

# The Connection of the Care for Self and Other in Plato's *Laches*

By: Will Tilleczek

*Epimeleia heautou*, or care of the self, is central to Socratic ethics. In other words, Socrates' cross-examinations and his search for virtue are part of a project ultimately concerned with the problem of caring for the soul. The importance of the care of the self to Socratic ethics is established, for example, throughout the *Apology*: "are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth [...] as possible while you do not care for [...] wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of your soul

?"<sup>1</sup> The Socratic ethic requires that individuals perpetually tend to themselves in order to "be as good as possible."<sup>2</sup> Given Socrates' emphasis on the importance of paying attention to oneself, his ethics may seem self-interested or even selfish, and indeed Socratic ethics are sometimes interpreted and criticized as such.<sup>3</sup> As the philosopher Michel Foucault explains,

the care of the self [has become] somewhat suspect. Starting at a certain point [i.e. in Christian morality], being concerned with oneself became denounced as [...] selfishness or self-interest in contradiction with the interest to be shown in others or the self-sacrifice required.<sup>4</sup>

Tentative to endorse egoism, or even seeing ethics as incompatible with self-interest, critics may demand that an ethical theory be self-renouncing, placing others before self. From this perspective, the Socratic project of caring for the self seems deficient, risking the neglect of others. Thus, one may be tempted to oppose a Socratic 'egoism' to a properly ethical 'selflessness'. However, such criticisms, as we will see, are misleading and inaccurate. First, because Socratic care of the self involves tending to the soul and studying virtue rather than pursuing reputations or material goods, it does not risk harming others in self-interest. Indeed, the care of the self limits desires and appetites, and so prevents the harm caused by greed and jealousy. Furthermore, to impose a dichotomy of egoism-altruism in the case of Socrates is to ignore the inseparable link between self-care and care for others in Socratic ethics. A close reading of the *Laches* will show that the care of the self implies the care of others, and that it is even *required* in order to properly care for others. Far from being self-interested at the expense of others, the care of the self is bound to the care of others, and to criticize it in opposition to selflessness is to misunderstand the deeply relational nature of the Socratic ethics of care.

---

<sup>1</sup> Plato, "Apology," in *Five Dialogues*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (U.S.A.: Hackett Publishing, 1981), 29e.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 39d.

<sup>3</sup> cf. Alexander Nehamas, "A Fate for Socrates' Reason: Foucault on the Care of the Self," in *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 181-2.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *Ethics*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. P. Aranov and D. McGrawth (New York: The New Press, 1997), 284.

To demonstrate the link between care of the self and care for others, it will be helpful to first discuss an argument that deems Socrates self-interested. Indeed, this is not an entirely implausible claim. After all, Socrates' quest for virtue is initiated when the oracle calls *him*, as an individual, the wisest man.<sup>5</sup> To find wisdom is his own personal adventure, and in this adventure Socrates often shirks public duties and political life.<sup>6</sup> Following this line of argument, commentator Alexander Nehamas claims that Socrates' ethics are a selfish pursuit: "[Through] the elenchus Socrates primarily [...] tries to find someone who knows what *aretê* is. And he does this primarily for his own sake [...]. Socrates' primary object of care is his own self, his own soul, not the souls of others."<sup>7</sup> For Nehamas, Socrates' usefulness to his city is "disputable" both because he is primarily concerned with improving *himself* by finding *aretê* and because he does not truly help others, since in his self-professed ignorance Socrates does not and cannot *teach arete*.<sup>8</sup> Socrates is therefore self-interested, and the elenchus is an activity unconcerned with the care of the city and its citizens.

As a form of egoism, then, Socratic ethics may appear primarily self-interested and, by extension, an additional anxiety may arise: "Doesn't the care of the self, when separated from care of others, run the risk of becoming absolute? And couldn't this 'absolutization' of the care of the self become a way of exercising power over others?"<sup>9</sup> That is, if care of the self is separated from and given priority over care for others, then this self-care could risk harming those who interfere with one's interests or could even encourage harming others if it is in one's interest to do so. Thus as an ethical style the care of the self may be potentially harmful to others.

These, then, are two related criticisms of Socratic ethics: firstly, that Socratic care of the self is detached from the care for others, and, secondly, that an isolated self-care actually risks harming others. I will begin by treating this second criticism. A more specific account of Socratic care of the self will dispel the belief that this ethic risks harming others. This criticism confuses Socratic self-care, which is a practice of cultivating virtue in the soul, with self-interest driven by one's appetites or desires. Indeed, this criticism inverts the Socratic injunction of care, which requires one to pursue virtue, limiting desire to what is appropriate and therefore *not* harmful to oneself or others. As Foucault explains,

the risk [...] occurs precisely when one has not taken care of the self and has become a slave of one's desires. [If] you take proper care of yourself, that is [...] if you know what you can reasonably hope for and, on the other hand, what things should not matter [...] there is no danger [of abusing others].<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> "Apology," 21a.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 31c.

