

# Socrates on Courage

by Sanderson Beck  
based on Plato's Laches

Characters:

Socrates

Lysimachus

Melesias

Two sons of Lysimachus and Melesias

Nicias

Laches

Scene: Athens 432 BC. The gymnasium of Taureas during the day. Some are  
The scene dissolves. The new scene is the same gymnasium, but twelve years  
later. Evidence of the Peloponnesian War is scattered around, and an exhibition  
of fighting with armor is taking place. LYSIMACHUS and MELESIAS enter  
with their TWO SONS and NICIAS and LACHES who are dressed as army  
generals of the time. They talk as they walk in and observe the brief fighting  
exhibition.

LYSIMACHUS: Melesias and I know you have seen this exhibition of  
fighting in armor, Nicias and Laches, but we asked you here for your advice.  
We each have a son as you can see, and we all live in the same house. Now we  
wish to give our sons the best training we can. We have talked of our fathers'  
noble deeds in battle, in making peace and managing the state, but neither of us  
has such deeds we can show. We're a little ashamed of this, and blame our  
fathers for letting us be spoiled while they were busy with the concerns of  
others. Thus we are urging our sons to work hard so they will become worthy  
like their grandfathers, and they have agreed to take up some training. Now  
fighting in armor has been recommended to us, and so as generals we are  
asking for your opinion as to who would be the best teacher for our boys.

NICIAS I'll be glad to help, and I think Laches will too.

LACHES: Certainly, and I agree with you that too often those in public  
affairs neglect their own children. But look, here is our friend Socrates. Let's  
ask him about the education of your youths, for he is in your district and is  
always spending his time where youths study the virtue you want.

LYSIMACHUS: But does Socrates know anything about this?

NICIAS I know he does, for he supplied me with a music teacher for my son,

who is an excellent musician and fine teacher.

LYSIMACHUS: Please, son of Sophroniscus, give us your advice, for I was a close companion of your father's, and he died without us ever disagreeing. As I recall, you boys often praise this Socrates. Tell me, my boys, is this the Socrates you talk about?

SON: Certainly, father; that's him.

They walk over to Socrates.

LYSIMACHUS: I'm glad to hear, Socrates, that you maintain the good name of your father. I hope we can renew our family ties.

LACHES: Indeed, Lysimachus, you shouldn't give them up, for I know Socrates has honored his country in battle. He was my companion in the retreat from Delium, and I can say that if the others had fought like him, we never would have been defeated.

LYSIMACHUS: That is high praise from important witnesses, Socrates, and I'm glad to hear about your fame. I hope that we can be friends. But what about this matter of fighting in armor? Do you think it's an advantage for a youth to be instructed in this practice?

SOCRATES: I'll be glad to advise you as best I can, Lysimachus, but since I'm less experienced than the generals here, let's ask for their advice first. Sit down here, and listen to them. Would you begin, Nicias?

They sit next to Socrates.

NICIAS: I have no problem with that, Socrates, for I think this art is beneficial to young men. Fighting in armor is good for strengthening the body, and it can be used in battle to defend oneself, whether fighting in a line or in single combat. Also this practice may lead to other military arts such as strategy and the complete art of the general, which certainly is very noble and valuable. Therefore I recommend this instruction. But Laches may not agree with me, and I'd like to hear his opinion.

LACHES: I wouldn't say that any learning is not to be gained, for I believe that to know anything is good. But is this skill with arms really learning, as the teachers and Nicias here claim, and if it is, is there any value in learning it? I've noticed these fencing masters do poorly in war, none of them being distinguished as heroes, and this is the only profession I know where the teachers don't excel. I think if the one who has this art is a coward, he's likely to be rash and so reveal his character. Or if he is brave, and fail only a little, he will be overcome by other brave men, because there is a jealousy of such

pretenders. Unless a man is absolutely the greatest warrior, he is apt to be ridiculous, if he claims this skill. That is my opinion, Lysimachus, about this learning. But as I said before, I think you should ask Socrates.

LYSIMACHUS: Well, Socrates, since they disagree, I would like to hear your vote so that I can decide.

