



Mains Practice Question

Q. What are the main teachings of Socrates and how are they relevant for ethical decision making in public service? Illustrate with examples. (150 words)

01 Jun, 2023 GS Paper 4 Theoretical Questions

Approach:

- **Introduction:** Introduce Socrates and mention that his teachings have significant relevance for ethical decision-making in public service.
- **Body:** Briefly outline the key teachings of Socrates, their Relevance for Ethical Decision Making in Public Service and Examples that showcase the application of Socratic teachings.
- **Conclusion:** Summarize the significance of Socratic teachings in ethical decision-making in public service.

Introduction:

Socrates was a Greek philosopher who is considered to be the founder of Western philosophy and one of the first moral thinkers of the ethical tradition of thought. He did not write any texts but his dialogues with his interlocutors are recorded by his students Plato and Xenophon. His teachings are highly relevant for ethical decision-making in public service.

Some of his main teachings are:

- **The Socratic method:** This is a way of learning and teaching that uses questions and answers to improve thinking and understanding. Socrates used this way to explore topics like virtue, justice, courage, etc. He thought that by questioning oneself, one can find the truth and become a better person.
- **The Socratic paradoxes:** These are statements that seem contradictory but contain profound insights. Some of them are: "The only thing I know is that I know nothing", "No one does wrong willingly", "Virtue is knowledge", etc. These paradoxes challenge the conventional wisdom and force one to rethink one's values and actions.
- **The Socratic ethics:** This is a moral system that says virtue is the best thing and happiness comes from being virtuous. Socrates said virtue can be learned by asking and answering questions. He also said one should do what reason and conscience tell them, not what others say.

These teachings are relevant for ethical decision making in public service because they encourage one to:

- Seek clarity and understanding of the issues before taking any action.
- Question one's own biases, and motives and be open to different perspectives and arguments.
- Pursue excellence and integrity in one's conduct and performance and avoid corruption, and negligence.
- Respect the dignity and rights of others and act with compassion and empathy.
- Uphold the values of democracy, justice, equality, and public interest.

Some examples of applying these teachings in public service are:

- Using the Socratic method to conduct public consultations, deliberations, and evaluations on various policies, programs, and projects.
- Following the Socratic paradoxes to avoid arrogance, ignorance, dogmatism, and complacency and to foster humility, curiosity, critical thinking, and self-improvement.
- Practicing the Socratic ethics to adhere to the code of conduct, ethics, and values of public service and to resist any temptation or pressure to compromise them.

Conclusion:

Socratic teachings of critical thinking, pursuit of knowledge, moral virtue, and prioritizing the common good provide a solid framework for ethical decision-making in public service. Public servants who embrace these teachings can make well-reasoned, morally justifiable decisions that ultimately serve the best interests of society.

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