

Research paper on relationship between knowledge and virtue: socrates

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Knowledge is a powerful mechanism for survival in the world. Knowledge helps us dig into our soul and understand the world better. Through our knowledge of the world and our environment, we become powerful both physically and mentally. Plato's words "knowledge is virtue" have deep underlying meaning in it. According to Socrates, virtue is knowledge of knowing what is good and bad. One who knows all the good and bad of the world is virtuous. Virtue is divided into four parts - courage, temperance, justice and piety. Courage refers to knowledge of what is good and bad in the future. Temperance refers to knowledge of what is good and bad for oneself. Justice refers to knowledge of what is good and bad for others and finally, piety refers to knowledge of what is good and bad for the gods.

(USCD)

Plato's Apology provides an important view on the relationship between virtue and knowledge. It says that being virtuous involves introspecting one's own life and reflecting upon virtue. But according to Socrates, being virtuous does not only involve examining one's own life, rather it is about knowing the meaning of virtue and the limitations of your actions. According to Socrates, merely being thoughtful about virtue does not make one virtuous. Being virtuous requires an amount of self-control to overpower temptations and desires that so naturally dwell in our hearts. According to him, a virtuous man would practice immense self-control to prevent himself from getting overwhelmed with longings and temptations. But he argues that the motivation to control one's desires would be a bit self-contradictory. He believes if the motivation for self-control comes from giving up an instant pleasure for another then it is not truly self-control. A true temperance is

where the temptation is there in front of your eyes, but still you control your desire because of your sense of morality, because of your knowledge that the momentary pleasure goes against your principles and ethics.

Similarly, Socrates argues that a courageous soldier puts up a brave act in the battle field because of the fear of shame and disrepute and not because of courage. The shame and disrepute associated with the lack of courage to fight the enemies in the battle field gives the soldier motivation to fight bravely. If the fear of enemy overpowers his fear of shame, then surely he will lose courage to keep the battle on. Socrates believes that the true motivation for self-control and courage should come from wisdom. It is the wisdom of knowledge and knowledge of what virtue is that should be the motivator for one to act virtuously.

Socrates opines that the knowledge derived out of our five senses is fallible. In traditional viewpoint, the empirical knowledge that is the knowledge gained with the help of our five sensory organs is adequate for our daily operation. But Socrates says that the senses are not reliable source for knowledge because knowledge derived from senses is not accurate. For example, a stick half way in the water appears bent rather than straight. So the image captured by our eyes may give us false information. Socrates observes that there is a clear distinction between body and soul and that body does not play any role in the acquisition of knowledge. Since our five senses are parts of our body, they do not help in the attainment of knowledge. Socrates opines that the knowledge derived out of our five senses is fallible. In traditional viewpoint, the empirical knowledge that is the knowledge gained with the help of our five sensory organs is adequate for

our daily operation. But Socrates says that the senses are not reliable source for knowledge. Socrates observes that there is a clear distinction between body and soul and that body does not play any role in the acquisition of knowledge.

Life is a fusion of body and soul, but Socrates does not find this combination ideal for attaining knowledge. The body has lot of needs and desires which impede our search for knowledge. For example, when we become sick, our sickness prevents us from concentrating upon the pursuit of knowledge. The body with all its senses causes disputes, war and battles and our engagement with these issues keep us away from our pursuit of wisdom. He believes by the time we complete learning about a particular earthly thing, the definition or the form of it has acquired a new meaning and so we just try to catch up. He argues that our body is like an evil tomb that imprisons our mind, corrupts our thought and tries to fool us at every given opportunity. Most of us see the sky as clear blue but what about the people who are color blind? Is the sky blue for them too? People suffering from jaundice have their vision tinted yellow. Do they see the sky as blue too?

With the help of many such examples, Socrates arrived at the conclusion that our senses do not capture reality. Knowledge can never be attained through things that are imperfect and inconstant. Reality and knowledge can only be attained through our soul which can interact with the forms. Through the exercise of our soul and not senses, true knowledge can be possible. Our ability to recognize different things through our senses is possible by our knowledge of forms. Socrates claimed that our soul through its existence in the real world with forms has acquired all the knowledge possible to attain

but owing to the trauma of our birth, the learnings made in the real world might have relegated to the back of our minds but which gushes into our memory through the practice of recollection. For example, our ability to recognize a triangular object comes from our participation in the Form of Triangularity in the real world.

