

The Best Part of Valor:
A Study of Plato's Treatment of Courage in the Laches and the Republic

by

Linda Rabieh

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
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in the University of Toronto

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Graduate Department of Political Science in the University of Toronto

Abstract

Beginning from the finding that contemporary liberalism offers little in response to the probing but ultimately flawed critique of traditional courage that feminist political theorists advance, I argue that there exists an urgent need today to reexamine courage. For despite its undeniably dangerous excesses, I show that courage is critical to both the survival and health even of peaceable liberal democracies and that we therefore need to explore both its risks and its rewards. I turn to Plato because he provides a balanced but richly complex treatment of courage. While it is alive and sympathetic to the multi-dimensional phenomenon of courage as ordinarily understood, i.e., as the virtue that enables one to act well in the face of dangers, Plato's treatment yields the paradoxical thesis that courage is both the cause and the consequence of wisdom. The Laches and the Republic together illuminate what courage is and why courage is needed to understand what it is. Carefully following the development of Socrates' conversation in the Laches with two Athenian generals who disagree with each other and even with themselves about courage, I argue that the generals' confusion stems from their deep-seated hopes about it, namely, that courage be both noble in itself and also good for the courageous individual. Their unwillingness or inability to examine these hopes is evidence, I argue, of a certain cowardice. Socrates' exploration in the Republic of spiritedness, which he characterizes as the psychological substratum of courage, shows why it takes (an incompletely developed) courage to examine the opinions that underlie its ordinary

manifestations. By comparing the courage of the Republic's guardians with that of its future philosophers, I argue that a failure to confront such opinions produces a courage that is confused and hence deficient; genuine courage requires at the very least knowledge of why it is worth possessing and exercising. But however much the refined spiritedness that underlies the guardians' courage falls short of the highest kind of courage, I argue that it still deserves respect as both politically reliable and suited for acquiring the wisdom that is the source of genuine courage.

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Introduction: the Problem of Courage

Courage is an essential political virtue and should thus be of serious interest to anyone concerned with politics. Indeed, at least because the courage of its citizenry is crucial to the very survival of any nation, courage is arguably the virtue that nations celebrate more than any other, including justice. Consider the lyrics of the national anthems even of liberal democracies, whose peaceable inclinations are remarkable from a historical perspective. Citizens singing the Canadian anthem repeatedly profess that they “stand on guard” for their country. Similarly, bravery is the one virtue extolled by the American anthem; the Stars and Stripes wave over the home of “the brave” rather than of the just. Courage may thus reasonably claim a certain primacy over justice because however important the latter is to citizenship, citizenship depends upon a nation’s existence, which in turn depends upon the willingness of citizens to risk their lives for it.

The reason, however, that courage is so highly ranked among civic virtues is not merely the fact that it is useful. For nations do not conceive of their soldiers as mere tools of war, as materiel to be expended when national emergencies arise, no different from bombs and bullets. Rather, nations are keenly aware that the courageous individual often pays a high price for his courage, and so they regard courage less as useful than as laudable, indeed, as worthy of the highest civic honors. Whereas justice means respecting and contributing to the common good, i.e., a good in which the just individual shares, courage means the willingness to endanger one’s own good and even one’s own life for others’ sake. Nations especially celebrate courage because it signifies one’s devotion to the country above all else. The highest honor bestowed by the American government is the Congressional Medal of Honor, which is awarded to someone “who

distinguishes himself conspicuously by gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty.”¹

To honor such gallantry and intrepidity, moreover, is not merely to go through the motion of an old practice that has no place in our modern world. Examples of outstanding courage stir and uplift modern hearts and souls. We are naturally moved upon learning such stories as that of one recent posthumous recipient of the Medal of Honor, First Lieutenant John Robert Fox, who during World War II ordered artillery strikes on his own position as it was being overrun by the German army.² The popular imagination seems no less stirred today than it was in the past by depictions of noble deeds in battle. Films that memorialize soldiers’ heroic actions, such as the recent “Saving Private Ryan,” continue to hold us powerfully in their grip. And these sentiments are not confined to the darkness of the theatre; they are expressed in public and powerful ways. Consider, for example, the advantage that war heroes such as Bob Kerry and John McCain have in politics. Voters view their heroism in war as evidence of their good character; having risked their lives for their country, they seem to have demonstrated that they are more concerned with the nation’s good than for their own personal advancement and enrichment. Bill Clinton’s deficiencies in this area support the point. During his bid for the Democratic Presidential nomination in 1992, the most serious doubts about Clinton’s trustworthiness were raised when it became known that he first attempted to avoid the draft altogether and then only made himself available for it, according to his own statements, to maintain his future political viability.

¹ Above and beyond, that is, even the call of justice.

² Ringle 1997.

Our admiration for heroic courage is complex, however. Although strong evidence suggests that we naturally admire it, problems attend heroic courage and our admiration for it, and thoughtful human beings cannot help but be perplexed by them. Much as we admire the courageous individual who confronts death nobly, we do not know quite how to think of his actions. On the one hand, while heroic action often costs the hero his happiness, we admire rather than pity him; we view his action not as a pure sacrifice but as an example of his having ascended to a higher plane of human existence. On the other hand, if we do not pity the courageous hero, neither do we simply congratulate him for his achievement; instead, we offer tears, monuments, and memorials both in recognition of his excellence and as a kind of compensation for his willingness to sacrifice it. Parades on Veterans' or Memorial Day are usually very solemn affairs where citizens remember with a mixture of awe and sadness both great virtue and terrible losses. We recognize that many of those who have risked their lives on the battlefield have sacrificed for the rest of us in a way for which they can never be adequately compensated.

This complex response to courage compels us to raise searching questions about courage, for upon reflection, this response reveals a difficulty with courage's status as a virtue, let alone as the virtue. We normally think of virtues as qualities worth having for our own sake, on the ground that they contribute to and even constitute our true well-being and flourishing. Courage, however, receives high praise because, as one contemporary writer puts it, "to freely permit one's own destruction in lonely and terrible circumstances... seems a uniquely difficult type of act" (Walton 1986, 9). Insofar as the reason for which courage is praised conflicts with the view that virtue is an integral component of human flourishing, one may legitimately wonder to what degree or in what

way courage can be called a virtue. This question emerges particularly vividly in Aristotle's illuminating treatment of courage in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (henceforth NE). Having argued that virtue is a constitutive element of happiness (NE 1098a7-17), Aristotle begins his discussion of specific virtues by considering courage. His treatment brings out with particular force the tension just mentioned. Aristotle does not shrink from presenting the willing sacrifice involved in courage, observing that, although "death and wounds will be painful for a courageous man and he will suffer them unwillingly," such a man will nonetheless endure them because "it is noble to do so or base to do otherwise" (NE 1117b7-9).³ Indeed, he emphasizes the greatness of the sacrifice that courageous individuals must sometimes make:

The closer a man is to having virtue in its entirety and the happier he is, the more pain will death bring him. Life is more worth living for such a man than for anyone else, and he stands to lose the greatest goods, and realizes that fact, and this is painful. (NE 1117b9-13)

Precisely because virtue is constitutive of happiness, the losses that courage can entail for a courageous individual are all the greater according to Aristotle. Yet, the fact that courage can lead to the loss of one's life, and therewith of the happiness that exercising the virtues is supposed to sustain, does not lead Aristotle to conclude that courage is not a virtue. That a tension exists between courage and happiness is not a fatal blow to courage because the view that virtue is somehow part of happiness is not the only relevant perspective.

³ All quotations from the Nicomachean Ethics are from Ostwald's translation, modified where appropriate.

Taking his cues from respectable opinion (see NE 1095b4-9), Aristotle affirms that the end of virtue is “acting nobly” (NE 1115b13), and it is at least arguable that acting nobly requires a certain disregard for one’s own happiness. Indeed, Aristotle says more than that courageous individuals endure death and wounds because doing so is noble; of the courageous man who fully realizes how much his deeds may cost him, he says that “he is no less courageous for that, and perhaps rather more so, since he chooses noble deeds in war in return for suffering pain” (NE 1117b13-14). As disturbing as it is to entertain the possibility that suffering pain is the lot of those who choose noble deeds, people’s common reaction to witnessing or learning about someone’s courageous acts seems to confirm it. We shed tears because we suspect that the courageous individual has suffered something terrible for his noble deeds. Aristotle’s treatment of courage starkly presents a problem inherent in the human longing for happiness: we want to be happy, yet we think that true happiness means leading a virtuous rather than a merely long and pleasant life, but insofar as it is noble, virtue seems to conflict with the happiness we seek. It is perhaps partly in order to inspire reflection on this conundrum that Aristotle insists that courage has its place above all on the battlefield, where “a man is faced by the greatest and noblest of dangers” (NE 1115a29-30; cf. 1095b9-13, 1099a22-30). Battlefield or heroic courage is, thus, not only a virtue worthy of examination in its own right. It may well be the virtue that most raises the question of virtue. This may explain why Aristotle leads off his discussion of the virtues in the Ethics with courage.

It has become difficult, however, to explore the pressing issues at the heart of battlefield or heroic courage, because there is a presumption held by many today that it is

not a virtue at all. Put simply, heroic courage has itself come under fire. Many contemporary scholars and writers argue that it and the admiration for it are in fact manifestations of unhealthy longings. And because they maintain that heroic courage is a vice instead of a virtue, its critics focus on means to eradicate it rather than on its character. Dennis Walton expresses the core of the serious reservations about traditional courage.

To many of us... courage as a virtue may seem but a tattered remnant of outdated ideals of chivalry — a macho-military quality that has outgrown its usefulness in civilized society. To some, courage is not a virtue but only an indelicate reminder of violence, war, domination, or other unpleasant conditions. (1986, 18).

As Walton's remarks suggest, the critique of heroic courage is not limited to a critique of its extremes or perverted forms; it is a critique both of old-fashioned courage and of all of its attendant qualities, such as toughness, love of honor, single-minded devotion to a cause, and, most of all, the willingness to sacrifice one's life for that cause. At the same time, however, none of its critics denies the importance of some form of courage. What they wish to do is to separate their preferred model of courage from the traditional one. But if courage — of some kind — is a virtue, can we be sure that such a virtue would be free of the qualities listed above? Can courage be severed from heroic courage? And should it be? Most importantly, have these critics fully come to terms with the admiration most people have for heroic courage? A brief look at the critique of heroic courage and at way in which its critics would rid us of the admiration for it suggests that they have not sufficiently thought through either the nature of courage or

the full meaning and implication of human responses to it. If this is true, then the value of heroic courage and its attendant qualities is still at issue. And since many are presently calling for its demise, heroic courage now more than ever needs a thorough exploration.

Feminist political theorists, psychologists, sociologists and students of gender have raised doubts about the high estimation in which citizens continue to hold heroic courage. Many among their ranks argue that heroic courage is an ideal that breeds various kinds of violence — from toughness and aggressiveness in the schoolyard to violence towards women and even murder. Among contemporary educators, for example, it is a commonplace view that images of superheroes and macho toys encourage violent aggressiveness in young boys (Sommers 2000, 48, 84-86). Others focus on the way in which the military ideal, which embodies traditional heroic courage, breeds violence that spills over into civilian life, particularly towards women.⁴ By far the most common form of violence that critics claim admiration for heroic courage breeds, however, is war itself. Leading feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan claims that the model of manhood embodied by the military man, which represents qualities such as heroism, competitiveness, love of honor and aggressiveness, makes men enamored of war and eager to embrace it (1996, 251). Nancy Hartsock goes further, arguing that intoxication

⁴ They argue that because military personnel — in war simulation as well as in actual combat— demean their enemies by referring to them as women and speak of their military objective as “overwhelming and penetrating” the enemy, military culture inevitably creates a climate in which men see and treat women in the degrading ways in which they become accustomed to thinking of the enemy (McBride 1995, 40, 55, 67-70; see also Held, 1993 144-148).

with ideals of manly courage is the reason why for many men, “[r]ather than war being politics by other means, political action... is simply war by other means” (1989, 147). And this “war by other means” threatens to unleash war in the primary sense. According to Hartsock, if a leader is attracted to war, this attraction can distort his (or her) view of the appropriate use of the military. As evidence for this she points to the effect that the call to honor and glory has on foreign policy. She maintains that American foreign policy positions from the decision to withdraw forces from Vietnam slowly, because of the need for “peace with honor,” to a tough stand against terrorism can be attributed to the influence of the heroic ideal on politics (1989, 147).⁵ To add further proof to the claim that such calls persist, Hartsock cites Ernest Becker’s exhortation that “our central calling, our main task on this planet is the heroic” and that “society as a whole should be understood as a vehicle for heroism” (146).

Wendy Brown offers a similar assessment of the effect that celebrating heroic courage has on politics. She argues that traditional manly ideals have “saturated” all male-dominated political institutions, i.e., “all past political constructions,” with “highly problematic, often dangerous, ideals and practices” (1988, 12; see also Held 1993, 138 and Elshtain 1981, 346-48). According to Brown, we are presently facing nothing less than “a crisis,” as these ideals and practices have brought us “to the brink of geopolitical and ecological disaster” (1988, 6). Although she concedes that liberal regimes are

⁵ In support of Hartsock’s claim, an American military official has suggested that the American stealth bomber that was recently shot down by Yugoslav forces was rendered more vulnerable than necessary by the military’s insistence that it be painted a manly, but more visible, black (Vistica 1999).

generally less warlike than their predecessors, she maintains that they are still driven by a dangerously high regard for honor, glory and heroism. She cites as evidence for her claim the fact that such ideals distort even the liberal state's priorities, for despite claims to the contrary, Brown maintains that "it is for 'national honor' that the state sacrifices its youth in foreign military interventions." And while conceding that "[o]urs may not be a polity that cultivates the pursuit of heroic deeds and honor," she adds that "to the extent that public figures still invoke the language of heroism, it is usually to rationalize and glorify the sacrifice of life for empty causes, whether it be marines in Lebanon or schoolteachers hitched to the project of conquering yet another 'frontier' – the domain beyond planet Earth" (184).⁶

While critics of heroic courage take issue with it from a variety of different perspectives, they agree that it is unnatural, or at least unhealthy, to see heroic courage as a virtue. They argue that the traditional view of heroic courage is a distortion of genuine human concerns, which distortion has been fostered by certain male pathologies.⁷ Many

⁶ To the objection that the U.S. Marines were in Lebanon to serve the national interest rather than for "empty" honor, Brown could respond that a desire for honor distorted American leaders' understanding of the national interest.

⁷ The characterization of heroic courage as a primarily male phenomenon is not confined to its contemporary critics. The best translation of the Greek word andreia, which is normally translated simply as "courage," might well be "manliness" (insofar as the word refers to the virtue, rather than merely the characteristics, of a man), for the root of the word is anêr, or "man"; this etymology implies that, at least according to the ancient Greeks, courage is above all the virtue of a man, i.e., that the courageous

feminist critics of heroic courage take as the starting point for their analysis Simone de Beauvoir, whose account of men's pursuit of "transcendence" suggests why heroic courage is so attractive to men. In de Beauvoir's portrait, men pursue transcendence because, free from the burdens of pregnancy and childbirth and thus the confines of the world of "natural functions," they seek "activity" or "creativity" in their lives (1989, 63-64). Ultimately, she argues, through the process of subduing nature, man encounters a realm beyond necessity, a realm, de Beauvoir implies, in which he can satisfy his desire to affirm his human existence.⁸ And man particularly finds dignity, or transcends his animal nature, through his encounters with danger. Discovering in himself a capacity to take on great risks, man finds proof that he cares for more than mere life, and he comes to see this as the sign of his superiority to all other beings (including woman), who seem to care only for survival and preservation. Brown and Hartsock agree with de Beauvoir's depiction of men's relationship to the activities of ordinary life. Brown claims that men see those aspects of "maintaining and sustaining life" such as feeding, clothing, cleaning, and reproduction as animalistic and think that to be human means to strive for something other than survival (1988, 192). Heroic courage becomes the most important and attractive virtue for men because "the willingness to risk death is the proof that life has been discarded as a fundamental value. To be willing to die for something is considered more glorious than to be willing to live for something.... A real man lays his life on the line" (182; emphasis in original). Hartsock also emphasizes the powerful connection

individual is not merely an excellent human being: he is a manly or macho man (cf. Salkever 1991, 167).

⁸ For a similar account, see Arendt 1958, 19, 31, 36-7, 199; 1968, 151-56.

between heroic action and disregard for the activities of mundane life. She maintains that men believe they become worthy of the title “hero” only if they are able to transcend their concern with mere life (1989, 137-44). As a result, she says, “heroic action must be disconnected from necessity, especially from concern with daily subsistence and thus from bodily, moral existence” (144).

Unlike de Beauvoir, however, who glorifies the pursuit of heroic courage (see 1953, 65, 684, 719), most contemporary feminists who write about it criticize not only the actual effects of pursuing heroic courage but also the opinions that both drive and accompany such a pursuit. According to Brown, men’s attempts to distinguish themselves as human beings through displays of heroic courage inevitably make them despise the things connected with survival, which they have “ideologically and practically divided off from the activity of creating history and meaning” (1988, 192). Men, she argues, do not merely seek activities that transcend mere survival; they have contempt for everything concerned with it. This means that when risking one’s life is esteemed so highly, attempting to preserve and nurture life, a concern ordinarily crucial to women, will necessarily appear as weak and trivial. According to this argument, where heroic courage is prized, women’s traditional concerns, such as compassion for the weak and commitment to nonviolent means of resolving disputes, will be marginalized, if not actively despised. And these are not merely women’s traditional concerns; many contemporary feminists argue that they form the only possible basis for a humane and just politics (see Elshtain 1981, 346; Held 1993, 149-59; Ruddick 1990, 232-34).

If being concerned with the pain and suffering of particular individuals is associated with women, however, then a man is not a “real man” if he embraces such concerns.

Men who are raised in a world that depreciates the concerns voiced by women learn to accept the effects of war in an abstract and impersonal way (Held 1993, 146), and this capacity to ignore how war or other harsh actions affects particular lives makes it easier for men to risk themselves and others for intangible ends, such as honor, glory. We have seen above what critics argue are the deleterious political effects that result from the contemporary attraction to heroic courage. History and literature, they suggest, are littered with similar examples. Jean Bethke Elshtain focuses on examples of such intense dedication to a cause that ordinary human life and especially family life is ignored (1981, 30). She cites Plato's Republic, in which all other concerns are subordinated to the establishment of a fully just city, as an instance of such a blind fixation on noble ideals. The Republic, she says, "exemplifies a purely abstract vision of a future condition... [where] the traditional web of social ties and relations has been cast aside in order to serve a larger purpose" (39-40). Carol Gilligan points out that the Biblical story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac perfectly illustrates this kind of male extremism: only a man, she says, could have such "blind willingness to sacrifice people to the truth" (1982, 63).

Critics of heroic courage, however, are not concerned only about the harm that the mentality associated with it wreaks upon others. Many emphasize the harm that this mindset causes men themselves, suggesting that to strive for heroic courage is to sacrifice individual happiness. To treat heroic courage as a virtue is, according to many critics, to treat detachment, harshness and tough-mindedness as virtues and thus to fail to see the way in which these qualities distance men from themselves and their own humanity. According to Held, this effect is exemplified by military training, because teaching a

soldier to be able to “dehumanize other people and make them into targets” also teaches him to “cut himself off from his own feelings of caring and connectedness” (1993, 141). Carol Gilligan warns that what she calls this “culture of manhood” encourages boys to “hide their humanity and sensitivity” and thereby “impedes [their] capacity to feel their own and other people’s hurt, to know their own and other people’s sadness”; as a result, she claims, men are “psychologically and morally” diminished (1996, 251). This view is widespread among contemporary psychologists. William Pollack argues that men are “emotionally hollowed out” because they “cover their need for dependency and hide their natural feelings of love and caring behind the mask of masculine autonomy and strength” (1998, 11-13; see also Kindlon, 143-49). He decries the fact that men think that they have to be “sturdy oaks,” and he insists that for a man to be psychically healthy, he should not be “called upon to be the tough one...to be hardened in this way” (50).

These critics of heroic courage helpfully elucidate how destructive the infatuation with it can be both to political life and to men themselves. But they aim to do more. Critics of heroic courage see it as irredeemably problematic and seek to eliminate the admiration for it altogether. This goal, however, reveals most clearly the limitations of their critique. Since for many critics, the admiration for heroic courage is a male phenomenon, their solution to the problem consists of turning men away from the transcendent to the immanent or natural world. This way to accomplish this task, it is argued, is to make childbirth and rearing the focus of both private and political life. Sara Ruddick argues that motherhood provides the answer. According to Ruddick, motherhood (or just the capacity for it) entails a way of thinking and acting that makes heroic action much less attractive to women. “Maternal thinking,” she argues, is

“incompatible with military strategy”; it is instead “consonant with pacifist commitment to non-violence” (Ruddick 1984, 233). Its core is a unique appreciation for life that comes from giving birth to and rearing a child. This appreciation, she argues, has been historically muted in Western thought, which treats the body as a “recalcitrant adversary” and a “distraction from worthier ‘transcendental’ pursuits” (1989, 188). Motherhood thus offers a model for how to diminish men’s reverence for courage. For motherhood emphasizes life and therefore the preservation rather than the risk of life. Ruddick argues that if men were to take an equal role in early child care, they would develop the same priorities and concerns that women have. And men would be fundamentally changed by the experience. They would come to appreciate more, and perhaps to prefer, life in this world to the possibility of transcendence (186).

That “mothering,” or immersion in the natural or immanent world can be an adequate antidote to the longings that inspire heroic action is hardly obvious. Can mothering, for example, satisfy the aim to live a distinctly human life? Ruddick places at the center of human life preserving the young, fostering their physical, emotional and intellectual growth, and shaping them so that they are acceptable to society as a whole (1984, 215; see also Held 1993, 159). Can a concern for the young supplant the longing for a humanly fulfilling life for oneself? After all, we care for the young not only so they can in turn care for the young of the future but most importantly so that they can themselves find and enjoy intrinsically joyful and satisfying activities.

Marilyn French’s proposal for a new vision of human life is similarly incomplete. She insists that only through developing a more intimate connection with their progeny will men no longer see the natural world as hostile and threatening (1985, 67).

According to her, a feminist vision of human life involves focusing on our earliest experience of being cared for; if we can learn from our satisfaction at being “fed, held, warmed, and protected,” we will, she argues, “continue to seek out such experiences in later life” and learn “how to do the same for others” (536, see also 541). But can such objectives constitute a truly human happiness? This vision does not seem to address fully the human longing to accomplish more in life than the satisfaction of our needs, the longing to find some humanly fulfilling activity. For all her criticisms of the manly attraction to heroic courage, Brown rebels at the notion that a satisfying human life can be found within the functions of motherhood. Mothering cannot satisfy the aching desire to have a meaning in our mortal lives that is significant and lasting, for child-rearing affords insufficient scope for the full operation of our capacities (1988, 202). She maintains that being a mother “no matter how freely arranged or how deeply valued by others is not enough for any of us.”⁹

Even if men could be taught to “mother” in the same way as women, would this extinguish the admiration and respect that human beings have for those who display traditional heroic courage? In other words, in a world in which the highest goals are creating and preserving life, what would be the posture towards the courage that requires risking one’s life (see Held, 1993, 159)? It might be easy to dismiss the impressiveness

⁹ Feminists as diverse as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, who says that “[w]ork previously undertaken out of economic necessity has become central to identity” (1995, 120; see also 113, 121), and Shulamith Firestone, who advocates freeing women “from the tyranny of their biology by any and every means necessary” (1971, 206), echo this sentiment.

of the courage of an Achilles, who wildly hungers for a noble confrontation with death. But what about the courage of a Martin Luther King? In King's famous 1968 speech, "I've Been to the Mountaintop," he says that he, like anybody, wants to live a long life. But he goes on to say that, "longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will." He proceeds to say that although he suspects that he will not live to see "the promised land," he is "happy tonight" and "not fearing any man" (1986, 244).¹⁰ These words illuminate some commonality between his and the more extreme and problematic courage of Achilles. Does not King reveal a willingness to face death in his struggle? King's courage is quieter and more thoughtful than that of Achilles. But his example suggests that the dedication to a noble cause even at the risk of his life is a crucial part of courage and our admiration for it. Consider how citizens feel about veterans on Veterans' or Memorial Day. Their sentiments suggest an underlying belief that battlefield courage — which even King, different though he was from Achilles, may be said to have exhibited — is still the core of courage because it is here that one consciously faces the greatest fear and risks the most for a cause.¹¹ Ruddick's

¹⁰ This last statement was portentous, as King was assassinated the day after he uttered it.

¹¹ Indeed, evidence that this is a genuinely human admiration is the fact that many women are moved and inspired by, although perhaps not as eager to demonstrate, acts of heroic courage. The desire among some contemporary women to serve in the military is usually downplayed by critics of heroic courage. In spite of the encouragement they offer women to pursue careers formerly dominated by men, many feminist critics are dubious about the military, doubting in this one instance that women could truly be

and French's high praise for motherhood and other natural, as opposed to transcendent, endeavors does not adequately account for the inherent respect human beings feel for those who are willing to risk their lives.

Even Wendy Brown, who explicitly emphasizes her respect for courage, fails to deal adequately with the deep and abiding admiration human beings feel for those who courageously risk their lives. While Brown argues that we need a "post-masculinist politics," she does not think that this politics must deny a place for courage, which she maintains is "one of the most important and inspiring elements of human and political existence" (205). But whatever she may find salutary in courage, she gives short shrift to what is ordinarily held to be "most important and inspiring" about courage. Put simply, Brown never mentions those instances of courage where individuals risk their lives and why such courage is inspiring. Rather than explore these questions, she takes issue with what she calls the "traditional view" in which courage "has been the willingness to risk death for an abstract aim and the effort to defy mortality through placing the body in peril." Indeed, she maintains that in contrast to the kind of courage that she sketches, the "traditional formulation of courage as risking life can be seen as very crude and simplistic" (206). Brown, however, devotes only one paragraph to sketching a "post-masculinist courage." She says simply that such a courage "alters boundaries" and that it

attracted to a career that has long held great appeal for men.¹¹ Ruddick, for example, seems to try to explain this attraction away by suggesting that women seek military careers only because "[f]or women confined in domestic life, war offers real education, new training and job experience" (1984, 257).

does so not by “simply smashing or denying them” but by setting “identity and security at risk in order to bring forth new possibility” (*ibid.*).

Brown does not, however, appear to mean that risking “identity and security” in order to “alter boundaries,” “engage with nature,” or “relinquish individual control in both public and intimate settings” means risking one’s life (206). Rather, she maintains that a “post-masculinist courage” would be “the courage to sustain life, to fight for freedom as bearers of life and hence of possibility” (*ibid.*). What the posture of those who display this “post-masculinist courage” would be towards risking their lives for their country is unclear. When Brown concludes her brief discussion of a “post-masculinist courage” by saying that a human courage must lie in “distinctively human things — intellectual and emotional life, building collective existence, inventing new possibility, stretching horizons” (206-207), she may speak of a part of or something like courage. But she misconstrues the nature of courage by obscuring the fact that it inspires precisely because its exercise requires human beings to risk everything. The reason that Brown finds courage “inspiring” is because the commitment to “alter boundaries,” “engage with nature” and “fight for freedom and possibility” reveals that an individual cares about more than his own life and well-being. But the very fact that human beings appear to admire a life that cares more about survival and well-being suggests that the traditional kind of courage has a more powerful and persistent allure than Brown acknowledges.

Brown’s account suffers from yet a further problem. She tries to depreciate that part of courage that longs for sacrifice. But since sacrifice or the willingness to sacrifice is always a part of courage, her account has the effect of merely slighting the fact that this longing usually manifests itself as a longing for noble sacrifice. Brown maintains that the

longing for heroic courage is really a longing for something that “fully taps creative capacities... [and] our impulse to exert power and to distinguish ourselves” (205). She is critical not of these longings themselves but only of the belief that heroic courage is an adequate way to satisfy them. If Brown’s account of the longings that inspire one to courageous action is correct, courage becomes a more dangerous phenomenon. Those who are seeking simply to fulfill their desire for creativity, power and distinction might legitimately wonder why courage should be limited by a concern “to sustain life”? But has Brown adequately and accurately depicted these longings?

Brown’s account, like those of the other critics we have discussed, abstracts from an important element in the reverence for traditional, heroic courage. In miscasting this reverence as the desire to escape necessity, these critics fail to recognize a crucial aspect of its character. However true it may be that human beings wish to be creative, to exert power and to distinguish themselves, this wish seems to be governed by another, more crucial consideration, namely, by a concern for the kind of mark left on the world as a sign of their creativity, power or distinction (cf. Brown 1988, 202); it is hardly insignificant whether one is remembered as a hero or a villain. By arguing that the pursuit of creativity, power and distinction can supplant the desire for heroism and glory, Brown slights the most salutary aspect of the longing for transcendence, namely, the longing not for distinctiveness but for excellence. Those who aspire to heroic or noble deeds demonstrate a willingness to sacrifice their lives for a noble cause, not because to do so is a mark of creativity or power but rather because it is the action of an excellent or noble soul, i.e., a soul with the capacity to face a terribly frightening thing, death, for a noble cause. Heroic courage thus looks to a standard beyond itself. Brown herself

acknowledges this in her discussion of the ancient Greeks, which suggests that they wanted to be more than creative; they wanted to be excellent: “fighting, denying, or transcending necessity and nature in order to realize man’s ‘nature’ as a political being... is at the heart of the Greek glorification of excellence in action known as arete” (193). This example suggests that men want to be remembered for the good that they have accomplished rather than merely for a creation or distinction of any kind whatsoever. Indeed, the fact that men do care about the kind of mark they leave behind is what makes the longing for transcendence/heroic courage open to education. Whereas creativity, for example, is its own standard, the concern for excellence that is part of the longing to sacrifice for a noble cause is inherently philosophic, or at least open to philosophy; it cannot help but prompt the question of whether what one takes to be excellence or a noble cause really is. And addressing this question can lead to the revision of one’s goals, i.e., to education.

Downplaying or ignoring the aspiration toward noble sacrifice, critics of heroic courage propose remedies for a condition that they have not adequately diagnosed. This fact hamstrings legitimate efforts to restrain its excesses. On a practical level, to the extent that critics’ proposals misunderstand the phenomenon, their proposals are in vain; it is hard to imagine how the suggestion that a man focus his ambitions more on parenting or on a vague kind of creative political action can impress someone who is moved by and who aspires to battlefield courage. More fundamentally, the critics’ misunderstanding prevents them from exploring sufficiently the untutored human attitude towards courage and the tensions within it. Because they treat it from the outset as a sickness, they do not attempt to investigate its many facets. They do not, for example, confront the puzzle that

we mentioned at the outset, namely, that human beings seem to admire heroic courage as a display of excellence but are most profoundly moved and inspired by it to the extent to which it seems to be a sacrifice and hence not simply an aspect of one's own happiness and flourishing. As a result of their inadequate analysis of courage, contemporary critics miss the possibility that a dialectical investigation of courage and what kind of virtue it is can not only uncover a healthy conception of a courage but also shed greater light on a genuine human excellence.

We might expect to find such an investigation in the work of those contemporary liberal theorists who seek to clarify and elaborate liberal virtues. Curiously, no such investigation exists there. Their inattention to courage is especially surprising because the very premise of the project undertaken by theorists like William Galston and Stephen Macedo seems to demand an investigation of courage. For these theorists mount a defense of liberalism against those who claim either that liberalism has no substantive notion of human flourishing or that liberalism lacks the resources to produce those virtues that its citizens must have for liberal institutions to survive much less thrive. By articulating liberal virtues, they aim to show that liberalism can indeed foster virtues that contribute both to the preservation of society and to the development of the individual. Since, as we have noted, courage at least seems both politically useful and an individual excellence, it is surprising to find that it is not explicitly identified as a virtue in four prominent attempts to catalogue and describe the liberal virtues (see Berkowitz 1999, xi; Galston 1982, 628-29; Macedo 1990, 129, 251; Spragens 1999, 229).¹²

¹² In a more recent work, Galston includes courage among the liberal virtues as a “means to the preservation of liberal societies and institutions” (1991, 220-21). But what

It may be the case that courage is implied or included in other virtues that need courage to be properly executed. “Responsible self-reliance” and a “public-spirited willingness to participate in civil service” (1999, 229), according to Spragens, and “autonomy” (1990, 216, 225) and “active self-control” (251), according to Macedo, are examples of liberal virtues. Perhaps Spragens and Macedo mean to refer to courage when they speak of these qualities. Such qualities do seem to require at least a certain toughness. The autonomous individual, for example, must be able to stand against public opinion. Is this toughness, however, courage? If so, courage of what sort? Is it a courage in some way akin to old-fashioned battlefield or heroic courage, or is it a

disappoints anyone interested in liberal virtues is that Galston prompts crucial questions about the liberal incarnation of courage which he fails to explore. He begins his discussion of the liberal virtues by asserting that they “are not simply the classical virtues justified on a different basis. They are in important respects different virtues” (220). But how, one may wonder, is this difference reflected in courage? Galston claims that “[t]he liberal virtues demand less self-discipline and sacrifice than do the virtues of classical antiquity... [or] civic republicanism,” but he also notes that not all socially useful virtues (including liberal ones) are “individually advantageous” and that courage requires “the willingness to fight and even die on behalf of one’s country” (*ibid.*). Does it then turn out that liberalism needs something of the classical virtues? If so, how does a liberal polity foster such a virtue? Is this courage, moreover, good only as a means to social ends, or, is it also somehow good in itself? Galston does not address such questions.

different kind? Or, rather, is it courage at all? Spragens explains what he means by “public-spirited willingness to participate in civic service” as follows:

[L]iberalism... does not expect its citizens to subordinate or sacrifice themselves to the larger society in the manner that the enthusiasts of republican virtue at times have done... Civic liberalism does not ask too much. It asks only that liberal citizens be willing to do their part... that they understand that if they and their fellows are not willing to make some sacrifices and bend some efforts on behalf of the common good then it will not be achieved. (1999, 229)

But that citizens be willing to contribute their fair share seems closer to the virtue of justice than courage. Indeed, Spragens explains citizens’ duty to bear the dangers of battle in terms of fairness; “if affluent,” he says, “citizens should not insist that the children of the less well-off bear all the dangers of mutual defense.” A citizens’ duty, moreover, to “bear the dangers of mutual defense” is just one in a list of many that includes serving in the PTA, supporting public education, and coaching the youth league (*ibid.*). By virtue of its inclusion in this list of civic duties, courage is eclipsed: here courage is simply treated as a form of justice, i.e., as a willingness to contribute to a common good rather than a willingness to risk one’s own for the good of others. While this argument may well capture a part of the character of courage, whether it captures the full nature of courage and our approbation of it is questionable.

Similar questions arise in Macedo’s treatment of the liberal virtues. As we have suggested, Macedo emphasizes the liberal virtue of “autonomy,” which Macedo defines as “the capacity to reflect critically and to act on the basis of these reflections.” And he

may mean for autonomy to represent a liberal version of courage. Autonomy certainly requires qualities such as initiative, independence, resolve, perseverance and diligence, which qualities often seem to accompany courage (1990, 269; see also 275). Indeed, these are the qualities Macedo singles out as needed by citizens “to rally to the defense of the regime and to act themselves to correct sustained injustices within the regime” (276). But does this list of qualities exhaust those needed for courage, particularly battlefield courage? Are these the qualities the ones that most inspire the admiration and gratitude that is typically felt for veterans? While these “executive virtues” are impressive and important qualities, they do not add up to that willingness to risk life and limb that is the hallmark of battlefield courage. The virtue that reveals this willingness is missing from Macedo’s discussion.

The absence of any discussion of a courage that, as Aristotle said, “chooses noble deeds in return for suffering pain” tempts one to think that Macedo implicitly denies that such courage is part of the constellation of liberal virtues. Curiously, however, Macedo’s bid to defend the liberal regime as worthy of respect because of the virtues it inculcates begins by highlighting the old-fashioned courage displayed by ordinary liberal citizens. At the outset of his book, Macedo maintains that “[f]ree government needs its heroes, individuals prepared to make great sacrifices on behalf of liberal values” (2). He defends this statement and prepares the way for a defense of liberal principles by offering two inspirational examples of courageous individuals who were prepared to risk whatever harm may come from holding firmly to those principles. If Macedo makes recourse to examples of old-fashioned, heroic courage in order to prove the worth of liberal regimes

and their principles, than an exploration of that kind of courage deserves attention.¹³ Moreover, insofar as Macedo indicates how important courage is to the value — and not just the survival — of liberal regimes, an investigation into how liberal institutions and policies affect it and can promote is needed. For as Macedo acknowledges, insofar as a “likely consequence of recognizing the plurality and conflict among ultimate values...is a detachment or moderation of commitment” (240) even “a degree of alienation” (250), the successful cultivation of liberal virtues may tend to corrode courage. Attention to the issue of courage is thus perhaps especially needed in liberal regimes if their citizens are to continue to display such inspirational acts of heroic courage.

If contemporary liberal theorists have placed old-fashioned, traditional courage into a closet, trusting that it’s there, to be hauled out in the case of emergencies, but otherwise ignoring it, it may be because military virtue fits uneasily with the theory underlying liberalism. Liberalism has always treated the cultivation of the virtues needed to sustain it with some ambivalence. As Peter Berkowitz notes, “[f]or liberalism today, the care for virtue is both awkward and necessary”¹⁴ But this may be especially true of courage. For an education in courage may also breed qualities, such as an aggressiveness and inflexibility that are inimical to the peacefulness and cooperativeness that are the hallmarks of liberal politics. Indeed, a brief glance at a range of liberal theorists reveals a certain tension between qualities that seem to accompany heroic courage and those that

¹³ Although Macedo offers thoughtful and sustained treatments of the liberal versions of reasonableness (44), moderation (69-73) and justice (77ff), he provides no similar treatment of courage.

¹⁴ Berkowitz 1999, xiv.

are needed for liberal political life. While Adam Smith speaks admiringly of the heroic actions displayed by those men, particularly of ancient times, who embody not only the “amiable and gentle virtues” but also the “awful and respectable” ones (Smith 1982, 23-25 [I.i.5.1, 5]; 152 [III.3.35]), he also indicates that the price of the liberal regime’s greater security and humanity will be the demise of the harsher virtues and the ascendancy of softness and effeminacy (*ibid.*, 152-53 [III.3.36-37]; 190-191 [IV.2.10]; 204-211 [V.2.8-9, 15]).¹⁵ Kant’s account of the liberal political sphere does not proclaim the demise of the “awful and respectable” virtues, but it does emphasize above all the need for citizens to be willing to cooperate with each other, to respect each others’ rights and to remain fundamentally committed to liberal institutions.¹⁶ Rawls and Dworkin both insist that for liberal society to flourish, citizens must not only cooperate for mutual advantage but treat each other with mutual respect.¹⁷

In other words, the grease that turns liberalism’s wheels seems to be (as Hobbes indicates [1994, 95{15.17}]) a willingness to accommodate oneself to others, to meet them halfway. Insofar as the prime liberal political concern is to foster the cooperation that enables citizens to enjoy their personal lives, it is not hard to see that virtues that incline us to harmony and friendliness are more important than a virtue like courage.¹⁸ While some partisans of liberal politics find courage valuable in private affairs,¹⁹ their

¹⁵ For a similar view, see Mill 1988, 92-94.

¹⁶ See Kant 1991, 473-74, 477-84. See also the discussion at Shell 1990, 265.

¹⁷ See Rawls 1971, 467-72, 497-98; 1996, 156-7, 304; Dworkin 1978, 127-36.

¹⁸ On this understanding of liberalism, see especially Rawls 1996, xli, 179.

¹⁹ Kant, for example, does exhort men to have the courage to be guided by only their

commitments make them wary of its public expression. Such partisans may think that the cultivation or promotion of patriotic courage, which necessarily entails a willingness to risk all, threatens internal peace.²⁰ This potentially corrosive effect of cultivating a vigorous courage in citizens may in part explain the hope present in much liberal theory that, as liberal regimes proliferate, nations' interests will preclude war and hence the need for such courage at all (see especially Kant 1985, 114).

The notion that individuals who prize courage are at odds with a regime whose public sphere looks above all to securing the private sphere has a distinguished ancestry.

Hobbes and Locke recognized that individuals who are enamored of courage and who therefore long for battle as the opportunity to display it pose serious threats to security, material prosperity and freedom.²¹ Indeed, they strive to keep such men in check, if not to eliminate them altogether, by reorienting their goals, i.e., turning them away from a fascination with war. Thus, Hobbes and Locke do not speak of war as the sphere of courage, much less of the individuals who exemplify courage as choosing noble deeds in war in return for suffering pain. Hobbes attempts this in part by calling into question the

own understanding (1985, 54). He does not, however, explore the precise character of this courage, e.g., whether it is similar to or different from the courage that men exhibit in their willingness to sacrifice their lives for their country.

²⁰ Cultivating in citizens the willingness to risk their lives for the principles of the regime may make them more willing to risk their lives for other principles, such as religious ones, that liberalism prefers to treat as matters of private concern.

²¹ Hobbes 1994, 74-80, 100, 138, 219 (13.1-14.4, 15.40-41, 21.5, 30.1); Locke 1980, 8, 17, 46-48, 52, 65-66, 68 (§§3, 22, 87-89, 95, 123-24, 131).

qualities that constituted their appeal for prior generations. Insofar as Hobbes, for example, recognizes the existence of these types of human beings, he treats them as petulantly concerned with honor (or, rather, pseudo-honor), as willing to undertake violence “for trifles” (1994, 76 [13.7]). For his part, Locke speaks highly of courage itself, calling it the “guard and support of the other virtues,” but the courage he emphasizes is that displayed not on the battlefield but rather wherever men face “pain, disgrace, and poverty” (1996, 86 [§ 115]). While Locke is certainly aware of the attraction that noble deeds hold for men, he seems to think that it can be effectively muted if men’s energies are channeled towards commerce and industry. Immersed in the latter pursuits, men will be too preoccupied to care much for the fame that comes from noble actions on the battlefield.²² A liberal citizen’s courage, therefore, must be moderate in character — a sort of resolve that can confront evils when they arise but that does not wish for the opportunities they provide.²³

There is also a more troubling tension between courage and the strand of liberal theory whose father is Hobbes. For to the question, Why one should one be willing to sacrifice one’s life in the service of one’s country?, ancient political theory could reply — though hardly without prompting further questions — that this willingness is noble. This answer, however, is difficult for a thinker such as Hobbes who claims that political life aims at ensuring security and material prosperity for citizens rather than at enabling them

²² On this point, see the helpful discussion in Rahe 1992, 313-315.

²³ See Locke 1996, 30-38, 75-90 (§§41-62, 103-117); Smith 1982 237-246 (VI.iii.1-20); Franklin 1964, 148-150 (where Franklin includes “resolve” rather than courage in his list of virtues); Publius 1987, Nos. 1, 3, 11. Cf. also the discussion at Shklar 1984, 4.

to accomplish noble deeds. If these are the chief political ends, according to Hobbes, then how can the question just raised be answered?²⁴ It simply makes no sense to die for the sake of one's life. It may be true, as Rousseau puts it, that those who will the end will the means, i.e., that those who wish to preserve their lives in a civil society must wish for its defense (1978, 64 [II.5]). But especially where individuals have not undergone the rigorous civic education that Rousseau favors as the means of forging a community whose members are wholeheartedly devoted to it, what arguments can explain to each individual why he himself rather than his neighbor should leap to his country's defense?

A particularly vivid illustration of this difficulty can be seen in Hobbes's discussion of the behavior of those who are drafted into military service (1994, 142-43 [21.15-16]). The sovereign political authority, Hobbes argues, has the right to demand service from a citizen and "to punish his refusal with death," for otherwise the commonwealth would collapse. But Hobbes adds that a draftee may "substitut[e] a sufficient soldier in his place," thereby indicating that what matters is that the commonwealth be defended, not that one defend it oneself; money (to hire substitutes) can take the place of courage. He then offers what might seem to be an excuse for those whose fears lead them to flee from battle, for he says that "to avoid battle is not injustice, but cowardice." According to

²⁴ If Hobbes is unusually bold in his emphasis on the individual's welfare, this does not render him of trivial import. It is perfectly sensible for the individual who is asked to risk death for his country to ask why he should. That other liberal theorists may articulate a broader range of political goals does not necessarily mean that they can answer this question satisfactorily and certainly does not render the question itself insignificant.

Hobbesian theory, though, a coward does not seem to need an excuse. To excuse someone is to cite his failings as a reason not to blame him, but in light of the primacy that Hobbes accords to life, how can human beings be blamed for treating their lives as primary? Indeed, insofar as fleeing from battle can preserve one's life, it is questionable to what degree cowardice can on Hobbes's principles be deemed a defect of character. The concern for life that occupies the center of Hobbes's political theory makes it hard to treat the courage to risk one's life as a virtue for which everyone should strive. No less than their predecessors, liberal regimes need citizens who are willing to risk their lives for the commonwealth.

How much this line of thinking has seeped into liberal souls remains unclear. On the one hand, we liberals at times speak of courage in contexts that ancient citizens, for example, would have deemed highly inappropriate. A recent best-seller, for example exhorts its readers to have The Courage to be Rich.²⁵ This title capitalizes on the inclination, typical of liberals, to try to connect courage to the courageous individual's own good.²⁶ On the other hand, as we have seen, liberal citizens not only are willing to risk their lives for our country but are powerfully moved by examples of traditional courage, as is evident in the high honor that the Congressional Medal of Honor represents and in citizens' natural reaction to the stories of its recipients. As a result of this tension

²⁵ This example is chosen less lightly than may appear to be the case. We shall see in our analysis of Plato's dialogue the Laches that Laches scoffs at attributing courage to the man who knows how to spend his money so as to increase it.

²⁶ On the tendency of liberal citizens to explain away acts of selflessness, see Tocqueville 1969, 525-528.

within liberal political thought, the default position with respect to courage is usually simply to downplay or even ignore it, as we have seen is the tendency of contemporary liberal theorists; courage is simply not an issue for them.

This dissertation turns to Plato's examination of courage because he offers the dialectical investigation into courage that we need in order best to assess the worth of courage. On the one hand, he shares some of the concerns that the critics of heroic courage articulate. Although Plato takes courage with the utmost seriousness, he, like Brown, Hartsock, and French, has serious reservations about its traditional form.²⁷ In the Republic, as we shall see, his Socrates sharply criticizes certain forms of courage; in Book III, for example, Socrates proposes a dramatic reform of the heroic version embodied by Achilles, arguing in part that it is politically unreliable. But as much as Plato may sympathize with concerns for political stability, he also sympathizes with the noble aspirations that express themselves in the greatest displays of courage. His examination of these aspirations is richly complex, alive to the various dimensions of the phenomenon. In the Laches, Socrates explores the question of what makes courage noble. He and his interlocutors wonder whether the nobility of courage lies more in what the courageous man risks himself or in what good his courage yields. Moreover, since the interlocutors agree that the courageous man is noble and therefore no fool, they are led to consider the role that wisdom plays in courage. Indeed, the relationship between courage and wisdom is a central theme for Plato's Socrates. For although Socrates indicates that there is something irrational about courage, particularly in the heroic form

²⁷ Elshtain, who is critical of Plato in many respects, notes that he challenges "the Homeric warrior ethos as a vision of male honor" (1988, 52).

that most excites the imagination of certain of his interlocutors, in the Republic he treats it as essential to a philosophic soul, and he devotes considerable thought to the ways in which education can cultivate courage so as to render the soul as good as possible. The respect that he shows for courage and for the aspirations wrapped up in it suggests that, as problematic as he may think all these are, they must be examined in a sympathetic and sustained manner in order for us to discover genuine courage and the life which exemplifies it. We shall attempt to conduct such an examination by focusing on the two Platonic dialogues just mentioned: the Laches, in which Socrates investigates courage together with two Athenian generals, and the Republic, in which Socrates discusses the psychological quality that he there contends underlies courage — thumos or spiritedness — as well as ways in which it might be educated so as to cultivate the best forms of courage.

