

SOCRATIC CONCEPT OF ETHICS AND IT'S RELEVANCE IN PRACTICAL LIFE

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Abstract:

Socrates is probably the well known name in the western philosophical tradition. He was more interested in the problem of human motivation and conduct. Human conduct is the main subject matter of ethics. Socrates did not see man as simply the product of the blind process of nature but conceived him as the author of his own destiny. He did not believe that man was at the mercy forces he could not control, but assume that there was scope and place for both human goodness and human reason. According to him all human actions are purposeful rather than simply mechanical. It is the basis of both his epistemology and ethics. Socrates was a critique of customary morality. His critical stands defined his philosophical practice which investigated the foundations of customary beliefs. The basic questions of Socrates are related with ethics. These questions are related to our live, way of living, best sort of life, etc, and also how is it to be achieved?. He used to say that an unexamined life is not worth living for human beings.

Keywords: *Socrates, Philosophy, ethics, concept, knowledge, virtue, values, custom, morality, develop.*

1.0. Introduction

Socrates was a classical Athenian philosopher. He is credited one of the founders of western philosophy. He is an enigmatic figure known chiefly through the accounts of later classical writers especially the writings of his students Plato and Xenophone as well as plays of his contemporary Aristophanes. Many would claim that Plato's dialogues are the most comprehensive accounts of Socrates to survive from antiquity. Very little is known of his early years and education, except that he took up his father's occupation as a sculptor. Socrates in his early life was deserted his profession in order to devote himself to what he considered his mission in life and philosophy. He had spent his entire life in Athens; never departing from it, save for short periods on three occasions, when he served in military expeditions in the Athenian army. For from twenty to thirty years he laboured at his philosophical mission in Athens, until, in his seventieth year. Socrates owns temperament predisposed him to a belief in the immortality of soul and in the existence of a divine providence which ordered all things for the best. He had developed his own peculiar and famous method. That method was method of question and answer. This is known as Socratic Method. He was charged with denying the national gods, introducing new gods of his own and corrupting the Athenian youth. On these charges he was condemned to death and executed.

1.1 Objectives of the study

Socrates was very much interested in the problem of human motivation and conduct. Human conduct is the main subject matter of ethics. The main objective of this paper is an attempt to understand the meaning of Socratic concept of Ethics and its relevance in our practical life. This study also tries to focus on the epistemology of Socrates as well as concept of virtues.

1.2 Methodology

This research paper is a theoretical work which explores in detail the Socratic concept of ethics and it's importance in our practical life. The study will be based on both the descriptive as well as analytical method understanding on the concerned

subject-matter. Necessary data and information are collected by consulting secondary sources. The secondary data related to the study are collected from some important books, articles, magazines, newspapers, journals, internet sources, etc.

1.3 Definition of Ethics

Before going to know the meaning of the concept of Socratic ethics we need to define the term of 'Ethics'. The word 'Ethics' has been derived from the Greek adjective 'ethica' which comes from the substantively 'ethos'. The 'Ethos' means customs, usages or habits. Ethics is also called 'Moral Philosophy'. The word 'moral' is derived from the Latin substantive 'mores' which also means customs or habits. Customs are not merely habitual ways of acting. They are also ways approved by the group.

Literally the word 'Ethics' means the science of customs or habits of men. It is the science of the habitual conduct of men. Habits are the expression of settled disposition of the will or character. Character is the permanent habit of willing, the inner bent of the mind, which is expressed in habitual conduct. Character is the inner counterpart of conduct, which is its outer expression. Thus, Ethics is the science of character and actions as well as habitual actions of person which considers their rightness and wrongness. The ethics evaluates the character of persons and considers its virtuousness or viciousness. Ethics is the Science of rightness and wrongness of conduct. Ethics is the Science of human character as expressed in right or wrong conduct. But rightness or wrongness refers to the Good which is the ideal of human life. It is the Science of the highest Good too.

The ethics is not concerned with the origin and growth of conduct like psychology. It is concerned with evaluation of conduct with reference to an ideal. It seeks to determine the supreme ideal involved in human conduct. Hence we can say that the subject of ethics is normative science which comprehensive study of the supreme ideal of human life and Highest Good. In the word of Mackenzie, "Ethics is the study of what is right or good in human conduct." William Lillie also define Ethics as "we may define Ethics as the normative science of the conduct of human beings living in societies--- a science which judges this conduct to be right or wrong, to be good or bad, or in some similar way". From this definition we can know that firstly it indicates the Ethics is a science and secondly it means Ethics is not the general subject but it is a normative science because it studies about norms, ideal or standards. There are three Ideals of human life, viz. Truth, Beauty and Good. These are the supreme values in human experience.

