

UNIT 98 – UPSC - Ethical issues in international relations and funding

In modern International Relations, there is immense development in the revival of ethics. Since last many decades, scholars are concerned to converse the way that states, institutions and individuals must behave. The situation that exists among nations in their relations to one another is such that it entices even those who ordinarily come for short of sarcasm to say that there is no connection between ethics and international relations.



International ethics is described as the good that international interactions, exchanges, relations which can bring to all life forms and which can be harmed by unfriendly, hostile, uncooperative behaviours. In simple term, international ethics is an area of international relations theory which concerns the extent and scope of ethical obligations between states in an epoch of globalization.

International ethics offers understandings into how nations and other entities treat other nations and its people. Good acquaintance of international ethics provides people with insights to assess the good and harms, the rights and wrongs, which can occur in the international space. For example, the UN has been encouraging various principles of friendly and cooperative and peace related humanitarian international actions by all the member countries.

The community of nations which respect other nations and their interests can itself be harmed by the governing nations willing to enforce their interests and will on other poorer nations when poorer nations are reluctant to cooperate without being treated as equals. Various agencies of the UN by their presence and action in various countries, promote certain world-wide principles that surpass the boundaries of individual nations and the ethical principles pursued by individual nations.

International ethic is not just an ethic of some leading country, it is not simply an ethic of a powerful country having obligations towards others because of the power they have over others. International ethics may be elaborated as that which enables one to participate more actively in shaping and building good international community. The vision of international community that every country has and reality of an international community provides us with food for thought on

what ought to be the nature and purpose of investing in international relations to build an international community.

The challenges of international conflicts must be dealt in appropriate way to embark upon studying what international community promotes and builds, whether perpetual peace and justice provide the much needed foundation on the basis of which it can succeed.

Nations and multinational organizations expand their boundaries of national domestic arena to trade or interact with other nations and organizations. Every nation had its own focus, as nations accepted the production methods, technologies, political systems and legal systems from other nations, similar problems began to appear in almost every country. These were not regarded as shared problems that required joint action by all those affected by it. Each country was mainly responsible for problems occurring within it. But eventually, there is more interconnectedness between people and nations greater interdependence and greater shared responsibilities, which call on nations and other multinational organizations to act mutually. Joint action of international community becomes necessary. International ethics may be visualized as responding to this need for international action.

International ethics monitors international relations and tenacity of international conflicts. International ethics guides the international environmental effort to fight against ozone depletion, global warming which are collective problems and which require actions from numerous nations who are major contributors to forces generating such problems.

It is to identify that the power that human collectives have over nature and economic and social goods and services in the international spaces, it is easier to see how different organizations may be working at counter purposes or competitive purposes. It is also easy to see how and why harms may be done by one against another and without any hope of international justice. There are numerous issues which have profound ethical implications present in international spaces that people create or in which they participate in many different ways. International relations can easily flourish in a global system renewed continually by greater levels of sensitivity to international ethics.

Power and International Ethics:

It is generally observed that the world attention, gets itself focused on the most powerful nation, both domestically and internationally, a nation that is willing to force its powerful will on the world, taking into task any nation that challenged its authority and its interests. Many wars and conflicts are certainly caused by the unilateral moves of dominant nations against other nations that endangered its global interests. International ethics is influenced by different philosophies of international and national power and the way this power play its role. There are beliefs that power does not follow any rules and this reasoning and is extended to apply to international spaces and relations. In its so called “chaos” nature, this belief in power, particularly power not following any rules slants the global balance in favour of dominant nations and entities and is unfavourable to weak or developing nations and entities. It is true that the anarchy of a dominant power imposes its will on other nations and entities. Under such conventions, justice follows national boundaries without any space for international or global justice.

In contradiction of “anarchy” nature of power, that is, power which does not follow any rules, there is another belief that international power follows certain rules which provide an international order which is qualitatively different from the previous case of anarchy. Power that follows rules of international order is better than power that does not.

