Plato's Cave: Thinking about Climate Change

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In The Republic, Plato explores the predicament of the Cave: a passive citizen body, a conniving and self-interested set of sophistic opinion-formers and demagogic political leaders, a systematically misleading and damaging order of political structures and common beliefs and appetites.

Does this have lessons for tackling climate change? In clinging to our current way of life and its fossil-fuel infrastructure, are we trapping ourselves in a modern version of Plato's Cave—and if so, how might we escape?

Introduction

Book 7 of Plato's *Republic* opens with an unforgettable image: the image of the Cave. Here is how Plato's character Socrates invites his interlocutors to 'imagine' the situation:

> *'Imagine human beings living in an underground, cavelike dwelling, with an entrance a long way up…They've been there since childhood…with their necks and legs fettered, able to see only in front of them, because their bonds prevent them from turning their heads around'* (Plato, *Republic* 514a).[1]

In this story, the prisoners are trapped in a world of artificial light cast by a fire. All they can actually see are shadows, cast by the 'artifacts' that puppeteer-like manipulators carry around behind their backs. In this world, says Socrates, 'the prisoners would in every way believe that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of those artifacts' (*Rep.* 514c). The 'honours, recognitions and rewards'[2] on offer in the cave, go to those who are most cunning and adept at responding to those shadows—not to anyone who might have been enabled to break their bonds and start to see what is real in the light of the sun.

This image has sometimes been read as a parable about the inevitable woes of mortal life: as if Plato were portraying human beings trapped in a vale of tears whilst on earth, to be freed only in a transcendental afterlife. But in fact, Socrates introduces the whole story as a comparison to 'the effect of education on our nature' (*Rep.* 514a). So, Plato's Cave is *not* the inevitable mortal abode. The Cave, rather, is the city, in the sense of the political community. It is *any* polity in which we grow up and are educated, which fundamentally shapes our appetites and assumptions and aspirations. And it is *every* polity that is organised around fundamentally flawed and mistaken assumptions. The misinformation purveyed therein is not occasional malpractice, but rather, pervasive delusion. It shapes everything that citizens are brought up to believe and to desire.

What Cave might we be trapped in today? Well, for starters, we might ask the same question about Plato and his contemporaries, in terms of what assumptions they took for granted that today look to us like deep mistakes. In lecturing this year at Gresham on the theme 'The Political Imagination: Ancient Greek Ideas', I have said relatively little so far about the stark fact that ancient Greek polities were, as the historian Moses Finley argued, slave societies: their economic development, political participation, and cultural achievements were all built on the backs of enslaved people, many of them captured in war.

So, the Greeks were trapped in a Cave that took slavery for granted. Slavery was a fate that everyone dearly wished to avoid for themselves—as the escaped 19th century American slave Frederick Douglass would later reaffirm powerfully, noting in an 1852 speech, in the gendered language of that era, that 'There is not a man beneath the canopy of heaven that does not know that slavery is wrong *for him*'.[3] But as Bernard Williams argued powerfully in his work *Shame and*

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[1] Unless otherwise noted, translations of the *Republic* are by G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve, in John M. Cooper (ed.), *Plato. Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).
[2] *Rep.* 516c, trans. Lane.
[3] Frederick Douglass, 'What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?', in Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, ed. Blight (New Haven, CT: Yale

Necessity, the Greeks overwhelmingly saw no alternative to relying upon slavery as a mode of organising society in general.[4] That was a social fact, not a natural or timeless one, and it's a social fact that since has changed: we no longer think it is right or reasonable for people to organise their appetites, assumptions, and aspirations around seeking to have slaves. The 'honours, recognitions and rewards' that most societies offer today are no longer bestowed on those who win wars to enslave the defeated survivors, but the opposite: honours would be given to those who fight against modern slavery, rather than those who seek to impose it. In that sense, we're no longer in the same Cave as the ancient Greeks.

