

PLATO'S *LACHES*

An introduction to Socrates

Laches, somewhat slighted by scholars of previous generations,¹ and considered by many to be the first effort of Plato's earliest period,² raises significant issues in Platonic thought and provides an introductory sketch of Plato's Socrates and his methods. Its leading interlocutors serve a similar purpose in that each exemplifies contrasting tendencies of the Socratic persona.

Viktor Goldschmidt's study of the aporetic dialogues showed that solutions to the apparent dead ends are usually available in other Platonic texts;³ and Charles Kahn has recently seconded the notion that these lesser dialogues are full of "proleptic" allusions to the longer and more forthcoming works.⁴ The definition of courage eventually reached by the interlocutors in *Laches* – knowledge of what is and is not to be feared – has close similarities to discussions of the same virtue in *Protagoras*, *Republic*, and other dialogues.⁵ The difficulty that Socrates raises with the definition – that it is in fact a definition of all virtue – corresponds to the complexity of isolating a single virtue, given that none can exist without knowledge.⁶ *Laches* is therefore a little paradigm of aporetic

1) See H. Bonitz, *Platonische Studien* (Berlin 31886) 210, and comments in E. V. Kohák, *The Road to Wisdom: Lessons on Education from Plato's Laches*, CJ 56 (1960) 123, R. G. Hoerber, *Plato's Laches*, CPh 63 (1968) 95.

2) See M. Pohlenz, *Aus Platons Werdezeit* (Berlin 1913) 14–15 and, later, W. Steidle, *Der Dialog Laches und Platons Verhältnis zu Athen in den Frühdialogen*, MH 7 (1950) 129–134. The latter's perceptive article is somewhat distorted by historicist concerns. On the negative effects of a developmental treatment of Plato's works, see discussion in V. Goldschmidt's preface to his edition of 1963, *Les dialogues de Platon: Structure et méthode dialectique* (Paris 41988) xiii–xxvii; and M. Erler, *Der Sinn der Aporien in den Dialogen Platons: Übungsstücke zur Anleitung im philosophischen Denken* (Berlin 1987) 4–6.

3) Goldschmidt (above, n. 2) 64–66, R. Dieterle, *Platons Laches und Charmides: Untersuchungen zur elenktisch-aporetischen Struktur der platonischen Frühdialoge* (Diss. Freiburg i. Br. 1966) 122–23.

4) C. H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue* (Cambridge 1996) xiii–xv.

5) Dieterle (above, n. 3) 73 n. 10, 102–03; at 116 n. 2, he cites *Meno* 88b, *Prot.* 351a, *Rep.* 430b. See also Erler (above, n. 2) 108–12; and discussion in B. Manuwald, *Platon, Protagoras* (Göttingen 1999) 429–30 on the essential agreement between *Laches* and *Protagoras*.

6) See discussion in Manuwald (above, n. 5) 430.

technique: the participants come right up to a central insight, only to retreat back into the Cave, "aus der ‚Blendung‘ durch die Helle des ‚ungewohnten‘ Lichts in die Vertrautheit des bisherigen Denkens."⁷

Laches is longer than several other aporetic dialogues; but an impression of brevity and slightness is created by the opening conversation, which is almost as long as the discussion of courage.⁸ This impression is enhanced by the tendency of commentators to give arguments more attention, while the opening conversations can be treated as dispensable prefaces, mere 'scene-setting.' In *Laches* the extended introduction may serve as a mark of the introductory status of the entire piece. As Steidle pointed out, while in other aporetic dialogues Socrates is treated as an acquaintance or friend of the participants, in this case he is "als ein Unbekannter ausführlich vorgestellt."⁹ The dialogue begins with a conversation between two pairs of men, the famous generals, Nicias and Laches, and two aristocrats, Lysimachus and Melesias, the sons of two leaders of the past, Aristides and Thucydides. Socrates is invited to join in only later. This social situation, in which a less distinguished person intrudes on a group of older notables, excuses a detailed recital of the late-comer's credentials, both as citizen and as philosopher. The inceptional quality of the dialogue must also motivate the anachronism by which Socrates, already in his middle forties, at a time after Delium (424 B. C. E., 181b1–4) and therefore near or after the production of Aristophanes' *Clouds*, is pictured as a little-known figure, junior in age to Nicias.¹⁰ Youth and obscurity are traits that mark one who requires introduction.

For English speakers, the sense of the prefatory 'introduction' to a literary work neatly parallels the social situation in which new acquaintances are 'introduced' to Socrates. Most introductions are attached to a longer work; and, in spite of the independent unity of each dialogue, *Laches* might be thought of as having a similar function, given R. Schaerer's comparison of the Platonic dialogues to a great book in which each chapter treats similar material in a differ-

7) Dieterle (above, n. 3) 137; see also Goldschmidt (above, n. 3) 65.

8) On the "imbalance" thus created, see Bonitz (above, n. 1) 226; Pohlenz (above, n. 2) 23.

9) Steidle (above, n. 2) 130; see recently Kahn (above, n. 4) 151–152 and id., *Plato's Methodology in the Laches*, *RIPh* 40 (1986) 11, 16.

