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For Lack of Wisdom: Courage and Inquiry in Plato's "Laches"

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In contrast to the common view of courage that conceives its contribution to be limited to acts of personal sacrifice, Plato's *Laches* highlights courage as an essential component of the greatest personal good, namely education. As such, courage operates specifically as a check against the fear of the unknown. This fear poses a serious threat both to politics and to philosophy by engendering a yearning for certainty or scientific expertise that impedes prudent citizenship and precludes genuine inquiry. In its opposition to this fear, courage underlies not only the soldier's risk-taking but also the juror's necessary firmness in distinguishing reasonable and unreasonable doubt. Above all, such courage proves to be essential to a philosopher grappling with his own ignorance. In general, then, courage supports the noble exertions of those who in a decisive respect are deficient in wisdom.

It has recently become fashionable in discussions of national defense strategy to criticize the inflexibility of our reliance on massive nuclear retaliation for the protection of vital interests. Many analysts contend that, at the margin, we would be better served by the enhancement of conventional forces than by the expansion and increasing technical sophistication of our nuclear arsenal. To the extent that one finds this contention persuasive as a strategic matter, however, he has still to square its policy implications with broader political considerations. For example, the level of mobilization necessary for victory in conventional, protracted warfare might involve the introduction of conscription, to say nothing of restrictions on the operation of a free press. It should not come completely as a surprise, then, that a liberal democracy would be more inclined to depend for its defense upon the development of technology than upon measures that require an appreciable sacrifice of individual rights or civil liberties.

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But one might suggest that expectations often condition performance; a polity devoted above all to the rights of private individuals might fail to win the public-spirited support necessary to its own defense, whatever its level of technological sophistication. Furthermore, no weapons system yet devised has made the will to win obsolete. It is in this vein that Alexander Solzhenitsyn (1978) warns of the loss of will or manly courage, which, in his view, liberal democracy's devotion to material comforts and individual rights has cost it. In fairness to the architects of commercial liberalism it should be observed that they (if not all the heirs to their achievement) were aware of the difficulty to which Solzhenitsyn alludes. Recognizing an implicit trade-off within the psychic economy, however, they deliberately favored encouraging the passion of acquisitiveness—and its correlative virtues of moderation, honesty, and generosity—to promoting a bellicose spiritedness and courage, precisely as the quality more conducive to the preservation of liberal society (see Diamond, 1977, p. 64; Strauss, 1953, p. 187). This controversy over the political status of courage, though surely one of the most profound in modern times, nevertheless does not penetrate to the heart of the matter. For the parties to this controversy, whatever their other differences, share an unexamined premise regarding the nature of courage. The sternest critics of contemporary liberal society contend that the democratic ethos of self-indulgence reveals a mere "paper tiger" skulking behind the sharp teeth of the world's most sophisticated military technology. On this account, it would appear that the value of courage is reckoned principally as a support for personal sacrifice as against such self-indulgence. But this is precisely the liberal's estimate of courage, which helps explain the studied neglect of this virtue in contemporary western democracies, where the individual is paramount. In either its liberal or authoritarian guise, the modern view fails to consider the possibility that courage is not merely the virtue of the sacrificial lamb, but is perhaps a necessary aspect of even the greatest individual and political good.

While current views neglect this possibility, it is explored in detail in Plato's *Laches*. In the *Laches*, Socrates corrects the underestimation of courage that currently underlies the position of both the liberal individualists and their authoritarian critics. The dialogue as a whole penetrates beyond the role of courage in individual sacrifice and reveals courage itself as a firmness or perseverance resisting the terrors of the unknown. These terrors pose a serious threat both to politics and to education by engendering a yearning for certainty that impedes prudent citizenship and precludes philosophical inquiry. Socrates reveals that inquiry fundamentally depends upon one's *conviction*, not certainty, that it is better to inquire than not to inquire; he calls this conviction "courageous" (*Meno*, 86b7-c2). We note, similarly, that the rule of law

(based as it is upon the *presumption* of individual responsibility) depends upon a citizenry of prospective jurors capable of distinguishing between reasonable and unreasonable doubt, which by definition can never be a matter of certainty.¹ Thus courage, as it comes to light in the *Laches*, supports not only the ultimate personal sacrifice but also the ultimate personal and political goods, education and prudent judgment. Consequently, the political argument for fostering courage through appropriate public policy is even stronger than the modern critics of liberal society suggest.

Despite the political importance of its theme, Plato's *Laches* is frequently overlooked by political scientists. It is rarely studied, owing, at least in part, to its reputation among specialists as an aporetic dialogue; as in several other dialogues, Socrates comes to no expressly formulated conclusion and even indicates a lack of means among his principal interlocutors for arriving at such a conclusion. On this basis the commentators typically suppose that the *Laches* stands as merely another exhibit of Socrates' already undisputed skill at refutation. We, however, must not forget that Socrates himself holds the aporetic in higher regard. For Socrates this lack of means *is* the means—the only means—through which genuine learning can take place. Careful attention to the aporetic is particularly warranted in the case of a dialogue whose theme is courage. For in a state of *aporia* or perplexity, Socrates explains, one is best positioned to begin to learn, if he is courageous (*Meno*, 81d3-4, 84a5-c9, 86b6-c2). Many indications within the dialogue itself, moreover, point to its status as a particularly serious consideration of the place of courage among the ends of political life.

The most immediate of these indications is evident in the persons of Socrates' principal interlocutors, Nikias and Laches. The *Laches* is the only Platonic work in which Socrates speaks at length with the top political men of Athens, men whose speech is not a ventilation of youthful enthusiasm and untempered high spirits but is rather governed by their

¹ Even Justice Bazelon, whose decision in the Durham case (214 F.2nd, 862) played a decisive role in authorizing the substitution of the testimony of experts for the prudential judgments of juries, has come to appreciate the political liabilities of the surrender of judgment to expertise. In the Brawner case (471 F.2nd, 969) Bazelon had the opportunity to reflect upon the practical consequences of his earlier decision, noting that "the Durham formulation gave the false impression that the question [of diminished responsibility] required a medical or scientific answer. . . . It offers the jury no real help in making the 'intertwining moral, legal, and medical judgments' that all of us expect. In fact, because it describes the question as one of fact it may lull the jury into the mistaken assumption that the question of responsibility can best be resolved by experts." Of course, there will be "experts" lined up on either side. But as Bazelon goes on to suggest, once the jurors are "cast adrift," having been led to suppose that the question is not within their capacity to decide, the choice among disputing experts will likely be made less on the basis of careful prudential judgment, which *Durham* undermines, than on the basis of other relatively capricious factors contributing to persuasiveness.

conception of their own weighty political achievements and responsibilities. The significance of this unique ensemble is further indicated by the dramatic date of the conversation reported in the dialogue, which we are to suppose to have taken place between the battle of Delium, 424 B.C., mentioned by Laches (181b1-4), and Laches' own death in 418 at Mantinea, recorded by Thucydides (V 74.3 with 61.1). Temporally centered between these events is the negotiation in 421 of a peace treaty between Athens and Sparta, which proved no more than an interlude in the Peloponnesian War. On the Athenian side, Thucydides (V 43.2) tells us, it was Nicias and Laches who played the major roles in the negotiation of this peace. Thus Plato's casting of these soldier-statesmen at this particular time invites a comprehensive reflection upon the relation between the pursuits of war and the pursuits of peace. The dialogue addresses this issue by means of an examination of courage, *the* martial virtue. Courage is a matter in which Socrates' interlocutors obviously have a deep professional interest. We may suppose that the generals, as seasoned veterans, have carefully observed not only the mock fighting to which they have been invited at the dialogue's opening, but real combat and martial valor. It is on the basis of this insightful apprehension that the dialogue quite literally begins (*tetheasthe*, 178a1; 181a7-b4, 188e5-189a1). The work develops as the interlocutors discover the importance of articulating in common their insights and thereby comprehending the essential character of this excellence in speech (*anakoinōsasthai*, 180a1; 194a6-b1 with 190c6). The drama of the work consists, I maintain, in the conduct of the interlocutors as they confront and respond to their own perplexity at being unable to articulate an adequate account of courage.

