Laches

PLATO

c. 428–348 BC

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Λάχης

Translated from the Greek with AI (Claude) and edited



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Laches · Plato (c. 428–348 BC)

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INTRODUCTION

Two old Athenians, Lysimachus and Melesias, are ashamed that they never achieved anything, and they want better for their sons. Should the boys learn to fight in armor? They ask two famous generals, Laches and Nicias, who disagree. Then Laches mentions how bravely Socrates fought in the retreat from Delium in 424 BC.

Socrates turns the question around. To know how to make the boys good, they must know what goodness is—or at least one part of it, courage. Laches, a blunt soldier, says courage is standing your ground. Nicias, more intellectual, says it is a kind of knowledge. Socrates finds a problem with each answer.

Within a few years Laches would die in battle and Nicias would lead Athens to disaster in Sicily. Here they end by admitting they don't know what courage is, and agree they all need to go back to school.

Laches

Athens, after a display of fighting in armor.
Two fathers ask the generals Laches and Nicias, and then Socrates, how to raise their sons, and the talk turns to what courage is.

LYSIMACHUS 178a You've watched the man fighting in armor, Nicias and Laches. Melesias here and I asked you to watch with us, but we didn't tell you why at the time. We'll tell you now, because we think that with you, at least, we ought to speak frankly. There are people who laugh at this sort of thing. If 178b someone asks their advice, they won't say what they really think. Instead they guess at what the person consulting them wants to hear and say something other than their own opinion. But we thought you were capable of judging, and that once you had judged you would simply say what you think. So we've brought you in to advise us on what we're about to put to you. Here, then, 179a is the matter I've been making such a long preamble about.[1] We have sons, these two here. This one is Melesias' son, and he has his grandfather's name, Thucydides. This one is mine, and he too has a grandfather's name, my father's: we call him Aristides. Well, we've decided to take care of them as well as we possibly can. We don't want to do what most people do once their boys have grown into young men, and let them loose to do whatever they like. No, now is the moment to start taking care of them, as far as we're able. We

1 Fighting in armor (hoplomachia) was a display of combat technique in the heavy armor of a hoplite, the Greek infantryman. Traveling professionals taught it for a fee.

knew [179b] that you have sons too, and we thought that you, if anyone, would have given thought to how they should be brought up so as to turn out as good as possible. And if perhaps you haven't often turned your minds to this sort of thing, we wanted to remind you that it mustn't be neglected, and to invite you to join us in taking some care of our sons together. You should hear how we came to this decision, Nicias and Laches, even if it takes a little longer.[2] Melesias here and I take our meals together, you see, and the boys eat with us. [179c] So, as I said at the start of my speech, we'll be frank with you. Each of us has many fine deeds to tell the young men about his own father. There's what our fathers achieved in war and what they achieved in peace, managing the affairs of the allies and of this city. But neither of us has any deeds of his own to tell. That makes us rather ashamed in front of these boys, and we blame our fathers for letting us [179d] live in luxury once we were young men while they busied themselves with other people's affairs. We point out this very thing to these young men. We tell them that if they neglect themselves and don't listen to us, they'll end up without any renown, but if they take care, they may well prove worthy of the names they bear. Well, they say they'll listen to us. So what we're looking into is what they should learn or practice in order to become as good as possible. [179e] Someone suggested this subject to us as well: that it would be a fine thing for a young man to learn to fight in armor. He praised this man you've just watched giving his display, and urged us to go and see him. So we decided that we ought to go and watch the man ourselves, and take you along with us. We wanted you to watch with us, and also, if you're willing, to advise us and share with us in the care of our sons. [180a] That's what we wanted to put to you. So now it's your turn to advise us. Tell us about this subject, whether you think they should learn it or not, and about any others, if you have any subject or pursuit to recommend for a young man. And tell us what you'll do about joining us.

2 The grandfathers were Aristides "the Just" and Thucydides son of Melesias (not the historian), both leading Athenian statesmen of the fifth century BC.

NICIAS For my part, Lysimachus and Melesias, I commend your plan and I'm ready to join you. And I think Laches here is too.

LACHES 180b You think right, Nicias. What Lysimachus was just saying about his own father and Melesias' seems to me very well said. It applies to them, to us, and to everyone who handles the affairs of cities. What he describes is pretty much what happens to them, with their children and everything else: their private affairs get slighted and neglected. So you're right about that, Lysimachus. But it surprises me that you invite us to advise you on the young men's 180c education and don't invite Socrates here. First of all, he's from your deme. And then he's always spending his time wherever there's any of the sort of thing you're looking for for the young, some fine subject or pursuit.[3]

LYSIMACHUS What do you mean, Laches? Has Socrates here taken an interest in anything of this kind?

LACHES Very much so, Lysimachus.

NICIAS I could tell you that just as well as Laches could. Only recently he introduced me to a music teacher for my 180d son: Damon, the pupil of Agathocles. He's the most accomplished of men, not only in music but in every other respect you could want, and well worth having as a companion for young men of that age.[4]

LYSIMACHUS You see, Socrates, Nicias, and Laches, men of my age don't really know the younger ones anymore, since our age keeps us at home most of the time. But if you, son of Sophroniscus, have any good advice to give your fellow demesman here, 180e you should give it. And you owe it to us, since you happen to be a friend of ours through your father. Your father and I were always comrades and friends, and he died before we ever had any disagreement. And something has just come back to me while these men were talking. When these boys are talking with

3 A deme was one of the local districts of Attica, in which every Athenian citizen was registered.

4 Damon was a celebrated Athenian theorist of music; Agathocles was a music teacher of the generation before him.

each other at home, they often mention Socrates and praise him highly. But I've never asked them [181a] whether they meant the son of Sophroniscus. Tell me, boys, is this the Socrates you were always talking about?

SONS Yes, father, that's him.

LYSIMACHUS By Hera, Socrates, I'm glad you keep your father's name standing tall. He was the best of men. And I'm glad above all that our families will be close, so that what's yours will be ours and what's ours will be yours.

