# 15. RICHARD POPKIN AND *PHILOSOPHY MADE SIMPLE*

Avrum Stroll

*Editor's Note: Evaluations of scholars' work rarely mention publications intended for a general audience. Philosophy Made Simple, the popular introduction to philosophy, and the college philosophy textbook that Richard Popkin co-authored with his longtime friend and colleague Avrum Stroll were nevertheless his most widely read publications. They introduced thousands of non-specialist readers—college students and ordinary people seeking an accessible survey of the discipline—to the main themes of philosophy. In a volume that attempts to survey the full range of Richard Popkin's contributions to philosophy, it seems appropriate to include a discussion of these publications. As the only analytical philosopher who collaborated extensively with my father, Avrum Stroll also offers a unique perspective on his contribution to the discipline they both loved, but that they approached very differently.*
*Jeremy D. Popkin*

## *Our Collaboration*

The story of how Richard Popkin and I wrote *Philosophy Made Simple* is less simple than the book itself. It begins in the early 1950s. Dick was a visiting professor at the University of California, Berkeley, from which I had recently received my Ph.D., and I had just begun teaching at the University of Oregon – my first professional job. I saw Dick before meeting him. Along with about 200 other auditors, I was in the audience at a presentation he was making to the American Philosophical Association. His topic was Hume's philosophy and he was arguing that Hume could best be understood as a radical skeptic and not primarily as an empiricist. After the talk concluded there was the usual question period. I had the temerity to question Popkin's elucidation of Hume. I contended that the standard construal of Hume as influenced by Newton was correct, and cited as evidence the subtitle of Hume's masterpiece, the 1739 *A Treatise of Human Nature*. The sub-title reads: *Being An Attempt to introduce the experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects*.

Popkin responded that the problem was too complicated to discuss in such a large forum and that if I would meet him later we could talk in detail about our diverse interpretations. After the session ended, I went down to meet him and his first remark to me was a question: Do you play two-handed pinochle? I admitted that I did. Popkin proposed that if I came over to his house after dinner we could play pinochle and also discuss Hume.

I accepted his invitation and though we talked about Hume at length, and played pinochle until the wee hours of the morning, we failed to reach an agreement about how Hume should be understood. That evening started a friendship that lasted until his death in 2005. Our friendship also led to my being invited in 1954 to the University of Iowa (where Dick had a permanent appointment) to be a visiting scholar, replacing Gustav Bergmann who was scheduled to go on sabbatical leave. I spent six months in Iowa City.

The visit had an unexpected, very pleasurable benefit. In Iowa City I met a young woman, Mary Swensen, who was soon to become my wife, a connection that also turns out to be relevant to the story of how *Philosophy Made Simple* came to be published. In Iowa City, Dick and I played pinochle on innumerable occasions, using many of those times to continue our debate about Hume, and without reaching a consensus about that famous philosopher.

In 1955, Dick was approached by a former student who was now an editor at Cadillac Press, a house that published books of questionable distinction. This editor and his management team had the idea of bringing out a new series that would be respectable and would present intellectual topics, such as mathematics, physics, and philosophy, in a format that would appeal to the average person – someone, the editor said, who might be shopping for books in a drug store. They were going to call the prospective volumes, The Made Simple Series, and the first projected title was to be *Philosophy Made Simple*. Always open to the challenge of explaining the incomprehensible in a form that anyone could understand, Popkin said that he would write such a book. He asked me if I would join him in this task and I readily agreed on the ground that philosophy should be made available to as many persons as possible. Cadillac was gratified to have two philosophers, who were already pretty well known by their publications, do the first book in the series. Before we had completed the manuscript, Cadillac sold the series to Doubleday and when *Philosophy Made Simpl*e was issued it was published by Doubleday.

