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Abstract

Did Wittgenstein violently threaten Karl Popper with a poker on the cold evening of 25 October 1946 at a meeting of Moral Sciences Club in Cambridge? Responding to this question is the wonderful pretext that the authors use to introduce the rich world and characters of mid-twentieth century philosophy. They grab their readers' imaginations by latching onto this concrete, legendary, event - the alleged aggressive wielding of a poker - at what many would have imagined to be an utterly civilised, if not downright dull, philosophical meeting. Through this investigation, they bring to life not only the characters in this drama, both principal and supporting, but they also put flesh on the bones of the historical contexts from which some great philosophical ideas have emerged.

Keywords

ten, story, poker, wittgenstein, argument, minute, between, philosophers, great, two

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Did Wittgenstein violently threaten Karl Popper with a poker on the cold evening of 25 October 1946 at a meeting of Moral Sciences Club in Cambridge? Responding to this question is the wonderful pretext that the authors use to introduce the rich world and characters of mid-twentieth century philosophy. They grab their readers' imaginations by latching onto this concrete, legendary, event - the alleged aggressive wielding of a poker - at what many would have imagined to be an utterly civilised, if not downright dull, philosophical meeting. Through this investigation, they bring to life not only the characters in this drama, both principal and supporting, but they also put flesh on the bones of the historical contexts from which some great philosophical ideas have emerged.

The book begins by reviewing the accounts of those eyewitnesses to the event who are still living. This activity, all too familiar for affidavos of courtroom dramas and mysteries, is nonetheless gripping. Naturally, their memories of the event disagree, ruling out a simple answer to the question of what occurred and why. But getting this right is of crucial importance because the way Popper recalls it in his autobiography has left him accused of, at least, unintentionally embellishing the cause of the provocation if not, in fact, lying about it.

To understand why he might have done such a thing, we are treated to a fascinating socio-historical tour of and insight into the lives, both personal and professional, of the two main figures in the dispute. What follows is a detailed account of the character and development of Vienna both pre- and post-war; the terrible plight of the Jews; and the way in which these two philosophers both, eventually, found their way from their shared homeland to the tiny seminar room in East Anglia.

Moving in the highest social circles, having both great wealth and regular contact with the cultural elite of their time, the members of the Wittgenstein family - even prior, during, and after the devastation of the war - had opportunities that simply were not available to others. Although his being recognised for his genius by Russell, and then later by others, is largely responsible for the ease at which Wittgenstein found himself dominating the intellectual scene

at Cambridge, this also meant that he never had to concern himself with such mundane matters as finding an academic position or self-promoting his work (not that it was likely that he would have done anything so demeaning in any case). Given his aristocratic background, he would certainly have deemed such activities to be unworthy or ignoble. A good example of this can be found in the way he responded to Moore over the submission of the *Tractatus* for his doctorate (which is detailed in the book). Because of this, Wittgenstein's entire focus could afford to be, and was, decidedly on the internal features of his work and his philosophical interests as they unfolded naturally. An explanation of his ghastly treatment of others (which is also chronicled within) - of which his behaviour towards Waismann is singled out as perhaps his lowest moment - is laid at the door of his uncompromising moral perfectionism: an expression of his requirement for absolute precision and clarity in all things.

Coming from a far less privileged background and without such robust connections, Popper's career is, on the other hand, cast by the authors as being largely driven by a need to prove himself and to achieve public recognition. He is characterised as deeply concerned by the way others perceived him and his work; hence, the importance of his securing a respectable philosophical post in England and indeed that of *being seen* to be the one who heroically defeated both Wittgenstein and the philosophers of the Vienna Circle whom he regarded as collectively threatening to undermine the only apology for doing philosophy: that it can solve substantive theoretical problems. Although he was never invited to be a member of the Vienna circle nor offered a chair at Oxford or Cambridge, aspects of Popper's philosophy left a clear mark on powerful political figures, organisations, and great scientists of his time. The fact that he, unlike Wittgenstein, was honoured with a knighthood is a measure of his ultimate stature in the world outside academia. Still, within philosophy, he never achieved the heights Wittgenstein ultimately attained.

All this makes a good story and the book is a very exciting introduction to these figures (and the world they moved in) - leaving one wanting to read more of their work and more about their history. Nevertheless, it also presents conclusions - particularly about the way that Wittgenstein viewed the nature and end of philosophy - as if these are easily discerned matters of fact when, of course, a great controversy rages about this. And it is right that it should so rage because how we understand what Wittgenstein was doing bears directly not only on the importance of his work but on the possibilities for doing philosophy now. It is not at all the case that everyone agrees that it is an accurate portrayal of Wittgenstein's approach to see it as entirely therapeutic or that it is only concerned with "merely" linguistic puzzles. By endorsing this view, in their admittedly thumbnail sketch of the philosophical issues at stake in the debate, the authors provide an over-simple account that threatens to trivialise what Wittgenstein took to be the source and character of philosophical disquiet. In fact, his views are far more complex and subtle.