LACHES Yes, Lysimachus, and don't let the man go. I've seen him elsewhere, too, keeping not only his father [181b] but his fatherland standing tall. In the retreat from Delium he withdrew alongside me. I tell you, if the others had been willing to be like him, our city would be standing tall and wouldn't have taken such a fall back then.[5]

LYSIMACHUS Socrates, this is truly fine praise you're receiving now. It comes from men worth trusting, and it's for the very things they're praising you for. So you can be sure that I'm delighted to hear you're so well thought of, and you must count me among those most well disposed [181c] toward you. You really should have been visiting us before now and thinking of us as family, as was only right. But from this day on, now that we've recognized one another, don't do otherwise. Spend time with us and get to know us and these young people, so that you and they, too, may keep our friendship alive. Well, you'll do that, and we'll remind you again. But about what we started with, what do you all say? What do you think? Is the subject suitable for the boys or not, learning to fight in armor?

SOCRATES [181d] Well, Lysimachus, I'll try to advise you on this too, if I can, and to do everything else you invite me to. But since I'm younger than these men and less experienced, it seems most right to me to hear first what they have to say and learn from them. Then, if I have something to add beyond what they say, I'll

5 At Delium in Boeotia, in 424 BC, the Athenian army was routed by the Boeotians.

try to teach and persuade both you and them. So, Nicias, why doesn't one of you speak?

FIGHTING IN ARMOR

Nicias recommends the training; Laches thinks it useless and tells a funny story about its teacher.

NICIAS Nothing to stop us, Socrates. I too [181e] think it's useful in many ways for young men to know this subject. For one thing, it's good that they spend their time on this, rather than in the places young men like to pass the time when they have leisure. It also necessarily improves the condition of the body, since it's inferior to none of the gymnastic exercises and takes no less [182a] effort. At the same time, this exercise, along with horsemanship, is especially fitting for a free man. In the contest we are competitors in, the struggle that lies before us, the only people in training are those who train with these instruments of war. Next, this subject will be of some help in the battle itself, when a man has to fight in formation with many others. But its greatest benefit comes when the ranks break and it's one man against one. He may be in pursuit, attacking a man who is defending [182b] himself, or in flight, defending himself against someone else's attack. A man who knows this skill wouldn't come to any harm at the hands of a single opponent, and probably not even at the hands of several. He'd have the advantage over them every time. What's more, this sort of thing stirs up a desire for another fine subject. Anyone who has learned to fight in armor would want the next subject too, the one about formations. Once he had mastered that and taken pride [182c] in it, he'd press on to the whole art of generalship. And it's already clear that the subjects and pursuits connected with these are all fine and well worth a man's learning and practicing, and this subject would lead the way to them. We'll add something to it, and no small addition, either: this knowledge would make any man in war considerably more confident and braver than he was before. And let's not disdain to mention this, even if it strikes someone as rather

minor: it makes a man cut a finer figure, right where a man ought to [182d] cut a fine figure, and his fine bearing will also make him look more formidable to the enemy. So in my view, Lysimachus, the young men should be taught this, as I say, and I've told you my reasons. But if Laches has anything to say against it, I'd be glad to hear it myself.

LACHES Well, Nicias, it's hard to say of any subject at all that it shouldn't be learned. It seems good to know everything. So with this armor-fighting business: [182e] if it is a genuine subject, as those who teach it claim and as Nicias says, it should be learned. But it may not be a real subject, and the people who promise to teach it may be deceiving us. Or it may be a subject, but not a very serious one. In either case, why would anyone need to learn it? I say this about it because of the following. I think that if there were anything to it, it wouldn't have escaped the Spartans. They care about nothing else in life but seeking out and practicing [183a] whatever might give them an edge over others in war, if they learned and practiced it. And even if it escaped the Spartans, it certainly hasn't escaped these teachers of it that the Spartans take such things more seriously than any other Greeks. Nor has it escaped them that anyone honored for this among the Spartans would make the most money from everyone else too, just as a tragic poet does who is honored among us. That's why anyone who thinks he writes tragedy well doesn't go traveling around Attica from outside, [183b] giving displays in the other cities. He heads straight here and shows his work to the people here, naturally. But these armor-fighters, as far as I can see, regard Sparta as holy ground where no one may tread, and won't set so much as a tiptoe on it. They go around it in a circle and give their displays to anyone rather than the Spartans. They especially favor people who would admit themselves that many others are ahead of them in matters of war. [183c] Then again, Lysimachus, I've been present with quite a few of these men in actual combat, and I see what they're like. We can also judge from the facts right before us. It's as if on purpose: not one man who has practiced armor-fighting has ever won distinction in

war. And yet in every other field, the famous names come from those who have practiced the thing in question. These men, it seems, have been uniquely unlucky in this respect. Take this Stesilaus, whom you [183d] watched with me giving his display in front of that huge crowd and saying all those grand things about himself. I watched him elsewhere giving a finer display, a real one, in which he truly displayed himself, though not by choice. The ship he was serving on as a marine rammed a merchant ship, and he was fighting with a scythe-spear, an exceptional weapon, naturally, for an exceptional man. Nothing else about the man is worth telling, but here is how his clever invention of the scythe [183e] on the spear turned out. While he was fighting, it got caught somewhere in the other ship's rigging and stuck fast. Stesilaus pulled, trying to free it, and couldn't, and meanwhile the one ship was moving past the other. For a while he ran along the deck of his own ship, hanging on to the spear. But as the ship slid past the other and dragged him along with it, still clinging to the spear, [184a] he let the shaft slip through his hand until he was holding on to the very end of the butt. The men on the merchant ship laughed and clapped at the figure he cut. Then someone threw a stone that landed on the deck at his feet, and he let go of the spear. At that point even the men on the trireme couldn't hold back their laughter anymore, as they watched that scythe-spear of his dangling from the merchant ship. Well, maybe there is something to this, as Nicias says. But in my own experience, this is the sort [184b] of thing it amounts to. So, as I said at the start, it may be a subject with such small benefits. Or it may not be a subject at all, and they merely claim and pretend that it is one. Either way, it isn't worth trying to learn. In fact, it seems to me that if a coward thought he knew it, it would make him more reckless and show more plainly what sort of man he was. And if a brave man thought so, people would watch him closely, and if he made even a small mistake, he'd be badly slandered. [184c] Claiming that kind of knowledge invites envy. So unless a man is astonishingly superior to everyone else in excellence, he can't possibly avoid becoming a laughingstock if he

says he has it. That's how the enthusiasm for this subject looks to me, Lysimachus. But, as I told you at the start, you mustn't let Socrates here go either. Ask him to give you his advice about the question before us.

