THE LEGACIES OF RICHARD POPKIN
THE LEGACIES OF
RICHARD POPKIN

Edited by

JEREMY D. POPKIN

Board of Directors:

Founding Editors:
Paul Dibon† and Richard H. Popkin†

Director:
Sarah Hutton (University of Aberystwyth, Wales, UK)
Associate Directors: J.E. Force (University of Kentucky, Lexington, USA);
J.C. Laursen (University of California, Riverside, USA)
Editorial Board: M.J.B. Allen (Los Angeles); J.-R. Armogathe (Paris);
J. Henry (Edinburgh); J.D. North (Oxford); M. Mulsow (Erfurt);
G. Paganini (Vercelli); J. Popkin (Lexington); G.A.J. Rogers (Keele);
Th. Verbeek (Utrecht)

For other titles published in this series, go to
www.springer.com/series/5640
CONTENTS

Contributors ................................................................................................... vii
Introduction .................................................................................................... xi
Jeremy D. Popkin

Part I Richard H. Popkin and the History of Philosophy

1 Popkin Non-Scepticus............................................................................. 3
   Brian Copenhaver

2 À Rebours: Richard Popkin’s Contributions
to Intellectual History............................................................................. 15
   Allison P. Coudert

3 Popkin’s Spinoza ..................................................................................... 27
   Sarah Hutton

4 Assessing the Work of Richard H. Popkin from
   the Vantage Point of Comparative Philosophy.................................... 39
   Peter K. J. Park

5 Gilles Deleuze: From Hume to Spinoza (An Attempt
to Make Good on a Popkin Request)................................................... 57
   Knox Peden

Part II Religion and Philosophy in the Seventeenth Century

6 Richard H. Popkin’s Concept of the Third Force
   and the Newtonian Synthesis of Theology and Scientific
   Methodology in Isaac Newton and Samuel Clarke ............................ 73
   James E. Force

7 The Third Force Revisited........................................................................... 109
   Martin Mulsow
8 The Study of the Mishnah and the Quest for Christian Identity in Early Eighteenth-Century England: Completing a Narrative Initiated by Richard Popkin ...................... 123
   David B. Ruderman

Part III  Popkin and the Skeptical Tradition

9 Popkin’s Skepticism and the Cynical Tradition .................... 145
   John Christian Laursen

10 Charron and Huet: Two Unexplored Legacies of Popkin’s Scholarship on Early Modern Skepticism ......................... 155
   José R. Maia Neto

11 The Quarrel over Ancient and Modern Scepticism: Some Reflections on Descartes and His Context ......................... 173
   Gianni Paganini

Part IV  Popkin and the Jews

12 Richard Popkin’s Marrano Problem .................................... 197
   Yosef Kaplan

13 Popkin and the Jews .............................................................. 213
   David S. Katz

14 The Spirit of the Eighteenth Century in the Anti-Sabbatean Polemics of Hakham David Nieto ........................... 229
   Matt Goldish

Part V  Popkin Close Up

15 Richard Popkin and Philosophy Made Simple ...................... 247
   Avrum Stroll

16 In His Own Words: Richard Popkin’s Career in Philosophy ....... 259
   Jeremy D. Popkin

Index ............................................................................................... 295
CONTRIBUTORS

Brian Copenhaver, the Udvar-Hazy Professor of Philosophy and History at UCLA, first met Richard Popkin in Avranches in 1981, where he studied French cuisine and scepticism with Popkin. Copenhaver is now working on Lorenzo Valla, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Cabala in the Renaissance and post-Kantian philosophy in Italy.

Allison P. Coudert holds the Paul and Marie Castelfranco Chair in Religious Studies at the University of California at Davis. Her publications include The Impact of the Kabbalah in the Seventeenth Century: The Life and Thought of Francis Mercury van Helmont (Leiden & New York: E.J. Brill, 1999) and Leibniz and the Kabbalah (Dordrecht & Boston, MA: Kluwer, 1995). She first met Popkin around 1981 or 1982 when she was an independent scholar at the Clark Library and had the temerity to slip him two articles about Francis Mercury van Helmont.

James E. Force, professor of philosophy at the University of Kentucky, is the author of William Whiston, Honest Newtonian (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 2002) and of numerous publications on David Hume, Isaac Newton, and the intersection of science and religion in the early modern period. Force first met Popkin in the office of the Journal of the History of Philosophy in the Humanities Library at the University of California, San Diego, in the late summer of 1972. Force had just returned from the Gulf of Tonkin and was in his first week as an Editorial Assistant for the JHP. Popkin had just returned from New York. Popkin burst into the JHP office in a rumpled suit, wearing a huge McGovern button, looking for the Oreo cookies that were hidden in one of the office’s file cabinets.

Matt Goldish is Samuel M. and Esther Melton Professor of Jewish History and Director of the Melton Center for Jewish Studies at The Ohio State University. His publications include Judaism in the Theology of Sir Isaac Newton (1998); The Sabbatean Prophets (2003); and Jewish Questions: Responsa on Sephardic Life in the Early Modern Period (2008). He first met Dick Popkin in a UCLA seminar on Spinoza around 1985.
Sarah Hutton holds a Chair at Aberystwyth University and is director of the International Archives of the History of Ideas. Her publications include *Anne Conway. A Woman Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), *Platonism at the Origins of Modernity*, co-edited with Douglas Hedley (Springer, 2008) and *Women, Science and Medicine 1550–1700*, co-edited with Lynette Hunter (Sutton 1997). She has also edited Ralph Cudworth’s *Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). She first saw Popkin when she was a student at the Warburg Institute which he visited, from time to time, at the invitation of his friend, Charles Schmitt. They first really became acquainted at a conference on Spinoza held in Amsterdam, where they discovered that, Spinoza apart, they shared an interest in the kind of historical characters that other people found strange and deemed irrelevant.


