

Queries On Method And Martial Virtue

Connor Grubaugh
Oriel College, Oxford

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 *Timaus-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.

Guarding The Guardians

Miyo Peck-Suzuki
Nuffield College, Oxford

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.

Author's Response

Melissa Lane
Princeton University

A YEAR before delivering the 1986 Carlyle Lectures at Oxford, Judith Shklar introduced the second edition of her classic study of Rousseau by remarking that she had ‘come to accept that he is one of those authors who says something personal to every reader’, such that ‘it is both vain and illiberal to insist that one’s own reading is the only right one’. Rather, as a scholar, one can aim at most to act as ‘a guide to others to come to their own understanding of Rousseau’s messages’.¹ The commentaries by Connor Grubaugh and Miyo Peck-Suzuki encourage me in believing that my own monograph, based on the Carlyle Lectures that I delivered in 2018,² can serve as such a guide for readers of Plato, given both commentators’ perceptive insights into my argument as well as their challenging questions.

As the commentators observe, the monograph is organised around the closely related ideas of rule and office, which in ancient Greek were focally expressed with the same vocabulary (*archē*, *archein*), with the context (including syntactic clues) serving to distinguish between the two senses. In contrast to more general and potentially untrammelled kinds of rule, I construe office as a kind of rule that is characterised by ‘limited political powers’, limits that in ancient Greek constitutions typically included the constraints imposed by annual accountability audits (*euthunai*).³ I analyse each form of rule, including constitutional rule organized through offices, in terms of two dimensions: as a *taxis* (order) oriented toward a *telos* (end or purpose), where the latter for Plato as for a wide swathe of Greek texts from Homer onward was assumed to be properly the good of the ruled (even though that assumption was often undermined or challenged).

In this context, Connor Grubaugh illuminatingly remarks that I show Plato to have been ‘keenly aware that means and ends in politics are not so easily disentangled’, and puts my fundamental point more pithily than I did: ‘tyranny gets the *telos* [of rule] wrong, which vitiates its *taxis*, while anarchy

¹ Judith N. Shklar, *Men and Citizens: A Study of Rousseau’s Social Theory*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985; first edn, 1969), vii.

² It was a special honour to do so in the footsteps of Shklar, from whom I had been so fortunate to learn at Harvard University as both her student and undergraduate thesis advisee, as well as those of the 1980 Carlyle Lecturer Quentin Skinner, from whom I was equally fortunate to learn at the University of Cambridge where he became a mentor, colleague and longtime friend.

³ Melissa Lane, *Of Rule and Office: Plato’s Ideas of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 3-5 and *passim*.

cannot achieve its *telos*, because it has no *taxis* at all.⁴ Indeed, I argue that Plato saw, and showed, that while it is crucial to grasp the proper *telos* of rule, doing so neither exhausts political philosophy nor ensures good political rule.⁵ Rather, each of the three dialogues discussed in the monograph (*Republic*, *Statesman* and *Laws*) explores a different answer to the question of what kind of *taxis* might sufficiently robustly secure the *telos* of rule, each of them ‘reconfigur[ing]’ various existing political models in exploring alternative ways of better orienting a *taxis* of rule to the securing and safeguarding of its *telos*.⁶

It is this attention to *taxis* as much as to *telos* that, as Grubaugh nicely puts my view, makes Plato rightly count as ‘a genuinely political philosopher’. To be sure, while highlighting this contribution of the book, Grubaugh also poses a significant challenge to its normative import for contemporary political theorising. He puts the point as follows: that what I call the ‘compossibility’ of rule and freedom was in practice interpreted as made possible by, and confined to, the military and political ordering of a particular Greek *polis*.⁷ Grubaugh points to Plato’s *Timaeus* (19b-20c) as indicating the intention to present the city of the *Republic* ‘in motion’ in the context of war, and one might also point to the fact that the guardians are originally introduced into the city founded ‘in speech’⁸ as military guards needed for offensive as well as defensive purposes.⁹ This highlights a limitation of my formulation of the *telos* of rule as ‘the good of the ruled’, namely, that this fails to register concern for anyone outside a given *polis*, such as those who might be subjected to its military attacks (though these observations would have to be reconciled with the fact that Socrates in *Republic* 373d-e diagnoses the origins of war as lying in *pleonexia* [excessive graspingness or desire for acquisition], an important theme of the dialogue from book 1 onward, which would presumably be curbed in a just and well-ruled city).

