

MUST THE COURAGEOUS ALSO BE WISE? (AN EXPLORATION OF PLATO'S *LACHES*)

Marc Oliver D. Pasco
Ateneo de Manila University
Loyola Heights, Quezon City

The Laches features two Athenian generals (Laches and Nicias) and Socrates discussing the essential meaning of courage. Laches defines it as “a certain perseverance of the soul,” while Nicias argues that it consists in “knowledge of what is to be feared and hoped for both in war and in all other matters.” This paper, with the aid of several Plato scholars, argues that although most scholars agree that Socrates does not present his own view of the matter, hence leaving the dialogue without a proper resolution, it may still be surmised that for Socrates, courage means willful yet wise perseverance.

INTRODUCTION

Plato scholars note that the *Laches* is one of the most “accessible” (Melling 1987, 19) of the thinker’s early dialogues. Like the *Euthyphro*, it is terse and specific as to its thematic line of inquiry, and much like the *Euthyphro* as well, it ends aporitically. Apart from the evident aim of reflecting and discursively clarifying the nature of courage (*andreia*), the aporitic conclusion of the dialogue sheds light on Plato’s underlying aim of highlighting the pedagogic novelty of the Socratic dialectic in its ability to “gently” compel the interlocutors to question, broaden, and deepen their *doxic* principles. This is in view of accommodating the possibility of engaging in a philosophical struggle to arrive at a more *eidetic* understanding of the subject matter being discussed. The dialogue does not end with a conclusive definition of courage. As Gerasimos Santas (1969, 460) explains:

In the *Laches* Socrates has not really given us any answers about courage. But by doing things and leaving things undone, by questioning and rejecting, by comparing and contrasting, by twisting and turning in short, by a paradigmatic show of his method, he has succeeded in bringing into view nearly all the important questions about courage. Appropriately, the dialogue ends with a resolve to continue the discussion on another occasion.

The dialogue, as a whole, represents a movement of deconstruction of certain commonly held beliefs people might have of what courage is and of what a courageous

man does. The *Laches* is also oftentimes reviewed vis-à-vis other Platonic dialogues that touch upon the Socratic understanding of courage and its relation to the other virtues such as temperance, but most notably with the virtue of wisdom. The *Charmides*, the *Meno*, the *Protagoras*, and the *Republic* have been exegetically interfaced with the *Laches* in many scholarly writings (cf. Foley 2009, 213-33; Gould 1987, 265-79, and Santas 1969, 433-60).¹ Much of the debate in these scholarly exchanges is focused on the Platonic notion concerning the unity of the virtues. As Reginald Allen (1996, 53) explains that the “primary question of the *Laches* is not What is courage? but What is virtue?” The “inquiry into the whole of virtue maybe too big a job, and that since courage is a part of virtue, it will be easier to begin with that.” Nicias’ thinking that courage is a “kind of wisdom or knowledge” is mistaken since it “makes not a part of virtue but the whole of it.”

Since wisdom—the knowledge of how to properly care for one’s soul—is commonly held to be the most important virtue for Socrates, scholars argue as to whether there is an “extra-intellectual” element involved in the cultivation of courage in men or whether courage is concomitantly related to the other virtues, specifically with wisdom. As Carol Gould (1987, 266) explains:

The problem turns on the sense in which the virtues are allegedly indistinct: does this mean that they are identical or that they do not occur apart from one another? For, while it is clear that Socrates thinks that to have one virtue is to have them all, scholars disagree as to whether he asserts this on the grounds that (i) they are not different from one another—each is knowledge of good and evil, and nothing more than that—or (ii) they are different from one another, but acquiring one involves acquiring all of the others.

The problem of the unity of the virtues brings to the fore the issue concerning the various “questionable” definitions of courage that Laches and Nicias (the main dialogue partners of Socrates in the *Laches*). There is a recurring retort periodically posed by Socrates concerning the relationship of his interlocutors’ descriptions of courage with knowledge, especially in the segment with Nicias. In other words, is there anything unique and novel in the *Laches* as regards the traditional equivalency between knowledge and virtue² maintained by most Plato scholars? Put more pointedly, can courage occur without wisdom? Or put in another way, must the courageous also be wise?

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

According to Allen (1996, 49), the dramatic date of the dialogue falls after the Battle of Delium in 424 B.C., six years before the death of Laches in the Battle of Mantinea. Socrates was then about forty-five years old. The dialogue involves five main characters: Lysiamachus, son of Aristides the Just; Melesias, son of the general Thucydides; Laches³ and Nicias,⁴ Athenian military leaders of great distinction; and Socrates. Lysiamachus and Melesias came to consult with Laches and Nicias about whether their sons should be trained to fight in armor. The former pair are quite bitter of

the fact that they were not able to achieve greatness as their fathers had and wish to give their own sons a better chance of attaining what was denied of them due greatly to their respective fathers' entanglement with political affairs. As Lysiamachus (Plato 1996, 62) admits:

So we're embarrassed by this and blame our fathers for allowing us to be spoiled as young men while they attended to the business of others; we point this out to these young fellows, saying that if they neglect themselves and fail to obey us, they too will be without renown, but if they care for themselves, they may perhaps become worthy of the names they bear. Well, they say they'll obey; so we're considering what they should learn of practice to become good men.

The issue being hinted, of course, early on is the irony of how apparently virtuous men were unable to pass on their virtue to others, especially to their own sons. This is a seemingly tangential point in the context of the entire dialogue, but might prove fruitful for understanding the trajectory of the ensuing discussion, especially when it is viewed from a socio-cultural perspective (the intimate dialectic between *oikos* and *polis*).

