LACHES

In Greek, the subject of this dialogue is andreaia, literally ‘manliness’, a personal quality of wide scope, covering all the sorts of unswerving, active leadership in and on behalf of the community that were traditionally expected in Greek cities of true men. Its special connotation of military prowess makes ‘courage’ a suitable, even inescapable, translation, but its broader scope should be borne in mind. Here Socrates probes the traditional conception of such courage as the primary quality a young man should be brought up to possess. His fellow discourses include two distinguished Athenian generals, Laches and Nicias, active in the Peloponnesian War (Nicias was captured and put to death in the disastrous Athenian withdrawal from Sicily in 413). The other two parties to the discussion are elderly and undistinguished sons of distinguished statesmen and generals of earlier times—Lysimachus, son of Aristides ‘the Just’, a famous leader during the Persian War, and Melesias, son of Thucydides, son of Melesias, a principal early opponent of Pericles in his policy of imperial expansion. Laches has an unusually full and extensive ‘prologue’ before Socrates takes over the reins of the discussion and seeks and refutes first Laches’ and then Nicias’ ideas about the nature of courage. Its function is at least in part to provide opportunities for these four representatives of the traditional conception to give it some preliminary articulation, thus bringing out some of the tensions and divergent ways of thinking about courage and related matters—what the tradition harbors and what Socrates exploits in his own questioning later on.

As always in Plato’s ‘Socratic’ dialogues, neither general’s answers to Socrates’ question ‘What is courage?’ prove satisfactory. Much of the discussion focuses upon the element of knowledge—of reasoned, nuanced responsiveness to the detailed circumstances for action—that on reflection Laches and Nicias both agree is an essential, though perhaps somewhat submerged, part of the traditional conception to which they themselves are committed. It is because of this that Nicias and Socrates agree (Laches is slow to accept the point, but it is clearly implied in what he has already said about courage’s involving ‘wisdom’ that no dumb animal, and not even children, can correctly be called courageous—however much people may ordinarily speak that way. Nicias, indeed, wants to define courage simply as a kind of wisdom—wisdom about what is to be feared and what, on the contrary, to be buoyed up by and made hopeful as one pursues one’s objectives. He intimates that this fits well with things he has heard Socrates say on other occasions, and in fact towards the end of Protagoras Socrates does adopt just this formulation of courage. Here, however,

whether this was a genuinely ‘Socratic’ idea or not, he and the two generals find difficulties in it that they seem to see no immediate way to resolve, and the discussion breaks off.

J.M.C.
names they bear. Now the boys promise to be obedient, so we are looking into the question what form of instruction or practice would make them turn out best. Somebody suggested this form of instruction to us, saying that it would be a fine thing for a young man to learn fighting in armor. And he praised this particular man whom you have just seen giving a display and proceeded to encourage us to see him. So we thought we ought to go to see the man and to take you with us, not only as fellow spectators but also as fellow counsellors and partners, if you should be willing, in the care of our sons. This is what we wanted to share with you. So now is the time for you to give us your advice, not only about this form of instruction—which you think it should be learned or not—but also about any other sort of study or pursuit for a young man which you approve. Tell us too, what part you will take in our joint enterprise.

LACHES: You are quite right, Nicias. As for what Lysias said just now about his father and Melesias, I am not at all convinced that very well to them and to us and to everyone engaged in public affairs, because this is pretty generally what happens to them—that they neglect their private affairs, children as well as everything else, and manage them carelessly. So you were right on this point, Lysias. But I am astonished that you are inviting us to be your fellow counsellors in the education of the young men and are not inviting Socrates here! In the first place, he comes from your own deme, and in the second, he 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.

LYSIMACHUS: What do you mean, Laches? Has our friend Socrates concerned himself with any of these kinds of things?

LACHES: Certainly, Lysias. Nicias: This is a point I can vouch for no less than Laches, since he only recently recommended a man to me as music teacher for my son. The man’s name is Damon, a pupil of Agathocles, and he is the most accomplished of men, not only in music, but in all the other pursuits in which you would think it worthwhile for boys of his age to spend their time.

LYSIMACHUS: People at my time of life, Socrates, Nicias, and Laches, are no longer familiar with the young because our advancing years keep us at home so much of the time. But if you, son of Sophroniscus, have any good advice to give your fellow demesman, you ought to give it. And you have a duty to do so, because you are my friend through your father. He and I were always comrades and friends, and he died without our ever having had a single difference. And this present conversation reminds me of something—when the boys here are talking to each other at home, they say, ‘This is of the sort you are looking for.’

