

While reading Plato

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Amicus Plato, sed magis amica veritas.
Aristotle

1. Introduction: First, the appetizer

It is a well-known fact, as regrettable as it may be, that majority of writers, even the great ones, are remembered by most of us, at best, by only a few quotations from the many pages they have written. Bearing this in mind, I decided not to waste mine or anyone else's time but to write nothing but quotations, namely, the quotations from myself. These different thoughts that have come to my mind at different times and under different circumstances – they have been recorded in my diaries over the past 50 years. Some of them are rather long (for a quotation), other are so short they sound almost axiomatic. But however long or short quotation is, each one represents in a more or less condensed form the end result of life-long experience and perpetual reflections. I would also like to point out that what will follow is not a philosophical treatise, and though I try to support every point and statement made by some arguments, they are by no means exhaustive and rigorous in a strictly philosophical sense. All I want is to share my views, not to prove them to be absolutely correct, and convince others to accept them as such.

And lastly, I have not spared any efforts in trying to make each and every quotation as clear and concise as I could. Whether I have succeeded or not is for the reader to judge.

2. And now, the Main Course

α. Like other philosophers before and after him, Plato had his favourite set of subjects and ideas which he would explore in his writings over and over again. Yet, even among the most repeated themes there is one that stands out and runs through all Plato's dialogues – the position of

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philosophers in society. In his not totally unbiased opinion, they are veritably a breed apart from the rest of humanity. They are endowed with all possible virtues and the only ones qualified to rule.

Now, considering Plato's opinion of himself as the greatest, after Socrates, among Greek philosophers (hasn't he defeated each one of them, albeit as Socrates's alter ego, in his dialogues) and also his position as head of Academy, the leading school of philosophy in Greece, this aspect of Plato's writings can be viewed as a remarkable case of self-advertising.

β. Plato refutes the rule by finding an exception, but then, he turns around and presents the same exception as a rule. And in this he is not significantly different from the majority of men. For everyone knows somebody who, to prove his point, does exactly the same thing.

γ. Conversation was the favourite pastime in ancient Greece, especially for those living in the democratic city-state like Athens. Moreover, the claim can be made, that the art of conversation was not only the product of democratic society but first and foremost its very basis. It stems from the nature of conversation in general and dialogue in particular, as the most egalitarian form of human interaction, since ideally it presupposes the social and intellectual equality of interlocutors and their right to speak freely. And theirs was the real freedom of speech when each individual was both, and to the same degree, a speaker and a listener, as opposed to the modern version of it, when the powerful few had virtually monopolized rights to and means of public discourse, thus effectively reducing the overwhelming majority of population to the role of passive listeners.

For all these socio-political reasons and also because of the sheer enjoyment they derived from it, the ancient Greeks loved to converse. But in order to converse, those who do it had to understand what each of them was saying. And since what they were saying, they were saying in words, these words had to have the same meaning for everyone. Thus they were faced with the problem of defining the meanings of words which could be acceptable to all. For this reason, the definition of words became, for a time being, the main preoccupation of ancient Greeks. And while they were defining the meanings of words, they also had to define the reality those words were describing. As a result, the description and explanation of the reality became their another favourite preoccupation.

The next inevitable step was to find the connection between the words and the reality, the spiritual and the physical, the idea and the matter, etc., etc. Philosophy was born! Thus again, the claim could be made that the art of conversation – and ancient Greeks unquestionably had elevated conversation

into the highest art form – was not only the basis of democracy, but also the foundation of the Greek philosophy which in its turn became the corner stone of the Western civilization.

δ. The Western philosophy is greatly indebted to Xanthippe, the shrewish wife of Socrates. For it is in order to defend himself from her incessant demands for the material things – food, clothes, money, etc. that Socrates developed the notion of primacy of the spiritual over the material. He also, in order to escape the constant harassment by his wife, who evidently treated this notion as another excuse of a loafer, had to spend a great deal of time on the streets of Athens. There, having nothing else to do, he would engage anybody who was willing to talk into a conversation and, while doing this, use successfully the argumentative skills he had developed in quarrels with his wife.

