

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN PHILOSOPHY (WHIP)-THE PHILOSOPHERS

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This new series, *What's Happening in Philosophy (WHIP)-The Philosophers* aims to provide a monthly snapshot of various trends and discussions happening across the discipline. Specifically, this series will explore these areas:

- news stories related to philosophers
- book releases (primarily) about philosophical figures
- recent articles on the history of philosophy
- current events focusing on the role of philosophers in society

In this inaugural post, we begin with a harrowing tale from David Edmonds involving the murder of the German philosopher Moritz Schlick. Schlick was a Vienna Circle guiding spirit and logical positivist thinker. Next up is Steven Nadler's take on several biographies of the 'father of modern philosophy' in his new paper, *The Many Lives of René Descartes*. Lastly, questions around AI in academia come up in an article from *Scientific American*.

Before I get to these topics, indulge me in a "first post" question to set the stage for this series. The question is this: what philosophical value is there in exploring the biographical histories and news about philosopher's lives? For example, why should we spend time figuring out why Rodis-Lewis insists (contra Baillet) that the setting for Descartes' *Discourse on Method* was Neuburg instead of Ulm? Philosophical biographer Ray Monk provides an answer. Speaking of research he did on Wittgenstein, he states, "If you understand a person, you are more likely to interpret what they say in the right spirit." He added, "if you miss that [sort of understanding of the person], you miss what gives [their writing]...its motivation."

This increased focus on the 'kind of person' (and kind of place) that created these philosophical works is one of the themes at the heart of this WHiP series.

A Recent Book of Interest: *The Murder of Professor Schlick*, By David Edmonds (2020)

David Edmonds (one of the hosts of the *Philosophy Bites* podcast) has written a number of books which deal with the personalities behind key themes in contemporary analytic philosophy. His latest page-turner leads us through the formation of the Vienna Circle. He explores how it challenged the philosophical *status quo* with its goal of setting aside metaphysics and pseudo-science. He covers the disbanding of the movement in the midst of the rise of fascism, antisemitism and widespread economic catastrophe.

His book centers on the fatal shooting of key Vienna Circle founder Moritz Schlick by one of his former students. *The Murder of Professor Schlick* (2020) succeeds as a work of cultural history while presenting the philosophical aims of the Vienna Circle in a clear and compelling manner. Edmonds does rightly note that the world was a tumultuous place in June 1936 (p. 173). Roosevelt was in the midst of renomination for a second presidential term. The depression was still lingering and Goebbels was busy finding the next 'non-Aryan' film to add to the ban list, etc. So it stands to reason that the general public was not overly interested in the fate of a renegade group of philosophers, logicians, and mathematicians. (The death of Schlick prompted only a paragraph in the *New York Times*. It was "buried at the bottom of the page below a much larger space devoted to an [Abercrombie & Fitch] advertisement for women's tennis clothing.") Yet Edmonds makes a compelling case for the lasting impact of the Circle as it "became integrated into Anglo-American philosophy" (p. 251).

Edmonds doesn't accept the proclamation that logical positivism is "as dead as a philosophical movement ever becomes." He thinks this "standard picture is unjust" (Passmore, 1967, p. 56; Edmonds, 2020, p. 259). Just what were the impacts of the Vienna Circle then? Gödel's "work in symbolic logic helped in the development of computers." Neurath's iconography led to "the male/female symbols on toilet doors." Much of the system of game theory driving economics could be traced from Karl Menger to Oskar Morgenstern (p. 259). We certainly rely on well-functioning restroom signage, computers and economic models in our daily lives. But is there more?

As philosophers, Edmonds' claim hits closer to home when he highlights that "even Quine, who became an important critic of the Circle, retained his empiricist instincts and his hostility to traditional metaphysics" (p. 259). Perhaps Edmonds' key takeaway about the real and lasting impact of the Circle echoes a remark A.J. Ayer made during his 1976 BBC television interview with Bryan Magee. "The greatest defect [with logical positivism] is that nearly all of it was false," he said, which he followed with a quick qualification that it was at least "true in spirit."

