

The 2024 William Drake Lecture

“Caring for Souls and a Teacher’s Courage in Plato’s *Laches*”

Frank Giuseffi, William Woods University

The literature abounds on the relationship between teaching and courage. Scholars claim teachers exhibit courage in their vulnerability (Brown, 2012); morality (Heischman, 2002); inner strength in the face of fear (Kohler-Evans & Dowd-Barnes, 2015), and in maintaining their integrity (Parker, 2009).

An ancient understanding of the role of courage in the teaching and learning process are in the Platonic dialogues. I will specifically turn to Plato’s dialogue, *Laches*. While the discussion essentially centers on the competencies required to care for youths’ souls, what also emerges is a new understanding of courage, made manifest in the person of Socrates who exhibits a longing to search for truth through philosophy, known today as Socratic inquiry. In this paper, I will first explain the dialogue, stressing the interlocutors’ views of courage, and Socrates’ refutations of those views. Second, I will claim that neither interlocutor offers persuasive definitions of courage or engage properly in Socratic inquiry, reflecting their lack of *eros* and consequently their incapacity to care for the souls of youth. Third, I will claim that Socrates exemplifies and reveals courage – a courage necessary for teachers to care for the souls of youth.

The dialogue begins with two concerned fathers - Lysimachus and Melesius – who believe their sons should learn armor-fighting – *hoplomachia* (Plato, trans. 1997, 179e). Given their roles and expertise in military matters, both Nicias and Laches agree to participate as special counselors and partners in the youths’ education. Laches is astonished that Socrates was not asked to join in the dialogue (180c), for Socrates is “always spending his time in places where the young men engage in any study or noble pursuit of the sort you are looking for” (180c). Nicias also remembers how Socrates recommended a music teacher – a man by the name of Damon – for his son. The two youths also praise Socrates, and Laches remembers how Socrates marched with him during the retreat from Delium (180de; 181b), the eighth year of the Peloponnesian War. And surmised that if all those fighting behaved like Socrates, the city would not have been destroyed (181d). Given these accolades, Socrates is added to the investigation concerning the efficacy of armor-fighting. In usual intellectual humility, Socrates obliges but states: “But if I should have something to add to what they say, then will be the time for me to teach and persuade both of you and the others” (181d).

After Laches and Nicias give their views on armor-fighting, Socrates believes the topic of armor-fighting is “some small thing” and not “the greatest of all our possessions” (185). Instead,

the larger issue is if the fathers' sons turn out to be noble and worthwhile individuals. The more important topic is dealing with the competencies and aims of teaching. Hence, Socrates states: "The question whether any one of us is expert in the care of the soul and is capable of caring for it well, and has had good teachers, is the one we ought to investigate" (185e).

As a prologue to the forthcoming discussion with Socrates, Laches states:

Whenever I hear a man discussing virtue or some kind of wisdom, then, if he really is a man and worthy of the words he utters, I am completely delighted to see the appropriateness and harmony existing between the speaker and his words. And such a man seems to me to be genuinely musical, producing the most beautiful harmony, not on the lyre or some other pleasurable instrument, but actually rendering his own life harmonious by fitting his deeds to his words. (188d)

Laches is more than willing to be examined by Socrates if he, indeed, possesses these attributes. We will eventually learn that Laches' comment actually contributes our understanding of courage, teacher competency, and Socratic education as a whole. As the discussion has now turned to being educated in virtue, according to Socrates, one must first endeavor to find out a part of virtue as opposed to the whole of virtue. Socrates suggests they examine courage - *andreia* (190e), an essential trait for soldiers and those learning *hoplomachia*.

Laches claims courage is standing at one's post and fighting. Socrates points out that certain soldiers have successfully fought, namely the Scythians and the Spartans, by retreating and then attacking. Consequently, Socrates broadens the definition of courage to warriors, fighters at sea, the sick, the poor, and those who run state affairs. Socrates also includes the courage people have in the face of pain, fear, desire, and pleasure (191d). As the definition of courage broadens, Socrates asks "What power is it which, because it is the same in pleasure and in pain and in all the other cases in which we were just saying it occurred, is therefore called courage?" (192b). Laches responds that courage is a "sort of endurance [self-control/persistence] (*karteria*) of the soul" (192b). But Laches also admits courage associated with wisdom or prudence is noble and fine as suggested by Socrates. But when accompanied with folly, it loses its nobility. Therefore, the courage Laches endorses must include wisdom or prudence. Socrates persuades Laches to agree that prudent endurance coupled with folly would not be a good thing (192d). And through several examples shows that those who lack the skill of courage and yet perform the action of courage, show the disgraceful and harmful disposition of foolish daring (193d). Socrates recognizes, however, one important element of Laches' definition – endurance. "Let us hold our ground in the search and let us endure" (194). Laches agrees to continue but is frustrated that he cannot fully articulate what he knows courage to be (194b). In fact, he states what is stated by many interlocutors of the Platonic dialogues (Braan, 2019):

I am ready not to give up, Socrates, although I am not really accustomed to arguments of this kind. But an absolute desire for victory has seized me with respect to our conversation, and I am really getting annoyed at being unable to express what I think in this fashion. I still think I know what courage is, but I can't understand how it has escaped me just now so that I can't pin it down in words and say what it is (194b).

