

DIALECTICAL SWORDPLAY IN PLATO'S *LACHES*

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Scholarly attempts to understand Plato's distinction between philosophy and sophistry typically concentrate on explicit thematic discussions or on dialogues in which primary characters are well known sophists or rhetoricians. By contrast, this paper elucidates the nature of sophistic speech by means of an interpretation of *Laches*, a Socratic dialogue with two Athenian generals about courage. Textual argument is provided to show that one of the two primary interlocutors, Nicias, attempts to avoid refutation by means of certain dialectical defence mechanisms. The nature of these defence mechanisms is analysed and shown to imply a form of discursive self-alienation, that is, an unwillingness to say what one really thinks about virtue. Socrates' elenchus is then interpreted as an attempt to penetrate Nicias's dialectical defences in order to reconnect him to a pre-theoretical self-understanding from which philosophy must take root.

Keywords: Plato; Socrates; *Laches*, Nicias, Sophistry, Elenchus.

1. Introduction

In *Laches*, Socrates engages in dialectical swordplay (μαχόμενον ἐν ὄπλοις, 178a1) with two Athenian generals. In the course of this exhibition, one general, Laches, repeatedly accuses the other general, Nicias, of talking like a sophist.¹ Laches complains that he can't understand what Nicias means (194d7, 196a4-5); he charges him with babbling (195a6), speaking outlandishly (195e3), adorning himself with fine words (197c2-3) and twisting himself one way and then another in order to avoid refutation (196b2-7); Nicias behaves, Laches says, in a way more fitting to a defendant in a court of law than a participant in private discussion (196b6-7).

Socrates does not immediately embrace Laches's complaints against Nicias; but he takes them seriously enough to recommend a test. They should see, he says, whether 'Nicias believes that he has something to say and is not arguing just for the sake of arguing' (196c1-2; my trans.). This inquiry apparently leads him to support Laches's complaint, for he later associates Nicias with Damon and Prodicus, 'the sophist most skilled at drawing fine distinctions between words'

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, the translation of *Laches* is by R Kent Sprague, as printed in Cooper & Hutchinson (ed.) 1997. Revisions are indicated where appropriate.

(197d1-d5; *cf.* 200a2). Nicias appears to have been convicted of dodging like a man on trial, just as Laches had charged (196b1-5).

By his representation of Laches's complaints against Nicias, Plato gives a picture of somebody's recognising or seeming to recognise discourse as sophistic. In his dramatization of Socrates's attempt to determine whether there might be truth in this perception, he elucidates the sophistic self-defence mechanisms by which Nicias tries to secure his account. And, in his portrayal of Socrates's refutation of Nicias, he shows how a sophistic interlocutor might be brought to set his weapons down so as to attain a degree of self-understanding.

2. *Laches accuses Nicias of sophistry*

Laches accuses Nicias of sophistic speech on multiple occasions in the dialogue.² I will in this section trace out the evidence for this claim as manifest in each of four discernible stages of discussion.

The first stage of discussion is initiated by Socrates's request that Nicias tell what he thinks that courage is (194c5-6; *cf.* 200b7). Nicias answers that a person is good in that 'wherein he is wise' and 'bad in that which he is ignorant' (194d1-2), so that 'if the courageous man is really good, he must be wise' (194d4-5; Lamb trans. with revisions). Laches claims not to understand: Nicias 'speaks strangely' (195a2) and 'babbles' (195a6), for wisdom is clearly 'separate from courage' (195a4). When Nicias replies that Laches merely wants to show him up as saying nothing, just as he had been shown up a few moments before (195a8-b1), Laches re-joins: 'Very well, O Nicias, I will try to show this', 'for you *are* saying nothing' (195b2; emphasis added; trans. with revisions).

In the second stage, Laches questions Nicias with a view to getting him to specify just who it is that he says has the knowledge that constitutes courage. Laches supposes that each craftsman knows the terrible and confidence-inspiring things pertaining to his art, but is no more courageous on this account (195b8-2). In response to these questions, Nicias distinguishes the partial knowledge of the artisan from the complete knowledge of the man whom he calls courageous (195d9). This response infuriates Laches, who complains that his fellow general is not willing to admit that he 'says nothing' but 'twists this way and that in an attempt to cover up his *aporia*'. Nicias adorns himself with empty words (196b2-7), continues Laches; this might be appropriate in a court of law but not in 'a meeting such as [theirs]' (196b6-7).

