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page

1	stewart umphrey	on the theme of plato's <i>laches</i>
11	mary pollingue	an interpretation of fortescue's <i>de laudibus legum angliae</i>
48	joseph carpino	three cosmologies
65	glenn n. schram	reinhold niebuhr and contemporary political thought: a review article



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ON THE THEME OF PLATO'S *LACHES*

STEWART UMPHREY

According to tradition, Plato's *Laches* is about courage.¹ This opinion is not false, but it cannot be the whole truth, for the "what-is" question is not posed until the thirteenth of some twenty-three Stephanus pages. The beginning of the *logos* (198^a1; cf. 187^c4) is not identical with the beginning of the dialogue. It is Lysimachus, not Socrates, who determines the scope of the conversation at first. For him the inquiry about courage must be a digression (cf. 189^c3-^d3). That inquiry is cut off before it can reach its own end: much that is relevant to the topic is not introduced; Socrates evidently knows more than he is saying.² Yet the dialogue seems complete: a test of deliberative expertise has been administered; Lysimachus and company know the score (200^d7ff.). Again, *Laches* may not be the strongest spokesman for courage. He maintains the superiority of soul to body, and of rest to motion in respect of virtue (190^e-93^d). He grants that courage is but a part of virtue, that it is inseparable from moderation in particular (e.g., 190^d2, 191^e3). He represents not unqualified or raw courage but political courage.³ These and other considerations lead one to believe that the theme of the *Laches* is not identical with that which receives thematic treatment in the *Laches*. The tradition in question is neither comprehensive nor precise. Those who maintain it steadfastly, simple-mindedly, cannot gain the understanding we seek. We are compelled to turn from authoritative hearsay about the dialogue to the dialogue itself.

It is entitled *Laches*. It was *Laches'* lot to be an unsung Athenian guardian (*phylax*). His phylactic character is emphasized by Plato. He puts the public before the private interest (180^b6). He alone of the interlocutors appeals to the city and the fatherland (181^a8-^b4). Speeches are to be judged with reference to deeds, he says: the plain of truth is the battlefield (183^d2-3, 188^c6ff.). It is he who praises the Dorian man of action (188^d6, 182^e5-83^a4). He exhibits love of victory and honor characteristic of real guardians (184^b6-^c4, 194^a8, 197^c4). In

¹ Cf. Diogenes Laertius 3, 57, 59; Athenaeus II, 506^b; R. G. Hoerber, "Thrasylus' Platonic Canon and the Double Titles," *Phronesis* I (1956): 10-20.

² Read 194^a1-5 with 194^d1-3 and 194^d1-3 with 197^e10-99^e11. Among the relevant things neglected are spiritedness and eros, the agonies and terrors of battle and Hades. Compare *Rep* 375^a11, 386^b4ff., 410^d6-7, 411^c6-8; *Symp* 203^d5, 212^b8; *Meno* 81^d3, 86^b8-9 (cf. *Thi* 169^c1, *Prm* 130^b1, *Hp Ma* 286^c7-8); *Laws* 880^d8ff., and Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* II 115^a6-17^b22.

³ Cf. *Rep* 430^c3 and context. Plutarch claims, plausibly if not correctly, that Nicias was a coward (*Nicias* 2.4, 4.3, 8.1, 14.2).

Plato's dialogues *Laches* is the chief representative of that political beast the watchdog, which *Laches* so much resembled, it seems, that Aristophanes portrayed him as a dog in the *Wasps* (835ff.). The *Laches* is an exposé of this hard-core political man, and by implication an exposé of the political as such. It is the Platonic dialogue in which Socrates converses with actual political men.⁴

