

EXCERPT FROM PLATO'S

# LACHES

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*The dialog begins with Lysimachus and Melesias asking Nicias and Laches for advice. Nicias and Laches are both generals well known for their bravery. Lysimachus and Melesias are the sons of men who were similarly distinguished, but they themselves, though decent men, haven't accomplished anything of great significance. They think that this is because their fathers were too lenient with them when they were young. Now that they have children of their own, they want to be sure not to make this same mistake, so they "are looking into the question of what lessons or pursuits will make them turn out most virtuous" (179d). It has been suggested to them that their sons would be improved by learning to fight in armor, and a certain instructor was recommended. So they asked Nicias and Laches to accompany them to a demonstration by the instructor, and then ask the two generals whether they should enroll their sons for these lessons. Nicias is in favor of the lessons, but Laches argues that this sort of training is useless and counter-productive. Lysimachus then turns to Socrates, whom Laches earlier invited to join the conversation.*

LYSIMACHUS: Socrates, it seems to me that the members of our council, as it were, need 184  
someone to cast the deciding vote. If these two had agreed, we would not have required d  
this help so much; but as it is (since Laches, you see, has voted on the opposite side to  
Nicias) we would do well to hear your view and see on which side you cast your vote.

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

LYSIMACHUS: Why, what else can one do, Socrates?

SOCRATES: And you too, Melesias, would do the same? Suppose you held a council e  
about how your son should exercise for a coming athletic 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?

MELESIAS: By the latter, naturally, Socrates.

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

MELESIAS: Very likely.

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

MELESIAS: To be sure.

SOCRATES: Then in this case also we must first consider, in particular, whether or not anyone among us is an expert in the subject we are considering. And if one of us is, we must be guided by him, even though he is only one, and ignore the rest. But, if none of us is an expert, we must look for somebody else. Or do you think that what you and Lysimachus have at stake here is some trivial matter rather than the thing that is really your greatest possession? For I take it that the whole of a father's estate depends on how his son turns out—whether he is a decent person or the opposite. 185

MELESIAS: Truly spoken.

SOCRATES: So it demands much forethought from us.

MELESIAS: Certainly.

SOCRATES: How then—to take the case I suggested just now—would we set to work if we wanted to consider which of us was the most expert in regard to an athletics? Wouldn't we pick the one who had learned and practiced, and had also had good teachers of this particular skill? b

MELESIAS: I think so.

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

MELESIAS: How do you mean?

SOCRATES: Perhaps it will be more easily grasped in this form. I don't think we have started with an agreement between us as to what the thing is about which we are consulting, when we ask which of us is an expert in it and resorted to teachers for this purpose, and which of us are not. c

NICIAS: But, Socrates, isn't it fighting in armor that we are considering, and whether or not it is a thing to be learned by young men?

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

NICIAS: About the eyes.

SOCRATES: 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? d

NICIAS: True.

SOCRATES: 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.

NICIAS: Necessarily.

SOCRATES: 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.

NICIAS: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And we say that our present subject is something studied for the sake of young men's souls? e

NICIAS: Yes.

SOCRATES: So what we have to consider is whether any of us is skilled in treatment of the soul, and is able to treat it rightly, and who among us has had good teachers.

LACHES: But I say, Socrates, haven't you ever noticed how some people have become more skilled in certain things without teachers than others with them?

SOCRATES: Yes, I have, Laches. But you would not care to trust such people 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 only once, but in several cases. 186

LACHES: That is truly spoken.

SOCRATES: 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 let them know what teachers we've had, if we say that we have any worth mentioning, who were themselves good to begin with, and treated the souls of many young people, and also eventually taught us and are well known to have done so. b  
Or if any of us says he has had no teacher but has some works of his own to speak of, then let him point out to us which people (be they Athenians or strangers, slaves or freemen) are recognized to have become good through his influence. However, if no one of the sort to be found among us, let's bid them look elsewhere; for we cannot run the risk of ruining our good friends' children, and so bringing upon us the most grievous of accusations from our nearest and dearest.