SOCRATES: What, Lysimachus, are you simply going to go with the majority?

LYSIMACHUS: Why, yes. What else can I do, Socrates?

SOCRATES: What about you, Melesias? If you had to decide about gymnastic training for your son, would you follow the advice of the majority of us, or of the skilled and trained master of gymnastics?

MELESIAS: Naturally I'd listen to the master, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then his one vote would be worth more than the votes of all four of us?

MELESIAS: Probably.

SOCRATES: Is that because a good decision is based on knowledge, not numbers?

MELESIAS: Of course.

SOCRATES: Then shouldn't we find out whether any of us is an expert on this matter and listen to him? After all, since children are your riches, isn't their education of the greatest importance, and shouldn't we take the greatest care about it?

MELESIAS: That's true.

SOCRATES: Before we consider who is a good teacher of this art, shouldn't we examine what the art itself is?

NICIAS: But Socrates, isn't the question whether or not to learn the art of fighting in armor?

SOCRATES: Yes, Nicias, but we must look to the end of the art, or the ultimate purpose for studying and practicing it. For every art is practiced to some purpose, such as medicine is for health of the body. Wouldn't you agree?

NICIAS: Yes.

SOCRATES: And by education we are looking toward the improvement of the soul of the youth, aren't we?

NICIAS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then let us consider who is most skilled in treating the soul, and which of us has had good teachers.

LACHES: But Socrates, haven't you noticed that in some things those without teachers are more skilled than those with teachers?

SOCRATES: Yes, I have, but we still couldn't trust them if they claimed to be masters of their art, unless they could show proof of their skill in works.

LACHES: That is true.

SOCRATES: Then, Laches and Nicias, if we are to advise well, let us tell these noble gentlemen here who and how experienced our teachers were, or if we had none, what works we can show, and the people we can point to as having improved. And if we can't do this, we should tell them to find other advisers, for to run the risk of spoiling our friends' children would expose us to the worst accusation imaginable. As for myself, I confess that I never had a teacher of the art of virtue, although I've always wanted one from my earliest youth. But I don't have money to pay the sophists who are the only professors of moral improvement around. Even now I still haven't been able to discover this art. But Nicias and Laches may have discovered or learned it, since they are wealthier than I am. They are also older and have had more time to learn it. They must be able to educate a person, or they would not have spoken so confidently about what pursuits are beneficial or not for youths. I trust them, but I am surprised they disagreed. Let us ask them who are the best teachers, or if they have discovered this art on their own, what good works they can show. Make them tell you, Lysimachus, and don't let them off.

LYSIMACHUS: That is well said, Socrates. Do you agree, Nicias and Laches, and will you answer the questions of Socrates?

NICIAS: Lysimachus, it seems to me it is true that you only know Socrates through his father and have not conversed with him since he grew up.

LYSIMACHUS: Why do you say that, Nicias?

NICIAS: Because anyone who converses with Socrates is liable to be drawn into an argument and be carried round and round by him, regardless of the original topic, until you must account for your own attitudes. Once you are entangled, Socrates doesn't let you go until he has thoroughly put your ways to the test. Now I predict I'll suffer this, for I like his conversations, and I'm not afraid of correcting my errors, for like Solon I intend to learn as long as I live, not believing that old age of itself brings wisdom. With Socrates around it was inevitable that the subject would shift from our sons to ourselves. So I'm willing to discuss this with Socrates, but you'd better ask Laches how he feels about it.

LACHES: I have one feeling about discussions, or if you like, not one, but two. For some think that I love them, and others that I hate them. When I hear someone speak on virtue or wisdom, I compare the speaker and their words. When their actions are true to their ideals, then I am very pleased, for those who have this correspondence and harmony between words and deeds I consider a true musician, and I love to hear the sound of their voices. But those whose actions don't agree with their words annoy me; the more I hear them, the more I hate them. As for Socrates, I don't know his words, but I have seen

his deeds, and as far as I'm concerned they entitle him to complete freedom of speech. I too with Solon would grow old learning many things, but I add, "only from the good." I don't care about a teacher's youth or reputation as long as the teacher is a good person. Therefore I invite you, Socrates, although younger, to teach and argue and learn from me anything I know, for you were my companion in danger, and you proved your valor.