Dick, who was in Iowa City, and I, by then teaching at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, were separated by about 2,000 miles, and email did not exist at that time. So we communicated by phone and by mail about what such a volume should look like, and with respect to this matter, unlike our inability to reach an agreement about Hume, we came to a common understanding of what was fundamental in philosophy and how those topics should be expressed. We both believed that the entire field of western

philosophy should be covered, and we concurred that the best way of doing this would be to divide it into a number of important sub-areas, such as logic, metaphysics, ethics, epistemology (also called "the theory of knowledge"), political philosophy, philosophy of religion, and contemporary philosophy; and, most important, that each of these should be treated chronologically. This was a unique format for its time and has been copied by many authors since. It explains why this book has been used by so many students as a basic text.

Dick and I also agreed on four other matters: (1) We assumed that we were both competent philosophers and accordingly that there was no necessity to edit each other's contributions, and (2) that because the book was most likely to be read by shoppers in drug stores, we would not look anything up but simply write the book from memory. We agreed that if we had to do any research on a topic the book would be too complicated for such readers. So with those commitments agreed to, we divided up the sections that each of us would write. (3) As I recall, he selected the chapters on metaphysics, philosophy of religion, and the theory of knowledge, and I wrote the chapters on logic, ethics and political philosophy. We divided the final chapter on contemporary philosophy, with Popkin discussing pragmatism and existentialism, and me analytic philosophy. (4) We agreed that the book should not be too weighty or long; so we aimed for a text that would be less than 100,000 words. When it finally saw the light of day it slightly exceeded this total.

Our intention, never formulated explicitly, was to write the book expeditiously, in no more than six or seven months. This we more than accomplished. Dick wrote and finished his part of the manuscript while en route by ship to Europe and I, having just married Mary, wrote my half while on a three-week honeymoon in Laguna Beach, sitting in the sand and writing on a Hermes portable typewriter. I must confess that I did violate one of the conditions we had agreed to. In writing the chapter on Political Philosophy, I could not remember something that John Stuart Mill had said, so I went to the Laguna Beach library. It was a small branch library that had only three or four books on philosophy, but one of them contained Mill's essay "On Liberty." I found the relevant passage, and quoted it in that chapter. As far as I know, Dick abided by our arrangement and wrote all of his material from memory.

We were informed by the publisher that they would give us a flat fee rather than providing us with royalties – a mistake as it turned out since the book sold extremely well. Both Dick and I needed the fee – $1,000, a huge sum in 1955 – for our various purposes. His was to pay for travel with his wife and two small children, and mine for expenses connected with setting up a new household. Both Mary and I thought at the time that we had done very well financially. Nobody could have predicted that the series would be successful and that *Philosophy Made Simple* would be, in effect, a best seller. The original copyright ran out some years ago, and our literary agent, Juliet Popkin,

Dick's wife, negotiated a better arrangement with Doubleday. The publisher still refused to give us royalties but Julie obtained a large advance that softened the impact of the revenues we had lost on the original contract. At that time, she also negotiated the world wide rights, including royalties, with the British publisher Heinemann; and the royalties over the years have amounted to a substantial sum. In one three-year period, for example, the foreign sales exceeded 25,000 copies.

*Philosophy Made Simple* has gone through at least three revised editions, the last in 1993, multiple printings (when I last looked about ten years ago it was in its 17th printing), has sold several hundred thousand copies, is a standard text in many universities, and has been translated into numerous languages, among them French, Italian, Czech, Polish, and Russian. I am pleased to say that the book still exists and is readily available.