Now I, Lysimachus and Melesias, am the first to say that I have had no teacher in this respect; and yet I have longed for such lessons ever since I was a youth. But I don't have c  
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 would not be surprised if Nicias or Laches has discovered or learned 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 complete confidence in them myself, except that I was surprised that they disagreed with one another. d

Therefore, I make this request back to 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 knowledge of the matter, that he isn’t competent to decide which of your statements is true, and that he has neither discovered nor been taught anything of the sort. So would you, Laches and Nicias, each tell us: first, who the cleverest person is from whom you have learned about the upbringing of youth; second, whether you have knowledge of it by learning from someone or by discovering it yourselves; and, third, if you learnt it, who were your respective teachers, and what other associates they had. This way, if you don’t have time, because of your civic obligations, we can go to them and induce them either with gifts or favors or both to take on the upbringing of our children and yours too, so that they won’t turn out to be rogues and disgrace their ancestors. Or, if you have made the great discovery yourselves, give us an example to show what other people you have succeeded in changing, by your care of them, from rogues to gentlemen. Because, if you are about to make your first attempt at educating, you should be careful, because you’re experimenting not on some slave from Caria, but on your sons and the children of your friends; you wouldn’t want to be a case, as the proverb says, of beginning pottery on a wine jug. So tell us what resources and qualifications you do and do not claim in this area.” There, Lysimachus, demand that from these good persons, and do not let them off the hook. e 187

LYSIMACHUS: Gentlemen, I think Socrates’ remarks are excellent, but it is up to you, Nicias and Laches, to decide for yourselves whether it suits you to be questioned and offer an 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 since your sons, like ours, are almost of an age to be educated. Therefore, if it is all the same to you, discuss it now by joint inquiry with Socrates, exchanging views 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. Do you consider this to be the proper course to take? c d

NICIAS: To tell the truth, Lysimachus, it seems to me that you only know Socrates at second hand—through his father—and had not spoken with him directly since he was a child, when you ran into 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 anything to do with him since he got older. e

LYSIMACHUS: How are you so sure of that, Nicias?

NICIAS: Because you seem not to know that, whoever gets close to Socrates and talks with him face to face, is bound to be drawn round and round by him in the course of the conversation, and, even if it started on a very different subject, he won't be able to stop until he has given an account of himself—of the manner in which he now spends his days, and of the kind of life he has lived up to this point. And once a man has been lead into doing this, Socrates won't ever 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 treated this way by him, and that I too will certainly get the same treatment. For I delight, Lysimachus, in conversing with the man, and see no harm in our being reminded of any past or present misdeed. Rather, someone thinks most carefully about the rest of our lives, if he does not run from his words but is willing, (as Solon said) “to grow old learning ever more and more,” and is zealous to learn as long as one lives, without expecting to grow intelligent merely by the arrival of old age. So to me there is nothing unusual or unpleasant in being tried and tested by Socrates; in fact, I've been sure for some time that our conversation would not be about the boys, if Socrates were present, but about ourselves. So let me repeat that I have no objection to talking with Socrates in the manner he likes, but you must see how Laches here feels on the matter.

LACHES: I always feel the same way about such discussions, Nicias, or if you prefer, the same two ways; for you might think that I am both a lover and a hater of discussions. When I hear a man discussing virtue or any kind of wisdom, then, if he truly is a man and worthy of what he says, I am exceedingly delighted: I take the speaker and his speech together, and observe how they fit and harmonize with each other. Such a man is exactly what I think of as musical: he has tuned himself with the most beautiful harmony; it's not that of a lyre or other entertaining instrument, but he has made a true harmony of his own life between his words and his deeds. [...] Such a man makes me rejoice when he speaks, and then anyone would deem me a lover of discussion, because I take in what he says so eagerly. However, 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 deemed a hater of discussion.

Now I have no experience of Socrates' words, but in the past, I believe, I've had experience with his deeds; and there I found him to worthy to speak fine words freely.<sup>1</sup> So if he has that gift as well, his wish is mine, and I would be very glad to be cross-examined by such a man, and would not chafe at learning; but I too agree with Solon, while adding just one word to his saying: I would like, as I grow old, to learn more and more, but only from honest folk. Unless Solon concedes to me that my teacher is himself good, I will 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 don't care at all.

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<sup>1</sup> Laches is referring to Socrates' conduct, when the two of them served together at the battle of Delium.

Therefore, I invite you, Socrates, both to teach and to refute me as much as you please, and to learn too what I for 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, and gave a proof of your own valor which is to be expected of anyone who hopes to justify his good name. So say whatever you like, taking no account of the difference in our ages. c

SOCRATES: It seems we can't find fault with the two of you for not being ready to advice and to join in our inquiry.

LYSIMACHUS: No, but now it's up to us, Socrates—for I to count you as one of us. Take my place in inquiring on behalf of the young men, and find out what we want our friends here to tell us, and be our adviser by discussing it with them. For I find that, because of my age, I forget the questions I intend to ask and the answers I receive; and, if the discussion changes in the middle, my memory goes altogether. So please 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 decision you reach. d

SOCRATES: Nicias and Laches, let's do what Lysimachus and Melesias ask. Now the questions that we attempted to consider a while ago were: "Who have our teachers in this sort of training been?" and "What other persons have we made better?" We could ask ourselves these questions, but I think that there's another line of inquiry that leads to the same thing, and will probably also start more from the beginning. e

What if we knew about a certain thing that, when it is joined to another thing, it makes it better, and what if we were able to do the joining? If so, we would clearly have to know the very thing that we're discussing how to acquire. I don't think you grasp what I mean. Well, you will grasp it more easily in this way. 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 could hardly prove ourselves credible consultants or physicians in the matter of eyes or ears, and the best way of acquiring sight or hearing. b 190

LACHES: Truly spoken, Socrates.

