



A CRITIQUE OF SOCRATES' STATEMENT THAT "KNOWLEDGE IS VIRTUE"

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Abstract

One of the paradigm shifts in the history of philosophy is the dramatic turn from the reflection on the basic stuff of all things to a consideration of human moral behaviour. This key shift was enabled by one of the greatest moral philosophers in the Golden Age of Ancient Greek philosophy called Socrates. Among many other ethical precepts attributed to his philosophical ingenuity, he is also popular for the statement that "Knowledge is virtue". This position of Socrates has raised critical debates among philosophers with some supporting him while others criticizing him. Using the exploratory as well as critical approaches, this paper delves into the debate and criticizes the Socratic position by denying such equation.

Keywords: Critique, Socrates, Statement, Knowledge, Virtue

Introduction

This discourse bothers on the weighty statement: "Knowledge is virtue" that is attributed to one of the greatest philosophers in the Golden Age of ancient Greek philosophy, namely, Socrates. Socrates remains famous for being if not the first, among the first philosophers to inject a paradigm shift in the philosophical reflection of his time. Earlier philosophers had focused attention on understanding the basic stuff from which all things originated. It was first in Socrates that one discovered attention to be focused on the moral life of *man* (Rogers 117) as can be found in the dictum: "Man know thyself; an unexamined life is not worth living" (Historical accounts report that Socrates adapted this statement from the Oracle of Delphi. In any case, Socrates must be credited for popularizing this dictum). Echekwube confirms this when he writes: "He was the first to turn from a philosophy oriented

towards nature to the consideration of human moral behaviour which was for him the most important concern for human beings” (75).

Socrates himself never left any written work; what we know of him has come to us through his disciples with Plato (Xenophon and Aristophanes are the other two) being the closest to him and most representative of his thoughts. The Socratic statement which equates knowledge with virtue has raised a lot of debate among philosophers with some siding with Socrates and others criticizing him. This present academic endeavour is an attempt to delve into this debate. The Socratic stand has been that many who engage in evil do that out of ignorance because human nature is naturally attuned to the pursuit of the good which guarantees happiness. However, against this Socratic bias is the fact that possessing knowledge does not guaranteed virtue because experience shows that there are many who engage in evil or wrong doing with full knowledge. In view of the foregoing, this write-up seeks to critique Socrates’ statement that knowledge is virtue. To undertake this task, this work shall consider the following subheadings: the explication of concepts, namely, virtue and knowledge; an explanation of Socrates’ statement that knowledge is virtue; a critique of Socrates’ knowledge is virtue and then a conclusion.

Explication of Concepts

Virtue: The term “virtue” derives from the Greek *arête* which was used for excellence of any kind. But generally the excellence referred to is an excellence belonging to human person so that the virtues may be described as the forms of human excellence. In its Latin form, ‘Virtue’ derives from the term *virtus* means moral excellence. A virtue is a character trait or quality valued as being good (Unit 2: Virtues and Vices” 2). Personal virtues are characteristics valued as promoting individual and collective well-being, and thus good by definition. The opposite of virtue is vice. In ethics, ‘virtue’ is used with two somewhat different meanings: first, a virtue is a quality of character – a disposition to do what is right in a particular direction, or to perform one of the more universal duties; and second, a virtue is also a habit of action corresponding to the quality of character or disposition.

Knowledge: The term “knowledge” is a very elusive and has no unanimous definition. Bolisani and Bratianu confirm this when they assert: “Knowledge is an

abstract concept without any reference to the tangible world. It is a very powerful concept, yet it has no clear definition so far (1).” Knowledge is a very important and fundamental concept in epistemology. Although the understanding of knowledge has remained elusive, the frequently adopted definition considers knowledge as “justified true belief” (Nonaka and Takeuchi 87). This definition affords three basic conditions of knowledge christened by some authors as the *tripartite account of knowledge*: The first is *the truth condition*. It requires that if one knows a proposition then that proposition must be true. If the proposition is not true, then that person does not know what he claims to know. The truth condition makes the difference between opinion and knowledge. The second is *the belief condition*. That condition demands that if one knows a proposition then he believes that proposition. Finally, there is *the justification condition*. That condition requires a practical way of justifying that the belief one has is true (Bolisani and Bratianu 5). Considering the above conditions, Ayer submits that “the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowing that something is the case are first that what one is said to know be true, secondly that one be sure of it, and thirdly that one should have the right to be sure” (13).

