

Status of Knowledge in Early Greek Philosophy

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Abstract—This paper intends to analyze the status of knowledge in the early Greek philosophy by bringing in the epistemological concept of Heraclitus, Plato, and Aristotle. It will also highlight their contribution in the field of epistemology. Knowledge being a growing phenomenon, this paper will examine the growth and development of knowledge. From the beginning of its evolution, mankind has been under the influence of myths and is content with the explanation that myths offered them. However, man being inquisitive by nature, began to reason myths and as such contradiction came into its believe system. My attempt in this paper is to show how transition of knowledge takes place from myths to logos and from logos to dialogue. And thereby examine how Heraclitus, Plato and Aristotle played a significant figure in pioneering the development of knowledge and highlight each of these philosophers' idea of knowledge.

Keywords: Epistemology, Logos, Myths, Dialogue, Dialectics.

Knowledge has been one of the major concerns in philosophy and that each philosopher has something to say about knowledge. To begin with, I would like to pose question – what is knowledge? What can be called knowledge? Knowledge, as pointed out by Plato in the *Republic*, is not the same as belief or opinion. Knowledge does not imply belief or opinion but it represents cognitive awareness. Knowledge can also be defined as justified true belief. It can be assumed that the criteria for something to be called knowledge must have truth content and must be actually true. According to Plato's *Republic*, knowledge must always be true irrespective of time and space. For Socrates 'virtue is knowledge'; virtue is of justice, courage, wisdom etc. The concept of virtue that we have within us is knowledge and this knowledge according to Socrates is not derived from ordinary observation. Aristotle held that all men desire understanding and that understanding being the issue of experience is knowledge. Knowledge is always in the line of progressing along with the development of human civilization and it moves from less perfect to more perfect. Since knowledge is a growing phenomenon, it is important to examine the transition of knowledge from myths to logos.

From Myths to Logos

Before epistemology as the field of study came into being, myths were prevailing among the human kind for about 2000 years. Myths are a kind of stories in which people believe since it can interpret and explain something about the creation

of the universe, creation of man, creation of the heavenly bodies, partition of day and night etc. Myths in some way meet the psychological needs of man and thus satisfy them. Myths pervades until the time when the ancient Greek started to reason myths and seek for the truth and validity of it. The discovery that 'the unexamined life is not livable by man' was the beginning of the intellectual adventure of the West, and it was the Greeks who made that discovery [1]. This line of Socrates was a break of the dawn that paves a way for a new kind of life. Prior to this breakthrough, the barbarian and the non-Greeks were content to live by traditions and customs. It was the Greeks who questioned myths, traditions and customs. This was the earliest sign of the movement from myths to logos in the scope of knowledge.

The word *logos* used in the time of Heraclitus was polysemantic i.e. covered a broad range of notion which was closely linked in the Greek's mind. *Logos* can mean word, speech, story, narration, argument, teaching, count, calculation, relationship, proportion, etc [2(1)]. The philosophical meaning of *logos* as used by Heraclitus can best be expressed by the word 'law' understood as an inner essential connections of things and phenomenon. Basically, *logos* for Heraclitus, is the law underlying the world process and this law is change and that change is the reality. Everything is in the flux of change; nothing is permanent in this world. Heraclitus stated that although this *logos* exists forever, men cannot understand the law before hearing it and even when they hear it for the first time. Man is still ignorant of the existing law in nature though all things come into being in accordance with this law. Here, Heraclitus asserts that man keeps on thinking that he possesses the absolute truth while he is under the veil of his own assumption. According to him, *logos* speak to man revealing itself in words and deeds and it is also perceived by senses and comprehended by the mind. However man is incapable of seeing this *logos* in their daily mundane life and feel strange when things change. Man tends to be comfortable with the notion of permanent despite the fact that everything undergoes change.

Heraclitus usage of *logos* is intelligence by which man has rationality to see the reality of change which is the law underlying the world process. *Logos* provide the link between rational discourse and the world's rational structure. Heraclitus started with a move from the actual reality to the

world of words. The law of order in nature is change and that change is the reality of all things. This reality has to be realized by us through reason so that we can really see things as they are. Hence, myths have no significant role like before since men are led to see the reality by *logos*.

From *Logos* To Dialogue

Dialogue derived from 'dai' which means 'two' and '*logos*' stands for word. Socrates used the method of dialogue, which consists of two different parties of different opinion, for extracting knowledge by engaging in an intellectual debate. The conversational method of Socrates took the form, known as 'dialectic'.