In stage three Socrates interrogates Nicias. His *modus operandi* is to draw two paradoxical implications from his definition, ostensibly with a view to

² For a wide-ranging discussion of sophistry in the Platonic dialogues, though not, significantly, *Laches*, see McCoy 2007.

determining how he will respond. Nicias accepts the paradoxical implications by drawing a distinction (197b1-b2) between courage and fearlessness or daring or boldness (197b3-4). This response provokes the irascible Laches, who again accuses Nicias of adorning himself with words (197c2-3); but this time he adds a further contention: Nicias is trying to deprive those whom everyone agrees to be courageous of that honour (197c3-4). When Socrates suggests that Nicias has 'acquired his wisdom from Damon and Prodicus, reputedly the cleverest of the sophists at distinguishing terms like these' (197d2-3; Sprague trans., with revisions; cf. 200a2; cf. *Charm.* 163d), Laches concurs: '[it] is ... more fitting for a sophist to contrive such subtleties ... than a man whom the city deems to be worthy to be its leader' (197d6-8; Nichols trans.).

In stage four Socrates refutes Nicias. His method is to solicit Nicias's agreement to certain propositions about the future-directedness of fear and confidence, and a-temporality of knowledge, in order to show his account to be inconsistent with the supposition on which the inquiry had proceeded, viz. that courage is a part of, but not the whole of, virtue (199e3-12). In response, Laches, who is delighted to observe his fellow general's downfall, makes yet another quip about Nicias's sophistic influences: 'But I, my dear Nicias, felt sure you would make the discovery after you were so scornful of me while I was answering Socrates. In fact, I had great hopes that with the help of Damon's wisdom you would solve the whole problem!' (199e12-200a3).

3. *Socrates puts Nicias on trial*

Many scholars have praised Nicias for his intelligence, thoughtfulness, and the Socratic tenor of his convictions.³ By contrast, Laches discerns or thinks that he discerns more than a hint of sophistry in Nicias's dialectic (cf. 188c3-188e5).⁴ Where does Socrates stand?

Socrates's initial response to Nicias's account of courage is affirming in the most unexpected way: 'By Zeus', he says, 'you speak truly' (194d4-5; Lamb trans. with revisions). And after Laches claims not to understand, Socrates helps Nicias to elaborate his account (194d8-9), thereafter questioning him light-heartedly in an attempt to get him to specify its nature more precisely (194d10-e8). Socrates's discourse in the first stage of the dialogue is exegetical in character, apparently

³ See, for example, O'Brien 1963:42, Hoerber 1968:104 and Penner 1992:20-22.

⁴ Scholars who to some extent agree with Laches's assessment of Nicias's character include Dobbs 1986:828, Schmid 1992:§4.8 and 173, and Gonzalez 1998:34-36. However, none of these scholars give an account of Nicias's dialectical defence mechanisms or explains how Socrates penetrates them in returning Nicias to himself in defeat.

designed to elaborate the content of the ‘true’ account of courage that Nicias had given.

Socrates is relatively supportive of Nicias in the second stage of the dialogue too. For example, when Nicias under the force of Laches’s questioning distinguishes the conditional knowledge of every artisan from the unconditional knowledge of the man whom he calls courageous (195c-d), Socrates asks Laches whether he understands what Nicias is saying (195d10; *cf. Gorg.* 511b-513c), thus implying that *he* thinks that Nicias is saying something. Furthermore, after Laches gives up the interrogation with the complaint that Nicias contorts himself like a man on trial (196b1-2), Socrates makes the following suggestion:

But let us see if Nicias thinks he is saying something and is not just [arguing for the sake of arguing]. Let us find out from him more clearly what it is he means, and if he is really saying something, we will agree with him, but if not, we will instruct him (196c1-4; Sprague trans. with revisions).

Socrates here recommends a test to see whether or not Nicias is arguing for the sake of arguing (196c1-2; λόγου ἔνεκα ταῦτα λέγει). Apparently he has not yet made up his mind as to whether Laches’s allegations have any substance.