This perplexity is both the source of the conventional view, that the *Laches* is simply an aporetic dialogue, and the chief consideration telling against it. Although courage is not satisfactorily defined in the *Laches*, we expect (on the basis of Socrates' remarks on the role of courage in inquiry) that its nature may come to light in the conduct of the interlocutors as they grapple with their own perplexity. In this sense, actions do speak louder than words. Of course, this interpretation depends upon a recognition that of all challenges it is inquiry that most tellingly summons, tests, and reveals the significance of courage in the human soul. Thus it is my aim in this essay to substantiate the central role of inquiry in Plato's *Laches* and thereby to highlight the importance of the difference between the deeds of Nicias and of Laches for the meaning of the dialogue as a whole. I shall suggest that Laches and Socrates manifest complementary, though not identically, courageous responses to perplexity in the conduct of their inquiry. In contrast to prevailing interpretations, I regard Nicias' response as inferior, precisely in its lack of courage.² Laches' *superiority*

² The commentators are all but unanimous in finding Nicias superior to Laches. As we

to Nikias is manifest, I maintain, in his willingness to acknowledge his own perplexity and to attempt a genuine inquiry to resolve it. Nikias, in part because of the very parroting of Socratic doctrine that induces the commentators to applaud him, obscures his own perplexity and obstructs genuine inquiry.

THE OPENING: FOUNDING A COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY (178a1-184c8)

Lysimachus and Melesias, who initiate the conversation performed in Plato's *Laches*, are the aged and undistinguished sons of famous fathers. Thus they find themselves ashamed that they have no great feats of their own to relate to their sons. Their fathers, Aristeides and Thucydides, were in their time the first men of Athens. Nevertheless, as Lysimachus and Melesias suggest, the great men are not blameless; their sons hold them responsible for their own lack of accomplishment (179c6-d2). Aristeides and Thucydides spent their time tending to the affairs of the political community, and consequently neglected the discipline and education of their own children. The two sons, now fathers themselves, declare their determination not to let their own sons suffer the same neglect. Their open declaration of this determination is perhaps intended to display for their sons, who are within earshot through virtually the entire conversation (cf. 201a2-b5), a deed of their own that in this respect at least rivals the achievements of the illustrious Aristeides and Thucydides. In this way the ensuing conversation would itself begin to supply the need most poignantly felt by the aging fathers.

shall see, this judgment is no small point, but central to the significance of the dialogue as a whole. Friedlander (1964, p. 42) holds that "of the two generals, Nikias . . . thinks more like Socrates." O'Brien (1963, p. 42) means to praise Nikias, calling him a man of reason, but considers Laches "a coward in argument." Hoerber (1968, p. 104) contends that Nikias' "theories, hypotheses, and mental concepts place him above the *pistis* of Laches," and that "Plato no doubt named the treatise after Laches because Laches represents the level of the masses in need of education." Kohak (1960, p. 126), by contrast, would place both Laches and Nikias on the same segment of Socrates' "divided line," but still distinguishes Nikias as superior on grounds that he is "far less content" than Laches to remain at that level. De Laguna's (1934, p. 175) estimate, in a sense, is more in line with the interpretation presented here. For he perceptively observes that Nikias "is not intended to represent the Socratic philosophy, but to misrepresent it" (see also Vlastos, 1981, pp. 266-269). Nevertheless, he fails to see anything superior in Laches, whom he describes simply as "a typical bluff old soldier." On the other hand, Umphrey's (1978, pp. 4-6) thoughtful and decidedly evenhanded account—note his assimilation of the two generals to the Platonic "indefinable dyad"—marks a definite advance (see also Blitz, 1979). But the parity between Laches and Nikias predicated by such a view still fails to represent accurately their comparative excellence. Laches, as I hope to show, is superior to Nikias.

This concern of Lysimachus and Melesias for the problem of private sacrifice, for the rift between public service and the proper cultivation of one's own, stands at the gateway of the *Laches*. It must be said in Lysimachus' behalf, despite his inability to execute his intentions, that he recognizes this rift and attempts a remedy. He and Melesias bid the famous generals, Nikias and Laches, to attend an exhibition of "swordplay" (*machomenon en hoplois*, 178a1). Swordplay had been nominated for consideration earlier by someone in whom Lysimachus had evidently confided his concern for the education of his son. The war with Sparta no doubt impressed upon Lysimachus the importance of the martial arts generally. But Lysimachus' self-consciousness of his own unmanliness—he apologizes later for not knowing Socrates on grounds that he spends nearly all his time "down home," and even swears, like the women with whom he is surrounded, by Hera (180d4-6, 181a4)—is perhaps most responsible for his selecting this unimpeachably masculine practice for further consideration. What he wishes to determine from the experienced martial practitioners, Nikias and Laches, is whether swordplay is indeed a fine thing for youngsters to undertake. Lysimachus makes it clear, furthermore, that what he proposes is not simply a professional consultation; Nikias and Laches have sons of their own, for whose sake they should have a personal interest in this question. Lysimachus, accordingly, asks not only for the generals' views on swordplay or other studies they might have to recommend for a young man, but also what they make of the community of interest he observes (180a1-5). This community of interest merits special consideration because its realization would help dampen the clash between public service and care for one's own. It is this conflict that Lysimachus sees as the dilemma responsible for his father's neglect and his own lack of manliness. In the community he envisions, by contrast, it is virtually impossible to promote the common good by neglecting one's personal affairs, since one's contribution to this community comes in the form of determining how best to care for one's sons (179b4-6; cf. *Crito*, 54b2-8; *Apology*, 41e2, 42a2). In fact, the final consummation of this community involves a common concern for the education not simply of one's children, but most especially of oneself (201a2-7).

The replies of Nikias and Laches to Lysimachus' questioning provide our first glimpse of these characters. Nikias is concise—one is tempted to say laconic (see Strauss, 1964, pp. 202-213). He commends Lysimachus' thought and is, he says, prepared to join his community. He supposes Laches is, too. Laches confirms this, speaking in corroboration of the dilemma of public servants and affirming his personal stake in the issue (*kai eis hēmas*, 180b3). If he has any reservations at all, Laches is surprised only that Lysimachus has summoned him and Nikias but not Socrates, who

happens to be near at hand, to join in the consideration. Considering especially Lysimachus' concern for the trustworthiness of his advisors, Laches suggests that Socrates is just the man for the job; Socrates has both a remarkable interest in the subject of Lysimachus' inquiry and personal ties to Lysimachus himself (178a5-b5, 180c1-4). This proposal is seconded by Nikias, who is on even more intimate terms with Socrates than is Laches. In fact, Socrates has recently introduced a music teacher to Nikias for his son. The teacher has proved to be not only an excellent musician, Nikias says, but also as worthy a companion for a youth as one could have wished. This declaration, however, would seem to belie Nikias' initial response to Lysimachus. Nikias evidently does not share the other communicants' need to inquire regarding a suitable education for his son, since Socrates has already taken care of the matter for him.

