

# The Value of Rule in Plato's Dialogues: A Reply to Melissa Lane

**David Ebrey**

Northwestern University  
[david.ebrey@gmail.com](mailto:david.ebrey@gmail.com)

## ABSTRACT

I examine Melissa Lane's claim that *antianarchia* is an element of Plato's political thought. Plato's *antianarchia*, she claims, is his profound rejection of political anarchy and corresponding general commitment to the value of rulers and office-holders. I argue that while Socrates is committed to *antianarchia* in the Republic and other dialogues, he is not committed to it in the Socratic dialogues. Where we might expect *antianarchia* in those dialogues we instead find Socrates simply committed to the value of being lawful and the value of being ruled by those with knowledge. I suggest that we can think of the Socratic dialogues as having a distinctive place within the structure of Plato's corpus without thinking that they were composed earlier in his life or that they served a specific pedagogical function. I end by suggesting that what is most interesting about Plato's *antianarchia* is how he develops it in the

Republic, which we miss if we are focused on Plato's general commitments, as opposed to the views he develops in specific dialogues.

Keywords: Plato, Anarchy, Rule, Republic, Apology, Crito, Socratic Dialogues, Developmentalism, Pedagogical reading, Chronology.

In this paper Melissa Lane defends in two-parts the claim that we can interpret Plato's political theory. First, she argues that it is possible to interpret any aspect of Plato's thought at all. Then she argues that we can interpret his political thought, in particular, by defending the more specific claim that one central element of his political thought is 'his profound rejection of political anarchy' (p. 60), which she calls his *antianarchia*. She provides an insightful philological argument that *anarchia* involves not having rulers, rather than simply lacking laws, and so his *antianarchia* is his support for having rulers and office-holders. In these comments I focus on how to think of *antianarchia* as an element of his political thought, and in doing so raise some methodological questions about how to read Plato's dialogues.

Lane says that *antianarchia* 'is asserted as a commitment of Plato's *political* thought, by which I mean the political relationships among, and within, embodied individuals in an era devoid of direct divine rule' (p. 63). At the same time, she acknowledges that *antianarchia* applies to the embodied soul as well as the *polis*, insofar as they have parallel structures (p. 63). In the *Republic*, *anarchia* is bad for the city and souls alike; in both, the different parts should follow a ruler. *Antianarchia* is, of course, merely one example of a norm in the *Republic* that applies to both the city and the soul. Justice is the most prominent example; instead of being a specifically psychic norm or a specifically political one, it applies at a broader level that encompasses both.

Does the generality of Plato's *antianarchia* pose a problem for thinking that it is distinctive of his political thought? I do not think so. Instead, let me suggest that this generality itself is a distinctive feature of Plato's political thought. It is a distinctive thesis about politics to claim that some of its central norms are not

unique to it, but are in fact more general. Of course, if Plato had no notion of politics, then he could not appreciate this as a distinctive thesis about it.<sup>1</sup> But one of the main ideas in the *Republic* is that at least some of the same norms apply to the city and the soul. Thus, while *antianarchia* is not a commitment of Plato's political theory *per se*, it is part of a distinctive position about politics: viewing at least some of its crucial norms as applying at a broader level. You might worry that having these broad norms downplays the importance of the *polis*. But there is no more reason to think this than there is to think that having such norms downplays the importance of the soul.

Lane's claim is not simply about the *Republic*; she claims that *antianarchia* is a distinctive commitment of Plato's political thought in general. On Lane's methodological picture we should, following Sedley, view the dialogues as a sort of Plato thinking aloud, and at the same time, following Gerson, think that there are certain basic commitments and patterns of argument that Plato has throughout the dialogues (p. 61-63). For Lane, calling these 'commitments' is compatible with thinking that they are high exploratory and non-dogmatic.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, she thinks that 'however firm or conversely exploratory and open-ended were Plato's positive intellectual commitments, there are certain patterns of argument that one would never find reason in reading the dialogues to attribute to him' (p. 63). She thus thinks that we can define Plato's general commitments as the denial of those things he argues against and never argues for. The question then, given this approach, is whether Plato is consistently against *anarchia*, or only in certain dialogues.

In order to answer that question, it will be useful to know why Plato is committed to *antianarchia*. He certainly seems committed across the dialogues to the value of having one's

actions guided by knowledge, and in particular to the value of being ruled by knowledge rather than ignorance. But this only supports rule by those who have knowledge; it does not provide a general reason to accept rule. The *Republic* does seem to provide reasons to accept rule in general. It seems that to the extent that things are ruled, they are harmonious and orderly, and this is good. The way that Lane puts this is that ‘the goodness of order [...] animate[s] the value of *antianarchia*’ (p. 63). This provides reason to view any rule as good, to the extent it imposes some order, not only rule by reason – although that would certainly be best. That some rule is better than none is clear in the criticism of democracy and tyranny that are found in book VIII. People are not ruled by knowledge in an oligarchy, but it is still better than the democracy and tyranny, with their attendant *anarchia*.

