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Introduction: Inertia as Failure of the Political Imagination

The image of the Cave propounded in the prologue may seem too strong to be either palatable or plausible. How can one dare to say that dominant systems of values and practices and norms are fundamentally misguided? In fact we have just been through an eerily similar indictment of another dominant system of thought and action in the form of the global financial crisis. Consider the AAA-rated securities that were actually worthless; models of risk which ruled out of necessary consideration the very dangers which threatened to bring the system down; the promises to avoid moral hazard which were immediately broken. The topsy-turvy nature of reality, in which our cherished faith in house prices rising, the 'great moderation' of the financial markets, and the ending of the cycle of boom and bust were all exposed as delusions, show us to have been trapped in a precarious cave of our own making, wilfully hiding from the searching light which would reveal the cracks in its foundation.¹

How can people trap themselves – how do we trap ourselves – in such caves of delusion? In Britain, the Queen posed this question on a visit to the scholars enrolled in the prestigious ranks of the British Academy: how was it that no one had noticed that the credit crunch was looming? (In fact, a few people *had* predicted such a crunch; the question was really why conventional wisdom wrote them off as fools and knaves, dismissing them as dangerous and deluded threats to the secure certainties of the cave.) The answer from the academicians was surprising. It was an appeal to the imagination.

So in summary, Your Majesty, the failure to foresee the timing, extent and severity of the [financial] crisis and to head it off, while it had many causes, was principally a failure of the collective imagination of many bright people, both in this country and internationally, to understand the risks to the system as a whole.²

This book proposes a parallel answer to the question of why – with mounting scientific evidence, and a plethora of available technologies – Western democracies by and large are still mired in inertia, unwilling to take the steps necessary to meet the looming challenge of climate change. Like the credit crunch, our failure to rise to – or in some cases even admit – the reality of the challenge is in large part a failure of the collective imagination.

In the financial realm, this collective imagination formed a limiting horizon, making some possibilities not so much literally unthinkable as outside the boundaries of ‘normal’ processes of reasoning and of ‘normal’ standards of the desirable and the admirable. The same phenomenon is at work in the looming ecological crisis. Even where rational solutions are available, such as zero-impact building or a ban on plastic bags, we see them neglected or evaded as inconsistent with the current imaginative horizon. One executive of a major British construction company has reflected ruefully on this phenomenon, observing that most builders do not build in zero-impact ways ‘because they believe it isn’t possible’ – even though it demonstrably is.³ When even an ardent inventor admits that the time-lag in adoption of the best and most useful new inventions tends to be fifteen years, because people are so resistant to change, an inquiry into the inertial drag of the imagination is a necessary complement to the multiple studies of the economic costs, technological possibilities, and normative ethical demands of climate change which dominate the field.⁴

Intimations of the need for an imaginative change

The need for a transformation of the ways in which we conceive the terms of political and economic life is increasingly felt, if inchoately expressed. One way it is sometimes spoken about is in the declaration, ‘We need a

new mythology.’ In the space of six months, I heard that said – in almost exactly those words – by an equity funds manager, the head of an economics think-tank, and the former head of a national UK environmental NGO.⁵ It’s not a sentiment you would usually associate with any of them. It’s not a sentiment that has been widely expressed in modern Western political life at all. In calling for a new mythology, what these leaders of business and NGOs meant is that we need a new vision of normality, of what fundamentally constitutes the relationships between public and private, the role of the individual, the values and costs and benefits which are socially acknowledged.⁶ They mean that the technical, economic, and political debates have left something out: not that we need a literal ‘mythology’ in the sense of a made-up lie or fable or rationalization, but rather that we need to reconsider the basic units of value and meaning which we perceive and in light of which we reason.

I will interpret what these diverse social leaders meant by ‘mythology’ as referring to the more or less conscious assumptions, paradigms, and approaches that inform our perception and so structure the prevailing social ‘ethos’, the ‘structure of response lodged in the motivations that inform everyday life’, as one philosopher, G. A. Cohen of Oxford University, has described it.⁷ Cohen argued that an egalitarian ethos was an indispensable conceptual element of social justice. My complementary claim is that transforming the way in which we imagine the social ethos is indispensable to the actual process of social change. If ‘ethics’ are rooted in ‘ethos’ (as indeed they were for the Greeks, being etymological kin), then both are rooted in turn in the way in which the faculty of imagination conceives them.

The Stern Review of the economics of climate change used more muted language to make a similar point. It called for public policy on climate change to ‘seek to change notions of what responsible behaviour means’: this is treated as a key lever for mitigating (limiting) the carbon emissions causing climate change.⁸ The meaning of responsible behaviour is rooted in ideas about the meaning of harm which in turn connect to a wide range of beliefs, practices, emotions, and desires. The Stern Review assumed that it was the role of the state – public policy – to engage in changing such ideas. I will argue that while the state can play a role in this process, it is likely to start and to succeed in doing so only as part of a larger process in which individuals and groups throughout society can play an active part. Each of us can play a role in re-imagining the social

ethos, even though doing so is a complex process which is beyond any one person's control.

