

interpretation

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Philosophy, Education, and Courage in Plato's *Laches*

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A very popular error: having the courage of one's convictions; rather it is a matter of having the courage for an *attack* on one's convictions!!! Nietzsche¹

I

When we consider the relation between philosophy and courage, three issues arise immediately. The first concerns the philosophy of courage, that is, the philosophical attempt to say what courage is. Plato, for one, thought this attempt interesting enough to focus a large section of a dialogue on it (the *Laches*), in addition to passages of other dialogues. The second issue concerns the question as to whether the pursuit of philosophy requires courage. At first glance, the answer to this question seems contingent upon historical circumstances. If a Socrates risks punishment by persevering in philosophizing, he is to be congratulated, perhaps, on his courage. Indeed, students of the *Apology* and *Phaedo* sometimes wax poetic about the uncompromising manner in which Socrates met his punishment. A Bertrand Russell, by contrast, has *relatively* little to fear from a modern liberal democracy, and courage does not seem to be a prerequisite of philosophizing under such tolerant conditions. Yet might not the pursuit of philosophy nevertheless require another sort of courage regardless of the political consequences? Having the courage "for an attack on one's convictions" might be a case in point. So too, in fact, might be the courage required to sustain one's conviction that it is worth philosophizing. We might refer to both of these as cases of the courage of the philosopher. Thus a species of the philosopher's courage might be required to say what courage itself is, as Socrates suggests at *Laches* 194a. The third issue, finally, is whether all courage requires philosophical knowledge if courage is to be beneficial. However difficult it may be to defend, Socrates' position on this last issue is fairly clear: courage must be combined with knowledge if it is to be beneficial (e.g., *Meno* 88b, *Prot.* 359c–360e).

In this paper I shall focus on Plato's view of the second of the issues just ad-

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1. *Gesam. Werke*, 23 vols. (Munich: Musarion, 1920–29), vol. 16, p. 318. The translation is W. Kaufmann's; see his *Nietzsche*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 19. I have used R. Sprague's translation of the *Laches* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), with slight emendations. Unless otherwise noted, Stephanus page numbers included directly in the text advert to the *Laches*. Except where noted, when I refer in this essay to Socrates, Laches, or Nicias I am advertising to these characters as Plato portrays them.

umbrated, though I must necessarily say something about the other two issues since all three are interrelated. For example, if something like “courage of the philosopher” exists, it would presumably be covered by the definition of courage as such, and the definition of courage was the first of our issues. Since the *Laches* is the only Platonic dialogue in which courage is a major theme, it is a logical place to begin an investigation into the nature of philosophical courage, and I shall therefore discuss the issue in terms of this dialogue. Moreover, our first two issues are connected in that, as already noted, the effort to define courage philosophically seems to require the courage to philosophize. We might then characterize the relationship between our first two issues as follows. The *Laches* is, among other things, an effort to give a *λόγος* of what courage is; the deed (*ἔργον*) of giving this *λόγος* requires courage. Thus the definition of courage, and the philosopher’s courage, stand to each other as word to deed. As it turns out, the relationship between words and deeds (and in particular the need for a “harmony” between the two levels) is itself a prominent and explicit theme in the *Laches*. These two strata of meaning throw a considerable amount of light on each other, as we shall see.

Our third issue, namely the necessity for philosophical knowledge in every sort of real courage, is also connected to the effort to define courage (our first issue). Indeed, one of Nicias’ definitions in the *Laches* (which Nicias says he has often heard from Socrates) is that courage is a kind of wisdom (194d). If philosophy itself requires a form of courage, then our second and third issues are also connected. I would prefer to concentrate on the matter of the philosopher’s courage, but for the reasons just adumbrated, discussion of the other two issues (particularly of the definition of courage) is unavoidable.

It is worth noting that the view that all sorts of courage require philosophy is initially less plausible than the view that the philosopher requires courage to philosophize. Of all the virtues, courage seems to be the furthest removed from any connection with knowledge. Unphilosophical men and women have performed, it seems, very courageous acts. Not just the ability to act courageously, but also to recognize instances of courage, seem widespread and in little need of the philosopher’s help. Only the effort to say what courage is seems to require such help. Thus while he cannot say what courage is, Laches believes that he knows what it is (194a–b), a claim Socrates does not dispute. However, Socrates points out that if we cannot say what courage is even though we are ourselves courageous, then our deeds and words are not harmonized. For in that event, the deeds but not the words “participate” in courage (193e). The ability of human beings to “participate” in courage at all, even if in an inarticulate way, would seem to be a prerequisite of our ability to give a *λόγος* of courage. The very accessibility of courage might ease the philosopher’s task considerably; indeed, the ability of the philosopher to “already know,” in some sense, what is good or noble would seem to be a prerequisite of his ability to say what virtue is. This is a point to which I shall subsequently return.

Before delving into the *Laches* I would like to consider why the issues of education and the philosopher's courage are worthy of reflection. They are intimately connected with several general philosophical questions of the utmost importance. In necessarily brief terms, this point may be stated as follows. As the word implies, "philosophy" is the love of one of the four Platonic virtues, namely wisdom. If we accept the teaching of Socrates' *Symposium* speech the "philosopher" loves what he lacks, not the lack itself. Love or desire (*ἔρως*) compels him to move away from the lack by attaining what he wants, that is, wisdom (203b–204b). A prime question for the interpreter of Plato, if not for the philosopher as such, concerns the "justification" of this erosophy. Plato must show that the love of wisdom is "good," not just because someone has the desire for it, but because wisdom is good in itself and for its possessor. And this assumes that wisdom *is* possessable, at least to some extent. In my opinion, the description of philosophy actually conveyed in Plato's dialogues is not an unambiguous one.