In view of their desire to cultivate goodness in their own sons, Lysiamachus and Melesias asked Laches and Nicias whether learning how to fight in armor is a step in the right direction. Nicias thinks it is useful, but Laches opines that it is not. Nicias (Plato 1996, 63) explains that learning the skill of fighting in armor promotes physical wellness and equips one with the ability to be effective when fighting in ranks and it proves to be especially useful when ranks are broken and fighting is man to man; it can also serve as a gateway for pursuing and learning other noble skills like tactics and strategy—the art of the general. He claims that such a skill can also make a man more confident and courageous in war as he is able to maintain a “graceful” appearance in the midst of conflict. Laches denies this and objects to Nicias' position. He (Plato 1996, 64-66) rebuts by pointing out how the Spartans, despite being known for their astute interest in military affairs have seemingly “overlooked” such an art. If they had placed value in it, he says, people from all over would flock to Sparta to learn this skill. Furthermore, he uses the example of a man named Stesilaus, a proponent of sword fighting who, fighting with a spear-scythe got his weapon entangled in the ship's rigging and was gravely humiliated by the incident. But most significantly, he disagrees with Nicias' position on the basis of his belief that if the person who learned this skill was a coward in the first place, such knowledge would only make him foolhardy; and if he was courageous to begin with, people would just be jealous of him and wary of the slightest mistakes, either way, coward or courageous, the man will encounter prejudice from others.

At this juncture, Lysiamachus asks Socrates to break the tie. Lysiamachus says that he will decide on the basis of the majority vote. However, since Socrates is one who would not accede to truth as determined by numbers, the philosopher asks the two if it would be wiser to seek an expert on the matter rather than to settle with what most of them would think. Socrates (Plato 1996, 67-68), then, in trying to determine the qualifications of an expert in the said matter says, “When someone considers something for the sake of something, the counsel is about that for the sake of which he was

considering, but not about what he was seeking for the sake of something else.” Since Lysiamachus and Melesias came to seek advice on the matter of whether or not learning to fight in armor is an endeavor worthy of time and effort in view of instilling and nurturing goodness in the souls of their sons, Socrates says that what they are really looking for are experts on character-formation (soul-experts) and not just on fighting in armor. Socrates claims that it is prudent, therefore, to ask first what virtue is since it seems that this is really what Lysiamachus’ and Melesias’ question is about. He suggests that the conversation proceed by trying to define, not the over-all meaning of virtue, but begin by shedding light on a part of it—courage—since it is widely accepted that skill in armor fighting aims at the cultivation of *andreia*.⁵

LACHES ON *KARTERIA*

Laches defines courage as standing to one’s post. A man is courageous, according to Laches, if he remains in ranks and fights the enemy (presumably under any circumstance). Socrates responds by asking whether courage can also be found in a man who flees while fighting (citing the Scythians in Homer’s account of Aeneas and the Spartans at Plataea in 191b-91c). Socrates clarifies that he is not only interested in the meaning of courage in particular cases (as in Laches’ citation of Greek infantry), but in the meaning of courage as it applies to all cases, military or otherwise. Laches, then, refines his definition and says that it is “perseverance of the soul” (*karteria tis einaites psyches*), a certain steadfastness or firmness of one’s character (Plato 1996, 75). Stewart Umphrey (1976, 17) elaborates on this definition as follows:

According to Laches’ revised account, courage is a certain stamina (*karteria*) of the soul which is naturally throughout all the aforementioned passions (192b9-c1). It is, in other words, a natural psychic capacity to withstand tortures and temptations. Laches abides by Socrates’ turn to the “subject” and to potency. Whereas his first attempt mistook something customary for something natural, his second attempt seems free of that mistake. Certainly he makes no use of the claim that courage can be acquired (see 191d6, 189e7; 184b3-c4 with 182c5-7; 185e). He moreover refuses to confuse it with impetuosity. Courage is, on the contrary, a certain recalcitrance to motion; it is fortitude or patience understood as a native ability to abide much for a long time. As regards how much must be endured, and for how long, no rule is supplied. Laches seems to have thought that courage can be defined without reference to anything beyond the field of battle. Now he seems to think that it can be defined without reference to anything beyond the soul. The independence of courage is maintained. Aristotle says that perseverance (*karteria*) is to mastery (*enkrateia*) as not-losing is to winning. While Laches is not one to insist upon fine distinctions, it is noteworthy that once again he does not require victory. The coward, one infers, is the man who surrenders to the psychic commotions which he experiences. Cowardice is either the absence of fortitude, i.e. unmanliness (*anandria*), or else the presence of a natural softness (*malakia*).

In response, Socrates asks whether such perseverance would still be courageous if it was mixed with foolishness. Darrell Dobbs (1986, 837) summarizes this segment in the dialogue as such:

Laches has to decide which of two soldiers is the more courageous: a soldier who perseveres in a battle, having shrewdly calculated that his forces outnumber his opponent's, that reinforcements will arrive soon, and there he holds the high ground; or a soldier in the opposing army who is willing to persevere against the odds?... Laches thinks the latter soldier is the more courageous despite his having the greater deficit of prudence or wisdom (*aphronestera*, 193b2). In fact, Laches is willing to generalize on this judgment and suggest that the less technically or scientifically expert perseverance is always the more courageous, since it involves the greater risks. Expert calculation, on the other hand, minimizes courage by reducing the risk.

Socrates responds by reminding Laches that they have already established beforehand that courage is a noble thing. It would then be contradictory to say that an action which involves foolhardiness be consistent with their prior understanding of courage. It appears, at this point that Laches is equating courage with foolish perseverance. As Dobbs (1986, 838) explains:

Courage cannot consist in a psychic firmness springing from technical or scientific calculation, which would eliminate the uncertainty and danger that a courageous man must face. But neither can courage consist in an imprudent or foolish perseverance, which is shameful rather than noble. Above all, nothing shameful can be courage, for Laches remains unshaken in his belief that courage is noble; in fact he still swears by it. Socrates, to be sure, is aware that Laches has failed to distinguish between mere lack of technical or scientific expertise and utter foolishness.

