Socrates was a combat soldier during the Peloponnesian War. This aspect of his biography is rarely placed at the center of an account of the enduring interest of the life of this celebrated philosopher. When it is the effect is striking. This is especially clear in the interpretation of Socrates by the Italian master of neoclassical sculpture Antonio Canova. In a series of four large bas-reliefs completed between 1789 and 1796 and now in the collection of the Museo Canoviano in Possagno, Canova addresses Socrates’ trial and death.1 In the first panel he depicts Socrates raising his arm and addressing the jurors while Meletus and Anytus, the historical accusers, hover in the background. Standing by Socrates is the boundary-crossing god Hermes ready to see him through dangerous circumstances and to the underworld (visually modeled on Alcibiades wearing a helmet). The next three panels continue the story and bring out its psychological complexity. Canova shows us Socrates rending his family away and draws attention to his parting from his eldest child. The scene suggests Socrates’ capacity for tenderness. It also presents Socrates’ seated philosophical friends composed and unshaken. Following that Canova displays Socrates’ calm and constancy under extreme stress. In this scene Socrates holds the cup of hemlock nearly to his lips with his left hand and, recalling the composition of the first relief, gestures upward with his right arm as he speaks to his friends. His philosophical partners now appear upset (they weep and hang their heads at the prospect of his imminent death). In the last relief of this series Socrates lies dead with friends in varying states of composure gathered around. At the center we see Criton leaning over to close Socrates’ eyes.

The group is brilliantly conceived and executed yet Canova apparently believed it failed to capture fully the meaning of this figure. Within the year, and on the occasion of his election to the Accademia di San Luca in 1797, Canova added a fifth relief to the set. This extraordinary piece shows Socrates standing by a wounded Alcibiades during a hoplite engagement at
Potidaea 33 years before his trial (Figure 6.1). There is nothing hesitant about Canova’s composition. Socrates is an uncompromising warrior. His muscular arms and legs are fully extended. He has a strong grip on his shield and projects his chin forward. Canova places both the wounded Alcibiades and the viewer of this work of art behind the protection of Socrates’ shield. He is a powerful defender, ready to strike. The positioning of Socrates features “dynamic diagonals” modeled on ancient battle reliefs and expresses martial prowess. The depiction of Alcibiades wounded is also defiant. Though an arrow is fixed in his thigh and his helmet and sword lie on the ground, he sports a fierce gaze and retains his shield. Furthermore, the arrangement of Socrates and Alcibiades as a pair conveys the camaraderie and fortitude of these men. Alcibiades’ left leg nearly obscures our view of Socrates’ left leg, suggesting their cooperation. Three sides of a triangle are made by Socrates’ arm, Socrates’ sword, and then the combination of the head and shield of Alcibiades; another triangle is formed by Socrates’ extended right leg, Alcibiades’ right arm, and Alcibiades’ sword on the ground. The fully extended legs of Socrates and Alcibiades also combine with the ground to form a stable triangle (while their opponent has a narrow stance and his right leg bows to form a compromised triangle one side of which is formed by a dead soldier). Canova’s portrait of Socrates, so unfamiliar to us today for its inclusion of a vigorous combat soldier in action, is exquisitely faithful to Plato’s account of Socrates’ distinctive excellence. In this chapter, I assemble the elements of Plato’s account of Socrates’ military service at Potidaea and elsewhere, develop that portrait in light of evidence from Thucydides’ account of these campaigns in his History of the Peloponnesian War, and consider the place of Socrates’ conduct as a soldier in Plato’s understanding of this philosopher’s peculiar excellence. I propose, in particular, that Plato identifies Socrates’ endurance of calamitous war experiences that could produce what today we call “war trauma” (with its attendant debilitating psychological symptoms) as constitutive of his excellence. Plato highlights Socrates’ ability to remain himself under shifting and trying conditions, especially when moving between combat and home. Overall, Plato treats the conduct of Socrates in his capacity as a soldier as a visible sign of his achievement of an uncommon measure of “psychological health.” This aspect of the portrait of Socrates engages myth (chiefly the figure of Ajax but also Achilles and Odysseus) and, in so doing, creates an archetype of resilience and “enlarges the significance of the philosopher’s life.” I conclude by showing that the psychologically rich theory of justice elaborated in the Republic mobilizes the vantage point of a combat veteran.

Preliminary Methodological Considerations: The Historical vs. Literary Socrates and the Suitability of the Term “Veteran”

This essay examines Plato’s portrait of Socrates the soldier on campaign, in combat and upon return home. I will not examine the evidence for Plato’s own service. Nor will I address the “historical Socrates” in relation to Plato’s Socrates. All our evidence for Socrates’ military service appears in Plato’s dialogues. This is not a reason to question the veracity of its basic elements. I am satisfied that the fact of his service would have been impossible for Plato to fabricate and still maintain a credible portrait. In addition, the chronology assumed in Plato fits Thucydides’ account of the relevant battles and scholarship does not cast doubt on the fact of his service. In order to address Plato’s portrait of his military service in the least speculative way possible, I will restrict myself to the references in the dialogues to Socrates’ own military experiences. I will not try to account for things such as how Socrates might have acquired his hoplite panoply.

I am not examining a literary representation of an idealized soldier for its own sake. The figure of Socrates has exercised moral imaginations across the globe for centuries. In this essay I want to call attention to the very rarely noted fact that Plato places a capacity to endure with moderation harrowing military experiences and an array of linked psychological stresses at the very center of his account of what it means to struggle to sustain a “just soul.” I also want to call attention to the fact that Plato’s political theory draws on the inner life of a warrior to develop a portrait of Socratic practice. Moreover, Plato assumes that an adequate understanding of “justice in the city” must address the likelihood that, however usual and honorable, military service can expose a person to strains that can devolve into disabili
mental function (lack of confidence in one's judgment and failing memory),
addictive behaviors, and loss of one's capacity for social trust (and thus
ability to sustain relationships), to outbursts of rage and episodes of going
erserk. One prominent psychiatrist summarizes the symptoms of combat trauma
worsened by moral injuries this way: "good character comes undone."\textsuperscript{14}

War-related posttraumatic stress is today a formal diagnosis recognized by
the medical establishment and veterans' affairs professionals. This is a recent
development. It has long been known that war often subjects soldiers (and
civilians) to traumatic experiences that can wreak havoc on their psyches as
well as scar or destroy their bodies. We can find examples in antiquity and
can point to accounts of "exhaustion" and "soldier's heart" among American
Civil War soldiers as well as "shell shock" and "battle fatigue" in the World Wars.\textsuperscript{15}
But it was clinicians working with veterans of more recent conflicts,
especially the Vietnam War, who identified a formal symptomatology.\textsuperscript{16}
We should observe, of course, that dreadful war experiences such as those
detailed above do not necessarily produce trauma and debilitating posttrau-
matic stress. Some servicemen and women do come through it stable and
capable. Precisely how and why they are so able when others suffer griev-
ously is the subject of considerable study. What variables—personal and
situational—can account for this? How is it possible to effectively and swif-
tly treat incipient and persistent posttraumatic stress? Can military practices
and policies help protect soldiers from developing it?\textsuperscript{17} How does the preva-
ience of trauma among veterans impact the public expression of morally
justifiable outrage and political critique? These are, of course, urgent ques-
tions today as we recognize the high incidence of combat-related trauma
among veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the heartrending
consequences of such injuries for the individual soldiers, their loved ones,
and their communities. Using the conceptual framework I refer to as war
trauma to approach Plato, I do not mean to suggest that this ancient philoso-
pher anticipated the modern psychiatric diagnosis. Instead, I mean to keep
contemporary understandings of war trauma and posttraumatic stress front
and center so as to alert us to features of Plato's depiction of Socrates' expe-
riences on deployment, in battle, and upon return to Athens that have gone
largely unnoticed for some time, thus enabling the recovery of a dimen-
sion of his work that resonates in important ways today. We do not need to
assume that Greek culture constructed something akin to a modern medi-
cal diagnosis to find something familiar in its literature's attention to the
physically and emotionally demanding aspects of military service and the
sometimes debilitating psychological effects this can have on good people.
Plato's explicit account of Socrates' behavior on campaign and in battle (219c–221d). Plato offers only brief supplements in other dialogues. At *Charmides* 153a–154b, the opening of that dialogue, we find Socrates in the act of arriving home from the Potidaean expedition. At *Charmides* 156d Socrates mentions having encountered foreign learning while on campaign “there” (Potidaea). At *Laches* 181b Socrates' behavior during the retreat at Delium is recounted by Laches, a general present on that campaign. At *Apology* 28e Socrates proudly reminds the jury that he served in the Athenian military on three campaigns, Potidaea, Amphipolis, and Delium. And at *Crito* 52b Socrates (impersonating the Law) recalls that he has never left the city except with the army on campaign.