SOCRATES IS CALLED IN

Asked for a deciding vote, Socrates says such questions are settled by knowledge, not by a majority.

LYSIMACHUS Yes, I do ask you, Socrates. Our council seems to me to need, as it were, [184d] someone to cast the deciding vote. If these two had agreed, there'd be less need for that sort of thing. But as it is, you see, Laches has voted the opposite way from Nicias. So it would be good to hear from you too which of the two men you're voting with.

SOCRATES What's this, Lysimachus? Are you going to follow whichever side gets the approval of the majority of us?

LYSIMACHUS Why, what else could anyone do, Socrates?

SOCRATES And you, Melesias, would you do the same? Suppose [184e] you had to decide what your son should practice for an athletic contest. Would you be persuaded by the majority of us, or by whichever of us happened to have been taught and trained by a good trainer?

MELESIAS By that one, naturally, Socrates.

SOCRATES So you'd be persuaded by him rather than by the four of us?

MELESIAS Probably.

SOCRATES Yes, because I think anything that's going to be judged well has to be judged by knowledge, not by numbers.

MELESIAS Of course.

SOCRATES Then now, too, we must first consider this very question: [185a] is any one of us an expert in what we're deliberating about, or not? If there is one, we must listen to him, even though he's only one, and let the others be. If not, we must look for

someone else. Or do you think it's some small matter that you and Lysimachus are risking right now? Isn't it that possession which happens to be the greatest you have? Whether the sons turn out good or the opposite, the father's whole household will be run accordingly, depending on what sort of people the children become.

MELESIAS That's true.

SOCRATES So we must take great forethought about it.

MELESIAS Very much so.

SOCRATES 185b So how would we go about it, as I was just saying, if we wanted to find out which of us is the greatest expert in athletic contests? Wouldn't it be the one who had learned and practiced it, and who had also had good teachers of that very thing?

MELESIAS I think so.

SOCRATES And even before that, shouldn't we ask what this thing is that we're looking for teachers of?

MELESIAS What do you mean?

SOCRATES Maybe it'll be clearer this way. I don't think we agreed at the start on what exactly it is that we're deliberating and inquiring about, when we ask which of us is an expert and has acquired teachers 185c for that purpose, and which of us isn't.

NICIAS But Socrates, aren't we considering fighting in armor, and whether the young men should learn it or not?

SOCRATES Certainly, Nicias. But when someone is considering a medicine for the eyes, and whether he should apply it or not, do you think his deliberation is then about the medicine or about the eyes?

NICIAS About the eyes.

SOCRATES 185d And when someone considers whether a bridle should be put on a horse or not, and when, then presumably he's deliberating about the horse and not about the bridle?

NICIAS True.

SOCRATES In a word, then, when someone considers one thing for the sake of another, his deliberation is about the thing for whose sake he was considering it. It isn't about the thing he was looking into for the sake of something else.

NICIAS Necessarily.

SOCRATES So we must also consider whether our adviser is an expert in caring for that thing, the one for whose sake we're conducting our inquiry.

NICIAS Certainly.

SOCRATES [185e] Now, aren't we saying that we're considering a subject of learning for the sake of the young men's souls?

NICIAS Yes.

SOCRATES Then this is what we must consider: whether any of us is an expert in the care of the soul, able to care for it well, and has had good teachers.

LACHES What, Socrates? Haven't you ever seen people who became more expert in some things without teachers than with them?

SOCRATES I have, Laches. But you wouldn't be willing to trust them if they claimed to be good craftsmen. Not unless they could show you some well-executed product of their craft, one or more.

LACHES [186a] That much is true.

SOCRATES So we ought to do the same, Laches and Nicias. Lysimachus and Melesias have called us in to advise them about their two sons, because they're eager for the boys' souls to become as good as possible. If we say we have teachers, we should point them out: teachers who were good themselves to begin with, who have cared for the souls of many young men, and who then [186b] clearly taught us as well. Or if one of us says he never had a teacher himself, he should at least be able to tell of his own works and point to people, Athenians or foreigners, slaves or free, who by common agreement have become good

because of him. And if we have none of this to show, we should tell them to look elsewhere, and not risk corrupting the sons of our friends and so earning the gravest blame from those closest to us. As for me, Lysimachus and Melesias, I'll be the first to 186c admit that I've never had a teacher in this. And yet I've longed for it ever since I was young. But I can't pay the fees of the sophists, who were the only ones claiming they could make me a fine and good man, and I still can't discover the art on my own, even now. If Nicias or Laches has discovered it or learned it, I wouldn't be surprised. They have more money than I do, so they could learn it from others, and they're also older, so they may have discovered it by now. They do 186d seem to me capable of educating a person. They'd never declare so fearlessly which pursuits are good for a young man and which are bad unless they were confident they knew enough. In everything else, then, I trust them. But I was surprised that the two of them disagree with each other. So I'm asking you a favor in return, Lysimachus. Just now Laches urged you not to let me go but to question me. Now I'm urging you not to let Laches or Nicias go, but to question them. Say to them: "Socrates says 186e he doesn't understand the matter, and isn't competent to judge which of you is telling the truth, since he's never discovered anything of this sort or been anyone's student in it. But you, Laches and Nicias, each tell us: who is the most skilled person you've spent time with on the upbringing of the young? Do you know about it because you learned it from someone, or because you found it out yourselves? If you learned it, 187a who was each of your teachers, and who else practices the same art? That way, if the city's business leaves you no time, we can go to them and persuade them, with gifts or favors or both, to look after our children and yours, so that the boys don't turn out worthless and shame their ancestors. And if you discovered this sort of thing yourselves, give us an example: whom have you already taken in hand and turned from worthless into fine and good? "Because if you're only now going to start 187b educating, you need to watch out that the risk you're running isn't on a Carian but on your own sons

and your friends' children, and that the proverb doesn't come true for you exactly as it says, 'learning pottery on a wine jar.' So tell us which of these things you claim to have and to be qualified for, and which you don't." Find these things out from them, Lysimachus, and don't let the men off.[6]

LYSIMACHUS Gentlemen, I think Socrates is speaking well. 187c But whether you're willing to be questioned about such things and give an account of yourselves is for you to decide, Nicias and Laches. For Melesias here and me, it would obviously be a pleasure if you'd agree to talk through everything Socrates asks. In fact, that's where I began at the start. I told you we'd called you in for advice because we assumed you'd naturally given thought to such matters, especially since your boys, like ours, are almost old enough 187d to be educated. So if you don't mind, speak up and look into it together with Socrates, giving and receiving accounts from one another. He's right about this too, that we're deliberating now about the most important of our concerns. But see whether you think we should do it this way.