As will soon become evident, my dissertation is premised on the claim that Plato's teachings cannot be understood simply by studying the arguments that are presented in his dialogues. To lift them out of their context and study them as simple propositions for the disinterested observer to consider is to slight the fact that Plato chose to write dialogues rather than treatises. One cannot understand his dialogues properly unless one attends to the dramatic interplay in them between arguments and characters because Plato aims to instruct us not only as to the character of philosophic truths but also as to something else that is every bit as important: the obstacles that prevent human beings from recognizing them. Many of the arguments contained in every dialogue, including those presented by Socrates, are flawed. This fact does not render them uninteresting because what the reader must seek to understand, among other things, is the function of

each argument in the dialogue, one of which is to shed light on which human beings are persuaded by which bad arguments. The reader of Plato's dialogues must inquire into such things as what leads the characters to say what they do, what Socrates might want to learn from his interlocutors, and how this goal might affect his arguments.²⁸

²⁸ For sustained discussions on how to read Plato, see Ahrens Dorf 1996, 4-6; Arieti 1991, 1-17; Bloom 1991, preface; Craig 1994, prologue; O'Brien 1967, 3-15; Strauss 1946, 348-52; Strauss 1964, 50-62.

Chapter 1

Education and Virtue: The Opening of the Laches

Two Notions of Courage

Plato's Laches, which is subtitled, "On Courage,"¹ is his most explicit treatment of courage. In it, two highly esteemed Athenian generals, Laches and Nicias, offer different definitions of courage. Both men would seem worth consulting on the subject. At the time in which the action of the dialogue occurs, Nicias is not only a leading Athenian general but perhaps the most powerful man in Athens; for he either is about to conclude or has recently concluded a peace treaty with Sparta, albeit a short-lived one, after ten years of the Peloponnesian War.² Laches, Nicias' fellow general, has by the time of the

¹ Contrary to the claims of Grote, who attributes the "double titles" of Plato's dialogues to Thrasyllus (1875, I.160), Hoerber finds in ancient sources proof that these titles are much older than Thrasyllus (d. A. D. 36) and strong evidence that they may well have been Plato's own (1957, 15, 18-20).

² Although it is impossible to deduce the precise dramatic date of the dialogue, we can tell that the action occurred roughly around the time the so-called Peace of Nicias was concluded, in 421 B.C.E. The historical events that frame the dialogue are the battle of Delium (424), where, as we learn in the dialogue, Laches and Socrates retreated together, and the battle of Mantinea (418), in which Laches was killed. (Nicias' own death in Syracuse occurred in 413.) Schmid argues for 423, on the ground that if the dialogue occurred later, "it would be amazing even for Lysimachus not to have heard of Socrates, whose name Aristophanes that year made a household word in Athens" through

dialogue ably led the Athenians in several battles (see Thucydides III.90, 99, 103, 115), and he is Nicias' chief colleague in the negotiations with Sparta leading up to the peace (Thucydides V.43). Their common experience as prominent generals, however, does not lead Laches and Nicias to agree about the meaning of courage. Laches claims that courage is "steadfastness of soul" (192b9), whereas Nicias defines it as "knowledge of the terrible and emboldening things" (195a1).³ It is not only the case, however, that they disagree with each other about courage. Each general in fact turns out to disagree with himself; in seeking to defend his initial claims, each winds up contradicting his own account of courage. By bringing to light each man's inner conflict, Socrates fleshes out the grave tensions at the heart of the ordinary understanding of courage, at the very least preparing the way for efforts to resolve them.

The conflict over courage between Laches and Nicias — and within each of them — turns in large part on their different views of what makes courage a virtue. Laches is most impressed by the courageous man's capacity to endure pains and fears: an essential toughness or steadfastness is the core of the virtue according to him. Socrates' questions to him, however, reveal an extreme and troubling position buried in Laches' view of courage. Socrates ultimately leads Laches to agree that the more ignorant or foolish the steadfastness, the more courageous it is. Laches is frustrated by this conclusion but does not see how to avoid it. Nicias, by contrast, takes up what is in effect the opinion opposite to Laches'. Latching on to what he considers the Socratic view of virtue, i.e.,

his play, the Clouds (1992, 183 n.1; cf. Hoerber 1968, 95-96; Taylor 1949, 58).

³ I have used Burnet's Oxford edition of the text of the Laches and relied primarily upon Nichols' translation, while occasionally modifying it (1987a).

that it is knowledge (194d), Nicias argues that the courageous man is distinguished by his prudence. Indeed, when pressed by Socrates, he reveals that he thinks the courageous man is so distinguished by his prudence that he possesses complete knowledge of good and evil. As we have just noted, Laches and Nicias turn out to be uncomfortable with the extreme versions of their views of courage that Socrates compels them to articulate. Nicias draws up short, as we shall see, when he realizes that complete knowledge of good and evil is the whole of virtue rather than a part of it; unable to imagine that human beings can possess the complete virtue entailed by his understanding of courage, he is at a loss to explain how they can possess any courage. The chief aim of our inquiry into the Laches will be to understand why Socrates' two main interlocutors are tempted by but unable to defend the rival theses that courage is, on the one hand, utterly devoid of prudence or, on the other hand, utterly determined by it.

The fact that Laches' and Nicias' disagreement over courage ends in a stalemate, with neither general able to offer a coherent account of courage, has led a number of commentators to conclude that the Laches is of little philosophic interest.⁴ Other commentators disagree, arguing that if a definition of courage is not simply offered in the dialogue, one can in fact be deduced from it that incorporates aspects of both Laches' and Nicias' definitions. Since courage is needed in the face of fearful or dangerous circumstances, it seems to require a kind of endurance or steadfastness; however, it also

⁴ Among those who argue that the Laches offers no real account of courage are Taylor (1949, 58) and Friedlander (1964, 49). Croiset dismisses it as "une simple exposition de méthode" (1921, 88).

requires knowledge, at least of the circumstances that demand steadfastness from us. The Laches, then, does seem to offer a correct definition of courage: “wise perseverance.”⁵

While this surely seems a sensible definition of courage, it possesses a deceptive clarity. Indeed, by failing to unpack the phrase “wise perseverance,” the scholars who offer it as the definition to which the Laches points wind up undermining, if unwittingly, the philosophic interest of the dialogue almost as much as do those who dismiss it as aporetic. One reason for doubting the sufficiency of this definition is a simple question: if courage is simply wise perseverance, why does not Socrates suggest this? We may offer a more compelling reason for doubt, as well as provide the likely answer to the question just raised, by observing that this definition, however sensible it may be, obscures the most interesting and urgent questions regarding courage. The difficulty with simply putting the pieces of the Laches together as though they were parts of a puzzle is that doing so flattens the dialogue; it suppresses what is at stake in the generals’ opinions about courage. To speak of “wise perseverance,” for example, is to leave open the character of the wisdom involved, which is thus to obscure the central issue dividing Laches from Nicias (and, in a way, each from himself): the degree to which courage must involve prudence if it is to be a virtue, i.e., something admirable or choiceworthy.

Laches’ discomfort with the notion that courage is foolish steadfastness does indicate that he thinks courage is admirable only when its exercise is governed by some

⁵ Bonitz suggests this definition, claiming that it salvages the correct elements in Laches’ and Nicias’ definitions. (1886, 216). For similar arguments, see Grote 1875, I.480; O’Brien 1963, 147; Devereux 1974, 136; and Dobbs 1986, 846. For a comprehensive list of scholarly opinions on the Laches, see O’Brien 1967, 117 n.8.

knowledge or wisdom. But what is the knowledge that makes courage admirable?

Laches turns out to be unable to pinpoint the substance of a knowledge that contributes to the nobility of courage. As for Nicias, he forthrightly associates courage with the prudent pursuit of one's own good, but he ultimately balks, as we said, at the implications of this association; we shall see it dawn on him that his view is incompatible with the piety he thinks human beings need in light of their inability to grasp the knowledge that he thinks constitutes complete virtue. What is it about the view of courage as a virtue that makes it so difficult for Laches and Nicias to settle on the role of wisdom, or prudence, in virtue? Can we ourselves answer this question? On the one hand, virtue seems to be a quality that contributes to a human being's own flourishing. On the other hand, the fact that we speak of virtue as noble implies that it is more than something that enables one to secure a narrow or low good. The reason we speak of virtue as something noble is because we think of it as something splendid. If we know that, say, jumping out of a burning house is the only way to save ourselves, doing so may be sensible and even impressive in a certain sense, but is it noble? It is only by addressing such questions, which the Laches powerfully raises, that we can find the genuine philosophic interest of the dialogue. Our task in the next three chapters will be to explore the different notions of virtue expressed in Laches' and Nicias' definitions of courage, to clarify the obstacles that prevent the generals from arriving at a coherent notion of courage, and to try to identify what such a notion might be.

A Paternal Perspective on Education in Virtue

Although we are most interested in what the Laches can teach us about courage, it is not immediately obvious that the dialogue concerns this subject; indeed, the

conversations in which Socrates examines Laches and Nicias about courage do not begin until the dialogue is half over. The Laches in fact has a broader theme: education or, more precisely, the education of the young in virtue. What happens in the course of its action is that Socrates, who is at this time relatively unknown (see 180e-181a and 189b1), makes at least one of his interlocutors — Lysimachus — believe that he is an expert in this field (see 201c). Socrates, amazingly, even instills the belief that he knows more about courage than two esteemed generals, whose accounts of courage he refutes without — equally amazingly — incurring their hostility.

In the Laches' opening scene, two fathers, Lysimachus and Melesias, invite Laches and Nicias to consult with them about whether a new kind of spear-fighting (*hoplomachia*), akin to fencing,⁶ would be an appropriate study for their young sons, Aristeides and Thucydides; the four men have just finished watching a demonstration of the new art to which the fathers have brought the generals (179e). The fathers' interest in the new spear-fighting reflects a deeper concern that their sons — “the greatest of our things” (187d) — become not just skilled but virtuous men. They are investigating this new practice, Lysimachus says, because unlike “the many” who allow their children simply to live as they wish, they seek a practice that will help their sons “become best.”

⁶ *Hoplomachia*, which is composed from the words *mache* (fight) and *hoplon* (the heavy shield used by the hoplite, or infantry soldier), was the study of how to fight with heavy arms in hand-to-hand combat of the sort that might occur after the closely knit phalanx formation, which placed a premium on coordinate fighting in lines and columns, broke down in battle. See Adcock 1957, 3-14; Schmid 1992, 4; and Tatham in Plato 1938, 42. See also Plato, Euthydemus 271d, and Xenophon, Memorabilia III.1.

They are soliciting advice from the generals, he continues, because the latter have sons of their own about whose education they must be similarly concerned. But if, Lysimachus adds, the generals have not yet thought enough about educating their sons, they ought to join him and Melesias in a common quest for the right education (179a-b; cf. 187d).

Although the specific topic of the first part of the *Laches* is *hoplomachia*, then, the deeper theme is the education of young men in virtue.

Lysimachus' concern for education denotes a certain seriousness about virtue, but that seriousness is limited. He asks whether the new kind of fighting will inculcate virtue; he does not ask what the virtue is that should be inculcated. This larger question is not at issue because, while Lysimachus and Melesias are serious enough about education to want the best for their sons, they are confident that they know the purpose of education; they believe that they know what the virtue of a man is. This becomes clear when Lysimachus explains to the generals that he and Melesias hold up their own illustrious fathers as models for their sons to emulate. Now their fathers, the boys' namesakes — the famous Aristeides and Thucydides⁷ — were not praiseworthy in all respects. In

⁷ Because of his surpassing reputation for justice, Lysimachus' father Aristeides was given the honorific "the Just." Along with Pausanias, he commanded the combined Athenian and Spartan armies in their defeat of the Persians at Plataea. See Plutarch 1916, 391; Plato, *Gorgias* 526b. Melesias' father Thucydides was a well respected and very influential Athenian nobleman. According to Schmid, he was a prominent member of the Athenian conservative party, dubbed "the Few," and he opposed Pericles' building up of Athens (1992, 3). Cf. Plato, *Meno* 94a-d, where Socrates describes both men as exemplars of virtue.

particular, Lysimachus blames them for neglecting his and Melesias' education, which neglect Lysimachus considers a leading reason why both he and Melesias, unlike their fathers, lack noble deeds of their own to recount. Their deficiencies as educators notwithstanding, Aristeides and Thucydides were great political men who, Lysimachus says, managed very successfully "the affairs both of the allies and of this city." They earned the fame that he and Melesias, to their great shame, lack (179c-d). For Lysimachus, virtue thus seems to mean acting nobly in the city and winning fame for one's actions; someone whose noble actions enable him to live on in the city's memory is a good man, even if he shows neither the concern nor the ability to educate others in virtue. It is the capacity to perform laudable noble deeds that Lysimachus and Melesias wish their sons to learn.

But why, we may ask, have the fathers only now become so interested in their sons' education and in spear-fighting as a pedagogic device? The reason may be that they perceive that their sons are insufficiently concerned with virtue as they understand it. For, it appears, the young Aristeides and Thucydides have become involved in, or at least auditors of, conversations with one "Socrates." We learn this because Laches begs off Lysimachus' request for assistance, expressing amazement at the fact that the fathers are consulting him and Nicias about the education of their sons rather than Socrates, who seems to know something about teaching virtue to young men; Socrates, he says, "is always spending his time wherever there is any noble study or practice of the kind you are seeking for the youths" (180b-c). The reason it did not occur to Lysimachus to consult Socrates is not that he is utterly unaware of the latter's existence. When Laches directs Lysimachus' attention to Socrates, Lysimachus addresses him as "child of

Sophoniscus”); he knew Socrates’ father (180d-e). And, as we have said, he knows that the young Aristeides and Thucydides have of late been frequently and vehemently praising someone named Socrates. He just never imagined that this Socrates and the one whose father he knew are one and the same.

Even if Lysimachus had known this, however, there is no reason to think that he would have sought Socrates’ advice. On the contrary, Lysimachus may be worried about the influence of “Socrates” on his and Melesias’ sons. When the boys, in their one sentence in the dialogue, confirm that the son of Sophroniscus is indeed the Socrates whom they have been praising, Lysimachus swears by Hera and congratulates Socrates for honoring well the memory of his father, “the best of men” (181a). While Lysimachus certainly praises Socrates, this does not necessarily mean that he has a high opinion of what the boys are learning from the person he now knows is the son of his old friend. For despite his flattering words, Lysimachus does not invite Socrates to join the discussion about *hoplomachia*. That he does not suggests that Lysimachus has doubts about what the boys are learning from Socrates. But what is the character of those doubts?

Manliness or its lack thereof is, as we have seen, prominent in Lysimachus’ mind. Indeed, the oath he makes to Hera when he praises Socrates also points to its prominence. His oath is noteworthy because women rather than men usually swear by goddesses.⁸ By invoking the goddess Hera, Lysimachus seems to reveal how much he sees his own lack of noble deeds as a sign of unmanliness.⁹ And his own unmanliness may be particularly

⁸ See, e.g., Aristophanes, *Ecclesiazusae* 155-56 and 189-90, where women disguised as men accidentally reveal their sex by swearing by Hera (Bonnette 1994, 158, n. 116).

⁹ If I am not mistaken, Lysimachus is the only man other than Socrates in Plato’s

on his mind at this moment, when he meets the man whom he learns is responsible for his and Melesias' sons flirtation with unmanly pursuits. Indeed, it may be precisely the boys' involvement with Socrates that has roused the fathers' interest in their sons' education. They know the Socrates about whom they have heard not as a man of noble deeds but rather as one who spends his time conversing with young men and teaching them to converse with each other. Insofar as Socrates prefers speaking to acting, he is neither the ideal example nor the ideal teacher of Greek manliness. The fathers may be concerned that their sons are acting more like women than like the action-oriented men their fathers want them to be. As we have indicated, the hallmark of a real man and the full expression of his virtue, according to Lysimachus and Melesias, is not engaging in long, private conversations but acting well and performing noble deeds, as their fathers did. The boys' infatuation with Socrates and their imitation of his activity may well be why the fathers have latched onto *hoplomachia* as potentially able to instill manly virtue in their sons.

That Lysimachus is worried about Socrates' influence on the boys is confirmed by his reaction when Laches, urging him again to consult Socrates rather than himself and Nicias, notes how courageously he saw Socrates act in the battle at Delium. Upon learning this, Lysimachus "rejoices" with apparent relief to hear that Socrates "enjoys a good reputation." The strength of his reaction underlines how lukewarm his initial praise was. Indeed, only after Laches' commendation of Socrates' courage on the battlefield does Lysimachus in fact invite him to join the common inquiry about spear-fighting

dialogues to use the feminine oath. For Socrates' use of this oath, see Apology 24e; Theaetetus 154D; Phaedrus 230b; Gorgias 449d; Hippias Major 287a, 2971e.

(181a-b), which is not surprising in light of the importance that Lysimachus places on noble deeds. For while he initially thought of Socrates as a mere talker, he cannot help but think much more highly of him after the lavish praise that Laches bestows on him. Socrates, Laches claims, displayed such steadfastness as he and Laches withdrew together in the Athenian flight at Delium that had the other Athenian soldiers behaved as he did, the city would have been saved.¹⁰ Socrates' laudable military experience seems to qualify him in Lysimachus' mind as a worthy consultant about educating young men in virtue.

The sequence of events leading up to Socrates' being invited to join the conversation shows that Lysimachus, Laches, and Nicias all agree that only men who have performed noble, manly deeds can give good advice on noble, manly pursuits. That Laches and Lysimachus believe this is clear enough from the fact that the former offers, and the latter accepts, Socrates' battlefield courage as evidence of his pedagogic credentials. That Nicias shares their view appears from the fact that he, before Laches speaks up about Socrates, agrees to "become a partner" in the inquiry Lysimachus proposes without suggesting that they consult Socrates (180a). Indeed, Nicias fails to suggest this despite his intimate knowledge of Socrates' involvement with the question of education — not only, as we learn, has Socrates recommended a music teacher for Nicias' son (180d), but Nicias himself has engaged in long, extended conversations with Socrates about how to live nobly (187e-188b). Nicias thus does not appear to have considered Socrates, whatever his virtues, qualified to give advice about such manly pursuits as spear-fighting.

¹⁰ Indeed, according to Alcibiades, Socrates' conduct at Delium was more impressive than Laches'. See Plato, *Symposium* 220e-221b. Cf. Plato, *Apology* 28e.

Socrates' skill at dialectical exchange seems, then, not to figure in his interlocutors' minds as an independent qualification for participation in the conversation. This is perfectly understandable in light of the apparent initial agreement among the fathers and the generals that virtue means accomplishing noble actions for the city.

If his interlocutors outflank Socrates on one side in their regard for action, they seem paradoxically to outflank him on the other side in their regard for education. Neither Laches nor Nicias challenges Lysimachus' apparent certainty that virtue, including courage, can be learned, through either a "study" or "practice" of some kind (179d7, 180a4). This belief is of course far from ridiculous. Were there nothing to be said for it, we could dismiss out of hand the claim of institutions like West Point to teach courage as well as strategy. Lysimachus, however, may think that virtue is teachable more because he has great hopes than because he has real evidence to support his belief. We should not forget that he blames Melesias' and his failure to accomplish noble deeds on the fact that their fathers, too busy with affairs of state, failed to provide for their education. If virtue can or, rather, must be learned, then Lysimachus and Melesias are absolved of responsibility for their unremarkable lives. If, moreover, virtue depends only on the right education, then with sufficient and well-informed effort on their part, Lysimachus and Melesias can ensure success and fame for their sons — and paternal pride for themselves. The combination of an excuse for their own situation and the prospective enjoyment of their sons' success may render Lysimachus' and Melesias' belief that virtue can be taught very difficult to question.

If, however, certain things can be taught, it is not obvious to what degree virtue is among them. Indeed, Socrates quietly suggests in another context, whether or not virtue

can be taught is a rather murky question (see 190e). There are sensible reasons to doubt that virtue is teachable. Virtue may well depend on a proper education, but the extent to which education can make a difference may also depend on an individual's nature or "raw material." Excellence in gymnastics, for example, requires natural flexibility; excellence in geometry, good spatial reasoning and a quick mind. Even, moreover, in cases where individuals are blessed with the sorts of natures that easily receive instruction, one's ultimate success at any study seems to depend on more than the ability to receive instruction. When, for example, Lysimachus and Melesias warn their sons that if they fail to look after themselves and obey their fathers they will be without fame (179d), the fathers point to the natural drive that is required for success: the sons must want fame enough to heed their fathers' advice. Even, then, if there is a study that can teach young men the virtue they need in order to accomplish noble deeds, they still need at least the drive to undertake and make progress in that study.¹¹

Lysimachus does not seem to have wrestled with the possible limits of education; as we have suggested, he may not wish to recognize any. If so, this would hardly be surprising. Lysimachus would merely be displaying an all-too-human wish to think that the qualities he most esteems are not beyond his or his son's natural capacities. If Lysimachus' belief that virtue is teachable consoles him for his own lack of virtue and fills him with hopes for his son, this may explain why Socrates broaches only delicately the possible limits of education; when Socrates suggests that the men examine how

¹¹ Cf. Plato, Meno 93e-94c, where Socrates contradicts Lysimachus' claims that his and Melesias' lack of noble deeds stems from their fathers' inattention to their education; cf. Plato, Protagoras 319a-320a.

courage can be cultivated in young men, he adds only in passing, “to the extent that it can be present from practices and studies” (190e; my emphasis). Socrates will not pointedly raise the question of the teachability of virtue in this dialogue.

We may, however, doubt whether tact fully accounts for Socrates’ behavior here. Although a general reluctance to upset fathers who wish to educate their sons in virtue could suffice to explain his delicacy, so could an agenda of his own. Socrates, after all, has been conversing with Aristeides and Thucydides; he may well wish to continue doing so, and upsetting the boys’ fathers would surely impede the satisfaction of this wish. By the end of the dialogue, as we initially observed, Socrates has grown so much in Lysimachus’ estimation that Lysimachus views him as an expert on education in virtue; in effect, the man whom Lysimachus initially suspects of corrupting, by feminizing, the young gives himself an image make-over, one that alleviates fathers’ concerns about his influence on their sons.

That Socrates may use the dialogue to improve his reputation does not mean that he fails to raise troubling questions about virtue and about courage in particular. After all, he could hardly induce belief in his expertise without at least identifying complexities in virtue and in courage. The fact that Laches and Nicias disagree about spear-fighting affords him the opportunity to do so. By drawing out the tensions in their accounts, Socrates shows that he understands a thing or two about virtue and even that he understands courage better than the generals, who Lysimachus and Melesias naturally expect to be expert in it. In this demonstration, Socrates proceeds with great care. Not only might he wish to avoid upsetting the fathers of boys in whose company he has shown some interest. He may also be more concerned to avoid offending powerful

generals, whose opinions of him will carry weight not just with Lysimachus and Melesias but with all of Athens.

The Goodness of Spear-Fighting

After learning from Laches of Socrates' bravery and thus of his credentials for speaking about teaching young men the capacity to accomplish noble deeds, Lysimachus asks Socrates for his opinion on the innovative kind of spear-fighting. Socrates, however, proposes that they hear the two generals' opinions first, and he adds that if he then has anything else to say, he will in turn "teach and persuade" them all (181d). Whatever other reasons Socrates might have for holding back, it may have appeared presumptuous of him to pre-empt the generals' own statements about spear-fighting. The generals' ensuing speeches will reveal different evaluations of the new art and, more importantly, a profound disagreement over the nature and purpose of virtue: whether virtue is a capacity to secure some further good or whether it is something simply good in itself, i.e., something whose goodness consists only in its exercise. This disagreement enables Socrates to steer the conversation toward an investigation of how one ought to understand the virtue whose intrinsic goodness may be hardest to see: courage.

Having deferred to the generals' expertise, Socrates directs Nicias to speak first (181d7). Nicias rises ably to Socrates' challenge. Although he is unfamiliar with this new technique of spear-fighting,¹² he extemporaneously offers seven plausible benefits that one might obtain from studying it. He thus appears to have deliberated before, if not

¹² Lysimachus and Melesias have brought the generals to see this new kind of *hoplomachia* for the first time (178a3; cf. 183d1-3).

about this particular study, about what constitutes a good education. It may thus well be the case that Socrates turns to Nicias first — with whom, as we noted, he has associated in the past (see 188a-b) — because he thinks that Nicias will have something useful, and perhaps even controversial, to say about the study.

From the outset, Nicias praises the new form of spear-fighting for the benefits it confers upon an individual rather than upon the city as a whole. The initial benefits he cites, however, are not especially impressive. He begins by stressing low, mundane, benefits. *Hoplomachia* is useful, he claims, for keeping young men busy and for improving their physical condition. The third benefit he lists, however, appears to be of a higher order; like gymnastics and horsemanship, he claims, this new kind of spear-fighting is a practice befitting a “free man” (*eleutheros*, 182a1). The free man, according to Nicias, is well trained in “the tools of war”; he is thus prepared “for that contest in which we are competitors and in those things for which the contest lies ahead for us” (182a). Exactly what Nicias means by a free man and what the contest is for which *hoplomachia* prepares him remains unclear. Insofar as the contests to which Nicias refers are contests other than war, such as gentlemanly and leisurely sports, Nicias may mean to praise *hoplomachia* as something noble, namely, as part of the activity of a free man’s soul. But Nicias’ emphasis on the importance of the free man’s training “in the tools of war” and on being prepared for “the contest that lies ahead,” suggests instead that he praises *hoplomachia* more simply for helping a man to prepare for war.

The fourth and central benefit that Nicias attributes to the study continues Nicias’ emphasis on the study’s usefulness for war. Nicias claims that the study “will be of some benefit even in the battle itself, when one must fight in the ranks with many others”

(182a). But it is hard to see how this study is of much use at all when one is fighting in the ranks, since there would be no room in the hoplite formation to engage in the feints and withdrawals that are part of fencing and which this study apparently teaches. Even the front-rank fighters would have great difficulty practicing this maneuver insofar as it requires taking a pace back. Indeed to maneuver in this way would be strategically unsound both because of the mass of troops pushing at front-rank fighters' backs, and because fighting in this way risks opening up gaps in the line thereby exposing the ranks behind them to charges from the opposing hoplites and to missiles or javelins from the auxiliary light armed troops known as peltasts.¹³ That Nicias is not concerned with good strategy or the soldiers' common good becomes clear when he admits that the "greatest benefit" the study provides is the skill to fight one-on-one, after the ranks break (182a), for it is at this point that a hoplite faces the gravest danger to himself in battle, since he then no longer has the defensive support of his comrades. Nicias claims that once a soldier is left to fight one-on-one, knowing the art of *hoplomachia* would both improve his capacity to pursue and attack an enemy and decrease his likelihood of suffering defeat (182b3, cf. 188a5).

To enable the soldier to pursue and attack the enemy would seem to encourage fierceness and daring and thus to be both impressive in itself and good for the army as a whole. But there is reason to think that the potential for daring engagements is not Nicias' prime interest in the study. To appeal as much as possible to his listeners and perhaps also because it seems nobler, Nicias may want to emphasize this aspect as much as possible. But even if the study could make men more capable of pursuit and attack, it

¹³ Anderson 1991, 26, 33-35; see also Hanson 1989, 165-68.

is unclear whether this capacity is at all useful for hoplite fighting. Pursuing and attacking the enemy one-on-one was not a prominent part of hoplite warfare (see Thucydides IV. 126. 4-5). With their heavy armor and shields, hoplites were ill-equipped to pursue the enemy in this way. When the ranks broke, it was because one side could no longer withstand the force of the opposing formation moving against it; the losing ranks were the ones that broke. For their part, the victors would hesitate to break ranks, as doing so could expose them to a counterattack.¹⁴ A hoplite who left the ranks in hot pursuit of the enemy might even be reprimanded by his general (see Herodotus 9.71). The new technique of spear-fighting would, therefore, be most useful in a defensive rather than an offensive capacity, when a hoplite has lost the defensive shield of the phalanx (see Thucydides IV.96.3). The fact that this primarily defensive skill impresses Nicias as the study's "greatest benefit" suggests that he is very much alive to matters of safety (cf. Blitz 1975, 193, and Schmid 1992, 65-67). But safety is only one objective; Nicias claims that the study does more. According to Nicias' summary of the study's "greatest benefit," one "who knows this would not suffer anything from one man nor perhaps from several, but in this way would gain the advantage everywhere" (182b, my emphasis). According to Nicias' description of its "greatest benefit," this study not only keeps a man safe, it also makes him capable of accomplishing all his objectives.

Perhaps because of this last benefit, Nicias proceeds to defend the study as noble. He claims that such a study will inspire everyone who learns it with the desire for "other noble studies," in particular, all those studies associated with generalship (182b-c, my emphasis). He assumes that "everyone" who learns how to fight in armor, every foot

¹⁴ See Lazenby 1991, 100-101.

soldier, desires to acquire the knowledge that comprises generalship (182b). This is surely an exaggeration. Nicias' claim seems instead to reveal more about what he thinks is the essence of nobility than what he thinks about the study itself. One might think that a general's nobility is revealed more through his conduct in the line, where he faces the enemy head-on, than through his strategic contribution.¹⁵ For Nicias, however, the general's nobility derives not primarily from his position in the front lines and his toughness in standing his ground but from his knowledge and thereby his ability to execute a successful charge or safe retreat. Thus, Nicias' fifth praise of the study confirms that what makes a study noble in Nicias' mind is the degree to which that study is useful for accomplishing some further task — either success or safety in battle.

In Nicias' final arguments in support of studying *hoplomachia*, we see more clearly why Nicias places such a high value on the knowledge that it can provide: according to Nicias, knowledge is the foundation not only of success and safety but of virtue itself. Nicias claims that “this knowledge would make every man in war not a little bolder and more courageous than himself” (182c). This enigmatic sentence suggests two ways in which the study inculcates virtue. First, this new technique of fighting in armor can give men the courage to face dangers on the battlefield that they may lack by nature. By teaching them what to do when the ranks break, it can give them the confidence that they can survive that perilous moment, thereby increasing their bravery in battle. Second, even those students of *hoplomachia* whose confidence is not sufficiently strengthened by it can benefit from it. Nicias adds that the study will make a man “appear more graceful”

¹⁵ On the instances of generals standing and dying with their armies see Hanson 1989, 113-15.

and thus “more terrible to his enemies,” which is no small thing (182c-d). He thereby implies that *hoplomachia* can give those who lack sufficient courage the appearance of it, enabling them to fool their enemies into thinking that they are more menacing than they in fact are. But is the appearance of virtue, virtue?

According to Nicias, the appearance of virtue can be virtue if the appearance produces the desired result. If knowledge makes one “more courageous than himself,” then knowledge, according to Nicias’ formulation, is a sufficient cause of courage. Nicias’ premise is that knowledge can replace what nature does not provide. Indeed, Nicias’ high praise for the new study may indicate in Nicias himself an underlying cowardice that leads him to hope to find techniques and information to bolster him. But there is a sign that Nicias senses that by indicating that knowledge is the foundation for courage, he has revealed something shameful about himself; he points out to his interlocutors that the benefit of appearing courageous must not be considered “dishonorable” (182c-d). Nicias seems to feel the need to justify his emphasis on the ability to project a fraudulent appearance. It is as though he is reminding his listeners that such concerns are not relevant only for base reasons, e.g., if one lacks courage, thereby tacitly revealing that such reasons had been prominent in his own mind. This conforms with the bulk of Nicias’ speech, which suggests that his main concern is obtaining a knowledge that will ensure an individual “gains the advantage everywhere” when the battle is most perilous for him.

At the conclusion of his praise of *hoplomachia*, Nicias urbanely announces that “if Laches says something besides these things, I would hear him with pleasure” (182d). Perhaps he does not suspect that his colleague will disagree with him. Laches takes him

by surprise. Whereas Nicias praised the new spear-fighting above all for supplying knowledge needed for self-defense in warfare, Laches treats it very suspiciously; as we will see, he doubts that the study can inculcate real virtue or, more precisely, real courage. Laches evaluates the study primarily on the basis of the regard paid to it by the exemplars of excellence in warfare and courage, namely, the Spartans.¹⁶ Unlike the teachers of the new kind of *hoplomachia*, who may, Laches says, be “deceivers” (182e5), the Spartans are “the most serious of the Greeks about such things” (183a); it is well known that they do everything they can to excel in war. They do not, however, practice this kind of spear-fighting. This fact alone means for Laches that it is not a genuine skill. It is possible, Laches acknowledges, that the Spartans might simply be unaware of the new practice, but even if this is the case, it does not affect his opinion of spear-fighting. For, he says, if the teachers of the new study believed that their practice contributed to excellence in war, then surely they would take it to Sparta, where it would be especially valued if it were genuine. The fact that they instead treat Sparta as “inaccessible sacred ground” (183b) constitutes strong evidence for Laches that they and their studies are fraudulent.

Laches thus purports to use the mere fact that teachers of the new study do not approach Sparta as proof not only that it is useless but also that its teachers know it is, so intent is he on discrediting it. The fact, however, that he appeals to an authority to discredit the new technique suggests that he does not himself know it to be useless. Indeed, how could he? Surely it is at least possible that this new art of spear-fighting

¹⁶ Cf. 188d. Laches’ claim that the Dorian (Spartan) is the sole Greek *harmonia* underscores how much he admires the Spartans.

enhances self-defense, as Nicias asserts, when the ranks break. Surely it is also possible that those who teach this art steer clear of Sparta not because they fear being unmasked as frauds but because of the Spartans' famous conservatism, i.e., resistance to change. We soon learn, it is true, that Laches has independent evidence of deficiencies in the teachers of spear-fighting; he previously witnessed the teacher whom they have all just seen putting on a display of the skill, one Stesilaus, make a fool of himself using this technique (183d-184a). But that a practice reveals a fool to be a fool is not grounds for dismissing it altogether. Given the limits of the criticisms that Laches levels at spear-fighting, we may doubt that his contempt for it really stems from open-minded skepticism about its military utility. We may wonder, that is, whether Laches' efforts to discredit it have another source. Perhaps his expressed doubts about the usefulness of spear-fighting are in fact a stalking horse for deeper concerns, of which he may not be fully aware.

We may approach these by asking why Laches is so confident that the Spartans would reject spear-fighting were the art's practitioners to attempt to export it there. After all, if he does not himself know that the study is useless and if his claim about why its teachers avoid Sparta is far from compelling, how can he be sure that the Spartans, who are interested in anything that will help them "gain the advantage over others in war" (183a2), would not welcome whatever military advantages spear-fighting might give them? Perhaps Laches thinks that the Spartans would reject it not because it is useless but because of the particular way in which it might conceivably be useful. Laches may suspect what Nicias' defense of the study suggests: it teaches a skill useful mostly for individual self-defense. Teaching it may well encourage each soldier to focus on his own

individual salvation.¹⁷ This would greatly undermine the Spartan virtue that Laches so admires. The Spartans were not known for their individualism, for each individual's putting himself and his own safety first. The virtue for which they were famed was arguably most on display during the Persian Wars at the battle of Thermopylae, where three hundred Spartans, fully aware that their actions would cost them their lives, stood their ground against a vastly superior Persian army trying to buy time for the cities to the south to prepare to fight the massive Persian force.¹⁸ If Thermopylae teaches anything about the Spartans, it shows their great capacity to rise in moments of crisis above concerns for their own safety.

Spear-fighting, then, may repel Laches because it undermines "Spartan" virtue even or precisely if Nicias is right about its contributions to self-defense. More simply, it may repel him because it appeals to and indulges cowards. When Laches describes the

¹⁷ These considerations may explain Blitz's argument that Laches' objection to *hoplomachia* reveals his "horizon... to be the public, the common good, what is useful for the city" (1975, 195). I disagree, however, that this accurately captures Laches' horizon. Although Laches is clearly impressed with the Spartans' devotion to war, he does not praise their skill in war for benefiting the city. Indeed, as we will see, Laches excoriates *hoplomachia* because it undermines men's ability to prove their own virtue (184b-c). Cf. Dobbs 1986, 832. For an interpretation closer to my own, see Schmid 1992, 69.

¹⁸ Herodotus VII.206-228. That Laches' high opinion of Sparta rests on her nobility in precisely such cases as Thermopylae is suggested by the fact that he first defines courage as "remaining in the ranks" and not fleeing (190e4-7).

display that he witnessed Stesilaus, the instructor of the new technique, perform on a previous occasion, he describes Stesilaus as having used “a sickle-spear” (*dorudrepanon*. 183e1-2), i.e., a long spear crowned by a curved blade.¹⁹ On that occasion Stesilaus conveyed the impression that he was a ridiculous coward. While he was engaged in fighting with his “sickle-spear” aboard a ship, it became entangled in the lines of the opposing ship, which dragged him down the length of his own. His ridiculous plight caused a great deal of laughter from both friend and foe. Stesilaus may not only have appeared foolish to Laches, he may also have appeared cowardly. As soon as someone threw a stone at his feet, Stesilaus dropped his spear (183e-184b). Moreover, if his “sickle-spear” performance is any indication, Stesilaus’ new techniques are not really designed for warfare, much less the hoplite kind. A “sickle-spear” that could be used to tear the opposing ship’s masts by cutting its rigging would be useless in war, since Greek fleets did not sail into battle with their masts standing.²⁰ Laches may suspect that if such skills are not useful in war, they are pursued only by unserious and cowardly men. If Stesilaus represents for Laches the sort of man who employs these new techniques of *hoplomachia*, its practitioners must strike him as exceedingly base in comparison to the Spartans and their amazing toughness in the face of terrible fears and pains (cf. Plato, *Laws* 633a-c; Adcock 1957, 8-10). In the contempt he expresses for spear-fighting, Laches seems to be defending good old-fashioned virtue against new-fangled learning. For Laches the former, cultivated as in Sparta through years of habituation, greatly

¹⁹ Plato 1938, 55; Plato 1985, 12; Anderson 1991, 24.

²⁰ Plato 1938, 55; Anderson 1991, 24.

surpasses the latter, which teaches men innovative techniques and strategies but does not reach the crucial thing: their souls.

Indeed, Nicias' praise of *hoplomachia* for enabling men to appear virtuous when they are not cannot but strengthen Laches' reservations about it. Not only does it, by Nicias' admission, mask the lack of virtue in certain individuals, but precisely insofar as it enables these individuals to intimidate others and thus to get by despite their deficiencies, it lulls them into thinking they do not need genuine virtue. They therefore remain vulnerable to the consequences of their deficiencies, such as Steisilaus' dropping his weapon in fright. *Hoplomachia* can therefore be indicted for being not merely useless but corrupting.

It turns out, though, that even genuinely courageous men could suffer for knowing the art. For those reputed to know *hoplomachia* attract especially great scrutiny from others, who are eager to detect signs of cowardice in them. Laches seems particularly concerned about the possibility of being revealed as a fraud. Virtue, for him, is not merely something useful in a particular situation; it is a sign of one's dignity; it is a sign that one is a real man. And courage, he implies, is a virtue whose exercise can be so difficult that only one who has virtue "to an amazing degree" could know *hoplomachia* and escape becoming ridiculous in others' overly watchful eyes (184b-c). We must wonder what he thinks it means to possess virtue to an amazing degree. If the knowledge of *hoplomachia* does not contribute to its possession, does some other form of knowledge?

Socrates' Rhetorical Strategy

As we have seen, Laches' and Nicias' speeches concerning spear-fighting implicitly raise the question of what virtue is. Nicias praised the study for enabling men to secure

their objectives, especially their safety, while Laches condemned it for failing to instill qualities of soul that lead men to despise placing a primacy on their own individual good. But if a dispute over the nature of virtue is implicit in their accounts, it is only implicit; neither they nor the fathers seem to be alive to the dispute about virtue in general, and about courage in particular, to which their conflicting accounts point. It is Socrates who awakens them to it. Upon entering the conversation, though, Socrates does not directly raise the issue of their dispute. Instead, he initiates a discussion on the difficulty of finding experts to educate the young.

The fact that Socrates does not immediately press the most serious question raised by Laches' and Nicias' speeches is surprising, however, in light of the self-portrait he gives in the Apology. The Laches is, in fact, one of the few Platonic dialogues that depicts Socrates as doing what he claims in the Apology he often did: converse with leading Athenian statesmen, examining their opinions about noble and good things (Apology, 21b-d). His behavior here, though, does not strictly conform to his account of his behavior there. In the Apology, Socrates presents himself as investigating what the statesmen think is "noble and good" (21d5), ultimately incurring their hatred by showing them that they are not as wise as they think. Here, though, Socrates proceeds delicately. He does not enter the conversation until he is invited to do so, and when he does enter it, he displays great finesse in questioning the generals about virtue. Indeed, as we noted, he manages to refute their accounts without incurring their hostility, and without upsetting the fathers' deeply held conviction that virtue is teachable.

Socrates' performance in the dialogue appears all the more impressive when one considers its subject matter and the context in which it occurs. The initial inquiry into the

suitability of using spear-fighting to teach virtue yields to an inquiry into courage, the virtue at which spear-fighting seems to aim. Not only does Socrates manage, without giving offense, to bring out deficiencies in the generals' views of courage, about whose meaning they have a professional interest, so to speak, but he does this in the middle of the Peloponnesian War, when the whole city of Athens may be presumed to have a great deal at stake in the status of courage. When citizens are fighting and dying on the city's behalf, it is perhaps not the easiest time to raise questions about their courage and to wonder whether the city, as represented by two leading generals, has good grounds for honoring them.

We should not forget that Socrates faces certain personal risks in this conversation. If he is not careful, he could, by raising questions especially at this time about courage, undermine the good reputation he obtained as a result of the brave actions at Delium for which Lysimachus has just congratulated him. Lysimachus' and the other interlocutors' opinions of him, as we suggested, may be of some consequence to Socrates. Socrates is about forty-five years old at the time of the dialogue and thus in the prime of his life. Plato's dialogues indicate that Socrates' pursuit of philosophy very much involves vigorous conversations with young friends. Thus wishing access to the young, he would not want to hinder it by incurring the animosity of civic leaders in the way that he claims he does in the Apology. Lysimachus' and Melesias' sons, we have seen, already know and have spoken with or at least listened to Socrates. As we learn from other dialogues, Aristeides and Thucydides go on to study with Socrates (see Theages 130a-e), and Aristeides makes impressive progress for a while (see Theaetetus 151a). These future developments would be imperiled were Socrates to do anything here to incur the bad

opinion of the boys' fathers or of the generals to whom the fathers look up. His tactful conduct in the Laches helps to protect his ability to converse with the young men of Athens.

At any rate, after hearing Laches and Nicias quarrel about the worth of *hoplomachia*, Lysimachus asks Socrates to "cast his vote" with one of the generals (184d6). Having deferred to the generals when Lysimachus first solicited his opinion about spear-fighting, Socrates this time objects to the character of Lysimachus' request. For Lysimachus merely wants Socrates to side with either Laches or Nicias, as though a majority vote sufficed to determine the merits of spear-fighting. Socrates responds to his request in a way that suggests that Lysimachus is not thoughtful enough about what a good education is. Turning to Melesias, Socrates gains the latter's agreement that, precisely because education is so important, the fathers cannot let numbers decide the case.²¹ Knowledge is what counts, Socrates says, reminding the fathers that "their greatest possessions" (185a6) are at stake.

The question, however, is, who has the knowledge they require. Thinking that all they need to know now is the educative value of *hoplomachia*, Lysimachus and Melesias surely think they have come to the right people. Who better to consult about this art than accomplished generals like Nicias and Laches? The exchange between the two generals, though, has revealed a difficulty in the fathers' plan: what are they to do when the purported experts disagree? Can they be confident, moreover, that the generals are expert

²¹ According to Schmid, Socrates probably relies on Melesias to make this point because Melesias is of aristocratic stock and hence less likely to respect majority opinion (1992, 73-74).

in the right field? It is this last question that Socrates forces upon their attention as he assumes direction of the dialogue. The men cannot assess the value of spear-fighting until they determine the end to which it might be a means. This requires them first to find an expert in education, someone who knows what the finished product of a proper education looks like. This turn in the conversation may benefit Socrates in two ways. First, when his interlocutors see how seriously Socrates takes education and virtue, they may excuse him for raising difficulties with their own notions. Second, by thus exhorting the fathers to take this inquiry with the utmost seriousness and by turning the conversation to the question of who the true experts in education really are, Socrates encourages the fathers to begin considering the possibility that he himself is the best educator for their sons.

The real issue, Socrates persuades them, is not spear-fighting *per se* but the condition of their sons' souls (185e). He does this by means of a series of analogies. Socrates compares the inquiry into spear-fighting that the fathers began to inquiries into the proper drug for healing eyes and into whether a bridle should be used on a horse (185d). Just as in the case of deliberations about the drug or the bridle, one is really deliberating about what is best for the eye and the horse, so in examining spear-fighting one is examining what is best for young men. Socrates' analogies raise questions concerning the nature and purpose of education. If education is like a drug that restores sight to an eye, it restores health to the soul, enabling it to flourish. But if education is like putting a bridle on horse, it curbs natural inclinations and freedom so as to make one useful to others (190a; cf. NE 110615-25). It is of course possible that both kinds of education are

desirable. But which should be primary? Which should fathers be most concerned to give their sons?

Through another analogy Socrates raises a further question about education, one that we have already broached: how much can education do for a soul? Socrates suggests that in order to determine whether any of them are experts in teaching virtue, they follow the same procedure they would follow in order to determine who is expert in athletics (185b). This analogy raises an obvious difficulty: the athletic trainer is limited by the natural talent of his charge. The best he can do for an individual is bring him to the best condition of which he is capable; no trainer can make everyone into an exceptional athlete. Insofar as this is a relevant analogy for education, it implies that a soul's excellence is limited by its natural composition. A soul may need to be naturally robust in order to reap the full benefits of education.

However this may be, Socrates says that anyone who would give Lysimachus and Melesias the advice they seek should show that he has expertise in teaching virtue; in light of the fact that Nicias and Laches have just offered advice, this is a not-so-subtle challenge to them. Making the requisite demonstration means showing that one has either been a good student or a good teacher. Either one must identify the expert, "manifestly good" teachers from whom one has learned how to teach virtue; or, because Laches objects that not all experts have teachers, one must identify the students whom one has made good oneself (185e-186b). This demand that would-be advisors show their credentials seems reasonable enough, but it seems to beg a fundamental question: what does Socrates mean by goodness? Here he indicates that he has nothing sophisticated in mind; of him who would choose the second method of demonstrating his pedagogic

expertise, Socrates asks only that he show someone who has by “general agreement” become good through associating with him. At least for the moment Socrates sets what seems an attainable standard for the generals to meet, namely, the ability to teach virtue as the city understands it.

As for himself, Socrates denies that he can meet even this standard. His poverty, he claims, prevents him from hiring the sophists who claim to be able to make him “noble and good,” and he has not been able to acquire “the art” himself.²² He therefore encourages Lysimachus to question Laches and Nicias to see whether or not they have the requisite expertise, restating the ways in which the generals can prove their capacities. Apparently sensing his own deficiencies, Lysimachus asks Socrates to examine the generals in his stead; Lysimachus has not concluded from Socrates’ profession that he does not know how to teach virtue that Socrates cannot examine others’ teaching abilities (cf. 189c-d). Lysimachus has clearly changed his views as a result of this discussion about expertise. Whereas before he took for granted Laches’ and Nicias’ expertise, he now wants them to demonstrate proof of it, saying that it would please him and Melesias if they would be willing to do what Socrates has asked (187c). His respect for the generals has diminished; he is unsure of their expertise. This is evident as well from his restatement of the reason why he and Melesias have sought the generals’ advice about spear-fighting. Whereas he earlier said that they have done so because they believed the generals were “capable of knowing” such things, and because the generals had sons about the same age as theirs, now Lysimachus mentions only the latter reason (187c5-6; cf. 178b3-4, 179a8-b1). At the same time, he has become more impressed with Socrates,

²² Note here that Socrates does not deny that the sophists possess this art.

whom he now has enlisted as his agent for finding an expert. Socrates has moved from the periphery of the dialogue to its helm.