David S. Katz is Director of the Fred W. Lessing Institute for European History and Civilization at Tel Aviv University, Israel. He co-edited two of Popkin’s Festschrift volumes, and with Richard Popkin, he co-authored *Messianic Revolution: Radical Religious Politics to the End of the Second Millennium* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999). His first sight of Richard Popkin was in the law school cafeteria at Tel Aviv University in early 1980, when he saw a large man with a beard drop a tray full of food in front of a crowd of students. Israel being Israel, no one paid the slightest bit of attention. Later on in the day, a proper introduction took place at the History Department. In order to spare his blushes, he never mentioned the story about the tray to Popkin.

José R. Maia Neto is Associate Professor at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, Brazil. He is the author of Machado de Assis, the Brazilian Pyrrhonian (Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1994), The Christianization of Pyrrhonism (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1995) and co-editor with Richard H. Popkin of Skepticism: An Anthology (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2007). He first met Richard Popkin in 1988 in Saint Louis, Missouri, when he arrived to begin his graduate study at Washington University. He was impressed that Popkin and his wife Julie invited him for a dinner in a very nice restaurant to discuss his thesis project and other issues.


Gianni Paganini is Professor of the History of Philosophy at University of Piedmont (Italy). His most recent books are Les philosophies clandestines à l’âge classique (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2005); The Return of Scepticism (Boston, MA, London & Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2003); Skepsis. Le débat des modernes sur le scepticisme (Paris, Vrin, forthcoming); Thomas Hobbes, De motu, loco et tempore (Turin, UTET, forthcoming). He corresponded with Dick starting in 1984, when Popkin reviewed his edition of Theophrastus redivivus, but first met him in 1989 at University of Milan, where he gave a lecture.

Peter K. J. Park is Assistant Professor of Historical Studies at the University of Texas at Dallas. He teaches early modern European history and the comparative history of philosophy. He met Richard and Juliet Popkin in 1999, while he was a graduate student at UCLA.

Knox Peden is a doctoral candidate in the Department of History at UC Berkeley, where he is preparing a dissertation on the conflict between Spinozism and phenomenology in twentieth-century French thought. He met Popkin in the spring of 2005 when he responded to Popkin’s advertisement for a research assistant. Thus began a lively conversation that would last for several short, but intense months, covering subjects ranging from Isaac Troki to Spinoza to Knox’s audition for “Jeopardy!” Popkin was ultimately delighted that Knox’s audition was unsuccessful because in his view fame and riches have a tendency to spoil academics.

Jeremy D. Popkin is T. Marshall Hahn, Jr., professor of history at the University of Kentucky. He has published a number of books on the history of the French and Haitian Revolutions and on autobiographical writing.
He first met Richard Popkin in the newborn ward of the University of Iowa hospital on 19 December 1948.

**David B. Ruderman** is the Joseph Meyerhoff Professor of Modern Jewish History and Ella Darivoff Director of the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies University of Pennsylvania. His most recent book is *Connecting the Covenants: Judaism and the Search for Christian Identity in Eighteenth-Century England* (Philadelphia, University of Penn, 2007). He first met Richard Popkin in about 1975 when he was visiting his friend, Leonora Cohen Rosenfeld, at the University of Maryland, and Popkin called to set up a meeting.

**Avrum Stroll** is Research Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, San Diego, and the author of numerous books, including *Surfaces* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988). He met Richard Popkin at a West Coast American Philosophical Association meeting in 1952.
INTRODUCTION

By the time of his death on 14 April 2005, my father, Richard H. Popkin, had already received many tributes for his contributions to the history of philosophy, Jewish studies, and other fields. He had been honored with two volumes of essays and several academic conferences had been held about his work. The memorial conference held at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library in Los Angeles on 10–12 June 2006, sponsored by the UCLA Center for Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Studies and its director, Peter Reill, showed that there was still something new to be said about the new directions in research he had continued to inspire until the very last days of his life. As his son and, later, as a fellow scholar, I had grown up listening to my father develop his ideas, and I thought I knew his areas of interest well, but the papers presented at the conference taught me many new things about his own research and the work it has inspired other scholars to undertake. As the program unfolded, all the contributors gained a new appreciation of the breadth of Richard Popkin’s interests, the number of fields he reshaped by his lifelong refusal to accept conventional scholarly wisdom, and his never-ending capacity to detect unsuspected connections between seemingly unrelated phenomena. Although each of the participants at the UCLA conference spoke about some particular aspect of my father and his intellectual legacy, the papers fit together into a larger whole: the portrait of a man whose scholarly curiosity never flagged, and who took as much interest in what others were discovering as in his own research.

Richard Popkin sketched out the main stages of his career in several autobiographical essays, and the many letters that he left to the Clark Library, as part of his donation of his scholarly papers, make it possible to follow the details of his intellectual development, as I have attempted to do in the essay, “In His Own Words: Richard H. Popkin’s Career in Philosophy,” which concludes this volume. His first great interest was in the role of the skeptical tradition (why he insisted on the spelling “scepticism” throughout his career remains a mystery). This was the subject of his first scholarly book, The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes, originally published in 1960 and still in print, in a revised and expanded edition titled The History of
Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle (2003) as I write this in 2008. He was proud of having shown the central role of the skeptical challenge in shaping the main lines of modern philosophy, but he never claimed to have written the definitive account of the subject. The contributions to this collection by Brian Copenhaver, Alison Coudert, Jose Maia Neto, and Gianni Paganini look at aspects of this subject that Popkin did not explore, and add to the picture he laid out; all of them show the continuing fruitfulness of the questions he raised. Sarah Hutton analyzes Popkin’s view of Spinoza, a figure who fascinated him although he was certainly not in the skeptical camp, and John Christian Laursen raises the question of why he paid so little attention to another classical philosophical tradition revived in the Renaissance, the school of cynicism.

