

The Legendary Predecessor of Epicurus

Post by "Cyrano" of January 23, 2024 at 8:53 PM

Greetings again, Epicurean friends. This post is a talk I gave 15 years ago to an Atheist/Agnostic Club. It mentions Epicurus only in passing, but features a soulmate of Epicurus, a fellow materialist.

Democritus the Materialist

Gene Gordon

Good afternoon friends in the Rossmoor Atheist/Agnostic Club! Let me ask you today to name two of the foremost philosophers. Which ones come immediately to mind? Please tell me: who are said to be the greatest philosophers in the world? What? Yes, Socrates and Plato! Isn't that true? Are there any others even in contention for that honor?

Well, I could tell you of a dozen philosophers any one of whom is infinitely superior to Socrates and Plato combined. But I will confine myself today to one of the very greatest - Democritus.

Democritus was a supreme and sublime philosopher - a giant among the ancient Greeks! He was a leading thinker of his time and, as we shall see, of all time. But we know very little if anything about Democritus while we can never hear too much about Socrates and Plato, Plato and Socrates. Why should this be so?

Is it because philosophy is not just carefree chitchat or an airy exercise in an ivory tower? Is philosophy serious stuff - deadly serious? Yes, philosophy is literally about life and death! Philosophy is behind class struggles, civil wars, and revolutions. Philosophy takes sides. Philosophy is political and very partisan in its politics. No philosopher is above the battle and there is always a battle, isn't there?

Plato hated Democritus and wanted all his books burned. That's how fierce philosophy is! In fact, Plato would not be above burning the person of Democritus himself!

Plato, to establish his Republic, would have cast out of the city everyone over the age of ten. The ruler, he swore, must wipe the slate clean: the philosopher/king must perforce expel from society all over age ten so that he may begin with fresh young minds. Yes, he would do this forcefully, violently with the aid of hoodlums, goons - Plato's 'genteel' young friends, the 'well-bred' and wealthy darlings of the time.

Did you know this about Plato? No, we are never told this about this 'paragon' of philosophy. But this is philosophy with a vengeance, is it not?

Plato and Democritus had fundamentally different outlooks on life - two diametrically opposed ways of understanding the world and the universe.

Plato was the epitome of *philosophical idealism*; Democritus the perfect example of *philosophical materialism*.

Ah, but straight away with these two terms we come to confusion. 'Idealism' has good connotations: it implies optimism, hopefulness, even the romantic. "So and so is an idealist; she is a great gal." 'Materialism,' on the other hand, is taken today to mean something rather mean: greediness, acquisitiveness, even avarice. "So and so is a materialist; all he does is hoard money and possessions."

But that is the common or even the vulgar usage. In philosophy 'idealism' and 'materialism' have no such implications. Idealism and materialism are *technical* terms in philosophy. In fact idealism and materialism are *ultimate* terms in philosophy in the sense that all schools of thought, all beliefs about the world and the universe tend toward idealism or materialism.

In philosophy idealism says that *idea* is primary: mind, the subjective, thought, spirit - this is where the idealist philosopher begins. Idea is fundamental: the world, the universe - all that exists - depends upon idea. Thus with Plato *forms* are the ultimate reality. Forms or perfect concepts are eternal and unchanging and are grasped, not by the senses, but by the reason. Forms are the only true reality and all else in the material world a mere imperfect and impermanent copy.

The materialist philosopher on the other hand holds *matter* to be primary: nature, the objective physical world is fundamental. All depends upon matter in motion. Thought is a property of matter. Thought is a consequence of highly organized matter. Thought cannot be separated from a brain that thinks.

Now if matter is primary then it was not created by a spirit or god or idea but always existed. Cause and effect, something always coming from something, matter in motion forever and ever or what science now calls the law of the conservation of matter: it cannot be created nor destroyed but simply changes its arrangement.

Thales, the first scientist and first philosopher - and a materialist - began the Western discussion on the true nature of matter; in the East - in India and China - there were materialist philosophers as well. 180 years after Thales this Greek discussion culminated in Leucippus and Democritus with their ingenious insight. Atoms! What an idea! A brilliant conception so long ago and yet so close to our modern understanding of chemistry... Leucippus and Democritus, materialist philosophers, positively deserve first prize for the best guess in antiquity.