The basic outline of Socrates' military service drawn in these sources can be stated simply. He was an Athenian hoplite during three significant campaigns of the Peloponnesian War: the extended siege of Potidaea on the distant isthmus of Chalcidice in northern Greece which started when he was in his mid-30s (in 432), the strategic attack on Delium in very nearby Boeotia about six years later (in 424), and the expedition north again to defend Amphipolis just two years after that (in 423/2). All three were disasters for the Athenians. The campaign to Potidaea was an enormous drain on resources and the Athenian forces suffered greatly—all for uncertain military gains. Delium was an utter defeat on the battlefield for Athenian hoplites with a large number of fatalities. Amphipolis was lost owing to a tactical blunder. But Socrates' own personal behavior on campaign was conspicuously exemplary. In particular, at both Potidaea and Delium he remained steadfast at his post, holding his ground and bravely leading vulnerable—and also notable—fellow citizens (a young Alcibiades at Potidaea and General Laches at Delium) through the bloody ordeal of close hoplite combat and the chaos of retreat in the midst of collapsing Athenian lines and fleeing, panicky troops.

Looking at these specific passages in Plato more closely, we find more details of the combat experiences Socrates lived through. On the expedition north to Potidaea the entire force confronted hardships that included serious deprivations (they were cut off from their supplies and suffered an acute lack of food), prolonged periods of severe discomfort (including long periods of intense cold), and the stress of a protracted deployment (*Symposium* 220a–b). The expedition to and home from Potidaea included especially fierce battles in which many personal friends of Socrates perished though none are specifically named (*Charmides* 153b). Socrates witnessed his close companion Alcibiades sustain a bad wound. He refused to leave Alcibiades' side and rescued him from the battlefield, managing not only to extricate Alcibiades but his armor as well (*Symposium* 220e). In addition, Plato reports details that allow us to infer that twice Socrates suffered moral insults by his own compatriots while on the Potidaean campaign. First, fellow soldiers mocked Socrates' endurance of hardships (especially the cold) thinking it an affront to them (*Symposium* 220d). Second, the commanders deliberately ignored Socrates' act of valor in rescuing Alcibiades. Instead, they gave the decoration to the one rescued, the ward of Pericles and well-connected young beauty, Alcibiades. In so doing they betrayed that their foremost concern was to curry favor with those who shared Alcibiades' social status, not fairly to recognize battlefield acts of valor (*Symposium* 220e). Furthermore, in the *Charmides* Socrates says that while on the Potidaean campaign a Thracian physician prompted him to question usual Athenian practices of healing (156d–157a). Turning to the account of Delium in the *Symposium* and *Laches*, we learn that Socrates' war experiences included additional challenges. On foot in hoplite armor he was caught in the middle of a lethal and disgracefully panicky Athenian retreat. Plato has the former general Laches report in his own voice that Socrates got him through the melee (*Laches* 181b). Plato also has Alcibiades report having witnessed Socrates' refusal to leave Laches' side during this horrible retreat (*Symposium* 220e–221a). Regarding Amphipolis, Plato places him there but provides no particulars (*Apology* 28e).

To fill out this picture we can consider what we might reasonably assume Plato's readers to have known about these campaigns. Looking at the evidence from Plato in the context of depictions of these specific campaigns in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* can give us some idea. The Athenian action against the rebellious tribute-paying ally Potidaea is among the conflicts that initiate the Peloponnesian War. The Athenians first fight a fierce battle (during which Callias, one of the four Athenian generals on site, perishes) and the Potidaeans retreat behind their walls. The Athenians lay siege. And so Socrates likely had to participate not only in hoplite combat but also in the backbreaking work of building fortifications for a siege. The Potidaeans held out for three years and so Socrates was likely away from home and living in severe conditions, possibly without leave, for a protracted length of time. Among the things he had to endure was an outbreak of plague among the troops besieging Potidaea (2.58). And as if all this was not enough, we must also recall that Thucydides mentions that the Potidaeans became so desperate for food that they resorted to cannibalism (2.70.1). Seeing this, and surviving on barely adequate rations themselves, the Athenians finally agreed to terms of capitulation. On the way home, the forces fought a few smaller engagements.

Thucydides' accounts of the Athenians' debacles at Delium and Amphipolis provide more reason to believe that Plato's readers understood that Socrates' service would have surely exposed him to harrowing experiences. Delium was the first full-scale and certainly the bloodiest hoplite battle of the Peloponnesian War. In this case the Athenians aggressively sought a stronghold in the heart of hostile Boeotia, just a day's march from central Athens, by fortifying the sanctuary of Apollo at Delium. Their tactical errors, humiliations, and gruesome suffering made this campaign infamous. Delium was the "only pitched battle of the Peloponnesian War fought in close proximity to Athens." Moreover, the "disaster of this Athenian 'home guard' must have quickly taken on mythic proportions and been recounted constantly throughout Athens." Four details reported by Thucydides stand
out. First, there was a “friendly fire” episode. In the midst of a hoplite battle in which the Athenians had gained a temporary upper hand, Thucydides reports, “some of the Athenians fell into confusion in surrounding the enemy and mistook and so killed each other” (4.96.3). In the confusion they likely speared and hacked away and dozens of men “must have been impaled by their own brothers, fathers, friends.”24 Plato acknowledges that Socrates was caught right in the middle of this: Alcibiades says at Delium Socrates was remarkable for the way he was “looking out for friendly and enemy troops” (Symposium 221b)25. Second, Thucydides indicates that the disastrous retreat at Delium was initiated by Athenian errors, not Boeotian superior strength. Athenian forces were far larger but they were routed and fled in a chaotic fashion. Specifically, in the confusion of the friendly fire episode, Thucydides tells us that a smart tactical move on the part of the Theban General Pagondas “struck panic into the victorious wing of the Athenians...[and that] the whole Athenian army took to flight” (4.96.6), some to the ships and some over land. Third, Athenian losses remained on the battleground for 17 days. Because Athenians had violated a sanctity by making it into a garrison and some Athenian troops had retreated into that space and therefore now still remained in Boeotian territory, the Boeotians refused to allow the Athenians to collect their dead until they abandoned the fortified temple (4.97.1–100.5). In effect, they held Athenian corpses hostage. The stalemate ended only after the Boeotians used a novel weapon on the holed-up Athenians in the offending garrison. This new weapon is the fourth special horror associated with Delium by Thucydides (4.100.1–5). The Boeotians used a “flame-blowing contraption”26 that allowed the enemy to set the wooden walls of the garrison ablaze from a relatively safe distance, incinerating some, driving out the rest, and striking terror in all.27 After this, the Boeotians let the Athenians recover their dead, including the decomposing corpses from the earlier engagement. Thucydides reports that, at the end of the day, at Delium “not quite five hundred Boeotians fell in the battle, and nearly one thousand Athenians, including Hippocrates the general” (4.101.1–2). And so we can observe that Delium adds to Socrates’ war experiences a grisly friendly fire episode, the sight of the rotting corpses of comrades, the deployment by the enemy of a fearsome new weapon technology, the combat death of another commanding general, and another episode of hand-to-hand combat in the middle of a disreputable retreat.