The character of *Laches* points to the thematic field of the *Laches*, namely "safeguarding" (*phylakê*). The conversation is initiated by two undistinguished Athenian gentlemen because they want their sons to become best possible, or worthy of the names they bear, and care for one's own is the root of safeguarding.⁵ These concerned fathers are seeking the means to the end in question, in explicit opposition to the insouciance of the multitude, and in unwitting neglect of their own sons' natures. It is characteristic of the *Laches* that "nature" is almost never mentioned: care is inattentive to the nature of things.⁶ A private deliberation ensues, and deliberation belongs to the calculative part of safeguarding⁷—it is, moreover, deliberation concerning the choiceworthiness of learning hopliteship, a phylactic martial art.⁸ Having been invited to join in that deliberation Socrates takes upon himself the task of guarding the soul of the sons against the folly of their elders. In a brief conversation with Melesias ("care") he stresses the need for *promêtheia*, whose basis is fear and whose most useful accomplishment is the arts, perhaps including statesmanship.⁹ Socratic forethought necessitates a regression to prior questions, eventually to the question of what virtue is (190^b). With *Laches*' consent, Socrates temporarily replaces this question with another, what is courage? The subsequent discussion illuminates the relation between the two constituents of correct safeguarding, namely, courage and prudence or forethought.¹⁰ *Laches* and *Nicias* unwittingly agree that courage is inseparable from some caution, that the courageous man is wary, aware. These two generals do not accept the popular opinion that the paradigmatic man of courage is the swift and wrathful Achil-

⁴ See *Ap Soc* 21^{b2-22e5}.

⁵ Consider 179^{a8-b6}, 187^{c5-d1}. Cf. *Ps-Plato Def* 413^{b1}; *Plato Rep* 330^{e3-6}, 412^{d2-3}, 414^{e3-4}, 462^{e7-8}, *Sis* 274^{b5-e1}, 279^{e7-80a6}; Aristotle *Politics* 1261^{b33-40}.

⁶ Cf. *Phdrs* 246^{e4-247c2}, *Rep* 501^{b-d}, et passim; Aristotle *Metaph* 981^{a20} and context.

⁷ Cf. *Rep* 441^{a1} and preceding; *Laws* 964^{d3-65a4}.

⁸ Cf. A. W. Gomme, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides* (Oxford, 1966), I, pp. 10-12.

⁹ Cf. 185^{a9} and 197^{b1-4} with *Prt* 316^{c2-6}, 322^{a-c}, *Grg* 523^{d7-e1}, *Rep* 441^{e5}, *Phlb* 16^{e2-7}; and Hesiod *Thg*, especially 540, 547, 551; Aeschylus *Prometheus Bound* 59, 113-27, 250-56, 442-506; also F. Bacon, "Prometheus, sive status hominis," *De Sapientia Veterum*, XXVI. For the apprehensiveness of *promêtheia*, consult any appropriate lexicon.

¹⁰ 197^{b2-e2} and *Rep* 428^{b3ff.}, 441^{e5}, 521^{b7-11}. Forethought is mentioned more often in the *Laches* than in any Platonic dialogue except the *Protagoras*, where the question of courage is also raised, albeit in a different setting.

les.¹¹ The dialogue ends with Socrates' guarded advice to the elders to persevere guardedly in their quest (201^a3).

