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THE SLUMS OF COSMOPOLIS: A RENAISSANCE IN THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY?

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In his amazing autobiography, when he describes his move in 1963 to UC San Diego in order to found a new department of philosophy, Dick Popkin mentions in passing that he also became the editor of a new journal at that time—the *Journal of the History of Philosophy.*1

Justly celebrated as stimulus and guiding spirit of cultural, political, intellectual and philosophical conversation on many planes and in many places, Dick has also won fame as founding and abiding genius of that journal for three and a half decades, with more to come. Since it is the leading vehicle in any language for the history of philosophy, his many years of dedication to the Journal’s growth and improvement deserve abundant thanks here and will long earn the praise of its readers—past, present and future. Dick also recalls in telling his story how his work as editor once caused him to glance at a Polish journal that happened to contain some unpublished Hume letters that happened to end up in Cracow because a Polish aristocrat happened to have bought them in England two hundred years before.2 This particular chain of happenings helped Dick dislodge Hume from the sole proprietorship of British empiricism. To the prepared mind, of course, such things are more apt to happen. In gratitude for what Dick has taught so many about preparing the mind—though few minds can aspire to rival his—I offer the following with its own chains of happening across the centuries.

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Scepticism is the incubus of modern philosophy—of philosophy’s post-medieval phase, that is to say, since the breach between Anglo-

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American and Continental thought after Husserl and Frege has stalled the growth of a robust philosophical post-modernism, for better or for worse. The sceptical nightmare hatched by renaissance humanists, schooled by Montaigne and fed on Descartes’ dreams still haunts philosophies of all kinds. Among Richard Popkin’s many contributions to the history of philosophy, the greatest is his account of the origins and original motivations of post-classical scepticism, the early modern revival of a philosophical tradition all but lost in the middle ages. It was Popkin who first showed how and why philosophers and philologists of the renaissance resurrected scepticism, an achievement that puts him among the most eminent scholars and thinkers of our century—Ernst Cassirer, Giovanni Gentile, Eugenio Garin, Paul Kristeller, Charles Schmitt—who wrote the story of renaissance philosophy. Despite the work done by Popkin and these other heroes of learning, despite continuing study of the history of scepticism by philosophers, despite even some awareness that philosophy has a history between Occam and Descartes, glaring defects of presentism and whig historiography remain in philosophy’s typical treatments of its post-medieval past. As our age challenges or destroys other canons of authority and value, renaissance philosophy is in little such danger—at least from an Anglo-American perspective—never having been admitted to a philosophical canon in the first place.

The warrant for philosophical ignorance of several centuries of philosophy’s history was given by Descartes, and given in two senses, the first familiar from the famous words of The Discourse on the Method.

Reading good books is like having a conversation with ... past ages. ... Conversing with ... past centuries is much the same as traveling. ... But one who spends too much time traveling eventually becomes a stranger in his own country; and one who is too curious about the practices of past ages usually remains quite ignorant about those of the present. Moreover, fables make us imagine many events as possible when they are not, ... and those who regulate their conduct ... from these works are liable to fall into the excesses of the knights-errant. ... That is why, as soon as I was old enough to emerge from the control of my teachers, I entirely abandoned the study of letters. Resolving to seek no knowledge other than that which could be found in myself or else in the great book of the world, I spent the rest of my youth traveling, ... gathering various experiences. ... But after I