

**NEXT  
LEVEL  
CLIMATE  
THINKING  
AND  
ACTION**

CLIMATE  
ACADEMY

Chapter 14  
**Plato I : The Anxiety**

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“Imagine prisoners that have spent their entire lives chained, deep inside a cave. They have been chained so that they cannot see behind themselves, and they are forced to stare endlessly at the cave wall in front of them. Behind them a fire is burning, and between the prisoners and the fire is a raised walkway. Now imagine that each day, a menagerie of objects crosses the walkway: animals, people carrying their wares to market... Their shapes create an intricate shadow-play on the wall in front of the prisoners. This is the only world that the prisoners have ever known: the shadows, and the echoes of unseen objects.

Now imagine that a prisoner is released. After sometime adjusting to the blinding light, the freed prisoner will begin to experience the world outside of the cave for the very first time. And it is like nothing like anything he could have ever imagined. With his new perception of the world the man would want to return to his friends to share his incredible discoveries.

But the prisoners cannot recognise their old friend. He appears as all things do – his voice is a distorted echo and his body is a grotesque shadow. They cannot understand his fantastic stories of the world outside of the cave, to them, it will never exist. This of course does not make the world outside of the cave any less real.”

**“The Allegory of the Cave”**

Plato, *“Republic”*, c375BC

This beautiful summary was written by Michael Ramsey.  
He also produced and directed a wonderful short animation of [The Cave](#) in clay.

Further helpful little explanations of the cave can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

### Questions

- What parallels can you identify between the man who escapes the cave and yourself?
- What could we understand the chains to represent in the climate crisis?
- In Plato’s original, full version, the man who returns to the cave is eventually killed. Do you think Plato is exaggerating people’s resistance to new ideas?

# INTRODUCTION

The cave will form the backdrop to the rest of this chapter.  
Now we need to meet the author.

## The Bust

Look at this guy.

White. Male. OK Boomer age. Upper class. Self-assured. Blank eyed. Stoney faced.

Isn't this the worst possible start to a chapter on Climate Anxiety?

Go further, it gets worse.

The man is Plato (b. 427 BCE). He is a Philosopher; in fact, he is widely accepted as the Father of all Western Philosophy. He is a thinker with a reputation as solid as the rock onto which his face was carved - a reputation for abstract thought, far removed from reality.

He is an intellectual. He looks like someone who is difficult to talk to. What could an old ancient philosopher say that would have any value for a young, modern person? What could a remote and austere man from the past have to tell us about climate change? What would such an esoteric man understand of the messy psychological challenges of modernity?

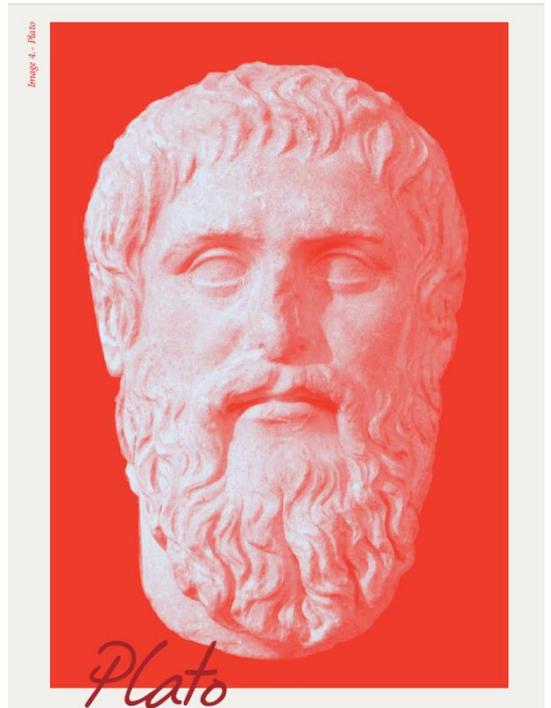
Well, we should be fair to him.

His Philosophy was utterly abstract, but, many commentators<sup>1</sup> claim that his ideas have been appropriated by political leaders to have a very real material impact. His ideals provided the background work for many famous men to radically reshape the societies that they governed.

Namely?

Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot...

So things really couldn't get worse.



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<sup>1</sup> Most famously the Philosopher Karl Popper, in his hugely important book, "The Open Society and Its Enemies" (1947). In it, he traces a dot to dot from 20<sup>th</sup> century totalitarian rule back through Marx to Hegel, and ultimately puts the accounting book at the feet of Plato. It is a brilliant book, even if his view of Plato is rather myopic (one-eyed).

Yet.

Surprisingly.

Plato is in fact someone that we can meet with at a deeply personal level. It is true that his blank eyeballs certainly don't help us to get beyond the surface of his image; but if we are patient enough, another Plato emerges from behind his stony-faced appearance.

This other Plato experienced trauma first-hand. He witnessed the collapse of a seemingly invincible empire – namely, the Athenian one to which he belonged. He also witnessed first-hand, the execution of his closest friend and mentor (on the basis of false charges). This is the Plato that wrote the allegory of the cave. The man who sees the truth, struggles to share his understanding with the world, and then ends up dead, can be understood has a thinly veiled reference to his teacher, Socrates.

Plato should not be approached as an indifferent, aloof mind. He was wrestling wholeheartedly with the same issues that climate change presents us with today. His struggles were born out of a profound love of the truth and a deep-seated commitment to justice. Behind Plato's flinty look in this bust, there was someone who had two superpowers.

Firstly, he was the most extraordinary pioneer in systems thinking. He could see way beyond the illusions of social reality and the conventional wisdom of his day. He looked beyond all of the clutter and opinions around him and reached through them in an attempt to grasp the key principles at work and identify the essence of things. Secondly, over two millennia before Freud started mapping out the inner structure of the psyche, and exploring the powerful forces at work under the skin of human reason, Plato had already taken a very good look.

As this book reaches its final chapters, we need a thinker to pull all of the angles that have been developed together. We need someone who can sustain a view of the central problems. In Plato, despite his mixed reputation, he has some significant things to teach us. Firstly, from the power and range of his systemic thinking his work provides us with a real and robust way forward out of the crisis. And secondly, despite the way he looks here, we can also meet a broken and vulnerable man who was grappling to make sense of the world – in all its beauty and stupidity.