Why worry about these fuzzy issues? Why not just focus on making markets work better by incorporating carbon emissions – climate change having been identified by the Stern Review as ‘market failure on the greatest scale the world has seen’?⁹ If we want to save capitalism while saving the planet, it might be objected, surely the urgent problems are technical and legal rather than psychosocial. Free markets constrained by law and regulation have been the preferred means of producing most private goods with a degree of collective harmony by most of the rich economies of the world over the last century. Markets work by incentivizing people to prioritize and economize on scarce resources, laws by expectations and sanctions making the law-abiding keep within permitted boundaries. On this view, the most important first step is regulatory, to establish a carbon price within a deep and liquid global carbon market or set of interlocking markets, either by cap-and-trade or by a carbon tax. Once this is done, coupled with a rationalization of the system of public subsidies in line with the goal of reducing emissions, we will be a large part of the way towards solving the problem by incentivizing the introduction of appropriate technologies. What can a discussion of fuzzy ideas about imagination and ethos and mythology add to such a practical, real-world approach?

Such a technical and legal approach is essential, and urgent. But we need to ask why it has not yet been implemented, and whether it will be able to do the job fast enough, all by itself. On both counts, my answer is that the psychosocial approach is a necessary complement. As to the first question, a large part of the reason for the delay is that real-world political change depends on there being enough individuals with the new vision and values to give politicians (especially, but not only, democratic politicians) courage, and political cover, to act. One leading environmentalist has recalled a moment early in the UK's New Labour government when Prime Minister Tony Blair was asking NGO leaders to suggest radical steps that would signal that New Labour was taking the climate change agenda seriously. One of those present piped up, why not ban incandescent lightbulbs? According to a recounting of this moment told to me on the condition that the source remain anonymous, Blair looked horrified and said, that's far too radical for government to do; it's your job to make the public happy with that first. Even so ‘minor’ a change

as this very often requires widespread public change of attitudes *before* there is much chance of its being politically imposed. This is not to deny other reasons for delay, including significant vested interests and their lobbying power, but it is to emphasize one which is less tangible but yet also important in determining the space for political action.

The second question as to whether the technical-legal answer will necessarily act quickly and fully enough invites a negative answer. Given the constraints of the 'normality' mindset and the political pressures which it generates, even the initial international and national regulatory fixes are likely to be set at too low a bar. This means that mere compliance will not get us fast enough to the level of emissions reduction necessary.¹⁰ Neither the law nor the market is a sufficient tool for this, though both are necessary. Laws can be captured by cunning lobbyists and can fail to be enforced by apathetic, corrupt, or simply straitened officials. Even the best-regulated markets offer unexpected loopholes which can be exploited for profit, rather than reliably funnelling investment in the publicly intended direction. So even if and when an effective global carbon market emerges, voluntary compliance and further action will remain important. The architecture of national and international regulation is vital to responding to the challenge of climate change. But, especially though not only in democratically governed countries, it is unlikely either to come about, or to succeed in all of its aims, without imaginative change leading to broader forms of public acceptance and participation.

This should not be a surprise. Voluntary obedience and action beyond what is required play a key role in human action generally. Consider the dramatic effects of 'work to rule' industrial action. When workers limit themselves to doing only what their job formally requires and nothing more, malfunctions and even chaos can ensue. Humans are social and communicative animals, and commitment in a communicative and collective endeavour feels very different from mere external compliance – with results that will, it seems likely, be very different as well.¹¹ Regulation which fails to engage with the habits, ideas, passions, and appetites of the people being regulated is unlikely to work very well.

Conversely, even if compliance imposed by regulation were achieved quickly enough, it is likely still to feel like sacrifice, like having to give up one's material comforts for reasons of an austere social goal. 'Mere compliance' with a carbon price could feel like wartime rationing, except with no end in sight. But this is not inevitable. It is possible that the real

need is not so much for material sacrifice as for imaginative transformation. If we are willing to let go of the sunk costs that we have invested in imagining and living by the current system, we may find that we see the world so differently that at least some ‘material sacrifices’ will no longer look like sacrifices at all. Once our values and habits are recreated, new frameworks for judging harm and value, cost and benefit, will produce new evaluations of what is lost and what is gained.