The earliest versions of Popkin’s thesis about skepticism said little about the connections between religion and philosophy in the early modern era. It was a turning point in my father’s thinking, as he himself recognized, when he came to see the debates about religious certainty provoked by the Reformation as crucial to the development of philosophical thinking, a thesis laid out in the initial chapters of the History of Scepticism. In all his later work, Popkin paid great attention to the interplay between religious and philosophical issues. James E. Force’s paper on Newton and Martin Mulsow’s discussion of the thinkers who Popkin labelled “the third force” in seventeenth-century philosophy – writers who found in millenarian conviction a position between philosophical scepticism and dogmatism – explore some of the new directions that Popkin’s work in this area suggested.

As he was finishing the writing of The History of Scepticism in the late 1950s, my father began to develop a passion for a new subject: friends who had been in the habit of calling him Popkin Scepticus began to refer also to Popkin Judaicus. Never willing to invest the effort to learn Hebrew, he devoted himself instead to tracing the interactions between Jewish and Christian thinkers in the early modern period, and especially to exploring the impact of members of the Sephardic diaspora as they and their descendants dispersed throughout the European world. In their contributions to this volume, David Ruderman, Yosef Kaplan, David S. Katz and Matt Goldish look at the reasons for Popkin’s interest in this subject and the new perspectives he brought, both to the history of philosophy and to the field of Judaic studies.

Always open to new ideas, Popkin was nevertheless essentially a scholar of western European thought in the early modern period. Nevertheless, as the two papers by the young scholars who worked with him in the last years of his life, Peter Park and Knox Peden, show, he took an interest in issues going well beyond his own field of expertise, including Asian philosophy and twentieth-century intellectual developments. An often unrecognized aspect of his
influence was his co-authorship of several introductory books about philosophy, intended for general audiences and students. Avrum Stroll, his longtime collaborator on these projects, has added to the papers delivered at the 2006 conference a short account of this aspect of Popkin’s work, together with an appreciation of Popkin’s work as seen by a friend who was also a practitioner of the analytic approach to the subject that my father often criticized.

This volume is not meant to be the last word on my father’s work: with the donation of his scholarly papers to the Clark Library, it will be possible for others to study the development of his own ideas and to find hints that will allow them to go beyond what he accomplished in his own studies. We hope, however, that *The Legacies of Richard Popkin* will provide a permanent record of his many intellectual contributions. Some contributors to this volume have insisted on referring to my father as “Dick” because they also want their words to convey the personality of a warm and witty man who was never happier than when he was discussing scholarship with his friends. Like the other participants in this volume, I learned a great deal from discussions with my father, who introduced me to the world of the mind and the passion of history. To me, of course, Richard Popkin was not “Dick” but “Dad.”

Putting together this volume for publication in the *International Archive of the History of Ideas*, the monograph series he co-founded with Paul Dibon in the early 1960s, has been one small way of honoring his memory.

Jeremy D. Popkin
PART I
RICHARD H. POPKIN AND THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY
René Descartes, a patriarch of modern philosophy, turned his back on history but could not escape it. Something similar can be said of the field in its current state: while a few of its practitioners have renounced history, philosophy still revels in its past. Indeed, considering philosophy’s ambition to be scientific, it is surprising that not many of the university’s disciplines concern themselves as much with the past as philosophy does – on the evidence of such things as numbers of journal pages or courses in college catalogs. Nonetheless, given the prominence of history in philosophy, it is not surprising that philosophy also has its historiography, best described in Giovanni Santinello’s massive *Storia delle storie generali della filosofia*. That this fundamental work of reference has appeared in Italian, not in English, bears on my story today.  

Periodization is a key problem for Santinello’s topic, historiography. It matters how we break the past into pieces, especially how we cut the big slices, giving them names like “ancient” and “modern.” For several centuries, the usual practice has been to put something between those two temporal bookends, something intermediary or “medieval.” The script says that modernity starts when the intermezzo stops. Jacob Burckhardt, a Swiss historian of art and culture, gave this new beginning a French name – *Renaissance* – borrowing it from Michelet for the title of a book written in German that deals almost

---

1 Job 28:12: “But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?”


uniquely with Italians. Since Burckhardt had little to say about philosophy, perhaps it is fair that philosophers have had little to say about the period that Burckhardt named.

Descartes published his first book – which included his most famous abjuration of history – in 1637; his last major work (not counting some of the letters) appeared posthumously in 1664. If Descartes is to count as the founder of modern philosophy, the founding seems to have lagged. If we think of literature, government, religion, art and politics, for example, such icons of incipient modernity as Ariosto, Henry VIII, Luther, Leonardo and Machiavelli had been dead for more than a century when Descartes made his fatal move to Sweden. And if, persuaded by Burckhardt, we locate the new age earlier, with Savonarola, Petrarch, the Medici, Masaccio and Bruni, the philosophical lag is even longer.

Notice that these last names are all Italian – just an artifact, you might say, of Burckhardt’s selection, in an un-philosophical book whose setting was Italy. But Italians, and people who taught in Italy, had long been prominent in philosophy. Think of Pythagoras, Empedocles, Cicero, Plotinus, Boethius, Anselm and Aquinas – all of them fixtures in the contemporary Anglophone canon. But after Vico, and with the possible exception of Croce, no Italian has entered that canon. Moreover, despite Italy’s time of glory in the Renaissance, there are no Renaissance Italians in that canon: not even Valla or Ficino.

That Italian names do not show up when the credits roll on the story of modern philosophy is not a consequence of “presentism,” to use an unfortunate word for an unfortunate thing. By anyone’s standards, Plato, Aristotle, Boethius, Abelard, Aquinas and Ockham belong to the deep past, and all of them get lots of attention from philosophers. Ockham, well regarded by contemporary students of logic, language and metaphysics, died nearly three centuries before Descartes published his Meditations. But (ignoring Bacon, if I may) no philosopher after Ockham and before Descartes has earned such respect. In effect, for a period of three centuries – which is also how long it took for philosophy to get from Descartes to Quine – philosophy has very little history.