At this point you may be wondering: why am I talking about slavery, when this lecture was supposed to be about climate change? Well, consider this comparison advanced by several historians: between the energy produced by enslaved humans, and the energy produced by fossil fuels. As Jean-François Mouhot has argued, 'Fossil fuel-powered machines and slaves play(ed) similar economic and social roles in the societies in which they operate(d). Both slave societies and developed countries externalize (d) labour. In the first case, labour came from slaves; in the other, 'work' is provided by machines'.[5] As social structures, dependence on fossil fuels, like dependence on enslaved people, has 'free(d) their owners from daily chores' and so provided those who benefit from these arrangements with 'the leisure to read and write, perform arts, get informed and participate in politics'.[6] Other historians have developed the concept of 'energy slaves' as a measure of the kind of energy that machines, mostly fossil-fuelled, more generally provide us: John McNeill documented that in the 1990s, on average, each person alive '"deployed about 20 'energy slaves' meaning 20 human equivalents working 24 hours a day, 365 days a year"'.[7]

To be sure, as Gresham's own Professor Myles Allen, the Frank Jackson Foundation Professor of the Environment, has argued in his most recent lecture, from a climate change perspective, what matters most are not overall carbon emissions, but more specifically, those emissions which result in net carbon being added to the atmosphere, as opposed to being reinjected and safely stored in a geological stratum on earth.[8] And we should also insist that the moral wrong of slavery is a categorical wrong of a unique kind. That said, while comparing these net fossil fuel emissions to human slavery may be a startling, even a shocking, way to think about climate change, that is precisely the *kind* of shock that Plato's image of the Cave was designed to produce. For the Cave asks us to consider that the bedrock assumptions on which our society is founded may be rotten to the core. Perhaps the seeming value of economic growth which allows net carbon emissions is actually a net harm. Perhaps chairing an oil and gas company that isn't investing maximally in carbon capture and storage is to be derided, not admired. Denial of these truths looks from this higher vantage point on the Cave like keeping one's head in the sand, refusing to face what is obvious and valid.

So, to recall the announcement for this lecture:[9] a passive citizen body, a conniving and self-interested set of sophistic opinion-formers and demagogic political leaders, a systematically misleading and damaging order of political structures and common beliefs and appetites: this is how Plato portrayed the effects of his contemporaries' system of education—by which he meant their values and practices. He described the polities of his day as being like closed caves. Trapped inside, people box at shadows, elbowing each other to achieve advantage and pre-eminence, while being all the time unknowing captives of a delusional state. The artificial firelight inside is but a feeble and perverse imitation of the light of the sun—the truth about the world, including about what is truly good—which stands outside and above every given cave. So, insofar as we cling to the comforts and familiarities of our current way of life with its fossil-fuel infrastructure, are we not trapping ourselves in a modern version of Plato's cave?

One difference between Plato's image and today makes our predicament even more perplexing. In Plato's story, the question of how easy it would be to escape the Cave is actually presented in a double-edged way. On the one hand, the Cave is depicted as almost hermetically sealed: no sunlight at all gets in to where the prisoners are held, and it is only by traveling arduously a long way up that anyone can start to see the light. But on the other hand, in reflecting on the moral of the story, Socrates insists that 'the power to learn is present in everyone's soul' and that the role of education is 'to redirect' our gaze upward to the truth and out of the shadows (*Rep.* 518c-d). These points make it sound easier, within our power, at least to start off on the upward path. In this latter sense, the moral would be akin to the film 'Don't Look Up!', in which an asteroid hurtling to earth sparks a movement of political denial. The film argues that all we

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University Press, 2014), 368-373, at 372.

[4] This point was powerfully made by Bernard Williams in *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 124-9.

[5] Jean-François Mouhot, 'Past Connections and Present Similarities in Slave Ownership and Fossil Fuel Usage', *Climatic Change* 105 (2010) 329–55, at 339.

[6] Mouhot, 'Past Connections', 340.

[7] John R. McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun: an environmental history of the twentieth century* (London: Allen Lane, 2000), 15; cited by Mouhot, 'Past Connections', 330.

[8] Myles Allen, 'A Just and Inclusive Net Zero: Who should get there first?', Gresham Lecture on 21 May 2024: https://www.gresham.ac.uk/watch-now/inclusive-net-zero.

[9] This paragraph, and other parts and aspects of the present lecture, draw closely on Melissa Lane, *Eco-Republic* (published in the UK and Commonwealth by Peter Lang Press, 2011; published in North America by Princeton University Press, 2012).

need to do to save ourselves from a desperate fate is (at least to start) to look up, and *that* is in our power to do all the time – even though social and political pressures, just as in Plato's story, conspire to prevent most people from doing so.

