment, since White has to decide about the possible exchange 14.Nd4.

The static balance does not give an advantage to either side. In addition, Black can improve his position after 14...a5 or 14...b5. This means...

For those who have faith in Dorfman's theory, I propose that you demonstrate it in practice: on the basis of the considerations given above, try to reach the same conclusion – or any conclusion, for that matter.

Back to the quote:

This means that White can either maintain the balance, or play for an advantage with 14.Nd4.

Astounding! Look how the theory has reduced White's choices: he can either play for advantage, or maintain equality! Without the theory, we might instead have played for the loss – what else could there be? And by the way – why is it just the move Nd4 that allowed White to play for the advantage – what is the connection to Dorfman's logic?

An honest author would find it natural to at least occasionally give his manuscript a fresh look, in order to see how logical and convincing his arguments are, or whether they give rise to a sound disbelief among his readers. It's unfortunate that Dorfman appears incapable of such testing, for it would have relieved his book of a huge amount of the nonsense found therein.

For comparison purposes, look at the short, clear explanation given by Mikhail Botvinnik:

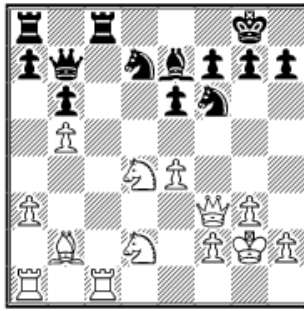
The exchange of the light-square bishops, for which Black has been openly aiming, turns out to be to White's advantage, since it weakens the c6 square, making it easier for him to seize control of it.

The game's further course, which I give with light notes, demonstrates the enormous power of a knight invading at c6.

14.Nd4! Bxg2 15.Kxg2 Qc7 16.Qb3

White wants to meet 16...Qb7+ with 17.Qf3, as the queen exchange definitely favors him.

16...Rfc8 17.Rfc1 Qb7+ 18.Qf3 Nd5 19.e4 N5f6 20.b5!



20...a6

In the event of 20...Ne5 21.Qe2, Black would have had to reckon with inevitably having to retreat his knight after f2-f4 (Botvinnik).

I believe Black should still have played this, with the continuation 21... Bd6!?. On 22.f4 Ng6, White would have had to spend time dealing with the threat of 23...Bxf4, and Black's bishop would have time to get to c5. If 22.Kg1, then 22...Ne8 23.f4 Nd7, intending to meet 24.Nc6 with 24... Bc5+ 25.Kg2 Nb8. Compared with what happened in the game, here White would face a harder time expanding his advantage.

21.Nc6 Bf8 (21...Bc5 was better) **22.a4 ab 23.ab Rxa1 24.Rxa1 Ra8 25. Rd1!**

This move decides the game. On the a-file the lone rook is no danger, whereas on the d-file the white rook is in close contact with its other pieces and will play a leading role (Botvinnik).

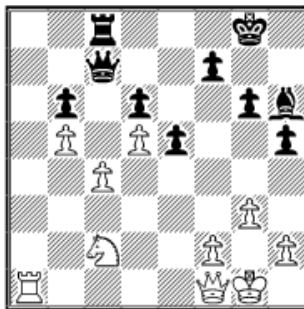
25...Ne8 26.Nc4 Ne5 27.e5 Rc8 (27...Nc7? 28.Rd7! Nxd7 29.Ne7+) **28. Ra1 Rc7 29.Ra7 Qxa7 30.Nxa7 Rxa7 31.Nxb6 1-0**

The Botvinnik game serves as a classic example of the execution of a plan of seizing the c6-square with a knight. The result of such a strategy is usually a major restriction in the activity of the enemy pieces, primarily the rooks.

Once you have learned a new idea, it's usually good practice to secure this new knowledge by examining additional examples on the same theme. I shall limit my example to one simple fragment, taken from my notebook of exercises.

Gheorghiu – Larsen

London 1980



1.?

A positional pawn sacrifice suggests itself: 31.Nb4! Qxc4 32.Nc6 Qxf1+ (forced, in view of the threatened 33.Ne7+) 33.Kxf1. Black's position is difficult. The knight on c6 is clearly stronger than the bishop firing off into nowhere, while Black's rook is locked into its own camp. Continuing 34.Ra6, White would win the b6-pawn and obtain a powerful passed pawn.

But in the game, White played **31.Ra4? Kg7 32.Qd3 h4 33.Kg2 hg 34. hg Bg5=/+**. Among other things, this structure illustrates an earlier theme of ours – the presence of a clear plan of action for one side, and the absence of such a plan for his opponent. Black threatens to whip up an attack by Rh8 and Qd7, while White has no active possibilities.