Being sharply aware of the beauty and stupidity of the world are two key aspects of climate anxiety. A cynic or sceptic might easily think that climate anxiety is the state of mind that you end up in after hyperventilating on green virtues, or overdosing on bio-apples. It is often portrayed as something light headed, or something for the extremists. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Climate anxiety is utterly rational. It is rooted in thousands and thousands of lines of scientific evidence. It is a condition suffered by the realists, not the idealists. Indeed, it is sharply dissonant to anyone who understands the crisis properly that those who shout the loudest about "freedom" and "growth" are the ones that are trapped the most deeply in delusional dogmas. The cynics and sceptics are the dreamers, they are the ones who are locked into myths about the status quo.

Climate anxiety couldn't be more normal.

Crikey. It is truly a topsy-turvy world out there.

In such a world, with Plato, we have a great guide. You cannot write such timeless, deeply powerful metaphors like The Cave without great insight into the fundamentals. Plato was, in many respects an outsider. He was the odd one out in his world, and in times like these, that outsider view is invaluable.

This chapter will be rounding up the problems identified in all the previous chapters, or put most simply, the main causes of climate anxiety. The hub of these thoughts will be democratic systems, as

they have provided the backdrop to the development of the crisis, and Plato critique here is particularly powerful. The next chapter will conclude this guide with a proposal that follows Plato: an Academy. A place of understanding, civic service, and systems change.

## MAIN TEXT

### Plato's Anxieties

The most important background feature to the life of Plato, that helps us to engage with him, is the fact that he lived the formative years of his youth inside a democracy. Something rather unique for the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

#### Democracy

Plato lived during the 'Golden Age of Athens' (480-404 BCE), an absolutely astonishing segment of history – a time in which so many cultural, social and political aspects of human life bounded forward together. Within the space of just a few intense decades, the huge strides that were made in conceptual, technological and artistic life had firmly established Athens as the dominant hub of the ancient world. A fact, heavily underlined by the size and strike power of their army and navy. Their military muscle had recently swiped aside the Spartans (The Battle of Marathon, 490BCE) and the Persians (The Battle of Salamis, 480BCE).

So the Athenians could afford to do remarkable things, like construct the magnificent marble Parthenon temple, which stands today as the iconic symbol of the city. However, the Greek gods that used to inhabit it have now long gone. Far less spectacular, but far more abiding in impact, is a flat space cut into the side of a hill, a kilometer west of the Acropolis. This space is marked by a low stone platform, and it was in front of these simple stones that the democratic assembly huddled together, to debate and to vote.<sup>2</sup> The area is called the Pnyx, and



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<sup>2</sup> Pnyx literally means

it was this unassuming space that was to provide the most enduring and celebrated legacies of the ancient Athenian society to human civilization.<sup>3</sup>

So, if you were a citizen of Athens during this period of history you had many reasons to feel pride and to also feel rather invincible. Things were going great: you had wealth, power and people power (*dēmos* = people, *kratia* = power).

Sounds familiar?

Here comes the twist.

Contrary to most Athenians, and contrary to the overall judgement of western history, Plato was highly critical of democratic rule. He had good reason to be. There were two events in his youth that had a powerful and formative impact on his life – and they were both exposed some of the structural weaknesses of democratic rule.

*This author is a passionate defender of modern democracy.* (The virtues of democracy hardly need any restatement.<sup>4</sup>) However, Plato's critique of democratic rule must not be brushed aside just because of all the evident advantages that transparent, open government brings to a properly democratic life. It is not because we value something that we then hold back from scrutinizing its faults. The opposite is true.

And so to the two crisis in Plato's life. Both will be sketched, before exploring the insights about climate anxiety that they open up.

### **Crisis One - 413BCE**

Firstly, Plato was born into a time of war. The Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta<sup>5</sup> was a defining moment in ancient history, and the defining moment of that war happened when Plato was a teenager. In September 413BCE, the Athenians suffered catastrophic losses in The Battle of Syracuse.<sup>6</sup> Their seemingly invincible navy was almost completely destroyed, and Athens would soon be subjected to humiliating occupation, looting and abuse by 'The Thirty Tyrants' – imposed on them by the Spartans. The whole war caused a serious economic depression throughout the region, and Athens would never fully recover.

As Thucydides emphatically and solemnly concludes in his '*History*': "They were beaten at all points and altogether; all that they suffered was great; they were destroyed, as the saying is, with a total destruction, their fleet, their army—everything was destroyed, and few out of many returned home."<sup>7</sup>

Trying to summarise such a complex set of historical events in just a few lines it an impossible task. However, one further moment of zoom can pick out an even more precise and pivotal detail. The

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<sup>3</sup> To avoid a clumsy European colonial view of democracy, it should be stated that many prototypes existed before the Athenian step forward. Most notably, in Egypt and Mesopotamia. *International Political Science Review / Revue internationale de science politique* Vol. 21, No. 2 (Apr., 2000), pp. 99-120

<sup>4</sup> But just for the record, because these things require continual reassertion, it is worth noting a couple of key points: Equality before the law and each other is one of the first principles of any just society; informed and genuine dialogue should always trump the divisions that are created by clichéd rants and misinformation. Genuine democracy, with extensive transparency and the rule of law, is emphatically worth our defence.

<sup>5</sup> The war (431BC-404BC) was principally between Athens and Sparta, but they were both central hubs of a massive alliance of city states. So the whole region was dragged into the war with them.

<sup>6</sup> The fact that this city is located in Sicily demonstrates the expansive size of the matrix of city alliances that Athens and Sparta were part of.

<sup>7</sup> Thucydides, "*History of the Peloponnesian War*", Book 7 (87,6)

decision to attack Syracuse with the full force of the navy was taken by the Athenian democracy. The series of votes that led to this rather unhinged decision was influenced by populism, bravado and a rather twisted sequence of tactical voting.

Whatever the cause, the result was devastating. Plato would have surely been jostling for a view at the harbour to wave off the awesome fleet of warships in 415BCE. What we cannot guess is where Plato was when he heard about the loss, two years later.<sup>8</sup> The pivotal role that democracy played in that sudden collapse did not escape Plato's attention.

For all the citizens like Plato who lived beyond the war, the harbour area of the Piraeus would have flipped - from being a symbol of Athenian glory and power, to one of dark tragedy. It is difficult for us to jump over thousands of years of history to pick up the vibes of how people felt, and what symbolic force and meaning different places would have had for those living there. To understand the seismic shock that this loss would have had on the collective psychology of the Athenians, it is probably easier to bring to mind place names that still carry powerful symbolic meaning: the muddy fields of Passchendaele (1917), the urban cityscapes of Nagasaki & Hiroshima (1945), the village of My Lai (1968). Like the the harbour of the Piraeus, they were all mundane, everyday locations until the disaster struck – then they became symbols of disaster.