While safeguarding furnishes the warp and woof of the *Laches*, it receives no thematic treatment in the dialogue. For a Platonic Socratic treatment of it, one must turn to the *Republic*. There Socrates and his associates make a city in speech. Glaucon easily persuades Socrates to admit unnecessary desires into the healthy city, thus rendering it feverish. They are then compelled to admit guardians. Socrates proceeds to give a long and intricate account of safeguarding or guardianship. That account exhibits difficulties. For instance, the disposition of the guardian cannot be simple. He or she is harsh toward enemies, gentle toward friends. Socrates casually identifies enemies as foreigners and friends as fellow citizens, as if he had already forgotten his conversation with Polemarchus.¹² The natural basis of safeguarding must be double: the guardian is necessarily both spirited and a lover of wisdom or learning, but Socrates is able to discover both natures together in the watchdog only by forcing an identification of the intelligible with the familiar and of the unfamiliar with the unintelligible. Later, when he must reintroduce philosophy, he will tacitly reject this identification: the philosopher has an erotic attachment to the truth regardless of its familiarity or unfamiliarity; he or she is said to resemble not a watchdog but, among other things, a lover of spectacle.¹³ The education to guardianship must be a dual one, says Socrates. Only through a most suitable application of the finest blend of gymnastic with music will the prodigious nature he speaks of become beautiful and good. He temporarily avoids the question of who can provide such an education and proceeds instead to discover the leaders of the guardians among the guardians themselves, and to identify these select peers with the rulers of the city as a whole. He now calls them not only courageous and moderate but prudent (*phronimoi*), and soon professes to discover in them as a class the virtue of good counsel and the power of calculation and deliberation.¹⁴ Although the guardians as hitherto described are certainly courageous and moderate, however, nothing has been said to indicate that any intellectual excellence belongs to them. Friends of learning need not be excellent learners, much less wise. Socrates abruptly makes the assumption, it seems, that top dogs can be shepherds—that the higher species of guardianship can be derived from the lower, or rather that both belong to the same species—but he cannot maintain it. In the first place, he finds it appropriate to conceive of the city as formally three, not two. The guardians previously described are now regarded as mere assistants,

¹¹ Especially 192^a1–c1, 193^d1–10, 196^b9–97^e1, 199^d8–e2.

¹² *Rep* 372^e2–74^e3, 375^b9–c5 with 335^a6–b1 (cf. *Tim* 18^a6–7).

¹³ *Rep* 375^e6–76^e7, 455^e6–56^a12, 503^b9–5^a2 (cf. *Tim* 18^a4–6; *Tht* 194^e1–95^a5; *Sts* 307^e3). Cf. *Rep* 474^b5ff., 573^b6, 574^d8.

¹⁴ *Rep* 412^a4–7, b8–c13, 428^a11–29^a7, 440^e8–41^b1.

the running dogs of the best. They are irrational in that they cannot deliberate and make good judgments themselves, but are rational in that they can heed and act upon directives issued from above.¹⁵ In the second place, in order to demonstrate that the best city is possible in a way Socrates reintroduces the philosophic nature, but this time apart from spiritedness. He outlines for it a higher education, culminating in dialectic, which effectively subverts the music education received by all the guardians;¹⁶ in other words, he simplifies the requisite nature and complicates the requisite education. According to Socrates' revised teaching, guardianship, in the most precise sense of the word, cannot be derived from guardianship as ordinarily understood. That human being who possesses the wisdom necessary to supervise the establishment of the best city is as different from the lawful soldier and policeman operative in that city as men are from dogs or gods from men.¹⁷ Socrates tries to recover his previous position without abandoning his new, still more elevated position. He asserts that the best guardian, the aristocrat, is at once a warrior and a philosopher, truly Athenian,¹⁸ but the reader, unlike Glaucon, is not dazzled by this splendid synthesis, for Socrates has shown that it is scarcely possible to achieve it, given the disproportion between philosophy and the city, between philosophic and political virtue. The virtue of the soul proves to be wisdom; the other so-called virtues, defined in the preceding conversation, are akin to those of the body. The city, however good, is like a cave which one must somehow transcend in order to view nature and finally to become wise. The wise alone are qualified to rule, but they do not want to take part in political affairs; if they are to rule, they must be compelled to do so.¹⁹ Correct safeguarding, in principle, is both within and without the horizon of opinion. It is a nigh indefinable dyad. Yet it is the core of political affairs and thus poses the crucial political problem.²⁰ When philosophy turns from the heavens or clouds to the human or political things, as it becomes political philosophy, it falls into perplexity about the constitution of safeguarding. The solution proposed in the *Republic* is a problematic one.