WHAT TALKING WITH SOCRATES IS LIKE

Nicias warns that talk with Socrates turns to one's own life; Laches welcomes it from a man of deeds.

NICIAS Lysimachus, it really seems to me that you know Socrates only through his father, and haven't had anything to do with him except 187e as a child, when he may have tagged along with his father and come up to you among your fellow demesmen, at a temple or some other gathering of the deme. Clearly you haven't yet met the man since he's grown up.

LYSIMACHUS Why do you say that, Nicias?

NICIAS You don't seem to know that anyone who gets as close to Socrates in discussion as a relative is by birth, and keeps com-

6 Two proverbs: to experiment "on a Carian" meant risking something of little value (Carians often served as hired soldiers), while "learning pottery on a wine jar" meant starting a craft with the largest, hardest piece.

pany with him in conversation, is bound to be led around by his argument without stopping, even if he starts out talking about something else, until he finds himself giving an account of himself: the way 188a he lives now and the way he has lived his life up to now. And once he's fallen into that, Socrates won't let him go until he has tested every bit of it thoroughly. I'm used to him, and I know that this is what you have to put up with from him, and I know perfectly well I'll get the same treatment myself. I enjoy his company, Lysimachus, and I don't think there's any harm in being reminded of what we have done 188b or are doing wrong. A man who doesn't run away from this is bound to be more careful in the rest of his life, if he's willing, as Solon says, and thinks it right to keep learning as long as he lives, and doesn't suppose that old age will bring him good sense all by itself. So for me there's nothing unusual or unpleasant in being tested by Socrates. In fact, I pretty much knew long ago that with Socrates here the discussion wouldn't be about the boys but about 188c us.[7] So, as I say, as far as I'm concerned nothing stops us from spending time with Socrates however he likes. But see how Laches here feels about this sort of thing.

LACHES My attitude to discussions is simple, Nicias, or, if you like, not simple but double. I might seem to some people to love discussion and also to hate it. When I hear a man discussing excellence or some kind of wisdom, a man who's really a man and worthy of the words he speaks, 188d I'm wonderfully delighted, as I watch the speaker and what he says together and see how they fit and suit each other. A man like that seems to me a true musician. He has tuned himself to the finest harmony, not on a lyre or some instrument for amusement. He has really tuned his own life so that his words are in concord with his deeds, purely in the Dorian mode, not the Ionian, nor, I think, the Phrygian or Lydian, but the one mode that is truly Greek.[8]

7 Solon, the Athenian statesman and poet of the early sixth century BC, wrote: "I grow old, always learning many things."

8 The Dorian mode was a musical scale the Greeks associated with manly dignity. The Ionian was thought soft, and the Phrygian and Lydian came from Asia Minor.

When a man like that speaks, he delights me [188e] and makes me seem to anyone a lover of discussion, so eagerly do I take in what he says. But a man who does the opposite pains me, and the better he seems to speak, the more he pains me, and then he makes me seem a hater of discussion. Now I have no experience of Socrates' words, but before that, it seems, I had experience of his deeds, and there [189a] I found him worthy of fine words and of complete frankness. So if he has this too, I'm with him, and I'd be very glad to be examined by a man like that, and I wouldn't resent learning. I too agree with Solon, with just one addition: as I grow old I'm willing to be taught many things, but only by good men. Let him grant me this much, that the teacher himself be good, so I don't look like a slow learner because I learn reluctantly. Whether the teacher is younger, or not yet well known, or has [189b] anything else of that sort, doesn't matter to me at all. So I offer myself to you, Socrates: teach me and refute me however you like, and learn, in turn, whatever I know. That's how I've felt about you ever since that day when you shared the danger with me and gave proof of your excellence, the kind of proof anyone must give who means to give it rightly. So say whatever you like, and don't let our age count against us at all.

SOCRATES [189c] It looks as if we won't be able to complain that you aren't ready to give advice and to join in the inquiry.

LYSIMACHUS Well, it's our job, Socrates, since I count you as one of us. So look into it for me, on the young men's behalf: what we need to find out from these two. Talk with them and give us your advice. Because of my age I now forget most of what I mean to ask, and what I hear, too. And if other talk comes up in between, I hardly [189d] remember anything. So you all speak and go through among yourselves the question we've set. I'll listen, and once I've listened, I'll do whatever you think best, together with Melesias here.

WHAT IS COURAGE?

To know how to make the boys good, they must first say what one part of excellence, courage, is.

SOCRATES We have to do as Lysimachus and Melesias say, Nicias and Laches. Now the questions we were just trying to look into, who our teachers in this kind of education have been and whom else we've made better, perhaps it wasn't a bad idea 189e to examine ourselves on things like that. But I think another kind of inquiry leads to the same point, and might even start a little closer to the beginning. Suppose we happen to know about something, whatever it is, that when it's added to another thing it makes that thing better, and suppose we're also able to make it be added. Then clearly we know the thing itself on which we could advise people about how to acquire it most easily and best. Perhaps you don't understand what I mean. You'll understand more easily this way. 190a Suppose we happen to know that sight, when it's added to eyes, makes better the eyes it's added to, and suppose we're also able to make it be added to eyes. Then clearly we know what sight itself is, and we could advise people about how to acquire it most easily and best. But if we didn't know even this, what sight is or what hearing is, we'd hardly be advisers worth listening to, or doctors of the eyes or ears, on how 190b someone could best acquire hearing or sight.

LACHES That's true, Socrates.

