Ethics in International Relations and Global Governance

For Mains: Significance of Ethics in International Relations and Global Governance and Its impact on India' Interest.

What is the Role of Ethics in International Relations?

- **About Ethics in International Relations:**
    - Ethics in international relations is the **study of the moral principles** that guide interactions between nations, international organizations, and non-state actors.
    - It is concerned with the **extent and scope of ethical obligations** between states in the era of globalization. The goal of international ethics is to **create a fair and just global community.**
- **Promoting Global Justice and Human Rights:**
    - Ethics plays a critical role in advancing global **justice** by framing norms around human rights and humanitarian concerns. The post **World War II** international system has focused on ensuring basic human rights for all individuals, irrespective of national borders.
        - The **Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine** is an ethical framework adopted by the **UN** that emphasizes the international community's obligation to prevent and intervene in cases of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.
- **Guiding Foreign Policy Decisions:**
    - Ethical considerations influence the **foreign policy** decisions of states, particularly when it comes to issues like **military intervention, trade relations**, and **environmental protection**.
        - The ethics of military intervention are debated in the context of situations like the **NATO** intervention in Kosovo or the **US-led invasion of Iraq**. In these cases, the ethical justification of intervention **(humanitarian aid vs. national security)** was contested.
- **Promoting Peace and Diplomacy:**
    - Ethics supports the cultivation of peaceful and diplomatic relations between states. It provides a moral foundation for **negotiation, conflict resolution**, and the **promotion of peace**. Ethical diplomacy prioritizes **peaceful coexistence, cooperation, and mutual respect** over conflict, recognizing that global peace is essential for the well-being of all nations.
- **Strengthening International Law and Institutions:**
    - Ethical frameworks underpin the legitimacy of international law and global institutions like the **International Criminal Court (ICC), the World Trade Organization (WTO)**, and the UN.
    - These institutions are guided by principles of **justice, fairness,** and **equality** among nations, which are ethically driven.
    - International law aims to create a system where states are held accountable for their actions in a manner that is just and respects human dignity.
        - The **Geneva Conventions**, which establish ethical guidelines for the treatment of prisoners of war and civilians in armed conflicts, are rooted in international legal norms that stress human rights.

- **Environmental Ethics and Global Sustainability:**
    - Ethics in IR emphasizes shared responsibility for environmental protection and sustainability, as seen in the **Paris Agreement**, promoting collective action to combat **climate change** and protect the planet.
- **Addressing Ethical Dilemmas in Global Governance:**
    - **Ethical dilemmas** in global governance often involve balancing competing moral considerations, such as state **sovereignty** versus human rights, national security versus international cooperation, or economic growth versus **environmental protection**.
    - The **Covid-19** vaccine distribution debate exemplified the dilemma between equitable access for all nations and prioritizing wealthier countries.

What are the Major Ethical Theories in IR and Global Governance?

- **Realism:** Realism is a foundational theory in international relations, emphasizing that **states must make realistic assessments of external threats** and prioritize defensive strategies.
    - Realists assert that in an **anarchic international system** with no overarching authority to enforce rules, **each state operates in a self-help environment,** where survival, security, and power are paramount.
    - According to modern realist thought, the **lack of a global enforcer** makes security the primary objective of all states. To protect themselves, states seek to balance power by **strengthening their capabilities** and deterring potential aggressors, viewing power as a means to safeguard national interests in a competitive and uncertain global order.
- **Idealism:** It promotes the idea that **states should act on moral principles and values**, emphasizing the potential for cooperation and ethical standards. Its key aspects are:
    - **Moral Standards:** Idealists advocate for adherence to **moral standards** and justice, such as honoring treaties, observing the **rules of war**, and maintaining peace.
    - **Peace through Cooperation:** Idealism holds that peace can be achieved through adherence to shared norms and ethical obligations, as well as by fostering cooperation and interdependence between states.
- **Neorealism (Structural Realism): Neorealism**, as formulated by Kenneth Waltz, revises traditional realism by **focusing on the structure of the international system** rather than human nature. Key ideas include:
    - **Structure over Human Nature:** Waltz argues that the anarchic structure of the international system compels states to prioritize survival.
    - **Power Distribution:** Unlike classical realists, neorealists view power as a means to security rather than an end. States assess power distribution to protect themselves rather than to dominate.
- **Neoliberalism:**
    - **Neoliberalism**, or liberal institutionalism, emphasizes cooperation and the role of institutions in promoting peace. Key points include:
        - **International Institutions:** Neoliberals argue that institutions like the **WTO** and treaties like **START** can encourage peaceful interactions and mutual benefits.
        - **Peace through Democracy:** Inspired by Immanuel Kant, neoliberalism asserts that democracies and institutions foster peaceful cooperation and create norms of engagement that reduce conflicts.
- **Postmodernism:** Postmodernism is a movement in **Western philosophy** that arose in the late 20th century. It rejects the values and worldview derived from modern Western philosophical theories grounded in a rational scientific outlook.
    - It has little faith in human reason and denies the possibility of objective knowledge, especially in social sciences.
    - Postmodernism regards the conclusions of social science, art and literature as based on an **individual's subjectivity**. It views mainstream social values and institutions with **skepticism** and **suspicion**.
    - It regards that the political and social power of dominant sections of society, based on overt or covert ideology, permeates social sciences and humanities.
- **Feminism: Feminist theories** in IR emphasize the **role of gender** and advocate for **gender equality** in global politics. It highlights:
    - **Gendered Power Dynamics:** Feminist theorists argue that traditional IR overlooks the roles and impacts of women, focusing instead on masculine power struggles.

