

# Study Guide on Plato's *Laches*

In light of this dialogue, what is courage (*andreia*, lit. "manliness")?

- What definitions of courage are proposed in the *Laches*?
- How do these definitions relate to one another? Try to bring them into "dialogue" —especially the definitions of Laches and Nicias.
  - **Laches**
    - First definition: "if a man is willing to remain at his post and to defend himself against the enemy without running away, then ... he is a man of courage" (190e<sup>1</sup>).
    - Second definition: "a sort of endurance of the soul" (192c)
  - **Nicias**
    - First: "some kind of wisdom" (194d)
    - Second: "knowledge of the fearful and hopeful" (195a)
    - Third: "knowledge of practically all goods and evils put together" (199d); on this definition, courage "would not be a part of virtue but rather virtue entire" (199e)

How does the part of the dialogue prior to the explicit discussion of courage prepare us for what follows?

- The explicit discussion of courage begins at 190d.
- Why does the dialogue begin with an image of a man fighting in armor (178a)?
  - Notice that the image is mentioned again at 179e; then the man is named [Stesilaus] and a humorous image is given at 183d ff.
  - Is the use of an image intended to point out the difference between the appearance and the reality of courage?
- Note that the first general question they consider is "what form of instruction or practice would make [young men] turn out best" (179e), which is soon narrowed to the specific question, "Is fighting in armor a useful subject for young men to learn or not?" (181c).

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<sup>1</sup> Plato. *Plato: Complete Works*. Edited by John M. Cooper. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1997. (All references in parentheses are to the standard Stephanus pagination for Plato's dialogues.)

Why is “frankness” emphasized in the dialogue (see, e.g., 178a ff., 179c, and 189a)?

What is the significance of the characters? Why might Plato choose these interlocutors?

- **Lysimachus and Melesias**
  - Lysimachus: an elderly, undistinguished man; son of Aristides the Just, a famous statesman and general who was active in the Persian Wars
  - Melesias: an elderly, undistinguished man; son of the elder Thucydides, who was an early opponent of Pericles’ imperial expansionist policy
  
- **Nicias and Laches**
  - Nicias: an Athenian general during the Peloponnesian War; advocates learning how to fight in armor, which is “beneficial for the young in all sorts of ways” (181e; see 181e-182d)
  - Laches: an Athenian general during the Peloponnesian War; against learning how to fight in armor, which is either an art of little value, or not an art, “but in any case ... it is not worth trying to learn” (184b; see 182e-184c); note the effect the dialogue has on Laches at 194b.

Why do we need an “expert” (cf. 185a)? (Socrates says the question should be “whether any one of us is expert in the care of the soul ... and has had good teachers” [185e].)

Quotation: “For me there is nothing unusual or unpleasant in being examined by Socrates, but I realized some time ago that the conversation would not be about the boys but about ourselves ...” (188c).

**Suggested use:** This study guide includes a few questions and observations about Plato’s *Laches*. Among possible uses, one could consider these comments while reading the dialogue; or one could use them as starting points for a classroom discussion.

