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Laches

Lys.

You have seen the performance of the man fighting in armour, Nicias and Laches; but my friend Melesias and I did not tell you at the time our reason for requesting you to come and see it with us. However, we will tell you now; for we think we should speak our minds freely to friends like you. Some people, of course, pour ridicule on such appeals, and when consulted for their advice will not say what they think, but something different, making the inquirer's wishes their aim, and speaking against their own judgement. But you, we consider, not merely have the necessary discernment but will give us the benefit of it in telling us just what is in your minds and hence we have enlisted your counsel on the question which we are about to lay before you.

Lys.

Now the matter about which I have made all this long preamble is this: we have two sons here, my friend that one, called Thucydides after his grandfather, and I this one; he also is named in the same way, after my father; we call him Aristeides. Well, we have resolved to give them our most constant care, and not—as most fathers do when their boys begin to be young men [1]—let them run loose as their fancy leads them, but begin forthwith taking every possible care of them. Now, knowing that you too have sons, we thought that you above all men must have concerned yourselves with the question of the kind of upbringing that would make the best of them; and if by any chance you have not given your attention to the subject, we would remind you that it ought not to be neglected, and we invite you to join us in arranging some way of

[1] *μειράκιον* applied to youths from 15 to 21.

taking care of our sons. How we formed this resolve, Nicias and Laches, is worth hearing, even though the story be somewhat long. My friend Melesias and I take our meals together, and our boys share our table. Now, as I said at the beginning of my remarks, we are going to speak quite freely to you. Each of us has many noble deeds of his own father to relate to these young fellows—their numerous achievements both in war and in peace, when they were managing the affairs either of the allies or of this city; but neither of us has any deeds of his own to tell. We cannot help feeling ashamed that our boys should observe this, and we blame our fathers for leaving us to indulge ourselves when we began to be young men, while they looked after other folks' affairs; and we point the moral of it all to these young people, telling them that if they are careless of themselves and will not take our advice they will win no reputation, but if they take due pains they may very likely come to be worthy of the names they bear. Now they, for their part, say they will do as we bid; so we are now considering what lessons or pursuits will lead them to the highest attainable excellence. Someone directed us to this particular accomplishment of fighting in armor, as being an admirable one for a young man to learn; and he praised that man whose performance you were just watching, and then urged us to go and see him. So we decided that it would be well to go and see the man ourselves, and to take you along with us not merely as companions at the show, but also as counsellors and copartners, if you will be so good, in the matter of looking after our sons.

Lys.

That is the question which we wanted to discuss with you. And we look to you now, on your part, to give us your advice, first as to whether you think this accomplishment should be learnt or not, and then as to any other such art or pursuit that you can recommend for a young man; and also, how you feel inclined as regards our partnership.

Nic.

For myself, Lysimachus and Melesias, I highly approve of your purpose, and am ready to lend a hand and I may say the same, I think, for Laches here.

Lach.

Yes, you think truly, Nicias. For that remark which Lysimachus made just now about his father and the father of Melesias was very apposite, in my opinion, not only to them but to us and to all who deal with public affairs: it is practically the rule with them, as he says, to treat

their private concerns, whether connected with children or any thing else, in a slighting, careless spirit. You are quite right in saying that, Lysimachus; but to invite us to be your advisers for the education of your boys, and not to invite Socrates here, is to me very strange, when, to begin with, he is of your district, and then he is always spending his time wherever there is any such excellent study or pursuit for young men as you are seeking.

Lys.

How do you mean, Laches? Has Socrates here given his attention to anything of this sort?

Lach.

To be sure he has, Lysimachus.

Nic.

I too might perhaps be in as good a position as Laches to inform you about that; for quite recently he introduced to myself a music-teacher for my son—Damon, pupil of Agathocles, who is not only the most exquisitely skilled of musicians, but in every other way as profitable a companion as you could wish for young men of that age.

Lys.

It is not possible, Socrates, Nicias, and Laches, for men of my years to continue to know our juniors, because old age makes us spend most of our time at home; but if you, son of Sophroniscus, have any good advice for our friend, who belongs to your own district, you ought to let him have it. And it is only right that you should: for you happen to be our friend through your father he and I were constant companions and friends, and he died without ever having a single difference with me.

Lys.

And a certain recollection comes back to me on hearing what has just been said: for these boys, in talking with each other at home, frequently mention Socrates in terms of high praise; but I have never asked them whether they meant the son of Sophroniscus. Now tell me, my boys, is this the Socrates whose name you have mentioned so often?

Son.

To be sure, father, it is he.

Lys.

On my soul, Socrates, it is good to know that you keep up your father's name, which was a most honorable one, both on general grounds and particularly because of the intimate relation in which you and we shall equally feel ourselves to be.

Lach.

Indeed, Lysimachus, he is a person you must not lose hold of; for I have observed him elsewhere too keeping up not merely his father's but his country's name. He accompanied me in the retreat from Delium, [2] and I assure you that if the rest had chosen to be like him, our city would be holding up her head and would not then have had such a terrible fall.

Lys.

Socrates, this is indeed splendid praise which you are now receiving from men whose word is of great weight, and for such conduct as wins their praise. So let me tell you that I rejoice to hear this and to know you have such a good reputation; and you in return must count me as one of your warmest well-wishers. You ought indeed, on your own part, to have visited us before, and treated us on intimate terms, as you have a right to do: now, however, that we have discovered each other, from to-day onwards you must make a point of sharing our thoughts and getting to know us and our young people also, that you and they may in your turn preserve the friendship of our houses. That, however, you will do yourself, and we will remind you of it another time: but what do you say of the matter on which we began to speak? What is your view? Is the accomplishment of fighting in armor a suitable one for our boys to learn or not?

Soc.

On that matter, Lysimachus, I will do my best to advise you, so far as I can, and also to do all the rest that you so kindly ask. It seems to me, however, most proper that I, being so much younger and less experienced than you and your friends, should first hear what they have to say, and learn of them; and then, if I have anything else to suggest as against their remarks, I might try to explain it and persuade you and them to take my view. Come, Nicias, let one or other of you speak.

Nic.