But we find ourselves today in an even stranger situation. For contrary to Plato's image, much scientific light about the true nature of reality (the reality of climate change) is actually getting into our current society, and yet, people are still somehow paralyzed or resistant to action in response to it. Indeed, when I first wrote about climate change and the Cave in a book called *Eco-Republic* more a decade ago (on which parts of this lecture draw), I was focused on the Cave at least partly as portraying sheer climate change denialism, or at least, denial that the effects of climate change—which were then still held to be largely looming in a medium or far future—should be taken into account in action today. But even then, and far more now, we find ourselves in a situation in which even those governments and individuals who acknowledge the need for urgent action are still strangely held back from the radical reconfigurations of norms and expectations that a full-throated political and economic response would entail.

This is why, in this lecture, I am reconsidering the Cave image from three perspectives.

- First, the *what*: what are some of the key beliefs and assumptions—the artefacts, or fetishes, if you like—that leaving the Cave would require us to reject?
- Second, the *how:* how do we persuade people to let go of the seeming certainties of the Cave, that they are still clinging to, even when ample news about both the necessity and the possibility of replacing them has already trickled in? Or to put it the other way round, how do we get people from seeming knowledge, to the kinds of actions that would show that they have really internalised a new perspective on the world?
- And third, the *if not:* what about people who simply refuse to leave the Cave—is the ethical thing to lie to them in order to help everybody else make it into the open air? We'll confront what Plato calls 'noble lies' in the final part of the lecture.

What can we come to see by leaving the Cave?

So first, the *what.*[10] What is the basis for ethics? In Plato's *Republic*, we are told that 'The form of the good is the most important thing to learn about', says Socrates, since it is in relation to the good that other things 'become useful and beneficial' (*Rep.* 505a). This is why 'every soul pursues the good and does whatever it does for its sake' (*Rep.* 505e),[11] even when people lack knowledge of what is actually good: they sense that there is something which is truly good or beneficial, and they are dissatisfied with anything less. Goodness or beneficialness is a sort of natural, genuine property, which people prize for its intrinsic consequences. if I am going to take medicine, I want it to be good medicine, not bad. If I learn that I've been taking fake or faulty medicine, I will feel cheated and alarmed. Good medicine produces real benefit which bad medicine cannot.

Contrast, Plato's character Socrates says, the way that people act with regard to what is thought good and with regard even to what is thought to be just or beautiful:

> *'in the case of just or beautiful things, many people are content with what are believed to be so, even if they aren't really so. Nobody is satisfied to acquire things that are merely believed to be good, however, but everyone wants the things that really are good…'* (*Rep.* 505d).

The point is that many people don't instinctively care about whether they are making such a mistake when it comes to what is just or beautiful. They are satisfied to appear just or to present a beautiful façade, without being intrinsically motivated to ask or care about whether that façade corresponds to reality. When it comes to what is good, however, people do have an instinctive, intuitive desire to have what is genuinely good and to avoid being fobbed off by a mere façade. It doesn't take a philosopher to persuade me that I want good medicine, good food, or good friends – much less a good vaccine against the coronavirus: I am instinctively on the lookout for what is good in these domains and averse to what is bad.

Socrates isn't content to leave things at this level. After all, he had spoken at the outset of the 'Form of the Good', not, simply, what is good. What Plato means by the 'Forms' or 'Ideas' is of course a deep question. We can at least say that they are meant to signal what is real in contrast to what is merely apparent, and indeed to signify what is most real in contrast to what is less so, in the sense that the formr is permanent and unchanging while the latter comes into being,

[10] In this section I draw closely on *Eco-Republic*, as in parts of the text above and elsewhere in the lecture; I have also presented elements of this argument online in other contests.

[11] On how to understand this claim—as signifying that we all desire the good, but are sometimes mistaken and therefore pursue what are only apparent goods—see Rachel Barney, 'Plato on the Desire for the Good', in Sergio Tenenbaum (ed.), *Desire, Practical Reason, and the Good* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 34-64.

varies with context, and passes away. So, while good medicine is real *as* medicine, as contrasted with bad medicine which is not 'real' medicine, on a more abstract level even the goodness of good medicine is merely apparent, a contextually bound and so varying feature, which contrasts with the permanent and unchanging true reality of the 'Form of the Good'.

