



On Courage [Laches]

Plato

Socrates. And are not our two friends, Laches, at this very moment inviting us to consider in what way the gift of virtue may be imparted to their sons for the improvement of their minds?

Laches. Very true.

Soc. Then must we not first know the nature of virtue? For how can we advise any one about the best mode of attaining something of which we are wholly ignorant?

La. I do not think that we can, Socrates.

Soc. Then, Laches, we may presume that we know the nature of virtue?

La. Yes.

Soc. And that which we know we must surely be able to tell?

La. Certainly.

Soc. I would not have us begin, my friend, with enquiring about the whole of virtue; for that may be more than we can accomplish; let us first consider whether we have a sufficient knowledge of a part; the enquiry will thus probably be made easier to us.

La. Let us do as you say, Socrates.

Soc. Then which of the parts of virtue shall we select? Must we not select that to which the art of fighting in armour is supposed to conduce? And is not that generally thought to be courage?

La. Yes, certainly.

Soc. Then, Laches, suppose that we first set about determining the nature of courage, and in the second place proceed to enquire how the young men may attain this quality by the help of studies and pursuits. Tell me, if you can, what is courage.

La. Indeed, Socrates, I see no difficulty in answering; he is a man of courage who does not run away, but remains at his post and fights against the enemy; there can be no mistake about that.

Soc. Very good, Laches; and yet I fear that I did not express myself clearly; and therefore you have answered not the question which I intended to ask, but another.

La. What do you mean, Socrates?

Soc. I will endeavour to explain; you would call a man courageous who remains at his post, and fights with the enemy?

La. Certainly I should.

Soc. And so should I; but what would you say of another man, who fights flying, instead of remaining?

La. How flying?

Soc. Why, as the Scythians are said to fight, flying as well as pursuing; and as Homer says in praise of the horses of Aeneas, that they knew "how to pursue, and fly quickly hither and thither"; and he passes an encomium on Aeneas himself, as having a knowledge of fear or flight, and calls him "an author of fear or flight."

La. Yes, Socrates, and there Homer is right: for he was speaking of chariots, as you were speaking of the Scythian cavalry, who have that way of fighting; but the heavy-armed Greek fights, as I say, remaining in his rank.

Soc. And yet, Laches, you must except the Lacedaemonians at Plataea, who, when they came upon the light shields of the Persians, are said not to have been willing to stand and fight,

and to have fled; but when the ranks of the Persians were broken, they turned upon them like cavalry, and won the battle of Plataea.

La. That is true.

Soc. That was my meaning when I said that I was to blame in having put my question badly, and that this was the reason of your answering badly. For I meant to ask you not only about the courage of heavy-armed soldiers, but about the courage of cavalry and every other style of soldier; and not only who are courageous in war, but who are courageous in perils by sea, and who in disease, or in poverty, or again in politics, are courageous; and not only who are courageous against pain or fear, but mighty to contend against desires and pleasures, either fixed in their rank or turning upon their enemy. There is this sort of courage-is there not, Laches?

La. Certainly, Socrates.

Soc. And all these are courageous, but some have courage in pleasures, and some in pains: some in desires, and some in fears, and some are cowards under the same conditions, as I should imagine.

La. Very true.

Soc. Now I was asking about courage and cowardice in general. And I will begin with courage, and once more ask, What is that common quality, which is the same in all these cases, and which is called courage? Do you now understand what I mean?

La. Not over well.

Soc. I mean this: As I might ask what is that quality which is called quickness, and which is found in running, in playing the lyre, in speaking, in learning, and in many other similar actions, or rather which we possess in nearly every action that is worth mentioning of arms, legs, mouth, voice, mind;-would you not apply the term quickness to all of them?

La. Quite true.

Soc. And suppose I were to be asked by some one: What is that common quality, Socrates, which, in all these uses of the word, you call quickness? I should say the quality which accomplishes much in a little time-whether in running, speaking, or in any other sort of action.

La. You would be quite correct.

