As a teenager, I had a rather low opinion of God (it was quite possibly reciprocated) and was contemptuous of the ethical judgments of my elders. Perhaps that’s why I raced through the first book of philosophy that was ever thrust at me, and it hooked me on philosophy for life. A. J. Ayer’s *Language, Truth and Logic* dismisses statements about God as meaningless. It rejects the idea of “objectivity” in morals. It has a wonderful, bravura style, free of doubt. It scorns philosophical predecessors: problems that have beset philosophy for two millennia, such as questions about God and ethics and aesthetics, are decisively laid to rest.

I didn’t fully appreciate at the time that the ideas in this book had essentially been recycled. They originated not in Oxford, England, but in Vienna, Austria. They’d been lifted almost (but not quite) whole from a group of mathematicians, logicians, and philosophers called the Vienna Circle.

A quick note on terminology. Members of the Circle were logical empiricists, sometimes called logical positivists. Positivism is the view that our knowledge derives from the natural world and includes the idea that we can have *positive* knowledge of it. The Circle combined this position with the use of modern logic; the aim was to build a new philosophy. But the term *logical positivism* was only introduced in an American journal in 1931, and I will follow the practice of most scholars of the Vienna Circle in talking about “logical empiricism.” Labels aside, logical empiricism was for a time, starting in the early 1930s, the most ambitious and fashionable movement in philosophy. Many of its central tenets have now been discredited, but its impact is still felt today. Analytic philosophy—the dominant form of philosophy in Anglo-American philosophy departments with an emphasis on the analysis of language—would not exist in its current form without the Circle. The Circle might not have had all the answers, but they posed most of the right questions—questions with which philosophers continue to grapple.
There have been some magnificent works of scholarship devoted to the Circle. This book aims to be of more general interest—to explain who the members were, what became of them, why they were significant, and, in particular, to understand them within the milieu in which they thrived.

The Vienna Circle was a philosophical group. But it cannot be understood in isolation. It arose in a city in which art and music and literature and architecture also flourished. The Austrian capital is a principal character in these pages. A birthplace of modernism, it was home to psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud and composer Arnold Schoenberg, journalist Karl Kraus and architect Adolf Loos, novelist Robert Musil and playwright Arthur Schnitzler. The Circle’s ideas complemented or competed with others circulating around Vienna.

Then there were politics and economics. The backdrop to the Circle was economic catastrophe and the rising political extremism to which the Circle itself would eventually fall victim. I want in this book both to give a sense of the revolutionary and evangelizing nature of the Circle’s philosophy as well as the troubled times in which the Circle operated. I’ve come to believe that whatever its scholarly merits the Circle’s project, especially its attack on metaphysics, made it inescapably political, creating powerful enemies on the Far Right who were bound, in the end, to destroy it.

Vienna’s always held a peculiar fascination for me. Much of a previous book, written with John Eidinow, *Wittgenstein’s Poker*, was set in Vienna. In the personal sphere, my mother is half Viennese. My grandmother, then Liesl Hollitscher, studied law at the University of Vienna roughly at the same time as the younger members of the Circle were studying there too. My family, like many in the Circle, was middle-class, assimilated Jewish, and, like many in the Circle, blind to the extreme turn that politics would take.

Writing the book has posed some challenges. One is the philosophy. The reason that there have been so few accessible texts on the Circle is because the philosophy is so complex. I have given only a schematic description of the Circle’s philosophical positions and the various philosophical disputes in which members were embroiled, both within the
Circle and between the Circle and its opponents. But I also include, without apology, some (sometimes difficult) philosophy; an account of the Circle without covering philosophy would be like a history of an orchestra without mentioning music.

Then there are the characters. The Vienna Circle contained some fascinating figures, including several who merit (and some who have been awarded) full-length biographies in their own right. Inevitably, some of these figures have loomed larger than others—such as the extraordinary Otto Neurath, virtually unknown outside philosophy. It would need a book five times as long to do equal justice to them all.

We live during a time where phrases like *post-truth* and *fake news* are bandied around. In this environment, empiricism is more relevant than ever. And my hope is that this work will do something to revive interest in a brilliant set of thinkers who thrived in a vanished world and with whose intellectual spirit it’s easy to sympathize.

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