LYSIMACHUS: I am delighted, Socrates, that you keep up your father’s good reputation, for he was the best of men, and I am especially pleased at the idea that the close ties between your family and mine will be renewed. LACHES: Don’t you think that under any circumstances let the man get away, Lysias—because I have seen him elsewhere keeping up not only his father’s reputation but that of his country. He marched with me in the retreat from Delium, and I can tell you that if the rest had been willing to behave in the same manner, our city would be safe and we would not then have suffered a disaster of that kind.

LYSIMACHUS: Socrates, the praise you are receiving is certainly of a high order, both because it comes from men who are to be trusted and because of the qualities for which you praise you. Be assured that I am delighted to hear that you are held in such esteem, and I think consider me among those most kindly disposed towards you. You yourself ought to have visited us long before and considered us your friends—that would have been the right thing to do. Well, since we have recognized each other, resolve now, starting today, to associate both with us and the young men here and to make our acquaintance, so that you may preserve the family friendship. So do what I ask, and we in turn shall keep you in mind of your promise. But what have you all to say about our original question? What is your opinion? Is fighting in armor a useful subject for young men to learn or not?

Socrates: Well, I shall try to advise you about these things as best I can, Lysias, in addition to performing all the things to which you call my attention. However, it seems to me to be more suitable, since I am younger than the others and more inexperienced in these matters, for me to listen first to what they have to say and to what I can add to what they say, then will be the time for me to teach and persuade both you and the others. Come, Nicias, why doesn’t one of you two begin?

Nicias: Well, there is no reason why not, Socrates. I think that knowledge of this branch of study is beneficial for the young in all sorts of ways. For one thing, it is a good idea for the young not to spend their time in the pursuits in which they normally do like to spend it when they are at leisure, but rather in this one, which necessarily improves their bodies, since it is in no way inferior to gymnastics exercises and no less strenuous, and, at the same time, this and horsemanship are forms of exercise especially suited to a free citizen. For in the contest in which we are the

1. On the boys’ future see Theaetetus 150e ff., where we are told that Aristides became an associate of Socrates but left his company too soon. Both Aristides and the young Thucydides are mentioned in Thuc. 130a ff.

2. The Athenians were defeated by the Boeotians at Delium in November of 424, the eighth year of the Peloponnesian War. Alcibiades refers to the conduct of Socrates in the retreat (to the detriment of Laches) at Symposium 226e ff.
contestants in the matters on which our struggle depends, only those are practiced who know how to use the instruments of war. And again, there is a certain advantage in this form of instruction even in an actual battle, whenever one has to fight in line with a number of others. But the greatest advantage of it comes when the ranks are broken and it then becomes necessary for a man to fight in single combat, either in pursuit when he has to attack a man who is defending himself, or in flight, when he has to defend himself against another person who is attacking him. A man who has this skill would suffer no harm at the hands of a single opponent, nor even perhaps at the hands of a larger number, but he would have the advantage in every way. Then again, such a study arouses in us the desire for another fine form of instruction, since every man who learns to fight in armor will want to learn the subject that comes next, that is, the science of tactics; and when he has mastered this and taken pride in it, he will press on to the whole art of the general. So it has already become clear that what is connected with this latter art, all the studies and pursuits which are fine and of great value for a man to learn and to practice, have this study as a starting point. And we shall add to this an advantage which is not at all negligible, that this knowledge will make every man much bolder and braver in war than he was before. And let us not omit to mention, even if to some it might seem a point not worth making, that this art will give a man a finer-looking appearance at the very moment when he needs to have it, and when he will appear more frightening to the enemy because of the way he looks. So my opinion, Lysimachus, is just as I say, that young men should be taught these things, and I have given the reasons why I think so. But if Laches has anything to say on the other side, I would be glad to hear it. LACHES: But the fact is, Nicias, that it is difficult to maintain of any study whatsoever that it ought not to be learned, because it seems to be a good idea to learn everything. So as far as this fighting in armor is concerned, if it is a genuine branch of study, as those who teach it claim, and as Nicias says, then it ought to be learned, but if it is not a real subject and the people who propose to teach it are deceiving us, or if it is a real subject but not a very important one, what need is there to learn it? The reason I say these things about it is that I consider that, if there were anything in it, it would not have escaped the attention of the Lacedaemonians, who have no other concern in life than to look for and engage in whatever studies and pursuits will increase their superiority in war. And if the Lacedaemonians had overlooked the art, the teachers of it would certainly not have overlooked this fact, that the Lacedaemonians are the most conscious of such matters of any of the Greeks and that anyone who was honored among them in these matters would make a great deal of money just as is the case when a tragic poet is honored among us. The result is that whenever anyone fancies himself as a good writer of tragedy, he does not go about exhibiting his plays in the other cities round about Athens but comes straight here and shows his work to our people, as is the natural thing to do. But I observe that those who fight in armor regard Lacedaemon as forbidden ground and keep from setting foot in it. They give it a wide berth and prefer to exhibit to anyone rather than to the Spartans—in fact they take pains to show their ingenuity, whereas in the case of a brave man, everyone would be watching him if he made the smallest mistake, he would incur a great deal of criticism. The reason for this is that a man who is outstandingly superior to the rest, there is no way in which he can possibly avoid becoming a laughingstock when he claims to have this knowledge. So the study of this art seems to me to be of this sort, Lysimachus. But, as I said before, we ought not to let Socrates here escape, but we ought to consult him as to his opinion on the matter in hand.
LySIAcHUS: Well, I do ask your opinion, Socrates, since what might be called our council seems to me to be still in need of someone to cast the deciding vote. If these two had agreed, there would be less necessity of such a procedure, but as it is, you perceive that Laches has voted in opposition to Nicias. So we would do well to hear from you too, and find out with which of them you plan to vote.

