

## LACHES

In the *Laches*, Socrates engages two generals, Nicias and Laches, in conversation. At the beginning of the dialogue, Nicias and Laches are asked whether they would recommend that the art of fighting in armor be taught to young men as part of an educational regime designed to make them good (virtuous). Nicias says yes. Laches says no. (Laches worries that either fighting in armor is not an “art” (techne: systematic body of knowledge) or, even if it is an art, it is of little or no value (see his example of Stesilaus at 183d ff.). Socrates is asked to adjudicate. He soon turns the conversation to a discussion of the nature of virtue (on the grounds that those who are in the best position to give advice about how to make men virtuous should know what virtue is—190b-c). Seeing that it would be too great a task to discuss the nature of the whole of virtue, Socrates asks about the nature of one of the virtues: courage (190d-e). Laches begins by suggesting that:

D1: Courage is being willing to remain at one’s post and defend oneself against the enemy without running away. (190e)

Socrates criticizes this definition by noting that some courageous soldiers do not stay at their posts, but fight in retreat. So staying at one’s post is not a *necessary* condition for being courageous. So D1 violates the requirement of Commonality on definitions. [See handout on Socrates’ theory of definition.] Moreover, Socrates asks for what courage is in general, not only when it is manifested in battle. For there are those who are courageous in the face of dangers at sea, in the face of illness, poverty, affairs of state, pain, and pleasure. What Socrates wants to know is “what is the courage that is the same in all these cases” (191e—compare *Euthyphro* 5d-6e).

Laches responds by providing a second definition:

D2: Courage is a sort of endurance of the soul. (192c)

Socrates finds this definition wanting. He argues as follows:

1. Courage is fine (*kalon*: admirable). (192c)
  2. Foolish endurance is not fine. (192d)
- So, 3. Courage is not foolish endurance. (192d) [1, 2, Leibniz’s Law]

Socrates concludes that if D2 is true, it must be the case that courage is wise endurance. This leads to the following revision of D2:

D2\*: Courage is wise endurance.

Socrates finds this definition wanting too. He argues that there are many cases in which a man who possesses wise endurance is not courageous. Here are his examples:

1. A man who shows endurance in spending his money wisely. (192e)
2. A doctor who shows endurance in refusing to give his ill patient food or drink. (192e-193a)
3. A soldier who shows endurance based on the knowledge that reinforcements are on the way and his battlefield position is superior to his enemy's position. (193a)
4. A man who shows endurance in a cavalry (archery) attack and has knowledge of horsemanship (archery). (193b)

These examples are meant to show that wise endurance is not a *sufficient* condition for being courageous.

Moreover, Socrates argues that there are many cases in which courageous men do not possess wise endurance (and possess foolish endurance instead). His main example of this is courageous men who show foolish endurance in diving into wells [presumably to save those who are trapped at the bottom]. This example is meant to show that wise endurance is not a *necessary* condition for being courageous.

So D2\* also violates the Commonality requirement on definitions.

At this point, Laches gives up the floor to Nicias. Nicias says that his definition is based on “the excellent observation [he has] heard [Socrates] make before now” (194c), namely the view that goodness (or virtue) in general, and courage in particular, is a some kind of wisdom (194d).

I take the “before now” to be an implicit reference to the *Protagoras*, where Socrates attempts to establish, on the basis of hedonism, that courage is knowledge of what is and is not to be feared (see Handout on the end of the *Protagoras*).

Confirmation of this appears when Nicias provides his definition:

D3: Courage is knowledge of the fearful and the hopeful. (195a)

Laches and Socrates both have an initial go at Nicias's definition (195a-197c), but Nicias stands his ground. For example, when Laches and Socrates press Nicias to admit that D3 must be false because wild beasts, who have no knowledge of the fearful and hopeful, can be courageous, Nicias responds that such beasts are rash, not courageous (196e-197c).

Socrates then provides his final criticism of D3 (at 198a-199e). Here is my reconstruction of the elenchus:

1. Courage is knowledge of the fearful and the hopeful. [D3]
  2. Courage is a part of virtue. [198a/190d]
  3. If X is a part of Y, then X is not the whole of Y. [unstated]
- So,
4. Courage is not the whole of virtue. [implicit at 198a]
  5. Fearful things are future evils and hopeful things are future goods. [198c]

- So, 6. Courage is knowledge of future goods and evils. [198c] [1, 5]  
 7. In the case of health, the fruits of the earth, and the affairs of war, knowledge of *future* goods and evils is knowledge of *all* goods and evils. [198d-199a]  
 So, 8. Knowledge of future goods and evils is knowledge of all goods and evils. [199c-d] [7: induction]  
 So, 9. Courage is knowledge of all goods and evils. [199c] [6, 8]  
 10. If courage is knowledge of future goods and evils, then virtue as a whole is knowledge of all goods and evils. [199d-e]  
 So, 11. Virtue as a whole is knowledge of all goods and evils. [199e] [6, 10]  
 So, 12. Courage is the whole of virtue. [199e] [9, 11]

Contradiction at 4 and 12. It follows that one of 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, and 10 must be false. As always, Socrates points the finger at the definition (1: D3).

Note: Some commentators think that Socrates is pointing his finger at 2, the claim that courage is part of virtue. As they see it, Socrates *endorses* the claim at 12, that courage is the whole of virtue. Their main reason for this is that otherwise the position of Socrates in the *Laches* is not consistent with the position of Socrates in the *Protagoras*. My reaction to this is to accept that the position of Socrates in the *Laches* is NOT consistent with the position of Socrates in the *Protagoras*, in just the way that the position of Socrates in the *Gorgias* is not consistent with the position of Socrates in the *Protagoras*. [See later handout on the *Gorgias*.] Plato is beginning to have second thoughts about moral intellectualism, second thoughts that will mushroom into a complete denial of moral intellectualism in the *Republic*.