Is Socrates committed to the value of order across the dialogues? In the *Apology* he reports that he was ordered to round up Leon of Salamis, but refused on the grounds that doing so would be unjust and unholy (32c-d). This is, of course, compatible with a broad commitment to the value of order and rule, but Socrates’ focus is entirely on the overriding value of doing what is just, regardless of what the rulers say. In opposing the wishes of the democracy he says that ‘I thought I should run any risk on the side of law and justice rather than join you, for fear of prison or death, when you were engaged in an unjust course’ (trans. Grube in Cooper 1997, 32b-c). He does say that it is wicked and shameful to disobey one’s superior, whether god or man (29b). But this comment forces us to reflect on what it is for someone genuinely to be a superior, especially given Socrates’ refusal to obey when ordered to round up Leon of Salamis. The natural Socratic suggestion is that a genuine superior is someone who has the relevant knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

The *Crito* is a trickier case. There Socrates faces a concrete decision, which is different from the project in *Republic* VIII. Nonetheless, he bases his decision on general principles, which are broadly in line with those in the *Apology*. Socrates’ emphasis, as in the *Apology*, is on the importance of law and justice, not rulers *per se*. Given Lane’s important point that *anarchia* is about rulers in particular, not lawlessness, it would be a mistake to think of the *Crito* as animated by *antianarchia* as opposed to *antianomia*. He says in both the *Apology* and *Crito* that if you follow someone with knowledge you will be helped and if you follow someone without, you will be harmed (25b, 47a-d). The only reason to do what a ruler or office-holder tells you to is either (1) this is required to be lawful and just, or (2) this person possess knowledge, and so will guide you well. If you follow a ruler who lacks knowledge, you do not do so because their rule itself is good for the city or your soul, but because to do otherwise would be unjust and harmful to your soul.

To be clear, Socrates is not positively arguing that we should embrace *anarchia* in the *Apology*. But it is too low of a bar to say that we should attribute to Plato any idea that he argues for in one dialogue and does not actively argue against in another. The entire focus in the *Apology* and *Crito* is on doing what is lawful, just, and guided by knowledge. There is no indication of an independent value to rule or order, and there are frequent claims that these other things should entirely guide one’s actions. By contrast, consider Plato’s antimaterialism, which Gerson takes to be a central element of Platonism. It is true that in many dialogues, e.g., the *Laches*, there are no antimaterialist claims, but nor are there claims where antimaterialism would have been natural to discuss, given the context. The *Laches* is silent on materialism because it is simply not relevant,

whereas *antianarchia* would be relevant in the *Apology* and *Crito* and we are given different reasons and arguments instead.

*Antianarchia* seems to characterize Plato's so-called middle and late period dialogues, rather than the Socratic dialogues.<sup>4</sup> In the middle and late dialogues order and structure are valued, even if they are not guided by knowledge.<sup>5</sup> In the Socratic dialogues, rule is valued as long as it is rule by someone with knowledge, but the order and structure provided by non-knowledgeable rule have no particular value. If this is correct, what should we make of it? On the unitarian side, we could simply say that in different dialogues Socrates pursues different interests and arguments. Perhaps in some dialogues there is no sign of *antianarchia*, but that does not mean he ever changed his mind. On the developmentalist side, we could say that Plato's views evolved from his earlier, Socratic views to the middle period. We could then discuss how, if at all, Plato's views change in the late dialogues.

Recently there has been weariness about the whole debate between unitarians and developmentalists. But if we abandon these approaches, what should we replace them with? One tendency has been to simply focus on Plato's views in particular dialogues. This can be quite productive, since within a given dialogue we can see the unfolding of developed lines of reasoning for particular views, between a stable set of interlocutors. But it seems unnecessarily restrictive to avoid talking about views across the dialogues. Patterns of reasoning in the *Euthydemus* and *Meno* or the *Republic* and *Phaedrus*, seem too closely connected to artificially refuse to draw on dialogues to tell a broader account; at the same time, the apparent differences between dialogues surely warrant consideration. The cross references Plato puts between the dialogues, both in the outer frames and within the discussions, suggest the he wants us to read them alongside each other.

One way to discuss the differences between dialogues without a developmentalist account is with a pedagogical one. The idea is, for example, that Plato intended readers to read a Socratic dialogue that asks a 'what is it?' question, like the *Laches*, before reading the *Phaedo*, and a dialogue that contrasts forms with sensible things, like the *Phaedo*, before reading the *Parmenides*. This is compatible with thinking that the *Laches* or *Phaedo* could have been written after the *Parmenides*. However, while I think it is very plausible that Plato wanted to structure the dialogues in some such way, we do not need to rely on such a hypothesis to see an important structure in the dialogues. Regardless of the order that Plato wrote the dialogues or how he intended us to read them, there is a structure to the ideas, arguments, and interactions within them. Ideas are mentioned in one dialogue and developed in others, similar arguments are presented in different ways, interlocutors respond to Socrates in different ways, and, I would argue, ideas are accepted in some dialogues and rejected in others. There is a philosophically interesting story to tell about how forms are discussed in the *Euthyphro*, described differently and further developed in the *Phaedo* and *Republic*, and then discussed in a new way in the *Sophist* and *Philebus*. And there's an interesting story about why and how it is important to be ruled, and the role of law, in the *Apology* and *Crito*, which is further developed in the *Republic*, and finally the *Statesman* and *Laws*. While it is nearly impossible to discuss these things without using temporal vocabulary, and suggesting that Plato did it for this purpose, we need not be committed to this. Tracing these intellectual lines is one of the most philosophically rewarding ways we can interact with Plato's dialogues, and we can do this without committing ourselves to the order in which he wrote the dialogues or to his intentions in writing them.