And, as if trying to compensate for the numerous defeats on the domestic front, Plato would put all his energy and passion into those discussions, bent on winning every argument this time.

ε. The real Socrates was in all probability much more open, clear and a straightforward man than the shrewd but vague and shifty character depicted by Plato obviously for purely dramatic effects²:

*The clear thoughts express themselves
in clear sentences as well*

ζ. Plato puts his ideas in a form of dialogue in which his alter ego, Socrates, always wins an argument. This is a very clever and convincing stratagem since the reader usually identifies himself with Socrates's interlocutor-adversary and thus takes, albeit vicariously, a part in the dialogue. As a result, when the opponent of Socrates is persuaded to agree with him such a reader feels automatically convinced also, without actually putting forth any of his own arguments against Plato-Socrates.

People who do not have a natural inclination for arguments of any, especially of intellectual sort, feel quite comfortable in a such situation. But those who do have the desire and ability to argue rendered impotent and frustrated.

η. While denying to others the right to use certain definitions as axioms, Plato nevertheless freely allows this luxury to himself, being completely oblivious, evidently, of the contradiction between what he does and what he preaches.

² Read “Memorabilia” by Xenophon.

And again, while denying to others the right to express themselves as poets or dramatists, he proceeds to write dramatic dialogues and poetic myths. Thus, by doing that, he consistently displays the same double standards as all of us.

θ. The so called Platonic “ideas”, e.g. “idea of chair”, “idea of bed”, etc., have been simply the expressions of the purely physical needs of man to sit or lie down as comfortably as possible considering man's specific type of body, its anatomical and geometrical proportions. At the beginning, the primitive men satisfied these needs by using objects as they are found in nature. The gradual realization that some of these objects are more suitable for the intended purpose than others led to the progressive search for the better and better ones, but still using them as they were found, i.e. without changing them in any way. Taking an object **as it is** from Nature and improving it by the labour of man's hands marked the beginning of a new revolutionary phase in the relationship between Man and Nature – the phase of creativity. Next, from the improvement of ready found whole objects men gradually progressed toward the actual making them out of simple and separate elements and materials in order to satisfy the particular needs and in accordance with the preconceived ideas about form and substance of those objects, ideas produced by these needs in the first place. And, finally, the last stage of this process, one which is probably endless, is making those man-made objects better and better and in greater and greater varieties.

Let's again take the chair, for example. And let's now try to retrace the entire process of its development, step by step, as it has been described above. First of all, by virtue of being erect and two-footed terrestrial animal Man has to sit down every now and then to get some rest. He can sit either on the ground (floor) or on some objects elevated above it. Anybody who tried both ways would agree that the latter is preferable to the former. So, at the beginning any suitable stone or piece of wood, if available, would do and as long as people remained nomadic probably nothing more complicated was used. As a matter of fact, most nomadic people even today prefer sitting on the floor. When people had settled permanently in one place they also built permanent dwellings and brought those pieces of wood inside to serve as the first primitive chairs. Then they figured out that a chair made up of a seat and legs is more comfortable and easier to move around. The next innovation was the back of a chair to support man's own back. This basic design of a chair is still with us, and though seemingly infinite variety of it has been created they all serve one basic physical need of man – to sit.

Thus, as we can see, the so called Platonic “idea of chair” is nothing more but the end result of the long evolutionary process of creating the perfect object for men to sit on and rest and as such it

certainly does not precede Man but on the contrary is developed by Him and therefore is neither eternal nor unchangeable.

ι. Plato’s “Apologia” and the Apology of the Athenians. Though eventually they condemned him to death, during his long life of 70 years, Socrates received from the Athenians a gift that would be highly desirable by any man, but was especially valuable, even priceless for a man like him, who has been blessed (or cursed) with the curious and inquisitive mind and with insatiable hunger for conversations and communication with other men. This was a gift of being listened to, since for many years the Athenians always heard him out. They didn't ignore him, they talked to him, they answered his questions, no matter how annoying or pointless they sometimes seem to be, they didn't tell him: “We have to get together sometimes”. Whether loved or hated he was never confronted by silence, by blank and stone faces.

