



Mains Practice Question

Q. Ethical relativism suggests morality is relative to a particular culture or society. Discuss. **(150 words)**

13 Jun, 2024 GS Paper 4 Theoretical Questions

Approach

- Introduce by defining Ethical Relativism
- Give Arguments in Favour of Ethical Relativism
- Delve into Arguments Against Ethical Relativism
- Conclude in a balanced manner.

Introduction

Ethical relativism is a philosophical theory that argues **moral judgments are not absolute or universal**, but rather relative to the norms and values of a particular culture or society.

- This perspective **challenges the idea of objective moral principles** that apply to everyone, everywhere.

Arguments For Ethical Relativism:

- **Cultural Diversity and Respect:** Different societies have developed their own unique cultural traditions, belief systems, and value systems over centuries of evolution.
 - Ethical relativism acknowledges and respects this diversity.
 - **Example:** The **practice of polygamy**, which is accepted in some cultures but condemned as immoral in others.
- **Changing Moral Norms and Social Evolution:** Moral values and ethical principles are not static; they evolve and change within societies over time, influenced by social, political, and technological developments.
 - Ethical relativism **allows for this adaptation and evolution of moral norms** based on changing social and cultural contexts.
 - **Example:** The **gradual acceptance of same-sex relationships and LGBTQ+ rights**, which were previously condemned or criminalized.
- **Avoiding Moral Imperialism:** Ethical relativism prevents the imposition of one culture's moral values on another, **promoting respect for cultural autonomy and self-determination**.
 - It avoids the perception of moral imperialism or **cultural hegemony**, which can be seen as a form of oppression or **neo-colonialism**.
- **Limits of Universal Principles:** Ethical Relativism realizes that defining universal moral principles can be challenging. What constitutes "**harm**" or "**respect**" might differ across cultures.
 - **Example:** **Capital punishment** is considered barbaric in some cultures, but a form of justice in others.

Arguments Against Ethical Relativism:

- **Cultural Practices vs. Universal Wrongs:** Some cultural practices, like **female genital mutilation** or **child marriage**, violate basic human rights. Ethical relativism risks justifying

harmful traditions.

- **Overlooking Internal Dissent and Diversity:** Ethical relativism may **overlook or suppress dissenting voices** and alternative perspectives within cultures, stifling individual freedom and moral agency.
 - **Example: Feminist movements** challenging traditional cultural norms and advocating for social change within their societies.
- **Moral Nihilism and Ethical Subjectivism:** Taken to an extreme, ethical relativism can lead to **moral nihilism**, where no objective moral truths or principles are recognized, and ethical decisions become purely subjective and arbitrary.
 - **Example:** Individuals or groups justifying harmful or unethical actions based solely on their personal beliefs or cultural preferences, without any objective moral foundation.
- **Moral Inconsistency and Hypocrisy:** Cultures or societies may selectively apply relativistic principles, accepting certain universal moral standards while **rejecting others based on cultural convenience or self-interest**.
 - **Example:** A society that condemns certain human rights violations but tolerates others, such as **discrimination against minority groups**, based on cultural traditions or political expediency.
- **Lack of Moral Accountability:** Ethical relativism can undermine moral accountability and make it difficult to hold individuals or societies responsible for unethical actions.
 - **Example:** Leaders or governments justifying **atrocities or oppression by claiming they are consistent with their cultural values**, without being held accountable to universal moral standards.

Conclusion

Ethical relativism compels us to be mindful of cultural contexts. Yet, a commitment to **core moral values remains crucial**. Navigating this complex terrain requires a thoughtful approach that **respects cultural diversity while upholding universal ethical principles**

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