---


But I should be less hyperbolic – and more precise. It would be more pre-
cise to say that philosophy has lacked not what Croce called the “history” of
those three hundred years but what he called their “historiography”: it is not
events that are lacking but an account of events. Ockham died in the time
of the Black Death – maybe because of it. And if the plague had also killed
almost every other philosopher in Europe, then old mortality could explain
why the canon registers so few philosophical events for nearly three centuries
after Ockham. But dozens of universities had been founded all over Europe
after 1200. Most of the undergraduate curriculum had long been philoso-
phical, taught by professional philosophers. Yet those philosophers who kept
philosophizing after 1350 have all but vanished from the historiography, in
Croce’s sense.

But again, I should be less hyperbolic – and fairer. It would be fairer to
say that all this began to change in 1981, when Charles Schmitt launched the
project that became the Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy, with
a chapter by Richard Popkin on “Theories of Knowledge,” culminating, natu-
really, in a section on “Scepticism.” The Cambridge History, soon followed – in
this our age of compendia – by Oxford, Routledge and Columbia histories,
finally made room for the Renaissance in the Anglophone historiography of
philosophy. Popkin was editor-in-chief of the Columbia History, and he saw to
it that the Renaissance got its due.

Part of the force that drove Popkin’s monumental achievement was human
and social – his dazzling gift for talking to people and convening them for hun-
dreds of projects, conferences and publications of great and enduring influence.
But what he achieved intellectually is deeper and wider than that. His range was
enormous, of course, centering on French, Dutch, English and Jewish thinkers
of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but reaching forward to twentieth
century politics in this country and back to fifteenth century religion and philosophy

6 Benedetto Croce, Teoria e storia della storiografia, ed. G. Galasso (Milan: Adelphi,
7 Richard Popkin, “Theories of Knowledge,” in Charles B. Schmitt et al., Cam-
bidge History of Renaissance Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
8 Copenhaver, Michael Allen and John Monfasani, “The Renaissance,” in The
Columbia History of Western Philosophy, ed. R. Popkin (New York: Columbia Univer-
sity Press, 1999), pp. 279–328; Copenhaver and Schmitt, A History of Western Philos-
ophy, III: Renaissance Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Jill Kraye,
“The Philosophy of the Italian Renaissance,” in The Routledge History of Philoso-
phy, IV: The Renaissance and Seventeenth Century Rationalism, ed. G.H.R. Parkinson
(London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 16–69; Stuart Brown, “Renaissance Philosophy Out-
side Italy,” ibid., pp. 70–103.
to the Italian Renaissance. In fact, his influence on the historiography of Renaissance philosophy was profound.

Popkin’s most important book – one of a multitude – is his *History of Scepticism*. The revision published in 2003 carries a dedication “to three of my coworkers in the…history of scepticism,” one of whom is Charles Schmitt. Since Popkin started at Columbia in the early 1940s, he was a generation ahead of Schmitt, who studied with Paul Kristeller at the same university in the 1950s. But Popkin had been one of only two students in the first course that POK taught at Columbia, and it was that course, along with another taught by John Herman Randall, that first attracted him to Sextus Empiricus and the Sceptics. As Popkin hunted for connections between Sextus and Hume, Kristeller encouraged him to find out what happened before Hume, which eventually became the *History of Scepticism*. The first edition, Popkin writes, “was submitted to two major academic presses…[but] turned…down on the grounds that it was not sufficiently philosophical”; it appeared, nonetheless, in 1960, followed by a second edition in 1979 and a third in 2003. Evidently, it was sufficiently readable.

Popkin’s very compelling story, according to the title of the first edition, goes *From Erasmus to Descartes*; but the second goes *From Erasmus to Spinoza*; and the third *From Savonarola to Bayle*. Once the apocalyptic Florentine friar appeared in Popkin’s title, the Italian renaissance of scepticism had finally made the headlines of Anglophone historiography. That alone was newsworthy, given the previous record of oblivion, both for Renaissance philosophy and for scepticism.

If you still need help forgetting the Renaissance, read almost any history of philosophy written in English before Schmitt’s *Cambridge History* became influential. One such work, first published in 1914, was still in print when Popkin was teaching at Iowa and Schmitt was studying at Columbia: this was *A History of Philosophy* by Frank Thilly, a Kantian who taught at Berkeley. In a book of 677 pages, Thilly’s Renaissance rates fewer than two dozen, including one whole paragraph on scepticism – mainly on Montaigne.

---


11 Above, n. 9.

Otherwise, scepticism was chiefly a Greek affair for Thilly, and thus stuck in antiquity. In the modern period, Berkeley gets just one paragraph to refute it. Pierre Bayle gets twice as many to expose inconsistencies in religion and work his “potent influence on Hume.” But Thilly’s Hume is the Third Person of the British Empiricist Trinity and thus immaculate against such stains. Hume has his doubts about cause and effect, of course, and about knowledge of the external world and other such items, but we are not told that these worries are “sceptical.” The word enters Thilly’s main account of Hume only in an affecting digest of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, where “in spite of these skeptical reflections, Hume declares that it hardly seems possible that anyone of good understanding should reject the idea of God…. How seriously these remarks are to be taken,… the reader is left to decide for himself.”

That was where scepticism stood in the awareness of Anglophone philosophy when Popkin awoke it from its dogmatic slumber. Leaving his voluminous work on the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries to those who know those periods better, I wish to return to the sixteenth and fifteenth centuries and to consider a reasonable question – which Popkin helped to answer – about that era. Why should philosophers care about the Renaissance? Nothing important happened, right? One might reply with other questions. How would you know? How much Renaissance philosophy have you read? Pico? Ficino? Valla? Even now, Valla’s *Dialectical Disputations*, a stunningly original exposition of the philosophy of language, can be read only in Latin. How many contemporary philosophers of language have heard of Valla?

