



A STUDY ON THE CONCEPT OF GOOD: WITH REFERENCE TO ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOPHERS

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ABSTRACT :

Each and every moment we are doing something. Some actions we done voluntarily and some non-voluntarily such as random actions, spontaneous actions and reflex actions etc. only voluntary actions are comes under the realm of morality. So we can say that any action which is connected with good and bad or right and wrong and which is voluntarily done by the agent may be called moral action. In this paper it has been attempted to figure out the concept of good from the viewpoint of ancient Greek thinkers starting from the Sophist to Pyrrho, the skeptic thinkers of ancient Greek. All the ancient Greek thinkers are accepted the necessity of good in moral life. But their thinking regarding the nature of good is different from each other. Some are thinking that what is good it depend on the individual and varies from culture to culture and community to community. Again some thinkers are think that good is something which we can achieve by the reason and knowledge itself is a good. In addition some are said that the ultimate aim of human life is pleasure or happiness and it is the human nature that human beings are naturally seeks the pleasure. So the good of man recline in the pursuit the pleasure. This is the brief sketch of what the ancient Greek thinkers are thought about the good. What is good? Where did the idea of good is comes from? When did we say that that particular action is good? What are the ways to attain the good? These are the some major questions which are deals in this paper.

KEYWORDS : *Morality, Voluntary action, Good, Pleasure, Happiness etc.*

INTRODUCTION:

The notion of good is the most fundamental of the morality. It is the judgment of moral value or aretaic judgment and something which is the cardinal and basic moral virtue. The term 'moral' is derived from the Latin word 'mores' means custom, manner, character, proper behavior etc. the word moral is now a day used with a variety of meaning as to indicate right and wrong, good and bad behavior and rules



according to which an actions is done.¹ Here it is noteworthy that Frankena has divided judgment into two; judgment of moral obligation e.g. morally right or wrong action, a duty, ought or ought not to etc. are the judgment of moral obligation. And judgment of moral value e.g. morally good or bad, morally virtuous or vicious, responsible etc. here it is not about the certain actions but it is about the persons, motives, intentions, characters etc.² The code of conduct or standard is

¹ William Lillie, *An Introduction to Ethics*, Allied Publishers private limited, p.9

² See William K. Frankena, *Ethics*, Pearson, p.9

derived from particular philosophy, religion and culture³ or the belief of the persons. And another thing is that the morality can be differing from person to person, community to community it depends on the particular philosophy or ideal of that particular person and community.

Good is a kind of term which we always use and hear, by using this term we are valuing something. But the philosophers have their own thought regarding what is good and what is the way to attain the good. Here it has been tried to highlight that what are the views of ancient Greek thinkers especially from the Sophists to the Pyrrho's view on the concept of good. We will see that how the ones view on good is different from another. Some thinkers or group of thinkers hold the view that there is no objective good, man are the main determinants of what is good and bad or what is wrong or right. The Sophists are suggested these views. There are some thinkers who are think that knowledge is good and anything which is done according to reason is a good, it is the knowledge of ideas which is the real good and it belongs to the realm of ideas. Socrates and Plato upheld these views. Antisthenes said that virtue is a good. Pleasure is the standard of good, pleasure is nothing but an absent of pain and the goal of life is a pleasure. And this pleasure is obviously bodily pleasure. It is the view of Aristippus. For Aristotle the highest aim of life is happiness. What is the process of attainment of happiness the answer will be the life of contemplation or reason. And the good is the life of reason. He rejects the asceticism and told that fortune, health, wealth etc. are also good because these are the auxiliary of the moral life. He does not deny the appetites as well as he also does not accept that bodily pleasure is the only good or one should desire it, as the Cyrenaics and Epicureans thinks. That is why the Aristotle's principle is known as golden mean.⁴ According to the Stoicism virtue alone is good, and one can achieve happiness through virtue. One must be pursue virtue not for pleasure but for the sake of duty. But the Epicurus think that pleasure is the ultimate goal of life. And the thing which gives the pleasure is a good thing. We can attain the good only by the knowledge. Pyrrho was a skeptic thinker. He thinks that good is varies from person to person and community to community. What is good, it depends on the law, customs and individual. This view is something similar with the view of the Sophists whose principle is that 'Man is the measure of all things'.

