



Wittgenstein's Poker

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Introduction Many of us will find it difficult to conceive of how a 10-minute argument between two brilliant and rather cranky men -- one that took place not in a courtroom or boardroom but in a dank, drafty study in one of Cambridge University's classical buildings -- could achieve mythological status more than a half-century later. Especially since the account (and the ensuing debate surrounding it) focuses on a single witty statement -- and the question of whether it was uttered before or after someone left the room..

As this book clearly shows, philosophy is a discipline that encourages us to strip down ideas to their bare essentials. It is these kernels of truth that draw us to a better understanding of the world around us. And so this debate, and the single sentence at the heart of the matter, is revealed to possess a world of import. In *Wittgenstein's Poker*, the authors illustrate how history, personality, science, religion, culture, and civilization played a part in bringing two parallel lives into an explosive juxtaposition in 1946. But what triggered the explosion? Why, with so many eyewitness accounts of

brilliant (although potentially fuzzy) minds, is the truth still impossible to establish? And, incidentally, why should we care?

There are myriad ways of appreciating this work of literary detection. The authors take us to the waning days of the Viennese empire, when an eminently civilized society became infected with hatred and disillusionment. They introduce us to two extraordinary men who emerged from a shared milieu to embark on widely diverging paths. They examine the inner workings of academic culture, where personalities loomed large and status and success were as capricious as the latest fashions. They provide an engaging and accessible crash course in Philosophy 101, providing the lay reader with a basic grasp of the ideas over which these two men fought so bitterly.

Fables, myths, and symbols help us comprehend history according to our individual truths. By dissecting a historic moment, revealing the variety of political and social forces, personalities, cultures, prejudices, and even natural phenomena that willed it into being, the moment is transformed into a symbol, a myth, a fable, its significance deepened by our understanding of the surrounding world. Its truth transcends its factuality. And there it hangs in the air, waiting for the next scholar to take it down and re-examine it in order to satisfy a different principle.

The authors of *Wittgenstein's Poker* have dissected this peculiar process, showing us the evolution of an event into an idea. That the event itself was concerned with ideas and truth provides the delicious irony that makes theirs such a compelling story. Do we, should we, continue to come to blows over abstract principles that seem only tangentially, at best, to affect our daily efforts to care for our families, further our careers, nurture our community and planet? Some of us may find that there are more pressing uses for our time; others may argue that abstract principles are the only measure we have for validating our existence. Whether you agree or not, we most likely will continue to argue about lofty ideas -- and this book shows us why.

Questions for Discussion

1. Among the many quotations cited by both philosophers throughout the book, two are frequently referred to: Wittgenstein's claim that "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent," and Popper's argument that "History is affected by discoveries we will make in the future." Why is each of these quotes important? What do they say about the men who spoke these words, as well as about the incident that is central to the book?
2. What was at stake during the debate for both Popper and Wittgenstein? Who had the most to lose?
3. Why do you think this debate achieved such legendary status?
4. Discuss the topic of the debate -- philosophical problems versus philosophical puzzles -- in the different contexts of post-war Europe and post-September 11th America. How do the events of history alter the debate? If you were a student at Cambridge in 1946, how might you have thought differently about this question than you do now?
5. What is the significance of each man's religious background -- including his rejection of his Jewish heritage -- to his position on philosophy?
6. How do the authors draw on 20th century European history and culture to illuminate the debate between Wittgenstein and Popper? How had both World Wars impacted the lives of each man?
7. What was Bertrand Russell's relationship to each philosopher? Why was his presence during the argument significant?
8. The authors describe both men as outsiders. Is this a necessary prerequisite to being a philosopher? Do you think each man achieved his successes because of his willingness to disassociate himself from society as a whole?
9. In addition to the basic theories of each man's philosophical leanings, the authors provide detailed information about Popper's and Wittgenstein's personalities as well as details about their daily lives. Is this information necessary? Does it enhance the book's recounting of the pivotal event, or does it confuse the matter, even detract from it?
10. Where do you stand on the debate between these two philosophers? Are philosophical problems real, as Popper argued? Or are they, as Wittgenstein insisted, just puzzles to be solved using language as a tool?
11. Who do you think won the debate?
12. How has this story affected your understanding of historical analysis? Is it important to get the facts right? Are the myths or memorable stories that grow out of historical events more relevant -- and often less engaging -- than the truth?
13. Where, on the political spectrum, do you think Wittgenstein and Popper would be on the major global debates of our times?