



## Mains Practice Question

Q. "Conscience is a necessary but insufficient guide for ethical conduct in public service." Discuss **(150 words)**

14 Nov, 2024 GS Paper 4 Theoretical Questions

### Approach

- Introduce the answer by defining conscience
- Give the role of Conscience in public service
- Delve into Challenges of Relying Solely on Conscience
- Conclude suitably.

### Introduction

**Conscience**, an **individual's internal sense of right and wrong**, is crucial for ethical decision-making, especially in public service.

- It **inspires integrity and self-discipline**. However, conscience alone can be insufficient due to **subjective biases, societal conditioning, and conflicts with established laws and ethical guidelines**.

### Body

#### Role of Conscience in Public Service:

- **Moral Compass for Integrity:** Conscience motivates public servants to make **morally sound decisions**, even in challenging environments.
  - For instance, **whistleblowers like Satyendra Dubey, who exposed corruption in the National Highways Authority of India**, acted from a strong sense of conscience, demonstrating courage and integrity.
- **Ensuring Public Trust:** A well-developed conscience helps officials prioritise public welfare over personal gains, thus strengthening public trust in governance.
  - Civil servants, such as **Armstrong Pame, who built a road in Manipur using personal funds** and community support, acted out of a conscientious commitment to serve people.

#### Challenges of Relying Solely on Conscience:

- **Subjectivity and Bias:** Conscience is influenced by **personal experiences, culture, and socialization**, leading to variability in ethical judgments.
  - For instance, **biases against certain social groups** could unconsciously affect a public servant's decisions, potentially leading to unfair treatment.
- **Conflict with Institutional Norms:** A conscience-driven decision may sometimes clash with rules or laws, leading to ethical dilemmas.
  - For example, **an officer might wish to avoid eviction of slum dwellers out of compassion**, but legal mandates may require such action. Here, personal values may

conflict with duties to enforce the law.

- **Inconsistent Ethical Standards:** What one person considers ethical might be deemed inappropriate by another.
  - This lack of consistency can **undermine fairness in public service**. Without clear institutional frameworks, one officer's conscience-based decision could contradict another's, leading to unpredictability.

### **Institutional Frameworks Complimenting Conscience to Guide Ethical Conduct:**

- **Codes of Conduct and Regulations:** Frameworks like the **Civil Services Conduct Rules and Right to Information Act** provide uniform ethical guidelines, ensuring that all public officials adhere to consistent standards of transparency and accountability.
- **Training and Ethical Frameworks:** Formal training on ethics helps public servants align personal conscience with professional standards.
  - The **Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration**, for example, conducts ethics training that instils core values, reducing reliance on subjective conscience alone.
- **Institutional Mechanisms for Accountability:** Bodies like the **Central Vigilance Commission (CVC) and Lokpal provide accountability**, deterring misuse of power that individual conscience may not address.

### **Conclusion**

While **conscience is a vital component of ethical behaviour in public service, relying solely on it is insufficient**. A comprehensive approach that combines personal morality with institutional **ethical frameworks, training, and accountability mechanisms** is essential to uphold fairness, transparency, and public trust.

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