10) 181d3, 186c8. Socrates and Nicias were probably near contemporaries. See D. M. Lewis, *CAH* 5 (21992) 406: in 427 Nicias was "well into his forties," when Socrates would have been forty-two.

ent way.¹¹ Almost all the shorter Platonic dialogues make brief and often enigmatic reference to matters that are treated more openly and more fully, though still with considerable reticence, in longer works such as *Symposium*, *Gorgias*, or *Phaedo*. Scholarly research has not been able to establish a convincing chronological sequence among the dialogues in an ‘early’ group of sixteen that includes *Laches* and other shorter, aporetic pieces in addition to the longer works just mentioned.¹² Rather than attempt to arrange these works in any conjectural chronology, it makes sense to treat them as a group designed to be mutually referential and mutually illuminating, each taking different perspectives and approaches to a rather homogeneous subject matter.¹³ *Laches* could serve equally well as introduction to many Socratic dialogues, even to the more ambitious *Gorgias* or *Protagoras*, with both of which it has a number of connections.

It would be an error to assume, however, that, because something is designed to be encountered first, it therefore must have been written first. While *Laches* may possibly have reached the public as the first item in the loosely-arranged Platonic œuvre, its appearance may equally well have followed the production of other works. Prefaces are usually written after the body of the work has been completed, because only then does the author fully grasp what it is that he is introducing,¹⁴ and *Laches* is effective as a prefatory piece precisely because it presents a complex and fully-formed view of Plato’s Socratic writings. Plato was only one of a number of contemporaries writing dialogues that featured a Socrates figure, and the complexity of his ironic style makes it unlikely that he invented either the form or the subject.¹⁵ Plato’s sophisticated manipulation of the conventions of protreptic in *Euthyde-*

11) R. Schaerer, *La question platonicienne: Étude sur les rapports de la pensée et de l’expression dans les dialogues* (Mémoires de l’Université de Neuchâtel 10. Secrétariat de l’Université, 1938) 81.

12) See Kahn (above, n. 4) 42–47.

13) Schaerer (above, n. 11) 64–65 and 81, noted the repetitiveness of Platonic concerns. For a conjectural chronology see Kahn (above, n.9) 15–17.

14) See J. Derrida’s description of a preface (*La dissémination*, Paris 1972, 13) “un écrit – un passé – que, dans une fausse apparence de présent, un auteur caché et tout-puissant . . . présente au lecteur comme son avenir.” Cf. Hegel’s famous rejection of a philosophic introduction (*Laches* may be said to deal with the problem by its indirect and aporetic structure).

15) The study of Socratic writers by O. Gigon, *Sokrates: Sein Bild in Dichtung und Geschichte* (Bern 1947), and Kahn (above, n. 4) 1–35, makes it plain that this persona was conventional rather than historically accurate.

mus, for instance, presupposes a tradition that appears in simpler form in other Socratic works.¹⁶ The general outlines of the (largely fictional) Socratic persona would thus have been no novelty to Plato's public: the function of *Laches* to introduce the particular Platonic version of this persona.

The social 'introduction' of Socrates in *Laches* is performed by persons well-qualified to certify the newcomer as a man of high personal worth. The military man Laches serves as the guarantor of Socrates' courage and good citizenship; and the more sophisticated Nicias of his intellectual and pedagogical authority. The contribution of the elderly and rather fussy Lysimachus, undistinguished son of the great Aristides, is to certify Socrates' respectable social background. Socrates' family is hardly mentioned elsewhere in Plato: the only other reference to his father is in *Euthydemus* (297e7–298b3), where Sophroniscus is the butt of a trick argument designed to prove that Socrates is ἀπάτωρ, presumably a bastard. The joke that Socrates makes about his mother, the "strong, true-born midwife," in *Theaetetus* (149a1–2) implies no very great concern on his part for conventional family respectability;¹⁷ and such concern would hardly match the usual Socratic posture of self-depreciation. By contrast, Plato's own distinguished connections figure prominently in the dialogues; and both his relatives and other well-born participants are praised for their descent.¹⁸ Only *Laches* among the briefer, aporetic dialogues makes explicit the high status implied by the easy familiarity between the humble Socrates and his eupatrid associates. The exceptional praise lavished on Socrates by all participants recalls the encomia of *Phaedo* or *Symposium* and creates a link to the longer dialogues. In this respect, *Laches* forms a kind of opposite to *Euthydemus*, in which Socratic false self-depreciation (εἰρωνεία) reaches such extremes as to approach buffoonery.¹⁹ Each of the two, like each of the other Socratic dialogues, has a particular contribution to make to Plato's rich and complex portrayal of philosophical engagement and to his pe-

16) See A. N. Michelini, Socrates Buffoon: Cautionary Protreptic in *Euthydemus*, forthcoming in AJPh.

17) References to a mother's occupation are unlikely to be honorific for Athenians, cf. jibes at the mothers of Euripides (Aristophanes, Ach. 478) or Aeschines (Demosth. de cor. 130, 259).

