



## Socrates v/s Plato—philosophy and knowledge

Meenakshi Mawi

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Shyama Prasad Mukherji College, University of Delhi, Delhi, India

### Abstract

This article shows itself as one of the results of a bibliographical or theoretical work. Its purpose is to explain the philosophical thinking of Socrates and Plato. Socrates has his teaching centered primarily around epistemology and ethics while Plato was quite concerned with society, education, literature, arts, friendship, rhetoric etc. Socrates argued in favour of an intellectual aristocracy whereas Plato divided the perfect society into three classes and advocated a government comprising the workers, philosophers, kings and soldiers that reflected a form of republic. Socrates' philosophy was a matter of how to live one's life. Plato founded an academy (A Philosophical school) where he taught the philosophical doctrines that would later become known as PLATONISM. The present article goes in search of different philosophical ideas applied in knowledge, education, virtue state etc. of Socrates and Plato.

**Keyword:** Socrates v/s Plato—philosophy, theoretical work, Platonism

### Introduction

Socrates (471/470-399 B.C.) is not only considered one of the main standards of philosophers; he is also one into the quality of one of the great educators of mankind; Socrates was born circa 469-70 BC in Athens, Greece. He was a philosopher and is considered the father of western philosophy. Plato was his most famous student. He studied music, gymnastics, and grammar in his youth (the common subjects of study for a young Greek) and followed his father's profession as a sculptor. We know of his life through the writings of his students, including Plato and Xenophon. When the political climate of Greece turned, Socrates was sentenced to death by hemlock poisoning in 399 BC. He accepted this judgment rather than fleeing into exile.

Socrates believed that philosophy should achieve practical results for the greater well-being of society. He attempted to establish an ethical system based on human reason rather than theological doctrine. He pointed out that human choice was motivated by the desire for happiness. Ultimate wisdom comes from knowing oneself. The more a person knows, the greater his or her ability to reason and make choices that will bring true happiness. Socrates believed that this translated into politics with the best form of government being neither a tyranny nor a democracy. Instead, government worked best when ruled by individuals who had the greatest ability, knowledge, and virtue and possessed a complete understanding of themselves.

Plato perceived political philosophy as an architectonic science of society, and like Socrates (469-399 BC) and the Sophists, distinguished the political from the other dimensions of life. Within the European intellectual tradition he conceptualized the disorders and crises of the actual world and presented to his readers a vision of a desirable political order, which till today fascinates his admirers and detractors. He has been described as a poet of ideas, a philosopher of beauty and the true founder of the cult of harmonious living. He has been praised for his denunciation of crass materialism and brutish selfishness. Plato's real name was Aristocles, which meant the "best and

renowned". He was given the nickname "Plato", derived from *platys*, because of his broad and strong shoulders. He was known for his good looks and charming disposition. He excelled in the study of music, mathematics, poetry and rhetoric. He fought in three wars and won an award for bravery. He never married. Plato established his Academy, which became a seat of higher learning and intellectual pursuits in Greece for the next one hundred years. The academy was not the first of its kind, for there were others, like the Pythagorean school of Crotona established in 520 BC and the School of Isocrates in 392 BC, but it was perhaps the most well-known. Plato devoted the bulk of his time and energies in organizing and managing the Academy. Plato spent the last years of his life at the Academy, teaching and instructing. He died in 347 BC while attending the wedding feast of one of his students

### Difference between Plato and Socrates

Plato and Socrates are two philosophers that showed differences between them when it comes to their philosophical concepts and thought. One of the primary differences between Plato and Socrates is that Plato gave a lot of importance to the soul of the human being than the body. On the other hand, Socrates did not speak much about the soul. Socrates always preached to be just than unjust. He says that everything has its own function that which one can do only with it or best with it. For example, Socrates would say that the function of the eye is to see. He would further say that a pruning knife is better suited for pruning than butchering. Socrates says that everything also is characterized by a virtue that has a direct relationship with the performance of its function. As per the example discussed above, the virtue of the eye is the sight, and the virtue of the pruning knife is its sharpness. This is the philosophy of Socrates.

Plato, on the other hand, refutes the position that injustice is better than justice. According to Plato, each person has a function, and the city can be virtuous when each one performs his function. Plato would call the human function as deliberation. He would include other functions such as

ruling, taking care of things and living. In fact, he says that these functions pertain to the community in which one lives. Thus, it can be said that the conceptualization of the concept of human function is the main area of difference between Plato and Socrates.

Socrates attacked the concept of overreaching. He would say that overreaching is not a good thing, and actually, it is a foolish way to live. These are the most notable differences between the thoughts of Plato and Socrates.

### **Knowledge and Opinion**

Plato differentiated between the intelligible world and the world of the senses. The former was the world of Being or Beauty or Forms, and the latter the world of becoming or beautiful or opinion. The world that we see, touch and experience through our senses was not real, but a copy, for things constantly changed and were fluid. Though its existence could be experienced in daily life, it was not real. The Real world of true things was the world of "Ideas", which was perfect, eternal, immutable and fixed. It was never created and had always existed from the beginning in a perfect way. It was independent of all things and immune to the changes that occurred in the sensory world. All that one experienced was because of the influence of the world of Idea upon matter, the other principle in the universe. Matter was not the "real" world but an impression, a raw material to receive the Idea. Therefore all changes and distortions in the sensory world were due to matter and not because of the Idea. In *Timaeus*, Plato explained that the world of senses was created by "an architect", the Demiurge, who brought the ideal world and matter together-without, however, explaining how the three came together.