SOCRATES: I see that neither of you is reluctant to counsel with me.

LYSIMACHUS: So it rests with us, Socrates. Now change places with me, and find out from Nicias and Laches what we want to know, for I'm old and my memory is bad, and I don't remember all my questions or the answers, and if there is a digression I lose the thread. Therefore discuss the problem among yourselves; I'll just listen, and when you have decided, then Melesias and I will do what you think is best.

Lysimachus and Socrates change places.

SOCRATES: All right, Nicias and Laches, let us do what Lysimachus and Melesias ask. However, instead of asking which teachers we had, let us start more from first principles, for if we know what makes something better, then we'll obviously know how to improve something. Perhaps you don't understand what I mean, but you'll understand it more easily this way. If we know that sight makes the eyes better, and if we are able to impart sight to the eyes, then obviously we know what this gift of sight is and how it might be best and most easily acquired. For if we didn't know what sight or hearing is, then we would be poor medical advisers, wouldn't we?

LACHES: That's true, Socrates.

SOCRATES: And aren't our two friends asking us how virtue may be imparted to their sons for the improvement of their souls?

LACHES: Certainly.

SOCRATES: Then first we must know what virtue is, for if we didn't know what it is, how could we ever advise about acquiring it?

LACHES: It seems to me we couldn't, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then, Laches, we are saying we know what it is.

LACHES: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then if we know, doubtless we can say what it is.

LACHES: Of course.

SOCRATES: Then let's not consider the whole of virtue, for that may be too much for us, but let's see if we have enough knowledge of a part, for this will be easier for us.

LACHES: Let's do as you advise, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then which particular virtue should we choose? Clearly it seems we should take the one the art of fighting in armor is supposed to promote, and most would say that is courage, wouldn't they?

LACHES: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then first let's try to say what courage is; and after this we may consider how youths may acquire courage and by what studies. So try to tell me what courage is.

LACHES: By God, that's not hard, Socrates. Whoever is willing to stay at one's duty and face the enemy and not run away is courageous.

SOCRATES: Well said, Laches; but you've answered something else. Maybe I'm responsible for not asking the question clearly.

LACHES: What do you mean, Socrates?

SOCRATES: What about those who don't stay but fight on the run?

LACHES: On the run?

SOCRATES: Like the Scythians who fight fleeing and pursuing, using quickness to outwit their enemy, or like the Spartans who fought heroically at Plataea by turning on the Persians after retreating.

LACHES: That's true.

SOCRATES: But I'm responsible for not asking my question well. For I did not mean to ask just about courage in war, but about courage in any situation, such as when in danger at sea or courage in facing pain or fear or struggling against desires and pleasures. Don't these require courage also, Laches?

LACHES: Very much.

SOCRATES: What is courage in general, or don't you understand what I mean?

LACHES: Not really.

SOCRATES: I mean, for example, with quickness, in running, playing the harp, speaking, or learning, the common quality of quickness would be accomplishing much in a little time, no matter in what kind of action. Now you, Laches, try to tell me what the common quality of courage is.

LACHES: Then it seems to me that it is endurance of the soul, if I have to say what is the nature of them all.

SOCRATES: Yes, you have to, if you are to answer the question. Now it appears to me courage is not every endurance. Here's why: for I know, Laches, that you would consider courage a fine quality.

LACHES: One of the finest.

SOCRATES: So isn't thoughtful endurance fine and good?

LACHES: Certainly.

SOCRATES: What about thoughtless endurance? Isn't it bad and harmful?

LACHES: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then do you say it is fine when it is bad and harmful?

LACHES: That would not be right, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then you admit endurance is not fine, but courage is fine.

LACHES: True.

SOCRATES: Then according to your argument only thoughtful endurance is courage.

LACHES: Yes.