Nicias readily agrees to the conversation, although he suspects that it will in fact focus on the generals themselves rather than on their teaching credentials (187e-188b). Based on his prior experience of conversations with Socrates, he knows that Socrates will question anyone with whom he speaks until his interlocutor “falls into giving an account of himself, the way he now lives, and the way he has lived his past life.” But since in Nicias’ mind “it is no bad thing to be reminded of what we have done or are doing that is not noble,” he agrees to “pass time with Socrates however he wishes.” Laches joins Nicias in consenting to Lysimachus’ request, but on the basis of his familiarity with Socrates’ deeds rather than with his speeches (189a). Indeed, Laches is wary of anyone who speaks about “virtue or some wisdom” if he is not “truly a man and worthy of the speeches that he is uttering” (189c6-d2). Laches is certain that Socrates’ speeches will be acceptable because, he says, Socrates’ action on the battlefield sufficiently proved his virtue and thus his worthiness to speak about it. Whereas Socrates’ prior speeches lead Nicias to consent to be “tested” by him, Socrates’ prior deeds are what make Laches eager to take part in the examination.²³

Nicias’ suspicion that Socrates will turn the conversation around to an investigation of the generals themselves (189b7-9) is soon confirmed. Once the generals agree to have

²³ O’Brien provides a useful beginning point for analysis by observing that Laches is a man of deeds and Nicias a man of speeches or arguments; from this he argues that their respective deficiencies with respect to courage indicate that genuine courage will be manifest in both deeds and speeches (1963, 136, 146-7). Cf. Hoerber 1968, 99.

their teaching credentials examined, Socrates immediately raises the question of whether or not they in fact know what goodness or virtue is. He turns to this question by claiming that while it is perhaps not bad to inquire about either the generals' teachers or their students (189d), another inquiry would "lead to the same thing and would be somewhat more from the beginning" (189e). This other inquiry proves to investigate what virtue is. It is not difficult to see why it is "more from the beginning"; one must first know the virtue of the soul in order to know who is qualified to cultivate it in another, if indeed doing so is possible. But if this inquiry will "lead to the same thing" as one into who is qualified to teach virtue, then what follows is not entirely a shift away from the problem of teaching virtue.

Rather than focus on virtue in general, Socrates proposes that they limit their inquiry to the part of virtue that spear-fighting aims to cultivate, which is "presumably" courage (190d3-5). In context, his proposal is, for the generals, an offer they cannot refuse. Lysimachus and Melesias have appealed to them out of concern for their sons; they have already offered some advice, which the dialogue to this point has made clear they could not have responsibly done if they thought they lacked expertise; how can they refuse Lysimachus' plea that they help him further by submitting to Socrates' questions? Because the plea issues from Lysimachus, the generals will be less likely to blame Socrates if, as in fact happens, they prove not to have expert knowledge of courage; after all, he is only doing Lysimachus' bidding (see 189d5). The fact of the matter is that Nicias at least is not eager to be examined by Socrates. He describes, rather unenthusiastically, submitting to Socrates' questions as "no bad thing"; he speaks of himself as having "suffered" Socrates' examinations, to which he submits because one

“must not flee these things” (188a). Ultimately he explains his heeding Lysimachus’ request by saying that “nothing prevents” him from passing time with Socrates “however [Socrates] wishes” (188c). Laches is more eager to converse with Socrates, encouraging Socrates to say “whatever is dear to him” (189b7) without taking account of their different ages. He, though, has no experience of Socrates’ conversations.

What appears to be a long introduction to the discussion of courage thus not only hints at many of the complexities surrounding courage but also demonstrates Socrates’ artfulness. Contrary to his self-portrait in the Apology, Socrates can press the most serious questions about virtue with important statesmen without incurring their hatred. Indeed, his examination of their views can even improve his prospects for talking to young men; here Socrates shows the fathers that he is at least more qualified than the leading statesmen of Athens regarding virtue. Moreover, having secured the fathers’ request to direct the dialogue, Socrates is largely absolved of responsibility for whatever troubling revelations emerge in the course of their dialogue, above all the revelation that these generals cannot give coherent accounts of what courage is.

Chapter 2

Socrates' Exchange with Laches

Laches

The fact that this dialogue is named after Laches suggests that understanding him and his opinion of courage is somehow integral to understanding the dialogue. We have seen thus far that he cares a great deal about courage. He is willing to be examined by Socrates regarding it because he witnessed Socrates' courage on the battlefield. Indeed, not only has Socrates' courage so impressed Laches that he defers to him when asked about what constitutes a noble study or practice (180c; also see 181a-b, 184c), but he even maintains that he submits to Socrates' scrutiny "with great pleasure."

Despite his stated willingness to have Socrates teach and refute him (189b), Laches does not seem to think he has much to learn from Socrates. From the outset, he appears confident that he sufficiently understands virtue in general and courage in particular. More precisely, if he does not think he understands these perfectly, he thinks he understands them sufficiently not to shy away from the challenge into which Socrates, relying on his earlier statements, leads him. This challenge is made possible by Laches' argument that spear-fighting was not worth learning because, not only did it not cultivate virtue, it even corrupted it. As we just noted, he could not have responsibly made this argument unless he had at least a solid grasp of what virtue is. So, when Socrates asks him how "we" could counsel anyone about virtue "if we did not at all know even what virtue happens to be" (190b-c), he is not merely identifying the conditions the generals must meet if they are to be deemed worthy to dispense advice; he is also implying that Laches must either understand virtue or admit that he behaved shamefully. Whether or

not this consideration affects Laches' response, he emphatically agrees with Socrates that "we" know what virtue is (190c).¹ Socrates, however, does not ask him about virtue per se; it would be a lot of work to "examine the whole of virtue straightaway" (190c). Rather, he says that they should more modestly focus on a part of virtue, the part at which "the many" think "learning about armor" seems to aim: courage (190d). Laches is confident that he understands courage. He swears "by Zeus" that courage is "not hard to state" (190e4). His swearing underlines both how much he cares about courage and, at the same time, how certain he is of its meaning.²

His certainty will be shattered when Socrates reveals the deep confusion in his view of courage. What may explain why the dialogue is named after him is the character of this confusion. Laches takes to an extreme the position of those who most esteem courage, those who believe, as he does, that courage is not only noble but "among the noblest things" (192c). The problem with this position is that it turns out to be very hard for Laches to reconcile the admiration for courage as surpassingly noble with the view that it is also a means to some further good. Laches initially accepts the view that courage accompanied by prudence is "noble and good." On its face, this claim is unremarkable; it merely implies that courage is most a virtue when one accomplishes through its exercise something that one apprehends to be good for oneself, for others, or for both.

¹ To be fair to Laches, he may not suspect that he rather than "we" will have to explain virtue or, rather, courage; he may think that Socrates will collaborate with him.

² This is only the second oath in the dialogue, Lysimachus' oath by Hera being the first.

But as the conversation proceeds, Laches retreats from this view. When Socrates indicates the skillfulness with which the prudently courageous man behaves, Laches begins to think less well of prudent courage. He winds up arguing that what is truly admirable is not prudent but foolish courage, i.e., the courage of the man who lacks both knowledge and skill. As Laches listens to Socrates' examples of prudent courage, he reveals that in fact he thinks that the nobility of courage is independent of its goal. But Laches never quite renounces his initial agreement with Socrates that courage accompanied by prudence is noble and good. He is torn between the two perspectives. His confusion represents a quintessentially human confusion, the exploration of which will illuminate the reasons why we are uncertain about the essence of courage.

Standing One's Ground

Laches' confident first attempt to define courage seems promising: if someone were "willing to remain in the ranks and defend himself (*amunesthai*) against the enemies and should not flee," he would, according to Laches, be courageous (190e). It is hardly surprising that Laches defines courage in terms of battle; not only is he a general, but the battlefield seems to be the greatest test of courage, since one faces the most terrible dangers there. Or, perhaps we should say, it is the greatest test of courage for anyone who considers courage to be "among the noblest" things, for unlike those who behave bravely when disasters befall them, those who confront dangers in battle choose voluntarily to face them. Socrates, however, is dissatisfied with Laches' definition and blames himself for its insufficiency. He claims that Laches has "spoken well" but adds politely that because he, Socrates, has failed to "speak distinctly" in his question, Laches has not fully addressed it. To clarify Laches' meaning Socrates asks him if he means to

say that the man who “remains in the ranks and fights (*macheitai*) the enemies” is courageous (191a2-3). Laches agrees that he does without seeming to notice that Socrates has changed the focus from defending oneself against enemies to fighting them. To be sure, that courage involves fighting the enemy is implicit in his original definition. But if so, why does Socrates reformulate Laches’ definition to make fighting against the enemies more prominently the focus than defending oneself?

Laches’ initial definition contains an ambiguity. A man could “remain in the ranks” and “not flee” in two very different situations. One could remain in the ranks and not flee by holding fast in formation and absorbing the enemy onslaught either until one exhausts the enemy, forcing it to retreat or, if the enemy proves stronger, until one dies.³ But one also remains in the ranks and does not flee when one executes a calm and orderly retreat. Indeed, it is in the latter case that one better defends oneself, even if one does so in order to fight another day.⁴ Laches’ initial definition thus evokes two different types of conduct and leaves unclear which for him exemplifies courage. That Laches does not object to — or notice — Socrates’ revision of his definition clarifies the fact that for Laches, the man who remains in the ranks is not courageous primarily because he is able to extricate himself safely from the battle but because he fights the enemy.

A further question remains, however, about Laches’ initial definition: if he believes that courage means fighting the enemy, why does he not say so? Fighting the enemy

³ For examples of such conduct, see Herodotus VII. 220-228; Thucydides 5.10.9; Xenophon 4.8.38-9.

⁴ For examples of such retreats, see Thucydides 3.108, 4.44, 4.76, 6.70; Plato, Symposium 221a-b.

seems to be an obvious part at least of any civic definition of courage; it is the duty of a good citizen to be willing to fight the enemy. Indeed, from the civic perspective, courage cannot be properly understood as a virtue without reference to the purpose it serves in defending the city. Thus, it is peculiar that a general like Laches would define the activity of remaining in the ranks as defending oneself rather than in a more civic-spirited way as fighting the enemy. The fact that he instinctively chooses the former rather than the latter formulation hints at what we have seen in his critique of the new kind of *hoplomachia*: in his heart, Laches does not understand courage primarily as a means to accomplishing some other task, even victory. When Laches suggests that courage is remaining in the ranks, defending oneself and not fleeing, he is not thinking that courage is exemplified by the capacity to retreat safely. But he may instinctively focus on “defending oneself” as opposed to “fighting the enemy,” because he is less concerned with what courage can accomplish than with displaying it, i.e., he thinks that the act of standing up to the enemy constitutes the essence of courage. To put it somewhat differently, what counts for Laches seems to be the “moment of truth,” the moment when one could run away but instead stands firm and faces down one’s fears. His definition raises the possibility, which subsequent developments will confirm, that for him courage is very much an end in itself. But this view, as we will see, is not unproblematic. To argue that remaining in the ranks is an end in itself means that the virtue of courage can only come into its own in the midst of dire circumstances. And insofar as courage is “among the noblest” things, such a view implies that only at the worst of times do we become our best selves.

We see the full import of Socrates' reformulation only after Socrates asks his next question. Having gained Laches' agreement that the courageous man remains in the ranks and fights the enemies, Socrates wonders about the man who fights the enemies not while remaining in the ranks but while "fleeing" (*pheugon*). Socrates' reformulation of Laches' original definition has thus introduced a crucially important addition Laches' reaction to which will reveal whether he really thinks that courage is an end in itself, for the extent to which he agrees that fleeing counts as courageous is the extent to which he concedes that courage cannot simply be an end in itself but must be guided by a higher purpose. Socrates seizes on Laches' agreement that the courageous man "fights the enemy" in order first, to bring out the degree to which Laches think that the courageous man must always have an objective, e.g., to fight the enemy, and, second, to force Laches to question whether, in light of this fact, remaining in the ranks and not fleeing is an adequate definition of courage. For if courage is a means to an end, it could include a variety of conduct; conceivably, courage could be anything that achieves that end. Socrates' reformulation of Laches' original definition is thus necessary for Socrates to elicit the full scope of Laches' view of courage. For Laches' initial definition is not as vulnerable to an interpretation of courage as a means and thus not subject to the difficulties to which Socrates now draws Laches' attention. As we have said, insofar as Laches means by courage defending oneself in the face of a terrible onslaught until one conquers or is conquered, he does not articulate a further end to which courage is a means; on this account, a man reveals his courage simply by standing his ground, and even dying. But Socrates' slight revision to Laches' definition and his subsequent questions reveal that Laches' initial definition does not exhaust his view of courage.

Indeed, Laches' agreement with Socrates' revision allows Socrates to refute Laches' original definition. Not surprisingly, Laches is very puzzled by Socrates' suggestion that one could fight the enemy while fleeing (191a), for this suggestion implies that fleeing the enemy can be courageous. Nothing could be further from Laches' apparent view that courage is holding one's position at the moment of truth. In support of his contention, Socrates cites the Scythian horsemen, whose battle strategy includes intervals of both pursuit and flight, and he also cites Homer's praise for the Trojan Aeneas' horses, who "knew how to pursue and to flee," and for Aeneas himself, who Socrates says is called a "counselor of flight" (191b1).⁵ Laches concedes that this kind of fighting may indeed characterize some, but he denies that "the heavy-armed soldiery of the Greeks" (191b) fight in this way. Laches may have to grant that flight is part of the strategy of certain fighters, but he seems not to hold these in very high esteem. Given his earlier appeal to them as the standard for warfare, we know that he greatly admires the Spartans; he is quite certain that flight is not part of the tactics of the masters of hoplite warfare. It is one thing, Laches seems to think, if cavalry and charioteers do not stand their ground, especially if they are barbarians like the Scythians and the Trojans; what else can one expect from men who need assistance from horses and chariots (cf. Thucydides IV. 126-

⁵ As Nichols (1987a, 255 n.27) observes, Socrates skews the meaning of Homer's text to support his claim that flight is a noble battle strategy. Socrates' interpretation of the term "counselor of flight" as one who advises his friends to flee is by no means the most plausible one. Homer seems rather to be describing the terror that Aeneas and his horses inspire in his enemies (see *Iliad* V.272 and VIII.107). For a somewhat different interpretation of Socrates' reference to these Homeric passages, see Schmid 1992, 103.

27)? The situation is very different for those among the Greeks who have the courage to put on heavy arms and fight man-to-man — they do not flee.

The problem with this position, however, is that according to Socrates it is wrong. In fact, Socrates points out to Laches that at Plataea, the Spartans “were not willing to remain in the ranks and fight” against their enemies, the Persians, but “fled” only to turn around later to fight and win when the Persian ranks were broken (191c).⁶ Laches agrees simply and even tepidly by saying only, “What you say is true” (191c6). It is not fully clear what Laches’ response means. On the one hand, Laches could be merely admitting that the Spartans did flee at Plataea, not that in doing so they acted courageously. Or, he could be admitting the latter. Indeed, insofar as he takes the Spartans as his model of courage, he may find it very difficult to deny that they behaved in a model fashion at Plataea, especially because of the magnitude of their victory there. Obscuring the full meaning of Laches’ agreement, however, is the fact that Socrates’ interpretation of the Spartan action at Plataea is highly unusual.⁷ The Spartans did not simply flee the battle but, under pressure from the Persian cavalry, had to retreat to a position from which they could have access to a new, unpolluted water source (their previous one had been ruined by the Persians) and replenish their dwindling provisions (Herodotus IX. 49-53). Thus,

⁶ Herodotus calls Plataea, where the Greeks put an end to the Persian threats of invasion under which they had long labored, “the fairest victory of any we have known” (IX.64). But he explicitly praises the Persians’ courage (IX. 62)

⁷ Many editors of Greek editions of Plato note that Socrates’ account of the battle differs from the accounts of Herodotus and Plutarch. See, for example, Plato 1938, 73, and Plato 1985, 25.

not only was their “flight” not a flight, but their retreat was not for the reasons that Socrates presents it, namely, for purely tactical purposes. According to other accounts of the battle, only after the Spartans were pursued by the Persians did the former turn around to fight. Even then, the Spartans did so only after sustaining many casualties as they hunkered down waiting for the omens to prove favorable to them.⁸ Why, we are thus led to wonder, does Socrates present the Spartans both as fleeing the battle and as having used the appearance of flight as part of their strategy?⁹

The answer seems to lie in Laches’ reaction to Socrates’ portrait of the events at Plataea. For perhaps what is most striking about Socrates’ depiction of the battle is the fact that Laches does not dispute it. To be sure, Laches’ agreement with Socrates’ characterization of the Spartan conduct is far from enthusiastic. Laches’ lack of enthusiasm is not surprising; he defined courage as standing one’s ground and was baffled at Socrates’ first suggestion that fleeing could be deemed courageous. But why does he not mount a stronger defense of the Spartans? Why does he fail to challenge Socrates’ description of the Spartans as “fleeing” (*pheugein*), rather than as retreating¹⁰ in

⁸ For these accounts of the battle, see Herodotus IX. 51-65 and Plutarch 1864 (“Life of Aristeides”), 401-405.

⁹ This is not to say that such tactics were never used, even by the Spartans. See Herodotus VII. 211.

¹⁰ Socrates might have used the word “*anastrepho*,” for example, which he uses to describe a calm retreat at 191e2, or other words, such as “*apochero*” (cf. Thucydides II. 89, 94, III. 13) that seem more consistent with his interpretation of the events than “*pheugo*” does.

an orderly fashion, the latter being more consistent with Socrates' interpretation of Spartan strategy as having employed a tactical ruse? With respect to whether or not the Spartans can be understood to have fled the battle, Laches may not dispute Socrates' choice of words because he fears that the word is appropriate.¹¹ Although the Spartans may have quit the field for eminently sensible reasons, that they quit the field at all could raise questions about their courage. Socrates' example hits upon and exploits an uneasiness in Laches with any kind of retreat. For if courage is displayed in the moment of truth, the moment one faces the greatest challenge, how does one know — even about oneself — that when retreating, one is not merely succumbing to one's fears, i.e., fleeing? Leaving the scene of a fearful confrontation raises the possibility that one lacked the courage to face it. If indeed this is Laches' view of the Spartan action, he would not be alone. According to Herodotus, the Persian commander Mardonius in fact ridiculed the Spartans when he learned about their retreat; he, at least, interpreted it as a flight, taunting the Spartans that despite their reputation as the "best of warriors," their "flight" proved them to be "the most complete nobodies in a nation of Greek nobodies" (IX. 58).¹²

¹¹ One indication that Laches thinks of the Spartans as at first having fled at Plataea is that he earlier praised Socrates for his brave retreat at Delium (181b1-4). Cf. Tessitore 1994, 126; Arieti 1991, 58. Laches would have not been so uncomfortable with the direction Socrates is taking if he understood Socrates to be talking about a retreat, which required, as Laches himself earlier notes, great courage.

¹² It was not only the Persians who took the Spartan action to be a cowardly flight. As Herodotus (IX. 53-55) and Plutarch (1864, 403) report, Amompharetus, a Spartan soldier, refused to retreat with the rest of the Spartans because he believed that to do so

Even if Laches is easily lured into calling the Spartan retreat a “flight,” he still might have seized upon Socrates’ explanation of that “flight,” namely, that it was a tactical ruse to secure victory, in order to defend it as courageous. Laches’ failure to do so underscores what we have thus far deduced is his understanding of courage. To offer a defense of the Spartans because they employed tactics would be to subordinate courage to the tactical objective, namely, victory. And if courage were subordinate to something else, its claim to be “among the noblest” things would be diminished; for it would be a means to what is noble instead of noble itself. Insofar as Laches’ great admiration for courage is an admiration for a man’s conduct at the moment of truth, he cannot hold the view that victory is more important than standing one’s ground. If he did, he would have to concede that courage cannot always mean standing one’s ground, particularly if to do so is not the best means to victory. Because the nobility of courage for Laches lies in the manner in which one behaves in the direst circumstances, however prudent a tactical

would disgrace Sparta. In fact, Herodotus fails to include Pausanias, the Spartan general who called for the retreat, in a list of the bravest Spartans at Plataea (IX.71). (For a different assessment of Pausanias’ strategy, see Adcock 1957, 12). The view of the Spartan conduct as shameful is not confined to antiquity. Because he himself seems to see the Spartan flight at Plataea as shameful, Schmid denies that Socrates means to identify it as a counter-example of Laches’ initial definition of courage; Schmid is thus forced into making the awkward claim that Socrates uses this example not to question Laches’ definition but to undermine his own suggestion that one can fight while fleeing and to offer quiet support to Laches’ original definition (1992, 105).

flight may be, it would not reveal the greatest courage.¹³ The fact that Laches does not take advantage of the opportunity to defend the Spartan action as a tactical ruse every bit as courageous as standing one's ground, may be because Laches suspects that when they are employing a tactical ruse, the Spartans do not exemplify the courage he most admires.

Laches, however, holds more than one view about courage. While Laches does not explicitly agree that in "fleeing," the Spartans acted courageously at Plataea, neither does he deny that they did. If he is in fact uneasy with the thought that flight could be considered courageous, why does he not simply and forthrightly deny that the Spartan action at Plataea constitutes an example of courage? Laches' failure to say this, i.e., the

¹³ Laches' view is neither idiosyncratic nor a mere artifact of Greek notions of courage. Having succumbed as a prisoner of war to brutal torture and signed a "confession of crimes" against the North Vietnamese, Senator John McCain describes his subsequent time in solitary confinement as follows: "They were the worst weeks of my life. I couldn't rationalize away my confession. I was ashamed. I felt faithless and couldn't control my despair... All my pride was lost and I doubted that I would ever be able to stand up to any man again" (McCain 1999, 244). Even many years later, during which time he learned that many others, including those he himself considered brave, had broken, McCain has said that "he feels no less shame" and that, although he did the best he could, he continues to believe that "the best I could was not enough" (Timberg 1995, 95). Like the motto of the U.S. Marines, "Semper Fi," McCain's intense and persistent shame at signing a militarily inconsequential confession underscores the power of the belief that there are some things a courageous individual simply does not do, no matter what. For a particularly powerful account of this belief, see Gray 1959, 116, 125.

fact that he is drawn up short by Plataea, suggests that he cannot wholly discount the importance of strategy, even the predominance of strategy over courage as he conceives it. We should not forget that his condemnation of the new kind of spear-fighting was partly based on the claim that the Spartans would adopt it if it actually conferred a military advantage. The end of victory, Laches seems to recognize, may make the means, however ignoble they seem in themselves, worthwhile. Yet, as we have seen, Laches is reluctant to follow through on this thought. Were he to concede that victory alone should dictate how soldiers should fight, he would be admitting that strategic knowledge is more important than the toughness shown by the hoplite. Moreover, were he to grant that courage could be displayed fully on a strategic retreat, he would also be granting that strategic knowledge is at least as important as, if not central to, courage.¹⁴ This centrality, however, threatens to crowd out the nobility of courage. To place too much importance on knowledge may be to attribute greater courage to the soldier with experience and skill than to the ordinary soldier, whose lack of special skills or knowledge does not render him unwilling to stand his ground in the face of an enemy onslaught (cf. NE 1116b5-25).¹⁵ Put simply, to subordinate the dictates of courage to military prudence may not, in Laches' mind, be to give courage its due.

¹⁴ Socrates seems to emphasize the necessity of knowledge for warfare by suggesting that even Aeneas' horses had some knowledge (191b).

¹⁵ According to the Israeli commando Jonathan Netanyahu, the principle underlying paratroopers' training is "practice, practice, practice, until the fear that is present in the initial exercises disappears, and you discover there's not much to it" (Netanyahu 1980, 62). Laches, as we will see, would deny that these paratroopers display as much courage

Steadfastness of Soul

However adequate is Socrates' refutation of Laches' first definition of courage, Laches' concession that when the Spartans fight their enemies while fleeing, they are acting courageously has revealed that definition to be too narrow. Socrates has thus broadened Laches' first definition of courage to cover conduct beyond standing firm. Now he aims to broaden Laches' horizon further. He tells Laches that he wants to know about those who are courageous not just in hoplite warfare but also in other forms of warfare, in dangers at sea, in sickness and poverty, in politics, in the face of pains and fears, and even in the face of desires and pleasures — whether, he adds, they stand firm against these things or retreat from them (191d-e). Now one may wonder whether courage is involved in all the situations Socrates mentions or, at least, whether Laches will think it is involved. After all, Laches originally described courage as standing firm in battle. Dangers at sea, sickness, and poverty may be evils, but facing them well may seem to be less noble than facing down one's enemy on the battlefield. Precisely because the quality Socrates now describes abstracts from the particular dangers one faces on the battlefield, we may wonder whether Laches will agree to call it courage.

Laches at first emphatically agrees that courage is present in all these examples (191e4).¹⁶ But Socrates suspects that Laches may not understand what he asks and may

as those who jump despite the fact that they are full of fear.

¹⁶ Socrates' list has occasioned much debate in the literature over whether or not he means, by citing all these various kinds of courage, to broaden the notion of courage so as to equate courage with the whole of virtue (Santas 1980, 186-88, argues that he does;

therefore not actually agree with this broad notion of courage. For despite Laches' enthusiastic agreement, Socrates claims that Laches has not really understood him and thus repeats himself, asking Laches a second time whether someone can possess courage or cowardice in pleasures, pains, desires and fears. When Laches once again agrees with Socrates' claim about the various manifestations of courage (191e8), Socrates, apparently convinced that Laches does not in fact agree with him, now simply asks Laches whether he understands what Socrates means, and Laches confesses, "Not altogether" (191e12), thus confirming Socrates' suspicion. Confronted with the very different examples of battlefield courage on the one hand and bravery in the face of pleasures on the other, Laches is unable to think of what they might have in common. In order to help Laches find the common element in these examples, Socrates offers the analogy of swiftness. He says that swiftness, like courage, manifests itself in many different ways; it exists, for example, in running, in playing a musical instrument, in speaking and in learning. If he were asked what the thing called swiftness is that is present in all these examples, Socrates says that he would call it "the power of accomplishing much in a short time" (192a-b).

Socrates' example succeeds in sparking Laches to offer a new, more comprehensive definition of courage. He says that if one must say what courage is "by nature in all cases," then it is a "certain steadfastness of soul" (192b-c).¹⁷ Socrates praises this

Schmid 1992, 107-8, argues that he does not). Whatever Socrates himself has in mind, both sides of the controversy fail to note that *Laches* agrees with Socrates that all the examples he cites count as courage.

¹⁷ *Karteria* can mean endurance or steadfastness (see also Symposium 219d6). It

response very highly and agrees that this is indeed what one must say “if we are to answer for ourselves what is asked” (192c2-3). His praise of the definition makes sense: courage does seem to involve steadfastness in the face of fearful circumstances. Socrates, however, now explicitly reveals his doubt that Laches fully endorses his own definition, for he tells Laches that he suspects that “not quite all steadfastness appears to you to be courage” (192c3-5); the “to you” suggests a divergence between him and Laches over what forms of steadfastness qualify as courage. Socrates’ suspicion stems from the fact that, as he tells Laches, he “pretty much knows” that the general holds courage “to be among the altogether noble things.” In fact, Laches corrects him, he holds courage to be “among the noblest things” (192c5-6).¹⁸ This belief, however, exposes Laches’ new definition to difficulties. Socrates’ high praise of it suggests that he thinks the definition either is or points to a perfectly coherent notion of courage. But the claim that courage is both a “certain steadfastness of soul” and something noble leads Laches to be confused over whether courage is prudent (192d10-12) or foolish steadfastness (193d6-8). The details of the exchange between Laches and Socrates that follows reveal the reason for Laches’ confusion.

Having obtained confirmation that Laches thinks courage is “among the noblest” things, Socrates next tries to determine what kind of steadfastness would be noble and hence qualify as courage. He asks Laches whether steadfastness is both noble and good

derives from the word *karteros*, which means strength or sturdiness.

¹⁸ Many commentators have concluded from this passage that both Socrates and Laches think that courage is “among the noble things.” This goes too far, since all we learn here is Laches’ view. Cf. Santas 1980, 188, and Devereux 1977, 133.

(*kalê kagathê*) when it is accompanied by prudence. Laches agrees readily to this, saying “certainly” (192c10). When, however, Socrates asks him whether steadfastness accompanied not by prudence but by folly is both wicked (*kakourgon*) and harmful (*blaberon*), Laches says only “yes” (192d3), which is in Greek a much less emphatic agreement. He seems uneasy with the direction of Socrates’ questions, which suggest that courage is not noble unless it is accompanied by prudence. Or, at least, Socrates’ questions suggest this conclusion insofar as what is wicked and harmful is not noble. And it is about this last issue that Socrates next inquires. He asks Laches whether he would assert that something that “is wicked and harmful is noble.” To this Laches says only that “it would certainly not be just, at any rate” to say so (192d3-6); he does not say that this assertion would be false.

Why does Laches answer as he does? Why does he hesitate to agree that foolish steadfastness is, first, “harmful and wicked” and, second, necessarily ignoble? Regarding the first issue, he may think that foolish steadfastness could be harmful without being wicked. To be wicked or to do evil is to do more than cause harm; it is to cause harm intentionally and without justification. Foolish steadfastness may cause harm but only unintentionally and therefore not be wicked. Take the well-intentioned passer-by who, upon finding a man drowning in freezing water, jumps in to save him rather than call for help. If the would-be rescuer is overcome by the shock of the cold water and both he and the drowning man die, he could well be said to have acted foolishly. He could even be said to have caused harm insofar as his failure to call for help prevented assistance from coming that would have led to a successful rescue. But he could not plausibly be said to have acted wickedly.

If, however, foolish steadfastness is not always both harmful and wicked, what of those cases where it is? Why does Laches show reluctance to grant that such steadfastness is ignoble, saying only that to do so “would certainly not be just”? In entertaining, at least, the possibility that harmful and wicked steadfastness is noble, Laches seems unwilling to conclude that clearly unjust acts are clearly ignoble. Perhaps he is thinking of an example like that of the daring criminal who takes enormous risks — even putting his life on the line — in order to accomplish some injustice. Laches seems tempted to think that even a morally repugnant act might be noble to the extent that it involves an impressive display of steadfastness. Such a view would hardly be peculiar to Laches; we are inclined to speak of soldiers, such as General Erwin Rommel, as brave and even as having acted nobly despite the fact that their courage was exercised in the service of injustice. We call them brave precisely because we have a sense that no matter how it is executed, the simple capacity for steadfastness of soul is impressive and thus somehow noble. Laches exemplifies this inclination by his reluctance to call harmful and wicked steadfastness ignoble; he is not wholly prepared to dismiss the impressiveness of steadfastness itself.

Nor, however, is he wholly prepared to defend courage as noble without reference to its goals and effects. Whatever Laches’ ultimate thoughts about whether a wicked action can still be noble, he refrains from agreeing that foolish steadfastness is courage. Because Laches will not forthrightly call harmful and wicked steadfastness noble, Socrates concludes that he “will therefore not agree that steadfastness of this sort, at any rate, is courage, since it is not noble and courage is a noble thing” (192d7-8). Laches responds by saying, “what you say is true.” While he is thus unwilling to deny firmly

that foolish steadfastness — insofar as it is harmful and wicked — is ignoble, Laches cannot bring himself to say that it is noble either; and because he thinks that courage is noble, he cannot therefore call foolish steadfastness courage. As much as he may admire the steadfastness that enables some to take enormous risks or hold firm in terrifying circumstances, the steadfastness that is for him most worthy of the name “courage” is not exhibited by fools or scoundrels. What kind of steadfastness, then, deserves the name? Socrates suggests that it is opposite to foolish steadfastness. He gets Laches to agree that, according to his own argument, “prudent steadfastness would be courage” (192d10-11). Laches’ agreement seems a decisive departure from his first definition of courage as standing one’s ground. Only to the extent that standing one’s ground is prudent would it seem to qualify as noble and therefore as courage.

But Laches’ agreement that “prudent steadfastness would be courage” is in fact rather tentative; he says simply that “it seems so” (192d12). Why does he hesitate to accept the logical conclusion of his preceding agreements? If courage is both noble and a form of steadfastness, and if only prudent steadfastness is noble, then courage is prudent steadfastness. The problem seems to lie in the meaning of the word that Socrates, with Laches’ endorsement, uses to characterize the steadfastness that is courage: “prudent.” As we have just seen, the implication of the claim that courage is prudent steadfastness is that courage is properly so called only when it is exercised well, which means when it is guided by an intelligent mind aiming to produce good results. This would mean that courage must be judged according to whether or not the ends for which it is exercised are worthy and the means undertaken to those ends sensible. But we saw earlier that Laches was unwilling to judge courage by the ends it serves: he conceived of it as displayed in

crucial “moments of truth” as an end in itself. The heart of the courage displayed in “moments of truth” may seem to Laches very far removed from the cool calculation that characterizes prudent action. This underlying conception may be the cause here of Laches’ reluctance to define courage as prudent steadfastness. Still, it is very revealing that Laches did not balk when Socrates initially (192c8-9) praised such steadfastness as good. Indeed, he there expressed a very high opinion of prudent steadfastness. He took, at least with part of himself, the view that for courage to be admirable it must be guided by a rational mind for good purposes. But as Socrates begins to focus Laches’ attention more on the aftermath of courageous action than on that “moment of truth,” Laches grows more uncomfortable with understanding courage as governed by prudence. The problem for Laches with prudence is connected to what we have seen is Laches’ wish to treat courage as an end in itself rather than as a means to some further good. Thus, to the extent that prudent courage is a courage aimed at accomplishing a further good, Laches is reluctant to acknowledge that for courage to be noble, i.e., a virtue, it must be prudent. Socrates’ attempt to clarify with Laches the circumstances under which steadfastness is prudent and therefore courageous will further clarify the reasons for Laches’ reluctance.

Socrates first asks Laches whether the capacity to be steadfast in spending money prudently is an example of prudent steadfastness, i.e., courage. Laches is outraged by the suggestion, swearing by Zeus that it is not (192e5). But Socrates’ suggestion is compatible with the claim that he earlier made and that Laches accepted, namely, that it is possible to be courageous in pleasures as well as pains (191d-e); if this is true, then someone who is steadfast in spending money prudently could be said to display courage in fending off temptations. However, Laches’ outrage here is perfectly understandable;

there is nothing noble about this steadfastness. The prudent spender neither faces any danger nor acts for any noble end. Next, Socrates asks whether a doctor is courageous when he steadfastly refuses to give food or drink to his son or to someone else whose illness demands abstention. Again, Laches emphatically denies that this is an example of courage (193a1). Unlike the prudent spender, the doctor who treats “someone else” might be understood to act for a nobler end; he looks after the health and well-being of others. But this end does not appear to impress Laches; not only is the end for which he strives still a rather low one, but also, as with the prudent spender, the doctor faces no dangers himself. To be sure, he must experience some pain when he refuses to relieve his son’s suffering. But he faces no danger in trying to treat either his son or “someone else.” Neither the actions of the prudent spender or the tough-minded doctor capture for Laches the essence of courage.

Socrates’ draws out what is in Laches’ mind the essence of courage in his third attempt to define prudent courage. Here Socrates asks Laches about the courage of a soldier. In contrast, however, to his procedure in the previous two examples where he simply asked whether a certain kind of steadfastness was courageous, Socrates now asks Laches to compare the courage of two men. Socrates asks him who is more courageous: the man who is “steadfast and willing to fight, calculating prudently and knowing that others will come to his aid, that he will be fighting against fewer and inferior men than those he is with and that he holds stronger ground,” or “the one in the opposite camp who is willing to remain standing his ground and to be steadfast” (193a4-9)? Unlike the prudent spender and much more so than the doctor, both these men exercise steadfastness in the most noble arena — war. The difference between the two lies in the risk that each

assumes, and Laches attributes greater courage to the fighter who takes the greatest risks. Now Laches' claim that warriors who stand their ground despite poor odds are more courageous than those who stand firm in full knowledge of their superiority does accord with common sense. Precisely because of their superiority, the latter group has less to fear and thus less need for courage. Yet, this fact has a troubling implication, for it suggests that courage is manifest most in those who have the least art or knowledge. Indeed, even as Laches maintains that the man without art or knowledge is the more courageous one, he acknowledges that his steadfastness is more foolish than the former's (193b2-3).

Socrates pushes Laches' answer to its logical extreme: he shows that according to Laches' position, the more one knows when undertaking some risky enterprise, the less courageous one is. Laches is cornered into saying that the cavalry soldier who does not know horsemanship is more courageous than the one who does, that the archer who does not know the art of the bow is more courageous than the one who does, and that those who dive into wells or perform any dangerous task without being "terribly clever" at their work are more courageous than their clever counterparts (193b-c). Laches is clearly frustrated at having to agree to these things; when Socrates asks him whether he thinks that the ignorant diver is more courageous than the knowledgeable one, he says in exasperation, "what else would one say, Socrates" (193c6)? Laches sees the logical necessity that forces him to agree here, but he resists doing so, surely for the sensible reason that unlike the unskilled soldier who stands his ground, someone who dives into a well without knowing how to swim seems foolish rather than brave; the latter seems to risk his life for no good end. But despite Laches' awareness that he is agreeing to

something dubious, he maintains here nonetheless that he has said what he thinks (193c6).

Increasing Laches' discomfort, Socrates points out the divergence between what Laches maintains now and his grudging concession earlier that foolish steadfastness is ignoble: "wasn't foolish daring and steadfastness revealed to us in what preceded to be shameful and harmful?"¹⁹ Indeed, Socrates continues, despite Laches' earlier praise for prudent steadfastness, he seems to be saying not only that steadfastness without knowledge is more courageous than prudent steadfastness but also that "this shameful thing, foolish steadfastness, is courage." Laches concedes that Socrates is right, but when Socrates presses further and asks him whether what they are saying now is, in Laches' opinion, "fine," Laches responds with an oath: "By Zeus, Socrates, not in my opinion" (1936d). As tempted as Laches is to call those who act without knowledge courageous, he cannot affirm that courage is foolish steadfastness.

On the other hand, he cannot quite deny it either. He is tempted to view foolish steadfastness as courage because he thinks that, if prudence means, as Socrates' examples

¹⁹ Socrates' rhetorical machinations are evident here. First, by speaking of foolish daring as well as foolish steadfastness, he magnifies the recklessness of such steadfastness. Moreover, he now speaks of this steadfastness as shameful and harmful rather than wicked and harmful. The substitution of "shameful" for "wicked" seems designed to intensify Laches' dissatisfaction with his present claim, since while Laches might be tempted to think that something wicked can be noble, he is unlikely to think the same of something shameful. Thus, Socrates makes Laches' earlier agreement that foolish steadfastness is ignoble seem to be much stronger than it in fact was.

suggest it does, knowledge that enables one to avoid the greatest risks, courage cannot be prudent steadfastness.²⁰ Laches insists upon the greater courage of the ignorant warrior because he rebels at the notion, implied especially by Socrates' last example, that prudent courage enables one to minimize the dangers one faces. If the knowledgeable warrior is confident of his success, then he will be less likely to have to face that moment of truth that Laches thinks is crucial to courage. Courage's nobility seems to lie for him in the willingness and capacity to face the greatest dangers. What is most admirable about the ignorant warrior is that he risks the most in battle; he shows himself to be more willing to risk his life. Precisely, then, because the ignorant warrior acts in a certain sense "imprudently," Laches finds him admirable; overcoming his fears for himself and his life,

²⁰ Schmid criticizes Laches in these exchanges for conceiving of prudence "in a merely technical sense" and ignoring the role of prudence in more broadly defining the ends of action, such as the general's prudence in knowing that one should do whatever is necessary to achieve victory in war (1991, 123). Laches is led to elevate the notion of foolish steadfastness, Schmid argues, only because he has defined prudence as what will keep a man safer. The difficulty with Schmid's claim is that it does not take into account that *Socrates* chooses the examples of prudence that imply that it is knowledge of how to accomplish one's task while advancing or safeguarding one's own good. It is true that Laches fails to correct him. But by characterizing prudence in this way, Socrates highlights Laches' attraction to the riskiness of noble courage. In choosing the examples of prudent steadfastness that he does, Socrates is doing precisely what Schmid denies he does (119): he uncovers a tension in Laches' earlier agreement that "steadfastness accompanied by prudence is noble and good."

the ignorant or artless warrior nobly stands his ground. Here courage is noble for Laches because it involves disregarding concerns for one's own safety and the willingness to accept the greatest evils.²¹

Yet, again, Laches does not firmly believe that courage means the simple willingness to embrace any and all dangers. At the end of his exchange with Socrates, Laches is left frustrated and perplexed. While he rejects Socrates' suggestion that courage means prudently minimizing dangers, he remains dissatisfied with the view that courage is foolish steadfastness. While he admits that his arguments have led to this view, he does not accept it as his own. He concludes that he simply cannot say what courage is (193e). As much as he wants to think of courage as the simple willingness to risk one's own life, he cannot bring himself to endorse this version of courage. He has seen that if the core of courage is steadfastness in the face of the greatest risks and a corresponding willingness to accept whatever harm this causes one to suffer, then any kind of foolish steadfastness can count as courage. According to this view, the ancient equivalent of bungee jumping is as much an example of courage as facing down a terrifying enemy on the battlefield. Laches views courage as "among the noblest things," but he is torn as to the nature of

²¹ I thus disagree that Laches' quandary is due merely to "thoughtlessness" (Devereux 1977, 134), to "cowardice" (O'Brien 1963, 141-2), or to the fact that "he has not reflected on the role of intelligence... in virtue" (Tessitore 1994, 119-20). Whereas these comments imply that Laches' position is rooted in a misunderstanding, I argue that it is rooted in a deep, if unarticulated, understanding. Because Laches partly believes that courage is noble and that nobility means indifference to one's own good, he simply denies that courage is noble to the extent that it bolsters or furthers one's own good.

nobility. While in part Laches thinks that nobility is the simple willingness to stand one's ground, he also thinks that it is something admirable and respectable, i.e., not the posture of a fool. And he thinks that to risk one's life for no good end is foolish. He intuitively feels that a serious human life involves more than the willingness to risk life and thus the mere willingness to risk one's life does not make that risk worthwhile. Therefore, no matter how splendid or noble is a man's willingness to assume great risks, Laches doubts that it can be truly noble if it is employed for trivial ends. Laches is thus confronted with the following problem: if courage is a noble steadfastness but neither prudent nor foolish steadfastness is noble, then in what does the nobility of courage consist?

Laches' inability to answer this question can be explained if we consider why he overlooks a possible solution to the dilemma into which Socrates leads him. Prudent courage need not mean, after all, a courage informed by a knowledge that minimizes the danger of the endeavor to the soldier himself. Soldiers who fight prudently in a battle may do so not to minimize the risk to themselves but to win victory for their city. Is there not a kind of moral prudence that looks to a good broader or higher than that of the individual actor's own safety? Could not a courage guided by this sort of prudence be noble by navigating between the two extremes described above? Such a courage is not ignobly prudent because he who exercises it does so fully prepared to risk everything himself; but it is also not foolish because it is exercised with a view to a noble end. But if such a courage is conceivable, why does Laches not mention it? His failure to do so is especially noteworthy since he earlier conceded to Socrates that even the Spartans, whom he so admires, employed less than noble tactics to win the battle against the Persians at

Plataea. Could he not have cited Socrates' example of Plataea as an example of prudent steadfastness, which insofar as it obtained a great victory for Sparta was also noble?²²

Laches' failure to appeal to a morally prudent courage at the very least prevents him from suggesting a way in which courage could be both prudent and noble. But does his failure merely reveal an intellectual shortcoming in Laches, or would the appeal in question fail to identify a courage that Laches would regard as adequately noble? In other words, are there difficulties with this solution that suggest why it is not a solution for Laches? Let us recall that Laches never quite called Socrates' presentation of the Spartans' conduct at Plataea courageous. His reluctance to do so seemed to be prompted by the fact that because their conduct could have appeared to be cowardly and because it used courage merely as a means to an end, it was insufficiently noble. His lukewarm agreement with Socrates' example suggested that he doubted that courage was as evident in the achievement of an objective, even if it was victory, as in the simple display of steadfastness. But is not the prudent exercise of steadfastness for the sake of the city noble and hence courageous? Would the nobility implicit in Nathan Hale's regret that he

²² Both Santas and Dobbs note that, by appealing to the existence of a "higher" or moral prudence that identifies as courageous those actions which are exercised for the sake of something *worthy* of one's life, Laches could have extricated himself from his contradictory position (Santas 1980, 192; Dobbs 1992, 838 n.8). Dobbs further argues that Socrates fails to make such an appeal for educative purposes; he means to provide Laches with "an opportunity to act courageously" by struggling to overcome his perplexity (1986, 838). These arguments assume that appealing to a moral prudence would solve Laches' perplexity. I will argue that it does not.

had but one life to lose for his country have been tarnished by the prudent avoidance of detection by the British? Why, then, does Laches fail to propose the position suggested above as a way out of his quandary?

As we have seen, Laches resists treating courage as a means to a further end, and we must try to tease out why. Laches certainly considers the battlefield to be *the* realm of courage. Now the most obvious objective of battle is to secure the good of the city. But this suggests that the courage men display on the battlefield is less important and worthwhile than the city itself; on this understanding, courageous men exist and act for the sake of the city. If courage is noble when it serves the city's good, the question then arises as to what is the city's good that it serves? Most obviously, the city is devoted to the survival and security of its citizens. But how noble are such things? Can courage be understood as sufficiently noble if its purpose is to serve them? The problem comes to sight most vividly if one thinks in terms of individuals. The soldier who risks his life so that another may live seems to have acted most nobly. But if, in order to avoid being compelled to define courage as foolish steadfastness, we deny that his action — his bravery in the moment of truth — is the end itself, we seem forced to say that his courage is a means to the other's living. On this view, life is more important than courage. But this view is unacceptable to Laches. Insofar as he admires most the steadfastness that is displayed under the greatest fire, he thinks that this very capacity is the most admirable for a human being. Laches does not think of offering public-spirited courage as an example of courage that is both prudent and noble because to concede that the amazing capacity for steadfastness exists to serve other, less impressive ends is to demean what Laches thinks highest. Would this difficulty disappear if the city were to claim that it

exists for nobler ends than survival and security? Perhaps in Laches' mind the city would be sufficiently noble and thus be worthy of one's sacrifice if it claimed to exist precisely to enable men to make just such sacrifices. This possibility, however, is not obviously more satisfying. It implies that one's sacrifice is somehow made noble simply because it enables other citizens to make a similar sacrifice for others, and so on. In effect this position denies that there is any noble end to anyone's sacrifice; in this case there is only endless sacrificing with no good cause that makes any of the sacrifices worthwhile.

Although Laches seems to have a nagging sense that there is nothing about the city that is as noble as the courageous man's steadfastness on the battlefield, this is not the deepest reason for his failure to argue for a morally prudent steadfastness. Or, at least, this nagging sense emerges from something more fundamental. As we have seen, if courage is a means to another's good, then, courage loses its essence as an activity which is somehow "good in itself," that is, a good greater than the ends to which it is a means.²³ Laches thus fails to argue for a morally prudent steadfastness above all because he refuses to treat the courageous man's courage as a tool for some further end. Laches is

²³ Some commentators (e.g., Blitz 1975, 211, 215; Nichols 1987b, 274; Schmid 1992, 101, 124-5; and Tessitore 1994, 127-8) argue that Laches represents civic courage, i.e., the courage that takes its bearings above all by what will ensure the city's victory or well-being. But this argument is undermined by Laches' failure to point to the courage of men at Plataea or Thermopylae or other battles as examples of prudent steadfastness that might qualify as noble courage. Laches' view of courage is rooted less in what is good for the city than in what constitutes the most noble posture of the courageous person's own soul.

unwilling to see courage as a means is because he resists treating virtue as primarily other-regarding, i.e., as serving others' good. His inability to suggest a way out of his predicament reflects the fact that the virtuous individual himself experiences the peak of life in the exercise of his virtue.

