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THE MAN IN THE HIGH GARDEN: AN EPICUREAN VIRTUAL HISTORY

Abstract

Following the lead of heterogeneous and invariably brilliant thinkers as Thucydides, Arnold J. Toynbee, Winston Churchill, Carl Sagan, Philip K. Dick, and Niall Ferguson, I consider a virtual history – or an alternative Everettian branch of the universal wavefunction – in which the ancient materialism and atomism of Epicurus (and heliocentrism of Aristarchus, for good measure) have prevailed over the (Neo) Platonist-Aristotelian religious-military complex. Such a historical swerve (pun fully intended) would have removed the unhealthy obsession with mind-body dualism and dialectics, which crippled much of the European thought throughout the last millennium. It is at least open to serious questioning whether quasireligious totalitarian ideologies could have arisen and brought about so much death, suffering and pain in this virtual history as they did in our actual history.

Keywords: atomism · naturalism · indeterminism · virtual history · historical contingency · futures studies

> Their view; it is cosmic. Not of man here, a child there, but an abstraction: race, land. Volk. Land. *Blut*. *Ehre*. Not of honorable men but of *Ehre* itself, honor; the abstract is real, the actual is invisible to them... It is their sense of space and time. They see through the here, the now, into the vast black deep beyond, the unchanging. And that is fatal to life. Because eventually there will be no life; there was once only the dust particles in space, the hot hydrogen gases, nothing more, and it will come again.
>
> Philip K. Dick (1962)

There has been a lot of interest in reevaluating the science of the classical antiquity since the turn of the century, usually with quite "boosterish" conclusions.[1] This has followed upon an earlier wake of interest and the tendency to downplay depth of ancient science/natural philosophy and its

1 E.g., Gregory (2007); Rovelli (2011); Graham (2013).

relevance for modernity. One could argue, however, that this reassessment *has not gone far enough*: we still do not appreciate what the science of antiquity could have done for us – or our analogues two millennia down the line – if it were not suppressed by successive societal collapses and regressive cultural forces.

This is the domain of virtual history: attempting to answer questions that arise from counterfactual conditions.[2] In particular, one wishes to hypothesize on what might have happened in order to better understand what did happen. While virtual political and military history has been practiced on a massive scale since Thucydides,[3] the exercise has not been applied much to the *history of philosophy* (or the history of ideas more generally). This is a pity, since history of philosophy offers much food for counterfactual thought – and has arguably been less infected by various strains of virulent determinism than political, economic, religious and even military history. The role of individual thinker in the history of philosophy could never be suppressed by the likes of Christian or Marxist or currently fashionable identitarian determinism as it was – and often still is – the case in other historical disciplines. An excellent example from the very domain of classical antiquity is provided by the great synthetic historian Arnold J. Toynbee in his "Three lives" essays.[4] Hence, viability and cogency of *any* explanation offered by the history of philosophy (as opposed to purely descriptive doxography) are underwritten by counterfactual thinking, as a generic feature of historical explanations.[5] Recent successful experiment in virtual history in the context of life sciences due to Peter Bowler serves as an additional motivation for the present discussion.[6] Of course, we do not need to throw all philosophical caution to the wind, especially in assessing and interpreting the multiple branching possibilities.

In his famous *Cosmos* television series, Carl Sagan made a bunch of remarks of relevance for history of science;[7] none more intriguing than his speculations about the counterfactual history of science and civilization if the inquisitive, free-thinking spirit of the ancient Greeks were not crushed by the Gibbonian "triumph of barbarism and religion". The fulcrum of that part of the narrative comes right after describing some of the great achievements of antiquity, from atomism to Aristarchus's heliocentrism to Eratosthenes's measuring the circumference of our planet to Hero's steam turbine and automata to the applied mathematics of Archimedes, all of which were literally or effectively forgotten before being rediscovered from the Renaissance

2 Hawthorn (1991); Ferguson (1997); Bunzl (2004); Tetlock, Lebow and Parker (2006).

3 Tordoff (2014).

4 Toynbee (1969); see also Africa (1989).

5 Fuller (2008); Sunstein (2016).

6 Bowler (2008, 2013); see also Hoquet (2021).

7 Sagan (1981).

onward. Viewers are then suddenly transported to space: in a vivid artistic rendering, we get a glimpse of a huge starship, using Bussard's fusion engine powered by interstellar matter gathered in flight,[8] with the emblem in the shape of dodecahedron painted on its hull. Sagan's commentary was to the effect that whatever name of this and similar starships would have been, it would have been written in Greek. It is a bold vision, indeed, and while Sagan did not elaborate on it – and it preceded the current tide of virtual history by decades – it deserves our attention.

