

## ABSTRACT

A Study of Plato's *Laches*

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In Plato's *Laches*, we find Socrates speaking to two generals, Laches and Nicias, during the Peloponnesian War. The philosopher finds himself in a position where he might possibly direct statesmen during a crucial political moment. However, instead of giving them guidance, it appears that instead, Socrates sets these generals in conflict with each other. The end of the conversation raises questions about philosophy's own possibility in the light of challenges posed to it by divine revelation. Socrates, thus, might be interested in spending time with the sons of Lysimachus and Melesias, because, he believes that by educating them, he can refine their moral self-understanding enough to be useful interlocutors for his continued inquiry into moral opinions, and, therewith, the divine. Political philosophy comes to light then, not as a skill that guides politics, but an activity that attempts to ground the possibility of philosophy.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction: Socrates' Intention and the Purpose of Political Philosophy

Plato's dialogue *Laches* is a conversation between two concerned fathers, Lysimachus and Melesias, two generals, Nicias and Laches, and a man "who is always spending his time wherever there is any noble study or practice of the sort [Lysimachus and Melesias] are seeking for the youths"<sup>1</sup>— Socrates. Since Laches makes reference to the upright conduct Socrates exhibited during the retreat at Delium (181b) and since Laches falls at Mantinea, the dialogue takes place sometime between the battle of Delium in 424 and the battle of Mantinea in 418. Thus Socrates converses with two generals and statesmen during the Peloponnesian War, a war that Thucydides claims is the greatest war up to his time.<sup>2</sup> The setting of the dialogue may lead us to wonder what the relationship is between philosophers and statesmen, and philosophy and politics. That is, which of these should or deserves to rule over the other, especially during war, the time at which correct or effective rule is most necessary?<sup>3</sup> Another question we might ask is: would philosophers even want to rule over politicians? And, further, if philosophy is a quest for the truth about the nature of things, how would this quest be served by ruling?

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<sup>1</sup> Plato *Laches* 180c. All subsequent references to the *Laches* will be in text citations by Stephanus pages to the translation by Nichols found in Pangle (1986). Occasional emendations to the translation will be made according to the Greek edition of Emlyn-Jones (1996).

<sup>2</sup> Thucydides *War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians* 1.1.1.

<sup>3</sup> As Benardete (2001) 264, points out, "The *Laches*... represents an occasion on which the philosopher might have had an effect on the politics and life of his own city."

In Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, Socrates claims that he began his attempt to refute the oracle at Delphi by questioning the politicians, hoping that they would prove wiser than he.<sup>4</sup> Without the *Laches*, Plato would have failed to provide evidence for Socrates' claim. But this is not quite correct. For in the *Apology*, Socrates says that he perceived with pain that he incurred the hatred of those politicians whom he showed to know nothing.<sup>5</sup> In the *Laches*, once Socrates works his way into guiding the conversation, the investigation into courage that he conducts shows that Laches and Nicias are deeply confused. However, instead of directing their ire at Socrates, Laches and Nicias become angry with each other.<sup>6</sup> The vehemence of their disagreement verges on the comedic by the end.<sup>7</sup> Is this really the kind of conversation that will provide grounding for Socrates' refutation or vindication of the oracle, or does Socrates have an altogether different purpose in participating in this particular conversation?

We discover early in the dialogue that Thucydides and Aristeides, the sons of Lysimachus and Melesias, have talked with Socrates frequently before (181a). Additionally, Laches points out that Socrates always takes care to be where noble practices are for youths (180c). Might it be that Socrates is much more interested in Thucydides and Aristeides than he is in either Laches or Nicias? If that is true, this

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<sup>4</sup> Plato *Apology of Socrates* 21b-c.

<sup>5</sup> Plato *Apology of Socrates* 21e.

<sup>6</sup> See Rabieh (2006) 29. Additionally, if we compare the conversation in the *Laches* with the discussion found at the end of the *Meno* between Socrates and Anytus (89e-95a, 99d-100a), we discover that it may be that Socrates is capable of choosing during a conversation whether or not his interlocutor becomes angry or not. That suggests in turn that Socrates could choose when his trial took place.

<sup>7</sup> See Tessitore (1994) as a whole for a detailed account of the comic dimensions of the dialogue, including some intriguing similarities between the *Laches* and Aristophanes' *Clouds*.

conversation would serve the purpose of being able to fruitfully spend more time with them. By undermining the claim to expertise of the two generals who are exemplars of virtue to their city, Socrates may cause the boys to consider an alternative model to imitate. The boys have already spoken highly of Socrates, and would have to be impressed by his upstaging of the generals. Further, the fathers can be relieved of any anxiety they might have had about their sons spending time with Socrates based on Laches' manly description of him, and Socrates' newly discovered educational expertise in the fathers' eyes based on his apparent refutations of the generals. One question we will try to answer in the course of our investigation is: why does Socrates want to spend more time with the boys? That is, is Socrates primarily motivated by concern for the well-being of their souls, or is he motivated by the prospect that the boys might somehow contribute to his theoretical activity?

If Socrates seeks not so much to guide the generals who daily make decisions that affect the lives of Athenians, but rather to become the primary guide for two young boys, what does this mean about the relationship of philosophy to politics? It suggests that philosophy or political philosophy's primary goal is not to directly guide political action. Certainly the education of the young may have future consequences for Athenian political life. However, Socrates either has no interest in guiding political life over the short term, or does not believe that political philosophy *can* guide over the short term. Additionally, from time to time, Socrates does in other dialogues hold out the promise that political philosophy can in fact guide political life immediately. In the *Alcibiades* 1 for instance, Socrates attempts to make Alcibiades believe that his guidance and self-knowledge are

indispensable for conquering the world.<sup>8</sup> Socrates sometimes overstates the usefulness of philosophy in order to attract ambitious or erotic followers. But what political philosophy or Socrates appear to be on the surface may not be what they are in fact.

Before we say too much about what political philosophy is or is not, it is appropriate to turn to a patient reading of the *Laches* itself. We will see if we can learn anything from Socrates and Plato that might shed light on why Socrates chooses to have this conversation, and what that choice means for the purpose of political philosophy.

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<sup>8</sup> Plato *Alcibiades* 1 105d-e, 124b.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Fathers' Plea (178a-180a)

The *Laches* opens with a long speech given by Lysimachus following a demonstration by one man of how to fight in armor.<sup>1</sup> The speech is on behalf of himself and his friend Melesias about how they ought to care for their sons. The fathers find themselves in a painful position. Their fathers—Aristeides and Thucydides after whom their sons are named—managed the affairs of the city well, and accomplished many noble deeds (179c). Lysimachus and Melesias, on the other hand, have nothing to show. They can, therefore, discuss only their fathers' deeds, and have none of their own to share with their sons. Lysimachus believes their lowly stature is caused by their fathers' neglect of their education (179d). Lysimachus does not wish the same fate upon his own child. He has decided to devote care to his son, and is therefore seeking Nicias and Laches to advise on whether fighting in armor is an appropriate art for the boy to learn, and what other noble arts may be good to learn. Further, Lysimachus is also seeking Nicias and Laches to devote their own time to care for the young men (179b-e).

Many serious points emerge from Lysimachus' speech. To begin with, an unnamed someone suggested to Lysimachus that he look into the art of fighting in armor (179e). Lysimachus trusted this man's views enough that he was willing to summon two of Athens' most important generals to investigate the demonstration. However, he did not

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<sup>1</sup> I have chosen to follow Nichols' (1987) translation of the Greek term *hoplomachia* (to fight in armor), though on occasion to avoid ambiguity within the paper I have simply used the transliterated term.

trust the person enough to believe that the art on display was good simply. Lysimachus thus portrays himself as serious about getting to the truth. He is willing to start back at zero and look for completely new arts or sources of wisdom if the present attempt fails. Lysimachus though also runs into the potential problem of judging something in which he is not an expert. He trusts that the generals have knowledge (178b), but he doesn't believe that this knowledge is simply predicated on their being generals. Rather, he believes that their knowledge arises, in part, because Nicias and Laches have their own children who are in need of education (179b). Nicias and Laches should be experts on how to educate children only because they should care about it—that concern should somehow be almost equivalent to knowledge. To put this another way, because Nicias and Laches should care, they themselves would have already sought out experts to make their own children good. But this search for experts leads to a kind of regress that will resurface in the dialogue later (186e-187a). If concern were enough, why would not that concern allow Lysimachus to gain the knowledge himself?

The question of who has expertise or knowledge of what is best for human beings is one place where politics and philosophy inevitably collide. In part, the question of whether politics or philosophy should guide humans becomes a question of limited time.<sup>2</sup> The boys Aristeides and Thucydides will not become any younger. All the time spent by their fathers' searching for an art to make them good may be lost time in becoming good. Failing to find a good art, Lysimachus and Melesias will likely have to rely on opinions

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<sup>2</sup> On this point see Umphrey (1976a) 4-5, "While philosophers may spend their time trying to understand how a political society can be so constituted that it acts in accordance with the best possible resolutions, political societies cannot. To say nothing of other considerations, [There seems to be something missing here. "they lack"?] the requisite leisure. Even the most important matters must be resolved quickly, and decisions must be carried out without further question. In practice time is of the essence. Speeches must be with reference to deeds. Inquiry must give way to resoluteness."

given to them by the Athenians they look up to, to fill the gap. Unfortunately, as the *Laches* proves, even the best Athenians may hold views that are utterly at odds.

The problem of time also comes up in Lysimachus' speech when he says that their fathers let him and Melesias live a "soft life" while "they were busy with the affairs of others" (179d). It is likely that precisely because their fathers were good, they could not care for their children.<sup>3</sup> We may sympathize in part with Lysimachus' plight, but what is implied in his anger with his father is a wish that his father had not nobly helped the city, so that he might have had time to instead make Lysimachus good. His father made a sacrifice in caring for the good of the city instead of caring for what was most his own. So while Lysimachus shows a kind of moral seriousness in trying to ensure that his son become good, he is ultimately self-concerned in a dangerous kind of way. That is, Lysimachus believes that he is being more just than his father by caring for his son, and at the same time, in so doing, he is also expressing a hope that the city would be worse off so that he could gain more.

Lysimachus, by asking the leading gentleman of Athens, Nicias and Laches, for help with a private need, unwittingly demonstrates the conflict or tension that exists between private and public life. To be truly excellent in either public or private life is arduous, and, perhaps, to the extent that a person excels in one, he at least partially inhibits himself from maximum excellence in the other. Lysimachus also raises the questions of what is owed by a father to his son, and what is owed by the most excellent members of a city to those who are less fortunate. There are no easy answers to these

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<sup>3</sup> All of my analysis that follows must be taken with a grain of salt in light of *Meno* 94a-b, where Socrates suggests that Lysimachus did in fact receive a fine education from his father.

questions, and one wonders whether these tensions can ever be fully untangled so long as cities exist.

Lysimachus' plea for help also demonstrates the limited resources available to political life. The glory bestowed to those in political offices appears to be, to use an anachronistic term, a zero-sum game. In speaking with Nicias and Laches, Lysimachus and Melesias are speaking with precisely the kind of men they wish to be. In part because Nicias and Laches are in the positions they are, Lysimachus and Melesias cannot inhabit those positions.

We are seeing mounting limits on how much politicians can do for themselves and others because of time, and a limit on how many people can be politicians. Another limit emerges from Lysimachus' speech that he may not be fully aware of: nature. The word nature (*physis*) appears nowhere in the opening speech. However, Lysimachus and Melesias hope that their sons will become worthy of the names that they bear (179d). In order to maintain that notion, Lysimachus would have to believe that birth (descent) or nature makes a difference.<sup>4</sup> To put it another way, to believe there is a specific standard set by one's family that it would be shameful not to live up to, implies some kind of essence is transmitted from family member to family member. Sharing the same nature or starting point prevents one from making excuses and puts the onus on freely chosen actions. Lysimachus does not allow himself to look toward nature too much in his own case because it would undermine his ability to blame his father for his softness. Nature may prove to be the most painful kind of limit for human beings because it is not changeable.

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<sup>4</sup> Nichols (1986) 270.

That Plato wants his readers to be thinking about limits on political life during Lysimachus' speech is confirmed by the immediate response of Nicias and Laches. Nicias praises the intention of the fathers and says that he and Laches are ready to be partners (180a). Without any hesitation, Nicias commits his time to another man's son. We may admire Nicias' intention, but surely this is not a promise on which Nicias can deliver. Later, Socrates even says as much about Nicias being too busy (187a). Nicias does not perceive any limits on his time. For Nicias then, there is no tension between the demands of public and private life. Alternatively, Laches thinks it is fine that Lysimachus points out that the men who are busy with the affairs of the city are heedless of private interests (180b). Laches feels that Lysimachus has pointed out a real problem for public men, and his participation in the conversation may show his belief that the problem is not insuperable. And while he thinks it is fine to help Lysimachus and Melesias, he must sense some kind of restraint on his time because he is the one who steers them towards Socrates (180c).