Lysimachus does not tarry to consider this ambiguity in Nikias' position. Instead, he turns directly to Socrates. His surprise that Socrates is the son of his old friend Sophroniscus blossoms into delight as he learns from Laches and Nikias that Socrates "does his father right." Laches adds that Socrates has done right not only by his father but by his fatherland; Socrates' conduct during their retreat together from Delium was exemplary (181a7-b4; cf. *Symposium*, 220e7-b1). Hearing this testimonial of Socrates' remarkable ability to satisfy the demands of both *oikos* and *polis*, Lysimachus is naturally eager to have Socrates' advice above all. As a result, his attention is distracted from Nikias and Laches. Socrates' response to Lysimachus' request is critical, then, to the future of the community Lysimachus proposed. Were Socrates simply to offer his own advice, Laches and Nikias could continue their public service divorced from considerations of education and could avoid undergoing a Socratic examination. This, however, would permit political men the tendency to neglect their private affairs, precisely what most disturbs Lysimachus. Socrates instead supports the ends of Lysimachus' proposed community by deferring to the greater experience and age or dignity of Nikias and Laches, thereby redirecting Lysimachus' question concerning swordplay to them.

Nikias, speaking first, favors learning swordplay on a number of grounds: it promotes physical fitness and a capacity for defending one's freedom or independence; it prepares for fighting in ordered ranks with others, but is especially useful when ranks are broken and the fighting is man to man; further, Nikias says, it summons a desire for other noble studies, particularly those connected with it such as tactics and strategy; it makes anyone, he maintains, bolder and more courageous; and finally, it lends its practitioners a sharp and intimidating appearance. We observe that Nikias provides no support here or elsewhere for his sanguine appraisal of the capacity of swordplay to engender courage in anyone,

unless he is supposing that technical virtuosity somehow imparts virtue.

Laches denies even this prospect, however, suggesting that the practice of swordplay is not at all a matter that one *learns*, but is merely a specious gimmick as opposed to a genuine *technē* or *mathēma* (cf. *Gorgias*, 464b2-465a7; *Euthydemus*, 271c5-272b4). More specifically, Laches cannot recommend the practice of swordplay for a number of reasons: were it truly useful in war, the Spartans, who study war more assiduously than anyone, would not have overlooked it as they have; and were it a matter only of oversight and not disdain by the Spartans, the exponents of this practice would flock to them to prove themselves (just as tragedians flock to Athens), which they most decidedly have not done; none of the practitioners of swordplay, furthermore, has proved the worth of his profession in the deeds of war; on at least one occasion, in fact, Laches has seen its chief proponent encumbered in battle—all tied up, so to speak, as his sophisticated weapon became entangled in ship's rigging—rather than liberated, as Nikias suggests, by his practice of this so-called art. Finally, Laches contends, swordplay is hardly capable of engendering virtue; its practice would merely make cowards rash and subject better men to envy and ridicule.

Laches has the better of Nikias in this exchange. Nikias' claims in behalf of swordplay are too grand to stand on the slim support he provides. Ultimately, Nikias' endorsement of swordplay rests on his belief that it is a martial *art*, something that indeed conveys a learned competence. But Nikias never offers an explicit account of this belief. Absent such an account, it appears nothing more than wishful thinking, a yearning for technical mastery, that inclines Nikias to believe in the power of all manner of counterfeits to offer what he wants. It is this same Nikias, after all, whom we know to be notoriously superstitious (Plutarch, *Life of Nikias*, 23; Thucydides, VII 50; n.b. Socrates' admonition, 199a1-3). Laches, by contrast, raises a question as to whether swordplay is an art or a learning matter at all. His argument is enthymemic. This too is revealing. Where Nikias aims for expertise, Laches relies upon probabilities. Laches' acceptance of a standard of judgment less demanding than certainty leaves him vulnerable, however, to the vicissitudes of opinion. Thus he is concerned that idle pretenses, such as he considers swordplay, unnecessarily expose even good men to ridicule. Already, then, there is developing in the persons of Socrates' principal interlocutors a pair of alternatives as to how one might respond to the terrors of change, opinion, and uncertainty in general. Nikias shuns the crowd and inclines toward technical expertise, while Laches resists specious sophistication and relies instead upon common standards of the seemly (cf. 182a7-b4 with 182e5-183b7). Each response, as we shall see, blossoms into a characteristic and telling disposition toward the fear of the unknown. If courage does come

into sight in the drama of the *Laches*, we may expect its appearance to have some relation to this variety of response to the fear of the unknown. But as yet neither Laches nor Nicias has been sufficiently tested for this courage; neither has yet faced the perplexing discovery that he does not know what courage is. In fact, courage is not yet the focal point of the discussion. The more pressing issue, in light of the immediate disagreement between Nicias and Laches, concerns the future of Lysimachus' community. How shall things proceed, considering the disagreement between the principal consultants of the community?

THE CONSTITUTION OF LYSIMACHUS' COMMUNITY (184c9-189d5)

Nicias and Laches, as we have seen, offer conflicting advice in response to Lysimachus' question. This leads the old man to ask Socrates to break the tie, as if the question were to be resolved by a vote. Majority rule threatens Lysimachus' community of consultants by replacing persuasiveness of argument with force of numbers as its ruling principle. But Lysimachus sees no other way. Socrates introduces an alternative. If they were considering a training regimen, Socrates asks Melesias, would they sooner obey the many or one who had acquired the scientific expertise (*epistēmēi*, 184e8) of the gymnastics trainer? Melesias would likely obey the trainer rather than the multitude. But when Socrates asks if he would sooner obey the expert trainer or his four companions, Melesias is less sure. Presumably the basis of the expert's authority, technical competence, does not by itself inspire complete confidence. As Melesias evidently realizes, this skill can be employed with either beneficial or harmful results (see *Republic*, 332d10-12, 333e3-335a2). Melesias does acknowledge that it is fitting to recognize the claim of technical competence as stronger than that of mere numbers. But whether one is to have more confidence in the judgment of an indifferent expert or that of well-disposed friends is not so easily determined. At least this much is clear: non-experts must undertake some consideration of the merits of the expert's advice before being persuaded. But what is this consideration based upon, if it is precisely a scientific knowledge of the subject matter that is lacking? Surely not expertise. Hence, the necessary consultation would itself require perseverance in the face of uncertainty and firmness in opposition to the terrors of the unknown. Lysimachus' and Melesias' inquiry itself requires the support of what we shall learn to call courage.

Socrates suggests then that Lysimachus' community of inquiry be guided not by majority will, nor necessarily by an expert, but rather by *a set of questions*. The questions together compose the agenda that determines the structure of the remainder of the dialogue. First, Socrates suggests that they consider if any among themselves are experts; if not,

then they should search together for a teacher who can impart this knowledge. But before they can conduct this search, they must consider more exactly what it is at which they are seeking experts. This important issue in fact monopolizes the balance of their discussion. By introducing this question, Socrates establishes a ruling principle that revitalizes Lysimachus' community. Just as recourse to majority rule would dissolve Lysimachus' community of consultation, so would blind obedience to the rule of an expert. But Socrates' questioning enables the community to persist despite the conflict of opinion within it.