The chair – the Athenians – always recognized Socrates. In our society where the majority of people have no time to talk, even when they have plenty of time, Socrates would have experienced psychological death long before the physical one. It’s also probably true that when the *private discourse* is stifled, because the reticence and the reluctance to express one's views and opinions is considered to be a virtue, the *public discourse* inevitably suffers the same fate. As a result, in such a society, unlike in the ancient Athens, neither philosophy nor genuine democracy can thrive.

κ. Being himself a slave of an idea that Good is not only morally but also **logically** better than Evil, it is no wonder that Plato reduces all other things to their respective ideas, apparently believing that if he is driven by an *idea* everything else must be as well.

In order to find such specific ideas, he regards every material or spiritual manifestation of life as if it were a cabbage head and then by peeling off one leaf after another tries to uncover the Essential inside of it, looking for the beginning, for something analogous to what we call now the “genetic code”, “chromosome”, etc. Yet even now we still don't know where the Gene comes from.

λ. The philosopher (Plato) sees the answer to all problems of humanity in Philosophy, the saint (Christ) – in Religion, the economist (Marx) – in Economics, the racist (Hitler) – in Racism, and so on and so forth.

μ. While the Academy – the philosophical school founded by Plato and later devoted to the study and further development of Platonism – lasted for 900 years, the Lyceum – a similar school opened by Aristotle – disintegrated in less than 200 years.

Anyone familiar with the writings of the both great philosophers would easily discern the reason for this glaring disparity. For Platonism has always been, for the most part, an art accessible with very little effort to practically everyone, regardless of his background. To comprehend Aristotle, on the other hand, one is required to think hard and be prepared by previous studies (and not until the Medieval monks had appeared on the scene, there were significant numbers of people with enough zeal and free time on their hands to do both). A philosophy or an ideology, or even a religion which is too complicated and demands hard work and a lot of time to be understood could never have a wide following.

ν. Sometimes, the almost obsessive quest for the perfect definition at all cost (as displayed most famously by Socrates, but to which none of us is completely immune) is but an outward manifestation of our reluctance or psychological inability to accept the things the way they naturally are – complex and manifold and, in some sense, always more or less ambiguous. It is also the expression of our desire, however subconscious, to impose our will on the world.

ξ. Any definition is incomplete, since any subject has the infinite number of predicates. Therefore, those who try to define anything immediately expose themselves to criticism of being wrong, though, in truth, they are probably wrong only in a sense of not being completely, one hundred percent right, which is impossible in the first place.

ο. Socrates is constantly dealing in exceptions to refute somebody else's generalization, since for any general statement an exception can always be found. But it doesn't destroy a particular generalization (with the exception of the mathematical ones). It just says that there is no absolute truth in the world of concrete things and if the rule is applicable in, let say, 90% of the cases it is good enough and to ask for more is to demand humanly impossible.

Let's take the language. It is described and explained by certain grammatical rules which cover majority of cases. But there are always exceptions, because language is a living thing and grammatical rules can only describe, but not proscribe it. And so are the so-called Laws of Nature (as discovered by Man). We wouldn't deny their validity because they are not absolutely perfect. For how could they

be when any physical event is caused and influenced by the infinite number of variables; if we do reject those laws because of their imperfection it will surely destroy science as we know it.

π. The basic flaw in the Socratic/Platonic logic is the arguing almost exclusively from analogy, which is the least reliable method of demonstration. Such types of arguments are weakened even further by comparing not just **two** but several related notions, thus creating the whole chain of consecutive and analogically similar objects. This procedure, in the long run, can and often does lead to the blatantly wrong conclusions.

Let's take **B** which is similar to **A**, then let's **C** be like **B** and **D** like **C**, etc. Depending on the degree of difference (which is always present) within each analogous pair, and also on the number of such pairs from the first member of the chain **A** to the last **D**, the total accumulation of the incremental differences is usually significant enough that in all probability **D** is neither equal to **A** (as Socrates would like us to believe) nor even has at this stage anything in common with it.

ρ. Socrates/Plato (in truth they can't be separated) despite numerous and explicit declarations to the contrary, is essentially a spontaneous materialist, albeit without being fully aware of it himself. In his arguments he is always mixing the material and the spiritual, matter and mind. The world of inanimate objects, animal world, man's world – they are never completely separable in his thinking but are always viewed as identical and the laws which govern one, being universal, govern others as well.