The key Platonic insights here are: that what appears is not always what is real; that what appears good is not always what is good; and that we must therefore interrogate apparent goodness in doing our utmost to attain what is really good. This idea has been developed more recently by the late Sarah Broadie in her final book, *Plato's Sun-Like Good: Dialectic in the Republic*,[12] arguing that 'Plato's transcendent sun-like good is the form of the good *in interrogative mode*', such that for practical reasoners 'judging X to be good is not primarily the upshot of, as it were, stumbling upon, or being handed, the information that X is good, but concludes interrogation *whether* it is good'.[13]

So, let's try out that interrogative approach to goodness. Consider the aim of economic growth—an almost axiomatic presupposition of politics in our modern Caves— in light of the Platonic idea of the good. Growth is not a bad thing, on the contrary: it is a condition of life, inasmuch as living organisms either grow or die. Yet growth as a process of material production and consumption, in which economic health is measured most publicly in GDP (gross domestic product per capita), is a poor surrogate for health, and even poorer for sustainability. As some economists have pointed out, one problem with GDP is that it will sometimes count an increase in environmental bads as if it were good: valuing as 'output' the product of polluting industries, for example). And conversely, GDP will also fail to count as good many things that we might actually care about (it won't give value to the 'output' of parents working less so as to spend more time with their children, for example).

For Plato in the *Republic*, by contrast, the condition of growth is intelligibility, modelled as the light of the Sun. Plants can only grow if exposed to the illumination of pure sunlight, the condition for their photosynthesis and so for their growth. Just so, Plato argues (or at least suggests: the argument here is difficult), people can only grow in wisdom and understanding if exposed to the illumination of the good, the condition for their being able to make sense of the world insofar as possible. In other words, we might say that for Plato, growth must make sense, it must be meaningful, otherwise it is not growth in any good sense but an anarchic cancerous sprawl. Rather than posit 'growth' and 'health' as rival scenarios for global development, as an Oxford study once did, the Platonic message is that healthy growth is the only growth to which it is sane to aspire.[14] This resonates with another Platonic dialogue, the *Gorgias,* in which the character Callicles contends that growth is an unbounded process of consumption. Plato's Socrates sought to combat that kind of Calliclean argument. Today, a similar image of growth is one which liberal societies are finally waking up to as an illusion. Only consumption which is limited and balanced can maintain the health both of the body and of the ecosystem. Any other notion of growth is nothing but a con.

How can people be persuaded to leave the Cave?

So that brings us to the second question, the *how:* how do we persuade people to let go of the seeming certainties of the Cave, that they are still clinging to, even when ample news about both the necessity and the possibility of replacing them has already trickled in?

As I noted earlier, we can also turn that question around: many of us like to think that we're woke, liberated, out of the Cave of climate denial. But are we really acting in accord with that knowledge? Or to put it another way, do we actually have that knowledge at all, if we are still acting in old habits and paradigms, despite paying lip service to these new ideas? In fact, I have to share an amazing experience that I had in this regard. I was starting to think about this lecture and related research when I stumbled upon a powerful statement in a Google search that read: 'To Know *is* to Act; to Act *is* to Know'. That statement struck me as an important mantra. If we don't act on what we claim to know, do we really know? And if we do, really, truly, know, why wouldn't we act? So, I eagerly clicked on the article—only to discover, with astonishment, that this was put forward by the climate scientist and environmental studies polymath Mike Hulme as a summary of the contribution of my own book *Eco-Republic*. Even as the author of a book called *Eco-Republic*, I am still not fully out of the Cave, not fully acting on everything that I would claim to understand.

In fact, Hulme understood the message of my book even more deeply than I did in writing it. He built on it in pointing out that when we don't act on climate change, it's not because we are lacking some one piece of factual information—meaning that we would leap out of the Cave as soon as we get that one final bulletin. Rather, Hulme argues that 'gaps in knowledge' are 'places of brittleness or weakness', which '[require] knowledge to be thickened: adding layers of

[12] Sarah Broadie, *Plato's Sun-Like Good: Dialectic in the* Republic (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).
[13] Broadie, *Plato's Sun-Like Good*, quoting respectively from 52 (emphasis original), 53.
[14] The Oxford study is by a team led by Angela Wilkinson, 'Beyond the Financial Crisis: The Oxford Scenarios', Institute for Science, Innovation and Society, Saïd Business School, University of Oxford, published 15 February 2010. The 'Growth' and 'Health' scenarios are of course only stylized as alternative choices: my moral is not so far from that of the report overall, but its mode of presentation can be misleading.

meaning and significance to our experience and understanding of reality'. As Hulme quotes the philosopher Nicholas Davey: '"[Knowledge] does not progress by overcoming the problems of previous generations, but rather thickens and extends an understanding of the issues involved"'.[15] To get out of the Cave, it is not enough just to patch together more pieces of thin-ice knowledge. Rather, the quest is to deepen understanding to the point that the ethics and the science go hand in hand.

