MAD MEN and PHILOSOPHY
Nothing Is as It Seems

Is DON DRAPER a good man?

What do PEGGY, BETTY, and JOAN teach us about gender equality?

What are the ethics of advertising—or is that a contradiction in terms?

Is ROGER STERLING an existential hero?

We’re better people than we were in the sixties, right?

With its swirling cigarette smoke, martini lunches, skinny ties, and tight pencil skirts, Mad Men is unquestionably one of the most stylish, sexy, and irresistible shows on television. But the series becomes even more absorbing once you dig deeper into its portrayal of the changing social and political mores of 1960s America and explore the philosophical complexities of its key characters and themes. From Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle to John Kenneth Galbraith, Milton Friedman, and Ayn Rand, Mad Men and Philosophy brings the thinking of some of history’s most powerful minds to bear on the world of Don Draper and the Sterling Cooper ad agency. You’ll gain insights into a host of compelling Mad Men questions and issues, including happiness, freedom, authenticity, feminism, Don Draper’s identity, and more—and have lots to talk about the next time you find yourself around the water cooler.

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MAD MEN
AND
PHILOSOPHY
NOTHING IS AS IT SEEMS

Edited by Rod Carveth and
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“I Think We Need to Salute That!”

The work on this book required getting into character. Much whiskey, many martinis, and countless cigarettes were consumed in an effort to make the book an authentic companion to Mad Men. In the interest of research, liaisons were entered into, suits were worn, and hostile takeovers by other publishers were thwarted.

Putting together a volume such as Mad Men and Philosophy requires a team of people working together—a team that deserves to be saluted for their efforts. We would like to thank our contributing authors, who met every tight deadline with high-quality work and good cheer. Unlike Bert Cooper, Bill Irwin, the Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series editor, offered invaluable assistance every step of the way, and Constance Santisteban at Wiley saw this book through press with all the efficiency and oversight of Joan Holloway.

Rod thanks James for such a great working relationship. Anytime James wants to collaborate on another project, Rod is game.

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Last but not least, we want to thank you, the reader, for your interest in the show and in this book. And we want to assure you that no one lost a foot throughout the entire process.
INTRODUCTION
“A Thing Like That”

Take off your shoes. Shut the door. Have a seat. Kick back in your Eames chair. Admire that Rothko print. Pour your favorite drink. And prepare to enter the philosophical world of *Mad Men*, or at least the world of philosophers thinking and writing about *Mad Men*.

*Mad Men* premiered in July 2007 to immediate critical acclaim. Set in 1960, the series seemed both exotic and nostalgic. It showed a past that many of us had not lived through, and for those who had lived through it, the episodes shined a new light on old experiences. Over the course of the first three seasons, *Mad Men* reminded us of many uncomfortable truths, from the prevalence of drinking and smoking to the systemic sexism, racism, and homophobia that were ever-present in the early 1960s. It also reminded us of a glamour long since lost as we became reacquainted with the fashions of the era, the luxurious civility of airline flight, and the forgotten manners and mores of a previous generation. And *Mad Men* poignantly dramatized the reactions of people to events we still commemorate today. By taking us inside a world in which people struggled to understand these events as they occurred, and
showing us those people in their historical context, _Mad Men_ helped us understand better both the past and the present.

Few series have distinguished themselves as quickly as _Mad Men_. But the audience didn’t need the Golden Globes or the Screen Actors Guild to tell them _Mad Men_ was something special, something delightfully disturbing. This show’s audience knows quality when it sees it. From the first episode viewers were immersed in a morally ambiguous atmosphere of corporate and family life. We were introduced to likeable characters performing questionable, and at times clearly immoral, actions. Somehow we found ourselves rooting for Don Draper to sell cigarettes, get away with dalliances, and conceal his true identity. And we found Sterling Cooper an alluring and attractive setting, all the while cringing at the subservient role of the women in the office.

The chapters that follow were written by _Mad Men_ fans for _Mad Men_ fans who can’t help but think about the characters, events, and issues long after they turn off the television. Whether you want to think more about the role of women in the series, or the morality of advertising, or the way to lead a meaningful life, you will find guidance in these pages.

Because we didn’t have a big advertising budget for this book, we had to write this introduction ourselves. Philosophers aren’t known as great salesmen, but hopefully this little pitch was enough to close the deal. Please read on.
PART ONE

“PEOPLE MAY SEE THINGS DIFFERENTLY, BUT THEY DON’T REALLY WANT TO”: MAD MEN AND PROBLEMS OF KNOWLEDGE AND FREEDOM
That *Mad Men* takes place in the 1960s is no accident. The creator, Matthew Weiner, could have made a series about modern advertising executives, but he chose not to. By showing us the differences between Don Draper’s time and ours, *Mad Men* deftly underscores the ways in which we aren’t so different after all. One thing does stand out, however, at least for me. Every time I watch the show, I find myself asking, “Were these people just *stupid*?”