Grubaugh asks whether this means that ‘the horizon of freedom in Plato is more limited than we would hope’, entailing that Plato’s ‘usefulness as a guide’ (strikingly, the same term that Shklar used) may likewise be curtailed. So too, Miyo Peck-Suzuki asks whether the book’s ‘project [is] to show

⁴ Grubaugh, referring to Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 409.

⁵ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 317. Here is part of what I write in the book on that page: ‘The evaluative status of rule derives from both its *telos* and its *taxis*, and from the relationship between them; conversely, a complete negation of the value of either will end in undoing of the other. Thus, tyranny and anarchy respectively illustrate key axes of Plato’s understanding of rule, as well as demonstrating the inevitable intersection of those axes. Tyranny calls attention to the axis of purpose (*telos*); anarchy to the axis of order (*taxis*). In principle, *taxis*...for Plato...has prima facie value in its own right. But, if the *telos* of a *taxis* is negated and inverted, that *taxis* loses its value. Indeed, as we have just argued, in so doing it is ultimately undone as a genuine *taxis* altogether. Absolute power without any limits inevitably turns into its opposite: no actual power at all’.

⁶ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 35, as noted by Grubaugh.

⁷ For ‘compossibility’, see Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 356-8 and *passim*; rule and freedom, together with friendship, are values which I note in the book are combined in the statement of the intertwined *telos* and *taxis* of rule in Plato’s *Laws*, as well as in what I call his articulation of ‘garden-variety constitutionalism’ (on which, see 367-9 and *passim*).

⁸ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 78 and *passim*.

⁹ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 182-3.

that...Plato has in fact been the authority we need for liberal constitutionalism' and implies that he cannot in fact serve as such. It is a fair and important point that Plato's political theory, as I reconstruct it, was bounded by the horizon of the Greek *polis* as being one among many others that were in practice always in the realm of potential military conflict. But how different is this from the view of the state that modern liberal political theory, including the broadly constitutionalist tradition in which I situate Plato as a precursor, also generally presupposes?

To be sure, as Constant, Hegel and others have insisted, the imperatives and conditions of citizenship in the *polis* were different from those in modern states. But the very fact of a horizon bounding one political community off from others, with potential military conflict always a concomitant threat, is in fact tacitly taken for granted in all but the most radically cosmopolitan of political theories. Once again, as in the common basic structure of an officeholding *taxis* of some kind which *Of Rule and Office* argues that ancient and modern constitutions share, the basic political contours of Greek antiquity are more consonant with those of modernity than our habitual distancing of their concerns might lead us to believe.

That said, what precisely is the nature of Plato's interest in questions of *taxis*? Peck-Suzuki proposes a distinction relevant to evaluating (the success of) my overall argument, between:

- (i) a 'strong claim' which she worries that the book does not succeed in vindicating, namely: 'that 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'; and
- (ii) a 'weak claim' which in her view the book 'proves...beyond doubt', namely:

'that Plato does...show an interest in accountability, safeguarding, and office-holding' but this is an interest which does not amount to a 'commitment...to a kind of classical constitutionalism'.¹⁰

Peck-Suzuki rightly emphasises that the origins of the decline of *kallipolis* as portrayed in *Republic* book 8 lie in a degeneration of the intellect and character of those ruling, that is, in what happens 'when the wrong people are in the wrong roles'. Here I welcome the opportunity to clarify that the book's emphasis on Plato's interest in the *taxis* of rule was never meant to exclude or minimise the importance of ensuring that the right people occupy the roles (typically including but not limited to offices) that constitute any such *taxis*.

¹⁰ Here I combine various formulations that Peck-Suzuki offers.

On the contrary, as Peck-Suzuki highlights, any *taxis* of rule will be undermined if the people occupying the *taxis* are unsuited to those roles. My point in the book is that the education of potential rulers and officeholders is education *for* their respective roles within the *taxis*, and those roles will carry with them certain kinds of limits (even if only the limits derived from the content of the appropriate *telos*) which are necessary to ensure that rule is carried out correctly rather than exploitatively.

To put this point in terms of the book's opening critique of Karl Popper's rejection of Plato, to which Peck-Suzuki alludes: it is not that Popper (or, *a fortiori*, Peck-Suzuki) was wrong in holding that Plato was concerned with the question of 'Who should rule?' Clearly, he was concerned with this question. Rather, as I put it in *Of Rule and Office*, 'Plato was far from limiting himself only to [this] question'.¹¹ In writing that Plato did not limit himself *only* to the question of who should rule, I intended to signal that Plato was not following Popper in the proposal to 'replace [that] question...by the new question: *How can we so organize political institutions that bad or incompetent rulers can be prevented from doing too much damage?*', with the emphasis put on the word *replace*.¹² Rather, as I welcome the opportunity to clarify in reply to Peck-Suzuki here, what I aimed in the book to show is that Plato was equally concerned with *both* of the questions framed by Popper, and with their interrelationship. The question of who should rule is not just a question of *who* should rule, but also of who should *rule*; we cannot know who should rule without considering the role of rule that they are to occupy.