By his own account, then, Socrates puts Nicias on trial in stage three of the dialogue; he attempts to determine whether he says something or is merely arguing for the sake of arguing. To this end, as already noted, Socrates draws two paradoxical implications from his account (196e1-9). In the first place, he argues that Nicias must either deny that any animal is courageous or accept that some animals have knowledge that very few human beings are capable of acquiring (196e3-196e9). In the second place, he argues that ‘he who posits courage to be what Nicias posits’ (196e8-9; Nichols trans. with revisions) must say that all animals are by nature equal in courage, even though lions and bulls, which stand and fight, are ordinarily considered to be more courageous than deer and monkeys, which run away at the first sign of danger.⁵ When Nicias responds by distinguishing courage from fearlessness (or boldness or daring), Socrates makes no comment on the cogency of Nicias’s response. Instead he quips that Laches has not noticed that Nicias has borrowed his wisdom from the sophists Damon and Prodicus (197d2-3; *cf.* 200a2).⁶ Thus it appears that Socrates has decided that Nicias has been answering sophistically; he has been found guilty by association.

⁵ See Schmid 1992:147. It makes sense to speak of Achilles as a lion ‘since both are brave’ (Aristotle, *Rhet.*, 1406b). We notice that Laches greatly approves of Socrates’s reasoning, exhorting Nicias to give an ‘honest answer’ to his questions (197a1-5).

⁶ According to Nicias, Socrates recommended Damon as a music teacher for his son (180d); it becomes clear later that Socrates refused to take Niceratus on as a pupil and ‘always recommends other people’ (200d; *cf. Theaetetus* 151b5-6). On the figure of

In the fourth stage of the dialogue, Socrates reduces Nicias to propositional inconsistency. His trial of Nicias has apparently led him to conclude that the latter no longer deserves support for speaking truly (194d4-5) but stands in need of correction. It looks very much as though Nicias, having been put on trial and convicted, is in the end 'instructed' (196c4).

4. *Nicias puts on his armour*

I have shown that Laches accuses Nicias of sophistry throughout the course of the dialogue. Moreover, I have argued that while Socrates is initially open-minded and even supportive of Nicias's dialectic, he ultimately comes to agree with Laches. Nicias hides his true opinions and dodges like a defendant in a law suit (196b6-7).

Laches's basic complaint is that Nicias does not answer honestly (197a1-5) but with a view to avoiding refutation (196b1-2). The phrase 'answer honestly' (ὡς ἀληθῶς τοῦτο ἀποκρίναι, 197a2) is here a placeholder, incorporating at least three more specific accusations. First, Nicias does not say anything or say anything clearly (194d7, 196a4-5, and 195a6). Secondly, he does not say what he truly thinks but evades and hides his state of mind (197c2-3, 197d6, 196b2-7, and 196b6-7). And, thirdly, Nicias is willing to contradict things that everyone believes (197a3-5; 197c3-4). I will now work through the content of each of these charges with a view to clarifying the particular nature of Nicias's defensiveness, as Laches — and ultimately, Socrates — sees it.

In stage one, Nicias answers Socrates's 'what is x?' question by appeal to something he has heard Socrates say: a person is good in that 'wherein he is wise' and 'bad in that which he is ignorant', so 'if the courageous man is really good he must be wise' (194d1-5; Lamb trans. with revisions).⁷ Laches says that he does not understand what Nicias means (194d7); the answer is, he suggests, vague. This allegation is supported by the action in the sequel, since Socrates clarifies the statement for Laches. What Nicias means, Socrates suggests, is that courage is a kind of wisdom (194d8-9).

Damon in other Platonic writings, see *Alcibiades* 118c, and *Republic* 440a. For discussion, see Schmid (1992:21-24). On the Platonic representation of Prodicus, see e.g. Plato, *Cratylus* 384b, *Charmides* 163b-e, *Meno* 75e, *Theaetetus* 151b5-6, and, most importantly, *Protagoras* 315d-316a, 337a-c, 339e-341c, and 358a-b. For helpful discussion, see Schmid (*ibid.* 24-26). As Schmid points out, Prodicus 'was spoken of as a pupil of Protagoras in the doxographic tradition ...' (*ibid.* 187).