SocrATes: What's that, Lysimachus? Do you intend to cast your vote for whatever position is approved by the majority of us?

LySIAcHUS: Why, what else could a person do, Socrates?

SocrATes: And do you, Melesias, plan to act in the same way? Suppose there should be a council to decide whether your son ought to practice a particular kind of gymnastic exercise, would you be persuaded by the greater number or by whoever has been educated and exercised under a good trainer?

MelesIAS: Probably by the latter, Socrates.

SocrATes: And you would be persuaded by him rather than by the four of us?

MelesIAS: Probably.

SocrATes: So I think it is by knowledge that one ought to make decisions, if one is to make them well, and not by majority rule.

MelesIAS: Certainly.

Socrates: So in this present case it is also necessary to investigate first of all whether any one of us is an expert in the subject we are debating, or not. And if one of us is, then we should listen to him even if he is only one, and disregard the others. But if no one of us is an expert, then we must look for someone who is. Or do you and Lysimachus suppose that the subject in question is some small thing and not the greatest of all our possessions? The question is really, that of whether your sons turn out to be worthwhile persons or the opposite—and the father's whole estate will be managed in accordance with the way the sons turn out.

MelesIAS: You are right.

Socrates: So we ought to exercise great forethought in the matter.

MelesIAS: Yes, we should.

Socrates: Then, in keeping with what I said just now, how would we investigate if we wanted to find out which of us was the most expert with regard to gymnastics? Wouldn't it be the man who had studied and practiced the art and who had had good teachers in that particular subject?

MelesIAS: I should think so.

Socrates: And even before that, oughtn't we to investigate what art it is of which we are looking for the teachers?

MelesIAS: What do you mean?

Socrates: Perhaps it will be more clear if I put it this way: I do not think we have reached any preliminary agreement as to what in the world we are consulting about and investigating when we ask which of us is expert in it and has acquired teachers for this purpose, and which of us is not.

NicIAS: But, Socrates, aren't we investigating the art of fighting in armor and discussing whether young men ought to learn it or not?

Socrates: Quite so, Nicias. But when a man considers whether or not he should use a certain medicine to anoint his eyes, do you think he is at that moment taking counsel about the medicine or about the eyes?

Nicias: About the eyes.

Socrates: Then too, whenever a man considers whether or not and when he should put a bridle on a horse, I suppose he is at that moment taking counsel about the horse and not about the bridle?

Nicias: That is true.

Socrates: So, in a word, whenever a man considers a thing for the sake of another thing, he is taking counsel about that thing for the sake of which he was considering, and not about what he was investigating for the sake of something else.

Nicias: Necessarily so.

Socrates: Then the question we ought to ask with respect to the man who gives us advice, is whether he is expert in the care of that thing for the sake of which we are considering when we consider.

Nicias: Certainly.

Socrates: So do we now declare that we are considering a form of study for the sake of the souls of young men?

Nicias: Yes.

Socrates: Then 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.

Laches: What's that, Socrates? Haven't you ever noticed that in some matters people become more expert without teachers than with them?

Socrates: Yes, I have, Laches, but you would not want to trust them when they said they were good craftsmen unless they should have some well-executed product of their art to show you—and not just one but more than one.

