Towards Deep Hope

Climate Tragedy, Realism and Policy

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Green House is a think tank founded in 2011. It aims to lead the development of green thinking in the UK.

Politics, they say, is the art of the possible. But the possible is not fixed. What we believe is possible depends on our knowledge and beliefs about the world. Ideas can change the world, and Green House is about challenging the ideas that have created the world we live in now, and offering positive alternatives.

The problems we face are systemic, and so the changes we need to make are complex and interconnected. Many of the critical analyses and policy prescriptions that will be part of the new paradigm are already out there. Our aim is to communicate them more clearly, and more widely.

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Voices of realism

If we are facing up to climate reality, as this important and timely new *Green House* project intends, we had better be climate realists. The question is what that means.

The realism of disillusion says that if we *had* been going to prevent destructive climate change, we would have put in place genuine constraints on our emissions-generating behaviour world-wide quite soon after this first became a live issue, instead of dragging our collective feet from the 1980s through Rio 1992 to Paris 2015; but we didn't; and so, we're not going to prevent it. This vicious little syllogism is valid and its minor premise, at any rate, is plainly true. We palpably did not do what was needed when we had the chance: we learnt to talk the talk over this period, but have only ever walked as much of the walk as would enable us to go on talking. Meanwhile, the hypothetical major premise asserting that we are out of time looks as well-grounded in scientific evidence and hard-headed economic, sociological and political observation as any empirically-based counterfactual well could be. The prospect of our turning the super-tanker of the carbon-dependent global economy around on a sixpence - in the very few years which we now have left before levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide take us past the tipping point at which global warming starts to run away with us (if indeed we haven't passed that point already)[1] - appears incredible on all those counts. The conclusion of the argument, with all its ugly implications, follows directly.

It is one which thinkers about these matters are increasingly reaching. As well as my own recent work, authors as diverse as Kevin Anderson (2011), Clive Hamilton (2010), Dale Jamieson (2014) and Tim Mulgan (2011) now make the working assumption that climate change, somewhere between seriously disruptive and catastrophic, is no longer something we must find ways of avoiding, but something we are going to have to live with. Parallel to this recognition is the rise of the 'Anthropocene' trope[2] with its defining acceptance that human beings have decisively altered the atmosphere and set in motion a mass extinction as drastic as any produced by Earth-system changes over geological time (and now, apparently, even further underway than had previously been feared). [3]

One of the motives for this *Green House* project, too, is evidently a sense of how powerfully the realism of disillusion now speaks to us. As Rupert Read and Brian Heatley make clear in their introductory paper,[4] a sensible ("realistic") working assumption for the consequences of the 2015 Paris Agreement – even should this not in the event be sabotaged by the lethally unpredictable Trump administration – is that global temperature rise will be at the very least 3-4°C over pre-industrial levels by

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[1] On the relevant thresholds see e.g. Lynas 2007.

[2] See Hamilton *et al*. (eds.) 2015 and Hamilton 2017.

[3] See for instance "Earth's sixth mass extinction event under way, scientists warn", *The Guardian* 10th July 2017 https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/jul/10/earths-sixth-mass-extinction-event-already-underway-scientists-warn (accessed 28.7.17)

[4] Available at http://www.greenhousethinktank.org/uploads/4/8/3/2/48324387/intro_final.pdf (accessed 9.8.2017)

2100, and more likely 4-5°C. This is as against the widely-endorsed absolute maximum rise of 2°C if drastic feedback effects of warming already in the system are to have any chance of being avoided. (As I write, a study in *Nature Climate Change* suggests that our chances of remaining below this allegedly safe threshold by the year 2100 are now only of the order of 5%.[5])

Unsurprisingly, the argument from disillusion is one which has *not* been embraced, still less acted on, in the official policy world. Modern democratic electoral politics is not a process through which truths that hard could be faced and then fed into policy-making. That we are in for what a former UK government Chief Scientific Adviser has described (Beddington 2009) as a 'perfect storm' of food, water and energy shortages, entailing famine, disease and homelessness on an epic scale, with associated worldwide migratory pressures and resource wars, is not going to form the starting point of any election manifesto under current arrangements. It is far easier for the political and policy community to stay in denial with the paradigm of 'sustainable development' and its climate change corollary of managed incremental emissions constraints. This approach has not only failed to deliver change of anything like the order required since it started to figure in mainstream policy-making: it was evidently always going to fail. It looks hard-headedly pragmatic at first blush: having quantified future needs for ecological resources to sustain welfare levels at least equal to our own, we work back, again quantifiably, to what we must do or refrain from doing now to ensure that those future needs can be met. But as I have argued in Foster (2008), this whole purported constraint from the future is as full of escape clauses as a dodgy insurance contract. It depends on gross exaggeration of our powers to predict and control, and does so in the service of supposed stewardship obligations to future generations which are no more than pseudo-obligations, since the only people interpreting them and monitoring how far we are meeting them are ourselves.[6] It doesn't, however, mandate messy and dangerous challenges to global corporate power, the world trade regulations which seek to lock it into place, nor the governing elites who profit so grotesquely by these arrangements – hence, in large measure, its continuing hegemony.

So even a disillusioned realism about our climate prospects seems to offer little chance of producing policies which might realistically address them – that is, policies for the decisive ending and indeed reversal of material progress and for the best available mitigation of a now gravely alarming ecological and climate future. It looks as if what is already firmly on course to be a disaster won't be addressed, or even recognised, in time to prevent its escalating into a global catastrophe.

