Plato’s Ship Analogy

‘[H]ow,’ he [Adeimantus] asked, ‘can you possibly say that society’s troubles will never cease until it is ruled by philosophers, if you agree that they’re useless members of society?

‘To answer that question,’ I [Socrates] said, ‘I must give you an illustration.’

‘A thing which, of course, you never normally do!’

‘There you go,’ I said, ‘pulling my leg when you’ve landed me with such a difficult point to prove. But you listen to my illustration, and see just how greedy I am for comparisons. For there’s really no single thing one can use to illustrate the plight of the better type of philosopher in contemporary society; one must draw on several sources for one’s illustrations in defence of him, like a painter combining two or more animals into a goat-stag or similar monster.

‘Suppose the following to be the state of affairs on board ship or ships. The captain is larger and stronger than any of the crew, but a bit deaf and short-sighted, and similarly limited in seamanship. The crew are all quarreling about how to navigate the ship, each thinking he ought to be at the helm; they have never learned the art of navigation and cannot say that anyone ever taught it them, or that they spend any time studying it; indeed they say it can’t be taught and are ready to murder anyone who says it can. They spend all their time milling round the captain and doing all they can to get him to give them the helm. If one faction is more successful than another, their rivals may kill them and throw them overboard, lay out the honest captain with drugs or drink or in some other way, take control of the ship, help themselves to what’s on board, and turn the voyage into the sort of drunken pleasure-cruise you would expect. Finally, they reserve their admiration for the man who knows how to lend a hand in controlling the captain by force or fraud; they praise his seamanship and navigation and knowledge of the sea and condemn everyone else as useless. They have no idea that the true navigator must study the seasons of the year, the sky, the stars, the winds and all the other subjects appropriate to his profession if he is to be really fit to control a ship; and they think that it’s quite impossible to acquire the professional skill needed for such control (whether or not they want it exercised) and that there’s no such thing as an art of navigation. With all this going on aboard aren’t the sailors on any such ship bound to regard the true navigator as a word-spinner and a star-gazer, of no use to them at all?’