There is no difficulty about that, Socrates. For in my opinion this accomplishment is in many ways a useful thing for young men to possess.

Nic.

It is good for them, instead of spending their time on the ordinary things to which young men usually give their hours of leisure, to spend it on this, which not only has the necessary effect of improving their bodily health— since it is as good and strenuous as any physical exercise—but is also a form of exercise which, with riding, is

[2] On the coast just north of Attica, where the Athenians were severely defeated by the Boeotians in 424 B.C.

particularly fitting for a free citizen; for only the men trained in the use of these warlike implements can claim to be trained in the contest whereof we are athletes and in the affairs wherein we are called upon to contend. [3] Further, this accomplishment will be of some benefit also in actual battle, when it comes to fighting in line with a number of other men; but its greatest advantage will be felt when the ranks are broken, and you find you must fight man to man, either in pursuing someone who is trying to beat off your attack, or in retreating yourself and beating off the attack of another. Whoever possessed this accomplishment could come to no harm so long as he had but one to deal with, nor yet, perhaps, if he had several; it would give him an advantage in any situation. Moreover, it is a thing which impels one to desire another noble accomplishment; for everyone who has learnt how to fight in armor will desire to learn the accomplishment which comes next, the management of troops; and when he has got that and once taken a pride in his work he will push on to attain the whole art of generalship. It is evident already that all accomplishments and pursuits in the military sphere are both honourable and valuable to a man, either in acquisition or in practice; and this particular one may well be an introduction to them. And we can make this addition—no slight one—to its claims, that this science will make any man individually a great deal bolder and braver in war. Nor let us disdain to mention, even though some may think it a rather slight matter, that it will give him a smarter appearance in the place where a man should look smartest, and where at the same time he will appear more terrible to the enemy because of his smartness. So my opinion is, Lysimachus, as I say, that we ought to teach this skill to our young men, and I have told you my reasons for so thinking. But if Laches has a different view to state, I shall be as glad as anyone to hear it.

Lach.

Well, Nicias, I am loth to say of any sort of accomplishment that it ought not to be learnt; for it seems good to know all things. And besides, if this skill in arms is an accomplishment, as they say who teach it, and as Nicias terms it, it ought to be learnt; while if it is not an accomplishment, and those who promise to give it are deceiving us, or if it is an accomplishment, but not a very important one, what can be the good of learning it?

Lach.

I speak of it in this way from the following point of view: I conceive

[3] i.e., in regular warfare.

that if there were anything in it, it would not have been overlooked by the Lacedaemonians, whose only concern in life is to seek out and practise whatever study or pursuit will give them an advantage over others in war. And if they have overlooked it, at any rate these teachers of it cannot have overlooked the obvious fact that the Lacedaemonians are more intent on such matters than any of the Greeks, and that anybody who won honour among them for this art would amass great riches elsewhere, just as a tragic poet does who has won honor among us. And for this reason he who thinks himself a good writer of tragedy does not tour round with his show in a circuit of the outlying Attic towns, but makes a straight line for this place and exhibits to our people, as one might expect. But I notice that these fighters in armour regard Lacedaemon as holy ground where none may tread, and do not step on it even with the tips of their toes, but circle round it and prefer to exhibit to any other people, especially to those who would themselves admit that they were inferior to many in the arts of war. Furthermore, Lysimachus, I have come across more than a few of these persons in actual operations, and I can see their quality. Indeed, we can estimate it offhand: for, as though it were of set purpose, not one of these experts in arms has ever yet distinguished himself in war. And yet in all the other arts, the men who have made a name are to be found among those who have specially pursued one or other of them; while these persons, apparently, stand out from the rest in this particularly hapless fate of their profession. Why, this man Stesilaus, whom you watched with me in that great crowd as he gave his performance and spoke in those high terms of himself before us, I have watched elsewhere giving a finer entertainment in the form of a very real display that he made against his will. The ship on which he was serving struck a transport vessel, and he was using in the fight a combination of a scythe and a spear—a remarkable weapon that suited so remarkable a man. Well, the story of this fellow's doings is hardly of enough interest in the main, but you must hear the upshot of his device of a scythe fixed to a spear. As he was fighting, it stuck somehow in the other ship's rigging, and held fast; so Stesilaus pulled at it in the hope of getting it free, but he could not, and the ships were passing by each other.

Lach.

For the first moments he ran along in his ship holding on to his spear; but as the other ship sheered off from his and drew him after, still holding the spear, he let it slip through his hand until he gripped the butt-end of the shaft. From the crew of the transport there came

laughter and clapping at his posture, and when someone aimed a stone at him which hit the deck near his feet, and he let go the spear, the troops on the warship in their turn could no longer restrain their laughter, as they saw the notable scythe-spear dangling from the transport. Now, there may perhaps be something in this art of theirs, as Nicias argues, but at any rate that is my impression of it, in the cases I have met with. Hence, as I said at the beginning, whether it be an accomplishment, and one of but little use, or not an accomplishment, but only supposed and pretended to be such, it is not worth the trouble of learning it. For indeed I hold that if a man who was a coward believed that he possessed it, his only gain would be in rashness, which would make his true nature the more conspicuous; while if he were brave, people would be on the look-out for even the slightest mistake on his part, and he would incur much grievous slander; for the pretension to such skill arouses jealousy, so that unless a man be prodigiously superior to the rest in valor he cannot by any means escape being made a laughing-stock through professing to be so skilled. Such is my opinion, Lysimachus, of the interest taken in this accomplishment; but do as I told you at the beginning; you are not to let our friend Socrates go, but must request him to advise us according to his judgement on the matter in hand.

Lys.

Well, I ask it of you, Socrates: for indeed our members of council, as it were, seem to me to need someone who will decide between them. Had these two agreed, we should not have required this help so much; but as it is—for Laches, you see, has voted on the opposite side to Nicias—it is as well that we should hear your view and see on which side you cast your vote.

Soc.

What, Lysimachus? Are you going to join the side which gets the approval of the majority of us?

Lys.

Why, what can one do, Socrates?

Soc.

And you too, Melesias, would do the same? Suppose you had a consultation as to what your son's exercise should be for a coming contest, would you be guided by the majority of us, or by the one who happened to have trained and exercised under a good master?

