


Ethics
Professor Dr. Sreekumar Nellickappily
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology Madras
Module No 1
Lecture 05
Socrates's Encounter with the Ethical


Welcome to this lecture series in ethics. This is the 5th lecture and this lecture will focus on some of the contributions of Socrates. So this is in continuation with what we have been doing because we have we were discussing the contribution to ethics by ancient great thinkers. And this is a very interesting phase in the history of philosophy and also the history of ethics because Socrates's encounter with the ethical, the question of the ethical or the ethical problematic is so central to the philosophical discourse of ancient Europe and also Western philosophy as such.

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Socrates: The First Moralist



- Brought moral concerns to the center of philosophical discourse.
- The idea of good is the *summum bonum*.
- Engaged in a ceaseless enquiry.


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So we can call Socrates arguably the 1st moralist. Not because moral concerns were not released by any other philosophers for him but the way in which he has discussed them, the way in which he has brought them to the forefront of philosophical discourse because for him philosophy was in a sense moral philosophy because the question of ethics was very central to his philosophy. So in one sense we can say that he is the one moral concerns to the centre of philosophical discourse because for him the idea of the good was the *summum bonum*.

That was the highest reality in Socrates's scheme of things. So in that sense, he is very important. But there are certain other reasons why he is important. We all know that you know, any student of philosophy would be learning Socrates as a very important thinker in all history of Western philosophy. And everyone develops a kind of passion in understanding Socrates philosophy because his method is so attractive and his method also has several faces, several aspect of that.

By employing a unique method in philosophy, Socrates was trying to discuss something. He was enquiring and trying to find it out but his philosophy and his method is interesting for us not because what he discovered, what he found but the way in which he has approached philosophy and the kind of achievements he made by approaching philosophy in that fashion and the way in which still continues to influence and also even today, the contemporary philosophers are influenced by Socrates a lot.

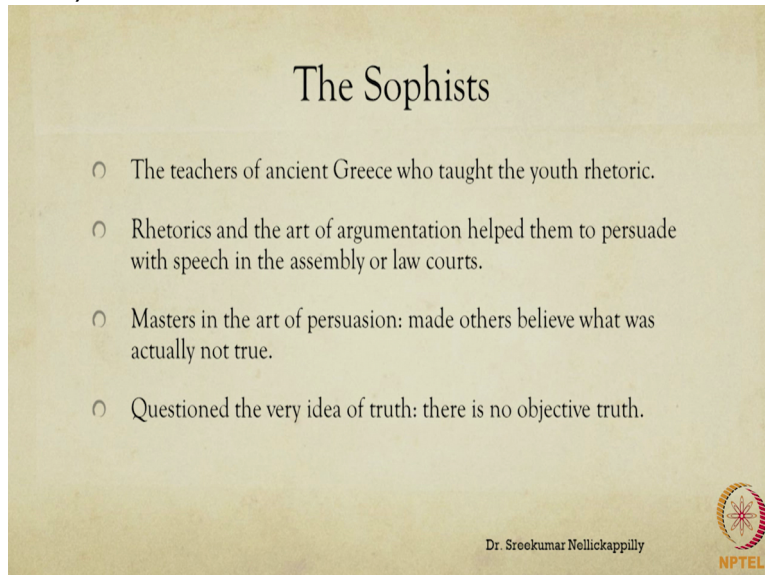
So in that sense, he is very important. So, more than what he has discovered, his approach, that is very important because he is the one who has told us that I do not know anything and that makes me, the very awareness of the fact that I do not know anything makes me the greatest, wise the wisest among all the Greeks. The famous story of the Oracle of the delphi which proclaims that Socrates is the wisest among all the Greeks and Socrates simply said that yes, I might be the wisest because I am the only one who knows that I do not know anything.

So he never claimed that he had any superior knowledge about morality like many others. He never taught or he never lectured like a professor to be knowing many things than his disciples or he never treated this partners as his disciples or his followers or anything. He had several followers, he had several disciples like Plato and many others but for him, all of them were partners, partners in a great enquiry, an enquiry to understand reality and truth.