Nikias, surprised by Socrates' suggestion of the necessity of further reflection upon the exact subject of their inquiry, wonders if their consultation does not simply concern the practice of swordplay. Socrates points out that in fact what they are truly concerned about is not swordplay, but the influence of that practice on the soul of youngsters. Nikias' technical expertise in arms, however great, is not authoritative in this deliberation. The needed advice would come above all from one who understands the soul, or, as we shall see, virtue (189e2-3). Socrates accordingly exhorts Lysimachus not to release Nikias and Laches. They especially must be made to testify, for surely they understand the soul, otherwise they would never have spoken so boldly about the benefits or liabilities of the practice of swordplay for youngsters. Socrates would enroll Nikias and Laches as members of Lysimachus' community by calling on them to submit their views to common examination. Socratic inquiry, consequently, emerges as the principal upon which the community Lysimachus desires—the community that heals the rift between public service and private good—can be maintained. Lysimachus is delighted at this suggestion and asks Socrates to stand in for him in the discussion. It remains for Nikias and Laches to judge themselves, Lysimachus says, if they should give accounts and inquire in common with Socrates.

Both Nikias and Laches agree to this examination by Socrates. At this point, perhaps, they are less concerned for the possible dangers of such a discussion than they are caught up in a spirit of competition. But Nikias, for his part, may suppose that he can outmaneuver this danger. He makes it clear that he knows what a Socratic examination entails. Lysimachus (and Laches) may not realize it, Nikias says, but Socrates is himself something of a terror. Socrates will not let go of anyone who falls in with him until he has been put to the test and been compelled to account for his entire life. Nikias, however, claims to be accustomed to Socrates and even boasts that he does not find his torturing unpleasant (188b4-5)! One should not flee from this treatment, Nikias declares, but rather be willing to undergo it, deeming it worthy, as Solon says, to continue learning all through one's life. If courage has anything to do with resisting the

temptation to flee terrors, then Nikias' remarks here indicate that courage may be necessary to facilitate learning through Socratic inquiry. Whether Nikias in fact manifests this courage, we soon shall have occasion to consider.

Taking his turn to respond to Lysimachus' invitation, Laches describes himself as straightforward as regards talk about excellence generally, though there are two aspects to his feelings. When he hears a man speaking about excellence who is genuinely manly and worthy of the words he speaks, he rejoices at the harmony of deed and speech. Such a one seems to Laches truly musical and a delight to behold; in this respect Laches would be considered a lover of discourse. One who does the opposite, however, causes Laches such pain that in this case he seems rather a misologist, a hater of discourse. Here Laches has in mind chiefly the empty words of worthless men (cf. 184b6-c4). But what he only dimly perceives, owning precisely to his unfamiliarity with Socratic inquiry, is that even good men may strike a false note in speech, in their attempt to render a rational account of the virtue they somehow manifest. Laches' discovery of this prospect, which emerges later with the recognition of his own perplexity, is the truly unknown or unexpected challenge that will put his courage to the test. For now, Laches gladly welcomes a discussion with Socrates. Like Nikias, Laches goes along with Solon, but would add a qualification. Laches too wishes to grow old continually learning many things, but "from good men (*chrēstōn*, 189a5) only."

THE PERPLEXITIES OF LACHES AND NIKIAS (189d5-199e12)

In view of the remarkably receptive declarations of Nikias and Laches, Socrates proposes now an even more fundamental inquiry (*mallon ex arches*, 189e2-3) than that concerning the soul which we had been led to expect on the basis of his earlier suggestion. What makes all the difference in the soul, Socrates indicates, is its characteristic virtue. An excellent soul is so different from a soul lacking excellence that an inquiry into the soul abstracted from the question of virtue and vice is pointless. Socrates illustrates this with the example of eyes. The seeing eye (*ommasi*, 190a3) and the mere physical organ (*ophthalmois*, 190a1-2, 8) are in the decisive respect different things. If eyes with and without sight are utterly different, how could a proper consultation merely concern "eyes" (i.e., without regard to the difference)? Must not the consultation in such a case rather concern sight? Is not sight, furthermore, the most important thing about eyes—that essential thing in virtue of which an eye is truly an eye? The quality that makes this difference, in eyes or in the soul, is the proper subject of inquiry.

Laches, not Nikias, responds to Socrates' proposal, admitting that Socrates speaks truly. This admission settles who is to be the first object of Socrates' examination. As Socrates now reminds Laches, the present consultation concerns how virtue may be engendered in the souls of their sons. To offer advice on this matter, presumably, one must know what virtue is. Laches acknowledges that to offer advice on the acquisition of virtue presupposes that one in fact knows what it is. Socrates then asks if what we know—or, have seen completely (*ismen*, 190c6; *eidenai*, 190c4)—we can also say. When Laches answers “of course,” Socrates suggests they consider courage in particular, for it is the component of virtue into which swordplay would seem to lead, at least to the *polloi* (190d3-5; cf. 182c5-7). Socrates bids Laches, accordingly, to try to say what courage is.

Laches: Courage as Perseverance (190e4-194c1)

Laches swears by Zeus that it is not hard to say what courage is. But he presents a very narrow account, fixing on what to him is the surest indication of courage. If, while bearing an enemy attack one is willing to keep his place in the ranks as he wards off his opponents, you may be assured that he is courageous. Thus Laches begins by offering what he considers the acid-test of a man's courage. Socrates will show and Laches will quickly see, however, that even certain knowledge of particular cases of courage is not sufficient for understanding the nature of courage itself. As their exchange continues, Laches moves with Socrates rather easily away from his acid-test to a more synoptic perspective, but at the price, we should note, of the comfort of certainty. Socrates' questioning, then, challenges precisely Laches' willingness to contend with uncertainty, to govern a fear of the unknown.

Socrates blames himself for not making clearer that his intent was not to ask for indications of courage, but rather for that one essential thing present in all cases of courage. Socrates means to ask about the courageous in the whole martial *eidōs* (191c8-d3). He is also interested in the common nerve of courage that links those courageous in the face of dangers at sea, in disease, in poverty, in politics, and besides these, those who are themselves terrors when it comes to fighting pleasures and pains. In response Laches offers his opinion, as he now understands Socrates to be asking about the common nature of all that is courageous. This, it seems to Laches, is a kind of perseverance or firmness of the soul (*karteria tis einai tēs psychēs*, 192b9). Socrates urges him to be more specific, for surely not all instances of psychic firmness are to be considered courageous. Perhaps, Socrates suggests, only a prudent perseverance is courage. Since Laches holds that courage is noble, the addition to it of prudence—an

undeniable good—would result in something both “noble and good” (*kalē kagathē*, 192c8-9). This is a phrase full of resonance for Laches, since it is the very term used by the Greeks to describe the character proper to a true gentleman. Where perseverance is joined with imprudence or foolishness (*aphrosynēs*, 192d1), on the other hand, the result is harmful and destructive. Laches denies that the combination of foolishness and perseverance can be courageous at all, since it cannot be right that anything noble be harmful and destructive. In the examination of Laches that follows, Socrates’ strategy pits Laches’ opinion that courage is a kind of perseverance against his firmly held conviction that courage is among the noblest of human affairs (192c4-7).

