

SOCRATES ON VIRTUE

SAHARA SULTANA
TDC Ist Yr. (Major)

Socrates was the author of philosophical tendencies and of a philosophic method. He never committed his opinions to writing. His method of philosophizing was purely conversational. Socratic teaching is essentially ethical in character. It was Socrates who had introduced the problem of man and the duties of man into Greek philosophy. He also turns his exclusive attention to these problems. He brushes aside all questions as to the origin of the world, or the nature of the ultimate reality as discussed by the earlier thinkers. Socrates openly deprecated such speculations and considered all such knowledge comparatively worthless as against ethical knowledge, the knowledge of man. However the ethical teaching of Socrates was based upon a theory of knowledge. According to him knowledge is based upon perception. Perception is that in which we are directly conscious of the presence of any particular thing, a man, a tree, or a star. Such consciousness is called perception. Thus all objective standards of truth had been destroyed. Socrates had founded knowledge upon reason and thereby to restore to truth its objectivity.

If virtue is knowledge through concepts which are given by reason then there will be universal knowledge. Virtue is the chief business of life. Virtue is the greatest good. These virtue must be universal, consistent and the same for all. This virtue must be equally binding on all if it were knowledge. Socrates thus identifies virtue with knowledge. Socrates believed that a man can not act rightly, unless he first knows what is right, unless, in fact, he knows the concept of right. Moral action is thus founded upon knowledge and must spring from it. But Socrates thought that if a man has no knowledge, he cannot do right. He also asserted that if a man possess knowledge, he cannot do any wrong. All wrong-doing arises from ignorance. If a man knows what is right, he must and will infallibly do what is right. All men seek the good but men differ as to what the good is. No man intentionally does wrong. He does wrong because he does not know the true concept of right, and being ignorant, he thinks that what he is doing is good. Again Socrates said that if a man intentionally does wrong, he is better than a man who does so unintentionally. For the former has in him the essential condition of goodness, knowledge of what goodness is but the latter lacks that knowledge.

Ordinarily we do not think that virtue depends upon a number of factors. The prominent among them are the inborn disposition of a man, heredity, environment, modified to some extent by education, practice and habit. The consequence is that a man's character does not change very much as he grows older. By constant practice, by continual self-control a man may to some extent, make himself better. But on the whole what he is, he remains. For Socrates, the sole condition of virtue is knowledge. As knowledge is just what can be imparted by teaching, it follows that virtue must be teachable. If virtue is knowledge certainly it can be taught, certainly it can be taught by one who knows what is virtue or the good. However, the difficulty is to find the teacher, to find some one who knows the concept of virtue. Question is where are the teacher of the concept of good. Socrates does not accept that the Sophists are the teachers of the good. Sophists believed in customary morality based on feeling and desires. Socrates himself says he knows that he does not know. Socrates by his assumed ignorance indirectly guide us towards the direction in which the seeker can have the kind of knowledge of the concept of virtue. Socrates thought that the knowledge of the concept of virtue is a precious piece of knowledge which no philosopher has ever discovered. If it were only discovered it could not at once be imparted by teaching where upon men would at once become virtuous. There are two sides of the Socratic teaching. In the first place, there is the doctrine of knowledge, that all the knowledge is through concepts. This is the scientific side of the philosophy of Socrates. Secondly, there is his ethical teaching. His ethical ideas were tainted with the fallacy that men are governed only by reason. The essential position of Socrates is that of a restorer of faith. Socrates opposed the doctrine that knowledge is through perception. To base knowledge upon concept is to base it upon the universality of reason, and therefore to restore it from the position of a subjective seeming to that of an objective reality.

The real concept is always a matter of recollection of and by meditation on the idea of the virtue of the good. In this way we can get a glimpse of the good. According to others, Socrates' virtue is one. The knowledge to which Socrates points out is not mere intellectual achievement. It is the kind of knowledge which controls the will and necessarily issues in action. For Socrates the idea of the good controls all other ideas and ultimately guides the whole men. It necessarily issues into virtue acts. Hence it lies in the culture of the soul which leads the soul in virtuous men towards regaining its pure glory. □