Having contradicted himself, and lacking the necessary discursive and rational capacity to go further into the issue at hand, Laches is left baffled, which, insofar as the Socratic enterprise is concerned, is a good thing. Nevertheless, some commentators are in disagreement as to whether Laches' definition (perseverance of the soul) carries an implicit weight within the purview of the Socratic definition of courage. Although refuted by the long and winding path paved by the Socratic penchant for dialectical refutation (and some scholars note also the presence of fallacious lines of questioning along the way), Laches' point, as some commentators argue, should not be naively dismissed. Theodore de Laguna, for instance, notes that Laches definition is not really thoroughly refuted by Socrates especially when examined within the context, for instance, of Socrates' conduct as relayed in the *Apology*. De Laguna (1934, 177) explains:

[Socrates] brings up what seems on the surface to be a strong objection to [Laches' definition], and one which Laches is wholly unable to dispose

of; but it is one with which any reader of Plato's *Apology* of Socrates ought to have no difficulty. Socrates has been used to arguing that any man is brave in matters of which he has knowledge; as the man who knows how to ride is the brave rider and the man who knows how to dive is the brave diver. And this is true enough so far as it goes. But now he turns the argument about. Suppose that the man who is not skilled in riding or diving is called upon to do it, and suppose that in spite of his lack of knowledge he nevertheless endures the trial; is he not far braver than the expert for whom there is little or no danger! Or take two soldiers in two opposing armies: the one confident of victory because he knows that all the advantages of number and position are on his side; the other equally conscious of inferiority. Suppose the latter nevertheless endures to the end; does he give more or less evidence of courage than the man who is supported by the assurance of superior force? To this there can be but one reply; and yet it is hard to say that his endurance shows the greater prudence. Yet that is, of course, exactly what Socrates would maintain: that fidelity to duty in spite of every pain and danger is the highest prudence. When, therefore, Laches defines courage as a certain endurance of the soul he makes a real contribution to the argument, although it is one that he himself is unable to clarify or defend.

It seems that it was Laches' personal deficiency in argumentation, rather than a flaw in the initial point that he himself has raised that caused the demise of a somewhat sound definition of *andreia*. His military training and civic education limited his understanding of courage within a very specific way of life such that he was not able to follow Socrates once the latter expanded the range of applicability of the definition proposed. Santas comments that, Socrates, in "overwidening" the concept of courage to include issues concerning the endurance of pain and the resistance of pleasure when it is harmful, effectively blurred the distinction between courage and the other virtues, specifically, temperance. As he (1969, 442) says:

If a man endures pain or overcomes fear in certain situations we might praise him for his courage; but if he resists certain pleasures or controls certain desires, presumably because he thinks they are wrong or harmful, we are more likely to praise him for his moderation, self-control, or temperance rather than for his courage. In including desires and pleasures, Socrates seems to be blurring the distinction between courage and these other concepts.

Tessitore (1994, 127) claims that Laches' courage (perseverance) is the product of Athenian civic traditional education that renders one impervious to novel ways of understanding and acting. He terms Laches type of courage as "political courage" as opposed to "rational courage" or a kind of courage that is not dictated upon by traditional social belief and opinion, commendable for its daring in questioning conventional wisdom. Since Socrates is known to contaminate the process of arriving at definitions

by straining the parameters of contexts, it became much more difficult for Laches, a man known for his acts rather than his capacity for argumentation, to “persevere” in holding on to the core of his initial point. However, the definition itself, viewed apart from Laches’ personal circumstance, is actually quite Socratic. As Thomas Morris (2009, 634) explains:

Socrates accepts the idea that manliness entails perseverance (193e8-194a1). He indicates that failing to persevere would be a failure of manliness (193e8-194a1), and that manliness includes fighting with fears (191d6-e1). Courageous people would persevere in their fight with fears. As the Crito indicates, cowards allow themselves to be dominated by their fears to such an extent that they reject out of hand those considerations that made them value their previous goals. There is nothing wrong with recalculating what one should do; if the chance of success becomes so small that it does not justify taking further risk, one should change one’s plans accordingly. Cowardice lies in not being willing, as one changes one’s plans, to think about the considerations which had been important before. These considerations would not be with regard to the chances of success (which have now changed), but rather with regard to what is to be valued. When cowards give in to their fear, they change their understanding of what is good to pursue.

Morris, along with Umphrey, Gould, Santas, de Laguna, and Daniel Devereux (1992, 765-89) all recognize that the interpretation of *andreia* as *karteria* is relevant in unlocking the essential meaning of courage within the context of its relationship to the other virtues, specifically to wisdom. Gould (1987, 266), for instance, remarks that Laches’ definition opens up the possibility of discovering that something else other than knowledge plays a significant part in the cultivation of virtue, namely, an active will.

The role of the will (*thumos*) in the determination of the character of one’s soul is a fundamental Platonic idea. Reason (*to logistikon*) necessitates the spiritual drive of the will (*to thumoeides*) in balancing the various forms of physical and psychological caprice associated with the appetites (*to epithumetikon*). The question concerning the sufficiency of wisdom in instilling courage in a person seems moot when viewed against this framework. However, since the possession of wisdom, according to some commentators, most notably Vlastos in his reading of the *Protagoras*, is implicative of the possession of the other virtues, including courage, the role of the will appears to be diminished. As Devereux (1992, 773) remarks:

According to Vlastos’s account of the unity thesis, each of the virtues is biconditionally related to all the others. All of the virtues, including wisdom, have the same status in relation to the unity thesis. But the Laches gives us a somewhat different picture: someone who is courageous will also be temperate, because courage requires wisdom, and if one has wisdom (or knowledge of good and evil) one cannot fail to be temperate (192c-d, 199e). Each of the other virtues directly entails wisdom, and since possession of

wisdom guarantees possession of all the other virtues, it is through wisdom that the other virtues entail each other. Wisdom is thus the key to understanding the unity of the virtues. This is surely one of the reasons it is not treated as a mere part of virtue, on a par with the others.