The point here is that Plato went through a period in his life when nothing made any sense. The scale of the suffering was so immense, it broke the symbolic order. It made what used to seem natural and permanent, look weird and alien. Athens had fallen, and the stability and sense of life had been brutally shaken up.

It would be tempting to write that the difference between Plato and the young people of today is that the trauma invaded his present, whereas the worst suffering of climate change will happen in the future. However, this would be to write in ignorance of the (literally) eye-watering truth that there are already around 30 million people forced away from their homes every year already due to exacerbated climate related events<sup>9</sup>. Such numbers are, paradoxically, too big to have an impact on our emotions (see Chapter 12 on 'psychic numbing').

However, behind each number is a life, a history, a culture and community that is abandoned by force. Not a force wearing bronze helmets and red cloaks, not a force carrying bronze shields and a long spear, but still, a truly formidable one.

### **Crisis Two – 399BCE**

Secondly, as a young man, Plato spent years in the company of an Athenian celebrity: Socrates. To Plato, he was an inspirational teacher, an artful guru, and the dearest friend. He would have passed hours of his life following Socrates around the streets and the marketplaces of Athens, listening to him engage Athenians in questions about pretty much everything: from justice to jealousy, from time to triangles, and from wax to wars. Famously, nobody was either too famous or too ordinary to evade his questioning. It didn't matter if you had just returned from a sweeping victory in battle, or

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<sup>8</sup> When a lone soldier returned to Athens in 413BCE for a haircut and started to talk about the magnitude of the losses, he was apparently unaware that no-one knew. His news sent deep shock waves through the city. From Plutarch's "Life of Nicias" p311.

[http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Nicias\\*.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Nicias*.html)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.ifrc.org/press-release/red-cross-red-crescent-report-reveals-extent-impact-people-forced-flee-their-homes#:~:text=The%20latest%20data%20from%20the,displaced%20by%20conflict%20and%20violence.>

if you had just finished sweeping the floor, everyone had the capacity to reflect on their life and their world.

We might expect Socrates' rugged commitment to the truth to be a welcome contribution to the world's first known democracy. The Athenians were immensely proud of their culture, and we could justifiably expect them to be enthusiastic about the rigorous, open debates that he prompted.

However, if you ask difficult questions too often, if you expose ignorance too easily, and if you challenge the status quo too much, it is much less welcome in the end.

So in 399CE Plato witnessed the execution of his teacher Socrates. A rather jarring end to the old man's playful life. The paralyzing hemlock that Socrates drank was delivered in a chalice by the executioner. The death sentence was delivered by a democratic vote.<sup>10</sup>

In the picture on the right, Socrates is framed at his execution by the artist Jacques-Louis David. He is accepting the judgement of the people with his right hand, and he is pointing to the truth with the other.



*'The Death of Socrates' (1787)*

Plato would have been there. Much later in life, Plato writes these lines, looking back to his youth, "Eager as I had once been to go into politics, as I looked at these things and saw everything taking any course at all, with no direction or management, I ended up feeling dizzy".

These lines from Plato explain the main drive behind why he set up an Academy. He was from an aristocratic background, he could have walked into a high position within the political circles with no problem. However, these two incidents were symbolic of a democratic culture that he considered to be systemically dysfunctional. Underneath the details, Plato thought that Athens was suffering from a truly dangerous level of truth decay. A rot that he thought was endemic to the way in which power functioned in democratic states.

It made him feel dizzy and nauseous.

This is the context within he which he founded his Academy – a place dedicated to truth and reality.<sup>11</sup> As stated earlier, the details of the Climate Academy lie ahead. For now, the focus is on the anxieties that can be provoked by democratic rule that is less in love with reasoned and balanced decision making.

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<sup>10</sup> Out of a jury of 501, the vote was likely 280 for his death, versus 221 against (*'The Apology of Socrates'*, 36a).

<sup>11</sup> To be more precise, behind these highly abstract notions of truth and reality, Plato offered a three-fold vision of a just society to his students. He put forward three key virtues: moderation (of the body), courage (of the soul) and wisdom (of the mind). The details are fully explored in *'Plato Tackles Climate Change'* (2020).

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## Questions

- Which teacher has had the biggest impact on your life? What was resonant about them?
- Why are democracies vulnerable to truth decay?
- Does social media help spread the truth or undermine it?

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## Climate Anxieties

### (a) Democratic dissonance

There is a truly difficult psychological dissonance to handle once the crisis has been understood. There is an impossible discord in the climate crisis between all the wealth, health and apparent democratic openness of the modern western world on the one hand, and the all the shortages, suffering, and the weirdly evasive response of the media and politics on the other. It is like singing in F major, [whilst playing the piano in F#](#).

The democratic world out there behaves, *in principle*, in a balanced, tolerant way towards its citizens. It talks in a persistent and prominent voice about human rights. The UHD democracies frequently point to their great material prosperity, as an affirmation of their virtues. They even point to their pledges to cut emissions as if they were good.

Therefore, when a young person grows up inside these narratives of openness, respect and wealth, it causes a genuine mind melt when they observe the zombie walk forwards into a world of systemic collapse that is going on at the same time. A collapse that will demolish prosperity, undermine rights, and lead to such awful privations that it will prove very difficult to sustain openness and collaboration.

It is truly difficult to look at these two worlds in juxtaposition. Whilst it would be a catastrophic outcome for humanity, it would be more honest if the worlds' leading democracies simply admitted that they are not prepared to make the investments and write the legislation required to meet the Paris Agreement. To continually make all the right democratic noises and then simply allow the concentrations of greenhouse gases to climb higher is just a very cruel way of passing over the planetary thresholds. (At least Donald Trump was honest in his declaration that he "digs coal".)