⁷ As Linda Rabieh observes, Nicias seems to draw the wrong inference from his Socratic account: 'A strict paraphrase of Socrates' formulation would say that if the courageous man is wise, he must be good' (2006:68). This is a delightful Platonic touch, which demonstrates that Nicias has failed to understand the account he attributes to Socrates.

Laches's response to Socrates's attempt to clarify Nicias's meaning is 'what sort of wisdom?' (194d20) Thus he judges Socrates's attempted elaboration of Nicias's dark statement to be overly general — 'wisdom, but of what sort?' (194d10). Socrates agrees with this assessment, suggesting that Laches ask Nicias what sort of wisdom he means (194e1). He then pre-empts the inquiry by putting some questions of his own to Nicias. These questions are, as Laches observes, intended to 'let him say what kind of knowledge it is' (194e10).⁸ They are thus meant to get Nicias to make more specific the overly general answer that Socrates has attributed to him.

In response to Socrates's questioning (194e3-8), Nicias defines the wisdom constitutive of courage as 'knowledge of the terrible and confidence-inspiring, both in war and in all other things' (195a1; Nichols trans. with revisions; *cf. Prot.* 360d5, *Rep.* 429c and 442c). While this answer is more informative than the previous attempt, it remains overly general. At the very least, something further needs to be said about 'all [the] other things' in which the courageous person has knowledge (*cf.* 191d-e). This reading is again confirmed by Laches's subsequent questioning, which attempts to give more specific content to Nicias's understanding of the nature of the knowledge of the terrible and confidence-inspiring. The fact that Laches's questioning is conducted with the intention of refuting Nicias does not make it any less exegesis.

In the course of his cross-examination of Nicias (stage two), Laches expresses frustration at his interlocutor's evasiveness in answering the question of who has the knowledge constitutive of courage. 'I don't understand what he wants to say', says Laches; 'he doesn't show a seer or a doctor or anyone else as the one he calls courageous, unless perhaps he means some god' (196a5-7). Laches thus communicates, once more, his sense that Nicias is being shifty (197a7-b2). The objection is in this instance not so much that his fellow statesman evades the issue by making unclear statements or giving overly general answers; rather, it is that he — while claiming to know — refuses to say who it is that has the knowledge constitutive of courage.

As indicated by the above analysis of stages one and two, Laches thinks that Nicias ducks and dives by giving vague and overly general answers, and condescendingly refusing to state his meaning. He is surely right in thinking that these modes of response are dialectical defence mechanisms. Vagueness forces the examiner to substitute the question 'what do you mean?' for questions such as 'is

⁸ There is an error at 194e10 in the Sprague translation. The line 'Let him state what kind of knowledge it is' belongs to Laches, not Socrates.

this true?' or 'is it consistent with such and such?'" Thus the respondent who gives vague or unclear answers cannot be shown to be inconsistent or to be speaking falsely.¹⁰ And something similar is true of overly general answers, which are uninformative even if they are clear, and on account of this, less vulnerable to refutation (*cf. Phaedo* 100e). (The limiting case of the overly general answer is the tautology, which cannot be falsified because it does not say *anything*.) Likewise, a respondent's claim to be in possession of abstruse knowledge that cannot be imparted to the questioner shields her from refutation by depriving the questioner of content for evaluation.

In stage three's examination of Nicias's discursive intentions, Socrates focuses attention on cases where an individual or species deemed courageous does not have all-things-considered knowledge of the terrible and confidence-inspiring (196e6-9). Nicias's defence is to radically circumscribe the domain to which courage has application: almost no one ordinarily thought to be courageous is really so (197b2-6). In this, he avoids refutation by undercutting the foundation of shared opinion necessary for further discussion. Since he will not admit any intuitive examples of courage, no counter-example can be constructed; his definition is un-falsifiable.¹¹ It is noteworthy that whereas Laches complains about Nicias's willingness to contradict what everyone believes (197a3-4), Socrates does not press the point at all. Instead he remarks that Nicias does not answer with an opinion that is relevantly his own. Socrates's suggestion seems to be that he takes refuge in clever distinctions that he has borrowed from sophists, and which are disconnected from his own understanding of the phenomenon. Nicias's parroted distinction between courage and fearlessness has no true significance for him; it merely enables him to hold on to his account. He is making use of yet another dialectical defence mechanism.