Against the realism of disillusion, however, some would set what they would claim to be the realism of hope. The American writer Rebecca Solnit has been a powerful voice here. She insists that

> hope is not about what we expect. It is an embrace of the essential unknowability of the world, of the breaks with the present, the surprises…[S]tudying the record more carefully leads us to expect…to be astonished, to expect that we don't know. (Solnit 2004/2016: 109)

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[5] See http://www.nature.com/nclimate/journal/vaop/ncurrent/full/nclimate3352.html (accessed 1.8.2017).

[6] See also on this Makoff, and Read 2017).

Ordinary empirical observation picks up the grindingly slow political foot-dragging, the backsliding and the failures of commitment, as well as the widespread public resistance to any but superficial shifts in habits and lifestyles, and projects these forward. But as Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone point out in the same spirit,

> there is also *discontinuous* change…structures that appear as fixed and solid as the Berlin Wall can collapse or be dismantled in a very short time…a threshold is crossed…There is a jump to a new level, an opening to a new set of possibilities… (Macy and Johnstone 2012: 189-91)

The concept of the tipping-point applies here too, in the uniquely unpredictable field of human action: change which is apparently quite implausible *ex ante* can happen suddenly once a critical mass of people starts to believe in it. Writers like Solnit and (from a different political perspective) Naomi Klein (2014) document instances of this kind of success, albeit local and partial, from a wide variety of social movement activism. There have even been glimmers of it in conventional politics – we need only, in fact, cast our minds back to the recent UK general election for a case in point.

What the realism of disillusion inclines us to overlook, in other words, are the *transformative* possibilities inherent in human action.[7] These may be triggered if enough people in enough specific actions and campaigns commit themselves vigorously; the overall situation which makes that commitment look forlorn might then suddenly change out of all recognition. On that basis, and on that basis alone, the major premise of the vicious syllogism can be resisted: nugatory gains made painfully slowly over the past twenty-five years can cease to be decisive evidence for what may realistically be possible over the crucial next five or ten. Indeed, when we think about what might emerge from widely-diverse but networked social action in a set of dynamic, volatile and systemically-linked contexts, what is *really* unrealistic is to suppose that we can reliably read off projections about the effects of our interventions from the course of past events.

Nor need the commitment which might drive such transformation be based on ignoring the inescapable consequences of damage already done. We just shouldn't expect foreknowledge, and therefore shouldn't be deterred by disillusioned claims to foreknowledge, of how these consequences will take effect. As Solnit (*op.cit.*: 4-5) compellingly frames this: "Wars will break out, the planet will heat up, species will die out, but how many, how hot and what survives depends on whether we act".

This too is a conclusion which one could hardly expect the policy world to have internalised, though for different reasons. For one thing, it depends too much on the perspective of social-movement and climate-activist engagement, a perspective not readily adopted by the rational-bureaucratic mind. Moreover, that engagement is typically directed to building alternatives to climate chaos *from the ground up*, and this is an approach with which policy-making in a centralised system will be structurally uncomfortable. But here, a lot of good work has been done (some of it, in recent years, under the *Green House* banner) on how policy-making of the sort with

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[7] I say this advisedly, having tended hitherto to overlook these possibilities myself, or at any rate to give them insufficient prominence. For helping me to see this, I am indebted to feedback on my work both in and since *After Sustainability* from a number of people including Nadine Andrews, Margaret Gearty and (in particular) Rupert Read – see my paper "On letting go" (Foster 2017) and Read's response "The future: compassion, complacency or contempt?" (Read 2017).

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which we are familiar could help the centralised system *get out of the way* of such creative grassroots initiatives. Policies, for instance, which replaced Gross Domestic Product as a measure of progress with almost any of the various quality-of-life indicators which have been canvassed, which re-regulated global trade to break out of the World Trade organisation stranglehold and which correspondingly incentivised local production of food, goods and energy for local needs, would contribute massively to the transformative potential of locally-based action. So too would institutional embedding of the precautionary principle, licensing action in advance of 'full scientific evidence' against technological risks where adverse outcomes are potentially catastrophic for life.[8]

I imagine that readers of this report will be drawn towards this kind of hope, the need for which is evidently also driving *Green House*'s present project, as when Read and Heatley write of not giving up in face of the bleak prospects which they identify, but of aiming for "climate-honesty without counselling despair" (*op.cit.*: 3). Refusal to despair certainly offers a more attractive agenda than does a realism of disillusion which must surely end in dismay, resignation and historic defeat. But the question as to what realism *means* in this context then re-emerges as a crucial challenge: *can* entertaining such hope indeed count as being a realist?

In the following three sections I shall try to answer that question by exploring various *conceptual* relations between hope and realism. I do so partly because, as a philosopher, exploring conceptual relations is what I do – but also in the firm belief that understanding these relations matters vitally for policy. Certainly, if we get them wrong, policy in relevant areas will be generally condemned to ineffectuality. But in the spirit of a report for *Green House*, I seek to keep the discussion in touch with specific policy considerations throughout, since these in turn help us to check the conceptual argument against its practical bearings. I will even conclude (in section 5) with a policy recommendation. This will be found to be of an unexpected kind and maybe even (at first blush) somewhat perverse, but it is actually intended as a litmus-test for the real-world relevance of the whole discussion.

Hope without denial

Confronting a prospect such as we now face, we need *hope* for life and action as crucially as we need food. This is no hyperbole, but a truth founded firmly in conceptual analysis.

