The Unity of the Laches

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The interpretation of many of Plato's early dialogues is hampered by their apparent inconclusiveness. One pattern which several of them share involves the statement of a problem (e.g. "Can virtue be taught?" or "What is temperance, or courage, or piety?"); the analysis of various suggestions, and the decision, finally, to accept none of them.\(^1\) The conversations have the air of being unplanned, of moving in no predetermined direction, and of coming to an end when suggestions have been exhausted. Not surprisingly, there has been no agreement, even in a broad sense, about their meaning. The simplest, and at first the most attractive, hypothesis is to take them for what they seem to be, conversations on themes recollected from Plato's hours with Socrates. John Burnet and A. E. Taylor have argued for this view. Burnet has sketched for us a picture of "the youthful Plato who was a great dramatic genius and whose chief aim was to set before us a picture of Socrates as he was" in dialogues which "do not give us Plato's own philosophy" but which "preserve the memory of the teaching of Socrates."\(^2\)

The notion that the early dialogues are idealized essays in biography by a young man with no original philosophy of his own has often led to their being classified under literature and not philosophy.\(^3\) In apparent support of this classification is the fact that in them Plato seems to lack ability or interest in drawing together into a conclusion their many scattered suggestions and arguments. Instead he seems content to offer a philosophic pot pourri. The disarray of ideas in these works caused Wilamowitz to treat them as literature and biography. A dialogue like the Laches, for example, which does not settle the question it sets out to answer ("What is courage?"). was not written with that theoretical interest in mind, he says, but in order to show that Socrates was a brave man and the best teacher of that virtue.\(^4\) It commemorates his courage at the battle of Delium (181b, 185b) and records the admiration of two distinguished contemporaries for his qualifications as a teacher of the young (200cd). It is a
personal tribute by Plato to a brave and wronged friend.

Regarded as philosophy, the Laches offers no such clear and explicit conclusion. Its result, in Socrates' own words, is: "We have not found out what courage is ..." (199c). Those who insist on treating it as philos-ophy have understandably produced quite irreconcilable versions of its main thesis. This is summarized by Grote as follows: "The perfect condition of the Intelligence, is the sole and all sufficient condition of virtue. None can possess one mode of virtue separately." Horneffer, on the contrary, argues that the dialogue is an attack on the Socratic view that virtue is knowledge, though remaining a tribute to Socrates' personal bravery, and Gauss goes so far as to call it "anti-intellectual." Such polar opposition in the interpretation of Plato is not at all uncommon. Its frequent occurrence shows that the fundamental technique of reading the dialogue form still remains to be settled. As Victor Goldschmidt has said, "le dialogue, en tant que genre litteraire, reste encore à définir. Nous n'en connaissons avec certitude ne la préhistoire, ni le but, ou les buts ... ni les lois de composition ..."6 What I propose to show is that in one dialogue at least, the Laches, some of Plato's "laws of composition" can be discovered. That work is not a literary vignette featuring random philosophic conversation, nor is it a treatise on philosophy spiced with wit and interesting characters. It is a balanced work of art, in which character and action illuminate the thought, and the thought is in turn a judgment on the characters. The cornerstone of its construction is the familiar Greek oppo-sition of logos and ergon.7

There are five adult characters in the Laches. Lysi-machus, son of Aristides, and Melesias, son of Thucydides, are the undistinguished offspring of famous fathers. With them are Laches and Nicias, Athenian generals during the Peloponnesian War, and Socrates. Lysimachus and Melesias are anxious to find a way of schooling their sons to greater distinction than they themselves have won, perhaps by training in arms, and ask the advice of the two generals. How does one train one's son to kala erga (199cd)? Laches is surprised that Socrates' advice has not been asked. Laches and he fought together at Delium, and Socrates more than proved his mettle (181ab). Nicias knows him too, but rather as the man who recommended a fine teacher of music, Damon, to his son.