According to Socrates, soul is immortal and based on the knowledge acquired in previous birth; the soul knows everything about life. He explains that knowledge is, thus, a process of recollection of the things learned in the past. In order to prove his argument, Socrates presents an example of a slave boy who has no knowledge of mathematics. Socrates gives the boy a geometrical problem to solve and asks him questions leading him through a multitude of reasoning in such a manner that the boy discovers the answers on his own. Socrates then concludes that the boy must have acquired mathematical skill in his previous life through the recollection of which, the boy is able to solve the problem in his present life. (Alex Scott, 2002

Knowledge is essential for understanding the enigma of life. The misinterpretation of these understandings, however, often results in disastrous consequences of hatred and devastation. Socrates emphasized upon the importance of right teachers to inculcate the virtue of knowledge in future generations. Virtue will be misrepresented if the teachers are not right. For example, the practice of capital punishment that has been in place for centuries is a result of improper teachings. Capital Punishment is vindictive to the core and yet this has survived in the world for years. Knowledge begets change. With proper utilization of knowledge, we can improve our life and the world around us. For example, the knowledge of

ailment and diseases has led to the discovery of medicines, thereby, improving our life. The more we acquire knowledge of diseases, the more we will know about the curative measures. However, change does not always happen in our favor. Misuse of knowledge can bring about catastrophic results. Many argue that knowledge invites antagonism and destruction. For example, the knowledge of atomic bomb has proved destructive for the world. If there was no knowledge of atomic bomb, then it could not have wreaked havoc in the world. Similarly, the knowledge of power has deluded generations of people resulting in relentless battles and massacres over the war of absolute control.

Socrates believes that knowledge is not destructive; it is the human emotions that are distracting and damaging. Human emotions are unstable, unpredictable, uncontrollable and changeable and that is why any decision influenced by human emotions is not perfect. Emotions block our thinking and prevent us from taking the right decisions. Socrates argues that knowledge is not emotion. Knowledge is an instinct to seek wisdom and understanding. Knowledge cannot impose an action on an individual but an individual can force knowledge upon an action. (Scribd)

Socrates argues that emotions drive one to battles and revolutions. Feelings of anger, grief blind people's judgment. In the context of ancient Greek civilization, this comment truly fits in as appropriate. Ancient Greeks were totally controlled by their emotions and desires. If they fell short of women, they would vandalize the neighboring villages to steal women. If they required workers, they would gather slaves. Socrates says that emotions, desires all are associated with the needs of our body. That is why we should

pay more stress on our soul than on the needs of our body. Because body with its needs and distracting emotions obstruct the passage of pure thought and knowledge is linked with reason and pure thought. Virtue, in similar way, is linked with reason and pure thought and not with emotions. Allowing our emotions to run amuck will prevent us from being virtuous. Therefore, for the attainment of pure and unadulterated knowledge one must exercise not of his senses, but of reason and pure thought.

Ancient Greek philosophers were concerned with morality, justice and piety over anything else. In their line of thinking, the answers for justice and morality lie in the question " what ought to be". According to Socrates, justice is giving a person his due. All the persons are born unequal but they should treated equal in the eyes of law. Sense of morality and justice are linked with the ability of making good or bad judgments. For example, you have a borrowed a weapon from a person who has gone mad. In all probability, you must return the weapon to him because it is his, but in consideration of the fact that the owner of the weapon has gone mad, will it be just for you return the weapon to him? Because he might kill himself or kill others with the weapon. That is not justice. Justice is where you can make right judgment and in this case, not returning the weapon. This is the knowledge Socrates seeks. (Moya K. Mason)

Socrates is a proponent of asceticism. He thinks the pursuit of true knowledge will succeed if one willingly renounces all the material and worldly pleasures and lives an ascetic life with simple means. He regards death as a kind of asceticism. When he states that a philosopher practices death, he implies that the philosopher lives ascetically. Through the rejection of worldly

pleasures and physical needs, the philosopher gives preference to the activities of the soul. Actual death is an extension of this practice of death because then you become rid of all the concerns regarding your health and body. Since soul is eternal, your all concerns will be reflected upon the nourishment of the soul which can be achieved through proper engagement in pure thought and reasoning. Asceticism is a way to be free from all the worries related to body while living so that when the actual death comes, we are ready to embrace it. The actual death will release our souls from the prison of our bodies, thus, enabling the possibility of our attaining true knowledge.

So we see that virtue is the way we should be as human beings and since virtue is linked with our souls and our souls with the knowledge of pure thought and reality, through the practice of being virtuous with reflection upon soul and pure thought, we can derive knowledge of pure essence. Thus, we can realize the truth behind Plato's " Knowledge is virtue."

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