

A Question of Courage

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Courage is the main subject of the Socratic dialogue *Laches*. Socrates engages Laches and Nikias in a debate about the definition of courage in the interests of seeing which of them should inform their friends about how to educate their children. Laches makes the first attempt to define courage, and in his discussion with Socrates finds himself in a paradox. After Laches has failed in his quest for a definition of courage, Nikias makes an attempt to avoid the paradox. His efforts are ridiculed by Laches although he does manage to avoid the paradox that Laches fell victim to. Socrates seems to think that Nikias' arguments are more important than Laches allows. After further inspection by Socrates, Nikias also finds himself embracing contradictory positions, just not the same ones that Laches did. In this paper I intend to describe the paradox that Laches finds himself in, show how Nikias' argument avoids that paradox, and then attempt to show that Socrates' attacks on Nikias' argument are not as serious as they might seem.

The group begins by debating about knowledge and what sorts of knowledge are useful. Eventually they begin to speak of courage. The part of the dialogue that I will focus on begins when Socrates starts questioning Laches about the definition of courage. Initially Laches claims that courage is a sort of endurance. This is evidently too broad a definition for Socrates' liking, since he says that there are some kinds of endurance that he would not consider courage. Socrates asks Laches if courage is good and noble, and Laches agrees. Socrates then asks if a wise endurance is good and noble. Laches agrees that wise endurance is good and noble. Foolish endurance, on the other hand, is held by the two to be evil and hurtful. Nothing evil

and hurtful is noble, according to Laches, and so since courage is noble and foolish endurance is evil and hurtful and cannot be noble, foolish endurance is not courage. Shortly after they have come to this realization, Laches claims that if a man knows that he will gain through his endurance, he is not showing courage by enduring. For example, a commander who has superior numbers and a better position than his enemy is not deemed to be courageous in standing his ground. Instead, a person who is in an inferior military position with fewer forces and still remains at her post would be considered courageous. Socrates leads Laches to agree that sticking it out when the odds are against you is a foolish endurance, and that acting without knowledge of the situation is more courageous than acting with knowledge—for example, the person who stays in a cavalry battle with no idea of how to fight on horseback would be considered more courageous than a person who remains in the battle who has knowledge of horses. Laches is left then saying that foolish endurance is courage, whereas before he claimed that it was not. He is not sure if he is right in saying so, and so the conversation turns to Nikias' thoughts on the matter.

Nikias begins his argument with a phrase that he has heard from Socrates before, “every man is good in that in which he is wise, and bad in that in which he is unwise.”¹ Nikias explains his understanding of this statement to be that if a brave person is good, then she will also be wise in her bravery. These people have “the knowledge of that which inspires fear or confidence in war, or in anything.”² This avoids the problems that Socrates found in Laches' argument since knowledge of the situation is no longer a part of the debate; it is a given in a courageous person that he will know what to do in a situation which might require courage. If a person is courageous and good, his actions in those sorts of situations will be wise.

¹ *Laches*, Trans. Benjamin Jowett, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/laches.html>

² *Ibid.*

Laches challenges Nikias, saying that courage and wisdom are two different things. He asks if physicians do not know the dangers of disease, and if so, are they the same as the courageous since they have this wisdom. Nikias' reply is that physicians have knowledge that is specific to their business, just as the husbandmen and the other craftsmen do. This wisdom does not make them courageous, since they are not skilled in the grounds of fear and hope. The courageous person will know whether it is better in any given situation for a person to live or die. I read this as a knowledge of whether or not it is better in a given situation for a person to die for a cause or whether it is better for that person to flee and fight for that cause a different day. A courageous person is wise in her courage; she can weigh what would be lost and would be gained through her various options in various circumstances. Under this reading a foolish woman could not be called courageous, since she would not know whether it would be better to stay and fight or to flee—and thus we would not call her actions courageous no matter what they were.

The first difficulty that Socrates brings against Nikias is that under his definition we would not consider beasts to be courageous, since they could not have the knowledge of the grounds of hope and fear. Most people consider some animals to be very courageous, as Laches points out. Nikias, on the other hand, thinks that beasts can not be considered courageous. Instead, he says that they are fearless and rash, without forethought. Actions made by the beasts, then, cannot be termed courageous since they do not know when they stand up to a larger, more ferocious beast whether they will live or die, and they are not able to weigh that which would be lost or gained through their actions. This difficulty brought up by Socrates does not seem to be serious, since Nikias is able to explain that he does not think animals consider situations in the same way. Socrates and Laches may not be happy with this

explanation, but Nikias' explanation that animals are fearless and not courageous seems to silence their complaints.

Socrates' next difficulty with Nikias' explanation is based on the idea that courage should be a timeless science. Socrates says, and Nikias agrees, that terrible things are evils in the future, and hopeful things are the “good or not evil things which are future.”³ It is the knowledge of these things which Nikias calls courage. Socrates argues, however, that there is not one knowledge of the past, one of the present, and one of the future; instead there is one science that covers all three tenses (past, present, and future). Courage, then, must not be only the knowledge of future goods and evils, but the knowledge of good and evil regardless of tense. If one is courageous, then, one must have all knowledge of good and evil, past, present, and future, and then one who has courage must be completely virtuous instead of having just a part of virtue, that is, courage (previously called a part of virtue by Socrates, Laches, and Nikias).

This difficulty seems to be more problematic for Nikias to deal with, since he is unable to defend himself against it in the dialogue. He could argue that courage is only concerned with the future good, but then he would have to disagree with Socrates and Laches that there is only one science for each of the three tenses of good and evil. This disagreement seems to be one that he does not want to face, for whatever reason. Nikias could also claim that courage is not the science that deals with goods and evils, but only a part of that science. I do not feel that this argument is particularly serious since Nikias could disagree with the argument that a science concerns itself with all tenses of its subject. If this line of arguing would be problematic for Nikias, I do not see the reason unless it is that he would be arguing with both Socrates and Laches against something that he himself has agreed to

³ Ibid.

already. In any case, Nicias does not argue himself out of this contradiction.

In this inquiry into the nature of courage, Laches presented the idea that courage was endurance, and then held that courage was wise endurance and not foolish endurance, and then that courage was foolish endurance and not wise endurance. To get out of this paradox, Nicias held that if a courageous person is good, then she is also wise—so if one is courageous and good, then her decisions to stand her ground or run will be wise. Socrates still finds problems with his arguments, first attacking Nicias on the grounds that his definition of courage does not allow for animals to be courageous. Nicias avoids this by saying that animals are fearless, not courageous. Socrates' second attack is that the courage that Nicias is describing is only based on future knowledge of good and evil, whereas a true science would be concerned with the past, the present, and the future good. If courage actually were concerned with all these things, then it would be all of virtue instead of just a part as was agreed before. Nicias seems to feel that this is an important point, whereas I feel that he should argue against the Socratic notion of science.