For example, the way in which philosophy is practiced in the dialogues makes it look simply negative and even skeptical, to the point that the refutation of arguments is substituted for sound arguments which establish positive results. The numerous myths and images to the effect that philosophy is a beneficial enterprise yielding some degree of *ἐπιστήμη* are themselves not examples of *ἐπιστήμη*. They might be taken as expressing the hope that philosophy is a defensible enterprise, but hope is not an argument.

In the *Symposium*, moreover, Socrates also says that *ἔρως* is "courageous" (203d5) as well as being a "philosopher through all of life, a clever enchanter and sorcerer and sophist" (203d7–8). Socrates concludes his encomium by saying that now as before he praises "*ἔρως*' power and courage" (212b7–8). Socrates does not link any of the other virtues to *ἔρως*. *Ἔρως* is the courageous *ἔργον* (work, deed, act) of the philosopher. If one were to emphasize this line of thought to the exclusion of others in Plato, then it would seem that the "virtue" of the philosopher's *ἔρως* is just the strength and perseverance it supplies, the "courage." But then philosophy would ultimately become a Sisyphean, or rather, a Quixotic enterprise. It would be reduced to the decision of desire, that is, to the self-conscious choice and resolution to fulfill a desire in the face of nonexistent paradigms. Philosophy becomes a meditation on the agony of desired decision; or the celebration of the power to create or will what we desire; or, more simply, just the subjective preference of its practitioner. The recent history of philosophy abounds with proponents of these conceptions, or reductions, of philosophy. The pivotal "ontological" role of "Entschlossenheit" (resoluteness) in Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* is a good example of such a conception.² Courage plays a prominent role in Nietzsche's writings, as well as in Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*.³

2. See, e.g., *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1972), pp. 297ff.

3. For a discussion of the issue in the context of Camus, see my "The Myth of Sisyphus: a Reconsideration," *Philosophy in Context* 7 (1978), pp. 45–59.

Despite the important differences among the thought of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Camus, it is safe to say that in their writings courage occupies a very important place and that its meaning is much closer to endurance (with which Laches' second definition has to do; 192b9–c1) than to wisdom (with which Nicias' first definition has to do; 194d4–5). "Courage" under these conditions becomes the ability to create choices and to hold to them in the face of an unfriendly universe.

This conception of courage and of its relationship to philosophy is tied to a larger picture of man and world. In general terms, from the standpoint of the "existentialist" thinkers just mentioned there exists no "wisdom" in the Platonic sense, since no soul, no Whole (or cosmos), and no natural harmony between man and eternity. The "Whole" is thought of as the multiplicity of parts, coming together and dissolving through history in unanalyzable ways and for unknowable ends. The Platonic counter to this view requires a very complex thesis about the connection between *ἔρως* and reason, soul and reality, and finally about the "goodness" in the sense of "intelligibility," "harmony," and "measure" of the cosmos in itself and for us.⁴ This is the sort of thesis Plato presents in dialogues such as the *Phaedrus*, *Republic*, and *Philebus*.⁵ While the *Laches* does not offer a comparably comprehensive discussion, it does in the ways I shall specify point us to a connection between philosophy and courage, the presuppositions of which are defended in the just mentioned dialogues.

The *Laches*' efforts to define courage are undertaken in the more restricted context of a discussion of education. The issue of courage does not explicitly arise until the dialogue is half over, and at the conclusion of the *Laches* the theme of education once again becomes explicit. The nominal connection between the controlling theme of education and the subsidiary theme of courage consists in the thesis that the purpose of education is to put virtue in the soul, courage being a virtue. While there are contextual reasons for the selection of courage rather than one of the other virtues (in particular, Laches and Nicias are generals and are presumed to know what courage is), I shall argue that the *Laches* suggests a deeper, albeit restricted, connection between education and courage. To anticipate, the philosopher's effort to understand is essentially an exercise in pedagogy and *ψυχαγωγία* (*Phaedrus* 261a8, 271c10), not just in that it is an effort to teach others, but more importantly in that the philosopher is above all concerned with educating himself—with self-knowledge. The issue of the philosopher's courage is finally the same as that of philosophical education, and the questions previously discussed in this paper about the nature of this courage are also questions about the possibility of education in Socrates' peculiar sense.

4. For an extended criticism of the "existentialist" position and an argument in favor of the "Platonic" position see S. Rosen's *Nihilism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969). Rosen argues that Heideggerean/Nietzschean "courage" leads to "nihilism," a disastrous consequence to be avoided by restoring wisdom as a partially accessible object of love (*Nihilism*, p. 221 and context), and so by restoring the by now "classical" notion of education.

5. I examine the *Phaedrus*' formulation of this thesis in *Self-knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

In the next section of this paper I shall discuss the problem of education as it is formulated in the *Laches*. In section III, I turn to the definitions of courage, and in the final section I discuss the connection between education and the philosopher's courage, again in terms of the *Laches*.

II

Plato deftly sketches the topic of education, as well as the problems it involves, by means of the drama of the dialogue. Two parents, Lysimachus and Melesias, are trying to find teachers for their children, Aristides and Thucydides. They recognize that they themselves are not qualified to educate their children. That they cannot be educated to do so becomes obvious when Lysimachus unself-consciously confesses that he is not suited to philosophical discussion: for he often forgets the questions he intended to ask, and then forgets the answers too, along with any other arguments that are brought up in the conversation (189c–d). He and Melesias will listen to the conversation and then do whatever Laches, Nicias, and Socrates recommend. Lysimachus and Melesias have this in their favor: they know that they are ignorant and incapable of either learning and teaching. Yet their knowledge of ignorance seems wholly unsuited to providing a basis not just for educating their children themselves, but for choosing the teachers for their children as well as the kinds of subjects the children should learn.