Laches: What you say is true.

Socrates: Then what we ought to do, Laches and Nicias, since Lysimachus and Melesias called us in to give them advice about their two sons out of a desire that the boys' souls should become as good as possible—if we say we have teachers to show, is to point out to them the ones who in the first place are good themselves and have tended the souls of many young men, and in the second place have manifestly taught us. Or, if any one of us says that he himself has had no teacher but has works of his own to tell of, then he ought to show which of the Athenians or foreigners, whether slave or free, is recognized to have become good through his influence. But if this is not the case with any of us, we should give orders that a search be made for others and should not run the risk of ruining the sons of our friends and thus incurring the greatest reproach from their nearest relatives. Now I, Lysimachus and Melesias, am the first to say,
advice us on these matters was that we supposed that you would naturally have given some thought to such things—especially so since your sons, like ours, are very nearly of an age to be educated. So, if you have no objection, speak up and look into the subject along with Socrates, exchanging arguments with each other. Because he is right in saying that it is about the most important of our affairs that we are consulting. So decide if you think this is what ought to be done.

Nicias: It is quite clear to me, Lysimachus, that your knowledge of Socrates is limited to your acquaintance with his father and that you have had no contact with the man himself, except when he was a child—I suppose he may have mingled with you and your fellow demesmen, following along with his father at the temple or at some other public gathering. But you are obviously still unacquainted with the man as he is now, he has grown up.

Lysimachus: What exactly do you mean, Nicias?

Nicias: You don't appear to me to know that whoever comes into close contact with Socrates and associates with him in conversation must necessarily, even if he begins by conversing about something quite different in the first place, keep on being led about by the man's arguments until he submits to answering questions about himself concerning both his present manner of life and the life he has lived hitherto. And when he does submit to this questioning, you don't realize that Socrates will not let him go before he has well and truly tested every last detail. I personally am accustomed to the man's company, Lysimachus, and don't regard it as at all a bad thing to have it brought to our attention that we have done or are doing wrong. Rather I think that a man who does not run away from such treatment but is willing, according to the saying of Solon, to value learning as long as he lives, not supposing that old age brings him wisdom of itself, will necessarily pay more attention to the rest of his life. For me there is nothing unusual or unpleasant in being examined by Socrates, but I realized some time ago that the conversation would not be about the boys but about ourselves, if Socrates were present. As I say, I don't myself mind talking with Socrates in whatever way he likes—but find out how Laches here feels about such things.

Laches: I have just one feeling about discussions, Nicias, or, if you like, not one but two, because to some I might seem to be a discussion-lover and to others a discussion-hater. 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

3. The same proverb appears at Gorgias 51a.e. A wine jar is the largest pot; one ought to learn pottery on something smaller.

4. Here (see also Republic 536d) Plato refers to a verse of Solon ( Athenian poet and lawgiver of the early sixth century): “I grow old ev’ry learning many things” (frg. 18 Bergk).
harmony, not on the lyre or some other pleasurable instrument, but actually rendering his own life harmonious by fitting his deeds to his words in a truly Dorian mode, not in the Ioridian, nor even, I think, in the Phrygian or Lydian, but in the only harmony that is genuinely Greek. The discourse of such a man gladdens my heart and makes everyone think that I am a discussion-lover because of the enthusiastic way in which I welcome what is said; but the man who acts in the opposite way distresses me, and the better he speaks, the worse I feel, so that his discourse makes me look like a discussion-hater. Now I have no acquaintance with the words of Socrates, but before now, I believe, I have had experience of his deeds, and there I found him a person privileged to speak fair words and to indulge in every kind of frankness. So if he possesses this ability too, I am in sympathy with the man, and I would submit to being examined by such a person with the greatest pleasure, nor would I find learning burdensome, because I too agree with Solon, though with one reservation—I wish to grow old learning many things, but from good men only. Let Solon grant me this point, that the teacher should himself be good, so that I may not show myself a stupid pupil taking no delight in learning. Whether my teacher is to be younger than I am or not yet famous or has any other such peculiarity troubles me not at all. To you then, Socrates, I present myself as someone for you to teach and to refute in whatever manner you please, and, on the other hand, you are welcome to any knowledge I have myself. Because this has been my opinion of your character since that day on which we shared a common danger and you gave me a sample of your valor—the sort a man must give if he is to render a good account of himself. So say whatever you like and don't let the difference in our ages concern you at all.

