Socrates And The Knowledge Of Forms: Phaedo Analysis

Plato’s writings on Socrates’s day in court and, eventually, his judgment and death reveal a unique, yet controversial approach to the idea of the dual existence of form and appearances. Socrates held lengthy discussions concerning the topic where he provides various arguments to explain his thinking to his associates. Primarily, the ability of forms to be known by an individual is the central topic of focus with equal attention being given to the techniques of acquiring the knowledge of forms. Forms are known by human beings through the distancing the soul and body and loving beauty to a limited extent because a significant portion of the knowledge of forms exist but are difficult to access.

The definition of knowledge is by itself a fleeting concept, which Socrates works to comprehend and attempt to assess fully. According to Socrates, knowledge refers to the ability of individuals to be aware of their surroundings through experiences while acknowledging that their human wisdom is limited because of ignorance (Apology, 23d). This definition of knowledge is hinged on the individuals’ capability to accept when their limited knowledge in a given craft cannot be extended to any other aspects of life. Consequently, Socrates’ pursuit to prove whether or not he was the wisest of men revealed that he did not possess superior knowledge as compared to other seemingly wise men (Apology, 21d). Based on the findings of this investigation, Socrates realized that many people considered themselves to be wise, but this was not the case. Socrates argues that he is wiser to a limited extent because he does not assume to know what he does not know (Apology, 21d). In this sense, Socrates demonstrates that when compared to others he might appear to possess the knowledge, but this does not hold when his knowledge is assessed independently. Accordingly, individuals that possess knowledge are expected to have at least a broad knowledge of earth and self-awareness, which appear to be qualities devoid of human beings.

However, Socrates infers that human beings can possess knowledge in relatively insignificant portions because of the nature of human life, which undercuts any efforts to acquire knowledge. Socrates explains that through his questioning approach on teaching young men, most of them have come to be viewed as being wise despite having limited knowledge or none (Apology, 22d). Socrates's questioning has little effect on the ability of young men to acquire knowledge. The probable explanation for the inefficiency of his attempts is the difficulty of human beings in refraining from the use of bodily senses in seeking knowledge (Phaedo, 65b). Socrates explains that employing any of the sensory perceptions in the learning knowledge is expected to impede the process, which implies that the dependence of human life on senses sustains the gap between human beings and knowledge. In consequence, Socrates concludes that “it is impossible to attain any pure knowledge with the body” (Phaedo, 66e). Notwithstanding, Socrates's observation of the challenge that human nature causes in acquiring knowledge do not bias his perception of the value of human life (Phaedo, 61d). Human life is sacred because Socrates considers suicide to be wrong under any circumstances, such as to secure knowledge on death. Human life undermines knowledge acquisition, but the desire for knowledge would not justify ending one’s life.

The flaws of human life have been addressed exhaustively but love, which occurs naturally in humans, attempts to compensate. Diotima explains that the concept of love is essential in the

sense that it acts as a bridge between the gods and man, which is an extension that provides some form of access to divine wisdom (The Symposium, 81). The spirit form of love provides human beings with an alternative means of pulling humans closer to pure knowledge because it facilitates communication with the gods who possess pure knowledge. The desire to acquire wisdom is a consequence of the fact that “Love only exists in relation to some objects” (The Symposium, 77). Knowledge is the object that humans desire to secure and, as a result, love of knowledge enables them to seek it. Socrates continues to argue that it is not likely that individuals can love an object, which they already possess because the aspect of need is non-existent (The Symposium, 76). Essentially, the need for an object is a prerequisite to the development of love towards that object as is the case with knowledge. Moreover, Socrates posited that the underlying reason to continue to love an object that an individual possesses is the desire to continue to possess the object in the future (The Symposium, 77). Wisdom is an object that cannot cease to have value because humans will always desire to possess it. Love contributes to the limited knowledge that can be accumulated before death.

The love of beauty is the highest object of love, which provides an alternative path to the conceptualization of the knowledge of forms. Socrates argues that the love of beauty is the highest object of love because the “[w]isdom is one of the most beautiful things” (The Symposium, 83). The love of wisdom can be achieved through the love of beauty since it is considered to be a beautiful thing. Ideally, this provides an alternative method of acquiring knowledge, but this is not practiced in the sense that human beings cannot possess knowledge in its entirety. The realization of the knowledge of forms is the goal of each philosopher and can only be achieved through love, which provides the desire to pursue this knowledge with little concern for the needs of the flesh.

The knowledge of forms is desired by many human beings and is described in detail by Socrates although he had not acquired the knowledge. Socrates describes form as the type of existence that is characterized by invisibility and the tendency not to change (Phaedo, 79a). According to Socrates's explanations, a form is intangible and exists in a consistent form unlike its appearance, which individuals can interact with more readily through their senses. Socrates argues that forms cannot exist in isolation and must exist in correspondence with the world of appearances because “those that have an opposite must necessarily come to be from their opposite and from nowhere else” (Phaedo, 70e). Notably, Socrates's argument suggests that it would not be possible for forms to exist without appearances, yet there is a transition process between these types of existence, for example, in the body to soul transition on death and soul to the body at birth. At the time Socrates was explaining form, he possessed this knowledge in the sense that his soul was enduring and immortal, which implies that it had experienced pure knowledge, but he could not recollect the memories. Based on this perspective of two opposites, that is, forms and appearances, it is a viable deduction that forms can be known because knowledge exists within the soul.

Socrates implies that knowledge exists within people in a form that cannot be erased but still insists that human beings lack knowledge. Socrates defends his position from an approach that he knows the nature of the two types of existence (Phaedo, 72b). This approach is conflicting in the sense that Socrates possesses the knowledge of forms because an individual cannot describe something that they do not know. Conversely, Socrates contradicts his initial statements where he declared that he had inadequate knowledge through his lengthy discussions are forms and appearances (Apology, 21d). Socrates does struggle to gain knowledge by denying himself an unnecessary indulgence in satisfying the needs of the flesh.

Consequently, it is possible that Socrates has gained a level of knowledge beyond the common man, but it is rather insignificant considering the effect that the body has on the soul. In the strict sense, Socrates does not know because his level of knowledge is comparable to that of a human than that of a god. The knowledge of forms that he discusses in his final days is the result of his efforts to empower the soul over the body.

There is a high likelihood that human beings can know forms through the elimination of worldly noise that tends to keep the knowledge of forms beyond the access of an individual. In a refined definition, Socrates articulates that knowledge cannot exist where ignorance lurks. Human beings have the potential to acquire knowledge, but the nature of human life significantly undermines this. Nevertheless, human life is still valuable despite the predicament it presents in knowing forms. Humanity is responsible for the experience of love, which has proved to be useful in realizing the need for knowledge among humans. Wisdom is an object that can be loved that causes constant motivation to unravel the mystery behind forms. Socrates dwells on the idea of two types of existence and provides two primary characteristics of a form: invisibility and maintenance of the same state. Moreover, Socrates points out that the forms and appearances cannot exist as single elements and are in a dependent relationship. Socrates denies that he has any significant knowledge. In his discussions, Socrates relies on the limited knowledge that he has been able to acquire to enlighten his countrymen. Socrates is the ideal example that humans can know from given the right approach in acquiring knowledge.

Works Cited

1. Plato. Apology. In Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo. 2nd Ed. Trans. G. M. A. Grube. Revised by John M. Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002. 21-44. Print.
2. Plato. Phaedo. In Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo. 2nd Ed. Trans. G. M. A. Grube. Revised by John M. Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002. 93-155. Print.
3. Plato. The Symposium. Trans. W. Hamilton. Edited by E. V. Rieu. The Penguin Classics. Print