According to Socrates, dialectic method has two meanings: first as the ability to ask and answer questions which is widely represented in his dialogue, second as the ability to divide concept according to their kind and embrace each one under a single idea [2(2)]. This method is the most effective means for acquiring knowledge which prevail during the ancient time especially among the Greeks.

In examining the transition of *logos* to dialogue, it is necessary to bring in Socrates' contribution to knowledge. Socrates' prime concern was to attain the true knowledge which is distinct from mere opinion. He maintained that sense perception could not give genuine knowledge. True knowledge, according to him, is innate in us and by reasoning one can recollect what one already has. He held that sense perception is incapable of leading us to true knowledge of virtue. In other sense, he use dialectic method to reason on man's morality that draw the attention of the Athenian when he proposed the use of reason to decide on moral question. Thus, Socrates seems to claim that the standard by which we judge the empirical things in the world to have certain features evidently is not derived from the observation through our senses but by the recollection. For instance, we have the idea of absolute justice, equality etc and thus try to measure or judge things according to the absolute standard of justice.

The objective of Socrates is to arrive at the explicit knowledge of the absolute idea of virtue which is universal and true at all time. From Socrates, It can be observed that knowledge is more develop from less perfect to more perfect.

Plato

Plato indeed is one of the significant figures in the field of knowledge and his contribution to knowledge has an immense impact to many philosophers. Knowledge, according to Plato in *Republic* is distinct from opinion. Plato asserted that knowledge is not "...opinion and must have different correlates corresponding to their difference of faculty (*Republic* 477 b)" [3(2)]. In *Republic*, he proposed that our mental state of knowledge and opinion can be further divided into four sub division [3(3)]. Knowledge (*episteme*) comprises of – (a) Intelligence and (b) Reason which are in the intelligible realm and it is in this realm that we can access to

the world of Forms. Opinion (*doxas*) consist of – (a) Belief and (b) Illusion which are in the visible realm and it is in this realm that we have image or shadow of the physical objects. Intelligence or understanding being place at the highest level is the place where one can grasp the Forms.

Plato believes that the reality of all empirical objects is in the Forms, apart from Forms nothing is real and that all physical things are mere copies of Forms. He stated that, "Not only do the Forms exist in the fullest possible sense they have a greater degree of reality than things in the world" [4(1)]. He further pointed out that, empirical objects are what they are because of their participation in the Forms, whereas forms do not depend on anything outside of themselves for their existence. He regards this empirical world as a mere illusion. He implied that we are most of the time under an illusion and fail to recognize that empirical objects are shadows of the Forms and that we are confine to our experience of the empirical world not knowing that knowledge involves a kind of understanding which does not rely on empirical things but on the Forms. Our confinement on empirical experience is like those prisoners trapped in the famous cave, whose content are at best dim copies of the Forms (*Republic* 514ff) [4(2)]. According to him, we need to make a journey out of the cave and learn to experience things as they really are; only then can we have a genuine knowledge.

For Plato, the world of everyday percept is imperfect and is constantly changing but the world of Forms is perfect and unchanging. Forms can't be perceived with our senses; it is only by means of reasoning and understanding can one experience the Forms. In *Theaetetus*, he has given a series of argument against the identification of perception as knowledge. Perception is due to an interaction between the object and sense organ, both of which according to the doctrine of Heraclitus are always changing that both of which, in changing change the percepts [5(1)]. Socrates remarks that when he is well the wine taste sweet but when ill it taste bitter. Here it is the change in the percipient that causes the change in the percept. All these are the objection to the doctrine of Protogoras that each man is the measure of all things and only indirectly to the doctrine that knowledge means perception [5(2)]. Some of our knowledge is not connected with any of the sense organs like concept of horseness, humanity etc, they are perceived by our understanding and reason. Therefore knowledge of Forms consists in reflection, not in impression and this clearly indicates that perception is not knowledge.

Plato also believes in the immortality of the soul and he claimed that knowledge resides in our soul. According to him in *Republic*, there are three parts of soul: (a) Soul which has wisdom can be identified with reason. He compared this part of the soul to the ruler who has the wisdom to rule the people, (b) Soul which has courage can be identified with the soldier who has the courage to fight for the welfare, (c) Soul which has tolerance or temperance can also be referred to appetite [3(1)]. He compares this part of the soul with the common

people who are tolerating those who are above them. All the three parts of soul are immortal because ideas don't die. For Plato, all knowledge lives in the soul therefore knowledge is eternal. In *Republic*, he mentioned that "...the same souls have always existed. Their number cannot be decreased, because no soul can die, nor it can increase; any increase in the immortal must be at the expense of mortality, and if that were possible, everything would in the end be immortal (611a)" [3(4)]. Man inherent notions of beauty, goodness, justice etc which cannot be acquired through sense perception testifies the fact that learning is nothing but the recollection of what the soul knows in the previous birth. Therefore, acquisition of true knowledge according to Plato is the recollection of what has been already learned.