How plausible would be a counterfactual world in which ancient science and the Ionian materialist philosophy were recognized and established as the main legacy of the antiquity? Can we seriously conceive of a virtual history in which it was the atomistic and reductionist materialism of Leucippus, Democritus, and especially Epicurus, rather than the idealism of Plato and Aristotle, which provided the philosophical backbone of the European civilization in all temporal continuity? In the actual history, of course, atomism in particular and the presocratic materialism in general have been repeatedly rediscovered by the likes of Gassendi, Stevinus, Boscovich, Dalton and many others; even Nietzsche played a part, if highly idiosyncratic, in the story of rediscovery and re-evaluation of the Ionian materialist cosmologists.[9] This grand intellectual project of rediscovery and re-evaluation has occasionally encountered fierce resistance; a beautiful description of one such episode was given by Stephen Greenblatt.[10] Arguably, parts of that powerful legacy are still rediscovered today, as Rovelli and Graham try to persuade us.[11]

Not so for idealism. No less scientific-minded philosopher as Alfred North Whitehead is often misquoted as saying that all philosophy is footnotes to Plato. What he wrote (actually spoke in his Gifford Lectures of 1927-28) is more serious and less sensational, but also more amenable to counterfactual analysis: "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato."[12] The same key role of Platonism has recently been argued for by Lloyd Gerson in his provocative monograph *Platonism and Naturalism*, which explicitly posits Plato's rejection of "naïve" naturalism as the *differentia specifica* of philosophical thought as such.[13] While Gerson's metaphilosophical conclusions should be taken with a grain (or a tonne) of salt, the part of the book describing the role of Platonism in the *actual* history of philosophy is right on target. And one need

8 Bussard (1960).

9 Nietzsche (1962). In addition, Nietzsche's name here suggests that this is not some Evil Positivist/Scientist conspiracy, the narrative unfortunately popular in some segments of contemporary humanities.

10 Greenblatt (2011).

11 See also Grujić (2001) for a fascinating account of the role of Anaxagoras as a precursor of modern fractal cosmologies.

12 Whitehead [1929] (1985), p. 39.

13 Gerson (2020).

not emphasize how central were Aristotelian doctrines in many key moments of Western intellectual history, from suppressing of Roger Bacon's early empiricism, to the fight against Copernicus's revolutionary cosmology and the trial of Galileo, to the resistance to Darwin's theory of biological evolution.[14] While it is clear that a part of the Aristotelian thought arose in opposition to Platonism (and their historical relationship has been complex and nonlinear), it is convenient to treat them together as a *first-order approximation* for the purpose of our thought experiment.

Therefore, since the stranglehold of Platonist-Aristotelian cartel on history of ideas has been excessively strong in the course of the actual history, perhaps the best way to assess the alternatives is to remove it *in toto* from the virtual history. Suppose Plato's Academy was never founded, perhaps because Plato ended his life in slavery, after the tyrant Dionysius I sold him as slave in 404 BC and none of his friends were around to save him.[15] This is the "Jonbar hinge,"[16] a true point of divergence: the course of intellectual history of Europe, the West and the entire globe would have been very different indeed in such a case. With the Academy gone, not only would the thought of Plato and Aristotle have failed to exercise such a terrifying grip on philosophy in centuries and millennia to come, but the whole Socratic turn away from Ionian cosmology and philosophy of nature could have fizzled out prior to the conquests of Philip II and Alexander the Great and the onset of the Hellenistic age.

In such a situation, it is warranted to speculate that the main philosophical legacy of the antiquity could well be materialist, rather than idealist.[17] In particular, the atomist school od reductive materialism could well have prevailed as *the* strongest intellectual current in Hellenistic and Roman times. We should not forget that even in our real history ancient contemporaries such as Diogenes Laërtius put Democritus on the same level as Plato in terms of philosophical influence and productivity. Subsequent streamlining – and

14 To give an additional specialized example, Aristotelian doctrine of spontaneous generation of living out of non-living matter claims the infamy of being perhaps the longest standing obnoxious dogma which seriously crippled scientific studies of abiogenesis for close to 2200 years. While Aristotelian cosmology was falsified by Copernicus, Tycho, Kepler and Galileo in 16th and 17th centuries, it only took Louis Pasteur's experiments in 1859-62 (!) to finally lay to rest that piece of peripatetic legacy.

