

Exchanges (part 1)

“You’re the Salt in my Coffee”

by Charles Matthews

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Do you believe Go is an intuitive game, or a rational pursuit? It is perhaps most useful to allow that it has features of both kinds. In discussing Go, however, there seems to be a constant recourse to this contrast. Some talk about shape, others about accurate reading.

Now Go does offer many attractive sides to those who take it up. There is Go as an art. Its oriental heritage plainly supports this aspect. Those who take this as a fundamental point are going to emphasise perception as a major part of playing. Alongside ideas on good and bad shape, the artistic school of thought will for example speak about correct style, or direction of play.

On the other hand, and something very much in evidence in the approach of many Western players, Go can be seen as a sort of technology. In attempts to graft it onto existing concepts (experience with other games, mathematics) various transparent ideas come to the fore: such as reading out life-and-death situations, applying set sequences of play, and counting to form judgements on the state of the game.

For myself I don’t find the implied contrast particularly helpful. Relying on the concept of balance (intuitive), but also on the requirements of limited time (practical rationality), I’d say you need all of this, and more, to take the decisions the board throws at you, and play well. The unbalanced nature both of “playing by guesswork” and “real-time problem-solving” approaches becomes clear when you meet them in opponents; and eventually the lesson may come home that both fluency and accuracy are of high practical value.

In choosing a topic to launch a series of AGJ articles, I found that I wanted some way to bridge this apparent divide. What I hope to do is draw out some of the content of the term “exchange”, as used in multiple ways in Go. It does have feet in both camps. Saying “good exchange” or “bad exchange for White” about a pair of successive plays is a comment in intuitive style. But, just as much, the evaluation of any sequence as an exchange is simply (though Go isn’t simple) a matter of relating “before” and “after” judgements on the overall position. Think for example of *ko* fights.

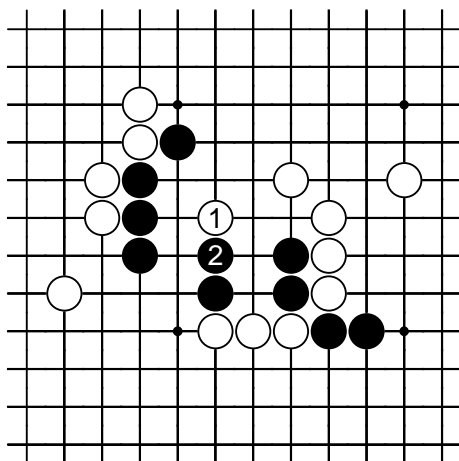
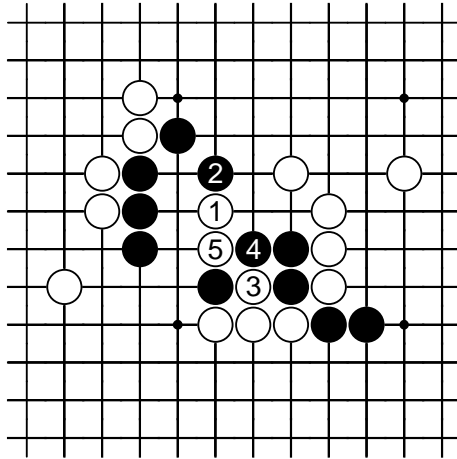


Diagram 1

I recently came across an example of a really bad exchange, something like what appears in Diagram 1. Watching this is like seeing someone putting salt in their coffee. There is no mystery about the process. It’s the motivation

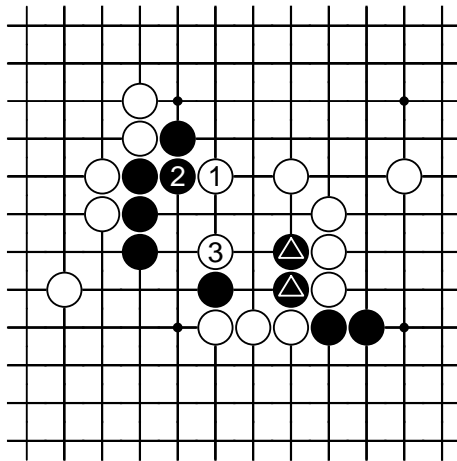
that is hard to understand.

Diagram 2



Well, no doubt White thought Black would be kind enough to follow Diagram 2. There Black treats White 1 as a peeping play and connects against it. Then White can capture key cutting stones with 3 and 5. The trouble is that Black's play 2 in Diagram 1 also protects against the cut, and now the chance is gone.