SOCRATES: Let's see then; in what is it thoughtful? In everything, great and small? For example, if someone shows endurance in spending money thoughtfully because they know they would make more money, would you call them courageous?

LACHES: By God, not I.

SOCRATES: What about a doctor whose son is suffering inflammation of the lungs and begs for food or drink, but the father endures by firmly refusing?

LACHES: That's not it either.

SOCRATES: Or if someone endures in war and is willing to fight based on thoughtful calculation that others will aid him and those against him will be fewer and weaker, and suppose also that he has an advantageous position, would you say that the one who endures having made this thoughtful preparation is braver than the one in the opposing army who is willing to stay at his post and endure?

LACHES: No, I'd say the one opposed is braver.

SOCRATES: But this is a more thoughtless endurance.

LACHES: True.

SOCRATES: Then you'd say the one who endures in a cavalry fight with the knowledge of horsemanship has less courage than the one who endures without that knowledge.

LACHES: I think so.

SOCRATES: Then anyone who endures in something even though they have less knowledge than the ones who are skilled you would say are more courageous.

LACHES: Yes. What else can I say, Socrates?

SOCRATES: Nothing, if that's what you think.

LACHES: I do think so.

SOCRATES: You realize I suppose, Laches, that these people who are thoughtless in enduring are in greater dangers than those who are skilled.

LACHES: Apparently.

SOCRATES: But did thoughtless boldness and endurance before appear to be harmful?

LACHES: Certainly.

SOCRATES: But we agreed that courage is something fine.

LACHES: We did.

SOCRATES: But now on the contrary we are saying that the shameful, thoughtless endurance, is courage.

LACHES: It seems like it.

SOCRATES: Then do you think this is well said?

LACHES: By God, not I, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then according to your logic you and I, Laches, are not attuned to the harmony of words and action, for by our actions it appears we had some courage, but not by our logic, if anyone heard our discussion.

LACHES: Very true.

SOCRATES: What then? Is this right?

LACHES: Not at all.

SOCRATES: Then do you wish to accept part of the statement?

LACHES: Which part?

SOCRATES: The argument which orders us to endure. Then if you wish, let us endure in our inquiry so that courage won't laugh at us for not enduring in this very search for her, which after all may often be endurance.

LACHES: I'm ready, Socrates, to persevere, even though I'm not used to these arguments. But an antagonism comes over me, and I'm upset at not being able to express my ideas. For I think I understand about courage, but I don't know how she escapes me so that I can't take hold of her in the argument and say exactly what she is.

SOCRATES: Then my friend, as a good hunter, don't give up the chase.

LACHES: I won't at all.

SOCRATES: Then do you think we should invite Nicias here to join in our hunt, since he may be more resourceful?

LACHES: I wish it, of course.

SOCRATES: Come on, Nicias, and if you can, help your friends who are caught in the storm of an argument. You see how lost we are; so tell us what you think courage is.

NICIAS: I've been thinking for a while now, Socrates, that you haven't defined courage well; for you are not using what was well said, which I heard from you before.

SOCRATES: What is that, Nicias?

NICIAS: Often I've heard you say that everyone is good in that in which they are wise, and bad in that in which they are ignorant.

SOCRATES: By God, you tell the truth, Nicias.

NICIAS: Then if the brave are good, clearly they must be wise.



SOCRATES: Did you hear that, Laches?

LACHES: Yes, but I don't really understand what he means.

SOCRATES: I think I understand; he seems to mean that courage is some kind of wisdom.

LACHES: What kind of wisdom, Socrates?

SOCRATES: Why don't you ask him?

LACHES: I am.

SOCRATES: Come on, tell him, Nicias, what kind of wisdom courage is in your meaning. For it wouldn't be in flute-playing.

NICIAS: Not at all.

SOCRATES: Nor in harp-playing.

NICIAS: Of course not.

SOCRATES: But what kind of knowledge is this?

LACHES: You are asking him correctly, Socrates, and let him say what it is.

NICIAS: I'd say, Laches, it is knowledge of fear and confidence both in war and in everything else.

