



Mains Practice Question

Q. What do you understand by conscience? Discuss the different conceptions of conscience given by moral thinkers. (250 words)

25 Mar, 2019 GS Paper 4 Theoretical Questions

Approach:

- Give a brief idea of conscience
- Bring out the different approaches of philosophers on the concept of conscience
- Conclude with how idea of conscience is important

Answer:

Introduction

- Conscience is a faculty of the mind that motivates us to act morally—or at least according to our most deeply held values.
- Conscience is knowledge of ourselves, or awareness of moral principles we have committed to, or assessment of ourselves or motivation to act that comes from within us (as opposed to external impositions).

Body

Different conceptions of conscience given by moral thinkers:

- Greek and Roman thought emphasized reason and knowledge in making moral decisions, a tradition beginning with **Aristotle's ideas** about the development of virtuous character and wisdom through reason and practice.
- **St. Bonaventure** and **St. Aquinas** wrote of **synderesis** (a divine spark of moral knowledge) which could only come to mind if it had been cultivated by reason and contemplation to overcome the distortions and corruption of social conditioning.
- In the 17th century, **Spinoza** similarly wrote that it was necessary to practice and develop reasons to transcend socially conditioned emotions and perceptions.
- **Immanuel Kant** also regarded critical reasoning as an important element of conscience, believing that moral truth could be evaluated objectively in light of his 'categorical imperative.'
- **John Locke** wrote about how a moral conscience might oppose the laws of the state, and **Thomas Hobbes** insisted that opinions based on conscience could easily be wrong or in contradiction to other people's consciences. So, these and other philosophers also advocated for a '**critical conscience**'—and some skepticism about the dictates of conscience in general.
- **Darwin** hypothesized that **conscience evolved to resolve conflicts** between instincts, such as between instincts for self-preservation and instincts to protect and cooperate with other human beings.
- **Sigmund Freud** analyzed **conscience as an effect of the super-ego**; as we grow up, natural instincts such as aggression and sexual desire must be frequently frustrated, and even punished, by parents and peers, in order for us to develop into well-adjusted members of society. This process creates the super-ego, where we internalize the beliefs, implicit or explicit, about right and

wrong in our culture and the super-ego causes us to feel guilt or anxiety when we violate them.

Conclusion

- Thus conscience is not an objective morality, since it is obvious that two people's consciences or religions can dictate opposing moralities—such as pro-choice and pro-life in the abortion debate
- Conscience is a necessary trait of character for public functionaries for ensuring ethical action in the spheres where there are no legal obligations upon them to act in a particular way.

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