

Ethics in Greek Philosophy

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Introduction

The aim of Greek ethics was to develop certain principles which help man to lead a good life or happy life. The most important search and quest of the human being in every human epoch is to discover the final end of his activity. Confronted with a multitude of ends, he is unable to assess and make sure of what the ultimate end would consist. Thus there are some age old questions: What is good? What is the highest good? What is the meaning of Good? Is it related to the good life of man? What is a good life? Is it happy life? What is the end and aim of life? Who is man, what is his function, what does man act for, what is the ultimate end of a man's activity and, finally, who is the supreme infallible authority to judge the good life?

Pythagorean Ethics

Pythagoras founded an association, the purpose of which is described as ethical, religious, and political. His ideal was to develop among his followers political virtues, to teach them to act for the good of the state, to subordinate them to the whole. Here the individual should learn to control oneself, to moderate his or her passions, to harmonise his or her soul; he or she should have respect for the authority, for the authority of his or her elders, his or her teachers and the state. As a result, the view has been held that the Pythagoreans were political

communities. But they were not essentially political but religious or ethical.

Purification of Soul: The chief orientation of his teaching was to the religious-ascetic ideals which centred round purification and purity. Pythagoreans saw the human soul as the life spirit which endures after the death of its first body and may take its abode subsequently in another human or animal body. This theory of metempsychosis or transmigration of souls is ethically significant since it provides for the rewarding of good action and the punishment of evil in these subsequent reincarnations. That is why they undergo purification and soul training in their life.

Right Reasoning: This is the beginning of a very important approach to ethical problems, the view that 'good' means what is rational and intelligible. Thus, in the fourth century B.C., a later Pythagorean, Archytas of Tarentum, first enunciated the principle of "right reasoning" as the key to good behaviour: "Right reckoning, when discovered, checks civil strife and increases concord...(it is) the standard and deterrent of wrong doers". It is quite possible that Aristotelian and the medieval theories of right reason (*recta ratio*) as the norm of ethical judgement are directly indebted to Pythagorean intellectualism.

Heraclitian Ethics

Heraclitean fragments suggest that there is an ever-present rational pattern (logos) in this Process or 'Becoming'. Heraclitus says: "To be ethical is to live a rational life, to obey the dictates of reason, which is the same for us all, the same for the whole world." Man is entrusting himself to his senses, and he lives as if he were epileptic.

Research on Heraclitus reveals that his moral views are of primary importance in his teaching. Morality means respect

for law, self-discipline, control of the passions; to be moral is to govern oneself by rational principles. The following excerpts from his writings illustrate the lofty idealism of Heraclitus' ethics: "Character is a man's guardian divinity"; "It is hard to contend with passion; for whatever it desires to get it buys at the cost of the soul". "To me one man is ten thousand if he be the best".

The word '*logos*' of Heraclitus has a decisive philosophical meaning. The '*logos*' brings the contraries into harmony or it makes possible the "coexistence of contraries". '*Logos*' reveals itself, it thinks itself and it is. It is the universal law immanent in all things and binding all things into unity and determining the constant change in accordance with universal law. Man's reason is a moment in this universal Reason. Man, therefore, has to struggle to live according to the reign of unalterable law. Man's reason and consciousness, which are the fiery element. Without pure fire body is worthless.

Democritian Ethics

Democritus stressed the soul as the locus of human well-being. His concept of *eudaimonia* includes both the notion of 'good existence' (*eu-esto*) and of 'good feeling' (*eu-thumie*). Pace Gosling and Taylor think that Democritus was the first Greek philosopher to produce a systematic ethical theory. The most important step towards systematisation was the transition from the vague ethical thinking that everybody wants to be happy or cheerful, or free from troubles. Democritus argues again, "Medical science heals diseases of the body but wisdom rids soul off passions." When one is free from passion he experiences happiness. The superiority of reason is taken into consideration in the ethical life. The end of all conduct of men is well-being of society and ultimately of man. Well-being means not only the intellectual satisfaction but also the pleasure

of senses. It needs a little pain, and requires repetition and moderation of pleasure. The less you desire, the less you are disappointed. All virtues are valuable only if they help to cultivate happiness. Envy, jealousy and bitterness of mind bring friction and they will destroy everybody. The sense of duty must be the basis of doing the right thing; it should not be from the fear of punishment. We have to serve the state too, because if the state is in peace, all realm of state will grow; if the governance of the state is corrupted, then there will not be any order or law but only chaos.