Soon after Delium, Socrates joined an Athenian expedition north to Amphipolis under the command of Cleon. Thucydides’ account of that campaign mentions three things of importance in the current context. First, the Athenian forces were suspicious of Cleon’s command skills and personal courage from the start and lost whatever small measure of confidence they might have had as the engagement progressed (5.7.2, 5.10.9). Second, this campaign ended not only in a decisive defeat of the Athenians but also in another full-blown rout and panic-stricken flight of Athenian forces (5.10.6) and slain commander. Thucydides’ account of the troops’ response to Cleon’s position during the battle suggests a near case of what we might call “passive fragging” as they refrain from coming to his aid (5.10.9). Third, this is the expedition in which Thucydides (the historian) served as a general. He was in command of troops charged with reinforcing the Athenians on campaign to Amphipolis. He failed to get his forces there in time to make a difference. Judged incompetent by the Athenians, he was sentenced to a 20-year exile as punishment (5.26.5). And so, Amphipolis added to Socrates’ war experiences moral injuries associated with service under the command of a known incompetent and failure to receive reinforcements due to poor leadership.

From the details Plato offers, read in historical context drawn from Thucydides, we can conclude that while Socrates did not himself sustain a bodily injury, his military service indeed exposed him to a whole array of war experiences that would place a person at significant risk of sustaining ruinous psychological wounds.28

Socrates Displays Uncommon “Resilience” on Deployment, in Combat and When Adjusting to Being Home

The physical afection of the “historical Socrates” are well known from various sources—walking with a particular swagger, going barefoot, tolerating meager and poor food, wearing a single threadbare cloak in both winter and summer, abiding the privations of near poverty, having extraordinary powers of concentration as well as measure of commitment to philosophical examination that sometimes made him neglect ordinary things and thereby look silly. The sources attest to his display of these “mannerisms” both on the battlefield and in the streets of Athens.29 Commentators ordinarily view the personal quirks as part of Socrates’ odd (and irritating) asceticism. But their persistence in war and peacetime highlights an additional point: despite repeated exposure to the dreadful stresses of war, Socrates’ character does come undone. The continuance of his idiosyncrasies into combat zones and their prominent display at the very moment of his return home make this especially clear. This is apparent in Alcibiades’ anecdotes about serving with Socrates at Potidaea and Delium recounted in his speech in the Symposium, the dramatic setting of the Charmides in which the reader encounters Socrates at the gymnasium only hours after having returned from Potidaea, and in Socrates’ view of his own military service expressed in the Apology.

Alcibiades’ account in the Symposium of what it was like to serve with Socrates on military expeditions immediately follows his account of Socrates’ ability to resist all his amorous advances over the years. Frustrated, Alcibiades blurs out that his best efforts to “capture” Socrates have failed. Socrates is able to resist all inducements. Alcibiades laments that he cannot even count on offers of money to tempt Socrates because such things have always “meant much less to him than enemy weapons ever meant to Ajax” (219e). Although it is not entirely clear from this fluid translation of the sense of
the passage, Alcibiades’ comment refers to Ajax’s extraordinary shield and its role in his ability to beat back enemy spears and swords. When Alcibiades recalls Socrates’ own military prowess, the reference to Ajax frames his story. In order to track the extent of the parallel, as Alcibiades invites listeners (and Plato’s readers) to do, let me recall key details of the story of this Homeric hero. Ajax is huge physically, very agile, swift, strong, and courageous. He fought in tandem with his bow-wielding brother Teucer, protecting him with the cover of an enormous shield. Moreover, though Ajax kills many, the Iliad celebrates Ajax’s excellence at defensive maneuvers. He personally fights Hector but nightfall forces their duel to conclude before a victory is won. The exchange of gifts that follows (Ajax receives Hector’s sword) is perhaps the strongest expression in Homer of the view that military ability does not require contempt for the enemy. Overall, he obeys commanders and never sustains a physical wound at Troy. But Ajax does experience what we might call trauma exacerbated by moral injury.In the aftermath of Achilles’ death, the commanders fail to honor Ajax’s heroic actions appropriately by presenting him with Achilles’ armor. Instead, Agamemnon requires Ajax to compete with Odysseus for the armor and sets up a contest the design of which—a contest of speeches—wholly favors honey-tongued Odysseus. In the Sophoclean tragedy Ajax, we get an account of the debilitating effects the trauma of Achilles’ death, compounded by the moral injury of the unfair contest, has on his fine warrior. In this play, this exceptional soldier, the bulwark of the Achaeans, appears in agonizing psychological pain. Broken, Ajax becomes a berserker; in a fit of madness brought on by the moral injury of having been denied the armor outright and instead made to suffer a humiliating slight at the hands of his own commander, he goes into a violent rage against his own compatriots. Only divine trickery saves him from massacring many of his own comrades (and fragging his commanders). Believing he is killing fellow Greeks, Ajax wildly slaughters livestock. When he regains his senses, his feelings of shame and fear only intensify and he descends into suicidal despair; he uses Hector’s gift to end his own life. The story of his madness was well known in Plato’s time. It not only was recounted in Sophocles’ play but was part of the Little Iliad, a now lost part of the epic cycle that was as familiar at the time as the Iliad and Odyssey of Homer.

As we imagine ourselves listening to Alcibiades tell stories about Socrates’ behavior on lengthy deployments and in battle, the comparison with Ajax can order our thoughts. Like Ajax, in battle Socrates is a bulwark. He fiercely protects his comrades in arms (particularly Alcibiades whom Socrates treats, despite his advances, “like a brother”—language that recalls Teucer), stays calm and determined in the heat of battle, does not himself sustain a physical wound, and obeys commanders. And, like Ajax (though on a vastly smaller scale than that of the Homeric hero), he is dishonored by an unjust decision by commanders (the Athenian commanders at Potidæa award the prize to Alcibiades/Agamemnon awards the armor of Achilles to Odysseus). But, while Ajax experiences severe psychological pain, rage, shame, and suicidal despair, Socrates appears buoyant in the aftermath of battle (and remain so when he faces trial, imprisonment, and execution by his fellow citizens).

All of Alcibiades’ anecdotes regarding Socrates at war stress continuities between home and war zones and his exceptional personal endurance (ἐπιστήμη Symposium 219d7). For example, he explicitly remarks on continuities between Socrates’ behavior at war and back at home. He starts by saying that their odd erotic relationship precluded their service together and continued on deployment: “All this had already occurred when Athens invaded Potidæa, where we served together and shared the same mess” (219e). Alcibiades also elaborates on Socrates’ attitude toward food. When they were cut off from their supplies at Potidæa, Alcibiades says of Socrates, “no one else stood up to hunger as well as he did” (ἐπιστήμη Symposium 220a1). This reminds him of Socrates’ attitude toward wine back at home; though he didn’t much want to drink, when he had to, he could hold his liquor (220a). Turning to more general conditions, Alcibiades reports that Socrates not only endured the extreme cold at Potidæa (ἐπιστήμη Symposium 220a6) but also did so in his usual bare feet and light cloak. He invokes the endurance of Odysseus to applaud Socrates’ odd and marvelous ability to conduct philosophy while on campaign (calling him ἐπιστήμης ὁ νάν ὁ ναεύ of Odyssey IV.242). Alcibiades says that one warm day in Potidæa Socrates started thinking about a problem and stood outside in the same spot, lost in thought, for a full 24 hours straight. After a few hours his comrades came out to watch him (and mock him), even taking their bedding outside to get a good view of the spectacle (220c). This did not deter him any more than mockery interfered with his philosophical work at home. In addition, Alcibiades tells us that Socrates was wholly untroubled at having been passed over for a deserved prize for bravery in the battle of Potidæa when he rescued the young Alcibiades and his shield. At war, like at home, Socrates lacked interest in conventional honors (220c) and bore personal slight lightly.

The last anecdote Alcibiades tells concerns Socrates’ behavior during the retreat at Delium and again stresses healthy continuities between home and war. Alcibiades calls Socrates’ constancy in this setting “a spectacle worth seeing” (220e9), implying a comparison to dramatic performances and possibly recalling the praise of celebrated warriors by elegiac poets such as Simonides. Alcibiades says that Socrates moved about in the midst of the battle “exactly as he does around town” and then, in an effort to drive home the substantive point, elaborates by openly quoting from Aristophanes’ characterization of Socrates’ in the Clouds saying that even during the retreat at Delium “you strut around like a grand gander [and] roll your eyes” (Symposium 221b citing Clouds 362a).