But that question, which is about access to texts, is for another day. Behind philosophy’s plausible scepticism about the Renaissance lie questions more relevant to this occasion and more serious. If the Renaissance is to be regarded as a period in the canonical historiography of philosophy, what is distinctive about it? What makes it different from what came before and from what came after? Even more important, how was Renaissance philosophy effective? How did it cause what came next to be different from what came before? It is this second question, about the philosophical consequences of Renaissance philosophy, that Popkin answered with great originality and effect.

---

13Thilly, *History*, pp. 318–319, 364–366, 367–381, cf. 382, where Reid’s common sense is described as a reaction against “the idealism of Berkeley and the skepticism of Hume,” both of whom in Thilly’s account belong to the movement called “British empiricism.”

By the time Popkin met Kristeller in the early 1940s, Kristeller, having come to this country from Germany and Italy, had begun to fill gaps in Burckhardt’s suggestive sketch of the Renaissance.\textsuperscript{15} Eugenio Garin was doing the same in Italy, while still in exile intellectually under Fascism.\textsuperscript{16} Garin, Kristeller and their students showed in detail how classicism – the rediscovery of Greek and Roman antiquity – made the Renaissance distinctive. Part of that classicism, of course, was philosophical. In the medieval university, where Aristotle was The Philosopher, Plato, Epicurus, Epictetus, Plotinus and dozens of other names were little more than that – just names. It was Renaissance scholars who attached texts to the names, recovering the philosophical literature of ancient Greece and turning it into Latin, the intellectual \textit{koine} of Western Europe. Because of this philological achievement, the philosophy that Descartes learned from the Jesuits was not the philosophy taught by Aquinas or Scotus or Ockham. It was a new kind of Aristotelianism, eclectic and classicized.\textsuperscript{17}

More and more Greek philosophy became available in better and better texts and commentaries and translations. Good news: except that more was not unequivocally better in the eyes of a Renaissance reader. Although Aristotelian philosophy remained paramount throughout the period of recovery and after it, what was recovered was also Platonic, Stoic, Epicurean and Neoplatonic, even Cynic, Hermetic and Pythagorean – a volatile mix of authorities for a culture that venerated authority, especially ancient authority. When venerable masters disagreed, disciples cried scandal. Conflict among authorities was a crisis of authority.\textsuperscript{18}

The crisis boiled over after 1512, when the Church convened the Fifth Lateran Council. In its eighth session of 1513, the Council issued a decree which needs to be read in a substantial passage to feel its force. It condemned “every proposition contrary to the truth of the enlightened Christian faith,” including

\begin{quote}
a number of extremely pernicious errors … particularly on the nature of the rational soul, specifically that it is mortal, or that it is one for all people … .And since there are some who philosophize so recklessly that they have
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\begin{itemize}
\item For recent discussions of Kristeller’s work as a philosopher and a historian, see \textit{Kristeller Reconsidered: Essays on His Life and Scholarship}, ed. J. Monfasani (New York: Italica, 2006).
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotes}
maintained this to be true, at least philosophically, ... we condemn and rebuke all those who maintain that the intellectual soul is mortal... and impute doubts in this matter, since the soul not only really exists, of itself and essentially, as the form of the human body ... but is also immortal ... .This is manifestly established by the Gospel....And since truth never contradicts truth, we define every contrary claim ... to be totally false, and we strictly prohibit it and declare it impossible to make any different statement of the dogma. Moreover, we command each and every philosopher who gives public lectures in university faculties or elsewhere ... to devote his every effort to teaching ... the manifest truth of the Christian religion, teaching it as persuasively as is possible, and giving all his effort to excluding and eliminating the arguments of philosophers of that sort....But since it is not enough to snip the roots of the brambles now and then ... . and since extended study, especially of human philosophy, ... sometimes leads more to error than to clarifying the truth, it is our decision and ordinance ... that no one in sacred orders ... may concentrate on the study of philosophy or poetry for more than five years ... without some study of theology or pontifical law.19

Too many verses and too many syllogisms too! The target of this anathema was an eminent professional philosopher, Pietro Pomponazzi, an Aristotelian who had access to the new Plato and to the Greek commentators on Aristotle, some of whom were Neoplatonists. Behind Pomponazzi’s subtle and disquieting treatment of the soul was a new array of philosophical authority. Horrified by novelty, the Council made Pomponazzi’s book on the soul infamous and dissuaded him from publishing more, but it failed in its main goal, which was to clean up corruption in the Church.20 As a result, when Luther made his complaints public in 1517, the last year of the Council, there was still much to complain about.

The dogmatic Luther, in conflict with the diffident Erasmus, has a leading role in the part of Popkin’s History that deals with the Renaissance – the introduction and the first three chapters – and this has been so from the first edition through the third. But in the third edition, the even more doctrinaire Savonarola has a part as big as Luther’s in the story of scepticism.21

20The best treatment in English of Pomponazzi is Martin Pine, Pietro Pomponazzi: Radical Philosopher of the Renaissance (Padua: Antenore, 1986); Copenhaver and Schmitt, Renaissance Philosophy, pp. 103–112.
Popkin opens the story with a sketch of ancient scepticism: Academics as negative dogmatists; Pyrrhonists as suspenders of judgment; and Sextus Empiricus as the sceptical physician who prescribes “a purge that eliminates everything including itself,” a methodical formulation of sceptical doubts about absolutely anything that you might be tempted to assert. Then, after more than a millennium of intermission, action resumes in the middle of the fifteenth century with the first signs of interest in scepticism that suggest continuity with its later career. Savonarola enters in the 1490s. As Prior of San Marco in Florence, he roars at that opulent city in sermons that turned it briefly into a pinched theocracy. He believes in his own prophetic authority and no other, not even the Church as an institution, which had tainted its authority by consorting with Aristotle. In this circumstance, Savonarola – who is a preacher, not a scholar – orders some of his friars to translate Sextus into Latin. He takes up scepticism as a sword to destroy philosophy and thus to chastise the worldly-wise clerisy that quakes at his prophetic thunder.