Let me push this point one stage further. In some cases of sustainable action, material sacrifice may not even be necessary. Changing lightbulbs actually saves money as well as cutting emissions. Yet it still feels like a sacrifice, to the extent that Tony Blair was reportedly adamant (as just mentioned) that this would be a psychological bridge too far, and that the *Daily Mail* still in 2009 chose to ridicule and attack the idea of banning ‘ordinary’ bulbs; in the United States, a law passed in 2007 requiring higher efficiency of lightbulbs from 2012 onward – which in practice requires redesign if not abolition of the standard 100 watt incandescent bulb – is being subjected to a similar backlash in Congress and the media at the time of writing.¹² A similar conundrum has arisen in India about what *the Economist* calls ‘the pestilence of plastic bags’, which litter the landscape, clog drains, and harm the cattle which eat them. Yet the municipal imposition of penalties in Delhi has to be draconian, because ‘the desire to pay the penalty is sometimes greater than the desire to change your mindset.’¹³ Why should this be? Why shouldn’t our supposed rational interest in saving money make it easy for us to change our lightbulbs or (facing even a small fine) stop using thin plastic bags, and welcome political pressure to do so? The answer is that our social imagination, our social mythology, frames this as a breach of normality. It is normal to have ‘ordinary’ lightbulbs, normal to be given plastic bags, therefore being asked or required to change these habits is unreasonable, and this sense of a violation of expectations actually trumps the urge to save money. Mythology is so powerful that it can trump material motivation.

My point here is in no way to imply that changing lightbulbs is doing enough, nor that most or all ecological measures are money-saving. It is that the case of lightbulbs – which would seem to be a best-case scenario for quick action – is an extreme illustration of how powerful is the inertial imaginative resistance to change. What one legal scholar has called the ‘status quo bias’ applies well beyond the making of law, in which new proposals are almost always at a rhetorical and argumentative disadvantage as

opposed to the ensconced 'standard' of the status quo.¹⁴ It is an important source of inertia: we are more attached to the status quo just because it is the status quo; this gives it a special edge over all alternatives, including those which are potentially far superior but which do not have the advantage of already being in place.¹⁵ Attachment to the status quo also makes it difficult to establish a standard of assessment for imaginative and social change. Just because we have always drawn the boundaries of harm in one way, those boundaries appear natural and necessary to us, and benefit from our existing bias in favour of them.

The same point applies to individual motivation and action. The status quo is the standard against which we test, and on the basis of which we resist, proposals for change, even when the status quo is demonstrably dangerous.¹⁶ To overcome such resistance requires a leap of initiative. The agents of change will be multiple, with varying differentiated roles in the process, so that while we don't all contribute in the same way, we may all take part if we so choose. This book will focus in particular on the role of the individual in contributing to such a transformation, not because individuals acting alone can do everything that is needed (there are major systemic factors that require political or commercial decision to change), but because the role of the individual has often been neglected.

Such a focus will both be informed by my appeal to Plato and also mark an important fault line where I break with Plato's assumptions. While Plato helps us by training a powerful lens on the mutually constitutive relation between the individual and the political community, his insistence that that relationship can only be positively shaped by a few people at and from the top hinders a full understanding of social change. Likewise, while Plato insisted that individuals should keep to their assigned social roles, with only one such role – that of the philosopher-ruler – being assigned to consider the good of the whole society, I will suggest that his notion of the good today must be incorporated into all social roles, not only that of the leaders. By asking how the individual at any level of society can contribute to imaginatively reshaping its ethos, and indeed must incorporate responsibility for doing so into whatever her social roles might be, we both learn from Plato and also move beyond him.

The skeleton of this book is therefore threefold: inertia, imagination, and initiative. Part I surveys the *inertia* of our current habits, and outlines a possible source for stimulating reform in the form of ancient ethics, and in particular in the work of Plato. Part II outlines elements which a

new process of *imagination* of the constituents of the social ethos could reshape, doing so for purposes of illustration and stimulation rather than strict prescription: my interest is in exploring what it would mean to carry out social changes of the requisite kind, rather than prescribing in detail precisely what those changes should be. One central focus here is on the mutually constituting relation between the individual and her political society: individuals are shaped by the way in which they imaginatively conceive of political relations, but they can also play a role in reshaping this. Part III returns to the current roadblocks, suggesting ways in which a new ethos transformed by the acts of political imagination outlined in Part II could enable various actors to take the *initiative* in addressing the challenges of sustainability, and surveying how individual and social roles in society might have to change in order to do so. To prepare for these arguments, this chapter will now flesh out what I mean by ethos and imagination, how I define sustainability, and why I turn to Plato as a guide in this quest.