18) Plato's maternal uncle Charmides receives lengthy praise from Socrates for both sides of his distinguished family (Charm. 157e1–58a6), and in *Republic* corresponding praise is given Plato's paternal line (367e6–368a5). For others, see the pedigree of Lysis 204e3–10.

19) See my article, above, n. 16.

cular version of the Socratic persona. Along with other ‘proleptic’ factors, this balance between promise and revelation justifies treating the separate and varied works of Plato as parts of an intentionally constructed whole.²⁰

This dialogue focuses more strongly than others upon Socrates’ interlocutors, Nicias and Laches, and gives each of them a significantly active role. The length of the opening matches and is in part entailed by Socrates’ unusual reluctance to assume his role as leader of the discussion. From the authorial viewpoint, on the other hand, the central figure in an introductory work should emerge slowly and with appropriate fanfare. It is Socrates who eventually shifts the question to the definition of a moral virtue (189d5–190e3), but his earlier attempts to direct the dialogue by proxy lead to some amusing puppeteering. He even dictates a series of inquiries to the inexperienced Lysimachus:

Ask them; and say that, ‘Socrates denies that he knows anything about the matter and is not capable of deciding which of you is right You, Nicias and Laches, each tell us which of you has associated with someone very clever at the nurture of youths, and whether you have knowledge as a result of study or have yourselves discovered it, and, if you learned it, who was the teacher of each of you’ Find this out from them, Lysimachus; and don’t let the men off. (186d–187b)

Socrates continues to encourage direct encounters between the two generals, instructing Laches how to question Nicias at 194e3: “Come on, then (ἴθι δῆ). Say to him, ‘Nicias, what sort of knowledge (σοφία) would courage be, according to your argument? It wouldn’t be knowledge of flute-playing, would it?’” In fact it is really Socrates who asks most of the questions, although Laches intervenes with rude remarks and eventually follows Socrates’ example by questioning Nicias briefly at 195b2–c2. Socrates prompts Nicias to reply; and the latter in turn questions Laches, until his opponent breaks off in irritation (196c5–6). Socrates makes continuing efforts to keep Laches actively involved in the discussion; and he succeeds in this to the extent that Laches continues to quarrel with and insult Nicias at intervals up to the end. Socrates’ pretended reluctance to assume leadership keeps both interlocutors on stage and active throughout, although his control of the dialogue makes it evident that this modesty is to some extent a pose.

20) See Kahn (above, n. 4) xv: the dialogues are not a record of “the development of Plato’s thought, but the gradual unfolding of a literary plan for presenting his philosophical views to the general public.”

The generals resemble most of Socrates' juvenile interlocutors in being Athenian citizens of high status, to be distinguished strongly from such claimants to expertise as the rhapsode Ion, the eccentric Euthyphro, or the traveling theorists and lecturers that Plato called 'Sophists.' This difference is made explicit in the contrast between the generals, experts at real fighting, and the theorist of military science, Stesileos, whose performance they have been invited to watch and whom Laches ridicules. The generals differ from Socrates' other well-born Athenian interlocutors, however, in that they are mature men,²¹ important figures in the political and military history of the fifth century, and at the peak of their powers and prestige in the mid-420's, when both were prominent in the peace negotiations with Sparta. Socrates' reticence thus corresponds to the status of his interlocutors.

Nicias and Laches play their roles in the dialogue in a way that sets them apart from other interlocutors. Each comes up with a definition of courage that, in major respects, matches definitions offered by Socrates in other dialogues.²² Each displays intellectual and moral qualities that are rare in Socratic interlocutors but typical of Socrates. The generals have clearly defined and opposed personalities; but this split reflects the subtlety and complexity of Socrates, a purveyor of paradoxes, who is himself something of a paradox. His appearance of innocence and naïveté masks great wisdom and agile wit. In love with learning and knowledge, he claims to possess none himself; continually urging the young to seek knowledge and even arranging for their instruction, he also mischievously challenges and lampoons those who claim to be teachers. In this introductory dialogue, Laches and Nicias perform an analytical task by neatly dividing the Socratic attitude between themselves.

Laches is in some respects a fairly typical Socratic interlocutor. He has little experience in argument and is easily reduced to perplexity by Socrates. What sets Laches apart from others is his genuine expertise in the highly valued area of military skill, his consequent moral authority, and his corresponding ability to detect sham and

21) Alcibiades, who figured in other Socratic writings as well (see Kahn, above, n. 4, 18) was young enough to be treated, as he is in *Symposium*, more as pupil/love-object than as statesman.