When faced with the interlocutor who fails to understand the psychological motivations behind human actions, Socrates/Plato gives examples either from Nature or from the practical activities of men, and, after establishing their laws and correlations, proceeds to thoughts and feelings of men. And by doing that he not only doesn't separate the material world from the world of ideas, but also, by always using the former to explain and elucidate the latter, he unconsciously reaffirms again and again the primacy of the first over the second, the matter over the mind.

σ. In Plato's *Republic* the soul is regarded as consisting of the three parts: the reason, which seeks knowledge, the passionate or spirited element, which desires honour, and the appetitive part, which craves the satisfaction of the body's functions. But I will put this "holy trinity" – Reason, Honour, and Body – in somewhat different relationships. I would say that body uses reason to make its appetites look honourable.

ς. The persistence of the stubborn, single-minded individuals invariably triumphs over the passive indifference of the masses. And that's what makes them so successful. If, for example, the statement like “ugly is beautiful” is repeated over and over again, seemingly infinite amount of times, eventually, despite the obvious fact that it violates the very notion of common sense, the resistance of the listeners will be broken due to sheer psychological fatigue and they will give up and agree even with such a preposterous statement as this.

The same thing happens with the ideas preached continuously unaltered by the obsessed intellectual fanatics during their entire lives: sooner or later they will break the resistance of their audience even if what they preach doesn't make any sense. For instance, Plato had been drilling into his listeners and readers head for sixty years the absurd ideas about the incorporeal and immaterial “good in itself”, “beautiful in itself”, etc., until even the most sceptical of them had finally given in and agreed with him simply because at the end they did not care anymore.

τ. As opposed to the modern ones, the ancient philosophers, starting with Socrates, and probably even before him, could be characterized as the sensible pragmatists. In their view, the most important goal of philosophy was to bring happiness to its practitioners. For if it does not, what is the point of studying and practicing it (these two elements were never separated in their minds, in contrast, again, to the modern philosophers)?

But right from the beginning they realized that a philosophically-inclined man is, of necessity, a contemplative and, provided he is intellectually honest and consistent, a good and just one. Such a man, clearly, is very vulnerable and, inevitably, will suffer from the external evils and, as a consequence, become an unhappy one.

Thus, the obvious contradiction arises – search for happiness leads, logically, to unhappiness. The most complete solution to this inherently unsolvable dilemma could be found in the teachings of the ancient stoics. Predictably, it was totally divorced from human experience. The stoics, probably the earliest practitioners of the Orwellian *newspeak*, were trying to convince themselves that pain is not pain, death is not death, etc.. The suffering from the external forces was declared non-existent, and the wise man was exhorted to feel happy on the rack. Thus, in the ironic development of a philosophical idea, what started as down-to-earth pragmatism had eventually evolved into the most contradictory wishful thinking, defying the basic common sense.

θ. I've read Plato, but have not become an idealist. I've read the New Testament, but have not become a Christian. I've read Lenin, but have not become a communist. I've read Hitler, but have not become a fascist. I have always been and shall remain to be myself.

φ. A life of a true philosopher must, of necessity, be an uninvolved and uneventful. For not only the preoccupation with day by day living leaves no room or time for contemplation, but also it is hard, or even impossible to maintain the vaunted philosophical detachment and objectivity when one is an active participant in the worldly affairs and exposed to all its vagaries and vicissitudes. On the other hand, since philosophizing is a mental process which requires, in order to be well-grounded and have any validity, as its primary raw material the actual human experience, the one who personally lacks it due to withdrawal from the active life has no choice but to depend on that of the others.

Such a "second hand" experience would be inevitably altered in this vicarious act of "appropriation" and therefore cannot be fully relied upon. And even if a philosopher spends the first half of his life as a busy "man of the world" in the very midst of the teeming masses of humanity, and the second one as a contemplative recluse using his own former life as a material for philosophical speculations, since memories get notoriously distorted with time, they again cannot be trusted to make valid conclusions which are the end product of the true philosophy.