For better or worse, we seem to have a natural disposition to believe that governments will act in a basically competent and constructive way. This expectation will be strongest in democratic nations<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> In belligerent dictatorships, this natural inclination to believe that the government hierarchy will fundamentally act in your best interests could well be decimated. However, the power of the symbolic order to sustain a belief in their basic value and good intentions should not be underestimated. (For example, the picture of Stalin still hung proudly in the corner 'shrine' of an old Soviet worker in 1990, who had worked in pitiful conditions in the arctic circle all his life. (p288, 'The Whisperers', Figes, O., 2008)).

where the main vocabulary used in public discourse has a paternal, or maternal shade to it. There are evidently countless ways in which the best policies will be disputed, however, it would simply be beyond imagination to think that they would actually, knowingly, allow something as destructive as climate change to move like a wrecking ball, unchecked, through civilization.

On a personal level, it is like a relationship with someone who says all the right things, but doesn't do the right things. It is maddening, and in acute forms, abusive. A democracy talks like a concerned parent, wanting to make sure that everything is all right. It acts like it listens, it shows gestures of support – but in the background, emissions continue to accelerate.

Indeed, to extend the parent analogy a bit further, democratic leaders very often patronise young people. They are applauded for their concerns and patted on the back for their efforts, but the major policy reforms don't happen.

For example, on November 20<sup>th</sup> 2018, the Climate Academy organized the first protest in the world to number more than 1 person. The 300 students shouting outside the European Commission building were chanting, "The Right to Know... The Right to Know" - for all the reasons detailed in the rest of this book (especially Chapters 4 & 7). In a telling moment, away from the TV cameras who had assembled to cover the event, a very senior member of the Commission came out of the building to applaud us for our energy and commitment. Then, he/she invited us to a conference that would be held soon after... concerning plastic waste.

Ouch.

It was typical of so many people's reactions, and it provides the background to this remarkable [short film](#), shot and produced by former Climate Academy student Katriina Surquin.



Once the wide gap between the science and the social reality has been seen, it cannot be unseen.

Indeed, it takes a long time to adjust to living in that doubleness because, it will keep reappearing at the different moments and at different levels. The situation is an echo from Plato's cave, in which the man who escapes is continually fighting to make the right adjustments in order to see things properly: when he sees the objects for the first time in the cave (and not their shadows) it takes him some time to accept that the object is more real than the shadow, when he gets outside the light of the Sun is impossibly strong... And finally, when he goes back into the cave he can't see anything, nobody understands him, and he is beaten to death. (This outrageously violent ending is inserted by Plato because understood that knowledge of the truth is powerful, and therefore it was predictable

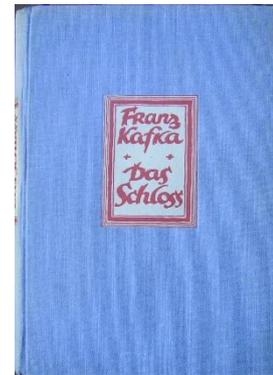
that the value of truth would be marginalized, or ridiculed, in systems of government where it was not a first principle.)

So coming to a full understanding of the science is like being thrown into another world – where the everyday comments by people, the commentary on the news, or just the sheer lack of reaction, takes on an extraordinary strangeness. However, before trying to reconcile ourselves to this extreme dissonance between words and actions, it is worth holding it in place for a while longer.

Simply to affirm that the dissonance is real is a healthy thing to do. It is important to put words on it for ourselves. It is important to recognize it, and to own it.

## b) The Absurd

The novelist Franz Kafka grew up with a profound sense of alienation from the world. Born in 1883, into a German speaking Jewish family in Prague<sup>13</sup>, Kafka had to live all of his life with the sense that he was an outsider. The alienated texture of the world was felt most acutely in his private life due to the shadow cast over him by his bulking, obnoxious and [bullying father](#). Fortunately for the world, Kafka articulated his anxiety and sense of the absurd in incredible works of literature. Arguably the greatest writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>14</sup>, his novels conjure up compellingly surreal worlds within which the main characters find it oddly impossible to get a grip of what is going on.



### The Opening lines of "The Castle"

"It was late in the evening when K. arrived. The village was deep in snow. The Castle hill was hidden, veiled in mist and darkness, nor was there even a glimmer of light to show that a castle was there. On the wooden bridge leading from the main road to the village K. stood for a long time gazing into the illusory emptiness above him."

(... soon, after falling asleep in a local inn, K is woken up by a polite townsman...)

"This village belongs to the Castle, and whoever lives here or passes the night here does so in a manner of speaking in the Castle itself. Nobody may do that without the Count's permission. But you have no such permit, or at least you have produced none."

In Kafka's novel, '*The Castle*' (pub. 1926), the protagonist, known only as "K", arrives in the nearby village after an invitation from the officials of the castle to do some work for them. The young "K" immediately finds himself having to deal with an unresponsive bureaucracy, and villagers with a foggy and oddly passive understanding of what happens in the castle - a castle that is always, weirdly inaccessible. After over 300 pages of fumbling around in the surreal, alienated village, the text suddenly stops. Unfinished.

"K" never gets to the Castle, there was a fuzz on the line when he tried to call, a snow drift when he tried to walk... Just like "K" himself, the novel goes nowhere.

The original German, is full of brooding word plays. The title "Das Schloss" does indeed mean castle or palace, but "Der Schluss" means "ending", or "conclusion" to something. And the official with whom "K" intermittently has contact, is called "Klamm". Given that access to the castle, his purpose for being in the village, and his earnest enthusiasm to do his job is all blocked by a confusing and arbitrary system, it is a poignant name: "Klammer" means

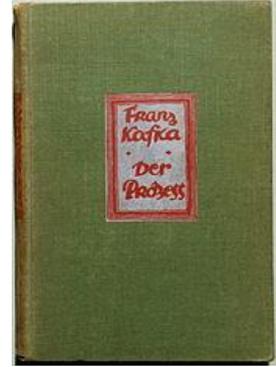
<sup>13</sup> This was a minority within a minority, in a world that was

<sup>14</sup> W.H. Auden called him "the Dante of the twentieth century".

peg, clip, staple or brace - all of which keep things in place. Claustrophobically, and maddeningly, in place.

'*The Trial*' (pub. 1925) (another unfinished work) could be seen, from one angle, as a modernist riff on the ancient trial of Socrates. Of course, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that Kafka writes from is more manic and contorted than the classical context that Plato scripted his text in. Although both are struggling for the truth, under Kafka's pen, that struggle reaches a twisted and perverse intensity. It is as if the Western European search for truth suddenly finds itself in at a darkly lit dead-end.