Defining ethos and the imagination

The terse definition of ‘ethos’ quoted earlier – defining it as the ‘structure of response lodged in the motivations that inform everyday life’ – was advanced by its proponent to argue that compliance with a set of basic rules and institutions in the absence of a reinforcing ethos can neither exhaust nor attain a basic social value. If people don’t share and act upon the values animating the rules and institutions in their everyday choices, the society will fall short of attaining and exhibiting those values. But what is it that structures such responses and motivations? Here we must supplement the appeal to ethos with an acknowledgement of the background beliefs, images, and narratives which are more or less explicit and more or less common. Such beliefs, images, and narratives are in part the product of imaginative modes of perception, and they in turn structure habitual acts and practices, which may be individuated in terms of social norms. What interest me in particular are the elements of this ethos relevant to politics in a broad sense. These are not restricted to the imagination of particular political institutions, but range more widely to encompass the

relationship between the individual and the political community and the units of value and meaning which are in play in that relationship.

We can imagine a different relationship between the individual and the polity, and instantiate this in a new set of habitual responses and motivations in everyday life as well as in engaging with specific political institutions. This axis has a long lineage: the ancient Greeks called it the relationship between *polis* and *psyche*, between city and soul. This re-imagining of the political even in a broad sense is only a subsection of the acts of collective imagination which might be relevant to the question of sustainability. The ways in which we imagine animals and the natural world – whether trees, for example, have legal standing, or whether we take wilderness to have value independent of human enjoyment or recognition of it – are of great importance to explore outside the confines of this book.¹⁷ But those are not my subject here.¹⁸ Supposing that we have at least a ‘fiduciary responsibility’ towards the earth,¹⁹ I am primarily concerned with human-to-human interactions rather than with our relation to the natural world, asking how the demands of sustainability impinge on, and invite rethinking of, the relationship between city and soul.

While ‘imagination’ refers to a capacity for engaging in acts of imagining, it is sometimes used to refer to the set of mental contents created by such acts,²⁰ and I will sometimes follow suit. Such an elision is made by many appeals to the ‘moral imagination’, a phrase which goes back at least to statesman Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*,²¹ and which has been used by scholars of literature and politics for decades,²² being given wider currency by the speeches of President Barack Obama in accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009 and in mourning the victims of the violent attack in Tucson in 2011.²³ That phrase however in recent decades has been closely tied to a limited, albeit vitally important, content, that of cultivating the qualities of empathy and humanity. In contrast, the ‘political imagination’ as I use it is broader, encompassing a wider range (and not necessarily only a positive one) of values, visions, and qualities that inform the relationship between individual and political community: in the political theorist Sheldon Wolin’s evocative and seminal discussion, ‘vision and political imagination’ are central processes of political theory.²⁴ The phrase ‘political imagination’ referring to a noun, the substantive contents produced by the imagination, has been employed by the political theorist Danielle Allen, who introduced one chapter of her book *Talking to Strangers*, for example, by remarking that

'A collective autobiography ought to explain how the landscape of the political imagination has come to have its political topography.'²⁵ It can also be found, without much elaboration, in a volume titled *Religion and the Political Imagination*, and in the context of a more fleshed-out account of the imagination and its political role in a book of essays on political theory called *Politics and the Imagination*.²⁶

Consider as an example of divergent political imaginations, the Japanese and American forms of modern capitalism: both have broadly similar institutions and rules (though of course these vary in some vital particulars), but they embody very different assumptions and expectations about the treatment of workers, the responsibility of companies, and the role of the state.²⁷ Of course, the Japanese political imagination is constituted by a more or less coherent cluster of institutions, practices, norms, and beliefs, and its elements can't be plucked at random out of context. But there is nothing impossible in the thought that the Japanese could begin to shift their values, expectations, and assumptions, either deliberately or by necessity, towards others closer to the American ones, or vice versa.

Other examples of changes in imagining the ethos at the order of magnitude which interests me include the sea-changes in attitudes towards and practices of smoking in the last two decades; or empire in the post-World War II period; or big-game hunting since the Edwardian era. Or consider, over a longer historical time span, the perceived value of sunbathing: we take for granted that this is an intelligible, or meaningful, thing to do (though now only when well protected by sunscreen), whereas such a way of spending time would have made no sense to an ancient Greek or a Victorian.