Laches' inclination to admire steadfastness in the greatest dangers suggests that achieving supreme nobility at the "moment of truth" is genuine human flourishing and therefore the greatest individual good. But if this is so, why does Laches not defend courage in this way? As we have seen, one reason is that Laches does not altogether admire its exercise simply in itself; he cannot help agreeing that in order to be noble, such courage cannot be altogether harmful or evil in its effects. But another reason Laches does not attempt to defend courage as good primarily for the courageous man — good because through its exercise the courageous man experiences true human fulfillment — may be because to defend the willingness to risk one's life, even for the most noble cause, as the peak of human life is problematic. To defend courage as the peak of human life would be to argue that the prime conditions for human greatness are the times of greatest terror. And it would be deeply troubling to embrace the thought that the crowning moment of a man's life occurs only in the midst of evils. If Laches could wholeheartedly think of courage as the peak of life, he would wish for war and other terribly dangerous moments as opportunities to exercise his virtue. His unwillingness to endorse foolish steadfastness indicates that he wants to think that there is something more to a noble human life than risking oneself on the battlefield; but his refusal to endorse prudent steadfastness suggests that he is uncertain whether or not there is something more that is as noble and impressive as courage. Thus, at the end of his exchange with

Socrates, Laches indicates that he does not consider any of their definitions of courage to be adequate. To Socrates he says, “in deed, it is likely, someone would declare that we partake in courage, but in speech, I think, he would not” (193e). Given how important courage is to him, he is deeply frustrated by the conversation.²⁴

If Laches’ and Socrates’ conversation fails to yield a coherent definition of courage, their exchange may contain elements of what one would include. At the end of his examination of Laches, moreover, Socrates suggests another element crucial to that account: a certain steadfastness or resolve in the face both of dangers and of uncertainty about what is the greatest good for human beings. When Laches despairs over their failure to say what courage is, Socrates claims that they do know something about courage, since steadfastness itself may often be courage (194a). He had originally given very high praise to the definition of courage as steadfastness of soul when Laches first

²⁴ A sign of Laches’ frustration and of the direction in which he seems inclined to look for the solution may be the frequency with which he makes oaths to the gods; he swears more frequently than anyone else in the dialogue. Laches’ oaths may also suggest that he has a certain, perhaps hidden, hope that the gods can resolve his dilemma, that they can make steadfastness accompanied by prudence both noble and good, as he initially wants (192c8-9). Laches swears by Zeus when he tells Socrates that, having called courage both prudent and foolish steadfastness, they have not spoken nobly (193d10); his oath may be a not fully conscious appeal to the gods to harmonize the noble and the good and to make it possible for courage both to be an amazing capacity to face the greatest dangers and something that can constitute the greatest good for a human being.

offered it. He now implies that they would show courage if they were to remain steadfast in their search for it (194a). Here courage seems to be a steadfastness in the pursuit of something good for the courageous man — wisdom about courage. But apparently in order to galvanize what seems to be Laches' waning interest in their inquiry, Socrates gently appeals to his sense of shame, suggesting that they must be steadfast “in order that courage herself not ridicule us, because we do not seek her courageously” (194a). His need to appeal to Laches' sense of shame suggests that even the pursuit of clarity about one's own virtue can be painful and may therefore need to be bolstered by a passion other than simple concern for one's own good.

The character of Socrates' appeal to shame is worth noting. Ordinarily, shame does not seem to encourage radical or probing thinking; it is usually rooted in and activated by a profound dependence on conventional opinion. Indeed, at the end of the dialogue, Socrates suggests that shame can impede one's education: when Socrates exhorts all present to seek teachers in order to correct what have been revealed to be defects in their understanding of virtue, he adds, citing Homer, that being needy men, they cannot let ridicule prevent them from seeking teachers despite their advanced age (201a-b; cf. Odyssey XVII.347). Socrates implies that a vigorous pursuit of wisdom demands that one be willing to defy common opinion. But Socrates' appeal to Laches' shame here is not to a conventional notion of shame. He does not appeal to Laches' sense of shame before others but rather before a virtue: “courage herself.” An appeal to this sort of shame seems more likely than its conventional counterpart to make Laches, and the young boys present, take their bearings from the aspiration to virtue itself rather than

from the opinions of others. It seems much more likely to spark the steadfastness or resolve needed to acquire wisdom, i.e., something different from conventional opinion.

But whether this notion of courage, which seems not to treat courage as an end in itself, would satisfy Laches is highly doubtful. If the acquisition of wisdom seems a less vulgar end for courage to attain than, e.g., money management, it does not obviously require the tremendous steadfastness and tenacity under fire that impresses Laches. Indeed, Laches' reaction to Nicias' attempt to define courage shows how little inclined he is to associate wisdom with courage. Nicias is just the opposite; making prudence the centerpiece of his definition of courage, he argues that courage is the knowledge that allows one to pursue one's own good. As we will see, however, Nicias' definition fares little better than Laches'; it turns out to be fraught with significant difficulties of its own.

Chapter 3

Socrates' Exchange with Nicias

Nicias' Socratism

Laches' inability to decide whether courage is prudent or foolish steadfastness leaves him and Socrates without a coherent account of courage. Socrates therefore appeals to Nicias to help them discover one. Acceding to Socrates' plea, Nicias claims that "each of us is good in those things with respect to which he is wise and bad in those with respect to which he is without learning." He therefore concludes that "if the courageous man is good, clearly he is wise" (194d).

Nicias thus sides with the part of Laches that resists equating courage with foolishness. He claims that one's goodness or virtue depends upon the possession of knowledge. Socrates forcefully affirms Nicias' formulation: "What you say, Nicias, is true indeed, by Zeus!" This is not surprising, since Nicias has only offered what he has "often" heard Socrates say (194c). But to say that the courageous man must be wise does not yet explain what courage is. Indeed, Laches claims not to understand what Nicias means. Socrates claims that he does, but in repeating Nicias' formulation, he rephrases it; he claims that Nicias is saying not that the courageous man is wise but that courage "is a certain wisdom" (194d). Mocking this suggestion, Laches asks Socrates to explain himself. Socrates diverts Laches' attention to Nicias, giving the latter the responsibility of explaining a definition that he did not quite offer. In order to make Nicias offer a more precise version of the definition he has put in his mouth, Socrates offers examples of the sorts of knowledge that courage surely is not, such as knowledge of how to play musical instruments. Laches chimes in to approve of Socrates' line of questioning: "Let him say

what he asserts courage is” (194e). Nicias rises to the challenge: “This, Laches, is what I say it is: the knowledge (*epistēmē*) of terrible and emboldening things in war and in all other things” (195a1-2, emphasis added).¹ If this is more precise than the first definition Socrates attributed to him, it is hardly crystal-clear. What exactly is this knowledge? And does it make courage both noble and good in the way that Laches wants it to be?

Nicias’ definition, as many scholars note, bears a striking resemblance to what Socrates says about courage elsewhere. In the Protagoras he calls courage wisdom (*sophia*) about what things are terrible and what things are not (Protagoras 360d5). Indeed, some commentators suggest that Nicias here is the mouthpiece for Socrates’ own thesis that virtue is knowledge.² This is incorrect. While there is a great similarity between the two definitions, Nicias’ cannot be understood as a stand-in for Socrates’ view. The claim that Nicias and Socrates define courage the same way ignores, first, the fact that Socrates coaxes Nicias into giving his own definition of courage (cf. 194d1 with 195a1) and, second, that his definition differs from what Socrates says in the Protagoras. Not only does Socrates there speak of wisdom rather than of knowledge (cf. 195a1 with

¹ The Greek word being translated as “terrible” is *deinon*. Although “terrible” in colloquial English means “bad,” its literal meaning in English, namely, terrifying is the sense intended by the Greek word. Cf. Nichols 1987a, 250 n.17.

² See especially Santas 1980, 195 n.10, 202. Devereux (1977, 136-141) agrees but suggests that difficulties revealed in the definition provide evidence that Plato distances himself from Socrates. As my own account shows, I disagree with Devereux’s premise that Nicias is Socrates’ mouthpiece and thus also with his conclusion that the refutation of Nicias’ definition evinces Plato’s break with Socrates.

194d5),³ but Nicias, unlike Socrates, includes knowledge of “emboldening things” as part of the knowledge that is courage, and he says that courage is knowledge of these things “both in war and in all other things” (195a1, emphasis added). It is perhaps because Socrates suspects that Nicias does not share the view of courage that he offers in the Protagoras that he presses Nicias to go beyond merely repeating what he has “often heard” Socrates say to define courage in his own words.

Staying within the confines of the Laches, we can easily discern a glaring difference between Nicias’ second or own definition and his first or parroted account, which received Socrates’ enthusiastic endorsement. To say, as Nicias initially does, that the courageous man is wise if he is good is to say only that the goodness of courage depends on its being accompanied by wisdom, i.e., that courage requires wisdom. This does not necessarily imply, as Nicias’ later formulation does, that courage is knowledge. Indeed, that the two accounts differ — and therefore that Nicias is not Socrates’ mouthpiece — appears from the fact that Socrates seems explicitly to dissociate himself from Nicias’

³ It is hard to know the significance of the use of these different words. Aristotle attributes different meanings to them: *epistēmē* seems to describe a scientific knowledge of principles according to which the same outcome always occurs, whereas *sophia* seems to refer to a broader, more comprehensive understanding (see NE 1139b15-35, 1140b30-1141a20). Whatever Aristotle may mean by these terms, the extent to which they indicate a difference in Socrates’ and Nicias’ views of courage can only be discerned by first teasing out, as Socrates proceeds to do, what precisely Nicias means by “the knowledge of terrible and emboldening things” and in what way such knowledge makes the courageous man good.

definition; when Laches protests that Nicias is speaking stupidly, he says in response that they must therefore “teach Nicias” (195a7).

The subsequent conversation treats Nicias as a potential expert on courage. This may or even must seem strange to anyone familiar with Athenian history. For, as Thucydides and Plutarch both report, Nicias was fearful and superstitious; he hardly seems to be obviously qualified to advise on courage.⁴ While he may be at the height of his power in Athens at the time of the dialogue’s setting, his extreme caution and susceptibility to divination later condemn the Sicilian expedition not only to failure but to “total destruction.” Not only does his caution lead him to conduct the Athenian campaign that he leads in Sicily poorly (see Orwin 1994, 120-21), but when disaster befalls the Athenian forces he delays retreating from the island despite the great vulnerability of his fleet for “thrice nine” days because he interprets a lunar eclipse as requiring that he stay put (Thucydides, VII.50). Part of our task in this section, then, is to understand why a man known for neither his courage nor his reasonableness is the spokesman for a hyper-rational account of courage. As we will see, Nicias’ fearfulness accounts for his hyper-rationalism and for his eventual rejection of it; because he sets very high standards for

⁴ While Thucydides never calls Nicias a coward, he does describe him as “somewhat overaddicted to divination and practices of that kind” (VII.50). Plutarch suggests that Nicias “dreaded the divine powers extremely” (1864, 629) and calls him “cowardly” and “superstitious” (628, 639, 645). Nicias was also a target of Aristophanes, who coined words that meant “to delay victory like Nicias” (Birds 638) and “to get or become flustered like Nicias” (Knights 358).

knowledge, his retreat from knowledge, when it fails to live up to those standards, is both swift and complete.

Courage as Knowledge

As we have said, Nicias offers a hyper-rational definition of courage. He rejects the less radical and more defensible view that courage requires knowledge. This latter view, after all, makes a certain sense. At the most basic level, displaying courage is not possible unless certain epistemological conditions are satisfied. For someone to be brave, he must at a minimum know that he faces danger. The man who walks through a dangerous neighborhood with no inkling that it is dangerous is not courageous. But even more could be said on behalf of the more limited claim that courage requires wisdom. For any mildly thoughtful person can be, like Laches, made to take seriously the possibility that the courageous man must understand something of the uses for which courage should be employed in order to act truly courageously. Individuals exhibit great daring in a variety of ways. But insofar as they do so foolishly or in a manner that causes great harm, human beings balk at speaking of them as fully courageous. As we have seen with Laches, people who are serious about courage can be led to resist attributing it to fools or scoundrels.

To concede the importance of some knowledge to courage is not to identify courage with knowledge. The strangeness of Nicias' identification of the two is underlined by the disgust in Laches' reaction to it. After insisting that "wisdom is doubtless distinct from courage," Laches swears by Zeus that Nicias is "talking rubbish" (195a5-7). Laches seems to think that Nicias is making no effort to help them identify courage but is rather resorting to sophistry. To prove his point, Laches relies on the fact that Nicias referred to

knowledge of “terrible and emboldening things” in all areas of life. He cites examples of artisans who know the “terrible and emboldening things” in their fields but who hardly seem courageous for that reason (195b-c). Can a doctor who knows the terrible things in medicine, i.e., illnesses, really be called courageous? Is a farmer courageous for knowing about crop pests?

Laches, however, has apparently misunderstood Nicias, for Nicias denies that a doctor is courageous “in any way at all” (195b7). But if, according to Nicias, courage is knowledge about terrible and emboldening things, why is courage not medical knowledge, according to him? Is not knowledge of, as Nicias puts it, “what is unwholesome and healthful” for the sick knowledge of something terrible and emboldening? Perhaps Nicias denies that the doctor’s knowledge is courageous because in his capacity as doctor, his knowledge concerns what is terrible for his patients rather than for himself. While his patients may take dangerous risks for the sake of their health, the doctor’s knowledge does not lead the doctor himself to undertake any risky endeavor. That Nicias has such considerations in mind is suggested by the fact that war is the only field he mentions by name where knowledge of the terrible and emboldening things constitutes courage (“both in war and in all other things” [192a]). Indeed, his mention of war suggests that he thinks courage operates where human beings are forced to confront not just dangers to themselves but grave dangers. After all, the farmer whose crops are at risk differs from the doctor in that he faces the danger of personal losses, but Nicias also denies that farmers possess courage, perhaps because the farmer’s knowledge does not lead him to undertake dangers comparable to those one faces “in war.” We cannot conclude, however, that Nicias thinks that courage is knowledge concerning only mortal

dangers like war, for we do not know what exactly he means by speaking of the knowledge of terrible and emboldening things in “all things” other than war.

But even if we conclude that Nicias means to call courage knowledge of the most terrible things for oneself, his formulation remains puzzling. How can courage not only involve but actually be knowledge of (genuinely) terrible things when such knowledge hardly seems to guarantee one’s ability to face terrors well? One might, for instance, find it necessary to jump from a burning building in order to save one’s life yet still be unable to do so. This may explain why Nicias does not say simply that courage is knowledge of terrible things. He says that it is knowledge as well of “the emboldening things,” as though knowing that we possess things like strength or skill emboldens us to confront dangers. Nicias seems not to think that courageous action is possible without the knowledge that one has good reason at least to hope to triumph over dangers. If knowledge of terrible things, then, supplies a necessary condition for courageous action, it seems not to supply a sufficient one; knowledge of emboldening things is also needed in order for one to be able to act in a courageous fashion. We can now provisionally explain Nicias’ opaque definition as follows: courage is both the knowledge that one must face something terrible for oneself — a sufficiently momentous and perhaps even mortal danger — and the knowledge that gives one hope of overcoming it.

Yet this provisional explanation still does not show how knowledge suffices to constitute courage. Insofar as one’s knowledge of emboldening things gives one only reasonable hopes of overcoming danger, might not one still need something else to face it well? This question indicates that we do not yet understand the knowledge that is courage according to Nicias. The sequel helps to clarify it. After Laches argues that

doctors and farmers are not courageous, Socrates asks Nicias to respond to this point. Although he has said that he agrees with Laches, Nicias still insists that courage is knowledge. He proceeds to explain why what doctors and farmers know does not qualify as the knowledge he has in mind. Focusing on doctors, Nicias maintains that they lack knowledge of whether “it is terrible for someone to be healthy rather than to be sick.” This, not knowledge of “what is healthful and unwholesome,” is what counts. While artisans may know what is generally good and bad in their own arts, they do not know what is truly good and bad for an individual. Nicias argues, with Laches’ agreement, that it is not always better for people to survive illnesses (195c-d). He thereby implies that although doctors may know that health is in general good, in their capacity as doctors they do not know whether it is good for a particular individual. He does not elaborate, but he may have in mind examples like that of the man who has lived so long that all his friends and loved ones, even his children, have died. Nicias implies that if the doctor knows how to keep such a man alive, the courageous man knows whether or not the doctor should do so. This helps us better to grasp what Nicias means by “the knowledge of terrible and emboldening things.” For Nicias such knowledge seems not just to inspire hope that an evil can be overcome but rather to teach whether the evil should be overcome, i.e., to teach whether what is evil under most conditions truly is evil in a particular case. This suggests that what Nicias has in mind is knowledge of what is truly good for an individual.

Now this understanding of courage may seem extreme or just plain odd; we shall soon see that Laches has no idea what to make of it. Common sense does not call courageous only those who act out of a certainty that they pursue the best course of

action. On the contrary, we tend to describe as courageous those who act boldly in the face of uncertainty. In effect, Nicias' definition implies that one is courageous only when one knows what is truly best — for oneself and for others. But this characterization of courage is not wholly contrary to common sense either. As Nicias and Laches earlier agreed, when virtue is present, it makes the soul better (190b4-6; cf. 185e13). Their agreement on this reflects the common-sense view that virtue is somehow good for the virtuous man himself and for those on whose behalf he exercises his virtue. Nicias' definition of courage seizes upon and takes to an extreme that aspect of common sense that holds that to the extent that he is understood as virtuous, the courageous man both knows what he is doing and accomplishes something good.

Or has his definition in fact done this? In denying courage to doctors, Nicias indicated that they do not know whether "it is better for all to live and not better for many to die." But that an individual might be better off dead may not quite mean that death is good for him. Nicias may mean only that the courageous man must know how to choose the lesser of two evils — and not necessarily an intrinsically choiceworthy good. Indeed, if one always knew how to obtain only such goods, one's knowledge might seem not to constitute but to preclude courage. In the spirit of Laches' earlier resistance to the claim that courage is prudent steadfastness, common sense would hold that courage is unnecessary for the man who knows that goods lie ahead for him, for he has nothing to fear. The situation would be very different if one's knowledge enabled one only to compare or judge among various evils. Such knowledge would be useful but would also leave room for something in addition to knowledge, e.g., steadfastness of soul.

While this latter position may accord with common sense, it is not Nicias'. It does, however, highlight the puzzle in Nicias' definition: how can courage be entirely knowledge? To take the example Nicias mentions in his definition, we can easily imagine soldiers facing death bravely in war because they "know" that dying for their city is preferable to the dishonor of flight or the deaths of their loved ones. But death is such a painful prospect to contemplate that one must wonder if knowledge — alone — suffices to inspire courageous actions. Or might not knowledge, especially when it concerns only a comparison of evils, waver in the face of a choice between apparent evils? If choosing the lesser of two evils is the best one can do under certain conditions, the question is whether one will not lose sight of the conditions that make this choice sensible. Because human beings do not live only in the moment, they can hope for a change in conditions. Much seems to depend on one's time frame. Were the aging invalid we mentioned earlier, for example, to recover from his illness and fall in love again, it would be much harder to say that the death that would end his present pain is really best for him. Indeed, insofar as one cannot know enough truly to know what is best under the circumstances, might not the hope for the eventual arrival of a genuine good, as opposed to merely the lesser of two evils, prove so strong that one cannot be courageous enough to settle for the latter?

In light of these considerations, we should consider carefully whether Nicias, at least, truly thinks that the knowledge of a good-in-the-circumstances adequately qualifies as courage. That he does not is suggested when he clarifies his claim that courageous men know the terrible and emboldening things. In order to explain further to the skeptical Laches what such men know, Nicias argues that "the same things that are terrible for

those for whom it is profitable (*lusitelei*) to die” are not the same as the things that are terrible “for those for whom it is profitable to live” (195d4-9, emphasis added).

What does it mean to speak of its being “profitable” to die? If death under certain conditions might be better than the alternatives, it might make sense to say that it is best to die. But it is strange in such a situation to say that it is profitable to die; to choose the lesser of two evils is to cut one’s losses.⁵ We ordinarily think of profit as a gain. How, then, does Nicias think that death can be profitable? Perhaps Nicias thinks that if one lives a sufficiently virtuous life and dies nobly, e.g., by obtaining victory for the city, one’s death could be profitable because it could bring one everlasting glory. The dialogue, however, offers no indication that Nicias is a man concerned with everlasting glory. Indeed, Nicias’ praise for the new kind of *hoplomachia* was based largely on its contribution to ensuring individual safety in battle. The prudence and cautiousness that characterize Nicias’ speech there are not emblematic of a man seeking glory. Rather,

⁵ One could say, as Socrates does at Republic 406d-e and 408a-b, that in some cases, e.g., where a man is extremely ill, it may no longer be profitable for him to live; such a man may simply no longer reap any benefits from life. But this statement differs from Nicias’, which says that one can actually profit from death. The strangeness of Nicias’ use of “profitable” here is not, moreover, merely a problem with our translation. The word translated as “profitable” is used frequently by Socrates in a way that entirely conforms to our ordinary understanding of profitable as producing a positive good rather than as warding off a greater evil or resigning oneself to a lesser one. For such uses, see Republic 444d-e, 591a-b; Theaetetus 181b; Statesman 294e; Alcibiades 113d; Gorgias 478c.

Nicias seems to be a man of caution who does all he can to avoid bringing any misfortune upon himself.⁶

An earlier passage in the dialogue suggests another way, more in accord with Nicias' cautious character, in which he could conceive of death as profitable. In the course of explaining why he is willing to be examined by Socrates, Nicias explains that a concern for living sufficiently nobly and thus a willingness to "suffer" Socrates' examinations is necessary for anyone who "takes forethought concerning his life afterward" (*ton epeita bion*, 188b1).⁷ The ambiguity of the language leaves it unclear whether Nicias wants to

⁶ This picture is bolstered by both Plutarch's and Thucydides' accounts of Nicias. Plutarch attributes the failed Sicilian expedition in large part to Nicias' excessive caution, arguing that "his reflection, his deliberateness, and his caution, let slip the time for action" (1864, 638-40). Thucydides' portrait reveals a Nicias whose fear of misfortune makes him not only extremely cautious in practical and political matters (V.17) but also scrupulous in fulfilling his duties towards the gods. Nicias' final speech in Thucydides' work indicates that he believes that his great virtue, particularly his piety, will save him from misfortune (VII.77; see also V. 17 and Orwin 1994, 136-39).

⁷ The exact nature of the "life afterward" or "future" to which this phrase refers is ambiguous. Blitz (1975, 203 and especially 219) and Schmid (1992, 194) take it to refer to an afterlife. Nichols (1987a, 251) translates the phrase so as to leave open the possibility of this interpretation. W. R. M. Lamb, in the Loeb edition translates this phrase as "the rest of his life," thereby excluding this possibility. Socrates' uses of this phrase fail to settle the issue, since they point in both directions. At Phaedo 90e, Socrates is clearly speaking about "the rest of one's life"; at Republic 619a-b and Gorgias 527e,

know how to become more noble simply for the sake of the rest of his mortal life or out of a concern for how he might fare after his death. But this ambiguity, coupled with his later statement that death can be profitable, does more than tip the balance in favor of the view that Nicias thinks that if a man lives sufficiently nobly or virtuously, death can be profitable for him. For if by living sufficiently nobly, one can not only avoid misfortune in this life but obtain a reprieve from the worst possible fate after death then it may, in fact, be possible for death to be profitable. It is, after all, perfectly human to hope that if one lives well, one could fare well after death.⁸

however, Socrates undoubtedly refers to a future life, i.e., a life that one has after death.

⁸Despite Homer's stark portrait of Hades, even ancient Greeks seem to have held this hope. According to Homer's standard teaching, all souls receive the same fate after death; they reside in the shadowy, miserable place called Hades (Iliad XX. 60-66; Odyssey XI. 475-490, XXIV 6-10). If this teaching captured everything the Greeks believed about the afterlife, it would seem to rule out the possibility that Nicias could think that there is a happy, eternal life for those who are worthy. But this is not the only or even definitive Greek teaching about what man can expect after death.

Strong evidence of this, and evidence highly relevant for our purposes, can be found in Plato's dialogues. In the Gorgias, for example, Socrates recounts to Callicles a myth about the afterlife in which human beings are rewarded or punished according to the way in which they have lived their lives. The myth suggests that those who have lived justly and piously will go after they die to the "Isles of the Blessed," where they will "dwell in total happiness apart from evils." By contrast, those who have lived unjustly and godlessly will go "to the prison of retribution and judgment which they call Tartarus"

(523a-b). The existence of such rewards and punishments after death are not, moreover, mere inventions of Plato's Socrates. Callicles may consider what Socrates describes to be a myth, but Callicles is clearly familiar with the tale (523a1-2). We see further evidence of the prevalence of these views about the afterlife among the ancient Greeks in Plato's Republic. The old father, Cephalus, certainly a representative of traditional Greek piety, does not believe that the same fate awaits all men after death. He claims that the man who is unaware of having committed any unjust deed has "sweet and good hope" which eases his "suspicion and terror" about what may happen to him after his death (330e-331a). Indeed, there are numerous references Plato's dialogues to teachings that promise the just either a blissful existence after death, or another, better life and threaten the unjust with some kind of punishment. (See Republic 363c-e, 614b-619e; Phaedo 107c-108c, 112e-115a; Apology of Socrates 40c-41c.)

We do not, moreover, find such promises only in Plato. Pindar's depiction of an afterlife in which gods reward or punish mortals according to their virtue and justice is an example of the kind of tales with which Plato's characters would have been familiar. He describes the existence of a "judge below the earth" who rules on "crimes committed in this realm of Zeus" and the fact that "in the presence of the honored gods, those who gladly kept their oaths enjoy a life without tears, while the others undergo a toil that is unbearable to look at" (Olympian II. 55-67; see also Nemean I. 65-72). If other Greek poets do not discuss such posthumous rewards and punishments as explicitly, this does mean that these poets deny their existence. There are even exceptions to Homer's general depiction of man's fate after death as uniformly horrible. Sisyphus, Tityos, and Tantalus, for example, all received unique and especially gruesome punishments for

having offended the gods (see *Odyssey* XI. 576-593, cf. Pindar, *Olympian* I. 52-62). By contrast, the goddess Persephone allowed the seer Teiresias the unique privilege of keeping his mind when he went to Hades (*Odyssey* X. 490-495). Menelaus is allowed by the gods to escape death altogether and is sent, not to Hades, but to the Elysian fields, where he enjoys, “the easiest life for mortals” (IV. 561ff), and Odysseus is almost given immortality by Kalypso. Even according to Homer, then, the gods could make death more or less terrible for mortals (IV.136, 205-210. See also Aeschylus, *Supplikes* 228).

On the basis of just such tales, scholarly opinion also seems to agree that the notion of unique rewards and punishments after death had a strong foundation in Greek tradition. Scholars focus especially on the role of the *chthonioi*, or, the earth-bound as opposed to Olympian gods (Guthrie 1951, 216-19, 254-59; Rohde 1966, 156-62, 217-18; Burkert 1985, 197-99). It is suggested that by the fifth century, the Homeric tales about the Olympian gods and these older *chthonioi* tales had become intertwined in such a way that together they provided the basis for a more complex notion of the afterlife, i.e., one in which, depending on his actions in life, a man could have either eternal happiness or suffer eternal punishment in death, than is the dominant thrust of Homer’s portrait. For example, Homer’s “Elysium,” i.e., the place to which Menelaus was sent when he was spared death, became, for the worshippers of the Eleusinian mysteries, the place of eternal bliss to which initiates went after death (Guthrie, 1951, 281, 290-291; Mylonas 1961, 226).

Indeed, the most explicit promise of rewards and punishments after death came from the religious cult that worshipped the Eleusinian mysteries. Even as it remained shrouded in mystery, the cult of the Eleusinian mysteries was very prominent in fifth century

Athens. According to Erwin Rohde, “large numbers not from Athens alone but from the whole of Greece sought eagerly to enter the state of grace vouchsafed to the worshippers at Eleusis” (1966, 225-29). The mysteries appear to have quite explicitly promised that its initiates would be rewarded with a blissful afterlife, in which they would be delivered from all pains (see, Homeric Hymn “To Demeter” 480ff; Mylonas 1961, 238, 261, 266, 281-283). The details of the afterlife, including how precisely one becomes worthy of rewards remain mysterious. Aristophanes, however, alludes to these details when in his Frogs, Heracles tells Dionysus that on the way to Hades, one passes the unjust, who are “stuck in a great sea of mud,” because, among other things, they have injured a guest or host, molested a child, beat up parents, or broken an oath. Heracles goes on to note that on this path, one also passes those initiated into the mysteries, who, by contrast, live “in sunlight” and are surrounded by the “sweet sound of flutes” (145-165).

To return to Nicias himself and whether he would have held out hope for or fear of such rewards and punishments, we should note that during his life, the “mysteries” were certainly widely revered. In fact, so seriously were they taken that opponents of Alcibiades were able to stir sentiment against him and recall him from the largest military mission ever undertaken by Athens, the Sicilian expedition, so that he might stand trial for mocking the “mysteries” (see Thucydides VI. 28, 53). One could even be sentenced to death for revealing them (cf. Andocides, “On the Mysteries”). In light of the possibilities sketched by the mysteries as well as by Pindar, and even by Homer, ancient Greeks of Nicias’ time would have had reason to hope or fear that they too could receive such rewards or punishments after death. Far from injecting a wholly new strand into traditional Greek piety, Plato’s Socrates seems to develop an existing one. Indeed, he

Laches takes Nicias to mean that he who has profitable knowledge of the sort Nicias describes must at least be able to predict the future. When Socrates asks Laches whether he understands what Nicias is saying, Laches insists that he does; he says that Nicias is “calling diviners courageous” (195e).⁹ In fact, Laches understands Nicias to be saying that only diviners can be courageous, because only diviners can know whether or not some good will result from an action. Not surprisingly, Laches scoffs at the possibility that only diviners can be courageous. First, such an account of courage excludes those whom Laches considers to be most courageous. To insist that courage requires certain knowledge that some good or, more precisely, some profit will result from one’s action, is to deny courage to the man who stands his ground or marches forward in his formation on the battlefield but cannot interpret omens. Second, this account of courage seems to eliminate the need for courage understood as Laches understands and admires it, namely,

may have intended his numerous accounts of the existence of reward and punishment in an afterlife to illuminate what is explicit in the cult of the mysteries and latent in Homer, namely, the true, if not fully self-conscious, object of certain powerful hopes and fears in the human heart.

⁹ Greeks typically believed that any occurrence that was not entirely a matter of course, such as a sudden sneeze or an eclipse, was a sign through which the gods meant to indicate their will. Diviners or seers would interpret these apparent signs as indicating how the gods wanted human beings to act (Cicero 1997, 2.5). Herodotus describes how the Greeks and Persians at Plataea remained encamped opposite each other for ten days because the omens obtained by each side were unfavorable for an attack (IX.36). For a scholarly treatment of divination, see Burkert 1985, 111-13.

as noble risk-taking. Nicias has implied that death is not terrible for a man for whom it is profitable to die and that the courageous man knows how to profit from death. Such a man would be less admirable in Laches' eyes insofar as he has less need for the steadfastness that Laches thinks is the essence of courage. Even if a course of action is painful, if someone knows that it will lead to his profit, he will in fact need far less of what Laches thinks is courage.

Nicias, however, does not back down before the scoffing Laches. Rather, he indicates that Laches does not grasp just how comprehensive is the knowledge he has in mind. He denies that he means diviners are courageous; they, he says, "know only the signs of the things that will be — whether death or illness or loss of property will come to someone or victory or defeat either in war or in some other competition" (195e-196a). Nicias does not deny that diviners know the future or that it is some kind knowledge that is crucial for courage. What we have seen is Nicias' concern with profit, however, explains why, according to Nicias, the diviner's knowledge is not courageous: if diviners only know the outcome of future events and not the whole future for each individual, they cannot know whether an individual will profit from the event. As Nicias goes on to say, "whether it is better for someone either to suffer or not to suffer these things — why does it belong to the diviner to judge rather than to anyone else at all?" (196a1-4) He implies that even if diviners know something about the future, they do not know about the whole of human life — including perhaps what the gods want from human beings — and they therefore do not know what is truly profitable for a human being. Their predictions about particular instances provide insufficient guidance about how to live.

Let us not forget that the knowledge Nicias calls courage surveys both terrible and emboldening things. Our interpretation to this point has suggested that Nicias thinks human beings can truly face terrible things, or evils, courageously only if they know how their actions will ultimately be profitable to them. This interpretation receives further support from his statement that the courageous man knows whether it is better for someone either to suffer or not to suffer things such as “death or illness or loss of property” (196a). Nicias’ statement suggests that one could choose not to suffer “these things,” which include death. Now surely Nicias does not think he can indefinitely choose not to die. His speaking, though, of choosing not to suffer it suggests at least that he thinks it can be delayed. In light of the preceding argument, his statement as a whole suggests that he thinks one can delay death and other evils until they are profitable.

Can human beings on their own possibly effect such delays, or are they possible only through the providential intervention of external forces? Nicias suggests here at least that we are not simply at the mercy of forces beyond our control.¹⁰ He seems to think that a certain kind of knowledge, namely, courage, has such power; according to Nicias, there seems to be a knowledge that can tell us not only of profitable goods but also which apparent evils (or goods) are profitable for us, and this enables us to submit to the latter when and only when they are no longer genuine evils.¹¹ The knowledge in question

¹⁰ To say that we are not at the mercy of external forces is not to say that we do not require their assistance; we may be able to affect the degree to which they will help us.

¹¹ Schmid’s account of Nicias’ statements here resembles mine. He maintains, though, that if the knowledge Nicias speaks about is indeed knowledge of one’s own good, Nicias’ claims must be “sophistic” rather than “Socratic” and therefore incorrect

would seem to be so great that one may wonder if human beings can possibly possess it; indeed, Laches scoffs at Nicias' claim, saying that according to Nicias' definition only a god could be courageous (196b1). As both Blitz (1975, 219) and Schmid (1992, 142-45) note, Nicias does not respond to this charge; as we will see, Laches is not far off the mark.

Whatever the precise extent of the knowledge that Nicias calls courage, it seems clear that he thinks it must include knowledge of how the evils we face may be confronted in a manner that advances our own good. But this remains an extremely puzzling definition of courage. It is one thing to argue that the courageous man must know enough to choose the least of the evil alternatives he faces in a terrifying situation. After all, to praise courage as a virtue is to claim that it is somehow good. But it is quite another thing to insist that courage will lead to one's own future profit. Is such a view sensible? In part the answer to this question depends on whether the knowledge Nicias has in mind is available to human beings.

Natural Strength and Prudent Forethought

After accusing Nicias of making "vain and empty speeches" (196b), Laches is ready to give up on the conversation. Socrates takes over the interrogation, but he tells Laches that his examination of Nicias "will be a common one on behalf of me and you" (196c-d). When he takes over from Laches, he does not at first press the questions of how extensive the knowledge is that Nicias thinks constitutes courage and of whether it is available to human beings. Instead, Socrates draws out implications of Nicias' thesis. He shows that

(1992, 142-43). My argument identifies a different problem in Nicias' view of courage.

anyone who thinks of courage as Nicias does must “of necessity” deny that wild animals can be courageous: if neither doctors nor diviners (qua doctors and diviners) have the knowledge required for courage, then, “according to a certain proverb,” surely “not every sow” would have it (197d-e). And, he adds, Nicias does not “trust the Crommyonian sow to be courageous either” (197e), referring to the fierce beast whom Greek myths depicted Theseus as slaying (see Plutarch 1864, 7). Socrates here brings out the fact that Nicias departs from the ordinary view that often speaks, however loosely, of certain animals as courageous. In doing so, he implies a possible objection to Nicias’ thesis: if courage depends on animal-like qualities or on some kind of natural bearing that precedes knowledge, courage cannot simply be knowledge.

Laches at least seems to think that Socrates’ point is decisive; he challenges Nicias either to say that “these wild animals, which we all agree are courageous, are wiser than we” or “to dare to say they are not courageous” (197a). Laches is so certain that wild animals are courageous that he is sure Nicias’ thesis is wrong if it denies this fact. He clearly thinks that the natural strength, impressive bearing, and spirited fierceness that certain animals exhibit show that courage does not depend on, let alone is identical to, knowledge. And, while one might deny that bestial fierceness and strength are properly termed courage, there is something sensible in Laches’ view. Socrates points out that, according to Nicias’ argument, the “lion and deer and bull and monkey are by nature alike as regards courage” (196e). His list of animals reminds us that some display natural dispositions that appear more courageous than others; deer are timid, and lions are not.¹²

¹² Socrates’ reference to nature here is the second of two such references in the dialogue. The first is Laches’ claim that if one were to say what courage is by nature in

Clearly, human beings also differ in this way. Even if courage in human beings has something to do with knowledge, are not such differences among human beings also rooted to some degree in natural strength? Some individuals seem more courageous in a way that seems to have nothing to do with knowledge. How is it, for example, that some prisoners of war hold up under intense interrogation and some do not, that some people remain calm in a crisis while others lose their heads? Is it clear that the former know something that the latter do not? Do not these examples suggest that some kind of natural strength or toughness is, if not courage itself, at least an important component?

The way in which Laches uses Socrates' reference to animals to attack Nicias' argument reminds us of another aspect of courage that does not seem reducible to knowledge: daring. Laches asks Nicias whether he has the daring or audacity to "contradict us all" and deny courage to animals (197a). Does Nicias' acceptance or refusal of Laches' challenge depend on his knowledge as opposed to something else, something sub-rational? The example of animals suggests not; lions appear to have a kind of daring that flows from their natural sense of their own strength. While human daring differs from the bestial kind, it may nonetheless depend on an underlying natural strength that renders one confident enough to undertake a risky endeavor. Laches himself seems to lack the natural foundation for daring. For his challenge to Nicias amounts to a condemnation of those who flout common opinion. Having almost equated courage with daring, he is ready to condemn Nicias for daring to dispute common opinion. Laches'

all cases, one would have to say it is a certain steadfastness of soul (192b9-c1). Both references to nature suggest that there must be some natural foundation for courage, though that natural foundation is not the full virtue.

challenge to Nicias reveals a certain weakness in him. His high estimation of common opinion suggests that he may lack the inner strength that would give him the confidence to think unconventionally. The particular fearfulness Laches displays here ironically confirms his own insistence that some kind of natural inner strength is crucial for courage.

Nicias, by contrast, is daring enough to defy common opinion about the meaning of courage, at least for the purposes of this argument. He takes up Laches' challenge and denies that wild animals can be courageous and thus that the strength and spirit that we find in some animals as well as in some human beings are elements of courage. Nicias "dares" to say this because, according to him, one who "does not fear terrible things on account of ignorance" is not courageous but "fearless and stupid." Indeed, he maintains that only "a very few people have a share in courage and forethought, whereas very many — among men and women and children and wild animals — have a share in boldness and daring and fearlessness with lack of forethought" (197a-b). Nicias thus lumps the fearless actions of women and most men together with those of children and animals. Now we can see why Nicias might include children in the same category as animals; they only seem courageous in the face of terrible situations because they are ignorant about just how terrible these situations are. Children are not brave for running in front of moving cars; they merely do not understand what can happen to them. Moreover, they do not use forethought; they tend not to think very much about the ends they pursue. Whatever natural boldness they have may equip them for tenacious pursuits, but insofar as they do not pursue anything with forethought, Nicias implies that their boldness cannot be called a virtue. Because adults surely differ, however, from children and animals in

their capacity to recognize dangers and to look ahead, is it fair to say that what “the many call courageous” is merely ignorant boldness (197c1)?

It is if one holds Nicias’ extreme view of courage. Dismissing the bold things that the many erroneously call courageous, Nicias says that “I call courageous the prudent things about which I am talking” (197b, emphasis added). In light of what Nicias has already said about the courageous man’s knowledge, it is likely that by “prudent things,” Nicias means the knowledge of how to profit when confronting potential evils.¹³ Anyone who undertakes some courageous action without knowing this seems to be merely “bold” in Nicias’ view because to act without knowledge of how one’s apparently courageous deeds will result in his own good is to operate on the basis of mere hope. Even if bold men and women act so as to secure benefits for themselves, their success according to Nicias is indistinguishable from luck. And relying on luck is not virtuous; why should someone be admired for the fact that events happened to turn out in his favor? Thus, the reason why Nicias attributes boldness rather than courage not just to “children and wild animals” but to “very many among men and women” seems to be that very few human beings are able to face terrible things because they know how to profit from them.

Nicias’ characterization of courage as “the prudent things” thus constitutes a refusal to budge an inch from his implicit denial that courage contains a sub-rational element. We should briefly remind ourselves of why his refusal to budge is the logical concomitant of his understanding of courage. If courage really is a knowledge that tells one how to find genuine advantages when faced with terrible things, then knowledge

¹³ Cf. 192e1-193b2, where Socrates, in his exchange with Laches, seems to attach a similar meaning to “prudent.”

suffices on its own for courage; it needs no supports, sub-rational or otherwise. He who knows how to profit from potential evils never really faces genuine ones. Neither steadfastness of soul nor daring would be necessary, according to Nicias' view, for there would be no risk of becoming uncertain about either the goodness or the attainability of one's objective when faced with a potential evil. The loyal soldier who knows with certainty that that he can profit from his death in battle would never waver in his resolve to fight; he has no reason not to die.

But if Nicias means by courage such comprehensive knowledge, why does he even speak of knowing "terrible things"? Does he use the phrase merely to depict the way certain things look to those who lack knowledge, i.e., who lack courage? Or does his use of the phrase indicate that he himself does not quite believe that the knowledge he sketches is possible to attain? Nicias still may speak of "terrible things" because he is fearful — hardly without reason — about his ultimate fate. If he cannot knowledgeably attain his ultimate good, then perhaps it is not only the case that he cannot act courageously as he understands the term, i.e., in full knowledge of how to secure his good. He may also be unable to act in a way that would conventionally be called courageous. The degree to which he stresses the importance of knowledge to courage — his hyper-rationalism — suggests that any ignorance he has about how to profit from apparent evils may leave him highly susceptible to fear, which would mean that he speaks sincerely of "terrible things." This is to say that in Nicias' view, the evils that confront human beings are at times too terrifying for them to face in a manner that qualifies as courageous. His argument implies that a sensible person would flee those things that appear terrible if he lacked knowledge of how they can be profitable. But is

such knowledge available to human beings? In the next section, we shall see that insofar as the knowledge that Nicias can imagine human beings acquiring is too limited to free them from all evils, his deeply fearful nature leads him to retreat from his own definition of courage.

The Terrible and Emboldening Things

Before Socrates proceeds with his examination of Nicias, he must once again cajole Laches into remaining a part of the conversation. Laches is furious¹⁴ over Nicias' account of courage, which he considers to be ignoble and to deny courage to most men. Indeed, an all-out fight between the two seems averted only when Socrates calms Laches by indicating that Nicias is merely repeating what he has heard Socrates' and Nicias' comrade, the sophist Damon, say (197d). When Laches voices disapproval of the fact that Nicias, a leader of the city, would associate and converse with such types, Socrates rebukes Laches for denying that to examine such questions is to "partake in the greatest prudence" (197e). Laches reluctantly agrees to proceed with the conversation but leaves it to Socrates to examine Nicias for both of them.

In his concluding round of questions, Socrates brings out an incoherence in Nicias' understanding of courage that reveals Nicias' lack of courage.¹⁵ Socrates begins by

¹⁴ Laches says that he will not speak his mind in response to Nicias, lest he be accused of being "Aixonean" (197c). The scholiast, Nichols reports (1987a, 263 n.36), says that "Aixonean" was a comic synonym for "abusive in speech."

¹⁵ I thus disagree with Schmid's conclusion that Nicias' confusion stems primarily from an attempt on his part to reproduce the arguments of sophists such as Damon and

asking him whether he believes that courage is a part of virtue, and Nicias replies that he does. But by the end of their exchange, Socrates has elicited his agreement that courage must be knowledge of all goods and evils in all conditions and that it is therefore the whole of virtue. This means, as Socrates points out, that Nicias has contradicted himself, and the dialogue concludes with Nicias' being revealed, like Laches, "to know nothing about courage" (200a5). Now Socrates' refutation of Nicias may itself seem sophistic, as though Socrates merely out-maneuvers him on a technical matter. But if Nicias is merely tricked into contradicting himself, why does he not correct his error on the spot? That is, why does he not relinquish either the view that courage is a part of virtue or the view that it is the whole of virtue, and what does his failure to do so reveal about both his understanding of courage and about his own character?

Socrates begins Nicias' final examination by first establishing its parameters; he secures Nicias' agreement that they have been investigating courage as a part of virtue (198a). He next articulates what he and Laches mean by "the terrible and emboldening

Prodicus. I also disagree with Schmid's claim that Nicias' statements about courage do not reflect his true opinions, i.e., that Nicias is parroting what he has heard the sophists say (1992, 174-75). It is true that Socrates names the sophists as the source of Nicias' views, but in light of the facts, first, that Nicias claimed initially to be repeating what he had heard Socrates say (194d) and, second, that Laches has taken great umbrage, it is likely that Socrates means to absolve himself of responsibility for Nicias' view. Even, however, if Nicias has heard from the sophists something similar to what he has heard Socrates say, the tensions in his account of courage, as I will show in what follows, reflect confusions about courage in his own soul.

things;” knowledge of which Nicias claims constitutes courage; he wants to know whether or not Nicias agrees with them. Socrates defines terrible things as those things we fear. He then adds that fear is caused not by past or present evils but “by those that are expected,” since fear is “the expectation of future evil” (198b7). This description seems perfectly straightforward until we reflect upon the word “expectation”: Socrates presents fear not as the knowledge of future evil but only as the expectation of it. His formulation implies an extraordinary (perhaps even counterintuitive) corollary: we fear something when we believe that it will likely harm us, not when we are absolutely certain that it will.¹⁶ This implies that fear involves uncertainty, that it arises when we face an evil that we hope to avoid — that, in short, a condition for our fearing an evil is the hope of avoiding it. This suggests that fear goes hand-in-hand with hope, i.e., the hope of avoiding evil, and ultimately that if one has no hope, one has no fear (cf. Aristotle, Rhetoric 1383a5-10, and Thomas 1964, 2.1 Q.41, A.2). This yoking of fear and hope suggests that when all hope disappears and one knows in one’s bones that one must face a certain evil, the fear of it disappears, too, so that fear really is, as Socrates says, only the expectation of evil. If so, this would mean, for example, that only the condemned man who still hopes for a stay of execution experiences fear; insofar as he has given up all hope of avoiding death, he might feel sadness or resignation, but not fear.¹⁷

¹⁶ That we might fear uncertain factors that accompany a certain evil, such as the extent of pain that might be involved, does not mean that we fear the certain evil.

¹⁷ Here I speak of the prisoner’s attitude toward the fact of his execution; he might well fear the pain he will experience during his execution or his fate in the afterlife, insofar as he does not know what these might be; but then he fears these things, rather

For a vivid illustration of this experience we might consider a scene from the film Jaws. The captain of the ship that is pursuing the killer shark of the film's title is a veteran of the U.S.S. Indianapolis, which delivered the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima during World War II and which was sunk soon after completing its mission. During a lull in the movie's action, he describes to his shipmates his experience trying to stay alive in the shark-infested waters during the several days that elapsed between the sinking of the Indianapolis and his and his fellow survivors' rescue. His tale is harrowing. As the sharks swarmed, the sailors sought to fend them off by splashing and kicking at them. Despite these efforts, the sharks took several hundred men. But as terrifying as this ordeal was, the narrator of the tale says that he was most frightened in the anxious period immediately preceding his rescue, as he awaited his turn to be plucked from the sea by helicopters. His fear of death thus swelled with his hope of escaping, which fact supports Socrates' claim that fear depends on the expectation — not knowledge — of future evil, i.e., on an abiding hope of avoiding it (consider Vera Brittain's statement about her experience during the First World War, she says that "having now no hope, and therefore no fear," she simply did not bother to pick up the paper to read the casualty lists. [1933, 447]). If Socrates means the language he uses here to describe fear precisely, then he implies that it is accompanied by hope rather than hopelessness.