Plato described the working of the human mind and the way it acquired knowledge with the help of: (a) the allegory of the Cave; (b) the metaphor of the Divided Line; and (c) the doctrine of Forms. He believed that individuals have different capacities for learning and attaining knowledge. He also asserted that most of us live in the darkness of the Cave, which represented the realm of beliefs. At the mouth of the cave was daylight, symbolizing knowledge. This was akin to the Hindu belief. The teacher or the guru meant one who helped a person to attain enlightenment from darkness. Moreover, Plato was also the first to emphasize the problem of universals, when he stated that there was a Form or Idea for everything that exists in the real world.

Socrates taught that people should care less about their bodies and possessions and more about their soul. He also stated wealth does not bring goodness but goodness bring wealth. As such he believed he was serving the city of Athens and its citizens by highlighting their incorrect thinking. He was a man of principals. Socrates states no one chooses evil, no one chooses to act in ignorance. Also he believes no one would intentionally harm others. Man seek the good, but fail to achieve it by ignorance or lack of knowledge. Our knowledge of Socrates comes to us from numerous dialogues which Plato wrote after 399 B.C. In nearly every dialogue - and there are more than thirty that we know about Socrates is the main speaker. The style of the Plato's dialogue is - important it is the Socratic style that he employs throughout. A Socratic dialogue takes the form of question-answer. It is a dialectical style as well. Socrates would argue both sides of a question in order to arrive at a conclusion. Then that conclusion is argued against another assumption and so on.

Knowledge is present in the human mind at birth. It is not so much that we "learn" things in our daily experience, but that we "recollect" them.

There is a reason why Socrates employed this style, as well as why Plato recorded his experience with Socrates in the form of a dialogue. Socrates taught Plato a great many things, but one of the things Plato more or less discovered on his own was that mankind is born with knowledge. That is, knowledge is present in the human mind at birth. It is not so much that we "learn" things in our daily experience, but that we "recollect" them. In other words, this knowledge is already there. This may explain why Socrates did not give his students answers, but only questions. His job was not to teach truth but to show his students how they could "pull" truth out of their own minds.

Ignorance is not lack of knowledge; it is disknowledge instilled into the soul by bad upbringing and bad education, consisting in false values and notions. And beliefs. – Socrates

Socrates points out the similarities and differences between "true beliefs" and "knowledge". He claims that while "true beliefs" may be as useful to us as knowledge, they often fail to "stay in their place" and must be "tethered" by anamnesis. This distinction between "true beliefs" and "knowledge" forms the basis of the philosophical definition of knowledge as "justified true belief".

### **Justice in the State and Individual**

Socrates examined the origin of states and cities, and pointed out that they arose out of two reasons. The first was mutual need, and the second, the differences in aptitudes of individuals. Mutual need led to reciprocal services, since the individual was not self-sufficient and depended on others for subsistence. Exchange of services necessitated division of labour and functional specialization, which was possible since individuals differed in their nature and aptitudes. Individuals could be trained to specialize and perform one particular task. Specialization was encouraged to bring about excellence and perfection. It was not to assign any kind of superiority or snobbery to one particular function. It was essentially to recognize and bring to fruition the uniqueness in every individual. Acceptance and organization of diverse human aptitudes would result in social benefit, cooperation and harmony.

Plato made two important points here. The first was that every individual was a functional unit, assigned a particular task with clear-cut obligations and privileges, which one was expected to perform diligently and meticulously. It also underlined the fact that none were born to render a specific function. Certain levels of training and skills were required. Moreover, since everybody would be involved in the performance of a socially required function, it would minimize, if not altogether eliminate, the probability of being a free rider or a shirker. Second, society was visualized as a harmonized, orderly whole, based on the recognition of individual talents and contributions. The functions of a society were broadly three-ruling, defence and production. The last one included all kinds of trades and crafts.

**Conclusion**

Plato's ideas affirmed absolutes and permanent truths, against the ethical relativism of Heraclitus and the democratic upsurge in Periclean Athens. His dialogues "are the earliest and the most fertile source of discussion of ultimate values, efforts to question conventional morality"

The importance of Socrates, like the importance of all great thinkers, is not that he gives us a neatly worked out answer. His importance stems from the nature of his questions, from the direction he points toward and the vocabulary he introduces into our conversations. Socrates philosophy examines how we should live. This led him to discussion on various things like wisdom, virtue, knowledge, courage, piety, justice, state and so on.

**References**

1. "A history of Political thought–Plato to Marx", Subrata Mukharjee, Susheela Ramaswamy, Second Edition, 2016.
2. "Socrates, a complete biography", Arun K. Tiwari, Prabhat Prakashan, 2023.
3. "Plato: the man and his work", Taylor, A. E, London Methuem, 1926.
4. "Essay: first and second series, Emerson, R. W. New Delhi, Eurasia Publishing house, 1965.