Let me explain myself. I don’t *actually* think that the people on the show are idiots. Nonetheless, sometimes they just seem *so dense*. There are things in their world that it seems like they *ought* to know, but, for some reason, *don’t*.

For instance, here in the twenty-first century we know that one of the most successful ad campaigns of all times is Marlboro’s use of the “Marlboro Man.” Cowboy hat pulled low to shade his squinty gaze, he stares into the empty distance,
alone in rugged country—the Marlboro Man is still an iconic figure, even though he hasn’t been seen in a decade. The campaign traded on the notion of smoking as manly, the smoker as a hardy individualist. It was a runaway success.

Why is it, then, that when advertising genius Don Draper is presented with a similar idea by his firm’s research department, he rejects it? Maybe we wouldn’t have known at first sight that it was a good idea for a campaign, but it seems we could reasonably expect Don to know—yet he doesn’t. What’s more, Pete Campbell, the junior man on the team, does see the potential of the angle. What’s going on?¹

Let’s use that case, and others like it, to examine exactly what it takes to know something. As we’ll see, Don’s a smart guy, but what he does and even can know is limited by the resources available at his particular time and place in history. Like any effective salesman, though, I need to wind up a bit and get a good lead-in before I can sell you on the bottom line. So before we get to the part where I try to convince you that we’re all blinkered by time and place, let’s start with something a little more general: What do we mean when we say we “know” something?²

“He Could Be Batman for All We Know”

In “Marriage of Figaro” (episode 103), Harry Crane points out to his co-worker Pete Campbell how little they really know about their boss, Don Draper. “Draper? Who knows anything about that guy? No one’s ever lifted that rock. He could be Batman for all we know.” Pete shrugs the comment off, but Harry’s right—they don’t know much about Don, because he doesn’t really talk about himself. He doesn’t give them anything to go on. The junior account executives could sit around making guesses about Don if they wanted. But at the end of the day, even if some of their guesses turned out to be correct
(without their realizing it), they still wouldn’t know anything because, right or wrong, they wouldn’t have any reasons.

The philosophical study of knowledge is called epistemology. Epistemologists have long recognized that having knowledge involves having reasons. Reasons, or—put another way—justification, are one ingredient of what you might call the formula for knowledge. (Philosophers will argue about anything, so I’m necessarily glossing over some quibbles about the details here.) Briefly, we can think of knowledge as justified true belief.

Let’s take the three ingredients of knowledge in reverse order. When epistemologists talk about “believing” something, they just mean that you think it’s true. “Belief” can sometimes carry other connotations, and in everyday speech it’s often even set up as an alternative to knowing. That’s not how we’re using the word here. For our purposes, belief is an ingredient of knowledge, not an alternative to it. So to have a belief is, roughly, to just “buy into” something. For instance, after her employee orientation with Joan in the pilot episode (“Smoke Gets in Your Eyes”), Peggy believes that if she doesn’t butter up the switchboard girls, she won’t be able to do her job as a secretary.

The next ingredient is truth. You can’t know what isn’t true. In other words, you can believe something false. Betty Draper, for example, believes her husband’s name is really Don Draper. She may even think she knows it, but she would be wrong. “Don,” as we learn in “5G” (episode 105), is really Dick Whitman. His ruse has fooled everyone, Betty included, into thinking he’s someone he really isn’t, so that they don’t really know who he is.

Truth and belief seem pretty straightforward, and they are, indeed, fairly uncontroversial elements of the definition of knowledge. They’re also of the least interest to us in trying to answer our initial question. People in all times and places wind up with false beliefs, and therefore come short of having
knowledge. What we’re interested in figuring out is how so many seemingly smart people wound up being so wrong about so many things that seem pretty obvious to us, while still yet apparently believing they have knowledge. To answer that, we need to talk about the last ingredient—justification.

It’s one thing to have a belief, and even to be right about it, but it’s quite another to have good reasons for that belief. We need reasons to believe the way we do—in other words, justification. Justification is the magic stuff that transforms merely being right into knowing. Earlier, we observed that the junior execs could make guesses about Don all they wanted and they still wouldn’t know anything about him, even if they somehow came up right on some of the guesses. You can’t know just by taking shots in the dark. You have to have reasons, too.