With this point in mind, we recognise that Nicias's original answer to the 'what is x' question manifested a similar sort of inauthenticity. For Nicias responds to a request for help in dialogue (194c5-6) with a Socratic answer couched in reproach: Socrates has failed, he says, to introduce a claim he has made on many

⁹ Or, to put the point differently, vagueness compels exegesis. For further discussion of vagueness and exegesis, see Futter 2016:103-105.

¹⁰ Of course, this strategy opens up the speaker to an accusation of speaking nonsense. But to judge that someone is speaking nonsense is not to refute her but to claim that she is no long worth conversing with. Laches reaches this point, or something close to it, only at 196c.

¹¹ While this reading might seem to be contradicted by Nicias's ascription of the relevant wisdom to Laches and Lamachus, and many others (195c5-7), this is not actually so. For the ascription is hypothetical (*εἴπερ ἔστῃ ἀνδρείοι*; 197c6), and, as Laches's angry rejoinder shows, insincere and insulting (197c7-9). For a persuasive analysis of the exchange, see Smith 2014.

occasions (194d1-2). Moreover, after exegetical questioning, Nicias clarifies ‘his’ view with an account that resembles what Socrates says about courage in other dialogues (*Prot.* 360d, *Rep.* 429c and 442c). What is significant here is not that Nicias presents a Socratic definition, which, after all, he might have made his own; it is rather that he answers ‘looking’ not to what he thinks true, but to what he thinks that Socrates will regard as true, because he supposes that Socrates will not refute his own account.¹² But Nicias is no seer, and, despite his professed familiarity with Socratic discourses (187d-188c), seems not to fully comprehend the nature of the man and his *logoi*; thus the ‘strange spectacle’ of Socrates overturning his own account of courage.¹³

The dramatic action of the dialogue then reveals Nicias as an imitator of other people’s speeches. He does not answer with his own opinion, but flatters his questioner and parrots the distinctions of authoritative others, all with a view to holding onto a secure account. If further evidence for this interpretation is required, more can be gleaned from his response to his final refutation. For, unlike the men who are ‘ready to bite’ when Socrates frees them of some nonsense (*Theaet.* 151c), and like the false mother in the judgment of Solomon (1 Kings 3:16-28), Nicias appears unconcerned after the failure of his definition (200b). If there is any problem with what has been said, it is a mere technical deficiency, a problem of formulation, which can be resolved with the help of Damon (200b4-5).¹⁴

The contrast with Laches’s response to his earlier dialectical failure is striking (194b). Laches was angry with himself for ‘being unable to [say what he knew] (ἂ νοῶ μὴ οἶός τ’ εἰμι εἰπεῖν). He thought he knew what courage was (νοεῖν μὲν γὰρ ἔμοιγε δοκῶ περὶ ἀνδρείας ὅτι ἔστιν), but couldn’t understand how (οὐκ οἶδα δ’ ὅπη) it escaped him, so he couldn’t pin it down in words and say what it is’ (194a6-b4; Sprague trans. with revisions). Thus Laches had looked to himself, to his own assumed knowledge of courage; his anger manifests philosophical commitment. But Nicias does not seem to care.¹⁵ A reasonable explanation for this is that Nicias does not feel that *his* account has been refuted. This is not to say that he still thinks that his account is correct; it is rather that that question does not even arise. He is not fundamentally committed to any definition of courage but to the goal of saving face by preserving the account, whatever it might be.

In summary, then, Nicias’s style of discourse appears to be a mirror image of that exhibited in Plato’s *Euthydemus*, where the ‘anti-logicians’ refute their

¹² See also Dobbs 1986:839.

¹³ See Gonzalez 1998:35-36.

¹⁴ Cf. Schmid 1992:175.

