

Guarding The Guardians

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IN *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Karl Popper made a series of vigorous and influential criticisms of Plato.¹ Melissa Lane summarises one of them in *Of Rule and Office: Plato's Ideas of the Political*: that Plato fails to attend to the project of a procedural limitation of power. For Popper, Plato cares only about who should rule and so neglects the importance of how that rule ought to be ordered.² One aim of Lane's book is to suggest that this a misreading. At the heart of her argument is the claim that Plato consistently engages with the very questions Popper suggests he ignores: How do we prevent abuses of power? Or the classic question from Juvenal's satire: Who will guard the guardians?³

What are we to make of Plato's engagement with these questions? At least two answers emerge from *Of Rule and Office*. On the one hand, there is the strong reading. On this view, questions about accountability and institutional safeguarding are Plato's primary preoccupations and a fundamental contribution of his political theory is a procedural constitutionalist account of how rule can be made to serve the good of the ruled. On the other hand, the book supports a potentially weaker claim: that Plato's character 'avatars' are simply exploring many potential theoretical and constitutional commitments, one of which is a commitment to a kind of classical constitutionalism. Here Plato himself is not best read as an advocate of procedural constitutionalism, but as an author who voices the case for it.

We might think that one thing which is at stake between the weak and the strong claim is the question of what Plato is doing. Does he explore questions of institutional safeguards and accountability insofar as these were things a well-born Athenian citizen simply had to discuss? As Lane points out near the beginning of the book, most city-states in Plato's day were organising themselves around office and accountability; classical constitutionalism would have been, for him, part of mainstream political discourse, perhaps an

¹ A version of this commentary was first presented on Friday 13 October 2023 in All Souls College, Oxford at a roundtable on Melissa Lane, *Of Rule and Office: Plato's Ideas of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023). See Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963 [1945]).

² Melissa Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 27.

³ Juvenal, *Satura* VI.345.O30 in *Juvenal and Persius* trans. Susanna Morton LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 266. Juvenal's question arose from his musings on how one might keep one's wife faithful: you can give her a guardian, but then who will watch him? The phrase has had a second life as a challenge to ways of arranging checks on power.

inescapable part.⁴ Alternatively, is Plato offering us something more: is he actively trying to advocate for the importance of safeguards and constitutionalism? Is the case for constitutionalism part of the intervention of his political theory?

In *Of Rule and Office*, Lane proves the weaker claim beyond doubt – that Plato does, in his dialogues, show an interest in accountability, safeguarding, and office-holding. We might wonder, however, whether the weak claim is enough to defend Plato from Popper’s criticism. Popper’s claim concerned Plato’s own project – the model of rule and governance that we have reason to believe Plato himself was trying to defend. In making the case that Popper is wrong, Lane does seem to want, then, to defend the stronger claim: that Plato wants to give an account of constitutional rule that cares about how rule is ordered – not just who is doing the ruling.

Before we can endorse the stronger claim, I’d like to look at some passages from across Plato’s work that we might think trouble it. Take, for example, Book Eight of the *Republic* which discusses the degeneration of cities.⁵ Here, Plato says that even in the beautiful city, the kallipolis, which is supposedly stable, leaders may fail to properly practice the ‘kairos’ which is so crucial to statecraft.⁶ That is, they fail to properly time their decisions, in particular when it comes to procreation, and this leads to a generation of children who are not quite worthy to serve as guardians. This begins a kind of chain reaction from which the city degenerates first to timocracy, then to oligarchy. How should we think about Plato’s view of what goes wrong in these cases? It seems quite hard to say this degeneration a failure of procedure or institution. What has gone wrong, on Plato’s account, does not appear to have been preventable by safeguarding or auditing. Instead, the problem does seem to turn on *who* is ruling – not how that rule is ordered. When we find ourselves in the second stage of degeneration, in an oligarchy, Lane points out that institutionally, things still look timocratic: that is to say, the institutional framework of the timocratic constitution has not changed.⁷ What has in fact changed, on Plato’s own account, is the quality of people within that constitution. Is the focus not (as Popper might insist) still on who is ruling, and not the framework within which that ruling is being done?

We could, perhaps, push this reading even further. Lane shows decisively that Plato was certainly engaged in contemporary conversations about institutions, accountability, and safeguarding. But might his point have in fact been to impress upon his readers the inadequacy of these measures? While constitutional constraints might prevent some instances of malfeasance and greed, they do not – and cannot – prevent the worst degeneration of the cities.

⁴ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, Ch. 2.

⁵ Plato, *Republic* VIII.546 trans. G.M.A. Grube in *Plato: Complete Works* ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997); Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 273.

⁶ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 273.

⁷ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 287. In her words: ‘In short, the majority of timocrats now elect to the office not the warlike but the wealthy. Its institutions are still the same at this stage, but the people who are chosen to hold the offices within them—and so to shape the overall regime in line with their political predominance—are of a fatally different breed’.

That degeneration happens not when there isn't enough auditing or guardianship, but when the mechanisms of education to virtue fail. That is: when the wrong people are in the wrong roles. We might imagine here that Plato is speaking to – and perhaps criticising – his contemporary situation, in which forms of classical constitutionalism proliferated. On this reading, perhaps Plato is giving his contemporaries a warning about the dangers from which these safeguards ultimately cannot protect them.

AT this point a sceptic might want to trouble this entire interpretative endeavour. Identifying exactly which claims we can attribute to Plato is notoriously difficult. A wonderful insight from Melissa Lane's second book *Plato's Progeny: How Plato and Socrates Still Captivate the Modern Mind* (2001), is just how many different political accounts you can get from reading the same Platonic dialogue.⁸ Readers have taken Plato to be a communist; a totalitarian apologist of absolute rule; or, as on Jill Frank's recent account, an advocate for ethical and political self-governance.⁹ We might wonder about the extent to which it should trouble us that we get these extremely different substantive outcomes from reading the same Platonic dialogues. Indeed, how should we understand Lane's present book in these tussles over which politics Plato supports? Is it a project to show that, all along, Plato has in fact been the authority we need for a liberal constitutionalism?

