

Place of Socrates in Greek Philosophy

In the history of Western philosophy, the role and importance of Socrates is like that of a multi-directional milestone, in reference to which we measure, weigh and assess the value and worth of pre-and post Socratic philosophy. In Socrates, we find for the first time the stress on the essentially humanistic nature of philosophy. The crucial place of Socrates in the history of Western philosophy can be gauged from two following quotations from John Dewey and Whitehead-

“Athens is a looking-glass, looking into which the Western World became conscious of its philosophic problems.” *-Dewey*

“The entire history of Western philosophy is nothing but footnotes to Plato.” *-Whitehead*

The importance of Socrates will be clear if we mention the fact that Socrates occupied a pivotal role in the cultural scene of Athens and that the philosophy of Plato is but an interpretation, elaboration and development of Socratic, ideas.

Socrates was a great thinker with a keenly enquiring mind. He initiated and developed the method of enquiry, that is, an examination of the meaning and use of various philosophical and ethical concepts. He stressed the need of rational examination of all ideas and deplored blind adherence to authority. In his own words, “An unexamined life is not worth living.”

Though Socrates was a great thinker and has exercised great influence on the course of Western philosophy, he, unlike other philosophers, did not commit his ideas to writing. He was, in fact, an itinerant thinker who went from one place to another, and engaged other philosophers and philosophically inclined youngmen in conversation about deep problems of life, society and morals. In this manner he used to communicate his ideas to others and learnt about theirs. This procedure is known as dialectic, that is, development, elucidation and precision of concepts through dialogue. Many philosophers of West have followed this method of philosophization and have expressed their views through dialogue between persons of contending view points. The dialogues of Plato, Berkeley and Hume are cases in point.

The aim and purpose of philosophy was very different for Socrates from those of many other philosophers. Unlike most philosophers, Socrates did not wish to influence others by his views; he did not wish to convince them about the validity and correctness of his views. Rather he wanted that everybody should be his own philosopher; should be critical and think for himself. He was convinced that every person had in him the germ for rational thought and the aim of philosophy was to bring rational thought to full blossom in everyone. The tendency among philosophers to persuade others to believe that their views are more valid gives rise to schools and controversy in philosophy. Socrates on the contrary, did not wish to convert others to his views nor did he wish to propagate a set of philosophical views. He only wanted to draw the attention of others to the crucial significance of philosophy for life and inculcate in them a love for philosophy, that is love of wisdom. The approach of Socrates to philosophy is known as mimetic approach, that is intellectual midwifery. As a mid-wife delivers a child of a pregnant woman, Socrates wanted to bring to surface the germ of rational thought and critical inquiry. The whole approach of Socrates in philosophy is summed up in two words-Dialectical Method. Now we turn to a detailed examination of this method.

Dialectical Method

Socrates was fully conscious of the value of knowledge. According to him, "Knowledge is virtue." Knowledge for Socrates was vision of universal truths. To discover this knowledge he made use of dialectical method. Though Socrates invented and used dialectical method he has nowhere given a systematic description of this method. As remarked earlier, Socrates did not commit his ideas to writing. This style of developing philosophical ideas was unique. He was used to go down the market place and would draw philosophically inclined to discuss with him the real and objective meaning of such simple concepts as friendship, love, courage, virtue etc. In the course of his dialogue he would let people know that what he was interested in was not the conventional meaning but the real and objective meaning of the concepts. Thus he would direct the course of conversation. This method was dialectical because to all proposed meaning and definitions of concepts Socrates would bring out the defects in them and thus persuade his interlocutor to modify his definition to rectify the defects pointed. This procedure of point and counterpoint would go on till a really satisfactory definition was found.

Thus we find that in the hands of Socrates dialectics was a means of discovery of objective and valid definitions of concepts familiarly used in daily life. It is not the condition of a dialectical argument that the domain of the argument should be confined to the concept being discussed. It is indeed considered desirable to examine the allied and other concepts if classification of the concept in question calls for such a discussion.

