

# Contributions of Western Moral Thinkers (Part-I)

Dr. Awdhesh Singh, IRS (Retd.)

Director, Awdhesh Academy,

Former Commissioner, Customs & Indirect Taxes

Socrates

# Socrates

- One of the greatest philosophers of the world
- Considered to be the father of Western philosophy
- The first systematic moral thinker of Western Tradition
- Born around 469 BC
- He served in army and known for his courage
- He practiced what he preached
- He never wrote any book.
- We know Socrates through the writings of Plato in 'Dialogues' where Socrates was the main protagonist

# Socrates's Method

- Philosophy begins when one learns to doubt—particularly to doubt one’s cherished **beliefs**, one’s **dogmas** and one’s **axioms**.
  - **Dogma** is defined as principles or rules that cannot be questioned, or articles of faith in different religions. **An example of dogma is the Ten Commandments in the Christian faith.**
  - Axiom is a statement or principle that is generally accepted to be true, but need not be so: Example: **“Governments should not negotiate with terrorists.”**
- There is no real philosophy until the **mind turns round and examines itself.**
- He maintained that **he knows nothing**. He is wiser only because he knows that he knows nothing
- His method of discussion involved putting a series of questions to an expert and destroy his pretention of knowledge

# Key Teachings of Socrates

# 1. The Importance of Knowledge

- He believed that the knowledge actualizes action
- Right knowledge leads to right action
- Hence,
  - A man with right knowledge can't do wrong deeds
  - A man with wrong knowledge can't do right deeds
- **Highest knowledge is the knowledge of good and evil**
- No one knowingly do what is bad. People do wrong things due to their ignorance of right knowledge
- Hence, it is possible to make people virtuous by imparting the right knowledge

## 2: Pursuit of Virtue

- The most worthwhile pursuit of human being is to live a **life of virtue**
- He preferred the **pleasure of self-improvement and duty** rather than a life of indulgence, honour or worldly pursuit's
- One must pursue **wisdom and virtue** rather than wealth and glory
- Virtue is sufficient for happiness
- True happiness can be attained only by living a moral life

# 3: Moderate Living

- A philosopher need not give up ordinary pleasure yet he should not be slave to them
- Physical pleasure is the greatest hindrance in spiritual growth
- He advocated mild ascetism



# 4: Spiritual Development

- Socrates believed that the human soul was invisible, immortal, and directs the physical body.
- Soul is divine while body is mortal
- Soul is what makes a body alive. Death occurs when the soul ceases to animate the body.
- One must work for strengthening of his soul instead of body
- Soul is strengthened by doing virtuous deeds

Plato

# Brief Biography

- He was a student of Socrates.
- Born in 427 BCE
- He was a son of wealthy and influential Athenians
- When Socrates died, Plato travelled to Egypt and Italy, studied with students of Pythagoras and spent several years advising the ruling family of Syracuse
- In 386 BCE, he returned to Athens and founded his own school of philosophy, the **Academy**
- **Aristotle was his most famous disciple**
- Died 347 BCE at the age of 81

# Plato's Idea of Virtue

- He identifies virtue with knowledge
- Virtue is teachable. Hence man can learn morality as he can learn any other subject.
- Fourfold Cardinal virtues
  1. Wisdom : Virtue of reason
  2. Valour: Virtue of Spirit
  3. Temperance : Virtue of the discipline of biological appetite
  4. Justice: Harmonious functioning of the three

# Fundamental thoughts of Plato

- The moral values of the citizens are governed by the moral values of the society.
- Only citizens of an ideal state can be moral
- Most people are governed by emotions and prejudices rather than reason and fair play
- In a democracy, people elect the people who are like them and not the best ones.
- Democracy can't get the ideal form of government
- Only Philosophers should rule the world since only they can gain knowledge of the perfect world and work selflessly to create such a world.

# Plato's View on Democracy

- The crowd loves flattery. It is so “hungry for honey,” that at last the wiliest and most unscrupulous flatterer, calling himself the “**protector of the people**” rises to supreme power.
- Whereas in simpler matters—like shoe-making—we think only a specially-trained person will serve our purpose, in politics we presume that every one who knows how to get votes knows how to administer a city or a state.
- Governments vary as the characters of men vary.
- A state is what it is because its citizens are what they are.