As Lane explores in Chapter 2 of *Of Rule and Office*, the question of what we can attribute to Plato – and on what grounds – is an old and vexed methodological issue in Plato scholarship. Can we say that any one character in a Platonic dialogue ever represents Plato's views? To what extent can we speak of a Platonic view at all? Some scholars, like Michael Frede, ask whether the dialogues represent a kind of special case of authorship, suggesting that their very structure – as dialogues rather than texts obviously written in Plato's voice – troubles our desire to attribute particular claims which emerge from the text to Plato himself.¹⁰ This approach might be unsatisfying to readers of Plato who feel that there is some kind of distinctive Platonic voice which emerges from the texts – but the puzzle then is to determine where and how this voice can be identified.

While one might imagine that these anxieties about Platonic attribution stem from specifically 20th-century methodological turns in both philosophy and the history of thought, we can in fact chart their history back to Plato's Academy itself. We know that Arcesilaus, a member and later a leading figure,

⁸ Melissa Lane, *Plato's Progeny: How Plato and Socrates Still Captivate the Modern Mind* (London: Duckworth, 2001).

⁹ Jill Frank, *Poetic Justice: Rereading Plato's Republic* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019).

¹⁰ Michael Frede, 'Plato's Arguments in the Dialogue Form' in Julia Annas et al (eds), *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 201-220. In Frede's words: '...the form of a Platonic dialogue is such that the mere fact that an argument is advanced in the dialogue does not yet mean that it is endorsed by Plato. To decide whether it is, we have to go by circumstantial evidence, by what we know about Plato's views, by clues offered by the dialogues. And this, notoriously, can be very difficult indeed' (203).

offered a staunchly sceptical approach to reading Plato, resisting the idea of dogmatic attribution. Cicero too suggested that Plato is a sceptic to whom nothing is attributable.¹¹ Meanwhile, as Lane points out in a footnote, there are other ancient readers of Plato who had no qualms about attributing claims to him, such as the Greek biographer Diogenes Laertius and the Roman grammarian Aulus Gellius.¹²

Fast forward two thousand years and we find ourselves circling similar questions about Plato: how – and whether – we can speak explicitly of a Platonic thought; what the relationship is between Plato and his characters; and which claims are his, if any. As Lane points out, there has been much criticism from scholars like Jane Gordon levied at any approach which identifies certain characters as ‘mouthpieces’ of Plato which simply speak for him.¹³ Yet despite all the criticism of this approach, Lane notes that it is difficult to find any of our contemporaries actually using it.¹⁴

The methodological stalemate on these questions makes it exciting to come to a sentence in a book about Plato that is so bold in its interpretative approach: ‘I unabashedly attribute views to Plato despite the fact that he is not writing assertorically in his own voice.’¹⁵ Lane proposes to do so via what she calls the ‘avatar approach’. The avatar approach suggests that we think of specific characters in the Platonic dialogues as ‘avatars’ of Plato through which he is able to investigate a range of claims in different contexts, just as someone who plays a video game more than once can explore different options.¹⁶ In this way, we can understand characters like Socrates and the Eleatic Stranger as Plato’s avatars through which he gives himself the freedom to explore.

The approach – intuitively appealing as it is – leaves open some questions about how the idea of ‘avatars’ might help to resolve existing methodological qualms when it comes to questions of attribution. How, for example, should we move from identifying what Plato is simply exploring via his avatars to, in the book’s words, ‘unabashed attribution’? Does the avatar approach take us from exploration to attribution? If yes, how should it escape the criticisms which Gordon and others make of the mouthpiece approach? If not – that is, if its purpose is not to help us with attribution, but instead to identify claims which Plato is interested in exploring – then how is the avatar approach

¹¹ Cicero, *Academica* II.72-75. See Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods / Academics* trans. H. Rackham LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933), 561. Though in II.74 Cicero advances a skeptical reading of Plato (and Socrates), he couches it in a bizarrely *unskeptical* comment about the depth of his knowledge about them: ‘...can I speak with more certain knowledge about any persons? I seem to have actually lived with them, so many dialogues have been put in writing which make it impossible to doubt that Socrates held that nothing can be known; he made only one exception, no more—he said that he did know that he knew nothing’. [*An de ullis certius possum dicere? vixisse cum iis equidem video: ita multi sermones prescripti sunt e quibus dubitari non possit quin Socrati nihil sit visum sciri posse; except unum tantum, scire se nihil se scire, nihil amplius*].

¹² Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 74 fn. 85.

¹³ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 74 fn. 85.

¹⁴ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 74 fn. 85.

¹⁵ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 30.

¹⁶ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 75.

methodologically different from a general attentiveness to the narrative structure of the dialogues and what is being said in them? What does the avatar approach allow us to claim distinctively?

It is rare to find so much that is at once new and challenging in a re-examination of texts which have been read and re-read with close attention for thousands of years. Lane's book is a much-needed challenge to the very familiar ways of reading Plato which allege that he had little to say about the nature of rule, its vulnerability to corruption, or how it might be organised in the pursuit of the good of the ruled. As she writes in Chapter 1, Plato's treatment of these issues has simply been 'hiding in plain sight.'¹⁷ Whether we attribute the constitutional case to Plato or not, it is clear that Lane's careful examination has uncovered a heretofore ignored aspect of Plato's meditations on the political.

¹⁷ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 10.