

Queries On Method And Martial Virtue

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THE scale of Melissa Lane’s achievement in *Of Rule and Office* is self-recommending.¹ If you are already persuaded that Plato matters, Lane’s book will introduce you to a Plato you’ve never met before: a Plato every bit as attentive to problems of institutional design, legal order, and political stability as those of epistemic virtue and philosophical education; a Plato who is not indifferent to political forms as long as the philosophers are on top, but keenly aware that means and ends in politics are not so easily disentangled; a Plato, finally, who is not a philosophical enemy of politics but a genuinely political philosopher. As Lane puts it, ‘the rule of knowledge in Plato is the *rule* of knowledge,’ and ‘Plato has as much to say about the nature of rule . . . as he does about the nature of knowledge’.² If, on the other hand, you are convinced that Plato doesn’t matter – that his convictions are so far from ours that he can no longer speak to us – then read *Of Rule and Office* for a serious challenge. Here is a Plato who recognised that the difficulty of ‘how to keep a political order oriented toward the good of the ruled’ is one that inheres in ‘any kind of political constitution,’ including modern liberal democracy.³ Lane stresses that she does not endorse all of Plato’s solutions to the proverbial ‘Juvenal conundrum,’ but she insists that there is something to be gained from the exercise – at once historical, interpretive, and philosophical – of seeing the problems his way.⁴

Seeing things Plato’s way is easier said than done. The history of rival approaches to his texts is long and riven with controversy. Lane’s success is built on the strength of her methods – but they are not always easy to discern. I’d like to begin by drawing them out.

Consider how she sets the scene: Lane depicts Plato as the inheritor of a longstanding ‘tradition’ of writing about the purpose, or *telos*, of rule (*archè*), and of an equally longstanding set of practices and institutions (*taxeis*) establishing ‘an ordered set of roles and relationships . . . through which [the] *telos* [of rule] might be achieved’.⁵ Rule in itself, on the traditional view,

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).

² Melissa Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 26.

³ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 31.

⁴ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 6-8; 34.

⁵ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 17-18.

consisted in the ‘power of creating *taxis* by issuing an *epitaxis*,’ an ‘order in the sense of command’.⁶ Crucially, however, *archē* in some grammatical forms could also refer to ‘offices’ and ‘officeholders,’ a specific way of organising rule through the distribution of epitactic power to public officials who are held accountable for their actions through power-sharing, performance audits, and other means.⁷

Lane then identifies two historical trends in Greek political thought that set the stage for Plato’s intervention. The first is the emergence of intellectual challenges by sophists and teachers of rhetoric to the traditional notion that the *telos* of rule is to serve the good of the ruled, reflected in the Homeric image of the king as shepherd. Thrasymachus in Book 1 of the *Republic* gives voice to one strain of these ‘debunking argument[s]’ designed to expose the traditional view as little more than empty moralism.⁸ The second trend is the increasing use of offices as an ordering principle for political rule: not only in democratic Athens, but elsewhere too, there was a turn from the mid-fifth century onwards away from ‘unaccountable’ rule in the form of kingship and tyranny toward ‘accountable’ officeholding within legal, customary, and constitutional frameworks.⁹

Lane’s methodological commitments come into view as she works to situate Plato in this context. In addition to the language of tradition and inheritance, she also speaks of received ‘vocabularies’¹⁰, ‘linguistic affordances’¹¹, ‘paradigms’¹², and ‘patterned usages’.¹³ Taken together they constitute an ‘evaluative nimbus’ of Greek attitudes toward rule.¹⁴ Elsewhere, she asks us to imagine Plato strolling through a statue gallery populated by the various ‘figures of rule’ in the Greek imagination: kings and tyrants, officeholders and constitutions, and so on.¹⁵ She argues that Plato ‘conserve[d]’ the Homeric tradition and preexistent officeholding system in some areas, while he ‘renovate[d]’ and ‘reconfigure[d]’ ‘exploit[ed] and extend[ed]’ it in others, combining aspects of ‘immanent’ and ‘rejectionist’ social critique.¹⁶

The meticulous effort Lane puts into faithfully reconstructing Plato’s context makes clear that she considers it a prerequisite to interpreting him correctly. But I would not call her a contextualist. For she is equally clear (and here the metaphor of the statue gallery is revealing) that Plato was not a victim of his context. Rather, on Lane’s view, he was capable of comprehending it (at least in part) and seeing it for what it was, as a spectator of sorts. This conviction leads Lane to make a hermeneutic presumption in favour of Plato’s extraordinary abilities as a thinker and writer – to a far greater degree than

⁶ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 52.

⁷ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 3-4, passim.