1.4 Nature of moral philosophy

Ethics is a branch of moral philosophy. It is moral philosophy or philosophical thinking about morality, moral problems and moral judgements. What this involves is illustrated by the sort of thinking of Socrates was doing in the Crito and Apology, supplemented as we have supposed it.

Moral philosophy arises when like Socrates, we pass beyond the stage in which we are directed by traditional rules and even beyond the stage in which these rules are so internalized that we can be said to be inner directed, to the stage in which we think for ourselves in critical and general terms and achieved a kind of autonomy as moral agents. We may, however, distinguish three kinds of thinking that relate to morality in one way or another. Firstly, there is descriptive empirical inquiry, historical or scientific, such as done is prepared by anthropologists, historians, psychologists and sociologists. Here, the goal is to describe or explain the phenomena of morality or to work out a theory of human nature which bears on ethical questions. Secondly, there is normative thinking of the sort that Socrates was doing in the Crito or that anyone does who asks what is right, good or obligatory. This may take the form of asserting a normative judgement as like "I ought not to try to escape from prison". "Knowledge is good" or "It is always wrong to harm someone", and giving or being ready to give reasons for this judgment or it may take the form of debating with oneself or with someone else about what is good or right in a particular case on as a general principle and then forming some such normative judgement as a conclusion. Thirdly, there is also "analytical", "critical" or "meta-ethical" thinking. This is the sort of thinking we imagined that Socrates would have come to if he had been challenged to the limit in the justification of his normative judgement. He did, in fact, arrive at this sort of thinking in other dialogues. It does not consist of empirical or historical inquires and theories, nor does it involve making or defending any normative or value judgement. It does

not try to answer either particular or general questions about what are good, right or obligatory. It asks and tries to answer logical, epistemological or semantical questions such as---what is the meaning or use of the expression “right” or good?”, How can ethical and value judgement be established or justified? .

Recently many moral philosophers limit ethics and moral philosophy to thinking of the third kind, excluding from it all questions of psychology and empirical science. And also all normative questions about what is good or right.

1.5 Socratic Concept of Ethics

Before the rise of the Sophists in Greek, an Athenian observed the laws of the state and promised to offer moral laws. It was considered valuable for the individuals to observe the laws and disadvantageous for the breaker of the laws. The Athenians made no enquiries into the origin and the validity of the laws. But with the rise of the city states and frequent changes of the state laws in different states and even in the same state by the ruling parties made the Athenian think about the origin and basis of the state laws. They not only found the relativity of the state laws, but also found moral laws too to be relative for different races and the peoples. The Sophists made enquires about the origin and basis of the laws of morality and states.

Against the teaching of the Sophists, Socrates maintained that morality is knowledge of the Good through from rational insight into the good. As reasoning is one and the same for all. Therefore moral laws are universally valid. Hence, moral laws are not based on feeling and desires, but on rational thought. In relation to Ethics, Socrates laid down three propositions are stated below--

- (i) Virtue is knowledge through concepts. So, nobody does wrong knowledge. Therefore, vice is ignorance.
- (ii) As virtue is knowledge, so virtue can be taught.
- (iii) Virtue is one.

Socrates believes himself in virtues. Usually discussions of Socrates would focus around how to become virtuous or attain excellence. Virtue was discussed in this general sense and also more specifically in terms of self-controlled, courage, wisdom, justice and holiness. In the Alcibiades Socrates convinces the young man that what people really need in order to be happy is virtue. Therefore, if he is to help the state, Alcibiades must first become virtuous himself, and this is done by looking at what is divine and bright, and acting accordingly. Only the virtuous can govern correctly, virtue makes a man free, while vice enslaves.

For Socrates, virtue is the chief business of life and the greatest good. But this virtue must be universal consistent and the same for all. And this virtue must be equally binding on all if it were knowledge. How can this be established? If there exists any good thing different from, and not associated with knowledge, virtue will not necessarily be any form of knowledge. If on the other hand knowledge embraces everything that is good, we shall be right to suspect that virtue is knowledge. Now Socrates grants that health, wealth and good looks are all good, but in the absence of knowledge proper they all can be misused. Courage and temperance are all good and would lead to happiness when they are guided by wisdom and evil if they are controlled by folly. Finally the right knowledge is the mind of the wise man, and wrong user is the mind of the foolish. Similarly in Euthydemus, it is printed out unless it is backed by ignorance.