The book starts with this arresting line: "Somebody must have been telling lies about Josef K, for one morning, without having done anything wrong he was arrested". It was the day of Josef K's 30<sup>th</sup> birthday when it happened, and this central character, is never informed of what he did, nor is there anybody who can explain it to him. And so he is trapped inside a bizarre, nightmarish world within which he finds it impossible to find a way forward. A cacophony of people enter and exit this stage of his life, until abruptly on the eve of his 31<sup>st</sup> birthday, he is led away to a small quarry outside of the city and stabbed with a sharp kitchen knife – summarized by Josef K himself with the words, "like a dog".



Was he alone? Was it everyone? Would anyone help? Were there objections that had been forgotten? There must have been some. The logic cannot be refuted, but someone who wants to live will not resist it. Where was the judge he'd never seen? Where was the high court he had never reached? He raised both hands and spread out all his fingers.

**Penultimate lines of 'The Trial'.**

We now have the word '*Kafkaesque*' in English to describe situations that are overwhelmingly surreal, especially when the trigger to the anxiety is rooted in a losing battle with the blind, banal forces of bureaucracy. There is a strange comfort in reading his work, as we are suddenly no longer alone in our fight.

Why is that we can legislate for road speed limits around schools to protect children, yet we are not prepared to legislate against emissions speeds that will cause the forces of nature to slam into their lives like 10 tonne buses? Why is nobody just dealing with this? The recent film, "*Don't Look Up*" (2021) united so many viewers, by

enabling them to identify with the scientists and anyone who understands the first principles of the crisis. The basic statements of facts (by Leonardo di Caprio and Jennifer Laurence) about reality and the future were somehow, in a very slippery and absurd way, never understood.

The first step in any chapter, or the first step in any work with climate anxiety is simply to recognize the reality of the situation. It is important to retain a secure grip on the science of the problem – this is very grounding because there is a global community of intelligent, specialised researchers who continually check and test their conclusions. It is not us that are mad, it is not our minds that have become unhinged, it is the wonky world that has somehow lost the plot.

Indeed, it is also helpful to know that two of the greatest minds in western cultural history (Plato and Kafka) both keenly understood the nauseous experience of looking out onto a world that was so disconnected from reality and so dangerously unconcerned about the truth.

### c) Double standards

The climate crisis exposes some abysmal double standards in modern democratic rule, and this is especially true of the democracies of the UHD nations. It is precisely these healthy, wealthy nations that have put the huge majority of the greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. And it is under the watch of these UHD nations, who have made the major calls at the UN, World Trade Organization (WTO) meetings (and so on), that emissions continue to accelerate.

The life and works of Kafka are a powerful expression of the general anxiety that follows from being in a world that simply does not seem to care about our existence. The young Kafka had to deal with a situation in which his dad was appallingly neglectful, a pain made more acute by the natural human expectation that a father would behave in a normal, helpful perhaps loving way towards him.

However, perhaps we should not be surprised by western style governments' behaviour?

Exploitative, aggressive actions are hardly uncommon features of modern democratic states. Democracies have always treated those *within* its safe space far better than those *without*. From 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial genocides, to 20<sup>th</sup> post-colonial wars, we can add on top of all that, the suffering of those not counted as good enough to be citizens – such as the suffering of people of colour, women, refugees, etc. To pluck out one of the most graphic examples of these double standards, the invasion of Guatemala by the USA in 1953 is a vividly clear one. It was a coup that was organised by the USA to *eliminate* a newly rooted democracy - in order to reinstall a dictatorship.

Sounds a bit twisted? Indeed, it was.

Not only did this happen in the heat of the Cold War when the USA was talking most emphatically about the virtues of democracy, but even more grotesquely: the CIA was sent into the country to protect the profit margins of one of its major companies, 'United Fruits'. To put it bluntly: having a democracy is a good idea, but not if the social justice achieved in land reform, wages and education by that democratic reform, injures the profit margins of the banana plantations. If profits are going to be damaged for a major multinational corporation, who has the ear of the Secretary of State (John Foster Dulles)<sup>15</sup>, then it is time to send in the army and restore a more comfortable dictatorship. Operation PBSuccess was an easy job, it only took 8 days to finish the job.

No wonder bananas are bent.

The first time that I read about the Guatemalan coup of 1953 I had to do several double takes<sup>16</sup>. It was similar to the first time that I understood about climate change back in 2011. It took me about a

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<sup>15</sup> Raising an army to protect your business interests is also easier if Dulles served as your lawyer in earlier years; if the former CEO of United Fruits is now 'Director of International Security Affairs in the State Department; and if your younger brother (Allen Welsh Dulles) was a Board member of the same company.

<sup>16</sup> There are further absurd details that emerge from further reading. This is a bulging footnote because there are so many remarkable angles to the event. For example, the pretext for the war was the threat of communism, so in a public relations event organized by United Fruits sometime after the coup, Vice-President Nixon was joined on stage in Guatemala City by the new dictator (Carlos Castillo Armas) and a huge collection of Marxist books - stacked up behind them. These books had allegedly been found in the former Presidents' central office (Arbnez). The truth was that after an exhaustive search, the only direct evidence of a link between Arbnez and the USSR was one singular receipt from a Moscow bookshop found by the CIA for \$22.95 in the Guatemalan Communist Party office; a fringe party that only held 4 seats in the 58 seat parliament of Arbnez's liberal government.

week of intense reading and browsing to dig around the evidence and line the essential data and reasoning up.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, Guatemala is just an example. But it is not an odd example. And if we consider the flooding of the atmosphere with greenhouse gas emissions by modern UHD nations, is this not another type of invasion? There might not be bullets thudding into the chests of the people in the less developed nations, but the systemic breakdown of their access to water, food and shelter is no less savage.

The numbers do not lie. Chapter 6 outlined the tough facts, there is a culture of silence about the responsibility for the climate crisis – both in terms of historic emissions and current emissions. These double standards are crushingly real for the MAPA right now; and it is also true that the high emitting UHD nations who live under the same atmosphere, will also be pulled into the same systemic mash up in the end.

The first phase of grief is denial.<sup>18</sup> The sooner we accept that our democracies are failing us the quicker we can move into a genuinely constructive set of actions that are tough enough to bring things under control. Until a proper systemic response is pushed through, the double standards must continually be put into the public space.

#### **d) Grief**

The structure and pattern of the feelings provoked by climate anxiety are close those experiencing grief. There are two aspects to this. Firstly, the background, diffuse sense of things not being as they should be. Then secondly, the particular shafts of anger about that loss. Most predictably, these moments of clarity can be triggered by climate events or news. However, because the crisis is so fully a systemic one – almost anything can point to the underlying emergency. Just as the most mundane word or object can trigger a breakdown of grief for someone mourning a death, divorce or other deeply disturbing situations.

