

Offsides: A Philosophical Dialogue about Action, Interpretation, and Judgment

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For R.R., in friendship

Author's note: The characters Vladimir and Estragon are taken, with apologies, from Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, which premiered in French, *En attendant Godot*, in 1953. Readers of this dialogue need not be familiar with Beckett's play, but it might help to know a rough profile of the characters. Vladimir is highly cerebral. By contrast, Estragon is typically dull, though with surprising outbursts of lucidity and even brilliance.

VLADIMIR: [*Ruminating*] Follow the rules—what could be simpler? But what if you need rules to follow the rules? Do rules come with rules that tell you how to follow the rules? But then, wouldn't there need to be rules for the rules for those rules? And so on, endlessly, ad infinitum...?

ESTRAGON: [*Interrupting*] What rules?¹

VLADIMIR: For offsides. [*Beat*] Offsides in the game of soccer, or le football, to use the French.

ESTRAGON: That doesn't sound very French.

VLADIMIR: Do you remember watching together France's game against Tunisia in the World Cup, in 2022, in Qatar?

ESTRAGON: No, I don't remember. Did we go to Qatar?

VLADIMIR: Then I suppose you won't remember the offside call against Antoine Griezmann, toward the very end of the game.

ESTRAGON: He doesn't sound very French. Are you sure he's French?

VLADIMIR: It's all so simple, until....

ESTRAGON: Until?

VLADIMIR: [*From memory*] "A player is in an offside position if any part of the head, body or feet is in the opponents' half [of the field] and any part of the head, body or feet"—note not the hands and arms, since you can't play the ball with those, unless you're the goalkeeper in your own box.... Where was I? "[I]f any part of the head, body or feet is in the opponents' half...and any part of the head, body or feet is nearer to the opponents' goal line than both the ball and the second-last opponent."² [*Beat*] Which means the opponent who is second in distance, or second closest, to his goal line. Normally that's a field player, since normally the team's goalkeeper is the first-last opponent. [*Beat*] That's simple enough, but it's clunky. You're never offside if you have the ball on a breakaway, or if you're first to it off a goal kick or a punt. Maybe the rest is clearer in the French. "Un joueur est en position de hors-jeu..."³

ESTRAGON: [*Interrupting*] Hors-jeu! Now that sounds French. Hors-jeu. [*Beat*] I could never be offside if you and I were playing, right?

VLADIMIR: What do you mean?

ESTRAGON: You would be my only opponent, so I couldn't be nearer to the goal than both the ball and the second-last opponent. Or, would I always be offside, at least when the ball wasn't between me and the goal, since there could never be more than one opponent, you, between me and the goal...?

VLADIMIR: [*Silence*] Where was I? Yes, yes. This is a key point [*from memory*]: "It is not an offence to be in offside position."⁴ That is, it's not, as such, an infraction of the rules. It becomes an infraction only in particular circumstances.

ESTRAGON: Say more.

VLADIMIR: [*From memory*] "A player who is in an offside position at the moment the ball is played or touched by a team-mate is *only* penalized on becoming involved in active play...."⁵ No longer so simple. "[B]ecoming involved in active play...." In French: "lorsqu'il commence à prendre une part active au jeu."⁶ Qu'est que c'est "une part active"?

ESTRAGON: You're speaking French.

VLADIMIR: Sorry. According to the rules, there are a handful of ways to be "involved" in the play. The first is clear enough: namely [*from memory*], "by interfering with play by playing or touching a ball passed or touched by a team-mate."⁷ I don't think that needs any commentary. You do that, and you're clearly involved in the play.

ESTRAGON: Clearly. Even paradigmatically. No comment.

VLADIMIR: What? Did you say "paradigmatically"?

ESTRAGON: Inasmuch as playing or touching a ball is an exemplar of involvement.

VLADIMIR: [*Beat*] Hmm. Where was I? The other, well, paradigmatic way to become "involved" in a play is by what the rules call "interfering with an opponent."⁸ Or influencing your opponent in some way or other.

ESTRAGON: Well, there's a judgment call.