Thus, I would suggest that we need further to refine the distinction that Peck-Suzuki introduces by selecting among the multiple options which she offers in presenting both the strong and the weak claims. I would reject the reading of my thesis in the terms with which Peck-Suzuki initially introduces the 'strong claim', namely, as the thesis 'that questions about accountability and institutional safeguarding are Plato's *primary* preoccupations' (emphasis added): not so, given that on my account, as noted by Grubaugh, Plato is equally concerned with the *telos* of rule as with its *taxis*. Moreover, as I argued above, Plato's concern with who fills the roles of rule is as much a concern with the *taxis* of rule as is concern with the nature of those roles itself. But while that version of the strong claim is infelicitous, I do defend a different version of the strong claim that Peck-Suzuki formulates as follows: 'that Plato wants to give an account of constitutional rule that cares about how rule is ordered – not just who is doing the ruling'. Indeed, that formulation is on my account consistent with (rather than contradictory of) Peck-Suzuki's own astute observation that part of Plato's project, for example in *Republic* 8, may be to 'giv[e] his contemporaries a warning about the dangers from which these [constitutional] safeguards ultimately cannot protect them'. I would say that Plato's concern with the *taxis* of rule need not, and in my view does not, equate to his claiming that any given *taxis* is failsafe.

¹¹ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 27.

¹² Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 27.

Peck-Suzuki further questions the political upshot of the book from another angle, namely, the methodological one with which I began in quoting Shklar: here she highlights the challenge involved in even ‘identifying ... which claims we can attribute to Plato’. Part of Peck-Suzuki’s formulation of the ‘weak claim’ is that the book might be read as claiming that that Plato uses the leading characters whom I call his ‘avatars’ simply to ‘explor[e] many potential ... commitments’, among which ‘a commitment to a kind of classical constitutionalism’ is simply one commitment being explored but not necessarily endorsed. While this is indeed a possible reading and deployment of my ‘avatars’ approach, it is not the path that the book proposes. Rather, *Of Rule and Office* proposes that ‘it is illuminating’ to construe the leading character in each of its three focal dialogues (that is, Socrates in the *Republic*, the Eleatic Visitor in the *Statesman*, and the Athenian Visitor in the *Laws*) as an ‘avatar’ of Plato, such that ‘we find as readers that it is in and through the avatars that Plato is most fully able to think through the questions to which he recurs in the context of variously revealing constraints’.¹³

Thus, while I do state earlier in the book (as Peck-Suzuki quotes) that ‘I unabashedly attribute views to Plato’, the views attributable in connection with each (distinct) avatar may differ, even as they can be seen overall as ‘complementary’.¹⁴ I would also emphasise that the avatar approach is presented as heuristically useful (‘it is illuminating’, 74, as quoted above), not as necessary or foundational. Indeed, as I discuss at greater length in a forthcoming symposium on the book in the journal *Polis*, I see the avatar approach as having emerged from my study of the dialogues, not as having preceded or underpinned that study: it is the fruit of a kind of reflective equilibrium between method and content.

The same is true of the question of contextualism which Grubaugh raises. While I appreciate Grubaugh’s observation that I show Plato to have been ‘not a *victim* of his context’, but rather ‘capable of...seeing it for what it was, as a spectator of sorts’, I would myself take this aspect of my work not as a contrast with the so-called Cambridge School approach, as Grubaugh positions it, but rather, as an elucidation of at least some positions that can rightly lay claim to that (variegated) mantle. In other words, *Of Rule and Office* is in my view an equal fruit of what I have been privileged to learn from time spent at Cambridge and (much shorter, but nevertheless significant) time spent at Oxford. In this context I am especially delighted to be able to contribute to the launch of *Oxford New Books* by Sophie Smith, whom I am proud to count as having been at one time my Cambridge undergraduate student, and to salute the extraordinarily thoughtful and challenging commentaries on my work produced at Oxford by Connor Grubaugh and Miyo Peck-Suzuki.

¹³ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 74-75.

¹⁴ Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, respectively at 30 (‘avatar’) and at 184-5, and *passim*.