How do we do this? How can those who have escaped the Cave, help deepen the understanding of those still inside it, so that they can turn around and get out? Well, one answer, conveniently enough for the title of my Gresham professorship, is a better deployment of rhetoric. Simply sharing scientific facts is not enough to deepen knowledge. Rhetoric can help to reinforce and thicken our trust in the knowledge of climate change that scientific experts offer. It can make us more willing to trust the word that comes from those who've made it outside, less ready to dismiss and resist the insights that they have to offer.

This is especially important because of the emotional and social resistance that people are likely to experience to ideas, even to information, that they take to imply hostility to their basic values, and here I turn to both modern psychology and ancient Greek texts for guidance. To start with, consider what might seem like a trivial case:

> *'In a famous 1950s psychology experiment, researchers showed students from two Ivy League colleges a film of an American football game between their schools in which officials made a series of controversial decisions against one side. Asked to make their own assessments, students who attended the offending team's college reported seeing half as many illegal plays as did students from the opposing institution. Group ties, the researchers concluded, had unconsciously motivated students from both colleges to view the tape in a manner that favoured their own school'.*[16]

This is reported by the psychologist and law professor Dan Kahan, who infers from it that 'People endorse whichever position reinforces their connection to others with whom they share important commitments'.[17] As he further explains:

> *'People find it disconcerting to believe that behaviour that they find noble is nevertheless detrimental to society, and behaviour that they find base is beneficial to it. Because accepting such a claim could drive a wedge between them and their peers, they have a strong emotional predisposition to reject it*'.[18]

Kahan's analysis resonates with Plato's description of the Cave: especially the attachment to one's prior beliefs about what is noble or base, and the 'strong emotional predisposition to reject' any challenges to our prior beliefs that's the basis of the ridicule that Socrates envisaged as meeting the returned ex-prisoners, after all. But on this account, such emotional and social responses are so powerful that they can stymie any effort to guide people out of the Cave, as it were, simply by sharing scientific knowledge with them. As Kahan explains:

> *'If…the truth carries implications that threaten people's cultural values, then holding their heads underwater [forcing them out of the Cave] is likely to harden their resistance and increase their willingness to support alternative arguments, no matter how lacking in evidence. This reaction is substantially reinforced when…the message is put across by public communicators who are unmistakably associated with particular cultural outlooks or styles—the more so if such advocates indulge in partisan rhetoric, ridiculing opponents as corrupt or devoid of reason. This approach encourages citizens to experience scientific debates as contests between warring cultural factions—and to pick sides accordingly'*.[19]

While Kahan focuses on the values that people bring to the table in making judgments (even perceptual ones), the psychologists Susan Fiske and Cydney Dupree have identified a related problem in the way that people evaluate the credibility of scientists: the issue being that *perceived expertise* does not always lead to perceived *trustworthiness.*[20] Their study relates to the kind of case that I discussed in my previous Gresham lecture, about experts in politics,[21] in which I argued that citizens should 'trust, but verify' the claims of experts, to steer between the Scylla of excessively

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[15] Mike Hulme, '"Gaps" in Climate Change Knowledge: Do They Exist? Can They Be Filled?', *Environmental Humanities* 10 (2018): 330–37, quoting Nicholas Davey, 'Philosophy and the Quest for the Unpredictable', in Jonathan Bate (ed.) *The Public Value of the Humanities* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 303–312.

[16] Dan Kahan, 'Fixing the Communications Failure', *Nature* 463, no. 7279 (January 21, 2010) 296–97, at 296, describing a study by A.H. Hastorf and H.J. Cantril published in 1954 in the *Journal of Abnormal Social Psychology* (49: 129-34).