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Introduction of Socrates (180a-181d)

Laches introduces a hitherto unknown participant to the conversation: Socrates, who is introduced as living in the same deme as Lysimachus and as one who is always spending his time wherever there is any noble study or practice for youths available (180c). Upon hearing this, Lysimachus does not yet ask anything of Socrates, but directs his question to Laches, asking for confirmation that Socrates has devoted care to such things (180c). Nicias jumps in to confirm that he could say the same no less than Laches, for when he inquired of Socrates about a teacher for his son, Socrates introduced him to Damon, whom Nicias has found to be “not only the most refined of men in music but, in whatever other matters you wish, worthy to spend time with young men of that age” (180d).

In response to Nicias, Lysimachus says that on account of his age, he often remains at home, and therefore does not know younger men like Socrates (this reference is strange, seeing that Socrates must be in his mid to late forties) (180d). Then, Lysimachus, seeing that Socrates is favored by the generals, suddenly claims Socrates as his demesman. Not only that, but Lysimachus, even though he has not interacted with Socrates recently, adds that Socrates must (*khre*) offer advice, for, this would be just (*dikaios*) (180e).<sup>1</sup> Lysimachus’ demand of Socrates is another asymmetric demand, and it

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<sup>1</sup> Emlyn-Jones (1999) 125, claims that Lysimachus resembles Cephalus from Plato’s *Republic*. There is something to this, as both Cephalus and Lysimachus demand that Socrates come to them more often, and it is not altogether clear that grounds exist that justify their demands. However, while Cephalus does want Socrates to spend time with the young men, Cephalus is also interested in his own pleasure as

is not clear that Lysimachus will offer Socrates anything for his trouble. In other words, justice is good for Lysimachus, but, it is bad for Socrates. Lysimachus then mentions his friendship with Socrates' father, Sophroniscus, and we find out that what Lysimachus most valued in his friendship with him is that they never quarreled (180e). Lysimachus also suddenly remembers that he has heard the boys, at home, talking with each other about a certain Socrates (180e). Could those conversations have led in part to Lysimachus and Melesias now believing that it is appropriate to take proper care for their sons?<sup>2</sup>

Another interesting feature of Lysimachus' speech is that formerly, Lysimachus had called his son a "young man" (*neo andris*) and now in the context of remembering his son's mention of Socrates, calls him a "lad" (*maraiikon*) (compare 180a with 180e). One possible implication of this shift in terms is that when he remembers his son in private conversation at home with a friend about some unknown man whom they think is good, Lysimachus calls him a lad on account of his unmanliness. If he is concerned at all that the man the children praise so vehemently is a corrupting influence, then he may now also call them "lads" to emphasize their vulnerability to Socrates—that they are not capable of protecting themselves from Socrates' influence because they do not know any better.

When Lysimachus asks the boys whether the Socrates before them is the Socrates of their speeches, they answer in unison: "Most certainly, father, this is he" (181a).

Lysimachus responds with an oath that is not characteristic of men in Plato's dialogues

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much or more. Further, Cephalus is a metic, and was therefore no demesman of Socrates. The core difference between Lysimachus and Cephalus is Lysimachus' more explicitly moral intent, and his knowing Socrates' father Sophroniscus, even if in a limited way.

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent analysis of this passage see Rabieh (2006) 30-32, much of which I follow here.

(except for Socrates that is),<sup>3</sup> “By Hera, Socrates, how well have you exalted your father, the best of men! And would that your things might belong to us and ours to you!” (181a). The oath is ambiguous. It is not clear if it is meant to indicate Socrates’ unmanliness, or perhaps his own. Lysimachus, then, cannot simply be giving Socrates wholehearted praise. We can also note that Socrates does not respond to the request that his things might belong to Lysimachus and Melesias. Socrates’ silence is important because it allows him to evade having to directly respond to Lysimachus about having had contact with his son. One could easily imagine the conversation shifting toward finding out whatever it is that Socrates has been talking to the boys about that caused them to praise Socrates so vehemently.

Laches responds to Lysimachus’ praise of Socrates by saying for the second time that he must not let Socrates go (181a). Laches adds more praise of Socrates by saying that Socrates not only has exalted his father, but has even exalted his fatherland. Socrates achieved exaltation by withdrawing from the battle of Delium with Laches in an “upright” (*orthos*) way, such that if those present in the battle were all like Socrates, the city would have been upright too that day, and not fallen (181b). It is important to note that Laches says “upright” (*orthos*) and not courageous (*andreia*). Many commentators interpreting this passage conflate the meaning of *orthos* and *andreia*.<sup>4</sup> It must be said that Laches is no Prodicus when it comes to words (197d), but here when he talks about Socrates being upright, he implies that good consequences of it came for Socrates, and

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<sup>3</sup> See *Apology of Socrates* 24e; *Gorgias* 449d; *Hippias Major* 287a, 291e; *Theaetetus* 154d; and *Phaedrus* 230b. On this particular oath, see Kirk (2015), who argues against readings that suggest the oath has anything to do with unmanliness, but, is rather an oath that was idiosyncratic to Socrates’ deme of Alopeke.

<sup>4</sup> Santas (1971) 183 and Zuckert (2009) 249.

that it could have been good for the city if more had been so. When he is induced to define courage later, his definition is vague on what if any benefits one derives from being courageous, and further, that he associates courage with standing against many and not fleeing (190e). Now certainly Laches means for Lysimachus to be impressed with Socrates' deed, and the deed is related to manliness, but perhaps because of his high estimation of courage, Laches is reluctant to use it loosely. Strictly speaking, we cannot say that Laches called Socrates courageous.

Lysimachus is impressed with the praise of Socrates coming from men worthy of being trusted (181b). And if Socrates is interested in spending time with the lads Aristides and Thucydides, Lysimachus' high opinion of him is crucial. It is helpful in one way because Socrates will face fewer obstacles if Lysimachus never explicitly forbids his son to consort with Socrates. Also, Lysimachus is impressed that Socrates enjoys a "good reputation" for his public actions, which is precisely what Lysimachus hopes his boy can have. Finally, with Lysimachus' now enthusiastic invitation of Socrates to join in this inquiry and to come to Lysimachus in the future to maintain their friendship, Socrates can now formally influence how the boys will spend their time. In this particular case, Socrates must think—though on very different grounds than Laches as we will soon see—that fighting in armor is not the best use of the boys' time.

Only once Lysimachus has explicitly asked Socrates to comment on the recent demonstration does Socrates utter his first words. However, in his initial speech Socrates defers to the experience and age of the generals (181d). The generals were led to this demonstration in order to offer their expert views on it, so Socrates tactfully steps back, yielding to the generals, offering to let them speak first. This may at first seem to be a

risky maneuver on Socrates' part. That is, if the generals agree on the status of fighting in armor, it would not be likely that Socrates would be needed again in the conversation. One crucial implication of that possibility is that Socrates would show himself to feel no urgency about directing the leaders of Athens toward any kind of specific policy decisions or even self-understanding. Though, even if the conversation does come to a sudden end by agreement, Socrates would have been held in high esteem by all present, and might have had access to the boys in the future. Socrates perhaps does not leave things completely up to chance. His deferral has the effect of making it slightly easier for Nicias to answer first.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps through already knowing Nicias and Laches Socrates anticipates that Laches may not be impressed by the demonstration, but that he even more so would be unimpressed with Nicias' sophisticated and innovative disposition toward technical knowledge. To see whether this is the case will require a close look at their eventual dispute.

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<sup>5</sup> On this point and what immediately follows see Bruell (1999) 52.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Generals' Quarrel (181e-184d)

Nicias approves of learning how to fight in armor and makes a four-step argument in its favor. The art of fighting in armor is not inferior to gymnastic exercise; it will help one when fighting in the ranks and when they break; it summons one to desire other noble studies; and it might make one more courageous at the same that it makes one appear more graceful and terrible (181e-182d). While these are the core elements that Nicias intends to communicate, when we look closer, we see that Nicias reveals a great deal about himself of which he may not be aware. We will see deeply rooted confusions in his soul—confusions that might not suffer being set straight. It is these very confusions that may make Socrates doubt that philosophy is capable of guiding political action.

Nicias first argues that studying how to fight in armor is good because it is not inferior to gymnastic exercise (181e). He shows himself to have no qualms about departing from the Athenian institution of gymnastic exercise in favor of novel technical knowledge. Part of his claim that fighting in armor is not inferior to gymnastics rests on the obvious claim that such exercise improves the body. The other good thing about such a study is that it prevents youths from spending time where they please when they have leisure (181e). The kind of leisure that Nicias is talking about may make possible private sophistic or philosophic conversations that we see, for instance, in Callias' home in the *Protagoras*. We also see a move from exercising naked with others to wearing armor and

learning how to fight alone.<sup>1</sup> The difference between exercising in a group and fighting in armor alone is valuable for thinking about Nicias' easygoing reconciliation of the demands of private and public life. We see here the beginning of a shift towards the prioritization of the private individual over and against the common good, but, we will have to see if Nicias himself recognizes this shift.

Nicias completes the first stage of his argument by suggesting that “only those who exercise themselves in the implements related to war exercise themselves in that contest in which we are competitors and in those things for which the contest lies before us” (182a). Nicias views war as something that does not or perhaps cannot end for Athens. He assumes a surprisingly martial or Spartan perspective.<sup>2</sup> It is the Spartans, as Laches will soon point out, “for whom nothing else in life is a care but to seek and practice that, by learning and practicing which they may gain the advantage over others in war” (183a). Nicias also believes that acquiring arts related to war is a fitting pursuit for a “freeman” (182a). It is also worth noting that Nicias talks about competition, but not winning the competition. One might wonder if surviving the competition is worth more to Nicias than being victorious in it.

The second part of Nicias's argument is that those who know how to fight in armor will profit during battle itself (182a). Nicias claims that the art will help while fighting in the ranks. As many commentators make clear, this is a very questionable

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<sup>1</sup> The demonstration that Stesilaus made surprisingly featured no other participants (178a).

<sup>2</sup> See Thucydides *War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians* 5.16, where Nicias pursues a peace with the Spartans that is good for him, for he has already established his reputation as a competent general, but not necessarily good for the Athenians.

claim.<sup>3</sup> The kind of individual mobility necessary to utilize the art is not compatible with traditional hoplite warfare in which soldiers fought in tight masses. Nicias then makes the plausible claim that the greatest benefit derived from the art of fighting in armor occurs when the ranks are broken and each must fight one on one, either in pursuit or in defense (182b). Yet by the time the ranks are broken and individual pursuit and defense commence, the outcome of the battle is usually determined.<sup>4</sup> So Nicias does not praise the art of fighting in armor for its ability to help an army claim victory, but for its ability to preserve individuals no matter what the outcome of the battle. We might find this a little bit strange given that Nicias is a general who should have the good of Athens on his mind, and, therefore, victory in battle.

In the concluding part of the second part of Nicias's argument for fighting in armor, he says that one who has the art would "not suffer anything from one man" or perhaps from many, and he would "gain the advantage everywhere" (182b). Nicias believes that the man who knows how to fight in armor will always overcome another man. He assumes that knowledge is enough to overcome the opponent regardless of other factors. But what if the enemy is bigger, stronger, or faster? What if the terrain is uneven and one of the combatants slips? What if one's opponent is favored by a god? As it stands, Nicias's assertion assumes that knowledge is sufficient to overcome chance (bad terrain), nature (physically gifted opponents) and providential concern. Further, an enemy

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<sup>3</sup> Blitz (1979) 192; Schmid (1992) 64; Rabieh (2006) 36; see also Anderson (1991) 25, 33-35 for more historical context that dismisses Nicias's claim for the usefulness of *hoplomachia* while fighting in the ranks. We might expect that because Nicias is a general he should be very aware of this problem. Perhaps he makes this absurd claim because he is uncomfortable making the argument that *hoplomachia* is good only when the ranks break and the battle is decided.

<sup>4</sup> On this point, see also Sims (2015).

may also possess knowledge of how to fight in armor, and, perhaps, more or better knowledge. Nicias seems to pin unreasonably high hopes on what knowledge can make possible for human beings. Also, while Nicias does say that the man who knows *hoplomachia* will get the advantage everywhere, his initial focus is on not suffering. Victory or overcoming is not what first comes to mind, but to “not suffer anything from one man.”

The third phase of Nicias’s argument for the goodness of learning how to fight in armor is that it “summons one to a desire of other noble study too” (182b). This is the first time that Nicias calls the art of fighting in armor “noble.” What exactly is noble about it? As we saw above, Nicias believes that this knowledge would guarantee the defeat of at least any one man. It is a knowledge that eliminates some risks and mitigates others. Yet we admire a soldier in battle partly because he risks his life against many uncertainties. To the extent that one minimizes that risk through technology or knowledge, one’s action loses at least some of its nobility. Perhaps unaware, Nicias has come dangerously close to identifying the noble with prudential self-interest.