Although wisdom is the logical key in understanding the unity of virtue because courage, as explained by Socrates, requires wisdom, the distinction between wisdom and courage must still be maintained. Devereux holds that *karteria*, the extra-intellectual element found in Laches' definition of courage although obviously distinct from wisdom, should nevertheless be understood as a necessary element in understanding courage. Recall that in Vlastos' account, as well with most Plato scholars' reading of the Socratic doctrine, wisdom always already implies the possession of courage (and of the other virtues). Perseverance, a characteristic that is more likely to be related with the will rather than the intellect, is therefore a trait that seems to occur outside the bounds of a traditional Socratic understanding of virtue. In this regard, Devereux, according to Gould (1987, 277), holds that in the *Laches*,

Plato is abandoning the Socratic thesis that knowledge is sufficient for virtue. It would seem possible, on this account, to know what is right, but due to weakness of will or perverse desires, to fail to persevere in doing what is right. On this reading, the *Laches* is markedly like the middle dialogues, most notably *Republic IV*.

The fourth book of the *Republic* discusses the tripartite soul, where the will gains relevance in the pursuit of a definition of a just man and a just state. It seems that Devereux is convinced, at the risk of going against tradition, that the *Laches*, by the apparent acceptance of Socrates of Laches' definition of courage as perseverance or endurance (the definition is only refuted due to Laches' incompetence in argumentation), admits that *karteria* is an essential element in discovering the nature of courage. Summarizing Devereux's argument, Gould (1987, 266) states:

This, at any rate, is the implication drawn by Daniel Devereux, who, in a recent article, calls attention to this problem and resolves it by seeing the *Laches* as a rejection of the Socratic identification of knowledge and virtue. According to Devereux, Plato's evident acceptance of the notion of *karteria* as part of the definition of "courage" implies that some quality of character (as well as of intellect) is necessary for courage. It suggests, for Devereux, that knowledge is only one constituent in courage and thus there must be another on a logical par with knowledge. He likens the *Laches* account of courage to that found in the *Meno*, a middle dialogue which articulates the un-Socratic view that knowledge is only one component of courage (or any other virtue), the other being boldness. For Devereux, then, Plato's position in the *Laches*, which is a rejection of the views of the historical Socrates, rules out the motivational sufficiency of knowledge and correlative denial of weakness of will.

Given this view, it seems to make more sense to view Laches' definition of courage as *karteria* as something which is more related to the will rather than to reason. A soldier's firm conviction to stand his ground in the battlefield even when the prospect of winning grows dim says more about his spiritual toughness rather than his rational reckoning of his situation. The class of guardians, for instance, as explained in book IV of the *Republic*, is after all a representative of the virtue of courage and not of wisdom. However, it would be an absolutely poor misreading of Plato if we were to contend that virtuous soldiers endure dangers blindly. In his perhaps earnest attempt to show Socrates the meaning of courage within the exclusive purview of action (after all, he is more renowned for his deeds rather than his arguments), rather than *techné*, Laches, according to Robert Hoerber (1968, 100) is unable to show, by way of argumentation, his own recognition that *karteria* is not blind or impetuous steadfastness. In addition, Dobbs explains that Laches, if he had been more skilled in dialectic, could have defended his view much better. He (1986, 838) expounds thus:

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

The element of risk, as touched upon by Dobbs, is an essential component in formulating a more refined definition of courage. The assessment of risk, as it is a function of technical knowledge, serves as the point of departure for the next section of the dialogue. If Laches is criticized (fairly or unfairly) for not sufficiently explicating the relevance of knowledge in acting courageously, it is in Socrates' dialogue with Nicias

where we shall find a somewhat more exhaustive discussion of the relationship between the two. This part of the dialogue also sheds more light on the question concerning the unity of virtue as, for instance, explained by Vlastos (1972) and other commentators. If the degree of risk is proportionately related to the degree of courage such that greater risk would involve and demand for a greater degree of courage, would not the elimination of risk through technical knowledge (or wisdom) totally undermine the possibility of performing a courageous act? In other words, is it possible for one to be called courageous if one is already so skilled, for instance, in battle that the boldness of his action may be interpreted as simply the natural offshoot of his expertise and not his spirited willingness to pursue a goal? Although it is already clear at this point in the dialogue that courage cannot be equated with rashness, it is yet to be clarified whether boldness accompanied by knowledge and endurance or perseverance despite great odds are mutually exclusive. For instance, if one already understands that there is absolutely no way that one can win a battle, and yet perseveres in fighting because he understands this to be his duty (as a soldier), is the person being courageous or simply being impetuous? On the other hand, if one engages in battle armed with so much knowledge and technical skill such that everything that happens becomes a matter of his plans (as to how things will turn out given what he knows of the enemy, the situation, the geographic elements at play, etc.) coming to fruition and the risks are concurrently neutralized by knowledge and skill, should he be called courageous or just plainly excellent in generalship?

NICIAS ON KNOWLEDGE AND THE ELIMINATION OF RISK

In sections 194c-196c, Nicias (Plato 1996, 78) presents his own definition of courage: as a kind of wisdom or knowledge of what to fear and what to be confident about. To be sure, such a definition appears sound and even Socratic for it weds knowledge with virtue. As Dobbs (1986, 828-29) notes, most commentators find Nicias' definition superior to Laches'.