22) Bonitz (above, n. 1) 216, suggested that the definitions are complementary; for arguments against this, see Dieterle (above, n. 3) 133 n. 3. The latter argues instead (see also Erler, above, n. 2, 108–09) that Laches' own first definition of φρόνιμος καρτερία is sufficient, if Laches only understood its implications. For parallels with other dialogues, see note 5, above.

pretense, characteristics that link him to Socrates at the same time that they lend credence to his endorsement of Socrates' practical virtues. The general's aptitude for satire – and Plato's – becomes evident early in one of the funniest passages in Greek literature, Laches' anecdote about Stesileos (183c8–184a7). The elaborate weapon, the “sickle-spear,” chosen by Stesileos for use in a real naval battle was caught in the gear of a passing enemy ship, as the “expert” ran along the deck, trying to hold on to the *δορυδρέπανον* with the tips of his fingers. Everyone laughed, Laches recounts, even Stesileos' own ship-mates. The story may be a bit too funny. Socrates is a great humorist; but his modest stance precludes open ridicule. Socrates later (186d1–3) implies that, in dismissing Stesileos so positively, Laches makes a very questionable claim to knowledge. The negative side of Laches' taste for ridicule emerges in the confrontation with Nicias (195a6–7). As Nicias points out (200a4–b2), Laches' competitiveness dominates his interest in learning. Laches' rivalrous and sarcastic tone provokes gentle rebukes by Socrates and furnishes a negative example of dialectical technique.

But in several ways, Laches replicates the naive Socrates who punctures the claims of the “experts.” Laches evaluates verbal arguments (*λόγοι*) by considering the source: for him, only concrete evidence, such as Socrates' courage in battle, can certify knowledge as genuine. The speaker's *λόγοι* must harmonize with his deeds (*ἔργα* 188c4–d2). Socrates does something not dissimilar when he asks the generals for references to substantiate their judgments on military science.²³ Laches' aptitude for Socratic tactics, if not Socratic manner, is demonstrated at 195b2–c2, when he picks up the Craft Analogy arguments used by Socrates. If, as Nicias claims, courage is knowledge of what ought to inspire fear and what ought to inspire confidence, don't doctors have more of this knowledge in the care of disease, and farmers in the tending of plants? None of Socrates' other interlocutors shows such an aptitude for this most characteristic Socratic trope. The tactic is appropriate to Laches, however, since he, like Socrates, uses concrete, everyday examples to deflate the claims of those who pretend to broader or higher knowledge.²⁴

23) Dieterle (above, n. 3) 95–96, however, points out that Socrates quickly moves from his impracticable demands for practical proof of knowledge about courage to the search for a *λόγος* that would define it.

24) On Laches' role here see Dieterle (above, n. 3) 113–14: he represents “das elenktisch-destruktive Element, die scheinbar bornierte Verständnislosigkeit ... und die provozierende Fehlauffassung im Horizont der gewöhnlichen *τέχναι*.” Socrates does Laches the compliment of picking up his analogies later on, in refuting Nicias (198d4–e2).

Skeptical of Nicias' expansive definition of courage as a form of knowledge, Laches sneers that Nicias' courageous person would have to be a prophet (195e1–4). The same argumentative ploy is used by Socrates in *Charmides* to attack Critias' expansive definition of σωφροσύνη.²⁵ Laches' further statement that only a god could satisfy Nicias' criteria (196a3–7) replicates Socrates' frequent references to the divine status of dependable knowledge.²⁶ When Laches questions whether what would-be theoreticians and instructors are teaching really is a μάθημα, or, if it is one, whether it is an important one (182e2–4), he sounds very much like Socrates, who doubts that virtue is teachable and who worries about the dangers of the μαθήματα peddled by the 'Sophists.'²⁷ Like Socrates, too, Laches is concerned for the bad effects of false pretensions to knowledge:

If someone weak thinks that he possesses this knowledge, it would make him bolder, thus revealing his weakness more quickly. If one were courageous, others would be on guard for his smallest mistake ... for the pretense to this sort of knowledge is a source of resentment (ἐπίφθονος). (184b4–c1)

Laches' words could be used to explain Socrates' argumentative tactics: the modest εἶρων takes advantage of the overconfidence of his adversaries, while avoiding resentment by making no claims for himself.

Nicias was viewed favorably by the immediately succeeding generations of Athenians,²⁸ and his relatively gentle treatment by

25) 173c2–7, e10–174a1: it would require a prophet to exercise the reflexive knowledge that Critias describes. See comments in Erler (above, n. 2) 190–94 on *Charmides*, and 207 n.159, on *Laches*.

26) On this theme in general, see R. Ferber, *Die Unwissenheit des Philosophen oder Warum hat Platon die ‚ungeschriebene Lehre‘ nicht geschrieben?* (Sankt Augustin 1991) 19, and discussion below.

27) Prot. 313c–d. See also Laches 186b5–6 and 187a8–b4.