Protagorian Ethics

Protagoras, a Sophist, took a relativistic position on ethical judgements. His most famous teaching is that “man is the measure of all things”. This idea would closely affiliate him with the common Greek respect for the judgement of rational beings. A thing becomes right or wrong always in relation to one’s need. Actually, Protagoras did advocate the practical virtue of good judgement. It is also more probable that he meant that each individual man is the sole judge of what is true or right for himself. Sextus Empiricus interprets it: “He posits only what appears to each individual, and thus he introduces relativity.” That means one is more normal or natural than the other: the vision of the normal eye is more reliable than of the jaundiced eye.

Thrasymachian Ethics

Thrasymachus is said to have taught that “Might is right”. In the *Republic* Plato speaks of Thrasymachus as a thinker who claims that “just or right means nothing but what is to the interest of the stronger party”. Plato himself criticises, that the honourable is one thing by nature and another by law, and that the principles of justice have no

existence at all in nature, but that mankind is always disputing about them and altering them. They are told by them that the highest right is might.

Socratic Ethics

His teachings on moral and religious elements are philosophical insights. These insights are the fundamental principles which brightened his life. They are mainly concerned with good and evil, conscience, the ethical person and moral virtues. Socrates clearly did think that all the moral virtues are rooted in practical wisdom or knowledge. The central teaching of Socratic ethics is “knowledge is virtue”. He who knows, what good is, will do good. By this he wanted to tell that the right insight led to the right action. For Socrates, the moral conscience is not mere sentiment but it is a responsibility before God. Human life is not tragic; one should confront it with the spirit.

Socratic ethic is teaching that human is a moral being in general. This was a revolutionary thought against the belief of the aristocratic people who thought that morals are limited only to a privileged group. He believed and taught that doing good is the moral duty of all human beings and possible for all. Socrates was teaching two moral imperatives attributed to the Delphic Oracle: “Know Thyself” (*gnōthi seauton*), and “Avoid Excess” (*meden agan*). For Socrates the ultimate evil was the “unexamined life”. He forced upon people for the recognition of their ignorance. At the end of the *Apology* Socrates told those jurors, who voted for his acquittal, of his confidence that death will not be an evil thing for him. He advised them, “to bear in mind this one truth: that no evil comes to a good man in life or in death”. Socrates believed that there is life after death, which reflects in the life itself. A virtuous life here leads to happiness in the life after death. The proof for

this is his death itself. This was done according to his faith in the immortality of soul. This faith is more religious than rational certainty. His life was a faith in the soul rather than a philosophy of the spirit. For him pleasure is below to the virtue.

Platonic Ethics

Plato sees human more in the soul. He affirms that “we are souls”. He meant that Soul is human. Evil elements are not in human but in the body. The real evil for human is the body, because human is always trying to liberate oneself from the bondage of body. Only with liberation of soul from body, a person can be happy and his ethics is known as *eudaimonistic* ethics. Plato’s works on ethics are fundamentally ‘eudaimonistic’ i.e., about well-being or a happy life. He saw the good life for man in terms of a personal attainment of well-being. In this level man’s reason would regulate and order all functions of the irrational appetites. Therefore the ethics of Plato is known as ‘intellectualistic’. The wise man is the one who can do the right thing and knows the right thing. He believed that the learned and rationally developed soul is the good soul. For him therefore, wisdom is the greatest virtue.

The movement within each human toward the ideal personality is an original version of self-perfection ethics. The development of the basic virtues is a personal process, of course, and varies from one man to the next. Childress comments on this point: Platonic ethics is eudaimonistic in the sense that it is centred around the attainment of man’s highest good, his true happiness, which involves the right cultivation of his soul and harmonious well-being of his life.

Human has to find happiness in intellectual exercise. Virtue does not depend upon the will, but on the practical intelligence, that understands the virtue and changes it

into action. The realisation of virtue is more important than the education. If the virtue is realised only to the highly educated people then the ethical life is only for philosophers. Here the ethics of Plato becomes an ethics of aristocracy. The ordinary people get only true opinion or extrinsic knowledge through the public education of moral life. He also believed that the greatest happiness is in the contemplation of the highest 'Ideas'. Yet Plato, like most of the Greeks, was well aware of the social dimensions of human life and well-being. A good life needs association with other persons. Thus ethics grows as part of politics which treats how to deal in a state (*polis*).