[17] Kahan, 'Fixing', 296.
[18] Kahan, 'Fixing', 296.
[19] Kahan, 'Fixing', 297.
[20] Susan T. Fiske and Cydney Dupree, 'Gaining trust as well as respect in communicating to motivated audiences about science topics', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111 (2014), Supplement 4: 13593-13597.
[21] Melissa Lane, 'Experts in Politics: Lessons from Socrates and Aristotle', Gresham Lecture delivered 30 May 2024: https://www.gresham.ac.uk/watch-now/experts-politics .

destructive skepticism, and the Charybdis of excessively dangerous credulity. One problem that arises in the effort to trust but verify, as I argued in that previous lecture, is this: whom should we believe, and how should we decide whom to believe, when experts conflict?

In that case, Fiske and Dupree have shown, listeners will tend not only to scrutinize each expert's knowledge, but also to try to identify their intentions, in order to decide whom to trust.[22] And they argue that in the case of some occupational groups, perceptions of intent ('warmth') can be at odds with perceptions of capability ('competence'), generating a problem of 'cold competence': in which certain groups (including 'scientists' and 'researchers') may be judged to be competent but still be distrusted in terms of their intentions. Fiske and Dupree found that climate scientists in particular are often distrusted on grounds of perceived ill intent, often being imputed to have 'alleged motives to lie with statistics, complicate a simple story, show superiority, gain research money, pursue a liberal agenda, provoke the public, and hurt big corporations,' with money being the far most salient among these.[23]

More broadly, the key issue in this study is once again (as for Kahan) whether a given expert is perceived as being well-disposed to the listeners' goals, interests, and values. And people may have good grounds to doubt this, at least *prima facie*, since scientists do disproportionately share certain social roles and characteristics as opposed to others. We can no longer share the hope expressed by Alexander Hamilton in the eighteenth century (in *Federalist Paper* 35), that the 'learned professions' 'form no distinct interest in society' and so can enjoy a special kind of public trust.[24]

So, if we're ever going to get out of our current fossil-fuelled Cave, we have to realise that simply hectoring people to look up may not actually work. And here we can turn to another ancient Greek resource, by Plato's star student, Aristotle, whose work on *Rhetoric* can help us to understand why many people are resistant to hearing or acting on scientific claims about climate change, and also, how those claims might be communicated in a way to make them easier for people to truly hear and so, to respond.

The scholar Danielle Allen (no relation, so far as I know, to Gresham's Myles Allen) has described Aristotelian rhetoric as an 'art of trust production' by which a speaker can overcome the 'challenges of distrust' by utilizing distinctive communicative capacities in three domains:

> *how to '…[make] logical arguments [logos], (2)… convey character [ethos], and (3)…engage the e motions of the audience [pathos]'*.[25]

Each of these interacts with the others in helping us decide whom to trust.

This schema illuminates the problem of 'cold competence', and more generally, the distrust of experts who are taken to be at odds with the values that members of the public may hold dear. For Aristotle highlights cases when listeners will recognise that a speaker is knowledgeable (has command of *logos*), and also recognise that the speaker is generally virtuous (has a good character or *ethos*)—but still distrust them, because they are not convinced that the speaker has emotional 'goodwill' (*eunoia*) toward them and their group (*Rhet.* 2.1.5-7). For example, Aristotle writes that we often feel anger toward speakers who show 'hubris' or 'contempt,' those who 'speak badly of, and scorn, things that [we] take most seriously,' and who 'do not care if [we] are suffering' (*Rhet.* 2.2.12-27). This last source of indifference, Aristotle argues, is why we 'become angry at those announcing bad news' (2.2.20)—in other words, are inclined to shoot the messenger.

This resonates with challenges in climate change communication, which is sometimes perceived as 'talking down' to lay audiences, showing 'contempt' for traditional worldviews, or remaining indifferent to the cultural and social losses that may come from social and economic attempts attempt to rein climate change in. This point resonates with Professor Myles Allen's admonition, in his most recent Gresham lecture, to those who belong to what he called the 'climate establishment'—in his term, a 'collective of academics, civil servants, environmentalists, sympathetic journalists, politicians and business-people'—that they (we) must work harder to avoid 'groupthink' and instead 'start thinking a lot harder about who is being disenfranchised by our technocratic, expert-led approach to climate policy'.[26]

So, what is the solution? Once audiences have been prompted to question a given climate scientist, or policymaker, in terms of their *ethos* and *pathos*, trust can no longer be taken for granted, and speaking purely in terms of rational or scientific argument (*logos*) may well exacerbate distrust. Only by taking the pains to demonstrate how and why they are

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[22] My discussion of Fiske and Dupree and associated issues in this lecture draws closely on Michael Lamb and Melissa Lane, 'Aristotle on the ethics of communicating climate change', in Clare Heyward and Dominic Roser (eds.) *Climate Justice in a Non-Ideal World*, 229-254 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[23] Fiske and Dupree, 'Gaining trust', 13596.