Hope is not simply belief that some desired outcome may be achievable; that specific combination of belief and desire is neither necessary nor sufficient for hope. It is not sufficient, because one can want some *x* (such as one's next cigarette) and correctly believe it to be within reach, bar accident – while actually hoping that one might resist reaching for it, and so precisely *not* hoping for *x*. Or again, one can have a clear preference between two plausible alternatives, in neither of which one invests enough concern for one's attitude to rise into hope. But nor is such a combination of belief and desire *necessary* for hope, since it is perfectly possible to be hopeful without

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[8] On all these, see the excellent report from Norberg-Hodge and Read (2016).

hoping *for* any particular outcome at all. This recognition takes us towards the core of the idea, as captured from their different angles by writers as diverse as Ernst Bloch (1959 / 1986) and Gabriel Marcel (1962). That is the sense in which, for example, so much of Beethoven's music expresses movement through doubt, darkness and threat to end in what we can only call hope.[9] At this level, hope is revealed as, fundamentally, a kind of trustful orientation towards whatever life may bring, actively risked for life's own sake. As I have argued elsewhere (Foster 2008), this attitude or orientation is the spontaneous energy of life working through reflexively-conscious human subjectivity. That is why at present, with quite unprecedented systemic threats to the whole thrust of life on Earth in general, it is correspondingly so vital, *literally* vital, for human beings to assert and vindicate hope as life-energy, courageously against the darkness.

The link with courage is also crucial to emphasise. Hope manifests itself most typically, of course, as an active attachment to particular desired outcomes which, however, may not eventuate, so that attachment to them always *risks* something – the more so, the more energy we have invested in related action. While such attachment may not be a necessary condition of the fundamental disposition or orientation, that something is risked *is* by contrast necessary for hope at any level. It is necessary for the simplest everyday anticipation to count as hope – I can hope that my team will win while the outcome remains open, so that I risk disappointment (even if they are brilliant and it's a pretty minimal risk), but as a matter of logic I can't *hope* for their winning goal in the video replay of the match I have just watched.[10] Risk is necessary too for "a trustful orientation towards whatever life may bring" not to collapse into merely banal constitutional optimism: without full awareness that life may bring eventualities such that my trustfulness will have exposed me to chagrin or pain, again we can't call the attitude in question hope. And wherever there is risk to be faced, the virtue of courage is appropriately called forth – hope, we might say, is the epistemological face of courage as courage is the active face of hope. The practical importance of these conceptual points will become clearer very shortly.

Our climate and ecological prospects are now so frightening that hope in relation to them requires courage as rarely before. Macy and Johnstone's book already cited is all about individual and group practices for bolstering that courage against the evidential weight of disillusioned realism. Many readers of this report will be interested in exploring further what transformation-enabling policy developments, perhaps as initially sketched above, could reflect and match commitment to activist hope. But the prior question remains – in the first place, for ourselves: *is* that kind of hope now actually realistic? And of course we could only expect actual policy-makers to take an affirmative answer seriously to the extent that it had become widely persuasive. So what grounds might there be for that?

Here it is only responsible to recognise that there is a serious difficulty with 'active hope' as Macy and Johnstone contend for it. Reinforcing the need for its cultivation, they say this:

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[9] The Fifth Symphony is only the best-known example. (See E.M. Forster's famous if rather florid account of it in these terms in *Howards End*.)
[10] For the example, see Pettit 2004.

> When we face the mess we're in we *know* the future is uncertain…But what we do with this uncertainty is a matter of choice…by making friends with uncertainty, we can become strengthened by the gifts it has to offer…Indeed, our awareness that the outcome is uncertain prompts us to prepare; it calls us to attention. (*op.cit.*:229-30)

The open-ended uncertainty inherent in polycentric networked human action addressing a massively complex and rapidly-moving ecological and political situation is here offered as a basis for what we might reasonably call *counter-empirical* hope. That is not to suggest something flying blithely in the face of any empirical evidence whatsoever – as noted above, when we start to look for them there are relevant examples of sudden discontinuous change transforming situations against the odds. But such hope is counter-empirical because it refuses to be daunted by just these odds – that is, by predictive probabilities arrived at from weighing this kind of evidence against other, more depressing and much more preponderant kinds. It says, in effect, that *whatever* may have happened up to now, and whatever future our past experience may indicate, we can't know that there *won't* be a transformative leap to a new set of circumstances: so, courageously, we act in ways that keep that possibility open.

Equally, however, and by just the same token, we can't know that there *will* be such a leap. The adverse forces driving Business-as-Usual – the corporate conspirators and their political cronies, the technological and other systemic imperatives, the lethargy of the disinherited consumer masses – might all be powerful enough to prevent it. And if what leaves rational room for hope is *uncertainty*, this too must be a real possibility. But then, to befriend uncertainty in the way which Macy and Johnstone propose will be to embrace a treacherous ally.

This point is important enough to spell out a little more formally. If there is genuine open-ended uncertainty as between two outcomes, and not just differential probability, then the possibility of A must bring with it the *equally likely* (because equally uncertain) possibility of not-A – and if the possibility of A is what we are investing hope in, then that of not-A must be the equal possibility that our hope will be *defeated*. But unless more is said, the way in which Macy and Johnstone's 'active hope' seeks to base itself on uncertainty turns into a way of insuring itself against taking the latter possibility seriously. For by its nature, at least at this point with transformative change still a live option,[11] counter-empirical hope is going to be immune from defeat by the merely empirical failure of hoped-for changes to have materialised. If the possibility of our allowing catastrophic global warming is just the possibility of contingently failing to solve a very complex and demanding set of problems, the response – over, at any rate, the crucial next few decades - can always be that all we have encountered so far is failure to have reached the tipping-point of a transformative solution *yet.* The point is that for counter-empirical hope, merely contingent failure *won't count as failure*. But (and here the conceptual analysis of hope starts to bite), unless our hope for situational transformation really risks defeat, it is not really hope.