Here again the drama is revealing. Lysimachus and Melesias selected two prominent generals, Laches and Nicias, as advisors in the task of finding the appropriate teachers. They take the generals to a display of armor fighting put on by Stesilaus. The parents' choice of advisors and subject area has a common-sense quality to it: select prominent people of great reputation who seem to possess a *τέχνη* which is eminently useful.⁶ As it turns out, both the selection of the advisors and the selection of the subject area (military science, in effect) are ill thought out. Indeed, the generals show themselves to be incapable of defining the very virtue on which the success of their art depends, namely courage. It is of the utmost importance to note that Lysimachus and Melesias did *not* select Socrates as an educator or advisor, even though Lysimachus had often heard about Socrates from the children and had known Socrates' father well.⁷ Socrates appears to be in the vicinity by chance (180c).

6. The dramatic date of the dialogue, somewhere between 424 and 418, would make the utility of military science and the reputations of the historical Laches and Nicias especially visible. The *Laches* may take place before or after the "Peace of Nicias" (421); in either case, the Peloponnesian war cannot be far from everyone's mind. For further discussion of the dramatic date, see R. G. Hoerber, "Plato's *Laches*," *Classical Philology* 63 (1968), pp. 95–96.

7. Lysimachus says that he never had a single difference with Socrates' father (180e), a remark which suggests that they did not engage in any philosophical discussions with each other. Lysimachus' father was a distinguished man, but his virtue did not pass on to Lysimachus (179d; cf. *Meno* 94a). The case is the reverse for Socrates, since he possesses a character not equalled, so far as we know, by his father.

Further problems arise with Lysimachus' and Melesias' program for educating their sons. They have all just watched Stesilaus' demonstration of his fancy fighting techniques. Stesilaus is allegedly an expert. But it turns out that appearances are deceiving, since the technique he is demonstrating made a fool out of him in an actual combat situation (183d–184a). Simply because one has the reputation among nonexperts for being an expert (and as Laches points out, Stesilaus does not demonstrate his art in Sparta where he would be surrounded by real experts; 183b), one is not necessarily an expert. To make matters worse, the two experts in warfare who are present, namely Laches and Nicias, disagree as to whether Stesilaus' technique is or is not a good thing for the boys to learn. They each cite at some length their reasons for their views. How is a nonexpert to decide between them?

The initial answer seems obvious enough: consult a third expert. Socrates has been accepted as an expert by both Laches and Nicias. For one thing, Socrates spends his time conversing with youths (180c) and has already advised Nicias on a suitable music teacher for his son (Damon). Moreover, Laches points out that Socrates distinguished himself in battle at Delium (181b), and for Laches deeds speak louder than words. The inclusion of Socrates as an expert in the matter of education and in particular the matter of educating by means of Stesilaus' technique has a certain irony to it, for Socrates will claim that he has no knowledge of these matters, only knowledge of his ignorance of them. In any event, the experts have recommended to nonexperts another expert.

At this point Lysimachus invites Socrates to settle the issue by casting the deciding vote (184d); when the experts disagree, let the disagreement be decided by majority vote. Socrates wastes no time in showing why this procedure is unacceptable. But his analogy to gymnastics (184e) seems question-begging given what has already transpired, since it merely indicates that we should consult the experts rather than take a vote. He adds, however, that we must also investigate whether anyone present is an expert (*τεχνικός*, 185a1) in the matter at hand, and if none is an expert we should find someone who is. Until this is done, the actual educating of the children cannot go forward. And as a matter of fact the boys have exactly one line in the dialogue (which they pronounce in unison; 181a3), and no attention is given to educating them.⁸ First we must discover who the educators are.

Socrates clearly has in mind here some procedure quite different from the one the parents used in selecting Laches and Nicias. Yet any such procedure for discovering the experts seems vitiated at the outset. The impasse or puzzle (*ἀπορία*) concerns the ability of nonexperts (among whom Socrates classifies

8. At the end of the *Laches*, Lysimachus prevails upon Socrates to come and see him the next day to discuss the education of Aristides. Evidently he succeeded in persuading Socrates to try to educate Aristides; at *Theae*. 151a Socrates says that Lysimachus' son Aristides left his company too soon and so failed to bear good thoughts (also *Theages* 130a). At *Laches* 200d we learn that Socrates has refused to educate Nicias' son Niceratus. Niceratus is, though, said to be present in the *Republic* (327c2).

himself) to pick out the experts. For precisely by being nonexperts they are not qualified to do so: only experts have the knowledge to distinguish charlatans from experts. We thus seem to end up with a version of Meno's paradox (*Meno* 80d): if you are a nonexpert, you will never find the true expert, and even if you chanced upon an expert you would not know that he possesses the knowledge you are looking for. If you are an expert you either have no need of finding true experts or you disagree with other experts about who the true experts are. The *Laches* begins to look like a species of comedy, a story about the blind who know they are blind leading the blind who do not know they are blind. I shall refer to this situation as the "ἀπορία of education." The ἀπορία is, differently put, to determine how those who are in need of education are to make an educated choice about who will give them or their children an education.

An assumption underlying Socrates' suggestion—that they look to the experts rather than take a vote—is that there is a τέχνη of education comparable, say, to the art of gymnastics. However, this assumption is nowhere justified in the *Laches*, and indeed the dialogue gradually casts doubt on it (below). The assumption is nevertheless a commonsensical one, and parents might well think themselves in desperate straits without it. Perhaps this is why parents (including Melesias and Lysimachus) did not send their children to study with a man like Socrates who claimed not to be an expert. As so often in Plato's dialogues, however, progress is made by starting with assumptions thought to be true, and gradually showing that they are not. In the *Laches*, true education turns out to be not an art but the artless practice of Socratic dialogue.