<sup>7</sup> Nehamas, 181.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Foucault, *Ethics*, 288.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

When Socrates discusses care of the self, he demands that one not seek goods that serve or are motivated by greed, jealousy, or excessive desires, which are precisely the forces that lead one to harm others. Instead, he persuades people “not to care for [their] [...] wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of [their] soul,”<sup>11</sup> for example. In the *Laches*, Lysimachus’ father has harmed his son precisely *because* he did not care for himself in the Socratic sense. He did not tend to himself, but rather kept “busy with other people’s affairs.”<sup>12</sup> As such, he pursued reputation and honour without defining for himself their appropriate limits, and in doing so he neglected more important goods, in particular the education of his son. Socratic ‘egoism,’ then, does not risk harming others, and even prevents one from doing so.

However, this does not yet prove that Socratic care of the self is also concerned with the well-being of others. Having answered the second criticism, that Socratic egoism might *harm* others, it remains possible that Socratic ethics is indifferent to *caring* for others. A closer reading of the *Laches* will demonstrate the close link in Socratic ethics between self-care and care for others. The opening of the *Laches* is crucial, as it establishes the primary concern of the dialogue and the rules that the dialogue is to follow. Lysimachus and Melesias have decided to do their “utmost to take care of them [their children],”<sup>13</sup> and so the primary concern of the *Laches* is the proper way in which they should do so. Suggestively, then, the specific subject of the dialogue is defined as the “*teknikos peri psukhēs therapeian*,”<sup>14</sup> or the technique of therapy or care of the soul.<sup>15</sup> This explicitly links the fathers’ search to Socrates’ mission, as defined in the *Apology*, of “persuading both young and old” to “care for [...] the best possible state of [their] soul.”<sup>16</sup> It is also important to note the precise way in which the fathers wish to care for their sons, namely, by teaching them how to care for themselves: “if they *take care of themselves*, they’ll [...] be worthy of their names.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, the fathers are seeking a means of caring for their sons’ souls that will, in turn, compel their sons to take this care upon themselves. The dialogue also adds another layer to this search for the ‘technique of care’. The reason that Lysimachus and Melesias are seeking a teacher in the first place is that they have not led notable lives themselves, which is precisely because they were not taught to take care of themselves in their youth.<sup>18</sup> As such, they are not authorized to teach their children themselves.<sup>19</sup> So, in their search for the discipline that will make their sons as good as possible, the fathers are also seeking teachers who are themselves as

---

<sup>11</sup> “Apology,” 30b.

<sup>12</sup> Plato, “Laches,” in *Early Socratic Dialogues*, ed. Trevor J. Saunders, trans. Ian Laine (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 179d.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> “Laches,” 185e.

<sup>15</sup> cf. Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2008), 134.

<sup>16</sup> “Apology,” 30a.

<sup>17</sup> “Laches,” 179d; my emphasis.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 179c-d.

<sup>19</sup> cf. *Courage of Truth*.

good as possible and whose own excellence authorizes them to teach the children. Thus they turn to Nicias and Laches, for two reasons. First, they are themselves successful political figures who have excellent achievements. However, they also have ethical excellence, represented by their use of *parrhesia*, or courageous free speech.<sup>20</sup> They are not only capable of forming an opinion, but are also virtuous enough to speak the truth courageously and without reservation.<sup>21</sup> In the opening of the dialogue, then, we are presented with what could be called a ‘chain of care,’<sup>22</sup> which continues to shape the ethical schema suggested by the dialogue. Lysimachus and Melesias wish to care for their children, and to do so they wish to teach the children to care for themselves. However, the two fathers are not qualified to educate their children in self-care because they have not properly cared for *themselves*. Thus, they turn to Laches and Nicias, who obviously do practice self-cultivation since they are not only successful in their own right, but also exhibit the desirable ethical quality of *parrhesia*, frank-speech. One must care for himself in order to care for another, by way of teaching the other to care for himself. This is the chain of care and the implicit rule guiding the dialogue’s search for a teacher.

