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Ron Barnette
Valdosta State University

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Book Review

Skeptical Philosophy for Everyone, Richard H. Popkin and Avrum Stroll (Prometheus Books, 2002; ISBN: 1-57392-936-0)

Professors Avrum Stroll and Richard Popkin have collaborated and written on the topic of skepticism for many years, with Popkin defending skepticism and Stroll arguing against it. In fact, the concluding chapter of *Skeptical Philosophy for Everyone* offers the reader letters exchanged between the authors who wish to share publicly their divergent positions and arguments. This longstanding collaboration is important to note, given the nature and purpose of this book, written together. By examining the challenges of skepticism, which they consider as integral to the very activity of philosophy, they set out to answer the question “What is Philosophy?” by posing and then answering six questions throughout the book:

1. Why do people philosophize?
2. Do humans possess knowledge of the external world, including knowledge of the minds of others?
3. What is the relationship between mind and body?
4. Is there a supreme being?
5. What is the good for man?
6. Is an ideal society possible?

These questions are designed to cover a wide range of topics in the main branches of philosophy: epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of mind, philosophy of religion, ethics, and political philosophy. The Contents, through which these questions are explored, are listed as follows:

1. Why Do People Philosophize?
2. Does Anyone Ever Know Anything?
3. Modern Skepticism
4. The Twentieth Century
5. Philosophy of Religion
6. Ethics
7. Political Philosophy
8. Skepticism Today: A Debate Between Avrum Stroll and Richard H. Popkin

The approach taken in *Skeptical Philosophy for Everyone* is both historical and analytic. The main views developed by major Western philosophers (from Plato to Wittgenstein and Derrida) are presented and are examined analytically; that is to say, these historical views are critically analyzed as to what degree they

can be defended or rejected as correct. As such, there is more than ample room for academic dialogue and debate over the authors' analyses.

The central theme of skepticism is developed throughout the book, both as an explanation, of sorts, of the process of philosophizing in Western thought, and as an engine for generating counterarguments and reasons for doubting philosophical and everyday claims. As such, skepticism becomes the *modus operandi* of philosophical reflection, and rational argumentation is the process of philosophical development. Referring to the above major areas of philosophy, the authors note that "Unlike any other text with which we are familiar, ours will emphasize the skeptical challenges that have been developed in each of these areas." (p.15) Their book is indeed unique in this respect, in particular by the manner in which skepticism is discussed as being essential to Western philosophy.

Six ingredients of a philosophical problem are described early on, and they serve to inform major discussions in each of the chapters that follow, save the last chapter, which, as noted earlier, is an exchange of views on skepticism between the two authors. These features of a philosophical problem serve to clarify well the development and flow of ideas, and they provide insight into the conception of philosophy maintained by Stroll and Popkin, which they summarize accordingly:

Philosophy is a complex, intellectual activity that (a) involves reflection about the world and its inhabitants; (b) is a conceptual, rather than a straightforwardly scientific, empirical, or factual discipline; (c) is a rational activity, demanding the use of argument in an attempt to support a particular conclusion; (d) arises in part because the world is complex and not well understood, and is therefore directed toward clarifying or resolving problematic issues or doctrines; (e) involves the quest for deeper explanations to get at what is fundamental and not superficial; and (f) does so by developing a theory or theories to account for the matters under consideration. (p. 28)

It is worth noting that throughout *Skeptical Philosophy for Everyone*, the concept of skepticism is explored in a very broad context. There are very helpful discussions on the notions of justification of belief and the search for a criterion of justification, in the chapter on epistemology. Contrast this, more traditional, context for discussions of skepticism with that in the chapter on political philosophy, where the authors talk of the separation of governmental powers as being a "fundamental part of the skeptical character of the American government." (p. 281) Skepticism writ large, indeed!

In the main, Stroll and Popkin make good on their stated plan and purpose of the book. One clearly senses the integral importance of skepticism in the history of philosophy and for the very activity of philosophizing, as presented and argued. They make a convincing case for concluding that practically every great thinker, from the time of ancient Greeks to the present, has produced theories to forestall or refute skepticism. For two authors who actually do disagree on fundamental aspects of skepticism, it is commendable that their coauthored text is presented with admirable objectivity. One does find oneself attempting to ascertain which chapter was written by which author---however, this reviewer came up short in his speculations! For an introductory course in philosophy, where a professor wants to address the theme of skepticism, or for an honors course in the introduction to philosophy, where more challenging class discussion is envisioned, *Skeptical Philosophy for Everyone* is definitely a book to consider for class adoption.

Valdosta State University

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