In the third part of his argument, Nicias also suggests that one who practiced how to fight in armor would desire to learn the orders of battle and after seeking honor in that, proceed to learn the whole of what comprises generalship (182c). We must keep in mind, while Nicias is speaking, that he is trying to advise Lysimachus and Melesias on whether or not their sons should pursue learning how to fight in armor. The two fathers want their sons to be able to perform the kind of noble deeds for the city in war and peace that their own fathers performed. It is precisely here that Nicias comes close to telling them that the art at hand will be a good springboard for the boys to perform noble deeds for the city.

But strangely, Nicias does not mention the city.<sup>5</sup> He mentions pursuing honor, which presumably would have to come from the city or its members, but he does not explicitly mention the city. Nicias's silence about the city suggests that pursuing the noble deeds of fighting in armor, ordering an army, and generalship, are good for oneself. If that is what Nicias thinks, it helps confirm our observation above that Nicias has not thought through the difference that exists between nobility and self-interest. Nicias's problematic conflation of nobility and self-interest is also an expression of what we saw earlier in the dialogue when Nicias expressed his view that the demands of private and public life are easily reconciled. Which is to say, Nicias takes for granted that any deed he performs which is good himself somehow also contributes to the well-being of others.

In the fourth and final stage of Nicias's argument for the goodness of learning how to fight in armor, he says that "knowledge (*episteme*) [of *hoplomachia*] would make every man in war not a little more confident and more courageous than himself" (182c). Knowledge or science (*episteme*) is sufficient to make men better and courageous. Nicias next says that it should not be considered dishonorable that a man possessing the art of *hoplomachia* would appear more graceful and terrible to his enemies (182c-d). Nicias's anticipation of potential objections may lead us to believe that most would consider it dishonorable to say that human goodness comes from *seeming*, for humans yearn also to *be* good.<sup>6</sup> That is, Nicias says that the art would make one appear to be more graceful and terrible, but perhaps would not actually be so; however, humans with this art would reap the benefits of the reputation of being graceful and terrifying. Nicias ends by saying that

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<sup>5</sup> Blitz (1979) 192, also notices Nicias's omission of the city.

<sup>6</sup> Plato *Republic* 505d.

the fathers “must teach the young men these things” (182d). However, as we just noted, the art at hand may be useful, but it is not perfectly clear that it will accomplish what the fathers hope for. Nicias addressed their hopes that their sons become noble only in his third argument, and even there he did not mention the city, nor did he mention peacetime activities.

Laches is much less impressed by Stesilaus’s demonstration of *hoplomachia*. His charming arguments have led many commentators to see Laches as getting the best of Nicias’s claim that learning how to fight in armor is good.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Laches’ remarks in his speech responding to Nicias may be the most memorable in the dialogue.<sup>8</sup> Laches offers three arguments against learning how to fight in armor: if practitioners of *hoplomachia* were truly competent, they would display themselves to the Spartans, who take war more seriously, but they do not; Laches has seen Stesilaus in real combat and he performed ridiculously; and knowledge of how to fight in armor would make cowards more easily revealed for what they are at the same time that it would cause courageous men to be closely watched so as to be ridiculed for boasting if they commit any mistake. Whereas Nicias never turned to his own experience, Laches appears to rely primarily on his own experience.<sup>9</sup> However, as we will see, Laches too engages in abstractions, and his argument will not prove to be coherent. Like Nicias, Laches will reveal more about his confusion over important things than he realizes.

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<sup>7</sup> Dobbs (1989) 132.

<sup>8</sup> Davis (2014) 18.

<sup>9</sup> Nichols (1987) 272.

Laches attacks fighting in armor for not being a serious study. He picks up on Nicias's claim that those who know to fight in armor "will get the advantage everywhere" (182b), and says in turn that because Spartans actually do seriously desire any practice that will get the advantage over others in war, it speaks poorly for *hoplomachia* that they have not taken it up (182e-183a). Laches next claims that excellent tragic poets do not avoid Athens but go straight to it, for this is what Athens is most known for (183a). Similarly, any practitioner of arts pertaining to war would go to Sparta because "someone who was honored for [*hoplomachia*] among them would make the most money from others [who are serious about war]" (183a). Laches believes that the teachers of how to fight in armor are motivated primarily by money. They do not promote their art to save lives or ensure victory. Further, they are mercenaries who do not care for any individual city but will sell their skills to the highest bidder.

Laches further attacks the seriousness of the armor fighting teachers by saying that they "consider Lacedaemon to be inaccessible sacred ground and do not so much as set foot on tiptoe; they go around it in a circle and put on a display for everyone else..." (183b). Here Laches abstracts from political realities. For it might be difficult for Athenians less prominent than Alcibiades to gain access to Sparta during the Peloponnesian War. Further, the Spartan regime is not as open a regime as is Athens. Sparta is not known for entertaining foreign novelties, and does not, as Pericles says of Athens, open itself to be a model to others.<sup>10</sup> In asking that Stesilaus put his demonstration on in Sparta, Laches seems to be asking far too much of him. We cannot yet say for certain, but Laches' mischaracterization of what is possible for Stesilaus may

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<sup>10</sup> Thucydides *War of the Peloponnesians and Athenians* 2.37.

be in part caused by the disdain that Laches has for Nicias's elevation of fighting in armor to the status of "noble," when Laches clearly thinks that at least its teachers are base. He allows his anger to distort his ability to see clearly necessities that prevent Stesilaus from being in Sparta.

In the second part of his argument, Laches verbally attacks the very Stesilaus whose demonstration had just taken place before the present conversation. Laches has, he claims, seen many men of this sort, and none of them have "become highly esteemed in war" (183c). He goes on to say that in many other things those who practice do well, but when it comes to combat, practice has very little to do with earning a name for oneself (183c). Here Laches opposes Nicias's earlier claim that one who pursues the art of fighting in armor could pursue honor. Laches thinks that far from receiving honor, one is more likely to expose oneself as a coward. People practicing *hoplomachia* apparently cannot win a name for themselves in war, but others can. Laches does not think knowledge of how to fight in battle is helpful, or that it is attainable. He comes close to saying that some kind of natural or inherent excellence is what accounts for those who do well. Whereas Nicias believes that a science of fighting in armor can make possible getting the advantage everywhere, for Laches, this science is either not possible, or is simply a sham because of its detrimental effects on warriors in battle.

Laches turns to Stesilaus, who he believes has not benefitted from learning how to fight in armor. Laches recounts a time when out at sea, Stesilaus yielded a scythe spear—a weapon as strange as Stesilaus himself—and in the midst of fighting found his weapon lodged into the side of an enemy transport ship that was passing by (183d-e). He ran along the deck as the ship passed by. Then he held onto the handle of his weapon while

being dragged, and let go at the last possible second. The men on the enemy transport ship laughed at the figure that he cut, and when he let go of the spear as a rock was thrown at his feet, his compatriots on his own ship shared in the laughter (184a). For Laches, witnessing this episode is sufficient evidence to disqualify Stesilaus as a teacher of anything worthwhile. However, perhaps Laches is too quick to dismiss him. To begin with, the fighting that takes place between troops on ships and the fighting that takes place on land are very different. Is Stesilaus more successful on land? Further, is being laughed at really enough to disqualify a man from teaching? That Laches looks down on Stesilaus for being laughed at and for using a novel weapon indicates how beholden he is to the views and opinions of others as a proper standard for judging important things. The laughter or opinions of many allow him to dismiss the possibility that Stesilaus has made a serious improvement in military science that could be beneficial for the Athenians. His remarks on the scythe spear also point to his attachment to convention. Strange weapons are not to be employed if they make their users appear to be ridiculous. Finally, as we saw above, Laches, in contradistinction to Nicias, makes many references to cities, which may be more evidence of his attachment to convention.

Laches' third and final criticism helps us confirm our observations about Laches' dependence on the opinion of others, and perhaps especially their opinions of himself. He argues that cowards could not benefit from *hoplomachia* because it would embolden them and, in so doing, expose them as what they really are (184b). His next criticism is less reasonable. He claims that if one is courageous and learns this art,

he would be under close watch from human beings, and if he made even a small mistake, he would receive great slanders; for the pretense of such knowledge evokes envy, so that unless he is distinguished from others in

virtue to an amazing degree, it is not possible that someone who claims to have this knowledge should escape becoming ridiculous. (184b-c)

Notice first that Laches says the person would be under close watch from human beings (*anthropoi*) as opposed to real men (*andres*). So the courageous or manly man must concern himself with the opinions of the many. Laches' underlying concern is not that the art might not be effective, but that it forces courageous men into situations where they are more likely to receive ridicule from the many human beings. Whereas Nicias asks us to not believe it is dishonorable that *hoplomachia* might make a man only appear more graceful and terrible, Laches is horrified at the prospect of the many envying a man who claims to have knowledge, for they might slander him. To put it another way, Nicias would be willing to suffer ridicule if it meant possessing means of being of safer, but Laches would rather forego any minimal protection that might be gained from *hoplomachia* in order to avoid slanderous ridicule. While Nicias and Laches initially seem to us to be polar opposites, one thing unites them: fear.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Socrates' Re-entrance: Democracy, Corruption, and Inquiry (184d-189e)

At the beginning of the *Laches*, Lysimachus appeared to us as a serious, hard-nosed seeker of the truth. Now, in light of the generals' disagreement, we see his determination wane. Before, he sought out experts to evaluate the goodness of another alleged expert. Now, he is willing to settle the question of the goodness of *hoplomachia* by the vote of one man, who will cause a majority to form. Also, by asking Socrates to vote, rather than give an argument, we see that Lysimachus is somewhat doubtful that Socrates can provide serious guidance. This in turn means that he is willing to settle the question of what is best for his son on the basis of a person who he doubts has any expert knowledge.

Instead of voting, Socrates questions whether voting is the appropriate way of proceeding. For the first and last time, Socrates brings the other father, Melesias, into the conversation. With Melesias, Socrates establishes that whoever is an expert in what they are currently seeking should be located: in whatever is to be finely judged, an expert or knower is superior to the majority (185e). In establishing this, Socrates challenges the basis of democratic rule as such. He opens the door for a knower—perhaps a philosopher—to rule over a political community. However, we will have to watch closely to see whether or not Socrates chooses to walk through this door, and why. That is, will we see if he will offer any serious guidance to the leading men of his city, and thus, take responsibility for the city's well-being.

The need for an expert is especially great, given that Melesias and Lysimachus have at stake “the greatest of their possessions” (185a). One does not get a second chance to raise the same child. Socrates elaborates how the sons are the greatest possessions by showing the way in which the goodness of a son radiates out to the whole of his household. He says that when the sons become good or bad, they rule the house of their father in a corresponding way (185a). Socrates suggests that the good of the sons and the fathers is one and the same. Perhaps there is something to this. On the other hand, we saw in the case of Lysimachus and Melesias that the goodness of their fathers did not benefit the entire household. Perhaps Socrates exaggerates the extent to which one individual’s good benefits another, in order to impress on the group the urgency with which they should discover an expert.

Before going forward with examining who in the group might be an expert, Socrates clarifies the purpose of the present inquiry. Nicias, not unreasonably, is surprised, for he thought that they were determining whether learning how to fight in armor is appropriate for the boys (185c). Socrates suggests that when one deliberates about something, one must understand the end that is being deliberated about in order to locate the proper means. He uses two examples which, when considered closely, reveal different ways of thinking about their investigation. First, Socrates says, when one deliberates about cream for the eyes, one is deliberating about the eyes, not the cream (185c). The cream, presumably, is used to heal eyes that are damaged or defective, so that they can partake in their natural excellence, seeing. Socrates’ next example is horses. “When someone examines whether or not, and when, a bridle should be put on a horse, presumably he is then deliberating about the horse, not about the bridle” (185d). In this

case, it is not altogether clear that the bridle helps make the horse naturally excellent. It certainly makes the horse useful to humans. Looking at these examples, the first suggests an inquiry into something that will help make the boys naturally excellent; the other suggests an inquiry into something that will by restraining the boys make them useful, perhaps to the city, to their fathers, or to Socrates.<sup>1</sup>

Socrates leads Nicias to agree that they must seek a counselor who is an expert in a study for the sake of the souls of the young men (185d-e). He suggests that they therefore have to examine which one of them knows how to care for souls and has a good teacher on this matter (185e). Laches interjects, surmising that surely some humans have become experts without a teacher; Socrates accepts that this might be so, and using a craft analogy, says that what is needed to prove Laches' suggestion in this case is an example of the craftsman's work (185e). We might wonder why Socrates does not say that one could demonstrate the excellence of one's own soul as proof. By not doing so, Socrates indicates that there is a big difference between making oneself good and making another good. One is, perhaps, led to wonder if one *can* make another good, or whether one's goodness comes primarily from one's own doing.

Socrates, now, finally urges Nicias and Laches to say who their teachers are, who, first of all, are themselves manifestly good and who, furthermore, have cared for the souls of many youths and have taught us. Or if one of us denies that he himself has had a teacher but has works of his own to tell of, he must show what Athenians or foreigners, whether slaves or free, have by general agreement become good because of him. (186a-b).