Of course, their notion of atoms is rough and falls far, far short of today's knowledge. We know now atoms are not indivisible and indestructible as Democritus thought. Protons, neutrons, electrons, leptons, gluons, mesons... - so many particles make up the atom we get dizzy listing them! Hadrons, nucleons, neutrinos... The muon, the tau, and the quark... There are six different kinds of quark: up, down, charmed, strange, top, and bottom. And each quark comes in three different colors: red, blue and green. Leptons have six different "flavors." There seems to be no end to it. What's more, corresponding to every particle there exists an anti-particle! Does the microcosm of the subatomic world go on and on into infinity as does the macrocosm of the galactic world with its supergalaxies and clusters of galaxies and great sheets and walls of galaxies? Perhaps. But it is certain that Leucippus and Democritus had not the faintest notion of the inexhaustibility of the atom.

"Nonetheless," to quote a Web site, "Leucippus and Democritus came closer to the truth than anyone else in the following millennium. They developed a fully mechanistic view of nature in which every material phenomenon is seen a product of the atom collisions. Democritus' theory had no place for the notion of purpose and the intervention of gods in the workings of the world. He even held that mind and soul is formed by the movement of atoms. In this regard, his attitude was genuinely materialistic."

Sadly, Leucippus and Democritus were the last in the line of ancient materialist philosophers - and there were many - whose focus was the nature of the physical universe. After them philosophy took a major turn with Socrates and Plato to individual concerns and to mystical speculation.

But Democritus' atomic theory shines forth despite the unfortunate fact that all that we know of it comes from *critics* of that theory, such writers as Aristotle and Theophrastus. For though Democritus lived, some say, to 109 years and devoted all of his time to science and philosophy, to study, to teaching and writing - he wrote 60 or as many as 90 works some say - only a few fragments of his voluminous writing remain and they deal with ethics.

Plato in his works never once mentioned Democritus. Plato disliked the ideas of Democritus so much that he resolved - since he could not burn his books - to kill the work of Democritus with disregard.

But the brilliance of Democritus can never be diminished. He was the first philosopher to realize that what we call the Milky Way is the light of stars - suns like ours - very far away. Other philosophers argued against this, even Aristotle. Democritus was among the first to propose that the universe contains many worlds, some of them inhabited.

Democritus traveled much - to Babylon, to Egypt, Ethiopia, and possibly to India. What kind of man was he? Let an anecdote told about him give us some idea: "Hermippus wrote that when Democritus was nearing his end, his sister was upset because his death could prevent her from worshipping at the three-day festival of Thesmophoria. Democritus told her not to worry, and kept himself alive by inhaling the fresh smell of baked loaves until the end of the festival, when

he relinquished his life without pain.” Hipparchus wrote that Democritus was then in his 109th year.

Democritus, called “The Laughing Philosopher,” taught that the true end of life is happiness to be accomplished through self serenity. Cheerfulness was the highest good, achieved through moderation and - most essential - freedom from fear. There were no gods to be afraid of. This is what so distressed Plato - and, of course, the church and the state for two thousand years now.

Yes, for many centuries Socrates and Plato have been elevated while Democritus has been disregarded and disparaged. Democritus and Epicurus were the two greatest philosophers among the Greeks. But the moneyed rulers of society have very good reason for wanting us to revere Plato and Socrates and to be ignorant of Democritus and Epicurus. The two former philosophers would steer us down a very reactionary channel - in Plato’s case to actual fascism. The latter two would - as the name Democritus itself implies - guide us in the paths of freedom and equality.

Our new friend from Walnut Creek who attended our meeting a few weeks ago - I forgot his name, darn it - described himself as a “fundamentalist atheist.” By this he means that he goes back to fundamentals, to the Greeks, the materialists.

And I do too. The essential thing about Democritus is not his source for the idea of the atom. No doubt he got it from his teacher Leucippus. Where Leucippus got it from we don’t know. What’s important is that both Democritus and Leucippus taught that these atoms are material entities, that their number is infinite, and that they exist through all eternity. The fundamental fact is that Democritus was a philosophical materialist and that materialism - philosophical and scientific - is the only solid basis for atheism. Thank you...



Post by “Cassius” of January 23, 2024 at 8:59 PM

Thank you Cyrano!

Post by “Bryan” of January 23, 2024 at 11:05 PM

Your writing is very engaging! If I were unfamiliar with Democritus, this would certainly spark my interest in him. Thank you for sharing! (The stamp is also a nice addition)

Post by “Cyrano” of January 24, 2024 at 12:49 AM

Again, Bryan, a lovely note from you. Thanks a million.

