



Mains Practice Question

Q. What is conscience? Discuss Butler's view on conscience. (150 words)

27 Oct, 2022 GS Paper 4 Theoretical Questions

Approach:

- Start the answer by briefly explaining conscience.
- Discuss the views of Butler on conscience.
- Criticism of Butler's view on conscience.
- Conclude suitably.

Introduction

- Conscience can be defined as having two things – **what a person believes is right and how a person decides what is right**. More than just gut instinct, our conscience is a moral muscle.
- By informing us of our values and principles, it becomes the standard we use to judge whether or not our actions are ethical. But unlike other social science concepts, conscience cannot be operationised – there is no way of discovering it or knowing how it works in actual practice.
- For example, attitudes can be studied using methods of social science research. But we cannot study conscience that way.

Body

- **Joseph Butler's view on conscience:**
 - Joseph Butler is the most prominent writer on the subject of conscience. According to Butler, conscience is a God-given ability to reason, our 'natural guide' with ultimate authority. It should be the **final authority for human actions**.
 - **Conscience is a reflective principle:** It judges morally what we did and want to do. All ordinary human beings have a sense of right. According to Butler, **it is an aspect of human reason or of sentiments**.
 - **Conscience as individual's moral insight:** Conscience is closely **connected to autonomy of individual's moral insight**. It signifies the motivation by our inner sense of moral rightness and wrongness, and not by external considerations such as moral law, duty, obligation, or virtue. It is **uninfluenced by fear of punishment or hope of reward**.
 - **Conscience as a superior principle:** Conscience is a **principle superior to and governing particular passions, emotions, and instincts**. There are various parts to human nature, and these are organized hierarchically. The part of human nature that is at the top of this hierarchy is conscience.
 - The **two principles of human nature at work are:**
 - **Self-love**, that is, is a **desire for happiness in the self**.
 - Benevolence, that is, desire or hope for happiness in other people.
 - Conscience adjudicates between these two principles. This is an intrinsic part of human nature. This guidance is intuitive. It is a gift from God, and as such, its guidance is not an option. It has universal authority in all moral judgments.

▪ **Criticism of Butler's view:**

- There have been many objections to Butler's ideas and some of these criticisms are essentially against the very concept of conscience like:
 - Conscience really is neither an independent nor a distinct moral principle. Suppose it is reasonable to obey conscience. Then "the rules prescribed by conscience" are either reasonable on their own or they are "the dictates of an arbitrary authority". If the latter, how can one justify the arbitrary authority. But if the former, there is no independent moral authority for conscience. Conscience becomes another name for reason.
 - Further, there is **no clear justification for the supremacy of conscience**. Intuition is not infallible - the conscience could be misinformed or even wrong. Without an appeal to external, objective moral yardsticks, therefore Butler's idea may lead to moral anarchy.

Conclusion

The appeal to intuitive conscience is self- authenticating or self-certifying. It has its authority from within itself. It is, however, possible to rebut this criticism by pointing out that men are altruistic and benevolent and will not use conscience in support of immoral actions.

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