Both Socrates and Sophists agreed that morality is guided by knowledge. But difference lies in the kind of knowledge and the kind of goodness. For the Sophists goodness is a matter of habit i.e. by habit and practice, without the help of philosophy and reason. But obviously habit cannot be always reliable especially in novel situations and in predicaments. In such circumstances, customary goodness becomes variable, inconsistent and relative. Similarly, true opinion may lead to the good accidentally, but not always. He said, “A system of morality which is based on relative emotional values is a mere illusion, a thoroughly vulgar conception which has nothing sound in it and nothing true”.

Further, for the Sophists goodness is a kind of art or skill for managing the affairs of the state and the family. But if goodness is an art, then it becomes relative, for what is good for the ruling party is not so for the opposition. Besides, art is always of the opposites, e.g. a man who can guard the treasury best, is the man who knows all the ways of committing theft. So he is also a kind of thief. This was seen in the case of Gorgias who disclaimed any responsibility of his pupils if they used the art of rhetoric for evil purpose. But what is the kind of knowledge through concept?

We have already seen that concepts are given by reason and is not given by the perceptions of the particular concepts are always in the mind of everyone. And they have to be enkindled by skilful questionings. But if virtue is knowledge, then certainly it can be taught by one who knows what is virtue or the good. However, where are the teachers of concepts of the good? Socrates does not accept that the Sophists are the real teachers of the good, for they believe in customary morality based on opinion which is based on feeling and tempting desires. Indirectly by his assumed ignorance, Socrates has guided us towards the directions in which the seeker can have the kind of knowledge of the concept of the good. The real concept is always a matter of recollection of and by meditation on the idea of the good. The conclusion of Socrates is “our present reasoning then, whenever has virtue gets it by divine dispensation.” In our Indian language the intuition of the good is a matter of enlightenment which meta-phorically can be said to be the gift of God.

One part of the whole discussion has been left out, i.e. virtue is knowledge and vice is ignorance. No man knowingly does wrong. This follows from another tenet of Socrates namely “virtue is one”. The kind of knowledge to which Socrates is pointing is not mere intellectual achievement. It is the kind of knowledge which controls the will and necessarily issues in action. Some sort of this thing is contained in what is known as Ideo-motor theory. The theory means that if one concentrates on an idea with sufficient intensity and frequency then it issues into an appropriate action. For Socrates, however, the idea of the good controls all other ideas and ultimately guides the whole man, his will and feelings too, and necessarily issues into good acts. Hence, it lies in the culture of the soul which ultimately leads the soul in a virtuous man, towards regaining its pure, pristine glory. This is the real interpretation of ‘no one does wrong knowingly’, and that ‘knowledge is virtue, and virtue is true knowledge’. This is the eudemonistic theory of Socratic ethics, which was taught by Aristotle. But in Plato the knowledge of the good has Stereological end, which one finds in the philosophy of Samkhya and Advaitism.

There is also another sense in which Socrates says that virtue or goodness is one. For example, Cowness is one but many Cows poorly imitate it. Similarly, wisdom, temperance, courage, justice and holiness are five kind of virtue, but there is one single reality which underlies them all. Again in Meno^{74a}, Socrates was looking for one virtue which permeates all other virtues named above. In the same way, Socrates speaks of one form of excellence only. In Gorgias, Socrates points out that all kind of bodily excellence follow from one single health of the body. Similarly all kinds of virtue follow from the health of the soul. The health of the soul follows from the order and arrangement between the different function of the soul. Socrates speaks of reasoning temper and desires as the three parts of the soul. The function of reasoning is wisdom, of temper is courage and of desire is soberness or temperance. Now the health of the soul follows from the discipline among these parts. Wisdom commands, whilst temper assists in the execution of these commands and desire furnishes the material basis of action. This is in harmony with the teachings of modern psychology. Conation drives the individual towards all kinds of action for food, mate etc, cognition controls these activities. A successful functioning of the harmonious activities under the regulation of reason yields happiness. Hence, Socrates means that virtue is one in the sense that the “self of a good man is an organic unity of all its functions.”

Lastly, Socrates, as also plato is supposed to hold that there is one Idea of the Good which underlies all that is right and beautiful. Hence the Idea of the good is one single reality which underlies all that is called “man is always a child.” According to him, knowledge meant the glimpse of the Supreme source of good and this changes, moulds and transforms the total personality of the seeker.