¹⁵ Ironically enough, Nicias later accuses Laches of looking towards others rather than himself (200a4-b2); this is precisely what he does in the course of his dialogue with Socrates.

interlocutor no matter what he says (see e.g. 275e5-6). His sophistry is that of the answerer rather than the questioner — he attempts to avoid refutation by mean of certain dialectical defence mechanisms, each of which manifests a distanced lack of concern with what he really thinks about courage.

5. *Socrates takes up arms*

By the end of stage three, Nicias has been convicted of sophistical speech and argument. In stage four, Socrates penetrates Nicias's dialectical defences. Socrates here exhibits the wisdom of intelligent adaptability needed to deal decisively with Nicias's dialectical *sophismata* (183d7; cf. 182b).¹⁶ In what way does he adapt his discourse? This is what I shall now endeavour to explain.

One of the most striking features of the discourse in stage four is that Socrates does not make much effort to determine what Nicias thinks or has in mind (cf. 194c5-6). He seems content to remain with what Nicias is willing to *say* rather than to search out what he might really mean.¹⁷ For example, he does not seek to determine whether or not Nicias thinks that courage is a part of virtue, but whether he answered with that view in mind (198a4); he does not try to determine what Nicias means by the virtues, but whether he will assent to a specific articulation of them (198a7-9); he does not try to determine what Nicias thinks the terrible and confidence inspiring things are, but whether Nicias will accept certain propositions that seem to him and Laches to be true (198c4); and similarly for relevant conceptions of knowledge and temporality (199a6-8). In each case, Socrates does not attempt to reconstruct what Nicias thinks of some topic; his discourse is not exegetical but what I shall call 'confirmative', that is, designed to elicit agreement to some specific propositions about the subject matter.¹⁸ The reader of the Greek text cannot help but notice the emphasis on *verbal* agreement; the language of 'supposing' or 'thesizing' is also conspicuous throughout (e.g. τῖθεσαί, 196e9; τῖθησι, 197e4).

¹⁶ Francisco Gonzalez has shown that Laches's anecdote of how Stesilaus's use of a 'scythe spear' ('referred to as a *sophisma* (183d7)') left him dangling in real combat foreshadows and parallels Nicias's dialectical technique in the second part of the dialogue (1998, 23ff.).

¹⁷ The repetition of the phrase 'your *logos*' in this section of dialogue is conspicuous (199c5, 199d1).

¹⁸ The basic form of the confirmative is this: 'P; do you agree?' There is a significant difference between making an effort to state one's own understanding of something in responding to a 'what is X?' or 'What do you say that X is?' question (cf. *Theaet.* 151d-e and *Charm.* 160d-e), and confirming or disconfirming a proposition about X that has been, as it were, presented on a plate.

Why does Socrates proceed this way? The obvious explanation is that he has come to agree with Laches: Nicias is arguing sophistically, trying to safeguard his definition by using methods of evasion or occlusion. Because Nicias does not say what he really thinks, Socrates will not be able to excavate it, but must rest content with what Nicias is prepared to *say*. At a superficial level, the shift from exegesis to propositional refutation is then part of Socrates's strategy for counteracting and minimising the effectiveness of Nicias's dialectical defences. We can understand how this might work by noticing that Nicias's evasiveness was facilitated by the openness of exegetical questions, that is, questions of the form 'what do you think that courage is?' (194c4-6) or 'who do you say the courageous person is?' (*cf.* 195a5-6). For, as has been noted, these questions enable him to avoid answering, to obfuscate, or to flatter and parrot the opinions of others. By contrast, the form of questioning I have called confirmation prevents this sort of evasion by straight-jacketing the answerer with specific propositions that he must either affirm or deny. The determinacy of the confirmative question makes it impossible to answer vaguely, with over-generalality, or pre-packaged sayings; in fact, short of refusing to answer or rejecting the logic of Socrates's argument, the only device that remains for his use is something akin to 'biting the bullet', that is, contradicting what everyone else believes on a topic (*cf.* 197a3-4).