28) Our sources are Thucydides, whose final elegy on Nicias deplors his fate as supremely unworthy of a one so devoted to the practice of virtue (ἡκίστα δὴ ἄξιος ὢν τῶν γε ἐπ' ἑμοῦ Ἑλλήνων ἐς τοῦτο δυστυχίας ἀφικέσθαι διὰ τὴν πᾶσαν ἐς ἀρετὴν νομομισμένην ἐπιτήδευσιν 7.86.5), and the Ath. Pol. 28.5.4–6, where he and Thucydides, son of Melesias, are said to be the only politicians of the post-Periclean period whose virtue is universally acknowledged: πάντες σχεδὸν ὁμολογοῦσιν ἄνδρας γεγεμέναι οὐ μόνον καλοὺς ἀγαθοὺς, ἀλλὰ καὶ πολιτικοὺς καὶ τῇ πόλει πάσῃ πατρικῶς χρομένους. W. T. Schmid, *On Manly Courage: A Study of Plato's Laches* (Carbondale 1992), who portrays Nicias as a "notorious coward" (26 and see 5–7), is over-influenced by Plutarch; on the Syracusan historian Philistus as a source of this hostile view in Plutarch, see G. Busolt, *Plutarchs Nikias und Philistos*, *Hermes* 34 (1899) 297: it is clear that Philistus "die Darstellung des Thukydides ... vom syrakusanischen Standpunkte aus bearbeitete."

the comic poets testifies to his contemporary prestige.²⁹ In Plato's version, however, Nicias resembles the conventional picture of Pericles, famous as a patron or even a student of intellectuals,³⁰ more than he does the conservative and fatally pious hero of Thucydides' Sicilian tragedy.³¹ Early in the dialogue, Nicias reports that, on Socrates' recommendation, he has engaged the musical theorist Damon as a teacher for his son Niceratus. But, towards the end of the dialogue, it becomes clear that Nicias himself has been influenced by Damon, whose help he will enlist to work on the problems raised in the discussion (200b4–5). Nicias is an enthusiast for learning. He is certain that study with Stesileos will guarantee improved military practice, but he also sees this study as an inducement to further intellectual work. He echoes Solon's view: a man should continue to learn as long as he lives (188b2–3). On this last point, Socrates seems to agree with Nicias, since he concludes the discussion by saying that the participants have shown that they need tutoring as much as their sons do and should not be deterred by ridicule from seeking it. In typically sly Platonic fashion, however, the absurd aspect of this principled willingness to play "old man at school"³² immediately emerges, as the aged and absent-minded (189c6–d1) Lysimachus volunteers to take lessons, too. Nicias may be right in his praise of learning, but he may have stated the case too strongly and without sufficient irony.

Nicias' Socratic traits are perhaps even more striking than those of his opponent and are not limited to his enthusiasm for

29) Plutarch's citations (Nic. 4) make this clear; see also W.R. Connor, *The New Politicians of Fifth-Century Athens* (Princeton 1971) 169 n. 59. Depreciation of Nicias' modest demeanor in Phrynichus (frg. 62 K.-A.) may be intended to satirize the speaker, not the general. A character in Teleclides (frg. 44 K.-A.) attacks a sycophant for blackmailing Nicias; but – declining the typical abusive function of comedy – he refuses to give the grounds for the blackmail, φίλος γὰρ ἀνὴρ σωφρονεῖν δέ μοι δοκεῖ. In Eupolis' *Marikas* (frg. 193 K.-A.), someone rebukes another for speaking ill of Nicias, who is called ἀνὴρ ἄριστος.

30) This image presented, with the usual ironic overtones by Plato himself, Phaedr. 270a3, where Pericles becomes a great statesman by learning from Anaxagoras to reason subtly (ἀδολεσχεῖν) about the heavens (τὰ μετέωρα) – as Aristophanes accused Socrates of doing.

31) See, however, M.J. O'Brien, *The Unity of the Laches*, YCS 18 (1963) 145 and Schmid (above, n. 28) 10: Socrates' remark that prophets should be ruled by generals and not the reverse is a small satiric jab at the eventual downfall of Nicias as shown in Thucydides (this might give further point to Laches' suggestion that Nicias' courageous man would have to be a prophet).

32) Socrates himself assumes the role of ὀψιμοθής in *Euthydemus*; see Michelini (above, n. 16) forthcoming.

learning. But, because, like Laches, he lacks Socrates' ironic detachment, it is hard to decide whether he may not really be more like the adversaries of Socrates, whom Plato calls 'Sophists.'³³ Laches accuses Nicias of sophistical and rhetorical twisting (197d6–8), unsuitable to a statesman; but then Socrates, too, can easily be mistaken for a 'sophist.' *Euthydemus* – among other dialogues – shows this in the very intensity of its effort to make the difficult distinction between Socrates and contemptible eristics. In the late *Sophist*, as the participants track their elusive quarry, Socrates seems to emerge at intervals in the hunt, perhaps as the "noble sophist" of 231b3–8, or even the "gabbler" (ἄδολέσχης) of 225d7–10, who neglects his personal affairs through a passion for eristic disputation.³⁴ The dividing line between Socrates and his adversaries is one of the subtlest and most complex matters in Plato;³⁵ and it goes to the heart of Socrates' paradoxical status as hero and scapegoat, wise and ignorant, ugly and beautiful.³⁶

