

Beyond Wittgenstein's Poker: New Light on Popper and Wittgenstein Launch  
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It's a pleasure and an honour to be asked to launch Emeritus Professor Peter Munz's book, **Beyond Wittgenstein's Poker: New Light on Wittgenstein and Poker**, published by Ashgate. It is a pleasure because Peter is a friend and an honour because Peter is one of Victoria's and New Zealand's most <sup>renown</sup> ~~illustrious~~ <sup>noted</sup> thinkers. His work has ranged over the history of ~~the medieval period~~, religion, mythology, darwinianism, psychology, the philosophy of science and historiography.

*burbled forth*

The problem of how knowledge grows and of the distinction between 'real' knowledge and what passes for knowledge, superstition or nonsense, was a central issue for the enlightenment ~~and~~ of 20<sup>th</sup> century thinking. It's still a vital concern for us all. I spent part of yesterday with a group talking about a response to the Tertiary Education Commissions latest document, **The Distinctive Contributions of Tertiary education Organisations** which is concerned to manage the production of knowledge and to evaluate our successes in producing and managing knowledge, a major function of the tertiary sector. Knowledge is good if it increases export earnings and helps achieve our, the Labour's party's, national goals. It is shame that TEC officials have not and may well not read what Peter has to say about the production of knowledge and then distinction between different knowledges.

Peter's latest book is a return to the themes of his 1985 study, - **Our Knowledge of the Growth of Knowledge: Popper or Wittgenstein?** Peter has the singular distinction of having been a student of both of these major 20th century philosophers – Popper at Canterbury University and Wittgenstein at Cambridge. Peter writes that his book is intended as a sort of sequel to the 2001 study by two

journalists, **Wittgenstein's Poker: The Story of a Ten Minute Argument Between Two Great Philosophers.** This book describes the short exchange between two Viennese philosophers Karl Popper and Ludwig Wittgenstein that took place at the Moral Sciences Club at Cambridge University on October 25, 1946. This was the only meeting between these two ex-pats of Jewish background, both now permanently living in the south of England. Peter Munz was at this meeting and an eye witness to the poker night.

Popper began by noting that while he was invited to talk about a philosophical puzzle he thought that there were genuine philosophical problems. Wittgenstein challenged 'name a problem' as he refused to believe that there were such and considered that such seeming problems would dissolve into philosophical-linguistic-logical puzzles when understood in terms of the linguistic usage of a given speech community. Popper suggested the problem of induction. Wittgenstein demanded to know what What do you mean by induction? But before Popper could respond Wittgenstein waved a hot poker near Popper's face. The chair, Bertram Russell ordered, 'Wittgenstein, put down this poker at once'.

Wittgenstein stormed out. One reviewer, Bob Corbett, wrote, 'While marvelously entertaining, I come away astounded by how little philosophical content is contained in these 316 pages'. Peter's book puts that right in spades *-poke here* taking us through the two thinkers and the issue at hand but he does something much more than that. An aside, something that struck me reading the book is just how odious both philosophers were – I for one was not at all surprised that they didn't kill each other with hammer and tongs too. Wittgenstein was selfish beyond any acceptable level and concerned only with his own thoughts. Peter's description of a worship and therapy class with the great Ludwig is wonderfully awful – students on the floor and the professor in his deck chair, the former there really just as

witnesses to the master's 'incoherent' obscure and partially connected process of thinking. Popper was not much better, if clearer, he was unwilling to be criticized and would steal your girlfriend. Dreadful men although Peter kindly remarks that they has un-philosophical temperaments.

The book traces Peter's intellectual biography from Plato in school in Italy via Popper as his private tutor at Canterbury to Cambridge, the links between Popper and his historical studies and of course Wittgenstein and the problem of language. On route we meet John Wisdom, Bertram Russell, Gilbert Ryle, Iris Murdoch, and a host of other notables.

Another theme that runs through the work is the heaviness of Popper and Wittgenstein and Peter's own seriousness – a mittel europa Jewish German speaking culture that contrasts so markedly with the unbearable lightness of anglo-being in Canterbury and Cambridge.