Of course, such general contrasts between of one society as a whole and that of another can be misleading: societies will typically include multiple, overlapping, and competing horizons of normality. (Plenty of people saw no point in sunbathing even in the halcyon days before knowledge of skin cancer and global warming.) And yet some aims are sufficiently widely shared, sufficiently little questioned in the media and public debate, to warrant a loose usage of the phrase in the singular. As one scholar remarks about the related notion of 'a system of values' (though this focuses primarily on norms and actions, without reference to metaphors and images), '[t]he vast areas of agreement [between individuals] often seem invisible because they are presupposed or assumed

without argument.²⁸ Such an approach, focusing as I do on widespread commonalities, contrasts with other academic approaches which explore divergent imaginations among different groups in a given population: the social psychology of ‘mental frames’, for example, which sees them as varying between individuals, or the ‘cultural theory of risk’, which distinguishes four broad types of orientation to groups and rules.²⁹ Such approaches generate valuable insights into diversity and conflict, helping to explain, as in the title of an important book by the former director of the Tyndall Centre in Britain, ‘why we disagree about climate change.’³⁰ Yet, notwithstanding the obvious existence of such disagreements, my interest lies in exploring the considerable extent of agreement which comes into being in the course of defining and negotiating both formal and informal political relationships. How we assume that harm must be defined, for example, is a key issue about which people will disagree, but on which society as a whole comes to some working resolution – and it is that sort of resolution, which may no longer work as well as originally thought, which I wish to interrogate.

One valuable analytical perspective on how broad shifts in attitudes and practices to sunbathing or smoking or similar phenomena come about derives from identifying and studying them as discrete norms. This is an area of study which spans the gamut from anthropological accounts to a growing discipline at the intersection of legal theory and rational choice. Despite the fact that there is ‘no common definition of social norms’ either within these disciplines or across them, certain subfields have crystallized their own definitions in a productive way.³¹ For some, ‘norms are a system of meaning’, while for others, they are ‘patterns of action’, but more commonly, they are seen as statements that regulate behaviour, usually with an ‘ought’ dimension.³² Within the parameters of an agreed definition, individuating and limiting the elements of the ethos as ‘norms’ has the advantage of focusing inquiry on a seemingly limited and definable set of expectations-cum-actions.

This perspective makes norm emergence and change seem a more tractable phenomenon: scholars have explained how the practice of foot-binding disappeared in China, and are now using that understanding to inform local efforts to abolish the practice of female genital cutting in parts of Africa.³³ The dynamics identified in such studies are illuminating and I will draw on them further in Part III. Yet in considering the role of the ethos and of the imagination in shaping it, we cannot limit the field

too neatly to individuated norms alone. Norms collectively comprise an ethos, which makes sense in turn only against a background of structured perceptions and assumptions derived from acts of imagination. Changes in individual norms do not necessarily amount to a systemic and integrated change of the kind which interests me, though they may be important contributions to such change.

Nevertheless, I share with the ‘new norms’ theorists a presumption that some if not all of these elements can in principle be brought within our conscious control, and that individuals can act – taking on diverse roles in the process – to bring this about. Political and social initiatives can be taken by at least some individuals and can kickstart further changes. Not all elements of the ethos will change at once, but many are at least in principle subject to collective or semi-collective processes of change.

How do such processes begin? ‘New norms scholars’ have an answer to this: changes in norms are sparked off by individuals who act as ‘norm entrepreneurs’.³⁴ A few individuals kickstart the process, embodying intrinsic commitment to a set of values and visions; others eventually join them for a range of reasons, whether being converted to the new values or simply jumping on the bandwagon of a successful social movement for more mundane reasons of seeking respect, recognition, or social advancement. Yet the ‘new norms’ literature tends to treat the original ‘norm entrepreneurs’ themselves as inexplicably arising out of the blue, due to a stroke of chance (Plato would call it divine fate). In contrast, my interest lies in what it is that can inspire an individual to set out on such a transformative path. Inspiration arises from new imaginative insights and then gives rise to broader imaginative – and eventually social and political – transformation. This process is not one-way only: each level of specificity and awareness – from the broad and partly submerged imaginative landscape which yields the more evident attitudes and actions that comprise a shared social ethos, to the specific and individuated norms of behaviour – is a possible node of change which can rebound upstream or downstream, reshaping the others in its wake. Or so I will argue.

One striking example of this process is the gradual emergence and legitimisation of the notion of sustainability, as a result of the efforts of the green movement, Green parties, academics, and others over many decades. Sustainability as an idea has moved from the fringes to the centre of political debate; the challenge now is to integrate it into our perceptions and our practices. To understand what this would mean, a first

step here is to flesh out how I understand this notion. My aim in this book is to focus on the ethics and ethos of sustainability, not to debate its scientific demands or implications, so my excursion into defining the concept will be brief.

Defining sustainability

The most widely used definition is probably that of the path-breaking 1987 United Nations report *Our Common Future*, also known – in honour of the chair of the World Commission on Environment and Development which produced it, Gro Harlem Brundtland – as the Brundtland Report: ‘Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.’³⁵ This focus on the future, however, risks downplaying and minimizing the nature of the standard with respect to the present. The appeal to ‘needs’ seeks a kind of philosophical bedrock. It is often thought that while we disagree about wants, human needs are self-evident: water, food, shelter, and so on. But in fact, philosophers and historians have long pointed out how even these most ‘basic needs’ are always interpreted within social contexts and conceptions of the good: it has been argued that early settlers in Greenland died because they would not recognize fish as ‘food’ even when starving.³⁶ Further, as political theorists have argued, the particular shape taken by our needs is socially dependent. I need mobility, but I don’t necessarily need a car, unless I live in a city with no public transport or cycle lanes.³⁷ Conversely, to function in Kenya or China today as an entrepreneur on even the smallest scale, one needs a mobile phone: that is a legitimate need in the context of current practices of communication.