The interlocutors of the *Laches* begin by assuming not just that there is a τέχνη of education, but that the τέχνη concerns the art of fighting in armor. That is, they are implicitly defining "education" by means of an example of it, a mistake which Socrates immediately focuses on. The parents have not yet thought through what the experts they are seeking are supposed to be experts in. The choice of what sort of experts we want may not suffer from quite the same ἀπορία which infects the choice among experts of a given sort. Indeed, the decision as to what we want experts to be experts in is not itself a decision which can be made by an expert without begging the question. The decision is a metatechnical one, as it were. It requires reflection, in a general philosophical sense, on what education is for, and therefore reflection on the value of understanding things as well as on the nature of the persons to be educated. Somehow nonexperts must orient themselves before consulting the experts.

Socrates proceeds by pointing out, once again by analogy with the arts themselves, the difference between means and ends implicit in them. Just as we go to the doctor not for the sake of the medicine but for the sake of health, and in general just as we consult an expert not for the sake of his τέχνη but for the sake of the τέχνη's ends, so now we are considering the art of education for a certain end (185c–e). This end is the care of the soul of young men (185e). Now, this statement is very controversial. Even though no one present objects to it, the fact is

that many people either reject it or subject it to such varied interpretations as to empty it of definite significance. Not surprisingly, the effort to defend the view that the purpose of education is cultivation of the soul, and to specify the meaning of “education of the soul,” is a pervasive theme in the Platonic *corpus*.

The introduction of the “soul” at 185e2 means automatically that techniques for caring for the body, including Stesilaus’ technique of fighting in armor, are to be considered only as means to a further end. Hence they are dropped from the discussion. One would expect Socrates to go on to say that it is necessary to define what is meant by soul if we are to determine who is qualified to care for it. He does not do so and that fact severely limits the scope of the *Laches*. Moreover, there is no definition of virtue in the *Laches*. These limitations are almost inevitable given the level of the interlocutors. One should not begin pottery on a wine jar, as Socrates says (187b; cf. 190c). In any event, an upshot of the means/ends argument is that the interlocutors are freed from having to concern themselves explicitly with *τέχνη*. Instead, the argument will focus on what the educator is to put into a soul to make it educated, not how he is to educate it. The “how” question will, however, receive an answer in terms of the *ἔργον* of the dialogue.

Socrates returns to the issue of finding an expert, and suggests two further strategies for deciding whether any of those present is an expert in the matter of education: first see whether anyone present has had successful teachers, or if not, see what their products (*ἔργα*) are (185e). In this case, the products are, presumably, students (186b). Both strategies are question-begging. For if one knows what a “good” student or teacher is, one would already be expert in the field. Moreover, Socrates explicitly claims that he has not had any teachers on the present subject. We are not told whether or not he has had any outstanding students or whether he has made anyone better (cf. *Apol.* 31b–c, 33a). Surely the reader is meant to ask whether or not conversations such as the present one make Laches and Nicias better. Socrates also claims in no uncertain terms that he has not discovered the art of education himself (186c5) and thus that he is not competent to decide which of the claimants to expertise is speaking the truth (186e). We seem, then, to have reached a dead end: for how is Socrates to ascertain the competence of putative experts (Laches and Nicias) when he knows he is not an expert himself?

It seems to me that Socrates’ abrupt redirection of the argument at 189e1 is a response to this *ἀπορία*. Socrates suddenly says that instead of looking at our teachers and students there is another path which will bring us to the “same point” (that is, which will inform us who the true experts are among those present) and which begins somewhat more nearly from the beginning. It had already been established that education is undertaken “for the sake of the souls of young men” (185e). Socrates now argues, again by analogy with the art of medicine, that the specific way in which education cares for souls is by putting “virtue” in them (189e–190b). How does this inquiry about virtue (*a*) bring us to the same

point as the previously projected inquiry? and (b) how does it start “more nearly from the beginning”?

The answer to (a) lies in the *ἔργον* of the dialogue. In the *Laches*, the inquiry itself demonstrates that Nicias and Laches are not in fact competent to educate the young, contrary to their own initial evaluations of themselves. This is established in a way that does not beg the question; so clear are the results that Laches and Nicias voluntarily disqualify themselves as educators. The deed of attempting to define courage has spoken louder than words (e.g., Laches' words to the effect that the definition is not difficult; 190e). We have thus been brought to the “same point” about the competency of Nicias and Laches; we know that they are *not* the experts. One might say that the test of competency has proceeded in accordance with the criterion Socrates offered at 185e, namely the criterion of the quality of one's “ἔργον”—now interpreted as “philosophizing” rather than with reference to one's students. We are also closer (b) to the beginning (*ἀρχή*). The issue of virtue is closer to the *ἀρχή* in the sense of the “ground” or “fundament” which constitutes the true beginning point. This *ἀρχή* of education is the soul (see 185e, 190b), and thus education is for the sake of the soul. In talking about virtue, that is, the soul's excellence, we are more nearly at the *ἀρχή* than we would be if we discussed who Nicias' and Laches' teachers are. Paradoxically, Socrates ends up looking like the expert they were seeking, and at the end of the dialogue Lysimachus overcomes Socrates' protests and presses him to agree to visit his house the next day for further discussion about educating the children.