Soc. And now, Laches, do you try and tell me in like manner, What is that common quality which is called courage, and which includes all the various uses of the term when applied both to pleasure and pain, and in all the cases to which I was just now referring?

La. I should say that courage is a sort of endurance of the soul, if I am to speak of the universal nature which pervades them all.

Soc. But that is what we must do if we are to answer the question. And yet I cannot say that every kind of endurance is, in my opinion, to be deemed courage. Hear my reason: I am sure, Laches, that you would consider courage to be a very noble quality.

La. Most noble, certainly.

Soc. And you would say that a wise endurance is also good and noble?

La. Very noble.

Soc. But what would you say of a foolish endurance? Is not that, on the other hand, to be regarded as evil and hurtful?

La. True.

Soc. And is anything noble which is evil and hurtful?

La. I ought not to say that, Socrates.

Soc. Then you would not admit that sort of endurance to be courage-for it is not noble, but courage is noble?

La. You are right.

Soc. Then, according to you, only the wise endurance is courage?

La. True.

Soc. But as to the epithet "wise,"-wise in what? In all things small as well as great? For example, if a man shows the quality of endurance in spending his money wisely, knowing that by spending he will acquire more in the end, do you call him courageous?

La. Assuredly not.

Soc. Or, for example, if a man is a physician, and his son, or some patient of his, has

inflammation of the lungs, and begs that he may be allowed to eat or drink something, and the other is firm and refuses; is that courage?

La. No; that is not courage at all, any more than the last.

Soc. Again, take the case of one who endures in war, and is willing to fight, and wisely calculates and knows that others will help him, and that there will be fewer and inferior men against him than there are with him; and suppose that he has also advantages of position; would you say of such a one who endures with all this wisdom and preparation, that he, or some man in the opposing army who is in the opposite circumstances to these and yet endures and remains at his post, is the braver?

La. I should say that the latter, Socrates, was the braver.

Soc. But, surely, this is a foolish endurance in comparison with the other?

La. That is true.

Soc. Then you would say that he who in an engagement of cavalry endures, having the knowledge of horsemanship, is not so courageous as he who endures, having no such knowledge?

La. So I should say.

Soc. And he who endures, having a knowledge of the use of the sling, or the bow, or of any other art, is not so courageous as he who endures, not having such a knowledge?

La. True.

Soc. And he who descends into a well, and dives, and holds out in this or any similar action, having no knowledge of diving, or the like, is, as you would say, more courageous than those who have this knowledge?

La. Why, Socrates, what else can a man say?

Soc. Nothing, if that be what he thinks.

La. But that is what I do think.

Soc. And yet men who thus run risks and endure are foolish, Laches, in comparison of those who do the same things, having the skill to do them.

La. That is true.

Soc. But foolish boldness and endurance appeared before to be base and hurtful to us.

La. Quite true.

Soc. Whereas courage was acknowledged to be a noble quality.

La. True.

Soc. And now on the contrary we are saying that the foolish endurance, which was before held in dishonour, is courage.

La. Very true.

Soc. And are we right in saying so?

La. Indeed, Socrates, I am sure that we are not right.

Soc. Then according to your statement, you and I, Laches, are not attuned to the Dorian mode, which is a harmony of words and deeds; for our deeds are not in accordance with our words. Any one would say that we had courage who saw us in action, but not, I imagine, he who heard us talking about courage just now.

La. That is most true.

Soc. And is this condition of ours satisfactory?

La. Quite the reverse.

Soc. Suppose, however, that we admit the principle of which we are speaking to a certain extent.

La. To what extent and what principle do you mean?

Soc. The principle of endurance. We too must endure and persevere in the enquiry, and then courage will not laugh at our faintheartedness in searching for courage; which after all may, very likely, be endurance.

La. I am ready to go on, Socrates; and yet I am unused to investigations of this sort. But the spirit of controversy has been aroused in me by what has been said; and I am really grieved at being thus unable to express my meaning. For I fancy that I do know the nature of courage; but, somehow or other, she has slipped away from me, and I cannot get hold of her and tell her nature.