A number of arresting things strike us here. First, just a moment ago, Socrates seemed to suggest that, perhaps, there is a difference between being manifestly good and being able

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<sup>1</sup>See Rabieh (2006) 43, for a similar but slightly different formulation.

to make another good. Socrates now collapses that distinction. Second, Socrates suggests that the teachers must not only have taught Nicias or Laches, but also have cared for the souls of *many* youths. How many? And given that Nicias and Laches have disagreed about *hoplomachia*, is it likely that the present company will agree with each other that the youths in question have become good?<sup>2</sup> We find this difficulty confirmed when Socrates says that the products of these teachers of the soul “have by general agreement become good because of him.” Socrates had just a moment ago, when talking with Melesias, dismissed general agreement as an insufficiently rigorous standard by which to judge important things. In the final quoted clause, Socrates raises the question of how one can really know that the teacher caused the youth in question to be good. Perhaps something else or somebody else is responsible for the youth’s goodness. Finally, as many commentators have pointed out, the problem of infinite regress is latent in Socrates proposed investigation, for there will always have to be teachers pointing back to teachers.<sup>3</sup>

Related to the problem of an infinite regression is the problem of inquiry, otherwise known as the Meno Problem. In Plato’s *Meno*, the problem or paradox is stated in the following way by Meno:

And in what way will you seek, Socrates, for that which you know nothing at all about what it is? What sort of thing among those things which you do not know are you proposing to seek for yourself? Or, even if, at best, you should happen upon it, how will you know it is that which you do not know? (80d)

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<sup>2</sup> See *Republic* 505d for Socrates’ discussion of how contested humans’ notions of the good are.

<sup>3</sup> See Bruell (1999) 56.

This paradox of not knowing or even not being capable of making a proper inquiry has plagued Lysimachus since the beginning of the dialogue. At the outset, Lysimachus sought out Nicias and Laches as experts to determine for him whether or not *hoplomachia* is appropriate for his son. It may be that one, both, or neither is an expert, but Lysimachus is not fit to tell. Socrates now introduces a similar problem in the pursuit of finding an expert. For he says that in order to show that one is an expert, the alleged expert must prove that he has an expert teacher or that he has made somebody an expert (186a-b). As we saw before, there is an infinite regress of teachers pointing back to teachers. As Griswold puts it, this is another version of the Meno problem. “If you are a non-expert, you will never find the true expert, and even if you chanced upon an expert you would not know that he possesses the knowledge you are looking for. If you are an expert you either have no need of finding true experts or you disagree with other experts about who the true experts are.”<sup>4</sup> Socrates dangles this problem in front of the group, but, before he lets his interlocutors wrestle with this perplexing paradox, he retracts it.

Before Socrates chooses to retract the inquiry problem, he, in the same speech we have just been examining, makes another puzzling comment. He says that if no teachers in the strictest sense are available, “we must bid [the fathers] seek other men and must not run the risk, with the sons of men who are comrades, of corrupting them and thus getting the greatest blame from the nearest relatives” (186b). Socrates’ comment is puzzling, because as we know from earlier in the dialogue (181a), Socrates has spent time with the boys. With respect to what Socrates has just said, that means one of two things: Socrates does in fact believe he is an expert and competent to care for souls. Or, he does

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<sup>4</sup> See Meno 80d-e with Griswold (1986) 184 and Umphrey (1976a) 9.

not believe he is an expert and is willing to risk corrupting the souls of the boys without being an expert. Given that Socrates is about to bow out of contention for being a competent educator, we may be compelled to consider the latter possibility—that Socrates is willing to risk corrupting the souls of the boys. Further, we note that part of Socrates' concern is that it is not right to corrupt the souls of our comrades' sons; but, while Lysimachus eagerly embraced Socrates as his own earlier, Socrates was silent (181a). Lysimachus not being much of a comrade to Socrates, perhaps, removes some of the impropriety of Socrates' former association with the boys. Additionally, Socrates at the end of our quotation, points not only to the risk of corrupting, but also, or, especially to the risk that may come to *him* from doing so: blame from the fathers. It may be that Socrates chooses to make himself available for this conversation in order to mitigate his own risk that is caused by the boys' high approval of him. It might only have been so long before Lysimachus and Melesias began to ask questions about what the boys were speaking to Socrates about, or perhaps it might only be so long until the boys themselves began to ask the fathers dangerous questions.<sup>5</sup>

One might ask if the present discussion is ultimately going to be one that will edify the boys, or corrupt them. By the end, the generals will butt heads, and neither one of them will come away looking like he can educate young men to virtue. Socrates thus pushes the boys not to see the leading men of their city as exemplars of excellence, but, rather, himself. However, it is too soon to speculate for what purpose Socrates wishes to secure future appointments with the boys.

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<sup>5</sup> Plato *Apology of Socrates* 23c.

Socrates next tries to put Lysimachus in charge of questioning Nicias and Laches because Socrates is apparently incapable of doing so, having learned nothing about being an expert on the soul (186e). However, Socrates only leaves us with a difficulty: if Socrates, being a non-expert, cannot properly question the generals, how is Lysimachus, another non-expert, supposed to question them? Socrates also reminds us and Lysimachus that it is not likely the generals have the requisite leisure necessary to care for the boys (187a). Thus, through the present inquiry, *if* it is possible for Lysimachus to inquire, and *if* the generals have in fact had or know of competent teachers, Lysimachus can turn to these newfound teachers. Socrates also reminds the generals that they should be careful if they are educating for the first time, for they are not educating a foreigner, but their own sons in addition to the sons of Lysimachus and Melesias (187b). In so doing, Socrates again calls democracy into question. Democracy generally assumes that all parents are capable of raising their children in an appropriate way. Socrates now raises the question of whether even the best men in the city are capable of properly educating a child. If Nicias and Laches cannot, how much worse must the rest of Athens be?

However the problems above may stand, the conversation now looks very different than it did at the start. Now, Lysimachus is beginning to take Socrates seriously. And instead of giving deference to the generals in asking for their help, Lysimachus now demands that they prove they are capable knowers (187c). However, Lysimachus does not quite take hold of the conversation in the way Socrates asks; instead, he asks the generals to “speak and examine in common with Socrates” (187d).

Nicias responds first. While he does not immediately dismiss an inquiry into his educational expertise, his response does seem evasive. He says that Lysimachus must not

know Socrates very well since he has grown up, for Lysimachus does not realize that those who are close to Socrates in speech must necessarily fall into giving an account of themselves (187e-188a). Specifically, the conversation will be about giving an account of the way a person “now lives, and the way he has lived his past life” (188a). Nicias is accustomed to suffering these conversations, but nonetheless claims that he “rejoices” at being in Socrates’ company and does not find the experience to be too “unpleasant” (188a-188b). We have to wonder why Nicias decides to give an account of Socrates’ way of life instead of directly turning to the present inquiry. He may expect to derail the inquiry by making sure that Laches and the others are aware that if they proceed with Socrates, they will have to look at their past deeds and discover whether or not they have done anything ignoble (188a). He ends his speech not by encouraging Laches to join the inquiry, but, rather, to see how Laches stands (188c).

Laches responds by telling Nicias that while Laches may appear to some to have conflicting attitudes about speeches, he in fact is committed to a consistent undergirding principle (188c). Laches wants to learn only from men whose deeds are in harmony with their speeches (188d). He has witnessed Socrates’ upright deeds, and he is eager to hear Socrates speak. In Laches’ attitude we find a great deal of common sense. When we see respected members of communities—teachers, politicians, and religious leaders, for instance—commit crimes or succumb to moral failure, we are more repulsed by their wrong choices than we are by others doing the same deeds. For we suspect that such leaders, who routinely exhort us to be good, more than others know better. In spite of their ostensible knowledge, they lack a kind of steadfastness or toughness to make their speeches comport with their deeds. Or worse, they lie to us about the need to be good,

and we are suckers for following for their moral exhortations. Laches then, has a serious point: what good is knowledge of how to be virtuous if it does not lead the attainment of virtue? Wouldn't this mean there is something ultimately defective or faulty in this kind of knowledge?

Yet Laches' desire to learn only from good men, while admirable, is not necessarily fully defensible without some qualification. Laches' hope to learn only from good men presupposes that he already knows what the good is for human beings, or what the best kind of man is. Socrates' looming investigation of courage will demonstrate that Laches does not have a coherent understanding of courage, the good, or the noble. In order for Laches to fulfill his desire to learn only from good men, he would need to refine his understanding of what is good for human beings by investigation, but as of yet, he does not feel any need to make such an investigation. That is, Laches takes for granted that he knows what is good, and, therefore, who the good men are.

Laches also assumes that a man of upright deeds would also be a man of complete frankness (189a). However, it is not clear that Laches or any decent person is as ready, as he believes everyone is, to be in full possession of certain truths. To put this another way, Socrates, in the *Meno*, while speaking to the politician and craftsman Anytus, shows us what it might look like for him to be frank, and to pursue his deadly and intransigent questioning with a politician.<sup>6</sup> It suffices to recall that Anytus becomes one of Socrates' accusers at his trial, while Laches instead ends up recommending Socrates to Lysimachus as the man best fit to teach his child (200c). This suggests that Socrates is not completely frank with Laches—but this does not mean that Socrates is not a good man. It rather

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<sup>6</sup> Plato *Meno* 89e-95a.

means that Laches, in order to speak more truthfully, would have to re-understand what a good man is; for he has taken for granted that good men speak frankly. Thus, Laches may have a great deal of trouble learning from good men if he is unable to tell when he is speaking to one. In the case of Socrates, Laches is right to say he is good, but, Socrates' goodness stems from a different ground than Laches thinks it does.

However things stand above, both Nicias and Laches are prepared to submit themselves to questioning. Lysimachus does not feel that he is up to such questioning. He hands the reins back to Socrates on the ground that because "of age I now forget many things that I intend to ask, and furthermore I do not remember what I hear very well, if other speeches come up in between. Therefore, speak and go through what we proposed among yourselves; I will listen and, having heard will then with Melesias here do what seems good to you" (189c-d). Lysimachus exhibits several common though ultimately problematic assumptions about learning. He assumes that the conclusions from a conversation can be entirely learned apart from the process or action of taking part in the conversation. It is likely that anyone who reads Plato and Plato scholarship immediately sees this as a problem. For a scholarly article may posit a correct conclusion about Plato's *Laches*, but without closely reading the dialogue and thus participating in the discussion to the extent possible, we cannot truly make the conclusion our own. Also, without examining ourselves while reading, the conclusion is likely to mean little to us, and threatens to become a mere scholarly abstraction instead of a permanent lesson.

Lysimachus also assumes that the knowledge made available at the end of the argument will be easily transmissible and easily understood—almost as taking a bird from one cage

and putting it in another.<sup>7</sup> Finally, we note that Lysimachus has left his son's future wholly in others' hands, the skills of which he has no ability to properly evaluate. It is then incumbent upon Socrates to seek out whether and to what extent Laches and Nicias are fit educators.

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<sup>7</sup> Plato *Theaetetus* 198b.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Laches' Attempts to Define Courage: The Difference between Moral Virtue and Psychic Self-Possession (189d-194b)

Socrates begins his questioning of the generals in a peculiar way. He says that he, Nicias, and Laches must obey Lysimachus and Melesias (189d). This is an odd request, since Socrates has ostensibly set knowledge as the standard by which a human being can tell another what to do (185a). Interestingly, Socrates also retracts his earlier request that Nicias and Laches provide evidence of either their teachers or their educated students (compare 186a with 189e). Presumably, this kind of investigation would have ended hastily and perhaps with a great deal of frustration toward Socrates.<sup>1</sup> Socrates determines that it is more appropriate to start somewhere closer to the beginning (189e). By that he means it is right to examine virtue, for it is that which, when it is present in the soul, makes it better (190b).

Socrates suggests that in order to be a counselor of virtue, one must know what virtue is, to which Laches assents (190b-c). Further, Socrates suggests that if one knows what virtue is, one could certainly say what it is, to which Laches agrees. He very nearly asks the question, “what is virtue?” to Laches before retracting it and asking about a part of virtue, courage. The question “what is virtue?” is the guiding question of Plato’s

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<sup>1</sup> On his way to intentionally enraging Anytus in the *Meno*, Socrates argues that even the best statesmen Athens produced, Pericles and Themistocles, were unable even to teach their own sons how to be good (93d-94e). If that is so, Laches and Nicias will be hard pressed to produce examples of their own successful pupils. As we have seen, and will continue to see, comparing Socrates’ handling of Anytus, to his handling of Laches and Nicias is very instructive.

*Meno*, the only other dialogue in which Socrates speaks to a statesman. In the *Meno*, Anytus becomes so incensed at this line of questioning that he goes on to be one of Socrates' accusers in the *Apology*.<sup>2</sup> We find, by contrast, evidence that Socrates is here handling Laches and Nicias carefully. He is gentler with them, because he hopes for, and eventually receives, their recommendation at the end of the dialogue to teach Lysimachus' and Melesias' sons. This would have the additional implication that Socrates principal purpose is not to learn what courage is from his interlocutors.<sup>3</sup> To put it another way, they are not, together, searching for courage in nearly equal ignorance.<sup>4</sup> As we will see, Socrates' carefully chosen questions and examples demonstrate that he has thought long and hard about what most humans think courage is and what they may wittingly or unwittingly hope to gain from it. If Socrates is not trying to learn what courage is, then he must have another goal in mind as he leads this discussion.