And in that scheme of things, the idea of good acquires a major role or a central position. So that is what makes Socrates a very important thinker in the whole history of modern philosophy for us. And he was engaged in a ceaseless enquiry and his dialogues, see the one problem we have today is that we do not know anything about this philosophy directly because he has not written any books. So almost all that we know about his philosophy have come down from Plato.

So there is a lot of controversy whether this is actual Socrates or the historical Socrates or it is just a mouthpiece of Plato, all such, let us set aside, let us not take into account such controversies very seriously. Let us for the time being try to understand Socrates as a philosopher who propagated or who advocated several I do not want to say philosophical position but certain philosophical approaches which he considered which he thought was very important.


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The Sophists

- The teachers of ancient Greece who taught the youth rhetoric.
- Rhetorics and the art of argumentation helped them to persuade with speech in the assembly or law courts.
- Masters in the art of persuasion: made others believe what was actually not true.
- Questioned the very idea of truth: there is no objective truth.

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Now, to understand Socrates's philosophy, we have to really place it in a situation and the situation is historical which we have already mentioned that the history of the creek, the ancient Greek. At the time of Socrates, there were several city states out of which Athens was one of the prominent city states which practised democracy and in a democracy like Athens, something the youngsters naturally preferred to one of the preferred options, career options for the youngsters were statesmen, to become the statesman, political, domain of the political always attracted the youngsters during those days.

So they needed the kind of skills to persuade people about their views and to argue with others and win the public argument. So certain skills are required for all this and the place where such skills were taught were in high demand or the people who taught that skills were in high demand in ancient Greeks. And there were of course set of such people, a set of such teachers who taught that and Sophists precisely did it, they precisely fit this requirement.

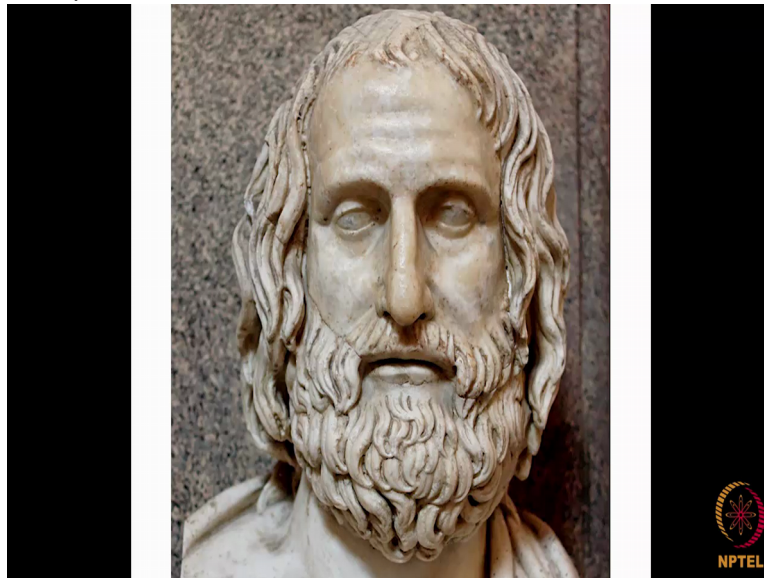
The teachers of ancient Greece, Sophists who taught the youth rhetoric and rhetorics and the art of argumentation helped the youth to persuade with speech in the assembly or law courts in those days, particularly in Athens in the democracy where democracy was a political order. And the Sophists were the masters in the art of persuasion. They made others believe what was actually not true.

So this was a very interesting aspect of rhetorics because one way in which you could practice is the way in which Sophists did it where you can actually argue a case regardless of whether it is true or false. Whatever it is, merely by using words, by rhetorics, they could prove that what they say is true. So which ultimately means that there is nothing called truth, absolute truth. And they also advocated that view, there is nothing called absolute truth.