Political Thought. 7.3. Political Ethics: In the book of *Republic* Plato gave the picture of an 'ideal state' which could be ruled by philosophers. The origin of state is natural. At a certain moment, a group of families can not live together and be self-sufficient. Economic needs brought division of labour and its administration. This is the functional requirement of the nature. Plato says, "Every citizen must practise only one activity of the many regarding civil life; that activity to which his natural inclination is most disposed". Therefore, a sound state gets its life and its function goes well. Then there arises the need for defence and the government.

A good state depends upon the government. Here the rulers are ruling with reason in wisdom. In the fourth book of the *Republic* the citizens are divided into three classes just like the division of man. 1) The lowest class is productive and acquisitive. And its virtue is in particular temperance, but not set aside only for this class but also generally for the society as a whole because "the desire of the inferior multitude will be controlled by the desires and the wisdom of the superior few". 2) The middle class is spirited, competitive, and warlike, its distinctive virtue is courage. 3) The highest class is that of the rulers which is

distinguished by its rationality and its special virtue is practical wisdom. The most capable member of the highest class will become philosophers and will be given complete political rule, since every good ruler is one who governs in virtue of knowledge of the truth. When all these three classes work well together, the city becomes virtuous and perfect. The special virtue of the highest class is justice. The goal of the state is general justice, while each of three classes follows their own virtue. In other words, we can tell that social morality or individual's morality is the purpose of the state

In Plato's 'ideal state' rulers and soldiers are not allowed family life or private property. They are suggested community life. This is a half type of communism. He confirmed that women could rule a country, because women have exactly the same powers of reasoning as men, provided that they get the same training. He said, a state that does not educate and train women is like a man who only trains his right hand. Plato had a good vision of women, considering the time he lived.

Division of Soul: According to Plato human's soul is divided into three parts. One part stands for the appetitive or concupiscent part of the soul (*to epithumetikon*) the second part is the spirited part (*thumos*); in fact these two parts represent two appetites in man: the desire for sensual satisfaction and aspiration for success and fame. The third part is reason (*logos, to logistikon*) the highest part of man's soul. All these three parts work together for happiness.

Virtues of the Soul: Each part of the soul has its special virtue. Practical wisdom (*phronêsis, sophia*) is the virtue of the rational part. Courage or manliness (*andreia*) perfects the spirited part. Temperance (*sôphrosunê*) is another virtue, which moderates desire. Finally,) justice (*dikaïosunê*) as a virtue of individual man is that general

condition of soul in which each part performs its proper function. The just man does what is right in his external actions as a citizen of a state; he does the right because his soul is internally well-ordered. To live well, with clear understanding, one must rise to a vision of the idea of the Good.

Aristotlean Ethics

Aristotle attempts to explain ethics as a science, which gives meaning of highest good. All acts of man have some ends in view of the acts. Every end has again another end of higher quality. If it is so, there must be some super most good, for the sake of which every other good is to be hierarchically ordered. What is the highest good? The goodness of a thing consists in the realization of its specific nature. For man it is the realization of the life of reason, not sensitive life like animal or vegetative life like plants. Therefore, man must function as a human being. The realization of human being is in happiness or 'eudaimonia'. In order to realize this goal all other parts of soul must cooperate in this direction. The virtue of the sensitive part is the moral virtue. This moral virtue must be controlled by the reason, i.e., rational part. These moral virtues are such as justice, temperance, courage, liberality.

Principle of Mean: The virtue exists in between the excess and deficiency. The mean of virtue is not to be confused with mediocrity. It is not a safe way between two extremes. The virtuous mean is the most reasonable course of action to be taken in a given situation. Aristotle does not claim the universality of the principle of mean. This principle is not applicable in the things that are bad in themselves. For example: shamelessness, envy, adultery, theft and murder. They are bad in itself, not only because of their excess or deficiency, but because they are always wrong and never right.

The mean will be relative to each individual, but it should be measured by the proper reason of the right-minded man. The virtuous man is the measure of all things. He judges everything correctly and he acts virtuously. The good man realizes his true self when he loves and acts according to the supreme part of his self. The virtuous man does not act for his selfishness, but he acts for his friend and his countrymen. He lays down his life for the other. The nobility of his character in the function is expressed clearly all through his life. He can also love a good man as his second self. He becomes a man of justice. Justice is the crown of all virtues, because it is in relation to others. Justice consisted in giving one's due. Justice considers all in a just way, whether he is a ruler or a servant. The mean position can be judged properly only by the virtuous man.