# The Republic

- 'The Republic' is the most famous book of Plato
- People should be divided into three classes
  - Common people (Farmers, Merchants etc.)
  - Soldiers
  - Guardians
- **Legislature would select the first set of guardians.**
- Republic would have no property or family system
- There will be community living and common eating
- Woman and children shall be commonly shared.
- Children shall be taken away at a certain age and will be taken care by the state.
- Weak and infirm children will be exposed to death at birth.

# Selection of Guardians

- For the first ten years of life, education shall be **predominantly physical**; **Then they will face the first test.**
- Those who fail will be assigned to the economic work of the nation; they will be business men, and clerks, and factory workers, and farmers.
- Those who pass this first test will receive **ten more years of education and training, in body and mind and character.** **Then they will face a second test.**
- Those who fail will become the auxiliaries, or executive aides and military officers of the state.
- Successful candidates shall go for further training for **fifteen more years** for doctrine of ideas and forms and its application.
- **Then the selection of posts for Guardians shall be made based on merit.**



# Other Features of Republic

- Strict censorship of literature, drama and music
- **A Royal myth is to be created that God has created men in three kinds**
- Everyone attends to his business without interfering in the business of others
- **Guardians shall be hereditary after the first selection**

# Criticism of Platonic Ideas

- Plato's envisioned state totalitarian as it advocated a government composed only of a distinct hereditary ruling class, with the working class — whom Plato regards as "human cattle" — given no role in decision making. ....Plato shows no interest in justice — the resolving of disputes between individuals — because Plato has redefined justice as "keeping one's place". (Karl Raimund Popper, an Austrian-British philosopher)
- Republic is autocratic and based on aristocratic principles
- Subordinate the individual to state
- No freedom and liberty to people
- Bertrand Russell traces Fascism to Plato
- Offensive to modern democratic temper

Aristotle

# Introduction

- Aristotle was born in 384 BC in Greece
- His father was a court physician of Macedonian king
- He lost his parents at early age
- Studied under Plato for twenty years in the Academy
- Went to Macedonia at the request of **King Philip** to tutor his son, the **Alexander the Great**, who was thirteen years old.
- He supervised Alexander's studies for five years
- Later he founded his own school of philosophy at a place called **Lyceum**

# Virtue

- Virtue are of two types
  - Intellectual
  - Ethical
- **Higher is the value of intellect** which comes by leading a life of reason and philosophical contemplation
- Ethical virtues are relating to action, which consist of subordinating the human passion and appetites to reason
- **Intellectual and Ethical values together constitute happiness**
- Your reasoning must be in tune with the ethics of the society in most of the ways

# Ethics of Aristotle

- Ethical virtues consist in **control of emotions with reason**
- Knowledge is not enough to make a person virtuous since control of passion is difficult
- **Passions can be controlled by self-discipline.**
- With practice, virtuous conduct can become a habit
- **Excellence is an art won by training and habituation: we do not act rightly because we have virtue or excellence, but we rather have these because we have acted rightly; We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.**

# Summum Bonum

- Aristotle believed in the **teleology**: The end purpose of everything.
- All things are done with an end in mind
  - Shipbuilding is done to make ship
  - Economics for wealth
  - Medicine for health
- All human activities are directed towards an end
- All ends are thus directed towards one final end i.e. **summum bonum**, which by itself is not a means of any end.
- **The aim of life is not goodness for its own sake, but happiness.** “For we choose happiness for itself, and never with a view to anything further; whereas we choose honor, pleasure, intellect . . . because we believe that through them we shall be made happy.”

# Summum Bonum for human beings

- Every creature's summum bonum depends on its special faculties
- Sensation is special function of animals. Hence pleasure is not good of man
- Reason is the special faculty of man. Hence *summum bonum of man is to be found in living a life of reason*
- Happiness must be a *pleasure of the mind*; and we may trust it only when it comes from the pursuit or the *capture of truth*.



# Virtue: The Golden Mean

- The extreme of anything is a vice
- The virtue is found in the **golden mean** between two extremes, one of excess and the other of deficiency.