But every truth is nothing but a conventional. So we are coming to that. The very idea of truth, there is no objective truth. So if there is no objective truth, there cannot be any objective knowledge, any absolute objective knowledge and if there is no objective knowledge, there cannot be anything which is objectively right or objectively good. So moral knowledge has no foundations. Or rather to put it another words, there is nothing called moral knowledge or ethical knowledge.

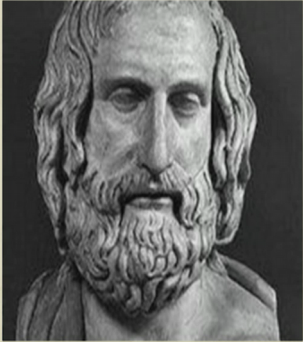
Every knowledge is what? Nothing but customary, conventional. A set of people would believe it on a particular period of time and they might change their beliefs later. So it is purely conventional. This is what they always believed.

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Sophists' Challenge to Morality

- **Protagoras:** moral ideas are a matter of convention.
- Nature Vs. convention.
- Every society needs a set of moral conventions for pragmatic reasons.
- No convention is a permanent foundation for erecting objective moral ideas.
- Conventions are simply shared by the members of a society.



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And this man, Protagoras who is a phenomenal figure among this moment, was the one who was credited for inventing this saying, and is the measure of all things which in a very beautiful way summarises the whole philosophy of the Sophists. It basically says that the individual man, not men, man, the individual man is the measure of all things. So there are no universal measures. There are no objective transcendental measures but everything is measured by or the standard is provided by the man who measures it.

So there are, since there are different men, there would be eventually different measures. So you cannot say that there is anything called absolute truth on anything. So no absolute moral facts are

available. Now, this is Protagoras and what he says is that moral ideas are a matter of convention. So this is probably the central thesis of the Sophists. Sophism is not a school of thought like rationalism or (())(9:08).

And it is not that you know all the Sophists agreed upon certain very central doctrines to which they all subscribed to, there is nothing like that because there are various types of Sophists and their views also differed from one another, not that they have contradicted completely but most of them agreed to the fact that moral ideas are a matter of convention. Now, what is the consequence of this statement or what is the consequence of this Convention?

They vary. There are several ways in which this can be understood. If moral ideas are convention, then they have no foundation, they are not truth but they have no knowledge associate it with that. If that is the case, then what is their value? How do you associate value to something? That is the question. Whether you can call something valuable if it has no foundation, if it has no truth, if it has no not a subject matter of objective knowledge.

Because Sophists say that yes, still it is valuable. In group of people say that still is valuable, another group will say that no, it is absolutely valueless. If everything is conventional, then what value can you associate with that? And yet another group might try to find a bridge between these 2 apparently extreme views but all of them seem to be arguing that they are matter of convention. So the conventional aspect of knowledge, the conventional aspect of truth and the conventional aspect of moral ideas.

So here they brings out the kind of conflict between nature and convention, nature vs convention. If something is natural that it has some foundation because you know if somebody asks me about what is the basis of your moral ideas, I can always say that it is naturalism. What I feel, my nature, human nature, there is something in human nature. What is that something in human nature? There are several inclinations, several passions, several emotions, several instincts.

So I can very well base my moral ideas or I can consider these instincts and passions and emotions as foundations of my moral theory or moral ideas or moral perspectives. On the other hand, convention, conventionalist has no basis because what is convention today is not a

convention tomorrow and what is convention here is not a convention elsewhere. So absolutely foundation less.

So this is a kind of interesting contradiction or conflict they bring forward and every society now, what do these moral ideas serve in a society? So what they say is that every society needs a set of moral conventions for pragmatic reasons, for the society to run, do you know that is certain things. Otherwise there will not be social existence, there will be total chaos, people will be fighting with each other. To avoid chaos, you need some sort of an order to be established.

