The Murder of Professor Schlick: The Rise and Fall of the Vienna Circle by David Edmonds (review)

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The main title and subtitle of this well-researched, lucidly written, and engaging book reflect the author’s double-sided approach. On the one hand, David Edmonds uses individual life stories (including Moritz Schlick’s) as a route of access to key philosophical, political, and sociocultural issues and trends in the first half of the twentieth century. On the other hand, in chronicling the broader history of the origins, aims, and legacy of the Vienna Circle, he shows how individual lives were caught up in—and shaped by—the group’s collective endeavor to “marry an old empiricism with the new logic” (p. 3), pioneered by thinkers such as Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, Alfred North Whitehead, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. In the process, Edmonds highlights the impact of the circle’s contributions not just on epistemology, logic, the philosophy of language, and the philosophy of science but also on fields as diverse as economic theory, sociology, information graphics, and physics, among others. The book brilliantly recreates, as well, the intellectual and cultural ferment of Vienna between the wars. Thus, Edmonds brings the circle’s philosophical and metaphilosophical debates—their efforts to build a philosophical program at first known as logical positivism and later termed logical empiricism—into dialogue with work by figures ranging from Sigmund Freud, Karl Kraus, and Otto Weiniger to Gustav Klimt, Arthur Schnitzler, and Gustav Mahler.

The first chapter is structured like an overture, introducing the leitmotifs of the composition that follows. The chapter centers on the Fifth International Congress for the Unity of Science, held September 3–9, 1939, at Harvard University; this meeting was organized by Otto Neurath, a founding member of the circle, along with Charles Morris, the American philosopher who helped disseminate the logical-empiricist program in North America. As Edmonds notes, the conference coincided with the start of World War II, triggered by Germany’s invasion of Poland, and he uses the opening paragraphs to name conference delegates who were suddenly stranded in the United States (such as the Polish logician Alfred Tarski and the Austrian mathematician Richard von Mises) or who had already emigrated from Europe because of the deteriorating conditions there (such as the German philosopher of science Carl Gustav Hempel and the Austrian physicist philosopher Philipp Frank). The chapter also introduces some of the key members of the circle, including Frank, Neurath, Schlick, Rudolf Carnap, Edgar Zilsel, Felix Kaufmann, and Kurt Gödel, as well as philosophers who had significant interactions with it, like Wittgenstein and Karl Popper. In addition, the opening chapter outlines several of the circle’s core concerns—for example, philosophy’s role in clarifying the meaning and status of scientific claims, and the distinction between scientific propositions
and metaphysical “pseudo-propositions” (p. 3). It anticipates, too, the events that led to the group’s dissolution: Schlick’s murder at the hands of a mentally unstable student in 1936, the ominous attempts to label logical empiricism “a Jewish philosophy” (p. 4), and the death blows dealt to the circle by Germany’s annexation of Austria in 1938 and the forced exile of nearly all of the circle’s members and fellow travelers.

The subsequent chapters then delve into the particulars of these philosophical concerns, historical events, and contributing members, evoking the vibrancy of both interwar Vienna and the circle. In this way, the author underscores how much was lost with the rise of fascism, anti-Semitism, and state-sanctioned violence, which destroyed not just the circle but what had become a Central European hub of multicultural artistic and intellectual creativity. After presenting a genealogy of the circle—one branch of which leads back through the mathematician Hans Hahn to the physicists Ernst Mach and Ludwig Boltzmann while another leads back through Russell and Wittgenstein to Frege—Edmonds discusses how the circle came into its own under Schlick’s leadership. Taking a chair in natural philosophy at the University of Vienna in 1922, Schlick “was able to exert a calming influence on those around him, moderating disagreement, keeping egos in check” (p. 15)—although Schlick and Neurath, as it turned out, did not get along. Noting that the considerable variety of the members’ views makes it difficult to draw blanket generalizations, Edmonds suggests that what united the many brilliant thinkers who were more or less closely associated with the circle was “a passion for science, a belief in its transformative possibilities, and a fervor about the power of philosophy to assist” (p. 23). Significantly, physics was the benchmark science for the circle, which, as the author remarks, remained largely incognizant of revolutionary developments that were then taking place in other scientific fields, such as biology and genetics.

Standout sections of the book include the discussion of the circle’s program-building efforts in the larger cultural context of interwar Vienna, in particular in the coffeehouses that were then so important to the city’s intellectual life (pp. 64–73); the account of the members’ attitudes toward Freud (pp. 81–88); the discussion, in chapter 9, of how the drafting of an official manifesto for the circle helped bring about the group’s demise, by attracting unwelcome attention from the authorities and also throwing into greater relief divisions among the members (pp. 89–100); the concise summary of the debates within the circle about protocol sentences (or observation statements) and verificationism (the idea that nonanalytic statements are meaningful if and only if they are empirically verifiable) (pp. 150–56); the account of Esther Simpson’s tireless efforts on behalf of the UK’s Academic Assistance Council (later renamed the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning) to support members of the circle who had fled from Austria in the lead-up to the war (pp. 199–208); and the final two chapters, “Exile” and “Legacy,” which follow up on the exiled members’ post-Vienna lives and trace the broader impact of the circle, respectively. In
this last connection, Edmonds notes that though the central claims of logical empiricism fell out of favor relatively quickly, work that originated from or in dialogue with ideas proposed by members of the group, including Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) and Popper’s *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945), has had a continuing influence in philosophy and the wider culture. More generally, the author suggests that the circle has “shaped the practice of philosophy, particularly Anglo-American philosophy,” insofar as that philosophy is still marked by a “meticulous attention to logic and language and the pursuit of clarity, the contempt for grandiosity, and the calling-out of nonsense” (p. 261).

*The Murder of Professor Schlick* is a major contribution to intellectual and cultural history as well as the history of philosophy. The depth and quality of the discussion benefit from the author’s extensive archival research, as well as the interviews he conducted with the family members and former students of thinkers associated with the Vienna Circle. Other value-added features include a list of dramatis personae that provides helpful biographical notes for the key figures mentioned over the course of the book, a bibliography of relevant scholarly sources, and a detailed index.

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