Mel.

By the latter, naturally, Socrates.

Soc.

Would you be guided by him alone rather than the four of us?

Mel.

Very likely.

Soc.

Yes, for a question must be decided by knowledge, and not by numbers, if it is to have a right decision.

Mel.

To be sure.

Soc.

Then in this case also we must first consider, in particular, whether anyone among us has expert skill in the subject of our consultation, or not; and if here is one who has, we must be guided by him, though he be but one, and pass over the rest; while if there is not, we must look for somebody else. Or do you think it a slight matter that you and Lysimachus have now at stake, and not that which is really your greatest possession? For I take it that according as the sons turn out well or the opposite will the whole life of their father's house be affected, depending for better or worse on their character.

Mel.

Truly spoken.

Soc.

So it demands much forethought from us.

Mel.

Certainly.

Soc.

How then—to take the case I suggested just now—should we set to work if we wanted to consider which of us was the most expert in regard to a contest? Should we not pick him who had learnt and practised, and had also had good teachers of this particular skill?

Mel.

I think so.

Soc.

And even before that, we should ask what was this skill of which we are looking for the teachers?

Mel.

How do you mean?

Soc.

Perhaps it will be more easily grasped in this form. I think we have not started with an agreement between us as to what the thing is about which we are consulting, in this question of who among us is an expert and to this end has resorted to teachers, and who not.

Nic.

Why, Socrates, is it not fighting in armor that we are considering, and whether it is a thing to be learnt by young men or not?

Soc.

Of course, Nicias; but when someone considers whether a medicine is to be used as an eyesalve or not, do you think that this consultation is about the medicine or about the eyes?

Nic.

About the eyes.

Soc.

And when one considers whether a horse is to be bridled or not, and at what time, I presume one takes counsel about the horse, and not about the bridle?

Nic.

True.

Soc.

And in a word, when one considers a thing for any purpose, the consulting is in fact about the end one had in view to start with, and not about the means to be used for such end.

Nic.

Necessarily.

Soc.

So we must consider our adviser too, and ask ourselves whether he is a skilled expert in the treatment required for the end which is the subject of our consideration.

Nic.

Certainly.

Soc.

And we say that our present subject is an accomplishment studied for the sake of young men's souls?

Nic.

Yes.

Soc.

So what we have to consider is whether one of us is skilled in treatment of the soul, and is able to treat it rightly, and which of us has had good teachers.

Lach.

But I say, Socrates, have you never noticed how some people have become more skilled in certain things without teachers than others with them?

Soc.

Yes, I have, Laches; people, that is, whom you would not care to trust on their mere statement that they were good practitioners, unless they could put forward some example of their personal skill—some work well carried out— not in one only, but several cases.

Lach.

That is truly spoken.

Soc.

We also, therefore, Laches and Nicias—since Lysimachus and Melesias have invited us to a consultation on their sons, whose souls they are anxious to have as good as possible—should bring to their notice what teachers we have had, if we say that we have any to mention, who being themselves good to begin with, and having treated the souls of many young people, taught us also in due course and are known to have done so. Or if any of ourselves says he has had no teacher, but has however some works of his own to speak of, and can point out to us what Athenians or strangers, either slaves or freemen, are acknowledged to owe their goodness to him, let him do so. But if there is nothing of the sort to be found amongst us, let us bid them look elsewhere; for we cannot run a risk with our good friends' children where we may ruin them, and so bring upon us the most grievous of accusations from our nearest and dearest. Now I, Lysimachus and Melesias, am the first to avow that I have had no teacher in this respect; and yet I have longed for such lessons from my youth up. But I have not the means to pay fees to the sophists, who were the only persons that professed to be able to make me a complete gentleman; and to this moment I remain powerless to discover the art myself. But I should not be surprised if Nicias or Laches has discovered or learnt it: for they have more means at their command to enable them to learn from others, and they are also older, and have had time to discover it. Indeed, I regard them as able to educate a man; for they would never declare their minds so freely on pursuits that are beneficial or harmful to a youth unless they felt confident that they had the requisite knowledge. And I have entire confidence in them myself, except that I wondered at their differing from each other. I therefore make this counter-request of you, Lysimachus: just as Laches urged you a moment ago not to release me but to ask me questions, so I now call upon you not to release Laches or Nicias, but to question them in these terms:

"Socrates says that he has no understanding of the matter, and that he is not competent to decide which of your statements is true; that he has never been either a discoverer or a learner of anything of the sort."

Soc.

"But you, Laches and Nicias, are each to tell us who is the cleverest person you have heard on the upbringing of youth; whether you have knowledge of it by learning from someone or by discovering it yourselves; and if you learnt it, who were your teachers respectively, and what other colleagues they had: in order that, if you are not at leisure through the demands of public business, we may go to them and induce them either with gifts or good turns or with both to undertake the care of our and your children together, and so prevent them from turning out knaves and disgracing their ancestors. But if you have made the grand discovery yourselves, give us an instance to show what other persons you have succeeded in changing, by your care of them, from knaves to honest gentlemen. For if you are now going to make your first attempt at educating, you must beware lest you try your experiment, not on a "corpus vile", [4] but on your sons and the children of your friends, and you prove to be a mere case, as the proverbial saying has it, of starting pottery on a wine-jar. [5] So tell us what you claim, or do not claim, as your resources and acquirements in this kind." There, Lysimachus, demand that from these good persons, and do not let them off.

Lys.

To my mind, good sirs, these remarks of Socrates are excellent: but it is for you, Nicias and Laches, to decide for yourselves whether it suits you to be questioned and offer some explanation on such points. For I and Melesias here would certainly be delighted if you would consent to expound in detail all that Socrates puts to you in his questions: as I began by saying at the outset, we invited you to consult with us just because we thought, very naturally, that you had given serious consideration to this kind of thing, especially as your boys, like ours, are almost of an age to be educated. Accordingly, if it is all the same to you, discuss it now by joint inquiry with Socrates, exchanging view's with him in turn: for it is a particularly good remark of his that we are consulting now about the greatest of all our concerns. Come, see if you consider that this is the proper course to take.

Nic.