Indeed, like with the grief suffered by the death of someone you love, the breakdown of climate equilibriums present themselves as massive, absolute realities, in front of which we find our puny little self. This profound lack of agency is an overwhelming truth to face.

One of the most powerful expressions of grief in western culture is the poem “In Memoriam” by Alfred Tennyson. This poem is sharply relevant for those suffering from climate anxiety. As Tennyson was not only wrestling with intense pain of suddenly losing his dearest friend as a young student<sup>19</sup>, in the background to his grief was the profound shockwaves that had been caused by Darwin and his theory of Natural Selection. That might sound like a strange connection to make, but evolutionary biology had grievous implications for how people understood the natural world. With one simple theory, nature was turned on its head. From being a beautifully ordered place, crafted by the loving hand of God, it suddenly lurched into an alien and hostile world, blind to human life and purposes. Or in Tennyson’s famous line, “red in tooth and claw”.

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<sup>17</sup> For a fuller account of how information can suddenly flip into something meaningful and resonant, see Chapter One of the Teacher Guide.

<sup>18</sup> Elisabeth Kubler-Ross famously developed the 5 stages of grief in her book, “*On Death and Dying*” (1969).

<sup>19</sup> The full title of the poem is “In Memoriam A.H.H”. Arthur Henry Hallam was the close friend he lost (aged only 22).

A brief summary of his anguished, restless poem can be found [here](#). Again, putting words onto grief is such an important step, and with the help of great artists, this process can be lifted to a clearer, more poignant level.

Ultimately, just as tears seem to have the weird mystical ability to cleanse the soul, engaging with artistic works of poetry, music, or literature can have a wonderfully cathartic effect.<sup>20</sup> It is like having a good cry.

### e) Capitalism

There is a critical subplot to this critique of democracy. And it has been a stretch to not allow it any space in the text until now. What has been kept muted is this chapter so far has been the primary power and influence of capitalism. Indeed, it would not be difficult to argue that democracy has simply been hijacked by a capitalist culture. A major case could be made for pointing the finger of blame at the capitalists first, not the democrats.

There is no time here to unpick the lock of this tricky puzzle because democracies and capitalism have grown up together so often.<sup>21</sup> Plato would simply note that both democracy and capitalism are systems that are rooted in desire, not reason or reality. He understands that [democracies](#) are not set up to vote in favour of actions that are either difficult or unattractive.

For example, in a famous passage in his work, *'Gorgias'* (380BC) Socrates is in conversation with what we might today call 'political spin doctors', just a few days before his execution trial. Socrates is not optimistic about his chances about the verdict of the jury, "I won't have anything to say in court...For I will be judged as a doctor would be judged if a sweetshop owner accused him in front of a jury of children." (521e2-4) Rather like children, Plato sees how democracies do not easily understand the virtue of being told to undergo some bitter treatment for their own good, especially if on the other hand they are presented with a handful of treats as an alternative. They are easily [spoilt rotten](#).

Those who understand the full picture of climate science, find it incomprehensible that the crisis is not a primary concern of election campaigns. Equally, capitalist market forces crop out external costs to the primary business of making profits. So someone suffering from climate anxiety is easily triggered when noticing that a packet of ginger biscuits in a supermarket, has been manufactured with palm oil. Just for the sake of a cheaper biscuit (and there are just billions of biscuits sat on shelves everyday with that ingredient) vast swathes of pristine rainforest have been felled, and in their place, long barren lines of palm oil trees now stand in silence.

So the two dominant systems of the modern UHD world, democracy and capitalism are both simply not wired to handle the crisis. They have no effective brake system to stop booming overconsumption<sup>22</sup>. This is not to ignore other benefits or defects of each system, but for those with climate anxiety it is clear that a systemic failure at the fundamental level of the environment, is more than just a detail. It undermines everything else. The difficult truth is that the climate crisis exists in a double blind spot: Democracies are prone to look away from difficulties, and capitalist cultural memes about individual consumption and choices have flooded out our capacity to think beyond the self.

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<sup>20</sup> It was Plato's student, Aristotle who wrote directly about the cathartic power of art. His work, *'Poetics'* (c335BCE) remains a major text for those seeking to harness such powers in the arts.

<sup>21</sup> China and Singapore stand out as interesting exceptions to this rule.

<sup>22</sup> See Chapter 8 on "Physical Tipping Points" that starts in the velodrome.

This double blind spot could be observed on the BBC, during the televised Tory leadership debate between Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak. There was only *one* question squeezed in about climate change and it was shambolically, irresponsibly limp: “As Prime Minister, what three things should people change in their lives to tackle climate change faster?”.<sup>23</sup> So no systemic view, no systemic responsibility, just a gentle a nudge to people to maybe change a few little things in their consumptive lives.

A fuller account of this double blind spot can be found in “[Plato Tackles Climate Change](#)” (2020).

#### f) Truth Decay

After reading through all the previous chapters of this book, having considered all the headline conclusions of mainstream science, it would be actually be a bit peculiar if there was no psychological tension or emotional response. Regrettably, for the moment, those who ‘get it’ remain in the minority – and to live inside that world within a world, is a painfully grating experience. It really is not difficult to find examples of this double world. It snags all the time.

As I punch that full-stop into place, one comes to mind immediately. This example is just one dot, there have been countless examples before, and there will be countless more from tomorrow onwards.

But here it is that dot:

Today is July 29<sup>th</sup> 2022. I am in Turin for the Fridays For Future (FFF) European Summer Camp (to help give a workshop on Climate Education). It is sizzling hot. In fact, it has been summer of unprecedented heatwaves, droughts and forest fires, in large swathes of Europe. Notwithstanding all the other recent scientific reports that vividly illustrate just how much destabilization of the Earth Systems is taking place, these heatwaves have provided a strong reminder of the dangers ahead. In the midst of this crisis, in the searing heat that might just help us grasp our predicament with greater clarity, the BBC put this story as the main news headline on their Homepage this evening.

## Spain heatwave: PM tells workers to stop wearing ties to save energy

By Malu Cursino  
BBC News

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<sup>23</sup> “Our Next Prime Minister”, BBC One. Monday July 25<sup>th</sup> 2022.