Hence, we are faced with the dilemma which has only one unavoidable answer – there is no such thing as "a true philosopher", nor ever was or will be.

χ. Philosophy is the most egalitarian of all arts. For the "sine qua non" of philosophy, its fundamental, yet, never fully acknowledged premise is that all men feel, think and act essentially in the same way. For how else a philosopher can extend the observation of one (himself) or of the very few particular subjects to cover, universally, the rest of mankind?

ψ. There is some evidence (whether historical or anecdotal it's hard to tell) that Plato started as a dramatic poet but later, either because of the lack of success or after meeting Socrates and discovering the joy of search for pure truth, became a philosopher. On the other hand, judging by the considerable philosophical content of his plays, which display more than superficial knowledge of the contemporary thoughts and ideas, Euripides must have started as a philosopher and later became a dramatist.

Now, let us imagine for a moment that each man had pursued his originally intended career – Plato as a dramatic poet and Euripides as a philosopher. How would the development of Western philosophy and theatre have looked like by now, considering the immense genius both men possessed and their enormous importance in the history of the philosophy and the theatre? Furthermore, if one subscribes to the notion that great ideas and great art have a great influence on the general history of civilization, how the above suppositions would have changed its course? And if one is looking for an example of a single individual altering the course of history, there is no need to travel so far back in to the past. For if Hitler, as a young aspiring artist, had been admitted to the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, the world we live in now would be a very different place indeed.

ω. Even if we allow Philosophy to be called a science, it must be admitted that it's a very unique kind of science. For unlike Physics, Chemistry, Medicine, etc., it doesn't produce any tangible goods but is solely devoted to the enlargement of human understanding. And if in the process of doing so, Philosophy creates confusion instead of clarity in the minds of the ordinary people (for whose benefit it's supposedly labouring) as it often does by contriving various esoteric concepts and next engaging into the endless deliberation of them, then it defeats its own purpose and makes its very *raison d'etre* highly questionable.

For while the benefits of the electric light are obvious to anyone, whether he understand the theory of electricity or not, the benefits of Philosophy which doesn't make anybody but the few professional practitioners of it, hopefully, more enlightened, is practically nil, and the attention and efforts of the reader and the listener are wasted on trying to understand what the philosopher is saying, instead of being used much more productively to enlarge his own knowledge.

αβ. Exposed for the first time to the views of the ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, for example, on the subjects of ethics, virtue and morality the modern reader (providing he can free himself from the obligatory veneration) is struck by the unabashed sincerity of their profound egotism. “*How to win friends and influence people*” is as good as any summation of their ethical precepts, which in the main could be roughly considered as a manual on how to get to the top for the upwardly mobile young men of Athens – a kind of nobler, slightly more democratic version of Machiavellian “Prince” – while the virtues are often confused with the abilities to successfully achieve above mentioned ambitions.

Finally, the morality in the present sense of the word seems to be totally unknown to them, at least in theory. For all their writings are devoted to achieving one's personal happiness, and they seem to be incapable of realizing that ethics, virtue and morality have nothing to do with personal happiness but with the happiness of others. For the latter, they should be motivated not by self, but exercise the outward directions and be motivated by love, kindness, compassion, sympathy and commiseration, and not by the desire of the personal fulfilment and glory. It is hard to tell now, after almost 2500 years have passed, what had caused such “a moral blindness” in the ancient philosophers. Perhaps the limitations of the times, perhaps their personalities. I suspect both. For as much as the times make men, men make the times, especially the men of Plato's and Aristotle's stature.

αγ. Many study philosophies but few live it, and only the second know the difference. Yet if one to believe Diogenes Laertius, the third century A.D. writer whose “*Lives and opinions of eminent philosophers in ten books*” is the most comprehensive collection of biographies of the ancient Greek philosophers from Thales to Epicurus, it wasn't always like this. According to him, the majority of these early philosophers felt obliged to give credence by their daily conduct to what they espoused as thinkers. But with philosophy gaining popularity and prestige and, as a result, becoming more and more a subject to study and a trade to earn a living, and less and less the way to live, the separation between the theory and a personal behavior began.