[24] Alexander Hamilton, *Federalist* no. 35, as quoted in Stephen Macedo and Frances Lee, *In Covid's Wake: The Harm We Did Ourselves and Our Institutions During the Pandemic — And The Lessons We Must Learn* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, forthcoming 2025); cited with permission from draft of 2 February 2024.

[25] Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship After Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 141, 143-44. She adds (141) that Aristotle's *Rhetoric* 'is neither a guide to manipulation nor a superficial manual of style, but rather a philosophically subtle analysis of how to generate trust in ways that preserve an audience's autonomy and accord with the norms of friendship'.

[26] Myles Allen, 'A Just and Inclusive Net Zero', Gresham Lecture on 21 May 2024.

trustworthy can even scientifically competent speakers earn and keep credibility. Aristotle's art of rhetoric suggests that scientists can earn this trust by showing respect for the agency and judgment of citizens, including by listening carefully to their concerns, and avoiding technical jargon or expressions of superiority that might generate anger, envy, or enmity. Listening patiently, engaging in conversation, showing attentiveness to an audience's values and circumstances, and explaining options clearly, can help climate change communicators earn trust.

If not: should we tell 'noble lies' to those who refuse to leave the Cave?

That brings me to my third and final question for this lecture, which is: what happens if all our efforts to persuade others to leave the Cave of denial or evasion, fall short? Can the telling of 'noble lies' ever be justified? Here Aristotle and Plato diverge. Aristotle argued that truthful messages are 'more persuasive' in the long run (*Rhet.* 1.1.11-12). By contrast, Plato in the *Republic* (414c-415d) allows for the telling of 'noble lies' so long as they express an underlying truth. To be sure, one little-noticed fact about the passage where Socrates introduces a 'noble lie', is that he says that it would be best if the rulers in a society believed it too (*Rep.* 414d): think of something like the historical myths that people believe about their own polity's foundation, rather than a manipulative or strategic lie told by the rulers to deceive the ruled. But still, the broader question of honesty in science and politics, and whether this can ever countenance the deliberate telling of a 'noble lie', remains open. Should we follow Plato in allowing some noble lies, or Aristotle (and later, even more emphatically, Immanuel Kant) in ruling them out?

In their reflections on the politics of the COVID-19 pandemic, political scientists Stephen Macedo and Frances Lee invoke a classic work by American philosopher Sissela Bok on the ethics of lying. Bok was writing in the wake of the tragic debacle of American foreign policy in the Vietnam War, that had been led purportedly by 'the best and the brightest' experts whom the country's establishment had to offer. And the moral of her study resonates with the need for self-aware skeptical testing of purported experts for which I argued in my previous Gresham lecture. Wrote Bok in the 1970s:

> *'We cannot take for granted either the altruism or the good judgment of those who lie to us, no matter how much they intend to benefit us. We have learned that much deceit from private gain masquerades as being in the public interest. We know how deception, even for the most unselfish motive, corrupts and spreads. And we have lived through the consequences of lies told for what were believed to be noble purposes'*.[27]

In my previous Gresham lecture, I emphasised the 'systematic biases in judgment and decision-making' that mainly affect *logos*—such as the endemic cognitive biases of over-confidence, anchoring effects, and so on—to which elites and experts are as subject as everyone else. To these cognitive biases, however, we have to add the tendency of elites to develop 'a self-righteous sense of moral and intellectual superiority', in Macedo and Lee's words,[28] which resonate with the warning recently given on this lecture stage by Myles Allen. Arrogance and a sense of superiority can reinforce and exaggerate the tendency to 'groupthink' against which all these scholars are warning us. And that tendency can prompt elites to resort to 'noble lies' which they believe justified to save the people who (as the elites see it) refuse to leave the Cave or are simply incapable of doing so.