Socrates insists that his elders should speak first, and they do. Nicias believes in the value of learning how to handle weapons from a professional instructor like
Stesileos; the skill will prove useful in actual fighting and may lead the student on to the study of strategy (181d ff.). Laches does not put much stock in theoretical knowledge. He has seen quite a few of these professionals ἐν αὐτῷ θρησκείᾳ (183c) and has not been impressed. In fact, he once saw Stesileos make a fool of himself in a battle. Socrates, he repeats, is the man to consult. Socrates points out that they are looking for an expert (techníkos) in the care of the soul (185a,e). Now in any art one can judge an expert by the teachers he has had, or, if he has had none, by his erga in that art (185e). Socrates has had no teachers in the art of caring for souls (186c), and he has not yet discovered the art, but no doubt Laches and Nicias, who have spoken out so confidently on the subject, have mastered it (186cd).

Let the logos begin, says Lysimachus (187cd). Nicias, who has conversed with Socrates often before, as Laches has not, warns the company that Socrates' partners in conversation are regularly forced to give an account of their past and present way of life. Socrates, moreover, will not let a man go until he is thoroughly tested. There is an ominous hint here that the conversation to come will be in some sense quite personal. Laches is of two minds about discussions (logoi) (188c ff.). When a man's erga are in harmony with his logoi, when he is truly a man (and not, we may infer, a Stesileos), then Laches is philologos. Otherwise he is misologos. With Socrates' logoi he is not familiar, but he has been well acquainted with his erga since the battle of Delium, and Socrates, if anyone, has earned his right to speak about virtue.

Socrates begins by steering the discussion to general questions. What they really want to know is how to make the boys virtuous, and this requires knowing what virtue is. But since that is too broad an issue, he narrows it down to the question what courage is (190d). Laches offers the first definition with high confidence and spirit: the courageous man is one who holds his place in the ranks and does not run away (190e). But Socrates points out that good tactics often require withdrawal even in infantry warfare, and that what he wanted was a definition of courage, not a single example. Laches then defines it as perseverance or steadfastness (karteria) of soul. But steadfastness can be intelligent or foolish, and courage must certainly be the former, since courage, a good, cannot be joined with foolishness, which is harmful. But this definition seems unsatisfactory too. Intelligent perseverance in spending money, if one foresees gain, is not courage. The physician, who intelligently perseveres in treating a patient, is not for that reason courageous. Even in war, soldiers are not
graded for courage by intelligent steadfastness. It is intelligent to persist in fighting an outnumbered and disadvantageously placed enemy, but if both sides fight on, the enemy is more courageous, though more foolish. If two men fight with equal perseverance, the one who knows less of military art is the more courageous, and the less skillful swimmer needs all the more courage to stay in the water. All these examples seem to prove that courage is foolish perseverance, which a moment ago was called an evil.

They seem defeated. Their erga, says Socrates, are not in harmony with their logos. Anyone who overheard them might say they had a share of courage in deed but not in word (193e). Nevertheless, he adds, they should heed their own argument to the point of showing steadfastness, so that courage herself may not mock them for not seeking her out courageously. Socrates turns to Nicias and asks him for a helping hand in the investigation.

Nicias proposes that courage is knowledge of the fearful and the safe in war and in all other matters (194e-195a). Nonsense, says Laches. Physicians know better than laymen what is fearful and what is not in matters of health, farmers know in farming, and every artisan has that knowledge in his own craft. Are doctors, farmers, and artisans all ex officio brave men? No, says Nicias, for each craft has a limited purpose, and what seems fearful with respect to that purpose may not be so in broader perspective. A doctor may not know if his patient is better off alive or dead, and so will not know which is really fearful. Even prophets, who can predict suffering, cannot by their art judge if it is good or bad, to be feared or welcomed. Courage is distinct from any art or profession. On the other hand, it is a knowledge, and the common attribution of courage to animals and children, and in fact to many unreasoning adults, is wrong. They are bold, or daring, or fearless, rather than courageous.