Two opposing schools have emerged regarding the process of acquiring knowledge. On the one hand is the rationalist wing which holds that knowledge can be acquired through reason alone, and on the other hand, are the empiricists who hold that knowledge can only be acquired through experience. In these two schools we have *a priori* and *aposteriori* knowledge respectively. In Immanuel Kant, we have another type of knowledge called *synthetic a priori* knowledge. There are other classifications of types of knowledge. In spite of all this, the definition of knowledge remains elusive.

Knowledge as Virtue in Socrates

Virtue has been regarded as the core of Socrates’ ethics (“Virtues and Vices” 3). Virtue, according to Socrates, is the deepest and most basic propensity of man. This virtue is knowledge. If virtue is knowledge, it can be known and consequently taught. According to Socrates, virtue is the highest aim and greatest good one has to seek in life. He also insisted that if it is to be highest aim and the greatest good, it must have universal consistency and be the same for all. Now, what is universally consistent and the same for all is knowledge which is obtained through concept by the use of reason common in all.

Ethics, according to Socrates, has yet another dimension. It does not stop at mere acquisition of the knowledge of the ideas of good. The knowledge of the idea of the good aims at controlling all other ideas and ultimately guides the whole man, including his will and feeling, and necessarily leads him to good actions. Hence, ethical knowledge tends to culture the soul which ultimately leads the soul towards regaining its pure, pristine glory. For Socrates, this is the reason for believing that “no one does wrong knowingly” and “that knowledge is virtue.”

Socrates says that virtue or goodness is one, although practices differently in different forms of good. In Plato’s *Protagoras*, Socrates says that although wisdom, temperance, courage, justice and holiness are the principal forms of virtue, there is one single reality which underlies them all. Yet on another occasion, in Plato’s *Meno*, we find Socrates looking for one virtue which permeates all other virtues.

The Socratic notion of virtue as one leads us finally to conclude that there is one Idea of the Good which underlies all the ethical activities of man which are intrinsically good. Socrates speaks in the Republic of Plato that ...in the region of the known the last thing to be seen and hardly seen is the idea of good, and that when seen must need point us to the conclusion that this is indeed the cause for all things of all that is right and beautiful, giving birth in the visible world to light, and author of light and itself in the intelligible world being the authentic source of truth and reason, and that anyone who is to act wisely in private or public must have caught sight of this.

According to Aneto, for Socrates, to know the good is to do the good. It implies that knowing presupposes doing (84). The implication is that there cannot be virtuous acts without knowledge. Knowledge is, thus, the fundamental determinant and necessary condition for virtuous acts. Socrates further argues that lack of knowledge is evil. Thus, he equates vice which is the opposite of virtue with ignorance. Socrates’ understanding of virtue is that which brings about the well-being or goodness of the soul. Many perform certain acts thinking they would give the soul happiness without knowing that the acts in question cannot give the soul intended happiness. For Socrates, it is the knowledge of the good act that necessitates its performance and such actually gives human soul the desired happiness. It is from this angle that he argues that ignorance is the cause of evil. It is on account of this that Ambury submits: “Socrates, therefore, denies the possibility of *akrasia* or weakness of the will. No one errs willingly”. Evil is, thus, the product of ignorance and not a willful act. It is

ignorance that causes one to do what is wrong with the intention that such would bring happiness to one's soul. It is a result of wrong calculation or estimation of what is actually good.

The Socratic statement of knowledge is virtue is labelled by Devereux as *Socratic Intellectualism* which he underscores that is the claim that moral goodness or virtue consists exclusively in a kind of knowledge, with the implication that if one knows what is good and evil, one cannot fail to be a good person and to act in a morally upright way (750-751). In Devereux's view, there are two ways to understand Socrates' position that knowledge of the good is sufficient for right action. The first is that all desires are rational, being focused on what is believed to be good; thus, an agent who knows what is good, will have no desire to act contrary to that knowledge. Secondly, there are non-rational desires, but knowledge of the good has sufficient motivational power to overcome them (751).

