

Plato's laches

[Education](#), [Learning](#)



During his lifetime Socrates' various interactions with his fellow Athenians left his intentions debatable. Popular belief in Athens seemed to be that, " he [Socrates] was an evildoer, and a curious person, who searches into things under the earth and in heaven? and makes the worse appear the better cause" (Plato, pg. 5) as stated by the unofficial charges against him in The Apology. After discussions, his interlocutor's were left confused in a state of aporia, with no conclusion.

And so while negative views of Socrates became increasing popular in Athens right up until his death, Socrates was, on the contrary, serving as Athens's benefactor, opening up their eyes to the truth of world in which they lived in. In Plato's Laches, Socrates does in fact tear down his interlocutors' claims but only to prove to them that they don't know what they claim to know by exposing holes in their fundamental thoughts and to redirect them on a path to finding true knowledge.

Through a method of elenchus, Socrates aimed to prove to his interlocutor that the ideas they held about certain topics were in fact false. When a person would come to him with a question, as Laches and Nicias do in Laches, Socrates would first direct the conversation in such a way that the question lying before the men is a foundational one, and not necessarily the original question.

In his explanation of this Socrates states, " So, in a word, whenever a man considers a thing for the sake of another thing, he is taking counsel about that thing for the sake of which he was considering, and not about what he was investigating for the sake of something else" (Plato 185D) and redirects the question of whether or not young boys should learn the art of fighting in

armor to how to care for the souls of young men. By doing this Socrates is able to expose the very source of his interlocutors' belief system and demonstrate that if the basis of the system isn't true nothing built on it can be true.

Socrates goes on to have the men discuss virtue, because they are trying to discover what virtue could be added to their sons' souls to make them better men and because virtues are the basis for the moral ethics by which they live.. He then invites them to define a virtue: courage. When Laches gives a less than sufficient answer, Socrates rephrases his question and asks for a true definition of courage, one that would encompass every sort of courageous act. Eventually Laches gets to a point where he is unsure of how to proceed, saying, " I am really getting annoyed at being unable to express what I think in this fashion. I still think I know what courage is, but I can't understand how it has escaped me just now so that I can't pin it down in words and say what it is" (Plato 194B). By admitting that he is unable to concisely express the definition of something he considered himself knowledgeable about, Laches allowed Socrates' method to have a reflective effect on him. The dialogue ends in an aporia, or a state of unknowing, leaving Laches and Nicias still without an answer to whether or not young men should learn the art of fighting in armor and more importantly without what a proper definition of courage.

They leave the conversation confused, realizing, that they don't know what they thought they knew, which is what Socrates had originally intended for them to eventually understand. Coming out of a Socratic dialogue usually left the interlocutor feeling one of two ways. Laches, after conversing with

Socrates and Nicias, is aware that he isn't as informed on the idea of courage as he would have like to think, but still agrees to go Lysimachus' house the next day to continue the discussion in hopes of revealing an answer.

Being made aware of his shortcoming, instilled in him a desire to further explore it. Leaving the Socratic dialogue left Laches wanted more; because it ended in aporia, the only piece of knowledge he got of the conversation was that his definitions were wrong. Instead of giving Laches the answer, and having him just accept it as true, Socrates invited him to search for it, because in searching for an answer to the definition of courage, Laches would gradually begin to question and search for other pieces of knowledge relevant to his life, and it would become an ongoing process.

However, other Athenians eventually grew tired of Socrates' extensive questioning and can be seen in The Apology putting Socrates on trial for it. Instead of taking Socrates' conversations for what they were worth, they labeled him as argumentative and a man who was corrupting the youth of the city. By breaking down his interlocutors' various thoughts, ideas, and theses, Socrates was trying to reveal to them that they were not in fact wise and that the knowledge they thought they possessed was not true knowledge.

Socrates himself was only considered wiser than his fellow Athenians because he considered his one piece of knowledge to be that he didn't know anything. By breaking down, piece by piece, the arguments of those he conversed with, he intended for them to realize that their knowledge was relative and therefore meaningless in the grander scheme of things. By

recognizing this, only then could they begin living a life in search of finding true meaning. In searching for meaningful things they would have to learn to question things.

While he is on trial in *The Apology*, Socrates tells the jury that, “ The unexamined life is not worth living” (Plato pg. 24) Living life without asking questions, and without inquiry, is not living life at all, and is therefore worthless. As an Athenian himself, Socrates wants to help the fellow men of his city led “ examined” lives and is quick to let them know, if they do away with him, there might never be someone else who does for them what he is attempting to do. In conclusion, Socrates is