Lysimachus, it looks to me, in very truth, as though you only knew Socrates at second hand— through his father—and had not conversed

[4] Lit. on the Carian slave.

[5] i.e., on a large instead of small piece of work, in which a beginner's mistake would be less costly. Cf. *Gorg.* 514 E.

with him personally except in his childhood, when you may have chanced to meet him among the people of his district, accompanying his father at the temple or at some local gathering. But you have evidently not yet had to do with him since he has reached maturer years.

Lys.

How are you so sure of that, Nicias?

Nic.

You strike me as not being aware that, whoever comes into close contact with Socrates and has any talk with him face to face, is bound to be drawn round and round by him in the course of the argument—though it may have started at first on a quite different theme—and cannot stop until he is led into giving an account of himself, of the manner in which he now spends his days, and of the kind of life he has lived hitherto; and when once he has been led into that, Socrates will never let him go until he has thoroughly and properly put all his ways to the test. Now I am accustomed to him, and so I know that one is bound to be thus treated by him, and further, that I myself shall certainly get the same treatment also. For I delight, Lysimachus, in conversing with the man, and see no harm in our being reminded of any past or present misdoing: nay, one must needs take more careful thought for the rest of one's life, if one does not fly from his words but is willing, as Solon said,"I grow old learning ever more and more;"*Solon Fr. 10* [6] and zealous to learn as long as one lives, and does not expect to get good sense by the mere arrival of old age. So to me there is nothing unusual, or unpleasant either, in being tried and tested by Socrates; in fact, I knew pretty well all the time that our argument would not be about the boys if Socrates were present, but about ourselves. Let me therefore repeat that there is no objection on my part to holding a debate with Socrates after the fashion that he likes; but you must see how Laches here feels on the matter.

Lach.

I have but a single mind, [7] Nicias, in regard to discussions, or if you like, a double rather than a single one. For you might think me a lover, and yet also a hater, of discussions: for when I hear a man discussing virtue or any kind of wisdom, one who is truly a man and worthy of his argument, I am exceedingly delighted; I take the speaker and his

[6] *γηράσκω δ' αἰεὶ πολλὰ διδασκόμενος*. See below, 189a.

[7] Laches plays with the two meaning of *ἁπλοῦν*—"I am single-minded (simple, straightforward) in such matters, that is, I should rather say, double-minded."

speech together, and observe how they sort and harmonize with each other. Such a man is exactly what I understand by "musical,"—he has tuned himself with the fairest harmony, not that of a lyre or other entertaining instrument, but has made a true concord of his own life between his words and his deeds, not in the Ionian, no, nor in the Phrygian nor in the Lydian, but simply in the Dorian mode, [8] which is the sole Hellenic harmony. Such a man makes me rejoice with his utterance, and anyone would judge me then a lover of discussion, so eagerly do I take in what he says: but a man who shows the opposite character gives me pain, and the better he seems to speak, the more I am pained, with the result, in this case, that I am judged a hater of discussion.

Lach.

Now of Socrates' words I have no experience, but formerly, I fancy, I have made trial of his deeds; and there I found him living up to any fine words however freely spoken. So if he has that gift as well, his wish is mine, and I should be very glad to be cross-examined by such a man, and should not chafe at learning; but I too agree with Solon, while adding just one word to his saying: I should like, as I grow old, to learn more and more, but only from honest folk. Let him concede to me that my teacher is himself good—else I shall dislike my lessons and be judged a dunce—but if you say that my teacher is to be a younger man, or one who so far has no reputation, or anything of that sort, I care not a jot. I therefore invite you, Socrates, both to teach and to refute me as much as you please, and to learn too what I on my part know; such is the position you hold in my eyes since that day on which you came through the same danger with me, [9] and gave a proof of your own valour which is to be expected of anyone who hopes to justify his good name. So say whatever you like, leaving out of account the difference of our ages.

Soc.

You two, it seems, will give us no bound for complaint on the score of your not being ready to join both in advising and in inquiring.

Lys.

No, but the matter now rests with us, Socrates; for I venture to count

[8] The different modes or scales in Greek music were associated with different moral feelings. The Dorian was most favored, as having a manly, stately character: the Ionian was more passionate and contentious. The Phrygian and Lydian were foreign modes, on the character of which there were various opinions. *Cf. Rep.* 398-99

[9] This instance of Socrates' intrepidity (at Delium cf. above, 181b) is more fully described by Alcibiades in *Plat. Sym. 221.*

you as one of us. So take my place in inquiring on behalf of the young men make out what it is that we want our friends here to tell us, and be our adviser by discussing it with them. For I find that owing to my age I forget the questions I intend to put, and also the answers I receive; and if the discussion changes in the middle, my memory goes altogether. Do you therefore discuss and elucidate our problem among yourselves; and I will listen, and then with my friend Melesias I will act at once upon whatever may be your decision.

Soc.

Let us do, Nicias and Laches, as Lysimachus and Melesias bid us. Now the questions that we attempted to consider a while ago—"Who have been our teachers in this sort of training? What other persons have we made better?"—are perhaps of a kind on which we might well examine ourselves: but I believe this other way of inquiring leads to the same thing, and will probably also start more from the beginning. For if we happen to know of such and such a thing that by being joined to another thing it makes this thing better, and further, if we are able to get the one joined to the other, we obviously know the thing itself on which we might be consulting as to how it might be best and most easily acquired. Now I daresay you do not grasp my meaning. Well, you will grasp it more easily in this way.

Soc.

If we happen to know that sight joined to eyes makes those eyes the better for it, and further if we are able to get it joined to eyes, we obviously know what this faculty of sight is, on which we might be consulting as to how it might be best and most easily acquired. For if we did not know first of all what sight or hearing is, we should hardly prove ourselves consultants or physicians of credit in the matter of eyes or ears, and the best way of acquiring sight or hearing.

Lach.

Truly spoken, Socrates.

Soc.

And you know, Laches, at this moment our two friends are inviting us to a consultation as to the way in which virtue may be joined to their sons' souls, and so make them better?

Lach.

Yes, indeed,

Soc.