The substitution of the confirmative for the exegetical question not only counteracts Nicias's defence mechanisms but also marks a definite change in Socrates's dialectical goals. Socrates no longer tries to explain what Nicias thinks that courage is (stage one); nor does he merely attempt to map out what Nicias is willing to *say* (stage three), but, crucially, he also sets out to refute him by reducing him to propositional inconsistency. Socrates's refutative intentions are manifest in what he does: he uses Nicias's verbal agreements to derive a contradiction and leaves the matter there (199e). This procedure is quite different to the one he had adopted in his earlier discussion with Laches when he sought to uncover his interlocutor's knowledge (190c4) and had interpreted incorrect or inconsistent answers in terms of Laches's failure to state his knowledge of courage (192c5-6; 193d1-10; 194a1-b4).¹⁹ Strikingly, Socrates does not interpret Nicias's inconsistency as a reason for inferring that he has not satisfactorily articulated what the latter has in mind (194a1-b4). Rather, he infers that they have not discovered what courage is (199e11-12), or at least, puts this conclusion to Nicias as a question.

Socrates's focus on propositional refutation is necessitated by Nicias's sophistry. In fact, inasmuch as Nicias has distanced himself from the framework of shared opinion from which philosophical inquiry begins, and which must constitute

¹⁹ For further discussion, see Futter 2017.

the basis of his understanding of the topic, the only form of refutation left open to Socrates is reduction to propositional inconsistency. Since the sophist 'forgets the truths of everyday life in his eagerness to grasp godlike wisdom',²⁰ he is invulnerable to forms of refutation that emphasise the conflict between his opinions and those of ordinary people (*cf.* the discourse of stage 3 as described above). Thus what remains to be done is to show that his position is contradictory. For the sophist will not lightly repudiate the law of non-contradiction; in fact, his goal of securing the speech, interpreted as maintaining a consistent position, is veritably defined by adherence to this principle (*cf. Euthyd., passim*).

6. *Nicias recognises himself in defeat*

In stage four of the dialogue, Socrates refutes Nicias. He does so in a questionable way, by appeal to an agreement that Nicias did not even make, and on a hypothesis that Socrates himself likely does not accept, *viz.* that courage is part of virtue (198a1-2; *cf.* 189e).²¹ What does Socrates hope to achieve by refuting him?

One superficial answer to this question is that Socrates wants to show that Nicias has not in fact learnt the nature of courage from the sophists (186c). This is partly for the benefit of Laches, with whom he had formed an alliance (e.g. 196c10-d1; 197e6-8). But it is also for the benefit of Lysimachus and Melesias, the two fathers whose desire to improve their sons had initiated the conversation (178a1-184c8). Socrates's refutation of Nicias serves to deflate the pretension of the sophists to knowledge of care of the soul (186c).

At a deeper level, though, Socrates counters Nicias's sophistry for the sake of the latter's own soul. His discourse is really a correction of Nicias, a way of instructing him (196c1-4). Since sophistry is a form of discursive self-alienation, correction of a sophistical thinker should require him to prioritise the concern for proper articulation of what he himself thinks over the security of the *logos*. Socrates goes some way toward accomplishing this in stage four of the dialogue, when he gets Nicias to recognise that he is committed to the independence of piety from courage.²²

This interpretation can be motivated by considering the question of why Nicias does not salvage his definition by rejecting the claim that virtue has parts.²³ As just noted, this is not a claim that he himself agreed to, and his account of courage is naturally extended to encompass virtue as whole (199c6-8; 199d1-3).

²⁰ Schmid 1992:48.

²¹ See Vlastos 1994:122.

²² *Cf.* Dobbs 1986:844. If this seems to lead Nicias away from the truth about virtue's fundamental unity, this must be because such a truth can only be recovered from within.

²³ Rabieh 2006:84.

Given that Nicias has been shown to have an interest in maintaining the security of his position, and given that he could do so without doing grave violence to the definition he had proposed, his failure to take this dialectical opportunity requires explanation. And when the details of the text are carefully scrutinised, it seems plausible to say that he has remembered his own commitment to piety as a virtue separate from courage.

