

RETHINKING OF THE MORAL AND POLITICAL IDEAS OF SOCRATES IN CONTEMPORARY SCENARIO- AN ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT: Socrates was a classical Greek Philosopher credited as one of the founders of Western philosophy and as being the first moral philosopher, of the western ethical tradition of thought. An enigmatic figure, he made no writings, and is known chiefly through the accounts of classical writers writing after his lifetime, particularly his students Plato and Xenophon. Other sources include the contemporaneous Antisthenes, Aristippus, and Aeschines of Sphettos. Aristophanes, a Playwright, is the only source to have written during his lifetime. Plato's dialogues are among the most comprehensive accounts of Socrates to survive from antiquity, though it is unclear the degree to which Socrates himself is "hidden behind his 'best disciple'". Through his portrayal in Plato's dialogues, Socrates has become renowned for his contribution to the field of ethics, and it is this Platonic Socrates who lends his name to the concepts of Socratic irony and the Socratic method, or elenchus. The elenchus remains a commonly used tool in a wide range of discussions, and is a type of pedagogy in which a series of questions is asked not only to draw individual answers, but also to encourage fundamental insight into the issue at hand. Plato's Socrates also made important and lasting contributions to the field of epistemology, and his ideologies and approach have proven a strong foundation for much Western philosophy that has followed.

Key words: Philosophy, Ethics, virtue, Moral ideas, political ideas

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MORAL IDEAS OF SOCRATES

Virtue

“The paramount interest of Socrates in philosophy was ethical or practical. He wanted that philosophy should enlighten the path of each man’s life. Accordingly, he regarded upright conduct to be the highest value and considered all else subservient to it. Virtue, for Socrates, was the *Sumum Bonum* of life. He however, considered the two to be identical. For him, knowledge is virtue or knowledge of what is good and right in conduct. He believed that no one did any wrong knowingly and that wrong action was bred by ignorance. This doctrine of Socrates is a little difficult to comprehend, because we find numerous examples of bad actions done knowingly. Socrates, as a matter of fact, overstressed reason and failed to appreciate the strength of irrational in man. He said, “Then if virtue is one of the things is the soul, and if it must necessarily be helpful, it must be wisdom; since quite by themselves all the things about the soul are neither helpful nor harmful, but they become helpful or harmful by the addition of wisdom or senselessness.”

“But if we have ordered all our enquiry well and argued well, virtue is seen as coming neither by nature nor by teaching, but by divine allotment incomprehensibly to those to whom it comes.”

“Then from this our reasoning, Menon, virtue is sown as coming to us, whenever it comes, by divine dispensation, but we shall only know the truth about this clearly when, before enquiring in what way virtue comes to mankind, we first try to search out what virtue is in itself.”

Socrates firmly believed that right knowledge is the key to right conduct. As a matter of fact he held that no one ever committed any wrong knowingly, that vice was bred by ignorance about the nature of things rather than from the defect of the will. For example, ordinarily we attribute selfishness, aggressiveness, irritability etc. to his self-love and hatred of others. But according to Socrates, these traits are due only to lack of self knowledge. Hence, the first dictum of Socrates’ moral theory is “know theyself.”

Pragmatic Ethics

The moral theory of Socrates is pragmatic. According to him, good acts are more important than good principles. The moral principles must be such as are practicable. A moral principle like “treat everybody as an end in himself”, is very lofty but inspite of its loftiness it is of little worth because it is unpracticable. Again, the injunction that taking interest on loans is sinful is very highminded, but if it were to be put in actual practice our modern society would collapse. Socractes made great effort to define virtue but his real interest was not definition of virtue but to make men virtuous.

Opposed to two Extremes

Socrates was opposed to both extreme skeptics and orthodox in matters of normal. According to skeptics there was no objective morality and that all actions were equally worthwhile from one or the other's viewpoint. There was a popular saying among Greeks which reflects this attitude, "You are being punished not because of the theft you have committed but because you have been caught." This means that thieving is not blame worthy; and the same is true with other social vices. On the other hand, the orthodox view was that the moral rules had been laid by our fore fathers and that the change in time and social context did not affect them in any manner. Therefore, morality was a code of fixed and unwavering rules which required no use of reason to be followed, in fact, an attempt to use reason in morals was tantamount to tempering with the rules with an intent to violate them.