15 That is the earliest date offered by conflicting accounts, in particular Philodemus and Tzetzes. An alternative is 399 BC, after the death of Socrates; cf. Huffman (2005). The conventional date was 387 BC, long after the founding of the Academy, but the case for an early date has recently been immensely strengthened by the discovery of the "Plato's burial" scroll in the Villa of the Papyri in Herculaneum (Ouellette 2024).

16 Aldiss (1964).

17 One could dispute that condemning Plato to slavery would have such a wide and profound effect, but there would be many secondary causes in play. Perhaps the most important one consists in the number and quality of Platonist and Neoplatonist thinkers in our actual history, which would (in our counterfactual history) have been attracted to alternative philosophical schools, and especially to the Garden of Epicurus after c. 306 BC.

occasional drastic falsification – of history, especially practiced under the auspices of the all-powerful medieval Roman Catholic Church, have erased this original equivalence. Removal of one weight, therefore, would upset the scales dramatically and throw the things into disequilibrium – which might turn out to be a highly creative and productive disequilibrium.[18] While plausibility of this thought experiment is open to criticism and doubt, it offers us an opportunity to reflect upon those historical contingencies which have recently again become politically incorrect or even offensive, due to the prevailing Counter-Enlightenment "critical" spirit in modern-day academia. In particular, we should shy from concluding in a Panglossian manner that the history of ideas could not have been very explicitly *better* on all sensible ethical doctrines.

Toynbee, among others, posited plausibility of steam engine being invented in Hellenistic Alexandria, sparking an early industrial revolution. In actual history, the resistance to such a development must have been ideological at least as much as economical; and this ideological resistance was firmly rooted in the idealist tradition of the Academy and the Lyceum. Remove those barriers, and there would be a flood of creative tinkering, indeed technology, all over the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

In assessing the plausibility of such a scenario we need to always keep in mind the widespread selection effects which follow from both **(i)** extremely rarefied nature of the survived written record of ancient philosophy/science, and **(ii)** intentional censorship and falsification of antiquity performed after the Edict of Milan and the Edict of Thessalonica, throughout the Middle Ages, and even in the Renaissance (though for somewhat different reasons). The two are not independent, for a major reason why we, for instance, possess none of the 70+ books of Democritus is that scribes were in many ways disincentived to copy his works throughout the centuries prior to the invention of the printing press. It is at least likely conjecture that copying of any survived book of ancient materialists carried a risk of imprisonment or even death throughout the medieval world in both Christian and Islamic countries. Interestingly enough, the intentional effort to suppress atomistic teaching goes all the way back to Plato himself; according to Laërtius (IX, 40) citing the testimony of Aristoxenus, Plato wished to burn all the writings of Democritus that he could collect. Some things stay constant indeed.

Moreover, there is in Epicureanism an explicit impetus toward technological transformation of nature going so far that we could even dub it *transhumanist*. It is visible, for instance, in a famous statement by Lucretius (V. 157 ff.):[19]

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18 Fully admitting that the relationship of Neoplatonism and Christianity was a complex and highly nuanced affair, often misrepresented and misused for various cultural and political purposes.

19 Lucretius (2001), p. 141.

> To assert that ... the gods purposely prepared the world and its wonders for the sake of human beings; that we should therefore praise their admirable handiwork and regard it as eternal and immortal; that it is sinful to use any means at any time to displace what was established by the ancient design of the gods for the perpetual use of the human race... is preposterous.

Here, the correct attitude of a materialist philosopher of nature is directly and starkly contrasted with the attitude of *both* pious believers and aloof idealists. "To use any means at any time to displace what was established by... gods" is no sin in the Epicurean book; on the contrary, it is desirable if the novel state of affairs is intrinsically better than the one of old. This is the very first such statement recorded in the history of ideas: melioristic and pragmatic view of humanity and its possibilities of improvement without any supernatural input. This gives us another key that the counterfactual Neoepicurean timeline would have enabled much quicker and livelier technological progress. In such a history, conservative whining of the likes of Leon Kass or Francis Fukuyama to the effect that our science and technology lead to the alleged evil of "playing God" would have found no purchase.[20]

Even within the circles of idealistic philosophy itself, one could conjecture that more Pythagorean strands of the Platonist thought, which have anyway been recently found stronger than hitherto believed[21] would have shown most resilience and durability. In actual history, the Neopythagorean movement of Apollonius of Tyana and his followers was overshadowed by Neoplatonism; this particularly applies to the 2nd century and later Neopythagoreans like Numenius of Apamea. Removing of Neoplatonism would thus enable flourishing of the Neopythagorean thought, with long-reaching and quickly divergent outcomes.