VLADIMIR: Yes, you're right. But let me focus. Here the rules become more...painstaking. A player can interfere with or influence an opponent by [*from memory*] "preventing [the] opponent from playing or being able to play the ball by clearly obstructing the opponent's line of vision."⁹ That's one. Do you notice that adverb there, "clearly"? It's in the French, too: "clairement."¹⁰

ESTRAGON: Major judgment call.

VLADIMIR: Yes.... Two: by "challenging an opponent for the ball."¹¹

ESTRAGON: No comment.

VLADIMIR: Yes. Three (let me see if I can recall this): by "clearly attempting to play a ball which is close when this action impacts on an opponent."¹²

ESTRAGON: Clunky.

VLADIMIR: The French is "alors que cette action influence la reaction d'un adversaire."¹³

ESTRAGON: You're speaking French again.

VLADIMIR: "Influences"—I suppose that's not all that different from "impacts on," but it *is* less clunky

ESTRAGON: Even mel-lif-lu-ous. [*Beat*] You keep telling me the English and the French. Are they translations from an original language? An *Ursprache*? Maybe that would make everything clear. A language that cuts reality at its joints. Latin? Greek? Hebrew?

VLADIMIR: *Ursprache*? [*Beat*] Well, the English version is the authoritative version;¹⁴ I suppose the other versions are translations from it. Anyway, the rules are in German, too. Now I really need to rack my brains. Four: A player can interfere with or influence an opponent when that player [*from memory*] "eindeutig aktiv wird und so die Möglichkeit des Gegners, den Ball zu spielen, eindeutig beeinflusst."¹⁵ Yes, that's it.

ESTRAGON: I think you're speaking German. Ich kann nicht Deutsch.

VLADIMIR: It isn't very clear anyway. A player can interfere with or influence an opponent by being clearly active and thereby clearly influencing the possibility of the opponent's playing the ball. That almost sounds like a tautology.

ESTRAGON: "Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen."¹⁶

VLADIMIR: [*Silence*] Maybe the English is better. A player can interfere with or influence an opponent by [*from memory*] "making an obvious action which clearly impacts on the ability of an opponent to play the ball."¹⁷ I suppose that's a bit better. The clunkiness makes it sound like the sentence is actually saying something. But, what's an "obvious action"? As opposed to an...un-obvious action? And "clearly impacts"? As opposed to...not so clearly impacting?

ESTRAGON: The French?

VLADIMIR: "Une action évidente qui influence clairement."¹⁸ Not any better.

ESTRAGON: The Spanish? Spanish speaking countries love fútbol, right?

VLADIMIR: Right. But I can't remember.¹⁹

ESTRAGON: Too bad. [*Beat*] Maybe Spanish should be the *Ursprache*.

VLADIMIR: I suppose the point is clear enough that, if you've entirely taken yourself out of the play, say by wandering over to the fans, or to a corner to pick daisies, you're no longer interfering with or influencing your opponent. But is whether you're interfering or influencing up to you—I mean, a matter of your own choice—or is it the opponent's perspective that's decisive? Say you realize that you're offside. A play is happening around you, and you just freeze, because you don't want to interfere with or influence your opponent in any way. You don't touch or otherwise play the ball (say, by letting it roll through your legs), you're not obstructing your opponent's line of vision (after all, you're behind him), you don't challenge for the ball, you don't make an attempt to play the ball when it comes near you, and in brief or in sum you don't make *any* "obvious" action—unless just standing there, minding your own business, counts, which I don't see how it would or should.

ESTRAGON: No? Why not? What's an action?

VLADIMIR: Not every sequence of movements is an action.

ESTRAGON: The mystery deepens.

VLADIMIR: And I grant that "freezing" is an action.

ESTRAGON: And deepens.

VLADIMIR: But I also think that what counts as an action is context-dependent, and for present purposes, within the context of the game of soccer, standing still is doing nothing. Not an action.

ESTRAGON: And deepens.

VLADIMIR: [*Beat*] Where was I? Right: you've done your part; you've done *nothing*, at least in a sense. But maybe your opponent is "impacted" or "influenced" by your just being there, stationary. Say that, noticing you and not knowing whether you're offside or on, he drifts back toward you, away from the advancing play, which, if not for you, he likely would have engaged by

stepping toward it. You've done nothing. No obvious action. You had the best of intentions. Everything was in your opponent's head. Should the referees call you offside? Were you "involved" in the play, despite yourself?