Immediately before the abrupt shift in the discussion Nicias and Laches speak at some length about their willingness to be examined by Socrates. Nicias has had previous experience with Socrates' words, and can testify that anyone who converses with Socrates will be compelled to answer questions about his present and past manner of life (187e–188a). Laches has had experience with Socrates' deeds in war but not his words. Unlike Nicias, Laches insists that when a man discusses virtue he must be in deed worthy of his words, else a Dorian harmony between deeds and words is lacking and the man is not truly musical. Laches' principle is not just that deeds and words should be harmonized, but that deeds speak louder than words. In the *Laches*, Nicias stands for the priority of words, and Laches the priority of deeds, as is evident from their respective definitions of courage.⁹ It is obvious that neither Laches nor Nicias exhibits the desired har-

9. For further discussion of the characters of the *Laches* see R. Hoerber, “Plato's *Laches*,” pp. 100–101; and M. Blitz, “An Introduction to the Reading of Plato's *Laches*,” *Interpretation* 5 (1975), pp. 185–225; and S. Umphrey, “On the Theme of Plato's *Laches*,” *Interpretation* 6 (1977), pp. 1–6. I add that Laches does most of the swearing in the dialogue (swearing by Zeus four times and by the gods once), while Nicias does none of it (Socrates swears once by Zeus, and Lysimachus once by Hera). Laches' *ἔργος* is strong but relatively inarticulate, while Nicias' *λόγος* is relatively complex but not animated by the desire for truth. Nicias' attitude towards Socratic dialogue is revealing. He claims to be acquainted with its inevitable turn to self-knowledge, and regards it as “not a bad thing to be reminded” of one's faults. It is “not unusual and not unpleasant” for him to be questioned by Socrates (188a–b). Yet at 185c he is surprised by the typically Socratic turn of the discussion. This, as well as his comments at the end of the dialogue, suggest that he does not take seriously enough the

mony between words and deeds in this matter of courage. Laches has a partially true opinion about what courage is and can identify true courage (as his remarks about Socrates show) as well as the sham (as his remarks about Stesilaus show); but he cannot say what it is. Laches, as we also know, served honorably in battle and died a soldier's death (in 418, at Mantinaea). Nicias is far more articulate than Laches, but in the deed of battle (in the expedition to Syracuse of 415) he relied on the advice of seers and so led the expedition to disaster. As if to drive home the point, Plato has Nicias defend the seers as those who have the knowledge necessary to courage (195e).¹⁰ Nicias relied on words ungrounded in deeds; he too is not "musical." At least initially, Socrates looks more like Laches than like Nicias, for he distinguishes himself in battle but claims to know only his own ignorance. Indeed, in the *Laches* Socrates offers no definition of his own. This seems odd at first glance, since Nicias' bent towards λόγος and knowledge seems closer to philosophy than does Laches' bent towards deeds. Socrates, moreover, does not insist that his interlocutors prove themselves in deeds before he will speak with them (as the *Charmides* shows especially clearly). Yet there is something sound about Laches' position and something unsound about Nicias' position, a point which will help us to understand the sense in which Socrates exhibits a harmony of words and deeds.

Whatever may turn out to be the case with Socrates, it is clear that neither words nor deeds can stand independently of each other. Correspondingly, Laches' and Nicias' definitions must be combined to yield an adequate definition of courage. Let us turn now to these definitions.

III

The *Laches* contains four main definitions of courage, two of which are compelled to undergo several modifications before being passed over for the next. None of these definitions is decisively refuted; instead, each is shown not to be the *whole* definition of courage. This leaves open the possibility that they may be parts of the definition, though this possibility is never made explicit in the *Laches*.

The first definition (190e4–6) is of the wrong logical form. Laches defines the courageous man in a specific situation, not courage itself. The definition would not even account for the courage of Socrates' retreat from Delium which Laches praised. However, nothing is said to disprove Laches' contention that the man

working of Socratic questioning and so is not truly in ἀπορία. Nicias fails to exhibit in deed what he praises in word. Correspondingly, Laches twice accuses Nicias of "adorning" himself with words (196b, 197c). Nicias is speaking like a "sophist" (197d6–8; cf. the sarcasm at 200c2), like a rhetorician in a law court (196b). Laches certainly does not want to run the risk of speaking like a "typical Aexonian" (197c8–9) himself.

10. For an account of these events see Thucydides, Books VI and VII. At *Laches* 199a Socrates reminds Laches and Nicias that the general should command the seer, not vice versa.

behaving in the way described could in fact be courageous. We learn instead that to know *why* he is courageous a more philosophical grasp of courage as such is required.

Laches' second definition of courage is "endurance of the soul," which is rapidly modified into "wise endurance of the soul" (192c–d). Laches is unable to specify satisfactorily what he means by "wisdom." Having uncritically accepted a conception of wisdom as an *ἐπιστήμη* or *τέχνη* of how to do X successfully, Laches contradicts himself by admitting that a man enduring in knowing how to successfully master a situation is not courageous. For such a man would eliminate all risk to himself. Laches also admits that those who endure in facing great risk seem foolish, since they lack the knowledge to minimize the risk. But foolishness is something bad and courage something good. Even though knowledge was included in the definition of courage precisely to ensure that courage not become foolish endurance, that is, something bad, the very inclusion of knowledge seems to make courage risk free and so not courageous. The root of this dilemma is the equation of knowledge with *τέχνη* (art, skill), an equation which we must therefore reject. The "knowledge" a truly courageous man possesses is not analogous to the technical "knowledge" a physician has, or to that which an expert in archery has (see 192e–193c). This point is of capital importance. I note that the necessity of "endurance" and "wisdom" (in a sense other than *ἐπιστήμη* or *τέχνη*), as well as risk to oneself as components of courage is not questioned.¹¹ It is at this point that Socrates invokes philosophical courage; we must stand fast in our search for the definition, and endure—else we will not have harmonized our words and deeds.

