Virtue is knowledge

According to Socrates, “Virtue is knowledge” because through virtue you can live your life in the best possible manner. To explain the importance of the virtue and care of self he says- “I go about doing nothing else than urging you not to care for your persons or property more than for the perfecting of souls and I tell you that virtue is not derived from the wealth but that virtue is itself the source of wealth and all other good, both for the individual and for the state”. The nature of soul can only be understood in terms of virtue. Virtue is the best condition of soul. If you do actions blindly you can never be satisfied and happy. The word ‘virtue’ translates ‘arete’ which means excellence in Greek. It has wide range of meanings moral as well as immoral but Socrates emphasized on its moral content. According to Socrates, the task of philosophy is to make men better. Thus, Socratic theory is assimilated to an ethical theory called eudaimonia as it appeals to happiness as an undisputed final aim of all our actions.

Socrates paradoxical statement, “virtue is knowledge” claimed that no one does wrong willingly, it is better to be wronged then to do wrong. It is paradoxical because at one level it gives semantic range of term ‘arete’ to say that knowledge is an excellence is innocuous but the claim implies that virtue is not possible without knowledge and that all you need for virtue is knowledge. In words of Socrates knowledge is not something which requires others help. For example, if someone who doesn’t know how to count will not be able to keep money effectively. But Socrates is making much more radical claim than that. He is saying more than simply that knowing how to use things properly is necessary for our being able to use them to our benefit. Knowledge cannot be taught with dialectical method. Socrates, says no one however wants willingly or knowingly to harm himself, since all wrong doing is harmful, no one does wrong willingly. Virtue is knowledge in the sense that whoever knows what virtue is will be virtuous, because he believes that-

1. No one wants to harm himself
2. Every action either proximately or ultimately aims to some good for the agent.

Socrates hold view that desires are unable to master knowledge. Virtue is teachable and those who do wrong things do not have knowledge they are ignorant being when they realize they are doing wrong as the property of knowledge is that no one can harm himself, and every one wants to live life in best possible manner. Knowledge is in itself complete and independent, self- sufficient. Thus, virtue is one and it is knowledge.

Socrates wanted to make ethics a science for that we need a base principle foundation. But he did not have a definition and he accepted his ignorance, did not say that he has knowledge thus he posses wisdom as he has given the ways to life in best possible manner.

Is Socrates a Sophists

According to Aristophane in “Clouds” Socrates is Sophists as he was a teacher of rhetoric, but he contrast in knowledge with many techniques that other claimants to wisdom- the Sophists offered to teach. Xenophanes and Plato disagreed with this. Plato discussed Socrates as genuine and Sophists as greedy, charging money. For Sophists practical reason is a means to achieve desired goods while for Socrates knowledge aims at good that are independent of our desire and sometimes even opposed to them. Knowledge is that which grasps the god, while the sophists taught technique that will enable others to satisfy their wants and needs without being able to discriminate between them. Sophists mainly used rhetoric technique to persuade others and they were concerned with eikos (something which is mistaken to be true). Socrates used the method “elenchus” (dialectic) to search knowledge. He searched for definition and consider himself ignorant of knowledge. While Sophists claimed that they know.

Socrates was interested in objective reality while Sophists were interested in subjective reality. The main aim of Socrates dialectic was to know the truth while the aim of the Sophists were to persuade others and win the argument. Socrates asked questions to show self-contradiction and to give comprehensive knowledge. Sophists were uncritical of existing believes and had not expose conventions. Socratic dialectic is regularly contrasted by Plato with Sophistic rhetoric. The dialectic method contains premises which are established by asking questions, making it interactive rather than dogmatic. The aim of rhetorical speech is not to instruct the people but to persuade them. Sophists are described as one who posses a sort of reputed and apparent knowledge on all subjects but not the reality. The Sophists according to Socrates does not really know and although they were teaching others. Socrates undermines the Sophists profession by showing that expert knowledge involves specialization which makes nonsensical the idea of comprehensive knowledge. Sophist in fact taught nothing but the conventional views held by the man in the street. For Socrates, the Sophist’s art is not a neutral technique which can be used well or badly, the effect of such teaching is itself under a cloud. Socrates was searching for definitions which help in discovering how to live life in best possible manner. In this way we can say that Socrates is not a Sophist due to difference in his technique and aim.