Savonarola, the scourge of Renaissance Florence, is the emblem of a rupture in historiography; the view of modern scepticism that Popkin found current in the 1950s identified it simply with disbelief in religion; fifty years later, Popkin had traced its roots to a priest whose dogmatic belief was not just sincere, but fanatical. Accordingly, Popkin sees scepticism not as disbelief in religion but as opposition of a certain kind to dogmatism of a certain kind – philosophical opposition to philosophical dogmatism. The ensuing suspension of judgment about truth-claims assists faith when the claims that threaten faith are philosophical and hence vulnerable to sceptical attack. Fideism emerges as a philosophically attenuated species of scepticism: scepticism about claims not based on faith, whether that faith is completely blind or simply prior to reason. Only faith, in any case, can trump the sceptic’s doubts for the religious fideist.

But religion needs a rule of faith, a license for its own claims to truth, and after 1517 some Christians promulgated rules that clashed, violently and shamefully, with rules decreed by other Christians. Catholics appealed to a criterion of tradition and institutional authority, while for their criterion Protestants looked to scripture, as revealed by grace to the illuminated individual. But Catholic tradition contradicts itself, ending in confusion, complain the Protestants, while Catholics rejoin that individual conscience is unreliable, leading to Protestant anarchy. From a Catholic perspective, the Protestant “criterion of religious knowledge is inner persuasion, the guarantee of… inner persuasion is… God, and this we are assured of by our inner persuasion.” From a

---

Protestant perspective, “the Church cannot be the authority of its own infallibility, since the question at issue is whether the Church is the true authority on religious matters. Any evidence for the special status of the Church requires a rule or criterion.” Either way, the search for a rule of faith spins in a circle.  

No wonder that scepticism and suspension of judgment looked appealing in the sixteenth century, as Christians fought bloody wars over points of dogma.

Popkin tells the story of scepticism during the Reformation and the wars of religion through books that he loved and collected, books produced by the younger Pico, Erasmus, Agrippa, Talon, Hervet, Sanches and others, including Henri Estienne, who published the first complete printed version of a work by Sextus in 1562, after which interest in scepticism accelerated and deepened philosophically. Popkin’s hero in this part of his story is Montaigne.

Because the “Apology for Raimond Sebond” is unforgettable, we all remember it: the relativism, both anthropological and moral; the critique of sense knowledge; the choice of Pyrrhonism over Academic dogmatism; the use of the sceptical tropes; the infinite regress of the criterion; the advice to follow law and custom in matters of practice; and the complementary advice to suspend judgment in matters of theory. Reading Montaigne reading Sextus through the Paul of I Corinthians, the Paul who writes “to destroy the wisdom of the wise,” Popkin recapitulates the immortal essay with grace and clarity. But he misses something about the relationship between Montaigne’s scepticism and Descartes’ first public reaction to it, in the Discourse on the Method.

Although Popkin discusses the Discourse, he follows the main line of Cartesian criticism by focusing on the Meditations and its aftermath. But the Discourse came first, after years of avoiding publicity. Since Descartes was at least obsessive, if not worse, about self-presentation, and since theological problems were exceedingly sensitive, we may assume that he thought very carefully about the theology in the fourth section of the Discourse. Having doubted everything but his bare thinking – everything including his own body and other bodies – he needs God to get them back. To show that God exists, he uses a version of the ontological proof, first formulated by Anselm in the eleventh century.

What Descartes does not use in the *Discourse* is the natural theology of later scholastic philosophy. Scholastic natural theology argued from creatures, as God’s effects, to their cause, God the Creator, in order to prove God’s existence and perfections. As Paul had written, “the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead.”30 Taking his cue from Paul, Peter Lombard gestured at proofs of God’s existence and introduced them with the claim that we have “recognition of the Creator through creatures.”31 Before Thomas Aquinas laid out five arguments – much more explicit but on the same general grounds – for God’s existence, he cleared the ground by rejecting Anselm’s ontological proof.32 Although Descartes’s Jesuit teachers had enshrined Thomas as the supreme theological authority, Descartes bypassed Thomas’s five ways for Anselm’s ontological proof. Why?

If we follow Popkin’s story, the scepticism that Descartes sets out to defeat is mainly Montaigne’s, recorded in the “Apology” and filtered through Charron and others.33 But what the “Apology” politely demolishes is scholastic natural theology, as summarized in the work by Raimond Sebond that Montaigne translated for his father. Hence, Descartes could depend on scholastic natural theology to prove God’s existence only if he could salvage enough from Montaigne’s demolition of it, which evidently he could not do.

Whether Descartes’ *Discourse* was actually shaped in this particular way by Montaigne’s “Apology” is surely debatable. In any event, a larger point will hold: in Popkin’s story, there is a momentous role for the Renaissance in the historiography of philosophy that is not just *distinctive* but also *effective*. The ancient wisdom revived in the fifteenth century included the sceptical wisdom of Sextus Empiricus. Religious strife in the sixteenth century encouraged study and dissemination of the sceptical texts, preparing the way for Montaigne’s corrosive essay. In the seventeenth century, Montaigne’s case for scepticism survived the best efforts of Descartes to refute it, letting this discovery of the Renaissance linger as the incubus of modern philosophy.

The discovery was made in Savonarola’s convent in the 1490s, but it became publicly effective only after 1562, when Henri Estienne produced the first printed text of Sextus. Examining the motives behind this publication, Popkin concludes that Estienne “did not present himself as a sceptic or a purveyor of scepticism…. [He] saw himself as adding to human wisdom and knowledge.”34 Because Popkin

---

30 Romans 1:20.
33 Above, nn. 25–26, 28.
himself added so much to human wisdom and knowledge, the same words apply to him as *non-scepticus*.

