

BOOK REVIEW

The Birth of Politics: Eight Greek and Roman Political Ideas and Why They Matter. By MELISSA LANE. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014. Pp. xii + 388. Hardcover, \$26.95. ISBN 978-0-691-16647-6.

Reading Lane's *Birth of Politics* in a presidential election year is a disturbing and chastening experience to say the least, which is the highest praise I can give this introduction to the multivalent nature of ancient political concepts and their value within today's fractured and fractious political landscape. Using a thinker (or group of thinkers) as a lens through which to explore the ideas of justice, constitution, democracy, virtue, citizenship, cosmopolitanism, republic, and sovereignty, Lane traverses familiar territory by way of a new path, providing the armchair classicist and common reader, in particular, with a foundation in political theory from which to imagine and build a new vision for our imperfect, but invaluable, democracy.

In Chapter One (Solon, Plato, etc.) on justice, Lane sets in motion themes she will revisit in later chapters, asking: what compels an individual to act against his own self-interest for the sake of justice? Is "divine sanction" of some sort necessary to compel a human being to act with justice towards others? A highlight of this chapter is Lane's discussion of ancient applications of checks and balances to compensate for differences in wealth through political power (interestingly, equal distribution of wealth is not something with which the ancients seem overly concerned); thus, the Athenians' choosing jurors by lot and allowing any citizen to speak in the Assembly, and the position of tribune of the plebs in ancient Rome.

The next two chapters, on constitution (Herodotus, Aristotle, etc.) and democracy (Thucydides, etc.), focus on Sparta and Athens. Lane does not leave justice behind, however, as she analyzes Greek views of monarchy, oligarchy, and democracy, each of which wrestles with the problem of justice. One of the strengths of Lane's approach (as in her earlier work, *Eco-Republic: What the Ancients Can Teach Us about Ethics, Virtue, and Sustainable Living*, 2013) is her ability to breathe new life into ideas so entrenched and institutionalized in western culture as to seem empty and abstracted from daily life. Thus, discussing Sparta, Lane reminds us that a constitution describes both the lifestyle of a polis (*politeia*) and "a certain

ordering of the habits and values of a group of citizens” that serves “to maintain the customs and principles animating a particular way of life” (60).

Implicit in Lane’s discussion of constitutions and democracy is the knowledge that no constitution can solve the problem of human susceptibility to flattery, greed, and persuasive (but, nevertheless, self-interested) rhetoric. This is addressed in Chapter Four on virtue (Socrates and Plato). Lane’s second great strength is her ability to demonstrate the continued importance of what many consider “old-fashioned” values. She reminds us of how radical Socrates’/Plato’s ideas were in their time, challenging the establishment and proposing a way of life aimed towards the Good of the souls of citizens and of the city itself.

The relationship between the cultivation of a virtuous citizen and a Good city-state becomes a theme running through the chapters on citizenship (Aristotle) and cosmopolitanism (Stoics, Skeptics, Cynics, and Epicureans). Lane corrects some oft misunderstood aspects of Aristotle’s ideas of citizenship, namely, that artisans, tradesmen, and farmers are excluded from the “expression of our most distinctively human capacities” (184), not because of some inherent inferiority, but because their way of life does not allow them the time to cultivate virtue (212). Economic inequalities once again lead to inequalities in the inability to participate in politics.

Sometimes political conditions mean that “inner emigration” is the only defense against tyranny. Turning to Rome to discuss the ideas of republic (Polybius and Cicero) and sovereignty (Seneca, etc.), Lane provides a succinct history of the Roman Republic, which developed through experience rather than theory. Again, we see the connection between self-rule and rule over others within the “cosmopolitan” Roman Empire. When confronting a tyrant becomes suicidal, cultivating an ideal of self-control and inner freedom instead is a way of coping. Ideally, however, the individual possessing ruling power will always marshal his own self-rule to virtuously rule over others.

My appreciation of Lane’s study does not preclude criticism. The Rome-focused chapters seem rushed, though the relationships Lane develops between Roman and Greek political ideas are very perceptive. In addition, with the humanities under threat, drawing direct lines between past and present is more important than ever. One wishes Lane were more explicit about the use of ancient Greco-Roman concepts today.

Lane’s work raises further questions. If corruption makes politics dangerous, is it ethical to avoid politics altogether and focus on self-rule? How do we balance

political equality with an inequality of wealth? Most provocative of all is the idea that a leader should rule himself with more discipline than he rules others. In today's political climate, it is difficult to imagine who would qualify for office because of his/her ability to rule him/herself. Does a thriving polis require a "philosopher citizen" (rather than a "philosopher king") to tackle today's many "cosmopolitan" problems; if so, where shall s/he be found?

Ultimately, the most important and puzzling question is: what do human beings require to be compelled to behave well towards others? Ancient law often relied on a deity or other transcendent ideal to inculcate obedience. Must citizens believe in a power that is "beyond the human" in order to focus their efforts on virtuous action in the political sphere? I am afraid the answer may be "yes."

SUSAN A. CURRY

University of New Hampshire, susan.curry@unh.edu