

HOT-TEMPERED PHILOSOPHY

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David Edmonds and John Eidinow. *Wittgenstein's Poker: the Story of a Ten-Minute Argument between Two Great Philosophers*. New York: Harper Collins, 2001. Pp. x, 340. US\$24.00 (paper \$13.95).

History knows of only one time when Karl Popper, Bertrand Russell, and Ludwig Wittgenstein were all together. This was 25 October 1946 at a meeting of Cambridge University's Moral Science Club. Wittgenstein was chairman of the club. Karl Popper was visiting lecturer. Bertrand Russell was in the audience. Wittgenstein and Popper had a lively disagreement over no less than the very nature of philosophy itself. One of the earliest, and most sensational, accounts of the occasion culminates in an actual duel between Wittgenstein and Popper with red-hot fireplace poker. *Wittgenstein's Poker* presents conflicting first-hand accounts of the incident in an attempt to set the record straight. It is largely the contradictions among the first-hand reports that lend drama and intrigue to the book.

David Edmonds and John Eidinow are award-winning journalists with the BBC. This is their first book. It is refreshingly light on jargon and should be of interest to philosophers and non-philosophers alike. In addition to giving a detailed account of the specific confrontation between Popper and Wittgenstein, the book presents an interesting and detailed prelude. It outlines the context of the tension between the two protagonists. It gives overviews of their respective upbringings, personalities, and philosophies. It also discusses kindred twentieth-century philosophical movements.

The kernel of Popper and Wittgenstein's difference that ill-fated night was that Popper believed in such things as genuine problems in the field of philosophy. By contrast, Wittgenstein maintained that there is nothing in philosophy that amounts to more than mere puzzles. All accounts agree that, as the argument heated up, Wittgenstein took the poker from the fireplace and started waving it at Popper. But the witnesses give different accounts of Wittgenstein's intentions and ensuing behaviour. An amusing undisputed climactic detail is that when Wittgenstein, while waving the implement, importunes Popper to cite a genuine moral problem, Popper replies (much to Wittgenstein's consternation): "What to do with chairmen who threaten visiting professors with

waving pokers!”

The third prominent character in the tale is Bertrand Russell to whom much reference is made. Russell had most recently addressed the Moral Science Club in 1935 and, more significantly, had been a mentor to both Wittgenstein and Popper. He is presented as a retiring, much revered, towering intellect who may have even put Popper up to this confrontation with Wittgenstein:

Although the war was over, the future of Europe looked bleak. Industry lay in ruins, basic necessities were in short supply, Communist parties were flourishing in some Western democracies, the Soviets were strengthening their grip in eastern Europe and developing the bomb. These developments presented the West with immediate threats to its democratic future. Meanwhile Popper and Russell frustratedly watched Wittgenstein persuade a generation of new philosophers that philosophy was solely, as they saw it, trifling with language. It was essential for the future of philosophy that this deception should be exposed. (P. 242)

The first twenty chapters of *Wittgenstein's Poker* give the groundwork and relevant history; the twenty-first chapter details the probable nature and sequence of events that infamous October evening. The book concludes with attempts to put the whole debacle in proper perspective. There is also appended to the book a most interesting 1998 *Times Literary Supplement* feature of seven eyewitness accounts reviving the debate over developments that day.

Wittgenstein's Poker is recommended reading.