Counter-empirical hope nourished on open-ended uncertainty, that is, needs to be exercised against the background of a robust criterion of possible defeat. Lacking one,

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[11] Things might well look different by the time we had actually reached +4°C or beyond.

we are not after all grounding our hope for transformative change in the uncertainty of the future. Rather, we are grounding *in our hope* the *certainty* that there will always remain room for such change. And the trouble is that this posture is nowhere near distinct enough from willed optimism protected against challenge by what I have elsewhere (Foster 2015) called activist denial. That is the attitude classically encapsulated by this answer to the question whether it is too late to stop drastic climate change: "No, of course it's not too late, because if you think it's too late, then where's the drive to act immediately?"[12] Here, of course, we have mere chocolate-cake logic – compare: "Of course it's not too fattening, because if I thought it was too fattening, I might have to not eat it". (If only the world and our desires were indeed connected up that way round!) But the slide to this sort of position, from "We don't *know* that it's too late, so there is still reason to act immediately" via something like "No belief that it is too late can be allowed to be empirically well-grounded enough to defeat our activist hopes" would seem to be perilously easy.

We may put the same point from another angle. The pragmatist or disillusioned realist is resigned to taking human beings as they more-or-less ordinarily are. The idealist, by contrast, wants them to be the best they can be – while the utopian wants something even better. Thus, what distinguishes the idealist from the utopian is that the former is also a realist, albeit of an ambitious stripe. (We *have* to be realists, on pain of failing to engage with the world as it is; the idealist, we may say, conceives nobly of the possibilities really inherent in the human world as it is.) But in the domain of counter-empirical hope, there is nowhere *ex ante* for this distinction between idealism and utopianism to lodge. Macy and Johnstone, for instance, deny that they are engaged in wishful thinking – and then celebrate aspirations towards (*inter alia*) "a world without weapons" which look about as wishfully utopian as thinking could get (*op.cit.*: 35, 169-170). If what we are cultivating is counter-empirical hope, however, the world-disarmers can perfectly legitimately say: "Of course, we've seen no transformative shift in this direction *so far*: but…". And unless we can reliably distinguish its realist-idealist from its utopian deployment, there is no chance of getting counter-empirical hope taken seriously by the policy world, or indeed by anyone else. Nor is this unreasonable, because counter-empirical active hope, just as such, never risks enough to *deserve* taking seriously.

This claim mustn't be misunderstood. Activists inspired by such hope often risk a very great deal, from personal inconvenience all the way through distress and burnout to fine, imprisonment and even death – all honour to them and their bravery. Unless their commitment measures up against a credible test of realism, however, it nevertheless has to be said that they won't be risking their deep psychological compensation for any or all of this, which is the conviction that their hope remains *justified* whatever results its pursuit may have actually produced. But as I have already argued above, unless hope is exposed to genuine epistemic risk (that is, unless we genuinely aren't sure that it won't be defeated) it is not really hope. Nor, even less comfortably, is what upholds it in practice really *courage* (as opposed to defiance, or obduracy, or sheer pig-headedness – all, of course, different forms of virtue in appropriate circumstances).

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[12] Quoted in *Green World* No.84 (Spring 2014)

It follows that if there is to be a courageous realism of counter-empirical hope which resists the slide into willed optimism and utopianism, its necessary antagonist – its criterion of potential defeat – under open-ended uncertainty cannot be the possibility of our happening not to have achieved transformative change in our situation by any given point. Rather it must be something much more demanding: that we should have run up against the impossibility of our *ever* achieving it. Activist hope, to count genuinely as *hope,* must now consciously risk itself not against any particular contingent failure to have avoided disaster, but against our being caught in radical dilemma from which there could be no non-disastrous outcome. That in turn means that the realism of hope, to have any chance of robustness, must operate against a background understanding of our situation, both in this particular respect of climate change and more generally, as always potentially issuing in *tragedy*.

I expect that this claim will initially strike many readers as strange. Whatever may be conceptually required for the defeat of a counter-empirical commitment, can it actually be the case that in order to entertain realistic hope for our damaged but still in many respects thriving world, we have to see the human condition in this grim and dismayingly unprogressive light? In particular, do we have to see in this way our position vis-à-vis the climate change which we are still hoping to redress or mitigate? I shall try to dissipate such scepticism in the next two sections. I turn first to one of its principal causes, and a powerful factor in our contemporary cultural, intellectual and political plight: that is, the grave difficulty which contemporary Western-inspired technological civilisation seems to have in even recognising the possibility of tragedy.

Recovering the tragic

By tragedy, to be clear at the outset, is meant here not just any sufficiently drastic event involving death and mayhem. The 24-hour global media circus recognises and indeed fixates on such occurrences all the time. But tragedy in the proper sense of the word, the sense in which certain acknowledged great works of drama and fiction are tragedies, arises when events bring out destructive weaknesses inherent in the key strengths and values of an agent – whether that agent be an individual, an institution or, as in the present case, a mode of civilisation – such that a grievous outcome *inevitably* ensues.

This pattern ought to be very apparent in the case of climate change. Deep-seated features of the secular and instrumentally-rational Enlightenment spirit which has produced so much worthwhile life-improvement across the world have also generated a pervasive inability to rein in the relevant activities before they do irreversible harm. Distinctive human capacities which Western civilisation in particular has realised – to make rational deliberated choices, to base belief on evidence and empirical testing, to free ourselves from ignorance, superstition and dogma – bring with them aspirations to mastery and control which have betrayed us into doing decisive eco-systemic damage. Meanwhile the material successes which exercising these strengths has brought us have blinded us (at first through ignorance, and latterly through various forms of denial) to what that exercise of them has entailed. All the classic ingredients of tragedy are here displayed in full view.

Our culture, however, and in particular our political culture, simply doesn't see them: instead, in this as in other cases (such as migration, or populism, or income inequality or the recrudescence of religious fanaticism) it sees only *problems*.