Then our first requisite is to know what virtue [10] is? For surely, if we

[10]Here, and in what follows, "virtue" embraces the accomplishments and excel-

had no idea at all what virtue actually is, we could not possibly consult with anyone as to how he might best acquire it?

Lach.

I certainly think not, Socrates.

Soc.

Then we say, Laches, that we know what it is.

Lach.

I suppose we must.

Soc.

And of that which we know, I presume, we can also say what it is.

Lach.

To be sure.

Soc.

Let us not, therefore, my good friend, inquire forthwith about the whole of virtue, since that may well be too much for us; but let us first see ifwe are sufficiently provided with knowledge about some part of it. In all likelihood this will make our inquiry easier.

Lach.

Yes, let us do as you propose, Socrates.

Soc.

Then which of the parts of virtue shall we choose? Clearly, I think, that which the art of fighting in armor is supposed to promote; and that, of course, is generally supposed to be courage, is it not?

Lach.

Yes, it generally is, to be sure.

Soc.

Then let our first endeavor be, Laches, to say what courage is: after that we can proceed to inquire in what way our young men may obtain it, in so far as it is to be obtained by means of pursuits and studies. Come, try and tell me, as I suggest, what is courage.

Lach.

On my word, Socrates, that is nothing difficult: anyone who is willing to stay at his post and face the enemy, and does not run away, you may be sure, is courageous.

Soc.

Rightly spoken, Laches; but I fear I am to blame, by not putting it clearly, for your having answered not the intention of my question, but something else.

Lach.

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lences of a good citizen.

What do you mean by that, Socrates?

Soc.

I will explain, so far as I can: let us take that man to be courageous who, as you describe him yourself, stays at his post and fights the enemy.

Lach.

I, for one, agree to that.

Soc.

Yes, and I do too. But what of this other kind of man, who fights the enemy while fleeing, and not staying?

Lach.

How fleeing?

Soc.

Well, as the Scythians are said to fight, as much fleeing as pursuing; and as you know Homer says in praise of Aeneas' horses, that they knew "how to pursue and to flee in fright full swiftly this way and that way;" *Hom. Il. 8.107-108* and he glorifies Aeneas himself for this very knowledge of fright, calling him "prompter of fright." *Hom. Il. 8.107-108* [11]

Lach.

And very properly too, Socrates; for he was speaking of chariots; and so are you speaking of the mode of the Scythian horsemen. That is the way of cavalry fighting but with men-at-arms it is as I state it. [12]

Soc.

Except, perhaps, Laches, in the case of the Spartans. For they say that at Plataea, when the Spartans came up to the men with wicker shields, they were not willing to stand and fight against these, but fled; when, however, the Persian ranks weree broken, the Spartans kept turning round and fighting like cavalry, and so won that great battle. [13]

Lach.

What you say is true.

Soc.

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[11] Socrates pretends to take the hero's epithet "prompter of fright" (in the enemy) as meaning that he prompted fright in himself and his side, and so know all about the feeling.

[12] i.e., they stand fast at their posts in the ranks (above, 191 A).

[13] In the final struggle at Plataea (479 B.C.) the Spartans at first hesitated before the barrier of wicker shields opposed to them by the Persians; but by a supreme effort they broke through and defeated the Persians by turning on them in man-to-man combat. *Cf.* Herod. ix. 61-2.

And so this is what I meant just now by sayng that I was to blame for your wrong answer, by putting my question wrongly. For I wanted to have your view not only of brave men-at-arms, but also of courage in cavalry and in the entire warrior class; and of the courageous not only in war but in the perils of the sea, and all who in disease and poverty, or again in public affairs, are courageous; and further, all who are not merely courageous against pain or fear, but doughty fighters against desires and pleasures, whether standing their ground or turning back upon the foe—for I take it, Laches, there are courageous people in all these kinds.

Lach.

Very much so, Socrates.

Soc.

Then all these are courageous, only some have acquired courage in pleasures, some in pains, some in desires and some in fears, while others, I conceive, have acquired cowardice in these same things.

Lach.

To be sure.

Soc.

What either of them [14] is—that is what I wanted to know. So try again, and tell me first what is this thing, courage, which is the same in all of these cases; or do you still not comprehend my meaning?

Lach.

Not very well.

Soc.

I mean in this way: suppose, for instance, I were asking you what is quickness, as we find it in running and harping, in speaking and learning, and in many other activities, and as possessed by us practically in any action worth mentioning, whether of arms or legs, or mouth or voice, or mind: or do you not use the word so?

Lach.

Yes, to be sure.

Soc.

Well then, suppose someone asked me: Socrates, what do you mean by this thing which in all cases you term quickness? My reply would be: The faculty that gets a great deal done in a little time is what I call quickness, whether in a voice or in a race or in any of the other instances.

[14] i.e., courage and cowardice

Lach.
Your statement would be quite correct.
Soc.
So now try and tell me on your part, Laches, about courage in the same way: what faculty is it, the same whether in pleasure or in pain or in any of the things in which we said just now it was to be found, that has been singled out by the name of courage?
Lach.
Well then, I take it to be a certain endurance of the soul, if I am to speak of the natural quality that appears in them all.
Soc.
Why, of course we must, if we are each to answer the other's actual question. Now it appears to me that by no means all endurance, as I conceive it, can appear to you to be courage. And my grounds for thinking so are these: I am almost certain, Laches, that you rank courage among the nobler qualities.
Lach.
Nay, among the noblest, you may be quite certain.
Soc.
And endurance joined with wisdom is noble and good?
Lach.
Very much so.
Soc.
But what of it when joined with folly? Is it not, on the contrary, hurtful and mischievous?
Lach.
Yes.
Soc.
And can you say that such a thing is noble, when it is both mischievous and hurtful?
Lach.
Not with any justice, Socrates.
Soc.
Then you will not admit that such an endurance is courage, seeing that it is not noble, whereas courage is a noble quality.
Lach.
That is true.
Soc.
So, by your account, wise endurance will be courage.
Lach.
Apparently.

Soc.

Now let us see in what it is wise. In all things, whether great or small? For instance, if a man endures in spending money wisely, because he knows that by spending he will gain more, would you call him courageous?

Lach.

On my word, not I.

Soc.