Socrates also defines emboldening things in terms of the future; they are "future non-evils or goods." Laches readily endorses Socrates' definitions, after which Nicias assents to them, too (198b-c). That is, he agrees that the terrible and emboldening things are

than his execution.

expected — and therefore uncertain — evils, non-evils, and goods. If courage is knowledge of all these things, its subject matter is comprehensive indeed. Socrates shows, however, that it must be even more comprehensive than this formulation suggests when he turns to explore what it means to know the terrible and emboldening things. Let us recall that Nicias describes courage as *epistēmē*, or scientific knowledge. What could he mean by a scientific knowledge of uncertain goods and evils? To find out, Socrates first explains what he and Laches understand by *epistēmē*. Socrates cites medicine, farming, and generalship as examples of scientific knowledge; all of these are practical sciences concerned with bringing about particular ends (health, crops, and victory). These sciences, however, are not concerned only with the future; every *epistēmē* must concern itself with how its ends were and are attained in the past and in the present (198d-e). Nicias accepts this view; knowledge of future things in farming, for instance, does not differ from knowledge of past or present things. If courage is a true *epistēmē*, then it, too, embraces past, present and future. But if this is true, then an extraordinary conclusion is reached. As Socrates states it, courage according to Nicias must be knowledge not only of future goods and evils but of those “that are coming into being and that have come into being and that are in all conditions” (199b-c).

Socrates solicits Nicias’ assent to every stage in this unfolding argument. But as it proceeds, Nicias agrees more and more weakly. To its conclusion he offers the noncommittal statement, “it seems so at least” (199c3). When Socrates finally summarizes Nicias’ argument as saying that courage is “knowledge about pretty much all goods and evils in all conditions,” Nicias says simply, “Yes, in my opinion, Socrates” (199d4). The reasons for his increasing hesitancy are not entirely clear. It seems that as

long as the discussion is conducted on a formal or abstract level, Nicias is comfortable arguing that courage is knowledge of one's own profit. When he can state abstractly that courage involves the "prudent things" (197c) or that the courageous man is wise if he is good (194d), he can speak confidently. When, however, Socrates shifts to a substantive level, trying to determine the substance of the knowledge that constitutes courage, Nicias loses his confidence. He seems to recognize just how extreme is the character of the knowledge he has been attributing to courage.

Armed with Nicias' agreement concerning the expansive character of courage, Socrates proceeds to inquire about the individual who possesses it. He asks Nicias whether this person would "lack anything of virtue." With this question he forces upon Nicias a version of the thought we earlier suggested was implicit in Laches' outrage over Nicias' definition of courage. Laches seemed to glimpse that if courage really is profitable knowledge, then there is no room for the impressive steadfastness that Laches thinks is noble. Differing from Laches, Socrates here does not question whether courage as comprehensive knowledge of goods and evils is a virtue but rather suggests that it precludes all other virtues or, rather, obviates the need for them. He asks of Nicias the following leading question concerning the man who possesses this virtue.

Do you think that this one would be in need of moderation or justice and piety — he to whom it belongs, concerning both gods and human beings, to be thoroughly on his guard for the terrible things and for those that are not and to provide himself with the good things by means of knowing how to associate with them correctly? (199d-e)

Nicias has to concede that Socrates is "saying something." Socrates then concludes that

Nicias is describing a man who possesses not a part of virtue but “virtue entire.” His description of the man with “virtue entire” brings to a peak the notion that virtue must be good for the virtuous man. For this man’s courage, i.e., his knowledge, enables him to be “on guard” for terrible things and to “provide himself” with good ones. He would seem to have everything for which Nicias could hope in virtue. Yet Nicias is less than enthusiastic about the conclusion that Socrates expresses. He says weakly only that “it seems so” (199e7; cf. e12).

In fact, three responses later Nicias has rejected the view that the courageous man possesses virtue entire. For when Socrates proceeds to point out that the view of courage as “virtue entire” conflicts with the view of it as a part of virtue, Nicias agrees that they “have not found out what courage is” (199e9).¹⁸ He thus indicates that he does not think

¹⁸ Socrates’ refutation of Nicias has occasioned a great deal of debate among scholars about its connection to the famous Socratic thesis that virtue is knowledge. One camp, led by Vlastos, maintains that although knowledge is required for the virtues, each virtue is different because it involves a different kind of knowledge; Socrates must therefore understand courage as a part of virtue. Vlastos maintains that Socrates in the Laches never refutes the position that courage is a part of virtue and that Socrates knows he has not done so, since he attributes solely to Nicias the inference that courage is (rather than merely implies) the knowledge of all goods and evils (1981, 267-68; cf. Santas 1980, 202-205, and Devereux 1977, 138-40). On the other side of the debate is Penner, who maintains that the virtues are equivalent to knowledge of good of evil and thus that courage is identical to moderation, justice, and piety, since all involve the same knowledge (1973, 60-63). Although I am less confident than Penner that Socrates’ own

courage is “virtue entire.” He still seems to think that it is somehow a part of virtue, although his confession of ignorance means that he cannot articulate this thought. But why is Nicias drawn to the view that courage is only a part of virtue? Why does he, who has emphasized so much the importance of virtue’s securing one’s good, fail to embrace Socrates’ claim that courage is “virtue entire”? We can understand his refusal to do so, I think, if we focus on two features of his final exchange with Socrates: Socrates’ discussion of the hierarchy existing between generalship and divination, and his claim that if courage is “virtue entire,” the courageous man does not need the virtue of piety.

As we have seen, a little earlier in the conversation Socrates uses generalship along with farming and medicine to illustrate the character of scientific knowledge. Generalship, he says, “uses forethought in the finest manner regarding the things relating to war.” For a reason he does not explain, he compares it to the art of divination.¹⁹ Because generalship has “finer knowledge of the things relating to war” than the diviner’s art does, Socrates says that generalship must rule divination rather than the other way around; indeed, “the law ordains thus” (198e-199a). This reference to divination here surely reminds Nicias, who relies so much on divination, of the limitations of scientific knowledge as human beings possess it. Or, more precisely, it surely reminds him, as it does us, of the limitations of practical sciences like generalship,

views can be so clearly discerned in this dialogue (cf. Schmid 1992, 159-60, which denies that any solid conclusions about Socrates’ views can be deduced from this dialogue), I incline more to his view than to Vlastos’ since I agree with him that none of the inferences Socrates draws in his final exchange with Nicias is necessarily mistaken.

¹⁹ For more on the art of divination, see Burkert 1985, 111-114.

i.e., sciences that seek practical ends; we do not seem to know enough to guarantee the attainment of the ends we seek through practical science. As farming cannot predict the weather and its effects on crops, generalship cannot guarantee military success because generals cannot know all the particulars that may affect their battle plans; both sciences lack perfect predictive power. In light of this fact, it is not surprising if human beings turn away from science for assistance, particularly when the stakes are high. Indeed, in the ancient world it was common for military leaders not to launch battles until omens indicated that conditions favored their side. As we noted, Herodotus reports that at Plataea the Persians and Greeks stood facing each other for ten days because the omens on both sides did not favor an attack (IX.36-37).²⁰

Now Socrates' claim that generalship must rule divination does not eliminate the possibility that divination can provide useful information to generals. He insists in the name of the law, though, that generals must rule diviners. The law treats the information that divination can provide as more limited than that of generalship; otherwise, it would make sense for diviners to rule generals. When Socrates asks Laches whether or not he agrees with him, Laches replies that he does (199a).²¹ Significantly, Socrates does not solicit Nicias' opinion on divination before he asks him about the extent of scientific knowledge in general and of courage in particular. He may suspect that Nicias is not

²⁰ According to Burkert, whether the credit for a victory was due more to the commanding general or to the diviner was often a matter of dispute (1985, 113).

²¹ For an illustration of the difficulties involved in relying on oracles and the prophesies they issue, see Thucydides II.17 and 54, and Herodotus IX.42-43.

prepared to subordinate divination so completely to generalship.²² After all, Nicias earlier gave diviners credit for a great deal of knowledge; although he denied that they could know whether or not it was good or bad for events to turn out a certain way, he indicated that he at least believed that they could know how events would turn out (recall 195e-196a). Whatever Nicias' opinion, though, of how generalship and divination should be ordered, Socrates' announcement of his and Laches' opinion certainly reminds Nicias, if he needed reminding, of the limitations of practical science and of the desirability of securing divine assistance if possible.

This "reminder" seems intended by Socrates as the first stage of a two-part strategy to make Nicias realize the gravity of what his account of courage implies; it is hard otherwise to explain why he specifically points out that generalship should rule divination. The second stage is his deduction, from Nicias' account of courage, that the courageous man does not need piety (or any virtue other than courage). Although Nicias agrees that his definition of courage, once unpacked, proves to explain "virtue entire," he retreats from this agreement, as we noted, when Socrates points out the contradiction between this view and his earlier claim that courage is a part of virtue; he admits that he and Socrates have not discovered what courage is (199e). The fact that Nicias refuses to embrace the notion of courage as "virtue entire" only after Socrates indicates that piety is not part of such virtue, suggests that his refusal stems from his recognition of his

²² Although it is not fully appropriate to use Nicias' later actions at Sicily as a sign of what Socrates thinks of him at this time, we cannot forget what every Greek reader of this dialogue knew, i.e., that Nicias subordinated sound military policy and the advice of his fellow general Demosthenes to what he interpreted as the omen of a lunar eclipse.

dependence on gods if he is to have what he wants. By reminding Nicias through his discussion of generalship and divination of the limitations of practical wisdom, Socrates sets up Nicias' refusal to relinquish the notion of virtue as parts; Nicias turns out to be deeply attached to that part of virtue that is piety. If it is obvious that the practical science of generalship cannot guarantee success in war, it seems at least equally obvious that no practical science can give a general like Nicias himself the knowledge that Nicias suggested the courageous man possesses, including above all the knowledge of whether and when "it is profitable to die" (195d). It is but a short step from recognizing, or at least being reminded, of the limits of practical science to embracing the notion of virtue as parts, especially the virtue of piety. When Socrates points out that courage as Nicias has presented it renders piety unnecessary, Nicias surely realizes that Socrates has cut him off from a potential route to salvation. For piety affords a substitute for the knowledge of his own profit that he wants but cannot have. Only gods would seem able to ensure that Nicias' risks will be profitable for him. In the absence of perfect knowledge about how to avoid evils, Nicias may hope that by following the wishes of the gods, whom his piety and other virtues would please, he will be rewarded with their help and thereby manage both to avoid suffering and to provide himself with good things.²³

²³ While my understanding of Nicias' character has much in common with Dobbs's account of Nicias' wish to eliminate "the riskiness in human affairs" (1986, 845; cf. Schmid 1992, 140, 164-5, 170-1), I do not think that his description of Nicias as incapable of dealing with uncertainty is adequate. More fundamental than his fear of uncertainty is Nicias' hope to secure his own well-being both in this life and perhaps afterwards. Only this account of Nicias explains why he is ultimately unwilling to

Much or even everything is at stake in Socrates' deduction that courage as Nicias "conceives" it obviates the need for piety.

What exactly, though, is the problem here? Does Socrates say that the man who possesses courage, i.e., "virtue entire," cannot receive assistance from the gods? On the contrary, he says that such a man would not be pious because of his ability to guard against evils and to provide himself with good things through "knowing how to associate with [the gods] correctly." Why, then, does Socrates' account of the courageous man with "virtue entire" lead Nicias to disavow his definition of courage and retreat to the view that virtue has parts? The answer seems to lie in what we have seen is Nicias' hope for perpetual profit — if not from knowledge, then perhaps from gods. Although Socrates' description of the man with "virtue entire" may suggest that such a man can secure divine assistance, it in fact suggests at least as much that he cannot. For knowing how to associate correctly with the gods may mean not deserving their care. If the man with "virtue entire" knew how to behave to secure the gods' favor, he might well undermine his chance of receiving that favor, for his behavior would be mercenary, intended to secure divine rewards — and hence unworthy of securing them. After all, do gods yield to blatant attempts to manipulate them? Or do they not instead bestow their favors only on those who are devoted to them, who heed their wishes without demanding rewards?²⁴ To the extent that Nicias hopes that the gods can make death genuinely

endorse the view that courage is "virtue entire" and willing to leave open the possibility, which creates greater uncertainty, that courage is a part of virtue.

²⁴ On the claim that it is *disinterested* action that the gods reward, see Plato, Symposium 179b-180b.

“profitable,” he needs to be pious. Indeed, precisely because of his piety, “virtue entire” cannot be possible, for the knowledge of how to “associate with both [gods and human beings] correctly” and to “provide himself with the good things” precludes becoming worthy of the gods’ favor by acting out of pure devotion to the gods. To state this differently, “virtue entire,” even if it is possible, can carry Nicias only so far in pursuit of his own profit. Since knowledge cannot enable human beings on their own to secure their profit, especially after death, they need divine assistance. That assistance, however, may not be forthcoming if human beings act simply with a view, even a knowledgeable view, to their own profit. Precisely because Nicias does want to attain his own profit, he must turn away from the knowledge that seemed the means of attaining it. The reason for his hyper-rational account of courage — his concern for his own welfare — leads him to turn away from rationalism.

He does not know, however, precisely where to turn. He concludes from the impasse into which Socrates leads him that they have not found out what courage is, and he announces his intention to clarify matters later “both with Damon and others” (199e-200b). It is not clear whether he will use as the starting point for future analysis Socrates’ depiction of the man who possesses courageous knowledge. For in that depiction lies a more sensible account of courage than Nicias seems here to recognize. Socrates speaks of a scientific knowledge of all goods and evils in all conditions that enables the courageous man “to be thoroughly on his guard for the terrible things and for those that are not, and to provide himself with the good things.” He does not say that this knowledge can prevent all evil outcomes and ensure only good ones. Regarding the former, Socrates says only that the knowledgeably courageous man is “on guard” for

them, or that he is well prepared for potential evils; some of these he will be unable to avoid.

What is very strange about Socrates' account of courageous knowledge, though, is that it describes more than its possessor's attitude toward things that inspire fear, i.e., the domain with which one normally associates courage. Socrates says that the courageous man is on guard not only for terrible things but also for "those that are not." Why in the world would one need to be "on guard" for what is not terrible? Let us recall that Socrates spoke earlier, with Nicias' assent, of things that do not cause fear, i.e., things that are not terrible, as "emboldening" (198b-c).²⁵ To be on guard against what is not terrible is thus to be on guard against emboldening things, which means that he thinks such things constitute a threat from which we must defend ourselves. How, though, do emboldening things threaten us? Socrates may have the following argument in mind. Emboldening things can lull us into a false sense of security, making us think that we are somehow protected against evils. Insofar as this situation undermines our self-reliance, it may reasonably be said that we should guard against it. Failure to do so sufficiently may incline us to expect assistance from external powers rather than to use our own abilities to their fullest (cf. Aristotle, Rhetoric 1383b5-10). One with "virtue entire," then, may

²⁵ If it seems strange to characterize things that do not cause fear as emboldening, this description may make sense as an account of how a fearful man reacts to things that do not portend evil; Socrates may mean to capture everything that might embolden a man such as Nicias. Whether or not this is right, the category "non-evils" does embrace "positive" as well as "neutral" things.

guard against emboldening things lest he slip into thinking that he can depend unreasonably on external assistance.

The man who is on guard against both terrible things and (unreasonably) emboldening things thus neither expects to avoid all evils nor fails to do all he reasonably can to avoid them. His possession of “virtue entire” may not offer all the security Nicias wants, but does it not fulfill Nicias’ demand that courage be good for the courageous man? Indeed, although it is oriented by the concern to “provide [one]self with the good things,” it retains something of the character of the courage Laches admires (though admittedly not enough to satisfy him [cf. Vlastos 1981, 267]). The man who possesses it will have to act in the face of uncertainty; at times he will have to act as best he can under the circumstances in full cognizance of the possibility that he may meet with a terrible fate, and that cognizance enables him to act well.²⁶ His self-reliance — his reliance on nothing beyond himself — lessens the effects of fear on him. He is less vulnerable or perhaps invulnerable to the hopes for external assistance that obscure from human beings their own capacities and thereby magnify their fears, even to the point of paralysis. He is better able to secure goods that are within his grasp rather than to lose them by awaiting salvation, as Nicias eventually loses the chance to extricate himself from Sicily because of his superstitious concern with a lunar eclipse.

Nicias’ hopes incapacitate him in the Sicilian crisis, where he must choose the lesser of two evils, ignominious withdrawal, over the greater, the likely destruction of his forces (Thucydides, VII.47-48). Although Thucydides attributes Nicias’ decision not to withdraw in part to his preference to die, if he must, “privately” at the hands of the enemy

²⁶ Might not this account characterize Socrates’ courage at Delium?

rather than publicly at the hands of a punitive Athenian people, Thucydides also indicates that Nicias hopes that he will not have to die at all because the enemy forces are in fact much worse off than they are themselves (VII.48; cf. Orwin 1994, 121-22, and Edmunds 1975, 136-37). His desperate hope not to have to choose between dying at home and dying abroad clouds his understanding of his and his army's predicament. He hopes, despite all reasonable indications, that something good can come out of his situation. This makes him particularly vulnerable to soothsayers, who counsel delaying the Athenian withdrawal "thrice nine days" because of the lunar eclipse (VII.50), and this leads to the utter destruction of the Athenian army and ultimately to Nicias' own death (VII.85-86).²⁷ Had he recognized that at times evils cannot be avoided, he might have arrived at a less disastrous solution to the Sicilian crisis. There is a direct and obvious link between the "solution" he did choose and the demand we see from him in the Laches for a courageous knowledge that can protect us from all evils. The latter demand instills extravagant hopes in him that prevents him from attaining the (useful) knowledge that is available to human beings. The frustration with knowledge that Plato's character Nicias exhibits may thus also explain the historical Nicias' inclination to seek refuge in superstition and diviners.²⁸

²⁷ For Pericles' different response to an eclipse, see Plutarch 1887, 209.

²⁸ We might even say that to the extent that Socrates' and Nicias' exchange awakens Nicias to the fact that the knowledge possessed by someone with "virtue entire" cannot secure for him his own good, their conversation may in fact have made Nicias more dependent on diviners than he was already inclined to be.

This discussion raises a crucial question about the role of gods in human life. Socrates' account suggests that one with "virtue entire" is thoroughly prepared for situations where the best that unassisted human beings can do is to choose the lesser of two evils. One might object, however, that virtue properly understood may in fact ward off all evils for some individuals: those whose virtue secures them the favor of the gods, as Nicias seems to hope his own virtue does (see Thucydides VII.77). We certainly have not had any proof that gods cannot rescue us from suffering evils; indeed, Socrates' argument that the man with "virtue entire" does not need piety cries out for an investigation into the existence of providential gods. But the position counter to Socrates' — namely, that in light of the possibility that gods can help us, we ought to be pious and act as the gods demand rather than so as to secure our own good — contains difficulties of its own. As we noted, to the extent that one obeys the gods simply with a view to one's own good, one does not thereby deserve divine assistance. This difficulty could be avoided by obeying the gods' demand to live virtuously simply because the gods demand it, without thought or hope for one's own good. To do this would be tantamount to saying that human beings must be pious and virtuous whether or not doing so is good for them. But this is a difficult position to maintain. Indeed, both Nicias' and Laches' concern for virtue has been revealed to be inextricably linked to their understanding of virtue as part, indeed the most important part, of an individual's own true good. Perhaps, then, the investigation into courage that reveals this fact about their concern for virtue is, to some extent an investigation into the existence of providential gods.

However this may be, Socrates' account of the knowledge that is courage, which guards against emboldening as well as terrible things, suggests that it can be acquired

only with difficulty. But if this is true, then perhaps some sub- or quasi-rational quality is also needed for courage, something that aids one in acquiring the wisdom that makes courage possible. Indeed, Socrates seems to have pointed to this quality when he focused attention on the possibility that a kind of courage exists in animals. The natural strength that is characteristic of certain animals and their capacity for tenacious pursuit may be crucially necessary for acquiring the knowledge that Socrates suggests is needed to be “on guard for terrible and emboldening things.”²⁹ In addition to knowledge, courage seems thus to require a simple toughness to undergird both our judgments about what is best to do and our understanding that we may be able only to rely firmly on ourselves.

Courageous Knowledge

We began this chapter by asking how courage could be sensibly understood as a kind of knowledge. Although neither of them sees this himself, both Laches' and Nicias' definitions of courage in fact indicate that courage is a limited knowledge. Despite Laches' strong inclination towards the view that courage is something noble and that it should therefore be an end in itself rather than a means to some other end, he is unwilling to accept the implication of this view that courage could include foolish steadfastness. To be sure, Laches remains uncomfortable calling courage prudent steadfastness precisely because doing so seems to make courage a means to some further end and thereby to undermine its character as something splendid and choiceworthy in itself. Yet he remains irredeemably uncomfortable with equating what he thinks is noble (courage) with what he thinks is shameful (foolishness). This fact indicates that Laches does believe that knowledge has something important to do with courage, although he cannot

²⁹ Nichols calls this quality “a natural temper of bravery” (1987a, 274-75).

articulate the precise connection between the two. For his part, Nicias finds himself facing two unpalatable options. If courage is a virtue, then Nicias believes that it must involve knowledge of what is good for the courageous individual, but he ultimately balks at identifying courage with what he thinks is the complete knowledge he desires (and therefore balks to a large extent at identifying it with knowledge *per se*); courage can be only a limited knowledge.

If, however, both Laches' and Nicias' definitions indicate that courage is a limited knowledge, Socrates' conversations with them have also indicated that it is not limited to knowledge. Socrates has indicated that knowledge can lessen, if not completely eliminate, our fears. Knowing that it is not always possible to avoid suffering some evil may not eliminate our fears because it does not tell us when we might have to suffer that evil, and insofar as we remain uncertain about the future, we may still have fears concerning it. Possessing the knowledge in question enables us better to deal with those evils that do confront us by preventing our judgment from being clouded by illusory hopes. But the limited nature of that knowledge may still leave us vulnerable to fears, which suggests that something in addition to knowledge is a useful and perhaps necessary supplement to it in the successfully courageous individual, a kind of basic strength or natural toughness. At the very least some such quality seems necessary for the acquisition of the knowledge needed for full-blown courage.

Indeed, the deficiencies in both Laches' and Nicias' definitions may result from their lack of just such natural strength. Having had both their definitions of courage revealed to be inadequate, neither Laches nor Nicias seems eager to meet and talk with Socrates again. Nicias claims that he will sort out his difficulties later with the sophist Damon,

and Laches merely encourages the fathers to hold onto Socrates as a teacher for their sons. Their attitudes may well stem from their unexamined hopes for courage. Nicias hopes for too much from courage and virtue to consider seriously the possibility that the best that courage can do is to enable one to be “on guard.” Laches resists acknowledging the role of courage in attaining further goods because of a deep, not fully self-conscious hope that a noble courage can constitute the peak of life. Both Laches and Nicias lack the natural toughness or hardiness of soul necessary to confront the problematic character of these hopes. The crucial role of a natural strength in gaining clarity about courage helps, moreover, to explain Socrates’ equivocation on the teachability of virtue in the first part of the dialogue. Virtue may depend on acquiring knowledge, but that knowledge in turn depends first on having the right raw material. Courage thus seems to result when knowledge transforms an essential natural strength or toughness into a virtue.

To say, however, that natural strength is necessary for courage is not to describe this strength; the Laches can hardly be said to explore its character. Is it the steadfastness of soul that Laches calls courage? And is it the same in everyone who faces something fearful or dangerous? Consider, for example, whether the steadfastness is the same in the wise individual who knows that in confronting rather than fleeing from something bad he does what is truly best in the circumstances, and in the person who does the same because he believes that what he is doing is right but is less certain of its other benefits? What is missing from the Laches is an exploration of this psychological substratum of courage. Indeed, no mention is made in the Laches of what Socrates famously presents in the Republic as the source of courage: spiritedness, which makes one “fearless and invincible in the face of everything” (375b).

If, however, Socrates claims in the Republic that spiritedness is intimately connected to courage, why is it not discussed in the Laches, the dialogue most explicitly devoted to courage? One reason may be that the overarching purpose of the Laches is to examine how courage can be understood simply as a kind of knowledge; examining the psychological substratum of courage would not only turn attention away from, it would conflict with, this purpose. Indeed, this suffices to explain why spiritedness does not come up here, given its thorny character. As we will see in the Republic, spiritedness is an extremely complex phenomenon. This comes to light particularly in the fact that however important a condition for courage spiritedness may be, spiritedness seems also to be an obstacle to it, at least insofar as courage depends upon or is a kind of knowledge. According to Socrates' presentation in the Republic, the spirited part of the soul is the part that becomes angry and indignant (440a-d). Anger, the most vivid manifestation of spiritedness, is much more likely to blind us to wisdom than to help us acquire it. When we are angry we are certain that we are in the right and are impervious to claims to the contrary. We see a good example of the anti-rational tendencies of anger in Laches. As he becomes angry with what he takes to be Nicias' dishonest (196b1-3) and insulting (197c3-5) comments, he becomes less and less inclined to remain a part of the conversation. His anger at Nicias makes him sure that even if he has not been able to define courage adequately, he has nothing to learn from Nicias. His anger ultimately leads him to give up pursuit of the question at hand (196a5-c1, 200c-d). How, then, can something as irrational as spiritedness either help one acquire the knowledge that is courage or coexist with such knowledge in a rational soul? In turning to the Republic, we

will try to gain a better understanding of this sub-rational aspect of courage and its connection to whatever might be legitimately called courage.

We will receive guidance in this investigation, moreover, from careful attention to one of the central characters in the Republic, namely, Glaucon. In Glaucon we find an interesting combination of the concerns that we have seen in both Laches and Nicias. On the one hand, like Laches, Glaucon is attracted to a notion of virtue understood as itself the peak of life. On the other hand, like Nicias, Glaucon is more self-conscious about the need for virtue to bring him personal happiness. Glaucon combines these views in an especially fruitful way. Glaucon may share something of Laches' view that virtue should itself be the peak of life. But whereas Laches was content to leave the conversation despite having been made aware of the difficulty of justifying the risks that are at the heart the virtue he most admires, Glaucon is deeply disturbed by the thought that virtue, particularly justice, may not be worth the sacrifices it demands. Indeed, Glaucon refuses to end his conversation with Socrates until Socrates has offered what Glaucon considers to be an adequate defense of the intrinsic choiceworthiness of justice. Glaucon thus also shares Nicias' wish that virtue should bring him happiness. But whereas Nicias wants virtue to be merely a means to secure his own profit, Glaucon wants Socrates to prove that it is virtue itself, with all the sacrifices that it demands, that will bring him the happiness for which he longs. Glaucon's both ardent and spirited demand for a defense of justice itself and Socrates' attempt to supply one will enable us to see more clearly and vividly than we can from the more limited and less impressive Laches and Nicias, the full dimension of the problem of courage.

Chapter 4

The Nature of Spiritedness

The Role of Spiritedness in the Republic

An inquiry into what the Republic has to teach about the relationship between spiritedness and courage must not lose sight of the complicating fact that this teaching is not the dialogue's primary theme.¹ That theme is justice. The bulk of the conversation reported in the Republic deals with the efforts of Socrates and two young companions to construct a city in speech in order to illuminate the nature of justice. Socrates embarks on this project in order to try to defend justice against powerful arguments that two brothers, Glaucon and Adeimantus, level against it. Neither of them is an enemy of justice — far from it. But they are dissatisfied with justice as they have heard it discussed; they know of no compelling argument that shows justice to be truly good for its possessors. They announce their dissatisfaction at the beginning of Book II of the Republic, having just heard Socrates in Book I argue against the sophist Thrasymachus' attacks on justice. Or, rather, they have heard Socrates silence him. As far as they are concerned, Socrates has merely proven to be a better sophist than Thrasymachus; having out-manuevered Thrasymachus, he has not offered what they consider a persuasive defense of justice (358b). The boys therefore challenge Socrates to offer a better defense in light of the considerations that they raise.

¹ Strauss 1964, 110-111 indicates that Socrates' primary concern in the dialogue in fact distorts the presentation of spiritedness.

Glaucon presents the stronger challenge. Whereas Adeimantus explains why he is dissatisfied with traditional defenses offered on behalf of justice (362e), Glaucon takes the offensive. He presents a compelling and justifiably famous attack on justice, which he claims to have learned from the sophists (358c). He first contends that justice is merely a contract among the weak that attempts to persuade the strong, who could otherwise commit successful injustice, to abide by the city's laws and concern themselves with others' good (358e-360d). In fact, Glaucon suggests, if both a just and an unjust man possessed the ring of Gyges, which legend says can make one invisible, both would embrace injustice. For injustice is the best means to the good things that all human beings want, such as money, sex, and power, and the only thing that prevents them from acting unjustly so as to get these things is the fear of punishment. By making their injustice impossible to detect, invisibility takes away their fear, liberating them to acquire what they desire without regard for justice. Ultimately Glaucon demands that Socrates show that justice is choiceworthy even in the direst of circumstances in order to prove that it is choiceworthy at all. He wants Socrates to show that justice is an end in itself, so desirable that one should choose it even if everyone else believes him to be unjust and inflicts terrible punishments such as crucifixion on him (360e-362c).

Amazed both by the power of Glaucon's and Adeimantus' arguments and by the persistence of their concern for justice, Socrates agrees to defend justice, and in order to do so, he enlists their assistance in constructing a city in speech. The professed rationale for this project is the claim that the city can serve as a model for the individual soul. Insofar as the city is analogous to the soul, Socrates asserts that by finding justice in the

former, they will be able to discover what justice is and what power it has in the latter (368e-369a).

Courage and the phenomenon Socrates calls *thumos* or spiritedness² play important roles in the city in speech. A brief summary of these is appropriate at the outset of our discussion. First and most simply, spiritedness is essential to the city's soldiers, who, according to Socrates, must be spirited if they are to be courageous.³ These soldiers, however, do not simply defend the city; they also enforce its laws, which in this city issue from Socrates' most famous creation: the philosopher-kings. The spirited and courageous warriors of this city are thus the helpmates of reasonable laws. Finally, it is from them that the philosopher-kings, i.e., the most rational citizens, are drawn. The soldiers become such with the proper education, part of which includes the transformation of spiritedness into a certain sort of courage. These facts suggest not only that spiritedness and courage are fundamental to the functioning of this particular regime but also that both may be crucial to the full development of reason.

The Republic's treatment of spiritedness thus will help shed light on the character of courage. Socrates claims that because spiritedness makes a soul "fearless and invincible in the face of everything," it is what makes one "willing to be courageous" (375a-b).⁴ Spiritedness thus first comes to sight as the substratum of courage. More precisely, it first comes to sight as the substratum of soldiers' courage, for Socrates first mentions it as

² Bloom suggests "heart" as another translation of the word (1991, 449 n. 33).

³ For an argument that presents the connection between spiritedness and courage as primarily a male phenomenon, see Craig 1994, 64-66.

⁴ Translations from the Republic are from Bloom 1991.

the quality needed by the soldiers of the city in speech if they are to defend the city (375a-b).⁵ This may suggest that spiritedness is the substratum not of courage *per se* but of a particular kind of courage. But if this is true, we should note that it is a kind that every city needs because every city needs courageous soldiers to defend it. Even if spiritedness were the source only of military courage, it thus would appear to be indispensable to any regime.

The fact that every city needs spirited courage, however, does not make that courage unproblematic. Socrates worries that spirited soldiers will be “savage to one another and the rest of the citizens” (375b). Raw spiritedness is thus as much of a threat as a benefit to the city, which suggests that the raw courage to which it gives rise may not be a politically responsible courage. Partly for this reason, Socrates turns for almost two full books of the Republic to outlining an educational program designed to refine the savage character of spiritedness. Only if it is properly cultivated, we learn, can spiritedness produce political courage. Yet political courage is not, according to Socrates, the best kind of courage. He indicates later in the Republic that there is a “finer” kind (430c; cf. 430b with 442c). This finer kind proves to be the courage that Socrates says is possessed by philosophic natures (486b, 487a, 491b; cf. 517b-c and 520b-c), who Socrates says need some sort of courage to become philosophers in the first place (503a-504a, 535a-b). This suggests that the cultivation of spiritedness can yield two sorts of courage, the political and the philosophic. Our exploration of the Republic will focus on how

⁵ See Zuckert 1988, 3-6, for a helpful summary of how spiritedness supports civic life.

spiritedness may lead to each and on why Socrates indicates that there is a courage finer than the political kind.

Spiritedness, Anger and Human Dignity

Spiritedness may be a necessary condition for and perhaps a component of courage, but it is not itself courage. Everyone recognizes that human beings at times act out of spiritedness without thereby acting courageously. The man who kicks the chair over which he has just tripped throws a fit of spiritedness, but he does not act courageously. One obvious reason explains why this is the case: in the chair he has not confronted anything frightening. But Socrates points to a deeper and more important reason for distinguishing between spiritedness and courage, which he clearly does. As we noted, Socrates says that spiritedness is what makes one “willing to be courageous,” since it is “irresistible and unbeatable” and “its presence makes every soul fearless and invincible in the face of everything” (375a-b). These words suggest that spiritedness makes one “willing” to be courageous because it fills the soul with a sense of “invincible” power, a capacity to overcome any obstacle or evil at hand. This is to say that it makes one “willing” to be courageous not by persuading one to act in the face of all one’s fears and doubts but by silencing them. Spiritedness thus seems not to appeal to reason but to blind it; if only because courage requires recognition of the dangers one faces, spiritedness cannot be the same as courage.

Insofar, moreover, as we think of courage as a virtue and therefore as something good, we have another, if more debatable, reason for distinguishing between spiritedness and courage: it is not always good to be “fearless” or to think oneself “invincible” in the face of everything. As we have seen, and as Laches acknowledges, because those who

dive into wells without knowing how to swim act foolishly, it is hard to call them courageous; the point does not change if spiritedness is the source of one's folly.

Consider the small man with great spiritedness who becomes so filled with anger that he challenges or attacks someone far bigger and stronger than he. There are two possible reasons why we might deny courage to him: either because spiritedness has so inflamed him that he does not realize what he is doing or because it so inflames him that he does not care. It makes him so preoccupied with the object of his anger that it either crowds out all other thoughts or clouds his judgment.⁶

This example also suggests why Socrates might speak of spiritedness as making one only "willing" to be courageous rather than as making one simply courageous. The actions that spiritedness inspires may well appear to be courageous. The Davids who attacks Goliaths not from a distance with a slingshot but from up close do strike most people as brave. If, however, their actions really stem from spiritedness, people may not view them as brave for long. The boy who stands up to a bully in full awareness of the potential consequences for him seems braver than the one who lashes out because of a quick temper. We typically consider courageous those who are in control of their actions rather than those who are out of control. The latter may perform actions resembling those of courageous people, but they are not really courageous. They may be willing to be courageous, but insofar as spiritedness blinds them, they are not truly so.

Spiritedness, in short, is a source of courage rather than courage itself because it is irrational. In fact, Socrates indicates the irrationality of spiritedness at its first mention by

⁶ For a helpful description of how anger can be the source of courage, see Gay 1988, 257-59, 264.

suggesting that animals possess it; he speaks of spiritedness as making a “horse or dog or any other animal” willing to be courageous (375a-b; see also 441a8-b2). From its first mention in the dialogue we learn why spiritedness needs to be educated; it is at odds with reason. As Socrates says later in the dialogue, one’s soul is courageous only if its spirited part is rightly trained (410d6-7).

Before we can know how spiritedness can be rightly trained, we have to understand better why it makes us behave irrationally. In Book IV Socrates claims that spiritedness, like reason and desire, constitutes a distinct part of the soul. In order to demonstrate this to a dubious Glaucon, he asks him whether it can be found in either the reasoning or the desiring part of the soul. Glaucon is not sure, but he suggests that spiritedness belongs to the latter (439e). To persuade him otherwise, Socrates recounts the story of Leontius. When Leontius one day happened upon the corpses of some executed criminals, one part of him wanted to look at their dead bodies and another part thought that it was shameful to do so. When he could no longer restrain himself from looking, he cursed his eyes for compelling him to gaze at the corpses (439e-440b). The cause, Socrates says, is that his spirit was roused against the part of himself that he believed to be worse, the desiring part. Socrates thus argues that anger, which he goes on to offer as the leading manifestation of spiritedness, can oppose desire. This helps to persuade Glaucon that spiritedness does indeed belong to a separate part of the soul.

Glaucon’s first instinct about spiritedness, though, is far from crazy. One might wonder whether what opposed Leontius’ desire to look — or the desire he attributes to his eyes — was not in fact something distinct from desire but rather a countervailing desire to avoid shameful behavior. Indeed, Thomas Aquinas offers an account of anger

that treats it as a kind of desire (Summa Theologiae, I.81.2). According to Thomas, there are two kinds of desires: concupiscible and irascible. Concupiscible desires are simple desires; they consist of our movement either directly towards something good, as in the case of love and joy, or directly away from something bad, as in the case of hatred and sorrow (cf. II.23.2). Irascible desires arise in response to the presence of some obstacle either to acquiring something good or fleeing something bad; “[the irascible desire’s] object is the difficult, for it tends to overcome and rise above threats” (I.82.2). Anger falls into this category. Now Thomas maintains that the irascible desires, like anger, differ from the concupiscible ones because they can sometimes cross them; the irascible desires, for example, may lead one to submit to something painful from which the concupiscible desires counsel flight. Still, this obviously departs from Socrates’ presentation; Thomas calls anger a desire, whereas Socrates does not. Thomas, moreover, indicates not just that anger is a kind of desire but also that it is rooted in ordinary concupiscible desires when he claims that all the irascible desires “start from and finish with the concupiscible ones.” They seem to be helpmates of the concupiscible desires because they help one to overcome what stands between the simple desires and the objects they seek. The irascible desires according to Thomas are derivative, not independent.⁷

Socrates’ account of anger, by contrast, treats it as independent. He suggests that spiritedness cannot be adequately explained either simply as a response to thwarted desire, or as something that helps thwarted desires to obtain their objects. When he describes the phenomenon of anger, he says that a man’s spirit “boils and becomes harsh”

⁷ Cf. Pangle 1976, 1063.

when he believes that he has suffered some injustice (440c). According to Socrates' formulation, one does not become angry whenever any desire is thwarted. Something more is involved: a sense that an injustice has been done. Socrates' account seems correct, since our anger at having been crossed or harmed tends to dissipate when we understand that harm not to have been inflicted unjustly. Consider, for example, how much our anger would dissipate if we were to discover that the individual who had rear-ended our car had done so because he had suffered a heart attack rather than because he had been driving recklessly. Socrates puts it this way: the noble individual is "less capable of anger at suffering hunger, cold or anything else of the sort inflicted on him by one whom he supposes does so justly" (440c). Both our anger and the concomitant desire to lash out at whomever or whatever makes us angry are intimately connected to our belief that we have been treated unjustly. We both assign and accept punishment, Socrates suggests, only as long as we believe that the offender (including ourselves) has acted unjustly.

To speak of anger as the response to thwarted desire simply does not capture the connection between anger and justice. Thomas' account of anger as an irascible desire also obscures another component of anger, namely, the fact that anger is no mere means to the satisfaction of the concupiscible desires but rather a force with its own agenda. Socrates says that the angry spirit will suffer "hunger, cold and everything of the sort" and "stand firm and conquer and not cease from its noble efforts before it has succeeded, or death intervenes" (440c-d). Even if individuals become angry because their concupiscible desires are thwarted, they often lose sight of what they originally wanted.

4 This phenomenon is evident in the fact that, if someone believes an opponent has unjustly

deprived him of something, he is usually not satisfied if the opponent merely yields the object in question; he demands that the opponent acknowledge his injustice and apologize. It is not uncommon for people to spend more in a court battle than the thing over which they are fighting is worth; they justify their behavior by saying that they are fighting for the sake of “principle.” One can become so consumed with anger that one forgets about one’s initial desire. Indeed, according to Socrates’ statement that anger makes one willing to fight on until death, anger can subordinate the preservation of life to the satisfaction of its goals.⁸

⁸ Thomas’ and Socrates’ accounts of anger may, though, be closer than they first appear (which is why I speak only of Thomas’ obscuring certain phenomena). Although Thomas suggests that the irascible desires derive wholly from the concupiscible ones, he also seems to point to the intimate connection between anger and justice. Although Thomas says that the irascible desires arise from and terminate in the concupiscible ones, the example he offers to describe the connection between the two kinds of desires raises questions about whether anger is as derivative as he at first suggests, for he says that “anger arises from sadness and, having wrought vengeance, terminates in joy.” What is open to interpretation is the claim that anger does not terminate in joy until it has wrought vengeance. This claim suggests that anger is satisfied not by the fulfillment of one’s initial, thwarted desire but rather by obtaining justice. For his part, Socrates may not think that spiritedness is as different from desire as he initially seems to suggest. In fact, his suggestion in Book IV that there is a separate, spirited part of the soul may belong only to a preliminary account of the soul. For later discussions undermine the division of the soul presented in Book IV. In Book VIII Socrates no longer speaks as though the

Anger, which Socrates features as the leading manifestation of spiritedness, reveals that spiritedness, at least as it is manifest in human beings, is fundamentally moral.⁹ As

parts of the soul are completely distinct, for he describes the spirited part of the soul as having its own desires (550b). And in Book X he describes men's souls as divided only between a prudent or calculating part and a desiring part (604e1-3, 605b4-7, 606d2-7).

The tripartite division of the soul that Socrates first articulates in Book IV may be designed more to bring out particularly vividly certain qualities of soul and to help foster the analogy between the city and the individual soul than to present a true account.

Indeed, even as he describes the tripartite character of the soul, Socrates calls attention to difficulties in that account when he says that their procedure will not yield a "precise grasp" of the soul (435d; see also 436b, 504a-b).

⁹ One might object to this claim on the ground that when Socrates first mentions spiritedness, he says, as we have seen, that it makes animals as well as human beings willing to be courageous (375a-b). Does this not suggest that there is a kind of spiritedness that is not moral? One might characterize such spiritedness as a natural "fight" that arises when one confronts obstacles. There seem to be three strong reasons for doubting, however, that Socrates thinks that this kind of amoral spiritedness exists in human beings. First, if I am not mistaken, Plato offers no instance of it in the two dialogues that I discuss. Second, the fact that Socrates says animals and human beings possess a similar quality does not mean that he thinks that it manifests itself identically in them. Third, examples of spiritedness that one might offer to show the existence of an amoral spiritedness may actually contain moral opinions. If one were to point to the spiritedness we appear to summon in ourselves, for example, to keep running in a tough

we have seen, Socrates reveals that anger depends on our having the belief that we are being denied something to which we believe we have a right. We therefore give reasons and explanations for our anger. We are not merely animals fiercely seeking what we desire; our anger, we believe, is reasonable.¹⁰ As we have also seen, this explains why anger is always accompanied by blame and the wish to punish what inspires it. We are not simply disappointed when we do not get what we deserve; we blame others for our deprivation because we believe they have an obligation to respect our rights, and we believe that they must be punished for violating their obligation. This belief can be so powerful that it leads us irrationally to think that *things* should be punished for harming us, as was shown by the case of Leontius, who cursed his eyes as though they were living, willful beings. Anger is thus moral in that it implies a belief that we can exert a claim upon others that they are obliged to fulfill.

What makes us think that we can exert such claims on others? And why do we think, moreover, that the world will or at least should support us in our demand that others abide by their duties? It is hard to answer these questions, although we can attach a label to the more fundamental phenomenon that anger reveals. Anger over the fact that we have not been treated as we deserve suggests that however human beings choose to articulate this belief about desert — whether it is because we have souls or free will or something else — in essence we believe that we have dignity. We believe that our existence has a seriousness and importance that confers upon us a right to be treated with

race, that “fight” often and perhaps always has a moral component, such as our encouraging ourselves by asserting that we are not the sort of human being who gives up.

¹⁰ Cf. Cross and Woosley 1966, 122.

the respect that beings like us deserve.¹¹ That such a right exists seems to emerge from the way we, when our better selves are acting, treat others: we believe that we respect, or at least can respect, others' dignity. We believe that we are capable of acting with a view to something other than our own welfare, which suggests to us that there is a level of existence on which human beings act not merely to advance their own interests but according to what is right, i.e., according to some universal principle of justice. That we think we can live on that level leads us to think that others can and should too. Getting angry over affronts to our dignity means blaming others for not acting in this way. But it is not the case that we simply wish to live high-mindedly, according to principle, eschewing all other concerns. We also seem to have our own well-being somewhere in mind. And acting justly at the very least should make one deserving of some respect. To the extent that we do not receive that respect, however, we hold more than simply the particular offender responsible. We seem to think that we have a claim on the world more generally to make up for it, in particular, by punishing whoever offended us. Of course, to say this is still to identify rather than to explain the phenomenon. It is to identify what conduct we expect rather than to explain precisely why that conduct should be forthcoming. Indeed, it is impossible to offer such an explanation here. A genuine explanation would be an account of why others — or we ourselves — should act justly, and this would be the task of another investigation. Here we must limit ourselves to noting that human anger depends on the belief in dignity, i.e., that we are beings who act

¹¹ For a powerful expression of this belief in human seriousness, see Plato, Laws 803b-804c.

in such a way as to deserve recognition and respect and that if the recognition is not forthcoming, we expect or have a claim on the world somehow to rectify that fact.

We learn more about the nature of the concern for dignity and thus about spiritedness in the role that Glaucon plays in the construction of the city in speech.¹² In collaboration

¹² In what follows, our focus will be on Glaucon's rather than Adeimantus' character and role in the dialogue. The reason is that the present investigation is devoted to exploring the connection between spiritedness and courage, and however spirited and courageous Adeimantus is, it is Glaucon whom the dialogue explicitly presents as embodying both qualities most vividly and consistently. Adeimantus himself attests to Glaucon's greater spiritedness. When Socrates describes in Book VIII the decay both of regimes and of the men whose souls correspond to their regimes, he identifies the regime that follows the best regime as honor-loving and "timocratic." Upon hearing that the timocratic regime is characterized by the prominence of spiritedness, Adeimantus remarks that the kind of man who corresponds to this regime would be "near to Glaucon here" (548e). But more importantly, Glaucon is the one that most provocatively compels us to grapple with questions about spiritedness and courage. As we shall soon see, it is at Glaucon's insistence that the city in speech is forced to wage war and thus to incorporate soldiers and an education in courage into its way of life (373ff). Indeed, the connection between Glaucon and courage is prefigured at the very beginning of Book II, as soon as the young men take over the conversation about justice from Thrasymachus. When Socrates remarks there that he has not yet been "freed from argument," he says that this is because Glaucon, whom he describes as "always most courageous in everything" (357a), will not let it go. Socrates' comment is compatible, moreover, with what we learn about

at first only with the moderate Adeimantus, Socrates describes a city that comes into being to supply its members' individual deficiencies. Individuals need assistance from each other because no one can fend entirely for himself. To ensure that everything in the city is made as well as possible, each man specializes in a particular art. So that the city may be adequately supplied, there must be many different kinds of artisans, including not only those who make goods, but also those who trade them. But while the city is "not a little" one (370e), it is very moderate and peaceful. Its citizens are concerned with only very simple pleasures — bread, wine, clothing, and shoes; they will work throughout the year; they will eat simple, hearty food; and they will relax by drinking wine and singing hymns to the gods (372a-c). The citizens of this first city, as Socrates describes them, are so moderate as to be unerotic; while they will enjoy "sweet intercourse," they will avoid producing too many children so as to "keep an eye out against poverty and war" (372a-c).

Upon hearing this last fact, Glaucon sharply interrupts the narrative, claiming that Socrates and Adeimantus have made these men "have their feast without relishes"

Glaucon and his courage from his speech about justice, which presents a more extreme case for Socrates to defend than does Adeimantus'. Glaucon demands not only that justice be shown to be sensibly good, as Adeimantus does (see especially 366e-367a and 367d); he demands that it be shown to be good for the just man even when justice is terribly hard, requiring the greatest sacrifices. Glaucon longs to hear an argument that defends justice as something for which it is worthwhile to endure the greatest risks. This fact suggests that Glaucon has a particularly high regard for courage as Laches understood it, namely, as the capacity for steadfastness of soul under the most terrifying conditions.