The ‘chain of care’ is solidified once Socrates enters the dialogue, as he establishes the methodology of the ensuing conversation. Initially, Lysimachus wants Socrates to follow a political mode of conversation<sup>23</sup> by voting for the speech (either Laches’ or Nicias’) that he believes is most accurate regarding military training.<sup>24</sup> However, Socrates unsurprisingly rejects this approach and suggests one in which qualifications and expertise must be taken into account. As the introduction of the dialogue suggests, the search for the proper technique of care requires that the teacher of this technique must himself be an expert of care. Thus, Socrates suggests that in their search they find someone who has had a good teacher, performed good works, and taught others.<sup>25</sup> The ‘chain of care,’ implied in the opening, is here suggested explicitly as the criterion that will guarantee the discussion’s validity: one must have been cared for by a teacher, achieved ethical excellence, and passed this excellence on if his testimony regarding the ‘therapy of the soul’ is to be trusted. This methodology then takes one more turn to become the recognizable Socratic elenchus. Although the truly Socratic discussion will still involve giving an account of one’s worth, Nicias recognizes that, with Socrates, they will each be expected to give an account of their *lifestyle* and of their

---

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>21</sup> “Laches,” 178b.

<sup>22</sup> See *Courage of Truth*, 90. Foucault sees a similar type of chain in the *Apology*, extending back to the god: the god called on Socrates as the wisest man, inciting Socrates’ mission of care, because the god cares for man. Caring for the god, Socrates examines the god’s pronouncement regarding his wisdom. Concerned for his own soul, Socrates then seeks wisdom and virtue, and this leads him to care for others, by having them care for themselves.

<sup>23</sup> See *Courage of Truth*, 134-138. The idea of a shift in ‘modes’ of discourse is indebted to Foucault.

<sup>24</sup> “Laches,” 184d.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 186a-b.

past life<sup>26</sup> rather than of their teacher and their deeds. This may be a subtle shift, but what it implies is the precedence, in the question of virtue, of the character of one's soul over a series of actions or the entirely external fact of having had a good teacher. This shift to an interlocutor's *ethical character* – to his mode of being or way of life, which we may term his *ethos* as a short-hand – as an authorization of his *speech* is intended to disclose whether an interlocutor is mistaken in his pretense to knowledge of the technique of care. The change of focus from the children themselves to the characters of Laches and Nicias<sup>27</sup> required by the elenchus should therefore not be interpreted as 'selfish'. The discussion of the older men's *ethos* still occurs squarely within their mission to benefit "the most precious thing [the children]."<sup>28</sup> But in order to do so properly, the fathers must first find, test, and prove the worth of a teacher who is himself sufficiently good and to whom they can therefore entrust the children. Otherwise, far from benefiting their children, they will "risk corrupting them."<sup>29</sup> The care of the self is thus required as the condition of possibility of caring for others. As mentioned above, it is precisely when one does *not* care for himself that he risks harming another, because he does not know his own limits and capabilities.

However, by the end of the dialogue it seems that none of the interlocutors can prove themselves as the true technician of care. They are unable to account for their own courage, and so while the interlocutors may be virtuous, they cannot uncover the technique that will teach this excellence. Nonetheless, the discussants do not leave utterly despondent. Despite Socrates' claim that he can be of no more assistance than Laches or Nicias, the interlocutors uniformly request that Socrates care for the youth, and Socrates agrees to do so.<sup>30</sup> They understand that Socrates is the one who can teach care of the self, and that the elenchus itself is the discipline that was sought all along. Despite the seemingly negative conclusion of the dialogue, Socrates meets the qualifications established for the technician of care, and the elenchus similarly matches the requirements for the technique of care.

That Socrates is indeed the qualified teacher of the care of the self is suggested throughout the dialogue. For example, before allowing Socrates to examine him, Laches explains that he only converses with someone whose "words harmonize with his actions," and requests that in an inquiry the examiner "himself must be a good man."<sup>31</sup> This reiterates the previous stipulation of the dialogue, namely that the teacher of care must be ethically distinguished, and also implies that Socrates meets this stipulation, since Laches agrees to be questioned. Socrates has exhibited courage in war,<sup>32</sup> but also, crucially,

---

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 188a.

<sup>27</sup> "Nicias: [...] I was fairly certain some time ago that with Socrates here it wouldn't be the boys we'd be talking about, but ourselves." (*Ibid.*, 188b-c).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 185a.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 186b.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 200e-201c.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 188d-189a.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 189b.

shows bravery in his discourse: “let’s stick to the search and show endurance.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, insofar as he obviously cares for his own virtue, Socrates is qualified to teach the care of the soul. The interlocutors so readily appreciate Socrates’ suitability as a teacher that even before the elenctic discussion begins Lysimachus says that he and Melesias will follow whatever conclusion Socrates offers.<sup>34</sup> (*Laches* 189d).