Post by “Bryan” of January 25, 2024 at 2:32 AM

[Quote from Cyrano](#)

But the moneyed rulers of society have very good reason for wanting us to revere Plato and Socrates and to be ignorant of Democritus and Epicurus.

Thank you Sir! This is true. I am about to share a work of Polystratus (a student of Epicurus) which, as far as I know, has not before been fully translated into English -- but modern education institutions have a lot of time and money --- can they not produce an English translation of Polystratus for the public? It is more than suspicious!

Post by “Eggplant Wizard” of January 25, 2024 at 11:04 AM

It is of course a common and effective rhetorical device to frame oneself as divulging information *they* don't want you to know- quite a few bestsellers are made this way. But there

is no concerted effort today to bury Epicureanism. Both scholarly and popular treatments of the philosophy are readily available and work continues to be done on the Herculaneum papyri and other material. I don't really see how the moneyed rulers of society really care about one philosophy over another. The primary enemy of Epicureanism, from a PR standpoint, is indifference, as it is with a great many beautiful things.

I would also question the treatment of Plato's Republic as a literal and dogmatic blueprint for how society should be formed. The subtleties and difficulties of Plato's work really don't justify broad statements like "Plato is a proto-fascist." One can find much to critique in his work without doing that. The one very committed, self-declared neoplatonist I know is an anarchist labor activist. The story of Plato wanting to burn Democritus' books is just gossip like so much of the philosophers' biographies.

Lastly it's unfair to say "their notion of atoms... falls far, far short of today's knowledge" because what modern chemistry/ physics calls "atoms" are by definition not the atoms that Democritus et al were talking about. Maybe we should call them "toms" instead.

Post by “Bryan” of January 25, 2024 at 11:56 AM

Yes, I agree, atoms are uncuttable. What is incorrectly called an 'atom' by those currently allowed to get credentials in physics is really a conglomerate.

Indifference is a "chicken and egg" situation. Elite educators consider themselves curators of the Overton window.

The many and frequent critiques of Epicurus brought forward by academics (for example in Oxford's 800 page Handbook, published 2020) do not show scholastic indifference but formal opposition. They know who Epicurus is, but he is heretical to their system. They ignore producing translations and only produce critiques, and the critiques they put forward against Epicurus are now being repeated by the public.

There has been a demonstrable effort to bury the Epicureanism scholarship that had started before the world wars. Very little has been done by them since 1950's even though pulic interest has been organically increasing.

Post by “Cassius” of January 25, 2024 at 12:05 PM

I recall how Emily Austin in her interview with us stated that she came to do her book "Living For Pleasure" as part of a series in which *no one else wanted to do a book* on Epicurus and her co-writers found it strange that she would wish to focus on Epicurus herself.

I understand that it is not generally part of the job description of professional academics to "promote" one philosophy over another, but enthusiasm for a topic is not hard to pick up. There are certainly some numbers of academics who write articles about Epicurus, but apart from Emily Austin's book not very many with an overtly positive spin about the entire philosophy. That's one reason why Norman DeWitt's book stands apart, and why I find it useful to check the bibliography of each recent book on Epicurus to see whether he is cited. Whether you agree with every point made by DeWitt or not, it's hard to write a book on Epicurus without taking notice of the arguments made in "Epicurus and His Philosophy" -- and yet that seems to happen all the time.

Post by "Cyrano" of January 25, 2024 at 9:27 PM

Okay, friends, I have read all your remarks induced by my Democritus post. I read them but I can't say I can answer them. To do so I would need to carry with me the Reading Room of the British Museum. That along with The New York Public Library with its 50 million items, The Library of Congress (largest library in the world), and the ancient Library of Alexandria. You guys are too much for me.

But seriously, I would like to comment on the Plato/fascism matter. Better still, go to Google and enter "Was Plato a fascist?" There you will encounter many websites discussing the question. The *New York Times* article is entitled (in bold capital letters) PLATO, THE FASCIST.

And while we are reading on this subject, absolutely essential is *The Trial of Socrates* by I.F. Stone. It is one of the ten most important books of my life.