The Brundtland Report’s reference to ‘meeting the needs of the present’ can only mean meeting those needs in relation to a certain understanding of value. A sustainable society will not be one which succeeds in doling out a set number of calories to imprisoned inmates just to keep them alive. It will be one which its members themselves recognize as thriving in a way which can be continued into the future, in relation to the interactive life-support systems of the earth.

This dynamic and imagination-structured approach is captured better in the definition of sustainable development offered by the charity Forum for the Future: ‘a dynamic process which enables all people to realise their potential and improve their quality of life in ways which simultaneously protect and enhance the Earth’s life support systems.’³⁸ As this definition shows, sustainability must be understood as a dynamic idea which will continue to change as contexts change. It relates to a broad condition for what I will call, in Platonic terms, a conception of the good – realizing potential and improving quality of life, protecting and enhancing the earth as an ecosystem. And it shows that we need not, and should not, take the status quo as the standard for sustainability. Sustainability is not about maintaining the status quo *ad infinitum* into the future. It is about reconfiguring society within the limits of the earth so that over time, society will be ever more able to realize and instantiate the good. What is unsustainable is what undermines the ability of society to develop in this way, or leads it to backslide in its ability to realize and instantiate what is valuable.

Sustainability, then, has ethics as much as science at its heart.³⁹ It makes sense to care about sustaining only something that we consider to be good, or at least to have the potential for good. Sustainability does not by itself answer the question of value, though it opens that question and invites debate as to how the values at its heart should be filled in.⁴⁰ What it does is to specify both that there should be a meaningful value at the heart of our endeavours – for why try to sustain something worthless? – and that those endeavours should only be carried out in ways consonant with protecting and enhancing the life-support systems of the earth.

Although sustainability is not the highest good itself, it is a necessary ingredient of and condition on the realization of the good. So one might pursue a career in publishing – sustainably; fight poverty – sustainably; raise children – sustainably. All of these only count as full goods when done in a sustainable manner. (This will rule out some aims which can’t be pursued sustainably at all.) Strictly speaking, it doesn’t make sense to make ‘sustainability’ itself into our principal goal; the goal is rather to achieve other independent goods in sustainable ways. The ultimate aim should be for ‘sustainability’ as a separate good to disappear, becoming wholly absorbed into the structure and nature of every other good that we pursue. In the meantime, however, significant attention and initiative are required to embed it as what philosophers call a side-constraint:

meaning roughly that any goal must be abandoned if it cannot be met while respecting the constraint.

It might be that at some time in the future, a technological revolution will make the immense potential of solar or wind or some other form of renewable energy available to us at very little cost of any kind. In that case, the sustainability of energy use, at least, would be a given for any and every possible goal – and so we would no longer have to worry about it as an organizing principle of psyche or polity. Yet so long as there are any scarcities in the human world – and it is hard to imagine that all of them could disappear – the issue of a psychologically and socially sustainable disposition in relation to them will remain.

Meanwhile, in order to incorporate the sustainability side-constraint – so long blithely ignored – into economic and environmental policy will require significant direct attention and consideration. Despite the fact that sustainability is to be incorporated into other goods that we pursue, in order to achieve that incorporation we need to focus on its specific requirements and demands. We need consciously to build it into our thinking and our institutions, in order for it to become an embedded and structuring part of our outlook. That task is supported by attention to our current conception of the social ethos and exploration of models for its reconfiguration.

Appealing to Plato: the reasons why

The terrain demarcated above could be explored from many points of view. As my earlier references to Plato's Cave and the Greek axis of the city and the soul already indicate, the vantage point chosen in this book is that of ancient Greek ethics and politics, and in particular, the work of Plato. In subsequent chapters I will say more to introduce Greek thought and its role in modern intellectual life, and the life and work of Plato himself. Here, I take a more personal approach to explain why I find Plato in particular so provocative and illuminating in thinking through the changes which sustainability requires.