Laches has by now lost patience with the turn of the argument. Ironically, he lacks steadfastness on the unfamiliar terrain of philosophical discussion, and he says he has had enough of questions and answers (196c, 197a). Nicias, with a touch of sarcasm, urges him not to lose heart: the argument is not meant to reflect on his courage (197c). Socrates, who has taken over the questioning, begins to treat him now like a lagging comrade whom he will not let run away from the fray. They are the comrades of Delium again, and just as at Delium (Symposium, 221ab) Socrates has the clearer grasp of what has to be done.
Socrates has an objection of his own to the definition of Nicias. **Courage, presumably, is only one part of virtue among others, like justice and temperance.** Nicias has called courage a knowledge of the fearful and the safe, i.e. of future good and evil. But if its object lies entirely in the future, the knowledge or science of courage will differ from all other sciences; it will, in fact, contradict the very notion of science, whose objects are independent of time. There is not one science of medicine to deal with the past, another with the present, and another with the future. **Courage, the knowledge of future good and evil, must also be knowledge of good and evil in general. But then courage is the whole of virtue, not a part, and that is not what they assumed. The dialogue ends in apparent failure.** "Then we have not found out what courage is, Nicias" (187e).

This failure to find even a tentative answer to the question under discussion is what tempts students of philosophy to abandon the dialogue to the literary critics. They would be wrong to do so. There is no disorder or even real inconclusiveness in the philosophy of the Laches. That philosophy is not given in an explicit conclusion, it is found in the interplay of thought and character. The dialogue, as Nicias reminds us (187e-188a), is not only a seminar for ideas, but a testing of the lives and actions (erga) as well as the arguments (logoi) of the participants.

First the logos. For all their perplexity, the speakers are closer to a definition of courage at the end than they were at the beginning. Socrates has discredited both Laches' final definition and Nicias', but it goes unnoticed that the merit in each corresponds to the fault in the other. Laches' definition, "intelligent steadfastness," is disproved by showing that in some things the more you know the less courageous you are. But the intelligence proved to be the inverse of courage is either technical knowledge, e.g. in warfare or swimming, or the good sense of fighting on when victory is almost assured. When Socrates "proves" to Laches that courage is actually foolish steadfastness, he means foolish in technical skills or in regard to immediate ends like military victory. He overlooks the possibility that there are other forms of intelligence consistent with courage. And he does not challenge the relevance of "steadfastness."

When Nicias defines courage as the knowledge of what is fearful and safe, Laches objects that the craftsman has this knowledge within his craft and is not thereby courageous. This is essentially the same objection that
Socrates brought against "intelligent steadfastness" when he proved that the courageous man can be technically ignorant and often has the bad sense to endanger his life. Laches could not answer Socrates, but Nicias does answer Laches. In doing so, he answers by implication Socrates' objection to Laches' definition. Courage, says Nicias, is the knowledge of what is ultimately fearful; it is beyond technical skill or grasp of immediate ends. But then, as Socrates shows, there is nothing to distinguish courage from virtue in general.

Does the logos imply any conclusion? Socrates, let it be noted, has left one thing unchallenged in each definition. Courage remains a kind of steadfastness. On the other hand, it involves knowledge of good and evil, since all virtue does. Laches anticipates Socrates' objection to Nicias' definition (the absence of a distinguishing mark) by calling courage, not intelligence alone, but intelligence joined with perseverance; and Nicias answers the objection to Laches' definition by explaining "knowledge of the fearful and safe" as Laches ought to have explained "intelligent." Plato has brought his readers within sight of a resolution and has stopped short. The logos, which has on the surface the appearance of unrehearsed conversation, is actually carefully directed by the author's guiding hand. The definitions of Laches and of Nicias complement each other too well not to suggest conscious contrivance. The dialogue, when it is interrupted, is moving towards a conception of courage which will join knowledge of good and evil with a steadfast quality of soul.