At the same time, there surely was a Popkin *scepticus*, for whom subversives like Erasmus and Montaigne were congenial characters. In not exactly the same spirit, E.M. Forster once said that he would rather take his laws from Erasmus or Montaigne than from Moses or St. Paul, understanding those amiable renaissance Christians in a gentler way than their religious rigorism would have allowed. Unlike Forster, they could not really “hate the idea of causes.” By the standards of their time, both were prophets of tolerance, but their time was different from ours.

Or maybe not so different. As in our time, so also in the age of Erasmus and Montaigne, and of Savonarola and Luther, faith was a cause good enough to die for – and for others of other faiths to die for. That some heroes of that embattled age promoted a scepticism whose main motive was religious is one – but only one – of the revolutionary insights which have made all citizens of the Republic of Letters Richard Popkin’s debtors. Another famous statement of Forster’s – writing as a novelist, not a social critic – speaks to the generous, persistent and passionate spirit of inquiry that led Popkin down so many paths to so many treasures. In *Howard’s End*, Forster wrote:

> Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its highest.

Popkin’s sermon, of course, isn’t a sermon at all. It’s a magnificent body of history and philosophy. It tells us, as philosophers, historians, thinkers and scholars: “Only connect!” And were we to connect as he did, the work surely would be exalted.35

---

35 These last lines of my essay, including the quotations from Forster, repeat what I said at the end “The Slums of Cosmopolis,” pp. 85–86.
2. À REBOURS: RICHARD POPKIN’S CONTRIBUTIONS TO INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

Allison P. Coudert

Some readers of this essay will be old enough to remember the Shmoo, the cartoon character created by Al Capp. But you may not know that it morphed into a popular toy in the 1940s, which was basically a large plastic balloon in the shape of a bowling pin with a weight in the bottom.¹ Whenever you punched it, it always popped right back up. That is my vision of my friend Dick Popkin in the last, unbelievably productive years of his life: emphysema, pneumonia, failing eyesight – all things that would fell a lesser man – could not keep him down. In 2000, Dick was invited by David Ruderman, the Director of the Institute of Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, to the final conference culminating a year of seminars devoted to a subject that Dick had helped pioneer, Christian Hebraism and the relation between Christians and Jews in the early modern period. In the months preceding the conference it was nip and tuck whether he would be up to making the trip from Los Angeles to Philadelphia. But with his new motto, “have oxygen, will travel,” he and his wife Julie arrived in style. And after a day of intense conferencing, without a note or moment of hesitation Dick summed up what had been said by the conferees and suggested areas for further research. It was just one more of Dick’s stunning virtuosic performances.

I met Dick at the Clark Library in 1984, where I worked up the courage over several days to give him offprints of two articles. At that point I had no reason to think that Dick would be any different from most accomplished academics, somewhat loathe to take handouts from unknown scholars, especially

¹“Shmoo” memorabilia generated 25 million dollars in the 1948 (about 300 million in 2003 terms). Denis Kitchen apparently has the largest collection of Shmoo memorabilia in the world: “I collected this stuff myself and it’s across the board. It includes ashtrays, birthday cars, boy’s belts, women’s brooch pins, charm bracelets, drinking glasses, earmuffs, Grape Nuts cereal, household deodorizers, puzzles, glass milk bottles, songs and large plush Shmoo dolls. One of the weirdest ones is fishing lures.” (http://forum.newsarama.com/archive/index.php/t-1114.html).
ones working on esoteric subjects like the Kabbalah and witchcraft. But, as I quickly learned, Dick’s skeptical and inquisitive bent inclined him to question prevailing wisdom and Whiggish interpretations when it came to understanding the past. Like two other great scholars of the twentieth century, Gershom Scholem and Frances Yates, he saw himself as something of an archeologist, digging deep in what he has described as the “marvelous and varied intellectual world or swamp which lies beneath our present thinking” to ferret out little known figures, whether they be neglected persons from the past or unrecognized scholars of the present. It was at the margins, in the writings of ignored and neglected figures, that Dick found ideas now seen to be central to our understanding of the transition from the early modern to the modern world. His *cri de coeur* from the very beginning was that philosophy has a history; it was not born fully formed like Athena from Zeus’s or any great philosopher’s head. It cannot be understood unless contextualized, and once this is done our view of the past is radically changed. Good science did not develop when bad religion, bad magic, or bad metaphysics disappeared. Good science was the product of a multitude of events and motivations among which were the recovery of Greek and Roman skeptical texts during the Renaissance, strands of esoteric kabbalistic, hermetic, and neoplatonic thought, millenarianism, and even messianism, all of which combined to produce a heady brew that placed man at the center of the universe. Religion played an essential role in this transformation. From the lowly worm postulated by Luther and Calvin, who could do nothing to mollify an angry God or contribute to his own salvation, mankind took on the pivotal role of restoring the world to its prelapsarian perfection; and science was the means to this end. By focusing on the margins, or at least by bringing the margins into the story, Dick has recovered large chunks of history lost to view, submerged in the swamp, just waiting to be excavated. And this led him to a number of startling and remarkable discoveries. Let me list five of them: (1) Spinoza’s possible connection with the Quakers; (2) Cardinal Ximenes learning Aramaic so he could speak to Jesus; (3) two small treatises by Abraham Cohen Herrera on method that anticipated Descartes’s discussion of clear and distinct ideas; (4) Isaac de Pinto’s dinner with David Hume; and (5) Columbus’s connection with Jews and even the possibility of his Jewish ancestry. This last point was developed by Dick in several lectures, one of which he gave at Arizona State University in 1988 with the irresistible title that only he would have dreamed up, “Columbus and Corned Beef.”