Nicias' definition of courage as wholly dependent on a supreme and magisterial sort of knowledge matches his boundless enthusiasm for technical learning and his faith in those who profess to teach. He had wanted to turn his son over to Socrates' tutelage; but Socrates continually proposed others to him and was unwilling to take up the task himself (200c8–d3). Socrates' rejection of Niceratus places a distance between himself and Nicias:³⁷ the general's study with Damon and interest in Socratic technique make it likely that Socrates would have been tutoring both father and son. But the 'Sophists' with whom Nicias is connected seem to have a closer relation to Plato's Socrates than others do. Nicias studies with Damon, who was, we are told, a pupil of Prodicus (197d2–3). When Nicias explains that "courage" (ἀνδρεία) and "boldness" (θρασύτης) are not the same thing, he makes a valid dis-

33) The term was vigorously contested in the fourth century, as scholars have recently pointed out: see A. W. Nightingale, *Genres in Dialogue: Plato and the Construct of Philosophy* (Cambridge 1995) 21–26, C. Eucken, *Isokrates: Seine Positionen in der Auseinandersetzung mit den zeitgenössischen Philosophen* (Berlin 1983) 6–7.

34) See S. Rosen, *Plato's Sophist: The Drama of Original and Image* (New Haven 1983) 24, 64–65, 140–41, 313.

35) Derrida (above, n. 14) 123 says of platonism and sophistic that "Par une indécision systématique, les parties et les partis échangent fréquemment leurs places respectives, imitent les formes et empruntent les chemins de l'adversaire."

36) See Derrida (above, n. 14) 133–36 on Socrates as marginal figure; also J. Farness, *Missing Socrates: The Problems of Plato's Writing* (Pennsylvania 1991) 27–30.

37) See Erler (above, n. 2) 61.

inction that Socrates attributes to the influence of Prodicus.³⁸ Prodicus' work on definitional precision has evident affinities to the favorite tactics of Plato's Socrates;³⁹ and some relationship between the two is suggested by the special treatment that Plato's Socrates gives Prodicus, in contrast to other 'Sophists.' With suspicious frequency, though always with a flavor of irony, Socrates claims Prodicus as his teacher,⁴⁰ cites his views with apparent approval,⁴¹ and implies considerable familiarity with this 'Sophist.'⁴² Damon, the student of Prodicus recommended by Socrates to Nicias, receives favorable mention in *Republic*. His expertise on musical terminology is first cited, as Prodicus' linguistic expertise often is, only to be rejected for its pedantry (400b1–c6); but later and very significantly, it is to Damon that Socrates attributes a theory of major importance to the dialogue, namely that changes in musical education determine political changes (424c5–6). Nicias' intellectual ties with these specially favored 'Sophists' justify a careful analysis of the degrees of closeness or separation between himself and Socrates.

Viktor Goldschmidt demonstrated that the dead ends in the aporetic dialogues are entailed by Socrates' choices of interlocutor, in that most of his partners are inexpert, uninitiated into the tactics of argumentation, and unfamiliar with Socrates. To the greater depth and philosophical clarity of the great dialogues *Phaedo* and *Republic* corresponds the intimacy of Socrates with Plato's brothers and the Pythagorean Cebes. Sophisticated amateurs such as Phaedrus, Critias, Ktesippus, or even Meno may fall somewhere in between, although none of them shows a familiarity with Socratic tactics equal to that of Nicias. The first indication that Nicias will be no ordinary interlocutor is his intervention at 187e6, where So-

38) For parallels to this definition see note 5, above.

39) J. de Romilly, *Les manies de Prodicus et la rigueur de la langue grecque*, *MH* 43 (1986) 1–18, has pointed out the moral associations of Prodicus' concern for definition.

40) *Crat.* 384b2–c1 (Socrates regrets not having been able to afford Prodicus' fifty-drachma lecture. He could only afford the one-drachma presentation.), *Meno* 96d6–7 (Gorgias has not sufficiently instructed Meno; nor Prodicus Socrates.), *Prot.* 341a4 (S. is well acquainted with the "divine wisdom" of P, being a pupil of his.).

41) *Phaedr.* 267b3 (Prodicus says that a text should be neither too long nor too short, but "moderate."), *Euthyd.* 305c6–7 (Prodicus identifies men like S.'s critic as "between the philosopher and the statesman.").

42) *Hipp. Mai.* 282c1–2 ("My comrade Prodicus"), *Theaet.* 151b5 (S. has handed many pupils over to P, and to other wise and divine men.), *Charm.* 163d4 (S. has heard P. making thousands of such distinctions about usage).

crates tries to get Lysimachus to impose impossible standards for a teacher of ἀρετή. Nicias recognizes that the aim of Socrates' apparently naive questioning is to force the victim to explain, in an echo of Socrates' words in *Gorgias*, "what is the manner of his current life and how he has lived in the past"⁴³, i. e., to make the men question themselves and their lives. Nicias' insightfulness is not typical of Socrates' victims, who usually respond to exposure of their weaknesses, as Laches does, with confusion and anger. If we consider the dialogue as an introductory or prefatory work, Nicias complements Socrates' presentation (186b8–c8) of his stance of ignorance, by revealing the εἰρωνεία behind the philosopher's disclaimers.

Even more surprising is Nicias' ability to recognize the value of the experience of Socratic elenchus. He states that there is nothing wrong with recognizing one's errors: it may make one more perceptive in the future.