ESTRAGON: You're thinking of the call against Griezmann.

VLADIMIR: [*Beat*] I thought you didn't remember watching. But yes. Griezmann realized he was offside, he stood still, not challenging for the ball, or attempting to play it. The play unfolded around him, and then the ball came to him, off a weak, contested head ball from a Tunisian defender who had moved goalside of him. At that point, Griezmann blazed into action and rocketed the ball into the net. Only for him to be called, eventually, offside. One explanation was that Griezmann's being there, in an offside position, had influenced the Tunisian defender to track back to him and thereby made a difference in the play. Or so the referees deemed.

ESTRAGON: Judgment call. Irreducibly. The element of discretion is ineliminable. That's why we need paradigmatic examples, to help us grasp the point or rationale of the rule and to extend it legitimately, or at least intelligibly, in difficult cases.

VLADIMIR: [*Silence*]

ESTRAGON: What are you waiting for?

VLADIMIR: If we're going to say that the call was made correctly, then it follows that being offside in those circumstances is an objective matter of fact that doesn't depend on the intentions of the offending player. Instead, what matters is whether, in the judgment of the referees, the player's being there made a difference for the play such that he or his team gained an advantage. But yes, you're right: the referees can't fall back on footage of the play to make the call for them. Whether they're watching live or reviewing a replay, they need to make a judgment. Maybe God could help them? Maybe God...knows? But—

ESTRAGON: [*Interrupting*] Is that who we're waiting for?

VLADIMIR: Taking God out of it—the referees can't look to the facts to speak for themselves. No matter how many times they watch the footage of the play, it won't tell them whether, in difficult cases like Griezmann's, what they're seeing is an infraction. Instead, they'll have to determine for

themselves what, in fact, the facts are, and they'll have to decide how to apply the rule. Note that description and evaluation become blurred here. How we describe what Griezmann did is bound up with our evaluation of what he did. Did he commit an offside infraction? The referees can't just look to the facts at hand. They have to evaluate the facts that they know and *decide*, not merely observe, whether the rule applies.

ESTRAGON: Simple enough. "It is not in heaven."²⁰

VLADIMIR: [*Beat*] No, not simple. And maybe it is in heaven? Or, the interpretation has been entrusted to us? Or, the reality can be perceived only internal to the dynamics of the game? Somewhat like the perception of color within our form of life...? Anyway, there's more.

ESTRAGON: I'm all ears. Or any part of the head, body, or feet, just not the arms and hands.

VLADIMIR: It's not the case that, once you're offside, you're always offside. In other words, it's not the case that, once Griezmann was offside, he could never be onside again.

ESTRAGON: Clairement. At least one would hope, by the mercy of God—if it's permitted still to invoke God.

VLADIMIR: There's another explanation for why Griezmann was called offside.

ESTRAGON: [*Interrupting*] Maybe he's Alsatian....

VLADIMIR: Let me think. A player is penalized for being offside [*from memory*] "by gaining an advantage...when [the ball] has rebounded or been deflected off the goalpost, crossbar, match official or an opponent, [or] been deliberately saved by any opponent."²¹

ESTRAGON: Is that what happened with Griezmann?

VLADIMIR: You do remember watching, or you don't? Anyway, no: as I told you, the play unfolded around him, and then the ball came to him off a head ball from a Tunisian defender who had moved goalside. It wasn't merely deflected off the defender.

ESTRAGON: And Griezmann was called offside?

VLADIMIR: He was called offside.

ESTRAGON: That's an outrage!

VLADIMIR: Look, we already considered one explanation: when he was offside, he had influenced the defender's movement and thereby gained an advantage for his team. Or so the referees deemed.

ESTRAGON: Mm. Justice must be tempered with mercy.²² Though mercy for whom—the offense or the defense? In favor of the offense: goals are normally hard to come by. In favor of the defense: they are so costly to allow....

