

# The Sorcerer's Apprentices

by David P. Gontar



“The Owl of Minerva Takes Wing Only with the Coming of Dusk”  
– Hegel

What has happened to the sturdy realism of philosophy? The tidy array of perceived objects celebrated by Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore in the early 20th century has vanished in vertiginous swirls of mathematical calculations. Puffing on their pipes like Alice's unctuous Caterpillar, how easy it all seemed to those complacent epistemologists. “Here is one hand, here is the other,” exclaimed the prestidigitator Moore before gasping audiences. “Astonishing, old boy!” they applauded. “Why didn't we think of that?” His heir and crown prince of pomposity, Ludwig Wittgenstein, gave his imprimatur: “The world divides into facts,” quoth he, with apodictic insight. Indeed, how could it be otherwise? For after all here

is one fact, and there another. QED and time for tea.

Russell, Moore and their ebullient fellows were confident that positive science was up to the task of raising the curtain on physical reality, which would surely yield its charms once and for all in sterile laboratories and Star Chamber observatories, much as the '*Philosophes*' had imagined during the ravishing 'Enlightenment'. Contrary to weeping Heraclitus (c. 500 BC), who lamented that Nature ('*physis*') modestly prefers to conceal itself, Diderot, Condorcet and their cohorts were certain that humanity was poised to bring the entire cosmos into plain view, and that the sum of knowledge thus quickly harvested could and would be enshrined in one grand volume (the *Encyclopedia*), to be absorbed by all people, so that in short order everyone would know everything. Lamentably, instead of the anticipated reign of reason, and its attendant Utopia, Europe saw everything unravel in the chaos and terror of the French Revolution (1789-1794) as it became plain that no one knew anything. To make matters worse, at the very apogee of the Enlightenment, an obscure Prussian by the name of Immanuel Kant subjected modern knowledge to the most searching intellectual investigation since Pyrrho, and identified endemic and insuperable difficulties. Kant showed in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781,1787) that the totality of our most fundamental conceptions or principles by which we lay claim to Knowledge are incurably flawed, and give rise not to comprehension but rather to contradiction. On facing pages it was shown for example that time and space are both limited and without limit. Hence time, space, causation, and other categories are fundamentally misleading as far as the nature of things is concerned. Few grasped the far-reaching implications of Kant's antinomic message: that the connection between human thought and nature is inherently askew. In 1893, F.H. Bradley, then the world's most eminent thinker, elegantly restated Kant's thesis in his magnum opus *Appearance and Reality*: human discoveries, formulas and theories can give only a semblance

of existence, not the *Ding an sich*. Reality itself cannot be fathomed. As the next century dawned, eager advocates of modernity like Russell and Moore, buoyed by an industrial and technological cornucopia, were swift to heap scorn on Kant and Bradley, casting the quest for human betterment in the mode of experimental science. Thus was Pandora's box thrown open as we remade everything in our own image. It wasn't necessary to refute Kant and Bradley; all that mattered was that they be expediently forgotten. When it eventually became clear that in order for physics to achieve its theoretical terminus it would have to "split the atom" there was no hesitation, and soon enough emerged the atomic bomb and the enticing corollary of bountiful "nuclear energy." Yet the human spirit in destroying the "atom" had shown itself to be in an essentially hostile relationship with its surroundings. Heirs to the new cosmology bequeathed by Copernicus, Galileo and Newton, scientists of the 20th and 21st century began to devise mathematical models of space and time all at variance with one another, thus confirming the findings of Kant and Bradley rather than overturning them. The result is that the geocentric worldview of the last 10,000 years was discarded yet not replaced by anything but unimaginable quantitative scribbling, coupled with the vain hope that the human species might sojourn in rocket ships to other regions of "space" to escape the mess they had made on *terra firma*.

If we were to return to the myths of the ancient Greeks, who bequeathed the notion of unrestricted rationality to future generations, we would see with hindsight that the donors were not without their misgivings. In a series of tales starting with Prometheus, who steals fire from the gods and gives it to "man," the Greeks expressed unconsciously their deep reservations about the implications of unchecked reason. Bellerophon, Phaeton, Icarus, Midas, Actaeon and Oedipus all deal with the perils of human mind, especially when coupled with avarice and pride. The conquest of mother nature and the destruction of the transcendent gods lead inexorably to the