Consider the way the authors treat the infamous "red and green all over" case (the example is apposite in that it did mark a pivotal point in Wittgenstein's thinking). They write: "Can something be red and green all over? No, but that is not a deep metaphysical truth - it is a rule of our grammar. Perhaps in a far-flung corner of the world, in a distant part of a remote jungle, there is an undiscovered tribe in which descriptions of shrubs or berries or cooking pots as 'red and green all over' are commonplace" (231). A moment's reflection on this "possibility" cries out for more, for, will we rightly be puzzled by what this tribe possibly means by saying such

things? It is certainly part of Wittgenstein's point that nothing independent could fix the bounds of sense for us: that our rules are not ultimately constrained by "reality" as-it-is-in-itself. Even so, it hardly follows that everything is simply left up to us as a matter of mere relativistic, linguistic convention. As Davidson's thought experiment of radical interpretation reveals, when interpreting others we need to see how the subjects in question *relate* to the various things in the world. Here the possibilities are not just left wide open. "We say grammar determines which combinations of words have sense and which do not; but on the other hand, grammar is not answerable to any reality, that it is *in a certain sense* arbitrary. Hence, if a rule forbids me to construct a certain combination of words, then I have only to abrogate this rule" (Baker, 2002, 39. See also 381. Emphasis added).

What these abrogations might result in is, I think, even for a Wittgenstein, a tricky business to understand. The notorious case of the seeming impossibility of our saying of something that it is both red and green (simultaneously) brings this home. Although our first reaction is to invoke the law of non-contradiction to judge any such statement to be nonsense, it is always possible for us to alter our meanings and revise this ruling – it is not, as it were, written in stone. Of course, in doing so, Wittgenstein also realises that we will necessarily break faith with our ordinary usage (this explains why we may be initially unable to "make sense" of any such use). This being so, as presented above, simply postulating an undiscovered tribe capable of making such judgements woefully underdescribes what is required of the imagination and in a misleading way.

On closer scrutiny of Wittgenstein's later writings, there lurks the possibility that such rule-breaking may fail to have any wider point or purpose. But this it is not something determined by a simple check against an independent reality: it is necessarily tied to our needs as well. In this way, we are driven to look at the place of such rules in our practices as a curative for endorsing the equally overly-simplistic idea that an underlying, pre-given reality defines what is possible and what is not. This is in keeping with Wittgenstein's rejection of Fregean and other forms of objectivism about meaning.

This pushes us to ask: In just what sense is it "up to us" to decide the limits of our grammar? Even if these are not entirely determined by something outside us, it does not follow that they are wholly arbitrary. If our language is bound up or an expression of our form of life, in what sense are the "rules" of grammar "merely" linguistic or conventional? These are difficult questions in Wittgenstein scholarship and the very fact that they can be asked with sense reveals that his views about the nature of philosophical problems are complex. Consider, for example, the following quotations in light of the fact that according to Edmonds/Eidinow's presentation of the Popper-Wittgenstein debate, Wittgenstein supposedly thought "real philosophical problems" do not exist at all:

I may find scientific questions interesting, but they never really grip me. Only conceptual and aesthetic questions do that. At bottom I am indifferent to the solution of scientific problems; but not the other sort. (1980, 79e, remark dated 1949)

By their very nature philosophical *problems* don't have solutions but resolutions. If one doesn't want to SOLVE philosophical problems – why

doesn't one give up dealing with them. For solving them means changing one's point of view, the old way of thinking. And if you don't want that, then you should consider the problems unsolvable. (1992, 84e)

There is not enough space to go into detail about this in a short review (I have discussed these issues at length in my book *Wittgenstein and the End of Philosophy*). What I want to underline is that these concerns are real and an oversimplistic presentation of them is likely to have a misleading influence on casual readers, promoting some common misconceptions. For example, in 2004, Alison Gopink, a prominent developmental psychologist, repeats - almost verbatim - the authors' interpretation of the thinking that lay behind the debate as if it were unproblematically transparent. Classifying Popper as a philosopher of science and Wittgenstein as a philosopher of language, Gopink (2004) writes: "Here Popper was issuing a direct challenge to Wittgenstein, who had argued that philosophy could only analyze linguistic puzzles - not solve any real problems" (21). Worse than putting this simple and controversial spin on the nature of their debate, she finishes by suggesting that Popper was eventually proven right, as shown by recent work in cognitive science.

As a philosopher of mind with an interest in Wittgenstein such comments provoke an impassioned response in me (and I would not be alone in taking sides in topics such as this and other important philosophical issues). The fact is that whether they are "great" or not, current thinkers still care deeply about the answers that are given to questions about how the nature of philosophy relates to science since such answers have important implications for our thinking. These debates still matter, just as they did in the past. This only goes to show that philosophy is not a finished business, something of only historical interest. Without wishing to detract from the well-crafted tale they tell, I think the authors are just wrong to say:

It is hard to imagine a similar debate raging today - in Cambridge or anywhere else. . . On the big issues it was not enough to be right - passion is vital. Now that sense of intellectual urgency has dissipated. Tolerance, relativism, the postmodern refusal to commit, the triumph of uncertainty - all these rule out a repeat of the pyrotechnics of [the meeting in room] H3. Perhaps, too, there is currently so much specialization and so many movements and fissures within higher education, that the important questions have been lost. (290-291)

The prediction that we have seen the end of such emotionally charged conflicts is both wrong and overly pessimistic. This said, *Wittgenstein's Poker* is a delightful book.

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