*Philosophy Made Simple* was our most popular and influential book. Several well-known philosophers have written me over the years indicating that not only had they frequently recommended it to their students, but also that they had been motivated to pursue philosophy as a career by reading it when they were undergraduates. In April 2006, a friend gave me a signed copy of a book, a publication that further illustrates the impact that it has had on various persons. The book is a novel by Robert Hellenga entitled *Philosophy Made Simple*. It is about a sixty-year old merchant, named Rudy Harrington, pretty much retired, who lives in Chicago. His wife has died and his children, now grown, have fled the coop. Harrington wonders how to spend the rest of his life, and the narrative describes the steps he takes to come to grips with what he sees as his diminishing future. He has been reading a philosophical treatise entitled *Philosophy Made Simple*, written by a character in the novel named Siva Singh, who is an East Indian philosopher. Singh's book, which pretty closely duplicates ours, has caused Harrington to reflect on the meaning of his life. He wonders, for example, after reading Singh's account of the Allegory of the Cave in Plato's *Republic*, if his life has been nothing but an empty shell, an illusion and of little value. In a footnote at the end of the book, Hellenga states that neither he nor Harrington has been influenced by the eponymous book written by Popkin and Stroll, but by the treatise written by Singh. Nonetheless, according to our mutual friend who had had dinner with Hellenga two weeks before I received my copy, Hellenga said that it was our book that influenced him to write his novel. He also said that *Philosophy Made Simple* had caused him to reflect on his own life and to think deeply about what it has meant. Like Harrington, Hellenga was evidently deeply moved by the Cave allegory, and also by our description of Kant's central idea that the human mind structures the perceived world, so that access to the so-called "external world" is always indirect.

For readers who may not know or remember what Plato wrote I will briefly quote him. Socrates is speaking to Glaucon:

> And now, I said, let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened: Behold! human beings living in an underground den, which has a mouth open toward the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets.
>
> I see.
>
> And do you see, I said, men passing along the wall carrying all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals made of wood and stone and various materials, which appear over the wall? Some of them are talking, others silent.
>
> You have shown me a strange image, and they are strange prisoners.
>
> Like ourselves, I replied, and they see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave.
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> True, he said, how could they see anything but the shadows if they were never allowed to move their heads?
>
> And of the objects which are being carried in like manner they only see the shadows?[1]

Like many others, Hellenga and presumably his protagonist in the novel have applied the allegory to their own lives and have drawn the conclusion that they may well have lived in a world of shadows, cut off from the reality which lies outside the cave. I should add that the novel doesn't discuss Singh's *Philosophy Made Simple* in any detail. Nevertheless, the information I have received from our mutual acquaintance makes it plausible that it was our book that influenced Hellenga to write his and to use our title for a novel that is hardly a work in philosophy. Why he picked this title is a mystery to me since the book is basically a romance about Harrington's later life.

*Philosophy Made Simple* has also received very positive reviews over the years. There was a lengthy review of it in an Italian periodical, *Il Sole*-24 *Or*e on November, 16, 1997.

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[1] Plato, *The Republic*, vii, 514, in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett (New York: Random House, 1937), 773–774.

I will quote part of this review, which is typical of many that the book has received. The author of the review, Simona Morini, supports the guiding idea of our work. She says:

> The title of their work, *Philosophy Made Simple*, does not only refer to the fact that it is a popular work, written in a simple style, amusing and accessible to all, but also to the fact that philosophy can be *useful* to all, in the sense that it can teach everyone to think and to act better. In this sense, the book by Popkin and Stroll is not, thank heavens, impartial. There are obviously disagreements about what it means to think or act better, so that in this domain everything is open to question and divergence of opinion. In other words, we have here a text guided by a particular idea—perhaps debatable but clear and explicit—of what it means to be a philosopher and to do philosophy.….The book states that its ultimate aim is to prepare human beings to do philosophy, to develop a critical attitude, and I would add, if possible to aid in *living* decent lives. (Translation by Avrum Stroll).

During our long association, Richard Popkin and I collaborated as authors on six or seven books (I have been unable to pin down the exact number). Besides *Philosophy Made Simple*, these include *Philosophy and the Human Spirit, Introductory Readings in Philosophy, Philosophy and Contemporary Problems*, and *Philosophy*. Our collaboration began in 1955, with the writing of *Philosophy Made Simple*, and continued through 2002, culminating in the publication of *Skeptical Philosophy for Everyone*. In addition, we were colleagues at the University of California, San Diego, from 1963 to 1973.

After Dick moved from Iowa to Harvey Mudd College in Claremont, California in 1960, and later, while we were together at UCSD, we wrote several of the books I have mentioned. Given that Dick was primarily an historian of ideas and that I was a standard, more or less hard-nosed analytical philosopher interested in the contemporary scene, it is remarkable that two authors with such divergent approaches to philosophy managed to cooperate on so many consensual books. I believe this was possible because of a mutual trust in each other's competence, so that we came to quick agreements about what normally might have been contentious matters. Both of us thought, as the Italian review states, that philosophy can and should play a positive role in helping people think critically, and as a result possibly to live better, so that the usual disagreements among philosophers did not impede our working together.