While philosophers may spend their time trying to understand how a political society can be so constituted that it acts in accordance with the best possible resolutions, political societies cannot. To say nothing

¹⁵ *Rep* 436^a8ff. Cf. 484^c6ff., 403^e7; Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1102^a27–3^a10.

¹⁶ *Rep* 502^e1–2, 537^e1–39^d7. From the reintroduction of philosophy (473^d) to the account of timocracy (545^bff.), spiritedness is mentioned only once (536^c4). Cf. *Laws* 965^b1–3.

¹⁷ *Rep* 440^d4–7, 497^c1–3, 589^d1, 590^d4; also *Sis* 275^b8–c8; *Sph* 254^a10–b1.

¹⁸ *Rep* 525^b8–9, 543^a4–6; cf. *Tim* 24^c7–d1.

¹⁹ *Rep* 518^c8–e3, 514^aff., 519^c1ff.; consider 485^c with 377^a1–8, 382^c6–d3, 389^b2–5, 414^b8ff.

²⁰ Cf. *Sis* 274^b5–e1 with 271^e8–72^a2, 284^a5–c3; *Laws* 760^a6.

of other considerations, they lack the requisite leisure. Even the most important matters must be resolved quickly, and decisions must be carried out without further question. In practice time is of the essence. Speeches must be with reference to deeds. Inquiry must give way to resoluteness. This desire for practical solutions may persuade one to give up hope of achieving the very best political society, which comes into being by chance, if at all,²¹ and to utilize readily available substitutes for guardianship. In trying to synthesize deliberateness and courage, political men must generally make concessions to ignorance and vice: cunning and circumspection, for example, are more readily available than good counsel; audacity and obstinacy are more common than courage. When Athens (praised by Pericles for its courage and exact knowledge) sought to execute her erotic design upon Sicily, it elected not one man but three to lead the adventure: Alcibiades, Lamachus, and Nicias—a monstrous triad.²²

Spiritedness is in fact rarely subservient to love of learning, and the question arises as to whether in any given case they can be harmonized. Plato's Laches is publicspirited and anti-sophistic, an exponent of the old Marathon fighters. He is the first to mention virtue (184^c2). Nicias, on the other hand, is learned and pro-sophistic, a representative of the intellectual avant-garde. He is the first to mention exact knowledge (182^c7). Laches is typically cautious and bound to tradition, while Nicias is typically confident and open to innovation. The former reminds one of Sparta; the latter, of Athens.²³ These two Athenian leaders disagree about the desirability of learning hoplite-ship. Nicias argues that the learning will make a successful man out of a lad. Laches is convinced that the sophisticated variety of it which Stesilaus professes is irrelevant at best (especially 182^a5–6, 183^c3). Shortly thereafter the generals again disagree about courage. Laches is convinced that it is a certain volition or steadfastness of soul; Nicias, that it is the science of things to be dreaded and dared. These disagreements reflect incompatible notions of the relation between courage and knowledge. Laches defends moral fiber against the en-

²¹ Cf. *Rep* 473^d2–3, 499^b5, 592^a8–9; *Laws* 709^d2–3, 710^c7–8, 736^c5; also Aristotle *Politics* 1270^b20, 1295^a28, 1331^b18–23; Cicero *Republic* 1, 65.

²² Thucydides 6.8.2, 24.2, 47–49. Consider, e.g., Machiavelli, *Prince*, XVIII; F. Bacon, "Of Boldness" and "Of Delays" (in *Essays and Counsels*); T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I, 11; H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1958), especially pt. 5. The problem is presented tragically in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In the *Laches*, Socrates refuses to seize the moment when he cannot do so knowledgeably. Aristotle attributes this refusal not to caution, however, but to pride (*Posterior Analytics* 97^b21).