The Romans, who were too busy building the Empire to devote much time and energy to develop their own homegrown philosophy, had appropriated amongst the many other things the Greek one, but mostly as a matter of fashion and hardly of practice. In the Dark Ages of barbarism and dogmatic, fanatical Christianity anyone with philosophical inclinations would translate it into the acceptance of a monastic life – this gross and superstitious perversion of Stoicism.

Later, during the Renaissance, with the proliferation of the European universities, philosophy again became a requisite course for students to take, and teaching it would simply be another respectable academic career for the ambitious middle-class intellectuals, but seldom a way of life. Which was just as well. For this development was spurred on by the historical inferiority complex and the desire to imitate the illustrious ancestors, not necessarily one's own. This slavish impulse was never successful, for the moderns have no way of knowing how the ancient actually lived, and despite the best intentions and assiduous efforts it seldom resembled more than a grotesque and silly caricature. Besides, as far as philosophy is concerned, the Renaissance men, notwithstanding the favourable publicity they received later, were more preoccupied with the conspicuous consumption, trying to

make up for the scarcity and austerity of the lean and hungry Dark Ages, than with contemplation, and paid but an obligatory lip service to the vanities of it all. In short, to use the modern expression, they were doers, not thinkers. Today, philosophy is a jealously guarded monopoly of a select group of university professors, securely tenured and well paid, not averse to good living and comfortable housing, guiltlessly enjoying such perks as departmental wine and cheese parties, international conferences, grants, sabbaticals, etc., etc. In a word, the followers of Diogenes of Sinope, who wore coarse clothing, ate plain food, and slept on the bare ground, they are certainly not. Bearing this in mind, it is not surprising therefore that the questions of personal morality and virtues, good and evil, truth and falsehood, right or wrong, etc. are as far from their daily concerns as of any layman, whose idea of philosophy is that it is something very few smart people occupy their free time with, and which has no practical application whatsoever.

αδ. The history of Philosophy can be summarized in short as the seemingly endless succession of very intelligent men asking again and again the same few and, let's face it, rather foolish, as far as the real existence of the real men and women is concerned, questions, and wasting in the process theirs and everybody else's, who had the misfortune to get caught in the seductively intricate web of their almost infinite arguments, lives.

αε. What distinguishes a philosophically inclined individual from the one who is not, is the obsession of the former with making frequent generalizations. Yet, what unites all men, including the philosophers, is that each has a relatively limited personal experience, though such an experience is the only solid foundation of any valid generalization. As a matter of fact, the philosophers, because they spend so much of their time in contemplation, which leaves little room for active participation in the actual business of life, have, on average, much less hand-on experience of it than most ordinary men.

Thus we are faced with a paradoxical situation in which those with the least life experience make most of the generalizations. It is no wonder then that the majority of such philosophical generalizations being based on insufficient data are seldom true and even then rather by accident (witness the notorious disagreements between so many philosophers on so many issues). Nevertheless, every philosopher worth his syllogisms, valid or not, is extremely fond of his own generalizations (while equally hostile to those of his colleagues), and once having arrived at this or that particular one, begins to treat it almost as a tenet of faith, and it is next to impossible to disabuse him of it, no matter how overwhelming the evidences to the contrary might be.

αζ. Though the philosophical problems hardly changed during the last 2500 years, the way the philosophers view the rest of humanity shows a definite process of alteration, though a term “fluctuation” would be more appropriate to accurately describe it than “evolution”.

The ancient philosophers, from Plato on, saw themselves as a breed apart, a selected and enlightened few, who should never stoop to reach the masses that are inherently incapable of comprehending *The Truth*. As a result, they completely disregarded the audience of the uninitiated, lay readers, not feeling obligated to make their writing accessible to *hoi polloi*. This was further exacerbated by the fact that those philosophers were either members of a small privilege elite (Plato), or derived their sustenance from its munificence (Socrates). This arrogant attitude lasted in a more or less pure form up to the Renaissance, when, perhaps as a reaction to the suffocating excesses of Scholasticism, but mainly as a response to the needs of the emerging middle class of the thriving cities, demanding respect for its new found prosperity and influence and manifesting the growing sense of being equal to the traditional elites, both social and intellectual, it began to change slowly, until in the Seventeenth Century the new trend, to make their works open to the public at large, became fashionable and predominant among the most influential philosophers of the times. From Hobbes to Rousseau, the appeal to this public became obvious and the majority of the philosophers in this period had tried (or at least claimed to do so) to make their writings accessible to the non-specialists. Which is not surprising, considering the social origins of most philosophers in this group. Their democratic tendencies were the essential part of their thinking, occasional and obligatory professions of the monarchist orthodoxy notwithstanding. For while the distinguishing quality of a democratic man is to favour a common sense, a man of privilege cannot help but to feel a special attachment to what is esoteric and exclusive.