VLADIMIR: Now here comes the second explanation. To understand it, you have to know first—if I can remember the wording.... Yes, here it is: you have to know that [*from memory*] “[a] player in an offside position receiving the ball from an opponent who deliberately plays the ball...is *not* considered to have gained an advantage.”²³

ESTRAGON: No? But he is considered to have gained an advantage if that deliberate play was a deliberate save.

VLADIMIR: [*Beat*] Right. That's an exception. If the defender deliberately saves the ball—where “[a] ‘save’ is when a player stops, or attempts to stop, a ball which is going into or very close to the goal”²⁴—and the offside player gains an advantage from being offside, he's penalized. That is, he's called offside. Do you follow?

ESTRAGON: Mm.

VLADIMIR: I'll take that to be a oui. I'm coming to the explanation. Deliberate saves apart, once the ball is played deliberately by the opponent, even if a player who was previously offside gains an advantage from his having been previously offside, he's no longer considered offside. Instead, the play is reset. It's gone on to a new phase, so to speak. The player who was offside is onside anew.

ESTRAGON: The lost has been saved. The last is now first. He who had given his life has found it.

VLADIMIR: Yes, the lost has been saved, if you will.

ESTRAGON: But Griezmann...?

VLADIMIR: Arguably, the Tunisian player who headed the ball didn't play it "deliberately"—depending on what "deliberately" means, or how we understand it. And that's the question here.

[*Silence*]

ESTRAGON: Do you have an answer?

VLADIMIR: We'll need exemplars again—paradigmatic examples of deliberate plays. You remember.

ESTRAGON: Mm.

VLADIMIR: It's a mistake to think that we can grasp a rule in all its purity, without needing concrete examples of its proper application to help us in difficult cases.

ESTRAGON: Mm.

VLADIMIR: Nonetheless, consideration of the concept does throw some light. I've done some reading. The Angelic Doctor, no less.

ESTRAGON: Angels, doctors? Do angels have bodies?

VLADIMIR: Aquinas. Thomas. The Angelic Doctor. His *Summa theologiae*, first part of the second part, question 1, on the "last end of human life"—"De ultimo fine humanae vitae."

ESTRAGON: That's not French.

VLADIMIR: Aquinas distinguishes between what he calls properly human actions, *actus humanus* in Latin, and what he calls actions of a man, *actus hominis*.²⁵

ESTRAGON: A fine distinction. How many angels can stand on the point of a pin...?

VLADIMIR: An action is properly a human action if and only if it proceeds from a deliberate will—in other words, you’ve weighed what you want to do, and you’re the master of what you go on to do. Aquinas even writes, “Wherefore only those actions of which man is master are properly called human.”²⁶

ESTRAGON: Where-fore....

VLADIMIR: It’s not like a cough you can’t stifle, or a sudden sneeze.

ESTRAGON: Gesundheit! But Griezmann...?

VLADIMIR: I’m coming to him, or to the defender who headed him the ball. Or, off whose head the ball bounced to him.

ESTRAGON: Another fine distinction.

VLADIMIR: Exactly! Or almost exactly. It’s not *another* distinction, but the very same distinction I’ve been trying to draw between a properly human action and an action of a man. You see, had the defender—we really should name him....

ESTRAGON: Talbi. Montassar Talbi.

VLADIMIR: [*Beat*] Had Talbi been the master of his action and deliberately headed the ball in Griezmann’s direction, that would have been a human action, and Griezmann at that point would have been onside. A deliberate, human action resets the play; it goes on to a new phase.

ESTRAGON: “I am the master of my fate,/ I am the captain of my soul.”²⁷

VLADIMIR: Hmm. Maybe, but we’re not always the masters of our actions. Sometimes, to quote I believe the same poem, we have to act “[i]n the fell clutch of circumstance.”²⁸ Sometimes, that is, we have to hazard an action that we can foresee, because of the circumstances, isn’t likely to meet its goal. No pun intended.

ESTRAGON: Talbi wasn’t trying to score!

VLADIMIR: No, but he also wasn’t trying to head the ball toward Griezmann. Instead, under pressure from another French player, he was just trying to divert the ball, to prevent the French player on him from scoring.

Talbi acted in desperation. Yes, he deliberately headed the ball, but he didn't deliberately head it toward Griezmann. In other words, that's not the description of what he voluntarily did.