Not because that order is anything transcendental or foundational or absolute in any sense but only because of pragmatic reasons. And no convention is a permanent foundation for erecting objective moral ideas. So this is where you often we confuse. Say when we say that moral foundations are their basis on the commandments of God or scriptures then we are trying to cement them, we are trying to find found them sponsored the historical transcendental foundation.

And we are saying that these foundations are always true, absolutely true. They cannot be false under any circumstances. In any context, they cannot be false but that is not the case. Here they argue that they are conventional and again conventions are simply shared by the members of society, another set of conventions might be shared by the members of another society but may not be valid here.

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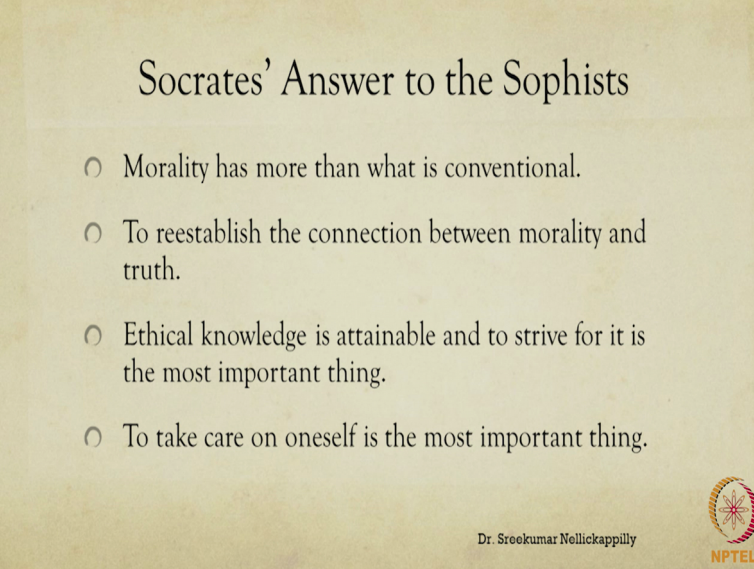
So this is one aspect which they bring out and here, this is the impact of the by moral conventionalism which is propagated by the Sophists. So morality is conventional can be, you can see it. On the left-hand side, you will see that society needs moral conventions but conventions cannot have a claim to truth. Since they are conventional, they have no claim and also if they have no truth claim, would then one can reject them.

Nothing will happen if one rejects them. Then what is right is right for a particular society. And here, we can also come from that than live according to nature and not according to conventions. There is something more attractive you may find in this kind of a proposition. Why if there is nothing foundational in conventions? Then live according to nature, follow your nature. So if that is the case, then ultimately this would be the conclusion, 1st through one's own self-interest. So you have to basically pursue or follow your own self-interest.

What is true for you is true for you because it suits you, it suits your purposes and your interests are being served. Now, it is in this context we will find Socrates getting into an argument with a Sophist. In many of his dialogues, Socrates encounters the Sophists, many of them in different dialogues prominently in the Republic of course because that is one dialogue in which he actually raises the question of justice.

The central concern of the dialogue, Republic is the question of justice and the whole notion of justice is apparently released from a very broad perspective by Socrates here because his idea is to understand the concept of an ideal nation, how it works and the need for founding such a concept on the idea of justice which is transcendentally true, which is absolutely true. And then there are various other dialogues of Plato where he raises this problem and where he encounters the Sophists.


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Socrates' Answer to the Sophists

- Morality has more than what is conventional.
- To reestablish the connection between morality and truth.
- Ethical knowledge is attainable and to strive for it is the most important thing.
- To take care on oneself is the most important thing.

Dr. Sroekumar Nellickappilly



Morality has more than what is conventional. This seems to be the basic idea of Socrates. Morality has more than is conventional. Again, he was trying to do is to re-establish the connection between morality and truth. See, one thing which as I mentioned, the Sophists have denied or completely rejected is the connection in morality and truth. There is no connection, there are no more truths, there are no moral knowledge.