Following are the salient features of this method-

1. *Methodological Doubt* - Socrates used to begin his conversation by

pertending ignorance about the real meaning of a concept and wanted others to enlighten him on the subject. This pretence of ignorance is known as 'Socratic Irony' in as much as Socrates exposed others to be ignorant and himself wise inspite of his earlier declaration to the contrary. Some scholars have criticized Socrates for concealing the truth that he knew the answer. This could only mean that he wished to humiliate his opponent. But such criticism is mistaken. The negativistic approach to the problem adopted by Socrates was really meant to let his interlocutors to exercise their minds and develop interest in the inquiry. Had he given a positive answer to begin with, others may have just accepted it blindly and the purpose of conversation would have thus been defeated. As his purpose was to encourage in others to think independently, he found it a useful procedure to feign initial ignorance and let others present their views and not be carried away by the Socratic authority. The dialectical method is essentially based on methodological doubt, that is, a critical examination of the problem concerned. The critical examination and doubt about the validity of current beliefs is not scepticism for the sake of scepticism; but, on the contrary it is a means and method to reach the truth and a safeguard against being duped easily. A man who questions and has an enquiring mind can alone be a philosopher, because people mostly have a strong will to believe and are very gullible. Only by constantly critical attitude can this natural tendency be countered.

2. Conversational - Another feature of the method by which Socrates philosophized is the use of dialogue or conversation for the development of ideas. A dialogue or conversation allows exchange of ideas; and it is only by certain tension and conflict of ideas that the thought is refined and developed. A lecture or an essay is quite suitable for passing on scientific information. But philosophy is something other than information. Therefore, for the unfoldment and development of philosophical ideas, it is essential that there should be a meeting of minds and exchange of ideas. This is possible only in a philosophical conversation. That is why Plato, a disciple of Socrates, follows the dramatic form to develop his ideas. This allows for expression of various aspects of a problem.

This feature of Socratic method is also referred to as intellectual midwifery. The stimulation and incentive provided by an engaged conversation usually helps to bring to surface the latent ideas in the mind of man. Therefore, as a midwife delivers a child from the womb of the mother, intellectual converse delivers the latent from the four walls of the unconscious mind.

3. Conceptual and Semantic - Socrates used to stress the need for correct and precise definitions of the concepts. Like modern logical positivists and linguists Socrates realized the paramount need for giving precise connotation and meaning to the concepts used in philosophy. In order to determine the meaning of a concept we have to abstract the general and universal features of things from their particular and

individual aspect. Socrates tried to find precise meaning of the concepts like "justice", "courage", "companion", "knowledge", "virtue", friendship", "love" etc. As the main emphasis of Socrates in philosophy is upon the correct and precise use of the concepts, he did not do what modern semantics tries to do today.

4. *Empirical or Inductive* - The subject matter of philosophic conversations of Socrates was provided by day-to-day affairs. This enquiry was always connected with some specific and concrete problem. For example, Socrates would urge others to define what is the meaning of friendship and by examining various forms of friendship try to discover something common to all of them. Therefore the enquiry of Socrates was both empirical and inductive.

5. *Deductive* - Lastly, the enquiry of Socrates has the feature of being deductive. Though Socrates used to begin his enquiry with common place definitions and examine all the popular ideas, his aim was the attainment of objective and universal truths. Therefore he was not satisfied till he was able to establish deductively certain truths.

To sum up, the dialectical method as employed by Socrates clearly displays the characteristics of (1) methodological doubt; (2) intellectual dialogue; (3) Semantic precision and (4) deductive inductive determination of truth.

Q. 3. Critically discuss Socratic theory of knowledge.

(Meerut 1980, Rohilkhand 1977, Raj. 1981)

Socratic Theory of Knowledge

The chief problem which engaged concentrated attention of Socrates was the challenge posed by the sophists to objective truth and morality. Sophist means a wise man; and sophists indeed were learned men who offered to teach against suitable payment the art of rhetorics and argumentation. They believed that there was no objective truth or morality and that each view was no more than an opinion of a particular person. Therefore, superiority of an opinion is not to be proved by its inherent character but by the manner and force of an argument. Accordingly, they placed utmost emphasis on the art and science of argumentation. For them, "man (an individual) was the measure of everything" (*Homo Mensura*) and that truth is particular, individual and contextual. It is obvious that such views are subversive of both philosophy and morality and open floodgates of opportunism and chicanery in politics. Socrates acknowledged that there was diversity of human opinions and that every body unreflectively considered his opinion to be true. But, according to him, this was a very superficial view and that the popular fallacy about the nature of truth sprang from an utter misconception about the nature and meaning of truth. The problem of knowledge was the key to everything. The sceptics have no faith in human reason's capacity to go beyond the particular. Socrates was convinced that human reason ultimately prevails and that man is capable of discovering the object and the universal.