Plato depicts Alcibiades closing his discussion of Socrates in war by turning once again to myth. There is a parallel for everyone, Alcibiades comments. We might understand Achilles by referring to Brasidas or compare Pericles and Nestor or Antenor (221c). But it is possible, he submits, that
Socrates is so out of the ordinary that “search as you might, you’ll never find anyone else, alive or dead, who’s even remotely like him” (221d). And so Alcibiades himself suggests that his earlier reference to Ajax is most telling not for the ways in which Socrates is like Ajax, though these are revealing, but instead for the single most dramatic way in which the parallel breaks down and Socrates outshines this Homeric hero. Alcibiades’ account of Socrates at war is playful. He delivers it in an inebriated state. And it is part of a larger story of Socrates’ meaningful oddity. It is also a key element of how Plato mythologizes Socrates. Socrates offers a psychologically rich conception of warrior excellence that lauds resilience in the face of catastrophic combat experiences.41

The Charmides extends Plato’s account of Socrates’ resilience to his reintegration into life in Athens. The dramatic setting of the Charmides represents Socrates coming home after the lengthy deployment to Potidaea (153a-154b). The picture of Socrates home from war is one of easy entry and return to old pleasures. Socrates narrates this dialogue himself and so in his own voice we learn that he arrived home from the army at Potidaea only last night, has been away for a long period, and that only a short time ago had been in a significant battle (153b3). Without hesitation he adds, “After such a long absence I sought out my accustomed haunts [the palaestra where the youth-congregate] with special pleasure.” And he specifically denies feeling ill at ease in any way. As if to stress Socrates’ oddity in this regard, he uses the language of mental instability to describe the unrestrained enthusiasm with which young men confined to the homefront, especially his young friend Chaerophon, greet him and pelt him with inquiries (μακάκος 153b3). At first, Socrates answers Chaerophon’s questions with very short, minimally informative lines. The tone and content of Socrates’ responses are a bit strange given his self-described good mood. His initial comments very much resemble the cautious, terse way of speaking that clinical psychologists and contemporary veterans report is indeed characteristic of the way soldiers only recently back from a war-zone typically speak about their war experiences, especially their combat experiences.42

Chaerophon: How did you survive the battle?
Socrates: Exactly as you see me.
Chaerophon: The way we heard it here the fighting was very heavy and many of our friends were killed.
Socrates: The report is accurate.
Chaerophon: Were you actually in the battle?
Socrates: I was there.

Chaerophon urges Socrates to sit and give a full account of the battle. Socrates very quickly adjusts to more extensive talking. Socrates says he took a seat, “proceeded to relate the news in answer to whatever questions anyone asked, and they asked plenty of different ones.” “When they had had enough of these things,” he continues, “I, in my turn, began to question them with respect to affairs at home, about the present state of philosophy and about the young men, whether there were any who had become distinguished for wisdom or beauty or both” (153d). Answering all the questions about the recent battle, about injured and dead friends, and about conditions on the long deployment likely took up some time. Plato does not depict that conversation. Plato shows us a homecoming in which Socrates slips back into his usual life at Athens with little fuss or anxiety on his part. Plato’s literary choices highlight Socrates’ lack of hesitation about relating his war experiences.43 His literary choices also show that Plato expected his readers to be familiar with returning soldiers indeed having difficulties traversing these spheres of life. He highlights the interlocutors’ wonder at Socrates’ composure and willingness to entertain so many questions. The opening of the Charmides is therefore striking in ways unappreciated in the scholarship. It stresses the ease with which Socrates resumes his usual practice of philosophical examination after two distinct kinds of stresses: experiencing combat and recollecting those experiences. The rest of the dialogue suggests how he does it. The substantive philosophical topic of the Charmides is the definition of “self-control” (συνέφεδον), a virtue of considerable practical concern to a returning warrior because it is the virtue that equips an individual to resist temptations to act violently in pursuit of desires. Possessing it, Socrates models how a returning soldier can mentally work to “turn off” combat-honed habits of mind and behavior and, once again, think, argue, and act in ways appropriate to life in the city. What does Socrates do? He talks, forms his memories of the war into narratives, retells stories of combat to others who were not there, engages in dialogic examinations of moral questions—all therapeutically valuable and healing act according to today’s clinical studies.44

Attending to the fact that Plato sets the discussion of self-control in the context of a warrior’s homecoming also makes some sense of two other puzzling aspects of the Charmides: the account of Charmides’ headache at the start of the text and the scheming conduct of Charmides and Critias that concludes the text. Charmides’ headache comes up in this way. After Socrates completes his account of the Potidaean campaign, he inquires into what’s been happening in his absence. He turns up that the most beautiful youth of the new generation, Charmides, is now of an age to undertake discussion and of course wishes to see him. Charmides’ guardian, Critias, calls him to Socrates’ side in a tricky way. Critias knows Charmides has been suffering from headaches and suggests Socrates is in possession of a cure (σφυρομακάρως 155b2, c10, e8). When Charmides appears, Socrates is overcome by the sight of him (and by a glimpse inside his cloak, 155d) but recovers his wits quickly in response to Charmides’ interest in his cure. Addressing Charmides, he stresses that the treatment he has to offer does not attend to the ailing body part in isolation but, instead, is in connection with the whole body, and also with the soul. Charmides agrees to try this strategy and, relieved, Socrates “regains his courage” (156d) and begins to describe some healing practices he learned from a Thracian physician when
he was away on campaign. In particular, he learned that treatment of the 
soul is by means of "charms," that is, by fine words that engender self-control 
(157a). In this way Socrates directs Charmides' attention to the important 
issue of how discussion can support the development of self-control and 
can function as a remedy for ills (157d). Socrates takes self-control and its 
practical benefits seriously. But he also bemoans Charmides' morning 
headaches. After all, Socrates is just back from war and has seen wounds 
and death, and he has just recounted at length stories of those horrors for 
Chaerophon and his friends. Socrates knows that there are kinds of "head-
aches" that actually need "curing" by means of hearing and telling stories 
and cultivating self-control. The aporetic ending of this dialogue (i.e., its 
failure to convince the interlocutors) is thus foreboding and realistic. 
At the close of the dialogue, Socrates worries that his healing charms have not 
worked on Charmides (and Critias) and that these two have not developed 
self-control or even a taste for it (175e). Charmides and Critias suggest they 
will keep at it (176b–c). But the dialogue does not end there. Instead, turned 
on to the end is a seemingly peculiar depiction of Critias and Charmides' 
sharing. Critias issues orders to Charmides, plots with him about secret 
matters, expresses a lack of interest in taking any counsel at all, and says he 
shall willingly embrace force to realize his plans (176c–d). It is not at all 
clear what they are doing. But, once we recall that the Plato and his readers 
knew that the historical analogs of the two characters depicted here were 
in reality leading figures in the conspiratorial and tyrannical rule of the 
Thirty at Athens at the close of the Peloponnesian War, an important 
layer of meaning in the final scene of the Charmides becomes clear. The historical 
Charmides (only a boy at the time of the dramatic setting of Plato's account 
of this conversation) was one of the Ten appointed by the Thirty to govern 
Piraeus. Critias was one of the Thirty. The closing scene of the Charmides 
asks readers to view the brutal regime of the Thirty in light of an utterly 
failure of self-control. Perhaps we can even say that the Charmides 
proposes that the Thirty represents a moment in Athenian history when attitudes and 
behaviors appropriate to a warrior facing an enemy combatant marched 
unchecked into domestic politics.

Plato's account of Socrates' speech to the jurors at his trial in the Apology 
also mobilizes his war experiences to illustrate psychological health and 
its political consequences. In his speech, Socrates mentions his service at 
Potidaea, Amphipolis, and Delium seemingly in passing (28e). His reference 
to his service might even be mistaken for a simple rhetorical move on 
Socrates' part, that is, a contrivance designed to remind the jurors that he 
is a commendable veteran and deserves their compassion. After all, he 
seems to do something similar when he awkwardly engineers recollection 
of his position as head of a household with small children a little later in 
the speech (34d). Or the reference might appear a clear, if clumsy, effort to 
validate philosophy by associating it with a manly, high-status civic activity. 
But Socrates does not just briefly refer to his service in his Apology passage 
(28b–e). The reference functions to weave together his life-long practice 
of philosophy and his repeat performances in battle into a single, integrated 
life-story. The references to his military service assert that he was not one 
man at war and another at home.  