Socrates at this point allows Laches to interrogate Nicias. For Laches, wisdom is separate from courage. Under the presupposition that courage is a kind of knowledge, Laches asks Nicias whether doctors, farmers and craftsmen may be considered courageous if it is established that they have knowledge of what to fear and what not to fear in their respective fields. He asks Nicias if doctors may be considered courageous if they know what things to fear in diseases. Nicias responds by saying that the knowledge of craftsmen is too narrow to befit the predication of courage. Doctors may know what diseases to fear and the like but they do not possess the knowledge of whether, for instance, an ill person may be considered better-off dead or if he should go on living. In other words, Nicias wants to make a distinction between technical knowledge and wisdom. A wise person for Nicias understands what to fear and what to be confident about not just in one specific field or instance but in life in general—such is the constitution of a courageous man. A courageous man is one who knows when it is better to suffer and to be defeated even if common sense dictates that these things are to be feared and avoided. However, in a perhaps sarcastic manner, Laches retorts by saying that Nicias must be talking about soothsayers for they are the ones who have the so-called skill to cast light upon the mysterious veil of a man's future entanglements, and as such possess the knowledge of

future evils that a wise man, in the present, would be able to avoid. Laches actually makes a good point at this juncture. If Nicias is really so concerned with being certain of results before one acts, then it becomes difficult to distinguish a courageous person from a coward. As Morris (2009, 634) expounds:

Laches positions manliness between rashness and cowardice. Both Nicias and Laches think that courage must be distinguished from acting without prudence, i.e., both see that rash actions are not courageous. Nicias, though, has no problem with the other extreme: he does not distinguish between unrash action and courageous action—indeed his concern is the coward's concern to avoid actions that involve any risk whatsoever.

As mentioned earlier, the element of risk seems to be pivotal in arriving at a sound definition of courage. Unrash action, when examined in light of Laches' interrogation of Nicias implies that technical knowledge and forethought propels action instead of the willingness, for instance, to stake one's life in defense of one's justifiable understanding of the good. If one is unable to foresee favorable results in a course of action, Nicias, we may assume, would advise us to proceed in a different direction. Morris (2009, 630) elaborates on this point:

Nicias makes a mistake when he implies that this forethought must entail knowledge of what will be good or bad in the future. Socrates can be courageous at his trial even though he does not know whether it will be good for him or for the jury if he were to win (*Apology* 19a2-4). More generally, if one's initial calculation merely results in a belief about the result of one's action being good, then, when fear or pain or desire or pleasure arise, they can suggest other, competing, objects of desire, and one would have the opportunity to persevere in one's original belief.

Although this makes a lot of sense, it does not help us clarify the distinction between courage and wisdom, unless of course we equate one with the other. If such is the case, then it would seem to make more sense to say that the *Laches* is really a dialogue about wisdom and not about courage (in which case, the same may be argued for every other Platonic dialogue). If wisdom ultimately determines how one ought to act, such intellectualism might be construed as a contradiction of the Socratic lesson explained in the *Republic's* discussion of the tripartite soul.⁶ Reason diminishes if not absorbs the function of the will in the performance of deeds. If courage is indeed just a part and not the whole of virtue, as Nicias defines it, then his definition confuses a courageous person with a wise person, unless of course it is proven that there is no distinction between the two, or at least it may be shown that courageous people derive their motives and actions from something else other than knowledge. If we return to Devereux's reading of the *Laches* mentioned earlier, unless it is shown that it takes more than knowledge to be courageous, *karteria*, Laches' notable contribution in the definition of courage becomes irrelevant. The other option of course is to find a logical complementarity between perseverance and wisdom.

The conversation then moves to the issue of whether courage may be equated with fearlessness. If courage consists in a kind of knowledge, Socrates (Plato 1996, 80) says, then it is not something that “any pig would know.” Nicias agrees with Socrates that courage may not be attributed to animals since they do not act or respond to situations *rationally*. In other words, they do not really know what they are doing so it is improper, if not implausible, for one to attribute virtue to their actions and dispositions. The rational understanding of what is at stake in one’s actions is, therefore, a concomitant in the performance of courageous deeds. Knowledge is indeed necessary for courage. The question is, of course, what kind of knowledge is Socrates talking about in this conversation? Is he talking about a specific kind of knowledge or a more general one?

Socrates (Plato 1996, 82) returns to Nicias’ original point, which says that courage is a part of virtue. This assumes that there are other parts to virtue like temperance and justice. Courage, if it is to be understood as a kind of knowledge must not just admit an understanding of future evils to avoid and future goods to be confident about but of good and evil in general. Allen (1996, 58) summarizes this point as follows:

In general, knowledge is not limited to the future but concerns past and present as well, a point Socrates argues by analogy with medicine, farming and generalship, in contrast to the art of prophecy. So if knowledge applies to past, present, and future, and if courage is knowledge, then courage is not only knowledge of what to fear and what to be confident about, that is, of future goods and evils. Nicias’ definition scarcely covers a third part of what is required. Courage, if Nicias is right in thinking that it is a kind of knowledge of good and evil, must be equivalent to virtue. So he has not succeeded in saying what courage is. It cannot be the case that courage is part of virtue, that courage is knowledge of good and evil, and that knowledge of good and evil is virtue—unless, of course, part is equivalent of whole, and the virtues are one as being coimplicatory. But this is a suggestion the *Laches* does not entertain, and Nicias, on the basis of his own admissions, accepts that he has been refuted.⁷

By holding that courage is a form and a function of knowledge, Nicias (and Socrates too?) has expanded the definition of courage from being a part of virtue to become the whole of virtue. Knowledge of good and evil (wisdom), within the context of the Socratic line of questioning in the *Laches* represents the whole of virtue. If courage is a kind of knowledge pertaining to past, present, and future evils, then it would then be construed as constituting the whole of virtue. The courageous man would then lack nothing in virtue. This, of course, contradicts the prior supposition that courage is but a part of the whole of virtue, which is supposedly composed of other virtues.

