



## Mains Practice Question

**Q.** Is conscience an infallible guide to ethical conduct, or is it shaped by social conditioning? Examine in the context of professional ethics for civil servants. **(150 words)**

13 Feb, 2025 GS Paper 4 Theoretical Questions

### Approach

- Introduce the answer by defining conscience
- Give arguments to Conscience as an Infallible Guide and as a Product of Social Conditioning
- Suggest Measures for Balancing Conscience and Ethical Frameworks in Civil Services
- Conclude with a good quote.

### Introduction

**Conscience** is the **internal moral compass** that helps individuals differentiate right from wrong. While some consider it an **infallible guide to ethical conduct**, others argue that it is **shaped by social, cultural, and institutional conditioning**.

### Body

#### Conscience as an Infallible Guide:

- **Innate Moral Sense:** Philosophers like **Immanuel Kant** argue that conscience is an **inherent faculty guiding moral actions** based on reason and universal principles.
  - Similarly, **John Rawls' Theory of Justice** emphasizes fairness and the "**original position**" concept, where moral and just principles are chosen behind a "**veil of ignorance**", ensuring impartiality and equity in decision-making.
- **Unbiased Ethical Judgment:** A well-developed conscience enables **civil servants to act with integrity, resisting external pressures** like corruption and political influence.
- **Examples from Administration:**
  - **E. Sreedharan's leadership in the Delhi Metro** project showcases unwavering ethical commitment despite bureaucratic challenges.
  - **Ashok Khemka's** stand against corruption reflects adherence to an internal moral code despite systemic pressures.
  - **T.N. Seshan** showcases moral courage in resisting political influence.

#### Conscience as a Product of Social Conditioning:

- **Influence of Cultural and Social Norms:** Values imbibed from **family, education, and society** shape an individual's moral outlook.
  - A civil servant raised in a system tolerant of nepotism may unconsciously justify favoritism.
- **Institutional and Professional Environment:** Bureaucratic culture, political influences, and peer behavior often condition ethical decision-making.

## Balancing Conscience and Ethical Frameworks in Civil Services:

- **Codified Ethics and Laws:** Civil servants should align their conscience with constitutional values, legal frameworks (**e.g., Conduct Rules**), and institutional ethics.
- **Training and Ethical Orientation:** Regular training on professional ethics (**e.g., through the LBSNAA and Mission Karmayogi**) helps refine conscience in line with democratic and humanitarian principles.
  - It should also include Cognitive biases awareness programmes.
- **Moral Courage and Reflection:** A well-informed conscience, **combined with self-reflection and peer discussions**, ensures ethical decision-making beyond personal biases.

## Conclusion

**“There is no pillow as soft as a clear conscience” - Glen Campbell.** While conscience is a critical guide to ethical conduct, **it is not entirely infallible due to social conditioning.** For civil servants, professional ethics must be shaped by constitutional morality, public service values, and continuous ethical training rather than personal or societal biases.

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