Socrates in the Apology refers to his military service in the course of his 
response to what he takes to be a commonplace objection to his devotion 
to philosophy; it is a shameful activity that places one at risk of death (leaves 
one vulnerable to prosecution and either unable or unwilling to defend oneself 
in court). Socrates imagines being asked, "Are you ashamed to have 
engaged in the sort of occupation that has now put you at risk of death?" 
(28b). He responds by invoking the praiseworthy example of Achilles' deci-
dion to avenge the death of Patroclus in full awareness of the fact that his 
own death is fated to follow that of Hector. Socrates asks, "Do you really 
suppose Achilles gave a thought to danger or death?" when he set out to kill 
Hector (28d). Socrates refers to a moral code appropriate to a war zone to 
explain his disposition as a citizen living in Athens. Socrates implicitly denies 
that different principles should apply to what is just in these two spheres of 
life (at war toward an enemy and in the city with fellows). His point is that 
one standard regarding what is shameful should guide men who traverse both 
these fields of activity, war and philosophy, battle and disagreement. 
He stresses the same point in other dialogues as well. For example, in the 
Laches he insists that a single definition of courage must apply to "those 
who are courageous in warfare but also those who are brave in dangers at 
sea, and the ones who show courage in illness and poverty and affairs 
of state...and not only those who are brave in the face of pain and fear but 
also those who are clever at fighting desire and pleasure" (Laches 191d). 
To drive this point home in the Apology, he reminds his listeners that he is 
not speaking lightly; he has himself faced death on the battlefield during 
three campaigns—Potidaea, Amphipolis, and Delium. And, as he develops 
his argument, Socrates continues to refer to military affairs. He argues that 
being a warrior and doing philosophy both require obeying a commander 
and remaining at one's "station" (28d) over a period of time and in the face 
of grave dangers, even threats of death. 

Socrates challenges his listeners to see that his life would lack coherence 
if it were to be the case that, while repeatedly proving himself able to 
endure the risks associated with taking up weapons and positions in obedi-
cence to military commanders elected by the city, he should now prove 
himself unable to continue to endure the risks associated with taking up 
argument and examination in obedience to the gods (in obedience to the 
oracle and his daimon at Apology 33c). Socrates does not liken philosophy 
to military service in the Apology. Socrates' reference to his own military 
service in the Apology does not propose an apt metaphor. Rather, Socrates 
indicates that his well-lived philosophical life has included exemplary military 
service. He assimilates the full arc of his life, not the single brave act of 
refusing to abandon philosophy at this moment, to the praiseworthy 
military conduct celebrated in elegiac poetry. Socrates also invites listeners 
to complete the comparison of himself to Achilles. Like Achilles, Socrates
is impressively resolute in the face of his own impending death and, in this instance, displays a laudable understanding of what would be truly shameful behavior (abandon what’s right to save one’s skin). Like Achilles Socrates chooses to live fully rather than allow fear of death to paralyze him or diminish his ambitions. But, unlike Achilles, Socrates’ good character does not come undone by anger and grief in the course of following through on that choice. Socrates remains calm in battle and throughout the action of the Crito and Phaedo, that is, imprisonment and execution (beautifully rendered by Canova in artwork discussed earlier). Achilles’ explosive wrath, in contrast, is of course the central theme of Homer’s Iliad and culminates with his abuse of Hector’s corpse.

Plato elaborates Socrates’ singular resilience further. He additionally distinguishes Socrates from Achilles and invites new comparisons with other heroes. In his speech in the Apology Socrates introduces two senses in which he will endure death. First, he is confident that the example of his coherent life and unjust punishment will enter the Athenian collective memory. He expects the episode to linger in the Athenian conscience, allowing him to continue conducting interrogations of the Athenians from beyond the grave and thus enact deathless kleos. Second, he is personally confident of the immortality of the soul and conceives of Hades as a place where he can continue his philosophical labors. Impressively, the conversations in Hades he most looks forward to will be those in which he examines the quality of his own resilience. Hades is, he says,

a place where I can converse with Palamedes, and Ajax the son of Telamon, and other heroes of old, who have suffered death through an unjust judgment; and there will be no small pleasure, as I think, in comparing my own sufferings with theirs. (41b)

Socrates does not minimize or mock the agonies endured by these heroes. Rather, he expects his own capacity for endurance to compare favorably. He specifically directs the listener to imagine a comparison of their respective “sufferings” and deaths, each brought on by an “unjust judgment” (in Shay’s language, drawing on the directness of veterans’ own words in clinical settings, brought on by “violations of what’s right”). Comparing his sufferings with those of Ajax would recall the similarity of their combat experiences and post-battle incidents of moral injury. In addition to the similarities detailed earlier, we observe now that both have close associates who try to dissuade them from accepting death (compare the pleadings of Ajax’s wife Tecmessa and Socrates’ friend Crito), both die by their own hands (Ajax buries Hector’s sword in his chest, Socrates lifts the cup of hemlock to his lips) and both deaths are set in motion by unjust judgments by recognized authorities (Ajax’s commanders, the Athenian jurors). But, in the end, it is their dissimilarities that stand out. Ajax is in despairing anguish. He remains in painful inner turmoil even after death; Ajax’s shade in Hades is so broken that he remains furious and cannot even bear to speak with Odysseus when

he visits the underworld (Odyssey 11.540). Ajax appears a cautionary tale of a great warrior who comes undone. Socrates, on the other hand, is a model of a warrior who remains himself through it all.

Socrates’s Capacity for Resilience Is Unaffected by
a Lack of Conviction Regarding the Justice of the “Cause”
for Which He Deploys, Suffers, and Kills

Plato never suggests that Socrates entertained the standpoint of what we would call a “conscientious objector” or showed any ambivalence about the moral legitimacy of killing enemy combatants in war. Loyalty to the city demanded service and that was sufficient reason to take up arms. His attitude is in this way thoroughly orthodox for his time and place. Plato portrays Socrates confident that honorable conduct in war is possible regardless of any personal attachment, or not, to a “cause.” This is important because Plato’s Socrates clearly lacks commitment to what we might call the “cause” behind Athens’ embrace of the Peloponnesian War—preservation (and extension) of Athenian hegemony. Socratic moral philosophy questions deeply the material and ideological aims of war policies advanced by Pericles and other leaders. Plato explicitly depicts Socrates objecting to Athenian ambitions to secure glory, reputation, and wealth by developing an “empire” and undertaking the war with Sparta to secure it (e.g., Gorgias 515e–517a, 519a–b). The very survival of the city as an independent entity was not the rallying cry for the campaigns in which he fought. Accordingly, we may say that Plato portrays Socrates fighting willingly but not entirely unburdened by doubts about the moral underpinnings of this particular war and the ugly appetites it unleashes.

The closest we come in the dialogues to any talk of Socrates trying to evade or resist military service is a joke at the opening of the Gorgias. In Greek, “War and battle” are the first words of the dialogue:

Callicles: This is the way they say you ought to join a war and a battle, Socrates.
Socrates: You mean we’ve missed the feast, as they say, and we’re too late?
Callicles: Yes, and a most elegant feast it was; for Gorgias put on many fine displays for us a little while ago. (447a)

The humor pivots on Callicles’ assertion that Socrates’ late arrival at the gathering is in keeping with what “they say” about how one ought to join a war and a battle. Socrates plays along by making explicit what was implicit in Callicles’ comment: Socrates says, “You mean we’re too late?” This opening scene is funny and playful in a way that only makes sense if the reader knows Socrates to be no such “reluctant conscript” but instead very much a reliably willing warrior in battle and in argument. As the dialogue progresses,
the extent to which successive interlocutors (Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles) also prove willing to take risks and approach the battlefield of ideas fearlessly becomes an issue. 59

The easy separation of conduct and cause in the portrait of how Socrates assessed the morality of combat has important consequences for how we understand Plato’s portrayal of his resilience. In particular, it brings out a difference between this account of Socrates and that of the conditions under which combat soldiers today struggle to cultivate resilience. Recent studies of American veterans indicate that particularly terrible anguish and post-traumatic stress afflict soldiers and veterans burdened by doubts about the justice of the war’s larger cause. For example, one recent study shows that the psychic distress experienced by American servicemen and women over their individual accountability for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan worsens significantly once they become ambivalent about, let alone furiously opposed to, American prosecution of these wars. The study details the “complexity of the inner moral landscape” they traverse, reporting that for these men and women “the moral oversight is internal” and might be best understood “as a soulful struggle with conscience.” 60 The moral landscape troops traverse today includes feelings of having been “suckered” 61 by leadership (political and military) into having gone to war on “a pretext that camouflages other, actual causes” 62 as well as thus having become “taunted” as a result. 63 We have no reason to believe that something similar is at play in the story of Socrates’ confrontation with questions regarding the morality of combat service. But we can imagine Socrates experiencing an “inner debate” or self-examination regarding his own culpability for his actions in combat (i.e., his own courage or cowardice toward comrades). This mental work is not complicated by worries about the justice of the cause. He disagrees with the war aims but there is no indication in Plato’s portrayal that he feels misled by leadership regarding what they are, nor that he feels abused. Plato’s focus is on Socrates’ control of his own conduct toward his compatriots, himself, and the enemy.