Philosophy of International Ethics:

(I) Realism and International Ethics

Realism concentrations on a single reality, international power: It is the power that one nation has to influence another nation directing and shaping its fortune in the direction it desires specifically into a kind of unspoken servitude of serving and protecting its interests at the cost of the other. In the international realm, realism embraces that the only thing that really matters is power, what power a country has. Other factor like morality, ethics, law, and political systems, legal systems, cultural systems are all irrelevant. The argument is raised that in international sphere, human nature is such that no one can be trusted and each seeks to dominate the other. Either one country will dominate the other or the other will try to dominate the first, so it is better to be the dominating or dominant country. The realist approach to international relations is to deny any role for common or shared ethics, and create an ethically neutral zone or an ethics free zone which can be filled by the power of one who is dominant.

Visibly others will perceive realist conception of international space, international relations based exclusively on the belief of power is quite unjust. There is nothing in realist conception that prevents someone from making an ethical assessment of the power motivation and the dominant actions of the prevailing country and be able to withstand such pressure and claim it to be unethical or unjust. For some people, the attempt to control other people and direct their destinies in the international sphere is objectionable and disheartening. There is a maxim that may be invoked implicitly, that power corrupts and that absolute power corrupts absolutely. When power is the only basis of international relations and international action, valuations will be blushed by such perceptions. It is established that realism considers the international sphere as a space where “anarchy” conquers and there are no ethical rules. This claims that there are no compulsory rules in the international sphere to which international relations are committed to follow and are questionable. If power is the only thing that works in international relations, then human rights violations or human dignity violations will continue to occur and there will be no control except a power greater than itself.

Chasing realism and realist policies will be harmful to common world with its common vision of a humane future for everyone. Realism is powerless of allowing such an achievement. Realism is an element for creation of a superpower and a relative independence or servitude as the case may be for others in relation to it. Currently only one country still retains the status of a superpower, and others are expected to follow its lead.

Realism does well in business as trade terms are set by the powerful against the weak to reflect the power imbalance and the power advantages. International ethics then, in so far realism is concerned is just the field of international trade wars and international war and peace and the requirement of having some kind of “international justice” dictated and dominated by the rule of the powerful country in the relation.

(II) Idealism and International Ethics:

Idealism stresses on “common interests” between nations, and not essentially at the power or power distance or at power balance. It builds the international sphere on the basis of idealist values that are of common interests to nations participating in any international issues and problems. It is said that idealism built on common interests seems to be stronger in power than unilateral power of realism and therefore can have capability to replace realism in thought, word and deed and as a philosophical thought. Idealism theory also create more lasting hopes of peace and of a emergent international sphere where mutual interests and common concerns are

addressed more sincerely in the spirit of pursuing human purposes. Thus, the rise of idealism holds out a promise, even though conflicts remain.

Idealism designates professional interests between nations as common interests and as good stand to build better, growing and mutually advantageous international relations. The growth of international and global market place and the increasing interdependence between nations are shown to be aiding and being supported by idealism. Human beings are capable of exhibiting high levels of idealism. In idealism, the international system, international order and the international sphere follow rules, laws and institutions. In idealism, ethics, morality, laws, legal systems, international institutions all have significant role. Thus idealism contrasts with realism which emphasized only power. International treaties, the UN organizations and the system, have pivotal role and supports idealism and idealist thinking endorses it. These provide international ethics guidance, even though it is voluntary, it has rational force of agreement and appeal to conscience to be accepted and guided by it.

Major challenges of Idealism are the dominant views of realism which holds that war is a necessary consequence easily justifiable by the powerful. International ethics has to guide and deal with how international power is used. International disparities infer that some nations have international power whereas others do not have. There may have been even historical injustices involved in the rise and fall of nations and their international power. It is important to realise international ethical sensitivities harnessing international power for international growth and development, peace and security.