Logos in the Laches is matched by ergon. The participants in a Platonic dialogue are not chosen at random, and for the total meaning of this dialogue what the characters are and do is as important as what they say. Lysimachus and Nicias are men of no distinction in life or in intelligence. They left almost no mark on their times by their achievements (179c), and so they contribute nothing to this discussion either (185cd). Laches and Nicias are men of great distinction at Athens, and each has much to add to the discussion of courage. They are soldiers, and this is appropriate. But the suitability of their personal characters and history to what they say goes further than this. Laches' conception of courage is standing one's ground in battle (190e), or, more generally, steadfastness of soul (192b). He does not immediately see that intelligence has anything to do with it. This is as we might expect. He is a practical soldier who has fought among the hoplites at Delium and who will die in battle at Mantinea (Thucydides 5.74.3). He scorns theoreticians of war, like Etesileos, and sees no absolute need for teachers
of any sort (185e), especially sophists (197d6), and Damon
in particular (200a). He is hearty and blunt and quick
to cry "Nonsense!" (195a6, 196bl); he has a feeling for
the colorful and humorous (the instructors in arms tip­
toeing around Sparta [183b]), and he is a good raconteur
(Ştesileos in the sea-fight [183d ff.]). He is out of
his depth, however, in intellectual discussion, and quickly
gives in when it goes against him. The subtleties of
argument he regards merely with suspicion (196b3).
But he knows a brave man when he sees one: he is the first to
invite Socrates to the discussion, and the first to point
out at the end that Socrates is the man to teach courage,
not he or Nicias. He is a likeable man, and steadfastness
of soul, his notion of courage, is a worthy ideal, but his
behavior in the dialogue proves its insufficiency, when it
is not accompanied by knowledge. He can give no account
of courage, though he feels sure he knows what it is (194b),
and in his efforts to find out his steadfastness deserts
him. He is a coward in argument; his own behavior dis­
credits his notion (at 192b) that the courageous man is
merely the steadfast man.

Nicias makes a good contrast to Laches and a good
exemplar of his own definition of courage. Less brusque
and more at home in intellectual discussion, he has cul­
tural interests too, and is happy to have found in Damon
a good teacher of music for his son Niceratus (180d). We
read elsewhere that Nicias forced this son to learn all of
Homer by heart and that Niceratus actually took part in a
rhapsodic contest. Even in discussing warfare, Nicias
dwells on the refined and the intellectual. A graceful
soldier is a better soldier (182cd), and knowledge brings
grace. Swordsmanship is a preface to strategy. This
in a speech that echoes with the words mathēma and episteme
(as noun or verb eleven times in thirty-five lines).
Laches' reply, at 182d6 ff., parodies that repetition with
noticeable sarcasm (eight times in the first seven lines).
Laches goes on to recall a battle in which Štesileos the
theoretician got himself into an ungraceful posture (183c
ff.), and he avows that the only music he admires is the
good old Doric harmony of logoi and erga (188d). Nicias,
on the other hand, not only reveres knowledge, but he is
used to having discussions with Socrates (188b), and he
acquits himself fairly well, at least in repelling Laches'
objections. But he is vain about his ability in discussion
(200b). His definition has succumbed to Socrates' objec-
tions, but he is confident that a little thought and some
help from Damon will right it again (200b).