I delight, Lysimachus, in associating with the man For me there is nothing unfamiliar or unpleasant in being tested (βασανίζεσθαι) by Socrates: I have realized for some time that, with Socrates present, our discussion would not be about the boys, but about ourselves. (188a6–c1)

The value Nicias places upon the painful experience of Socratic "testing" is unexampled. In *Gorgias* Socrates actually defines the elenchus of Callicles as "punishment" (κολάζεσθαι), complementing his own argument that punishment is a good that we must welcome, if it corrects error.⁴⁴ Βασανίζεσθαι can also mean 'torture'; but in Nicias' case this torment is "not unpleasant," because he recognizes the benefit to be derived from it. Nicias' rebuke to Laches underlines the difference between them: Laches has an attitude that is human (ἀνθρωπεῖον 200b1) but deplorable, in that he looks, not to himself and his own ignorance, but to others, in a spirit of competition. Laches is better able to spot pretension in others than Nicias is; but he cannot see the same flaws in himself.

Nicias is called into the discussion only after Laches has succumbed to bafflement. The clever general has his response already formulated: "I have been thinking for some time, Socrates, that you have not defined courage correctly." Nicias states that "Each of us

43) 187e10–188a2: ὄντινα τρόπον νῦν τε ζῆ καὶ ὄντινα τὸν παρεληλυθότα βίον βεβίωκεν. Cf. ὄντινα χρῆν τρόπον ζῆν, *Gorg.* 500c3–4.

44) See A. N. Michelini, Πολλὴ ἀγροικία: Rudeness and Irony in Plato's *Gorgias*, *CPh* 93 (1998) 57.

is good in the things about which he is wise and bad in those about which he is ignorant.”⁴⁵ The coincidence of knowledge and virtue is a frequent topic in Platonic dialogues. Nicias claims that he has “often heard” Socrates saying something like this (194d1), and it has been suggested that Plato means to imply that the historical Socrates really did express himself in this way.⁴⁶ But the formula in which some view of Socrates has “often” been heard before by the participants is used in *Republic* and *Phaedo* to introduce key concepts in a casual manner. In *Phaedo* similar formulas preface the most direct reference to the Forms to appear in the large ‘early’ group of dialogues (100b1–9). It is Socrates, however, who usually uses this formula.⁴⁷ Only the Pythagorean Cebes among the other interlocutors introduces an important concept by remembering what Socrates has “often said.”⁴⁸ When an unprompted interlocutor in an aporetic dialogue uses this trope as his opening sally in the discussion, he stands out as specially knowledgeable in Socratic techniques and ideas.⁴⁹

Both generals offer definitions of courage that have much to recommend them. Laches’ “wise endurance” (φρόνιμος καρτερία) has echoes in *Republic* and elsewhere.⁵⁰ Pohlenz argued that Laches fails because he confuses technical competence with the higher, moral and evaluative knowledge that is required for courage.⁵¹ Nicias’ definition, “knowledge of what is to be feared and what is not to be feared,” supplies this lack. The craftsman (δημιουργός) can, if he is a doctor, tell what will save or not save the patient; but whether it is better for the patient to live or die does not belong to mere medical knowledge (195c9–d9). This claim is echoed by So-

45) The formulation is rather vague, but Socrates rephrases it as “courage is a kind of wisdom” (194d9).

46) Kahn (above, n. 4) 86.

47) Dieterle (above, n. 3) 101 n. 2, cites Rep. 504e8, 505a3; Phaed. 76d8.

48) Phaedo 72e: Cebes is prompted by Socrates’ summary of the doctrine of metempsychosis; and his contribution, the doctrine of ἀνάμνησις, would presumably be appealing to a follower of Philolaus.

49) On the high quality of Nicias’ contributions see P. Friedländer, *Platon V.2: Die platonischen Schriften, Erste Periode* (Berlin 1964) 39f., and P. Woodruff, *Expert Knowledge in the Apology and Laches: What a General Needs to Know*, *Proc. of the Boston Area Colloquium* 3 (1987) 104.

50) See note 5, above.

51) Pohlenz (above, n. 2) 25–27; see esp. 25: “Nicht ein technisches Wissen, sondern . . . eine Einsicht in die wichtigsten Probleme des Menschenlebens, in das Wertverhältnis der Güter des Lebens macht die καρτερία zur Tapferkeit”. See also Friedländer (above, n. 49) 39; Dieterle (above, n. 3) 64–75; Erler (above, n. 2) 111–12.

crates in a number of important passages. In *Charmides* he uses the analogy of the physician in just this way at a key point, as he forces Critias to reformulate his attempt to define σωφοροσύνη in terms of self-reflexive knowledge.⁵² In *Euthydemus* Socrates argues that knowledge for production, e.g. of health, is subordinate to knowledge of proper use (289a4–a7), a knowledge that turns out to belong to the political art (βασιλική τέχνη 291b5). The same argument – that the highest knowledge, defined as the political art, decides the καιρός in which each action must take place, determining what is best – reemerges in the late *Politicus* (304b4–305a7).⁵³ Nicias, without prompting from Socrates, has introduced a motif that is central to Platonic thought, a rare show of initiative for any interlocutor. But his promptitude as a pupil is related to his key defect: Nicias' over-confidence in the ability of experts, and in himself as the pupil of experts, makes him liable to the kind of ignorance that Socrates most deplors, the assumption of knowledge.