This is what the Sophists would argue. But here, Socrates is trying to really establish that connection. So once you do that, once established that there is a inherent link between morality and truth, then you can also link morality with knowledge and once you have done that, if you have that knowledge, then you can be practising it without any mistakes, committing any mistakes. Ethical knowledge is attainable and to strive for it is the most important thing in life.

See, this seems to be the Socratic mission in a nutshell that ethical knowledge is attainable because there is an important link between truth and morality. The idea of good and morality are inherently connected. Since they are inherently connected, the knowledge about the good is attainable. Once you attain that knowledge, then it ultimately is going to help you. The person who has knowledge will be benefited and also that person can serve the society in a better way because he knows what the truth is.

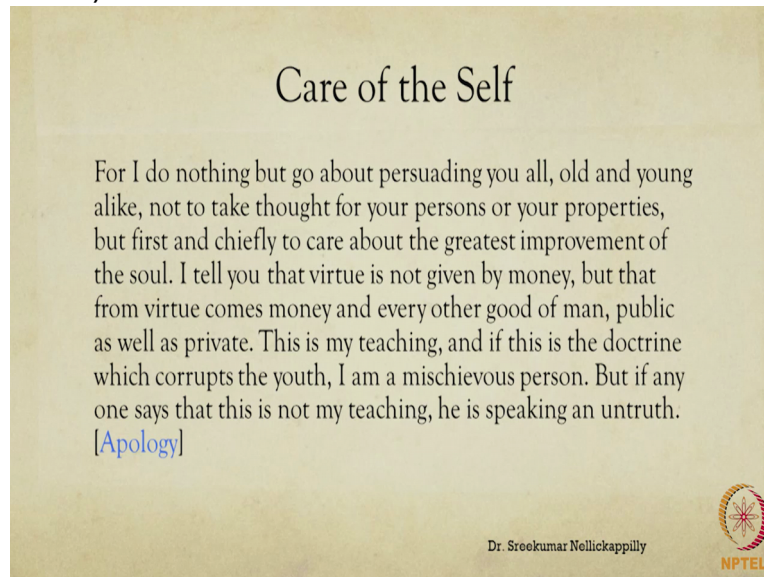
So it is here we have to see the connection which Socrates tries to establish in Republic. And also the notion of virtues which we have seen earlier, Socrates was discussing and in general, the the Greek civilisation was considering, the 4 cardinal virtues which we have already seen, the virtues of wisdom, courage, temperance and justice. So at the state level, the just state or the nation, the just nation is the best nation.

And at the individual level, what is important is to contribute to the Justice to the state so that everyone would be benefiting. How do you do that? Through your virtues. And each person be having different virtues out of which one of them would be dominant. So, there are people among whom wisdom would be dominating. They are the guardians, they are the philosophers according to Republic.

The philosophers according to Plato who are wise men would have to rule the country and since they rule the country, they have perfect vision about what is just, they can rule the country in a better way. They can keep the proper direction to the state and then to have other virtues like courage and moderation and temperance and all that which would help individuals to again contribute to social welfare and as well as to benefit themselves.

So basically virtues would benefit the society as well as benefit oneself. So we are really going in that direction. This is what Socrates was trying to argue. There is moral knowledge and morality and truth are connected and there is ethical knowledge which is attainable and once you attain that, the result will be Eudaimonia or rather the welfare, the benefit of the agent. To take care of oneself is the most important thing in the Socratic scheme of things. To just highlight this aspect, I will just read out a quote from Socrates's apology.

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This is where the trial of Socrates is presented by Plato and where he says, I quote. Socrates argues or Socrates rather says that, this is what he says. For I do nothing but go about persuading you all, old and young alike, not to take thought for your persons or your properties, but first and chiefly to care about the greatest improvement of the soul. I tell you that virtue is not given my money, but that from virtue comes money and every other good of man, public as well as private. This is my teaching, and if this is the the doctrine which corrupts the youth, I am a mischievous person. But if anyone says that this is not my teaching, he is speaking an untruth. Unquote.