SOCRATES And now, Laches, aren't these two calling us in to advise them how excellence might be added to their sons' souls and make them better?

LACHES Certainly.

SOCRATES Then don't we need to have this at least, a knowledge of what excellence is? If we didn't know at all what excellence actually is, how could we 190c advise anyone about how best to acquire it?

LACHES We couldn't, it seems to me, Socrates.

SOCRATES Then we claim, Laches, to know what it is.

LACHES Yes, we do claim that.

SOCRATES And if we know something, surely we can also say what it is.

LACHES Of course.

SOCRATES Then let's not look at the whole of excellence straight away, my friend, since that might be too big a job. Let's first take some part of it and see whether we're in a position to know it. That way, 190d most likely, the inquiry will be easier for us.

LACHES All right, Socrates, let's do it the way you want.

SOCRATES So which of the parts of excellence should we choose? Isn't it obviously the one that learning to fight in armor seems to aim at? And most people think that's courage, don't they?

LACHES They certainly do.

SOCRATES Then let's first try to say, Laches, what courage is. After that we'll look 190e at how it might be added to the young men, so far as it can come from pursuits and studies. Come on, try to answer my question: what is courage?

LACHES' DEFINITION: STANDING FIRM

Laches says courage is staying in the ranks and not running away; Socrates asks for what all courage shares.

LACHES By Zeus, Socrates, that's not hard to say. If someone is willing to stay at his post in the ranks and hold off the enemy, and doesn't run away, you can be sure he's brave.

SOCRATES Well said, Laches. But perhaps I'm to blame for not speaking clearly, since you answered not the question I had in mind but a different one.

LACHES What do you mean, Socrates?

SOCRATES [191a] I'll explain, if I can. The man you describe is brave, I suppose: the one who stays at his post in the ranks and fights the enemy.

LACHES That's what I say, anyway.

SOCRATES So do I. But what about this other man, who fights the enemy while retreating, instead of standing his ground?

LACHES Retreating how?

SOCRATES The way the Scythians, I believe, are said to fight just as well while fleeing as while pursuing. And Homer, praising Aeneas' horses, said that they knew how "swiftly, this way and that, [191b] to pursue and to flee." He praised Aeneas himself for the same thing, for his knowledge of fear, calling him a "master of fear."[9]

LACHES And he was right, Socrates, because he was talking about chariots. And you're talking about Scythian horsemen. Their cavalry fights that way, but heavy infantry, Greek infantry at least, fights the way I say.

SOCRATES Except perhaps for the Spartans, Laches. They say that at Plataea, [191c] when the Spartans came up against the troops with wicker shields, they weren't willing to stand their ground and fight them, but retreated. Then, when the Persian ranks broke up, they turned around and fought like cavalry, and that's how they won the battle there.[10]

LACHES That's true.

SOCRATES So this is what I meant just now when I said I was to blame for your not answering well, because I didn't ask well. I wanted [191d] to learn from you not only about those who are brave in the infantry but also in the cavalry and in every kind of warfare, and not only those in war but also those who are brave in dangers at sea, and all who are brave in the face of illness or

9 In Homer the word *phobos* means "rout" or "flight," so "master of fear" originally meant "master of the rout"; Socrates plays on its later sense, "fear."
10 At Plataea in 479 BC the Greek allies, led by Sparta, decisively defeated the invading Persian army.

poverty, or in politics, too. And again, not only those who are brave against pains or fears, but also those who are formidable at fighting desires or pleasures, [191e] whether by standing their ground or by turning back. For there are people, Laches, who are brave in things like these too—

LACHES Very much so, Socrates.

SOCRATES So all of these are brave. But some have acquired their courage in pleasures, some in pains, some in desires, and some in fears. And others, I think, have acquired cowardice in these same things.

LACHES Certainly.

SOCRATES What is each of these two things? That's what I was asking. So try again and say first what courage is, the thing that's the same in all of these. Or don't you see yet what I mean?

LACHES Not really.

SOCRATES [192a] Well, I mean something like this. Suppose I were asking what quickness is. We find it in running, in playing the lyre, in speaking, in learning, and in many other things. In fact we have it in pretty much anything worth mentioning, in what we do with our hands or legs, our mouth and voice, or our mind. Or wouldn't you put it that way too?

LACHES Certainly.

SOCRATES So if someone asked me, "Socrates, what do you say it is, this thing that you call quickness in all of them?" I'd tell [192b] him that what I call quickness is the power that gets a lot done in a short time, whether in speech or in running or in anything else.

LACHES And you'd be right.

LACHES TRIES AGAIN: ENDURANCE

Courage is endurance of the soul, but wise endurance looks less brave than foolish endurance.

SOCRATES Then you try too, Laches, to say in the same way what power courage is, the power that's the same in pleasure and in pain and in all the things we just said it was found in, and that's why it's been called courage.

LACHES Well, it seems to me to be a kind of endurance of the soul, if [192c] I have to say what courage is by nature in all of them.

SOCRATES You do have to, if we're going to answer the question for ourselves. Now here's how it looks to me: I don't think every kind of endurance looks to you like courage. I infer this from the following. I'm fairly sure, Laches, that you consider courage one of the very fine things.

LACHES You can be sure it's one of the finest.

SOCRATES Now endurance joined with understanding is fine and good?

LACHES Certainly.

SOCRATES [192d] What about endurance joined with folly? Isn't that, on the contrary, harmful and destructive?

LACHES Yes.

SOCRATES Then will you call something like that fine, when it's destructive and harmful?

LACHES It wouldn't be right to, Socrates.

SOCRATES So you won't agree that this kind of endurance is courage, since it isn't fine, and courage is something fine.

LACHES That's true.

SOCRATES Then by your account it's wise endurance that would be courage.

LACHES It seems so.

SOCRATES [192e] Let's see, then: wise about what? About everything, great and small? For instance, suppose someone shows endurance in spending money wisely, because he knows that by spending it he'll gain more. Would you call him brave?

LACHES By Zeus, I wouldn't.

SOCRATES Or suppose someone is a doctor, and his son or someone else has pneumonia and begs him for something to drink or eat, [193a] and he doesn't give in but endures?

LACHES No, that's not courage at all either.

