

Ethics of Socrates

Socrates' philosophical interests were restricted to ethics and the conduct of life. Socrates wanted that philosophy should enlighten the path of each man's life. So he regarded upright conduct to be of highest value and considered all else subservient to it. Since Socrates' ethics mainly deals with the concepts such as, virtue, justice, good, courage etc., virtue for him was so important that he considered it to be the summum Bonum of human lives. We have stated earlier that Socratic theory of knowledge was not a theory put forward for its own sake, but for practical ends. Socrates always made theory subservient to practice. He wanted to know what the concept of virtue is so that one can practise virtue in life. This brings us to the central point of the ethical teaching of Socrates.

We have mentioned earlier that for Sophists knowledge is perception. So they explained perception on the basis of private sensation; So they based morality on primary ethical feeling and desires. Feeling is extremely subjective and differs from person to person. That is to say, what is agreeable to one is not so to another. So the Sophists concluded that morality is what is agreeable, useful and desirable to the majority of the people. Therefore, morality is based on convention. The Sophists also concluded that the basis of the state laws is might is right. A law is protected by the morality. Hence it is the right of the strong man to rule over the weaker ones. Hence the state laws have the principle 'might is right'. But against this teaching of Sophists, Socrates maintained that morality is knowledge of the good through concepts. Morality sprang from rational insight into the good. Since reason is one and the same for all, 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 principles :

1. Virtue is knowledge through concepts. So nobody does wrong knowingly. Therefore, vice is ignorance.
2. As virtue is knowledge, so virtue can be taught.
3. Virtue is one.

Now let us explain these principles.

1. Virtue is knowledge through concepts

For Socrates virtue is the main concern of human life and the greatest good. So virtue must be universally consistent so that it would be same for all. This virtue must be equally binding on all if it were knowledge. Socrates believed that a man can not act rightly unless he first knows what is right. Moral action is thus founded upon knowledge

and must spring from it. If a man only knows what is right, he must do what is right. All men seek the good, but men differ as to what the good is. According to Socrates no man intentionally does wrong. He does wrong, because he does not know the truth of the concept right. So he is ignorant. Being ignorant, he thinks that what he is doing is good. If a man intentionally does wrong, he is better than a man doing so unintentionally. Because the former has in him the essential condition of goodness, but the latter lacks that knowledge. Now Socrates grants that health, wealth and good-looks are all good, but in the absence of proper knowledge they all can be misused. Courage and temperance are all good and would lead to happiness when they are guided by wisdom. They would be evil when they are controlled by foolishness. The right knowledge is the mind of the wise man and the wrong user is the mind of the foolish. In the Euthydemus it is pointed out that unless it is guided by wisdom it would be bad.

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 knowledge is perception; but for Socrates knowledge is through concepts. For the Sophists goodness is a matter of habit. But obviously habit can not be always reliable. In such circumstances customary goodness becomes variable, inconsistent and relative. Similarly true opinion may lead to the good accidentally, but not always. Thus a man with knowledge will always be successful, but the man with right opinion may succeed only for sometimes. Further, for the Sophist 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. We have also mentioned earlier that concepts are given by reason, but is not given by the perception of the particulars. Concepts are always in the minds of everyone, but they have to be enkindled by skilful questioning. So virtue is knowledge through concepts.

2. Virtue can be taught

Virtue is concerned with will. '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 science, virtue could be taught. 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 the question arises : Where is teacher of the concept of the good ? Socrates does not accept Sophists to be the real teachers of the good. Because they believe in customary morality based on opinion which is based on feeling and tempting desires. So if Sophists were not good teachers, can Socrates claim to be a teacher ? Certainly not; because Socrates said that "All I know is that I do not know," i.e., he says that he knows that he does not know. By his assumed ignorance, Socrates has guided us towards the direction in which the seeker can have the kind of knowledge of the concept of good. The real concept is always a matter of recollection of the idea of good. In this way one can get a glimpse of the good.

We have established that virtue is knowledge and vice is ignorance. No man knowingly does wrong. This follows from another doctrine of Socrates, i.e., **virtue is one.**

3. Virtue is one

The traditional Greek theory held that there are five virtues : Wisdom, Courage, Justice, Holiness and Temperance. But Socrates believed that all these particular virtues flowed from the one source, that is knowledge. Therefore, knowledge itself is the sole virtue. This includes all other virtues. Since knowledge is virtue, it is, thus, virtue of all virtues. All virtues were offspring of knowledge. There is also another sense in which Socrates says that virtue or goodness is one. For example, cowness is one but many cows badly imitate it. Similarly, wisdom, temperance, courage, justice and holiness are five kinds of virtue; but there is one single reality which underlies them all. Similarly Socrates speaks of one form of excellence only. Now the question arises : how to explain this ? Socrates points out that all kinds of bodily excellence follow from one single health of the body. Similarly, all kinds of virtue follow from the health of the soul. What is 'health of the soul' ? The 'health of the soul' follows from the order and arrangement between the different functions of the soul. Socrates speaks of reasoning, temper and desires as 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 the discipline among these parts. Wisdom commands, while temper assists in the execution of these commands and desire finishes the material basis of action. 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.

Criticism

1. If evil were never done deliberately or voluntarily, then evil would be an involuntary act and consequently no one could properly be held responsible for the evil that is done.
2. 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.
3. 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.