At last the investigation into courage, after which the dialogue receives its subtitle, begins. When asked to define courage, Laches says, "By Zeus, Socrates, it is not heard to state. For if someone should be willing to remain in the ranks and defend himself against the enemies and should not flee, know well that he would be courageous" (190e). While the courageous man presumably has allies near him in the ranks, Laches phrases his answer by reference to a courageous individual defending himself against multiple enemies. Interestingly, Laches does not say whether the courageous man perishes before his many foes or succeeds; that is, we don't know if courage is ultimately going to be bad

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<sup>2</sup> Plato *Apology* 23e.

<sup>3</sup> For an example of this view, see Emlyn-Jones (1996) 10.

<sup>4</sup> For an example of this view, see Irwin (1995) 38.

or good for its possessor—assuming that death is bad. It is precisely this question that we will see Socrates press Laches on during his next definition.

Socrates disqualifies Laches' definition on the ground that it is formally mistaken, that is, it is only an *example* of courage; the definition cannot claim to reveal the essence of courage in every case (190e). In so doing, Socrates blames himself for not asking in clear enough terms. He then provides counterexamples, both from Homer and from recent deeds (of Spartans), of men who have not stood their ground, but who, while moving (that is, retreating), fought their enemies (191a-191c). He suggests that these men, too, are courageous, to which Laches offers his ambiguous assent. Socrates' examples show men who are more effective at fighting and winning precisely because they do not stand fast. His examples point to prudence, or a concern with safety, as an element that is coeval with courage, and not in contradiction to it. When we look back at Laches' definition, we remember that he did not mention whether or not courage entails success in battle. His definition made courage out to be an individual test, one that would determine whether one is capable of standing in the ranks, come what may. If courage is primarily the means to winning a battle, it would become subservient to another goal, and would not be an end in itself.<sup>5</sup> It is Laches' concern that virtue must be an end in itself that makes him only half-heartedly confirm Socrates' suggestion that the Spartans were courageous when they retreated and then turned to face the Persians (191c). That the Spartans retreated at all suggests that they have subordinated standing in the ranks and fighting to other, prudent concerns such as victory. However, Laches is not willing to go so far as to condemn the Spartans for their retreat, likely in part because they achieved an

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<sup>5</sup> On this point and what immediately follows, my analysis has profited from Rabieh (2006) 50-53.

important victory. And the extent to which Laches is not willing to condemn the Spartans for being willing to retreat, is the extent to which he partially holds courage as other than simply an end in itself. Laches, on one hand, sees courage as an end in itself, and on the other, sees that it should be subordinated to ends that are good for its user, such as victory.

Socrates also invites Laches to expand his understanding of the different circumstances in which a human might be courageous. He mentions being courageous at sea, towards poverty and sickness, politics, and pains and fears (191d). Additionally, Socrates mentions fighting against desires and pleasures. Laches assents to this expansion, allowing courage to enter into dimensions of human life other than just the battlefield (191e).

Laches admits that he is not ready to provide an essence-revealing definition of courage that can explain what courage is in all cases (191e). Socrates offers Laches an example of a correct definition by defining swiftness as the power of accomplishing many things in a short time, in respect of voice, running, and all other things (192b). While this example clearly serves as a model for how one might offer a clear definition, it might also serve the purpose of helping Laches see another way to look at courage. Swiftness, like courage, is not unambiguously good in all cases. For example, it is sometimes necessary for an army to move swiftly to catch its enemy by surprise; at other times, it may be more advantageous to move slowly, in order to avoid detection. Swiftness is good only if it is governed by an understanding of what is good, or what needs to be done. Perhaps in the case of courage as well, one should sometimes stand

one's ground, but at other times, when it is advantageous, retreat. In both cases, courage would be subordinated to other purposes or an understanding of what needs to be done.

Laches now finds himself able to grasp what kind of definition Socrates wants. He says that courage is a certain steadfastness (*karteria*) of soul "if one must (*dei*) say about courage what it is by nature (*pephukos*) in all cases" (192b). Socrates offers a strongly encouraging reply, saying that this is indeed what one must (*dei*) say "at least if we are to answer for ourselves what is asked" (192c). He emphasizes that Laches has adequately grasped his basic demands for what is required of a definition. Socrates next wonders whether Laches believes that steadfastness of soul in all cases is courage, or whether some qualification might be necessary. Socrates now really begins to put Laches to the test. He asks Laches whether or not he holds courage to be amongst the noblest things, and Laches vehemently affirms that it is among the noblest (192c).<sup>6</sup> Laches also agrees that steadfastness accompanied by prudence is noble and good, and that foolish steadfastness does not deserve the name courage. Famously, in the *Apology*, Socrates will claim specifically to be unaware of anything that is noble *and* good for human beings.<sup>7</sup> Rabieh, in her excellent study of the *Laches*, brings this question to the forefront of her analysis, saying that "it turns out to be very hard for Laches to reconcile his admiration for courage as surpassingly noble with the view that it is also a means to some further

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<sup>6</sup> Foley (2009) 219, claims that Socrates "forces" Laches to accept a definition of courage that is not his own in order to push Laches to eventually adopt a more "Socratic courage." However, given Laches' vehemence in his assessment of the nobility of courage, it seems safe to say that Socrates is not forcing a foreign definition onto Laches, but rather making more explicit what Laches' assumptions are about what courage is. Dobbs (1986) 837, rightly notes that Laches seems to be offering his genuine opinion throughout the examination.

<sup>7</sup> Plato *Apology* 21d; consider also that when Socrates describes his own way of life, he calls it the greatest good, but does not call it noble. See Leibowitz (2010) 180.

good” (Rabieh 2006, 48). Her suggestion is that there is an inherent tension between the noble and the good, that perhaps there is nothing truly good for us that is also at the same truly noble or beautiful. A noble deed is one that is freely chosen for its own sake, without reference to calculations of self-interest or reward. And not only is it not self-interested, it even, at its most sublime, entails a sacrifice in the strictest sense, of one’s own good, even one’s own life—not a price paid for a future good. This is the sentiment expressed in Laches’ initial attempt at a definition, his description of a soldier who stands his ground and whose courageous deed we now see Laches saying would be among the noblest.

We deeply admire acts like the one Laches has in mind. Our admiration is for the selfless character of the deed precisely because we are aware of our own attraction to good things (even if this is not all we find ourselves attracted to). To forego our own good in this way is surpassingly difficult, and, though we may hope to be capable of truly foregoing our own good, not all of us may be. For most who attempt to perform noble deeds, there may be a confusion in motivation such as we see disclosed here in Laches. For while humans believe they are motivated to perform noble deeds for the sake of the noble, they also expect—often unwittingly—that these deeds are good for them. This is the core of Laches’ confusion which Socrates examines. To the extent that one’s deed is done for the sake of victory or one’s own family or city, it is subordinated to a concern for the good, and is not noble in the strictest sense, for it is not done for its own sake. It is productive of some other good. Further, we also presume that by performing noble deeds that are genuinely selfless, we make ourselves deserving of good things. But, if noble deeds are admired because they forego our good, how or why would we ever expect to

receive a reward for them? Having a hidden hope to be rewarded for noble acts, in fact, would disqualify us from being truly deserving of a reward, for the noble act would be done with a view to serving one's good rather than in sacrifice of one's good. As we will see, it is not clear that Laches is capable of coming to grips with this tension.

To repeat, Laches confidently agrees that steadfastness accompanied by prudence is noble and good (192c). As a corollary, he accepts that steadfastness accompanied by folly would be evil and harmful (192d). Laches implicitly claims here that a noble deed is not harmful for its doer—but didn't we see above that Laches admired nobility because it entailed great risk and sacrifice? Surely such risks as the noble demands might be harmful, as would be the sacrificing, the giving up, of one's own good. However, perhaps Laches' resistance to seeing nobility as foolish is not on the face of it unreasonable. For why would anyone intensely admire a deed that is foolish or done out of some kind of ignorance? Laches, is unaware of the incoherence of holding both that courage is noble and that it is good. Laches wants to insist that it is good to be courageous, but that courage does not serve his own advantage. Before embarking on more questioning, Socrates asks Laches one more time if he wishes to commit to prudent steadfastness as his definition (192d). Just a moment ago, Laches was confident. Now, he begins to wonder if his definition is solid, saying only that Socrates' new formulation "seems" to be what he means (192d). Laches now evinces increasing awareness that prudence, a power that minimizes risk or harm, might not always be identifiable with nobility.<sup>8</sup> Laches does not spell out the reasons for his tepid response, but he must have begun to reflect more deeply on the character of self-sacrifice that he admires in courage. If he

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<sup>8</sup> Foley (2009) 218, makes a similar suggestion.

thinks back to the soldier who stands his ground no matter what, he must realize that he does not admire this man for any other reason than that he performs his noble deed for its own sake. This man does not prudently engage in a false retreat in order to surprise his opponent, but rather stands his ground, come what may. Socrates seeks to make Laches confront the tension between his simultaneous admiration for the selflessness of the noble on one hand, and his concern that a deed should not be harmful and instead good for its user and perhaps for others, on the other. However, as we will soon see, Socrates does not press Laches as hard as he might have, and is perhaps trying to help the boys catch a glimpse of the problems endemic to moral virtue as opposed to taking Laches farther down the road.

Socrates offers Laches several examples of people performing deeds that are prudent and steadfast but that Socrates expects Laches will not find courageous. He first asks if one who is steadfast in spending money prudently is courageous, and Laches scoffs at the notion; he says that he is not, “[b]y Zeus” (192e). Socrates’ example stands in marked contrast to Laches’ first definition of a soldier remaining in the ranks. We might congratulate a person on spending money prudently, but we would not experience any admiration at his deed. There is, by contrast, something impressive about one man standing against many, in part because there is great personal risk involved. Laches recoils from understanding noble courage as something that is obviously rewarded, or done for the sake of future gain, which is what Socrates’ money-spending example would seem to signify. For Laches, to make a noble deed instrumental is to debase it.

After Laches denies that the prudent and steadfast money-spender is courageous, Socrates asks him if a doctor who denies a thirsty patient water for the sake of the

patient's health is steadfast in a courageous way (192e-193a). Laches fervently denies that this example meets the demands of courage. We can say with some certainty that there are at least two clear reasons motivating Laches to deny that the doctor, under ordinary circumstances, is courageous. First, the doctor, while he may undergo psychic turmoil as he battles misplaced empathy for his patient, does not expose himself to serious personal risk. The doctor does not have to make a sacrifice in order to help his patient. Second, Laches must also see that the doctor is not performing his act of healing for its own sake. No serious doctor would ever perform a medical procedure on a patient for its own sake. He would perform the act only in order to bring a patient from a state of sickness to a state of health. To do otherwise might harm the patient. The doctor's deed is always instrumental, and is always conducive to ends beyond itself. As we saw before, Laches expects that courage entails great personal risk, and that it is done for its own sake. By using this example, Socrates is trying to illuminate for Laches or perhaps for the boys, the half of the conception of courage that expects that courage entails great risk and sacrifice—that is, the noble half that demands that courage not be good for its user. In so doing, Socrates may help readers and the boys Laches see more clearly the tension between the noble and the good, while fully spelling anything out for Laches.

Following the discussion of the doctor, Socrates now offers Laches a potential example of courage that turns Laches' initial definition of courage on its head. He asks if a man calculating prudently, and knowing that others will come to his side while he holds good ground against an enemy, could be considered courageous. Laches affirms that it is the men in the opposing camp who are the courageous ones. Socrates asks whether or not those men's steadfastness would ultimately be more foolish, and Laches agrees (193b).

There are many striking implications in Laches' assertion that it is the outnumbered and apparently foolish men who are brave. First, we see that he is more willing to admit that courage is not good than to admit that it is not noble. Also, he does not seem to hold courage on a spectrum where a person is more or less courageous than another; rather, one either is or is not courageous. He does not seem willing to grant that even prepared and prudent men would need courage to overcome men who will not run, who are prepared to fight to the death. Laches' denial is also interesting, or potentially alarming, given that he is a general. If all is to go well in war, one should always have greater numbers of well-prepared men on well-suited terrain; however, the virtue of courage, which Laches intensely admires, can be exhibited only in the worst of situations,<sup>9</sup> situations in which a general may have failed at his own art. In this way, Laches' vision of courage is that it is always *bad* for its adherents, or is available only in situations that are dangerous, potentially harmful, to them. Laches admires the few standing against many. But in most cases it is better for few to run from many, to be prudent, so that they can join up with other forces in order to win on the field another day. It would seem that prudence, and the securing of one's own advantage or good that prudence has as its end, are often at odds with the sacrifice and risks that courage demands. However, Laches' willingness to let Socrates add prudence to courage helps confirm that Laches has a divided conception of virtue. On one hand, virtue should be good for us or allow us to acquire good things, and, it should protect us or minimize our risk; on the other, virtue is admirable only when it is devotional, or entails a true sacrifice of one's good, a loss or potential loss, undertaken because it is noble and for no other

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<sup>9</sup> Rabieh (2006) 50.

reason. Laches lets slip that he thinks courage is also good for its possessor, which may point to him harboring the hope that ultimately, somehow, our risks taken in the name of virtue will be rewarded—meaning that virtue, in the final analysis, would be a price well paid for a future reward, rather than admirably sacrificial.