I might add another curious point here in agreement with Edmonds and the lasting legacy of the Circle and logical positivism. Quine's *Two Dogmas of Empiricism* (1951) is often presented as the thorn in the side of the notion of analyticity that the movement

needs. Some of the overview authors present Quine's attack here as quite a fatal blow. Yet the 2020 Bourget & Chalmers PhilPapers Survey reports a 62.5% (yes), 25.8% (no), 11.9% (other) split on the question of the analytic-synthetic distinction (p. 8). The reports of logical positivism's death may have been an exaggeration—at least if its supposed death depends on the enduring impact of Quine's *Two Dogmas*. Clearly there are other complexities and distinctions which come into play regarding why professional philosophers answered the analyticity question the way they did. I'll leave that topic for a future article or WHiP post. Whatever debates linger as to the lasting philosophical influence of the Vienna Circle, it is at least clear to me that Edmonds has crafted a wonderful introduction. He explores their mission and the key philosophers and historical figures which are central to understanding the movement in a more nuanced and charitable manner.

A Recent Article of Interest: *The Many Lives of René Descartes*, By Steven Nadler (2022)

Reading about philosophers and philosophies in this more open and historically rich manner would seem to be a good bit of advice for any foray into the history of philosophy. But can we go too far? In Steven Nadler's *The Many Lives of René Descartes* (2022), he claims that much of our current view of the philosopher connects back to the "touchstone (and the albatross) for all subsequent biographies," *La Vie de Monsieur Des-Cartes* (1691) by Adriaen Baillet (p. 503). In Nadler's view, *La Vie* moves beyond the occasional case of charity and "right from the start, it is clear that, with Baillet, we are dealing with hagiography" (p. 503). Not only does Nadler present a compelling case for ways in which Baillet might have gone too far in his praise of Descartes (from our modern perspective), but notes that "even in Baillet's own time, he was judged to have gone a bit too far" (p. 504).

After presenting his case against a strict reading of Baillet, Nadler surveys two Descartes biographies. He starts with *Descartes: Biographie* (1995), a bit of "a scholarly polemic" in which Geneviève Rodis-Lewis "is concerned with putting to rest as many of the mistakes and inaccuracies in Baillet as possible" (p. 505). He compares Rodis-Lewis' "first up-to-date, critical biography of the philosopher" with Stephen Gaukroger's *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography* (1995). Nadler notes that Gaukroger certainly chose the right title for the work, as "he is interested in Descartes's life primarily as a background to his thought ... [his] philosophical development, an itinerary of his *cogitationes*" (p. 508). *The Many Lives of René Descartes* is an entertaining and informative read for any philosopher with even a passing interest in the life and times of the philosophical icon.

Coming full circle here and touching upon a few of our key WHiP characters and themes, Nadler's conclusion really struck a chord with me:

There are classics of philosophical biography. Peter Brown's *Augustine of Hippo*, Ray Monk's *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*, Peter J. Conradi's *Iris Murdoch: A Life*, and Annie Cohen-Solal's *Sartre: A Life* are just a few works that come to mind that both tell a story well and do justice to the philosophy in a way integral to the life being narrated. None of the lives of Descartes surveyed here rise to that level of literary achievement with a combination of biographical detail, philosophical thoroughness, and readability. Still, each has its virtues, and taken together they do a wonderful job of revealing, with very different styles and from very different perspectives, the life and character of a very public individual who also did his best to dissimulate when he needed to, and sometimes even disappear from view. (p. 522)

Recent News of Interest: *We Asked GPT-3 to Write an Academic Paper about Itself – Then We Tried to Get It Published*, By Almira Osmanovic Thunström (2022)

I'll close this first *WHiP-The Philosophers* article with a bit of news related to the philosophy of mind. Nadler describes Descartes as "a very public individual who also did his best to dissimulate when he needed to, and sometimes even disappear from view." 'Philosophers' like the GPT-3 machine learning language model created by OpenAI can take this disappearing act a step further as they never appear in view in the first place. Almira Osmanovic Thunström begins her *Scientific American* article, *We Asked GPT-3 to Write an Academic Paper about Itself – Then We Tried to Get It Published*, with this quite curious scene: "On a rainy afternoon earlier this year, I logged in to my OpenAI account and typed a simple instruction ... Write an academic thesis in 500 words about GPT-3 and add scientific references and citations inside the text." Rather than give away too many spoilers here as to how this experiment turned out, I'll simply leave you with this question: What happens when the future of the history of philosophers involves AI philosophers who aren't flesh and blood and don't have the sorts of backstories and connections to the 'real' world that we are so far accustomed to? Head over to [Scientific American](#), see how GPT-3 did with its directive of producing a publishable academic paper, and let us know what you think in the comments. More on this theme next month.

1.] Thanks to Daily Nous commenter Rollo Burgess for bringing this survey result to my attention.

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