To follow some commentators, one could only agree that
he is right. If "the perfect condition of the Intelligence,
is the sole and all sufficient condition of virtue," as Grote put it, then we will have to accept Nicias' definition, as Socrates revises it at 155c5-dl (courage is the knowledge of good and evil). But, apart from the fact that all present balk at this conclusion, there is Nicias himself to consider. Laches' failings as a man are obvious; he is shown here to his worst advantage, in philosophical argument. Laches' behavior is a commentary on the insufficiency of his own definition. What of Nicias? The memory which Nicias left to posterity was that of an intelligent and extremely prudent man without much force of character who was more than once overborne in matters of policy by stronger-minded rivals, and who ended his life in spectacular failure. In 425 he resigned his command to Cleon in the face of criticism of his policy in the Pylos campaign and suffered the chagrin of seeing his rival score an unexpected victory. In 421, with Cleon now dead, Nicias had the satisfaction of seeing Athens and Sparta conclude the peace which goes by his name; but soon after this his pro-Spartan policy was frustrated by Alcibiades, and Athens allied itself with Argos. The event, however, which his name calls to mind before any other is the Sicilian expedition. No one of Plato's contemporaries who read the Laches could have dissociated the Nicias of the dialogue from the man who led the Athenian army and navy to utter defeat at Syracuse. Those events took place in 415-413, a few years after the dramatic date of the Laches, which falls between Delium (424) and Laches' death at Mantinea (418). Of all the Athenians, Nicias perceived most clearly what was "fearful and safe" about the Sicilian expedition. His speech in the Assembly (Thuc. 6.9-14) is evidence of his prudence at a time when Athens was in the grip of folly and overconfidence. Later, when the expedition had been voted in spite of him and he had been made general with Lamachus and Alcibiades, his proposals for the armament were on a generous and prudent scale. They were designed to discourage Athens' zeal for the venture; or, if that failed, to insure its success (Thuc. 6.24). The long story of the expedition, with its early successes and eventual disaster, is well known to all readers of Thucydides. Nicias, so foresighted in the Assembly, was ineffective in Sicily, the more so after Alcibiades had been forced out of command and Lamachus killed. The last stages of the campaign were a personal failure for him. Defeated before Syracuse, he at first rejected the proposal to retreat; then he gave in. Finally, when all was ready for the abandonment of the siege, the moon was eclipsed, and his superstitious fear made him follow the advice of his soothsayers and delay the retirement for a month. By that time all was lost. At the end, quaking before the moon while the Syracusans made
their preparations to destroy his army, he even lost his knowledge of "the fearful and the safe" (Ithuc. 7.50).

The irony of Laches, who proposed steadfastness as a definition of courage and then failed to persevere in the argument, needs no point of reference outside the dialogue. The irony of Nicias is the sort possible only for an author who puts historical figures in his fiction. Plato makes Nicias argue for an intellectual's conception of courage. But he was perhaps the most notorious example in recent Athenian history of the intelligent man who failed, and in the last crucial decisions of his life he fell short of his own definition of the courageous man. No reader in the early part of the fourth century should have missed that. If he did, certain remarks in the dialogue were meant to jog his memory. It is Nicias himself who insists that Socrates is about to submit them to a test of their whole way of life. "I am used to him, and I know that one must endure this from him; moreover, that I myself will suffer this (test) I am well aware" (188a). The argument will not be about the boys, but about Laches and Nicias (188b). Nicias does not mind. Like Socrates, he wants to go on learning as long as he lives, like a man who does not think that "old age is coming to him bringing sense" (188b). Those bitterly significant words are later underlined by some pointed references to soothsaying, Nicias' peculiar weakness. "You're calling the prophets the courageous," says Laches at 195c. Nicias denies it: prophets may not know what is really fearful. Socrates remarks later that prophecy should be the servant of strategy, not the reverse (198c-199a). The comment grows naturally out of the context, but it is also an unmistakable reference to Nicias' superstitious decision to postpone retreat at Syracuse.12 Finally, Socrates' description of the fully virtuous man is ad hominem. He is the man "to whom it will belong, in matters concerning the gods and men alike, not only to be exceedingly cautious regarding the things that are fearful and not fearful, but to produce the good, since he knows the right way of dealing with them (199a). Nicias, though reverent and cautious in the extreme, fell short of this ideal. Plato's pen, therefore, wrote ironically at 200b, where Nicias rebukes Laches for "the truly human practice" of "looking not at yourself but at others."