Lysimachus: But the task is clearly ours, Socrates (for I count you as one of ourselves), so take my place and find out on behalf of the young men what we need to learn from these people, and then, by talking to the boys, join us in giving them advice. Because, on account of my age, I very often forget what questions I was going to ask, and I forget the answers as well.

Socrates: Let us do what Lysimachus and Melesias suggest, Nicias and Melesias here. Perhaps it won't be a bad idea to ask ourselves the sort of question which we proposed to investigate just now: what teachers have we had in this sort of instruction, and what other persons have we made better? However, I think there is another sort of inquiry that will bring us to the same point and is perhaps one that begins somewhat more nearly from the beginning. Suppose we know, about anything whatsoever, that if it is added to another thing, it makes that thing better, and furthermore, we are able to make the addition, then clearly we know the very thing about which we should be consulting as to how one might obtain it most easily and best. Perhaps you don't understand what I mean, but will do so more easily this way: suppose we know that sight, when added to the eyes, makes better those eyes to which it is added, and furthermore, we are able to add it to the eyes, then clearly we know what this very thing sight is, about which we should be consulting as to how one might obtain it most easily and best. Because if we didn't know what sight in itself was, nor hearing, we would hardly be worthy counsellors and doctors about either the eyes or the ears as to the manner in which either sight or hearing might best be obtained.

Socrates: Well then, Laches, aren't these two now asking our advice as to the manner in which virtue might be added to the souls of their sons to make them better?

Laches: Good heavens, Socrates, there is no difficulty about that: If a man is willing to remain at his post and to defend himself against the enemy without running away, then you may rest assured that he is a man of courage.

Laches: We say then, Laches, that we know what it is.

Socrates: We say then, Laches, that we know what it is.

Laches: Yes, we do say so.

Socrates: And what we know, we must, I suppose, be able to state?

Laches: Of course.

Socrates: Let us not, O best of men, begin straightaway with an investigation of the whole of virtue—that would perhaps be too great a task—but let us first see if we have a sufficient knowledge of a part. Then it is likely that the investigation will be easier for us.

Laches: Yes, let's do it the way you want, Socrates.

Socrates: Well, which one of the parts of virtue should we choose? Or isn't it obvious that we ought to take the one to which the technique of fighting in armor appears to lead? I suppose everyone would think it leads to courage, wouldn't they?

Laches: I think they certainly would.

Socrates: Then let us undertake first of all, Laches, to state what courage is. Then after this we will go on to investigate in what way it could be added to the young, to the extent that the addition can be made through occupations and studies. But try to state what I ask, namely, what courage is.

Laches: Good heavens, Socrates, there is no difficulty about that: if a man is willing to remain at his post and to defend himself against the enemy without running away, then you may rest assured that he is a man of courage.
SOCRATES: Well spoken, Laches. But perhaps I am to blame for not making myself clear; the result is that you did not answer the question I had in mind but a different one.

LACHES: What do you mean, Socrates?

SOCRATES: I will tell you if I can. That man, I suppose, is courageous whom you yourself mention, that is, the man who fights the enemy while remaining at his post?

LACHES: Yes, that is my view.

SOCRATES: And I agree. But what about this man, the one who fights with the enemy, not holding his ground, but in retreat?

LACHES: What did you mean, in retreat?

SOCRATES: Why, I mean the way the Scythians are said to fight, as much as retreating as pursuing; and then I imagine that Homer is praising the retreat of Aeneas when he says they know how “to pursue and fly quickly this way and that,” and he praises Aeneas himself for his knowledge of fear and he calls him “counsellor of fright.”

LACHES: And Homer is right, Socrates, because he was speaking of chariots, and it was the Scythian horsemen to which you referred. Now cavalry do fight in this fashion, but the hoplites in the manner I describe.

SOCRATES: Except perhaps the Spartan hoplites, Laches. Because they say that at Plataea the Spartans, when they were up against the soldiers carrying wicker shields, were not willing to stand their ground and fight against them but ran away. Then when the ranks of the Persians were broken, they turned and fought, just like cavalrymen, and so won that particular battle.

LACHES: You are right.

SOCRATES: So as I said just now, my poor questioning is to blame for your poor answer, because I wanted to learn from you not only what constitutes courage for a hoplite but for a hoplite as well and for every sort of warrior. And I wanted to include not only those who are courageous in warfare but also those who are brave in dangers at sea, and the ones who show courage in illness and poverty and affairs of state; and then again I wanted to include not only those who are brave in the face of pain and fear but also those who are clever at fighting desire and pleasure, whether by standing their ground or running away—because there are some men, aren’t there, Laches, who are brave in matters like these?