Even if you are unfamiliar with Plato's writings, you are likely to have heard his name, and to know that he figures as arguably the most

important and influential philosopher in the history of Western thought. What you may not have considered, even if you know his works, is that he can be read as having written a primer in the functioning of political possibility.⁴¹ The *Republic* is a diagnosis of the ways in which city and soul were diseased in Greek societies, locked in some form of pathological embrace in which the dominant group imposed irrational goals on the society as a whole, and in which the satisfactions sought by the ambitious and competitive were consistently unsatisfying, leading to further degeneration as their children sought satisfaction elsewhere. It is at the same time an effort to transform the imaginative horizon of those societies, represented by the young Glaucon and Adeimantus, characters given the names of Plato's brothers, and by each reader who finds herself drawn in by the great reworkings of *polis* and *psyche* which the book proposes. The soul as healthy or diseased, and healthy only when it is balanced and orderly; the city as existing to serve its members rather than being a vehicle for their exploitation; the Sun as an image for the notion of absolute goodness; and the Cave as an image of delusory denial of the reality of the good: all these images have become staples of philosophical thought, without which the political thought of both the Latin West and the Islamic East would have been very different. It is Plato's images, as much as his appeal to reason, which have haunted readers over the centuries.

In speaking for over a decade to delegations and conferences about the ethics and politics of sustainability, primarily in forums convened by the Cambridge Programme for Sustainability Leadership (formerly the Cambridge Programme for Industry) in the United Kingdom, Europe, and the United States, for audiences drawn globally from the ranks of business, government, and academia, I found myself reaching for Plato in trying to explain the ways in which reason and desire might be re-envisioned, and the notion of a healthy society in which city and soul could be in harmony rather than in tension or mutual isolation. The richness and precision of Plato's imagery, its deployment targeted to particular audiences in order to challenge and reshape their assumptions and ideals, struck me as offering a structured account that models what transformative social change would look like and require. Plato himself stressed the need for *paradeigmata* or models (plural) in order to understand complex phenomena: Plato's work can now serve us as a *paradeigma* (singular) in its turn.⁴²

Such a useful ingredient seemed to be neglected, however, in the cookbook of my main academic subject, political theory. There has been

extensive and excellent work, of course, in the physics of climate change, in its biology, more recently in its economics, its domestic and international politics, and in applied ethics, exploring the terms of fairness of possible political solutions. But there has been less work drawing on the history of political thought – including the great books of the Western canon – either to situate and diagnose the challenges of sustainability or to sketch the outlines of possible solutions.

To turn to the history of political thought, however, is to encounter a further challenge to the relevance of the ancient Greeks, insofar as most modern political thinkers have marginalized them. Modern society is supposed to be built on a rejection of Spartan self-discipline and Athenian participatory democracy, in favour of the luxuries of commercial society and a capitalist economy in a representative state. Adam Smith, James Madison, and Max Weber are among the prophets of modernity who in key respects rejected aspects of ancient thought as irrelevant and misleading for modern politics, even while drawing on others. But the modern project so defined is built on certain flawed assumptions which put it at risk of running itself into the ecological sand.

These assumptions are ones which the ancient Greeks will in subsequent chapters help us to query and rethink. They include that of negligibility, to be discussed in chapter 3, together with a broader range of views about virtue, character, the good, and the relation between individual and society. Precisely in being free from advanced bureaucracy and capitalism, the ancient Greeks were aware of certain aspects of human development and potential which we have tended to forget. In appealing to them, we follow in the footsteps of many who have revived ideas that might seem untimely or anachronistic. As even an historian of ideas who stresses the importance of interpreting ideas within their context acknowledges, '[t]he history of political thought must consist, in significant measure, of actors doing things that historians of political thought insist that *they* should not do,' that is, appealing to ideas that would otherwise be anachronistic, and so giving them life within a fresh context once again.⁴³ This book is an exercise in such unabashed appropriation. While drawing extensively on study of and scholarship about Plato's writings, it does so in order to make use of them, and it rejects or reshapes the ideas they offer where necessary.

Why turn to Plato in particular, rather than some other ancient thinker, such as his younger Greek contemporary Aristotle or the later

Roman philosopher and statesman Cicero? It should be said that Plato is the leading but not only author on whom I will draw: his is the road map of social and political transformation which we will trace, but this will be augmented by other ancient as well as modern authors for specific points. I highlight Plato over other ancient authors for several reasons. While Aristotle is especially instructive on the rhetoric of political change, and can be read as offering deep insights into the mutual constitution of the individual and society,⁴⁴ he is less fertile in producing his own transformative images. He offers a deep understanding of the mutually shaping nature of individual and social practices on which I will draw but lacks any detailed model of a new society (the brief sketch at the end of the *Politics* is not comparable to the major works of Plato). The same is true of Cicero, despite his homage to Plato in writing his own *Republic* and *Laws* ostensibly modelled on works of the Athenian. Among thinkers of the ancient classical world, only Plato was fecund enough to give rise to a meditative philosophical system – known as Neoplatonism – which rivalled and inspired the monotheistic structure of Christianity as well as influencing the further development of Judaism and the later advent of Islam.

