

Week 1

The Socratic Method (1)

Socrates and Plato

Plato's enemy

A dialogue with Laches and Nicias on courage

SOCRATES. What is courage?

LACHES. It's what soldiers have when they hold their ground instead of running away from the enemy.

SOCRATES. But that can't quite be right, can it? Some people show courage *while* running away from an enemy. You need a definition that covers them, too. Also, someone can be courageous in other situations—in politics or in poverty or in dealing with desires, for example. A definition of courage would need to cover what courage in a soldier has in common with courage in all those other ways. Do you see what I mean?

LACHES. No.

SOCRATES. It's like defining speed. Speed can be shown in lots of settings—when someone is speaking or running or making music on a lyre. So we might say that speed *generally* means the ability to get a lot done in a short time. Courage is a quality, like speed. Can you describe it in a general way that is comparable?

LACHES. How about: at the most general level, courage means persistence of mind.

SOCRATES. Okay, but I'm not sure you mean that, either. You think courage is admirable, right?

LACHES. Yes.

SOCRATES. And sometimes persistence can be foolish rather than wise, yes?

LACHES. True.

SOCRATES. And foolishness isn't admirable, is it?

LACHES. No.

SOCRATES. But you said that courage *is* admirable. So our definition seems wrong: it makes courage sometimes sound bad, but it's good.

LACHES. Yes, there's something wrong with the definition.

SOCRATES. Perhaps you meant that courage is *wise* or *intelligent* persistence of mind?

LACHES. That's better.

SOCRATES. Yet it still creates problems. First, some cases of intelligent persistence have nothing to do with courage, as when someone persistently invests money because it will produce a good return. That sort of person wouldn't be called courageous, right?

LACHES. Right. Not courageous.

SOCRATES. So the definition covers some cases that you think it shouldn't. But the definition also doesn't cover some cases that you probably think it should. Imagine a soldier who is persistent because he knows that help is on the way; compare him to one who is persistent but doesn't know that help is coming. Which is more courageous?

LACHES. The second one seems more courageous—the one who doesn't know that help is coming.

SOCRATES. Yet the persistence of the second one might seem *less* informed and *less* intelligent. In fact, it's starting to seem that courage might really be *unintelligent* persistence!

LACHES. Well, I'm sure that's wrong. I don't mean to produce that result.

SOCRATES. All right, but let's not give up. Let's show our own persistence, and try something different.

NICIAS. Maybe this captures the idea: courage really amounts to a kind of wisdom or knowledge.

SOCRATES. You can't mean just any sort of knowledge. Which kind?

NICIAS. A courageous person is one who understands what is worth fearing and what isn't.

LACHES. But doctors know what is worth fearing by their patients, yet we wouldn't necessarily describe doctors as courageous, would we?

NICIAS. Not on that account, no. But doctors just know what the physical effects of various things might be. They aren't experts on what is ultimately worth fearing and avoiding.

SOCRATES. So you must think that animals can't be courageous. They never have the kind of knowledge you describe, do they?

NICIAS. That's right. There's a difference between being fearless and courageous. I'd say some animals are fearless, but I wouldn't give them credit for courage.

SOCRATES. But still, there's another problem. Courage is just one kind of virtue—as opposed to, say, showing self-control or being just, right?

NICIAS. Yes.

SOCRATES. Good; I'll come back to that point. Now when we talk about knowledge of what's worth fearing, what does that really mean? It seems that something worth fearing can be described more generally and simply as a bad thing to come—an evil

in the future, as opposed to something good in the future. Agreed?

NICIAS. Yes, fair enough.

SOCRATES. Courage, then, is the same as an understanding of what's truly good and truly evil in our possible futures—is that what you'd say?

NICIAS. Yes, that sounds right.

SOCRATES. But if you understand whether something to some is worth fearing—in other words, whether it's a evil—then you also must know whether it was good or evil if it happened in the past. Judgments about what is genuinely bad, and what merely *seems* bad, shouldn't depend on whether it's coming or already happened, should they?

NICIAS. True enough.

SOCRATES. So then courage isn't just knowledge of whether thing *to come* are worth fearing—that is, good or evil. It amounts to an understanding of what's good and what's evil, period—yes?

NICIAS. That does follow.

SOCRATES. But people who have *that* knowledge would have more than courage. Since they understand the true nature of what is good and what is evil, they would also be just and pious; indeed, it's hard to think of a virtue they *wouldn't* have, isn't it?

NICIAS. So it would seem.

SOCRATES. Yet we said that courage was just one kind of virtue. Now we've defined it in a way that covers too much. We've turned courage into a form of knowledge that doesn't make it distinctive from other virtues. So I'm worried that we still haven't figured out exactly what courage is.

NICIAS. No, it seems we haven't.

In a nutshell

Can you give a crude analysis of the Socratic method?

Practice:

1. Have you explored your understanding of the key ideas and values that shape your life, such as love, success, or health?
2. Do you cultivate a critical and skeptical attitude to protect yourself against being bamboozled?
3. Are you truly open-minded?
4. Can you appreciate why the argument being presented could be convincing to the person presenting it and to the many readers who find it convincing?

5. Have you examined the “conventional wisdom” you imbibed from your parents and family to see whether it makes sense and conforms to your experience of life?

Consistency

Indirection

The Socratic ethic