

## Author's Response

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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’.<sup>1</sup> 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,<sup>2</sup> 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*).<sup>3</sup> 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

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

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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*.<sup>6</sup>

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*.<sup>7</sup> 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’<sup>8</sup> as military guards needed for offensive as well as defensive purposes.<sup>9</sup> 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

<sup>4</sup> Grubaugh, referring to Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 409.

<sup>5</sup> 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’.

<sup>6</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 35, as noted by Grubaugh.

<sup>7</sup> 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*).

<sup>8</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 78 and *passim*.

<sup>9</sup> 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'.<sup>10</sup>

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*.

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<sup>10</sup> 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'.<sup>11</sup> 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*.<sup>12</sup> 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.

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<sup>11</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 27.

<sup>12</sup> 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’.<sup>13</sup>

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’.<sup>14</sup> 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.

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<sup>13</sup> Lane, *Of Rule and Office*, 74-75.

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