(372c2-3); the erotic Glaucon is clearly frustrated by the mundane lives of these citizens. He may be especially frustrated by Socrates' portrait of these citizens both because they have dull, orderly sexual lives and because they eschew war. Socrates interprets Glaucon's complaint literally; he responds by granting them a greater variety of foods. This is hardly what Glaucon had in mind. He is dissatisfied; indeed, he seems angry. Dripping with sarcasm and obvious disgust, Glaucon likens the city to a "city of sows" and implies that the citizens' lives consist of nothing more than getting fat. Glaucon then suggests that the citizens should instead be able to enjoy tables, couches, relishes and desserts (372d). Both of Glaucon's interjections into Socrates' description of the first city appear to indicate that he rejects it because it does not satisfy his desire for luxuries, which appear to include copious and unconventional sexual encounters and fine meals in comfortable surroundings. There are, however, strong indications that luxuries are not Glaucon's only, or even main, concern. As we shall see, luxuries would not suffice to satisfy Glaucon or to attach him to the city (after all, would he not feel a deeper attachment to wealthy Athens than his speech about justice suggests if his top priority were luxuries?).

In response to Glaucon's objections to the city, Socrates asks him how the city "ought to be" (372d). Glaucon suggests that "as is conventional," the men in the city ought to have the things we just mentioned: relishes and desserts and couches and tables. But the specific "relishes" Glaucon proposes are less important than why he proposes them; the only addition to the city that Glaucon specifically mentions is furniture. Comfortable furniture, however, does not satisfy an appetite for erotic pleasures. Indeed, Glaucon does not propose including furniture in the city for the sake of the citizens' comfort or

pleasure; he includes it because reclining on couches and eating from tables is proper for men “who are not wretched” (372d8-10).¹³ Of all the possible things that Glaucon could ask that they include in this city of their own creation, he chooses to include not especially interesting sources of pleasure but rather the conventional trappings of wealth, leisure and status. Why are these important to Glaucon? Perhaps even more than he enjoys the pleasures that can be had from these goods (which are not, as we have said, substantively much different from that which are available to the first citizens), Glaucon may delight in the signs of status that they confer. It seems to be important to Glaucon that human beings distinguish themselves from lowlier men and animals, even if it is only by eating off tables and while reclining on couches.

The importance to Glaucon of conventional signs of status helps to explain why he likens the first city to a city of sows and the manner in which he does so. Glaucon is not merely dissatisfied with the first city’s incapacity to supply him with a happiness he desires. By implicitly calling the first citizens pigs,¹⁴ Glaucon reveals that his disgust lies in the fact that its citizens seem more animalistic than human. And his sarcastic dismissal of the city suggests that the description of such an inhuman way of life offends his sense of dignity. As we have seen, Glaucon does not simply identify the problems he sees with the first city and complain that this city will not make human beings happy. He evinces an angry repugnance at the presentation of human beings in what he regards as a

¹³ As Bloom notes, since most Greeks ate off the floor, it was a mark of wealth and social standing to eat from a low couch or cushions (1991, 448 n.30).

¹⁴ That Glaucon calls them sows, i.e., *female* pigs, should be understood as yet an additional slur on the first citizens.

degrading light and treats the whole picture with utter contempt. Glaucon thus seems to believe that the goodness of human life consists above all in its being somehow distinct from animal life. He does not merely think that men should live more pleasantly than they would in the first city; he thinks that they should live with more dignity. And in his articulation of “how it should be,” Glaucon is groping for something that will make the city and its inhabitants into more than sows. His additions to the city suggest that he is at a loss for what specifically that might be.

What leads Glaucon to see the first citizens' lives as so undignified and why he cares so much about dignity is not obvious. But the development in the way he refers to the first citizens suggests an answer. Glaucon initially objects to the city after Socrates' first description of its citizens' “manner of life”; after hearing how moderately they live, he protests that Socrates makes “these men have their feast without relishes.” Only after Socrates revises his account to give the citizens desserts like “figs and beans” does Glaucon accuse him of providing for a “city of sows” (372a-d; my emphasis). It is in between these two descriptions that the citizens' way of life ceases to be worthy of human beings. But Socrates' revised account does not seem to differ much on this score from the first one, which depicted the citizens as eating and drinking and engaging in moderate sex. What in the revised account inspires Glaucon to suggest that Socrates is providing for a city of sows? It may well be the fact that Glaucon' reference to sows follows immediately after Socrates mentions death. Socrates says that the citizens “will live out their lives in peace with health... and at last, dying as old men, they will hand down other similar lives to their offspring” (372d). Socrates' reference to their deaths seems to remind Glaucon of his deep concern, which we will see is evident in his speech

about justice, that human life involve more than satisfying the needs of the body. Death, for Glaucon, seems to cast a large shadow over human life, lending a particular urgency to the desire for more than being fattened for worms and perpetuating the species.

Socrates' mention of death brings to the surface, with particular force, Glaucon's desire to live a serious life, which desire tempts him to make extraordinary demands on himself. Dignity or having the trappings that indicate one "is not wretched," may be important to Glaucon because it holds the promise of a meaningful life that can reinforce his sense of significance despite the fate that seems to undermine all human significance.

We see a further example of Glaucon's concern with dignity when he paints remarkable portraits of both the just and the unjust man. While justice is the virtue that Glaucon most wants to see defended, he is also powerfully attracted to courage. This is evident from the fact that he uses courage to bolster his portrait of the unjust man; Glaucon thinks that the unjust man must possess the virtue of courage if he is to come across as sufficiently admirable. When Glaucon describes justice as a compact among the weak to delude the strong into not pressing their advantages, he claims that no one who is "a real man" (359b2) would agree to the compact, even if he would suffer for rejecting it; he dismisses the possibility that the manly unjust man might simply choose to agree to the compact publicly but then quietly not honor his agreement. The real man, according to Glaucon, does not dissemble; he courageously gives and sticks by his true word. Glaucon prefers the man who preserves his dignity as a free and independent agent

to the one who takes the easier path to injustice by pretending to acquiesce in the many's wishes.¹⁵

However powerful these passages reveal Glaucon's concern with dignity to be, Glaucon does not himself articulate this concern. Indeed, Glaucon may not even be conscious of his deepest concerns; let us recall that his attempt to suggest alternatives to what he regards as the first city's animalistic way of life was rather feeble; all he could muster was the recommendation that the city have fine food and furniture. Glaucon wants a more meaningful life, perhaps a life that can be satisfying even despite the fact of death, but he is at a loss to articulate what that includes. He just knows that such a life cannot be found in the city of sows. His demand for luxuries may appear frivolous, but it in fact ushers human concerns into the city. And especially noteworthy for our purposes is the fact that the extent to which Glaucon's objection to the city and his wish for a more human life is rooted in a concern for dignity is the extent to which it is a spirited objection.¹⁶ In this objection, moreover, we see that spiritedness, which Socrates initially

¹⁵ Some commentators seem to think that Glaucon's demand in fact represents Plato's own extremism or his "flight from the natural world" (Barker 1925, 150; see also Nettleship 1937, 58-59). While I disagree that Glaucon's demand represents Plato's own view, I do think that it may indicate that he, Glaucon, wishes to "flee the natural world." I would, however, also maintain that his longing is hardly idiosyncratic; Glaucon represents the uniquely human longing for a meaningful and serious life.

¹⁶ Bloom's interpretive essay focuses on Glaucon's erotic nature (1991, 345-47). I do not deny Glaucon's eroticism or that his objection to the city of sows is also an erotic objection (he senses that it cannot supply him with the happiness for which he powerfully

presents as a threat to the city's stability, has a positive as well as a negative dimension: it fuels aspirations toward full humanity.

Indeed, the fact that dignity is the animating concern of spiritedness makes it possible for spiritedness to blossom into noble courage. Socrates highlights this potential when he describes the spirited phenomena other than anger. He calls, for example, the loves of honor and of victory "spirited," and he similarly describes the ascendant part of the "timocratic" man's soul, i.e., the soul of the man characteristic of an honor-loving regime (548c).¹⁷ The love of honor suggests, even more than Glaucon's objection to the city of sows, what is promising about spiritedness. About the spirited part of the soul, Socrates says that "it admires and honors" (553d4). Spiritedness looks up — and leads spirited human beings to try to resemble what they admire. The spirited men of Socrates' timocratic regime admire and aim to be admirable themselves. They seek honor, which means they do not seek merely to win fame and its attendant benefits. They want respect and admiration from respectable and admirable people, who alone fully appreciate genuine dignity. Indeed, according to Aristotle, one pursues honor not for its own sake but as a sign of one's own goodness; it is, he says, virtue rather than honor that honor-lovers seek (NE 1095b25-30; cf. 1123b35, 1159a15-25). Insofar as it is manifest as the

longs), but it seems to me that he is at least as spirited as he is erotic, as may be seen especially in the fact that he is happiest with the city in speech when it is purged of luxuries and devoted to a self-denying virtue. See 399e; cf. Strauss 1964, 112.

¹⁷ Socrates describes the timocratic regime in Book VIII. Concerned above all with honor, particularly in war, it is according to Socrates second in virtue only to the best regime. It is thus a more virtuous regime than either oligarchy or democracy.

love of honor, spiritedness is thus open to an education about virtue.¹⁸ This, of course, does not by any means suggest that all spirited human beings are excellent students of virtue. We must not forget the propensity of spiritedness to express itself as anger, which carries with it a sense of righteous certainty that hinders rather than helps education. If

¹⁸ Cf. Craig 1994, which attempts to show that men with spirited natures are “the worthiest candidates for philosophy” (245). In making this argument, some aspects of which have a kinship with my own, Craig strongly distinguishes between the loves characteristic of the spirited man — the love of honor and the love of victory — and maintains that the latter is far more educable, and hence desirable, than the former (75-78). Although these loves do have different objects, Craig’s account of their differences seems forced. Craig rests much on the fact that Socrates says that good men are not lovers of honor but makes no parallel statement about the love of victory (75-76). Craig argues that this is due to the fact that honor-lovers always depend on other people’s opinions, but lovers of victory “are open to be detached from the opinions of others, as the man who most loves honor can never be” (78). But Socrates does not distinguish so sharply between the love of honor and the love of victory (cf. 548c). Indeed, the love of honor and the love of victory are in fact very similar. Both are linked by a concern for dignity. It is far from clear, moreover, that lovers of victory care less about others’ opinions than do honor-lovers. Do they not wish to achieve victory before an audience? For another reason, Craig may reverse the proper hierarchy of the two loves (insofar as they should be distinguished): whereas the love of honor testifies to a love of virtue for the reason Aristotle proposes, the love of victory arguably leads one to measure oneself against another, rising or falling to the level of the competition.

spiritedness can inspire attempts at self-improvement, it can also inspire self-satisfaction. In order to fulfill its potential as a vehicle of education, it itself has to be educated.

It is explicitly to the education of the guardians' spiritedness that Socrates turns in Book III. And it is the moral opinion at the heart of the human expression of spiritedness, i.e., the opinion that human beings are dignified, that enables the city to take this feral and irrational quality in hand and transform it into something that the city needs: courage or, rather, political courage. Courage is the first virtue that appears in the city in speech (375a; cf. 386a). Possessed above all by the city's soldiers, it is exercised on the battlefield for the sake of the city. This distinguishes it from the battlefield courage that Laches admires. Unlike Laches, whose admiration for the courageous hoplite focuses on his bravery in the moment of truth, Socrates and his interlocutors do not abstract from political considerations in their account of courage; after all, their primary aim is to found a city in speech. The courage that they seek to instill in the city's guardians through educating their spiritedness must serve the city. According to Socrates, the guardians are courageous because they are able "through everything" to preserve the opinion "produced by law through education about what — and what sort of thing — is terrible" (429c). Because the law teaches that citizens must do what is best for the city (412e, 413c), what is truly terrible is a failure to do what is best for the city. But this opinion is not easy to sustain. It is frequently besieged by fear, pain and desire, all of which have the power to dislodge even a very firmly rooted attachment to the city and to lead one instead to do what is or merely seems to be best for oneself (430b; cf. 412e-413c). The guardians' courage lies above all in their ability to fend off challenges to their devotion to the city, for unless their bravery is guided by the appropriate political

opinions, it is not the political courage the city needs. Guardians whose spiritedness has been properly trained into courage, then, will locate their dignity in remaining steadfastly devoted to the city. Whereas the ordinary spirited man may simply demand others' respect whether or not he has "earned" it, the guardians would seek to demonstrate their dignity through devotion to a cause greater than themselves.

Is it, however, truly virtuous to exercise courage because doing so satisfies the city's need for courageous soldiers? In other words, is political courage a genuine virtue? Glaucon's speech at the beginning of Book II raises questions about whether justice, insofar as it involves sacrifice, is in fact a virtue. This necessarily implies similar questions about political courage, since its animating principle is serving justice — at least as understood by the city. Now Glaucon, as we have seen and as Socrates observes, is unpersuaded of the superiority of injustice to justice despite the power of his speech (368a; see also 347e6). To use terminology that appears later in the dialogue, we may say that this means he is also unpersuaded that political courage is defective: he is more than open to the possibility that courageous devotion to justice, or the common good of the city, is choiceworthy.

But in order to defend justice and the heroic courage that accompanies it adequately, Socrates must show Glaucon that the heroically courageous just man is no fool. Glaucon demands that Socrates show that even if the just man has a reputation solely for injustice and ends up whipped, racked, bound, and with his eyes burned out, his decision to be just was not worthwhile, because he is happier being just than unjust (358d, 361d-362a). Glaucon's attraction to the self-overcoming required of the just man is reminiscent of Laches' attraction to the notion of courage as the simple willingness to risk one's life,

although Glaucon goes much further in illustrating the extreme conditions one must be able to embrace happily in order for virtue to be choiceworthy.¹⁹ But if Glaucon cares about dignity, he must think (as Laches does when he proves unwilling to equate noble courage with foolishness) that the just man's heroic courage can be truly noble only if it is not foolish. A model of human virtue is not merely courageous but rationally courageous; i.e., true courage, or truly noble courage, is rational. Spiritedness thus has a philosophic as well as political dimension. Not only is Glaucon's spiritedness, for example, responsible for the transformation of the city of sows, but it also renders him open to some degree to an education concerning the true goods of the soul. Thus, according to the criteria established in Glaucon's speech, if the guardians of the city in speech are to be truly admirable, the courage that the city cultivates in them must be rational. We will have to see whether Socrates' account of political courage actually measures up to this criterion.

¹⁹ Craig does not address the degree to which Glaucon's apparent defense of injustice in fact bespeaks a longing for a noble life, i.e., a life of splendid action that appears to demand great sacrifice, not to mention a strong concern with honor (cf. Craig 1994, 113, with 360d-e). His inattention to this aspect of spiritedness prevents him from seeing what I will argue are the real problems and benefits of a spirited nature. Annas notes that Glaucon "stresses the need to praise justice for itself" rather than for its consequences and the implications of that demand. But she diminishes the power of that demand by saying that Glaucon and Adeimantus are "merely stressing different parts of the task" that they are setting for Socrates (1981, 60-66).

Chapter 5

The Guardians' Education in Courage

Spiritedness and the Problem of the Guardians

Socrates' account of political courage emerges as he elaborates how courage should be inculcated in the city's future guardians. As we have seen, a crucial part of this task must involve taming the guardians' spirited natures, since spiritedness is a potentially savage quality (375b9-10). Indeed, at the outset of the guardians' education in Books III-IV, Socrates seems to minimize rather than utilize the guardians' spiritedness. We have already seen some evidence for why he might treat spiritedness in this way. Political courage, into which spiritedness is supposed to be transformed, means following the city's teaching about what is and is not truly terrible (429c-430c), i.e., obeying the city's laws. But spirited men are often angry, and angry men often act impulsively and irrationally; this does not comport well with obedience. Achilles, the great warrior of Homer's Iliad, is a perfect example of how anger can lead to civil disobedience and political disaster. Indeed, the Iliad is in large part the story of the consequences of Achilles' refusal to help the Greeks fight the Trojans because he is angry at having been deprived of his war prize, the girl Briseis. His departure from the battle costs the Greeks dearly. Even after Briseis is returned to him and he receives more compensation, Achilles petulantly refuses to return to the battle. Whatever other problems anger has, its presence in a city's soldiers can be disastrous for the city.

The guardians of the city in speech will, moreover, have to be obedient in a peculiar way, for they will not be guardians of any ordinary regime. Indeed, it is far from clear how significant their "guarding" function is; Socrates does not provide details of their

military training.¹ What makes their role unique is that the city, as we noted, turns out to require philosopher-kings as its rulers (474c, 500e-501a). The uniqueness of the city, as we will see, thus also explains why Socrates initially appears to try to minimize the guardians' spiritedness. Socrates is cultivating guardians who are to obey philosopher-kings, but this is not likely to be easy for spirited men. In the first place, spirited men are proud men who love honor and victory. To what extent can such men respect philosophers, who prefer quiet thinking instead of winning honor from others (496b-e, 549c-550a) and who think of ruling not as a great activity but as a duty they must fulfill (see 519c, 520b-521b)? Second, even if the guardians do come to respect philosophers, will they be content to adhere to the law reserving rule to them? Or would they not demand to share in rule themselves? If the tendency of spirited men is to make such a demand, it must be controlled in the guardians for the regime to succeed. For most guardians cannot hope to share in rule; those who remain merely as guardians, i.e., who do not become philosophers, must be satisfied with their roles. But can the spirited men Socrates says the city needs to defend it be satisfied with this? Socrates thus appears to be in the awkward position of having to devise an education that teaches courage by at the same time using and moderating the quality that makes one "willing to be courageous" and thus an adequate defender of the city, namely spiritedness.

We will see, however, that there is a deeper reason for Socrates to try to moderate the guardians' spiritedness, which reason stems from the fact that philosophers are to rule the

¹ The training that Socrates connects most explicitly to military activity focuses only on that which will give the guardians' strong and healthy bodies, namely, exercise and good nutrition (404a^{ff}).

city in speech “in the light of day” (Strauss 1975, 38; Bruell 1994, 267). To the extent that philosophers rule openly, they will not have to disguise the understanding that governs their lives, including their understanding about the gods. What this implies for the guardians is that along with accepting the rule of philosophers, the guardians will have to accept the rule of a philosophic theology in the city. We get a glimpse of the substance of this theology at the beginning of Book II. Here Socrates proposes revising Homer’s teaching about the gods in a way that turns out to make the city’s theology more compatible with philosophy, which does not let pious scruples hinder its inquiries. The highest beings for the philosophers are presented as the famous unchanging Ideas (see Bolotin 1995, 87). Whatever else they are, they do not involve themselves in human affairs. The revised theology that Socrates proposes at the beginning of the construction of the city in speech prefigures the Ideas. Socrates indicates that the guardians should hear stories only about gods who, first, are wholly good and who, second, cause only good things. Being the cause only of good things, however, appears to limit the degree of these gods’ involvement in human affairs. At the very least, they do not rule over human beings, for ruling requires punishing injustice. It does not seem, however, that these gods punish anyone. If the gods cause only good things and if punishment involves harming people, then although Socrates does not spell out this consequence, the gods do not punish human beings (379b-c). But might not punishment be understood as correction rather than harm? If so, then Socrates’ further claim that the gods are friends only of the good and the wise (382e) means that they have no interest in correcting those individuals who need their chastisement

Most importantly for our purpose, the fact that the city in speech is ruled — or, rather, not ruled — by distant gods means that the guardians need a courage that is self-reliant. They cannot think, for example, that their courageous devotion to the city will make them worthy of gods' assistance or support. As we will learn, however, from Socrates' revision of the traditional education, spiritedness, the source of courage, is not self-reliant. As we will see, spiritedness and the concern for dignity that we have suggested in the previous chapter drives it, contain the hope that there are external forces that will help human beings secure the most important things. The challenge facing Socrates, then, is whether he can reconcile the city's need for the guardians to be, on the one hand, spirited with the need for them to be, on the other hand, obedient and self-reliant, both of which qualities are in some sense at odds with spiritedness.

Anger's Weakness

Socrates and Adeimantus initially undertake the task of designing the guardians' education. They first agree that a sound education begins by telling the young the right stories and providing them with proper models of emulation (377b, 378c-d). They then agree that the guardians will become courageous only if they hear tales about Hades that differ from the terrifying ones told by Homer (386a-b). According to Socrates, in order to be courageous, the guardians must hear the stories that “make them fear death least,” for no one who “believes Hades' domain exists and is full of terror will be fearless in the face of death and choose death in battle above defeat and slavery” (386a-b). Homer's terrifying portrait of Hades makes it impossible to face death in battle bravely, because those who hear it are led to believe that death is the greatest evil. But Socrates' alternative is rather strange. By saying that the guardians should “fear death least,”

Socrates implies that the best way to make the guardians into courageous defenders of the city is to minimize this fear, for as he and Adeimantus agree, no one “who has this fear in him would ever become courageous.” But insofar as courage means acting well in the face of fears, how can anyone who does not have “this fear in him” possess courage? Perhaps it is desirable for a city to have fearless defenders; but is it accurate to speak of them as courageous?

Socrates spells out what he considers problematic about the Homeric tales in seven passages he cites that do indeed depict Hades as “full of terror.” In two of them Achilles speaks from Hades, saying that it is incomparably bleak. Hades is so terrible, Achilles reports once he is sent there, that he would prefer a long life on earth as “a serf to another” to the greatest honor in Hades (386c; cf. *Odyssey* XI.489); he also mourns the fate of his beloved friend Patroclus, whose ghost returns from Hades as a mere shadow. The other references to Hades reinforce its dreadfulness. Its occupants, for example, are like bats, fluttering around mindlessly and voicelessly in the dark; “even the gods hate it” (386d; cf. *Iliad* XX.64).

If, however, such images make the guardians fear death, or, more precisely, fear it more than slavery, this fact by itself does not prove they will teach cowardice rather than courage. After all, in spite of this depiction of Hades, Homeric heroes and Greeks raised on tales about them were extraordinarily brave. As we have seen, when the Persians invaded Greece in huge numbers, the Greeks chose to stand their ground at places like Thermopylae and Plataea rather than submit to enslavement. Can Socrates’ desire, then, to reform the presentation of Hades be adequately explained by a fear that Homer’s tales sap courage in soldiers? Socrates even acknowledges that the traditional tales about

Hades did not simply instill fear in those who heard them. Socrates indicates that Homer's stories are "poetic and sweet for the many to hear" and that while the terrible and fearful names applied to this domain, such as "Cocytus, Styx, 'those below,' 'the withered dead,' and other such names," give those who hear them "shivers," they may perhaps "be good for something else" (387b-c). Insofar as the tales themselves are not simply bad for those who hear them, Socrates may be concerned more about the character of the courage they teach than about whether they teach any form of courage at all.

If Socrates' professed grounds for rejecting Homer's tales are insufficient, he must, then, object to some other effect they have on their auditors. What Socrates objects to becomes clearer when he says that as a result of hearing these tales, the guardians will become "hotter and softer than they ought to be" (387c). The problem is less that the tales would make the guardians cowardly than that they would make them improperly courageous. Insofar as Socrates criticizes the tales for making the men "hotter" than they ought to be, he seems to mean that they make the guardians angrier: Homer's tales are defective because they nurture spiritedness. We can grasp what Socrates seems to have in mind if we think about Achilles, whose sentiments are cited by Socrates to illustrate the harm caused by the offending tales and who seems to exemplify what it means to be hotter than one ought. As we have seen, Achilles petulantly withdraws from the war against the Trojans because of a perceived slight to his honor; he even considers taking all of his ships home (Iliad IX.320). When he returns to battle, it is to wreak wild vengeance on Hector for having killed his friend Patroclus. His anger at Hector for killing Patroclus is so overpowering that, after seeking out and killing him, he vents his unexhausted rage by mutilating Hector's corpse. Indeed, his towering rage causes him to

battle a river (391a-b; cf. *Iliad*. XXII.20, XXI.225ff). But if Achilles is a hot-head, it is not clear that frightening tales about Hades are responsible for this. At least at first sight, his rage seems caused less by the utter bleakness of Hades than by the failure of men and gods to grant him the respect he thinks he is due.² He refuses to fight because he is offended by Agamemnon's failure to return his war prize to him, and he considers taking his ships home when he thinks Zeus is not answering his prayers that the Greeks suffer enormous losses as punishment for slighting him.

Achilles' fierce concern for his honor and dignity may, however, be closely connected to the terrible tales he hears about Hades. Knowing that he is destined for a short life, the thought of having to endure the terrors of Hades so soon may make him especially determined that his life be grand and glorious. As he says to his mother, "since you bore me to be a man with a short life, therefore Zeus... should grant me honor at least" (*Iliad* I.350-55). His sense of dignity and his wish to be treated as he believes he deserves may thus loom especially large to him precisely because of the terrible fate he ultimately faces. Indeed, Achilles' despair over what awaits him grows when the ghost of Patroclus visits him from Hades. Achilles is frightened by the fact that Patroclus seems to lack both a physical presence and a mind (386c-d; *Iliad* XXIII.100-106). It is thus in large part because of the fate that awaits him that he is so attached to honor. Honor is for him a great compensation, and his desire to receive it prevails over all other concerns.

² See Saxenhouse 1988, 31-34, which offers a very helpful discussion of this aspect of Achilles' anger.

If the Homeric tales regarding Hades cause their auditors to become, like Achilles, feverishly concerned with honor and dignity, Socrates has clear political reasons to reform them: doing so can minimize the guardians' excessive concern with dignity. The greater that concern, the more susceptible they are to anger and the more likely they are not to act as is best for the city — and not to act as is best for themselves either. If Homer's tales make the guardians ferocious fighters, their ferocity does not serve the city or themselves, for it comes the expense of a more obedient and more rational courage. When Achilles kills Hector, he is aware that, according to a prophecy, this means that he will soon die, too. But in his fury, he has no concern for himself; he seeks wildly to destroy Hector despite his mother's reminders about the result (*Iliad* XVIII.94-100). Once in Hades, however, Achilles himself calls into question the reasonableness of his actions when he expresses his preference to Odysseus for a long life on earth as "a serf to another" over the greatest honor in Hades (386c).

If, however, "hotness" is a problem, it is not the only problem that Socrates seeks to mitigate. Although Achilles' anger harmed the Greeks, his extremely irresponsible action was a rarity among Greek soldiers. The other, perhaps more fundamental, problem that Socrates identifies with the traditional tales is that they make men "softer than they ought to be." The fourth of Socrates' seven references to Homer's offending tales suggests what he means. Here Socrates quotes Odysseus as saying that the seer Teiresias, whom Achilles encounters in Hades, "alone possesses understanding; the others are fluttering shadows" (386d). This means that it is in fact possible through divine intervention to keep one's mind in Hades and not wind up bat-like; it is by virtue of Persephone's grace that Teiresias was allowed to keep his mind and his gift of "seeing"

in Hades.³ The tales about Hades thus not only can inspire a feverish concern with dignity. To some degree they can also inspire the hope the gods can save men from a terrible fate. The tales thus make men soft by undermining their self-reliance.

In fact, if we consider the example of Achilles, it appears that anger goes hand-in-hand with a certain softness. Achilles' anger at being deprived of what he believes he deserves leads him to demand a rectification of his situation. This is to say that he demands that some force — specifically, Zeus — intervene to restore the world to its proper order. Achilles illustrates the connection between anger and the belief in forces that restore that order. If one were to believe it utterly impossible to obtain what one has been unjustly denied, one would very likely be resigned rather than angry. The angry man believes the world should be different, which is to say he thinks that it can be different. Anger thus contains the hope that someone or something can and will rectify the disorder in the world and thus leads us to summon gods to our side. A small but telling indication of this may be found in our use of the expletive “Goddamnit!” Of course, no one who swears in this fashion consciously intends to invoke God, but the fact that anger causes to blurt out an expletive that is essentially a command or a wish for God's assistance suggests that anger inspires some sense of helplessness. The angry man may make great efforts on behalf of what he takes to be justice, but he is less self-reliant than may seem to be the case.

Numerous instances in the Iliad reveal that Achilles, despite his great power, is soft in the sense that he appears to depend greatly on Zeus; in other words, he shows signs of

³ Odyssey X.494-95. I owe my awareness of the significance of this reference to Bolotin 1995, 85.

precisely the kind of dependence that is at odds with the austere theology that Socrates indicates in Book II the city will have.⁴ As we have seen, Achilles believes that Zeus must compensate him for his short life by ensuring that he will receive abundant honor and glory (*Iliad* I.352). He depends on Zeus at least to right the wrongs that he suffers. When Agamemnon slights him, Achilles expects Zeus to restore his honor by making the Greeks suffer terribly and thereby realize how much they need him. But Achilles seems to want the gods to do even more than simply help him get the honor that he is due. When he comes to doubt that Zeus will heed his prayers that the Greeks suffer without him, he begins to fear that “a man dies still if he has done nothing, as one who has done much” (*Iliad* IX.320). This fear almost leads him to reject honor altogether and to take his ships home in order to live a quiet life. Now it may well be that at this moment Achilles is prepared to give up his concern with honor above all because he does not believe that he will ever get it. But what he emphasizes and what makes him momentarily willing to abandon the pursuit of honor is his creeping realization that however much honor anyone receives, that person still dies. This suggests that that it is not only honor about which Achilles most cares. Achilles’ belief that the gods have neglected him seems to lead him to a brief but revealing insight that all along he had hoped that the man who “does much” will be worthy of a fate better than that allotted to all other men, perhaps some reprieve from a terrible fate in Hades.⁵ When he comes to believe that such a reprieve is not forthcoming, he experiences great despair.

⁴ For a different assessment of Achilles’ character, see Nichols 1987b, 73,77.

⁵ Saxonhouse maintains that Achilles’ spiritedness subsides in this middle portion of the *Iliad* because he comes to believe that Agamemnon’s inability to compensate him

The deepest problem with the courage inspired by the traditional tales of Hades is not that they make men unwilling to fight for the city but that they promote an excessively spirited courage, i.e., a courage rooted in anger and therefore in a softness that encourages hopefulness.⁶ Socrates' first proposals for reforming these tales rest on the premise that if the guardians hear no tales that depict Hades as terrible, they will be able to face death, i.e., will have courage, without the anger or hopefulness characteristic of the Homeric models. We can see why he may wish this were the case. First, insofar as the guardians of the city in speech would not believe that they are facing so terrible a fate after death, they would be less likely to demand compensation for that fate in this life, particularly in the form of honor and especially the greatest honor, rule. They would thus be more likely to rest content with their limited role as obedient defenders of the regime. But, more significantly, guardians less prone to anger would also be less prone to its attendant softness; to this extent they would depend less on providential gods to make their devotion to and especially sacrifices for the city worthwhile, making them more likely to accept the new teaching about the gods. In fact, that Socrates is more concerned

sufficiently reveals that a just distribution of goods is impossible (1988, 34). Even if Achilles does come to doubt Agamemnon's abilities, Saxenhouse over-interprets what this entails. In particular, she fails to consider that Achilles looks to the gods to effect justice when human beings fail to do so. After learning the lesson that Saxenhouse attributes to him, Achilles has ample time to return home but does not do so. His staying put testifies to the depth of his hopes for divine support for justice.

⁶ Thomas describes hope as an irascible desire, thus placing it in the same category as anger (ST II.1, 23, 3).

with minimizing such softness than he is with minimizing the guardians' fierceness appears in his next criticism of traditional Greek education. After proclaiming the flaws in Homer's tales about Hades, Socrates next discusses the flaws in his depictions of gods and heroes and aims to reform them so as to promote in the guardians an extremely austere self-reliance. Socrates so wishes to foster self-reliance that he argues that the city in speech must excise all the tales of heroes and gods lamenting the deaths of loved ones.

In a way eliminating all such examples is merely the natural consequence of the new treatment of Hades (387d). If Hades is not a terrible place, there is no reason to lament a loved one's arrival there. But Socrates focuses on other reasons why gods and heroes should not be presented as wailing and lamenting. Socrates argues that a decent man should not lament the death of a friend because a decent man is most "self-sufficient" and "has least need of another" (387d-e). By including this specific teaching, Socrates clearly does not mean merely to make the stories of gods and heroes consistent with the new treatment of Hades. The latter can be justified on the simple political grounds that both excessive anger and softness are undesirable in a warrior. It is more difficult to justify excising Homer's depiction of heroes' wailing on such grounds. On the contrary, with a view simply to waging war, it seems to make little sense to have the warriors care so little about each other that they won't lament each other's deaths. For it may well be out of mutual love that soldiers courageously persist in a fight.

If Socrates' strictures are not simply designed to make the guardians willing to die for the city, bolstering this willingness cannot then explain the prohibition against lamentation. The problem with indulging in wailing, as Achilles does when Patroclus dies, is that wailing is an expression of a needy softness. Socrates discusses the problem

with wailing later in the dialogue. There he suggests that wailing is a sign of self-pity and that the part in us that inclines to self-pity is, in fact, “a friend of cowardice” (604d, cf. 605d, 606b). The character of this cowardice becomes clearer if we consider the opinion that is expressed by self-pity. According to Aristotle, pity is a feeling of pain at the sight of undeserved misfortune (Rhetoric 1385b12-18; Poetics 1453a6). If wailing is a sign of self-pity, tears must indicate that one believes oneself to have suffered undeservedly. Were the guardians to indulge in wailing, their wailing would signify the presence of the softness that is characterized again by the view that the world can be other than it is. And as long as the guardians hold this opinion, they will not be self-sufficient. For this opinion opens them up to the hope that gods, the only beings who could reliably ensure that human beings receive what they deserve, exist and are providential. Their self-pity would make them open to cowardice because insofar as they would continue to hope for external salvation, they would be less capable of facing evils. Wailing thus contributes to softness by reinforcing the hope that human beings should hold out hope that salvation from elsewhere will enable them to avoid a bad fate. And insofar as softness inclines one to persist in the hope that an evil can be avoided, it is inimical to courage understood as honestly and steadfastly facing what is fearful.

Homer’s portraits of gods and heroes, however, legitimize such hopes. For example, in the course of his critique of lamentation, Socrates takes Homer to task for depicting Zeus as crying over the imminent death of Sarpedon at the hands of Patroclus. Socrates does not spell this out, but in Homer’s passage, Zeus’ distress over Sarpedon’s plight leads him to consider plucking Sarpedon out of the battle and granting him immortality (388c-d; cf. Iliad, XVI.433-44). Such a passage is inappropriate for the guardians, since

it encourages those who hear it to believe that gods pity human beings and may even be persuaded to help or to save them. In order to suppress this sort of hope, Socrates wishes for his guardians to hear only about models who do not lament because they are self-sufficient and therefore have least need of each other — even if this deprives the city of the sort of fierceness in battle that Achilles displayed in avenging the death of his beloved Patroclus.

If, however, extreme self-reliance cannot be defended as a useful military goal, why does Socrates promote it as the guardians' model of courage? To answer this question, we must recall the character of this particular city, namely, that it is to be ruled by philosopher-kings and is thus to be as rational as possible. As we have seen, Socrates prefigures the rationality of the city by outlining in Book II austere models of gods. He immediately turns to revise the portrait of heroes in such a way as to inculcate in the guardians a tough self-reliance. The sequence of these proposals and the extreme character of the new model of courage suggest that at least an important reason Socrates promotes the latter is that it is needed to support the new theology. The revised models of courage will teach the guardians to be as free as possible from hopes for divine assistance and thereby enable them to live in a regime ruled by philosopher-kings rather than by providential gods.⁷ There may be another reason, though, for the education that

⁷ Nichols argues that the guardians' education is intended to make them more attached to the city than to their families and friends (1987b, 57, 59). This seems right, but it neglects the character of the desired attachment to this city, i.e., the degree to which the education is necessary for the members of a city that is ruled by reason and that looks up to rational gods.

Socrates proposes. If the guardians' education helps to foster the courage that a rational regime requires, it may also outline or point to a shadow account of the character of a fully rational or genuine courage. If their education were successful, the guardians would courageously face up to fearful things without appealing to the gods. Indeed, if they were to come to believe that Hades is not terrifying and that their friends' deaths are not terrible, then their need for ordinary courage would be diminished: they would not understand themselves to be confronting in battle the same dangers that soldiers who have received an ordinary education face. By eliminating the negative features of the traditional Greek education, Socrates strives to instill in the guardians a courage whose exercise will not make them miserable. As we will later see, this courage has much in common with what Socrates will indicate is genuine courage.⁸

But can the guardians' education succeed? Can the revised portrait of gods and heroes suffice to convince them that death is nothing terrible and that a decent man does not need others? In fact, there are serious reasons to doubt that Socrates thinks that the guardians can be trained to risk their lives with such equanimity. Socrates proposes new tales in order to encourage an extreme self-sufficiency in the guardians, but he also indicates that he thinks the guardians' self-sufficiency will be limited. If the guardians refrain from tears, they do so out of shame: when Socrates says that the city's poets should restrict depictions of wailing to only the "least serious women and bad men," he adds that the guardians will, as a result, not engage in wailing because "they won't be able to stand doing similar things to those such people do" (387e-388a). Then, in order to

⁸ Cf. Jaeger 1957, 221-22, which claims that Socrates is merely trying to raise the moral tone of poetry in Greece. See also Guthrie 1975, 452.

strengthen their resolve not to succumb to tears, Socrates says that each guardian should “ridicule” stories of men weeping and believe such behavior to be “unworthy of himself” (388d). It is thus shame that will make them strive to live up to the model of a “decent man”; the guardians’ education will not actually make them into such men, that is, into the men who have “least need of another.” The guardians’ fear of death and great pain at the loss of loved ones, like those of any human being, cannot be eliminated simply by presenting them with appropriate models to emulate; these passions are embedded too deeply in their souls. The same seems to be true of shame. Indeed, Socrates relies upon shame, for the presence of shame suggests that although the guardians’ would continue to have hopes and fears, when presented with the new models, they would at least strive not to appear as though do.

Once we see the crucial role that shame will play in their lives, we can better understand the full reason why the guardians had to have spirited natures. Despite the obvious problems that spiritedness poses for this regime, Socrates needs the guardians to be spirited; he relies on their spiritedness. It is precisely the guardians’ spiritedness that enables them, as sub-philosophic men, to emulate the tough, self-reliant role models that seem to be needed for this highly rational city. For it is spirited souls, as we have seen, that “admire and honor” (553d) and thus aspire to the highest models of excellence. As spirited men, the guardians will care not just about living but about living in a dignified manner. If Socrates’ educational reforms were to succeed, then when the guardians felt the sting of sorrows, they would care sufficiently about living up to the city’s models that they would not succumb, at least publicly (cf. 605d-e), to what they regarded as shameful behavior. Thus, while the guardians’ spiritedness is in some ways an obstacle to the

establishment of this highly rational city, it can also be a great asset. The guardians' spirited sense of shame will make them appear as though they embody the tough self-reliance that is necessary for this city (cf. Klosko 1986, 77).

That the guardians will not themselves be able to embody perfectly what Socrates establishes as exemplary courage is thus not an insuperable political problem. Indeed, it seems to be a political advantage. Guardians who actually possessed the kind of self-sufficiency Socrates describes might be tepid defenders of the city; insofar as such men would have "least need of another" and would therefore lack intense attachments to anyone in the city, they would also lack the fierce loyalty inspires great sacrifices. The guardians' spirited natures, however, provide something of a solution to this problem. Spirited men are good for this particular city not because, as Socrates initially suggested, they are, like dogs (375d-e), fierce defenders of their own, but rather because they are attracted to a dignified life, a life that aspires to the standards of nobility exemplified by their gods and heroes. In moderating the guardians' spiritedness, Socrates' education does not deprive the city of the advantages of spiritedness. By establishing these appropriate models for the guardians to imitate, it rather channels the guardians' spiritedness into a version more politically reliable than, say, Achilles'.

This is by no means to say that concerns about the guardians' willingness or capacity to fight for the city entirely govern the character of the education that Socrates lays out. We should not forget that Socrates aims to found a city that is as rational as possible. We see, however, that there are limits to its rationality. As Socrates indicates, in refraining from lamenting others' death, the guardians are motivated by shame rather than by a genuine understanding that they have no need to lament. The guardians' education,

therefore, will not fully “take.” In other words, if they are not as self-reliant as the models that are presented to them, then they will be much more inclined to hope secretly that gods do protect and assist human beings, even if their sense of honor induces them to strive to be as self-sufficient as possible and therefore to avoid turning to gods (cf. 464e4-7). But that striving may have philosophic as well as political advantages insofar as it may lead one to aim to guide oneself as much as possible by one’s own reason. By presenting austere models to the guardians and thereby moderating their spiritedness, Socrates makes them at least aspire to emulate rational models. He also may prepare the way for a superior form of courage, one that enables its possessors to confront terrible things completely on their own. Refining spiritedness into an aspiration toward self-reliance is a crucial step in the acquisition of both rationality and courage, which we shall see go hand in hand.

Magnificence

It is doubtful, however, that the guardians’ strong sense of shame is the proper foundation for a superior form of courage. For however useful it may be for ensuring that the guardians will stoically defend the city, this strong sense of shame is not without problems for this hyper-rational city in which the best among the guardians are to become more than guardians. For at this stage of the city’s development it appears that the guardians’ service to the city will be simply hard and painful for them. This is evident from the next models that Socrates establishes for them to emulate. According to these models, the character of the guardians’ lives may fairly be described as sheer endurance. Socrates approvingly cites Odysseus’ control of his anger as an example of moderation for the guardians to emulate. By controlling his anger, Odysseus manages to restrain

himself from killing Penelope's attendants for bedding the suitors who descended upon his home during his absence (390d; cf. *Odyssey*, XX.17-18). Now Odysseus' ability to control his anger may be a useful model for the guardians insofar as Socrates wants them to be courageous without being angry. But his reference to Odysseus's famous exhortation to his spirit to "endure" because it "has endured worse before" suggests that the guardians' lives will consist in enduring trials rather than in the "living well" for which the new heroic models are said to have the requisite self-sufficiency (387d-e).

Indeed, as Socrates elaborates further the kinds of models appropriate for the guardians to emulate, it becomes clear that they are being taught above all to be obedient. At least at this stage of the discussion, the cultivation of virtue in them seems undertaken with a view more to the guardians' obedience than to the health or excellence of their souls. When, for example, Socrates discusses the proper models of moderation, he describes not men with moderate passions but men whose great spiritedness allows them to subdue their strong passions. Indeed, to illustrate what he means by moderation, Socrates calls "immoderate" starving men who steal cattle for food (390b; cf. *Odyssey*, XII.342). The guardians' moderation seems thus to mean an ability to endure great suffering, even the suffering caused by being deprived of basic needs, for the city's sake. Their lives as depicted here seem bleak. As Adeimantus objects at the beginning of Book IV, it is hard to see what serving the city does for the guardians (see 419a-420a).

Indeed, the bleakness of their lives may explain why at this point Socrates says that the guardians should be presented with models who are not only courageous, moderate

and free, but also “pious” (395c4-5).⁹ Why Socrates would call the guardians pious, after all, is puzzling. For Socrates’ revised models both of gods and heroes seemed to have the effect of instilling in the guardians a self-reliance which would seem to preclude a need for gods, particularly gods who are involved in human life and who demand much from human beings. The reason for the guardians’ piety, however, can be gleaned from what we have thus far seen of the character of their lives. For Socrates has not explained how the guardians, in their courageous service to the city, exercise a virtue that is or promises to bring them some kind of fulfillment or happiness. Because of the difficulty of enduring a life in which they have no hope of happiness, it is not surprising that they are in fact very serious about fulfilling what they think the gods demand from them; their virtuous citizenship may well depend on the hope that gods will bring them the happiness that is missing from their lives. The piety that Socrates expects the guardians to have, therefore, appears to result from the fact that their lives are insufficiently choiceworthy.

⁹ The Greek word is *hosious*. *Hosious* refers to that which the gods have allocated to or require from men. The first sense of the word refers to those things which the gods grant to human beings, e.g., the city is *hosious* while the temples, which the gods are understood to reserve to themselves, are sacred or *hieron*. The second sense refers to persons and indicates that a person has fulfilled all that the gods expect of him. In the passage above, *hosious* appears in a list of adjectives that describe the condition of the guardians’ soul, which suggests that among their virtues is a scrupulous attention to performing their duties towards the gods, i.e., that they are pious. For similar uses of *hosious*, see Gorgias 523b1 and Euthyphro, 4e-5a, 5d-e, 6e-7a; for more on its translation, see West 1984, 45, n. 17 and Pangle 1980, 518, n.7.

Underscoring the connection between the guardians' hard lives and their piety is the fact that in a list that Socrates gives a little further on of the virtues they are trying to instill in the guardians, magnificence replaces piety. Indeed, this replacement seems necessary with a view to at least some of Socrates' objectives in this city. Now neither the bleakness of the guardians' lives nor their piety would undermine their willingness to risk their lives for the city. But as we noted earlier, not only are providential gods supposed to be excised from this philosophic city, but Socrates also has other plans for at least some among this guardian class. Philosopher-kings are to be drawn from their ranks. Accordingly, a different picture of the guardians and the proper education for at least the best among them emerges in this subsequent list of the virtues which Socrates says "we" or the guardians "we say we must educate" must have in order to have harmonious souls (402b-c). What, then, is the importance of the virtue of magnificence and how is its substitution for piety related to an education in courage? The fact that magnificence replaces piety in a list of virtues suggests that they are incompatible. Why they are incompatible comes to sight from Socrates' description of magnificence as the disposition characteristic of a great man who is aware of and delights in his own capacities. When Socrates discusses the magnificence that is manifest in a philosophic nature in Book VI, he describes it as the attitude that one can contemplate "all time and all being" (486a). Magnificence is the virtue of someone who believes that he has the capacity to accomplish the greatest things through his own efforts. To the extent that any among the guardians can be magnificent, they would wish to be liberated from dependence on gods, for, to need gods would imply a deficiency or weakness in themselves.

The discussion of the arts that intervenes between Socrates' first description of the guardians virtues and his subsequent description of what they should be seems thus to be part of a new stage of their education and an attempt to cultivate magnificence which supports a more self-reliant and less unhappy courage than that which depended on shame. After finishing their discussion of Homer's tales, Socrates and Adeimantus turn to the kinds of songs, melodies, rhythms and art that the guardians should experience. Socrates' ultimate purpose here seems to be to awaken in the guardians an appreciation of beauty and to inject into the city instances of beauty that can inspire their dedication to it. If the guardians are alive to the possibility of genuine beauty in the city, then perhaps they will believe that because the city makes such beauty possible, the city itself is something beautiful. Insofar as they see the city in this light, they will understand their service to the city, especially their exercise of courage, as devotion to something noble and experience that devotion as more satisfying and inherently choiceworthy. The education in the arts aims at more than obedience; it cultivates a "good and fair disposition" (400d). Above all, by cultivating such dispositions in the guardians, the education ultimately makes it possible for them to find sources of happiness in each other, whose harmonious and thus beautiful souls will inspire love (402d-403c). In this way, far from making the guardians miserable in their service to the city, their education will make them think that only by service to their city will they find sublime fulfillment.

Exposing them to beautiful arts, however, is intended to do more than harmonize, after a fashion, the guardians' needs with the city's. Socrates argues that such exposure in fact constitutes a proto-rational education. Socrates emphasizes exposing the guardians to those arts that are graceful, orderly, and harmonious (400d-e). The

guardians should not, for example, hear harmonies or rhythms that imitate wailing and lamenting (398d-e) nor instruments like the flute, which produces especially passionate or tragic sounds (399d; cf. 411a-b). All of the arts will aim to capture “the nature of what is beautiful and graceful” (401b-d). Socrates claims that the young, by being exposed to this kind of beauty, will learn to “blame and hate” (402a) what is disharmonious, confused, and defective, and to love the opposite. Because the young will “blame and hate” what is ugly in the right way before they are able to grasp reasonable speech, when reasonable speech comes to them, they will “take most delight in it, recognizing it on account of its being akin” (402a). To the extent that this is true, a magnificent individual would have the sub-rational foundation of the orderly and harmonious soul that Socrates will later indicate is essential both to human happiness and genuine virtue.