Soc. But, my dear friend, should not the good sportsman follow the track, and not be lazy?

La. Certainly, he should.

Soc. And shall we invite Nicias to join us? he may be better at the sport than we are. What do you say?

La. I should like that.

Soc. Come then, Nicias, and do what you can to help your friends, who are tossing on the waves of argument, and at the last gasp: you see our extremity, and may save us and also settle your own opinion, if you will tell us what you think about courage.

Nicias. I have been thinking, Socrates, that you and Laches are not defining courage in the right way; for you have forgotten an excellent saying which I have heard from your own lips.

Soc. What is it, Nicias?

Nic. I have often heard you say that “Every man is good in that in which he is wise, and bad in that in which he is unwise.”

Soc. That is certainly true, Nicias.

Nic. And therefore if the brave man is good, he is also wise.

Soc. Do you hear him, Laches?

La. Yes, I hear him, but I do not very well understand him.

Soc. I think that I understand him; and he appears to me to mean that courage is a sort of wisdom.

La. What can he possibly mean, Socrates?

Soc. That is a question which you must ask of himself.

La. Yes.

Soc. Tell him then, Nicias, what you mean by this wisdom; for you surely do not mean the wisdom which plays the flute?

Nic. Certainly not.

Soc. Nor the wisdom which plays the lyre?

Nic. No.

Soc. But what is this knowledge then, and of what?

La. I think that you put the question to him very well, Socrates; and I would like him to say what is the nature of this knowledge or wisdom.

Nic. I mean to say, Laches, that courage is the knowledge of that which inspires fear or confidence in war, or in anything.

La. How strangely he is talking, Socrates.

Soc. Why do you say so, Laches?

La. Why, surely courage is one thing, and wisdom another.

Soc. That is just what Nicias denies.

La. Yes, that is what he denies; but he is so.

Soc. Suppose that we instruct instead of abusing him?

Nic. Laches does not want to instruct me, Socrates; but having been proved to be talking nonsense himself, he wants to prove that I have been doing the same.

La. Very true, Nicias; and you are talking nonsense, as I shall endeavour to show. Let me ask you a question: Do not physicians know the dangers of disease? or do the courageous know them? or are the physicians the same as the courageous?

Nic. Not at all.

La. No more than the husbandmen who know the dangers of husbandry, or than other craftsmen, who have a knowledge of that which inspires them with fear or confidence in their own arts, and yet they are not courageous a whit the more for that.

Soc. What is Laches saying, Nicias? He appears to be saying something of importance.

Nic. Yes, he is saying something, but it is not true.

Soc. How so?

Nic. Why, because he does not see that the physician’s knowledge only extends to the nature of health and disease: he can tell the sick man no more than this. Do you imagine, Laches, that the physician knows whether health or disease is the more terrible to a man? Had not many a man better never get up from a sick bed? I should like to know whether you think that life is

always better than death. May not death often be the better of the two?

La. Yes certainly so in my opinion.

Nic. And do you think that the same things are terrible to those who had better die, and to those who had better live?

La. Certainly not.

Nic. And do you suppose that the physician or any other artist knows this, or any one indeed, except he who is skilled in the grounds of fear and hope? And him I call the courageous.

Soc. Do you understand his meaning, Laches?

La. Yes; I suppose that, in his way of speaking, the soothsayers are courageous. For who but one of them can know to whom to die or to live is better? And yet Nicias, would you allow that you are yourself a soothsayer, or are you neither a soothsayer nor courageous?

Nic. What! do you mean to say that the soothsayer ought to know the grounds of hope or fear?

La. Indeed I do: who but he?

Nic. Much rather I should say he of whom I speak; for the soothsayer ought to know only the signs of things that are about to come to pass, whether death or disease, or loss of property, or victory, or defeat in war, or in any sort of contest; but to whom the suffering or not suffering of these things will be for the best, can no more be decided by the soothsayer than by one who is no soothsayer.