LACHES: That's a strange meaning, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Why do you say that, Laches?

LACHES: Why? Because surely wisdom is different than courage.

SOCRATES: But that's not what Nicias says.

LACHES: He doesn't, by God, and that's where he's so silly.

SOCRATES: Then let's teach him, and not abuse him.

NICIAS: It seems to me, Socrates, that Laches wants me to appear to not make sense, just as he appeared so.

LACHES: Certainly, Nicias, and I'll try to make it apparent. For you're not making sense; for example, don't doctors know the diseases to be feared? Or do you think the courageous know them? Or do you call doctors courageous?

NICIAS: No, not at all.

LACHES: Nor are farmers, I would think. Yet they know what is to be feared in farming, and so with all the skilled workers who know the fear and confidence of their skill; but that doesn't make them any more courageous.

SOCRATES: What do you think Laches means, Nicias? There does seem to be something in it.

NICIAS: There is something, but it's not true.

SOCRATES: Why not?

NICIAS: Because he thinks that doctors know more than health and disease. But Laches, do you think a doctor knows whether health is to be feared by anyone? Or is it sometimes better for some never to rise up from their sickbed? Do you think it is always better to live? Isn't it sometimes better to die?

LACHES: I think so.

NICIAS: So do you think the same things are to be feared by those who would be better off dead as by those for whom it would be better to live?

LACHES: No, I don't.

NICIAS: But do you attribute this knowledge to any doctors and other skilled workers except to those who know what is to be feared, whom I call courageous?

SOCRATES: Do you understand what he means, Laches?

LACHES: I guess he's calling the seers courageous, for who else could know for whom it is better to live or die? So are you a seer, Nicias, or are you neither a seer nor courageous?

NICIAS: What? Do you think a seer knows fear and confidence?

LACHES: I do. What else?

NICIAS: No, a seer can only know signs and omens of the future, but not which things someone should suffer or not.

LACHES: I don't understand, Socrates, what he means; for if neither a doctor nor a seer is courageous, who could he mean but some god. It appears to me that Nicias is not willing to admit that he makes no sense, but he twists up and down in order to conceal that he is lost. You and I could have done this, if we wanted to seem like we weren't contradicting ourselves. If we were in a court of law, he might have some reason to do this, but why should he idly embellish the argument with empty words among friends?

SOCRATES: He shouldn't, Laches, but let's see what he means.

LACHES: Then if you want to, Socrates, you ask him. I've probably done enough asking.

SOCRATES: Then I'll ask the questions for you and me. So tell me, Nicias, or rather, us--- for Laches and I are sharing the argument--- are you saying that courage is the knowledge of fear and confidence?

NICIAS: I am.

SOCRATES: And not everyone knows it, since neither a doctor nor a seer is courageous unless they have this particular knowledge; isn't this what you said?

NICIAS: Yes, it was.

SOCRATES: Then this is not something which, as the proverb says, "Every pig would know," and so a pig is not courageous.

NICIAS: I don't think so.

SOCRATES: If only a few people know this, then could a beast like a lion know it, or are you saying that a lion is not courageous?

LACHES: By the gods, you argue well, Socrates. Now answer truly, Nicias, whether a lion, which everyone admits is courageous, is wiser than we are, or

do you dare to contradict everyone else by saying that lions are not courageous?

NICIAS: I don't, Laches, call any beasts courageous which from thoughtlessness have no fear. Do you think I call all children courageous who from thoughtlessness are not afraid? I don't think fearlessness and courage are the same. I think very few people have courage and forethought. Rashness, boldness, and fearlessness without forethought may be found in many men, women, children, and beasts. The actions many call courageous I call rash, but the thoughtful ones I call courageous.

LACHES: Look, Socrates, how well he embellishes with words and how he tries to deprive of the honor of courage those whom everyone acknowledges as valiant.

NICIAS: Not you, Laches, for I say you are wise, because you are courageous.

LACHES: I'd answer that, but I'd not let you say I'm arrogant.