Critique of Socrates' Knowledge is Virtue

Socrates must be commended for being among the earliest pacesetter in ethical matters. His invaluable call for knowledge to chisel human beings to a virtuous life remains always pertinent in moral matters. However, a number of objections could be leveled against his encompassing ethical statement that knowledge is virtue:

In his opinion, Socrates states that, evil is never done deliberately. 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.

Since in 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. Beyond that, Socrates' claim that possessing knowledge helps one to know the good and the bad further buttresses the fact that evil or the bad is capable of being chosen as a course of action because it is part and parcel of the knowledge that Socrates claims is the guarantee for virtue. If Socrates' knowledge claims could only make one aware of only the good without its contrary, human beings will naturally do only that which is good because that is the only knowledge they have. But since there is an opening for knowing the bad, then it is an option for an agent of moral action.

Socrates holds that, moral laws were objective and independent of feelings. 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.

Furthermore, psychiatric evidence shows sometimes that people behave in an entirely self-damning manner. For example, taken from the Holy bible, St. Paul said: “For I do not so the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Rom. 7:19). If this could be the case, it implies that knowledge is not enough to guarantee virtue because one could possess full knowledge of the good and still opt for evil or the wrong.

If Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytical theory is correct, we are often unaware of rationalizing unethical actions in order to maintain our self-respect. That is, this kind of defence mechanism leads to self-deception. With respect to Freud’s definition, Goden pointedly submitted that: “Insofar as defence mechanisms are employed by normal, neurotic and psychotic personalities, they may be regarded as universal features of the human mind” (247).

Therefore, Socratic equation of knowledge with virtue clearly suggests that knowledge is utopian. This is because of the fact that human beings are naturally imperfect and always engaged in evil or wrongdoings at one time or the other. By implication, the defective and imperfect nature of human beings will always deter them from attaining that knowledge that will guarantee a virtuous life. It is the same as holding that a virtuous life is a utopia or a mirage.

The claim of Socrates that people who engage in wrongdoing or evil do that out of ignorance cannot be upheld because of the tact and thoughtfulness involved in the planning of evil. For instance, those who engage in theft or murder often do them with the intention of never being caught and under circumstances that have been masterly teleguided in order not to be caught. The whole process of planning implies that they are conscious of the fact that what they are planning is evil. To confirm this, most of these criminals admit that they have done these wrongs; a confirmation that they were done with full knowledge. A situation such as this will consider Socrates’ claim as defective.

Finally, the Socratic claim that “to know the good is to do the good” debunks the fact of human freedom which enables individuals to make choices over their actions. The

theme of human freedom is very central in ethics and it is this capacity that is often used to distinguish humans from other beings. This capacity to make choices forms the foundation for carrying out certain acts and avoiding others. We can only make choices when we know them. Thus, when human beings choose to do evil over good, it is not because they lack knowledge of the good or they are ignorant.

Conclusion

This discourse has attempted a critical examination of Socrates' statement that knowledge is virtue. As an example of a man with deep ethical conviction, it is not surprising that Socrates had to give up his life in defence of his moral ideas. For him, knowledge is virtue because once an individual is knowledgeable, it is possible to go for virtuous acts that guarantee happiness. Evil within the Socratic realm was the product of ignorance because no rational being in the right senses would choose evil over good. Of course, it is a fact that human beings have a natural appetency to that which is good. However, explains proves beyond reasonable doubts that Socrates' claim that knowledge is virtue does not contain the whole truth because people often engage in evil with full knowledge. Inherent in the Socratic statement that to know the good is to do the good is the complete denial of man's ability or capacity to make choices in life. It worthwhile to acknowledge here that our contemporary society is different from that which Socrates lived because here there are people who actually know the good but do not do it for selfish reasons. To hold that doing evil is involuntary will deter evil doers from taking responsibility for their actions. The working of the society where evil doers are punished for their criminal offences debunks Socrates' claim that ignorance is the cause of evil. They are punished because they could have also chosen not to carry out those evil acts.

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