- - **Waves of Feminism:** Feminism in IR encompasses three waves: legal **equality, workplace inclusion**, and **broader equality** across race, class, and gender, each seeking to challenge and expand IR perspectives to include diverse voices.

What are the Key Sources of International Ethics?

- **International Law**: Legal frameworks established through treaties, conventions, and agreements form the foundation of ethical behavior in the international arena.
  - The **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)**, adopted by the **United Nations** in 1948, is a cornerstone document outlining the rights and freedoms that are universally applicable to all human beings.
- **Universal Moral Principles:** Certain ethical principles transcend national and cultural boundaries. These include respect for human **dignity, equality**, and the **principle of non-discrimination.** These values are embedded in many international agreements and are the basis for promoting global justice and human rights.
- **Religious and Philosophical Traditions**: Concepts from religious and philosophical traditions shape international ethical discussions.
  - For example, the **"just war" theory** provides guidelines for when it is morally justifiable to go to war, while the principle of **"ahimsa" (non-violence)** influences India's approach to international relations.
- **International Institutions:** Organizations like the **United Nations (UN)** and its specialized agencies play a pivotal role in promoting ethical behavior among nations.
  - The UN's **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** exemplify the global ethical aspirations of nations, focusing on issues such as **poverty** reduction, gender **equality**, and **environmental sustainability.**
- **Global Public Opinion**: Public opinion and civil society movements can significantly influence international ethics. Global campaigns, such as those advocating for climate action or fair trade practices, exert pressure on governments and international actors to adhere to ethical standards.
- **Academic Discourse:** Scholars, philosophers, and researchers contribute to shaping international ethics through debates and academic discussions. Think tanks and academic institutions provide platforms for refining ethical frameworks that guide global diplomacy.

What are the key Ethical Challenges in International Relations?

- **Human Rights vs. Cultural Relativism**: A core ethical issue in international relations is whether **human rights are universally applicable or should be adapted to different cultural contexts**. This issue extends to humanitarian intervention, where the international community must balance protecting human rights with respecting state sovereignty.
- **Sovereignty vs. Intervention**: Respect for state **sovereignty** is a fundamental principle in international relations, however, it often conflicts with the moral imperative to prevent human rights violations, such as genocide.
- **War and Peace**: The ethical dilemma in war involves balancing the principles of the **Just War Theory**- proportionality, legitimate intent, and civilian protection. International bodies like the **International Criminal Court (ICC)** face challenges in **holding war criminals accountable due to state sovereignty and political resistance,** complicating global justice efforts.
- **Global Inequality**: Wealthier nations have an ethical obligation to support developing countries through fair trade, debt relief, and sustainable development, addressing global economic disparities, but they have most times failed to fulfill this.
- **Environmental Ethics**: The ethical dilemma in international relations revolves around the **responsibility of developed nations**, which have historically contributed to climate change, and the need for global cooperation.
  - Despite agreements like the **Paris Agreement**, disparities in economic capacity and historical emissions create challenges in ensuring fairness and accountability in climate action.
- **Migration and Refugees**: Nations face ethical challenges in **balancing the protection of refugees with national security concerns**, requiring humane immigration policies.
- **Power Imbalances in Global Governance**: Global institutions often **favor wealthier nations,** raising ethical questions about **legitimacy and fairness in decision-making,** marginalizing smaller countries.

Way Forward

- **Universal Human Rights and Cultural Relativism**: Foster cross-cultural dialogue to balance human rights frameworks with cultural diversity, ensuring core principles are upheld globally.
- **Sovereignty and Humanitarian Intervention**: Establish clear criteria for intervention, focusing on legitimacy, multilateral oversight, and conflict prevention, while strengthening the **Responsibility to Protect (R2P) framework.**
- **Role of the International Criminal Court (ICC)**: Encourage wider ratification of the **Rome Statute**, ensure unbiased case selection, and enhance enforcement through stronger international cooperation.
- **Global Inequality**: Reform global trade to eliminate barriers, expand debt relief programs, and ensure funding for **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**.
- **Migration and Refugees**: Promote humane immigration policies, international burden-sharing, and address root causes like conflict and **climate change.**
- **Power Imbalances in Global Governance**: Democratize global institutions, giving smaller nations more representation and fostering transparent, equitable decision-making, while strengthening South-South cooperation.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)

Mains

Q. Strength, Peace and Security are considered to be the pillars of International Relations. Elucidate. (2017)