La. I cannot understand what Nicias would be at, Socrates; for he represents the courageous man as neither a soothsayer, nor a physician, nor in any other character, unless he means to say that he is a god. My opinion is that he does not like honestly to confess that he is talking nonsense, but that he shuffles up and down in order to conceal the difficulty into which he has got himself. You and I, Socrates, might have practised a similar shuffle just now, if we had only wanted to avoid the appearance of inconsistency. And if we had been arguing in a court of law there might have been reason in so doing; but why should a man deck himself out with vain words at a meeting of friends such as this?

Soc. I quite agree with you, Laches, that he should not. But perhaps Nicias is serious, and not merely talking for the sake of talking. Let us ask him just to explain what he means, and if he has reason on his side we will agree with him; if not, we will instruct him.

La. Do you, Socrates, if you like, ask him: I think that I have asked enough.

Soc. I do not see why I should not; and my question will do for both of us.

La. Very good.

Soc. Then tell me, Nicias, or rather tell us, for Laches and I are partners in the argument: Do you mean to affirm that courage is the knowledge of the grounds of hope and fear?

Nic. I do.

Soc. And not every man has this knowledge; the physician and the soothsayer have it not; and they will not be courageous unless they acquire it—that is what you were saying?

Nic. I was.

Soc. Then this is certainly not a thing which every pig would know, as the proverb says, and therefore he could not be courageous.

Nic. I think not.

Soc. Clearly not, Nicias; not even such a big pig as the Crommyonian sow would be called by you courageous. And this I say not as a joke, but because I think that he who assents to your doctrine, that courage is the knowledge of the grounds of fear and hope, cannot allow that any wild beast is courageous, unless he admits that a lion, or a leopard, or perhaps a boar, or any other animal, has such a degree of wisdom that he knows things which but a few human beings ever know by reason of their difficulty. He who takes your view of courage must affirm that a lion, and a stag, and a bull, and a monkey, have equally little pretensions to courage.

La. Capital, Socrates; by the gods, that is truly good. And I hope, Nicias, that you will tell us whether these animals, which we all admit to be courageous, are really wiser than mankind; or whether you will have the boldness, in the face of universal opinion, to deny their courage.

Nic. Why, Laches, I do not call animals or any other things which have no fear of dangers, because they are ignorant of them, courageous, but only fearless and senseless. Do you imagine

that I should call little children courageous, which fear no dangers because they know none? There is a difference, to my way of thinking, between fearlessness and courage. I am of opinion that thoughtful courage is a quality possessed by very few, but that rashness and boldness, and fearlessness, which has no forethought, are very common qualities possessed by many men, many women, many children, many animals. And you, and men in general, call by the term “courageous” actions which I call rash;-my courageous actions are wise actions.

La. Behold, Socrates, how admirably, as he thinks, he dresses himself out in words, while seeking to deprive of the honour of courage those whom all the world acknowledges to be courageous.

Nic. Not so, Laches, but do not be alarmed; for I am quite willing to say of you and also of Lamachus, and of many other Athenians, that you are courageous and therefore wise.

La. I could answer that; but I would not have you cast in my teeth that I am a haughty Aexonian.

Soc. Do not answer him, Laches; I rather fancy that you are not aware of the source from which his wisdom is derived. He has got all this from my friend Damon, and Damon is always with Prodicus, who, of all the Sophists, is considered to be the best puller to pieces of words of this sort.

La. Yes, Socrates; and the examination of such niceties is a much more suitable employment for a Sophist than for a great statesman whom the city chooses to preside over her.

Soc. Yes, my sweet friend, but a great statesman is likely to have a great intelligence. And I think that the view which is implied in Nicias’ definition of courage is worthy of examination.

La. Then examine for yourself, Socrates.

Soc. That is what I am going to do, my dear friend. Do not, however, suppose I shall let you out of the partnership; for I shall expect you to apply your mind, and join with me in the consideration of the question.