The sustainability paradigm, for instance, is a concerted attempt to problematise, and thus frame as accessible to social-scientific understanding and technocratic management, the current phase of human-environment relations. It represents these relations as a series of in-principle-resolvable adverse human impacts on the present and future well-functioning of the system comprising the human economy and the biosphere. The application of this general framing to the issue of carbon emissions then gives us the overarching 'problem of climate change', bringing in its train an ever-expanding agenda of sub-problems including:

- the problem of getting robust international agreement on emissions targets (leading us into the sub-sub-problem of arbitrating differential equitable responsibilities as between the developed and developing nations);

- the problem of shifting on a large enough scale from fossil fuels to renewables in pursuit of these targets;

- the problem of finding economically viable techniques such as carbon capture and storage for taking out some of the CO_2 already in the atmosphere;

- the problem of devising appropriate incentives to change emissions-generating behaviours and patterns of living;

- the problem of educating people effectively about all these problems;

and so on, and on….

The first thing that surely ought to strike any detached observer about this viper's nest of entangled difficulties is the utter intractability of the package taken as a whole. This certainly seems to be what our continuing experience of failing to deal with it has amply demonstrated. But far from leading to an abandonment of the overall problem-solution framing in favour of recognising tragic deadlock, this experience has only produced an attempt to distinguish between ordinary, tame problems and what have come to be called '*wicked* problems'.[13] Key characteristics of these, according to the sociologist of science Steve Rayner who has applied the idea to climate change in particular, are that they are persistent and not amenable to clear-cut solution, since proposed 'solutions' standardly give rise to new problems, and that this stems from their calling forth 'contradictory certitudes': that is, empirical evidence in relation to them can be interpreted within distinct alternative value-framings. (Rayner 2014).

Plainly, not just climate change but a range of other environmental issues fit this characterisation, including water resource management, the use of GMOs in agriculture, waste disposal, marine ecosystem protection and biodiversity loss.

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[13] This concept originated in a now famous paper by two planning academics from Berkeley - see Rittel and Webber 1973.

Climate change, however, provides a very clear instance of this key element of contradictory certitude. As Rayner and others have pointed out, drawing on the 'cultural theory' of Mary Douglas (1982), climate change can be seen as a problem of global co-ordination, where the dominant value is rational control, or as a problem of profligate consumption, where inter- and intra-generational equity dominates, or again (under the inspiration of individual liberty) as one of freeing up enterprise to make new renewables technologies affordable. These distinctions correspond respectively to the broad cultural-theoretical perspectives of hierarchy, egalitarianism and individualism – and, as it is the point of cultural theory to emphasise, none of these perspectives is obviously wrong, nor is any of them obviously fundamental, but they each offer a different spin on the data and a different, distinctive policy direction. From a technocratic global-management perspective, rigorously policed emissions targets could help to combat rising global temperatures, but at the cost of opportunities to live a comfortable Western lifestyle for lots of people in India and China and elsewhere, something valued from the perspectives of both individual liberty and egalitarianism. Or again, substituting biofuels for fossil fuels contributes to the global management goal of reducing CO_2 emissions, at the cost of taking up land which an egalitarian would want to see used for food crops to alleviate global food poverty.

As this profile of sociologically and politically contested values defining wicked problems has come to be better appreciated, approaches to addressing these issues have correspondingly come to be conceived of as "clumsy solutions". Clumsiness in this sense means not adopting a single value-framing nor anticipating any clearly-evaluable end-state, but rather appealing across the range of evaluative constituencies involved. As a corollary, it will tend not to rely on master-planning envisaging a well-defined goal, but on emergence and 'snowballing' effects. Mike Hulme (2009: 312) describes the 'clumsy solutions' concept as "the idea of approaching the challenges of climate governance through a series of diverse, multi-level and almost deliberately overlapping, and even partly contradictory, institutions and policies…By appealing to a wider variety of instincts and constituencies, such a bottom-up approach to climate governance may offer a greater prospect of delivery". So for example Prins and Rayner in their 2007 paper "The Wrong Trousers" criticise the top-down global emissions-management (at that time the Kyoto) regime, advocating a "silver buckshot" approach: instead of target-driven world-wide emissions trading, the Clean Development Mechanism and all, they look to an options-portfolio approach which combines building national and regional emissions markets from the bottom up, encouraging initiatives at state and city level, and in the business world opportunistically sector by sector, investing in R&D for both longer-term and stop-gap technologies and increased spending on adaptation, all with a much greater emphasis on a culture of learning and fine-tuning as we go. Since every perspective, on this scattergun approach, has the chance to get a bit of what it values, unpredictable convergence on a generally acceptable way forward may then emerge.

Now all this seems on the face of it to be in the spirit, and to go with the policy grain, of what I have called the realism of hope – working at the task locally to hand and trusting to transformative change to bring it all together. It represents, nevertheless, an insidious mental trap, because a problem recognised as wicked is still being unquestioningly framed as a *problem*. Accepting that only 'clumsiness' could grapple with it is certainly better than looking for neat-and-tidy-looking pretend-solutions –

what Marco Verweij (2011) calls 'elegant failures' – but still, a clumsy solution remains a would-be solution (and something we do clumsily is by clear implication something which we would do less clumsily if we could). The wicked-problem framing, in other words, by presenting what confronts us in any given case as a problem (and thus at least open to being solved), and also as so seriously intractable that we have to put the idea of a solution firmly into inverted commas, facilitates bad faith. It allows us to half-recognise that we are not in control, while reassuring ourselves that *ultimately* we still are. This amounts to denial in the last conceptual ditch, because these manoeuvres persist in altogether occluding the possibility that our situation is not problematic at all but tragic.