ESTRAGON: He voluntarily headed the ball, but he didn't voluntarily head it toward Griezmann? "There are more things in heaven and Earth, [Vladimir],/ Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."²⁹

VLADIMIR: Actually, philosophy has that one covered, more or less. But the explanation may be more than you want to hear.

ESTRAGON: No. I'm all ears, or any part of the head, body, or feet—

VLADIMIR: [*Interrupting*] The statement that this or that action "is voluntary" is true only under certain descriptions—that is, the descriptions under which the agent willed it.

ESTRAGON: Mm.

VLADIMIR: That's not true of all statements. For example, the statements, "My copy of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is missing its cover" and "My copy of Beckett's most famous play is missing its cover" are both equally true, despite the fact that the descriptions are different.

ESTRAGON: Mm.

VLADIMIR: By contrast, the statement that "Oedipus chose to kill the haughty stranger who ordered him to give way" is true, whereas it's not true that "Oedipus chose to kill his father," even though *his father* designates the same individual as *the haughty stranger*.³⁰

ESTRAGON: Mm. TMI. And I think you're mixing your theatre.

VLADIMIR: Yes. But I hope you see the point. [*Beat*] Where were we?

ESTRAGON: Griezmann. Talbi. Deliberate action. Voluntary action. Human action. Action of a man. TMI.

VLADIMIR: Right! Remember what happened: Talbi went up for a contested head ball and weakly headed it toward Griezmann. Or more accurately perhaps: the ball hit off Talbi's head and bounced toward Griezmann.

It seems that wasn't a properly human action on Talbi's part. It was what Aquinas calls the action of a man. Talbi did it, but he wasn't the master of it. Maybe we could say that the game mastered him in that moment....

ESTRAGON: And Griezmann?

VLADIMIR: And it follows that Griezmann was still offside when the ball came to him, because the play hadn't reset. The referees made the right call. [*Beat*] Unless....

ESTRAGON: Unless...?

VLADIMIR: Unless we want to say that what matters is that Talbi did deliberately head the ball—that was a deliberate, human action on his part—though it didn't work out well for him. The ball didn't just knock off him, after all. He did hit it with his head—that's the description of his voluntary action—though he wasn't able to direct where it went.

ESTRAGON: Where is this going? God help us.

VLADIMIR: On that interpretation, Griezmann was no longer offside, and his goal should have counted.

ESTRAGON: It's too late.

VLADIMIR: It's too late.

ESTRAGON: God save us all.

FINIS

¹ See IFAB, *Laws of the Game 2022/23*, online at www.theifab.com, from which versions in various languages can be downloaded.

² *Ibid.*, 93.

³ *Lois du jeu*, 97.

⁴ *Laws of the Game*, 93.

⁵ *Ibid.* (emphasis added).

⁶ *Lois du jeu*, 97.

⁷ *Laws of the Game*, 93.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

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- ¹⁰ *Lois du jeu*, 97.
- ¹¹ *Laws of the Game*, 93.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 94.
- ¹³ *Lois du jeu*, 98.
- ¹⁴ *Laws of the Game*, 17.
- ¹⁵ *Spielregeln*, 102.
- ¹⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, bilingual ed., trans. C.K. Ogden (London: Routledge, 1922), 189: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”
- ¹⁷ *Laws of the Game*, 94.
- ¹⁸ *Lois du jeu*, 98.
- ¹⁹ *Reglas de Juego*, 100. Sensibly, no adjective: “realizar una acción que afecte claramente a la posibilidad de un adversario de jugar el balón.”
- ²⁰ Deuteronomy 30:12.
- ²¹ *Laws of the Game*, 94.
- ²² Compare Jean Porter, *Moral Action and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 195.
- ²³ *Laws of the Games*, 94 (emphasis added).
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I-II, q. 1, a. 1, online in Latin and English translation at <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~ST.I-II.Q1>.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.* “Unde illae solae actiones vocantur proprie humanae, quarum homo est dominus.”
- ²⁷ William Ernest Henley, “Invictus,” online at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51642/invictus>.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I, v, 167.
- ³⁰ See for discussion Alan Donagan, *The Theory of Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 118–125.