To state Laches' confusion in another way, he takes courage to be both bad and good at the same time and in the same respect. For courage, being a great good in his eyes, must be prudent or not foolish; on the other hand, courage exists only in cases where a person is most foolish. Socrates allows Laches to speak in a way that suggests that courage is bad for us, that is, a real sacrifice—however, Laches won't admit that what he admires most is bad for him or its possessor. He won't admit that courage requires sacrifice in the strictest sense.<sup>10</sup>

Socrates proceeds with more examples to help illuminate Laches' confusion. In each case, from riding a horse, to diving into a well, Laches admits that in the end, the person with less knowledge about his task and its possible outcomes is the one who is most courageous (193b-c). All these examples further underscore that Laches is much more willing to admit that courage is foolish than he is to say it is not noble. Laches' view of courage runs very far afield of the Socratic dictum that virtue is knowledge. For Laches, virtue requires that one have little or no knowledge. Laches evidently thinks that having to endure extreme risk on the battlefield is the necessary and perhaps sufficient condition for courage. But, if so, why does Laches wish to insist that courage is not foolish?

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<sup>10</sup> Bruell (1999) 59. Bruell does not say or suggest this on p. 59 of his book, which is almost all about Nicias.

Thus, Socrates says, he and Laches are not in harmony, for their deed—searching for truth—is not in accord with their speeches, which have thus far failed (193d-e).

Socrates has shown us that there might exist, within the moral conception of virtue, or at the very least in courage, an irreconcilable tension. Laches sees virtue as a sacrifice at the same time that he sees it as a great good, and he will not ultimately acknowledge that virtue does not meet these competing demands. Laches' hopes for virtue, which cannot be met, raise questions about the possibility of virtuous deeds themselves and whether they have a rational basis. All of this is not to say that Socrates is suggesting that soldiers run for their lives at the drop of a hat, or that he is pointing us to some kind of base egoism. However, when a battle reaches a point where it cannot be won, isn't it good for one to retreat? In fact, Laches admires Socrates for his upright retreat in a battle (181b).

Laches, though, does not tell the whole story about the retreat. Perhaps we should briefly turn to Alcibiades' account of Socrates' and Laches' retreat, given in Plato's *Symposium*, in order to gain a little more clarity on precisely what Socrates' retreat looked like, and what it signifies about Socrates. In doing so, we can catch a glimpse of how different Socrates' and Laches' understandings of virtue are.

Furthermore, men, it was worthwhile to behold Socrates when the army retreated in flight from Delium; for I happened to be there on horseback and he was a hoplite. The soldiers were then in rout, and while he and Laches were retreating together, I came upon them by chance. And as soon as I saw them, I at once urged the two of them to take heart, and I said I would not leave them behind. I had an even finer opportunity to observe Socrates there than I had had at Potidaea, for I was less in fear because I was on horseback. First of all, how much more sensible (*emphron*) he was than Laches; and secondly, it was my opinion, Aristophanes (and this point is yours), that walking there just as he does here in Athens, 'stalking like a pelican, his eyes darting from side to side,' quietly on the lookout for friends and foes, he made it plain to everyone even at a great distance, that if one touches this real man, he will defend himself vigorously. Consequently, he went away safely, both he and his comrade; for when you behave in war as he did,

then they just about do not even touch you; instead they pursue those who turn in headlong flight. (*Symposium* 221a-221c)<sup>11</sup>

This sliver of Alcibiades' enchanting portrait of Socrates points to important differences between moral virtue and Socrates' own psychic self-possession.<sup>12</sup> As we discussed above, it may be that for Laches, moral virtue, whether he will admit it or not, is a price well paid for future goods, and possibly the greatest future goods. This half hidden belief rests on a hope – one that is never admitted – that the virtue one has, especially in the case of courage, will protect us from death. Laches does not think that those who have an art or knowledge that mitigates risk are deserving of being called courageous. By minimizing risk, one makes oneself less deserving of the transcendent kind of goods that one hopes virtue will provide. That is, the greatest goods can be deserved only by running the greatest risks, for without these risks, one is not deserving. In Alcibiades' account, Laches does not appear to have been sensible or in possession of himself (*emphron*). It is the case that Laches admires courage, but, evidently, while retreating, he doubts during this crucial moment in the hopes he places in virtue. Perhaps this is too much to say, but since in the *Laches* we discover that Laches has an incoherent understanding of courage and of the noble, it makes sense that when he needed courage most, it failed him, or he failed himself. A contradiction might not always be the firmest ground to stand on. Socrates, on the other hand, must have located a much firmer base. While he retreats, fear does not prevent him from seeing what needs to be done. Laches falls into despair while

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<sup>11</sup> Translated by Benardete (2001).

<sup>12</sup> Tessitore (1994) 126-128, also draws on the same passage from the *Symposium* as a resource to help explain the difference between moral virtue and Socrates' own psychic self-possession. He emphasizes that Laches has received his opinions from the city and that he is ultimately too soft to rid himself of the certainty these opinions give him; his view is not incompatible with our presentation of Laches' confusions over the noble and the good.

retreating, perhaps because he realizes he was not able to stand his ground in the moment of truth.<sup>13</sup> He must have realized, even if but for a moment, that at bottom, virtue cannot protect him, or that he does not possess the steadfastness that would make him deserving of protection. His newly discovered doubt in the virtue of courage, or at least in his own willingness to be courageous, which he holds to be among the noblest things, leads him to panic, blinding him from seeing actions he could now take to mitigate his risk of death on the battlefield. Now when we say that Laches thought he could be deserving of protection, we have to wonder how Laches must believe that this protection could come about. It may be that Laches secretly hopes that he might be saved by some providential being, for who or what else would be capable of guaranteeing one's survival in the direst of circumstances? Perhaps, then, Laches despairs because he realizes that virtue does not have the providential support that he had always believed in his heart that it had; or perhaps more likely, he realized that he was unworthy of such providential support. Undoubtedly, Laches hid this shocking realization from himself after the battle, for in the present dialogue, he still believes that courage is among the noblest things. Turning back to Socrates, we see that he may not have been able to guarantee his own survival, but he took all the necessary steps that *could* be taken in order to do what is good for himself. Socrates does not rely on courage as ordinarily understood, but must have somehow rid himself of the false hopes that attend virtue, ordinarily understood. He had no expectation that standing in the ranks could make him worthy of protection from gods that are concerned with human beings. It is too much here to say precisely how or why Socrates achieved this, but we will return briefly to this question in our conclusion, when we

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<sup>13</sup> I borrow this formulation from Rabieh (2006) 50.

speculate on what kind of activity Socrates would want to secure future meetings with Thucydides and Aristides for, and what this activity has to do with the noble and the divine.

With Alcibiades' suggestive account in hand, we return to the *Laches*. However much Socrates shows Laches to be deeply confused about courage, he still points out that Laches grasps something important. Drawing on Laches' second definition, Socrates says that they must persist steadfastly in the inquiry, lest courage ridicule them (194a). With this, Socrates gives Laches some external motivation to search: shame and ridiculousness at failing. As we know from earlier, part of Laches' distrust of Stesilaus stemmed from his observation that Stesilaus looked ridiculous while fighting on board a ship (183d). Socrates uses this external motivation as a spur to make Laches feel the sting of not being able to give a coherent account of the thing he admires the most.

Laches, for his part is irritated with himself for not saying what he thinks he perceives in his mind (194b). But hasn't Laches already said what he thinks?<sup>14</sup> He attributes his failure to account for courage to his unfamiliarity with speeches of the kind he is now making. But he is not brought to doubt that he has knowledge of courage. In his heart, Laches is certain that he knows what courage is.<sup>15</sup> He thus has no motivation to seek it.

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<sup>14</sup> Bruell (1999) 57.

<sup>15</sup> Santas (1971) 184, and Foley (2009) 213, claim that Laches, as well as the rest of the characters in the dialogue, admit to not having knowledge of the nature of courage. This seems to mischaracterize the surface of the text when Laches says, "I am truly irritated, if I am unable to say what I thus perceive in my mind" (194b). Laches thinks he has hit a stumbling block in speech, but believes he has the answer. Thus, by suggesting that Laches does admit to not knowing what courage is, Foley misses the crucial point that Laches (and likely most of us, even when we are refuted in our deepest held beliefs) persists in holding on to his beliefs. Our inability to admit that we lack answers to essential questions is a problem Plato

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persistently shows us in his dialogues, and this inability is one that will keep us from any kind of genuine mental liberation.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Nicias on Courage; or, on Socrates' Handling of the Generals (194c-199e)

Socrates chooses not to press Laches any further. He asks Laches if he thinks that they should turn to Nicias to save them from their perplexity, and Laches agrees (194b-c). Laches has been forced to claim that those with the least understanding are the most courageous (194d). Nicias begins in a very different way, asserting something he thinks he has heard Socrates say: that one is good only at those things one is wise about (194d). Socrates, at least for now, enthusiastically encourages Nicias to continue on, even swearing by Zeus (194d). Nicias says that if the courageous man is good, then he is wise. He must have somehow misheard Socrates, for Socrates says that it is wisdom that makes one good, not that being good makes one wise.<sup>1</sup> To formulate it as Nicias does makes wisdom dependent on virtue, instead of the other way around.

We should note that during the entirety of Laches' attempts to define courage, Nicias did not speak at all, nor was he asked to speak. When he rejoins the conversation at the behest of Socrates, he says that Socrates and Laches have not been speaking well for a long time (194c). We can then safely say that Nicias would like to have been called on earlier. Now, Socrates changes his approach to the conversation, asking Laches if he has heard that Nicias said that the good man is wise (194d). That is, Socrates asks Laches

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<sup>1</sup> See Rabieh (2006) 68; see also Strauss (1959) [1954] 112, who while not talking about the *Laches* in particular, does detail how the unwise unsuccessfully receive the knowledge of the wise: "The diffusion among the unwise of genuine knowledge that was acquired by the wise would be of no help, for through its diffusion or dilution, knowledge inevitably transforms itself into opinion, prejudice or mere belief."

to respond to Nicias, instead of immediately examining him as he had examined Laches. Socrates was nothing but polite to Laches, but he evidently thinks the time for civility is over. The timing is striking. For Laches has just been shown that cannot articulate what courage is. While this might not make him doubt that he is wise, it may make him appear worse in the eyes of others. Nicias' current argument, that the courageous man is wise, amounts to saying—whether Nicias means it to or not—that Laches is not courageous. Socrates, it appears, is attempting to put Laches and Nicias at odds with one another. Plato also draws our attention to this shift in the drama with the use of a pun. When Laches had said he was irritated at not being able to say clearly what he perceived in his mind, he said that he felt a “love of victory” (*philonikia*). Any reader can see the resemblance to Nicias' name. The word for the kind of love friends have for each other is *philos*. Socrates, ironically, directs Laches' love of victory (*philonikia*) toward Nicias, preventing Laches from having *philos* toward Nicias.<sup>2</sup>

Laches claims not to understand what Nicias means when he says that those who are good are also wise. When Socrates clarifies that Nicias means that courage is a certain kind of wisdom, Laches uses a phrase out of comedy that means something along the lines of: wisdom my foot (194d)!<sup>3</sup> Through questions Socrates bids Nicias to further elaborate on his claim. He begins by saying that what Nicias is talking about must not be the art of the aulos nor the art of the cithara, to which Nicias agrees (194e). It is difficult to tell precisely what Socrates is getting at with these examples, but, at least as a

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<sup>2</sup> Benardete (2001) 73, also notices the pun, but does not point our attention to Socrates intentionally causing the discord between Laches and Nicias.

<sup>3</sup> See Nichols (1987) 259n30.

suggestion, we can say that Socrates means to differentiate the knowledge Nicias is talking about from a technical art. Socrates forgoes adducing any other examples and asks Nicias again what his knowledge is. Before he can answer, Laches intervenes again, saying, “[y]ou are questioning him very correctly indeed, Socrates; and let him say what he asserts it is” (194e). Laches clearly suspects or hopes that Socrates will soon dispose of Nicias’ definition in the same way his own was disposed of. By encouraging Laches to intervene in his questioning of Nicias, Socrates allows Laches’ love victory to aim at overcoming Nicias instead of himself. Socrates deliberately sets the generals at odds, making them more ridiculous and less trustworthy than they might have been had they been shown only not to understand courage. This carries with it the further benefit that the generals do not become angry at Socrates. That Socrates would make such a maneuver implies that he is not straightforwardly helping the generals search for courage. To reiterate an earlier point, this is not some kind of mutual venture taken to discover courage together. Further, it is then also not clear that Socrates’ primary interest is to educate the generals. Each participant in his own way *might* benefit from the conversation, but the benefit of others does not seem to be Socrates’ chief purpose here. Perhaps he has the boys in mind more than the generals.