LACHES: Very much so, Socrates.

SOCRATES: So all these men are brave, but some possess courage in pleasures, some in pains, some in desires, and some in fears. And others, I think, show cowardice in the same respects.

LACHES: Yes, they do.

SOCRATES: Then what are courage and cowardice? This is what I wanted to find out. So try again to state first what is the courage that is the same in all these cases. Or don’t you yet have a clear understanding of what I mean?

LACHES: Not exactly.
LACHES: Yes indeed.

Socrates: Well, suppose a man endures in battle, and his willingness to fight is based on wise calculation because he knows that others are coming to his aid and that he will be fighting men who are fewer than those on his side, and inferior to them, and in addition his position is stronger: would you say that this man, with his kind of wisdom and preparation, endures more courageously or a man in the opposite camp who is willing to remain and hold out?

LACHES: The one in the opposite camp, Socrates, I should say.

Socrates: But surely the endurance of this man is more foolish than that of the other.

LACHES: You are right.

Socrates: And you would say that the man who shows endurance in a cavalry attack and has knowledge of horsemanship is less courageous than the man who lacks this knowledge.

LACHES: Yes, I would.

Socrates: And the one who endures with knowledge of slinging or archery or some other art is the less courageous.

LACHES: Yes indeed.

Socrates: And as many as would be willing to endure in diving down into wells without being skilled, or to endure in any other similar situation, you say are braver than those who are skilled in these things.

LACHES: Why, what else would anyone say, Socrates?

Socrates: Nothing, if that is what he thought.

LACHES: Well, this is what I think at any rate.

Socrates: And certainly, Laches, such people run risks and endure more foolishly than those who do a thing with art.

LACHES: They clearly do.

Socrates: Now foolish daring and endurance was found by us to be not only disgraceful but harmful, in what we said earlier.

LACHES: Quite so.

Socrates: But courage was agreed to be a noble thing.

LACHES: Yes, it was.

Socrates: But now, on the contrary, we are saying that a disgraceful thing, foolish endurance, is courage.

LACHES: Yes, we seem to be.

Socrates: And do you think we are talking sense?

LACHES: Heavens no, Socrates, I certainly don't.

Socrates: Then I don't suppose, Laches, that according to your statement you and I are tuned to the Dorian mode, because our deeds are not harmonizing with our words. In deeds I think anyone would say that we partook of courage, but in words I don't suppose he would, if he were to listen to our present discussion.

LACHES: You are absolutely right.

Socrates: Well then: is it good for us to be in such a state?

LACHES: Certainly not, in no way whatsoever.
LACES: You are questioning him in just the right way.
SOCRATES: Let him state what kind of knowledge it is.
Nicias: What I say, Laches, is that it is the knowledge of the fearful and the hopeful in war and in every other situation.
LACHES: How strangely he talks, Socrates.
SOCRATES: What do you have in mind when you say this, Laches?
LACHES: What do I have in mind? Why, I take wisdom to be quite a different thing from courage.
SOCRATES: Well, Nicias, at any rate, says it isn't.
LACHES: He certainly does—that's the nonsense he talks.
SOCRATES: Well, let's instruct him instead of making fun of him.
Nicias: Very well, but it strikes me, Socrates, that Laches wants to prove that I am talking nonsense simply because he was shown to be that sort of person himself a moment ago.
SOCRATES: Quite so, Nicias, and I shall try to demonstrate that very thing, because you are talking nonsense. Take an immediate example: in cases of illness, aren't the doctors the ones who know what is to be feared? Or do you think the courageous are the people who know? Perhaps you call the doctors the courageous?
Nicias: No, of course not.
LACHES: And I don't imagine you mean the farmers either, even though I do suppose they are the ones who know what is to be feared in farming. And all the other craftsmen know what is to be feared and hoped for in their particular arts. But these people are in no way courageous all the same.
SOCRATES: What does Laches mean, Nicias? Because he does seem to be saying something.
Nicias: Yes, he is saying something, but what he says is not true.
SOCRATES: How so?
Nicias: He thinks a doctor's knowledge of the sick amounts to something more than being able to describe health and disease whereas I think their knowledge is restricted to just this. Do you suppose, Laches, that when a man's recovery is more to be feared than his illness, the doctors know this? Or don't you think there are many cases in which it would be better not to get up from an illness? Tell me this: do you maintain that in all cases to live is preferable? In many cases, is it not better to die?
LACHES: Well, I agree with you on this point at least.
Nicias: And do you suppose that the same things are to be feared by those for whom it is an advantage to die as by those for whom it is an advantage to live?
LACHES: No, I don't.
Nicias: But do you grant this knowledge to the doctors or to any other craftsmen except the one who knows what is and what is not to be feared, who is the one I call courageous?
SOCRATES: Do you understand what he is saying, Laches?
LACHES: Yes I do—he is calling the seers the courageous. Because who else will know for whom it is better to live than to die? What about you,
I think that anyone taking this position must necessarily deny courage to any wild beast or else admit that some wild beast, a lion or a leopard or some sort of wild boar, is wise enough to know what is so difficult that very few men understand it. And the man who defines courage as you define it would have to assert that a lion and a stag, a bull and a monkey are all equally courageous by nature.