METHODOLOGY:

The aim of this paper is to know the concept of good by analyzing the views of ancient thinkers (The Sophists to Pyrrho). This paper is a conceptual in nature and it is based on the secondary source of data. Let us see what are the ancient Greek thinkers' contemplation regarding the good.

The Sophists' View:

The Sophists are the class of professional teachers and educators scattered over ancient Greece, they are basically the humanistic, their tendencies were purely practical and they teach according to the demand of situations. They were the first in Greece who takes fees for teaching and delivering lecture. The word 'Sophist' is derived from the word 'sophia' which means the wisdom. Hence the literal meaning of Sophist is the wise man. So the Sophists are the men who are considered as wise man. Protagoras (born about 480 BC) was an earliest known Sophist, Who said that "Man is the measure of all things." If he indicates 'man' to individual man, we have to say that an individual man will decide what is good. So good is something which is subjective. If one say that it is good then it is good for him. Whatever I think good is good for me. Thus there is no scope for objective goodness and also truthfulness. There is no permanent good, what is at this moment good, the next moment is not. Because everything is depends on individual man and the thinking of man is depends on the situations and circumstances. So the thing is that there is no objective good which is accepted by all man. Anything what a man think or do is good at least for that person. These are the views of the Sophists.⁵

³ <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/morality>. retrieved on 25-11-2018

⁴ Y Masih, *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*, pp.107-108

⁵ See W.T. Stace, *A Critical History of Greek Philosophy*, pp. 112-114

Democritus' View:

Democritus (460-360 BC) give emphasize the soul than the body. He thinks that happiness is the property of soul and the good of the soul is something divine. Pleasure of the senses is not the real pleasure. The true pleasure is the pleasure of soul or mind i.e. happiness. And the happiness is nothing but the good. Good is conceived as something internal, it is not directly related to external things. Else the good is given many names such as cheerfulness, absence of pain and fear etc. and it is also suggests that pursuit of pleasure is beneficial for man.⁶ "He who chooses the goods of the soul chooses what is divine; he who chooses the calm of the body chooses what is human."⁷ Democritus believed that good can be attained by the discipline and practice; it is not innate or human nature. It is acquired value by having knowledge and true insight. So ultimately we can say that for Democritus good is something internal and divine, good is not come from innate human nature. We can achieve the good by the discipline and practice supported by the knowledge. And good or cheerfulness leads us into the realm of happiness.

Socrates' View:

Socrates (born about 470 BC in Athens) said that our actions should not be morally wrong. Now the question is how we will decide that this particular action is morally right or morally wrong. According to Socrates the answer will be that, doing by the direction of the reason and at the time of decision to avoid the emotion. He also told about the rule of moral principles, these are never to harm anyone, keep our own promises and obey and respect the teacher and parents. What is right action in particular situation one can determine by this pattern of moral principles,⁸ and to obeying the law is also the moral action as stated by him. So we can say without hesitation that morally right action is a good action and we can attain the good by the reason. Socrates said knowledge arises from the reason and all knowledge is knowledge through concepts. Concept means the general idea of the things. Knowledge is good, all men wants to do Good but due to lack of knowledge some person could not do the right or good actions. Thus the essential condition of good is the knowledge which is arises from the concepts. For Socrates Good is the ideal of reason. He also told that virtue is one. All the particular virtues namely, temperance, prudence, kindness, benevolence etc. are arises from one source and that source is the Knowledge.⁹

The Cynics' View:

The Cynics¹⁰ school of Greek philosophy founded by Antisthenes (445-365 BC) one of pupil of Socrates upheld the view that Virtue is alone good and virtue is sufficient for happiness. What does the virtue means? For Cynics Virtue means Self mortification, absolute asceticism and renunciation from all worldly pleasure. So if the virtue is the good then good means absence of pleasure, desire and ascetic life. Nothing is good or bad in this world. Everything is 'indifferent' and living indifferent life is a good life. Any action will be considered as good action if this action is done by indifferently i.e. without pleasure, desire, pain and misery. If you posses a virtue you are free and you are good. And you are no longer slave of your body, mind and the society.