The bi-conditionality thesis of virtue holds that the possession of wisdom is the necessary precondition for the possession of the other virtues such as courage. It is not solely courage that causes the performance of courageous action. Wisdom is always already implied in the courageous act. This would eliminate the earlier equivalency proposed and consequently refuted in the dialogue that boldness is rashness. However,

such a position must not be hastily interpreted as an intellectualist theory of virtue. *Karteria*, Laches' definition of courage, remains relevant in the discussion. If Nicias had maintained that knowledge is sufficient to ground a virtuous action, insofar as emphasis is placed on one's understanding of the good and the risks involved in its attainment, then he would have arrived at a more or less Socratic definition of courage. However, since the greater part of his definition stresses the elimination of risk and not the worthiness of one's goal vis-a-vis the necessary perseverance of the soul included in its pursuit, wisdom is not only reduced to technical knowledge, but courage itself becomes *ad hoc*, as it were. However, if we are to incorporate *karteria* in Nicias' definition, we come to an arguably more edified definition of courage. As Foley (2009, 229) explains, "Anyone willing to run a high risk for a goal is psychologically likely to pursue the same goal when there is no risk. If someone is courageous, then he or she will be pious, temperate, and just, not because all these virtues are identical but because the psychological motivation that produces the first behavior—the desire to produce the good—is likely to produce the others as well."

The unity of virtue, understood in the context of the *Laches*' discussion of courage, holds that the co-extensivity between knowledge and virtue must not be interpreted as one terminating in equivalency or identification. Courage is not wisdom. However, true courage cannot occur without knowledge. This knowledge, however is not simply that which pertains to the calculation of risk and the eventual elimination thereof. Wisdom, as it relates to courage, is knowledge of the value of what is at stake and the understanding of the concomitant strength of will (*karteria*) required to do what is necessary. As Devereux (1992, 783) says:

We noticed earlier that there are clear suggestions in the *Laches* that the quality of endurance is characteristic of courage and should be included in its definition. But this view seemed to conflict with Socrates' claim near the end of the dialogue that knowledge of good and evil is sufficient by itself for courageous behavior: if this knowledge is sufficient, then whether or not one has endurance seems irrelevant. However, once we see the particular way in which Socrates understands the power of knowledge (i.e., as a force that can overpower resistant passions), we can see that endurance is a necessary concomitant of knowledge of good and evil. This knowledge is sufficient for virtuous behavior by indicating how one ought to act, and at the same time enabling one to endure in the face of conflicting appetites and emotions. Thus, we can grant that knowledge of good and evil is sufficient by itself for courageous behavior, and still maintain that endurance is an essential distinguishing feature of courage and should be included in its definition; if the definition mentions only the kind of knowledge involved, we end up with the dilemma Socrates poses at the end of the dialogue: courage becomes indistinguishable from the whole of virtue, that is, wisdom.

Wisdom, in this regard, involves the tempering or the rational calibration of spirit, insofar as it is still the will that propels and grounds one's actualization of the good beyond one's understanding of it. Wisdom is always exemplified in virtuous actions,

including courageous acts. The ability to endure or persevere in one's course comes with the knowledge of the good.⁷ In Nicias' case, however, his over-emphasis on calculative and technical knowledge, compounded by his superstitious reliance on seers and sophists in deliberating about his decisions, results in an informed cowardice instead of wise perseverance. As Tessitore (1994, 129) opines:

Nicias' limitations result in paralysis. He is not able to accept without question the city's teaching on the nobility of death in battle and so lacks the tenacious conviction of Laches. But neither is he able to move beyond a merely civic horizon in the pursuit of truth. Nicias' sophistic education neither aims at truth nor furnishes any other basis for political action. His preoccupation with his own safety turns Nicias toward speech—both the art of speaking as it is taught by the sophists and the art of divination with its reassuring but false words.

Staying the course, despite great odds, is not always rashness. Boldness, when accompanied by wisdom, results in courageous deeds. As Gould (1987, 272) says, "courageous action requires a certain attitude towards the goal, the belief that there is some chance to attain it, and the conviction that the worthiness of the goal merits the risk." Wisdom, however, is not to be understood solely as a tool for minimizing risks in one's pursuit of a goal. It pertains to the rational understanding of the gravity and value of what is at stake and the attendant understanding of the required degree of endurance for its realization. *Karteria* is not the complete knowledge of good and evil, as Socrates' refutation of Nicias has shown us. Courage is not the whole of virtue. Nevertheless, as the life of Socrates has demonstrated for us, a courageous man always knows why he has to be courageous and that despite the urgings of the appetites and popular opinion, "remains at his post," as it were, and fights for the Good to the death. The unity of virtue, as applied to the relation between courage and wisdom, is a bi-conditional correlation, such that the presence of one implies the presence of the other, but the former is not to be identified with the latter.

SOCRATIC COURAGE

At this point in the exposition, it is quite logical to expect a resolution to the question we have posed at the beginning: Must courage always be wise? However, the dialogue ends without a concrete definition of courage. More than anything, the *Laches* is a remarkable example of the value of Socratic dialectic. The exchange of thoughts between the characters was able to illustrate a dialectic deconstruction (I use this word loosely, in the particular sense of purging in view of exposing unexamined and often dogmatic presuppositions behind principles and arguments that oftentimes hinder one from attaining or at the very least asymptotically approaching a more essential understanding) of commonly held beliefs concerning the meaning of courage. Laches, as we saw, set out to prove that courage may be understood and carried out without knowledge, favoring action over thought. He values persistence in the face of risk and difficulties and subsequently falls into the danger of equating courage with blind boldness—a common

way of defining *andreia*. Nicias, on the other hand, although admirable in his attempt to wed courage with wisdom was unable to “foresee” the implications of his argumentation and fell short of what he meant by courage in the first place. As Santas had remarked earlier, the dialogue ends aporitically. Nevertheless, it seems “cowardly” if not totally implausible for us not to venture an intelligent guess about how Socrates himself actually understands courage. For as Foley (2009, 214) says:

...it is likely that Socrates knows what courage is not just because he fought in Potidaea, Delium and Amphipolis, but even more because his service was heroic in two of these three places. At Potidaea, he single-handedly saved the wounded Alcibiades and prevented the humiliating loss of his armor (*Symposium* 219e-20e). Socrates then demonstrated a remarkable degree of courage when the entire Athenian army was routed at Delium. Keeping calm, rationally surveying the situation, and projecting a formidable mien, Socrates saves Laches himself (*Laches* 181a-b, *Symposium* 221a-c). Despite this distinguished military record, Socrates paradoxically avows that he is no more able to say what courage is than either of his interlocutors.