SOCRATES: Don't say anything, Laches, for you don't seem to have noticed that he got this wisdom from Damon who is often found with Prodicus, the sophist who is best at defining words. Let's examine his definition then. Do you remember, Nicias, that at the beginning we considered courage as a part of virtue?

NICIAS: Certainly.

SOCRATES: Now do you understand the same parts as I do? I call them courage, prudence, justice, and so on. Do you also?

NICIAS: Certainly.

SOCRATES: Then so far we agree. Now let's consider fear and confidence. Doesn't fear have to do with future evils and confidence with future goods?

NICIAS: I'd say so.

SOCRATES: And is knowledge of these what you call courage?

NICIAS: Precisely.

SOCRATES: But doesn't knowledge of any particular subject take in the past and present as well as the future? In medicine the doctor best understands the past, present and future of medical cases, and so too a farmer in farming, and in war for example, isn't a general more able to forecast future battles than a seer so that a general gives orders to a seer, and a seer does not give orders to a general? Shouldn't we say this, Laches?

LACHES: We should.

SOCRATES: Then do you agree with us, Nicias, that the same knowledge understands the same things whether they are past or present or future?

NICIAS: Yes.

SOCRATES: And the things we fear and are confident about are future

goods and future evils.

NICIAS: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And the same knowledge is concerned with the same things both in the future and in other times.

NICIAS: That's so.

SOCRATES: Then courage is not merely knowledge of the fear and confidence about the future, but in order for it to be a complete knowledge it must comprehend the past and present as well. What do you say to this change, Nicias?

NICIAS: It seems right to me.

SOCRATES: Then does it seem to you that anything could be missing from the virtue of a person who knew all about good and evil things of the past, present and future? Do you think such a person could be missing either prudence or justice or holiness who is able to take precautions in divine and human affairs as to what is to be feared or not, and also in attaining good things based on knowledge of correct behavior?

NICIAS: You've got a point, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then isn't your definition not just a part but actually all of virtue?

NICIAS: It seems like it.

SOCRATES: But we said that courage is one part of virtue.

NICIAS: We did.

SOCRATES: But now it apparently is not.

NICIAS: It doesn't seem like it.

SOCRATES: Then we have not discovered, Nicias, what courage is.

NICIAS: Apparently not.

LACHES: And I thought, my friend Nicias, you'd discover it, since you looked down on my answers to Socrates, and I had great hope with Damon's wisdom you would.

NICIAS: Well, Laches, you think that now you have an excuse for being ignorant concerning courage as long as I seem to be ignorant too. You are like many people who look at others instead of working to improve yourself. I must go back to Damon to see if the definition can be corrected. And when I've figured it out, I'll be glad to come back and teach you, for I think you have much need of learning.

LACHES: You are wise, Nicias, but I still would advise Lysimachus and Melesias not to take you and me as advisers about the education of their children. They should ask Socrates, as I said at first, for if I had children of that age, I'd do the same.

NICIAS: I agree, if Socrates is willing to take care of them, but I've asked

him to tutor my Niceratus, and he refuses himself and recommends other tutors. See, Lysimachus, if Socrates will listen to you.

LYSIMACHUS: It would be right if he would, Nicias, for I'd do for him what I'd do for very few others. What do you say, Socrates? Will you assist in the improvement of these youths?

SOCRATES: It would be terrible, Lysimachus, for me to refuse to assist in the improvement of anyone. Now if in the discussion I had appeared to know what our two friends do not, it would be right to invite me to take up this task; but since we're all in the same difficulty, why should one of us be preferred? Since this is the case, let me give you some advice. I think we all should search for the best teacher, first for ourselves and then for the youths regardless of the expense or anything else. Even if they laugh at us we should appeal to Homer who said, "Modesty is not good for a needy man." Let's be glad then to work together and take care of ourselves as well as the youths.

LYSIMACHUS: I like your suggestion, Socrates, and as I'm the oldest, I'm most eager to learn with the youths. Please come to my house tomorrow morning so that we can consult on these matters, but for now let's break up our meeting.

SOCRATES: Then I'll come to you tomorrow, Lysimachus, if God is willing.