Diagram 3



What White has lost is the chance of the better peep 1 of Diagram 3. If Black connects with 2 White can follow with 3, a quietly effective clamping play to capture the two marked black stones.

Peeping plays very often are answered immediately. Then there is the question, was the exchange peep/connection a good one for the peeping player? This can be harder to answer, in general, than whether the peep will really force a reply. I want to develop that theme further in the rest of this article.

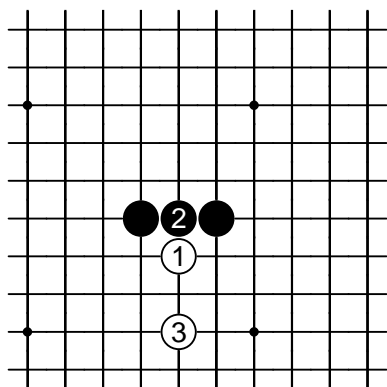


Diagram 4

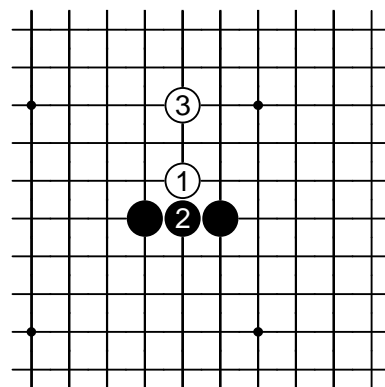


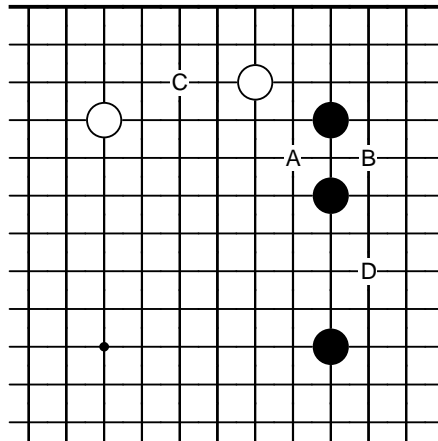
Diagram 5

Considered as a piece of fighting in the centre of the board, the peep and follow-up jump away employed by White in Diagrams 4 and 5 isn't so hard to understand. Having peeped, it would be heavy (clumsily possessive) for White to connect any more solidly to 1. But suppose we ask in the abstract, which of these diagrams should White choose? This becomes a question about direction of play that clearly must be answered on the basis of further information about the game. White can't go making a weak group, in the hope that Black will also be weak, with

complete disregard for the fighting and influence elsewhere on the board.

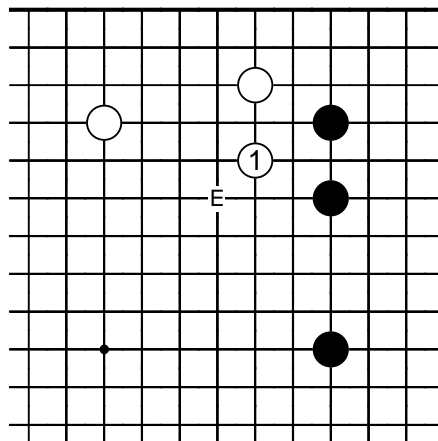
That being said, even playing 1 for 2 as an exchange, leaving 3 for later, may be a mistake for White. A fundamental type of bad exchange is peeping on the “wrong” side, and later being swallowed up. If you can’t tell which side is “right” or “wrong”, what should you do? Why, resist the temptation to peep, at least until you are more convinced.

Diagram 6



In the more familiar context of Diagram 6, there is still a question for White about the peeping plays A and B. This is a common position, but one with an underlying dynamic tension. Black can invade at C. In that case it may be useful for White to peep at A. White however may invade at D. Then the White peep at B is one of the fighting options, so that White doesn't yet want to close it down.

Diagram 7



The normal follow-up play for White in this area of the board would be 1 of Diagram 7. There is an alternate play at E, which performs much the same function: take a key point for central influence, for dominance either in a framework contest or a game of invasion and counter-invasion. Now if you plan this choice of 1 next, the peep at A would be redundant. If you plan E, the peep may be more tempting as a shape, but it would still be a bad exchange. While Black's formation is open both to a 3-3 invasion and an intrusion at D, it makes no sense to play a peep from outside. In Go serious weaknesses should be landed on, not pushed at. You would have to have quite convincing reasons to believe that the game in question was simply a central framework contest, before playing A then E as White.