Judging by his conduct as relayed in other dialogues, such as the *Phaedo*, the *Apology* and the *Crito*, it may indeed be naïve to suppose that Socrates was really clueless about the meaning of courage. His martyrdom may be deemed as one of the greatest feats of courage exemplified by a man in history. In addition, his treatment of Laches, as purported by de Laguna, signifies a degree of concession to at least the spirit of the former’s definition of courage as perseverance of the soul. On the other hand, the proximity of his definition of courage in the *Protagoras* with Nicias’ reckoning of courage somehow demonstrates his view concerning the relevance of wisdom in the possession of courage. As Chris Emlyn-Jones (1999, 129) explains:

This idea of intellectual progression has suggested the notion that Plato is also presenting the one-sided personalities of Nicias and Laches (the “intellectual” and the “man of action”) as contributing to some kind of synthesis in Socrates himself: The inconclusive ending invites the reader to supply the missing piece of the jigsaw, and if it is to match Socrates’ character, that piece must also be a combination of the strengths to be found in the definitions of both Nicias and Laches. This interpretation implies that, whatever degree of autonomy may be allowed to Socrates’ partners, what they say, and the way that they say it, must be seen essentially as a contribution to the intellectual position and personality of Socrates, and that the point of the dialogue lies in the implied ending. In Socrates, despite what he himself may say, words and deeds have been “harmonized,” and the *aporia* conceals a positive conclusion which is, by implication, the Socratic position.⁸

This so-called harmonization of word and deed is indeed characteristic of the historical Socrates.⁹ It therefore makes more sense for us to suppose that Socrates does

know what it means to be courageous. However, since he acknowledges his duty (as the proverbial midwife) towards his interlocutors as having greater weight than demagogically impressing them with the knowledge he possesses, he allows the process of dialectic to purify Laches' and Nicias' opinions on the matter for their own sake. As Foley (2009, 229-30) expounds:

Nicias is right that courage requires knowledge of an acceptable risk for a morally appropriate goal. But Laches is right that courage requires more than this knowledge—it requires bold action. It is, therefore, not the generals who embody courage but Socrates, who is always thoughtful but always equally ready to lay down his life defending Athens. Finally, however, it is worth reminding ourselves that courage involves more than just performance in battle. This Socratic commitment to philosophy—his relentless questioning of experts despite the fatal animosity that results—is the paradigmatic instance of Socratic courage (*Apology* 22e-23a), and it is the reason that Socrates uses the *elenchos* to guide Laches and Nicias. Courage requires an intellectual perseverance, as Socrates himself says, and his reluctance to tell his interlocutors what they themselves must seek is simultaneously the great frustration and the greater merit of the Socratic *elenchos*.

The merit of the Socratic *elenchos* manifests itself not in the neutralization of the recalcitrance of Socrates' interlocutors. The dialectical method of investigation instigated by Socrates opens the possibility of precisely making his interlocutors become aware and understand their own impertinence regarding their lifelong beliefs concerning the meaning of courage. Having proceeded as such, Socrates, apart from the explicit goal of arriving at a definition of courage, wittingly or unwittingly, was able to share a lesson on perseverance as well.

On this note, provided that we pay close attention to the responses offered by Socrates to his interlocutors' definitions, we may venture to say that courage is a virtue comprised both of perseverance and wisdom. Steadfastness of soul, combined with the knowledge of what to fear and what not to fear, produces courage. The spirited part of the soul must be controlled by a kind of wisdom that can recognize what is truly worth fighting for (in whatever way, be it by attacking or retreating). As Gould (1987, 274) astutely remarks:

To persevere wisely would be to do so for the sake of some good recognized by the agent as surpassing the good of evading the physical, psychological or social injury that might arise from the action he is resolving to perform. Perseverance thus appears a determination of the will. So, it is one thing to persevere wisely and another to persevere at doing something wisely.

A person that perseveres wisely has rationally harnessed the "blind" eagerness of the will to bring reason's determinations into fruition. However, this is not sufficient to produce a courageous act. One must also be able to persevere at doing something wisely, and by this we mean that one must possess the necessary technical skill in

translating what he holds to be just and good from ideas into concrete action. Seen in this light, Laches and Nicias do make key contributions in defining courage.

CONCLUSION

The courageous must indeed be wise. However, insofar as the intellect necessitates an active will for the historical realization of its ideas, wisdom does not automatically produce courage but must be accompanied by a steadfastness of soul, which is housed in the human spirit. Courage and wisdom are therefore not identical. This is precisely the reason why courage, Socratically interpreted, necessitates wisdom, for wisdom guarantees the capacity to endure. The capacity to endure (*karteria*) for it to be properly understood as courageous, must be grounded upon a deeper understanding of the reason(s) behind one's perseverance and the concomitant *techné* necessary for endurance to rationally endure.

NOTES

1. See especially Gregory Vlasto's (1972, 424-25) discussion of the so-called Biconditionality thesis: "Wisdom is the necessary and sufficient condition of all moral virtue," such that if one possesses the virtue of temperance or bravery, one must also be wise. (All references to the Socratic dialogues are italicized in this paper, including those in quotations and the References.)