Socrates asks Laches whether he considers the perseverance of shrewd investors, or others whose prudence stems from calculation or technical expertise, to be courageous. Laches swears that he would not call such individuals courageous. One wonders why exactly Laches does not consider the calculating investor courageous. Perhaps it is as simple as the heralded Grecian contempt for trade; in other words, the end that commercial perseverance serves is ignoble, thus disqualifying it as an essential component of an excellent character. But as Socrates’ next question reveals, it is the calculating itself which, for Laches, raises serious doubts. Laches has to decide which of two soldiers is the more courageous: a soldier who perseveres in a battle, having shrewdly calculated that his forces outnumber his opponent’s, that reinforcements will arrive soon, and that he holds the high ground; or a soldier in the opposing army who is willing to persevere against the odds? Notice that the only variable in this question is the degree of reliance on calculation for one’s steadfastness. The nobility of the end served by each instance of soldierly perseverance is, for lack of more information, to be presumed equal. Laches thinks the latter soldier is the more courageous despite his having the greater deficit of prudence or wisdom (*aphronestera*, 193b2). In fact, Laches is willing to generalize on this judgment and suggest that the less technically or scientifically expert perseverance is always the more courageous, since it involves the greater risks. Expert calculation, on the other hand, minimizes courage by reducing the risk. We note that Laches is remarkably forthcoming here, hazarding his genuine opinion despite its obvious incompatibility with his previous agreement in favor of a prudent perseverance as the common nature of all courage. Insofar as gentlemanliness, the “noble and good,” is identified with prudent perseverance, Laches’ initiative is truly daring, for it calls into question the possibility of precisely the gentlemanliness with which he is himself affiliated. It was no exaggeration, then, that Nikias expressed when he said that Socrates’ examination leads his interlocutor around irresistibly to give an account of his entire way of life (187e9-188a2)!

Laches could avoid contradicting himself here by maintaining that perseverance deficient in wisdom is in fact a great good when, for example, there are no experts present to perform an important task, say no life-guard to save a drowning child.³ He might also have maintained that even where perseverance deficient in wisdom is genuinely harmful, one must determine the relative value of what is harmed. For there are higher aspirations than saving one's skin, as Laches would be the first to agree (190e5-6; cf. 182a7-8). But Laches does not take refuge in any of these refinements; he is simply perplexed. Courage cannot consist in a psychic firmness springing from technical or scientific calculation, which would eliminate the uncertainty and danger that a courageous man must face. But neither can courage consist in an imprudent or foolish perseverance, which is shameful rather than noble. Above all, nothing shameful can be courage, for Laches remains unshaken in his belief that courage is noble; in fact he still swears by it (193d10). Socrates, to be sure, is aware that Laches has failed to distinguish between mere lack of technical or scientific expertise and utter foolishness. Not merely Laches' argument, but "gentlemanliness" itself stands or falls with precisely this distinction. But if Socrates understands this, and indeed exploits this weakness in Laches' *logos*, it would appear that his questioning could be criticized as polemical. In the present case, however, polemics are not incompatible with zetetic ends. By attacking Laches in this way, bringing him into perplexity, Socrates creates an opportunity for Laches to *act* courageously, thereby bringing the virtue with which they are concerned closer into view.

Socrates urges Laches to have the courage of his convictions, so to speak. Laches should at least persevere in the search for courage, since it would bring on the ridicule of courage itself (*autē hē andreia*, 194a3) were he not to do so. It appears that *courage itself*, and not simply Laches' conception of courage, has to do with perseverance. Nevertheless, courage itself cannot be simply identified with Laches' verbal formulation, since that was refuted. Laches' perseverance in the inquiry, like his definition of courage, lacks a grounding in scientific expertise. But is it simply foolish? This is the critical question for determining Laches' status

³ For more on this possibility see Santas (1969, pp. 446-48), who does a commendable job drawing out the elements of Laches' position that might have survived Socrates' refutation. His suggestion, that such "residues" indicate a Platonic teaching that belies the dialogue's inconclusive appearance, is perceptive and helpful. But Santas errs, I think, in limiting his analysis to this narrow path. As he becomes more interested in these dialectical residues, he tends to neglect the interlocutors themselves. The strictly logical analysis of particular arguments distracts him from the due consideration of the subtler dramatic elements that lend these arguments, sound or unsound, their ultimate significance. He does not consider, for example, why Laches does not make the refinements that he suggests, or, more importantly, what the significance of Socrates' deliberate exploitation of this fact is.

in the dialogue. To consider this question we must return to the scene of Laches' perplexity.

Laches declares that he is prepared not to be the first to give up, though he is unaccustomed to such perplexing discussions. He is particularly inspired, he confesses, by a desire to conquer his own irritating inability to capture in words what he has in mind (see *Republic*, 535d9-536a1). Socrates responds that a good huntsman will run after his quarry and not give up. It is significant that both Socrates and Laches begin explicitly to understand their conversation no longer as a mere exercise of words, but through images of action. Inquiry for them now combines the challenges of words and deeds. Socratic inquiry counts as deed because it alone is capable of truly moving the soul once it has been brought to a recognition of perplexity. Anything else would be just talk. The remarkable drama-logical character of Socratic inquiry offers a special attraction for Laches in particular. It affords Laches, who finds it impossible to achieve his prized Doric harmony in argument, an opportunity to achieve the harmony he most desires. For if deed and speech are one in Socratic inquiry, the courage displayed there would, necessarily, be harmonious with itself. The test of courage in inquiry is, consequently, more conclusive than that manifest either on the battlefield or merely in eristic argument. Laches is indeed in a genuine state of perplexity or *aporia*, but as these considerations suggest, nothing else could promise him greater benefit (*Meno*, 84a5-c9).

Nikias: Courage as Expertise (194c2-199e12)

Socrates now teams up with Laches and calls on Nikias to help them, as he must surely see how perplexed they have become. Perhaps Nikias, by saying what he considers courage to be, can both dissolve their perplexity and more firmly settle his own notion. In response, Nikias contends that Socrates and Laches have not been defining courage in a fine or noble manner (cf. 194c7-8 with 293d9-10). But the basis of Nikias' judgment here is not, like Laches', a personal conviction concerning some aspect of courage. Instead, Nikias bases his finding on the inconsistency between what Laches and Socrates are now saying and what he has often heard Socrates say on other occasions. Nikias has many times heard Socrates say that one is good with respect to the things in which he is wise, and bad with respect to those in which he is "hard of learning" (*amathēs*, 194d2; see, e.g., *Protagoras*, 360c6-d2). If the courageous is good, and the good is wise, Nikias reasons, it follows that the courageous is wise or, more precisely, a kind of wisdom.

It is significant that Nikias responds to Socrates' S.O.S. without risking any of his own troops, i.e., his own opinions. He has simply repeated, and created a formal syllogism from what he has heard Socrates say before.

Against his earlier declarations, Nicias proves in deed to be most infirm when it comes to Socratic inquiry (cf. 188a6-c1). He merely repeats what he takes to be Socrates' view that courage is a kind of wisdom. Socrates in response asks Nicias to be more specific. Nicias contends that this wisdom is a scientific expertise (*epistēmēn*, 195a1) concerning which things are truly terrible and which, on the other hand, may be ventured upon with confidence. Laches too would like to have considered courage to be wise. But on the basis of the dichotomy between noble perseverance and expert skill to which Socrates called his attention, Laches concludes that wisdom—particularly understood as expertise concerning what may be confidently ventured—is utterly separate (*chōris*, 195a4) from courage. Such expertise would eliminate the element of risk that Laches considers essential to a situation calling for courage. Thus what Nicias is saying appears to Laches to be sheer nonsense. Nicias, in his turn, believes that it is Laches who has been shown to say nothing; his discussion with Socrates ended, after all, in self-contradiction. Both Nicias and Laches evidently think that what the other says amounts to nothing. It should be noted, however, that Laches' view is at least based on what he has learned in arriving at his perplexity, while Nicias' view is based simply on the formality of Laches' self-contradiction. Laches' well-earned perplexity seems preferable to Nicias' borrowed and barren familiarity with Socratic *logoi*. But perhaps Nicias can be induced to be more forthcoming.