²³ Cf. 182^e6–83^b2; Thucydides 1.70.2–3, 8.96.5; also Plato *Rep* 557^c4–9. Contrast W. Nagel, "Zur Darstellungskunst Platons insbesondere im 'Laches,'" in *Serta Philologica Aenipontana*, ed. R. Muth (Innsbruck, 1962), p. 129. It is noteworthy that while all the interlocutors are Athenians none is a partisan of democracy (cf. 179^a5–6, 181^b2–3, 184^d8–85^b5, 195^f12–d9, 197^b6–c1. None denies that resolutions concerning the sons' education should be based on knowledge rather than majority opinion (cf. 184^d5–85^b5).

croachments of craft. Nicias promotes science at the expense of character.²⁴ Whereas Laches is oriented principally to the noble, Nicias is oriented principally to the beneficial (cf., e.g., 188^d3-4, 192^e7, 181^e1, 195^d4). Whereas Laches' initial definition is partly behavioral, Nicias' definition has no such implications. Laches finds it difficult, upon reflection, to distinguish courage from audacity (192^e1-93^d10). Nicias obscures the ordinarily evident distinction between courage and cowardice (197^a6-c1). Laches is guided by trust; he does not readily distinguish knowledge from authoritative opinion (e.g., 191^b6-7, 195^b3-4, 197^a3). Nicias, on the other hand, thinks that if one lacks knowledge one is simply thoughtless; he does not distinguish opinion from ignorance (e.g., 197^a6-b1). In the end these two political men are hardly polite to each other. Together they exhibit in deed as well as in speech the crucial political problem. Having asked what the nature of a citizenry ought to be, Aristotle finds that the Europeans are one-sided because they are spirited but lack intellect and art, hence they remain free but are anarchic. The Asians, on the other hand, have an intellectual and technical soul but lack spiritedness, hence they are eminently political but easily enslaved. Greece alone, situated between Europe and Asia, is well balanced. It alone can partake of both political courage and deliberative expertise. (Aristotle adds, however, that this is not true of every Greek city.²⁵)

Having identified and explicated the thematic field of Plato's *Laches*, we must ask why, given this field, the question of courage in particular should be raised. The most obvious reason is the context, which is that of a dialogue. Lysimachus first determines the scope of the conversation. He urges two generals to advise him concerning education in general and the worth of learning hopliteship in particular. In his first formulation he makes the particular request first; in his second formulation he makes it alone (180^a2-3 with 179^d6-e5, 181^e7-9). Nicias and Laches do not give consistent advice. Xenophon remembers that when there was disagreement about something Socrates would turn the conversation to the bone of contention, the "hypothesis," and having indicated it by name he would ask the interlocutor to consider with him what it is. The *Laches* confirms Xenophon's reminiscence.²⁶ Given Lysimachus' request and the generals' inability to

²⁴ Cf. 182^d8-84^e5, 195^a4ff. Nicias alone refers to the body (181^e4); in his account of courage he never refers to the soul (compare Laches at 192^b9).

²⁵ *Politics* 1327^b19-38, 1332^b8-9. Cf. Herodotus 4.46, 95.2, 142, and 8.136.1; Thucydides 2.40.2-3; Plato *Laws* 818^b7-d3, *Rep* 435^e3-36^a3, 503^e2-d12. We have now partially explained the fact that the *Laches* is distinguished by numerous dualities: for a description of this fact, cf. R. H. Hoerber, "Plato's *Laches*," *Classical Philology* 63 (1968): 95-105; also M. J. O'Brien, "The Unity of the *Laches*," *Yale Classical Studies* 18 (1963): 131-47.