The Golden Mean

Socrates tried to steer on a middle course between the above two extremes. He agreed with skeptics that social and personal context played a role in determining the moral conduct and that there was apparent diversity of opinion regarding what is right? But he pointed out that behind the veil of diversity, there was some fundamental unity provided by rational thought. For example, it is unjust to return a fire arm to a person who is drunk or otherwise mentally disturbed; but it would be quite just to return the firearm if the loaner is normal. The apparent contradictions in two acts cease to look so if we consider the matter rationally. Both actions are fundamentally rational, and, therefore, in accordance with the same principle. Regarding the views of orthodoxy, Socrates shared their respect and reverence for moral rules can be blindly followed. As a matter of fact, rationality is, according to Socrates, the very essence of morality and uncritical and blind faith, the breeding grounds of vice. For Socrates a moral man is a virtuous man. The virtue is the *Summum Bonum* of morality: and virtue is nothing but knowledge.

Fundamental Principles

In order to appreciate fully the moral views of Socrates, the following fundamental principles need detailed discussion.

Knowledge is the Goal of Life:

The concern of a moral theory is to define and describe the concept of good or *Summum Bonum*. There are various views with regard to the goal of human life. According to some, it is pleasure, and according to others it is happiness. Still some other philosophers believe that the highest good is to follow the rules of Elders. But Socrates considered knowledge to be the Highest Good and therefore the true aim of life. This was so because he believed that knowledge was a *sine qua non* of all virtues and that if we knew what is right, we cannot do the wrong. Therefore the knowledge of self and society was the key to moral life. Virtue is nothing else than knowledge.

Socrates used to say that "knowledge is virtue" and he tried to establish the proposition thus: Every man seeks happiness and happiness results from good deeds. In order to do good

one must know what is good. That is, one must have the knowledge of the good. Therefore, knowledge is *condition sine qua non* of moral conduct.

Side by side with knowledge, Socrates gave equal importance to will and desire in moral conduct. But he did not subscribe to the view that there was some antinomy between will and reason, that is dichotomy existed between will and reason. He firmly believed that no one could do any bad knowing it to be bad, nor could anybody do some good unconsciously. Therefore, for him, will was subject to reason and was moulded by knowledge. A moral good consisted in knowing what is good and doing it. There could be no virtue which was blind and unconscious. Without knowledge there could be no good and no virtue.

Socrates also held an opinion which is contrary to the above and unintelligible to common sense. According to him, a wrong committed in full knowledge is superior to a wrong committed unwittingly. Normally, we take a lenient view of a bad act which has been done accidentally. For example, a person whose gun fires and kills someone while he is cleaning it is treated less harshly than a person who kills a man with his gun deliberately. Accordingly, the view of Socrates that known bad was superior to unknown bad would be tantamount to the belief that deliberate killing was preferable to accidental killing. Socrates moral theory, as a whole seems contrary to common sense and it has been subject to both practical and theoretical criticisms. In practice we can cite numerous instances of vices indulged in knowingly. Many people drink, and eat gluttonously and commit adulteries, incest, sodomy, knowing them to be unpardonable wrongs. In theory, the belief that reason is subject to will is open to theoretical criticism.

However, the above criticism is considered to be based on a mistake. Socrates' concept of 'knowledge' is no ordinary one. According to Socrates, a man of knowledge is a man of self control. Therefore the idea of knowledge, for Socrates' moral theory therefore is a blend of reason and will in a harmony.

Virtue can be Taught:

Virtue is concerned with 'will' and 'will' becomes virtuous by habit and practice. Accordingly we believe that it is not by reason but by repeated performance of good deeds, that we develop virtue. But Socrates held quite an opposite view. According to him virtue was knowledge and since knowledge was a system and a science, it could be taught. We sometimes give up many bad practices on learning their true nature. But, on the other hand, this is also a well known fact that we know better but do worse. Whether virtue is a matter of practice or matter of knowledge is a difficult question. Some emphasize the former whereas philosophers like Socrates stress the latter. However, as a matter of fact, there are both elements in virtue.