Does that mean that 'noble lies' are always off the table? Could there ever be a democratic case for lying to the public in order to get them out of an emergency, as it were, to get them out of the Cave – or because they refuse to exit? That question forces us to grapple with the ethical norms internal to science itself, and the overlapping set of norms that regulate the 'scientific social contract':[29] the licence to operate that scientists are given by society (both metaphorically and in terms of the funding and permissions afforded them).

With two Princeton colleagues, Robert O. Keohane (a political scientist) and Michael Oppenheimer (a natural scientist and policy expert), I have identified five ethical principles that should regulate scientific communication with the public (and am here further developing my previous Gresham lecture about the relationship between experts and lay publics):

> (1) Honesty: not lying or intentionally deceiving one's audience, as well as avoiding deliberately misleading incompleteness or manipulation involving deception.
> (2) Precision: providing as precise as feasible a description of scientific findings.
> (3) Audience relevance: communicating clearly about issues that have implications for public policy in such a way that members of the intended audience can draw valid inferences for policy and policy advocacy.
> (4) Process transparency: providing a clear description of the scientific process of inference, and the process of peer review, in such a way that scientifically qualified members of the audience could check the validity of the conclusion for themselves.

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[27] Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*, 2nd Vintage Books edn (New York: Vintage, 1999), 169, as quoted in Macedo and Lee, *In COVID's Wake*.
[28] Macedo and Lee, *In COVID's Wake*.
[29] Robert O. Keohane, Melissa Lane and Michael Oppenheimer, 'The ethics of scientific communication under uncertainty', *Politics, Philosophy and Economics* 13 (2014) 343-68, at 349.

(5) Specification of uncertainty about conclusions.[30]

We argue further that:

> *'…honesty should be accorded a different status from the others. For reasons intrinsic to both the nature of science and the scientific social contract, honesty is required of scientists in an unconditional way; it is a deontological requirement rather than a source of utility to be traded off against others, a requirement attaching to the professional role of being a scientist'.*[31]

Honesty has a special status. It rules out lying, deception, and manipulation. So, there is no justification for 'noble lies' from scientists, and (as we may discuss further) from policy-makers about science. But even when scientists are honest, they still in communicating have to achieve relevance to their particular audience, on pain of not succeeding in communicating at all. And audience relevance can conflict with the other norms mentioned above: the price of achieving it might be less precision or transparency, for example.

These are real trade-offs that need to be addressed explicitly and reflectively, especially when we put them in the context of the sources of emotional and social resistance to scientific information that I discussed earlier. Trying to make scientific insights relevant to audiences who fear or resent what they take to be its implications is never easy. Trying to do so in the high stakes of climate change, and the effort to get people to give up clinging to the certainties of the Cave, is the challenge of our lifetimes. Experimenting with ways to regain trust and renew faith in mutual goodwill is the only path forward — remembering that trust once lost is very difficult to regain.

Thus, we should rule out the telling of noble lies. But in doing so, the task of how to persuade people to leave the Cave and genuinely come to know and understand scientific truths becomes even more urgent—and the role of rhetoric that appeals effectively to *ethos* and *pathos* as well as to *logos* to do so, even more important.

This task has been made harder by failures (often with the best intentions) during the pandemic—as two recent contributors to public discussion have noted. In Congressional hearings in the United States House of Representatives about emails sent during the pandemic by officials of the NIH (National Institutes of Health), one member of Congress, Deborah Ross, put it plainly: 'When people don't trust scientists, they don't trust the science'.[32] That statement was quoted by Princeton sociologist Zeynep Tufekci in a recent *New York Times* article about the damage done by these 'noble lies':*'*As the expression goes, trust is built in drops and lost in buckets, and this bucket is going to take a very long time to refill'.[33]

[30] Keohane, Lane and Oppenheimer, 'Ethics of scientific communication', 352.
[31] Keohane, Lane and Oppenheimer, 'Ethics of scientific communication', 353.
[32] David Hilzenrath and KFF Health News, 'Fauci Faces Congressional Committee over COVID E-Mails', *Scientific American*, 3 June 2024 (last accessed 11 June 2024): https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/fauci-faces-congressional-committee-over-covid-e-mails/.

[33] Zeynep Tufekci, 'An Object Lesson From Covid on How to Destroy Public Trust', *The New York Times*, 8 June 2024, sec. Opinion: https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/08/opinion/covid-fauci-hearings-health.html.

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