⁸ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 48-53.

⁹ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 53-64.

¹⁰ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 35, 42ff.

¹¹ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 4, 45, 66.

¹² Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 53, 67.

¹³ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 45.

¹⁴ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 19, 25, 37, 41, 49, 65.

¹⁵ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 45-46.

¹⁶ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 64; 35; 66; 25-26; 82-83.

might be permitted, for instance, in the Ideas in Context series from Cambridge University Press. She portrays Plato's 'literary universe' as 'painstakingly crafted' and refers favorably at one point to M. M. McCabe's judgment that 'Plato wrote nothing in vain'.¹⁷ Rather than treating Plato as an object of historical research alone, Lane sees him as a 'guide' to thinking through the subject of rule and office in which they share a common interest.¹⁸ Here I take Lane to be suggesting that when we are dealing with a thinker as exceptional as Plato, we cannot assume that we have a greater mastery of the context than he did, and hence no amount of contextual data can release us from the task of textual interpretation, which is inevitably dialogical. In her refusal to let Plato's context swallow his texts, she reminds us that reconstructing context – however necessary to set interpretation in motion – is for the sake of understanding the text, rather than an end in itself.

Lane's interpretations are creative and challenging. She effectively dismembers Karl Popper's argument in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) that Plato was the ur-source of modern totalitarianism. Popper claimed that Plato's sole political interest was in the answer to the question: 'Who should rule?' Everything else was only a matter of 'technology' and utopian 'social engineering'.¹⁹ To be fair, Popper was far from alone in his opinion that Plato 'hated the individual and his freedom'.²⁰ Isaiah Berlin and Hannah Arendt also frequently denounced Plato for an alleged abhorrence of pluralism, and both followed Popper in using the image of an 'Archimedean point' *outside* the world—from which leverage can be exercised *over* the world – to illustrate what they regarded as Plato's dangerous instrumentalization of the political.²¹

Lane builds her response in careful interpretations of Plato's *Laws*, *Statesman*, and *Republic*.²² To summarise: First, Plato both conserves the traditional 'service conception' of rule as aiming at the good of the ruled and further specifies this good as the virtue of each individual citizen.²³ Contra Popper's critique of technicity, Lane emphasises that Socrates's analogy between *archē* and *technē* in *Republic* 1 extends only to a subset of crafts or professions that can be classified as 'interpersonal' or 'therapeutic.' Here, the craftsman *qua* craftsman cannot benefit from abusing and exploiting his craftwork, because his object is also a patient.²⁴ Such crafts offer an example of a type of relationship in which 'rule and freedom can become compossible

¹⁷ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 75.

¹⁸ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 8.

¹⁹ Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 1:21-23, 99-101, 114-116, 119-121, 147-157.

²⁰ Popper, *Open Society*, 1:156.

²¹ Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, ed. H. Hardy & R. Hausheer (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), 3-5, 29, 64, 238-239, 282, 312, 326-327, 495-496, 557; Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 11, 14, 20, 204, 220-230, 237-238, 248, 257-268, 269, 284, 287, 319, 302-304, 322-323; *Between Past and Future*, exp. ed. (London: Penguin, 1968), 278-279.

²² Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, Chs. 3-9.

²³ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 20-21; 90.

²⁴ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 149ff.

through willing obedience'.²⁵

Second, while the *Statesman* departs from the *Laws* in acknowledging that reliance on procedural mechanisms of official accountability is inadequate to the end of civic virtue, and the *Republic* internalises this critique, the *Republic* does not abandon offices and officeholding as one element of the *taxis* of rule. On the contrary, to give just one example among many, even the philosopher-kings reign by rotation in time-limited terms.²⁶ The reason, as Lane explains, is that Plato views *taxis* as a good internal to the *telos* of virtue. Every good constitution must possess an institutional order well-suited to its end.²⁷

Lane concludes her book with a stirring defence of the virtues of rule against its modern critics. She chides a raft of theorists for imagining that rule is something they can do without: from Rousseau, Engels, and Lenin to contemporary democratic theorists, including agonists like Bonnie Honig and relational egalitarians like Niko Kolodny, to post-Marxians and postmodernists including Claude Lefort, Jacques Rancière and Judith Butler. As Lane puts it: 'One cannot hide behind a Rousseauian formula in which obedience to laws means that one only obeys oneself. Rather, any such move . . . can only obscure the painful and difficult fact that constitutional order – including officeholding – requires some human beings willingly to obey others'.²⁸ The question for Plato, she explains, is not whether or not to have rule at all, but whether and how the hierarchical relationships of rule 'can be made ethically valuable' by conforming to the good.²⁹ There is no mistaking the jeremiad in the book's final pages: We citizens of modern democracies have forgotten how to command and obey, how to rule and be ruled in turn. We oscillate between anarchism and tyranny, the absence of rule and the obliteration of rule by pure coercion. The problem is that tyranny gets the *telos* wrong, which vitiates its *taxis*, while anarchy cannot achieve its *telos*, because it has no *taxis* at all.³⁰ So we have Bakunin in the morning and Hobbes (or Weber) in the evening, all while rejoicing with Rousseau that at least we *obey* nobody.³¹