LACHES: By heaven, you talk well, Socrates. Give us an honest answer to this, Nicias—whether you say that these wild beasts, whom we all admit to be courageous, are wiser than we in these respects, or whether you dare to oppose the general view and say that they are not courageous.

Nicias: By no means, Laches, do I call courageous wild beasts or anything else that, for lack of understanding, does not fear what should be feared. Rather, I would call them rash and mad. Or do you really suppose I call all children courageous, who fear nothing because they have no sense? On the contrary, 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.

LACHES: You see, Socrates, how the man decks himself out in words and does it well in his own opinion. Those whom everyone agrees to be courageous he attempts to deprive of that distinction.

Nicias: I'm not depriving you of it, Laches, so cheer up. I declare that you are wise, and Lamachus⁶ too, so long as you are courageous, and I say the same of a great many other Athenians.

LACHES: I shan't say anything about that—in case you should call me a typical Aexonian.⁷

NICIAS: Never mind him, Laches, I don't think you realize that he has procured this wisdom from our friend Damon, and Damon spends most of his time with Prodicus, who has the reputation of being best among the sophists at making such verbal distinctions.

LACHES: Well, Socrates, it is certainly more fitting for a sophist to make such clever distinctions than for a man the city thinks worthy to be its leader.

Socrates: Well, I suppose it would be fitting, my good friend, for the man in charge of the greatest affairs to have the greatest share of wisdom. But I think it worthwhile to ask Nicias what he has in mind when he defines courage in this way.

LACHES: Well then, you ask him, Socrates.

NICIAS: Yes, indeed. But I think it worthwhile to ask Nicias what he has in mind when he defines courage in this way.

LACHES: And didn't you give your answer supposing that it was a part, and, as such, one among a number of other parts, all of which taken together were called virtue?

Nicias: Yes, why not?

Socrates: And do you also speak of the same parts that I do? In addition to courage, I call temperance and justice and everything else of this kind parts of virtue. Don't you?

Nicias: Yes, my good friend.

Socrates: And do you also speak of the same parts that I do? In addition to courage, I call temperance and justice and everything else of this kind parts of virtue. Don't you?

Nicias: Yes, indeed.

Socrates: And you declare that knowledge of just these things is future evils, and the ones inspiring hope are either future non-evils or future goods. Do you agree with this or have you some other view on the subject?

Nicias: I agree with this one.

Socrates: And you declare that knowledge of just these things is courage?

Nicias: Exactly so.

Socrates: Let us find out if we all agree on still a third point.

Nicias: What one is that?

Socrates: You hear what we have to say, Nicias: that fearful things are future evils, and the ones inspiring hope are either future non-evils or future goods. Do you agree with this or have you some other view on the subject?

Nicias: I agree with this one.

Socrates: And you declare that knowledge of just these things is courage?

Nicias: Exactly so.

Socrates: Let us find out if we all agree on still a third point.

Nicias: What one is that?

Socrates: You hear what we have to say, Nicias: that fearful things are future evils, and the ones inspiring hope are either future non-evils or future goods. Do you agree with this or have you some other view on the subject?

Nicias: I agree with this one.

Socrates: And you declare that knowledge of just these things is courage?

Nicias: Exactly so.

Socrates: Let us find out if we all agree on still a third point.

Nicias: What one is that?

Socrates: You hear what we have to say, Nicias: that fearful things are future evils, and the ones inspiring hope are either future non-evils or future goods. Do you agree with this or have you some other view on the subject?

Nicias: I agree with this one.

Socrates: And you declare that knowledge of just these things is courage?

Nicias: Exactly so.

Socrates: Let us find out if we all agree on still a third point.

Nicias: What one is that?