I have so far argued that Plato’s depiction of Socrates’ war experiences directs us to his observation of a layer of complexity in Socrates’ extraordinary inner life. This dimension of Plato’s portrayal of an archetypal philosophical life provokes some questions. How is such resilience possible? What sustains it? What upends it? Does its practice have moral or political consequences? Can we get more precision and clarity regarding what it might mean to remain psychologically intact despite suffering trauma? Does resilience facilitate critique and philosophic labor? These seem very possibly to be among the questions that motivate Plato’s moral psychology and theory of justice, especially in the Republic.

Signs That the Republic Is Alert to Psychological Challenges

Peculiar to Experienced Combat Soldiers

The psychologically rich theory of justice elaborated in the Republic mobilizes the Socratic model of “resilience” in the face of war trauma in several ways. This is evident in the way, the long argument of the Republic gets started when Socrates and his dinner companions examine two commonplace definitions of justice. The apparently sensible definitions forwarded by Cephalus and Polemarchus in Book I quickly collapse into muddles as Socrates subjects them to scrutiny. Socrates’ clever manipulation of these two interlocutors is the subject of much scholarly discussion. I only want to add that the definitions they offer crumble precisely when they fail to traverse war and peace. Specifically, at 331b–332a, the definition, “speaking the truth and paying debts,” disappoints when Socrates asks Cephalus if it can apply to a hard case involving the use of weapons. Isn’t the case, Socrates inquires, that if a sane man gives his weapons to a friend for safe keeping and then asks for them back “when he is out of his mind,” the friend “shouldn’t return them, and wouldn’t be taking justly if he did?” The situation suggests the case of a former soldier now suffering mental distress. Socrates insists that his friends owe him more than the repayment of a debt, that is, the mechanical application of a rule. He therefore objects to Cephalus’ definition. Next, at 332c–334b, Socrates exposes as unsatisfactory Polemarchus’ suggestion of a revised definition, “helping friends and harming enemies.” In this case, the rule fails because its application denigrates “the clever guardian of an army” in the eyes of noncombatants. Socrates asks Polemarchus whether a good guardian of the army should be able to steal the enemy’s plans and dispositions. When he sensibly answers, “Yes,” Socrates observes that according to his revised definition of justice, “a just person has turned out to be a kind of thief”—an intolerable conclusion. My point is not that Socrates has at this point indeed refuted these traditional views of justice. Rather, I want to call attention to the fact that these passages depict Socrates and his interlocutors demanding that a definition of justice must address the anxieties that reasonably trouble good men moving between war zones and home. A definition that can guide behavior in only one sphere or that neglects the needs of experienced combat soldiers is taken to be patently unacceptable.

The Republic is also attentive to the vantage point of an active duty soldier when Socrates begins shaping the institutional structure of the ideal city and proposes a distinct class of “guardians.” Socrates implicitly abandons the experienced amateur or citizen-soldier model familiar to Athenians and instead argues for creating a professional class of soldiers on the grounds that war, like other crafts, requires expertise and that “it is of the greatest importance that warfare be practiced well” (374e).64 He proposes that the requisite expertise includes not only physical strength, courage, and command of the technical skills needed to design strategy and tactics, but also a sort of psychological agility that enables a soldier to enter a war zone with fierce confidence and to adjust with ease to being home and handling political and domestic responsibilities with gentleness. Consider this passage from Book II:

Socrates: The physical qualities of the guardians are clear.
Glaucias: Yes.
Socrates: And as far as their souls are concerned, they must be spirited.
Glauc on: That too.
Socrates: But if they have natures like that, Glauc on, won’t they be savage to each other and to the rest of the citizens?
Glauc on: By god, it will be hard for them to be anything else.
Socrates: Yet surely they must be gentle to their own people and harsh to the enemy. If they aren’t, they won’t wait around for others to destroy the city but will do it themselves first.... (375b–d)

The passage clearly acknowledges that intense psychological challenges characterize soldiering and that a just city must enable its troops to manage these stresses. Specifically, soldiers must be equipped to adjust to shifting contexts with the kind of nimbleness easily observable in a fine guard dog: “he is gentle as can be to those he’s used to and knows, but the opposite to those he doesn’t know” (375c).

It is important to note that the Republic does not rely on silver genetic material to produce such resilience among its guardians, as the myth of the metals might superficially suggest. Specific physical and musical training, education in censored myth and higher math, communal lifestyle, scheme of rewards and punishments for performance in combat (extra kisses and honors for valor as well as demotion to the farmer/artisan class for abandoning one’s shield in battle, 468a–c), a confidence-inspiring command structure, and strictly enforced rules of engagement governing conduct on campaigns against other Greeks all work together to make sure that the just city’s soldiers are minimally exposed to catastrophic war experiences (especially to moral injuries), thoroughly insulated from the family and economic stresses that accompany long deployments and maximally resilient psychologically in the face of war-related hardships—even calamities. The kallipolis or “beautiful city” elaborated in the Republic will be able to “pursue war” in a way that reflects “her true character” (Timaeus 20b).

Resilience comes up again later in the argument of the Republic when Socrates turns to consider how the “philosopher-ruler” should be selected from among the population of the beautiful city. First, he makes it clear that the man or woman capable of being trained to rule and who will rule well must be selected from the guardian class (military), not separately raised. Socrates is also clear that great intellectual accomplishment alone cannot equip a fine member of the guardian class to become a philosopher-ruler. He does not hesitate to stress this in precise terms: “Our guardian must be both a warrior and a philosopher” (525b). To spot a potential philosopher this is what must be done. Once men have reached the highest level of rigorous training in abstract thinking, including mathematics,

Socrates: [Y]ou must make them go down again into the cave again, and compel them to take up command in matters of war and occupy the other offices suitable for young people, so that they will not be inferior to the others in experience. But in these too, they must be tested to see whether they’ll remain steadfast when they’re pulled this way and that or shift their ground.
Glauc on: How much is allowed for that?
Socrates: Fifteen years. Then, at the age of fifty, those who have survived (τοίς διαμορφωμένοις τοις) the tests and have been successful in both practical matters and in the sciences will...spend most of their time with philosophy, but, when his turn comes, he must labor in politics for the city’s sake. (540a–b, my emphasis)

Those ready to serve as philosopher-rulers will be those who, over the course of repeated deployments marked by successively greater burdens of responsibility, excel not only in intellectual tests but in armed conflict as well. The philosopher-rulers will be “those among them [the guardians] who have proved to be best, both in philosophy and in warfare” (543a). In the Republic, good at warfare includes being fierce and gentle at appropriate times, enduring the hardships of deployments, remaining steadfast in combat, smartly utilizing math to plan strategy and tactics, observing rules of war between Greeks, and bearing psychological wounds lightly. For Plato, a history of conduct that exhibits what I have called “resilience” is an observable indicator of the condition of one’s soul and evidence of a philosophic nature.