downfall of "man." Philosophers followed suit. Zeno of Elea (c. 500 BC) made short work of Euclid in his paradoxes. When the disciples of Pythagoras discovered the surd of  $\sqrt{2}$  ... , an irrational quantity, they were so appalled that they threatened to punish anyone who might divulge this horror to the people. Shakespeare's Prince Hamlet voices the same doubts when in the context of a survey of the grandeur of the cosmos he refers to our kind as the "quintessence of dust." Ten years after Kant's Second Edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the German poet Goethe published the *Sorcerer's Apprentice*, in which a lazy servant usurps his master's magic powers and loses control with awful consequences. As the United States began to work feverishly during the Second World War to create its horrific weapon, Walt Disney in *Fantasia* (1940) revived Goethe's monitory tale with Mickey Mouse playing the role of the hapless apprentice. Following Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in the 1950's Disney ironically became an enthusiastic proselytizer for atomic energy on television, eagerly simplifying nuclear "chain reactions" for America's "Mouseketeers" using mousetraps and ping pong balls. That we might be at mortal risk in following that path was an idea never raised in those loopy years of "Tomorrowland." Instead, a chorus of professors and experts celebrated the blessings of the "experimental method," failing to note that an experiment is a venture whose terminus is, by definition, unknown. To experiment is always to gamble. A succession of ever more sweeping and invasive experiments must inevitably run afoul of a Nature weary of being poked and prodded. Yet even today few reach this stark conclusion, or stop to ask how humanity stands in relation to *physis*. Unaware of its deadly properties, Marie Curie died of radium exposure in 1934. How many of us in the 21st century will perish from the effects of radiation? We don't know. So let's experiment and find out. To put it bluntly, the experimental method is nothing more than institutionalized stupidity.

And so, lacking a coherent, stable physics and cosmology, the

United States launched its "space" program and surrendered itself entirely to the siren call of nuclear energy, with the jaunty aim of "conquering the universe." This delusional enterprise is still supported by Hollywood fantasists who gull the public into supposing that it's all one sexy adventure. You see, we are still on the cusp of "evolution" as "progress" unfolds. Things will get better and better until they can't get any worse. As fissionable weapons proliferate, the nation which initiated the trend is unable bar the door, as helpless as Mickey Mouse watching all those water-carrying brooms gone berserk. Hastily thrown up nuclear power stations are everywhere, each one a ticking time bomb. When Chernobyl melted down the Russians had to bring in the entire Red Army to inter the site in sand and concrete. It is today a grim spectacle of death. Beneath that cement sarcophagus an explosive monster slumbers restlessly. The situation in Fukushima is much worse, as tons of radioactive materials flood daily into the Pacific Ocean, one of our principal sources of food and oxygen. The paradise of clean reliable "atomic" energy has proved a cruel hoax, a tempting oasis turned sickening mirage. Yet more such nuclear power plants are being installed everywhere, as though they had received the green light of history. The inevitable response is censorship. The biggest issue facing us as a species was never mentioned during the entire presidential campaign of 2016, as though the Japanese had licked the problem. Now what cannot be fixed cannot be faced. The last hope would be an armada of technicians from every land sent to Fukushima before it becomes unfeasible. This is not done, of course, because of fears of 'globalism'. Better to close our eyes and hope it all goes away.

For all their logical acumen, Russell, Moore, Whitehead, Wittgenstein, Ayer and so many other Oxbridge luminaries reveled in misplaced skepticism, challenging religion while giving science a free pass. Religion merely anticipated the end of the world; science engineered it. Even if we succeed in

capping the inferno at Fukushima, it would be like pasting a bandaid on a raging volcano. The fundamental dilemma is not this cataclysm or that, but the incongruities of the human mind and its congenital inability to accommodate itself to its surroundings. There was a reason that the gods had forbidden mankind to possess fire, a reason which too late becomes apparent, as is always the case with genuine tragedy.

Outside the mainstream media there is a plethora of evidence that the crisis at the Fukushima power plant has worsened dramatically and has the potential to render "planet" Earth uninhabitable in a relatively short period of time. Not only seafood is at risk. At least 80% of our oxygen is produced by ocean waters whose plankton reservoirs are in jeopardy. Then there is the direct threat to living higher organisms (plants and animals) directly exposed to ever surging doses of radioactivity. Experts point out that hundreds of thousands of gallons of deadly polluted water at Fukushima are precariously stored in cheap metal tanks which are in increasing states of disrepair. But the reactors sit in the midst of incessant seismic activity and it is expected that another earthquake will strike soon, triggering a universal disaster on a scale not seen since the extinction of the dinosaurs. Further, the molten core of the reactors has burned through the floors and has sunk into the underground water table and beyond. What will happen as the pressure on that molten core increases at ever greater depths? Finally, it should be obvious that as the Pacific Ocean dies the toxins will soon spread around the globe, ensuring that it will take millions of years before any form of life might survive in such an environment.

Set aside for a moment the deeper philosophical difficulty of humanity's incommensurate relationship with the natural world, and just consider what must be done at this point – and done in haste. First, all people must be apprised of the magnitude and urgency of the Fukushima nightmare. There is only one person who can effectively address this matter: President

Donald J. Trump. Only he can rally the nations and create a Fukushima Task Force to step in and neutralize this facility. Japan and TEPCO have shown themselves utterly incompetent and must be relieved and replaced immediately. Remember that Fukushima was allowed to deteriorate over the past five years because of the neglect of Barack Obama, who seemed to almost delight in disasters. Fukushima is by any yardstick the biggest of Obama's blunders and must become the number one priority of those who are working to make America great again. Failure to act expeditiously will undermine every other plan of the new administration. As we try to close our borders to dangerous immigrants, some thought may be given to places US citizens may migrate before we all glow in the dark. Only our Sorcerer in the White House can save us now.