Melissa Lane, Eco-Republic: What the Ancients Can Teach Us About Ethics, Virtue, and Sustainable Living. Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012. Pp. vii, 245. ISBN: 978069115124-3.

In this stimulating and timely book Melissa Lane turns to Plato for a model of the kind of transformative social change that she believes is necessary to put reason and desire, and the city and the soul into a harmonious and ecologically sustainable relationship. Lane does not write with the purpose of "greening" Plato, but with the aim of utilizing Plato to help green modern ethics and politics. While Lane is willing to abandon many specific (anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian) features of Plato's model of the beautiful city, she nonetheless takes cues from two central Platonic ideas: that the city (political institutions) and the soul (mind and character) are bound-up in a mutually constitutive relationship, for good and ill; and the classical virtues (wisdom, moderation, courage, and justice) are essential for the healthy and stable flourishing of both city and soul.

This book seeks to intervene on the imagination of individuals as a means of reshaping a social ethos conducive to kick-starting and maintaining ecologically sustainable practices. One part of this argumentative project is related to the concerns of scholars like G.A. Cohen¹ for whom an egalitarian ethos is necessary for any meaningful and lasting conception of social justice – the difference principle should orient character and conduct as much as it should guide political and economic institutions. Hence for Lane, values, habits, and widespread understandings of things like harm and responsibility (as well as body and time) must undergo a profound transformation if sustainable practices are going to come about in a reliable way. On this view, technical and institutional arrangements are necessary but insufficient to the task of breeding a sustainable ethos, especially one that would be capable of leveraging an expanded time horizon against most politicians and business leaders today. The other part of the "psychosocial approach" that Lane adopts mirrors Plato's own ethical interventions. Following the work of scholars like Danielle Allen² who have emphasized the psychological and ethically transformative aims that Plato exhibits in writing texts like the Republic, Lane too wants to effect a new imagination in her readers with the belief that this will translate into broader cultural change in the direction of a more sustainable environmental ethic. If Lane's passionate arguments persuade her readers, they will see themselves as "citizens of eco-republics, who share a common good and need to take responsibility for producing it in common" (44).

Since this book opens and closes with the image of Plato's cave, Lane is clearly under no illusions that this project will be an easy one; but she also thinks that individuals can take initiative and boot-strap their way out of their comforting delusional caves. How might this come about? This is where virtue ethics comes in and the ancient virtue of sōphrosunē in particular. Eschewing deontological moral imperatives, Lane relies upon the Platonic argument that connects virtue with the health of the city and the health of a

¹ G.A. Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

² Danielle S. Allen, Why Plato Wrote (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

soul. Thus ecological sustainability and with it the stability of a political society is only possible on the basis of an underlying value of health, and Lane accepts without challenge Plato's understanding of health as a "kind of order, in which each part of the body is doing what is should do and nothing is doing more or other than its own task" (104). The same holds true for the individual as well: virtues like justice and moderation are not perfectionist aims but the precondition for the psychic health necessary to achieve any of our other individual pursuits (105; drawing on Republic 443d-e). In this context Lane gives particular weight to the virtue of self-discipline, referring to it as "the underlying scaffolding of all the other virtues. . . Like sustainability, self-discipline is not the highest good, but it is a condition for achieving that good: indeed, it is a condition for its sustainable achievement over time" (116). These qualities are particularly needed to combat the vices of greed (pleonexia) and the love of money which pull individuals away from real well-being which depends on virtuous activity (122). To temper and rationally order the desires inflamed by modern materialism (the "hedonic treadmill") is a joint project for city and soul, one that Lane wants to cast as less an obligatory moral ought, and more a smart ("savvy") choice.