The third definition is proposed by Nicias, and it picks up on the issue of the kind of wisdom courage requires. It is first formulated as "if a good man is courageous, it is clear that he is wise" (194d4–5; note that again the man, not the quality, is defined, a mistake which parallels the error in Laches' first definition). The definition then becomes "courage is knowledge of the fearful and the hopeful in war and in every other situation" (194e11–195a1). The insistence on knowledge as a key element in courage means that, contrary to popular opinion, animals and children are rash, not courageous (197a–b). Nicias successfully avoids the pitfall of identifying wisdom with instrumental *τέχνη*; it is, rather, knowledge of what is good and evil for a man and so of when life is worth living and when not (195c–d). That is, if there is to be courage, life cannot be the highest value without qualification. On the contrary, the person who holds life to simply be the highest value is the coward. The knowledge of when life is worth living and when not is, of course, the knowledge which Socrates claims is the most important for a man to possess. Again, the third definition of the *Laches* is, at worst, too narrow since it does not include other elements I have mentioned; but it is not

11. Cf. G. Santas, "Socrates at Work on Virtue and Knowledge in Plato's *Laches*," *Review of Metaphysics* 22 (1969), p. 439: "Not everything in the answers [to the 'what is courage' question] is refuted."

completely without merit. Courage is, among other things, knowledge of the fearful and hopeful.

When pushed by Socrates, Nicias agrees that what is fearful is bad, and what is hopeful is good, and that while fear and hope are directed to the future, the knowledge of what is good and bad is knowledge of things as they are in the past, present, and future. His definition must thus be corrected and restated (I refer to this as Nicias' second definition, that is, the fourth of the dialogue): courage includes knowledge of "practically all goods and evils put together" (199c5–d3; cf. *Charm.* 174a–c). This almost amounts to saying that courage is the knowledge of what is good and evil as such.¹² If such knowledge is part of courage, then even the most ordinary sorts of courage require philosophical knowledge.

The last definition is not modified or refuted on its own grounds at all. Rather, it is shown to contradict a separately agreed to premise—the courage is a "part" of virtue. For we now seem to have supplied a definition of the "whole" of virtue. Indeed, the contradiction is generated only because Socrates quickly replaces the qualification "practically" (199c6) with the unconditional "all" (199d5–6) and gets Nicias' ambiguous assent to the question suggesting that having such wisdom is a sufficient condition for being temperate, just and holy.¹³ Socrates does not himself answer the question, and the truth or falsity of this last definition is not examined further.

On the surface the *Laches* ends in *ἀπορία*. It is therefore referred to at times as a dialogue whose outcome is "negative," the point having been to refute various definitions of courage and correspondingly to show that Nicias and Laches are *not* experts in the matter. To take that position is, however, to overlook the role of the reader as a partner in the dialogue. The *Laches* supplies us with a splendid example of something which is true of all the dialogues; namely that they must be understood as pedagogical *texts* aimed towards the reader by Plato, and so that they must be read on at least two levels. The first level is that of the oral dialogue which is (in the fiction) taking place between the characters. The second is the dialogue taking place between Plato and reader by means of the written text. Thus Plato, like Socrates, may well (for pedagogical reasons) intentionally withhold the solutions to *ἀπορία* posed in the dialogues, so as to force his (Plato's) interlocutor (the reader) to find the answer for himself. To introduce considerations of this sort is to invite a discussion of irony, Platonic rhetoric, and a host of other considerations. Without going into this controversial matter any further, however, it can fairly easily be seen that the *Laches* does supply the key to the *ἀπορία* about courage, and in a sense to the deeper *ἀπορία* about education.¹⁴

12. The "Ideas" are not actually mentioned in the *Laches*, but the passage under examination comes close to doing so—especially if there is an "Idea" of evil (consider *Rep.* 475e–476a).

13. Nicias' assenting phrase is (literally translated): "You seem to me to be saying something, Socrates" (199e2).

14. I am of course assuming a number of important exegetical principles, the detailed justification for which may be found in the introduction to my *Self-knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus*; in the Introduction to S. Rosen's *Plato's Symposium* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968); the Intro-

An adequate but still rough definition of courage, along with the reasons for the definition, can be arrived at by gathering together elements of the four attempted definitions offered in the *Laches*. This definition would be something like the following: 'courage is an endurance of the soul, in a situation containing risk to oneself, endurance accompanied by knowledge (which is not a *τέχνη*) of goods and evils hoped for and feared, that is to say, by knowledge of good and evil in the sense of knowledge of when life is worth living and when not.' I do not pretend that such a definition solves all problems, of course. But in general it is a fairly good definition, and is in fact quite close to Aristotle's.¹⁵

IV

In the final section of this paper I would like to return to the meaning of the philosopher's courage, as well as the solution to the *ἀπορία* of education. We have seen that the two are closely connected. The philosopher's courage, that is, the courage to keep on searching for (in this particular case) a definition of courage, is mentioned once in the *Laches* explicitly (194a1–5). But it is never defined for us explicitly, anymore than the above mentioned definition of the whole of courage was made explicit. The very formulation of the point at 194a suggests that we may use the definitions of courage as elements in the definition of the philosophical courage it took to generate the definitions themselves. We must hold our ground and endure in the search for courage, Socrates says. We cannot help but to think of Laches' first two definitions of courage (holding one's ground in the face of the enemy, and endurance of the soul). The formulation of the nature of the philosopher's courage is to that extent quite Lachean.

However, Nicias' two definitions (courage is a kind of knowledge of the fearful and hopeful in all situations; courage is also the knowledge of all goods and evils put together) must also be part of the nature of the philosopher's courage. For the philosopher cannot undertake his quest unless he is animated by the hope for wisdom and the fear of ignorance. And in order to search eagerly he must understand that ignorance is evil and self-knowledge good, and so that life is not the highest value without qualification. As Socrates says in the *Apology*, the "unexamined life is not worth living" (38a). In sum, the "deed" of the *Laches* itself, considered as an effort to say what courage is, supplies us with a basis for formulating a *λόγος* of the philosopher's courage. But, we want to know next, is this kind of knowledge in fact available to the philosopher? Can the philosopher in fact get anywhere in his philosophizing? If not, as I said at the beginning of

duction to J. Klein's *A Commentary on Plato's Meno* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965); and the Introduction to R. Brague's *Le Restant: Supplément aux Commentaires du Ménon de Platon* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1978). For an extended discussion of Platonic and Socratic irony see my "Irony and Aesthetic Language in Plato's Dialogues," in *Literature as Art: Essays in Honor of Murray Krieger*, ed. Douglass Bolling (New York: Haven Press, 1987).