He says that my teaching is to tell people, it is from virtue comes money and every other good of man, public as well as private. So they are all goods, they are all virtues. In one since you know money, fame, everything is good but they acquire or rather the status of good can be attributed to them only if they are accompanied by virtues. If possessed by a person who is not virtuos, these virtues, these goods seem to be dangerous for society and also for oneself.

This is what he was arguing. And again, we should not miss this point that not to take thought of your persons or properties but first and chiefly to care about the greatest improvement of your soul. So this is what is called the care of the soul. So Socrates wants everyone to care for the greatest improvement of one's own soul. What do you mean by this greatest improvement of one's own soul? That is nothing but Eudaimonia.

That is Eudaimonia, precisely what is Eudaimonia in the Socratic scheme of things. And this can be attained only by the possession of real knowledge about truth and what is that truth? It is equated with morality, it is equated with goodness. So truth and goodness are identical and once you know that ultimate truth, you also have the perfect knowledge about reality which would also make you obviously a happy man.

Then you would realise that there is nothing to crave for. You have actually attained what you were craving and what was that craving? The greatest improvement of your own soul. That you have attained. So Eudaimonia is at it. And Sophists and the question of justice as I already mentioned, has 3 viewpoints we can just summarise. This is narrated by Plato's Republic.


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Sophists and the Question of Justice:
Three Viewpoints

*As narrated by Plato in his *The Republic*.*

1. **Cephalus and his son Polemarchus:** advocates conventionalism – justice as convention
2. **Thrasymachus:** justice is invented by the mighty to rule over others and hence we need to defy it and pursue our own interest.
3. **Glaucon:** justice is a convention as we cannot do injustice on others—which is good for our self-interest—and escape retaliation.

Dr. Sreekumar Nellickappilly



These Sophists, says Cephalus and his son, Polemarchus they advocate kind of conventionalism, justice as convention. Again Thrasymachus says that justice would des invented by the mighty to rule over others and hence we need to defy it and pursue our own interest. So we can see that you know, though the 2nd one does not contradict the 1st one, it actually extends the implication of the 1st one.

Since it is conventional, Thrasymachus also seems to be agreeing with Cephalus and others that justice or morality is conventional but then he says that the (())(23:15) of historical purpose for which this is invented by human societies, they are invented by the strong, the mighty to rule

over others. And it becomes then our responsibility also defy it and pursue our own interest. Actually what is good according to Thrasymachus is to pursue one's own interest, self-interest.

Pursuing self-interest is a good, no doubt in that. Then you know, as the previous pictures I have already mentioned, they know that it is not always possible to do that that pursuing one's own self-interest and not being retaliated by others, of course my self-interest consists in harming others often but I would not definitely gain by harming others on such circumstances. But I may not be able to always get away with easily.

There might be retaliations. So since it is impossible for me to get away with in all circumstances, I have to basically come to an agreement with others that that I will not harm you, you will also not harm me. That is justice. So it is a convention. It is a kind of you call, convenience. It is never the best alternative. The best alternative is always to pursue one's own self-interest. Possibly that might harm others but still.

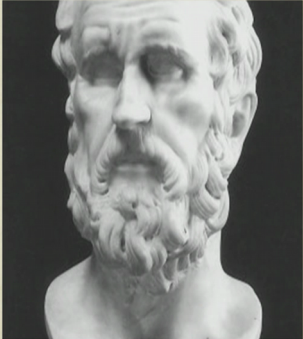
And that 3rd one is Glaucon's view which says that justice is a convention as we cannot do injustice on others which is good for our self interest and escape retaliation. This is what precisely as I mentioned now Socrates was trying to counter all these views one by one but before that, this view demands a little more attention.

Thrasymachus's view, might makes right. He says that justice is the interest of the stronger. So all the rules and conventions and norms which a society might be having are devised by the strong, by the mighty in order to protect, in order to serve their purposes, their interests. So this is what they have done. Historically, that has been the case.


