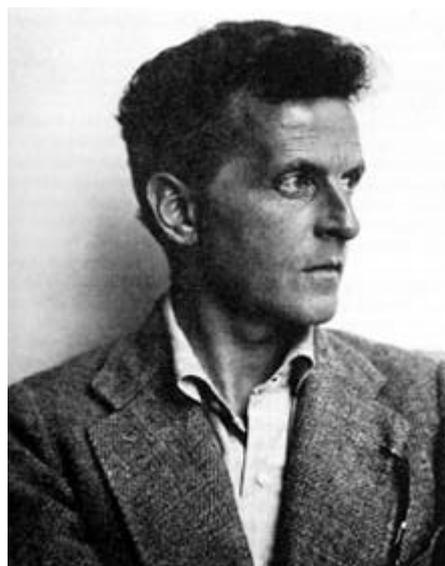


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## The truth will out

Professor John Watkins



**The Background.** About a year ago Peter Geach published a letter declaring that 'Popper is a liar' (*Times Literary Supplement*, February 13). This harked back to the account Popper had given in his autobiography of a stormy meeting of the Cambridge Moral Science Club in October, 1946. Wittgenstein was chairing the meeting and he began gesticulating rather freely with a poker. Popper had instanced as a genuine philosophical problem the problem of the validity of moral rules. According to Popper, Wittgenstein demanded an example of a moral rule, to which Popper responded with: 'Not to threaten visiting lecturers with pokers' (henceforth, *P!*) - whereupon 'Wittgenstein, in a rage, threw the poker down and stormed out of the room, banging the door behind him.'

The immediate occasion for Geach's letter was the account of this meeting that I gave in the course of an extended obituary of Popper that had recently appeared in the *Proceedings of the British Academy*. He wrote as if I had simply repeated this 'old story'. I had in fact done some research on it, which resulted in such vital facts as that the secretary of the club got the date wrong and Popper got his own title wrong. And I brought in some interesting recollections from an American student of Bertrand Russell called Hiram McLendon. But Geach could rightly complain that I failed to consult him.

**Fresh Evidence.** As a result of that correspondence in the *TLS* I now have a good deal of new evidence from people who were at the meeting. This includes an account by the late Richard Braithwaite, in whose room in King's the meeting occurred and whose poker it was. His account was relayed to me by Charles Pigden, an ex-King's man who had 'pumped' Braithwaite about the meeting soon after the publication of Popper's autobiography in the mid-1970s. A transcript of a lengthy interview of Peter Munz by the late Bill Bartley was sent me by Raymond Mew; I have met and corresponded with Sir John Vinelott, who was there as an undergraduate; and I corresponded with Stephen Toulmin. Geach had been corresponding with me in a helpful vein before loosing off his 'Liar' letter.

**The Issue.** Most witnesses recall Popper saying something like *P!*; what is in question is not whether he said it but whether he said it to Wittgenstein who thereupon stormed out, or said it in the discussion after Wittgenstein had left.

(1) Here is Braithwaite's reported account: Wittgenstein was gesturing with the poker in a manner which he (Braithwaite) considered dangerous; so he manoeuvred himself round and gently relieved him of the poker, thus averting catastrophe. Soon afterwards Wittgenstein pulled out his watch and said, in the Edwardian slang he cultivated, 'Golly, is that the time!', got up and left abruptly. In the subsequent discussion Braithwaite asked Popper for an example of a moral rule, whereupon Popper responded with *P!*.

(2) Geach wrote to me that Wittgenstein eventually subsided into his chair, letting the poker drop, whereupon it was picked up and removed by Braithwaite. (McLendon also recollected Wittgenstein eventually subsiding, after waving the poker.) Soon afterwards Wittgenstein left the room. The subsequent discussion got round to moral principles and Popper gave *P!* as an example, which caused some laughter.

(3) The late Casimir Lewy, according to Geach, remembered it similarly.

(4) Toulmin also recalls Popper saying *P!* jokingly, after Wittgenstein's departure.



**The Verdict.** So the new evidence I have received all points in one direction. Sir John Vinelott had written to the *TLS* in support of Popper's version. When I presented this new evidence to him, he accepted that Popper may have said *P!* in reply to Braithwaite, but he clearly remembers Wittgenstein leaving the room abruptly, in a huff, after a heated discussion in which he had picked up the poker and used it to emphasise his points. So the conclusion has to be that Popper said *P!* in the discussion after Wittgenstein had left. For me this has the following happy consequence. Peter Munz was present at this meeting. He gave an account of which I long resisted, with much regret since he is an old friend. He had *Russell* making a remark about the poker to Wittgenstein, namely 'Put down that poker at once!'. This seemed to me both to misattribute Popper's *P!* and take the wit out of it. But my objection falls away if Popper said *P!* after Wittgenstein had left. Indeed, Popper would be more likely to hark back in the discussion to Wittgenstein's poker-waving if it had been highlighted in this way by Russell.

**An Explanation for Popper's Slip.** To anyone who knew him, the suggestion that Popper deliberately 'improved' his story by slipping in something he knew to be untrue is not credible. Then how did he come to make this mistake, as it now seems to be? He was probably writing about the meeting (for his Intellectual Autobiography in the Schilpp volume, published separately as *Unended Quest* afterwards) in late 1968, over twenty years after it took place. He remembered saying *P!* and this causing laughter, and he remembered Wittgenstein, who was chairing the meeting, abruptly getting up before it was over and walking out in an angry-seeming way, banging the door behind him. Why else should he have behaved like that unless he had been provoked by Popper's provocative remark? In fact, there is another explanation for his behaviour. Braithwaite told Pigden that Wittgenstein made a point of leaving Moral Science Club meetings early in order not to dominate them too much; and Munz told Bartley that Wittgenstein always 'walked with this brisk impetuous tension' and 'never shut a door quietly'. So the alternative explanation is that Wittgenstein was behaving much as he was wont to do.

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