

SOCRATES, PLATO AND ARISTOTLE: CONCEPT OF KNOWLEDGE AND EDUCATION

Abstract

This paper scrutinizes the key concepts of knowledge and education in the context of the classical masters of antiquity-Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. It commences with underscoring the significant role played by Sophists, in developing knowledge and enriching the history of Greece, and then focuses on the dialectic method developed by Socrates to discover truth. Further elaboration is made on Socrates's proposition about two kinds of knowledge and virtue; the dissemination of his fundamental ideas and doctrines by his disciple, Plato, who borrowed the Socratic dialectic method and dictum of knowledge (i.e. virtue is knowledge). The Platonic contributions in the field of imparting knowledge- use of analogy, the theory of knowledge and education being allied concepts, role of state as an educational institution in enhancing knowledge. two aspects of education, theory of functional specialization- are next illustrated. Penultimately the paper foregrounds the Aristotelian tenets and approaches like his use of the inductive method, high regard for history and tradition, classification of sciences into three groups, and notions of knowledge and education. I conclude my paper with an analysis of the two greatest Greek philosophers (Plato and Aristotle), their distinguished traits and the precise areas of their correspondence and difference.

Keywords: Knowledge, Education, Sophist, Dialectic, Dialogue. Virtue, Truth, Analogy, Inductive Method

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It is a crude fact that the concept of Language and meaning does not occupy an important place rather any place in early Greek thinking. But with the advent of the sophists there started a new dimension about knowledge and education. A separate science of Grammar is not seen, but the method of dialectics adopted by Socrates is clearly an indication that they were fully acquainted with the Guru-Shishya tradition as we had in ancient India. The method of dialectics was main source of knowledge and education. In the early Greek period a line of demarcation cannot be drawn between knowledge and education. Education imparted true knowledge.

The sophists had played an important role in the development of knowledge and the history of Greece. They were the first who brought a swing in the direction of humanistic studies. They made man the centre of human thought and study. Protagoras was the first thinker who said that 'man is the measure of all things'. The sophists had a sceptic attitude towards the ideal of knowledge. According to them there is nothing which is absolutely and universally true.

Socrates, a disciple of Archelaus, was regarded as a sophist by the Athenians. But in true sense he was not a sophist. In the words of Will Durant ' he could be regarded as a sophist in so far as he was rich in crafty dodges and the argumentative tricks, slyly changed the scope or meaning of terms, drowned the problems loose analogies, quibbled like a school boy, and beat the wind bravely with words.¹ The sophists were humanists while Socrates was the first who concerned himself with the teleological explanation of things. In fact, Socrates was the wisest man in Greece of his day. He developed a typical method the method of dialectic, by which he put to test the knowledge of those persons who claimed to possess it. This fact should not be forgotten that Socrates never tried to teach something to his listeners rather assist them in discovering truth.

He did not provide his hearers with new and interesting ideas, but like a midwife assisted the pregnant mind to bring forth its own truths. He developed his techniques and philosophy of knowledge by contacts with other minds. The profoundly exciting quality of his personality influenced men of the most different character and induced conclusions which were logically quite incompatible through obviously all derivative from Socrates.² It can be said that Socrates was the head of a definite philosophic school at Athens, who taught a definite doctrine and the main principles of his school were Pythagorean.

The method of Socrates was the dialectic method and pursued the method of question and answer. This method was employed by him everywhere and among all sorts of persons. It was a definite method as much as the scholastic method of the middle ages, there were rules for the adoption of the theme of discussion and the rules for the relevant answering of question.³ The method adopted by Socrates was unpleasant for the victim and a method which might become merely eristic turning to argument in any direction for the sake of argument but it was all the same, in the hands of Socrates, a genuine organ truth.⁴ Virtually, by this novel method he put to test the knowledge of those who claimed to possess it. The main aim of Socrates was to expose the ignorance of his listeners and to assist them in covering truth for themselves. The aim of Socrates was good but those who were made to look ignorant. Therefore, truth could not be discovered. It was a method which might become

eristic. turning to argument in any direction for the sake of argument. The full credit of this method goes to Socrates.