Pleasure and Happiness: The ultimate end of man's activity is the happiness. Life of happiness includes pleasure also. Pleasure is the necessary and immediate consequences of virtuous activity, but not the end of life. Pleasure is the completion of activity. Pleasure is the concomitant of action, but pleasure is not the effect of the act of reason. Hence it will not be the highest good.

Since rational part is the highest part, its activity will be the highest activity proper to man. The contemplative life is the highest life, the most continuous, the most pleasant, most self-sufficient, most intrinsically worthy way of life. This type of life will be a step higher than virtuous life; since virtuous life belongs to the sensitive part, which is under the control of rational part.

Function Argument: Aristotle says every being has a special function according to its nature. Here the nature of a thing consists in fulfilling its special function. He is of this opinion that human function is with an "activity of

soul in accordance with virtue and if there are more than one virtue, then it will be accordance with the best and most perfect virtue. He thinks with the concept of good in a specialized realm, for example, the good of a flutist or of a sculptor, consists in fulfilling a certain function. A flutist becomes a good flutist by playing the flute well, not by playing cricket. The same law should be held true of human beings in general. If human person has a function to do, its goodness consists in doing that peculiar function perfectly well. Human function is not any activity of the soul that conforms to virtue, for eating is an activity that can conform to the virtue of temperance, but it is an activity of the lowest faculty of the soul, the nutritive faculty. Like that, the sensation can not be the peculiar function of the human, because animals do the same activity. Aristotle is seeking something which is very peculiar to human alone: certain life of the part of having reason. This should be the function of the human, the activity of reason, which is characteristically the human beings engage in.

The function argument can thus be explained: 1) every species has a unique essence, which is its function. 2) The good of each species is just doing well its function. 3) The essence of the human is activity in accordance with reason. Thus the good of the human is such activities. Thereby the by-product of such activity is happiness.

Teleological Argument: Aristotle is universally praised for inventing the concept of teleology. In *Physics* Aristotle declares that “nature is among the causes which act for the sake of something”. ‘For the sake of something’ is a thing’s purpose. This is the end or goal at which a thing aims. Aristotle is of this opinion that nature does nothing purposeless. The nature is not without purpose. The natural processes, according to Aristotle, are ordered to the good ends. Among the good ends, there must be a single supreme good; this supreme good must be God.

Aristotle believes that man's ultimate aspiration is to contemplate and imitate the highest being, God. All other material beings except human person aspire to become human person, who is the best among the material beings. Human person has the character of reason which distinguishes human person from all other beings in the cosmos. So we understand there is a hierarchical order in the process of reaching the highest good. Therefore, there is a purposeful act of actualization from lower to higher.

In Aristotelian words, one might say that everything in the universe strives to actualize its potentialities or capacities. Growth leads to maturity or fullness of things. This tendency for growth is the hidden cause within the nature of that being. This completion of hidden potencies is the good at which everything aims. This purpose or teleology, therefore, rules Aristotelian ethics, although as we shall see, deontological elements, those pointing to the duties, are not absent from it. Moral obligation is only the consequence of man's good life. Therefore in *Physics* he says that there is purpose in the things which come to be and are by nature.

Contemplation: The whole purpose of virtue is to achieve happiness, but according to Aristotle happiness is two-fold. These two kinds of happiness are proportioned to man's nature, and obtainable by means of natural capacities. These two kinds of happiness are those to which the moral and the intellectual virtues are immediately ordered. Aristotle finishes his discussion indicating that contemplation, which is the peak point of happiness, is similar to God's activity of contemplation. We understand that Aristotle puts forward by this concept of a two-fold happiness two ideals for life: theoretical life and practical life. It is not possible that everybody can lead the contemplative life; still each one has the

opportunity to lead a happy life that is a virtuous political life. Here, we find the greatness of Aristotelian ethics. Those, who cannot lead the highest happy life, will not be happy as they might have been, still they can lead the best kind of life in the fullness of moral virtuous life.