## Aristotle's Concept of the Golden Mean

Deficiency (-)	BALANCE	Excess (+)
cowardice	COURAGE	rashness
stinginess/miserliness	GENEROSITY	extravagance
sloth	AMBITION	greed
humility	MODESTY	pride
secrecy	HONESTY	loquacity
moroseness	GOOD HUMOR	absurdity
quarrelsomeness	FRIENDSHIP	flattery
self-indulgence	TEMPERANCE	insensibility
apathy	COMPOSURE	irritability
indecisiveness	SELF CONTROL	impulsiveness

# Virtues that should be maximized

- Wisdom
- Truthfulness
- Impartiality
- Magnanimity ( a person with valour, generosity, loyalty and dignity)

# Criticism

- An aristocratic state confines its benefits and privileges to a chosen few
- He accepts **inequality** of different kinds including that between man and woman
- His concept of Ethics are quite vague and conventional

Q. Socrates never advocated the following

- A. Moderate living
- B. A life of virtue
- C. Questioning your beliefs and dogma
- D. Living the life of an ascetic

Q. Socrates emphasized on the importance of knowledge because he believed that

- A. Knowledge is power
- B. Knowledge gives wisdom
- C. Knowledge actualizes action
- D. Knowledge is important for earning good income

Q. Which of the following is not a virtue, according to Plato

- A. Wisdom
- B. Valour
- C. Temperance
- D. Power

Q: Summum Bonum of a human being is found in

- A. Living life according to reason
- B. Maximisation of pleasure
- C. Minimisation of pain
- D. None of the above



# Epicureanism

# Brief Biography

- Epicurus (341 - 270 B.C.) was a Greek philosopher of the **Hellenistic period** i.e. the period between the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC and the emergence of the Roman Empire
- In Athens, Epicurus founded **The Garden**
- **Epicurus never married and had no known children.**
- He died in 270 B.C. at the age of 72, as a result of kidney stones

# Epicureanism

- Epicurus regarded happiness and pleasure as the main goal of life rather than virtues
- He identifies the fears of God, death, retribution and hell as the principle cause of human unhappiness
- Sources of Epicurean Pleasure
  - Knowledge,
  - Friendship,
  - Living a virtuous and temperate life

# Main teachings of Epicurean

- The greatest good is to seek modest pleasures in order to attain a state of tranquillity, freedom from fear and absence from bodily pain
- Avoid constant desire of pleasure (Hedonism)
- Advocated absence of pain as the main goal of life
- Condition mind to rise above pain and adversity
- Achieve tranquillity by having the knowledge of the workings of the world and the limiting of desires.
- Morality should be pursued as it gives pleasure
- **Virtue has no intrinsic value; It derives its value from the pleasure that accompanies virtuous action**

# Teaching (continues)

- Avoid momentary and sensual pleasures which often lead to pain later
- Mental pleasures arise from remembrance.
  - Remembering past achievements give us joy.
  - Remembering future problems, give us pain.
- Discouraged learning, culture and civilization as they could result in disturbing one's peace of mind,
- Acquire knowledge which could help rid oneself of religious fears and superstitions, such as the fear of the gods and of death.
- **Strong laws and strict punishments are desirable**
- **A just law is one that contributes to promoting human happiness**

# Decline of Epicureanism

- After the official approval of Christianity by the Roman Emperor Constantine in 313 A.D., Epicureanism was repressed as its teachings were irreconcilable with Christian teachings
- The school endured a long period of obscurity and decline.
- It is still popular in the present work due to its doctrine of the **pursuit of Happiness.**

# Stoicism

# The Origin

- Stoicism literally means the **endurance of pain or hardship without the display of feelings and without complaint.**
- It is an ancient Greek school of philosophy founded at Athens by **Zeno** (342-270 BC)
- The term "stoic" was taken from the "stoa poikile" meaning "**painted porch**" where Zeno of Citium used to teach



# Three famous Stoics

1. Seneca
2. Epictetus,
3. Marcus Aurelius

# Stoics Ethics

- Develop indifference and a passive reaction to external events
- Develop equanimity in the face of life's highs and lows.
- Live according to nature
- Accept Suffering in Life
- **Rational Observance of laws**
- **Reduce expectations to check anger**

# Stoics Ethics (contd.)

- Wisdom is the source of all virtues. (Good man and wise man are one)
- Promoted 'egalitarianism', and encouraged the acceptance of even slaves as equals
- World is material and the body and soul were of the same substance
- Knowledge comes from senses and interpreted by mind
- God is within us and is the source of goodness. Follow inner guide to attain happiness.