Socrates opined that there were two kinds of knowledge — the first was only apparent and the second was real and a permanent possession of the mind. It was the pious duty of all men to find true knowledge and which could only be achieved if the people knew themselves. They had knowledge if they know how much they really knew. True knowledge consists in true goodness. Corresponding to the theories of knowledge there are two forms of virtue. The first form of virtue is based on opinion and the second one based on knowledge. Opinion is insecure, it is liable to be forgotten, it may change by some new impression. Virtue based on opinion is a matter of habit knowledge is secure because it is reasoning reference to a cause. The virtue based on knowledge is equally secure. Virtue based on knowledge is a matter of reasoned conviction and insight. The second form is based on real knowledge and hence it is secure. It is a permanent possession of mind. It is not based on merely blind faith. But, both the forms have same content. The difference lies only in a difference of grasp on the content. Real knowledge cannot be changed by any new impression. It can be communicated like the knowledge on which it rests. Virtue which rests on principles admits of some definitions of those principles and one can communicate and teach something which can be embraced in a general definition. Such types of definitions were the object of Socrates' dialectic and cross-questioning. Socrates did not accept any remuneration for imparting knowledge. Unlike the sophists he conversed with his fellow citizens everywhere. He talked to everyone without any distinction. Contrary to sophists, Socrates made a fundamental distinction between ordinary and real knowledge. Ordinary knowledge does not rest on secure and sound foundation, so it is liable to be changed or modified and it cannot be accepted as real knowledge. On the other hand, the real knowledge has sound foundation and is a permanent possession.

The discussion about Socratic concept of knowledge can be concluded with best in the words of Barker. It is obvious that the stress laid by Socrates on the value of true knowledge had its affinities with the emphasis laid by sophists on the special knowledge they professed to impart. Not only had the sophists methodised subjects like rhetoric and offered to impart a technical knowledge of such subjects, they had made human conduct itself into an art, and professed to be able to give a special knowledge of that art which would result in practical ability and enable its possessors to manage states and families rightly. To the sophists therefore as to Socrates real virtue depended upon and consisted in special knowledge. nor can we say that the identification of virtue or goodness with knowledge is, in itself, a peculiarly Socratic doctrine. On the contrary, the sophists, professing as they did to teach goodness, were committed as deeply as Socrates to the proposition that goodness is knowledge.⁵

Plato was a disciple of Socrates and most of the fundamental ideas of Plato can be traced to Socrates. It would be an exaggeration if we say that Plato is the mouthpiece of Socrates in almost all his dialogues. It is true that Plato followed the dialectic method borrowed from his master Socrates. The purpose which leads him to prefer that form is the purpose which animated Socrates. Socrates had never attempted to instill knowledge, on the contrary, he had always disclaimed in possession. He desired to awaken thought. He was the gradfly who stung men into a sense of truth, he gave the shock of the torpedo fish, he practised the art of midwifery, and brought thought to birth. He appealed to what was in

man's own mind, and trusted it to respond to the appeal, he called to the intelligence of man, believing that would reply to the call. And so it was with Plato.⁶ In true sense and like a good student Plato preserved the form as well as the spirit of the method introduced by Socrates in his dialogues.

The great contribution of Plato in imparting knowledge is the use of analogy. Socrates has also used analogies drawn from the arts and such appear most prominently in Plato. Plato has borrowed three doctrines from his master — the theory of knowledge, the theory of reality and the theory that virtue is knowledge. But, we are concerned here only with the theory of knowledge. Socratic theory of knowledge is known as a doctrine of two knowledges — one is apparent and not real while other is real and permanent possession of mind. Socrates opined that it was the duty of all men to seek true knowledge and it is only possible if we know ourselves. Plato derives his theory of knowledge from Socrates. In opposition to these things, Socrates thought the need of an expert knowledge, based on first principle, for the conduct of political affairs. The germ of that doctrine of specialization which is propounded and expounded by Plato in detail in his book Republic.⁷ Plato identifies knowledge with virtue and says that both the terms are synonymous. We cannot think of knowledge without virtue or virtue without knowledge. Socrates had said that ignorance is the source of all vices. In the words of Foster, it can be said that the outstanding fact of Plato's intellectual development was his association as a young man with Socrates and from Socrates he derived what was always the controlling thought of his political philosophy - the idea that virtue is knowledge.⁸ Plato built up his entire structure of thought on the foundation stone of the Socratic dictum of knowledge.

In Plato, the theory of knowledge is allied with the concept of education. Education is the positive means by which the ruler can shape human nature in the right direction. Plato considers the state as the first and foremost educational institution. To Plato education is an attempt to cure a mental malady by mental medicines. Education is a social process and is intended to adjust the individual to his society. It is also the way to the vision of absolute truth. Education results in the training of the inward eye towards the light. Education is concerned with the reaction of the soul on its environment. In fact, the perfection of human experience is the curriculum and subject matter of education.

It is said that education is a social process by which the units of a society become instinct with social consciousness and learn to fulfil all social demands. Education is a right means of social righteousness and realization of truth and not of social success.⁹ For Plato, education improves the individual mind for becoming virtuous being. Platonic concept of education has two aspects- individual and social. The first makes an individual to realise knowledge, which enables him to turn the eyes of his soul to the inward reality and truth. It is the way to the vision of absolute truth. The second aspect of education paves the way for a social process by which the units of society become distinct with social consciousness.