Without militant idealism in the background, Tertullian's motto *credo quia absurdum est* would not have been possible, and with its demise most of the methodological divide between religious and scientific thought. Much of the inter-magisterial contention between religion and science in the actual history has been focused on exactly this point of "fideism". The latter would have been removed to the distant margin in our counterfactual materialist history. This could, only seemingly paradoxically, set grounds for more harmonious relations between religion and science. As the entire debate about the role of gods in Epicureanism shows, the philosophy of the Garden could accommodate both theism and atheism.[22] It is the aggressive monism of the Augustinian Christianity which would have been decisively rejected by the Neoepicurean tradition.

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20 E.g., Fukuyama (2003), which is notably full of idealistic and "dialectical" attitudes and assumptions.

21 E.g., Garnsey (2005); Horky (2013).

22 Obbink (1989); Konstan (2011).

One ideological item stands out by its tremendous and far-reaching consequences: the rejection of Plato's key distinction in *Timaeus* between the works of reason (29e-47e) and the works of necessity (48b-68d). Plato's works of reason are strictly teleological, going after what is best: it would be best for the universe to be one, perfect, self-sufficient, etc., beyond any extension of necessity. Hence also emerges the well-known Platonic doctrine of the world soul, inexplicable through the works of necessity alone. Plato's argument was at least in part directed against Democritus, whose atomism joined absolute naturalism with absolute determinism. It certainly does not work so well against the version of Epicurus, which explicitly endorses (partial) indeterminism through the spontaneous "swerve" of atoms in the void, therefore resulting in unpredicted and indeed unpredictable configurations of atoms in the fullness of space and time.

The unfortunate circumstance in the actual history was that *Timaeus* had already been too strongly entrenched by the time indeterminism of the swerve appeared on the philosophical scene (or became widely known, which it perhaps never was). This has led to the avalanche of various ponderous "dialectical" doctrines clogging up philosophical literature from Aquinas to this day and causing all kinds of confusions and troubles. This includes the emergence of Cartesian mind-body dualism – and its myriad subsequent versions – a confusing and antiscientific doctrine which would have sounded ridiculous, and rightly so, in the Neoepicurean world. Naturalistic materialism, when taken seriously, has simply no use for such coattails of Platonic mysticism.

To take it seriously, though, is the most difficult step. Critics of this counterfactual thought experiment are likely to invoke **(i)** the alleged disconnect between abstract knowledge, including scientific knowledge, and practice in the ancient world economically based on slavery, and **(ii)** the Whiteheadian assumption that Platonism established primacy of mathematical knowledge without which modern science could not have emerged. Let me briefly address both these criticisms.

The prejudice that the ancients were not capable of translating their abstract scientific/philosophical knowledge into successful technology is an old one. Commonplace mention is reserved for the rigid class structure of the ancient slaveholding states, and the disdain felt by philosophers for anything requiring manual work, crafting or construction; the latter were deemed appropriate mostly for slaves or foreigners. This is often stated in order to affirm a Hegelian or Marxist agenda of streamlining history into well-defined epochs characterized by progressively improving economic, social or cultural relationships and structures. Among many counterexamples to that unbridled structuralism, I shall here mention just one: the sophistication of and the obvious prerequisites for the famous Antikythera Mechanism. The Mechanism has recently been reinvestigated and in part reinterpreted – with

the results of improved resolution X-ray tomography solidly supporting the "boosterish" conclusions.[23] As a modern researcher concludes:[24]

> The realisation of the complexity and sophistication of the mechanical design of the Antikythera Mechanism, and the evidence that the knowledge of such mechanisms were reasonably widespread, forces us to acknowledge the influence of mechanical models in stimulating ideas of a mechanical universe not only for the Renaissance, but as far back as Plato. Design elements within the Mechanism may even hint at symbolic traditions carried through from the Bronze Age.