Socrates advises Laches not to rail against Nicias, but to join in the attempt to instruct him. Laches does not set off half-cocked to teach Nicias. It is not clear to Laches that he has something positive to teach; but like Socrates he can try to show the perplexity of Nicias' position, which he undertakes to do. Under Laches' questioning, Nicias agrees that the courageous are not the technocrats, such as physicians, with whom we are familiar. They, indeed, know what is terrible and what may be confidently ventured, each in his field. But their wisdom, according to Nicias, is too narrow. The physician *qua* physician does not know, for example, whether it is truly terrible for a patient to go on living rather than to die (cf. the *statesmanlike* physician, *Republic*, 407c7-e4). For the physician, life is good; for the trainer, health; for the general, victory. But the courageous man, according to Nicias anyway, would transcend the limited horizon of such mere convictions. He would know if such things are truly good or not. He would know whether it is better for someone to suffer disease, or even defeat in war (195e10-196a3). Thus General Nicias!

But who has such an expertise? Who can foresee all the consequences of a particular disease, bankruptcy, or defeat and thus know whether each is good or bad? Laches wonders if perhaps Nicias has soothsayers in mind. Although Nicias denies that he believes that soothsayers possess such

expertise, his conduct subsequently, on the Sicilian expedition, suggests that there is something infirm in his denial.⁴ For his part, Laches cannot imagine any human being, as distinguished from a god, possessing the expertise Nikias describes. Since Nikias will not say who his expert is, Laches supposes that he is merely refusing to acknowledge, as a gentleman would, that what he says amounts to nothing. Instead, Nikias twists back and forth concealing his own *aporia*. Nikias evidently is interested only in avoiding the appearance of contradicting himself. Laches, however, holds the present communion (*synousia*, 196b6) in too high a regard to tolerate such conduct. Socrates agrees that it is wrong for a member of such a communion to adorn himself vainly with empty words. But perhaps, he suggests, the fault lies with themselves for not having inquired of Nikias sufficiently.

In view of Nikias' numerous attempts to conceal his own *aporia*, Laches supposes that he has nothing more to say and that, as he suggests later, Nikias is merely a wise-guy (200c2). Laches is willing to learn from good men only (189a5-6). Consequently, he supposes that he has inquired of Nikias sufficiently. But as Socrates' urgings indicate, Laches is mistaken. Nikias' own opinion has hardly been determined, so clever has he been at avoiding the sting of Socrates' cross-examination. But if Nikias' own opinions have not yet been adequately discovered and examined, what is to prevent their being essentially correct? Socrates and Laches might yet learn something from Nikias. What Laches evidently does not see, then, is that the further examination of Nikias can be a benefit to his own understanding (see *Charmides*, 166c7-d6).

Nothing, however, prevents Socrates' taking the initiative on his own and Laches' behalf. Socrates begins by ferreting out the implications of Nikias' purported view for conventional designations of praise and honor. His questions indicate that Nikias would, in a phrase, make a monkey out of the king of the jungle. If scientific expertise is the measure of courage, as Nikias suggests, a lion will be no more courageous than a monkey. Laches at this point sees precisely the dilemma of Nikias' position. Nikias, who holds that courage is wisdom, must either say that lions are wiser than the multitude of human beings, who are unremarkable in their courage, or he must deny that these beasts, whom everyone calls courageous, are courageous at all. In either case Nikias will be opposed by common opinion. Thus Laches' implicit argument, once again, is

⁴ Shaken by a lunar eclipse as he was preparing a tactical retreat from Syracuse, General Nikias consulted soothsayers who bid him to hold his position for thrice seven days. In obedience to the soothsayers Nikias halted the retreat. As a consequence he and his men were captured and massacred (Thucydides, VII, 50; Plutarch, *Life of Nikias*, 23). As I have suggested above, Nikias' notorious superstitiousness is hardly at odds with the scientism manifest in his contention in the dialogue. They are kindred expressions of precisely the same yearning for certainty.

enthymemic: who is more likely to be right, Nikias or everyone else? Nikias can contend against such odds only by proving himself the expert whose knowledge is weightier than the mere opinion of the multitude. Nikias will have to make a stand.

Nikias' display of expertise consists in a series of verbal distinctions. He denies that animals such as lions and bulls are courageous, since he distinguishes courage from fearlessness, which arises from mere thoughtlessness or ignorance regarding terrors. Precious few people, he says, partake in courage and forethought. But a boldness deficient in forethought belongs to many men, women, children, and even animals. Thus what popular opinion regards as courageous, Nikias designates as boldness or daring; he reserves the word courageous for what is prudent (*ta phronima*, 197c1). The line of Nikias' contention is precisely tangent to Laches' perplexity at this point. But despite his interest in distinctions, Nikias fails to distinguish the source of such prudent acts from the expertise he considers central to courage. Neither does Laches as yet recognize this distinction, though his perseverance in pursuing the inquiry—to say nothing of the status of gentlemanliness—rests upon it. Laches instead objects to Nikias' adorning himself with fancy verbal distinctions that come at the expense of the honor merited by those everyone agrees are courageous.

It might appear as if Laches squares off here as the defender of an outraged common opinion against Nikias' heresy. But Nikias' position is hardly the heresy it seems, as his sarcastic response to Laches' rejection reveals. He tells Laches, in effect, not to take his verbal distinctions personally. Nikias means to include Laches, as well as a pile of other Athenians, as wise, inasmuch as they are courageous (197c5-7). Far from being daring in opposing common opinion, Nikias at the first complaint of a representative of that opinion awards the name of courage promiscuously to any Athenian commonly deemed so. Worse, Nikias gives common opinion even more credit, counting its endorsement of courage a sufficient credential for wisdom too! The promiscuity of Nikias' "pile" (*sychnous*, 197c7) of courageous men shows his distinctions among courage, daring, boldness, and fearlessness to be mere sophistic wordplay, something else he merely parrots, for in fact he displays no judgment in the application of these terms. The culmination of such sophistry, evident in Nikias' commending as wise those popularly designated only as courageous, is not the posing of risky paradox, but instead the flattery of conventional opinion. Socrates steps in here to identify for Laches the source of Nikias' "wisdom," namely Damon and ultimately Prodikos, "the finest of all the sophists when it comes to distinguishing such words." Nikias has for the second time avoided the exposure of his own opinion to Socratic examination.