Or what do you call it in the case of a doctor who, when his son or anyone else is suffering from inflammation of the lungs and begs for something to drink or eat, inflexibly and enduringly refuses?

Lach.

That is no case of it, in any sense, either.

Soc.

Well now, when a man endures in war, and is willing to fight, on a wise calculation whereby he knows that others will come to his aid, and that the forces against him will be fewer and feebler than those who are with him, and when he has besides the advantage of position,—would you say of this man, if he endures with such wisdom and preparation, that he, or a man in the opposing army who is willing to stand up against him and endure, is the more courageous?

Lach.

The man opposed to him, I should say, Socrates.

Soc.

But yet his endurance is more foolish than that of the first man.

Lach.

That is true.

Soc.

So you would say that he who in a cavalry fight endures with a knowledge of horsemanship is less courageous than he who endures without it.

Lach.

Yes, I think so.

Soc.

And he who endures with a skill in slinging or shooting or other such art.

Lach.

To be sure.

Soc.

And anyone who agrees to descend into a well, and to dive, and to endure in this or other such action, without being an adept in these things, you would say is more courageous than the adepts.

Lach.

Yes, for what else can one say, Socrates?

Soc.

Nothing, provided one thinks so.

Lach.

But I do think it.

Soc.

And you observe, I suppose, Laches, that persons of this sort are more foolish in their risks and endurances than those who do it with proper skill.

Lach.

Evidently.

Soc.

Now, we found before that foolish boldness and endurance are base and hurtful?

Lach.

Quite so.

Soc.

But courage was admitted to be something noble.

Lach.

Yes, it was.

Soc.

Whereas now, on the contrary, we say that this base thing—foolish endurance—is courage.

Lach.

Apparently.

Soc.

Then do you think our statement is correct?

Lach.

On my word, Socrates, not I.

Soc.

Hence I presume that, on your showing, you and I, Laches, are not tuned to the Dorian harmony: for our deeds do not accord with our words. By our deeds, most likely, the world might judge us to have our share of courage, but not by our words, I fancy, if they should hear the way we are talking now.

Lach.

That is very true.

Soc.
Well now, does it seem right that we should be in such a condition?
Lach.
Not by any means.
Soc.
Then do you mind if we accept our statement to a certain point?
Lach.
To what point do you mean, and what statement?

Soc.
That which enjoins endurance. And, if you please, let us too be steadfast and enduring in our inquiry, so as not to be ridiculed by courage herself for failing to be courageous in our search for her, when we might perchance find after all that this very endurance is courage.
Lach.
For my part I am ready, Socrates, to continue without faltering; and yet I am unaccustomed to discussions of this sort. But a certain ambitious ardour has got hold of me at hearing what has been said, and I am truly vexed at finding myself unable to express offhand what I think. For I feel that I conceive in thought what courage is, but somehow or other she has given me the slip for the moment, so that I fail to lay hold of her in speech and state what she is.
Soc.
Well, my dear sir, the good huntsman must follow the hounds and not give up the chase.
Lach.
Yes, indeed, by all means.
Soc.
Then do you agree to our inviting Nicias here to join in our hunt? He may be more resourceful than we are.
Lach.
I agree, of course.
Soc.
Come now, Nicias, and use what powers you have to assist your friends, who are caught in a storm of argument and are quite perplexed. You see the perplexity of our case; you must now tell us what you think courage is, and so at once set us free from our perplexity and give your own thoughts the stability of speech.
Nic.
Well, for some time I have been thinking, Socrates, that you two are

not defining courage in the right way; for you are not acting upon an admirable remark which I have formerly heard you make.

Soc.

What is that, Nicias?

Nic.

I have often heard you say that every man is good in that wherein he is wise, and bad in that wherein he is unlearned.

Soc.

Well, that is true, Nicias, I must say.

Nic.

And hence, if the brave man is good, clearly he must be wise.

Soc.

Do you hear him, Laches?

Lach.

I do, without understanding very well what he says.

Soc.

But I think I understand it: our friend appears to me to mean that courage is a kind of wisdom.

Lach.

What kind of wisdom, Socrates?

Soc.

Well, will you put that question to your friend here?

Lach.

I do.

Soc.

Come now, tell him, Nicias, what kind of wisdom courage may be, by your account. Not that, I presume, of flute-playing.

Nic.

Not at all.

Soc.

Nor yet that of harping.

Nic.

Oh, no.

Soc.

But what is this knowledge then, or of what?

Lach.

I must say you question him quite correctly, Socrates, so let him just tell us what he thinks it is.

Nic.

I say, Laches, that it is this—the knowledge of what is to be dreaded or dared, either in war or in anything else.

Lach.

How strangely he talks, Socrates!

Soc.

What is it that makes you say that, Laches?

Lach.

What is it? Why, surely wisdom is distinct from courage.

Soc.

Well, Nicias denies that.

Lach.

He does indeed, to be sure: that is where he just babbles.

Soc.

Then let us instruct and not abuse him.

Nic.

No, it seems to me, Socrates, that Laches wants to have it proved that I am talking nonsense, because he was proved a moment ago to be in the same case himself.

Lach.

Quite so, Nicias, and I will try to make it evident. You are talking nonsense: for instance, do not doctors know what is to be dreaded in disease? Or do you suppose that the courageous know this? Or do you call doctors courageous

Nic.

No, not at all.

Lach.

Nor, I fancy, farmers either. And yet they, I presume, know what is to be dreaded in farming, and every other skilled worker knows what is to be dreaded and dared in his own craft; but they are none the more courageous for that.

Soc.

What is Laches saying, in your opinion, Nicias? There does seem to be something in it.

Nic.

Yes, there is something, only it is not true.

Soc.

How so?

Nic.

Because he thinks that doctors know something more, in treating sick persons, than how to tell what is healthy and what diseased. This, I imagine, is all that they know: but to tell whether health itself is to be dreaded by anyone rather than sickness, —do you suppose, Laches, that this is within a doctor's knowledge? Do you not think that for

many it is better that they should never arise from their bed of sickness? Pray tell me, do you say that in every case it is better to live? Is it not often preferable to be dead?

Lach.

I do think that is so.

Nic.

And do you think that the same things are to be dreaded by those who were better dead, as by those who had better live?