Nicias then gets a chance to offer his first definition: courage is knowledge of terrible and confidence-inspiring things (195a). Laches finds this answer to be strange and, quite frankly, rubbish, because of his sense that courage and prudence are separate from one another. Even to the reader, it is not very clear what Nicias means. To take a stab at explaining his definition, we suggest the following: courage is calculating whether one has a sufficient amount of confidence- inspiring things—skills, allies, good ground,

etc.— to overcome those things that are terrible or most threatening to oneself. This understanding would be consistent with Nicias' endorsement of *hoplomachia*, for he believed that learning how to fight in armor may inspire the confidence one needs to overcome terrible things (182c).

Socrates does not share Laches' disgust at Nicias' answer. Similar to what he will tell Meletus later, during the trial in the *Apology*, he says that if Nicias is wrong, he should be taught, not reviled (195a with *Apology* 25c). If virtue is knowledge, as Socrates claims, then it does not have moral content. Wisdom may entail its possessor to be good, but moral goodness does not entail the possession of wisdom. If Nicias made a mistake through ignorance, he could not have done otherwise, for he did not know any better. We revile only those whom we suspect know better but who choose to do the wicked thing. For his part, Nicias suspects that Laches is merely being competitive; he is hoping for Nicias to fail so as to look better by comparison (195b).

Laches, for a moment, takes over the questioning. He strives to find counterexamples with which to invalidate Nicias' thesis. He asks whether or not the farmers or craftsmen are courageous, since they likely know the terrible things related to their own profession (195b-c). It appears that Nicias does not wish to respond to Laches' query, for Socrates has to ask Nicias what he thinks Laches is saying (195c). Nicias responds that doctors have knowledge only of what is healthy and unwholesome. They do not know for whom it is good to live, and for whom it is better to die (195c-d). Here, Nicias reveals much of what his ambiguous definition means. He means that the courageous man has knowledge of what is truly good for him and for others.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Rabieh (2006) 73.

Laches thinks that Nicias must be saying that only diviners are courageous, for only they have knowledge of what is good for human beings. In addition, Laches seems to sense that Nicias' courageous person can gain some kind of certainty about the future, thus being a diviner. Nicias responds as follows:

[T]he diviner must know only the signs of the things that will be—whether death or illness or loss of property will come to someone or victory or defeat either in war or in some other competition. But whether it is better for someone either to undergo (*pathein*) or not to undergo these things—why does it belong to the diviner to judge rather than anyone else at all? (195e-196a)

The diviner knows what will be, but not necessarily whether it will be good or bad for those to whom it happens. Nicias' list of examples—death, illness, loss of property, and defeat in war—is primarily negative. As his sole positive example, he includes victory. One might be inclined to see Nicias as a man who looks to the future filled with fear.<sup>5</sup> However, on closer inspection, it seems rather that Nicias wants to have knowledge of what is genuinely profitable for men. That is, as he points out to his men at the end of the Sicilian disaster, sometimes it is good for men to suffer; for one can learn from a god's punishment.<sup>6</sup>

Laches, frustrated, still believes that the knowledge Nicias is speaking about is something available only to a god. Laches thinks that instead of capitulating, like a well born man among friends, Nicias twists and turns as if in a law court, to avoid refutation (196a-b). And Laches' view has some sense to it, for Nicias' definition is vague and dense. Further, Laches drew on common sense and experience to craft his definitions, whereas Nicias uses abstractions. These abstractions make it difficult to understand what

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, Schmid (1999) 242.

<sup>6</sup> Thucydides *War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians* VII.77.

kind of concrete actions a courageous person might take. Also, Laches' answers seem to come from his own attempts to understand the world, whereas Nicias' definition relies on something he thought he has heard Socrates say.

Laches' attack on Nicias, while having some sense to it, is at the same time unhelpful for refining his own, or Nicias' understanding. Socrates steps in to say that he and Laches must continue to inquire after Nicias, and accede to him if he speaks well, while teaching him if he does not (196c). Socrates reminds us for the second time about a way of looking at the world to which neither Nicias nor Laches come close to rising. Part of why Socrates does not get angry in Plato's dialogues is that he does not hold non-philosophic interlocutors to be capable of anything better. Also, Socrates clearly does not believe that he somehow deserves or is owed better answers from people. This does not amount to saying that Nicias and Laches are not admirable men, or that most readers have a higher capability. Far from it. It is only to indicate the gulf that exists between Socrates' view of things and the view of political men. Nicias, having lived a good life so far, having so much to lose, appears to have crafted a definition of courage that he thinks he has heard from Socrates, one that, if correct, will grant him continued security in the future, assuming that he can follow its mandates.

Laches, however, thinks that he has inquired sufficiently into what Nicias has to say about courage; he has no interest in learning from Nicias or trying to teach him (196c). Socrates chooses not to let Laches go, and says that he will make an inquiry on behalf of both himself and Laches. He first confirms that Nicias still thinks that courage is knowledge of terrible and confidence-inspiring things, and then asks if this kind of knowledge does not belong to every man, and is of such a kind that animals could not

possess it (196d). Socrates elaborates on his question by saying that few among human beings would have the kind of knowledge Nicias describes, and that of necessity, Nicias would have to say that no animal is courageous (196e). At this point Laches intervenes again, swearing, “[b]y the gods,” that Socrates’ statement is good (197a). Laches thinks that Socrates has surely caught Nicias in a contradiction this time. Laches thinks that courage is primarily a natural kind of toughness that has no significant cognitive prerequisites. Thus, there is no reason for him to doubt that animals are capable of courage, and his enthusiasm indicates that both animals and humans possess it. It is not perfectly clear exactly how Laches understands this, but we may speculate. As we have seen, Laches does not think that courage is knowledge; it is not a trait reserved for rare human beings, but one that surely any human can from time to time manifest. Laches seems to miss some of what makes courage uniquely human and truly admirable. Animals do not possess choice in the same way that humans do. When a duck moves to protect her children from a predator, she is reacting instinctively to external stimuli; she could not do otherwise than what we see her do. Her act certainly resembles courage, for she risks her own good for the good of her ducklings. However, she does not know what she is risking. Humans are unique in that they are aware of their mortality. Further, animals do not possess a sense of justice in the same way we do. And the predator—a bird of prey or wolf—hunts because it must, not because it chooses to. Laches is then simultaneously attributing to animals much more than they are due, while at the same time taking away from human beings some of what makes them so interesting and admirable. Laches’ insistence that animals can be courageous is not completely unreasonable, for the natural toughness or steadfastness they possess is undoubtedly at least a part of what might

genuinely be called courage. What animals are incapable of, is an understanding of what might be choice-worthy about courage, as well as the ability to choose to be courageous. Laches' conviction that animals can be courageous is quite instructive for seeing how his conception of virtue differs from that of Socrates. Laches does not see courage as knowledge or as an intellectual quality of humans. The basis of the moral virtue of courage for Laches, is that courage is to be uncalculating, precisely to preserve its admirable character; it may be that Laches thinks of human reasoning as aiming at one's own selfish good, whereas, Nicias, evidently, sees no such problem.

Nicias, far from thinking that he is caught in a contradiction, explains that not only are animals not courageous, but neither are children, and perhaps neither is anyone else who does not know what courage is (197a-b). Nicias stresses that courage goes together with forethought. This would seem to re-introduce questions we found earlier with Laches' definitions. For the more forethought that a human being successfully uses, the *less* courage would then seem to be necessary. Whereas Laches ended up showing that he thinks courage is more noble than good, Nicias here shows that he thinks courage should be good; however, we will have to wait to see more precisely what Nicias believes the human good to be. Nicias ends his speech saying that what Laches and the many call courage, Nicias calls bold, whereas Nicias asserts that courage is among the prudent things he has been talking about (197b-c). Nicias thus attempts to rise above the confused and unreasonable demands of courage that Laches and the many make. We will have to see if he is up to the task, but we may already begin to have our doubts. For if Nicias really does believe that courage is foreknowledge that is akin to divination, as Laches thinks he does, he hopes for far too much from virtue.

Laches believes that Nicias speaks only for the sake of adorning himself, and not out of any desire to get at the truth (197c). On the face of it, Laches' disgust appears reasonable. For Laches thinks that if courage is only knowledge possessed by a few, then his comrades who died at the battle of Delium while holding their ground against many enemies did so only due to ignorant boldness or a lack of forethought. In other words, these men died because they were foolish, and therefore, cannot be admired. We see then, Laches let slip again that courage is somehow good for us. Nicias attempts to reassure Laches by saying that both Laches and his fellow general, Lamachus, are wise, and therefore courageous, as are "numerous other Athenians as well" (197c). Doubtless, this can do little to improve Laches' reception of Nicias' definition. While Laches certainly has a high opinion of himself as someone who adequately grasps the character of courage, he probably does not consider himself to be wise in Nicias' sense of the word, or one who engages in theoretical arguments.<sup>7</sup> He does not think that abstract theorizing is necessary to understand what virtue is, and, is therefore, unlikely to be comforted by Nicias' claim that he is wise. Frustrated, Laches has to restrain himself in order not to wish to voice his objection in such a way that he be considered one who is abusive in speech (197c).

Socrates encourages Laches not to use abusive speech, and then proceeds to give Laches a strange justification for Nicias' manner of speech (197d). He points out that Laches must not realize that Nicias has received this particular bit of wisdom about courage from Damon, a man who keeps company with Prodicus, a sophist who

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<sup>7</sup> As Bruell (1999) 53, suggests, Laches may have been the first of the generals to bring Socrates into the conversation in order to bring a counterweight in against the sophistication of Nicias.

distinguishes terms in the finest manner (198d). Socrates performs a sleight of hand here, one that is designed to increase Laches' regard for Socrates and decrease his sense of Nicias' seriousness. For while it is true that Nicias is finely distinguishing terms, something that Prodicus is known for, the basis for Nicias' decision to do so is his definition of courage, which comes from something he thought he heard Socrates say before (194d). Socrates, thus, distances himself from any involvement in Nicias' current formulations. He also omits saying that he was the one who suggested that Nicias seek out Damon in the first place. Laches responds with a predictable dismissal: "It is indeed fitting for a sophist, Socrates, to contrive such subtleties rather than a man whom the city deems worthy to be its leader" (197d). If the current conversation is serving the purpose of a straightforward inquiry into the nature of courage, why would Socrates align Nicias' remarks with those of a sophist? This action would surely inflame a decent man like Laches, and it does so here.<sup>8</sup> Socrates takes this kind of action in order to perpetuate the rivalrous irritation that he has agitated almost since he began speaking in the dialogue.

As we observed, Laches does not think it is fitting for political leaders to engage in sophistic linguistic subtleties. Presumably, in political discussions, Laches would like a spade to be called a spade so that things closer to the heart of matters can be discussed. Socrates, after throwing Nicias under a sophistic bus a moment ago, now points out that surely leaders of the greatest things must partake in the greatest prudence (197e). Socrates urges Laches to continue examining Nicias' view, and Laches now tries to exit the discussion for the second time (197e). Socrates urges Laches not to depart from their partnership, and Laches relents.

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<sup>8</sup> Just as a similar mention inflames Anytus at *Meno* 91b-92b.

Having now increased the tension between the two generals to what might be its highest possible point, while still maintaining the minimum necessary civility for conversation, Socrates turns to unravel Nicias' view in earnest. He no longer invites Laches to comment on Nicias' position, but addresses Laches only to briefly gain assent on various points.

Socrates begins by asking Nicias if by talking about courage he meant to discuss a part of virtue, there of course being other parts or portions of virtue (198a). Socrates lists courage, justice, and moderation as parts of virtue, choosing to omit piety (which is mentioned by Socrates as a virtue at 199d). As we know from Thucydides, Plutarch, and Laches' earlier accusation of Nicias, Nicias is perhaps overly concerned with divination (195e).<sup>9</sup> Socrates thus excludes the virtue that Nicias may aspire to the most, though Socrates does admit that his list of virtues is not exhaustive.