The process of testing (μεταβάλειν in 183b) in this dialogue proceeds on two levels, a testing of ideas, a testing of men; in the terms of the dialogue itself, of logos and of erga. The unity of the dialogue lies in the fact that the men not only defend the ideas tested, but by their personal history are identified with them.
Laches, the bluff soldier, thinks courage is standing one's ground. Nicias, the strategist, thinks it is a knowledge of the fearful and the safe. Both conceptions are relevant to courage, but both are incomplete; and, though both men have courage, both have it incompletely. Laches, according to Alcibiades in the Symposium (221ab), did not show Socrates' presence of mind at Delium, and perhaps on other occasions not known to us. Nicias, prudent as he was, was ineffectual at Syracuse. Furthermore, steadfastness alone will not even make a man consistently steadfast. Laches proves this by being a laggard in argument. On the other hand, as Nicias showed in later life, even a man's knowledge of what is fearful may desert him in a crisis, if he lacks the firmness of purpose needed to sustain it.

The two men not only match their own conceptions of courage but, in a general sense, Nicias represents logos in human affairs and Laches erōn. The inadequacy of men who are merely reasonable or merely decisive was not a new idea with Plato. Pericles had already praised Athenians for not regarding discussion (logoi) as an impediment to action (erōn), and for "daring to act as well as reasoning out their ventures beforehand" (Thuc. 2.40.3). Here, as elsewhere, Plato adopts an old ideal and old terminology and turns it to his own purposes. The Laches dramatizes two aspects of courage by contrasting a thoughtful soldier with an active one.

On the level of ideas the dialogue remains incomplete. A satisfactory conception of courage is never formulated, although one may infer that it would draw on the suggestions of Laches and of Nicias.13 On the level of personalities, however, there is a solution, in the person of Socrates. Socrates has fought bravely at Delium and has matched or surpassed Laches in steadfastness. But he can also examine courage rationally and realizes the importance of knowledge to virtue (194d1-2), like Nicias. More steadfast than Laches in discussion, more clear-sighted than Nicias, and more aware than either of what he lacks in knowledge, he is the truly "musical" man, in the sense in which Laches uses the word (168d). His deeds are in harmony with his words; his character befits the subject on which he speaks. The way he died, as Plato's readers knew, showed not only his steadfastness, but his clear knowledge of what in that crisis was fearful, injustice (Crito 54c), and what was not, death itself (Phaedo 67c, Apol. 29e ff.). In Socrates the theoretical strands of the dialogue come together and find their practical solution.

Neither Laches nor Nicias is fully worthy as a person of the subject of discussion, as Socrates is. But there
is a harmony between the incomplete definitions they offer and their own characters. The unity of the Laches rests in this. It is both a piece of dramatic literature and an essay in philosophy, and the purposes of the dramatist and the philosopher are in perfect agreement.

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NOTES

1. So, e.g., the Laches, Charmides, Protagoras, Meno, Euthyphro.

2. Platonism (Berkeley 1928) 15, 13, 3.

3. J. Moreau, in La Construction de l'Idéalisme Platonicien (Paris 1939) 2 ff., has called attention to the markedly different treatment, in the Duke editions, of the early dialogues and those of Plato's maturity, which alone are judged important as philosophy. The Protagoras is "avant tout une très belle oeuvre d'art" and an essay in method, but of slight interest philosophically (Platon, Oeuvres Complètes, 3.1 Protagoras, ed. A. Croiset, L. Lodin [Paris 1923] 3). The Laches is "une simple exposition de méthode," like the Charmides (Ibid. 2. ... Charmides, Laches ... ed. A. Croiset [Paris 1921] 86). The Hippias Minor has no distinctively Platonic ideas (Ibid. 1 Hippias Minor ... ed. N. Croiset [Paris 1920] 21). Ernst Hoffmann defends a similar notion in "Die literarische Voraussetzungen des Platonverständnisses," Zeitschrift für Philos. Forschung 2 (1947) 465-480. He calls the Ion, Hippias Minor, Protagoras, Laches, Lysis, and Charmides "comedies in prose [and sometimes] pure porsiflage" (476).