Lach.

No, I do not.

Nic.

Well, do you attribute the judgement of this matter to doctors or to any other skilled worker except him who has knowledge of what is to be dreaded and what is not—the man whom I call courageous?

Soc.

Do you comprehend his meaning, Laches?

Lach.

I do: it seems to be the seers whom he calls the courageous: for who else can know for which of us it is better to be alive than dead? And yet, Nicias, do you avow yourself to be a seer, or to be neither a seer nor courageous?

Nic.

What! Is it now a seer, think you, who has the gift of judging what is to be dreaded and what to be dared?

Lach.

That is my view: who else could it be?

Nic.

Much rather the man of whom I speak, my dear sir: for the seer's business is to judge only the signs of what is yet to come—whether a man is to meet with death or disease or loss of property, or victory or defeat in war or some other contest; but what is better among these things for a man to suffer or avoid suffering, can surely be no more for a seer to decide than for anyone else in the world.

Lach.

Well, I fail to follow him, Socrates, or to see what he is driving at; for he points out that neither a seer nor a doctor nor anybody else is the man he refers to as the courageous, unless perchance he means it is some god. Now it appears to me that Nicias is unwilling to admit honestly that he has no meaning at all, but dodges this way and that in the hope of concealing his own perplexity. Why, you and I could have dodged in the same way just now, if we wished to avoid the appearance

of contradicting ourselves. Of course, if we were arguing in a law-court, there would be some reason for so doing; but here, in a meeting like this of ours, why waste time in adorning oneself with empty words?

Soc.

I agree that it is out of place, Laches: but let us see: perhaps Nicias thinks he does mean something, and is not talking just for the sake of talking. So let us ask him to explain more clearly what is in his mind; and if we find that he means something, we will agree with him; if not, we will instruct him.

Lach.

Then, Socrates, if you would like to ask him, please do so: I daresay I have done enough asking.

Soc.

Well, I see no objection, since the question will be on behalf of us both.

Lach.

Very well, then.

Soc.

Now tell me, Nicias, or rather, tell us—for Laches and I are sharing the argument between us—do you say that courage is knowledge of what is to be dreaded or dared?

Nic.

I do.

Soc.

And that it is not every man that knows it, since neither a doctor nor a seer can know it, and cannot be courageous unless he add this particular knowledge to his own? This was your statement, was it not?

Nic.

Yes, it was.

Soc.

And so in fact this is not a thing which, as the proverb says,

"any pig would know"; and thus a pig cannot be courageous.

Nic.

I think not.

Soc.

Indeed it is obvious, Nicias, that you at least do not believe that even the Crommyonian sow [15] could have been courageous. I say this not in jest, but because I conceive it is necessary for him who states this theory to refuse courage to any wild beast, or else to admit that a

[15]The fierce moster slain by Theseus in the region between Corinth and Megara before he became the hero of Attica.

beast like a lion or a leopard or even a boar is so wise as to know what only a few men know because it is so hard to perceive. Why, he who subscribes to your account of courage must needs agree that a lion, a stag, a bull, and a monkey have all an equal share of courage in their nature.

Lach.

Heavens, Socrates, how admirably you argue! Now answer us sincerely, Nicias, and say whether those animals, which we all admit to be courageous, are wiser than we are; or whether you dare, in contradiction of everyone else, describe them as not even courageous.

Nic.

No, Laches, I do not describe animals, or anything else that from thoughtlessness has no fear of the dreadful, as courageous, but rather as fearless and foolish. Or do you suppose I describe all children as courageous, that have no fear because they are thoughtless? I rather hold that the fearless and the courageous are not the same thing. In my opinion very few people are endowed with courage and forethought, while rashness, boldness, and fearlessness, with no forethought to guide it, are found in a great number of men, women, children, and animals. So you see, the acts that you and most people call courageous, I call rash, and it is the prudent acts which I speak of that are courageous.

Lach.

Mark you, Socrates, how finely, as he fancies, my friend decks himself out with his words! And how he attempts to deprive of the distinction of courage those whom everyone admits to be courageous!

Nic.

I am not referring to you, Laches, so do not be fiightened: for I grant that you, and Lamachus also, are wise, since you are courageous, and I say the same of numerous other Athenians.

Lach.

I will not say what I could say in answer to that, lest you call me a true son of Aexone. [16]

Soc.

No, say nothing, Laches: for in fact you seem to me to have failed to perceive that he has acquired his wisdom from Damon, our good friend; and Damon constantly associates with Prodicus, who is supposed to be the cleverest of the sophists at distinguishing terms like these.

Lach.

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[16] A deme or district of Attica, noted for the abusive wit of its people.

Yes, for it is more suitable, Socrates, for a sophist to make a show of such refinements than for a man whom the State thinks worthy to govern her.

Soc.

Indeed it is suitable, I presume, my amiable friend, for a man in the highest seat of government to be gifted with the highest degree of wisdom. But it seems to me that Nicias is worthy of further attention, so that we may learn in what connexion he uses this word "courage."

Lach.

Then attend to him yourself, Socrates.

Soc.

That is what I propose to do, my good sir: still, you are not to think that I will release you from your due share of the argument. No, you must put your mind to it and join in weighing well what is said.

Lach.

Well, so be it, if you think that I ought.

Soc.

Indeed I do. Now, Nicias, please go back to the beginning [17] and answer us: you know we started our discussion by considering courage as a part of virtue?

Nic.

Quite so.

Soc.

And you joined in this answer,—that it is a part, there being also other parts, which taken all together have received the name of virtue.

Nic.

Why, of course.

Soc.

Now, do you mean the same as I do by these? Besides courage, I refer to temperance, justice, and other similar qualities. And you also, do you not?

Nic.

Certainly I do.

Soc.

So much for that; thus far we agree: but let us pass on to what is to be dreaded and what to be dared, and make sure that you and we do not take two different views of these. Let me tell you our view of them, and if you do not agree with it, you shall instruct us. We hold that the dreadful are things that cause fear, and the safely ventured are those

[17] Cf. 190 c.

that do not; and fear is caused not by past or present, but by expected evils: for fear is expectation of coming evil. You are of the same mind with us in this, are you not, Laches?