Post by "DavidN" of January 26, 2024 at 6:16 PM

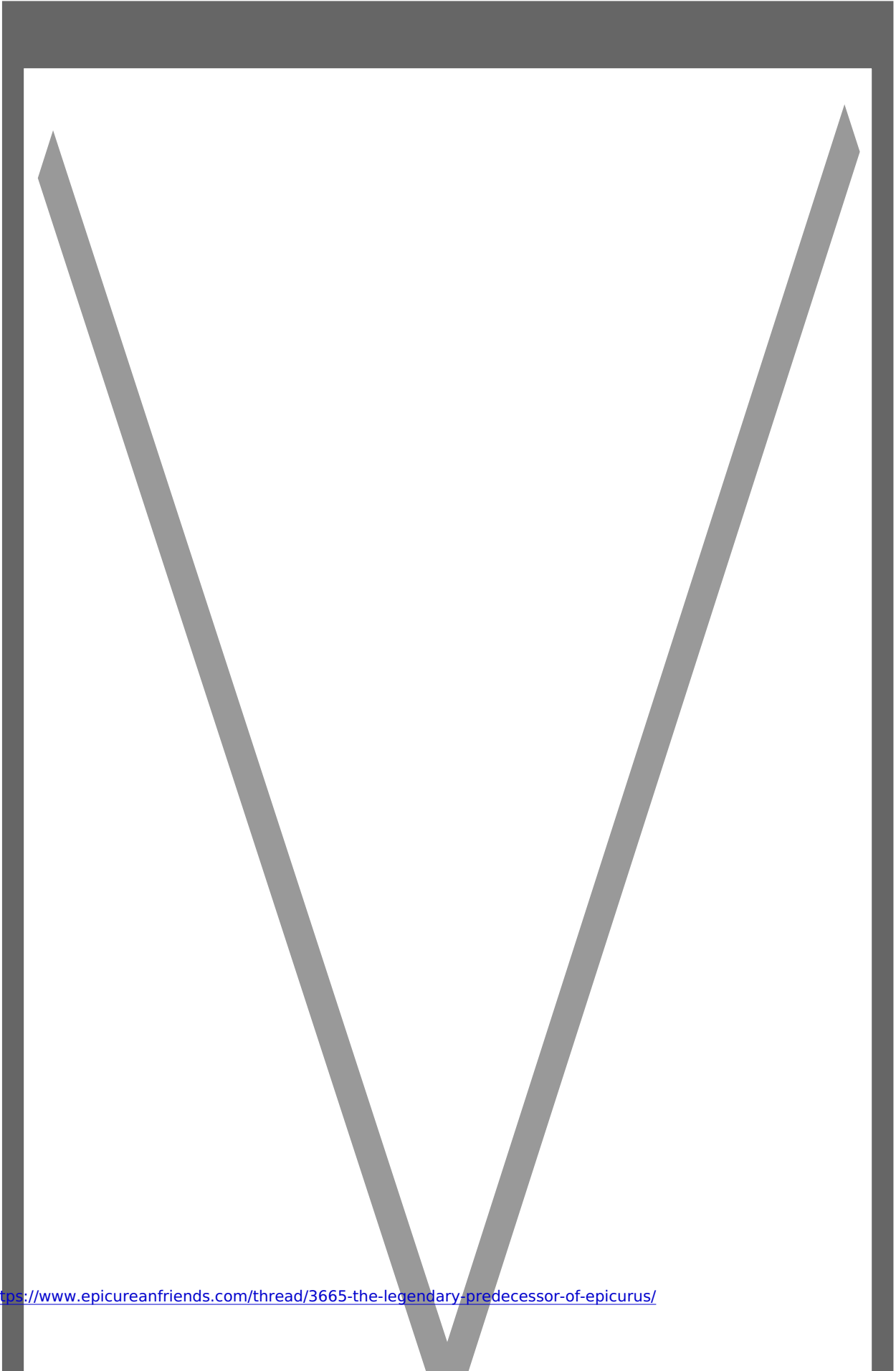
[Quote from Bryan](#)

[Quote from Cyrano](#)