7. The pairing of logos and ergon as doublet (word and deed) or as antithesis (claim vs. fact) was a thoroughly ingrained feature of Greek style before Plato. Cf. Aeschylus, Prom. 338; Herodotus 6.38; Sophocles, Electra 55-60, 357-58, 625, 1330, Oed. Tyr. 517, 864-65, Oed. Col. 382-83, 782, 1187-88; Euripides, Androm. 265, Alcestis 339, Electra 893, Orestes 287, and fragments 360, 890, 898 (A. Nauck, Trag. Graec. Fragm. 2nd ed. [Leipzig 1885]); Thucydides 1.120.3, 2.40.1-2, 2.43.2 (among many occurrences). A glance at Ast confirms that the formula is common in Plato too. Cf. Phaedo 100a, Protag. 325d, Crito 52d, Lysis, 244b, Gorgias 461d, Rep. 382e, 399d, 492a, 492b, Phaedrus 240e, Tim. 19e, Laws 679de, 717d, 769e, 907e.

8. This method of reading a Platonic dialogue as a deliberately incomplete but suggestive expression of Plato's thought is well known, though not by any means universally accepted. Paul Shorey, e.g., argues that the early dialogues present in dramatic, antithetical form what the Republic presents as systematic exposition (Unity of Plato's Thought [Chicago 1903] 14-15). W. Jaeger describes the inconclusiveness of the early dialogues as Plato's way of "setting us a riddle . . . the solution [of which] lies within our grasp" (Pseudo, trans. G. B. Haight, 2.9). T. Gompers regards the Protagoras as a kind of riddle (Griechische Denker, 2te Aufl. [Leipzig 1903] 2.261). The method could not be thoroughly justified here without a detailed analysis of several other early dialogues. I propose to show only that it works well in the Laches, and that it is reinforced by the dramatic interplay of character.


10. Aristophanes, Wasps 959 seems to be a joke about Laches' unmusical tastes.

11. The principal sources for Nicias' life are the generally sympathetic account in Thucydides and the biography by Plutarch. Plutarch draws mainly on Thucydides and on Philistus, the Syracusan historian (cf. G. Lusol, "Plutarch's Nikias und Philistus," Hermes 34 [1899] 280-97). His judgments on Nicias' character and ability are harsher than those of Thucydides. Nicias, according to Plutarch, was not only childishly cautious and hesitant on the Sicilian campaign (14.2), but he was by nature a coward (2.4); on occasion he had to be forced to fight by his colleagues (21.4). But his cautious nature is attested by Thucydides too (7.47, 7.42-43), who also presents his peace policy in
an unfavorable light, as an attempt not to endanger his own
good fortune (5.16). His resignation to Cleon in the Pylos
debate, says Plutarch, was regarded at Athens, after Cleon's
success, as an act of cowardice (8.1). Plutarch also
records that blackmailers had great success with him owing to
his timidity (4.3). Both Thucydides (7.50) and Plutarch
(4.1-2) mention his superstitious nature. Aristophanes
refers to his caution, using the word *mellenikian,* "to delay
victory like Nicias," at *Birds* 638; and "I will fluster
Nicias" is meant to raise a laugh at *Knights* 358. Phrynicus
jokes about his timidity in the line "He did not walk with
a cringing air (hypotageis) like Nicias" (J. M. Edmonds,
On the positive side, "intelligence" and "good fortune" are
the terms associated by Plutarch with his initial successes
in Sicily (18.5), and Thucydides' tribute to his virtue is
well known (7.86). His policies and character are discussed
by A. B. West in "Pericles' Political Heirs," *CP* 19 (1924)
124 ff., 201 ff., and by G. Heincke under "Nikias" in Pauly-
Wissowa. He is severely criticized by R. Cohen in "Quelques


1871) 1.70. So did H. Bonitz, whose perceptive comments
on the *Laches* are found in his article "Zur Erklärung Plato-
nischer Dialoge," *Hermes* 5 (1871), 413-42. He repeated
them and replied to Zeller's criticism in his *Platonische
Studien* (Berlin, 1886), 216 ff.