When Laches remarks that such sophistry is not fitting for a man the *polis* deems worthy to stand at its head, Socrates declares that a proper cultivation of the intellect, which he identifies as prudence or practical wisdom (*phronēseōs*, 197e2), is indeed fitting, especially for the principal statesman of the polity. Socrates here calls Laches' attention back to the difference between expertise and prudence, between mere sophistication and genuine wisdom. This distinction is not a sophistry, but it is a distinction Laches has not yet fully understood. In fact, it will be possible to grasp this distinction only through further inquiry. Because Nicias himself brought up the importance of prudence in courage (197c1), Socrates supposes that he is worth investigating further on this point. But Laches supposes, on the basis of Nicias' repeated efforts to conceal his own perplexity, that he is not worth further examination. Consequently, Laches is at the brink of revoking his own partnership in the community of inquiry (n.b. *autos*, 197e5). If Laches is inclined to quit the inquiry here owing to a failure to see the good in it for himself, his lack of perseverance would spring from an intellectual deficiency of his own—a shortage, specifically, in foresight or prudence. Thus Laches' perseverance cannot exist separate from prudential foresight, though such perseverance in inquiry is hardly necessary for one already possessing expertise (195a4).

At this point Laches' perseverance in the inquiry depends upon Socrates' recognition of the value and prospect of further learning. Laches' failure to recognize this prospect prevents his resuming on his own the examination of Nicias. Thanks, however, to Socrates' rather spirited refusal to release him, Laches agrees to continue. His response, though hardly eager, is firmly resolute (*ei dokei chrēnai*, 197e9). Laches and Socrates will continue to inquire together (*syskopei*, 197e8). Socrates, for the third time, invites Nicias to examine his own view of courage. He asks Nicias to start back at the beginning, when courage was first introduced and considered as a part of virtue. In response, Nicias maintains that courage consists in scientific expertise at distinguishing true terrors, on the one hand, and what may be ventured upon with confidence, on the other. The coward, then, would be hard of learning in regard to the distinction between what is truly terrible and what is merely perceived to be so. As we have noted, Socrates himself espouses this view of cowardice elsewhere (*Protagoras*, 360c6-d2). Nicias has evidently heard this, or similar, conversations (194d1-2). One wonders, then, why Socrates now undertakes a remarkably pointed assault upon what appears to be his own position.

The answer to this important question cannot consist in some supposed effort on Plato's part to distinguish his view from the doctrines of the "historical Socrates," as some commentators have maintained. For one thing, Socrates quickly shows that Nicias does not fully understand the

opinion that he repeats here. Socrates elicits admissions from Nikias that are neither logically entailed by Socrates' original opinion nor necessarily reflective of his broader views. As a result, the subsequent refutation of Nikias does not imply a similar inadequacy in the Socratic doctrine. In fact, Socrates' reliance on such non sequiturs in his examination of Nikias would seem to disqualify his effort as a refutation even of Nikias.⁵ Consequently, Plato's views—as distinct from Socrates'—are hardly the more evident in light of Socrates' critical examination of Nikias here. We must search instead for another explanation of the mode and objective of this peculiar examination. Above all we must keep in mind the peculiar character of Nikias' participation, or lack of it thus far, in Socratic inquiry. So far Nikias has put forward only the opinions of others, none of his own. There is, then, a method in the illogic of Socrates' examination here. Had Socrates proceeded strictly logically, the opinion he would be examining would not be that of Nikias but merely a logical corollary of his own previous assertions, or those of Damon or Prodikos, which Nikias has overheard. Instead, by suggesting inferences that are not simply analytically derivable from the views of Nikias' authorities, Socrates shrewdly draws out what Nikias himself really thinks. The verification principle at work in Nikias' assent to Socrates' leading questions is evidently psychological, not logical; confronted with a complex set of premises and equivocal terms, Nikias, like most people, is less inclined to reject likely sounding statements as formal non sequiturs than on grounds of their conflict with his own prior beliefs, however well insulated. Nikias' agreements in this round of questioning, then, disclose at last what he thinks courage is.

Socrates' intention from the first has been to induce Nikias to hazard his own view as distinguished from what he has heard Socrates say. Nikias resists because he prefers to play it safe. He knows too well the ways of Socratic examination. But in the course of Socrates' questioning, Nikias on his own places greater demands on the scope and certainty of the courageous man's foresight than Socrates' own view would seem, logically, to require. Nikias ultimately maintains that courage involves not merely the ability somehow to distinguish what should and what should not be ventured, but consists in a scientific knowledge of good and evil.

⁵ Santas (1969, pp. 451-59) quite nicely reveals some of the non sequiturs in the arguments through which Socrates leads Nikias to ultimate refutation. But he fails to recognize the dramatic significance—or rather, necessity—of these non sequiturs. Nikias will not offer his own opinion for examination, which he must do to participate in Socratic inquiry, as long as he can shield himself behind opinions of Socrates, or others analytically derivable from those of Socrates. As I will suggest, these non sequiturs are Socrates' way of helping a most hesitant Nikias to introduce something of his own into the inquiry, to hazard his own opinion as to what courage is.

But the capacity for distinguishing what should and what should not be ventured, which Socrates seems to agree is an aspect of courage, does not manifestly require scientific knowledge of the good. In the affairs of war, for example, Socrates says that it is the general, not anyone else, who foresees in the finest possible way (198e2-199a4). As Nikias observes, however, the general does not foresee all the consequences of victory and defeat. But what the general does see above all is the need to achieve victory—though someone with a more sophisticated bent might wish to question this. Although this aim is not certifiably good, scientifically speaking, the conviction of its goodness, the foresight of it as what one most needs, Socrates suggests, is essential to the general's courage.

Overall, Nikias' contention is quite opposite to Laches', as we can now see. Laches, we recall, was driven to divide courage from wisdom precisely in order to preserve the element of uncertainty, the riskiness, that he takes as essential to the experience of courage. But if Nikias, on the other hand, actually possessed the knowledge he describes, he could virtually eliminate the riskiness of human affairs. There would then be no need to persevere against the terrors of the unknown; the courageous man would never simply have to "risk it." It is interesting to note, however, that Nikias violates his definition in deed even as he offers it in speech. Though not entirely intentionally, Nikias has at last hazarded his own opinion of courage; he has finally exposed himself to the terror of Socratic examination. In response, Socrates immediately moves toward refuting Nikias' view and bringing him into *aporia*. On the basis of Nikias' admissions Socrates points out that, if courage were scientific expertise, it would extend not only to future evils and their opposite, but also to past and present evils. But Nikias has credited only one third of this, that pertaining merely to future evils (the terrors), to courage. Thus Nikias is impaled upon the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, what he has described is only a fraction of courage understood as scientific expertise. On the other hand, this same expertise would hardly be a part of virtue (as Nikias had agreed courage to be from the beginning), but rather virtue altogether (199e3-4). What Nikias is describing, a scientific expertise, cannot be courage.

FINAL APPRAISALS (199e13-201c5)

Laches immediately seizes the opportunity to comment upon Nikias' *aporia*. As he had suggested earlier, the exponent of a sophism is especially apt to be the target of ridicule (183d7, 184c1-4). Laches' remarks here indicate why this should be so; at the same time they helpfully illuminate the status of prudence as distinct from expertise, the issue toward which

Socrates has consistently directed Laches' consideration. Laches observes that Damon's sophistic wordplay, on which Nicias relies, creates great expectations but makes no discovery. Nicias fails, after all, to determine what courage is. In view of his failure one might suppose that his sophistry, though impotent, is innocuous and that Laches is simply gloating. But this supposition is mistaken. Nicias' wordplay has a significant psychological consequence, which Laches now perceptively notes. Wordplay instills in Nicias a spirit of contempt (*kataphronesas*, 200a1) for Laches' unsophisticated answers to Socrates. Laches' ridiculing response constitutes a deliberate counterattack against such sophistic and supercilious contempt. We recall that Socrates urged Laches to persevere in the examination of Nicias, on grounds that to do so would be worthwhile. How, then, does Laches' recognition of Nicias' contemptuousness—the outcome of his examination—prove worthwhile?