Socrates next decides to clarify Nicias' definition for Laches. He asks whether Nicias agrees that "things that cause fear are terrible and the things that do not cause fear are inspiring and that fear is caused not by past nor present evils, but by those that are expected, for fear is the expectation of future evil" (198b). Laches and Nicias both agree to this. Nicias further agrees that with his definition of courage, he aims to supply its user with knowledge of future evils and future non-evils. Socrates then says that if one has knowledge of something, he does not just know about "that which has come into being" or "in what way it has come into being," but also "about those things that will come into being" (198d). Here, Socrates is speaking about knowledge generally. He is saying that to

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<sup>9</sup> Thucydides *War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians* 7.42-50; Plutarch *Life of Nicias* (1864) 638-40.

know the causes of things is to know necessities, which cannot be otherwise, and so will be the same in the present, the past, and the future. We will cover this more in our closing remarks; it suffices here to say that if this is what Socrates means by knowledge, then knowledge leaves no room for an omnipotent divine being. That is, an omnipotent divine being would rule out a human's ability to attribute causation to the things that appear to be necessary, for a god could change these at any moment. Socrates extends his reasoning about knowledge to farming, and, importantly, to generalship, saying that "generalship uses forethought in the finest manner in other respects and also concerning what is going to be, and it thinks that it must not serve, but rule divination, on the grounds that it has finer knowledge of the things relating to war, both those that are coming into being and those that will come into being. And the law ordains thus, not that the diviner rule the general, but that the general rule the diviner" (198e-199a). It is striking that Socrates says that a knowledge of causes that cannot be otherwise must rule divination. This amounts to saying that unassisted human reason should guide generals instead of diviners, who are thought to be messengers or interpreters of the gods. If Socrates means this in earnest, he would have had to have somehow found arguments that make him confident that human reason should guide human beings instead of the gods' alleged commands; or in other words, Socrates must think he has evidence that the gods who are alleged to send omens and portents do not exist. Further, Socrates says that it is the command of the law (*nomos*) for generals to rule diviners. This would point to a confusion in Athenian law itself. Insofar as there are any laws of the Athenians concerning the sacred, the laws assume that the gods exist and are concerned with human action. But, at the same time, the laws also command humans, especially generals, to act as if the gods do not exist, or are

not interested in human affairs. This is rather strange, since it is especially during war that humans pay more attention to non-human motions.<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, Socrates does not direct his question about generals and diviners to Nicias, but to Laches, who agrees. Evidently, Socrates is not interested in discussing with Nicias the evidence of his claim about the divine, for he turns to Laches, the less theoretically oriented of the interlocutors. Socrates is able to say, without objection from Nicias, that generalship rules over divination, because earlier, Nicias had said that while divination does have knowledge of what will be, it does not have knowledge of what is good for human beings (195e-196a). Even if Nicias would not immediately be capable of seeing the full weight of the implications latent in Socrates' speeches, perhaps Socrates senses that Nicias might have resisted saying that divination must be subservient to anything. Socrates will shortly refute Nicias' claim to know what courage is, but, evidently, Socrates does not wish for Nicias to be tripped up by the argument here. Socrates does not confront Nicias with any evidence that unassisted human reason should be favored over interpreting alleged divine portents; and, further, he does not force Nicias to consider that his role as a general, one whom the law commands to rule diviners, may be in tension with his role as a devoted and pious human. Faced by these considerations, Nicias might have had cause to be much angrier at Socrates than if he is only shown not to know precisely what courage is.

Socrates then turns back to Nicias, and secures his agreement that if one has knowledge of something, then one will understand the past, present, and future of this thing (199b). Socrates re-establishes that Nicias' definition of courage is knowledge of

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<sup>10</sup> Burns (2010) 33.

terrible and confidence- inspiring things, and that this pertains to future good and evil things, as well as to things in all other conditions (199b-c). Though Nicias agrees, at this final step in the argument, he is more hesitant, saying only, “[i]t seems so, at least” (199c). Socrates, therefore, accuses Nicias of initially having offered only one third of a definition, for Nicias did not originally argue that courage is knowledge of “pretty much all goods and evils and in all conditions.” (199d) Nicias agrees, and then Socrates finishes his refutation of Nicias. Socrates asks if a man with this kind of knowledge would

lack anything of virtue if indeed he knew how all good things, in all ways, come into being and will come into being and have come into being and all bad things in the same way? And do you think that this one would be in need of moderation or justice and piety—he to whom alone it belongs, as regards both gods and human beings, to be thoroughly on his guard for the terrible things and for those that are not, and to provide himself with the good things, through his knowing how to associate with them correctly? (199d-e)

Since this ostensible knowledge constitutes the whole of virtue, and Nicias meant only to describe a part, his attempted definition of courage does not offer a proper account. Why, though, does Nicias not just revise his earlier statement, and say to Socrates that he is speaking about the whole of virtue? Perhaps the reason is that earlier, as we have seen, while speaking to Nicias, Socrates listed several virtues, but omitted piety from the list (198a). Socrates has now brought piety in, and something in the pious Nicias resists the thought that human, unaided reason is alone needful for human action. Nicias breaks virtue into parts because he thinks that both human reason *and* devotion to the gods are necessary. If all of virtue is knowledge, this would not leave room for one to worship gods that are at least partially mysterious. Nicias, however much he may want to secure his own good in the future, must not think that acting well is enough. He also wishes for divine support. It may be that this is one of the core differences between Socrates and

Nicias, for Socrates, as we saw in his remarks about diviners, seemed to indicate that human reason alone was what he thought humans should take their bearings from.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Concluding Thoughts: Philosophy and the gods (200a-201c)

After Socrates is recommended as a teacher to Lysimachus and Melesias by Laches and Nicias, Lysimachus eagerly suggests a meeting for the next day at dawn (201c). In response, Socrates says that he will do so “if god is willing.” (201c). One commentator says of these words that “they show [Socrates] to be cautious even about tomorrow in Athens.”<sup>1</sup> But then what is it about the god’s willingness that Socrates must be so cautious of? Lysimachus asks Socrates to meet the next day at dawn, not a strange thing for anyone to say, even if it is a little demanding. However, what Lysimachus unthinkingly presupposes in making this request of Socrates is that the sun will rise the next day. That is, Lysimachus operates in this moment, under the assumption that the sun will always rise the next day and will not admit of being otherwise. Socrates’ laconic response indicates that he is more wary about assuming that his reason can access permanent intelligible necessities. By saying he can meet tomorrow only if the god is willing, he suggests the possibility, however unlikely, that a divine being could interfere with the order of the world, such that it could be radically different than it was the day before. The order or patterns that human beings believe they observe in their experience and that some dare to call “nature” could admit of change if divine beings exist and choose to alter that ostensible order. All of this suggests that earlier, when Socrates

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<sup>1</sup> Benardete (2001) 257.

suggested that generals should not listen to diviners, he was much less certain than he appeared to be.

If what we have seen in the exchange between Socrates and his interlocutors is true, we may say that the existence of a powerful god or gods poses a serious challenge to the possibility and necessity of philosophy, understood as a search for nature (*physis*), an unchanging principle of motion from which we might discern permanent intelligible necessities.<sup>2</sup> If an omnipotent god exists who can perform miracles—i.e. acts that are impossible in nature—then there is no causation. That is, there is just a divine moving of things, and anything could come to be.<sup>3</sup> In order for philosophy to be possible in the strictest sense, it has to confront the challenge posed to it by this possibility. What has the *Laches* to do with this daunting challenge besides its cryptic ending?

The present study, while attempting to comment, though not exhaustively, on many of the puzzles that Plato presents us with in the *Laches*, has tried to argue that Socrates' motivation for being in this conversation is to secure the future company of Aristides and Thucydides. In order to do so, Socrates has to accomplish several things. First, he must confront the fathers of the children he has already been meeting with, and convince them that he is not a threat to the children's education. Second, he must compete with the leading men of the city, Nicias and Laches. Third, he has to do so without incurring the ire of these political men, for Socrates is still a younger man who may yet have important things to discover or confirm about the divine as well as of the

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<sup>2</sup> My thinking on this problem is highly indebted to Strauss (1954), Pangle (1983), Meier (2007), Burns (2010), and Leibowitz (2010), and mistakes in understanding it are very much my own.

<sup>3</sup> See also Leibowitz (2010) 42-43 who characterizes nature as not being stable enough to inquire into if providential beings exist. This formulation seems to miss that if an omnipotent providential being exists, then there is no nature. On this point, see Strauss (1954) 151.

order of things. While Socrates may understand the primary contours of the conflict between philosophy and the divine, he must still think he has to gather more evidence to be sure he is correct about whatever provisional conclusions he has come to. If that is true, he is better off not angering these men, as we know from the *Meno* he does with Anytus later in life; that is, Socrates needs to know whether he should take his bearings from unassisted human reason or from the gods before he dies, and if he is too reckless with his conversations, he could easily be accused of impiety and corruption, which are capital crimes, long before he eventually is. The three tasks outlined above serve the good of Socrates, and Socrates, though he has the opportunity, does not go out of his way to educate the generals. In fact, as has been argued, he stirs up a rivalrous irritation between the two of them. This suggests that the primary purpose of political philosophy is not to guide political life, but, rather, that it is an activity that attempts to understand whether or not it is possible to ground a rational inquiry into nature.

Why then, does Socrates choose to pursue future meetings with the promising lads? Socrates attempts to ground philosophy by dialectically examining what human beings say about moral virtue. The commands that gods make of beings are the only possible point of access by human beings to the divine. If Socrates can repeatedly demonstrate that the claims of morality are inconsistent, then he can gain confidence that no gods have made commands of human beings. However, Socrates must not think that he can ground philosophy just by refuting admirable, though, philosophically unpromising men like Laches and Nicias.<sup>4</sup> Partly, this is so for prudential reasons—reasons that have been argued above, namely, that Socrates does not wish to attend a

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<sup>4</sup> Leibowitz (2010) 98-99.

capital trial at this point in his life. Socrates must be careful about when he makes men angry by refuting them. More importantly, an interlocutor may not have the strength of soul required to follow Socrates through questions about his motivations to be virtuous. Thus, Socrates must eventually train young potential philosophers, like Aristeides and Thucydides, whom he must suspect have greater psychic strength than most, to cultivate the kind of strength required to see, and, hold onto, important realizations about virtue, in order to get farther down the road in his own investigations.<sup>5</sup> That is, Socrates wants to prove that his own insight into human motivation is not just idiosyncratic.<sup>6</sup> To put this one more way, Socrates wishes to make sure that his own capacity to see the true character of virtue is not unique to his own experience. Thus, we see Socrates in the *Laches* securing for himself future meetings with Aristeides and Thucydides—meetings that we know from the *Theaetetus* and *Theages* he secured.<sup>7</sup> Socrates will attempt to engage the boys more fully in the kind of dialectal examination that leads to a full scrutiny of one's moral opinions, so that Socrates can confirm that his own experience of a purification of thought is not unique. Socrates does not want mere faith in the possibility of philosophy. In order to make this a serious possibility, he must be able to offer “not a definitive, but a fuller account of the moral experiences to which the pious point as their significant experiences.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid* 104.

<sup>6</sup> Burns (2015) 3.

<sup>7</sup> Plato *Theaetetus* 150e-151a and *Theages* 130a-130e.

<sup>8</sup> Pangle (1983) 22.

One final question we will consider is: what does Plato intend for us to learn from the fact that what appears to be a search for courage forms much of the dialogue? What does courage have to do with what has been argued for in this paper? After demonstrating the contradictory character of Laches' second definition of courage, steadfastness of soul, Socrates suggests that he and Laches must continue to be steadfast (*karteros*) towards the inquiry (194a). Nichols translates *karteria* as steadfastness, which is a fine choice, but the word might also be understood as toughness or strength as well. Socrates then seems to be saying that a certain kind of toughness is a necessary characteristic if one wishes to inquire into the most important things.<sup>9</sup> Laches and Nicias have been found to lack this kind of strength in facing up to the incoherency of their views, and perhaps of moral virtue generally. Laches does not ultimately believe that he is wrong, only that he cannot say what he knows. Nicias thinks that he has argued well on the whole, and that he can easily rectify his misunderstandings with his son's teacher, Damon. Will Damon be willing to question Nicias' views as sharply as Socrates just has? Presumably, Nicias expects that Damon will give him the answers he needs. Nicias will not be compelled, as he is when he spends time with Socrates, to give an account of himself.

As Leo Strauss observes, we never read a Platonic dialogue that takes place between equals.<sup>10</sup> Except for a few cases, Socrates is the lead interlocutor, and he has discussions with non-philosophers who do not possess the same kind of moral clarity or self-awareness that he does. That is to say, they are confused about virtue, and their motivations for being virtuous. Socrates, and Plato for that matter, never spell out these

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<sup>9</sup> Rabieh (2006) 161-162.

<sup>10</sup> Strauss (1964) 54-55.

confusions for the interlocutor or for those reading the dialogue. That would seem to suggest that unless one can discover these confusions for oneself, one will always be at a loss. As we saw in the *Laches*, when Lysimachus withdrew from asking questions, he seemed to think that acquisition of knowledge functions as an easygoing transmission; he thinks we can go from having zero knowledge to somehow having everything we need without any real effort. By never spelling things out to interlocutors in the way suggested above, Socrates indicates that we can learn the most important things only by coming into possession of the answers ourselves. We must have the toughness to examine ourselves not just when Socrates is there, but when we are on our own. We can begin to hone our steadfastness by closely examining our moral experiences and wondering about what assumptions are necessary for our moral outlook to be true, and by wondering whether these assumptions are contradictory or not. Without having the toughness to admit that we might be wrong about the things that are dearest to our hearts, we risk never being able even to begin to satisfy our minds that we have ground to stand on.

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