Lach.

Yes, entirely so, Socrates.

Soc.

So there you have our view, Nicias,—that coming evils are to be dreaded, and things not evil, or good things, that are to come are to be safely dared. Would you describe them in this way, or in some other?

Nic.

I would describe them in this way.

Soc.

And the knowledge of these things is what you term courage?

Nic.

Precisely.

Soc.

There is still a third point on which we must see if you are in agreement with us.

Nic.

What point is that?

Soc.

I will tell you. It seems to your friend and me that, to take the various subjects of knowledge, there is not one knowledge of how a thing has happened in the past, another of how things are happening in the present, and another of how a thing that has not yet happened might or will happen most favorably in the future, but it is the same knowledge throughout. For example, in the case of health, it is medicine always and alone that surveys present, past, and future processes alike; and farming is in the same position as regards the productions of the earth.

Soc.

And in matters of war; I am sure you yourselves will bear me out when I say that here generalship makes the best forecasts on the whole, and particularly of future results, and is the mistress rather than the servant of the seer's art, because it knows better what is happening or about to happen in the operations of war; whence the law ordains that the general shall give orders to the seer, and not the seer to the general. May we say this, Laches?

Lach.

We may.

Soc.

Well now, do you agree with us, Nicias, that the same knowledge has comprehension of the same things, whether future, present, or past?

Nic.

I do, for that is my own opinion, Socrates.

Soc.

And courage, my good friend, is knowledge of what is to be dreaded and dared, as you say, do you not?

Nic.

Yes.

Soc.

And things to be dreaded and things to be dared have been admitted to be either future goods or future evils?

Nic.

Certainly.

Soc.

And the same knowledge is concerned with the same things, whether in the future or in any particular stage?

Nic.

That is so.

Soc.

Then courage is knowledge not merely of what is to be dreaded and what dared, for it comprehends goods and evils not merely in the future, but also in the present and the past and in any stage, like the other kinds of knowledge.

Nic.

Apparently.

Soc.

So the answer that you gave us, Nicias, covers only about a third part of courage; whereas our question was of what courage is as a whole. And now it appears, on your own showing, that courage is knowledge not merely of what is to be dreaded and what dared, but practically a knowledge concerning all goods and evils at every stage; such is your present account of what courage must be. What do you say to this new version, Nicias?

Nic.

I accept it, Socrates.

Soc.

Now do you think, my excellent friend, there could be anything wanting to the virtue of a man who knew all good things, and all about their production in the present, the future, and the past, and all about evil things likewise? Do you suppose that such a man could be lacking

in temperance, or justice, and holiness, when he alone has the gift of taking due precaution, in his dealings with gods and men, as regards what is to be dreaded and what is not, and of procuring good things, owing to his knowledge of the right behaviour towards them?

Nic.

I think, Socrates, there is something in what you say.

Soc.

Hence what you now describe, Nicias, will be not a part but the whole of virtue.

Nic.

Apparently.

Soc.

But, you know, we said that courage is one of the parts of virtue.

Nic.

Yes, we did.

Soc.

And what we now describe is seen to be different.

Nic.

So it seems.

Soc.

Thus we have failed to discover, Nicias, what courage really is.

Nic.

Evidently.

Lach.

And I, in fact, supposed, my dear Nicias, that you were going to discover it, when you showed such contempt for the answers I made to Socrates: indeed I had very great hopes that the wisdom you derived from Damon would avail you for the discovery.

Nic.

That is all very fine, Laches; you think you can now make light of the fact that you were yourself shown just now to know nothing about courage; when my turn comes to be shown up in the same light, that is all you care, and now it will not matter to you at all, it seems, if I share your ignorance of things whereof any self-respecting man ought to have knowledge. You really strike me, indeed, as following the average man's practice of keeping an eye on others rather than on oneself: but I fancy that for the present I have said as much as could be expected on the subject of our discussion, and that later on I must make good any defects in my statement upon it with the help of Damon—whom I know you choose to ridicule, and that without ever having seen the actual Damon—and with others' help besides. And when I have settled

the matter I will enlighten you, in no grudging spirit: for I think you are in very great need of instruction.

Lach.

You are a man of wisdom, I know, Nicias. But still I advise Lysimachus here and Melesias to dismiss you and me, and to retain our friend Socrates as I said at first, for the education of your boys: were my own sons old enough, I should do the same thing too.

Nic.

For my part I agree; if Socrates will consent to take charge of these young people, I will seek for no one else. I should be only too glad to entrust him with Niceratus, if he should consent: but when I begin to mention the matter to him, he always recommends other men to me and refuses himself. Just see, Lysimachus, if Socrates will give you a more favorable hearing.

Lys.

It is only right that he should, Nicias, for indeed I would be willing to do many things for him which I would not do for a great many others. Well, what do you say, Socrates? Will you comply, and lend your endeavours for the highest improvement of these boys?

Soc.

Why, how strange it would be, Lysimachus, to refuse to lend one's endeavours for the highest improvement of anybody! Now if in the debates that we have just held I had been found to know what our two friends did not know, it would be right to make a point of inviting me to take up this work: but as it is, we have all got into the same difficulty, so why should one of us be preferred to another?

Soc.

In my own opinion, none of us should; and this being so, perhaps you will allow me to give you a piece of advice. I tell you, gentlemen—and this is confidential—that we ought all alike to seek out the best teacher we can find, first for ourselves—for we need one—and then for our boys, sparing neither expense nor anything else we can do: but to leave ourselves as we now are, this I do not advise. And if anyone makes fun of us for seeing fit to go to school at our time of life, I think we should appeal to Homer, who said that "shame is no good mate for a needy man." *Hom. Od. 17.347* So let us not mind what anyone may say, but join together in arraging for our own and the boys' tuition.

Lys.

I gladly approve of your suggestions, Socrates; and as I am the oldest, so I am the most eager to have lessons with the young ones. Now this is what I ask you to do: come to my house tomorrow at daybreak; be

sure not to fail, and then we shall consult on this very matter. For the present, let us break up our meeting.

Soc.

I will not fail, Lysimachus, to come to you tomorrow, God willing.

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