War trauma and resilience also figure in Plato’s startling suggestion in Book X that the beautiful city must prohibit the performance of dramatic poetry (especially tragedy) a grand and beloved Athenian cultural tradition. By this time in the text Socrates has completed his account of justice and the interlocutors have agreed that it’s attractive. Socrates chooses to bring up some complicating issues that they had passed over earlier on. He says, “I think we omitted some things that then that we must now discuss” (603c). He points out that while their ideal city has cultivated an environment that will minimize exposure to trauma and nurture strong and resilient psyches, people will still experience grief and bereavement. This is unavoidable. And so he turns to detail how the institutional structure of the beautiful city can illuminate how to help good people experience measured responses to the pain of loss, especially of a child in war. Socrates explains:

Socrates: Grief prevents the very thing we need most in such circumstances from coming into play as quickly as possible.
Glauc on: What are you referring to?
Socrates: Deliberation. We must accept what has happened as we would the fall of the dice, and then arrange our affairs in whatever way reason determines to be best. (603e–604c)

Socrates goes on to state that deliberation is not what happens in a “crowd gathered together in the theatre” (604e). Accordingly, Socrates affirms the exile of dramatic poetry from the ideal city (605b, 607b) unless or until it can defend itself by demonstrating how it can benefit a grieving person.
struggling to sustain a just “constitution within him” (608a). While scholars today view Athenian dramatic festivals as providing rituals that support the psychological well-being of soldiers and the “reintegration of veterans” into civilian life, Plato only sees theater’s capacity to stir emotions and deliver superficial pleasures that, in his view, actually aggravate psychic wounds and worsen potentially debilitating symptoms. Plato’s remedy for war trauma and other forms of psychological strain is the cultivation of resilience through rational self-examination, deliberation, and storytelling, not the “communalization of trauma” through the grand civic ritual of dramatic festivals.

Consideration of the relationship between living well, war trauma, deliberation, and resilience also features in the way Plato brings the long text of the Republic to an end. In the closing passage known as “The Myth of Er” (614b–621d), Socrates tells the unnerving story of a foreign warrior’s visit to the underworld. He starts with a brief but vivid account of the treatment of Er’s corpse after he is slain in battle. Er’s comrades collected his corpse from the battlefield on the tenth day, observing that unlike the others Er’s body had not begun to decay. Nevertheless, two days later they placed it on the funeral pyre with all the others. While on the pyre Er revived. After reviving he told what he had seen. Socrates then goes on to recount Er’s graphic descriptions of the peculiar topography of the other world and, most remarkably, of the process that immortality undergoes in preparation for rebirth on earth. This process is extensive. It includes being judged based on one’s conduct on earth and awarded spectacular rewards or subjected to severe punishments. Most important for tracking Plato’s observation of war trauma, this process also includes each soul being required to actively choose for himself or herself a new life into which to be born. Among the souls Er witnessed making a selection are five Greek soldiers of various ranks and accomplishment who served in the Trojan War: Ajax, Agamemnon, Thersites, Epeius, and Odysseus (620b–c).

The setting in which these figures must choose is simple. Er reports seeing the gods set a large assortment of possible lives before a sizeable gathering of souls. The gods explain that there are more good options than there are souls gathered and so a good life—choice is within everyone’s grasp. Each option consists in a mixture of aspects of life (e.g., fame, nobility, sickness, poverty, beauty, athletic prowess, etc.), so some deliberation is necessary to choose well. Each soul can draw on his past experiences and skills developed in his immediately prior life to assess the options. After choosing, each is reborn with no memory of the process. Er reports seeing the great warrior Ajax chooses to return a lion, remarking, “He avoided human life because he remembered the judgment about the armor.” Agamemnon chooses to become an eagle. Er explains “His sufferings made him hate the human race.” Without comment Er mentions that Thersites (the frank speaking common soldier assaulted by Odysseus in Iliad 2.211–277) opts for the life of a monkey and that Epeius (a poor warrior but a good boxer and a builder who worked on the Trojan Horse, Odyssey 8.493) picks the life of a craftsman. Odysseus, last to choose, searches for a long time and selects

the life of a private man. Er reflects, the “memory of sufferings had relieved this soul of its love of honor.” In sum, three are so psychologically wounded that they seek refuge in the animal kingdom, one is moved to be reborn a woman and one is determined to retreat from public affairs. All choose to avoid war at all costs. But we know that in the Republic Plato not only accepts that cities will experience war, but proposes that it is indeed possible for war to be practiced well and for combat to be a meaningful, even enriching, part of human experience. The Myth of Er’s attention to these psychologically wounded soldiers of Homeric myth begs renewed attention to how that can be possible. It raises interest in the idea of Socratic resilience and its part in illuminating what it might mean to live well.

Conclusion

Writers have occasionally tried to conscript Socrates for pacifism. But to do so, these authors must take “extreme liberties” with Plato’s texts. Plato indicates that Socrates served willingly and honorably in the Peloponnesian War. Moreover, I have shown that Plato values combat service highly without romanticizing it and shapes his portrait of Socrates to feature the philosopher’s multiple experiences of deployment, battle, and homecoming. Drawing on recent studies of “war trauma” to frame my inquiry and historical details culled from Thucydides to provide context for Plato’s accounts, I have argued that Plato characterizes Socrates as exceptionally “resilient” in the face of calamitous war experiences and in this respect a wondrous or odd creature in the eyes of his fellow citizen-soldiers. I have stressed that this dimension of Plato’s portrait of Socrates engages myth (Ajax, Achilles, and Odysseus) and in so doing creates an archetype of resilience. In the last section, I demonstrated that attention to the inner life of a combat veteran informs key elements of the psychologically rich theory of justice elaborated in the Republic. Together this material suggests that we should conclude, with Canova (Figure 6.1), that Socrates’ conduct as a soldier is as fascinating and important philosophically as the manner in which he faced trial, imprisonment, and execution.

Notes

1. I wish to thank Peter Meineck, David Konstan, Edith Hall, and Melissa Lane for encouraging me to take up this project. This work has also benefited from the comments of colleagues and students at New York University, University of Michigan, University of Wisconsin, University of Oxford, University of Sydney, University of South Carolina, and the Research Workshop in Classical Receptions at the Alice B. Kaplan Institute for the Humanities at Northwestern University.

2. Images of the series can be found in Albrizzi, Cicognara, and Minisiri, 1824. Photographs of the pieces are online in various postings. One can be found at: http://www.corbimages.com/stock-photo/rights-managed/M001709/crito-closing-the-eyes-of-the-dead. Art
8. There is a large literature on Greek warfare. Key recent studies include Hanson (1989, 1991); Hamilton and Krenz (1997); McCann and Strauss (2001); Bekker-Nielsen and Hannestad (2001); Chaniotis and Ducray (2002); Van Wees (2004); Trudde (2004); Hodkinson and Powell (2006); Raaflaub (2007a, 2007b); Sabin, van Wees, and Whitby (2007); Pritchard (2010); and Crowley (2012).


10. On the evidence for evasion of conscription in ancient Athens, see Christ (2006). Many non-citizen residents, including slaves, were also pressed into service. See Brown and Morgan (2006).


12. For a recent discussion of the gap, see Wright (2012).


14. Shay (1994), also (2002); on "moral injury," also see Maguen and Litz (2012). On the way "trauma is exacerbated by moral anguish and resentment that...trust was misplaced and abused" see Sherman (2013) (at p. 158).

15. Incidents of war-related post-traumatic stress in Greek sources include the story of Epizulos' loss of sight at Marathon in Herodotus 6.117) (King 2001), the report of Aristodemos' survivor guilt and suicidal behavior after Thermopylae in Herodotus 7.229, 9.71–3, the report of battle survivors' suffering psychological damage in Gorgias' Helen 16–17 (Tritle 2010, 127–8, 159–61) and the case of Clearchus in Xenophon's Anabasis (Tritle 2004). Less obvious are "hidden" examples reflected in tragedy such as Herakles' violence against his own family as presented in Euripides' Heracles (Tritle 2010, 127–8), Ajax's suicidal despair in Sophocles' Ajax, and the depiction of the suffering of noncombatants in Euripides' The Trojan Women. Arguably, all existent tragedy addresses relevant themes. Recognizing that warfare was thoroughly, integratively, into every sphere of Athenian life and that the Athenian cultural practices were adept at producing combat ready psyches (see Crowley 2012) does not mean that every Athenian mobilization went well and that experienced killers could not suffer psychological injuries in combat situations. Note that Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War makes it abundantly clear that great upheavals and stresses horribly upset traditional practices and that war experiences could provoke even good character to unravel.