The Cyrenaics' View:

The Cyrenaics is an ancient Greek school of philosophy founded by Aristippus (435-356 BC) of Cyrene which taught that pleasure is the ultimate goal of life. Pleasure means the absent of pain. Pleasure is

⁶ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/democritus/#7> retrieved on 27-12-1018

⁷ Y Masih, *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*, p. 29

⁸ See William K. Frankena, *Ethics*, Pearson, p.2

⁹ See W.T. Stace, *A Critical History of Greek Philosophy*, pp. 142-152

¹⁰ The name of Cynic is derived from the Greek word 'kynokos' means dog-like and 'kyon' means dog. It is also said that Antisthenes taught in the Cynosarges gymnasium at Athens, and the meaning of 'Cynosarges' is the place of white dog. See [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cynicism_\(philosophy\)](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cynicism_(philosophy)). Retrieved on 28-11-2018

the standard of good. This school is similar with the Carvaka school of Indian philosophy. The Cyrenaics believed that good is something which arises through pleasure. Any action which gives pleasure is considered as good actions. So we can say that pleasure is the ground where goodness stand. And what is the process to attain the goodness? Cyrenaics said that through social obligation and altruistic behavior we can attain the pleasure.

The Megarians' View:

Euclid, (435-365 BC) the founder of Megarian school of philosophy and the pupil of Socrates hold that the Good is identified by the being. And the being is one and that One is God. So we can say that good is God, One, Being and Divine. These are all same and indicate to one absolute being; these are different names of One and the same being. There is no such thing as evil. Evil is an absence of Good and it is an illusory; only the Good is true and real. Multiplicity of thing is unreal only the Good or God is real.¹¹ This view is to some extent similar with Advaita Philosophy, one of the most influential school of Indian philosophies. Which hold that only the Brahma is truth and the rest are mithya or maya.

Plato's View:

For Plato the goodness is natural and it is the fundamental fact of the universe. The most fundamental of these realities are the idea of good. For him the ideas are the most perfect things of the real world and through perception whatever we see it is an imperfect thing of this world. The process of knowing the goodness is to understand the universe as a whole. When we realize the whole universe and particularly the human nature we will understand the goodness. The only way to attain the good is the knowledge of Ideas. This is somewhat a metaphysical concept of goodness upheld by the Plato. He often says that the aims and the ends of moral activity is happiness. And the way to attain happiness is the knowledge of ideas. As his philosophy is based on the theory of ideas, his view on ethics is also depending on the theory of ideas. W.T. Stace said that the ethics of Plato is an application of his theory of ideas. He thinks that sensible world is a copy of the real world i.e. the world of ideas. The world of sense is full of evil because it hides the reality. The good belong to the world of non-sense i.e. the world of ideas. The knowledge of Ideas is the constituent of the happiness and good is nothing but the knowledge of Ideas.¹² When we say about good of the community we actually want to say that the welfare of the community, so we can say that good imply the welfare. Anything which brings welfare of the masses is a good.

Aristotle's View:

Plato's good is something beyond this world but Aristotle's view on the good is something belongs to this world and realizable and attainable by the men. He said that an action which gives enjoyment is not good rather it is good that is why it gives enjoyment, i.e. enjoyment is the effect of good, the moral value. And happiness is the highest good. The way to attain the good is the performance of special faculty. There is no doubt that man's special faculty is reason because Aristotle thinks that man is a rational being and reason is the defining characteristic of the man. So the reason is the good for man. He defined good as 'that which all things aims'.¹³ The rational aims of an activity are good. Simply physical pleasure is not the end or the summum bonum of human life because sensuality does not belong to the human special faculty. Sensation is the special function or faculty of animals not humans. That is why physical pleasure is not the ends of human life. The end of human life is something higher than the sensation or bodily pleasure, it is the pleasure of the reason or the happiness is the end of human life. The morality consists in the reasonable actions and the

¹¹ See W.T. Stace, *A Critical History of Greek Philosophy*, p.163

¹² Ibid pp.220-222

¹³ See Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Penguin Classics, p.3

good life is nothing but the reasonable life. And that reasonable life only can produce the happiness which is the summum bonum or the end of human beings.¹⁴