Still, the question remains: how does the exposure not only to beauty but to a proto-rational beauty cultivate magnificence? The answer is not clear, but it may well be that being surrounded by orderly and harmonious music, rhythms and artifacts habituates the guardians to believe that a pleasing order permeates the universe. They may also feel a sense of pride that because they feel such an pleasing order permeates them too, they can recognize and thus to some degree participate in a universal order and harmony.¹⁰ They may be inspired by the arts surrounding them to appreciate the order and harmony within

¹⁰ Indeed, Socrates suggests a direct connection between an education in beautiful arts and a concern for more permanent, universal notions. He implies that human beings who are educated in the arts and who truly care about being musical will be motivated to explore and understand not merely the particular virtues expressed by the arts but the “forms” or “ideas” of those virtues themselves (402b-c; cf. with 479a-b, 516a-c).

their own souls and thus be filled with pride at the thought of their own excellence.¹¹ It seems significant, moreover, that Socrates focuses on exposing the guardians to artificial rather than natural beauty, i.e., beautiful things made by excellent craftsmen, who impress beautiful and graceful dispositions on “images of animals or on houses or anything else their craft produces” (401b-c). Exposure to such craftsmanship may be intended to give the guardians an early experience of the fact that even with lowly technical pursuits, the world yields — and yields beautiful things — to human endeavors. When combined with their belief in their own virtue, this would inspire in them a powerful ambition to achieve something grand on their own. If this education in beauty can cultivate magnificence, then it will also instill in the guardians such pride that they would scorn the mere thought of seeking the gods’ favor or looking to them for assistance. Their virtue will no longer consist of shame-based endurance. Conscious of themselves and their souls as models of an excellent human being, they would experience the exercise of courage not as self-denial on behalf of the city but as noble self-fulfillment. Their magnificence would thereby replace their piety.

Insofar as the guardians become magnificent, they do not thereby appear to cease to be spirited. Their magnificence seems to be part of their understanding of themselves as dignified human beings, as truly deserving of the seriousness with which they believe human beings ought to be treated. The education in beauty transforms their spiritedness into a noble sense of pride and greatness. But the guardians’ magnificent character and courage remains within the horizon of civic virtue, for it remains bound up with the belief

¹¹ For a good illustration of the effects of the guardians’ education in beauty, see Nettleship 1937, 112-16.

that their dignity consists in devoting themselves to something greater than themselves, to a city that is beautiful itself and that is home to beautiful individuals. While they may not experience quite the same hard or painful self-denial that seems true of the earlier shame-filled guardians, magnificent guardians seem to be drawn to the self-sacrifice that is required of them — at least if Glaucon’s reaction to the unfolding education is any indication.¹² As we intimated, the cultivation of “good and fair dispositions” in the guardians leads them to fall in love with each other. Indeed, since their characters are “most lovable,” their love will be “immoderate” and “mad” so as to threaten to overwhelm their concern for virtue. It is therefore necessary to restrict the guardians to kissing their beloveds (402d-403c). Glaucon acquiesces in this restriction, despite the fact that he personally knows the pain of immoderate love (see 402e). In fact, Socrates gives him the credit for it: “you’ll set down this law.” Apparently enamored of Socrates’ portrait of the guardians, Glaucon reveals a kind of magnificence in his willingness to set down a law *himself* that subordinates his “immoderate” desires to virtue. In restricting the fulfillment of his own desires, Glaucon wants to submit to himself and his own law rather than to that of the gods. But his eagerness to do so suggests that such magnificence does not mean that one who possesses it is wholly fulfilled or self-satisfied. By contrast, it seems to call out for opportunities to demonstrate one’s dignity by

¹² Glaucon as well as Adeimantus seem very much to be touchstones for the educational proposals outlined here. What they demand and what they accept set the boundaries for the education that is possible in the city in speech. Bruell 1994, 268-69, contends that the education of the guardians in the city in speech is in part an education of Glaucon and Adeimantus. Cf. Craig, 1994, 137-41.

overcoming oneself or devoting oneself to something splendid. But precisely this desire to find one's happiness, or proof of one's virtue, in overcoming oneself forces us to question whether magnificence is wholly self-reliant or whether Glaucon is — or the guardians could be from this education alone — in fact magnificent. When Glaucon agrees that the guardians should not consummate their desires, he swears by Zeus, as though he needs divine support to accept this limitation (403b3). The self-reliance that Socrates has implied is part of full-fledged courage has not developed yet.

The Limitations of Political Courage

Even if magnificent guardians could be wholly self-reliant, cultivating magnificence in the guardians does not solve all of Socrates' political difficulties. If a courage rooted in magnificence is more self-sufficient than shame-based courage because the guardians see it as a virtue which is genuinely fulfilling, it is not necessarily the most public-spirited courage. Glaucon "sets down" the law restricting love affairs less because it is good for the city than because he agrees with Socrates that the passionate love he feels for beautiful souls is incompatible with virtue. This suggests that magnificent guardians will be concerned above all with their own characters and that they will see themselves as the peak of the city. They will tend to think that the city exists for the sake of their exercise of virtue, including their courage, rather than the other way around. This belief may well lead them to accomplish much for the city, but they would understand their achievements as expressions of their excellence rather than as what they are obliged to do for their city. Their courage would be exercised primarily for them not for the city. And it remains unclear how much such men would be willing to relinquish for the sake of the city. It is

likely, for example, that such men would think that their virtue deserves the greatest honor a city confers – rule, something prohibited to all but philosophers here.

We must recall that Socrates is trying to construct a fully just city in order to demonstrate that justice is good. And in order for the city to be fully just, i.e., for the citizens to put the good of the whole ahead of everything else, its guardians must be completely devoted to it. This city makes extremely rigorous demands on its guardians; it requires them on each occasion to “do what they believe to be advantageous to the city” (412e, 413c), and this requirement is reflected in the well-known fact that the guardians, in addition to being prepared to risk their lives for the city, must not only submit to the permanent rule of philosopher kings, they must also give up private property and private families (416d-e). But, as we have noted, the guardians’ education in magnificence leads them to strive primarily for the excellence of their own souls. Insofar as that education focuses one’s attention on one’s own soul rather than on what the city needs, it is not, then, the education that best serves the city. Socrates thus abandons the proto-rational education in magnificence and returns to an education guided by strictly political considerations, i.e., ensuring that the guardians will be not only courageous defenders of the city but obedient servants of it.

These obedient servants of the city, however, will not exercise self-reliant courage. Indeed, when it comes time to choose the rulers of the city, civic courage is defined as the simple capacity to be wholly, even unthinkingly, devoted to the city. To find guardians with such courage, the guardians must be tested during and after their education to see whether or not they are fit to rule in the city. Socrates says that the best among the guardians must be subjected to tests in order to demonstrate their ability to hold onto the

opinion through “terrors and pleasures” that they must always do what is best for the city (412d-e).¹³ Those who pass these tests are ultimately said to have the courage that the education has aimed to cultivate (429c-430b; cf. Gadamer 1986, 64-65). But this does not mean that they have the greatest virtue. Indeed, when Socrates describes their courage, he calls it “political,” and he alerts Glaucon to the possibility of a “finer” kind of courage, thereby indicating that the courage of the loyal guardians is deficient (430c).

¹³ Having argued, not without reason, that the guardians’ education is intended to make them happy (Reeve 1988, 158, 165-66), Reeve finds Socrates’ claim that the guardians must always be prepared to do what is best for the city an “unexpected requirement” (179). He is not fully alive to the tensions between the interests of individual citizens and those of the city that never disappear from Socrates’ presentation. A further sign of this is his uncritical acceptance of Socrates’ “resolution,” which consists of asserting that those guardians who love the city most, those who are its potential rulers, will believe that their good and the city’s are identical (412c-d). According to Reeve, “unless we are to suppose that the rulers are deceived on this matter, a possibility excluded by the fact that their belief must be true, we must conclude that the rulers are selected with an eye both to what is advantageous to the polis and to what is advantageous for themselves” (181-82). The closest he comes, however, to arguing that “their belief must be true” is to appeal to the fact that Socrates assigns rule to those who prove through harsh tests that they cannot be swayed from their determination to act always for the sake of the city (412e-413d). He naively assumes that if someone is capable of holding onto this opinion under all circumstances, it must be true.

The problem with political courage is captured in Socrates' definition of it.

According to Socrates, the city in speech is courageous as a whole because one part of it, i.e., the guardian class, has the power "that through everything will preserve the opinion produced by law through education about what — and what sort of thing — is terrible" (*ibid.*). Courage in the city thus depends upon the guardians' preserving the opinions that the laws instill in citizens. To say that courage means maintaining opinions, as opposed to performing actions, makes great sense. First, as we have already seen with Laches, it is hard to separate courage from the belief that the courageous action leads to some perceived good. But not only do courageous actions depend on some understanding of their end or purpose, they also arise from certain opinions about what is good or terrible for the courageous man himself; the soldier who believes in death before dishonor will not act bravely in a crisis unless he maintains that opinion throughout it. There are good grounds, therefore, to define courage in terms of opinions about what things are truly terrible.

Now Socrates defines courage in terms not just of any opinion but of opinions cultivated by the city. For this reason, at least, Socrates calls it "political courage" (430c); he may also call it political because it serves the city. The connection between this courage and the city's opinions explains why he deems it inferior to the courage that a "finer treatment" of the virtue would describe.¹⁴ First, one might say that political

¹⁴ Most commentators recognize that what Socrates calls political courage is meant to be an inferior kind. See Nettleship 1937, 149; Friedlander 1964, 100; Cross and Woosley 1966, 105-6. But cf. Vlastos 1981, 136, 137 n.78, which suggests that the proposed education is in fact sufficient to inculcate genuine courage. Vlastos here ignores not only

courage per se is defective because its quality varies with the location; the goodness of political courage in a given city depends on the quality of that city's opinions. At least as was evident in the Laches, to the extent that one believes the purpose of a brave action is foolish or ignorant, one may hesitate to call it brave. To take an extreme example, if one attributed courage to German soldiers in World War II who believed it was more terrible that the Nazi regime be defeated than that they die in its defense, one would be inclined to argue that their courage was inferior — to that, for example, displayed by Germans who resisted the regime. The fact that the loyal Nazi soldier lacks the virtue to recognize the wickedness of his regime and thus the cause for which his courage was exercised may leave someone who would ordinarily admire such courage with the nagging sense that the Nazi soldier was fundamentally lacking in virtue. And the notion that someone lacks virtue in this important respect tends to impugn his other virtues, including his courage. Insofar as we think courage is a virtue, i.e., something noble, we, like Laches, have or can be led to have a difficult time associating it with any person or any action that we find essentially abhorrent.

But if political courage depends on the city it serves, why would one call inferior the courage displayed by the guardians of the city in speech, i.e., the most just and best city? How can a courage that preserves the opinions promulgated by such a city be defective? Perhaps it is simply because the guardians' courage, however impressive it is, still rests on opinion; they have not themselves fully learned why what the city says is terrible truly

Socrates' references to the preparatory character of the higher form of education (402a) but also Socrates' indication when discussing the guardians' political courage that a "finer treatment" of courage is possible.

is so (cf. 442c1-3). But is the guardians' courage inferior only because they have not yet transformed their opinions into knowledge? On the contrary, there is a further reason. According to Socrates, this city's opinions are no truer, or even less abhorrent to those who care about the truth, than those of any other city. Socrates says, for example, that the philosophers will dread the time they spend ruling in even this city; for they will know that what they see and promote in the city are mere phantoms of the just, noble and good things (520b-d; see also 516d-e, 517d-e, 519c-d, 540b-c; Irwin 1977, 221).

Socrates is forthright about the fact that at least some things the city teaches can be called lies. Above all, he says that, in order for their patriotism to be assured, the guardians and the rest of the citizenry will have to be told and must believe the famous "noble lie." Citizens are to believe that they originally sprang fully formed from the earth and that their placement in one of the city's three classes has been determined at birth by the kind of metal they have in their souls (414b-415c). By encouraging citizens to see the earth as a common mother and hence to see each other as siblings, the noble lie sustains the belief that the city is one big family. Now Socrates' reason for teaching the guardians this "noble lie" can be discerned in what he says just prior to his proposing it. As we observed earlier (see note 11), Socrates claims that the best guardian will be the one who loves the city because he believes "that the same things are advantageous to it and to himself" (412c-d). Insofar as this is the case, the guardians' loyalty to the city, their willingness to risk their lives for it, thus depends on their belief that they fulfill their own good in looking to the city's. Can this belief be true? The very need for the noble lie casts grave doubt on this possibility. That the guardians must think of the city as a family born of the same mother underscores the extent to which the education the guardians

have thus far received is not sufficient to make them believe that their own advantage is identical to the city's; the noble lie is needed to shore up each guardian's supposition that "if [the city] did well, he too himself would do well along with it."

Now the mere fact that a lie is needed to shore up this proposition does not in and of itself prove that the supposition is false, i.e., that the guardians' advantage is not the same as the city's; one might say that the guardians' advantage is the same as the city's but that seeing this is not easy; perhaps the noble lie simply helps to maintain belief in a correct opinion.¹⁵ If so, this lie is not enough to do the trick. Socrates concedes that the city will look up to providential gods rather than the distant gods described in Book II. He describes gods who both punish citizens for disloyalty to the city and reward them for loyalty to it. If, for example, the citizens violate the natural hierarchy in the city, the city will be destroyed (415c). And the guardians are promised further and posthumous rewards for their service to the city (414a; see also 427b-c and 519e). Still, these may be merely additional myths meant to sustain correct opinions. Whether or not this can really be true depends of course on the correctness of the opinions in question. The true role of

¹⁵ For an argument along these lines, see Reeve 1988, 211, which argues that the noble lie is meant only to bolster what is true. According to Reeve, the noble lie is not a real lie because the citizens' "friendship is in fact well founded in mutual self-interest." For reasons to be stated, I disagree with Reeve's claim that a perfect congruence of interests exists between the guardians and the city.

these sanctions ultimately depends on whether the guardians' advantage can be so clearly linked to the city's that they gain by dying for it.¹⁶

Socrates at least seems highly doubtful that it can. We should recall that just prior to proposing the noble lie Socrates indicated that the guardians would need to undergo trials to determine their loyalty. Although he had initially suggested that the guardians will believe that their advantage is identical to the city's (412d), he immediately proceeds to insist that proof of the guardians' loyalty is that they will always do "what is advantageous for the city" (412e, 413c). By leaving out of this last statement that the guardians' are also doing what is most advantageous for themselves, Socrates quietly suggests that in acting for the city the guardians may not in fact be doing what is most advantageous for themselves. Moreover, as we have seen, Socrates recommends that all the guardians, even those who pass the patriotism tests, be denied private possessions. Apparently, the guardians' education in moderation is not a sufficient shield against "licentiousness, hunger or some other bad habit" (416a). The problem that seems to warrant this measure is the following: if there were anything that the guardians wanted from the rest of the city, their toughness and courage would enable them to take it. Indeed, it seems that none of these precautions — education, patriotism tests, and communism — is sufficient to protect the rest of the city from the guardians; the guardians can have no privacy either (416d-e). Presumably this last restriction is intended to ensure that if all other precautions fail, at least the guardians will have no

¹⁶ The presence of a noble lie and of punitive gods in the city undermines claims such as Barker's that "the Republic is as much meant to prove and is as earnest in proving that the eternal laws of morality cannot be shaken by the skeptic" (1925, 63).

opportunity for intrigue. The number and extent of these machinations raise serious doubts about just how much the guardians' advantage and the city's coincide.

These doubts are bolstered vividly in Book V when Socrates articulates the dubious premise on which rests the notion that the guardians' and the city's advantage are the same. There he claims that this identity of interests rests on the city's being a "community of pain and pleasure" (463e-464b). Every citizen is supposed to be affected by the pains and pleasures of his fellow citizens in the same way that each part of one's body is affected by the pains and pleasures of other parts. Only if this were true, it appears, could there be such a strong common interest between the guardians and the city that the guardians could be understood to be exercising their courage just as much with a view to their own advantage as to the city's. No such thoroughly common interest exists, however. While we may speak of a whole city's suffering if, for example, a storm destroys houses, such speech is loose; while those whose houses are destroyed entirely suffer, the housebuilders who are hired to rebuild them benefit. In the case of this city, we can already see a way in which some will benefit from the suffering of others. Socrates and Glaucon agree that denying the guardians private possessions and privacy itself will benefit the rest of the city by ensuring that the guardians will not inflict harm on the other citizens (416a-e). These strictures obviously benefit the rest of the city. But Socrates' indications that first, the guardians must demonstrate under duress their willingness to put the city first and, second, that they must always be carefully watched suggest that the guardians suffer as a result (see also 419a, 421b-c). The rest of the city surely does not experience the pains of the guardians' penury. Even in this city, then, it is

simply false to say that each individual's advantage is identical to those of his fellow citizens or to the city's.

The inferiority of political courage thus does not seem to turn merely on the difference between correct opinion and knowledge. Political courage means preserving under all circumstances what the law teaches about the terrible and not-terrible things, and this means, even in this city, preserving at least some false opinions. When Socrates later moves beyond his political focus and compares the virtues in the city to those in the individual (recall that the purpose of founding the city in speech was to illuminate the latter's virtues), he says that the courageous individual preserves "through pains and pleasures" not the city's opinions about what is truly terrible but rather "what has been proclaimed by reasoned speeches about that which is terrible and that which is not" (442c; my emphasis). Genuine, as opposed to the inferior "political," courage is guided by reason.¹⁷

This, of course, was readily discernible in Socrates' linking political courage to opinion. The question is, What does reason dictate? If the individual's good is not

¹⁷ In addition to what we observed in note 12 above, Reeve tries to dispose of the tension between the city's and the individual's good by arguing that the guardians have the inferior "political courage" only if philosopher-kings do not rule in the city (1988, 239), for if they do, then the guardians will exercise their courage with a view to what is best whether or not they are aware of it. But can the guardians' courage be the finest kind if they do not know that they are exercising it for the right reasons?

identical to the city's, then which good does reason dictate that we should pursue?¹⁸ Socrates' analogy between the city and the individual soul suggests that the guardians possess only political courage not just because, as we have said, they have not reasoned out for themselves what is and is not truly terrible but also because in following the city's dictates, they do not look to the advantage of their own souls, as the parallel between city and individual suggests they should. For the parallel implies that what the political version of a virtue does for the city, the "personal" counterpart should do for the individual. If the guardians' political courage leads them to do what is "advantageous for the city" as a whole (412e), then according to Socrates' analogy between the city and the soul, the individual's courage should look to what is advantageous for the individual as a whole (cf. 441e, 443d).

To see, however, that and why political courage is deficient does not yet raise a, or perhaps the, most perplexing aspect of Socrates' discussion of it. Socrates invents lies so that the guardians will have the greatest degree of civic courage. But even if their civic courage is not genuine courage, precisely because of the parallel that Socrates has drawn between the city and the soul, the character of the guardians' courage in relation to the city's good cannot help but provide a model, as we have seen, for the relationship between courage and the individual good. But should we accept the implication of that model, namely, that genuine courage serves the advantage of the individual's own soul? Is this more than an (implicit) assertion on Socrates' part, especially since it is based

¹⁸ Although both Nettleship (1937, 149) and Friedlander (1964, 100) suggest that political courage is inferior because it rests on laws rather than on reason, neither asks whether reason and law disagree about the proper exercise of courage.

upon an admittedly imprecise parallel (435d)?¹⁹ Does Socrates present here evidence for why courage is genuine only when it is exercised in the knowledgeable pursuit of the good of one's own soul and not when it is exercised as the noble devotion that appears to be the highest expression of spiritedness? In the next chapter we will try to discern the reasons underlying Socrates' account of genuine courage by examining his treatment of the proper education for philosophy. Only those who philosophize, Socrates maintains, lead a truly "good and prudent life" (521a). Only philosophers, he thereby implies, possess genuine virtue and hence genuine courage.

¹⁹ On the difficulties with the analogy between the city and the soul, see Annas 1981, 110-18, and Bloom 1991, 375.

Chapter 6

Courage and Philosophy

An Education for Genuine Courage

A careful examination of Socrates' attempt to cultivate courage in the guardians invites us to investigate the argument underlining Socrates' indication that the "finer" kind of courage is exercised above all with a view to the good of an individual's own soul. Why is the noble courage displayed by the guardians in their devotion to the city not as good as courage gets? The problem with the guardians' courage may well stem from a confusion in their understanding of the nature of their courage. Socrates has said that the reason the guardians should be devoted to the city and willing to risk everything for it is that, in exercising their courage, they secure their own as well as the city's advantage (412d). But there are signs that this is not how the guardians will understand their courageous devotion to the city. This disjunction between the way in which Socrates says the guardians should understand their service to the city and the way in which they do in fact see it further clarifies for us why their courage may be called deficient.

One sign of this disjunction lies in Socrates' comparison of the guardians' lives to those of Olympic victors. Insofar as the guardians were akin to Olympic victors, they could understand themselves to be fulfilling themselves when acting on behalf of the city. And the honors that the city would then bestow upon the guardians would simply constitute public recognition of their excellence. But Socrates cites the example of Olympic victors to emphasize the guardians' superiority, not their similarity, to them. Because the guardians win victory for the whole city rather than for themselves, Socrates

says not only that their victory is “nobler” than that of the Olympians but that “the public support is more complete.” As a result, the guardians are “crowned with support and everything else necessary to life — both they themselves and their children as well; and they get prizes from their city while they live, and when they die they receive a worthy burial” (465d-e). What appears to make the guardians’ victory nobler than the Olympians’ is precisely the fact that the guardians do not achieve the same intrinsic satisfaction from their service to the city. The guardians must be willing to sacrifice everything for the city. And this is perhaps why the public support for them is “more complete” and why the honors accorded the guardians are so extensive. At least under these circumstances, honors do not simply recognize excellence. In the case of the guardians, who in achieving victory for the city sacrifice so much and put their lives at risk, honors serve as the gratitude and even as a kind of compensation for their willingness to sacrifice. By conferring great honors on the guardians, the city demonstrates its appreciation for the noble sacrifices they make on its behalf.¹

The degree to which the guardians will think their courageous devotion is noble in the sense indicated above, namely, in the sense of being willing to sacrifice themselves for the good of the city, can also be gleaned from Glaucon’s attitude toward their lives, at least if Glaucon’s attitude fairly denotes what theirs will be.² For Glaucon ultimately

¹ The title of George W. Bush’s Memorial Day address in Killean, Texas, “What Do We Owe the Brave?” (NYT, May 30, 2000, A1) expresses this sentiment.

² Cf. Zuckert 1988, 6, which says that because the guardians are “[b]ereft of any particular stake in the community,” they “have no particular reason to serve it.” This may, however, not simply be the case. Even though measures must be instituted to

seems to think of the guardians as selflessly devoting themselves to the city, and he finds this thought attractive. Although Glaucon seems to be interested in the construction of the city only once he believes that it provides a path to individual fulfillment (398c-d; cf. Bloom 1991, 360), if of an austere kind, he interprets this fulfillment, paradoxically, as available to those who subordinate themselves completely to the city. To be sure, by agreeing to the noble lie, Glaucon seems to accept Socrates' attempt to make the guardians believe that their own interests and the city's coincide. But he also agrees that the guardians should be subjected to patriotism tests to determine who among them will "always do what is best for the city" (413d-14a). And he agrees to deny them private property and private families (416d-17b). Most significantly, despite all the deprivations that the guardians must suffer, Glaucon does not express Polemarchus' and Adeimantus' wonder about whether the guardians themselves will be happy (see 419a-20a and 449b-d). The fact that he remains attracted to the city once the full scope of the demands that it makes on the guardians becomes clear suggests that he is attracted to it precisely because of the self-transcendence it requires, precisely because it asks the guardians not to serve their own advantage. Indeed, his enthusiasm for the city is consistent with what his speech about justice in Book II revealed is his attraction to the demands of virtue, especially of a kind of heroic self-overcoming.³

bolster their devotion to the city, the guardians' spirited desire for dignity may still inspire them to defend the city passionately.

³ Glaucon is thus drawn to what Barker calls an "internal tyranny" of the soul, but Barker errs once again in attributing what is true of Glaucon to Plato. Glaucon may well believe that "the ideal condition of the soul is one in which reason has conquered desire,

Glaucon's enchantment with the prospect of complete devotion to the city suggests that he, like Laches, thinks that the nobility of courage lies in the simple willingness to put oneself at risk. Courage may be good, but Glaucon wants it, like justice, to be good "all alone by itself when it is in the soul — dismissing its wages and consequences" (358b). To the extent that he wants this, he must therefore be inclined to resist the full implications of the model of individual courage provided by Socrates' account of political courage. That account reinforces what our analysis has revealed about courage: if courage is most a virtue when it benefits its possessor, then genuine courage cannot be understood in terms of sacrifice. But Glaucon, like Laches, does not want to think that courage is noble only to the extent that it is good both as an end in itself and as a means, i.e., when it constitutes an essential part of an individual's own flourishing (cf. 357c-d). What Glaucon demanded of justice in Book II seems to apply to virtue *per se* and therefore to courage: he wants it be so good that it is worth the sacrifice of everything else. He wants it to be good as an end in itself even if it involves the sacrifices that he so vividly describes in Book II.

Glaucon, however, is not a glutton for punishment. When he asked Socrates in Book II to vindicate the choice of the just man whose justice causes him to die both in pain and as a man of ill repute, he asks him to show that justice is good for this man, that it is a good that outweighs all others. If in his attraction to the just man's willingness to sacrifice himself, Glaucon seems similar to Laches, he also differs from Laches in an

erected a trophy and rules as a despot over the vanquished" (1925, 113), but it is highly unlikely that Plato does, since this view is at odds with what Plato's Socrates describes as the happiness characteristic of a philosopher's soul, which is unified.

important way, he is not only spirited and courageous, he is also erotic (see especially 360a-b, 474c-d, 548d-e). He makes a much more open and forceful demand than Laches did, or would, that this sacrifice be worthwhile for the just, or courageous, man himself. Glaucon's erotic nature brings into sharper focus the problem, which we have seen dimly present in Laches, with understanding the nobility of courage in terms of risk or sacrifice. To the extent that Glaucon's attraction to noble courage indicates how the guardians will understand their own courage, the reason why their courage is an inferior "political" courage is not merely that it is based in opinion and on lies that the city tells them: it is also that political courage is based on lies — or at least a confusion — that they are inclined to tell themselves. If Glaucon's own inclinations are any indication, the guardians will occupy a half-way house, believing both that they nobly devote themselves to the city in disregard of their own good and that they thereby achieve their own good. If virtue means truly knowing what one is doing, genuine courage is not possible until this confusion is sorted out.

Courage and the Problem of the Good

When describing the guardians' courage, Socrates says, as we noted, that it is possible to give "a finer treatment" of courage (430c). This treatment seems to arrive in the form of Socrates' discussion in Book VI of philosophic natures and of the studies needed to cultivate them (504a-b). In Book V Socrates drops his famous bombshell that the city in speech could only come about if philosophers were kings or if kings could adequately philosophize (473d, 499b); he then proceeds to describe philosophers and to argue that they alone should rule. They have two main qualifications for ruling: they possess both the wisdom to legislate well and all the other parts of virtue (484d). Now Socrates

suggests that their virtues stem in part simply from their natures; their passionate love of learning channels all their energies away from vice and towards acquiring wisdom. But at least in the city in speech, their natures are perfected by education (487a), in particular by an education in what Socrates ultimately calls the “greatest studies” (503e). These include calculation, geometry and astronomy, but the “greatest” one of all is of the idea of the good (505a; cf. 523b).

This study seems to be the culmination of a philosopher’s education because it teaches him to understand virtue properly; Socrates says that studying the idea of the good is the path to the “most perfect elaboration” of the virtues, which is much superior to the limited understanding that his interlocutors and he were able to attain by founding a city in speech and by investigating the virtues on the presupposition of an analogy between the city and the individual soul (504a-e). The gain in understanding is no merely intellectual achievement; Socrates speaks of education as perfecting natures, as enabling one to acquire virtue entire. But how does acquiring a more precise understanding of the virtues lead to the acquisition of virtue and — in particular for our purposes — of genuine courage? In order to see this and to understand genuine courage better, we must try to understand what the study of the good involves and why Socrates indicates that it is the most important study for acquiring not “political” virtue but virtue simply.

Socrates’ description of the “idea of the good” and the study of it is rather opaque. He claims both that he does not know what “the good itself” is but has only an opinion about it, and that he can explain that opinion to Glaucon only by analogizing it to the sun. It is beyond our purpose here to delve into the complexities of Socrates’ analogy. Rather, we will restrict ourselves to considering, first, why Socrates offers a dual account of the

study of the “idea of the good,” the two components of which seem to be at odds with each other, and second, how these two parts can be reconciled.

Socrates’ initial discussion of the study suggests that it is something extremely lofty.⁴ He presents the idea of the good as a quasi-divine first cause of all things and as something worthy of worship or devotion. Comparing the idea of the good to the sun, Socrates says that it causes things to be known just as the sun causes things to be seen. He cryptically adds that the idea of the good, which he says causes not just the truth of the beings but even their existence, is more beautiful than knowledge or truth and of greater dignity and power than being itself (507d-509b). By highlighting the nobility and beauty of the good, Socrates allows his auditors to conclude that it is worthy not just of study but even of self-forgetting devotion. Indeed, he identifies a difference between the good and the sun that makes the former seem much loftier than the latter. For the sun illuminates the same objects that sight grasps only dimly without it, i.e., things that come into being and pass away. But the idea of the good is said to illuminate “objects of intellection” that exist permanently (508d-e). Thus, whereas those human beings who do not know the idea of the good live on the level of opinion, those who know it grasp the truth about beings of surpassing grandeur and nobility. Indeed, when Socrates says that

⁴ Indeed, this is how most commentators interpret it. Nettleship, for example, suggests that the idea of the good “occupies the place in regard both to morals and to science which the conception of God would occupy in a modern philosophy... if that philosophy considered the conception of God as essential to its system” (1937, 232-3). See also Barker 1925, 126-27; Wolin 1960, 46; Friedlander 1964, 112; Cross and Woosley 1966, 184-87; Guthrie 1975, 560.

the study of the good enables one to grasp “by intellection itself that which is good in itself” (532b), he suggests that those who are immersed in the “greatest study” transcend themselves in the contemplation of the highest being.

At the same time, Socrates’ account of the study of the idea of the good contains indications that this study also involves something much less transcendent than his analogy to the sun suggests. When he first mentions the “greatest study,” he says that it is something of which Adeimantus has heard “many times,” by which he means a study that makes the “just things and the rest” become “useful and beneficial.” Socrates and Adeimantus then agree that no knowledge of the just and of other things can be of any “use to us” without knowledge of the good, because there is no “profit” in possessing anything “in the absence of the good” (505a-b). Whatever else the good is, these statements suggest that it is good for us in the sense that it benefits whoever studies it and thereby serves him rather than the other way around. One needs to know it, Socrates says, in order for the virtues, including courage (“the just things and the rest”), to be useful for us and therefore worth possessing. Socrates goes on to say that the good is what “every soul pursues and for the sake of which it does everything” (505d-e). Insofar as the good makes everything worth having and is what everyone seeks, it seems to be the *sine qua non* of true human happiness.⁵

⁵ For a similar claim, see Reeve 1988, 201, 231, 237-245. Nettleship, by contrast, implies that the good is something to which one is disinterestedly devoted when he says that the good is what is good “in proportion as it serves a wider purpose and ultimately the purpose or good of the order of the world” (1937, 221). He slights Socrates’ indications that knowing the good is the source of the individual’s happiness.

This explanation of the good, however, is not very revealing, since it fails to identify what the good is; we do not yet know in what happiness consists. Indeed, this is the very problem; Socrates claims that “[t]he soul divines that [the good] is something but is at a loss about it and unable to get a sufficient grasp of what it is” (505e). He identifies two things that people claim constitute happiness, but he leaves out one possibility that would seem to appeal to Glaucon: noble sacrifice. According to Socrates, the many say that the good is pleasure, whereas refined human beings say that it is prudence. Neither definition is adequate; the many cannot say what distinguishes good from bad pleasures, and the few cannot say what is the good thing that prudence helps us attain. But it is instructive that Socrates does not deny that the good, whatever it is, involves pleasure and prudence (see 506b2-6, 509a5-9, and cf. 581d2-3). Indeed, when describing the philosophers’ study of the idea of the good, Socrates depicts them as supremely happy because they satisfy their own desires in this study (516c4-6, 521a3-4, 526e3); they are fulfilling rather than transcending themselves. When they philosophize, they believe that they have “emigrated to a colony on the Isles of the Blessed while they are still alive” (519c, cf. 619d-e); their study is in fact accompanied by the greatest pleasures (583a1-3, 586a-b).

In light of this treatment of the good, we are led to consider the possibility that “the just things and the rest” are finally obtained not through a study that involves self-forgetting devotion, but rather through one that is both driven and guided by an intense wish to perfect one’s own soul. For, as Socrates has indicated, this study is the necessary step for acquiring genuine virtue. According to this view, the worth of the virtues depends on their being truly good for the human beings who possess them. In other

words, genuine virtue is genuine because it makes possible human happiness. But this seems to be at least partly at odds with Glaucon's attraction to the extremely harsh and self-denying features of the city (especially 403b, 417b, 461e-462a). Glaucon, like Laches, seems inclined to subordinate "the good," understood as what is good for human beings, to virtue, understood as something choiceworthy in itself, apart from its effect on its possessors. On the other hand, as we have observed, Glaucon does not wholly subordinate his concern for his own good to his aspirations to a self-denying virtue. We must recall Glaucon's demand in Book II that for justice to be worth having, it must ultimately constitute one's happiness and genuine flourishing (cf. Plato, Laws 663b, 664c). We see powerful evidence of this concern in Glaucon's reaction to the philosopher-kings' fate. When Socrates tells him that the philosophers will still have to descend into the cave in order to rule in the city, he vigorously protests, saying that it would be unjust to force them to leave the "Isles of the Blessed" and thereby to "live a worse life when a better is possible" (519c-d; cf. 347e6, 464e3-7). Then again, Glaucon ultimately finds persuasive Socrates' claim that since the philosophers have been reared by the city, they owe the city their service (520b-d); he shows here that he does not think that an individual's own happiness is the only relevant consideration. His initial and untutored reaction remains revealing. In stark contrast to the position he expressed in Book II, Glaucon's reaction discloses his doubts that justice, if it is choiceworthy, could demand that rulers relinquish their own greatest good to care for the city (cf. Lutz 1997, 578).

Glaucon's inability to separate the nobility of virtue completely from happiness suggests that his concern for virtue is inextricably bound to his wish for his own true

happiness. But the very fact that his concern for happiness is intertwined with beliefs about virtue that, on the surface, bespeak a noble indifference to his own welfare sheds light both on the nature of the true human good and on the nature of noble courage. Why, we must wonder, is Glaucon drawn away fairly easily (particularly, as we have said, in comparison to Adeimantus and Polemarchus) from his forceful demand in Book II that justice bring him happiness? We may draw an answer from Glaucon's demand that justice be good in and of itself even when it means making the greatest sacrifices. If this demand fairly indicates the character of his attitude toward the good and toward virtue, then Glaucon may appear to be diverted from a concern with his own happiness because he has no experience of a happiness that can constitute the peak of life or that can answer his longing for a lasting and perhaps eternal happiness. If we consider those things, such as pleasure or prudence, that Socrates has said people call good to be the things ordinarily thought to bring happiness, we can see why especially Glaucon may find them deficient. A prudent and pleasant life may well strike him as incompatible with a serious and permanently satisfying happiness. Laches' frustration with Socrates' characterization of prudence showed his inability to see at what prudence aims if not some further end, and Laches could not conceive that an end prudently sought could be splendid like noble courage. To men who care about dignity, a life whose goodness consists in obtaining pleasure or pursuing prudent ends appears most unsatisfying. Not only is the satisfaction provided by pleasure often fleeting; to the extent that striving for and even enjoying pleasures does not test our uniquely human capacities, a life limited to pursuit of such things may seem base or merely mundane. Virtue in general and courage in particular appear similarly base or mundane if they are understood only as advancing these same

goals. The willingness nobly to sacrifice oneself may seem for these men to characterize a truly dignified human life.

This helps to explain why courage looms so large for both Glaucon and Laches: noble courage seems to them to be the virtue that most tests a man, since by confronting one's greatest fears and the most terrible pains, one seems to embody a dignified life. But since, as we have seen, Glaucon's attraction to noble courage also contains a deep-seated wish for his own happiness, we need to explain how noble courage might paradoxically appear to him as a way of finding the happiness that he cannot otherwise obtain. Insofar as Glaucon is drawn to a notion of virtue, and hence of courage, that demands great sacrifices, he may in fact be drawn to a notion of virtue which does not constitute his happiness but instead makes him worthy of a future happiness that is serious and lasting in a way that neither pleasures nor prudence can be. He may, in fact, believe that gods confer an eternal happiness upon worthy human beings. Glaucon is very attracted by the thought that gods exist who reward men for their sacrifices and compensate them for their suffering. At the end of the dialogue, for example, he eagerly agrees with Socrates' suggestion that if the just are not rewarded in this life, they are in the next (612c-14a).⁶

To be sure, Glaucon's hope for rewards from gods is hardly prominent. But if the gods have only a shadowy presence in his mind, this underscores the very problem with this understanding of courage. If his hope for providential gods lies in the background, this may be because that is where it must lie. If human beings who sacrificed their own

⁶ Cf. Lutz's claim that in referring to Apollo, Glaucon indicates that he thinks of the good as something like a providential god who "might admit 'beautiful and good' lovers of the good to the Isles of the Blessed" (1997, 579). Cf. Plato, *Symposium* 80b3-5.

good knew that the gods would reward them and relied upon this fact, this reliance would undermine their worthiness for any kind of reward from the gods, for if they acted with a view to anticipated rewards, they would behave in a mercenary fashion. The only possible “solution” for those who hope to achieve happiness from the gods by becoming worthy of their favors is to act as though they are indifferent to their own good and wholly devoted to virtue itself, i.e., not because virtue is the true human good. This solution was perfectly evident in Glaucon’s initial request to Socrates: he wants Socrates to defend making the greatest sacrifices as good without reference to its “wages and consequences,” i.e., as sublimely satisfying, *and* as capable of making him supremely happy.

The solution just proposed, however, is highly problematic. We suggested that Glaucon and Laches are attracted to the notion of courage as an end in itself because they cannot conceive of ends that promise a sufficiently sublime happiness. The fact that others might call those ends, such as pleasure or prudence, “happiness” does not alter the picture for them. They share a hope that virtue is more than a means to these ends. If serious human beings are unable to embrace virtue as a means, however, this does not mean that they can easily embrace it as a simple end in itself, as an object to which they should devote themselves fully, no matter what sacrifices it entails. But as we have seen very powerfully in the erotic Glaucon, it is hard to put happiness altogether out of one’s mind. Tempted by the possibility of virtue as an object of devotion while retaining in the back of his mind a wish for the true human good, Glaucon holds a conception of virtue that cannot withstand close scrutiny. That is, he seems not *really* to have stopped treating virtue as his own true good but instead to have transformed it from a direct route to that

good to an indirect one. Putting blinders on, he is tempted by a self-transcending virtue with the secret hope that this will somehow lead to the perfect happiness for which he longs.

These considerations suggest that the only coherent resolution of the apparent tension between virtue and happiness lies in a conception of virtue the practice of which is intrinsically satisfying, so that virtue and happiness go together. But for this conception of virtue to be compelling to those, like Glaucon, who care about dignity, it cannot treat virtue as only a means to some further end, for that would make virtue either mere drudgery or utterly mundane. If happiness is to be not merely attained but constituted by the exercise of virtue, it cannot be merely pleasant; it must be noble, but in the sense of fulfilling rather than requiring the sacrifice of one's true good. It seems to be through studying the idea of the good that one might arrive at the conception of virtue just sketched. For, as we have seen, it is the idea of something that is both splendid and beneficial.

The study of the idea of the good, Socrates says, is a "dialectical investigation" (532b). According to him, dialectics involves destroying hypotheses so that one can ultimately "give an account of a thing to himself and another" (534b, 533c-d).⁷ To the degree that someone believes strongly in a given hypothesis, the dialectical investigation of it can cause pain; calm and delicacy are required. Seeking to arrive at a coherent account, he who investigates anything dialectically focuses on the conflicts between rival explanations of it, trying to figure out which of the hypotheses best explains it or whether the conflicts point to a superior hypothesis not yet under consideration. He must be open-

⁷ For a helpful account of the meaning of dialectics, see Nettleship 1937, 278-82.

mind; he must aim to arrive at an account that satisfies “another” as well as himself, which is why dialectics is fundamentally a cooperative venture.

To study the good partly involves focusing dialectically, in concert with others, on the claims that render virtue appealing (cf. 532b-d with 514b-15a and 520b-c) and hence in part on the conflict, which besets the characters we have met, between courage as risking oneself and courage as attaining true fulfillment. As Socrates indicates when he first broaches the idea of the good, studying it enables one to understand the virtues properly and thus to act without misconceptions about what genuinely virtuous action entails. If we were correct in suggesting that genuine virtue is somehow constitutive of happiness, this means that studying the idea of the good dispels misconceptions that virtue is either a mere means to or beyond happiness. We learned, however, from our study of Nicias’ conversation with Socrates that human beings cannot guarantee to themselves consistently good results and, indeed, that he who tries to do so taints his own virtue. This suggests that the genuinely virtuous human being chooses in general to practice virtue because it fulfills him while fully aware that its exercise in particular instances may potentially cause him harm. Thus, when it comes to courage, even if it is the case that genuine virtue is oriented by one’s own true good, it may still sometimes require one to risk one’s life; Socrates, after all, fought for Athens. But as we have just indicated, in light of the importance of the good to human beings, genuine (i.e., non-deluded) virtue means running such risks in full awareness that one has chosen the best course available for oneself under the circumstances and that one deserves nothing further for one’s actions; to express the same thought in moral terms, it is to say that virtue truly is its own reward. This explains why all the virtues become “useful and beneficial” (505a) only as

a consequence of studying the idea of the good; for those who profit from that study can then exercise their virtues with a view to the genuine benefits that virtue makes possible rather than in the (hidden) hope that doing so will allow them to secure further benefits.

If this account is correct and if studying the idea of the good means thinking about one's own true good, how are we to understand that part of Socrates' account of the study that describes it as disinterested contemplation of a higher being? How can we reconcile these two apparently conflicting accounts? Providing a full answer to this question would take us farther afield than is possible or appropriate to go here. But one possible reason for the two accounts is that one serves a rhetorical purpose.⁸ Indeed, if we turn to examine the effect these accounts have on the interlocutors, we find that Socrates' high-minded portrait of the idea of the good has an extraordinarily powerful effect on Glaucon. As Socrates describes the idea of the good, Glaucon declares that Socrates speaks of "overwhelming beauty," and when Socrates says that the good "isn't being but is still beyond being, exceeding it in dignity and power," Glaucon swears by Apollo and exclaims ("quite ridiculously" according to Socrates), "What a demonic excess" (509a-c). Glaucon's outburst suggests that he wholeheartedly endorses Socrates' poetic articulation of the idea of the good. Glaucon's evident astonishment here suggests that he may think he has finally found something sufficiently beautiful or awe-inspiring the immersion in which will satisfy his deepest longings and enable him to realize his greatest hopes.⁹

⁸ Cf. Socrates' statements at 507a and 450d-e.

⁹ If scholarly interpretations of this passage are any indication, Glaucon's outburst may well suggest that he thinks that he has finally found something worthy of wholehearted and self-forgetting devotion. Gadamer points out that Socrates' statement

Glaucon thus seems to understand this study as splendid or sublime rather than as “useful and beneficial.” Is Glaucon simply wrong to interpret the study in this high-minded way? Perhaps not. Socrates’ description of it certainly invites such a view. And Glaucon’s embrace of it has clear benefits for Socrates and Socrates’ students. Indeed, this particular account may be specifically intended for Glaucon’s benefit.¹⁰ Glaucon may not ultimately turn to this study, i.e., to philosophy,¹¹ but the mere suggestion of its self-transcendent character stokes in him a supreme admiration both for the study itself and for those who pursue it. And Socrates has at least a practical reason for encouraging such admiration in Glaucon. According to Xenophon, Socrates talks to Glaucon for the sake of the latter’s younger brother, Plato (Xenophon, *Memorabilia* III.6.1). We have seen that Glaucon’s longing for some dignified activity had previously led him to admire

that the good is beyond all being “lends the idea of the good a transcendence that distinguishes it from all other noetic objects, which is to say all other ideas” (1986, 27). Annas similarly says that Socrates’ account of the idea of the good suggests that to study it one must lose oneself in a disinterested contemplation of the forms (1981, 260). She notes, however, that this position conflicts with Socrates’ aim to show that having a just soul leads to one’s own happiness (266-7). Instead of probing to discover why Socrates might put forth these contradictory positions, Annas explains away the contradiction as a problem with Plato’s preference “for contemplation and theoretical study” and his consequent belief “that intellectual absorption will [not] make claims on a person that cannot be reconciled with the claims of practical judgment” (270).

¹⁰ For a different interpretation, see Klosko 1986, 163-64.

¹¹ On this point, see Bruell 1994, 268 and Lutz 1997, 571-72.

actions that demand terrible suffering and even the sacrifice of one's life. For him to believe that the study of the good involves a similar transcendence moderates his longing for these painful and dangerous activities. He thus becomes an admirer of the contemplative instead of the heroically courageous life and thus perhaps less inclined to prevent others, including his own brother, from devoting themselves to the former rather than the latter.¹²

But there also seems to be evidence that Socrates' high-minded account is not merely a distortion the aim of which is to moderate the extreme tendencies of Glaucon or men like him. Indeed, Socrates' description of the study of the good as somehow both self-transcendent and self-fulfilling may have a crucially inspiring effect on those who hear it. The belief that one transcends one's self-concern in turning to philosophy may be useful for making progress in philosophy. Glaucon provides a helpful example of why this might be. As we have seen in Book II, Glaucon's doubts about the goodness of justice enable him to describe in extremely vivid detail the attractiveness of the goods available through injustice, particularly, the freedom to satisfy all one's desires all the time. We might even suspect from the force of his account that Glaucon himself is powerfully tempted by a life devoted to satisfying such desires. In his infatuation, however, with the study of the idea of the good or the first cause of things, Glaucon seems to forget about such desires. The turn toward an appreciation, at the very least, of philosophy seems to be accompanied by a certain noble self-forgetting (but cf. 612c-613b).

¹² The change in Glaucon is thus akin to the change in the honor-loving fathers of the Laches, who move from being displeased by their sons' spending time with Socrates to being eager that the boys do so.

To be sure, as Annas notes (1981, 209 n.7), Socrates describes philosophers as supremely happy and fulfilled by their immersion in the study of the good. But Glaucon's delight at Socrates' high-minded description of it and his embrace of a regime that requires enormous self-overcoming suggests that this latter interpretation is the one to which novices are attracted. Indeed, in Book VII, Socrates indicates that novices may benefit from having a somewhat distorted image of a philosopher's activity. There Socrates describes young men who misuse dialectics by trying to refute the arguments made by their fathers and by the city about what is just and noble (538c-39b). He notes that when these young men refute the city's claims about the just and noble things, they become "outlaws" unless they subsequently find the truly just and noble things. Evidently, if they see problems with the city's conceptions of justice and nobility but do not discover the true alternative conceptions, they will ignore the law in pursuit of their own narrow interests; they begin to think that there really is nothing just or noble and therefore that the law should not stand between them and the satisfaction of all their desires.