SOCRATES: 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?

LACHES: Yes, indeed,

SOCRATES: Then our first requirement is to know what virtue is? For surely, if we had no idea at all what virtue actually is, we could not possibly consult with anyone as to how he might best acquire it? c

LACHES: I certainly think not, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then, Laches, we claim to know what it is.

LACHES: I suppose we must.

SOCRATES: And when we know something, I presume, we can also say what it is.

LACHES: Certainly.

SOCRATES: Then, my good friend, let's not inquire right away about the whole of virtue, since that may be too big an issue for us; but let's first see if we are well stocked with knowledge about a part of it. In all likelihood this will make our inquiry easier. d

LACHES: Yes, let's do as you propose, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then which of the parts of virtue should we choose? I think it's clear that we should choose the part that seems to be promoted by the art of fighting in armor. Most people suppose that the art promotes courage, don't they?

LACHES: Yes, most people think that.

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

LACHES: On my word, Socrates, that is not 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.

SOCRATES: Rightly spoken, Laches. But I fear I am to blame; because I didn't put my question clearly, you didn't answer what I had in mind but something else.

LACHES: What do you mean by that, Socrates?

SOCRATES: I will explain, as far as I can. Let us agree that a man is courageous, if he, as 191 you yourself describe him, stays at his post and fights the enemy.

LACHES: I, for one, agree to that.

SOCRATES: Yes, and I do too. But what about this other kind of man—a man who fights the enemy while retreating rather than staying?

LACHES: Retreating?

SOCRATES: Well, as the Scythians are said to fight, as much retreating as advancing; and as you know Homer says in praise of Aeneas' horses, that they knew "how to pursue and

to fly in fright full swiftly this way and that way;” and he glorifies Aeneas for this very b  
knowledge of retreat, calling him “councilor of fright.”

LACHES: And very properly too, Socrates; for he was speaking of chariots; and so are  
you when you talk about the Scythian horsemen. That is the way of cavalry fighting but  
with infantry men it is as I described it.

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

LACHES: What you say is true.

SOCRATES: And so this is what I meant just now by my putting the question wrongly was  
to blame for your wrong answer. I wanted to have your view not only of brave d  
infantrymen, but also of courage in cavalry and in every sort of warrior. And I wanted  
you to include not only those who are courageous in war, but also those who are  
courageous in the perils of the sea or in disease and poverty, or again in public affairs;  
and further, all who are not merely courageous against pain or fear, but adept fighters e  
against desires and pleasures, whether standing their ground or turning back upon the  
enemy—for I assume, Laches, there are courageous people in all these areas.

LACHES: Very much so, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then all these people are courageous. Some of them 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.

LACHES: To be sure.

SOCRATES: What I wanted to know is what these two things are. So try again to tell me  
first, what this thing courage is, which is the same in all of these cases. Or do you still  
not understand me?

LACHES: Not very well.

SOCRATES: Here’s what I mean. Suppose, for example, I were asking you what quickness 192  
is, as we find it in running and harping, in speaking and learning, and in many other  
activities, and as possessed by us in any action worth mentioning, whether it’s an action  
of the arms or the legs, or of the mouth, or the voice, or the mind. Don’t you use the  
word in this way?

LACHES: Yes, I do.

SOCRATES: Well then, suppose someone asked me: “Socrates, what do you mean by this thing which in all cases you call quickness?” My reply would be: “What I call quickness is the ability to get a lot done in a short time, whether in a voice or in a race or in any of the other instances.” b

LACHES: Your statement would be quite correct.

SOCRATES: So now try and tell me on your part, Laches, about courage in the same way: what ability is it (the same whether it’s 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?

*The dialog continues with Laches and Nicias each in turn giving a definition of courage which Socrates goes on to refute. Laches and Nicias agree that neither of them are experts on virtue, and suggest that Socrates would be the best person to teach them. Indeed, they say that they have been trying for some time to persuade Socrates to take on the task of teaching their own sons. Socrates responds that it would be wrong for him to do so, since he is not an expert either. He proposes that they all join together in the search for a true expert, who can teach first themselves and then their sons. The dialog ends with Socrates and Lysimachus agreeing to meet the next day to plan the search.*