In order to reach the truth, man must indeed be sceptical about all sorts of opinions entering his head. He should be able to cut through the false layers of prejudice and arbitrary assertion in order to pierce the truth. The foremost condition of reaching the truth is, according to Socrates, to make our ideas clear and know exactly what we are talking about. Thus, for Socrates, we obtained our knowledge through concepts. In order to appreciate fully the Socratic theory of knowledge, we must examine firstly his theory of concepts.

Theory of concepts

Socrates believed that knowledge was gained through the medium of concepts. A concept is an idea representing the characteristics common to all members of a class. A concept is opposed to a percept. A percept is an idea based on the observation of a particular thing, whereas a concept is an abstraction intellectually derived by considering the common features in a class of things. To illustrate: if we say this is a book on philosophy, we have the percept of a particular book: but if we say, Books are printed materials designed to convey some ideas or information on some subject the term Books is a concept. When we say "book", we use a term applicable to all members of its class, whereas "this book" applies to "this" and no other book. A concept includes in it those qualities alone which are common to all members of a class; it must also have in it a quality which distinguishes it from other classes; otherwise the concept will be vague and ambiguous. For example, the concept "man" has the quality of rationality or animality. However, if there were other creatures who were animals and rational, the above concept of man will be confusing. To illustrate; the concept of man as "biped" (two footed animal) is quite adequate, but the trouble arises when we note that all birds are two-footed. The "rational animal" is adequate because we know of no animal which is rational. A concept, as we have noted, includes only common or generic features; the natural corollary from this point is that we cannot include those features in a concept which are peculiar to one or some of its members. For example, it will be erroneous to describe man as white-skinned, crazy, stupid, genius, anglophile, misogynist or bigamist, because though some men no doubt have one or more above-mentioned qualities, they are not found in other men.

Socrates tries to construct a concept or definition of a concept by using familiar examples, and then, by a process of induction and with the aid of suitable examples, ventures to form a provisional definition. The provisional definition, in turn, is tested by trying to discover the exceptions. This process is carried on till a wholly satisfactory definition is found. As Frank Thilly has observed, "The aim is always to discover the essential characteristics of the subject to be defined, to reach clear and distinct notions, or concepts. At times Socrates goes back to the first principle, criticizing the first principles in the light of basic definitions assumed to be correct."

The Place of Reason and Definition in Knowledge

By reason here we mean objective and universal power in man by

which he gains knowledge. Therefore reason must not be confused with intelligence. In the above sense, sophists denied that there was some rational faculty in man which he shared with other men. They took precipitation to be the source of all knowledge and in as much as the sense organs of various people differ in their strength and modality, the perception of each man is peculiar to him, and therefore, there is no agreement among men about things and morals. Every man is his own measure or rule. But Socrates vehemently opposed this theory and pointed out that beneath apparent diversity and chaos in human opinions there is a fundamental agreement.

In order to establish the universality of knowledge, Socrates emphasized the importance of precise and clear definitions. By definitions we secure fundamental elements of things. As a matter of fact, definitions are nothing but linguistic expressions of concepts. The abstract concepts are in the mind and when these are clothed in language, these become definitions. The definition accordingly, has same elements and features as found in concepts. The definitions mention generic or common characteristics of a class and also mention its distinguishing mark. Without exactitude and precision in definitions, we can not gain knowledge nor can we make its correct use. For example, if we have to do justice, we must know the meaning of justice and the meaning should be such that no important aspects of justice is ignored in it and more over, it should be free from superfluity and ambiguity. For example, if we say that justice consists in paying back one's debts, we have to ask ourselves if there are no special circumstances where paying back of debt may be immoral or unjust. To return a man's pistol who is under a fit of anger is a dangerous proposition. Therefore, we should define justice more adequately. Similarly, as we saw above we had to define reason as a universal power in man, because otherwise the statement that sophists decried the role of reason in knowledge will be misleading, because, as we know, even a reaction involves definite cognitive elements. Sophists were not unaware of this; but what they denied was that reason was a faculty which is common and same in everyone. They denied its universal nature. Thus we presume that reason and definition are two elements of paramount importance in knowledge.

Knowledge and 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 *Summum 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.