According to Socrates, the most serious problem that these debunkers of justice and nobility face (the reason why Socrates tells Glaucon that he should pity them [539a]) is the harm that they do to themselves. Having rejected justice and nobility because they city's teaching about these things is flawed, they fail to see the degree to which thinking itself, for example might be a noble activity, particularly insofar as it aims to grasp not merely one's own narrow good but the true human good as such. Socrates' account of these debunkers suggests that they may fail to appreciate the degree to which the true goods are not the most narrowly self-serving goods but the truly human and hence

universal goods of the soul. For those among the debunkers who may be well-suited for philosophy, this is a devastating error. Rather than turning to thinking about the nature of the whole and ascending from the realm of opinion to knowledge, they give up on thinking altogether, believing that the only goods of life are those that satisfy their own ordinary, mundane desires and thus failing ever to discover the pleasures of philosophy that could genuinely satisfy them.

By relinquishing their concern for justice and nobility without adequately confronting the degree to which thinking or philosophizing appears in some way to be self-transcendent, the debunkers also very likely fail to understand something crucial about themselves. They are likely unaware of the extent to which they themselves are in fact still enthralled by ordinary civic opinions. The sophist Thrasymachus, whose opinion about justice Socrates examines in Book I of the Republic, illustrates just how deeply rooted such opinions can be. Claiming that justice is nothing more than the advantage of the stronger (338c), Thrasymachus in effect denies that justice exists. Yet he becomes terribly indignant when he thinks that Socrates is not arguing fairly (336b-d). His anger implies that he believes that Socrates should be bound by concerns of fairness whether or not they are to his advantage. Despite his apparent denial of the existence of justice, Thrasymachus proves to be in its grip. If even this impressive sophist remains bound by the same opinions he dismisses, how much more would this be true of other men?

Socrates' twofold account of the study of the idea of the good and of philosophy in general may be a response to this difficulty. The picture of philosophy as a transcendent activity enables youths who encounter dialectics to take the longings for some kind of noble life seriously even after they have come to see difficulties with the city's teaching

about nobility. Philosophy, understood as Glaucon does, prevents young students of dialectics from becoming debunking “outlaws.” Even as they come to question what the city teaches them is noble, these youths do not simply reject the existence of the noble itself before they are able to discover what it truly is. Indeed, it is perhaps only by channeling the longing for transcendence into that activity which, by leading men to forget all their other, previously pressing desires, seems most to partake of transcendence that this longing can be fully and purely examined. Socrates’ account of the philosopher’s highest activity as intellecting “the good itself” may help to preserve in the souls both of youths who encounter dialectics and perhaps of proto-philosophers the hope that the truest goods are admirable or high.

Courage in the Cave

Socrates’ account of the idea of the good suggests that the genuine courage that is part of, or an expression of, a truly virtuous soul and that is exercised with a view to that soul’s good cannot come into being until one comes to terms with the opinion at the heart of ordinary courage, namely, that risking or sacrificing oneself can be both the peak of life and a means to one’s own happiness. But coming to terms with this opinion is no easy task. We have already seen that Laches is reluctant to face this tension at all and that Glaucon is tempted by an inadequate resolution to it. Indeed, when Socrates describes real education in his famous image of the cave, he stresses the difficulty of such education. Real education is not a course of study that everyone can follow, if only because, according to Socrates’ account, it is at least in part a hard and even painful process. For this reason, as we will see, it requires courage. But the courage that is necessary to persevere in education of course cannot be the genuine courage that one

acquires as a result of education. It thus seems that confronting the opinions at the heart of ordinary courage, which confrontation is necessary for genuine courage to develop, may, paradoxically, depend on ordinary courage.

It may seem strange to characterize the pursuit of education as requiring courage at all. After all, in pursuing education, one neither puts one's life at risk nor attempts anything especially noble, such as saving the city, and we ordinarily understood courage to be exercised when one risks oneself for some noble end. We must, however, recall that such criteria are not necessarily the correct ones for determining the nature and scope of courage. As we have learned from examining Socrates' account of the idea of the good, he who possesses a coherent conception of virtue will know that its exercise is good in itself and contributes to his own true good. According to this view, courage is exercised whenever one faces some evil or something fearful, even if by doing so one ultimately gains some benefit, like wisdom. Thus, the fact that one pursues what is best for oneself in pursuing wisdom does not by itself disqualify the courage that one summons for this pursuit from being called courage. We should recall that in the Laches, Socrates indicates that courage includes steadfastness in pursuit of one's own true good. When Socrates was guiding Laches as to what a good definition of courage would be, he indicated that it should include not only the courage of the hoplite but also the courage of those who are courageous toward "pains and fears" and "desires and pleasures;" and he includes among his examples of those who are courageous, those who face sickness, poverty, and those who engage in politics (Laches 191d-e).

Still, even if it is legitimate to speak of those who pursue some good for themselves in the face of fears and pains or desires and pleasures as courageous, does this accurately

characterize those who pursue philosophy? Socrates indicates that it does; he repeatedly describes the philosophic nature as, among other things, courageous (486b, 487a, 490c, 494b, 503b-504a, 535b). But the question remains as to why courage must be part of a philosophic nature. Is the simple desire for education not sufficient to propel one towards philosophy? To answer this question we must turn to Socrates' image of true education or of the path to philosophy, namely, the cave. In examining this image, we will glimpse why it is sensible to say that courage is a part of a philosophic nature. We must also, however, keep in mind that just as Socrates' high-minded depiction of the idea of the good seemed at least in part designed to appeal to non-philosophers, like Glaucon, the same might be true of his depiction of philosophic natures as courageous. If non-philosophers recognize the philosopher as courageous, they will admire him and tolerate his presence in the city. But just as there seemed to be a non-rhetorical purpose to the discussion of the good, Socrates' image of the cave suggests that there may be a non-rhetorical reason for calling philosophic natures courageous; courage may be especially important in the initial stages for many, if not necessarily all, of those embark on the quest for wisdom.

Socrates calls his image of the cave an image of "our nature in its education and want of education" (514a). The cave represents political society as such, whose inhabitants Socrates claims are benighted. According to his image, all human beings are born into a cave and chained from childhood to face its back. In the cave, certain "human beings," who seem to be the founders or rulers of political society, hold up "all sorts of artifacts... and statues of men" (514c) in front of a fire that projects their shadows onto the back wall. The rest of us see only the "shadows" of these artifacts, which we mistake for the

truth about the nature of things (515c). To become enlightened, the image suggests that we must extricate ourselves from our bonds, turn around to examine the artifacts whose shadows we generally believe are real, and ultimately escape from the cave into the light that shines at the end of its long tunnel.

What, however, are these artifacts whose shadows are projected on the cave's wall? And why are we shown them? The following references provide crucial clues: Socrates describes some of the artifacts as "statues of men" (515c), he identifies certain shadows as "of the just" (517d), and he claims that the cave is populated by "phantoms" of the noble, just and good things (520c). Taken together these statements help to explain how the cave affects human beings. The artifacts appear to be the models that each regime establishes of what constitutes a just and noble life (cf. Annas 1981, 256; Klosko 1986, 92). Different cities project different models: Sparta holds up warriors as models, and America, rugged individualists.¹³ As long as we remain in the cave — benighted — we accept these models uncritically, believing that they are the true models of human perfection. Put simply, the image of the cave suggests that each city educates its citizens in distorted notions of virtue and that it is only by examining these and thereby coming to

¹³ Cf. Nietzsche's "One Thousand and One Goals" from Thus Spake Zarathustra, which beautifully illustrates Socrates' image by speaking of the different models characteristic of different peoples: some "speak the truth and handle bow and arrow well"; some "honor father and mother and follow their will to the root of one's soul"; and some "practice loyalty and, for the sake of loyalty, risk honor and blood even for evil and dangerous things" (1982, 171).

understand them as distortions that one acquires a true education (see 515d-e, 532c-d, 538c-e).

But Socrates indicates that turning around to examine the models and leaving the cave is a difficult process. Socrates describes one who is led out of the cave and who comes to grasp part of the truth as “in pain” and as “dazzled” by the light outside the cave, i.e., the truth about the nature of things. For this reason he is at first unwilling, Socrates says, to believe that in turning toward the light he is closer to the truth. The suffering inspires a wish to return to the cave and its comforting illusions (515c-d; see also 504a, 518c-d, and Theaetetus 151a-b), for it shocks the newly liberated individual to discover that what he always held to be true is illusory. Rather than remain in the light, he is inclined to “flee” from it and to turn back to familiar things. According to Socrates, it takes a great deal of time and patience to be able eventually to “endure” looking directly at the light (518c).¹⁴

Even in the city in speech, the best and most just city, we can see why questioning the city’s teachings is painful. First, Socrates clearly indicates that even the best city is a cave: he says that it will be very difficult for the philosophers to descend from the “Isles

¹⁴ Strauss says that Plato in general abstracts from eros in the Republic and that this abstraction is “effective in the simile of the Cave in so far as that simile presents the ascent from the cave to the light of the sun as entirely compulsory” (1964, 128). Even if this is true, i.e., even if Plato slights the erotic allure of the world outside the cave, Strauss’s statement does not rule out the fact that there is some pain involved in leaving the cave; Strauss indicates merely that Socrates’ image is over-broad. For a helpful account that treats escaping the cave as painful, see Nettleship 1937, 261-62.

of the Blessed” to take their turn ruling in the city because it will be hard for them to adjust to the darkness of the cave and the “phantoms” of the noble, just and good things that will pervade it (520b-d). But what are the phantoms and artifacts of this city? The most prominent one is undoubtedly the noble lie that Socrates and Glaucon agree the guardians must be told. It is not hard to see why it would be painful to confront this lie, which, we recall, teaches that the city is the common mother of the citizens. To recognize the noble lie for what it is, is painful not only because one realizes that one has been duped. What is more important is the meaning of the lie’s content, for whether or not the city actually is the common mother of the citizens has serious implications for how one should live one’s life. What turns on this question is the degree to which the citizens are united, i.e., whether or not they have a common good akin to that of a family (463c-64b). For the existence of such a common good — indeed, “a community of pleasures and pains” — is, we have seen, what makes it possible for the guardians to love the city and to be eager “to do what they believe to be advantageous to the city.” If, however, the premise that makes this eagerness possible is false, the question of why they should look to the city’s advantage becomes very pressing.

Still, this is not yet to explain what is painful about pressing this question. If the city’s teachings, because they lead the guardians to act against their own true good, are not merely illusory but in fact detrimental, would not seeing through this illusion be liberating rather than painful? Why might it be painful for a citizen to confront the possibility that his own happiness is more important to him than the city’s welfare? If the city were merely imposing views at which citizens chafe, then it would indeed be simply liberating to be freed from them. But Socrates’ indication that confronting the city’s

most important views is painful and that it requires courage suggests that citizens are in fact attracted to the city's teaching, that they are willing participants in their own deception; this means that to question civic teachings on virtue is painful because it means risking losing something that they hold very dear.

What we have seen in Glaucon illustrates why the possibility of devotion to the city can be so appealing. Glaucon is attracted to a life that consists in self-forgetting or even sacrifice, which he regards as transcendent and dignified. As we have argued, though, dignity is not the only thing at stake in "dignity." As Glaucon's assault on justice revealed, he believes that transcendent actions (if they can be shown to be choiceworthy) are bound up with the greatest human good, with the most profound and perhaps eternal happiness. It is thus not hard to see how his whole world could be shaken by the possibility that the sort of dignity he reveres is incoherent. For it would mean that the sublimely satisfying or eternal happiness for which he truly longs is impossible.¹⁵

If, however, scrutinizing the illusions of one's cave is painful, why would anyone wish to do it? Perhaps it is better to remain in the cave, deluded but happy or at least comfortable. This may well be the case for some human beings. But to remain in the

¹⁵ Were Glaucon idiosyncratic, what may seem to him the painful prospect of the incoherence of transcendence would not strike other human beings the same way, and so this particular explanation would not account for the suffering that leaving the cave causes others. The fact, though, is that justice understood as devotion to something grander than themselves appeals at least to the vast majority of human beings; although we might find extreme the challenge he poses to Socrates in Book II, there is at least a little bit of Glaucon in us.

cave is not an ideal option; it is chosen only by those who never truly and passionately confront the alternative. For those who are strong or healthy enough to embrace the truth, Socrates indicates that they are better off doing so — and that something within everyone testifies that, among human beings, those who can and do embrace the truth are best off for doing so. According to Socrates, the desire for the truth is present in all human beings. In the course of explaining to Glaucon in Book II why gods do not lie, he says that human beings as well as gods “hate the true lie.” When Glaucon professes puzzlement at hearing this, Socrates responds by saying that no one “voluntarily wishes to lie about the most sovereign things to what is most sovereign in himself” (382a). His claim may at first seem very dubious, for people appear to lie to themselves all the time. Socrates, however, does not deny that people lie to themselves. Rather, he claims that at least on important matters (“most sovereign things”), people do not “voluntarily wish” to deceive themselves; to the extent that they do lie to themselves on such matters, they do so involuntarily (382a-b).

Socrates’ meaning is not crystal clear. To begin to understand what he has in mind, we should consider first why we might ever wish to lie to ourselves. In those cases where we do, is it not because there is something that we suspect is true but wish were false because the alternative is too painful to handle? In such circumstances it is not that we consciously persuade ourselves of the opposite of what we know is the case — we cannot make ourselves believe, for example, that Santa Claus exists. We can lie to ourselves, though, in the midst of uncertainty. When we wish to lie to ourselves, we wish to hide from ourselves evidence that contradicts what we desperately want to believe. It is one thing, for instance, to seek to get to the bottom of a disease that we know can be cured.

In the case of an incurable cancer, however, we might ignore apparent signs of it because to confirm suspicions that we are terminally ill would be to subject ourselves to pain that we cannot relieve — the disease will strike when it strikes, we might say, so why subject ourselves to the pain of anticipating its onset? In such a situation, it does seem reasonable to say that we lie to ourselves.

But it also seems reasonable to say what is consistent with, or what follows from, Socrates' claim: that in this situation we lie to ourselves only as the result of an involuntary wish. If no one voluntarily wishes to lie about “the most sovereign things to what is most sovereign in himself,” this seems to mean that human beings wish to lie to themselves — i.e., force from their minds suspicions that what they want to be true is not — only when what their hearts cherish most is at stake. Fear for our survival is not the only fear that creates the wish to lie to ourselves. The wish is also generated by the fear of discovering that opinions crucial to our happiness, such as the belief in the existence and providence of gods or in the faithfulness of a lover, are false. The wish to lie to ourselves may be reasonably called involuntary if it is a response one makes when placed in an insupportable position, one in which one's best option seems to be embracing a lie of significant moment.¹⁶ This is not to interpret an “involuntary wish” merely as a wish for the best of all possible circumstances. While all human beings might wish for the best for themselves, human beings clearly differ in their constitutions; some are able to accept truths about their circumstances from which others recoil. The question is whether the latter human beings agree that the former in principle are superior, i.e., whether they wish they had the strength or psychic health not to flee the truth. If so, then one can truly

¹⁶ For a very incisive discussion of this question, see Reeve 1988, 231-33.

conclude that the wish to lie to oneself is involuntary — akin to a drug addict's succumbing to his desire for drugs despite his best efforts to resist it.

Socrates' claim that human beings hate true lies seems thus to be a claim that, insofar as human beings are healthy, they wish not to be deluded. The difficulty is that since we all begin, to use Socrates' language, in a cave, we all begin ignorant and thus at least partly unhealthy. We thus might often wish — although involuntarily, as the result of a weakness that the better part of us despises — not to confront the matters that challenge our greatest hopes and the things closest to our hearts. It is thus not surprising if in one's initial forays, and perhaps in those beyond them as well, one wishes to return to the comforts of the cave. For these reasons we seem, in order to acquire the wisdom needed for genuine courage, to need ordinary courage, the spirited willingness to face a prospective evil because one believes that flight is beneath one's dignity. Confronting our familiar and cherished opinions is akin to taking a medicine for the soul, and human beings seem to need courage to take it (see 604c-d, 606a; cf. Plato, Gorgias 479b-480d and 521d-522b, and Sophist 230d-e).

One might object, however, that the analogy between psychic and physical health actually militates against the claim that courage is necessary for the health of one's soul. Would not someone who becomes sick and who knows of a cure for his illness eagerly seek it out? Why would he need courage in addition to his knowledge? The question answers itself: to the extent that he truly knows his situation, he would not seem to. But when it comes to psychic illness, i.e., ignorance, one must face the pain both of seeing one's true self as deficient and of being aware that one lacks knowledge of the proper remedy. A certain courage is therefore required to face this fact and risk venturing into

the unknown. One simply does not know that psychic health might be attained by following a path other than the one laid out as a model in one's cave. To question that model is thus not to seek a known cure but to embark on an uncertain journey at the end of which one might find oneself unhappier than before. We might say, then, that a spirited, and thus to some degree irrational, courage is needed to help human beings question their most sovereign opinions and overturn the cherished foundations of their whole lives.

Courage and the Path to Philosophy

How is it that a spirited and irrational courage can help human beings dispel their ignorance? Is it not the tendency of spiritedness to make us cling to our own opinions rather than to examine them? As we have seen, spiritedness manifests itself most prominently as anger, which fills us with a sense of righteousness and therefore increases our belief in our opinions. In light of this fact, how could spiritedness contribute to the rigorous examination of one's own opinions? How could a spirited courage be an asset rather than a liability for an ascent from the cave?

Rather than being simply the obstacle to reflection that Socrates at times presents it as being, spiritedness may in fact help to propel one out of the cave in two different but related ways.¹⁷ First, if the concern for dignity at the heart of spiritedness can lead people tenaciously to defend what they take to be the elements of their dignity, it can for this reason lead them not to want to be fools who are deceived by the cave's images; for

¹⁷ But see Annas 1981, 253, 259 and Nichols 1987a, 118-19, which both deny that the philosopher actually seeks to leave the cave. But cf. 611e-12a and Strauss 1964, 128.

anyone who cares about dignity would consider it slavish to persist in remaining deluded to be a slave. Spiritedness, then, can help to level obstacles blocking the ascent from the cave. Second, spiritedness can inspire (“inspirit”) one with a sense of grandeur that enables one to persist in a project despite difficulties encountered along the way. If it takes the right form, the very thing that maintains people in their illusions can thus help to overcome them.

The first useful element of spiritedness may be a part of the hatred (*misein*) of lies that Socrates says is part of a philosophic nature, i.e., a nature that is well suited for leaving the cave (485c, 490b). To call the philosophic nature’s disposition toward lies a hatred suggests that this disposition may be spirited. Socrates does not say that one wants simply to expunge lies as though they were merely discomforting — say, like a blister. To speak of someone as hating lies can suggest that he is angry at them. To understand what it could mean to “hate a lie,” consider what is implied in the Christian saying that one should hate the sin rather than the sinner. Is this not an injunction to direct one’s anger at the sin rather than at the sinner? Socrates’ discussion of misology, or the hatred of reason, in the Phaedo illustrates this kind of angry hatred in a context that has a bearing on the hatred of lies. In the Phaedo Socrates compares misology to misanthropy. He says one develops a hatred of reason for the same reason that one develops a hatred of people. According to Socrates, one becomes a misanthrope from having placed excessive trust in people and from having subsequently been deceived by them (89d-e). And when one is deceived by many people many times, one grows to hate all people. Just as Socrates implies that one can come to hate reason because the trust that one has placed in it has been repeatedly disappointed, one could also come to hate previously cherished

opinions that one learns are lies. If one has seen many of one's opinions overturned as lies, according to this argument, one would become highly suspicious of and treat with an angry hatred any opinion that appears to be a lie.

One who hates lies, then, may hate them in a spirited fashion, i.e., one may in a certain sense be angry at them. The question is whether such anger can actually help someone make progress in ridding himself of lies. Such anger can be useful to the extent that one's anger is directed not at those who disseminate the lie but at oneself for being duped by the lie. This anger can fuel one's efforts to eradicate the lie from the soul (cf. Sophist 230c-d). This kind of response to lies seems particularly characteristic of someone who cares about dignity. A man who prizes his dignity will, upon suspicion of having been deceived by lies, not let up until he has examined his beliefs thoroughly in order to test their adequacy. Now in attempting to eradicate the lies in his soul, such an individual may not be doing so because he knows that it is best to do so; he may be infused with a blinding determination to break through the bonds of conventional opinion so that he will not be a dupe rather than so that he can have what is genuinely good for himself. But the virtue of this anger is that it can be the source of the courage to undertake examinations that might appear beyond one's reach, to face possibilities that could undermine all that one cherishes, and to resist the temptation to return to the lie and thus to the cave upon discovering unpleasant truths.

Of course, an angry hatred of lies is hardly the most obvious mark of a philosophic nature. As we have seen, anger's tendency is to blind us from the truth and it is thus more of an obstacle than an asset to learning. Insofar as Socrates' mention of a hatred of lies can be interpreted as a spirited hatred of lies, he may be describing something that

occurs very early on in the philosophic experience. Or, he may be articulating a portrait of a philosophic nature that someone like Glaucon, who cares about dignity and who seems to have had this very reaction upon coming to see the problems with the city's view of justice, will understand. But a hatred of lies is not the only spirited quality that Socrates indicates is be present in a philosophic nature. Socrates also speaks of the importance of "youthful fire" and of "magnificence," both of which have spirited roots (see 486a, 487a, 490c, 503c-d). They differ, however, from the hatred of lies because they add a "positive" dimension absent from the hatred. They contribute not just to destroying the obstacles in one's path but to forging along it. Socrates does not explain precisely what he means by "youthful fire," but it would at least include a courageous daring to seek out and wrestle with challenging arguments.

Magnificence seems to be the "positive" spirited quality that is most likely to help guide one out of the cave. In Book III, magnificence emerged as a disposition toward greatness that arises when spirited men receive a certain education in beautiful song and art. Having developed a love for beautiful things as well as a lively sense of human capacities, they become magnificent and seek to perform noble deeds, at least in part to express the beauty they sense within their own souls. Magnificence thus inspires one to seek honor not for its own sake but as a testimony to one's own excellence. Because of the connection between it and noble deeds, it — like spiritedness in general — may not seem so useful for real progress in a philosophic education. The famed Alcibiades was surely magnificent, but he was ultimately incapable of suspending his political aspirations and turning wholly to philosophy. Socrates in the Republic articulates the difficulties with magnificence when he explains why someone with a magnificent nature may be

especially tempted to remain in the cave. Since such an individual is likely to be “first among all in everything,” he will likely be “mindlessly full of pretension and empty conceit” (494b-d).¹⁸ For this reason, he is unlikely to accept that “he has no intelligence in him although he needs it” and that such intelligence “is not to be acquired except by slaving for its acquisition” (494d). Someone whose magnificence becomes self-satisfaction is a poor candidate for the most important kind of education, for he will be incapable of accepting that he is radically deficient and therefore in need of serious education.

But magnificence is not inextricably connected to the ambition to perform noble deeds that win public honor. In his discussion of philosophic natures in Book VI, Socrates attributes to them magnificence as expressed in an understanding which does not hold “that human life is anything great”; such an understanding is “endowed” not only with magnificence but also with “the contemplation of all time and all being” (486a). This form of magnificence, Socrates teaches, is particularly useful and perhaps even essential for philosophic endeavors. As described, it seems to aim at something like what earlier dazzled Glaucon (who agrees enthusiastically with Socrates’ account of a magnificent soul here): contemplation of the idea of the good understood as the first cause of all things. Indeed, in the Phaedo, Socrates says that as a young man he himself was immersed in questions about the first cause of things precisely because he believed that it would be “magnificent to know the cause of everything” (96a-d).¹⁹ This kind of

¹⁸ Both Nettleship 1937, 207 and Friedlander 1964, 110 suggest that Socrates has Alcibiades in mind here.

¹⁹ For a comic illustration of Socrates’ youthful magnificence, see Aristophanes,

magnificence expresses itself as the refusal to bow before anything not out of anger or indignation but out of the conviction that one is capable of grasping the whole, that to do so would be to participate in some way in something eternal, and that one can thereby ascend to the grandest heights of which rational beings are capable. The magnificent individual may be said to believe that those who successfully escape from the cave really do inhabit something like “the Isles of the Blessed” (519c), and the prospect of joining them excites his constant efforts.²⁰

Clouds 215-235.

²⁰ Nichols disagrees with my claim that spiritedness, in certain forms, is present, at least at an early stage, in a truly philosophic nature. She argues that if it were present, it would distort and ultimately destroy true philosophy. She finds evidence for this argument in the philosopher-kings of the city in speech, whom she finds spirited; indeed, their spiritedness leads them erroneously to “renounce [the world of becoming] for one of simple beings.” Spiritedness thus distorts philosophy according to her by leading one to run away from the truth of the real world to the austere realm of pure being; the “greatest threat to the self,” she argues, is “the familiar world of becoming,” and rather than face up to it honestly, she believes that the philosopher-kings engage in merely spirited attempts “to preserve [themselves] against change and death” (1988, 62). On the one hand, Nichols seems to me to take too literally the rhetorical elements of Socrates’ presentation of philosophy; she forgets that Socrates warns his audience that he is not speaking perfectly accurately (507a). On the other hand, she underestimates the degree to which true philosophy according to Socrates does contain a longing for something that transcends the familiar world of becoming. She thinks that Socrates himself did not aim

But however useful certain forms of spiritedness may be for a philosophic quest, it is not clear what role they play in the soul of a full-fledged philosopher. For whereas the hatred of lies bespeaks a desire not to be bested, and philosophic magnificence denotes an aspiration toward grandeur, it is not clear that the full-fledged philosopher shares these concerns. This potential difference emerges from a consideration of Glaucon's reaction to Socrates' description of the philosophically magnificent man's attitude towards death. Glaucon agrees with Socrates that human life does not "seem anything great" to the magnificent man who contemplates all time and all being and that, for this reason, such a man will not "believe that death is something terrible" (486a-b). Why, though, does he readily²¹ agree to these claims, which are surely hard to accept? Has he truly come to view all of human life, as they say, philosophically? This seems most unlikely in light of his openness at the end of the Republic to Socrates' claim that the soul is immortal (608d)

to escape the cave: philosophy as practiced by the philosopher-kings "is the repudiation of Socrates' philosophizing, which explores the familiar world that philosopher-kings escape," as can be seen in the fact that Socrates' conversations are "anchored in the individual natures of his interlocutors" (1988, 62, 64). The question Nichols does not address is whether Socrates conducts his conversations mainly with a view to what is good for his interlocutors or whether he tries to learn something for himself about the nature of being. It is at least worth noting that at the beginning of the Republic Socrates informs the reader that he is compelled to participate in this particular conversation (327a-28b).

²¹ He says that it is "impossible" for human life to seem great to the man in question and that this man would "not in the least" believe that death is something terrible.

and that gods reward and punish men after death (613a). Rather, what explains Glaucon's agreement here is the fact that it is solicited in the immediate wake of Socrates' teaching that philosophers spend their most precious time not with mundane and temporary things but in the realm of the eternal Ideas, of which tangible things are mere instances (475e-80a). Adopting the loftiest of perspectives, Glaucon seems to think that a sufficiently magnificent man who communes with the Ideas can somehow so transcend the world of coming-into-being and passing away that death really does seem nothing terrible to him — why would passing away matter to someone who gazes upon such magnificent things as the permanent Ideas? That Glaucon's reaction is mediated by the immediately preceding discussion of the ideas appears even more clearly when we contrast it with the reaction of the Spartan Megillus in a similar context in Plato's Laws. Upon hearing the Athenian Stranger say that “the affairs of human beings are not worthy of great seriousness,” Megillus very gravely censures him for “belittling our human race in every respect” (803b-c). Glaucon, by contrast, is so transported by the idea of Ideas that at this moment he himself evinces contempt for human things; he has come a long way from his initial wish to see justice vindicated in the human world.

The question is whether Glaucon could maintain his lofty attitude toward death upon considered reflection. His reaction to Socrates' later claim that the soul is immortal suggests that he could not, at least at this stage of his development. Rather, his “superhuman” attitude seems bound up with a belief that, when he identifies with philosophers contemplating Ideas, he has transcended the human plane. This suggests that, while magnificence as manifested in the contemplation of all time and all being may serve as a great inspiration for the pursuit of wisdom, it may also distort one's perception:

it can so hallow the objects of contemplation that one loses sight of one's own situation and feels hallowed oneself. Glaucon bears witness to the possibility that magnificence can lead one to dismiss human things as unserious not as the result of real insight but from the belief that philosophic contemplation elevates one to such a dignified level that one is immune to the concerns of most other human beings, including the concern with mortality.²²

For if Glaucon were truly to dismiss all human things as unserious, these would include himself and his own activities. That Glaucon and Socrates, when they agree on how human affairs appear to the magnificent man, do not share the same perspective becomes clear later when they discuss what happens to "Philosophy" when people ill suited for it engage in it (536a-c). After expressing a sort of moral outrage at the prospect of bringing the wrong sort of people to philosophy, Socrates apologizes for having been "ridiculously affected just now."

I forgot that we were playing and spoke rather intensely. For, as I was talking I looked at Philosophy and, seeing her undeservingly spattered

²² One difficulty with Craig's thought-provoking argument that philosophizing itself involves spiritedness is the fact that he treats the higher or highest part of spiritedness, which seems to be akin to magnificence, as unproblematic. Craig sharply distinguishes the higher forms of spiritedness that help one philosophize from lower manifestations such as anger to such a degree that he claims that they should be understood as two separate parts of the soul (1994, 104). He does not appear to see how the two parts are not just rooted in but fundamentally characterized by a particular belief in nobility and human dignity whose rational grounds we have seen are fraught with difficulties.

with mud, I seem to have been vexed and said what I had to say too seriously as though my spiritedness were aroused against those who were responsible.

So highly does Glaucon regard Philosophy that he, by contrast, does not think that Socrates spoke with sufficient force: “No, by Zeus, that’s not the way you seemed to me” — his oath suggests that he thinks a more spirited response to the situation Socrates described is appropriate. However Socrates was when he was younger, as a mature philosopher he seems unable to muster more than a pale imitation of spiritedness. In fact, it seems that spiritedness played no role in the delivery of the speech just quoted:

Socrates apologizes for coming to the aid of Philosophy “as though my spiritedness were aroused” (536c1-5, my emphasis). However important, however good, Socrates may think that the activity of philosophizing is, he does not regard it as “serious” in the way that Glaucon does. If he agrees with the Athenian Stranger that “the affairs of human beings are not worthy of great seriousness,” it is not because he looks down on them, as Glaucon does, with spirited contempt.

Rather, Socrates seems to have transcended the ordinary concern with dignity with which spiritedness is intertwined. Although we cannot trace out here the course of events that led to this, we have seen a or perhaps the crucial reason for Socrates’ highly unorthodox understanding of human dignity: the opinions underlying the ordinary notion of dignity seem unable to withstand the dialectical investigation of the good. Socrates’ conversations with Laches and Glaucon have revealed at least some of the difficulties with these opinions. At the core of Laches’ and Glaucon’s belief in dignity seems to be a confusion about whether, on the one hand, dignity is found simply in forgetting oneself

and one's own good or whether, on the other hand, that by virtue of this forgetting one becomes worthy of the greatest good. If no virtue that rests on confused opinions is genuine, then genuine courage can come into being only from confronting this tension at the heart of ordinary courage. One result of this confrontation appears to be the recognition that genuine dignity must be rooted in the awareness that courage is a virtue only when one "preserves the opinion" that what is truly terrible is not pursuing the true human good (cf. 442c).

Genuine courage may not require spiritedness at all because the pursuit of the true human good does not require spiritedness; rather, it takes spiritedness to make the demands of ordinary nobility and dignity seem to be good. That spirited courage may be unnecessary in an educated soul was in fact suggested back in Book III by an analogy that Socrates offers ostensibly to explain political courage (429c-e). Socrates says that the guardians' courage consists in "preserving" the city's opinions about what is truly terrible. But to illustrate the character of this preserving, he offers a strange example. He compares the guardians' preserving to the way in which properly prepared material preserves the dye with which it has been colored: if the guardians have been well prepared by their education, the opinions handed down by the city will stick to them, Socrates says, as well as colorfast dye does to properly prepared material. The difficulty with the analogy is, however, that the material does not actively have to work to retain the dye. Socrates' analogy raises questions about whether the guardians' education has sufficiently prepared them to receive the legislated opinions. Because if it did sufficiently prepare them for these opinions, no "work" on their part would be necessary. He calls the guardians courageous because they have a part in them that preserves

through everything the city's opinions: spiritedness. They must work at preserving the city's opinions, aided by the spirited opinion that directs them to be guided not by what is good for them but by what is noble or dignified. The guardians require spiritedness to "preserve" the city's opinions because they could not otherwise hang onto them; they could not follow the city's dictates on the basis of the belief that doing so is best for them because that belief is not evidently true.

If, then, the guardians' courage does not precisely fit the analogy, might something else? The silent alternative to which the analogy points is that of the soul that does preserve "opinions" as a material preserves colorfast dye. Because opinions are vulnerable to corruption, only wisdom can be preserved so thoroughly. Socrates' analogy thus suggests that the best education — not merely a civic education — can prepare certain human beings to assimilate wisdom fully, so that no active preserving is necessary.²³ The beneficiaries of this education do not "cast out" what they know in the face of "pains and pleasures and desires and fears" (429c). This is not to say that the philosopher never experiences fears or never hopes to avoid evils. But having examined the opinions that derail human beings from the steady and single-minded pursuit of their

²³ Klosko cites Book IV's definition of courage as a "power of preserving" as evidence that Plato rejects Socrates' view that courage is a kind of knowledge (1986, 53). But as Klosko himself recognizes, in Book VI Socrates "discusses a higher form of virtue, based on knowledge" (77), and he recognizes that this "discussion" includes a higher form of courage. He does not, however, understand this knowledge as imparting anything more than a firmer basis for using one's power of preserving in a reliably moral way (78-79). For a position similar to Klosko's, see Irwin 1977, 198-99, 201-02.

true good, he does not forget that success in this pursuit ultimately turns on his own efforts. He does not succumb to the spirited temptation to “forget” his own good (and what he knows) in order to secure it.

To say that the wise individual leaves behind whatever spiritedness he had by nature is not to imply that he does not need strength or toughness, i.e., that his character and understanding result entirely from intellectual achievements. Rather, his strength or toughness seems to be interwoven into his very nature, just as, for example, a low pain threshold or an iron stomach is. This appears from Socrates’ discussion of the guardians’ initial education in Book III, where Socrates warns against exposing the guardians to too much traditional flute music. The problem with this music, he says, is that it tends to charm the spirit and then to dissolve it, cutting out “the sinews” from the soul and making it “a feeble warrior” (411b). Socrates thereby implies that every soul needs “sinews,” so that it can fight fiercely against difficulties and obstacles that it encounters. This is especially true for daring souls (cf. 375a6-8). If the path to philosophy can be hard and painful, even a soul with many other gifts needs, at least at the outset, to have a little of the warrior within it.

However important toughness is, though, the essence of genuine courage remains self-sufficient knowledge, which produces an impressive steadiness in the face of fears. Socrates, as we saw from the Laches, possesses this steadiness.²⁴ As he demonstrated to Laches at the battle of Delium, Socrates can withstand great pressure without losing his head. His courage is the courage initially sketched in the Laches and developed in the Republic; it is, as Nicias initially suspected, a “certain wisdom” (Laches 194d). This

²⁴ See also Symposium 203d5, 219d2, and Phaedo 64a.

wisdom does not provide the guarantees that Nicias wants, but it enables one to know that, say, calmly retreating in battle is the best means of securing one's well-being. The genuinely courageous individual faces evils not out of high-minded hopes or angry pride but out of the awareness that he cannot avoid confronting all evils; rather, he knows that the best he can do when forced to face evils is rely on his own wits to secure his well-being, expecting no external assistance. Even if this courage differs from that of the ordinary steadfast soldier, e.g., from a Laches, he can recognize it as courage and so come to respect the philosopher. A philosopher's courage ultimately depends, then, on the knowledge that the wise and happy human being always pursues what is best for himself in the circumstances — though his courage includes an innate toughness that enables the philosopher to accept the limitations which this implies. In this way, a philosopher, in a certain sense, always pursues what is good. For a philosopher the greatest evil, or what is truly terrible, seems to be not to do what he can to pursue the best life.

Conclusion

Genuine courage is possible according to Plato only once one acquires wisdom about the ends of human life. This raises the implication that courage exhibited by unwise human beings is in some ways deficient. Plato's image of the cave captures the reason for these deficiencies. As long as we remain in the cave, we take for granted that the models presented by the governing authorities are true. The regime of the Republic, for example, teaches its guardians that their courage is noblest when it is wholly concerned with the city's good, and the guardians, for whom Glaucon is an apt stand-in, are inclined to believe that this is true. Socrates' conversations in the Laches and the Republic, however, show that this self-understanding is incoherent: it reveals a wish that virtue can consist both in self-forgetting or self-sacrifice and in the greatest good for a human being. We see this in Laches and Glaucon, who reveal despite themselves that their attraction to a courage the nobility of which is characterized by its self-sacrifice is tied to a deep-seated belief that indifference to their own happiness and flourishing will somehow lead to the greatest happiness. They appear, moreover, to hide the tension in this belief from themselves in large part by refusing to choose as their most fundamental concern either, on the one hand, a self-sacrificing nobility or, on the other, happiness. And Nicias, whose definition of courage as complete knowledge of all goods and evils clearly suggests that he considers happiness to be his fundamental concern, ultimately wavers in this choice when he begins to think both that he cannot secure happiness without divine assistance and that the gods do not help those who set out to help themselves. Perhaps even more clearly than Laches and Glaucon, moreover, he hides from facing up to the problems in his account of courage by leaving the conversation reported in the Laches

without trying to settle the question of what courage might be. Rather than continue to explore the matter with the maddening Socrates, he announces that he will take up courage later with Damon and others, with whom he is presumably more comfortable (Laches 200a-c).

But why, we have wondered, are Laches, Nicias and Glaucon unwilling to look their notions about courage squarely in the face to learn whether or not they are sensible? Although they see that their ideas are deficient, they seem unwilling to get to the bottom of those deficiencies. They all appear, in fact, to lack the ordinary courage needed to persist in risky endeavors despite uncertainty about their outcomes. They also seem to lack something more fundamental, the natural hardiness or toughness that would lead them not to shy away from the possibility that their own view of courage is not the noblest one. Courage is genuinely noble when it is exercised by those who do not avert their eyes from that the fact that human beings are unable consistently to view it as an excellence of the soul unless they can see it as part of an individual's own genuinely human flourishing. Averting one's eyes from this fact leads one to hope ignobly that self-forgetting action (insofar as this is possible) will somehow redound to one's benefit. Of course, being alive to the intimate connection between courage and true human flourishing does not guarantee that one's courage can secure it; evils are at times unavoidable. But if courage really is "a certain wisdom," then the courageous individual knows that the best one can do when faced with unavoidable evils is to make the least, so to speak, of them rather than to fight vainly to overcome them. Such wisdom gives one an impressive bearing in the face of adversity, a bearing that excites and deserves the admiration of those who witness it.

If, however, the Laches and the Republic suggest that courage is a genuine virtue, i.e., something good, only to the extent that it is exercised as part of one's own truest good, we have not yet decisively proven that this is true. Doing so would first require us to address, more fully than we have, objections to this claim, especially those voiced by those who might claim that it is not preferable, and may even be sinful, to be oriented primarily by one's own fulfillment. The inability, however, of any of Socrates' interlocutors to maintain consistently that it is noble to forget utterly the concern with what is truly good for a human being is a powerful first, though by no means decisive, step in addressing such objections. Glaucon's inability to set aside such concerns is evident in his initial request that Socrates show that justice, understood as complete devotion to others' good, is choiceworthy for the just man; Laches' similar inability is evident in his refusal wholeheartedly to endorse the view that courage is foolish steadfastness.

Insofar, then, as we have seen that Plato's treatment of courage points to a great difficulty with the ordinary view of courage, does his treatment resemble that political theory that makes the primacy of one's own good the foundation of political thought? it does not. For studying Plato's treatment of courage enables us to grasp the power and complexity of the deeper concerns in the human soul that incline us to resist pursuing our own true good. Plato's treatment of courage does greater justice to the phenomenon of courage by beginning from what ordinary individuals think about it. Going on to reveal the tensions in ordinary accounts of courage, his treatment forces us to attempt to draft a coherent account of courage, which attempt compels us to confront the question of the true human good. If this has something formal in common with a certain version of the

modern, liberal characterization of human life (that the human good is a relevant question), it remains very different in substance.

However, if in doing justice to the longings for heroic courage, Plato's treatment shows them to be confused, does his treatment then suggest an agreement with those whom we discussed in the introduction, who treat those longings as unhealthy and dangerous? On the contrary, the connection between, on the one hand, the capacity for dedication in those who revere courage and, on the other hand, the need for such dedication in order to philosophize leads Plato to evaluate the admiration for heroic courage very differently. For Plato, that admiration testifies to the existence of a need in the human soul to which the critics of courage have not given sufficient attention: the need for a fulfillment of the soul. If they correctly argue that attempts to satisfy that need by exercising courage are misguided, this does not mean that human health consists in suppressing or renouncing ambitions to transcend the ordinary world, of which ambitions heroic courage represents a vivid instance. To dismiss such ambitions is, at the very least, counter-productive insofar as dismissing them means failing to educate them; for they then lurk within the soul, ready to flare up in unexpected ways. According to Plato, moreover, human health can result only from recognizing and thinking through the significance of transcendent ambitions so that one might arrive at a full account of the truth of the human situation. To downplay courage and similar phenomena is, he argues, to deprive oneself of access to that truth.

For despite the fact that courage is rooted in problematic opinions, Plato teaches that it may be important for acquiring wisdom. The admiration or even longing for a heroic courage testifies to our wish not just to be secure and well-provided-for but to live as

fully as human beings can. Because it is far from evident how we can do this, the wish to flourish — at least if it is strong — awakens us to the need to employ fully our capacities to think about our own situation and the world around us; we realize that our happiness depends upon our reason. Following through on this realization can, according to Plato, lead to the philosophic life, which he learned from Socrates was the best human life. Now it is true that those who long for heroic courage may not in any way think that they long for philosophy. There is a certain kinship, though, between the partisans of heroic courage and philosophers: both types seek a non-utilitarian, uniquely human activity that transcends the plane on which most human beings live and through the practice of which they can thrive. And those longings for heroic courage can perhaps only find true satisfaction ultimately in philosophy. It is philosophers, Socrates says in the Republic, who live on the “Isles of the blessed,” which is to say it is they who find real happiness. It is also the philosophers who Socrates says at the end of the Republic would, if they were able, choose the same life over again.

Whatever kinship exists between the partisans of ordinary courage and philosophers, it is obviously going too far to say that the former can always become the latter. As the example of Achilles shows in spades, the spiritedness underlying courage can lead to a self-righteous raging that blinds reason. But the Republic as a whole teaches that spiritedness can be educated — at least so as to become politically responsible. Indeed, if Achilles reminds us that a raw spiritedness can cause human beings to seek single-mindedly what they believe they deserve, in complete disregard of the common good, the guardians of the city in speech suggest that spiritedness can also lead citizens to take pride in subordinating their own welfare to that of their city. The capacity for devotion to

causes held to be noble, moreover, can lead spirited human beings, even if they cannot become philosophers, to honor them on grounds of kinship. For both political and philosophic interests, Plato's Socrates thus has good cause to look favorably upon spiritedness. In the Republic we see that he does not try to stamp out Glaucon's admiration for heroically courageous actions but rather to refine it and to lead Glaucon to admire philosophers.

As we have seen, however, it is not only the case that spiritedness can make some human beings into supporters and allies of philosophers. Spiritedness also seems to be very important at least for the initial stages of the ascent to philosophy. Plato does not explore the foundations of ordinary courage so as to debunk it or to say that it is good only as a means to power or comfortable self-preservation. It would be wrong, Plato's account suggests, to understand the importance of virtue to the human soul in this light, for to do so would be to confuse narrow and material advantages for our true good. And it is, after all, all too easy to be tempted and distracted by the pursuit of comfortable self-preservation, which the early liberal theorists we have discussed know involves many pleasures. But a life surfeited with these remains fundamentally dissatisfied, as even those who describe human life in this way acknowledge.¹ The life that takes seriously transcendent aspirations such as those implied in the admiration for courage, then, may

¹ See Hobbes 1994, 34 [chap. 6], which defines "felicity" as "continual success in obtaining those things which a man from time to time desireth." (This of course is to say not just that enjoying comfortable self-preservation cannot give us the lasting happiness we think we desire but also that no other way of life can either.)

be said to take happiness more seriously than at least certain lives that take as their fundamental orientation some more basic and bodily version of happiness.

And yet, even if genuine courage is part of true human happiness, ordinary courage still looms quite large in the economy of human life. All thoughtful but unwise human beings can come or be made to realize that they cannot give a coherent account of their deepest concerns, and this realization — at least if they do not shy away from it — cannot help but make them feel dissatisfied with their lives. According to the Republic's image of the cave, moreover, it is very difficult and even painful to strive to develop such an account, at least for the overwhelming majority of human beings. For this reason courage is required to pursue the wisdom that we all at one time or another deeply feel we need. But it is not just any sort of courage: it is a daring courage that is willing to pursue hard questions wherever they lead.

Our liberal world, however, does not nurture such courage especially well. Locke's treatment of courage in Some Thoughts Concerning Education is very enlightening on this score. In this treatise on how to educate the young Locke offers a definition of courage and describes its goodness in a way that may seem to resemble what I have suggested here is Plato's view. Locke describes "true fortitude" as "the quiet possession of a man's self" and as being "prepared for dangers of all kinds and unmoved whatsoever evil it be that threatens"; he ultimately summarizes courage as "noble and manly steadiness" (1996, 86-7). In order to cultivate this steadiness, though, Locke seeks to make children so prudent that they take on few risks. He focuses on preventing children from feeling frightened and then on habituating them gently to the things that frighten them, especially to pain (89). He does not encourage the performance of noble deeds,

and he strongly opposes organized military education. Moreover, he specifically warns against daring or the “insensibility of danger” (85). He claims that running into danger is simply a sign of “ignorance or some more imperious passion,” and he adds that nobody could be “so much an enemy to himself as to come within the reach of evil out of free choice” (86).

In his effort to promote what might be called a hyper-rational form of courage in the young, Locke encourages parents to teach their child not to think anyone would ever be foolish enough willingly to risk harm to himself. But this, together with Locke’s objections to military education, means that the young will neither learn about nor experience activities that require them to forget about their own physical safety and well-being. They can surely acquire what looks like a form of courage if they are raised in accordance with Locke’s prescriptions, for it is possible and even probable that, because their exposure to fearful things will be limited, they will be less fearful than others who are raised differently. One may well wonder, though, how well they would manage if they did encounter unfamiliar dangers. But this practical question is not the most important one to ask of Locke’s education for courage, in part because in the liberal, peaceful world that he so successfully cultivated, human beings are less exposed to dangers than they were in pre-liberal political societies. The more important inquiry to press concerns the souls of those who acquire a “Lockean” courage: how likely is it that those who are taught to stay safely out of “the reach of evil” will learn to appreciate the value of goods beyond those of the body enough to struggle to acquire them in the face of adversity? If they come to think, as Locke teaches, that things “are good or evil... only in reference to pleasure or pain” (Locke 1975, 229 [II.xx.2]), for how long will they

persist in painful inquiries when the good they seek is far from readily apparent? For how long will they attempt painfully to dispel ignorance about their most cherished concerns when it seems much easier and more pleasant to dismiss their ignorance as trivial (e.g., by affirming that seeking the truth is wasted effort because no one can know it anyway)? By discounting admiration for traditional courage, for coming “within the reach of evil out of free choice,” Locke saps the strength human beings generally need to acquire greater psychic health. As irrational or excessive as the old admiration for heroic courage may have been, the teaching that I have aimed to articulate in this dissertation contends that it is a great helpmate for efforts to acquire the wisdom that human beings at times recognize is essential to true happiness. From Plato’s perspective, then, the cure proposed by the contemporary critics of courage — the attempt to vitiate or even eradicate an admiration for heroic courage that is admittedly fraught with political danger — is worse than the disease.

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