

Philosophy in Review



David Edmonds, "The Murder of Professor Schlick: The Rise and Fall of the Vienna Circle"

Mark Porrovecchio

Volume 43, numéro 1, février 2023

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1098272ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1098272ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (imprimé)

1920-8936 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Porrovecchio, M. (2023). Compte rendu de [David Edmonds, "The Murder of Professor Schlick: The Rise and Fall of the Vienna Circle"]. *Philosophy in Review*, 43(1), 14–15. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1098272ar>

Copyright © Mark Porrovecchio, 2023



Cet document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

David Edmonds. *The Murder of Professor Schlick: The Rise and Fall of the Vienna Circle.* Princeton University Press 2020. 336 pp. \$27.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780691164908); \$17.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780691211961).

David Edmonds' *The Murder of Professor Schlick* revisits a particularly tumultuous and tragic chapter in the history of philosophy. Edmonds, the coauthor of *Wittgenstein's Poker* (Ecco 2001, with John Eidinow) and an Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics distinguished research fellow, places a dizzying array of characters into a richly detailed context where ideas were debated even while livelihoods and lives were very much at risk.

The Murder is a well-thought-out book. It is comprised of twenty-one chapters. The front matter includes both preface and acknowledgement sections. The back matter is rich in useful detail; it includes brief biographies of the people discussed, a chronology of events, notes, a brief bibliography, and a useful index.

Two contrasting personalities stand at the center of *The Murder*: the even-tempered physicist and philosopher Moritz Schlick (1882-1936) and the brilliant, if mercurial, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951). It was the former who helped to introduce the latter's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) to the Circle as their 'first major project' (45). Schlick, measured where others could be grating, also managed to hold together an eclectic mix of participants—ranging from Rudolph Carnap (1891-1970) to Herbert Feigl (1902-1988)—over the course of the group's years together, even when he, at times, squabbled with members such as Otto Neurath (1882-1945).

In contrast, Wittgenstein was in constant motion, often waffling between a departure from and a return to philosophy. A case in point? He came to disavow the brilliance of his *Tractatus* almost as soon as it had been discovered by the Circle. As Edmonds notes, Wittgenstein's ideas were always 'evolving, so much so that it was almost impossible to record a fixed position' (102). That said, Schlick remained a fan of Wittgenstein's work and made sure it continued to be discussed, even as some members of the Circle viewed his output with more critical eyes (49).

What was the philosophical bond that held the Circle together? Edmonds displays a deft hand contextualizing their work. While never as unified as some have suggested, a through-line did develop that all of the members embraced: 'to develop a philosophy of knowledge that was able to comprehend the latest revelations in physical science and in the process to slay metaphysics' (160). In the process, the group ranged across methods and matters of emphasis in covering a host of topics ranging from the problems of verification to questions of ethics. They also had disputes about the degree to which the Circle should be a school of thought proper, no less one with a boastful manifesto—*The Scientific Conception of the World: The Vienna Circle*—suggesting social and political aspirations (90-92).

The Murder also makes a compelling case for why logical positivism (and/or logical empiricism) was seen as dangerous by those embracing fascist and autocratic tendencies. In an era rife with anti-Semitism, many of the Jewish members of the Circle faced injustices that grew only more threatening as the 1930s wore on. It was also the case that their critics saw in their philosophical positions the taint of modernism. In viewing metaphysics as myth, they challenged the traditions to which their



critics clung (80; 117). So, while members of the Circle disagreed on the outward facing aspects of their work, their critics aligned them with all that they thought was wrong in society. As Edmonds notes, even ‘if there was nothing inherently socialist about logical empiricism, there was certainly something inherently antifascist and anti-Nazi about it’ (138). A tragic manifestation of this paranoia is sadly referenced in the title of this book. In 1936, Schlick was gunned down on his way to work by Johann Nelböck. His defense of his actions when he was put on trial? Simply and horrifically, Nelböck claimed that Schlick ‘had promoted a treacherous Jewish philosophy’ (178). Nelböck received a light sentence from sympathetic judge. In 1938, he was released on appeal, an appeal that justified the murder of Schlick on grounds of ‘ideological and political necessity’ (190).

Beyond the coverage of major figures, a signal strength of *The Murder* is its ability to bring to life people who existed on the periphery of the Circle, no less the history being told. One such figure is the mathematician and logician Rose Rand (1903-1980). Suffering professional and personal slights for being a Jewish woman, Rand nonetheless was an active member of the Circle in the early-to mid-1930s. Edmonds paints her post-war life as a series of stops and stumbles, in many cases attributable to her having a difficult personality. In spite of seeing the world through ‘soot-tinted glasses’ (223), she was aided, both financially and otherwise, by persons such as Wittgenstein and British philosopher Susan Stebbing (1885-1943).

Those with even a passing familiarity with the rise of fascism in Europe will find that some of the latter chapters threaten to obscure the characters amidst the drumbeats of impending war. Here again, though, Edmonds manages to reclaim important, if neglected, figures and the organizations that helped move members of the Circle to safety. Consider the impact of Esther Simpson (1903-1996) and her work on behalf of the Academic Assistance Council (AAC), renamed in 1936 the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning (SPSL). All told, her efforts resulted in helping approximately ‘1,500 academics sacked by the Nazis flee from their homeland’ (267), including such figures as the Circle’s brash irritant Karl Popper (1902-1994) and Friedrich Waismann (1896-1959), the gifted if meek follower of Wittgenstein.

Edmonds’ ability to craft a narrative out of a potentially heady thicket of dates, details, and personae recalls the broad scope of Louis Menand’s *The Metaphysical Club* (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux 2001). But *The Murder* stands on its own as a snapshot of a group of people who took philosophy seriously while the world around them turned to dictators and devolved into war. Edmonds also makes a measured argument for the limited, though lasting, influences of the Vienna Circle. *The Murder* is a book where individuals and ideas come to life, as sure to be enjoyed by practitioners as by the general public.

Mark Porrovecchio, Oregon State University