SOCRATES Now take a man in war who endures and is willing to fight, on the basis of wise calculation. He knows that others will come to his aid, that he'll be fighting against fewer and weaker men than those on his side, and that he also holds the stronger position. Would you say this man, enduring with that kind of understanding and preparation, is braver than the man in the opposing camp who is willing to stand his ground and endure?

LACHES [193b] The man in the opposing camp, I'd say, Socrates.

SOCRATES And yet his endurance is more foolish than the other man's.

LACHES That's true.

SOCRATES So you'll also say that the man who endures in a cavalry battle with a knowledge of horsemanship is less brave than the one without that knowledge.

LACHES I think so.

SOCRATES And the same for the man who endures with skill at slinging or archery or some other art.

LACHES [193c] Certainly.

SOCRATES And people who are willing to go down into a well and dive, and to endure in that work, or in any other work like it, without being skilled at it—you'll say they're braver than those who are skilled at it.

LACHES What else could anyone say, Socrates?

SOCRATES Nothing, if that's what he thought.

LACHES Well, it's what I think.

SOCRATES And yet, Laches, people like that take risks and endure more foolishly than those who do it with skill.

LACHES Apparently.

SOCRATES 193d Now didn't foolish daring and endurance turn out earlier to be shameful and harmful?

LACHES Certainly.

SOCRATES Whereas courage was agreed to be something fine.

LACHES Yes, that was agreed.

SOCRATES But now we're saying the opposite, that the shameful thing, foolish endurance, is courage.

LACHES It seems we are.

SOCRATES So do you think we're speaking well?

LACHES By Zeus, Socrates, I certainly don't.

SOCRATES So it seems, Laches, that by your own account you and I aren't tuned to the Dorian mode. 193e Our deeds aren't in harmony with our words. In deed, it seems, someone might say we have a share of courage. But in word, I imagine, he wouldn't, if he heard us talking just now.

LACHES That's perfectly true.

SOCRATES Well then? Do you think it's a fine thing for us to be in this state?

LACHES Not in the least.

SOCRATES Then shall we obey what we're saying, at least this far?

LACHES How far? And obey what?

SOCRATES 194a The argument that tells us to endure. So, if you're willing, let's stand firm in our search and endure. That way

courage itself won't laugh at us for not searching for it courageously, in case endurance turns out after all to be courage.

LACHES I'm ready not to quit before the end, Socrates. Mind you, I'm not used to arguments like this. But a kind of competitive spirit has taken hold of me over what's been said, and I'm honestly annoyed [194b] that I can't put what I think into words this way. I do seem to myself to understand what courage is. But somehow it slipped away from me just now, so I couldn't pin it down in words and say what it is.

SOCRATES Well, my friend, a good hunter has to keep up the chase and not give up.

LACHES Absolutely.

SOCRATES Then shall we call Nicias here to join the hunt too, in case he's better at finding a way than we are?

LACHES [194c] Yes, let's. Why not?

NICIAS' DEFINITION: KNOWLEDGE

Nicias cites Socrates: courage is knowing what is to be feared and what is to be dared.

SOCRATES Come on, then, Nicias. Your friends are caught in a storm of argument and don't know where to turn. Help us, if you have any power to. You can see how stuck we are. Tell us what you think courage is, and free us from our perplexity. At the same time you'll make your own thinking secure by putting it into words.

NICIAS Well, Socrates, it seems to me you two have been defining courage badly for some time now. You're not making use of something I've heard you say, and say well.

SOCRATES What's that, Nicias?

NICIAS [194d] I've often heard you say that each of us is good at the things he's wise about, and bad at the things he's ignorant of.

SOCRATES By Zeus, Nicias, that's true.

NICIAS So if the brave man is good, clearly he's wise.

SOCRATES Did you hear that, Laches?

LACHES I did, and I don't really understand what he means.

SOCRATES But I think I do. I think the man is saying that courage is a kind of wisdom.

LACHES What kind of wisdom, Socrates?

SOCRATES [194e] Isn't that a question for him?

LACHES It is.

SOCRATES Go on, then, Nicias, tell him what kind of wisdom courage would be on your account. Surely it isn't the wisdom of playing the pipes.

NICIAS Not at all.

SOCRATES Nor of playing the lyre.

NICIAS Certainly not.

SOCRATES Then what is it? Knowledge of what?

LACHES You're asking him exactly the right question, Socrates. Let him tell us what he says it is.

NICIAS This, Laches: the knowledge of what is to be feared and what is to be dared, [195a] in war and in everything else.

LACHES What a strange thing to say, Socrates!

SOCRATES What did you have in mind when you said that, Laches?

LACHES What did I have in mind? Wisdom is surely something separate from courage.

SOCRATES Nicias, at any rate, says it isn't.

LACHES No, by Zeus, he doesn't. That's exactly why he's talking nonsense.

SOCRATES Then let's teach him instead of abusing him.

NICIAS No, Socrates. It seems to me Laches wants me to be shown up as saying nothing too, since he was just shown up [195b] that way himself.

LACHES Absolutely, Nicias, and I'll try to prove it, because you're saying nothing. Take an obvious case. In illness, isn't it doctors who know what's to be feared? Or do you think it's the brave who know? Or do you call doctors brave?

NICIAS Not in the least.

LACHES Nor farmers either, I suppose. And yet they surely know what's to be feared in farming. All the other craftsmen know what's to be feared and [195c] what's to be dared in their own crafts. But that doesn't make them any braver.

SOCRATES What do you think Laches is saying, Nicias? He does seem to be saying something.

NICIAS Yes, he's saying something. It just isn't true.

SOCRATES How so?

NICIAS Because he thinks doctors know something more about the sick than how to tell what's healthy and what's diseased. Surely that's all they know. If for someone being healthy is more to be feared than being sick, do you think the doctors know that, Laches? Or don't you think that for many people it would be better not to get up from their sickness than to get up? Tell me this. [195d] Do you say it's better for everyone to live, and that for many it isn't better to be dead?

LACHES I do think that much, at least.

NICIAS Then do you think the same things are to be feared by those who'd be better off dead and by those who'd be better off alive?

LACHES I don't.