Of course, reasons aren’t enough, not all by themselves—you need justification as well as true belief, and it’s very important to understand that having justification doesn’t entail having the truth, and vice versa. Betty doesn’t know her husband is really named Don Draper for the obvious reason that he isn’t. That much seems right. But wouldn’t we say that she’s justified in thinking he’s Don Draper? Seeing a person use a name on a day-to-day basis, buy a house and conduct business under that name, get married under that name, and so on certainly constitutes good reason to think that that is the person’s real name.

Betty’s a smart woman, but she’s dead wrong about her husband. Still, she’s also justified in believing as she does. Can that possibly be right? Perhaps something about how this whole justification thing works can explain how an otherwise smart person who seems to have all the good reasons in the world to believe something is true can somehow wind up with a false belief. If so, then we’ll be in a position to better understand why, with the benefit of hindsight, some of these folks from 1960 come across as so obtuse. So let’s dig into justification.
What constitutes being justified? Where do justifications for beliefs come from? The most obvious sources of justification for beliefs are our senses. Some philosophers maintain that we cannot regard beliefs that come about from relying on our senses as justified, but it’s clear that what we perceive about the world must play an important role in justifying our beliefs. It certainly seems that the chest pains Roger Sterling felt in “Long Weekend” (episode 110) constituted justification for thinking he was experiencing some sort of problem, even if it didn’t necessarily mean he was justified in thinking he was having a heart attack, specifically.

Another means of justifying beliefs that is a bit more complex than pure sense data, but still pretty basic, is personal experience. In “The Hobo Code” (episode 108), Don observes from their behavior around each other that Midge, his Greenwich Village mistress, and Roy, her fellow beatnik, are in love. “Every day I make pictures where people appear to be in love. I know what it looks like,” he says, and he’s right. They are in love. Don’s not justified in thinking that it’s true in the same way as he might be justified in reporting some mundane fact about the world around him, like the color of Midge’s wallpaper, for instance, but he is justified. He can’t see love in the same way he can see the color of the walls, but, owing to his personal experience, he can nonetheless “see” it when it’s right in front of his face.

So far, so good. We can be justified in our beliefs in virtue of what we sense directly and in virtue of what we can figure out based on our own personal expertise. That certainly seems plausible enough. We can imagine we’d accept such first-hand accounts as fairly solid justification for beliefs. But this hasn’t helped us answer our initial question at all, or at least not in a satisfactory way.
Normally, if someone doesn’t see something that’s very obvious to most other people, we think that person is either being careless with the evidence or just isn’t “getting it.” But all this started when we noted that some things that we regard as obvious are obscure to the _Mad Men_ characters. For instance, even the most well-behaved characters on the show are rather startlingly sexist. Their behavior is just wildly inappropriate—it’s offensive, intimidating, and unpleasant to a lot of the women on the show. It’s hardly surprising that Peggy would come across Bridget crying in the bathroom of Sterling Cooper (episode 102, “Ladies Room”)—who knows what she had to put up with that day? So if this is so obvious to us, why don’t the characters get it?

On the account I’ve just given of justification, when someone fails to grasp something it either means that the evidence is difficult to perceive or the person is somehow at fault, epistemically speaking. Since the fact that the behavior of the junior account executives at Sterling Cooper is clearly inappropriate, and would seem so to just about anyone watching the show, it doesn’t seem right to say that the evidence isn’t clear. But that means the characters must be either very careless or just not very bright. There’s something that doesn’t seem quite right about that, either. We must be missing a piece of the puzzle.

As it happens, we are. What the preceding account of justification does *not* take into account is that there’s only so much we can know first-hand. If we could rely only on ourselves for justification, we’d have relatively little of it, and would therefore know next to nothing. The idea that we must depend on ourselves and only ourselves for justification, and therefore knowledge, is called *epistemic individualism*. Very few thinkers have actually held this view, but for many years, most of the epistemology that was done *acted as if* we were isolated, solitary knowers, focusing solely on the ways in which we were or were not justified with respect to our senses and our own internal mental processes. Relatively little attention was
paid to the fact that most of the evidence for our beliefs comes from other people, but that’s been changing recently, and this new approach is commonly known as social epistemology. Social epistemology recognizes the importance of the social nature of humans in thinking about what and how we come to know things. As a result, it has been able to shed some light on issues that might otherwise be puzzling. Some of the concepts used in social epistemology can help us fill out our picture of justification a little more, and get us closer to an answer to our question that rings true.

“Well, I Never Thought I’d Say This, but What Does the Research Say?”