Interacting with Dick was a lot of fun. He had a great sense of humor and an inexhaustible quiver of jokes. Each of these sessions was a learning experience for me as well. He had an impressive memory and had virtually total recall of every philosophy text that I had ever heard of, and many that I had not. We met frequently while Dick was at Harvey Mudd, and of course even more often after we became colleagues at UCSD, to discuss a future project

and in very pleasant circumstances. We would normally get together, along with our wives, at a small motel, the Andrea Villa, that no longer exists. It was located near the beach in La Jolla, and had a minimal restaurant where we could buy coffee and soft drinks. After an exchange of jokes and a bit of clowning around, Dick and I, seated near a heated pool, would begin to explore various possible scenarios for our next book. We would each advance an idea, no matter how esoteric or idiosyncratic, and discuss it fully. As an ex-Marine, I found that the process of creating a new book by trial and error was like trying to calibrate a rifle. One would take several shots at a target, say 500 yards away, missing either high or low, or wide, and eventually would zero in on the "C-ring" as the sharpshooters call it. I found the technique to be interesting. The discussion would usually last several hours, typically occupying a whole morning.

On reflecting on those past days, I now realize that we were operating with a couple of principles which we presupposed rather than articulating. The most important idea was that any person who read our book should get some knowledge of the whole range of conceptual problems that philosophy deals with. A second was that whatever we wrote should be clear and understandable to a general reader. I think these principles motivated all of the books we wrote together. The Preface to *Introduction to Philosophy* (1961) contains a brief statement expressing these principles:

> Our intent in composing this work has thus been to present a synoptic picture of philosophy, written in a simple, nontechnical fashion, and yet within these limits, to achieve a high degree of accuracy in exposition. But, of course, it will finally rest with the reader himself to decide whether we have achieved these aims.[2]

One of the works to come out of this interaction was the aforementioned *Introduction to Philosophy*, published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston. Holt had heard of the success of *Philosophy Made Simple* and asked us to write something similar, though of course not identical. We tried several variations on *Philosophy Made Simple*, including some that deviated sharply from that earlier book. By the third edition, we hit on a format that appealed to both of us. It began with a long introduction about the nature of philosophical inquiry and the difference between what a philosopher and a scientist are trying to achieve in understanding the world. I still like much of we said then. *Introduction to Philosophy* was expensive for its time; it was a hardback unlike *Philosophy Made Simple*, and had a lengthy career, despite having our

[2] Avrum Stroll and Richard H. Popkin, *Introduction to Philosophy* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1961), iv.

pictures on the dust jacket. Most textbooks have a run of about five years. Instructors use them for a year or two when they first appear and then turn to later productions. The books are then sold by students as used copies and within three or four years are out of print. *Introduction to Philosophy* went through at least three complete revisions, and was still being used in the late 1980s. It lasted for at least a quarter of a century. Most of our books fell "still born from the press," as Hume said of his 1739 *Treatise*, so that even counting *Philosophy Made Simple* and *Introduction to Philosophy*, we had hit or miss success overall.

### *Richard Popkin as Philosopher*

Dick was not only one of the best philosophers I have worked with, he was also the most productive. The number of books he published is still not completely ascertained by his various biographers, but according to Julie Popkin it is at least 36. She also estimates that he published more than three hundred papers and articles during his lifetime. Dick's work completely changed our understanding of the history of philosophy. In *The Skeptic Way*, Benson Mates gave an extensive account of his contributions to the subject. I quote part of what he said:

> If philosophical authors were to be ranked in order on the basis of their relative influence on the subsequent history of Western philosophy, Plato and Aristotle would be at the top of the list, no doubt. But a good case can be made that the third place should be assigned to a rather obscure Greek physician of the second century, A.D., Sextus Empiricus. His writings were immensely influential. Due largely to the work of Richard Popkin and his students and associates, it is now clear that the rediscovery and publication of these works in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries led directly to the skepticism of Montaigne, Gassendi, Descartes, Bayle, and other major figures, and eventually to the preoccupation of modern philosophy, right down to the present, with attempts to refute or otherwise combat philosophical skepticism. (Oxford, 1996), p.4.

