



Mains Practice Question

Q. What do you understand by 'conscience' and 'moral reasoning'? How do they influence ethical decision-making in public life? (150 words)

03 Apr, 2025 GS Paper 4 Theoretical Questions

Approach

- Introduce the answer by briefing about the relevance of conscience and moral reasoning.
- Define conscience and moral reasoning and highlight differences between them.
- Give their Influence on Ethical Decision-Making in Public Life
- Conclude suitably.

Introduction

In the realm of ethics, especially in public life, decision-making is not merely a matter of legality or policy but also one of moral responsibility. Two key internal faculties that guide such ethical decision-making are **conscience** and **moral reasoning**.

Body

'Conscience'

Conscience is the inner voice or internal moral compass that guides an individual in distinguishing right from wrong. It often manifests as feelings of guilt, shame, or pride, depending on whether one's actions align with their moral values.

- It is **intuitive, subjective**, and often **emotionally charged**.
- Thinkers like **Immanuel Kant** referred to it as a "moral faculty" that functions as an inner court.

'Moral Reasoning'

Moral reasoning is the **rational and deliberative process** of evaluating what is right or wrong in a given situation by **applying** ethical principles, norms, and logical analysis.

- It is **cognitive, objective**, and **situationally responsive**.
- It allows a person to weigh competing values or duties, especially in complex dilemmas.

Differences Between Conscience and Moral Reasoning

| Aspect | Conscience | Moral Reasoning |
|--------|----------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Nature | Emotional, intuitive | Rational, analytical |
| Basis | Internalised values | Ethical theories, principles, logic |

| | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| Role in decision-making | Acts as an internal compass | Helps resolve ethical dilemmas logically |
| Limitation | May be biased or underdeveloped | May become over-analytical or detached emotionally |

Influence on Ethical Decision-Making in Public Life:

Ethical decision-making in public life demands **both conscience and moral reasoning** to ensure just, fair, and effective governance.

- **Strengthening Personal Integrity**
 - A civil servant driven by conscience is less likely to be swayed by unethical orders, corruption, or political pressure.
 - **Example: Satyendra Dubey**, an engineer, exposed corruption in the Golden Quadrilateral project despite the risks—an act rooted in moral conscience.
- **Balancing Competing Values**
 - Public servants often face dilemmas—such as **transparency vs national security, law vs compassion, or order vs liberty**.
 - Moral reasoning helps weigh such conflicting values through frameworks like **utilitarianism, deontology, or virtue ethics**.
 - **Example:** Deciding whether to forcibly remove protestors to maintain law and order requires careful moral reasoning, balancing rights with responsibilities.
- **Promoting Rule of Law with Humanism**
 - Conscience prevents rigid application of laws and enables empathetic decisions.
 - **Example:** A police officer showing discretion in handling a poor street vendor rather than imposing heavy fines shows the influence of conscience.
- **Building Public Trust**
 - Citizens expect not only efficient but **ethical governance**.
 - Conscientious and morally reasoned decisions enhance **legitimacy, accountability, and transparency**.

Conclusion

An ethical public servant must therefore cultivate **both a sensitive conscience and a robust framework of moral reasoning**. The real test of a public servant lies not just in doing things right, but in doing the **right things the right way**—a task only possible when both the **heart (conscience)** and **mind (moral reasoning)** work in tandem