Mains Practice Question

Q. What is cognitive dissonance and how does it affect ethical decision making? How can you overcome cognitive dissonance and act in accordance with your moral values? (150 words)

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Approach

- Start your answer with a brief definition of Cognitive dissonance. You can provide some examples also for better understanding.
- Discuss how cognitive dissonance can affect ethical decision making and discuss the strategies to overcome cognitive dissonance.
- Conclude with a positive note.

Introduction

Cognitive dissonance is a psychological theory that refers to the discomfort that arises when a person holds two contradictory beliefs, attitudes, or values, or when their behavior conflicts with their beliefs and values. For example, if you believe that smoking is bad for your health, but you still smoke, you are likely to experience cognitive dissonance.

Body

Cognitive dissonance in ethical decision making can lead to:

- **Ethical Dilemmas:** When faced with a moral dilemma, individuals may experience cognitive dissonance if their chosen course of action conflicts with their deeply held ethical values. This can result in inner turmoil and discomfort.
- **Rationalization:** People may engage in rationalization to reduce cognitive dissonance, justifying their unethical behavior or minimizing its significance.
    - For example, someone might downplay the harm caused by their actions to alleviate the discomfort of their moral transgressions.
- **Selective Information Processing:** Individuals may actively seek out or pay more attention to information that supports their unethical behavior while ignoring or dismissing information that challenges it.
    - This selective information processing helps them maintain consistency in their beliefs and actions.

To overcome cognitive dissonance and act in accordance with one's moral values, the following strategies must be considered:

- **Honest Self-Analysis**: Recognizing and addressing that guilty feeling is the first step in resolving cognitive dissonance. By honestly analyzing the source of this discomfort, you can gain insight into the areas where your actions may be misaligned with your values.
- **Seeking Feedback:** Getting input from others who share your moral values can be highly beneficial. They can offer different perspectives, challenge your rationalizations, and provide constructive criticism. It's important to approach this feedback with an open mind, as it can help

you see your actions more clearly.

- **Learning from Mistakes:** Acknowledging and taking responsibility for your mistakes and failures is crucial. Denying or justifying them only perpetuates cognitive dissonance. Instead, learning from these experiences can lead to personal growth and help you avoid repeating the same errors in the future.
- **Informed Decision-Making:** It's essential to base your decisions on well-reasoned, ethical principles rather than biases or emotional reactions. Being open to new information and evidence, and being willing to adjust your beliefs or actions when they are proven to be wrong or harmful, is a key aspect of ethical decision-making.
- **Reinforcing Moral Values:** Regularly reminding yourself of your moral values and principles can help keep them at the forefront of your decision-making process. Reflect on how your actions align with these values and consider the positive impact they can have on yourself and others.

Conclusion

Cognitive dissonance isn't always a negative phenomenon. Sometimes, it can motivate us to act in accordance with our moral values, especially when we feel guilty or regretful about our actions. For example, if you cheat on a test and feel bad about it, you might decide to study harder next time and avoid cheating.

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