In an essay, "Philosophy in a New Century," (2003) John Searle concurred that skepticism has had a major influence on modern philosophy. As he said in that essay:

> The modern era in philosophy, begun by Descartes, Bacon and others in the seventeenth century, was based on a premise which has now become obsolete. The premise was that the very existence of knowledge was in question

> and that therefore the main task of the philosopher was to cope with the problem of skepticism. Descartes saw his task as providing a secure foundation for knowledge, and Locke, in a similar vein, thought of his *Essay* as an investigation into the nature and extent of human knowledge. It seems reasonable that in the seventeenth century those philosophers took epistemology as the central element of the entire philosophical enterprise, because while they were in the midst of a scientific revolution, at the same time the possibility of certain, objective, universal knowledge seemed problematic. It was not at all clear how their various beliefs could be established with certainty, and it was not even clear how they could be made consistent. In particular, there was a nagging and pervasive conflict between religious faith and the new scientific discoveries. The result was that we had three and a half centuries in which epistemology was at the center of philosophy.
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> During much of this period the skeptical paradoxes seemed to lie at the heart of the philosophical enterprise. Unless we can answer the skeptic, it seemed we cannot proceed further in philosophy or for that matter, in science. For this reason epistemology became the base of a number of philosophical disciplines where it would seem that the epistemological questions are really peripheral. So, for example, in ethics, the central question became, "Can there be an objective foundation for our ethical beliefs?" And even in the philosophy of language, many philosophers thought, and some still do, that epistemic questions were central. They take the central question in the philosophy of language to be, "How do we know what another persons means when he says something?"
>
> I believe the era of skeptical epistemology is now over. Because of the sheer growth of certain, objective, and universal knowledge, the possibility of knowledge is no longer a central question in philosophy. At present it is psychologically impossible for us to take Descartes's project seriously in the way that he took it: We know too much.[3]

Searle and Mates are not alone in holding that skepticism has played a central role in philosophy. To be sure, Searle begins with Descartes, whereas Mates and Popkin think the entire history of philosophy, from Plato to the present, is dominated by the need to rebut the skeptic. But they all concur on its general importance.

The quotations from Mates and Searle raise three questions: (1) When did skepticism assume its historical importance? On this point, I agree with Mates and Popkin. In opposition to Searle, we think that it commences as early as

[3] John R. Searle, "Philosophy in a New Century," Philosophy Documentation Center, 2003.

Plato. (2) There is also the role played by Popkin as a diagnostician of the historical role of skepticism. Searle does not mention Popkin. Again on this point, I agree with Mates' assessment of the importance of Popkin's researches. (3) The third question that needs a response is whether today, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, skepticism still remains a threat, and here Searle and I disagree. The matter is complex, but worth pursuing. Searle and I agree, as against Popkin, that skepticism now lacks the force it was thought to have in previous philosophy. But we differ over what it is threatening. Searle says it is the existence of knowledge. As he writes: "At present it is psychologically impossible for us to take Descartes's project seriously in the way that he took it: We know too much. This is not to say that there is no room for the traditional epistemic paradoxes, it simply means they no longer lie at the heart of the subject." Searle's view is that with the growth of scientific knowledge since the time of Galileo we cannot deny the existence of knowledge. His point is that such propositions as (1) the heart pumps blood, (2) the earth is a satellite of the sun, and (3) water consists of $H_2O$ molecules, have overwhelming evidence in their favor, and further that they are embedded in theories that are so well established that it would be irrational to doubt them. As these remarks indicate, Searle's assumption is that what Descartes is challenging is the existence of knowledge; but in my view this is a mistake. As Popkin used to emphasize in the many conversations we had, it is not knowledge that the skeptic has traditionally challenged but certainty.