2. Aristotle (1998), for instance, holds that for Socrates, "all the virtues were [kinds of] knowledge."

3. With respect to Plato's portrayal of Laches, Richard Foley (2009, 215) explains: "Plato uses Laches to personify the risks posed when bold leadership is unaccompanied by discretion, and again, this character trait is linked to the important biographical fact of Laches' being the first Athenian commander to lead an expedition against Sicily." Ignorant of Sicily's size in terms of area and population, Laches personifies this excessive zeal for a military campaign when completely heedless of the factors that would be relevant to success or failure. He could have been a good example to illustrate *andreia*, but a foreboding of his conduct and his early demise would indicate, as Plato reveals, that Laches' "definition of courage involves rashness."

4. Regarding Nicias, Foley (2009, 224-25) elaborates that "Plato chooses Nicias to emphasize foresight due to the glaring irony of the general's death. "Nicias not only lacks foresight but remains indecisive in his plan of attack and retreat against the Syracusans. Nicias "delayed the attack, enabling the Syracusans to organize and fortify their position. This delay probably cost the Athenians a quick victory and certainly resulted in a protracted campaign." Again, Nicias "delayed retreat due to the inauspicious omen of a lunar eclipse. Never one to be hasty, he refused to consider retreat for twenty-seven days." Learning that the Athenians wanted to retreat, "Syracuse attacked, gained control of the harbor, and forced a gruesome retreat over land that resulted in the utter destruction of the Athenian army." Plato reveals that Nicias' definition, which makes a "certain type of knowledge necessary and sufficient for courage...neglects to require actions commensurate with this knowledge."

According to Aristide Tessitore (1994, 124), “There is nothing very subtle about the comic dimension of Nicias’ presence in the dialogue. Nicias was a wealthy general and statesman who was known for his moderation and piety but not his courage.” Plutarch speaks about Nicias’ lack of courage, natural diffidence, and lack of assurance in war. Thucydides also records his excessively cautious nature and Aristophanes makes jokes about it in his plays. It was Nicias’ “characteristic temerity and superstition that led to the complete rout of the Sicilian expedition.”

5. Ryan Balot (2004, 407-408) explains that:

The use of the English word “courage” as the best approximation to the Greek ideal of *andreia*, that is, “manliness” or “machismo.” The term *andreia* is an abstraction derived from *aner*, or “man” as opposed to woman. Ancient Greek norms made war the sole prerogative and obligation of men. Therefore, the “prototypical” meaning of *andreia* was that virtue that enabled men, and especially hoplite citizens, to overcome the fear of death on the battlefield. Naturally, Greek speakers could produce synonyms of this word to emphasize particular, contextual elements of courage. For example, *areté*, a heroically tinged term, is common in Greek epigrams and means “excellence” or “valour” or, in specifically military contexts, “martial courage.” Thus, *areté* is a vaguer term offering speakers a traditional, epic nuance. He further adds that, courage is referred to indirectly, as, for example, when Pericles uses the locution “strongest in soul” to refer to those most capable of overcoming fear in the dangerous situations of war. At other times, the ideal of “manliness” is evoked by contrast with negative representations of cowardice.

6. Regarding this point, Santas (1969, 454-55) expounds:

Nicias’ definition of courage is really Socrates’ own, as we learn in the *Protagoras* (329d). And Socrates thought that this argument against Nicias, or rather against himself, was a good one. He thought therefore that he had to give up his favorite definition of courage or the very center of his ethical teaching (that knowledge of good and evil is a necessary and sufficient condition for the virtues) or the proposition that courage is part and not the whole of virtue. Somewhat understandably perhaps, he chooses the last course? Or at least he decides to give it a good try. In the *Republic* of course the story has a different ending. In all probability Plato could not bring himself to accept the outrageous paradox of the unity of virtue in its strong version. Though he retains the view that knowledge (or at least true belief) of good and evil is necessary for virtue, he gives up the view that it is sufficient; and he brings in new elements for the definitions of the various virtues, the three elements of the soul, their functions and relations; and through the analogy of social virtues and virtues in the individual he even makes circumstances and behavior relevant again to the definition of the virtues. Possibly, a case can be made that in the *Republic* Plato still holds the view that the virtues are not found apart each from the others; but no

case can be made that he still supposes that the virtues cannot be distinguished in definition each from the others.

7. Santas (1969, 453) adds, “This is indeed the punch line in Socrates’ argument against Nicias: in defining courage as knowledge of good and evil, Nicias has not succeeded: for his definition is a definition of the whole of virtue and hence not a definition of courage, since courage is part of virtue, not the whole of virtue.”

8. To further clarify this point, Gould (1987, 277-78) states:

Socrates regards perseverance as something one does, as an activity akin to diving, playing the lyre, or fighting in armor. The courageous act is itself the act of persevering. This does not mean that knowledge is insufficient; rather it pushes the problem further back. What we must ask is this: given that persevering is something one does, according to Socrates, is it possible to know it is right to persevere and yet to fail to do so? Socrates’ remarks to Nicias indicate that he would answer no. The higher order knowledge of the principles of discerning good and evil are, for Socrates, motivationally sufficient for persevering to execute one’s beliefs about the good thing to do. The coward, on this analysis, is not the victim of an inadequately nurtured spirit or will, but of ignorance. It is the intellect that Socrates believes must be trained if one is to be courageous.

9. In addition, Tessitore (1994, 131) narrates:

When Alcibiades recounts Socrates’ military exploits, he praises Socrates for possessing both *phronesis* and *karteria* (*Symp.* 219d), the pivotal elements in Nicias’ and Laches’ understandings of courage. He adds, however, that what is most worthy of wonder about Socrates is his complete unlikeness to any other human being (221c). Socrates possesses both *phronesis* and *karteria* but in a unique and certainly unconventional way.

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