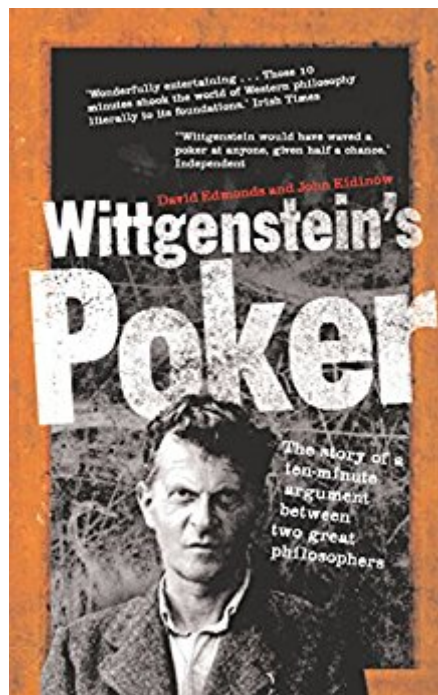




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Wittgenstein's Poker: The Story Of A Ten Minute Argument Between Two Great Philosophers



Synopsis

On 25 October 1946, in a crowded room in Cambridge, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Karl Popper came face to face for the first and only time. The encounter lasted only ten minutes, and did not go well. Almost immediately, rumours started to spread around the world that the two philosophers had come to blows, armed with red-hot poker . . .

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Customer Reviews

This was a light read, that could have benefitted by a bit more weight. The book goes deep into the background of the two sparring philosophers, delving into the social and historical milieu that spawned these two intellectual giants. Mr. Edmunds is at his best when describing the Vienna Circle; and the group of philosophers who made up that cadre of thinkers. But the descriptions of the competing world views is shallow, at best; with Mr. Edmunds skirting the harder questions; particularly with regard to the factors that motivated the change in Wittgenstein's philosophy. It was that change that ignited the disagreement between the two men. I enjoyed the book, but would have

enjoyed it more had there been a bit of meat at the end of that poker.

On October 25, 1946, at a meeting of the Moral Science Club at Cambridge University, England, there was a confrontation between two of the great twentieth-century philosophers. They represented polar opposite views, views upon which each of them had built their life's work and reputation. Other prominent philosophers were in attendance, among them Bertrand Russell. Both were Viennese Jews who fled Austria when the tide of antisemitism was overtaking Austria, Germany, and much of Europe in the 1930s. That's where the similarities end. Ludwig Wittgenstein was born to a wealthy family, one of the richest in Vienna. Karl Popper was not. But what this brief confrontation in 1946 came down to was philosophical world-view, and it was this: Wittgenstein's obsession was language, and he believed that if we could understand how language worked, most philosophical problems would disappear. He believed that philosophical problems arise when we misunderstand "the logic of our language." This view was anathema to Karl Popper, who believed that there existed real philosophical issues, with real world consequences, and that focusing only on the language was akin to "the practice of cleaning spectacles. Language philosophers might think this is worthwhile in itself. Serious philosophers realize that the only point of the cleaning is to enable the wearer to see the world more clearly." [236] Popper was a guest of the Moral Science Club that evening to present a paper titled "Are There Philosophical Problems?", and it was aimed directly at Wittgenstein and his views. At some point in the presentation, according to eyewitness accounts, Wittgenstein interrupted Popper, rose and shook a hot poker from the fireplace at him. That's one account of many. WITTGENSTEIN'S POKER is actually many things. It's a biography of the combatants, Wittgenstein and Popper. It's an overview of the prevailing philosophical views from the First World War to 1946. And, more to the point of the book's raison d'être, Edmonds and Eidinow have performed something of an historical "dig," an unearthing of the details of that evening which became the stuff of legend in academic circles, trying to piece together what really occurred between those two giants of philosophy. It may have been a mere 10-minute outburst, but the ripples from that evening are still felt today.

Very clear and vivid account of the period, the principal and secondary protagonists and the

philosophical issues and their significance. The incident that is the very reason (although it sometimes seems to be a pretext for describing the intellectual environment and the characters involved) illustrates very well that it's not just a clash between very strong characters but also between two intellectual world views that are strongly felt about by both and their view associates.

This is a creatively 'designed' book. Basing their focus on an event that happened for 10 minutes, the authors have summarized the origins, the developments and the rise to prominence of 2 of our greatest intellectual minds. This is an ideal book for someone who wants to, in under 250 pages, read about both Wittgenstein and Popper, analyze their growth to the status they eventually achieved and the kind of lives they had before they got to their rightful status. I did however feel that the authors are biased towards Wittgenstein. Though, they have tried to portray the man's general behavior towards his colleagues, his sympathizers and his students using examples of his dismissive attitude, one cannot run away from the distinct feeling that they are favoring the version of the story that makes Popper turn out to be the devious scheming instigator of the argument. Also, some more details from the actual exchange would have been great and would have been a perfect finish to what is otherwise a decently written and entertaining book.

A socially detailed look at two philosophers who barely knew each other and rather opposed each other's positions...the worlds of Vienna, Austria, England, money, personalities and thinking are all examined in a careful but engaging piece, sometimes a bit repetitious (as if the chapters did not trust each other). Although I know the philosophy pretty well and missed some of that detail, I didn't know much of the context, so I enjoyed "the gossip", much of it enlightening and all of it enriching...However the authors have a serious problem with their unwillingness to speak of homosexuality and its expression (or repression) in England, so that is someone else's task...did I miss that book? And this book makes one yearn for a similarly congenial look at the psychology of important philosophers.

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