Summary on Plato

Plato's contribution to knowledge has been a great stepping stone to many philosophers. His theory of Forms along with the divided line and the allegory of cave and the immortality of the soul has been a remarkable breakthrough in the history of ancient philosophy which leaves an open ground for the movement of knowledge. In the doctrine of Forms, Plato emphasizes on knowledge as opposed to opinion. The sources of knowledge are reason and understanding which has nothing to do with the empirical world. It is in the intelligible realm that one can get access to Forms which according to Plato is real since it is eternal and unchangeable. All the empirical objects are mere copies of the Form; they are in the realm of visible world of which belief and illusion are the source of opinion. Plato wants us to come out from our experience of the empirical world of illusion to the world of ideas and take hold of the real in itself. Where this true knowledge does reside? Knowledge resides in our soul. Since man's soul is immortal it has the capacity to retain what it had already learned in the previous birth. All these doctrines of Plato's are great contributions to the development of knowledge which he acquired by the dialectic method.

Aristotle

Though Plato was more elaborate and systematic than Heraclitus in the field of epistemology he was less inadequate in comparison to Aristotle. Shortcomings in Plato's philosophy as pointed out by Aristotle can be summarized as follows:

- 1) When Plato claimed that we have universal ideas on the basis of material things like horseness, humanity, cowness etc, Aristotle pointed out the inadequacy of pure Form. According to Aristotle whenever we encounter things in the world we encounter them as Matter and Form. Though Matter and Form are inseparable in real, we can make the distinction logically.
- 2) According to Aristotle, since there is a distinction between Matter and Form but not separation, there is also a distinction between reason and sensibility as well as in knowledge and opinion. Reason gives the Form and

sensibility gives the Matter. In Plato there is a distinction of knowledge and opinion where opinion are mere copies of knowledge but in Aristotle though there is a distinction between Matter and Form they exist together.

- 3) In Plato's philosophy, universal and particular did not participate together which is inadequate whereas in Aristotle's view, we see universal and particular participating together.
- 4) Though Plato talks about the subject of knowledge, he did not talk about propositional knowledge which is necessary for Aristotle to acquire the pure form of knowledge.
- 5) Plato's philosophy has concepts or ideas in an obscure way and he did not have categories. And also there is no law of logic. For Aristotle categories are means of knowledge which is needed for distinction of ideas in a precise way.

Epistemologically the role of categories is very important in Aristotle's philosophy which is required for obtaining a precise form of knowledge. Aristotle has given ten categories (1b 25-28-14), such as 'uncombined utterances which denote uncombined ideas necessarily denote one of the ten things – either substance, or quantity, or quality, or relation, or where, or when, or position, or to have, or doing, or being acted upon' [6]. These categories are supposed to be one of the means for acquiring propositional knowledge in a specific form. The subject of properties is the primary substance and is distinct from all the other properties which are called secondary substance. But apart from the properties, the substance has no existence of its own. Substance in fact is merely a convenient way of collecting events into bundles [5(5)]. For instance, what can we know about Socrates? When we look at him we see patterns of color; when we listen to him we hear a series of sounds. It can be assumed that he too must have thought and feelings. But what is Socrates apart from these occurrences? We see that Socrates is a collective name for a number of occurrences. Thus, from the given illustrations, it can be observed that Aristotle is more elaborate and systematic than Plato. Aristotle moves on from propositional knowledge of categories to the law of logic which undoubtedly is a great significance for epistemology. The relations between propositions (judgments) are determined by the principle or law of thinking. Aristotle has given three laws of logic: (a) law of identity, according to which every concept must be used in reasoning in the reasoning ($A=A$); (b) law of non-contradiction, according to which two propositions negating each other cannot be simultaneously true ($A \neq \text{non} - A$) and (c) the law of excluded middle term, according to which either A or $\text{non} - A$ is true and no middle is possible [2(3)]. The discovery of this law of logic has an immense impact in the field of knowledge which enhances the thinking level from obscure form to more accurate form of knowledge.