It seems that scepticism in regard to technology of antiquity – and its potentials, given the right cultural climate, as was the case at Hellenistic Rhodes or Alexandria – has been mostly the result of our selection biases, not something established by empirical findings. Moreover, the Antikythera Mechanism embodies mechanist, cosmological clockwork worldview *17 centuries or more before Newton*.[25]

On the other hand, the idea of primacy of mathematical knowledge as a legacy of Platonism seems appealing, although one should always be cautious about the ideas that conform to the established status quo. While Galileo could proclaim that the Book of Nature is "written in the language of mathematics", this could also be understood to mean that it is a matter of convenience rather than necessity, since one language could always be translated into another. In modern physics, in particular, apart from the worries about the "unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics in the natural sciences"[26], there are opposing views as well. Among others, Richard Feynman has held such a view; his well-known quote about the "next great era of awakening of human intellect" in physics as understanding the *qualitative content of the equations*[27] is reasonably interpreted as implying that we do not have such insight at present. See also his skeptical remarks about the contemporary mathematical physics in his *Character of Physical Law*, esp. Chapter 2.[28] Some of these methodological issues have reemerged in the context of contemporary string theory.[29] It is not at all outlandish to speculate that less formal and less mathematized historical trajectory of physics is possible with essentially the same or even better outcomes than the actual one.

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23 Wright (2007); Pastore (2010); Edmunds (2014).

24 Edmunds (2014), p. 20.

25 It is highly indicative that the Mechanism remains an awkward data point for defenders of the revisionist history of medieval era as "not so dark" ages like Holland (2011) or Falk (2020). For example, while Falk (2020) has an entire chapter on "Computer of the Planets", he does not mention the Mechanism a single time in the entire book.

26 Wigner (1960).

27 Feynman, Leighton, and Sands (1964), vol. **II**, p. 41-12.

28 Feynman (1965).

29 E.g., Smolin (2006).

There are many more thought-provoking issues related to the proposed virtual-historical trajectory. One need not give full weight to Popper's injunctions against Plato[30] to perceive the role of abstract formalist, idealist and teleological thinking as exemplified by the Academy and the Platonist tradition in the emergence of various illiberal and ultimately totalitarian ideologies and political systems. Thus, one may make the case that the Plato-less history would be less likely to fall into the trap of totalitarianism. (See also Dick's epigraph above, from arguably the greatest alternate-history novel of all time; "they" of the eerily Platonist views are, of course, the victorious Nazis.) Instead, the Enlightenment ideas of reason and liberty, bolstered as they were in the actual history by scientific and technological progress of the century of Galileo, Huygens, and Newton, could have emerged much earlier, leaving more time for tinkering with and improving an essentially secular and liberal social order. Of course, by the epoch of Sagan's vision of interstellar spaceship, we would expect that an extreme diversity of space colonies and settlements would enable a myriad of live social and political experiments, on the scale dwarfing even the magnificent experiment of the American Founding Fathers, as the greatest triumph of the Enlightenment in actual history so far.

What's past is prologue. As a broad aside, there is no need to be shy about virtual-historical research as far as history *of philosophy* is concerned. For thoughts and insights characterizing great figures of philosophical tradition – especially from the period before the emergence of special sciences – have deeper potential to change the world than any battle or political intrigue. And philosophy in general, even if it deals with ancient topics, should be far more future-oriented.

At the very end, one may add another meta-speculation. The Epicurean doctrine of many worlds has most plausibly been interpreted as belief in multiple planetary systems, similar to our Solar System; this makes more intelligible the notion of gods as living *between* the worlds and yet using atoms from those worlds. This notion, however, would make – in the wide-ranging expansion of the Epicurean thought envisioned in this counterfactual history – the acceptance of other, more sophisticated forms of the *multiverse* much easier, more culturally attractive, and less controversial down the line. Especially this is so when one considers the powerful influence of Abrahamic religious thought on presence and popularity of the single-universe Design hypothesis for explanation of observed fine tunings in cosmology and elsewhere.[31] Conversely, in a counterfactual secular world of Neoepicurean materialism, conceiving of the multiverse would be immensely more natural and appealing than any design-based speculation. However – and this is the supreme irony – many actual multiverse schemes are ergodic enough

30 Popper [1945] (2012).

31 Barrow and Tipler (1986); Hogan (2000); Barnes (2012); Ćirković (2016).

to contain universes in which such a Neoepicurean historical trajectory was actually traversed. One need not be full-fledged modal realist[32] to reach such a conclusion; a kind of broadly Everettian many-worlds view would suffice.[33] This has to be among the strangest consequences of the objective success of physicalist science: that it can, at least in principle, ground in physical reality a conjecture about real existence of the worlds in which it is *even more* successful. As the great R. Buckminster Fuller used to playfully say: *Only the impossible happens!*

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32 Lewis (1986).

33 E.g., Deutsch (1998).

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