15. *Nicomachean Ethics* Book III, vi–vii.

this essay, his “courage” comes down to *mere* endurance in the face of an unintelligible universe.

The answer to these questions are withheld from the *λόγος* of the *Laches*, but are once again given to us on the level of the *ἔργον*. For the dialogue *does* in fact make progress. Points about the nature of definition *are* established, as is the partial falsehood of definitions. And for the reader, much more than this is gained. We are given grounds for formulating our own definition of both courage in general and of the philosopher’s courage in particular. The deed of the *Laches* teaches among other things that *there is learning*, and thus progress in philosophizing. This may seem an insignificant fact until we recall the “*ἀπορία* of education” discussed above.

Still further, the *Laches* shows us the solution to the *ἀπορία* of education. The solution to the problem of nonexperts selecting experts in the matter of education is that the nonexperts must themselves become educators by educating themselves. We educate ourselves by learning to ask the right questions. And this is to be done by engaging in the kind of dialogue the *Laches* exhibits. The education one thereby receives is not, however, education in an art comparable to medicine or carpentry. Consequently, the solution is that one should become a philosopher. And this is of course what Socrates is bent on bringing about, both with respect to himself and others. The *deed* of the *Laches*, as I said, is the “proof” that education in this philosophical sense is possible, and so that the philosopher’s courage is not a matter of foolish endurance or of defiant proclamation of one’s desires in the face of an absurd world. Of course, good explanations of this ability to get anywhere in a conversation are not easy to formulate in detail, and the *Laches* does not attempt it. But like so many Platonic dialogues the *Laches* does seem designed to show us that the deed of learning speaks louder than the skeptic’s words to the effect that learning is impossible. We know that we know something about courage, for example, by experiencing the search for it, realizing that some definitions will not do, that others are better, and so forth. At the end of this dialogic experience we know our way about the issue of courage, so to speak. And if we are willing to reflect on what we have done during the process, we will also know our way about the issue of education. None of this is something that could be proven to a skeptic prior to his undergoing it.

Similarly, in the *Meno* Socrates says that although he is not sure that learning should be called “recollection,” he is prepared to do battle “in word and deed” for the proposition that we shall be “better, braver (*ἀνδρικώτεροι*), and less idle” if we think it necessary to look for or search out that which we do not know (86b6–c2). Indeed, Socrates refutes Meno’s paradox with a demonstration of the deed of somebody learning something, not with a theoretical attack on the paradox. Now *Laches*, we recall, is the proponent of not just a harmony between words and deeds, but of the foundational nature of deeds. We have seen that the *Laches* points to a solution of the *ἀπορία* of education through its deeds. This ob-

ervation helps to explain Plato's decision to name the dialogue after Laches rather than Nicias.¹⁶

As it turns out, then, the education of the soul for which we are seeking is gained through the *search* for the educator. We thereby become in large part our own educators. But how, more specifically, can the search be conducted by someone who has not reached the end of the search? That is, let us grant that philosophical conversation is not an art; how are we to carry on such a conversation? Socrates knows only his own ignorance and yet is able to both inquire and show others that they too are ignorant. He knows how to proceed. This knowledge is what Socrates calls (using the word "techne" in an equivocal sense) his "erotic art" or "knowledge of erotic matters" (*Phr.* 257a, *Symp.* 177d–e). It is the ability to ask questions which arouse and guide ἔρωζ. Since Socrates can do this, his words participate in the philosopher's courage. His deeds too, as Laches suggested, participated in courage (though only at *Symp.* 219d5 is Socrates explicitly called "courageous"). Socrates thus exhibits a harmony between word and deed. Any effort to explain Socrates' erotic dialectic must consider a number of complex metaphilosophical questions. I must limit myself here to making some suggestions about these questions with reference to the *Laches*.¹⁷

The progress of the dialogue depends very heavily on a variety of opinions, particularly opinions about the noble and the base and on opinions about what constitutes "knowledge," as well as on an immense stock of information which every human being possesses by virtue of being a resident of a civilized community. For example, the modification of Laches' second definition explicitly depends on agreement with the opinion that courage is "a fine and noble thing" and ignorance "harmful and injurious" (192c–d). Had this not been admitted, the connection between courage and knowledge could not have been drawn. Yet no arguments in favor of these judgments about value are offered. Similarly the arts which are called upon repeatedly in the second half of the dialogue are the foundations for Socrates' analogical reasoning. It is assumed that these arts are kinds of knowledge; but there is no attempt to prove that they *do* constitute knowledge. Many more examples of the reliance on opinion could be mentioned.¹⁸ They in-

16. Hoerber explains Plato's choice of title as follows: "Plato no doubt named the treatise after Laches because Laches represents the level of the masses in need of education, and does make a better showing than Nicias at the conclusion of the composition by attacking Nicias with some success." "Plato's *Laches*," p. 104. For still another explanation, see Blitz, "An Introduction," p. 209.

17. The metaphilosophical questions are explored at greater length in my "Plato's Metaphilosophy," in *Platonic Investigations*, ed. D. O'Meara (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1985), pp. 1–33.