NICIAS Well, do you grant the knowledge of this to doctors, or to any other craftsman? Or only to the one who knows what is to be feared and what isn't, the man I call brave?

SOCRATES Do you see what he means, Laches?

LACHES [195e] I do. He's calling seers the brave ones. Who else will know whether it's better for someone to live or to die? So tell me,

Nicias, which is it? Do you admit to being a seer, or are you neither a seer nor brave?

NICIAS What? So now you think it's the seer's business to know what's to be feared and what's to be dared?

LACHES I do. Whose else?

NICIAS Far more the man I'm talking about, my good friend. A seer only has to know the signs of what's going to happen: whether someone will meet with death, or illness, or loss of property, [196a] or victory or defeat, in war or in any other contest. But whether it's better for someone to suffer these things or not, why should judging that be the seer's business any more than anyone else's?

LACHES Well, I don't understand what he's getting at, Socrates. He doesn't make clear that the brave man he means is a seer, or a doctor, or anyone else at all, unless he's saying it's some god. It looks to me as if Nicias isn't willing [196b] to admit like a man of honor that he's saying nothing. Instead he twists this way and that to hide his own perplexity. Yet you and I could have twisted around like that just now, if we'd wanted to avoid seeming to contradict ourselves. If we were arguing in a law court, there might be some point in doing this. But in a gathering like this one, why would anyone dress himself up for nothing with empty words?

SOCRATES [196c] I don't see any point either, Laches. But let's make sure Nicias doesn't think he's saying something real, and isn't just saying it for argument's sake. Let's ask him more clearly what exactly he has in mind. If he turns out to be saying something, we'll agree with him. If not, we'll teach him.

LACHES You ask him, then, Socrates, if you want to. I've probably asked enough.

SOCRATES Nothing's stopping me. The questioning will be on behalf of us both.

LACHES Certainly.

SOCRATES Tell me, then, Nicias—or rather tell us, since Laches and I are partners [196d] in this argument—do you say courage is knowledge of what is to be feared and what is to be dared?

NICIAS I do.

SOCRATES And that this isn't something every man can know, since neither a doctor nor a seer will know it, nor will he be brave, unless he acquires this particular knowledge as well? Isn't that what you were saying?

NICIAS Yes, it is.

SOCRATES So really, as the proverb says, it isn't something "any pig would know," and no pig could become brave.[11]

NICIAS I don't think so.

SOCRATES [196e] Clearly, then, Nicias, you don't believe even the Crommyonian sow was brave. I'm not joking. I think anyone who says this has to deny courage to every wild animal. Otherwise he has to grant that some animal is so wise that a lion, or a leopard, or some boar knows what few human beings know, because it's so hard to know. Anyone who defines courage as you do has to say that a lion and a deer, a bull and a monkey, are equally suited by nature for courage.[12]

LACHES [197a] By the gods, that's well said, Socrates. Give us an honest answer, Nicias. Do you say these animals, which we all agree are brave, are wiser than we are? Or do you dare to go against everyone and not even call them brave?

NICIAS No, Laches. I don't call animals brave, or anything else that has no fear of what's to be feared because it lacks sense. I call it fearless and stupid. Or do you think I call all children [197b] brave too, who are afraid of nothing because they have no sense? No. I think being fearless and being brave aren't the same thing. In my view very few people have courage and fore-

11 The proverb "any pig would know it" was said of something obvious to everyone.

12 The Crommyonian sow was a monstrous wild sow near Crommyon, on the Isthmus of Corinth, killed by the hero Theseus.

thought. But a great many have boldness, daring, and fearlessness without forethought: men, women, children, and animals. So the actions that you and most people call brave, I [197c] call bold. The brave ones are the wise ones I'm talking about.

LACHES Look, Socrates, how nicely he dresses himself up with this argument—or so he thinks. And the men everyone agrees are brave, he's trying to rob of that honor.

NICIAS Not you, Laches—don't worry. I say you're wise, and Lamachus too, given that you're both brave, and plenty of other Athenians as well.[13]

LACHES I won't answer that, though I could, so you won't say I really am a man from Aixone.[14]

SOCRATES [197d] Don't say anything, Laches. In fact I don't think you've even noticed where he got this wisdom. It's from our friend Damon, and Damon spends a lot of time with Prodicus, who's thought to be the best of the sophists at drawing distinctions between words like these.[15]

LACHES Well, Socrates, that sort of hair-splitting suits a sophist better than a man the city thinks fit to lead it.

KNOWLEDGE OF ALL GOODS AND EVILS

Socrates shows that such knowledge would be the whole of excellence, not a part of it.

SOCRATES [197e] Surely, my dear friend, it suits a man in charge of the greatest affairs to have the greatest understanding. But I think Nicias deserves to be examined, to see what he has in view when he gives the name courage to this.

LACHES Examine him yourself, then, Socrates.

13 Lamachus was an Athenian general, later Nicias' fellow commander on the Sicilian expedition of 415 BC.
14 Aixone was an Attic district whose people had a reputation for abusive talk.
15 Prodicus of Ceos was a sophist famous for distinguishing between words of similar meaning.

SOCRATES That's what I intend to do, my good friend. But don't think I'll let you off your share in the argument. Pay attention and examine what's said along with me.

LACHES All right, if you think I have to.

SOCRATES I do. Now, Nicias, tell us again from [198a] the beginning. You know that at the start of the discussion we were examining courage as a part of excellence?

NICIAS Certainly.

SOCRATES And you too answered on the basis that it's a part, and that there are other parts as well, which all together are called excellence?

NICIAS Of course.

SOCRATES Then do you mean the same parts I do? Besides courage I count moderation, justice, and a few others of that kind. Don't you?

NICIAS [198b] Certainly.

SOCRATES Hold on, then. We agree on that. Now let's look into what's to be feared and what's to be dared, so you don't think one thing and we another. We'll tell you what we think, and if you don't agree, you'll teach us. We think that what's to be feared is whatever causes fear, and what's to be dared is whatever doesn't. And fear is caused not by evils that have already happened or are present, but by evils that are expected, since fear is the expectation of an evil to come. Or don't you share this view, Laches?

LACHES [198c] Very much so, Socrates.