Europe heatwaves



GETTY IMAGES | Pedro Sanchez went tie-free at a press conference in Madrid as he encouraged workers to do the same

**Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez has called on workers in the public and private sector to stop wearing ties, as an energy saving measure in the heat.**

Seriously?

Indeed, very seriously.

There was not a flicker of irony in the text. It was just described as another component of the EU's response to the crisis. "Extremely high temperatures over the past couple of weeks have led governments across the world to reconsider their energy usage - from an environmental and cost saving perspective", writes Malu Cursino. It is truly difficult to think of a more feeble gesture, and for such a lamentably small act to make it to the front page of the BBC website as newsworthy demonstrates the mind-melting gap between where we are and where we need to get to.

The BBC has a firmly established reputation. It is the world's most popular news website (with about 1.1bn visits per month)<sup>24</sup>, and it also holds a strong symbolic value as the primary source of reliable and informed reporting. How is such a level of ecological illiteracy possible in 2022?

For any young person with a decent grip on the systemic depth of the crisis, this is just not funny.

We could be suspicious of the BBC.

Perhaps they are discreetly in the pay of the fossil fuel industry? Given the remarkably diverse ways, both direct and indirect, in which the fossil fuel industry manages to get access and control of the media – such an inept level of reporting could be explained by the industry's mendacity. The oil sector alone has made a staggering average *profit* of \$3bn a day for the last 50 years. The IMF

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<sup>24</sup> These statistics are from May 2022 (<https://pressgazette.co.uk/most-popular-websites-news-world-monthly/>)

calculated that the fossil fuel industry (globally) still enjoys \$11m of state subsidies every minute.<sup>25</sup> So they certainly need a few things to spend their money on.<sup>26</sup> Why not splash it around on a bit of subtle greenwashing? The extensive matrix that the industry uses to keep the Overton Window firmly away from the realities of science was sketched out in Chapter 10.

In the last decade, as the graphs have climbed even more steeply, and nature has fired increasingly hostile blows into our societies. It requires a great acts of mental contortion to avoid looking at the truth. So it is now probably more effective to achieve your goals of delaying climate legislation by deploying smart looking people (maybe with a suit, but certainly not a tie) into the media. They can calm our nerves by talking about gradual steps, small doable actions, promote individual responsibility, and provide with some kind of executive assurance that this is all part of a wider plan. If the BBC is not stressed or critical about the pathway that we are on, then it is hard to resist the idea that somewhere or other, the calculations are wrong.<sup>27</sup>

Yet, of course, involving the BBC in some kind of Machiavellian plotline does appear rather weird.

However.

What is the alternative to this suspicious reflection? How do we understand this article, if this shady explanation sounds much too far-fetched? Is it really reasonable to think that such a highly educated organization, dedicated to independent journalism, could make such a basic error of judgment? For a report to hit the main section of their homepage, it would have to pass across so many editorial screens. Is it really possible that nobody was triggered by the absurd insignificance of the action? Was there no flinch by someone who understands the basic science of the crisis to at least offer some wider point of analysis?

Neither option is comfortable at all.

The truth about this blob of reality on July 29<sup>th</sup> 2022 is of course not knowable – it is not knowable in a very full sense. But identifying the cause doesn't matter – the point of indulging these details over this one report, was simply to bring to the surface how far our culture has slid away from reality. Either this fake reality has been purposefully manufactured by a financial interest, or it is a product of a general culture that has an interest in the truth that is far too casual. Either way, we find ourselves in a society that lives in a deep illusion. The notion that the status quo is remotely sustainable is that deep illusion. Such an article appears normal at first glance, but it is just indicative our human societies zombie walk towards various tipping points. What appears to many as a regular bit of news, is in fact, on closer inspection, a signal of a hidden crisis.

Those who have tried to communicate the urgency of the crisis to the wider population, particularly those with climate anxiety, know how deeply frustrating and scary it is to talk (and sometimes shout) into the shadows of the cave. From the dull ache of continually noticing that the crisis is

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<sup>25</sup> Ian W.H. Parry, Simon Black, Nate Vernon, "Still Not Getting Energy Prices Right: A Global and Country Update of Fossil Fuel Subsidies." IMF Working Paper, September 24th 2021.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/jul/21/revealed-oil-sectors-staggering-profits-last-50-years>

<sup>27</sup> The buffoonery of the climate sceptics that featured so commonly in the 90s looked to be fading away in some nations. However, the recent swings towards populist parties across the world seem to have also brought a resurgence of this kind of infantile denialism about the science.

misrepresented or ignored, to the sharp pain induced by those moments of tragedy when nature just overwhelms human civilization. The Kafkaesque tragedy we are in is not an easy place to live.

It could a good moment to stop the text here for a moment. Before looking forward to the next chapter it might be valuable to return to the cave, a re-read very first page of this chapter. It is likely that Plato's allegory will have a few more dimensions to it with a second reading.

Chapter 15, the final chapter, is optimistic about how the reality of climate change can be communicated *and understood*. It is a solution that can be traced distinctly and directly back to Plato himself. It was Plato's response to the crises that he suffered in a context that was very close to our own. He understood the importance of education, and he structured his curriculum and community to enable the students to escape from a wide set of illusions:

He founded an Academy.

## Conclusion

Climate anxiety is real, simply because the science is real. In a sense, anyone who has looked at the science in one hand, and the human response in the other, will have anxiety. This is not written to denigrate the sharp anxiety felt by those who live with a persistent sense of the absurd, but it is simply to stamp the authoritative label, "of sane mind", onto those thoughts and convictions. In this sense, it is a shame that more people do not suffer from climate anxiety. It is the passivity of the quiet majority that is a major trigger for those who see the pathway that we are on. Those reading these pages, those reading this guide, will most likely have a strong sense of being an 'outsider' – simply because the 'time-zone difference' between the world of systemic understanding outlined here, and the world of patchy snap-shots of the truth that exist in schools and the media.

Schools have a responsibility to be *on the front-foot* with climate anxiety. They are a bedrock of human civilization, and rather like the BBC which holds a certain symbolic status as a reliable space for news and current affairs, if they are oddly muted or passive, it poses a very troubling set of questions. As stated so many times in this guide, it is profoundly weird that schools across the world have only made the most timid and fragmentary responses to the crisis.

How bad does it have to get before urgent measures are taken to inform young people of what is actually going on?