If we can once let go of the default problem-solution framing which has beset us since the Enlightenment, however, it becomes obvious that tragic possibility in the full sense runs through and through the structure of the human world. It is inherent in the way we are exposed to radical conflict among the plurality of core human virtues and values – we find the material of tragedy in what Martha Nussbaum, in a famous discussion, calls the "everyday facts of lived practical reason" (2001: 5). As humans we have an inescapably dual nature; our rationality tends to universalise our motivation as *value*, while our organic embeddedness motivates through immediate and particular relationship. Rationalised value-claims, from any of Douglas's sociological perspectives, are thus always generating direct counter-demands which make equal claims, confronting us with competing and incommensurable goods between which we are often forced by circumstances into the dilemma of choosing. These dilemmas deprive us of even clumsily-bodged control over how our difficulties pan out.

It would need a longish existential-philosophical argument for which there is no space here to make these claims watertight. We can, however, bolster their plausibility by analysing in such terms the extent of climate disaster to which we are already committed. When we do so, it becomes quickly apparent that our situation in this regard is already tragic, through the irresolvable inner conflictedness of the value of progressivism. A commitment to improving people's material conditions is an expression of important virtues (care, compassion, justice…) seconded by active strengths (techno-rationality, practical imagination, foresight, forms of creativity…) which human beings have developed with an ever-growing momentum since the Industrial Revolution. Material progress, as I remarked earlier, has vastly improved the (material) human condition in a thousand ways, and the impetus to do this was admirable and for a long while perfectly reasonable. But value-conflict was always potential within this progressivist commitment, because it includes two indispensable elements which circumstances now make simply irreconcilable. The whole point of improved material conditions is for them to benefit actual people, and this must mean *present* people – betterment which is always only prospective is self-cancelling. The pressure towards improving circumstances which we have the capacity to improve for people around now is therefore going to be irresistible. But we have also come to believe that this process of meeting material aspiration can supply human purpose indefinitely, in what is essentially now (despite anomalies and throwbacks) a secular world. This is the role of material progress classically formulated in the mid-nineteenth century by John Stuart Mill: "Let it be remembered that if the individual life is short, the life of the human species is not short; its indefinite duration is practically equivalent to endlessness; and being combined with infinite capability of

improvement, it offers to the imagination and sympathies a large enough object to satisfy…grandeur of aspiration" (1985: 420). Since then, however, our vastly extended technological reach, powered by huge reserves of fossil energy, has caused the drive for present material betterment to assume forms which drastically jeopardise the prospects for indefinite future benefit. And this is both a bitter and an inescapable dilemma, because the future reference of material progress is not dispensable either: if present people have a claim on it, so in justice do people who will follow them, and ignoring that actually undermines the benefit in the present.

Sustainable development was supposed to let us off precisely this hook – but all it really offered was a way of sacrificing the future to the present more discreetly, by at least half-convincing ourselves that we weren't. The 'sustainability' choice always actually lies between clear present benefits with uncertain and politically-contestable future disbenefits, and clear present disbenefits with uncertain and politically-contestable future benefits. That being the case, our combination of great and *actual* technical power with circumscribed and conditional foresight as to the effects of its use was always going to make its present use for human benefit effectively *incumbent* on us – unless we could demonstrate, with a robustness which the numbers just don't have, that the cost to the future of any particular present benefit currently attracting us was going to be intolerable. And this is surely how we should understand the claim made earlier, that sustainable development was always going to fail: it was always, for just these reasons, tragically inevitable that it would fail.

Such an analysis seems to me compelling – I would add, irresistibly so, except that we largely go on resisting it. I would also claim for it an intellectual integrity beside which the 'wicked problem' framing of our climate plight looks both factitious and shifty. So why is the account of this situation in terms of tragedy so resisted? Here, I believe, we reach the assumption on which all our contemporary refusal to acknowledge the tragic is tacitly premised: that acceptance of our being caught up in real, actual tragedy, especially climate tragedy, must not just stand over against even counter-empirical hope, but must open the floodgates to *despair*.

That this is a misconception is the single most important claim which I have to make in this essay. Limitations of space restrict me to an extremely summary discussion,[14] though hopefully not too summary to provide some justification for the pattern of conceptual relations between climate realism, hope and tragedy already sketched.

From radical hope to deep hope

Suppose irretrievable failure to have prevented grievous climate change to be what we were eventually forced to admit. If that were *merely* a disaster, the upshot of a long trajectory of greed, stupidity and ineptitude culminating in complete failure to have come anywhere near solving a wicked problem, it would indeed be reason for despair. We should be left with all the values by which we should be condemning that outcome, together with anguished recognition that we had thrown away our single, epochal chance to live up to them. But if, instead, we recognise it as a tragedy – an

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[14] There is a more extended one in Foster 2017.

outcome of fundamental and inescapable conflictedness in the pursuit of vital human ends – the case is different.

Tragedy, unlike mere disaster, strikes at our values so deeply as to shake *the whole structure*. It does not simply leave intact those values by which we would condemn a grievous outcome (those of intergenerational equity as just discussed, for instance) – rather it reveals them to have been inextricably and dilemmatically entangled with the counter-values (maximising intra-generational utility, in the case in point) which have undermined them. But these are key components of our whole structure of value. In shaking this whole structure by bringing them into irresolvable conflict, tragedy can't help but shake our *reliance* on value – that is, our complacency that we can make generally good choices by investing in a stable evaluative world-view. Tragic dilemma always reveals not just the inadequacy of certain values or their contestation with certain others, but the human danger, the existential precariousness, of our whole practice of evaluative living.

