Plato, THE REPUBLIC, "The Common Prejudice Against Philosophy." (find the section title in your table of contents)

SUMMARY

Why do people think philosophy is either useless or dangerous? Plato is addressing the question of why there is a "common prejudice against philosophy." He draws several analogies, one about learning to navigate a ship, one about a healthy plant, one about dangerous beast, and one about a "bald-header tinker."

Navigator --
is surrounded by people who have learned the skills necessary to seize power on the ship, but not how to navigate. He, on the other hand, has learned how to navigate but not how to seize power. Those in power think he is a useless star-gazer, since his knowledge doesn't help them in their quest for power. The reckless sailors may even insist there is no art of navigation, since if there were, they would know it. "Anything is useless if you won't use it." Hence, the common misconception that philosophy is useless.

This analogy applies to the predicament of anyone who "loves wisdom" and tries to live accordingly in society. Also, it applies to the soul, in so far as one has the choice to cultivate the "lover of wisdom" in his own soul, or to live life like a reckless sailor. Remember the additional idea of soul as a chariot drawn by three horses - appetite, passion and reason? The idea is similar, to be led by reason (as with the navigator), not jerked around by appetites and passions (as with the reckless sailors).

Also, a person who has all the traits that would enable a sincere life of wisdom -- intelligence, charisma, memory, eloquence, alertness, charm, etc. -- is especially dangerous if he turns those traits toward destructive ends. He is dangerous to himself and to society. Hence, the public conviction that "philosophers" (or those who claim to be wise) are dangerous.

Plant --
weeds grow anywhere, whereas a valuable plant requires special care. The same is true of vices and virtues. Without cultivating "love of wisdom," both in society and in our own souls, vices (weeds) will overrun us. It takes effort to learn to navigate through life. Without that effort, we stumble blindly.

Dangerous Beast --
the "trainer" claims to control the beast, but in fact is controlled by the beast. The trainer has merely learned to placate the beast when the beast is growling. Any so-called leader in society who merely panders to common ignorance or prejudice is like the "trainer." Likewise, we all have a "dangerous beast" in our own souls, and need to learn to train our appetites and passions to be "steered" by reason, rather than giving in to our dark side.

Tinker --
is a wannabe, and a charlatan. Because people who have real talent are lured away from pursuit of wisdom by bribes and flattery, the field is wide open for pretenders. This is a swipe at the professional wise men (sophists) who dominate Athenian education, law and politics. Applied to the soul, the analogy cautions us not to follow impostors, but also cautions us not to become impostors. If we give the best of our time and energy to the pursuit of bribes and flattery (popularity and wealth), we will do a half-baked job of forming beliefs and values.

This is also a self-effacing comment. Socrates was himself a bald-header tinker (mender of household items,) and is humbly lamenting that with more talented and charismatic people drawn away to other concerns, philosophy is left to the likes of him- a man who professes ignorance!
But Wait! -
Also, remember that brief passage that puts a different spin on everything?

“You know, my dear Adeimantus, you shouldn’t make such accusations against the common run of men.”

Adeimantus has fallen into “yes-ing” Socrates without thinking. Socrates snares him in the act by asking if philosophy is impossible for ordinary people? Socrates gently chides Adeimantus, and urges that one shouldn’t condemn people for their misconceptions about philosophy, which results from the misbehavior of those who claim to be wise men. If people understand what philosophy really is, they will begin to see its value. Love of wisdom can and should be a part of everyone’s life, regardless of occupation.

QUESTIONS FOR FIRST ESSAY
(answer ALL THREE parts)

1. Explain the analogies (navigator vs. crew vs. captain), the healthy plant, the dangerous beast, and the bald tinker. How do these illustrate Plato’s ideas about the philosophical life, the prejudice against philosophy, and the differences between the concerns and values of philosophers vs. non-philosophers.

2. How does Plato’s critique apply to both the state and the soul? By the way…what did Socrates mean by “philosopher,” as distinct from “sophist?”

3. How do you think these ideas can be applied to contemporary society, and to your own life? Feel free to suggest both strengths and weaknesses of these ideas, as you understand them.