Yet by adhering to the Platonic vision of a virtuously ordered and rationally disciplined city/soul one wonders whether Lane has done enough to interrogate the ideal of unity that undergirds and inspires this model and to consider the political and ethical requirements of producing a "unified personality and a unified city" (175). This is one of many places where I thought Aristotle deserved more consideration as a thinker who also provides a bi-directional model of political structure and character, but who understood the political and ethical dangers of seeking this kind of unity ("we ought not to attain this greatest unity even if we could, for it would be the destruction of the state" Politics 1261a21, Barnes translation). At the same time, and unlike Plato, there is very little discussion here of the kind of widespread educational and cultural pursuits that would have to be undertaken to generate a "culture of character which respects limits, instills self-control, and subjects appetites to rational scrutiny and discipline" (121). For Lane, it would seem, Greek paideia and ancient virtue will have to come through individual initiative or not at all. For a scholar who appreciates the deep interconnections between structure/economy and character/virtue, this seems to leave the prospects of virtue hanging with a few (hopeful) exemplars caught-up within a systematic condition of ill-health, ecological and otherwise.

Throughout her discussion of the virtues that might serve to temper the vices unhinged by contemporary capitalism Lane compliments Plato for taking the individual more seriously than modern Enlightenment thinkers (94–5). This surprising claim follows an extended discussion of the political negligibility of the individual in modern social and political thought (Chapter Three). While Lane has done an effective job in showing how the idea of negligibility helps to underpin political inertia, deflate individual agency, and corrode personal responsibility, the argument that Plato takes the individual *qua* individual more seriously than modern liberal thinkers, and the related claim that individual virtue is "squeezed out of the framework of a society imagined in

mass terms" (54) are, in my estimation, overstatements that don't do complete justice to either ancient or modern ethics. For example, while it is certainly true that Plato and Socrates take seriously the social and political effects of individual character and choice (particularly in relation to the reputed leaders and opinion-makers of Athens), it is also the case that Plato attends to character and choice as a way of interrogating the wider cultural and political sources that constitute moral personality. Analytically Plato emphasizes the force of the city acting upon the soul (as the image of the cave indicates), and normatively and politically speaking, Plato makes it clear that the *Republic* is not about the flourishing of any one individual or class, but is about making the city happy/healthy, as he understands these categories. These points speak to a wider tension in Lane's account between rightly emphasizing the complex structure of the city-soul relationship, and at the same time wanting to read Plato as thinker who took the individual more seriously than modern liberals (Kant, Mill, and Emerson be damned).

This tension reappears in Lane's final chapter dedicated to championing the role of individual initiative for transforming the wider social ethos in accordance with a more sustainable ecological ethic. In this context Plato seems more of a constraint or an internal challenge than a helpful resource for thinking about the "ethics of responsible initiative" (170). For even if we can agree that individual initiative and so-called "norm entrepreneurs" play an important role in social change, a thinker who emphasized the role of necessity, force, and the need for "noble lies" to move people toward new values and identities may not be the most amenable source for theorizing initiative in a liberal democratic age. Indeed, Plato might be viewed as a valuable critic of the "new norms" literature that Lane draws upon in this final chapter, for Plato was much less sanguine about the conditions necessary for cultural change than the new norms literature indicates – perhaps reflecting upon the limits that Socrates faced in playing the part of a would-be "norm entrepreneur" in his own time. Because Lane is aware of this disjunction – labeling this chapter "A (Partly) Platonic Project" – it is not surprising to see her turn to other sources (like modern psychology) to supply an account of individual initiative; but it is surprising to see the language of ancient virtue increasingly eclipsed by the language of ethical duty in these final pages (175–77). But perhaps this too is understandable. Confronted with the urgent task of motivating individual and group action in support of a holistic and long-range ecological ethic, virtue and acting in accordance with knowledge of what is good for the whole is sidelined in favor of a discussion of reporting rules and other regulatory schemes that will enforce the ethical duties that individuals and organizations have to the environment but otherwise shirk. This is not the language of initiative or virtue, but the language of compelling actors to do what is good for the whole - mimicking Plato's own counsel to the founders of the beautiful city (519d). This may not represent Lane's preferred response to the ecological and ethical challenges before us, but like Plato, it may signal the limits of virtue and the challenges for imagination in our time.

MARK E. BUTTON
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
UNIVERSITY OF UTAH