Laches' aporetic moment, which is the cornerstone of Socratic inquiry, indicates the importance of speech or *logos*. While Laches thinks he knows what courage is, the words are not there. In

Socratic inquiry, the intelligibility and comprehension of something must be captured in speech, in clear arguments, in the *logos* (Klein, 1999).

Nicias believes courage is knowledge (scientific expertise-*epistemen*) “of the fearful and the hopeful in war and in every other situation” (195a). But to Laches, if courage is, in fact, knowledge of fearful and hopeful things, then artisans, doctors, and farmers would exhibit courage since they know fearful and hopeful things in their specific crafts. For instance, as a doctor would know when it is better to live or to die (195bcd). Nicias counters that a doctor’s knowledge (and ostensibly artists’ and farmers’ knowledge) is restricted to just health and disease. If this is the case, then to Laches, Nicias is arguing that seers and diviners are the courageous ones for they have the power to know whether it is better “to live or to die” (195e). Laches scoffs at this idea and indicts Nicias as someone who refuses to offer a “gentlemanly admission that he is talking nonsense” (196b). Socrates enters the discussion as a joint effort with Laches (196c) – a telling sign.

Socrates posits if courage consists of knowledge of fear and hope, very few would possess it. He argues that no wild beast would be courageous. Nicias clarifies, arguing that only “sensible people are the courageous ones” (197c). These people possess prudence when enacting courage. Wilds beasts act based on rashness, which is not the same as courage. Nicias states:

I think that rashness and courage are not the same thing. My view is that very few have a share of courage and foresight, but that a great many, men and women and children and wild animals, partake in boldness and audacity and rashness and lack of foresight. These cases, which you and the man in the street call courageous, I call rash, whereas the courageous ones are the sensible people I was talking about. (197c).

Laches grows agitated and claims Nicias “decks himself out in words and does it well in his own opinion” (197c). Socrates eventually agrees and accuses Nicias of sophistry by seeking advice from Damon who associated with Prodicus, the sophist (197d).

Both Socrates and Nicias agree that courage is a part of virtue, or one of several parts (198) – such as temperance and justice. Socrates posits - fearful things produce fear and hopeful things do not. Fear emerges from things anticipated, not from things that occurred in the past or in the present since fear is the expectation of a future evil (198b). Nicias seems to agree with this description of fear and that hope comes from either future non-evils or future goods.

This leads to a new discussion about knowledge and its relation to the past, present, and future. Socrates argues there is not one type of knowledge (*episteme*, *scientific knowledge*) by which things of the past are known, or a type by which the present is known, or a third type by which the future is known. Knowledge is the same in each of them (198d). For example, medicine is knowledge of health; that knowledge does not make a distinction between past, present, or future. This can be applied to farming and generalship in war (199). Nicias agrees and concedes that “the same knowledge has understanding of the same things, whether future, present, or past” (199). This refutes Nicias’ argument that courage is knowledge of only fearful and hopeful things since knowledge comprises the past, present, and future. Socrates states:

Then courage is not knowledge of the fearful and the hopeful only, because it understands not simply future goods and evils, but those of the present and the past and all times, just as is the case with the other kinds of knowledge. (199c)

Nicias described a part of courage, whereas Socrates' intention was to search for a comprehensive definition of courage. Socrates now holds the opinion that courage is knowledge "of practically all goods and evils put together" (199d). But to Socrates, the person with this kind of knowledge would not lack virtue, temperance, justness, or even holiness. Nicias agrees with this statement and realizes this claim describes the wholeness of virtue, not a part of it. Therefore, the search for a definition of courage continues (199e). Both Laches and Nicias agree they should abandon the idea of educating Lysimachus' and Melesius' sons and relinquish the responsibility to Socrates. Socrates in no way will reject the opportunity to educate the young; however, he states:

I say we ought to do, my friends – since this is just between ourselves - is to join in searching for the best possible teacher, first for ourselves – we really need one – and then for the young men, sparing neither money nor anything else. What I don't advise is that we remain as we are. And if anyone laughs at us because we think it worthwhile to spend our time in school at our age, then I think we should confront him with the saying of Homer, "Modesty is not a good mate for a needy man." (201ab).

Laches defines courage as uncompromising duty and noble sacrifice (Rabieh, 2006), but the second definition is that it is endurance (*karteria*), with Socrates' addition of prudence (*phronimos karteria*). Laches reaches a state of perplexity because he struggles with Socrates' inquiry. A clear definition of courage has somehow escaped Laches (194b). But even with Laches' aporetic state, he joins in further discussion with Socrates. It should also be noted that Socrates never refutes the emended definition of courage as prudent endurance (Kahn, 1986), leaving us to wonder if prudent endurance is actually courage. Moreover, Socrates carries on the conversation with Laches since he admitted his *aporia*, and as I argue, recognizes those who are 'musical.' Socrates is willing to consider Nicias' view that courage is a kind of knowledge (Bruell, 1999), but this is short-lived. Nicias' definition of courage is scientific knowledge, the *know-how* (*teknikos*) of something, specifically the know-how of the fearful and hopeful of the future, the past, and the present, but, as Socrates revealed, this defines virtue, not a part of virtue known as courage.