These and many more equally revolutionary discoveries stemmed from Dick’s initial interest in skepticism, the work for which he is undoubtedly most famous. It seems ludicrous now to think that before Dick, no major historian of philosophy was aware that there was a “skeptical crisis” in early modern Europe or cognizant of the role it played in shaping modern philosophy.
Furthermore, no one before Dick was aware of the role that Jewish converts to Christianity and Marranos like La Peyrère played in this skeptical crisis, the French Renaissance, Napoleon’s Jewish policy, the emancipation of the Jews, and the assault on revealed religion. Not content with simply tracing the contours of skepticism from the Renaissance onwards, Dick recognized that in addition to Marranos there were whole groups of philosophers, theologians, and scientists left out of the picture, figures like the Cambridge Platonists and Comenius, those described by Charles Webster as “the spiritual brotherhood” but whom Dick referred to as the “Third Force” in early modern history. These thinkers were united in their quest to overcome the skeptical crisis ensuing from the rediscovery of classical texts and the bitter sectarian conflicts accompanying the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. The interpretation of the Bible was central to their worldview, and they were deeply influenced by various currents of esoteric and mystical thought. They were united in their deeply held religious convictions, their view of the millennium as imminent, and of science as a crucial tool in hastening its advent. From this Dick came to the conclusion that Christian millenarianism and Jewish messianism were potent creative forces in seventeenth-century thought, an idea that has been borne out by subsequent scholars. Henry More, Isaac Newton, William Law, William Whiston, Andrew Michael Ramsey, Hartley, Priestley, Swedenborg, and even Balfour were all part of this Third Force, whose historical influence only began to be appreciated and more fully investigated as a result of Dick’s prodding.2 Our understanding of early modern philosophy, theology, science, and history has changed radically as a result of Dick’s many scholarly endeavors. He has made it clear for all to see how central religion was in the transition from the early modern to the modern world. One of his students quotes him as saying that “the problems of the world are not really political, economic, or social; they are religious. To change the world you must change the hearts of human beings.”3 After September 11, 2001 this statement seems uncannily on the mark. So, in addition to Dick’s role as incomparable scholar, convener of conferences exceptional, and generous friend and mentor, we can add that of prophet and philosopher in his own right.

2When discussing the “Third Force” I should also mention the “Fourth Force,” namely James Force. I recall him driving up to a Clark Conference in his 1960 Oldsmobile convertible and coining the term “Popkinettes” to describe people like us who were so devoted to and influenced by Dick.

In thinking how to define Popkin’s contribution to scholarship, I was struck by the family resemblance that exists between his work and that of two other distinguished scholars I referred to earlier, Frances Yates and Gershom Scholem. In significant ways all three were “heretics” inasmuch as they went against the grain of accepted scholarship by emphasizing the centrality of what other scholars had marginalized, denigrated, or ignored. As I mentioned, Dick was fascinated by what he referred to as the “swamp which lies beneath our present thinking.” Scholem had a similar penchant for delving into uncharted regions. He was convinced that one had to excavate traditional history to get to the truth hidden below the surface, and he discovered the sources of this hidden truth well beyond the borders of orthodoxy:

There are domains of [tradition] that are hidden under the debris of centuries and lie there waiting to be discovered and turned to good use ....there is such a thing as a treasure hunt within tradition, which creates a living relationship to tradition and to which much of what is best in current Jewish consciousness is indebted, even where it was—and is—expressed outside of the framework of orthodoxy.4

Scholem was much more interested in what he called “the failures of history” than in its so-called successes. As he said:

If I were called upon to teach, I would try to show that Jewish history has been a struggle over great ideas and the question is to what extent we should be influenced by the degree of success achieved in that struggle ....At the same time, I would consider with my pupils the failures of history, matters having to do with violence, cruelty and hypocrisy.5

David Biale describes this orientation of Scholem’s work as “counter-history,” which does not revise history so much as suggest that the vital forces which propel history forward lie in a secret tradition beneath the surface of “mainstream” or “establishment” history.6

---

5Ibid., 108.
6Ibid., 11–12: “Counter-history” [is] the belief that the true history lies in a subterranean tradition that must be brought to light. Counter-history is a type of revisionist historiography, but where the revisionist proposes a new theory or finds new facts, the counter-historian transvalues old ones. He does not deny that his predecessor’s interpretation of history is correct… but he rejects the completeness of that interpretation: he affirms the existence of a “mainstream” or “establishment” history; but believes that the vital forces lies in a secret tradition.”
Yates shared this same conviction that true history was subterranean. Like Popkin and Scholem, she saw herself as an archeologist, whose excavations among the ruins of the past revealed the truth that lay beneath what she described as “superficial history.” As she writes in *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*:

One way of looking at the explorations of this book is to see them as having uncovered a lost period of European history. Like archeologists digging down through layers, we have found under the superficial history of the early seventeenth century, just before the outbreak of the Thirty Years War, a whole culture, a whole civilization, lost to view, and not the less important because of such short duration.

Yates pursued the theme of “lost” history throughout all her work. She describes her quest in poignant terms in her great book *The French Academies of the Sixteenth Century*:

…history as it actually occurs is not quite the whole of history, for it leaves out of account the hopes which never materialized, the attempts to prevent the outbreak of wars, the futile efforts to solve differences by conciliatory methods. Hopes such as these are as much a part of history as the terrible events which falsify them, and in trying to assess the influence of their times upon idealists and lovers of peaceful activities such as our poets and academicians the hopes are perhaps as important as the events.7

Like Yates and Scholem, Popkin turned to what was deemed irrational by many scholars in constructing his own counter-history. I do not use the term “irrational” in the sense of unreasonable but to describe intuitive and essentially religious forms of cognition – rather than those based on empiricism or deduction – which are expressed in symbolic images rather than logical propositions. Scholem was convinced that myth and religion were more important sources of human creativity than reason alone: “Reason is a great instrument of destruction. For construction, something beyond it is required …. I believe that morality as a constructive force is impossible without religion, without some power beyond pure reason.”8 As Biale points out, however, Scholem did not glorify irrationalism, being well aware of its destructive potential: “Scholem believes in the rational regulation of irrationalism, and in his historiography he strives for a rational account of the history of irrationalism.”9 I think the same can be said of Frances Yates and Dick Popkin.

---

9 Ibid.