The Aristotelian contemplator is a man who has already acquired wisdom; and what he is contemplating is precisely this wisdom already present in his mind. By contemplation he brings his wisdom once again to the forefront of his mind. In this way contemplation is a quasi-aesthetic appreciation of wisdom and truth. The activity of God is also contemplation. So, if man can also do the activity which resembles the activity of God, he is doing a God-like activity. That means he is experiencing the life of God.

Epicurean Ethics

As all other philosophies of this age, the main thrust of Epicureanism was the acquisition of happiness. He believed that the powerful objection to happiness was fear of death instructed by religion. He wanted to root out this fear from his followers and accordingly he formulated his philosophy by explaining the nature of the universe. Our happiness depends upon ourselves in this life. Man has two types of pains: physical pain and psychological distress. According to him the end of human existence is the health of the body and tranquility. Actually he meant when he said, pleasure is “the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul.” He did deliberately say that this was not the pleasure of prodigal or the pleasure of sensuality (*Letter to Menoecus*, 131-2).

The means of pleasure are the practice of the four virtues. They are prudence, temperance, fortitude and friendship. Prudence is for the calculation of pleasures. The next two virtues are instruments for pleasures; because they control

the desire and lead to the continuation of pleasures. These virtues become evil, if they do not bring pleasures. The last virtue is to enjoy the communion of the people especially in the public. For him justice is not a virtue, because it is not harming others. This is in cohabiting in the name of giving and having which reduces itself into utilitarian fact. Animals also share this reality.

Epicurus is registered as one of the members of classical Greek ethicists. We see the special role of reason in his arguments for the attainment of happiness. He believed that pleasure is not intrinsically evil in itself (Principal Doctrines, 8). But he did not recommend its pursuit. Two reasons were given. 1) Pleasures are not capable enough to attain tranquility. 2) Physical pleasures do not avoid mental anxiety. Certain sensual activities produce more pain than pleasure. Tranquility of soul was attained through philosophical study and prudence. Human persons have different desires. He classifies these desires into three groups: some are natural and necessary; some are natural but not necessary; some are neither natural nor necessary (Principal Doctrines, 29). It is good to understand that the pleasure and tranquility, that Epicurus thought, were that each one of us should seek our own pleasure and tranquility. Therefore his ethical theory is egoistic one.

Stoic Ethics

Stoic ethics has its own originality distinguished from Platonic, Aristotelian and Epicurean. The Stoics developed a system which is based on their anthropology of the “logos”, the presence of the “pneuma” in man. This is the qualified presence of the divine in man. In order to discover this divinity in man, one has to dedicate himself to the order of morals. The cosmos, for them, was a harmonious unity with a living and intelligent God. Man is the part of

this universal order as a spark of divine fire. For Stoics, therefore, moral life is a discovery of “logos” and arrangement of life accordingly. There are four steps for the ethics of stoics. They are duty, virtue, good and happiness. Duty is the moral obligation that one perceives within oneself according to his nature. Mere duty is not the perfection of moral act; but right intention is also necessary. Right intention is the perfection of the morality and it is coming from the virtue. Virtuous man is better than the one who is mere duty oriented without good intention. Virtue transforms the duty to right intention. According to Stoics, virtue is the highest good and the highest happiness, because only a virtuous life can lead and experience a happy life. To live in such a way is to realize one’s self; and thereby to realize the will of the universe and therefore to serve the purpose of universal reason and to remain for the universal ends. The stoic ethics stands for a universal society of rational beings with the same rights and duties, because the fundamental principle is same in all and this is the will of God.

Conclusion

In *Republic* of Plato, he speaks, “Each of us should lay aside all other learning, to study only how he may discover one who can give him the knowledge enabling him to distinguish the good life from the evil”. Greek ethics is enabling one to lead a happy life all through one’s life. As we know ethics is a normative science which makes judgments on the voluntary human conduct; we are supposed to make judgment on our own life. Socrates is of this opinion that the most evil in the life of human is an unexamined life. This is a code of conduct for human to make judgment on one’s own feelings, words and activities. Each living being is born with certain good potencies. As it goes through its life, all these potencies ought to be slowly actualized into its intended end. In this ongoing

process there is a control of final cause. This end is not some goal outside human's nature, but it is compatible with well being of human person and society. For Aristotle, human's final end is in serving and contemplating God, because this is the most beautiful act a human can do in this life. This act of contemplation is the similar act that God himself does. Here God's act and human's act become similar but not same.

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