Socrates: You hear what we have to say, Nicias: that fearful things are future evils, and the ones inspiring hope are either future non-evils or future goods. Do you agree with this or have you some other view on the subject?
In fact, the law decrees, not that the seer should command the general, but that the general should command the seer. Is this what we shall say, Laches?

**LACHES:** Yes, it is.

**SOCRATES:** Well then, do you agree with us, Nicias, that the same knowledge has understanding of the same things, whether future, present, or past?

**NICIAS:** Yes, that is how it seems to me, Socrates.

**SOCRATES:** Now, my good friend, you say that courage is the knowledge of the fearful and the hopeful, isn't that so?

**NICIAS:** Yes, it is.

**SOCRATES:** And it was agreed that fearful and hopeful things were future goods and future evils.

**NICIAS:** Yes, it was.

**SOCRATES:** And that the same knowledge is of the same things—future ones and all other kinds.

**NICIAS:** Yes, that is the case.

**SOCRATES:** Then courage is not knowledge of the fearful and the hopeful only, because it understands not 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.

**NICIAS:** So it seems, at any rate.

**SOCRATES:** Then you have told us about what amounts to a third part of courage, Nicias, whereas we asked you what the whole of courage was. And now it appears, according to your view, that courage is the knowledge not just of the fearful and the hopeful, but in your own opinion, it would be the knowledge of practically all goods and evils put together. Do you agree to this new change, Nicias, or what do you say?

**NICIAS:** That seems right to me, Socrates.

**SOCRATES:** Then does a man with this kind of knowledge seem to depart from virtue in any respect if he really knows, in the case of all goods whatsoever, what they are and will be and have been, and similarly in the case of evils? And do you regard that man as lacking in temperance or justice and holiness to whom alone belongs the ability to deal circum­spectly with both gods and men with respect to both the fearful and its opposite, and to provide himself with good things through his knowledge of how to associate with them correctly?

**NICIAS:** I think you have a point, Socrates.

**SOCRATES:** Then the thing you are now talking about, Nicias, would not be a part of virtue but rather virtue entire.

**NICIAS:** So it seems.

**SOCRATES:** And we have certainly stated that courage is one of the parts of virtue.

**NICIAS:** Yes, we have.

**SOCRATES:** Then what we are saying now does not appear to hold good.

**NICIAS:** Apparently not.
Lylias, together with Charmides, gives a rich and subtle portrayal of Socrates in one of his favorite pursuits—engaging in conversation with bright, cultured, good-looking teenage boys from distinguished Athenian families. Lysis and Menexenus are best friends; in their early teens, still overseen by family servants (slaves) as 'tutors'. (Menexenus later became one of Socrates' close associates: there is a dialogue named after him, and he was present at the conversation in Phaedo.) Hippothales is an older teenage boy, infatuated with Lysis to the point of boring to death Ctesippus (another close associate of Socrates later on, also with him on his last day) and the other boys of his own age, with his poems and prose discourses on Lysis' and his ancestors' excellences. For Socrates, however, this is the wrong way to draw such a young person to you. Poetry and rhetorical praises will play to their pride and encourage arrogance. The right way is by engaging them in philosophical discussion. If they are worth attention at all, it is by turning them toward the improvement of their souls, that is, their minds, that you will attract their sober interest and grateful affection. Readers should compare what Alcibiades says about his own love for Socrates in the Symposium, and Socrates' dithyramb to love for boys in his second speech in Phaedrus.

Socrates exhibits this right approach by engaging Lysis, and then also his friend Menexenus, in an extended discussion about the nature of friendship: who are friends to whom (or what), and on what ground? His first question to Lysis fixes the theme, before it is clearly announced: 'Am I right in assuming that your father and mother love you very much?' The Greek word for love here is philein, cognate to the word for 'friendship', philia: 'friendship' in this discussion includes the love of parents and children and other relatives, as well as the close elective attachments of what we understand as personal friendship. It also covers impassioned, erotic fixations like Hippothales' for Lysis. What is friendship, so understood, and under what conditions does it actually exist? Socrates does not really seek and examine the boys' opinions on this topic (as he does with other interlocutors, including Charmides, in Plato's 'Socratic' dialogues). Rather, he confronts them with a carefully constructed series of conceptual problems that arise when one tries to think seriously about friends and friendships. Is the friend the one who loves or the one loved? Or are there friends only where each loves the other? Difficulties arise for each solution. Or is it rather that good people are friends of other good people? But wait: since good people are so much like one another, can they do each other any good at all, as friends must do (if friendship is a good thing)? Poets such as Hesiod...