Where might this leave us as creatures who formulate and act upon values, and who, through whatever grievous outcomes we may bring upon ourselves, still have to go on living? We should have to learn to do something which might be described as letting go of our values without giving up on them. (This of course is what all the great tragedies of literature show their protagonists struggling to do.) That would mean, among other things, learning to treat our evaluative commitments and principles as at best heuristics, subject to ongoing revision and reinterpretation in the light of (especially, tragic) experience. In climate terms, that might for instance mean trying to reach a new understanding of *justice* for a world of survival bottle-necks. More demandingly than simply making space alongside considerations of justice for an ethic of care directed towards the future which the present is always becoming, as in the paper by Makoff and Read already cited, this might mean trying to understand justice as a kind of *constrained impartiality* which did not prescind from the specific relationships in which caring, along with other human relations, makes sense – a deliberate forgoing of Enlightenment rational universality, such that we probably couldn't at present even recognise what emerged as a form of justice.[15]

This is no more than a gesture towards a possible response, but the point is that, far from being despairing, this kind of creative struggle to re-invent our values when our reliance on them has been shaken by tragedy would be, or could be, a work of hope – that is, of what Jonathan Lear, discussing essentially the same thing in a different context, calls *radical hope*. This, he argues, is the attitude which might be able to save a people when their whole culture and way of thinking collapses (his example is a tribe of North American Indians forced off their ancestral hunting-grounds onto a reservation). It is hope which is

> directed towards a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is…a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it. (2006: 103)

Evidently, when we turn to such hope in response to tragedy which shakes our ways of evaluative thinking, we are in the domain of transformative possibility as clearly as we are with counter-empirical hope: but what will undergo transformation, if the hope

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[15] I explore this thought in more detail in Foster 2017: 184-186

turns out to be justified, is not our situation but our value-structure and associated self-conceptions – that is, in effect, *ourselves*.

This kinship in transformative possibility is, I think, the underlying reason why plausible hope for our present world and the acknowledgement of the human condition as inherently tragic are indeed non-accidentally linked. Both counter-empirical commitment and tragic recognition require us to let go of the illusion that we are in control. They are two sides of an acceptance that we will only discover in action whether or not our relevant values and strengths are up to carrying us through. Hope trusts that, unpredictably, they will be; tragic awareness is prepared for their inherently not being – but in neither case is this something we can plan or manage in advance. Hope can thus only be serious (which means, realistic) if it invests itself at this level of existential risk.

This brings us back to the relations between hope and realism. If under uncertainty there is an indeterminate possibility of transformative change for the better in our situation vis-à-vis oncoming climate change, then it is, as we have seen, unrealistic to rule such change out in advance on the basis of experience to date. Here is the ground for counter-empirical hope. If we are appealing to a context of uncertainty, however, it is equivalently unrealistic not to recognise that we may be caught in a tragic bind, such that a sufficiently transformative change in our situation may be simply impossible. It would therefore be only realistic to entertain both of these possibilities as open. This means that counter-empirical hope, even if it acknowledges the permanent background possibility of tragedy and so avoids the slide into willed optimism or utopianism, cannot just on its own lay claim to realism. What can lay such a claim, in the face of looming climate chaos, is commitment to a hope which could be justified *in either case*. This must be what both counter-empirical and the radical hope appropriate to tragedy have in common. We may call it *deep hope*. It is the embarking of the spirit in active anticipation that ongoing life will somehow justify itself, at whatever cost – life as energy investing itself in creative transformation of either our situation or our structure of values or of both, as required. Through deep hope, life in us insists on its own undaunted continuance.

The guiding theme of this *Green House* project has been expressed to me thus: "There is hope between disaster and catastrophe". [16] This is absolutely right, provided that the disaster which we are already in for is clearly understood as tragic, and it is part of that understanding that continuing tragic possibility may yet end in catastrophe. [17] Paradoxically, perhaps, for those trying at this very difficult juncture to strengthen themselves in counter-empirical hope in order to carry on working as activists, this recognition ought to make a positive difference. In the nature of all such activism, energies periodically slacken, the voices of disillusion grow more insistent, and hope fades. If what its lapsing brings up to replace it on such occasions is the gloom and dismay of merely disillusioned realism, hope can over time become so weakened that eventually it may fail to bounce back. But if we find instead the deep hope which recognition of tragedy can spring, we may recover a purified and hardened

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[16] Rupert Read (personal communication).

[17] Importantly, that a situation is already tragic doesn't mean it can't deteriorate.
    "The worst is not
    So long as we can say, 'This is the worst'." *King Lear*, Act IV, sc.i

commitment when we turn again to activity. And that means that we can also step back from activism when we need to with less fear of sinking into despair. Here is the final, demanding realism of a refusal to be defeated.

To summarise, then, the case which I have made in these four sections: Policy-relevant hope in our present ecological and climate plight must mean actively keeping open our communications with transformative possibility, against now very daunting odds. The price of an honest counter-empirical realism here must be the acknowledgement that we are tragic beings by nature, and as such not finally in control of what happens to us for good or ill. As part of that recognition we must accept that in any particular work of hope – any given struggle for ecological responsibility, climate justice or due care for the future, as we presently understand those claims – we may find ourselves not only defeated, but inescapably self-defeated. But if we can reach down as far as deep hope, we can find the resources to act creatively under that possibility too. And that we go on working in *some* mode of hope is all that either the living, the dead or the unborn can ask of us.

A new paradigm for policy?