There must be freedom of speech. Freedom of speech involves religion or world religions, the world press or international press and media, the education sectors, the cultural expressions, exchanges and products. Religions are powerful players in international relations and international peace and security. The international press has important role and can raise the issues on nations and their covert or overt activities, reveal uncomfortable or disgusting truths to the international publics. Analysis of international relations, international power are needed and it may be guided by rules of international media ethics which would be part of international ethics as well.

The cultural exchanges offer a mutual obligation of different culture and cultural differences and a welcome richness of diversity and social inclusion instead of the extensive social exclusion and discrimination. The education sectors provide the basis for sustainable societies and healthy international connectivity. The future of the world is determined by events in the education sector which spans internationally as people move to countries to gain access to education they desire for their future wellbeing.

In the realm of international ethics and international actions, Freedom of Information is necessary. There must be good international and global flow of information. Primary actions and activities in international space are the issues of technology, particularly information technology and to put internationally and nationally by individuals and countries. Information is useful for countries. Various international receptionists can control the flow of information. Information technologies and their use also may be directed by ideas of international ethics. Information technologies not only control the availability and flow of information, they also make it easier for nations and people to communicate suitably, easily, without any government or individuals interfering in their “private” conversations. Obviously, this may intimidate some as it is possible to carry out

“suspicious activity” from the supposedly safe borders of another country against some other country.

Another important factor in international ethics is the development of scientific Research Agendas and Projects. Science has been a teamster of global developments. Every country has its group of scientific advisers to offer best science advice to their governments and these are in constant international and global contact with their counter parts in exchanging ideas and scientific research trends and information that could be strategically employed. International ethics may be prejudiced and driven by developments in the scientific research fields. Different research fields have different circumstances and so research ethics may be more circumstantial and international ethics then follows various contextual offerings and multidimensional. This is not just a matter of its scope but also of the very nature of international ethics that it is continually challenged by global research in various frameworks.

Constructivism and International Ethics:

Constructivism focuses on the matters such as foreign policy, diplomatic initiatives to shape international relations and the international sphere where a country has trustworthy influence. In these matters, the focus is on domestic politics and how it forms foreign policy with goals. Every nation and every state create a sense of national identity in various ways and develop it through historical and cultural celebrations and means. Thus national identity is constructed and it in turn is said to influence the way the nations interact. Fundamentally, constructivism allows for influence of national identities and its constructions on the international sphere.

International sphere can also be a place where various identities can liquefy into more humane indulgent between people through the ‘give and take’ of identity respects and exchanges. Constructivism demonstrates that nations resist any danger to their identities, nationalism, national independence that are perceived. This works against attempts to make the world a better place or to change world systems. These efforts by other nations will be resisted if national identity is not valued. Constructivism gives more power to individual nations through its focus on national identity which is politically a more powerful tool to having less to do with other nations in the international sphere than with what furthers and promotes its own identity.

In present scenario, there is increase of identity politics and political power arising out of it harnessed by interested parties for their own advantage. National identities based on religious domains span across countries and define international relations. Religious baseless conflict may accelerate and cause problems not only in the international sphere but within a nation itself. It also leads to violence and anger instead of the spurs of peace and humane relations. Identity tensions will be strongly felt and whatever feeds identity tensions and forms them is far from allowing people to be truly free and open in shaping the one world destiny of all of human kind. Cultural identities may not all be good, but they are to be respected even when critically evaluated for their role in determining international spaces, international sphere and international freedoms.

Cosmopolitanism and International Ethics:

Cosmopolitanism shares views of idealism, which entails do the right thing. The right thing to be done is to behave as person would want others to behave. It focuses on how people interact in a global society. It embraces that since people interact with other countries, therefore they have a moral responsibility to treat people of that country morally as moral people. Hence the prescription in cosmopolitanism is to “do the right thing”. Cosmopolitanism thus empowers international ethics and the development of “global values and ethics” fully.