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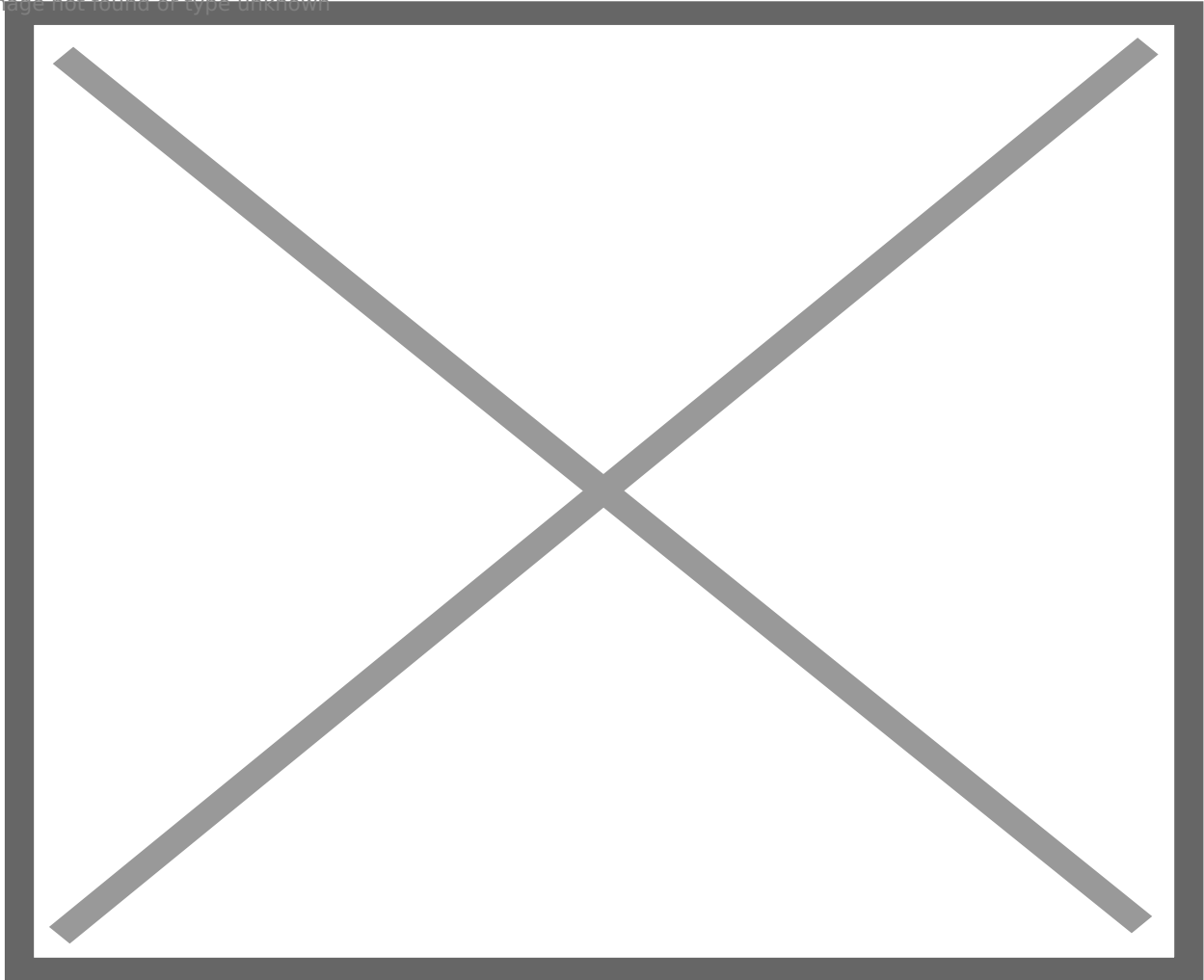
[The Trivium: Why American Public Education Doesn't Want Students to Think - The Scarlet](#)

Long before the creation of the liberal arts education (the education we all receive at Clark right now) was something called the trivium. The trivium is the...

thescarlet.org

This was just the first one to come up but I've been seeing the same argument for a couple decades now.

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[The Classical Education of the Founding Fathers by Martin Cothran](#)

The Classical Education of the Founding Fathers by Martin Cothran. Published in the Winter 2020 Edition of The Classical Teacher by Memoria Press.

www.memoriapress.com

Also seeing this one for quite some time.

Post by “Onenski” of February 1, 2024 at 11:44 AM

Thanks for the post, [Cyrano](#), I enjoyed it as much as I enjoyed your slides on your hero Cyrano de Bergerac.

And just to complement the reference,

[Quote from Cyrano](#)

But seriously, I would like to comment on the Plato/fascism matter. Better still, go to Google and enter "Was Plato a fascist?" There you will encounter many websites discussing the question

In a long book called "The Open Society and Its Enemies" (written in 1945) Karl Popper argued vehemently that Plato was a Proto Totalitarian. I guess that book is the source of many of the articles in internet that you mention.

Post by "Cyrano" of February 1, 2024 at 4:04 PM

Yes, many websites discuss Popper's book.

I am very happy, Onenski, that you enjoyed my Democritus post.