What makes Laches' perseverance in the examination of Nicias worthwhile is the prospect that the distinctiveness of prudence, as opposed to expertise, may thus come to light. On this distinctiveness depends the nobility of Laches' courage and his gentlemanliness generally. Upon examining Nicias, Laches does not discover prudence (*phronēsis*) in him, however, but only contemptuousness (*kataphronēsis*). This fact is itself significant. The literal similarity of *kataphronēsis* and *phronēsis* highlights the possibility that one might mistake mere superciliousness for the height of discernment. One need not depend merely upon Greek to convey this suggestion. Though seeming to bear the imprint of intellectual virtue, wise guys and know-it-alls are recognized by the truly discerning as deficient in judgment. The crucial point is that Laches' gentlemanly objection to sophistic expertise takes issue ultimately with its ill-founded contemptuousness, not with true prudence. If expertise implies merely contemptuousness, not prudence, as Laches at last recognizes, then nothing prevents a linkage between prudence and noble courage (195a4, 200c2). In recognizing the distinction between expertise and prudence, Laches shows that he has profited from his perseverance in the examination of Nicias. The inquiry was indeed worth it, as Socrates had the foresight to see. Furthermore, the original question which brought the inquiry about can now be answered. If sophistry, whether swordplay or wordplay, imparts contemptuousness and impedes the acquisition of prudence, it would be the last thing one would recommend for the education of youths or anyone else.

But Nicias does not comprehend this point or, for the same reason, the significance of his own perplexity. Instead, he takes his turn to blame Laches for caring only how he fares compared with others; it makes little difference, Nicias claims, to Laches that he lacks the scientific expertise (*epistēmēn*, 200a8) every real man should possess, as long as Nicias proves

to be in the same boat. Thus Nikias still insists that expertise is the core of manliness or courage. Oblivious to his own refutation, Nikias continues to claim that what he has said is quite sound. If anything is lacking, however, he intends to correct it later with the sophist Damon. Once this is settled, he will un begrudgingly instruct Laches.

In answer, Laches merely says, "You're wise (*sophos*) alright, Nikias." As Laches now understands, this sophistic "wisdom" indicates a deficiency not only of courage, but also of prudent judgment. He then turns to Lysimachus and Melesias and offers them some remarkable advice. Laches recommends that they dismiss Nikias and himself as consultants concerning the education of their sons, but urges them not to release Socrates. Laches' recognition of his own perplexity has not paralyzed his judgment. Although Laches acknowledges Nikias' wisdom, he nevertheless identifies Socrates, who is himself in perplexity, as the superior counselor. Nikias goes along with Laches' assessment, although on a different basis. If only Socrates would agree to care for Nikias' son, he would not search (*zēteîn*, 200c8) for anyone else. Evidently, Socrates can encourage a truly searching inquiry only by resisting the wishes of Nikias. He does not, therefore, agree to tutor young Nikeratus. Instead he plans to meet again, god willing, to search further for the best possible teacher not simply for their sons, but especially for themselves.

CONCLUSION

The *Laches* begins with Lysimachus' complaint that his father's occupation with political affairs led to the neglect of his own education, that public service impedes care for one's own. To the extent that this is true, public service could be said to reveal something imprudent or foolish in the human soul. Socrates ultimately joins in the consideration of Lysimachus and the others, we may suppose, because he too is disturbed by the conflict between the public interest and the private good. Philosophy, the serious attempt to educate oneself, may be set back by too assiduous an attention to the affairs of one's polity. Hence Socrates has deliberately chosen to stay out of politics, though his valorous deeds would incline other souls to run for office. It would seem that Socrates' decision points toward a limit beyond which public service must indeed involve private sacrifice (see *Apology*, 31e2-33a1). Lysimachus' complaint evidently warrants deeper consideration.

This consideration takes the form of an inquiry by Socrates and two top Athenian generals, Laches and Nikias, into the nature of courage. Courage seems to be the virtue which, more than anything, disposes one to promote the public interest even at the risk of the ultimate personal sacrifice. Such courage, to Laches, is above all noble. It is choiceworthy

its own sake, notwithstanding its riskiness. Laches' convictions are so strong that for him the nobility of courage overshadows even wisdom, at least as he currently conceives wisdom. Thus, for Laches courage is noble, although by implication its goodness is uncertain. Nicias rejects this uncertainty. He denies any tension between courage and wisdom. In fact, he claims, courage *is* wisdom or, more precisely still, scientific expertise. Such courage is not risky in any sense; it guarantees success. Thus, for Nicias courage is good especially in view of its consequences. Hence, the principal dramatic tension in the *Laches* is not between a probing inquiry and civic responsibility, not between the philosopher and the *polis*, as one might expect, but between two civic leaders. The contrast between Nicias and Laches highlights their conflicting attitudes toward uncertainty, toward the fear of the unknown. Laches proves willing and able, both by acknowledging his perplexity in the wake of Socrates' refutation, and by playing his part in the ensuing inquiry, to grapple with uncertainty, to dare to venture beyond the known. Nicias, as we have seen, is neither willing nor able to do either adequately. What prevents him, quite simply, is an unchecked fear of uncertainty, with which he contends only absurdly by demanding scientific expertise as a guide for his conduct. Having adopted this standard, General Nicias doubts whether even victory in war is something one should venture to bring about.

It would be a grave mistake to suppose, as some have, that Nicias' demands for certain knowledge dispose him more favorably than Laches to philosophy or even to good citizenship. On the contrary, the *logos* of the expert, on which Nicias patterns his own answer, is incompatible with genuine inquiry and impedes responsible action in politics. Laches' belief in the need to persevere in the face of uncertainty is, by contrast, essential to the conduct of genuine inquiry and prudential judgment. Socrates suggests as much elsewhere (*Meno*, 86b7-c2), when he rests his case against a dilemma, which argues for the impossibility of inquiry, on his belief that it is more courageous and better to inquire. It is, indeed, perseverance in the face of uncertainty that opposes the paralysis of judgment induced by the epistemology of the expert. Such perseverance underlies every inquiry and every decision that does not collapse before the spiral of demands to "know how we know we know. . . ." The demand for certainty, we may conclude, immobilizes both the philosopher and the citizen. Nicias, Athens' foremost statesman at the time of the dialogue performed in the *Laches*, was drawn subsequently to sacrifice his judgment in submission to expertise—though that expertise consisted merely in astrology.⁶ We conclude that the quest for certainty threatens both the polity and the private human being; it is politically and philosophically dangerous. Courage, by contrast, resists the fear of the unknown. It is this

⁶ We need not rely exclusively on Nicias' heart-rending experience in Sicily to make this

fear that lends the demand for certainty its compelling force. Hence, courage underlies education and good judgment; it proves to be not merely the virtue of the sacrificial lamb but the fundamental excellence which the good citizen and the philosopher necessarily share.

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point. The importance of courage understood as it comes to light in the *Laches* is perhaps nowhere more evident to us than in our own political affairs. Modern technology in the "nuclear age" has so raised the stakes of political risk that we today are if anything more terrified by uncertainty than even Plato's original audience and, consequently, all the more inclined to worship at the shrine of the expert.