Testimony occupies a central place in social epistemology. Testimony is a pseudo-religious-sounding term for sincere communication of belief, and social epistemologists have come to understand that it plays a hugely important role in individual knowledge. Freddy Rumsen, Don Draper, and the others didn’t do any personal exploration of “the Electrosizer” (which made its infamous debut in “Indian Summer,” episode 111), but they’re nonetheless justified in believing that it gives “sensations” of a certain sort. Why? Peggy told them, and they have good reason to believe that she is in a position to know. Their justification for the belief (and, incidentally, the belief itself) came from her testimony.

So we get a lot of our beliefs through testimony, and likely most of our justification, too. Since beliefs and justification are both required before we actually know anything (the other part, of course, is being right), this means that we’re remarkably dependent on other people for the ingredients of knowledge. We need other people in order to know much of anything. We depend on other people for knowledge, so maybe it’s the case that if otherwise intelligent people fail to know something that seems obvious to us, something’s gone wrong in the realm of
testimony. So we should ask ourselves, who do the characters on the show depend on, epistemically speaking?

Then and now, one of the best kinds of testimony is expert testimony. After Betty’s accident in “Ladies Room,” she’s very worried because she doesn’t know why she had the strange attack that caused the car accident. Don, frustrated and worried as well, appeals to the promise of knowledge that experts offer us. “Well, go to a doctor, another doctor. A good one!” Of course, he’s also got a healthy sense of skepticism about at least some doctors. “That Dr. Patterson is not thorough. I swear when we walked down Park Avenue, I could hear the quacking.”

It’s all well and good when we can find a qualified so-and-so to answer our queries and be done with it. If any of the secretaries at Sterling Cooper have a question about how the office runs, they can always ask office manager Joan Harris; they do not ask Don, even though he’s senior to Joan. We may be stuck getting our knowledge from other people, but we can be judicious about who we listen to. What’s worrying, however, is when experts in the same area disagree—like Betty’s doctors. There’s an interesting example of this phenomenon in the first episode (“Smoke Gets in Your Eyes”). It’s an incident we touched on earlier—the tobacco ad campaign and Pete Campbell’s insight that playing on the danger of smoking could be a viable advertising option.

In case you haven’t seen the episode recently, let me refresh your memory. In the wake of widely publicized research revealing that cigarette smoking is linked to various diseases, the Lucky Strike cigarette company is worried about its image. They want an ad campaign that’ll still sell a product now known to be potentially dangerous, and they can no longer rely on the dubious doctors’ testimonials and vague health claims they’d made in the past. Don Draper is the man in charge of delivering the pitch, and mere hours before the meeting, he still doesn’t have any ideas. Grasping at straws, he takes
a meeting with Dr. Guttman, a psychologist who works for Sterling Cooper’s research department, with Pete Campbell sitting in. The researcher tells him that the best psychological theory available suggests that many people have, on some level, a “death wish,” and that it should be possible to sell cigarettes precisely by highlighting the rebellious, death-defying aspect of it. Don sums it up pithily: “So basically, if you love danger, you’ll love smoking.”

Dr. Guttman is clearly a capable individual who is quite confident about her conclusions. Don, on the other hand, isn’t confident. When the big meeting comes, Don doesn’t pitch the “death wish” angle, but Pete—without Don’s go-ahead—does. As a result, Don’s pretty upset with Pete. Not only was it Don’s pitch to make, but, as he says later in his office, “If Greta’s research was any good, I would have used it.”

The difficulty lies in the fact that we have two experts in roughly the same area—how to influence consumers—who are saying opposite things. What do we do when experts disagree? Some philosophers say that when two people who are epistemic peers disagree, they should both suspend judgment. There are some good arguments for this as a kind of ideal practice, but Don was not in a situation that allowed for him to suspend judgment. He had a pitch meeting in just a few hours. He had to make some decision. So why make the decision he did, which was to ignore Dr. Guttman’s advice?

The answer to this question is going to prove useful to our analysis, but to see it we need to step back a bit. Now, normally, Don’s own expertise would be a good reason for having certain beliefs about an ad campaign. Suppose that one of his junior execs, like Ken Cosgrove, had “spitballed” the idea of positioning smoking as “dangerous.” If Don’s gut instinct was to reject the idea as unworkable, he’d surely be justified, and we’d have no worries about it, either. Why? Well, because while Ken might know something about advertising (he’d better, if he wants to keep his job), he’s not an expert in the same class as
Don. If Don doesn’t listen to his advice, even if Ken happens to be right (as we might know with the benefit of hindsight), we don’t think Don’s behaving unreasonably, because we don’t class Ken as an expert, and neither does he.