The flaw that commentators have found in Laches' reasoning, the confusion between the "ordinary" arts and the super-ordinate, moral and political arts, cannot be dismissed as a simple mistake, since the tensions in Plato's treatment of crafts are evident and persistent. The use of the arts (τέχναι) as an analogy for higher knowledge necessarily involves a central point in Platonic ontology, the gulf between, and analogic relation between, ideal and real.⁵⁴ Plato's Socrates persistently uses the ordinary arts as a device of argument; and, even after Socrates moves into the background, the Eleatic Stranger continues to employ the same, familiar paradigms.⁵⁵ Yet the infinite inferiority of the lowly craftsman to the master of the art of government is plainly apparent, not least in the political stance of *Republic*, which would deny craftsmen any role in government. Recently an increasing number of scholars have viewed the super-ordinate art as an impossible ideal toward which the Platonic protreptic directs an endless, erotic quest (φιλο-

52) For the parallel with *Laches*, see Erler (above, n. 2) 184, 237.

53) See Friedländer (above, n. 49) 40: "Das ‚Gute‘, die ‚königliche Kunst‘ des *Euthydem* und des *Politikos*, tritt von fern in den Gesichtskreis." Erler (above, n. 2) 237, points also to *Rep.* 531c–532b, which completes the argument in *Charmides* by identifying the art to which all crafts must be subordinated as dialectic.

54) See R. Patterson, *Image and Reality in Plato's Metaphysics* (Indianapolis 1985) passim.

55) See *Pol.* 293b, 296a8–97b3, and 297e8–9, where the Stranger refers to the necessity of "returning again" to the analogies of the doctor and the pilot.

σοφία).⁵⁶ But the wholly aporetic view of these works overlooks their function in service of a “radical cultural enterprise.”⁵⁷

The search for the “political art” is basic to Plato’s philosophical endeavor;⁵⁸ the possibility or impossibility of its existence is one of the equivocations upon which the contradictory persona of Socrates is based. The paradox is inherent in the figure of Socrates, who disavows knowledge (ironically?) and at the same time praises (ironically?) intellectual precision as a guarantee of moral value and social efficacy. Both positions are sketched out in this dialogue. The speciously aporetic conclusion fulfills the summarizing function of an introduction, by hinting at the central connection of knowledge and virtue, without unfolding its meaning in any detail. The difficulty in the craft analogy is similarly both exposed and hidden.

The duality of Socrates, reflected in the face-off between the two generals, may also determine another trait scholars have noted in this dialogue, its emphasis on pairs of speakers and the doubleness of its argument, which reaches essentially the same conclusion twice.⁵⁹ The sophisticated Nicias, familiar with both Sophistic and Socratic techniques, represents one side of Plato’s complex and elusive protagonist. The other side is presented by the naive, bluff Laches, who is able to spot pretension and who insists on concrete evidence of the speaker’s competence, before he accepts an argument. In Plato’s Socrates, these contradictions are united: the intellectual

56) See particularly D. Roochnik’s recent study ‘Of Art and Wisdom: Plato’s Understanding of *Technē*’ (Pennsylvania 1996); also among American scholars who have been influenced by the views of Leo Strauss, see D. A. Hyland, *Finitude and Transcendence in the Platonic Dialogues* (Albany 1995) 88–94. Dieterle (above, n. 3) 129–31, tried to resolve the conflicts in *Laches* in a similar way. But see also Ferber (above, n. 26) 17: “Er ist und bleibt Aporetiker,” also 20, 29–30; and a more nuanced approach by M. Frede, *Plato’s Arguments and the Dialogue Form*, in: J. C. Klagge and N. D. Smith (eds.), *Methods of Interpreting Plato and his Dialogues*, OSAPh Suppl. Vol. (1992) 201–19. For an attempt to find a “third way” between these alternatives see the introduction by F. J. Gonzalez to ‘The Third Way: New Directions in Platonic Studies’ (Lanham, MD 1995) 15: “Plato’s philosophy seems to exist between two opposites.”

57) Kahn (above, n. 4) xiii, Plato aims to “alter the hearts and minds of his readers.” See also Patterson (above, n. 54) 163, on Plato’s “radically counter-intuitive philosophy,” in which the changeable real is treated as an imperfect sketch of the unseen ideal.

58) Kahn, citing the Seventh Letter, has pointed out political motivation as a constant in Plato’s career (above, n. 4, 48–51).

59) See Kohák and Hoerber (above, n. 1); and most recently Schmid (above, n. 28) 33–36.

sophistication and willingness to learn that Socrates shares with Nicias is, in the philosopher's case, flavored with a complex irony, since, like Laches, Socrates recognizes the enormous gap that tends to separate pretension from performance.

University of Cincinnati

Ann N. Michelini