1.6 Importance of Socratic Ethics

From the above discussion we have find that Socrates believes in virtue. Socrates maintained that morality is knowledge of the Good through concepts. In this sense, he stated that knowledge is virtue and virtue is knowledge. Moral laws are not based on feeling and desires but on rational thought, because, reason is one and the same for all. Socrates ethics gives us the proper knowledge of ethics. Therefore, there has the relevance of Socratic concept of Ethics in the present time.

In relation to Ethics, Socrates laid down three propositions such as virtue is ethics through concept. So nobody does wrong knowingly. Therefore, vice is ignorance. It is a very important statement of Socratic ethics. Pleasure is the achievement of virtue. Virtue is the main point of human life. Only the virtuous can govern correctly. Virtue makes a man free, while vice enslaves. The second proposition given by the Socrates is as virtue is knowledge, so virtue can be taught. For Socrates, virtue is the chief aspect of life and the greatest good. It is also universal and same for all. This virtue must be equally binding on all if it were knowledge. If virtue is knowledge, then certainly it can be taught. But certainly it can be taught by one who knows what is virtue or the good. Now here arises a question, where are the teachers of the concepts of the good?. That is why Socrates various concept of ethics are most important for the present time. In his period he was gave various concept of Good. And these are very important for our theoretical as well as practical life in the modern age.

The last proposition of Socrates is “virtue is one”. No man knowingly does wrong. This follows from the tenet virtue is one. If one concentrates on an idea with sufficient intensity and frequency then it issues into an appropriate action. For Socrates, however, the idea of good contras all other ideas and ultimately guides the whole man, his will and feelings too, and necessarily issues into good acts. And we the human beings seek pleasure. And pleasure is the achievement of virtue. Only the virtuous can attained pleasure.

Hence, the Socratic concept of ethics is very important in the philosophical field. His various concepts of ethics are not only important and relevant for Socratic period but also for all the present time and also for the future. We cannot deny his contribution. It is remarkable for all of us.

Conclusion:

From the above discussion we can say that Socrates ethical intellectualism has an eudaemological character. Socrates presupposes reason is essential for the good life. One’s true happiness is promoted by do what is right. When your true utility is served, you are achieving happiness. Happiness is evident only in terms of a long term effect on the soul.

The Socrates ethics has a character----consequently, mechanistic explanation of human behaviour is mistaken. Human action aims towards the good in accordance with purpose in nature. Socrates states no one chooses evil, no one chooses to act in ignorance. We seek the good but fail to achieve it by ignorance or lack of knowledge as to how to obtain what is good. He believes no one would intentionally harm themselves. When harm comes to us, although we thought we were seeking the good, the good is not obtained in such case since we lacked knowledge as to how best to achieve the good.

Aristotle’s criticism of Socrates belief that no one intentionally harms oneself is that an individual might know what is best, and yet still fail to act rightly. Some propose objections to the Socratic ethics are as follows---

- a. If evil were never done deliberately or voluntarily, then evil would be an involuntarily act and consequently no one could properly be held responsible for the evil that is done.
- b. Since on Socrates view the good is that which furthers a person’s real interests, it will follow that if the good is known, people will seek it. But many times people do not.

c. If moral laws were objective and independent of feelings, and if knowledge were to be identified with virtue, then it would seem to follow that moral problems are always capable of rational resolution. But often they are not.

d. Psychiatric evidence shows sometimes people behave in an entirely self-damning manner. For example, St Paul said, "For I do not do the good I want but the evil I do not want is what I do".

Therefore, from the above stating reasons we may say that Socrates ethics are also not free from contradiction. Some philosophers are not agreeing with his ethics. They vehemently criticise his ethics as an intolerable theory. Apart from criticises the Socrates Ethical idea is still relevant today. He taught us that life is worthless without happiness. If, we are not worthless without Happiness, If we are not pursuit of happiness and understanding in our daily lives, then we are basically akin to ants toiling at an ant-hill sure. We go about our practical tasks instinctually. But we also need to step back and develop awareness of the world and from a conscious relationship with our existence. He had made philosophically ethics. He was a champion of human virtue. Socrates was firm believer in friendship and community, and common threads between all of mankind. He said, "Virtue is the most valuable of all possessions. We can always benefit from being a bit nicer to each other. His theory of knowledge was not a theory put forward for its own sake, but for practical ends. Even he wanted to know what the concept of virtue is, only in order to practise virtue in life. And this statement brings us to the central point of the ethical teaching of Socrates, which was the identification of virtue with knowledge. Therefore, Socrates ethics is not only important for Socratic period but also important for all the time. It is a great contribution of him which is always helpful for the human life.

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