Strange as it may seem to us here in the twenty-first century, this may be exactly the same reason that Don didn’t use Dr. Guttman’s research—he didn’t consider her an expert. We’re used to thinking of psychologists as having great insight into the human mind, but Don doesn’t seem impressed. Maybe it’s because he regards psychology as something new and unproven; Roger Sterling’s comments in “Ladies Room” make it sound as if psychology is something of a fad. Whatever the reason, Don makes his assessment of the field clear when he tells Dr. Guttman that “psychology might be great at cocktail parties” before dismissing her ideas. To us it appears that Don is behaving irrationally, because we have decades more experience with the sorts of insights that psychology can provide us about how and why people do things. As far as Don’s concerned, though, research psychology still has yet to make good on its claims—it’s “bullshit,” as he says in “Ladies Room.”

Pete ran with Dr. Guttman’s research angle, but he probably doesn’t put much more stock in psychology than Don; if he does, we’re never given any indication of it. His motivations for bringing out the “death wish” approach are clear enough—he wanted to prove himself where Don seemed to be flailing. As Don told Midge about Pete in the first episode, “There’s this kid who comes by my office every day, looks where he’s going to put his plants.” Pete probably went with the research not because he had more reason to believe that it was correct than Don did, but rather just because he thought it gave him a shot at Don’s job.

But there’s another instance of Pete going against the popular opinion that doesn’t seem to have such a shallow motivation. In “Red in the Face” (episode 107), the Sterling Cooper guys are brainstorming about the upcoming presidential election,
assessing Kennedy’s chances against their candidate, Nixon. The partners don’t seem to think much of Kennedy’s prospects. After Sterling notes that Kennedy doesn’t even wear a hat, Pete Campbell says, “I don’t know. You know who else doesn’t wear a hat? Elvis. That’s what we’re dealing with.” The others dismiss his observation.

Pete certainly didn’t improve his chances of getting promoted by plumping for Kennedy, so why did he do it except that he actually believed that Kennedy was more of a threat than the others did? Clearly he did, and he was right, too, as we know. He was right because he was able to see something that the others couldn’t, something importantly relevant to the situation at hand—Kennedy’s youth appeal. Being young, Pete saw what Roger Sterling and Bert Cooper did not. Cooper apparently never even considered the possibility that the vantage point of youth could provide any worthwhile insights. “Remind me to stop hiring young people,” he says.

We’re now closing in on the real answer to our question. Don didn’t grasp the importance of the angle that would eventually come to define one of the most successful ad campaigns ever because he didn’t recognize the person presenting the evidence as being appropriately trustworthy. He failed to know because Dr. Guttman’s say-so was not enough to provide justification for a belief. Don, along with the other senior execs, failed to know that Kennedy was a threat to Nixon’s campaign for the White House because Pete Campbell’s insights were not proper justifiers. To them, the opinion of some wet-behind-the-ears junior account executive was just not enough to provide reason to believe.

But why would they think that? Wouldn’t knowing that Kennedy had youth appeal be pertinent information? Wouldn’t being able to understand different viewpoints be of use in forming our beliefs and seeking justification? Some epistemologists have explored that very question. So to get to the bottom of this, once and for all, we’re going to look at just a
few more examples, this time with the help of an analytical approach known as *standpoint theory*.

**“It’s Like Watching a Dog Play the Piano”**

*Standpoint theory*, or *standpoint epistemology*, assumes that some individuals in a society are better situated, by virtue of their experiences, to know certain things, even things that it might be impossible for anyone who doesn’t occupy a similar place in society to know first-hand. This isn’t the same as simply recognizing the importance of expertise, but it is related. Expertise is, in principle, something that anyone can acquire—all things being equal, anyone could work on Madison Avenue long enough to acquire expertise in advertising. The kind of privileged viewpoint that standpoint theory addresses comes from a whole existence that is shot through with the relevant kinds of experiences.

Even the relatively unenlightened characters in *Mad Men* seem to have *some* intuitive grasp of the notion. In “Babylon” (episode 106), Freddy Rumsen and the ad boys use the secretaries to brainstorm for the Belle Jolie lipstick account. They don’t have a high opinion of their secretaries’ intelligence, referring to them at one point as “morons.” The only reason they even bother asking is because they don’t know anything about lipstick themselves. Thus they’re aware that the girls have *some* information that they don’t. But standpoint theory goes further than merely to suggest that some people have access to certain facts that others don’t. It proposes that there may be a *great deal* of valuable knowledge that one might acquire from having a particular vantage point, and *that* is something Freddy and his crew never even entertained. When Peggy actually comes up with a good pitch for Belle Jolie lipstick, most of the people in the office are fairly amazed.

It seems obvious enough to us now that things worth knowing are spread out, diffuse in society. In 1960, however, that was