Virtue is one :

The traditionally Greek moral theory held that there are four virtues; Wisdom, Courage, Temperance and Justice. Socrates however believed in a single virtue, that of knowledge. According to him, knowledge was the virtue of virtues and all virtues were progeny of knowledge.

Virtue is Bliss:

According to Socrates there can be no happiness without virtue and no happiness is equal to that of virtue. Therefore virtue, according to him, is bliss.

Plato's Dialogue The Apology sums up the general Socratic philosophy in the following passages. The Apology is the reply given by Socrates to his prosecutors.

POLITICAL IDEAS OF SOCRATES

The following are the most important views of Socrates concerning political issues:

The Laws and the State:

According to Socrates laws should be based upon the moral principles so that they may guide the citizens who, in their term, may respect them. Therefore law, according to Socrates, is above both the ruler and the ruled. It points out what a citizen should do and what he ought not to do. Man is a social being and therefore the institution of the State is necessary and beneficial for him.

Theory of knowledge:

Man's aim in the field of knowledge is to know himself. Knowledge is of two types-based upon common sense and based upon philosophic goodness. Knowledge, cherished by the Sophists, was based upon common goodness. Socrates aimed at universal knowledge, a knowledge of virtue since, according to him, virtue is knowledge and knowledge is virtue.

Theory of State:

Politics, according to Socrates, is not a profession but an art. The ruler should be well versed in the art of politics. The state is a natural institution. It is prior to the individual and the community and aims at general welfare. Only a person well versed in the art of politics may be appointed a ruler. The ideal state is that where intellect and reason are utilized in state craft.

Human nature:

Man, according to Socrates, has both selfishness as well as the urge to welfare. While the former is injurious, the latter is useful. The later nature is the primary human nature.

Means of knowledge:

Socrates adopted the dialectical method for the achievement of knowledge. In this method he used to visit the so called scholars and political thinkers of Athens and discuss with them different issues. As they could not give satisfactory answers he used to argue and prove that they are ignorant though he never claimed any knowledge for himself. The utilization of this dialectical method turned almost all the contemporary scholars against Socrates. He was charged and presented in the court as a result of which he was sentenced to death by drinking poison. His death, however, resulted in a wide and fast circulation of his idea. The most important role in this process was performed by his eminent disciple Plato. His

contemporary Athenians considered him as a Sophist as his criteria was also humanist and yet his thinking was different from that of the Sophists on the following counts:

- (i) While according to Sophist the world is mechanical, Socrates considered it a as purposive.
- (ii) According to Sophists goodness is an art which can be achieved by specialized knowledge. According to Socrates, on the other hand, goodness is not an art but an innate power of man.
- (iii) While according to Sophists man is the measure of all things, according to Socrates the criteria of different things are established according to their different purposes.
- (iv) The theory of knowledge present by Socrates was very much different from that of the Sophists.
- (v) According to Sophists the social rules are not base upon the Nature and the traditions but they are manmade. According to Socrates the traditional laws are above man. It is hence that he embranced death while following the law.

The above distinctions between the thought of Sophists and that of Socrates shows that they had real differences. While Socrates was a citizen of Athens, the Sophists were foreigners. While Socrates did not charge any thing as his fee for education, the Sophist used to make charges. Socrates, therefore, was not a Sophist. At the age of 70 he was charged and sentenced to death. His death shocked his disciple Plato. It influenced thinking men everywhere. It encouraged enquiry into freedom of thought. Socrates laid emphasis upon reflective thinking. He preached that man should himself decide about the true and the false and follow the path directed by his soul. Besides having individual decisions the individual should follow the laws of the state which are obligatory upon him. The greatest contribution of Socrates is his dialectical method which was later on utilized by his eminent disciple Plato.

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