Cosmopolitanism claims for following morally lawful behaviour. Where rules and laws do not exist, it needs that people come together and negotiate the rules and laws that are ethical to follow and follow them in international relations. Cosmopolitanism welcome people of all origins and identities without any discrimination or treatment of them as means to some ends. It will give reputation to people, their freedom and rights rather than dominance of nation states. It is certainly capable of universality in thought, word and deed. In simple term, cosmopolitanism focuses on the international community as having an important role on determining what a country should or should not do morally. Such developments may be resisted by nations who feel they are at the receiving end of world opinion or world politics and which select their national identity and sovereignty sentiments.

The size of the nation with respect to population appears less of an influencing factor as the population is contained by migration policies inhibiting or prohibiting international movements for economic opportunities. It poses challenge in the future years. Nations with older generations and few young people will experience an imbalance of the need for labour. So, nations with younger generations and less older generations will also experience an imbalance. International policies favour movement of talented and highly capable populations. Various levels of cultural exchanges also occurs as people harbour their culture with them and learn other people's language and culture as well. This enables to develop international understanding. People move across national boundaries and their international interaction and experience provides a dimension to international relations guided by international ethics.

Nations competition in the international space and national advantages are the drivers of the space of international ethics. National shortcomings will work against the expanded role of that nation in international ethics, while national advantages facilitate its development. It is easier to grasp the international problems and the ethical issues related with international problems when visualizing various nations competing with one another for natural resources, competing for markets, competing for investments, competing for talents, competing for technology and education.

Constrained Choices and International Ethics:

International ethics also control choices of nation in the international sphere, but evidently choices are constrained rather than free. The choices may be constrained by the necessity of pleasing the domestic political support. The choices may be inhibited by the identity politics. The choices may be constrained by power equations and balances.

Several practical restraints may also be present, assuredly economic constraints and national interest constraint will not be missing when choices have to be made. Many experts squabbled that preference is given for national interests when it is a choice of national interests versus global interests. While accepting in general that a country's goals must be defended as ethically that means right thing to do. A country's goals and interests are several and may be in conflict within themselves without any transparency and more confusion. It is no doubt that morality infers choice between two or more alternative states of action. It is argued that if the practical necessities or constraints are such that they concern the survival or extinction of a state or its identity, any such constraints make morality or ethics, or law or political systems, immaterial.

There is an issue of equality of Life and International Ethics. All humans must be given equal moral weight. This viewpoint must be accepted at global level. No preference is given by

governments or by anybody else to the welfare of citizens of that country. There are no differentiating factors acknowledged by such governments that distinguish between the welfare of its citizens and those belonging to another country. Everyone has equal rights. Everyone is treated equally in equal respects. In such cases, it becomes meaningful to make sacrifices for others. It is generally observed that people hardly sacrifice themselves for even their close ones in present scenario. But people sacrificing themselves for others in the international space are truly worthy. Respect for life should guide international ethics.

International ethics must be pursued to compete ecological System: Nations are competing for ecological system advantages to help the environment to preserve its natural capacity and vitality. This will secure for nations an ecological and economic advantage. At the same time, they are not ready to bear much burden for the climate change action which can impede economic progression in short term. Ethical reflection on the natural environment has actually become international and global phenomena. Various perceptions are available from each of these fields for critical reflection on harms that human beings pose through daily activities.

Currently, all nations have made vision plans for long term future foreseeing the changes necessary say for 2020, which have domestic and international implications and effects. All such vision plans by several countries are drivers of international ethics. These promises to be realized and fulfilled.