Therefore, neither Laches nor Nicias possess the aptitude to educate youths (Dobbs, 1986). They cannot care for their souls or teach them virtue. Laches and Nicias "lack the natural hardiness or toughness of soul" to grapple with courage (Rabieh, 2006). First, Laches quickly offers a definition of courage, seemingly to reach a quick resolution to the issue. Then as Socrates' inquiry develops, Laches spends his time accusing Nicias of using sophistical arguments, and outrightly levies attacks on him. Nicias, on the other hand, is concerned with ensuring he always has an answer, and thereby struggles to properly engage in Socratic inquiry. He does not realize the magnitude of his ignorance. For Nicias, it is simple. Damon will provide the answers if there is any more difficulty (Tessitore, 1994). We then realize neither of the interlocutors follow the *logos*. Laches recognizes the *logos* and does admit his perplexity, but because he continually exhibits vitriol and antagonism toward Nicias, sabotages his own future development to be a teacher. Likewise, Nicias cannot be a teacher. Futter (2022) has argued that following the *logos* improves the interlocutors' souls while sophistry separates the *logos* from the self. Since Nicias is a sophist, he separates himself from the *logos*, using speech as a mere weapon to win arguments. Neither Laches nor Nicias possess this erotic disposition or love of knowledge essential for Socratic inquiry (Woodruff, 2000; Zhao, 2000). Without this longing, they lack the competency to care for the souls of youth.

Is it possible that courage is prudent endurance or knowledge? I do think it could be considered prudent endurance. Socrates does not refute this possible definition. However, true courage is Socratic inquiry, and the courageous person is Socrates. We know Socrates was courageous in battle. But Socrates is also courageous in what one scholar has claimed, in the “battlefield of words” (Tessitore, 1994) because he illumines for the interlocutors’ their inconsistent claims and to be otherwise. But even more importantly, Socrates is the person whom Laches describes as the one “genuinely musical, producing the most beautiful harmony” since he fits “his deeds to his words” (188d). By Socrates harmonizing words and deeds, he attempts to move people to action – to live virtuously, and in turn, to become musical themselves. As Dobbs (1986) has noted “Socratic inquiry counts as deed because it alone is capable of truly moving the soul once it has been brought to a recognition of perplexity” (p.839). Therefore, the truly musical are courageous. This person does not resist the *logos*, accepts *aporia*, and continues the inquiry. This “Socratic music” converts the soul toward philosophy (Braan, 1990) and *eros* – the longing for knowledge of the whole. Those who are competent to teach and care for youths’ souls share in this conversion and erotic state of being.

Is the Socratic teacher supposed to be a philosopher like Socrates? Is this too much to ask of a teacher? The answers may be found in Socrates’ closing thoughts. Socrates recommends they all find the right teacher. In other words, Socrates invites his fellow discussants and all of humanity - to investigate and probe through philosophy the basis for their beliefs, to strive for knowledge of the good (Stefou, 2018). In this way, Socratic education relies on *eros* and for us to be our own teachers. And those committed to philosophy, says Socrates, are like beggars in Homer’s *Odyssey*, with outstretched hands as if requesting food and drink, signifying their erotic skepticism. This is what we as teachers are to do to be courageous.

References

- Braan, E. (2019). Courage nailed down: Plato’s Laches. *Kronos*, 8, 57-71.
- Brown, B. (2012). *The power of vulnerability: Teachings on authenticity, connection, and courage*. Sounds True.
- Bruell, C. (1999). *On the Socratic education: An introduction on the shorter Socratic dialogues*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Cooper, J.M. (1997). *Plato: Complete works*. Hackett.
- Dobbs, D. (1986). For lack of wisdom: Courage and inquiry in Plato's Laches. *The Journal of Politics*, 48(4), 825-849. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2131002>
- Futter, D.B. (2022). How to read a Platonic dialogue. *Akterion*, 67, 29-41.
- Kahn, C. (1986). Plato’s methodology in the Laches in Platon. *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 40(156-157), 7-21.
- Klein, J. (1999). Modern rationalism. In R.B. Williamson, & Elliot Zuckerman (Eds.), *Jacob Klein: Lectures and Essays* (pp. 53-64). St. John’s College Press.
- Kohler-Evans, P. & Dowd Barnes, C. (2015). *Civility, compassion, and courage in schools*

today: Strategies for implementing in K-12 classrooms. Rowman & Littlefield.

Parker, P.J. (2009). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life.*

Jossey-Bass.

Rabieh, L. *Plato and the virtue of courage.* The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stefou, K. (2018). *Socrates on the life of philosophical Inquiry: A companion to Plato's Laches.*

SpringerBriefs

Tessitore, A. (1994). Courage and comedy in Plato's Laches. *The Journal of Politics.* 56(1), 115-

133. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2132348>