Aristotle also brings in the doctrine of Matter and Form to describe the empirical objects. Taking an example of Aristotle, "if a man makes a bronze sphere, bronze is the matter and the

sphericity is the form; in case of a calm sea, water is the matter and the smoothness is the form”[5(3)]. He further stated that it is in virtue of the Form that the Matter in some way can be called a ‘thing’. For a Matter to be called a thing it has to be in some way bounded and that the boundary constitutes a ‘thing’. For instance, water when separated in a bottle becomes a ‘thing’ otherwise It cannot be called a ‘thing’ when left in a homogeneous mass. Similarly, Aristotle maintained that, the soul is the form of the body. We need to notice that Form does not mean shape. In Aristotle’s system of thought the soul is what makes the body one thing, having unity of purpose and the characteristics that we associate with the word ‘organism’. The Form of a thing is the essence and the primary substance [5(3)]. The view that Forms are substance, which exists independently of the Matter, in which they are exemplified, seems to expose Aristotle to his own argument against Platonic ideas [5(4)]. A Form is intended by Aristotle to be something quite different from universal but it has turned out that it has many of the same characteristic like Plato’s form. It can be suggested that Forms are more real than Matter therefore Matter is a mere copy of the Form.

Aristotle theory of Form and Matter is connected with the doctrine of potentiality and actuality. Potentiality as a Matter by itself has no Form of its own. That which has more Form is considered to be more actual. According to Aristotle, God is the pure Form and the pure actuality is in Him and there can be no change. Aristotle’s doctrine of potentiality and actuality provide a rational explanation of the genesis of phenomenon, things do not come into being ‘from nothing’, but originates as the actualization of potency which is no longer conceives as “everything for everything”. His doctrine also give more realistic account of the source of motion, retrieving it from the platonic supra sensuous world and bringing it back to the earth as one of the aspects of nature [5(6)].

Aristotle place God as the first cause of all things. He says that there must be something which causes motion but this cause by itself is unmoved. This unmoved mover he refer it to God who has an eternal substance, the actuality of all potentiality and the form of life. God being place as the unmoved mover is intriguing to the modern mind. It appears to them that the cause of change must be cause by the previous change and it can go on and on. Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* has given four causes in order to show that the ultimate cause is God Himself. He pointed out that:

“Eventually we have to acquired the knowledge of the original causes (for we say we know each thing only when we think we recognize its first cause, and causes are spoken of in four ways- in of these we means the substance ie., the essence (for the ‘Why’ is a cause and principle); in another the matter or substratum in a third the source of change, and in a fourth the cause opposed to this, the purpose and the good (for this is the end of all generation and change)”(983a, 25-30. 3) [7]).

There are four causes in Aristotle’s causal theory: material cause is the wood, formal cause is the essence of the

table to be produced, efficient cause is the skill of the carpenter in making the table and final cause is the table. Aristotle regarded the unmoved mover that is God as the final cause who supplies a purpose for change which essentially is an evolution towards the likeness with God. He describes God as the first principle and cause of the universe. When he speaks of Matter and Form relationship, God is the “form of form”. And when he describes motion and change, He is the “prime mover” or “unmoved mover”. And when he refers to activity, He is the “thought of thought”. Aristotle’s philosophy culminates in the concept of God and to his teleological conviction that nature makes nothing without a purpose and that everything in this world move towards the goal.

Conclusion

Accordingly, Heraclitus advocated the use of *logos* (reason or law) in order for us to know the reality of law, which is the order of change that implies to our ability in knowing the real as it is by using our reason. Plato on the other hand, has offered the theory of forms for us, in order to wake us up from our every day mundane experience of empirical world to the intelligible world of Forms. Plato even pointed out that everything in this world are a mere copies of the Form. He goes on to say that there is need for us to come out from our world of illusion and move to the real world of Forms to posses’ genuine knowledge. Finally, Aristotle organized and systematized knowledge by setting out ten categories, giving ten precise propositional knowledge. He also discovered three law of logic which prevails till today. In fact, one can say that these laws give the truth and validity of a proposition which will particularly deal with our thought. He also propounded the doctrine of matter and form which affirms that the potentiality of matter is indeed the actualization of the forms, meaning we are always in the process of becoming, and that with each becoming we are moving towards the actuality of form and that the cause of all these movement is the Unmoved Mover that is God. By highlighting the contributions of these early Greek philosophers, it can thus be concluded that they have indeed played an important role in the growth and development of knowledge.

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