18. Even the selection of courage as a theme is based on what "seems" to be the case to "everyone" (190d) in the light of Stesilaus' demonstration. In spite of the fact that we learn right from the start that we are to define not the courageous man or act but rather the single quality of courage itself, instances of courage are repeatedly adduced as a means of deciding whether or not a given definition is adequate. Also, Socrates refutes the first definition by citing counterexamples of behavior opined to be courageous. Laches' second definition leads to a contradiction because Socrates cites six examples

dicating that the dialectic of the *Laches* is thoroughly embedded in *δόξα*, and so in the perceptions and judgments about the nature and worth of things and deeds. Opinion is a kind of “already knowing” or “pre-judice.” It seems clear that without shared opinions the discussion could not progress. But if the discussion progresses on the basis of “mere” opinions, then the “education” we have been discussing would not amount to much. The opinions must be grounded in some truth if they are to be more than mere dogma.

Plato’s talk about “recollection” (*ἀνάμνησις*) is meant to explain just this phenomenon, namely, the groundedness of some opinions in truth. Of course, the people holding the opinions in question may not know this. But dialectic consists at least in part of “reminding” ourselves of the truth which we “already know” and speak in an opinionated way. The *Laches* does not refer to *ἀνάμνησις*. However, the word/deed distinction may imply the same doctrine. Laches’ principle that deeds speak louder than words and that deeds are the necessary basis for the seriousness of the corresponding words could be given, in this context, the following interpretation. The nature of courage, among other things, is partially present to the soul in a prediscursive way, and this is the basis of the soul’s ability to articulate something true about it.¹⁹ That is, the *ἔργον* of courage is visible in part through our actions and in part through our opinions, but the philosophical *logos* is difficult. Without the grounding *ἔργον*, however, the *λόγος* would be *merely* an opinion.

The point I am making is implicit at the crucial juncture in the *Laches* in which the issue of the philosopher’s courage is made explicit (194a). Laches complains that although he knows what courage is he does not know how to articulate it adequately. Socrates never denies that Laches does know, in some way, what courage is. The superiority of Laches to Nicias lies in just that fact. Nicias, by contrast, may have “forgotten” (failed to “recollect”) what he is talking about; this is why, in effect, his answers are too discursive, too verbal. Laches is not altogether wrong in suggesting that Nicias speaks like a sophist,

of actions that meet the specifications of the definition but which are not popularly thought to exhibit courage (192e–193c). Nicias is compelled to specify what he intends in his first definition by “wisdom,” by means of a series of examples produced by Laches (195b). Nicias does so by getting agreement to the opinion that in some cases it is better to be dead than alive (195c–d). One would expect fighting men such as Nicias and Laches to readily assent to some such proposition, but no proof for it is offered. The requisite knowledge is thus that of goods and evils to be feared and hoped for, that is, that death is not the *summum malum* and that loss of liberty is more fearful than death. Nicias is led to modify his definition by means of reflection on the examples of medicine, farming, and generalship (198d–e). The knowledge of goods and evils lying in the future requires knowledge of practically all goods and evils as such. Having arrived at this result on the basis of (undemonstrated) opinions and analogies, Socrates makes his final point to the effect that having such wisdom entitles one to temperance, justice, and holiness.

19. Yet there is no talk in the *Laches* or, so far as I know, in any of the other dialogues about an “*εἶδος*” or “*ιδέα*” (in the sense of “Form” or “Idea”) of courage. For an interesting attempt to connect Socratic dialogue with the notion of “anamnesis” see G. Vlastos, “The Socratic Elenchus,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 1 (1983), pp. 27–70.

that is, as someone whose talk is clever but not founded on sound insight. Even Nicias, though, has *some* sense of what courage really is; and so do most of us. Thus although the search for a definition of courage is, on the surface, unsuccessful, no one concludes that courage does not in fact exist. Similarly, while in the *Lysis* two young people are unable to define friendship, Socrates terminates the dialogue by observing that they are nevertheless friends. In the *Laches* Socrates repeats his usual view that if we know something we must be able to state it (190c6). But, as I have been suggesting, it is not simply true that if we cannot state it we do not know it. For in some sense we must already know what we are discursively searching for in order to search for it.

The whole Socratic search for wisdom, as well as the related notion of education, makes sense only on the assumption that what is being searched for is not a semantic definition but the thing itself. The corresponding notion of recollection implies a complicated view of man's place in the cosmos, a view fundamentally opposed to the "existentialist" view adumbrated at the start of this paper. I am suggesting now that Plato's opposing view is implied by the *Laches*, and in particular by the "priority" of ἔργον to λόγος. Laches associates deeds with truth (183d1–4). Socrates holds to a philosophical version of the same point, and this is why he is in the final analysis closer to Laches than Nicias, in spite of the latter's greater verbal sophistication. The "knowledge" which the Socratic dialectician has is thus in part nonpropositional or intuitive.²⁰ It requires insight. One might ask why, if this is true, speech is required at all. The partial failures of the definitions in the *Laches* give us an indication of the answer. Simply put, our insights are unclear. It may be that we cannot talk without in some sense knowing what we want to say, but at the same time it is true that we do not know what we think we know until we have subjected ourselves to questioning. The gradual process of refining and tying down our insights is, Plato wants to say, recollection (*Meno* 97e–98a). Recollection does not furnish a complete "revelation" of truth unambiguous in its clarity and meaning.

The *experience* of recalling and sharpening one's insights has no substitute. Socratic dialectic is able to bring this experience about through the powerful means of questioning. Plato performs a similar operation on his readers. He does not *tell* his readers the solution to the problems of education and courage, he *shows* it to them in a way that invites them to articulate it for themselves. In undergoing the work of philosophizing they discourse about their insights into the deeds of men and so receive an education in philosophical courage.

20. A very strong version of this view is argued by W. Wieland in his *Platon und die Formen des Wissens* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1982).