Is appealing to Plato, then, merely a substitute for religion today? After all, religions offer transformative images which mark the way to a blessed, saved, or prescribed form of life, and which are already deeply rooted in the minds of many people. The rethinking of stewardship and of the ethic of creation by many Jews, Christians, and Muslims, as well as other forms of ecological ethic in Buddhism and other Asian religions, may seem a more promising step than appealing to an esoteric and long-dead ancient author such as Plato. Some religious people may even be suspicious of Plato as an ersatz and so potentially misleading form of pseudo-religion. In the fourth century A.D., the Christian author St Augustine of Hippo passed through a Platonist phase on his journey to religious commitment. He later criticized Platonism as deluding itself about the possibility of self-sufficient human virtue, failing to attain the radical awareness of sin and dependence on God which only Christianity offered. The fear that an ethic modelled on Plato will be similarly flawed is one which many religious believers might share.

Augustine's criticism of ancient virtue ethics gave rise to another source of criticism about the relevance of Plato today. Such doubt can come from philosophers committed to modern versions of 'deontological'

ethics, which treat impartial prescriptions for what is right as separate from – and more important than – individual conceptions of what is good. Such scholars reject an approach to ethics focused primarily on virtue and the good as opposed to duty and right. They are most likely to appeal to the ethics of Immanuel Kant, which offer categorical imperatives to govern the choice of maxims for human action.

Without entering the technical debates about whether virtue ethics and deontological ethics can be reconciled,⁴⁵ or about whether virtue has any real causal role in explaining human behaviour,⁴⁶ I suggest that raising the debate to a higher level – the level of the imaginative construction of the social ethos – offers a useful shift of attention. Here, virtue ethics enters the background assumptions and values of a society, whatever the particular ethical commitments of individuals may be.⁴⁷ My appeal to Plato is pitched at this more abstract level, treating his thought as a structural model rather than a substantive blueprint (though I do not dismiss the need for blueprints altogether, I do not offer one here).⁴⁸ Plato's ingredients are useful for us as a generic recipe to be modified and adapted, not in the specific cultural imagery which he chose to appeal to his long-ago contemporaries. He tells us, as it were, what sort of ingredients and methods are required to bake a loaf of bread, not what specific kind of bread we should bake. Some of those elements are ones which we tend today to overlook, to forget that we need – as if we were to forget that most kinds of bread require yeast – and that is what Plato can help remind us.

Some of Plato's ideas remain in the bloodstream of modern thought, but have been neglected or distorted; others need to be retrieved from their ancient context. In neither case do I suggest that we should adopt his metaphors or theories wholesale. Rather, my aim is to illuminate in Plato the structure of his effort at transforming the ethos of his own time, in order that we can appreciate the magnitude of the challenge and the terrain that any solution of our own will have to cover – as well as the junctures at which Plato's thinking misleads us or is no longer something that we can accept.

This means that religious believers and secularists alike should be able to find something of interest in this approach – and indeed, over several centuries, Plato and other strands of ancient ethics have played the role of an alternative moral resource to avoid dogmatic conflict.⁴⁹ The religious may turn to their own metaphors rather than those of Plato, but Plato can help remind them that such metaphors have to connect soul to city.

The secular may be less accustomed to seeing transformative visions as essential to political change than Plato makes clear that they must be. So too, Kantians may continue to hold that ethics must be categorically prescriptive of what is right, yet they can accept that it also matters what a society assumes the good to be. Plato won't settle any of these debates once and for all, but we can find in him something to offer to each side.

This book is called *Eco-Republic* because it displays Plato's ideal form of city and soul as a model for the greening of modern ethics and politics. The word 'republic' is a play on the English title of Plato's greatest and best-known work. But while the English title (following the Latin *respublica*) suggests a particular form of regime, the original Greek title, *Politeia*, means simply 'constitution' generally: what it means for a regime to be suitably ordered to count as a regime at all. For Plato, only the ideal form of city and soul arguably counted as a proper or real regime in this sense; perversions of that ideal could be regarded as pseudo-regimes, lacking the essential structure of unity.⁵⁰ So by *politeia*, he meant not so much a particular kind of government as the notion of good, and adequate, government altogether.⁵¹ Likewise, by 'eco-republic' I do not mean a specifically 'republican' form of government, but rather any polity insofar as it is adequate to the demands of sustainability, which means among other things insofar as it is sustainable itself. How can we model a sustainable relation between what we may still call in archaic terms the city and the soul?

Before we can answer this question, we need to acknowledge a significant obstacle to it, for a deliberate reaction against ancient models of politics was promoted in the eighteenth-century development of a new ethic for commercial society. To see what was intended, gained, and lost by this development is the subject of the next chapter.