²⁶ Xenophon *Memorabilia* 4.6.13-15 (cf. Plato *Phaedrus* 237^e2-d1). On this feature of the *Laches* see P. Grenet, "Note sur la structure du *Laches*," in *Mélanges Auguste Diès* (Paris, 1956), pp. 121-28; see also P. Vicaire, ed., *Platon: Lachès et Lysis* (Paris, 1963), Introduction.

grant it, Socrates moves the participants to reflection on their deliberative activity (185^d10). The conversation thereupon retreats to the general question of virtue, which is the general goal of education, and then to the particular question of courage, which may be the goal of the particular activity of learning hopliteship (190^d3-6; compare 179^d6-80^a3 and 182^e5-7 with 184^b4-c4). Whereas deliberation is like mathematics in that its principles remain hypothetical, Socrates' procedure here is like that of dialectic. They are contrary movements.²⁷ Even though it does not arise as a matter of course and is not perfectly intelligible to everyone present, however, Socrates' "what-is" question does not appear out of the blue. It renews in perhaps loftier and more general terms Lysimachus' first "how-to" question. A deliberation about means to an end, because it miscarried, is replaced by an inquiry about that end.²⁸ Lysimachus's question does not become inoperative. The inquiry about virtue in general, and about courage in particular, is not a free inquiry but a test to ascertain the presence or absence of deliberative and hence pedagogic expertise, which Lysimachus seeks. Although Socrates turns the conversation toward the *archê* in the sense of first principle, the *archê* in the sense of starting point is preserved. In this regressus without forgetfulness resides the difference-within-sameness of the dialogue.²⁹

Aristotle says that the political is divisible into two: "the hoplitical" and "the deliberative." Presumably the latter is superior to the former; surely both parts are essential.³⁰ In Plato's *Republic* Socrates wishes to construct a city which is a model of justice. It proves to be a city at rest. Its heart is the spirited class of guardians. Its central virtue is political courage.³¹ The hoplitical, then, would appear to be the more constitutive of the political as such, in respect of its "matter," if not of its "form." It follows that the most thoroughly political and thus most representative political man is less the statesman than someone like Laches. Whether it follows that lawful courage is the paradigmatic political virtue is more controversial.

In Plato's *Timaeus* Socrates concedes that the city at work is a city at war, i.e., in motion, and when in motion there can be little doubt as to which class is most representative of the city: then Socrates makes no reference to the philosopher-king.³² The *Laches* transpires in Athens

²⁷ Cf. *Rep* 510^b5-7 with Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1112^b11-34.

²⁸ Cf. *Grg* 472^c6-d and 487^e6-7 with 447^c1-2, etc.

²⁹ Of course there are complications. For instance, Socrates persuades his audience to consider the sons' soul, but it is unlikely that the fathers had this foremost in their minds (see 179^c3). Again, Socrates is tempted to transform the test into a free inquiry (see 194^a).

³⁰ *Politics* 1329^a30-31; cf. 1291^a31-33, 1252^a32-33.

³¹ 439^e2-41^d3, 442^b11; cf. *Tim* 70^a2-b1.

³² 19^b7-c8 and the preceding. In the *Sts* the statesman is progressively separated from the city. The "way" which *is* the statesman (258^c3-5) carries one beyond political society.

during the greatest motion known to the Greeks of that time.³³ Almost without exception its leading political men are also generals. This is not extraordinary, for political societies must try to safeguard their existence as well as their excellence. Political animals are, so far as we know, homicidal as well. War obscures the distinction between statesmanship and generalship. What is more, the excellence of a political society is ordinarily thought by its citizens to depend in part on its domination over other political societies. Under certain, not uncommon, conditions the deliberate and unconcealed killing of men by men is thought to be not only necessary but noble. Under certain conditions it is easy to confuse the political art with the hoplitical art and even with an art of hunting.³⁴ Those who seek victory in battle most of all throughout their lives suppose that courage is the paramount virtue, even the whole of virtue.³⁵