Interdependence, Cooperation and Collaboration must be judged to maintain international ethics. In the obscurities of dominant countries, other countries have evolved certain international cooperation and collaboration treaties for several reasons. It is well recognized that one country emerged as a super power and have a dominant role in international relations between nations. International cooperation and collaboration are a measure of countries interdependence with other nations. Such international cooperation provides a measure of international order between them. International ethics in the framework of cooperation and collaboration are based on recognition of their mutual interests with each other. There may be several fields in which international cooperation has worked well and thus provides the basis for further cooperation and collaboration. Interdependence between nations through cooperation and teamwork, can provide the basis for a “law of peace” to be established for relations between people.

Diplomatic Relations and Understanding is also major drivers of International ethics. Diplomatic initiatives are always available for nations to resolve their differences and make agreements that ensure peace and security and also to further their rights and interests and to share duties and responsibilities. The movement of people can be eased by the diplomatic presence and provides another driver for international relations and international ethics which guides it. Each country may have its own interests in another country and or in promoting ties with other countries. In each country recognizing the other, there is the “international law of peace”, even though it may not resolve all conflicts between nations. A rule of reason can triumph under such circumstances.

Defence and Military Enterprise: Each nation use the power to achieve its global interests. International ethics can also be considered as the use of power by one country against another country to accomplish its international goals and protecting its national interests. International conflict and wars are still a probability and it may even be impacted by the defence related establishments which have international reach and influence. International conventions on

“international law of war” may be binding only when international community analyses and insists on it.

The Poverty and Wealth of Nations: Nations who want to become wealthy, have to reckon with poverty which hampers them from being active and responsible international actors involved and partaking in emergent international issues. Poverty may be a national issue.

Lessening poverty is major issue at international level. “International law of justice” may be invoked to have nations pledge to reduce and eradicate poverty wherever it is found, through responsible joint actions. The UN framework on Millennium Development Goals calls on nations to reduce poverty to half and continue to decrease poverty around the world. Poverty measures, poverty indices, are available to guide policy. Several international NGOs involved in this field to eliminate poverty have frameworks to make decisions and choices which offers other field of international ethics and can drive the values of global solidarity and justice.

The Inequality of Nations: At global stage, there is growing inequalities. Inequalities lead to certain conflicts which may be domestic in origin or international, but they are indicators of troubling trends. In an unequal world, expectations of equity, international equity are high. Any international action must be aimed at benefiting the least advantaged nations more than that would be expected for a most advantaged nation. Otherwise, there would not be an incentive for less advantaged or least advantaged nations to participate in international actions. In cases of such failures, only those international actions which are driven by prevailing nations will be carried through creating and endorsing a more divided world with even a greater possibility of future conflict.

International Ethics with respect to economic, Social and Environmental Frameworks: There are a number of frameworks available for making decisions concerning international actions which have economic, social, and environmental consequences and impact over future generations. There is a gap between any system of global and international values and international ethics on the ground. This is because of the broadening gap in ground realities between nations and international organizations due to levels of difficult conflict. The frameworks are evolved to provide a way to resolve the conflict and they are useful to deal with numerous conflicting ideas on international ethics.

For instance, the framework provided under UN agencies, the framework of Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the framework of Universal Declaration of Human Genome and Human Rights, the various international declarations and conventions which offer the necessary framework for supportive and collaborative international action to resolve international issues.

There are several global institutions concerned with the global economic order, others with the global information order, still others with the global environmental regimes or order. Each of them provides frameworks within which its members are expected to take decisions that are respected and supported by virtue of the frameworks agreed upon.

To summarize, there is vast literature that demonstrates ethics as an important determinant for good understanding of international relations. International relations must forestall serious and sometimes dangerous conflicts between nations or groups. Ethnic and ideological differences can explode into major conflicts. The threatening complexity of competing narratives distinguishing national and non-state actors alike disrupts the relative tranquillity of formal dialogue on

ideological differences. Cycles of ethnic conflict, civil war shape clashes in ways where formal dialogue may never progress or deter. Many professionals have stated that matters of equity and justice, of human dignity in the face of adversity and terror, are to be judged morally and not merely administratively (Bietz (1979). It is significant that moral issues in international relations must be shown.