

BOOK REVIEW

Melissa Lane, *Eco-Republic: What the Ancients Can Teach Us About Ethics, Virtues, and Sustainable Living*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012. Pp. ix + 245. \$29.95. ISBN 978-0-691-15124-3.

Melissa Lane's *Eco-Republic* is a very good example of what I hope is a burgeoning trend in classical scholarship: the application of ancient thought to contemporary environmental problems. By using Platonic images to conceptualize contemporary obstacles to the creation of a sustainable society and unraveling forgotten connections between city and soul in Plato's writings, *Eco-Republic* offers a powerful corrective to those who devalue the role of the individual in favor of a top-down, policy-oriented approach to problems like climate change. For classicists, Lane's work shows how the insights garnered from the close reading of ancient texts can and should be applied to today's global challenges.

Using Plato's ideal city as a model, Lane effectively demonstrates the crucial role the individual plays in reshaping his/her community's ethos and acting towards the creation of a sustainable society. A sustainable society "will be one which its members themselves recognize as thriving in a way which can be continued into the future, in relation to the interactive life-support systems of the earth" (19) and, over time, "will be ever more able to realize and instantiate the good" (20). Citizens of bureaucratic societies have lost sight of the way individual ethics and behaviors are intertwined with a city's values and policies. As a result, many individuals have come to feel that what they could do would make no measurable difference and so do not act at all. Similarly, when one's government fails to take action, as when the U.S. government refused to ratify the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, many of its citizens do not believe that they ought to act either. In Plato, Lane finds ways of understanding why individuals fail to act and of imagining a society in which the individual participates in creating a vision of and implementing a society oriented towards, the good.

In the first part of *Eco-Republic*, "Inertia," Lane analyzes three factors (inertia, greed, and negligibility) interfering with individual action. In the first chapter, "Introduction: Inertia as Failure of the Political Imagination," Lane uses Plato's

myth of the Cave to discuss just how difficult it is for an individual to change his or her habits. While in Chapter two, “From Greed to Glory: Ancient to Modern Ethics—and Back Again?,” Lane traces the values of modern Western societies back to their origins in ancient Greece, but suggests that we no longer employ certain Greek terms and values, which now may prove vital to reinvigorating the contemporary political imagination and channeling it towards a more sustainable way of life. Toward that end, Lane discusses the importance of individual participation and virtue, and the dangers of *pleonexia*, “grasping-for-more,” and *hubris*.

The third chapter, “Underpinning Inertia: The Idea of Negligibility,” is the most provocative. Using Plato’s tale of the ring of Gyges, which renders its wearer invisible, Lane grapples with the problem of negligibility, the idea that whatever action an individual takes would make so little difference that that action is not worth taking, *even* when s/he believes it to be “right.” Lane convincingly argues, however, that one never knows what *indirect* effects an individual action may have. For example, installing solar panels on one’s roof may not save one enough money in the long-run to warrant their installation and certainly will not, by itself, radically alter the pace of climate change, but if one person in a community installs them anyway, his/her neighbors, too, may wish to be, or be seen to be, “green” and install solar panels themselves. Having solar panels may become a factor in one’s social identity; and, together, all of these solar panels will begin to make a measurable difference.

The second and third parts of *Eco-Republic*, “Imagination” and “Initiative,” further rely on Plato’s writings to describe the psychosocial relationship souls have with their cities and to illuminate ways individuals can positively influence the societies in which they live. In Chapters four through seven, “Meet Plato’s *Republic*,” “The City and the Soul,” “The Idea of the Good,” and “Initiative and Individuals: A (Partly) Platonic Political Project,” Lane summarizes the *Republic*, defends the values of virtue and health, and provides a cogent argument for ecological sustainability as “an indispensable part of the common good” (137).

Of these, chapter six, “The Idea of the Good,” makes the best use of Plato’s *Republic*. In discussing the concept of the Good, Lane stresses the Platonic idea that self-destructive actions are in themselves unsustainable. Since what is of highest value must be both intelligible and a source of growth, the pursuit of goals that are self-undermining is the pursuit of that which cannot generate indefinite growth and is not sustainable. Sustainability, Lane concludes, “is best understood as a condition on goodness” (136).

Lane does not purport to offer practical solutions to the myriad ecological challenges we face in the 21st century, which can frustrate the reader hoping for more direct applications of ancient theory to modern practices. Some Plato specialists will also find fault with the particular way Lane interprets and then applies Platonic ideas to the problems of sustainability. However, Lane's is an original book that brings ancient psychology, political theory, and ethics to bear on the issues of sustainability. Ultimately, *Eco-Republic* admirably shows that students and scholars of the ancient world have unique contributions to make to discussions concerning the creation of a more sustainable society. We should take our place at the table.

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