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Might Makes Right

- **Thrasymachus:** justice is the interest of the stronger.
- Appears in the first book of Plato's *Republic*.
- Critique of moral values: they are socially constructed.



Dr. Srookumar Nellickappilly



Again Thrasymachus as a character appears in the 1st book of Plato's *Republic* where he appears as a person who would be critiquing or values: they are socially constructed. All moral values are socially constructed. And interesting aspect of Thrasymachus's argument is that he also brings in the power relationship involved in the construction of justice, which is very valid even today. We understand that the idea of justice is built upon certain, taken for granted sometimes, power relations that exist in the society.


And he also points to the fact that it is very important for us to question them, these power relations. Naturally, if you question the idea of justice, you will have to question the power relations that exist in the society which is not always very easy.

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The Socratic Response by Plato

- Conventional justice is not antithetical to human nature as the Sophists thought: **It is grounded in human nature**
- Conventional justice is not antithetical to personal benefit: **the life of justice is the happiest life.**
- There are objective ethical truths and **there are good reasons for living the life of justice.**

Dr. Srookumar Nellickappilly



So the Socratic response is that conventional justice is not antithetical to human nature as the Sophists thought. It is grounded in human nature. This is what the Socrates in Republic, Plato's Socrates does. He responds to the Sophists. He says that the very problem the Sophists had was it is conventional. But he says that that is fine. Conventional justice is not always antithetical to human nature.

It is grounded in human nature. So he makes it just upside down. Again, conventional justice is not antithetical personal benefit: the life of justice is the happiest life. You can always show this because once you pursue justice then it will be followed by happiness. This is precisely the thesis of Socrates. Then again, there are objective ethical truths and there are good reasons for living a life of justice which again was denied by the Sophists.


Socrates argued that there are objective ethical truths and since they are there, it is worth pursuing to know them. And once you know them, you are the happiest person, Eudaimonia. So everything is interlinked in the Socratic scheme of things. So it is in this sense we can say that morality, knowledge and happiness are interlinked.

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Morality, Knowledge and Happiness

- To establish the connection between them.
- All the virtues are the same: knowledge of the good.
- Knowledge of the good is also knowledge of what is morally right, and knowledge of one's own welfare or happiness (*eudaimonia*).
- Once we know what promotes our own good, we will act on our knowledge.
- This knowledge of the good, which is also virtue, is sufficient for happiness.

Dr. Srookumar Nellickappilly



So Socrates established the connection between them. All the virtues of the same: knowledge of the good. And then knowledge of the good is also knowledge of what morally is right and knowledge of one's own welfare or happiness which is Eudaimonia which I just pointed out. So there is a link between these 3, knowledge of good, knowledge of what is morally right and knowledge of one's own happiness or welfare are inherently interconnected.

Once we know what promotes our own good, we will act on our knowledge. Naturally, it was justifiably for Socrates, Socrates always thought that it is quite justifiable to pursue one's own good, one's own benefit. Nothing wrong in it. And everyone, that is what I said in the previous slide I mentioned, greatest improvement of the soul. It is not that one should pursue one's own good through a blind pursuance of self-interest, money or fame or something like that.

But rather the greatest improvement of those soul is the greatest benefit one can gain in life and once we know what promotes about own good, that is the greatest movement of the soul. In what does that improvement consist in, once we know that, we will act on that knowledge. Again, this knowledge of the good which is also virtue, is sufficient for happiness. It is not just necessary, it is also sufficient.

We do not need anything more in order to be happy. So this is the kind of conclusion which Socrates arrives at at this juncture. Of course, there are other questions. What is that all? All

those questions are there. But at this point of time, this is where he stops. He says that knowledge of the good is also the virtue and it is sufficient for happiness. If that is done, happiness is also or Eudaimonia is also guaranteed. We will stop this lecture here with this remark and we will meet and continue our discussions in the coming lectures. For the time being, thank you, bye.