Lane does acknowledge one notorious obstacle to accepting his account of rule: his repeated comparisons between rulership and slavery in Book 9 of the *Republic*.³² She handles this objection well by admitting that Plato's uncritical attitude toward actually existing slavery in his time was 'morally odious,' while pointing out that slavery's argumentative function in the *Republic* is either to denigrate tyranny as a form of unjust rule or to illustrate only the epitactic power of rule, without reference to its *telos*.³³ Yet there may be at least one more feature of the Platonic conception of rule, and the possibilities of

²⁵ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 381.

²⁶ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 238-43.

²⁷ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 317.

²⁸ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 380, 397-408.

²⁹ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 404.

³⁰ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 409.

³¹ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 130, 377, 380-81, 406.

³² Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 362-75.

³³ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 372.

freedom to which it gives rise, that makes it difficult to translate into a modern context. If historians like Oswyn Murray and Hans van Wees are to be believed, there is another side to the story about the emergence of the classical *politeia* and its system of officeholding from the archaic period that Lane describes in her second chapter. From the new style of hoplite warfare, which required coordination and concentration in mass, there also emerged a new duty of obedience to the city as a whole – no longer, as in Homer’s fading world, to one’s kin and lord.³⁴ There is a reason why Benjamin Constant said that the liberty of the ancients was bought at the ‘price of war’ and consisted chiefly in ‘deliberating . . . over war and peace,’ which was the ‘constant interest, the almost habitual occupation of the free states of antiquity.’³⁵ At least one place where rule and freedom became compossible for the Greeks, perhaps the typical place, was on the battlefield. Yet as Plutarch understood, this inability to disentangle their civic ideals from highly particularist forms of martial virtue lay at the heart of their eventual tragedy: it stymied any capacity to confederate, or extend the bounds of rule beyond the walls of the *polis*.³⁶

There is evidence of a similar belligerence in Plato, often precisely in those passages where he is keenest to defend the virtues of willing obedience. The guardians in the *Republic* are first introduced to us as warriors who fight to ‘enlarge the city’ so that it can become truly ‘luxurious,’ no longer fit only for ‘pigs.’³⁷ We are never told who is standing in the guardians’ way, or what price they will pay for the misfortune, though it is certain to be a fate worse than being ruled. It is also perhaps too rarely observed that when Socrates in the *Timaean-Critias* turns away from discursive legislation of the ‘city in speech,’ and requests from his interlocutors an account of the city ‘in motion’ (*kinoumena*), enacting its ‘education and training’ both ‘in word and deed’ (*te en tois ergois praxeis kai en tois logois*), he explicitly identifies this state with a condition of war.³⁸ If Plato takes hierarchies of command and obedience to be inevitable features of political rule, as Lane argues, I wonder if he also thinks the same of warfare against the unruly. Does the compatibility of freedom and rule, for Plato, amount in the end to marching in step? If so, what does this suggest about the compatibility of his conception with modern ideals, and his usefulness as a guide for modern people? It may be that the horizon of freedom in Plato is more limited than we would hope. To confront Plato’s idea of the political anew, not just historically but dialogically, is thus in part to ask whether such hopes are well-founded. Here as elsewhere, Lane may wish to challenge our intuitions – or perhaps this is where Plato ceases to be her guide. In any case, this is not so much an objection as an invitation to elaborate on

³⁴ Oswyn Murray, *Early Greece*, 2nd ed. (London: Fontana 1993), 124-136; Hans van Wees, ‘Citizens and Soldiers in Archaic Athens’ in A. Duplouy & R. Brock (eds.) *Defining Citizenship in Archaic Greece* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 103-144.

³⁵ Benjamin Constant, ‘The Liberty of the Ancients as Compared with that of the Moderns’ in *Constant: Political Writings*, ed. B. Fontana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 311-313.

³⁶ Plutarch, *Life of Cimon*, 19.2-3; *Life of Agesilaus*, 15.1-3, 16.4; *Comparison of Philopoemen with Flamininus*, 1.

³⁷ Plato, *Rep.* 372d-373e.

³⁸ Plato, *Tim.* 19b-20c.

her thesis in this challenging and brilliant book.