16. The diagnosis entered the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DMS) published by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980. The criteria have been revised in subsequent editions. Note that war experiences are not the only kind of traumas that can result in PTSD (others include criminal assault, sustaining or witnessing life-threatening injuries and natural disasters). The US Department of Veterans Affairs established The National Center for PTSD in 1989. Some contemporary veterans' advocates raise concerns about the medical profession's reliance on the language of "disorder" because it obscures the point that the origin of the disability is an injury or wound (as opposed to it arising from an organic problem or personal deficiency). I will try to respect this concern though "PTSD" is entrenched in the literature and civic culture and thus hard to avoid.


20. Planeaux (1999) suggests the dramatic features of Plato’s texts are consistent with the possibility that Socrates served without leave for three full years. See chapter 1 for discussion of the rotation of troops.


23. Translations from Thucydides are from Strassler (1996).


25. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Plato are from Cooper (1997), modified to clarify who is speaking.


27. Thucydides explains the technology at 4.100.2–4. I suspect that the puzzling end of Aristophanes’ Clouds might be an allusion to this episode of the battle of Delium (Strepites sets the Thinkery ablaze) and that Socrates’ notable behavior in war might have contributed to playwrights’ interest in him that year. The Clouds was produced in 423, the year following the disaster at Delium. Another comic play produced at the Dionysia that same year also featured Socrates as a central character (Amphiaraus’ Connois). Other reasons to suspect a link between the Clouds and Socrates at Delium include: (1) Alcibiades explicitly quotes Clouds line 362 in his account of Socrates’ memorable behavior in the retreat at Delium at Symposium 221b and (2) similarities between Strepites’ characterization of the Thinkery’s cosmological teaching as “we are the hot coals in an oven” and Thucydides’ account of the central role of hot coals in the operation of the Theban flamerhower (ἀνάθηματα ἐκ τῶν θεῶν), as both Clouds 97 and Thucydides 4.100.4). Another reason for suspecting that Aristophanes mobilizes his audience’s knowledge of Socrates’ military experience is the similarity of description of the Thinkery’s students at Clouds 412–20 to Alcibiades’ account of Socrates’ notable behavior on campaign at Potidaea at Symposium 221a–b.

28. Cited by Crowley (2012) and in this volume. I acknowledge that it is problematic to look for the elements of a culturally constructed modern medical diagnosis (war trauma, PTSD) in the ancient record and classify our sources accordingly. I do, however, remain confident that it makes sense to consider how war experiences, especially when they go catastrophically wrong, can stress the human psyche in ways that are recognizable.


33. Symposium 219d1.

34. On the capacity of Sophocles’ Ajax to speak to the experience of combat trauma, see the “Theater of War” programming developed by Outside the Wire, artistic director Bryan Doerries (http://www.outsidethewirellc.com/projects/theater-of-war/overview). They perform on military bases and hospitals as well as in civilian settings and receive funding from the Department of Defense and National Institute of Health as well as private foundations. See also the programming developed by the Aquila Theatre of New York, artistic director Peter Meineck, for the National Endowment for the Humanities funded project, “Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives: A National Conversation” (http://ancientgreksmodernlives.org/). For discussion, see Meineck (2009) and Lodeswyck and Monson (2015).

35. The friendship was erotically charged, but, to Alcibiades’ dismay, not physically realized.

36. On the capacity of Socrates’ endurance to “convey to others an attitude of superiority” and thus elicit mockery, see Edmunds (2004, 196). He notes that a fragment of the Connois, a lost comedy of Amphilochus that featured Socrates and was performed in the same competition as the Clouds soon after Delium, includes the phrase, κρυμφρασθείς κάθετος (“you are capable of endurance”).

37. Cf. Apology 35e–36b where Socrates is not disturbed by his own conviction at trial.

38. Cf. Republic 528a7 (the torch-race that prompts Socrates to stay) and 619e6 (or the sight of souls choosing lives in the myth of Er).


41. Plato’s lively portraits of Socratic argument often employ allusions to Socrates’ behavior in hand-to-hand combat situations at the moment an Athenian phalanx line collapses, that is, to his “refusal to join the panic-frenzy that overtook most of the Athenian army” (Hanson 2003, 213). For example: Crito 51b–c; Phaedo 88e–89a; Laches 188b and 191a; Euthydemos 307b; Republic 473e–474b, 471d. On argument as war see also Gorgias 513d and Phaedo 106c.

42. I owe this way of reading this passage to a conversation with L. A. Tritle.

43. Cf. Odyssæus’s reluctance to talk among the Phaeacians.

44. On the importance of converting fragmented memories into narratives, see Herman (1992). An anecdote is apt here. Tammy Duckworth was a helicopter pilot in the Iraq War. She was grievously injured in a crash and lost her legs. She recovered and went on to serve as assistant secretary for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs for the United States Department of Veteran Affairs from 2009 to 2011. In a public setting in 2012, she explained that she does not suffer from PTSD and she thinks that is due to the fact that part of her medical care post-crash involved repeated (nearly daily) efforts to tell her story and create a narrative that she could treat as a chapter in her life. She reported that some of the men on her helicopter who were far less seriously wounded physically on that terrible day still suffer from severe PTSD years later—something she attributes to their lack of similar opportunities to craft narratives about what they suffered. Author’s notes from a “Talk-Back Session” following a “Theater of War” performance at the National Veterans’ Art Museum, Chicago, January 25, 2012.

45. This visit with the Thracian physician might be the trip to the Ithamus epi teorion referred to at Crito 52b.

46. At Apology 28e Socrates lists the three campaigns out of historical order. On why see Calder (1961).

47. Contra Benardete (1963, 174): “he mentions his soldierly duty only to dismiss it.”


49. The language of obedience to commanders calls to mind Simonides’ famous epitaph for the Spartans at Thermopylae and the poet’s case for their deathlessness. In the Scottish poet Robert Crawford’s recent translation: “Stranger, take this message to our masters: we lie here dead. We did as we were told.” McBeath and Crawford (2012, xiv).

50. Some peculiar features of the reference to Homer’s Iliad 18.104 at Apology 28d might also confirm the importance Socrates attaches to a capacity to yield to “commanders” on deployment and in moral argument. See Benardete (1963, 174–5).
fellow soldiers, eyewitnesses, and other evidence (943b–c). Assessment of servicemen's behavior in battles that turned out to be calamitous for the army must pay very serious attention to the circumstances so as to distinguish between criminal neglect of duty and simple bad luck (943d–944e). On how far these texts influenced policy debates in Athens, see Allen 2010.

66. Cf. τοῦ βουλευτοῦ ἐκ τῆς μάχης; at Charmides 153b (Chaeropophon's question to Socrates upon his return from Potidaea).

67. Plato's expectation that excellence at war and philosophy will go hand in hand is evident in the opening scene of the Theaetetus (142a–c). There, a philosophical conversation conducted by a young Theocritus is recalled on the occasion of the news that this great, now much older, philosopher has just returned from war grievously wounded. It is also evident in Plato's characterization of Socrates' main interlocutors in the Republic, Glaucon and Adeimantus. At Republic 368a, Socrates links his confidence in their intellectual sophistication to his knowledge of their honorable conduct in war. Also see Blondell (2002, 261). On the proximity of philosophy and war in Plato's Republic also see Nails (2012).

68. Τῷ βουλευτοῦ, ἐκ τῆς μάχης; cf. τοῦ βουλευτοῦ ἐκ τῆς μάχης; at Charmides 153b (Chaeropophon's question to Socrates upon his return from Potidaea). 


71. The Myth of Er has puzzled commentators for some time. An exception is Baracchi (2001) who links it to Plato's discussion of war.

72. At Gorgias 525d Socrates mentions that Theras' actions in the Iliad, while wrong, do not amount to an incurable offence. And so the point here may be just to note that he is indeed among those who are reborn, not condemned to eternal punishment (as are tyrants, Republic 615d).


Bibliography