In the *Laches* Plato arranges a chance meeting of philosophy with political power. Given the political setting of the dialogue, one is inclined to say that this meeting is most opportune: Athens more than ever needs someone who can safeguard her virtue, or susceptibility to virtue, against war's subversive teaching. In the course of the dialogue, however, it becomes evident that Socrates is unwilling or unable to bring Laches and Nicias to an agreement about means or ends. On the contrary, his interrogation only exacerbates their differences, and one might, on reflection, be inclined to accuse him of contributing to civil disorder, and at the worst possible time. Be that as it may, both Laches and Nicias seem to believe that Socrates is praiseworthy. They agree, first, that Lysimachus ought to invite him into the council (180^b–81^b); second, that they will allow themselves to be interrogated by him (187^d–89^b); and finally, that Lysimachus ought to entrust his son to Socrates' care. Although their advice is unanimous in this regard, however, their reasons differ. Laches believes that Socrates has good counsel chiefly because he distinguished himself at Delium (181^a7–^b4). Nicias, on the other hand, has direct acquaintance with Socrates as a matchmaker of sorts, and later he confesses his esteem for him as a pedagogue (180^e8–^d3; 200^e7–^d3). Laches praises Socrates the upright citizen-soldier; Nicias praises Socrates the sophisticated procurer-educator.

It seems to some, at least, that Socrates has both political and philosophic virtue; though in truth there is an irremediable disparity

³³ Thucydides 1.1.2. Regarding the dramatic date of the *Laches*, begin by noting 181^b1 and Thucydides 6.75.3.

³⁴ See, e.g., Thucydides 5.16.1 (also 3.36.6, 82.2); Plato *Laws* 625^e6–26^a3, *Euthyd* 290^b1–^d8, 291^e7–9, *Grg* 483^d2–484^d1, *Sph* 222^c; Aristotle *Politics* 1255^b38–39, 1267^a18–21, 1271^a3–^b6, 1333^b5–34^a10; Machiavelli *Discourses* 1. 19. Contrast Plato *Sts* 303^d4–5^a10.

³⁵ Cf. 182^e5–83^a6 with *Laws* 626^b7–^c2, 629^a5, and context; also *HP Ma* 283^e9–84^a2, *Alc I* 122^e5–8, *Rep* 548^a1–2; Aristotle *Politics* 1269^b19–21, 1270^a5–6, 1271^b2–3, 1324^b5ff., 1222^b9–10.

between philosophy and political society, in practice there is some harmony between the two.³⁶

Nicias, in his second long speech, decides that he is willing to be tested by Socrates because such inquisition is always beneficial. The life thus examined is surely worth living, he thinks. Laches, in his second long speech, decides that he is willing to learn from and be refuted by Socrates because he has indeed given proof of manly excellence. The worth of a man as a teacher depends, he thinks, on the worth of the teacher as a man. The assumptions that Socratic inquisition is never harmful, and that Socrates has manliness, are doubtful.³⁷ What is not doubtful is that in the subsequent conversation Socrates shows a tendency to initiate and pursue certain questions. He displays what we shall call zetetic courage. Whether he has or can have zetetic knowledge as well is a terribly perplexing question.³⁸ In any case it is his eagerness and capacity to persevere in inquiry that most distinguishes Socrates from Laches and Nicias. Having been shown to be inconsistent with himself, Laches asserts that he is ready to pursue courage courageously (194^a). The man's waspishness is easily distracted, however; this watchdog proves to be no hound.³⁹ Having been shown by Socrates that his putatively Socratic definition of courage is defective, Nicias asserts that whatever is wrong with it can be rectified with Damon's help. Both political men believe they know what courage is (cf. 194^{b1}, 200^{b4-5}). It is not surprising, then, that neither entreats Socrates to help him discover it. Moreover, they seem to have forgotten Socrates' forthright profession of deliberative and therapeutic incompetence (186^{b8-c5}). In his last long speech Socrates, impoverished and resourceful, alludes to that confession and advises all present, including himself, to seek the best possible teacher, sparing neither money nor anything else. A line from Homer's *Odyssey* is supplied to protect the men from ridicule and shame (201^{a7-b3}). But neither Laches nor Nicias shows the least tendency to heed Socrates' private counsel: neither political man is ready to try to compel the philosopher to lead them. They must be convinced that they are not in need of such leadership. Any fear that the city will suffer a plague of conscious ignorance, of human wisdom, is groundless.⁴⁰

Laches is a partisan of courage as fortitude; Nicias is a partisan of courage as forethought; for them this disagreement is basic. We are now in a position to observe that the seeming incompatibility of these virtues conceals a still more basic agreement. They both "look ahead,"

³⁶ Cf. *Rep* 487^{a4-5}, 490^{a1-c1}.