La. I will if you think that I ought.

Soc. Yes, I do; but I must beg of you, Nicias, to begin again. You remember that we originally considered courage to be a part of virtue.

Nic. Very true.

Soc. And you yourself said that it was a part; and there were many other parts, all of which taken together are called virtue.

Nic. Certainly.

Soc. Do you agree with me about the parts? For I say that justice, temperance, and the like, are all of them parts of virtue as well as courage. Would you not say the same?

Nic. Certainly.

Soc. Well then, so far we are agreed. And now let us proceed a step, and try to arrive at a similar agreement about the fearful and the hopeful: I do not want you to be thinking one thing and myself another. Let me then tell you my own opinion, and if I am wrong you shall set me in my opinion the terrible and the are the things which do or do not create fear, and fear is not of the present, nor of the past, but is of future and expected evil. Do you not agree to that, Laches?

La. Yes, Socrates, entirely.

Soc. That is my view, Nicias; the terrible things, as I should say, are the evils which are future; and the hopeful are the good or not evil things which are future. Do you or do you not agree with me?

Nic. I agree.

Soc. And the knowledge of these things you call courage?

Nic. Precisely.

Soc. And now let me see whether you agree with Laches and myself as to a third point.

Nic. What is that?

Soc. I will tell you. He and I have a notion that there is not one knowledge or science of the past, another of the present, a third of what is likely to be best and what will be best in the future; but that of all three there is one science only: for example, there is one science of medicine which is concerned with the inspection of health equally in all times, present, past, and future; and one science of husbandry in like manner, which is concerned with the productions of the

earth in all times. As to the art of the general, you yourselves will be my witnesses that he has an excellent foreknowledge of the future, and that he claims to be the master and not the servant of the soothsayer, because he knows better what is happening or is likely to happen in war: and accordingly the law places the soothsayer under the general, and not the general under the soothsayer. Am I not correct in saying so, Laches?

La. Quite correct.

Soc. And do you, Nicias, also acknowledge that the same science has understanding of the same things, whether future, present, or past?

Nic. Yes, indeed Socrates; that is my opinion.

Soc. And courage, my friend, is, as you say, a knowledge of the fearful and of the hopeful?

Nic. Yes.

Soc. And the fearful, and the hopeful, are admitted to be future goods and future evils?

Nic. True.

Soc. And the same science has to do with the same things in the future or at any time?

Nic. That is true.

Soc. Then courage is not the science which is concerned with the fearful and hopeful, for they are future only; courage, like the other sciences, is concerned not only with good and evil of the future, but of the present and past, and of any time?

Nic. That, as I suppose, is true.

Soc. Then the answer which you have given, Nicias, includes only a third part of courage; but our question extended to the whole nature of courage: and according to your view, that is, according to your present view, courage is not only the knowledge of the hopeful and the fearful, but seems to include nearly every good and evil without reference to time. What do you say to that alteration in your statement?

Nic. I agree, Socrates.

Soc. But then, my dear friend, if a man knew all good and evil, and how they are, and have been, and will be produced, would he not be perfect, and wanting in no virtue, whether justice, or temperance, or holiness? He would possess them all, and he would know which were dangers' and which were not, and guard against them whether they were supernatural or natural; and he would provide the good, as he would know how to deal both with gods or men.

Nic. I think, Socrates, that there is a great deal of truth in what you say.

Soc. But then, Nicias, courage, according to this new definition of yours, instead of being a part of virtue only, will be all virtue?

Nic. It would seem so.

Soc. But we were saying that courage is one of the parts of virtue?

Nic. Yes, that was what we were saying.

Soc. And that is in contradiction with our present view?

Nic. That appears to be the case.

Soc. Then, Nicias, we have not discovered what courage is.

Plato. "Laches." *The Dialogues of Plato*. Trans. Benjamin Jowett. New York: Oxford University Press, 1892.

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