Consider the following points. When Socrates catalogues the virtues to see whether he and Nicias call the same things parts of virtue, he omits piety, explicitly mentioning justice and temperance as examples (198a8-9).²⁴ But when he begins the final refutation, he introduces and even emphasises piety by placing it last in the sequence of enumerated virtues (199d7-8). Moreover, Socrates goes on to ask Nicias whether someone with the knowledge that he says constitutes courage would be lacking in temperance, justice or piety if he knew how to guard against all bad things and secure for himself all good things both in relation to men and gods (199d4-7). This question appears to make an impact, for ‘after the [suggestion] that the courageous man [would] not need piety ... Nicias abandons his claim’.²⁵ It may be inferred that Socrates’s success in refuting Nicias has something to do with this virtue.²⁶

Nicias’s account of courage emphasises its knowingness, the component of courage that distinguishes the courageous from the ignorantly fearless (197a6-b5). Furthermore, he understands the cognitive element of courage in terms of prudence, understood as the ability to secure good things for oneself and one’s city (197b6-c1). Socrates exploits this connection when he suggests that it is the same art that knows the things of the past, the present, and, crucially, how things ‘would and will come about most beautifully’ in the future (ἄν κάλλιστα γένοιτο καὶ γενήσεται; 198d4; cf. 197e1-2). The law commands that the general should preside over the seer rather than the other way around (199e3-a4) because his ‘normative’ knowledge of the future is superior to the ‘descriptive’ knowledge of the seer (196a). It is thus clear that Nicias’s conception of courage is closely related to prudence, and also, that Socrates’s refutation of this account homes in on the nature of, and prerequisites for, the exercise of this power.

Nicias is willing to accept his dialectical comeuppance when Socrates uses leading questions to suggest that the man with knowledge of all good and evil would not be in need of virtue (199d4-5). He says:

And do you regard that man as lacking in temperance or justice and [piety] to whom alone belongs the ability to deal circumspectly with both gods and

²⁴ Schmid 1992:167.

²⁵ Rabieh 2006:84.

²⁶ See also Schmid 1992:10 and 168ff.

men with respect to both the [terrible] and its opposite, and to provide himself with good things through his knowledge of how to associate with them correctly? (199d7-e1; Sprague trans. with revisions)

Nicias's response 'you seem to me to say something' (199e2) suggests that he has seen or 'looked to' (197e3-4) something. What has he looked to and what has he seen?

We learn from the ancient sources that Nicias was an extraordinarily superstitious man. Plutarch informs us that he 'made daily sacrifices, kept a diviner in his own home, and constantly sought out omens for guidance on matters of public and private affairs'.²⁷ Laches's earlier introduction of the diviner as the man whom Nicias regards as courageous was thus by no means coincidental (195e). It appears that Nicias has at last been led to see himself in the questioning about courage. His thought is momentarily turned away from Damon and logical consistency back onto his own actions and his existential commitment to piety as enabling correct association with the gods. Nicias looks to himself, and sees himself as one who knows by his conduct that the man of courage cannot control the gods. He must rather associate with them correctly by conventional rituals and sacrifices.²⁸ On this reading, Nicias's concern for the prudential aspect of courage leads him to accept the need for piety as a separate virtue. Thus he maintains his commitment to the thesis that virtue has parts and accepts that he has not found what courage is (199e11-12).

Nicias lays down his dialectical weapons when he comes to recognise that he is committed to the goodness of piety as a virtue distinct from courage. It is this recognition or self-recognition that makes his logical refutation possible. Socrates succeeds at last in getting Nicias — at least for a moment (*cf.* 200b4-5) — to abandon his sophistic style of answering. He does not answer with a view to securing his safety in speech, but with what he really thinks. Socrates returns Nicias to what he really thinks by reminding him of his own sense of piety.²⁹

²⁷ Schmid 1992:8. The disastrous consequences of Nicias's reliance on diviners for the so-called Sicilian expedition are well known. See Thucydides, 7.50 and Plutarch, *Life of Nicias*, 23.

²⁸ Schmid's comment on this passage is well worth quoting. He writes: 'The words *xeulabeisthai* and *prosomein* and the notion of self-provision through being in good standing with men and gods call vividly to mind our image of the historical Nicias, who appealed daily to the diviners for advice and sought in every way to remain in good standing with everyone, taking no risks so as to insure that he would always acquire and keep the good things of worldly fortune that he cherished' (1992:167).

²⁹ I would like to express thanks to two anonymous referees for helpful comments on this paper and to Sjarlene Thom for guiding me through the editorial process.

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