³⁷ Athens' evaluation of Socrates' questioning is well known. Nowhere in Plato's dialogues is Socrates called "androsios."

³⁸ Cf. *Meno* 80^{d5ff}.

³⁹ Cf. *Prm* 128^{c1}, *Rep* 432^{b7}, *Prt* 308^{a1-2}. Compare the interpretation offered by R. Sprague in *Plato, Laches and Charmides* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1973), p. 7.

⁴⁰ Cf. *Ap Soc* 20^{d6-e1} et passim.

as does care. Hence it is fitting that in the *Laches* there should be little reference to justice and even less to law. It is fitting, moreover, that the dialogue should proceed without reference to those arts or sciences which exemplify intellect, which (according to Socrates in the *Republic*) can be employed in turning the soul's attention from becoming to being.⁴¹ Like care, and unlike (Platonic) philosophy or wisdom, political virtue is bound up with the thesis that being is to be understood within the horizon of time. Even Nicias does not hesitate to agree that science is of what becomes (198^{d1}-99^{a9}).⁴² It is perhaps because courage is inseparable from the "being" of the soul that Plato's Socrates always refrains from speaking of an *idea* of courage. One wonders whether this is connected with the fact that courage is that cardinal virtue which seems to have a brutish likeness.⁴³

The *Laches* is a dialogue in which two political men prove unable to define the central political virtue. They cannot even agree upon some less than adequate conception of it. The dialogue presents a philosophic critique of what is now customarily called politics. Of the gentlemen present, only Lysimachus, a relative nonentity, professes eagerness to join the inquisitive society which Socrates recommends (201^{b6}-8). Again without consulting Melesias, he orders Socrates to be present at his house on the next day. He seems to have lost interest in Nicias and Laches, to say nothing of Stesilaus and his profession. One might wish to say that philosophy has been victorious over political authority in the present contest. Socrates replies that he will do as Lysimachus commands, if god be willing. Not everything can be compelled or induced. But what is god? The *Laches* leaves us with a question which is coeval with philosophy, a question which Plato's Socrates treats with much circumspection.⁴⁴

⁴¹ 521^b, 522^{c-e}, 525^{b-c}, 526^{c-e}, 527^{c-d}. This omission cannot be a consequence of the fact that the *Laches* is an "early" dialogue, for consider the *Charmides*, which in the judgment of some is even earlier.

⁴² Consider *Phdrs* 244^{b4}-45^{a8}, 249^{d4}-5, 265^{b2}-6, 247^{a4}-^{b1}; cf. Cicero *De Inv. Rhet.* 2. 53 with Aristotle *Rhet.* 1358^a36ff. In the *Epinomis* (975^{e2}-76^{a6}) it is said that the three arts mentioned by Socrates at 198^d-99^a have the least to do with wisdom; see also *Laws* 889^{d4}-6.

⁴³ Cf. 196^e-97^b, *Rep* 375^{e11}-12; Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1116^{b23}-17^{a9}, together with his accounts of the other virtues. Compare the interpretations offered by E. V. Kohak, "The Road to Wisdom: Lessons on Education from Plato's *Laches*," *Classical Journal* 56 (1960), especially p. 131, and by Th. de Laguna, "The Problem of the *Laches*," *Mind* 48 (1934): 170-80.

⁴⁴ Cf. L. Strauss, *City and Man* (Chicago, 1964), p. 241; Plutarch "Eroticus" 756^b; Plato *Thi* 151^{a1}-^{b1} and the *Theages* 129^{eff}.