If we take this approach, focusing on the web of ideas and arguments that connects the dialogues, is there something important to be gained from determining Plato's commitments in general, as opposed to his commitments in particular dialogues, or how his commitments develop across dialogues? What do we gain from a general understanding of Plato's political theory, where this is a theory compatible with what he says across the dialogues, not simply in certain ones? Perhaps such a theory provides us with the guiding undercurrent of Platonic thought: that wisdom is the key virtue, or that it is important to answer 'what is it?' questions, or that everyone seeks the good, or that our actions should be guided by knowledge. But it is not clear that this undercurrent is fundamental to Plato's thought in any given dialogue, or it contains the most important ideas in the dialogues. Arguably the most interesting and exciting ideas in the *Republic* are the ones that are only found there, and denied elsewhere. Ideas that we attribute to Plato *simpliciter* will play an important role in our overall understanding of the corpus, but we should be careful not to over emphasize them.

With this methodological picture sketched, let me return to *antianarchia* and its role in the *Republic*. I want to suggest a slightly different picture than Lane's. She claims that before Plato tyranny and anarchy were opposed, whereas Plato aligns them (p. 67). However, I do not think that that is suggested by the passage Lane quotes from Isocrates' *Panegyricus* (4.39):

For, finding the Hellenes living without laws and in scattered abodes (Παραλαβοῦσα γὰρ τοὺς Ἑλληνας ἀνόμως ζῶντας καὶ σποράδην οἰκοῦντας), some oppressed by tyrannies, others perishing through anarchy (καὶ τοὺς μὲν

ὑπὸ δυναστειῶν ὑβριζομένους τοὺς δὲ δι' ἀναρχίαν ἀπολλυμένους) .... (trans. Norlin 1928)

Note that both those that are oppressed by tyrannies and those perishing through anarchy are living without laws (ἀνόμως ζῶντας), and so tyranny and anarchy are aligned here. In fact, Lane's philological examination of *anarchia* helps us appreciate what Isocrates is saying. *Anarchia* is not simple lawlessness; it is the lack of a ruler or officeholder. Isocrates is here relying on the idea that there are two different ways people can live without laws: they can do so because they lack a leader, or they can have a leader but one with no regard for law – a tyrant. Thus, it is not a Platonic innovation to align anarchy and tyranny; Isocrates, and quite possibly others, see them as both involving lawlessness. Is there anything innovative, then, about Plato's connection between anarchy and tyranny in the *Republic*?

Let me suggest that the innovation is that the political anarchy of democracy leads to the psychic anarchy of the tyrant. The innovation is not only to see the same problem, *anarchia*, in the city and the soul, but to give a deeper account of what brings about tyranny, namely an underlying psychic condition of *anarchia* (574e-75a, 565d-66a), which is the result of living in the *anarchia* of a democratic city (562e-63e). Thus, what is distinctive about Plato's alignment of anarchy and tyranny in the *Republic* is how it fits both into the city-soul analogy and into the interaction between city and soul. And this, of course, is a distinctive feature of the *Republic*, not found in other dialogues. There is a danger that in looking for a commitment that we can attribute to Plato *simpliciter* we miss what is most interesting about *antianarchia* in the *Republic*.<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES

1 By contrast, I take it that even though Plato has commitments relevant to the philosophy of mind, he does not have a notion of the mind, and so could not be aware that his commitments are about this.

2 Lane suggests that the term 'view' can sound dogmatic (in the modern English sense of 'dogmatic', p. 61), and so instead she tends to talk about Plato's 'commitments'. To my ear, 'commitment' sounds more dogmatic than 'view', but in any event, the point is that we need not think of Socrates as dogmatically committed to these positions.

3 Even if Socrates thinks it is wicked to disobey one's conventional superior, this need not mean that obeying them would be good for you. It may simply be that disobeying them is unjust and unlawful.

4 In most of the so-called Socratic dialogues Socrates does not mention the value of order and harmony – the notable exception being the *Gorgias* (503e-504d), which is frequently thought of as a transitional dialogue.

5 Although, if what is ultimately valuable is order and harmony, it might seem that this could be brought about with less of a role for rulers. Arguably, the *Laws* is engaged in precisely such a project.

6 I would like to thank Emily Fletcher and Richard Kraut for comments on an earlier draft of these comments.