But this phase of fraternization with the common man was of a rather short duration. In the Eighteenth Century the popularizing trend began to reverse itself so that by the time of Kant and Hegel it came the full circle. How a philosopher had been torn between two conflicting motivations: one – to enlighten the public and another to impress his fellow academics (for what appealed to the first was, unfortunately, unappealing to the second) is vividly revealed by Hegel on the last page of his Preface to *The Phenomenology of Mind* where he laments the fact that “the public takes up an attitude [toward philosophical writings] in many respects quite different from the [academics], and indeed even opposed to them”.

Eventually the academics won and clearly for a reason that had nothing to do with either the substance or the form of philosophical writing – they simply could provide a job and prestige, and with

proliferation of universities, which became as common in Nineteenth Century as monasteries in Tenth, the overwhelming majority of philosophers became university professors with all the consequences it entailed – a common man was abandoned again and the specialization and esotericism has been flourishing ever since.

an. There is this one little problem with Plato’s proposition that philosophers, as the best qualified, should rule the World, namely that they, as a rule, don’t give a damn about the World as it is and, given a choice, would rather have nothing to do with it, and for one simple reason – the reality like an ocean surf is constantly washing away the sand castles of their ideas and hypotheses.

For how else could it be explained that in the midst of the scientific revolution of the Eighteenth Century and a **hundred years** after Newton had formulated the ground-breaking law of universal gravitation, a law that bound terrestrial and celestial motions together in a synthesis of stunning generality and mathematical precision and accuracy. In turn, Kant, who is considered by many to be the greatest of modern philosophers, regarded the objects of the material world as fundamentally unknowable, the “things in themselves”. Essentially, this is the same epistemological position Plato held 2200 years before, in the times of widespread beliefs, even among the most educated, that a huge sphere, bearing the stars permanently fixed to its inner surface, moves around the Earth at its centre in a daily rotation. In addition, to account for the solar, lunar, and planetary motions, it was assumed that inside the star sphere there were many interconnected transparent spheres revolving in a similar manner.

The wilful epistemological “blindness” exhibited by most philosophers, and not only at the dawn of the true scientific knowledge but in the very midst of its triumphant flourishing was not, however, an accidental oversight but rather strenuously self-serving undertaking. For the growing empirical and hard scientific knowledge was not only undermining the traditional religious beliefs but was also making the classical philosophy no more relevant than religion itself as a tool to explain the world. And despite the enormous efforts of Philosophy to separate itself from Religion by claiming to be driven by Reason as opposed to Faith, when faced with the possibility of extinction or irrelevance, philosophers, like their religious “adversaries”, resorted to the tactics of trying to hide their heads into the sand of the constructs of *pure reason* which would gradually become more and more unreasonable. And no matter how hard they were trying to present the *transcending* of the immediate reality as a noble elevation, it was ultimately the act of a cowardly escapism, for while the reality continues to exist, it is the one who transcends it that perishes.

3. *Conclusion: Dessert*

In conclusion, how are we to judge Plato? He is undoubtedly a very talented and entertaining poet and dramatist. But as for his contribution to philosophy, I personally don't see any of permanent importance. It is next to impossible to find in a mountain of ore of his wordy output enough pieces of philosophical gold to justify the enormous efforts required for such laborious undertaking. I spent many days and months reading, first in Russian and then in English almost all he wrote, and can't recall too many original thoughts therein. Alas, mining is a risky business – one has to be prepared to end up empty-handed.