The next chapter will outline how a Climate Academy has been designed to address this failure – not with long term, slow syllabus reforms, not by repeating the same clichés about the crisis in an undifferentiated way to a general audience, but by supercharging a small community of people to have an immediate, systemic impact. The fullest account of the pedagogical thinking behind the Climate Academy can be found in the Teachers' Guide.

## A few simple words of advice

There are some general insights about climate anxiety that can be put forward, aside from the structured programme of the Academy.

### a) Stand behind the science

Chapters Four and Seven are important because they lay out precisely where we are up to. The data and graphs in those two chapters normally function to awaken the reader to the close proximity of the planetary thresholds. Or in other words, the chapter provides the key numbers to take into the civic space (as most people are far too casual about the speed of change). However, they also have another function – and that is to protect a concerned reader against fatalism or unnecessary panic. These thresholds have not yet been reached, and with a radical change of gear we could still avoid the worst.

### b) No clear line between success or failure

Stabilising temperatures at 2.1°C above the pre-industrial level is far better than pushing them as high as 2.9°C; keeping the increase at 2.11°C rather than 2.19°C is also significantly better. The lines drawn in the sand by scientists are the key limits, they mark important points – however, success or failure is not a binary issue, so every single small step forward should be celebrated as such – without losing sight of the bigger picture.

### c) Mark out what you can and cannot do.

No one individual can save the world. Anyone suffering from an Atlas Complex needs to take the world off their shoulders. This might sound like an obvious thing to do, but the syndrome is more common than we might expect and the removal of the world from the shoulders is also more difficult than we might predict.

Below is a simple chart that shows the different levels of action and ambition. At the lowest level are the simple pragmatic steps that are needed to fulfil a key steps forward. These steps build up to something more systemic and enduring – perhaps what we could call ‘a legacy’. This layer of ‘legacy’ the highest level that any one human being could achieve, the rest requires high level collaboration and for things beyond reach, simply a hope, that the other parts of the system play their role.

Insert =====

### d) What to do with guilt?

One of the most astute observers of human psychology was the Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (d. 1900). He made an important insight about our reactions to situations of profound pain and powerlessness, when there is no possibility to make a meaningful response that has any traction at all. Nietzsche understood that the anger generated in such a situation has to be discharged – and since it cannot be unloaded onto the cause of the problem (because it just bounces off) - the anger is unloaded onto the self, in the form of guilt.

As with Plato, the context of Nietzsche's work is very different from the modern climate crisis. However, as with Plato, there is a residual power to what he noticed. Nietzsche was thinking through the history of *guilt* and *resentment* in western culture in his book '*The Genealogy of Morals*' (1886). He thought that a key moment had occurred in the minds and hearts of the Jewish people who had found themselves living in occupation under the immovable weight of the Roman Empire. The anger that they could not *externalize* onto the system that oppressed them, was then *internalized* into a violence against themselves.



The internal violence of guilt could never solve the problems of the real world, but Nietzsche asserted that because the anger had to be released onto something, the most effective target became the self. This was due to the fact that anger transformed into guilt always reaches its target, causes damage and by internalizing the problem, it gives the person who is suffering another couple of bonuses; major bonuses in fact: a sense of power and control.

The dynamics of anger and power, observed by Nietzsche, between the immovable system and the weak individual can be seen throughout history and in our modern culture too. Powerlessness is a very common and a very powerful feeling for young people today; there are so many issues that young people face. The recent publicity surrounding various child sexual abuse scandals and the strength of the #MeToo movement have brought to the surface how tragically common such profound suffering is.

More commonly, in situations where children cannot mend their parents broken marriage, they find themselves with an irrational sense of responsibility and guilt. More generally, many young people feel powerless when they are faced with the standards set by an aspirational society – because they think that their brains or bodies are just not good enough. Indeed, for many students, the constant imperative to 'Enjoy!' and 'Fulfil Yourself!' cannot be met, even by the most enthusiastic member of a predominantly consumer society. And so when many young people experience a sense of boredom or fatigue, it is also flavoured with a touch of guilt too.

It would not be a surprise for Nietzsche to observe the increasing number of young people who self-harm or who suffer from eating disorders. The causes to such conditions are always complicated and particular, however Nietzsche's insight that we often find internal solutions to an external problems is a very illuminating one.

The push and nudge towards small individual actions as the dominant narrative to the climate crisis has certainly been manufactured by those in power to keep us self-absorbed and distracted from the systemic change required. However, it is not just a top-down problem. There are many tactile rewards in doing something with a visible, immediate impact; and in the psychological background to every "less this" and "no that", there are, Nietzsche would assert, the twisted rewards of power and control through guilt.

#### **d) Fight for climate laws**

The Climate Academy emphatically endorses all of the individual actions that reduce our carbon footprints in the world, from less meat to no flying, and beyond. These are all

important pieces of the jigsaw that will make up our exit from the crisis. However, these individual actions require the fundamental groundwork of legal reform. They need the leverage of system change, achieved through law, that can bump the infrastructure of our lives to a new level. As stated in the previous chapters (especially Chapters 7 & 10) the size of the shunt required is unlikely to come from anything other than policies and laws that are rooted in the reality of the carbon budget.

This shift of focus to a systems understanding of the problem, and a systems focus to the solutions is not only an approach that can have a much greater traction with the problem, it is also an approach which creates a point of attention which is external to the self. This externalization of a problem, alongside the mobilization of our skills towards something beyond us is often feature of improved mental health.

**e) A new community**

Most schools have a wide range of climate change projects, but have no central point of reference. Most schools have green programmes that are focused on individual actions, not systems change. Given that this is the dominant narrative of the world, it is not a surprise. The shift in gear that the Climate Academy proposes, can bring a new energy into the civic space. This fresh approach to the crisis will not only be capable of gaining far more traction at a systems level, but it also provides a very constructive way forward for those suffering from climate anxiety, as it plugs them into a community that has a clear cognitive map of the crisis and a shared set of values and ambitions.

**f) Set up an Academy**

And so the chapter ends up where it started. Plato established his Academy in Athens, in response to the crises he experienced in his youth, a love for the truth, and a commitment to his fellow citizens – to help them overcome some of the illusions they had been living under.

Societies that are not committed to the truth, or concerned about the reality behind the shadows of things, put themselves in significant danger. Plato left behind many stony reminders of his face. He also left behind the rock solid legacy of his Academy. In a time of crisis, it is often important to get back to the basics.