It is also suggested throughout the *Laches* that the Socratic elenchus is the discipline, the technique of care that is being sought. As we have seen, the technique must be one that teaches care by inciting others to care for themselves. Nicias himself recognizes Socrates’ method as precisely this type of process, and says so explicitly: “you’re bound to be more careful about your way of life in the future if you don’t shrink from this treatment.”<sup>35</sup> Following this logic, it becomes apparent that the investigation is successful in spite of, and even because of, its negative conclusion. That is, insofar as no one was able to prove themselves perfect practitioners of the care of the soul, they all resolve together to tend to and improve themselves.<sup>36</sup> In the aporetic moment, the interlocutors are motivated by their very lack of perfection to begin the work of self-cultivation; it is precisely the acknowledgment of one’s limits that teaches the desire for development. Nicias, having been subjected to Socrates’ treatment, even begins to care for Laches in a Socratic manner, exhorting him to examine himself: “you keep an eye on others, but you never take a good look at yourself.”<sup>37</sup> Thus the practice of self-care has already been activated in the chain of care extending from Socrates to Laches via Nicias: having been cared for by Socrates, that is, criticized in his own current lack of knowledge regarding the cultivation of virtue, Nicias not only comes to appreciate the value of self-cultivation but, mimicking the exhorting style of Socrates, ensures that Laches too comes to appreciate his need for this ethical practice. Socratic discourse “is precisely a discourse joined to and ordered by the principle ‘attend to yourself,’”<sup>38</sup> and because the interlocutors recognize this, they insist that Socrates be the one to care for their children. Socrates is the teacher who cares for himself, and can care for others by compelling them to do the same.

Having illuminated the connection of self and other in the ethics presented by the *Laches*, we are now able to return to Nehamas’ criticism, namely that Socratic ethics is disconnected from the care for others. This criticism confuses an ethic in which the care of the self is ethically prior for one in which the care of the self is wholly sufficient. That is, in Socratic ethics the centrality of one’s attention to his virtue and to his soul is the guarantor of a larger context of care. Care of the self must be in some sense prior, as we can see in the *Laches*, because it is the precondition of all other care. Insofar as one is

---

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 194a.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 189d.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 188b.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 200b, 201b.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 200b.

<sup>38</sup> Foucault, *Courage of Truth*, 149.

able to realize the proper means of relating to and caring for another, they must first attend to their own souls. One must develop a thoughtful relationship of self-to-self, nurturing their own virtue, in order to care for others in a healthy manner. However, ‘self-interest’ does not thereby exhaust the horizon of Socratic ethics. Because Socrates cares for his soul, he is capable (and even compelled), through the elenchus, to care for others. By tending to others in his cross-examinations, he incites them to care for their own souls. Thus, the elenchus is precisely the method that allows Socrates to transform his own pursuit of virtue into care for his interlocutors, by instilling in them the same desire to tend to their own souls. That the elenchus arrives at *aporia*, or, as Nehamas says, that the elenchus does not lead to knowledge of *arête*,<sup>39</sup> is precisely what compels others to attend to their deficiencies. Nehamas neglects that Socrates’ “personal” pursuit of virtue is always and necessarily linked to the souls of others, through elenctic discourse, by inciting others to care for the self. As such, Socrates’ ethical activity is intimately connected to the city and the care of its citizens.

The ethic of the care of the self, then, is not distinct from the care of others, nor can it become an exaggerated form of egoism that harms others. Socratic self-care is always bound to the care of others, as it both allows one to properly care for others and, conversely, it is by being taught and cared for that one can learn to care for himself. Throughout this process, it should be added, because the *teacher* of care is himself a *practitioner* of virtue, he will not harm others. The care of the self limits one’s excessive desires, leaving one free to interact with others in a healthy manner. Indeed, to reverse this ethic is dangerous, and it is precisely when one cares for others without due deliberation that they “risk corrupting them.”<sup>40</sup> If Socratic ethics is egoistic, it is an egoism that allows one to adopt a reflective and appropriate stance towards others. Thus, although the *Laches* concludes with the older generation realizing that they must first of all tend to themselves,<sup>41</sup> this is precisely in the best interest of the sons on whom they exert their power and influence. The *Laches* demonstrates the full implications of Socrates’ ethics, in which the pursuit of virtue allows one to care for others by teaching them to tend to themselves. Thus, to criticize Socratic ethics as a form of egoism in opposition to a selfless care of others is inappropriate. Neither a self-interested seeker of wisdom nor a dangerous teacher of self-love, Socrates, as the master of *epimeleia heautou*, is the hinge between the care of self and others.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Nehamas, 182.

<sup>40</sup> “Laches,” 186b.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 201a.

<sup>42</sup> This paper has benefitted from several readings by Melanie Thompson. While I take full responsibility for all remaining errors, shortcomings, and points of confusion, I thank her for her assistance and helpful suggestions.