To Plato education stands for the bringing of the soul into that environment which in each stage of its growth is best suited to its development. The problem of the education is to make proper surroundings and environment. Education is a lifelong matter. At one stage it seeks to tune the feelings and imagination of youth, as one would tune a lyre with many vibrating strings at another it seeks to guide by the discipline of science, the reasoning powers

which come with older years..... into the final purpose of human life and the world of human experience.¹⁰

Plato adopts a state controlled system of education for enhancing knowledge. He is quite opposed to the private system of education. The main aim of Platonic education is mental and physical development of education. He always thought of a healthy mind in a healthy body. The element of justice has got important place in his educational system. His division of education into primary and secondary is very scientific and psychological. The door of education is opened for all. He does not exclude anyone from obtaining knowledge. He does not accept bad literatures in his scheme as it influences in back gear. He has based his scheme on the recognition of the fact that soul acts like a living organism. Much stress has been given on a course of dialectics.

Plato has neglected the major parts of the population in his plan. His plan of education minimizes the influence of literature and exaggerates that of mathematics on mind. The place of literature has been ignored. In Plato's theory, there is certain wavering between the ideal of action and that of contemplation.¹¹

Plato laid emphasis on the theory of functional specialization. He was of the opinion that expert knowledge was essential for the conduct of public affairs and was influenced by his master Socrates.¹² To Plato, specialization is synonymous to unity everywhere. His theory of knowledge is also based on the theory of functional separation. It is a mistake to put too much stress upon the theory of three souls in his scheme.¹³ Plato's system of functional specialization concentrates on only one class and ignores the remaining bulk of the population.

Now, turning to Aristotle it can be said that he regarded himself as a scientist who would, more as a systematiser of existing knowledge than the creator of new thought or philosophy of knowledge. He believed in the experiences of ages and therefore, made history as one of the fundamental basis of his study. He was of the opinion that the experiences of the ages should not be neglected and discarded. He has respect for tradition. He followed the inductive method and this habit of mind was naturally accompanied by what may be termed as historic temper, a respect for tradition and a readiness to accept the verdict of general opinion.¹⁴ On the contrary, Plato has no faith in tradition or general opinion. He admonishes that we should not disregard the experience of ages in the multitude of years these things, if they were good, would certainly not have been unknown.¹⁵

Aristotle's approach to the problem was scientific. It is said that his procedure of knowledge was observation and registration of all relevant data, and the objective of his knowledge was in each case to discover some general theories. He collected the data for his study on a very systematic and scientific way. He was considered to be an encyclopaedia of knowledge. This is due to the particular fact that his conclusions are based on the data collected from observations. This is why he is regarded as the first pragmatist thinker.

Aristotle has classified sciences into three groups :

1. Theoretical Sciences : It deals with material unalterable by man and hence seek the truth.

2. Political Science : It include poetry, medicine and rhetoric.
3. Practical Sciences : The subject matters of this sciences discover a principle and try to bring external things in conformity with this principle.

According to Aristotle the character of the people depends upon their education and knowledge. The aim of education imparting knowledge is to cultivate moral, intellectual and physical excellence in an individual. It will enable the people to perform their duty property. In Aristotle's plan of education there are three main stages and the education system should be public and not private.¹⁶ Education is necessary for harmonious adjustment in the society. For the exercise of and faculty or art a precious training and habituation is required, clearly therefore for the practice of virtue.¹⁷

But, it is true that Aristotle has left the subject of knowledge unfinished and has given less importance to literature.

Rousseau has considered the Republic of Plato as the finest treatise on education that ever was written. Plato's conception of education is the outcome of the combination of Athenian and Spartan method and both of them were diametrically opposed to each other. Their methods of education depended upon the different condition and circumstances under which they were living. On the other hand, Plato advocated compulsory public education for each and every.

Aristotle is said to be the true copy of Plato. The ideas expressed by Plato as suggestions, allusion or illustration are taken up by Aristotle.¹⁸ Plato and Aristotle both have much in common. Both believed that the antidote lay in proper system of education imparting knowledge for a better way of living It is also accepted that both differ much more in the form and method than in the substance of thought.¹⁹ The causes of differences are that Plato is imaginative and synthetic, while Aristotle is an analytic.

Now, it may be concluded that like ancient Indian Grammarians Greek thinkers did not bother about the concept of language and meaning, but it is clear that in the city-states of Athens and Sparta a feeling of obtaining true and real knowledge with the foundation of psychological and social basis started in the minds of the people. One thing is important to be noted here that the dialects of Greek thinkers and Shruti parampara of ancient India have something common. As Pratisakhya prescribed the rules of Grammar, so Socrates and Plato invented the novel method of imparting knowledge.

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