"There is always a solution to every human problem – neat, plausible and wrong" –
attributed to

H.L.Mencken
Every area of human activity has its 'horizon', the limits to our vision and therefore to our background framing of possibilities which its particular configuration of assumptions subtends. The concatenation, as it were, of all our horizons has been helpfully characterised (Earle 2017) as the "social imaginary" within which we think and act at any given time. At present, as we have seen, the policy-world's horizon in respect of climate change is the 'wicked problem'. Up to the limit, every difficulty which we confront or could confront is taken to be a problem open to solution, with even the most dauntingly complex and systemically intractable difficulties open to at any rate 'clumsy' solution. But if the foregoing argument is accepted, and correspondingly this framing is indeed seen to be denial in the last conceptual ditch, how do we begin to substitute *climate tragedy* as the effective policy horizon, the background against which hope in its various modes can be dynamically maintained?

I want to conclude by suggesting that many elements are already present within the purview of climate-related policy which would make best sense on just such a changed framing. We have already met some of these elements briefly in the first section above – those policies for economic localisation and for the embedding of precaution which could help to clear the ground for the kind of transformation aspired to by counter-empirical hope. I have argued that such hope is going to be much too cheaply bought, and come down to nothing better than willed optimism, unless it is entertained against a background of awareness that our condition reaches always towards the tragic, and unless it wrestles with tragic possibility as its necessary antagonist. What is needed, then, is for these policy options and others of a similar cast to be brought explicitly under the rubric of a policy methodology which directly reflects that kind of awareness.

My account of this methodology here can only be very initial and exploratory – it clearly needs very much more work than belongs to a report like this. The key idea is to see all measures of localisation, community empowerment and precautionary technology management as different specific upshots of a general policy approach which I will call, for the sake of a working label, *underreaching*.

For an example of this approach in perhaps its purest form, we can jump contexts momentarily and invoke the great eighteenth-century writer, critic and lexicographer Dr Samuel Johnson, whose advice to a prolix author, and by extension to authors generally, was: "Read over your compositions, and whenever you meet with a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out".[18] Rigorously applying this rule protects us from the danger of thinking ourselves masters of our material, rather than servants to our creativity. The passages which we are inclined to think particularly fine will be those where we feel pleased to have captured our subject most perspicuously, incisively, eloquently, movingly and so on, and that is just where we are most exposed to the danger of *over*reaching – of overconfidently exceeding our capacities. (As anyone who has ever attempted serious writing will testify, we come most effectively to grips with any subject when we still feel our words to be painfully inadequate, and go on fighting a losing battle against their liability to looseness, rhetorical inflation and dishonesty.)

The danger of this kind of overreaching, generalised, is *hubris* – in ancient Greek tragedy, the overconfidence that led men to mount catastrophic challenges to the gods. We may think of it in contemporary terms as the attitude which doesn't just overlook how ignorant, headstrong and fallible human beings always are, but tries to forget that we are inherently exposed to irresolvable value-conflict which is always liable to combine with events in undermining any attempt at decisive mastery of our situation.

If we now think what might be a policy or project-planning equivalent for Johnson's advice, we might come up with something like: 'Study the available options, and whenever you meet with one which strikes you as particularly neat, smart, win-win, cutting-edge, cost-effective, idiot-proof… – discard it from the list'. As an explicit rule of procedure for policy practice, this seeks to embed within any option-evaluation process the tragic awareness that what humans tend to aspire to when caught up in complex interactive systems (ecological or social) is to exert mastery, to control and manage, while what their permanent liability to value-conflictedness very typically results in their doing is making a disastrous mess.

Importantly, underreaching doesn't preclude policy radicalism. On the contrary, it would represent the *really* radical development of ceasing to pretend that we can be both sufficiently radical and in control. So for instance, it is compatible with carbon rationing (for individuals and corporations) stringent enough to cut emissions dramatically, but not with trying to manage on some fantasy-utilitarian basis how the multiple effects of this would sift through the economy. Underreaching here means by and large just accepting that there would be, as always, winners and losers.

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[18] See the Oxford Standard Authors edition of Boswell, p.528. (I am told that this was more recently plagiarised by the American novelist William Faulkner and others as the advice to "kill your darlings".)

In terms of implementation, our long-established resistance to tragic awareness might call for a standard model where two parallel design or planning teams worked together – one tasked solely with proposing and ranking solutions by standard cost-benefit and other criteria, the other with subjecting them to hubris-testing in the spirit of Johnson's advice and Mencken's aphorism – with scope for negotiation between teams, but with the latter always having the final say. Understanding how this very broad procedural recommendation might pan out in practice for different areas of policy-making and different types of project management is clearly an early task for the further work now required.

An equally important task would be to define the relation between systematic underreaching and the precautionary principle. They are evidently closely akin, but I incline to see precaution as a subsidiary principle having narrower scope. In the environmental and climate domains, it is invoked if an action or policy has a suspected risk of causing serious and irreversible systemic damage, and it mandates a decisive shifting of the burden of proof that such harm will be avoided onto the proposer of the action or policy. But underreaching applies to *every* action or policy, and rules out everything that precaution would rule out plus a lot more besides: not only fracking, geoengineering the atmosphere, GMOs and the like, but all those follies of technological, intellectual, commercial or administrative overreaching such as HS2, or sub-prime mortgages or the computerised benefits scheme, where no irreversible damage seems to be threatened in any particular instance but the cumulative effect is to reinforce our persistent delusion that we can happily manage complexity in which we are always also entangled. This delusion, which also lies behind everything to which precaution *does* apply, is close to the root of environmental and climate crisis, and is absolutely central to the sustainability paradigm through which most policy still seeks to address it. To build into all policy-making a recognition of its hubris would be a major shift towards acknowledging our inherently tragic nature across the board.

This practical suggestion is offered in good faith and perfect seriousness. It is also, as I said, meant as a kind of litmus test. The extent to which policy-makers and others familiar with the present policy world might find it hard to take the proposal quite seriously is a measure of how far we have still to move towards a climate policy paradigm subserving the realism of hope.

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