A re-reading of Descartes's *Meditations* confirms what Dick was saying. In *Meditation II*, Descartes writes:

> Yesterday's meditation has thrown me into such doubts that I can no longer ignore them, yet I fail to see how they are to be resolved. It is as if I had suddenly fallen into a deep whirlpool; I am so tossed about that I can neither touch bottom with my foot, nor swim up to the top. Nevertheless, I will work my way up and will once again attempt the same path I entered upon yesterday. I will accomplish this by putting aside everything that admits of the least doubt, as if I had discovered it to be completely false. I will stay on this course until I know something certain, or, if nothing else, until I at least know for certain that nothing is certain. Archimedes sought but one firm and immovable point in order to move the entire earth from one place to another. Just so, great things are also to be hoped for if I succeed in finding just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshaken.[4]

It will be noted that in this passage, Descartes does not speak about the quest for knowledge. It is true that he twice uses the word "know" but the passage

[4] René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress, 3rd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1993), 17.

makes it clear that what he wishes to know is whether anything is certain. He says he is searching for "just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshaken." So the emphasis is clearly on certainty and not on knowledge. I think it is fair to say that this emphasis runs through all six *Meditations*. We can find similar quotations from many major philosophers, past and present. G.E. Moore, for example, wrote an entire essay entitled "Certainty." I am thus on the side of Popkin in this matter.

Searle and I differ from Popkin in assessing the contemporary philosophical importance of skepticism, but Searle and I differ in turn over why it is impotent. It is certainly true that in the recent past such major thinkers as G.E. Moore, Gilbert Ryle, J.L. Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein have seen it of central import. In various ways, their major works, such as *The Concept of Mind* by Ryle, and *Zettel (Scraps)* and *Uber Gewissheit (On Certainty)* by Wittgenstein, are dedicated to refuting it. From Searle's standpoint, the discoveries by science and such theories as atomic theory have made the quest for *knowledge* a resolved topic; but since I see the challenge as concerning *certainty* rather than knowledge my approach differs from Searle's. It is that radical skepticism is senseless. I hold, with Wittgenstein, that what the skeptic is calling doubt is not really a case of doubt at all. What determines something to be a case of doubt is that it is a practice that is in conformity with communal behavior. I thus distinguish between philosophical doubt and normal or ordinary doubt. It is the latter that conforms to community practice. In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein says: "A doubt that doubted everything would not be a real doubt." My point is that philosophers like Descartes and Moore assume that doubting can go on forever; and that such a practice is significant. Popkin also seems to have held such a view. But I contest this assumption. Like any practice, ordinary doubt has its limits and when these are exceeded the result is nonsense. There is a wonderful example in *On Certainty* (315) that expresses this idea in a powerful way.

> It would be as if someone were looking for some object in a room; he opens a drawer and doesn't see it there, then he closes it again, waits and open it once more to see if perhaps it isn't there now, and keeps on like that. He has not learned how to look for things….He has not learned the game we are trying to teach him.[5]

The person who keeps looking in a drawer, opening and closing it again and again, searching for a missing object has not learned how to look for things. He has not learned the game of searching. How could one be taught that

[5] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Ueber Gewissheit* ("On Certainty") (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), entry 315, 40e.

game? Roughly speaking, the answer is by early training, by living in a family as part of a community in which people search for lost objects. One comes to learn as a result of such training that it is *senseless* to continue to open and close a drawer obsessively; nothing can be gained after the first few tries. It is like checking the date by looking at dozens of copies of the same issue of a newspaper. Such an obsessive process lacks a procedure for closure. It is senseless because doubt must come to an end. This is something that neither Descartes nor Moore understood. From my perspective, radical skepticism is like the obsessive searcher. It makes no sense in what it wishes to question. In our *Skeptical Philosophy for Everyone*, published in 2002, Dick and I debated the philosophical merit of skepticism. As with our interpretations of Hume, we could never come to a resolution about the matter. The debate is too lengthy to be reproduced here. I am deeply sorry that Dick is no longer present to continue it.