Aristotle also said that the good is in itself good or the end of our life but the conditions or circumstances to achieve the good is also very much important. The external good like riches, friendships, health, wealth and good fortune are very much necessary to attain the good. Though these external good are not good in themselves but they are the means we can say to quest the good and to attain the good. He also told that in order to cultivate the good, the good habit is also required. Only by the repeated practice a man can control his or her desires or appetites. It is the circumstances and situations who determine the external good. There are no such fixed criterions to judge the external good. It is depends on the circumstances and person, because what is moderate is differ from person to person. External good means the mean or the moderate. The middle of the two extremes e.g. courage, is the mean of the two extremes cowardice and rashness. That is why courage is good. He also believed that man has a faculty to choose what is good and what is bad. A man, who cannot reject the evil, cannot choose the good. Men do good things not necessarily but voluntarily.¹⁵

The end of life is obviously happiness and this happiness cannot be achieved fully without the state or society, because man is a political or social animal. State gives the opportunity and circumstance to the man to achieve his ends. Aristotle finds three kinds of good states these are Monarchy, the rule of one man, by virtue and wisdom he rules his fellows. Aristocracy is the second form of state which is ruled by the wise peoples. And the third one is Constitutional republic or Timocracy, here all the citizens take part in the government functions and all are equal. Equal, according to class and capacity. These all are we can say the means to attain the goodness.

The Stoics' View:

The Stoics¹⁶ are held that virtue is the only good, pleasure is not good in itself, and it will be good if it is based on reason. Zeno (334-262) BC of Citium/Cyprus was the founder of this school. According to Stoicism any actions will be good if this action is done by certain principles and reason. To live a good life man has to know natural laws and has to apply the reason. "Live according to Nature" is the maxim of Stoicism. They used the term 'Nature' in two aspects, in one sense 'Nature' means law of the Universe. And in another sense 'Nature' means the essential nature of human being i.e. reason. That is why they said that anything which is done according to law of universe and the reason is good. Riches, pleasure, wealth and health are not good, even these are not considered as external good as stated by Aristotle. Only virtue alone is good. The prime and root of virtue is knowledge or wisdom and those who are wise person they are only good. An action is good if it is done reasonably, wisely and with the sense of duty. But there are some actions which are done due to gratefulness, friendship etc. and the love of mother to her child is something beyond the duty. So we cannot say that every action which is done with the sense of duty is good.¹⁷ There is no degree of good. All goods are equally good.¹⁸

Epictetus (circa 55-135 CE) A Greek Stoic philosopher hold that good is an object of desired. It is profitable thing also because it is not hurtful. It is an internal thing and we have been finds it in ourselves. We have no power over external things. But we have power over internal things. In as much good is internal thing so we can control it and direct it according to our will. That means good is determined by the choice of the person. In addition to this he also told that reason alone is a good means anything which is done

¹⁴See W.T. Stace, *A Critical History of Greek Philosophy*, p.315

¹⁵ Ibid pp.319-320

¹⁶ Stoicism is a school of philosophy founded by Zeno of citium in Athens. This philosophy is greatly influenced by Socrates philosophy. For more see <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/stoicism>. retrieved on 25-11-2018

¹⁷ William K. Frankena, *Ethics*, Pearson, p.71

¹⁸ See W.T. Stace, *A Critical History of Greek Philosophy*, pp.350-351

following reason is good.¹⁹ Epictetus said that good life is the life of inner serenity, life of harmony of actions and desires in accordance with nature. Everyone can follow the good; no matter he is slaves or saints. It is an opportunity to all to achieve the happiness through goodness in life. He prescribed that good life means controlling desire, performing duty and knowing himself and knowing the relation with the society.²⁰ So we can say that the way to attain the goodness is to live with reason and following the natural laws. William Lillie said that, Kantian morality is heavily influenced by the Stoicism and Utilitarianism is by Epicureanism.²¹

The Epicureans' View:

Epicurus (born in 342 BC) was the founder of Epicureanism. According to Epicureans pleasure is the ultimate end of life. And pleasure is the only good. The good of man recline in the pursuit of pleasure. Man seeks pleasure by nature; it is the instinct of man to seek the pleasure.²² There are two categories of pleasure, namely, pleasure of body and pleasure of mind. Pleasure of body is the pleasure which received by the eating of delicious food and involving with the sensation of the body. This is the momentary pleasure; one can enjoy these bodily pleasures when experiencing them. A pleasure of mind is the pleasure which received mentally. Peace, Feeling of joy, free from fear and pleasant memories are the example of mental pleasure.²³ Epicurus gives more emphasis on the pleasure of mind that is pleasure of life time, the happiness. He said an action is good if it brings own good and good is identified by the pleasure or happiness.²⁴ The aims of our life should be to attain the calm and untroubled mind. And this could be possible only through wisdom. Simplicity, cheerfulness, moderation, temperance etc. arises from the knowledge. That is why it is said that a wise man can only live a life happily. Happiness resides in the womb of knowledge, not in the trap of senses.²⁵