SOCRATES There's our view, then, Nicias. We say that what's to be feared is evils to come, and what's to be dared is things to come that are either not evil or good. Do you put it this way, or some other way?

NICIAS This way.

SOCRATES And it's knowledge of these that you call courage?

NICIAS Exactly.

SOCRATES Then let's look at a third point too, and see whether you and we agree on it.

NICIAS What point is that?

SOCRATES [198d] I'll explain. My friend here and I think that, for any subject there's knowledge of, it isn't one knowledge that knows how past things happened, another how present things are happening, and another how what hasn't happened yet might best happen and will happen. It's the same knowledge. For example, where health is concerned, at every point in time there's no knowledge other than medicine. Being one, it oversees what is happening, what has happened, and what will happen, and how [198e] it will happen. Farming is the same with what grows from the earth. And as for warfare, you two would surely testify yourselves that generalship has the finest foresight about everything, and especially about what's going to happen. It doesn't think it ought to serve the seer's art but to rule it, because it knows better [199a] the affairs of war, both what is happening and what will happen. And the law lays it down this way: the seer doesn't command the general; the general commands the seer. Shall we say this, Laches?

LACHES We shall.

SOCRATES Well, Nicias? Do you agree with us that the same knowledge understands the same things, whether they're future, present, or past?

NICIAS I do. That's how it seems to me, Socrates.

SOCRATES Then, my good friend, courage is knowledge of what is to be feared [199b] and what is to be dared, as you say. Isn't that so?

NICIAS Yes.

SOCRATES And it's been agreed that the things to be dared are future goods, and the things to be feared are future evils.

NICIAS Certainly.

SOCRATES And that the same knowledge deals with the same things, whether they're in the future or in any state at all.

NICIAS That's right.

SOCRATES So courage isn't only knowledge of what's to be feared and what's to be dared. It understands goods and evils not only in the future, but also in the present and the past [199c] and in any state at all, just as the other kinds of knowledge do.

NICIAS So it seems.

SOCRATES So, Nicias, the answer you gave us covers only about a third of courage. Yet we were asking what courage is as a whole. And now, it seems, on your account courage isn't only knowledge of what's to be feared and what's to be dared. It would be more or less knowledge of all goods and evils in any state at all. That, [199d] on your revised account, is what courage would be. Do you accept the change, Nicias, or what do you say?

NICIAS I accept it, Socrates.

SOCRATES Then do you think, my remarkable friend, that a man like this would lack any part of excellence, if he really knew all good things, and exactly how they come about, will come about, and have come about, and the same for evil things? Do you think he'd be lacking in moderation, or in justice and piety? He alone, in dealings with gods and with human beings alike, is the one whose task it is to guard against what's to be feared and what [199e] isn't, and to secure good things, since he knows how to deal with them rightly.

NICIAS I think there's something in what you say, Socrates.

SOCRATES Then, Nicias, what you're describing now wouldn't be a part of excellence, but excellence as a whole.

NICIAS So it seems.

SOCRATES And yet we said courage was one of the parts of excellence.

NICIAS We did.

SOCRATES But what we're describing now doesn't appear to be a part.

NICIAS It doesn't seem so.

SOCRATES So we haven't found what courage is, Nicias.

NICIAS Apparently not.

BACK TO SCHOOL

The generals trade jibes, and everyone agrees they all need a good teacher, themselves included.

LACHES And here I was, my dear Nicias, thinking you'd find it, [200a] since you looked down on me while I was answering Socrates. I had very high hopes that you'd track it down with the wisdom you got from Damon.

NICIAS Very nice, Laches. You think it no longer matters that you yourself were just shown to know nothing about courage. All you care about is whether I'll be shown up as another of the same sort. It won't make any difference to you anymore, it seems, that you and I both know nothing of what a man who thinks he amounts to something ought to understand. You, [200b] it seems to me, are doing a thoroughly human thing: looking not at yourself but at others. As for me, I think what I've said on our subject has been reasonable enough for now. And if any of it hasn't been put adequately, I'll correct it later with the help of Damon—whom you think you can laugh at, though you've never even laid eyes on him—and of others. And once I've made it secure, I'll teach you too, and I won't begrudge it. You seem [200c] to me to be in great need of learning.

LACHES You're a wise man, Nicias, no doubt about it. All the same, my advice to Lysimachus here and Melesias is to say goodbye to you and me where the boys' education is concerned, and, as I said from the start, not to let Socrates here go. If my own boys were of that age, I'd do exactly the same.

NICIAS I agree with that too. If Socrates is willing to take care of the young men, they shouldn't look for anyone else. In fact, [200d]

I'd be delighted to entrust Niceratus to him, if he were willing. But every time I bring up the subject with him, he introduces me to other people and won't do it himself. Still, Lysimachus, see whether Socrates might listen to you more.[16]

LYSIMACHUS That would only be fair, Nicias, since I'd be willing to do a great deal for him that I wouldn't be willing to do for many others. So what do you say, Socrates? Will you listen to us and share our eagerness for the boys to become as good as possible?

SOCRATES [200e] Yes, Lysimachus, it would be a terrible thing to be unwilling to share anyone's eagerness to become as good as possible. Now if, in the conversations just now, I had seemed to know and these two not to, it would be right to call on me above all for this work. But as it is, we all ended up equally at a loss. So why would anyone choose any one of us over the others? In my own view, [201a] none of us. But since that's how things stand, see whether my advice seems worth anything to you. I say, gentlemen—and this stays between us—that we should all join together in looking for the best teacher we can find, first for ourselves, since we need one, and then for the young men, sparing neither money nor anything else. What I don't advise is that we leave ourselves as we are now. And if anyone laughs at us because, [201b] at our age, we think fit to go to school, I think we should hold up Homer as our shield, who said that "shame is no good companion for a man in need." So let's not mind if anyone says anything, and let's take care of ourselves and the young men together.

LYSIMACHUS I like what you say, Socrates. And the older I am, the more eager I am to learn along with the young men. But do this for me. Tomorrow [201c] at dawn, come to my house—don't fail me—so we can consult about these very matters. For now, let's bring our gathering to a close.

16 Niceratus was Nicias' son.

SOCRATES I'll do that, Lysimachus. I'll come to you tomorrow, god willing.