Peter writes that in the aftermath of the poker night he lost almost all interest in both Popper and Wittgenstein and it was only much later that he returned to their mutual dead ends and came to recognize that these were not only different but that the limitation of one is the breakthrough point of the other and vice versa, that the thought of these two thinkers is complimentary. He describes his project as the dialogue that never took place that evening. He even has Wittgenstein say 'well, yes, all right!' Peter ends his wonderfully civilized dialogue ...read .... 106.

In a world of mass murders and terrorism why should we give a damn about these two horrible and unkind men? Both men like Kant rejected positivism – the view that there is a correct method to get knowledge and that our knowledge is solely derived from observation – but also that both W's and P's failed in some important way to secure certain

knowledge for us. Peter's argument is that a relativism like Rorty's is not acceptable we need something more – something that recognizes that knowledge is both progressive and that its production is dynamic and that the type of community makes a difference to the sort of knowledge produced and the processes involved.

As Peter puts it 'I came to understand that Wittgenstein without Popper's political philosophy is stultifying and that Popper without Wittgenstein's explanation of how sentences can be meaningful; in spite of the absence of ostensive definitions, is mysterious'. P.71. In itself, I don't think that we might have followed up on either Wittgenstein or Popper but Peter marshals aspects of these two thinkers to launch a critique of the currently faddish and fashionable explanation of all our behaviours and culture – evolutionary biology or evolutionary psychology.

The second half of the book takes issues with the accounts of knowledge offered by these Darwinist evolutionary psychologists. The problem again is how to we produce knowledge and how do we know if its any good. These psychologists explain us without reference to our changing cultures – mere byproducts of our adaptive survival. He characterizes this view as a neo-positivism. This is the link to the Wittgenstinian and Popperian critique of positivism. Peter offers a new theory drawing on and contesting some of the more recent philosophy of science and evolutionary studies – a better Darwinianism. He refers to Popper's free construction of proposals or hypotheses as philosophical Dawinianism or evolutionary hypothesis selection. Popper considered that our problem solving capabilities were deeply imprinted and originate before humanity per se and that knowledge acquisition is essentially the same activity. Popper has the merit of accounting for new knowledge unlike most evolutionary psychologists who work backwards and insist that what is the result of evolutionary and

successful adaptation thus loosing the possibility of anything novel at all – Peter refers to biological evolution as embodied theories (organism) and parallels these with disembodied organism (theories). These nova precede experience and are spontaneous in the sense that it's 'what we just do'. But here Popper reaches his limits as we cannot decide which of these are meaningful and here we need to return to Wittgenstein whose philosophical investigations offer the explains that these 'proposals' that precede experience can be articulated, literally verbalized meaningful and only in forms of life, speech and behaviour cultures even though they are not based on experience or derived directly from it. Without culture we cannot have meaningful speech beyond pointing – show and tell – and this process is essential to our very evolution.

**One comment: I am not at all sure why Fred Hegel and not Georg William Frederich like everyone else.**

**Peter's modesty belies the fact that what Beyond Wittgenstein's Poker offers is something much more than an imagined conversation between two limited philosophers. To take this at face value is to miss Peter's originality and creativity not only in bringing these two together in a counter-intuitive way but to have produced an answer, a solution that could not be found in neither Wittgenstein nor Popper, that ahs much more to do with more recent work than either of them. My comments have failed to do any kind of justice to Peter prose, his argument or to the sense of his restless mind pursing solutions to problems or the elegance of his solution and objection to the most dominant evolutionary men are from mars explanations of our life, knowledge and culture. He offers us a new way of thinking about our knowledge and its development and an alternative to the dominant evolutionary psychological view. There is, of course, much more to be said about culture – and religion - but Peter tells me that's his next book.**

We have had recent debate in NZ about teaching and research. Peter in the centenary survey of this university came out as the teacher than had most impacted on people and changed their lives as did Popper and Wittgenstein (less so) for his. But as we contemplate commenting on the Govt's TEC's 'Teaching and Research nexus', and the prospect of teaching only university staff or non-teaching academic researchers we might consider Prof Munz as inspired teacher and researcher whose 6<sup>th</sup> book in retirement is an inspiration to us all.

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Last word????? What is most evident from reading Beyond Wittgenstein's Poker is that sense of intellectual excitement — absent from govt documents — a lifelong excitement of the sheer exhilaration of learning, thinking and working it out — what Peter refers to as the nobility of invention and speculation which he describes as a liberation. This book makes a real contribution to our understanding of knowledge and I urge you to read it.