Pyrrho's View:

Pyrrho was the skeptic thinkers among the Greeks. He was not left his philosophy in any written form. The teaching of Pyrrho was found in his disciple Timon's writing. The primary goal of his philosophy is to achieve the happiness and freedom from calamities of life. To attain the happiness one has to know how to stay desire less. Because unhappiness is comes from desire. So the knowledge and wisdom are the necessary prerequisite to achieve the happiness. His philosophical outlook is based on practical aspect. For him everything is appearance, things are appears to us and we know only the appearances. What is the real thing we don't know, we are ignorant about this. One thing appears to one in one way and the same thing is appears to another man in another way. So it is impossible to know that which one is the real one. The good is also the same. There is nothing good or evil in itself. A thing is good for one but may be bad for another one. So it is difficult to determine what a good is really. According to Pyrrho it is the opinions, customs, laws etc. makes anything good or bad.²⁶

CONCLUSION:

On the basis of above study we can say that the concept of good is inconceivable without the concept of right and wrong and also without the concept of pleasure and happiness. So good is something which we could not conceive directly, it is related to other concept like right, wrong, pleasure, happiness, cheerfulness, natural law, reason, custom, convention, individual opinion, fulfillment of desire and so on.

¹⁹ See <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epictetus> retrieved on 30-12-2018

²⁰ Sharon Lebell, *The Art of Living*, p. xv

²¹ William Lillie, *An Introduction to Ethics*, Allied Publishers private limited, p.95

²² Y Masih, *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*, p. 128

²³ <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/epicureanism> retrieved on 03-12-2018

²⁴ See William K. Frankena, *Ethics*, Pearson, p.18

²⁵ See W.T. Stace, *A Critical History of Greek Philosophy*, pp.358-360

²⁶ *Ibid.* pp.363-364

And anything which we achieve or attain by these concept is may be called good. These are the standard of the good. Good may be divided into two viz. the good of body and the good of soul. And the good of soul is the divine. It is observed that most of the thinkers give stress on the happiness of mind i.e. good of soul. There is a deep relation between right and good. Any action is considered as right action if it is good or it brings the good. So good is the cause of an action to be right. Again right is determined by the laws, customs, conventions and also it depend on how much it brings pleasure and happiness in our life.

We can divide the good into two i.e. the subjective good and the objective good. It is true that any action or thing may be good for one person but may not be good for another person. Still we have to accept that there is a something in this world which is good for everyone. And that something is the knowledge. Here it is noteworthy that one has to know that how to deal with himself as well as with other person. If the happiness or mental peace or cheerfulness or untroubled mind is the ultimate end of life then we have to know how to deal with each other. It is said that pleasure is something which is related to body and happiness is related to mind. It is also said that happiness is higher than the pleasure but if we look into the matter then we will see that we get happiness or pleasure when we receive something which we desire. So both are somehow similar to each other and depend on the fulfillment of desire. One person's desire may be different from another person's desire. Again one person's happiness may be different from another person's happiness. So if the happiness is good then good may be differing from person to person and we have to say that there is no objective good. But the amusing thing is that we have accepted that knowledge is an objective good. And if we accept the knowledge is an objective good then we could not say that happiness or pleasure is an objective good, which is good for everyone. Here one can say that though the things of happiness or pleasure may be differing from person to person but the very concept of happiness or the pleasure is the same. In reply to this it can be said that without receiving any objects or any feelings we have not get the so called pleasure or happiness. So finally we have to say that good is a kind of concept which varies man to man and gives their arguments according to their approaches based on the circumstances. The nature of thinking and the way of lifestyle determined ones concept of good.

At last,
Can good become a good
Without coming others' mouth
Whom, I associate with
At the end, I rely on her
Whom, I have accepted as knowledge
That knowledge came out as happiness

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<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/democritus/#7>

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