UPSC MAINS · ANSWER PRACTICE

Essay · Essay

Best for an individual is not necessarily best for the

society

जो किसी व्यक्ति के लिए
सर्वोत्तम है, वह आवश्यक नहीं कि

समाज के लिए भी सर्वोत्तम हो।

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SUBJECT

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MARKS

125

WORD LIMIT

~1200 words

Answer Hint

Individual interest and collective welfare, individualism versus collectivism, social contract, public good, ethical decision-making, environmental sustainability, economic inequality, constitutional morality, role of government, social responsibility, balancing personal freedom with social welfare

Model Answer

Introduction

Human beings are individuals with unique aspirations, needs and ambitions, but they are also members of a larger social community. Every person seeks happiness, prosperity, freedom and personal fulfilment. However, when individual interests conflict with the welfare of others, the pursuit of personal benefit may create social costs. An action that appears advantageous to one individual may weaken public institutions, deepen inequality, damage the environment or undermine collective well-being.

For instance, an individual may benefit financially from evading taxes, but widespread tax evasion deprives society of resources needed for healthcare, education and infrastructure. Similarly, a factory may increase its profits by discharging untreated waste into a river, but the resulting pollution harms entire communities. These examples

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demonstrate that individual benefit and social welfare are not always identical.

The statement does not imply that individual aspirations are unimportant. Rather, it emphasises that personal choices must be evaluated in a broader social context. A just and prosperous society requires a balance between individual freedom and collective responsibility.

Body

1. Understanding Individual Interest and Social Welfare

Individual interest refers to actions intended to promote a person's well-being, preferences, security or material gains. Social welfare, in contrast, concerns the overall well-being of the community, including fairness, public health, social harmony, environmental sustainability and equal opportunity.

These interests may complement each other, but they can also conflict.

- **Personal gain versus public cost:** An individual may profit from an activity whose harmful consequences are borne by society.
- **Short-term benefit versus long-term welfare:** A choice that produces immediate rewards may create lasting social or environmental damage.
- **Private freedom versus public responsibility:** Individual liberty must be exercised with due regard for the rights of others.
- **Unequal distribution of benefits:** Actions that benefit a privileged group may impose disproportionate burdens on vulnerable communities.

The distinction is important because society is an interconnected system. The consequences of individual actions often extend beyond the person making the decision. Therefore, the ethical assessment of an action must consider both its private benefits and its wider implications.

2. Why What Benefits an Individual May Harm Society

A. The problem of negative externalities

A negative externality occurs when an individual's or organisation's activity imposes costs on others without adequately accounting for them.

For example, excessive use of private vehicles may provide convenience to individuals but contribute to congestion, air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. Similarly, industrial pollution may reduce production costs while increasing public expenditure on healthcare and environmental

restoration.

In such cases, private decisions do not fully reflect their social costs. Appropriate regulation, environmental standards and economic incentives are needed to align individual choices with collective welfare.

B. The tragedy of the commons

When individuals independently pursue their interests in a shared resource, the resource may be depleted.

Overfishing, excessive groundwater extraction and overgrazing illustrate this problem. Each individual may benefit from extracting more resources, but when everyone behaves similarly, the shared resource deteriorates.

The result is a collective loss even though each participant may have acted rationally from a narrow personal perspective.

C. Competition without ethical boundaries

Competition can encourage innovation and efficiency. However, when personal success becomes the sole objective, it may encourage cheating, exploitation, corruption or the suppression of fair competition.

For example, a business that underpays workers or ignores workplace safety may gain a short-term competitive advantage. Yet such practices undermine labour dignity, increase social insecurity and damage trust in markets.

D. Unequal access to opportunities

When influential individuals or groups use their advantages to secure disproportionate benefits, others may be denied fair opportunities. Nepotism, monopolistic practices and preferential access to public resources can weaken social mobility and public confidence.

Thus, unrestricted pursuit of individual advantage can produce outcomes that are harmful to the larger community.

3. The Philosophical Foundations of the Individual-Society Relationship

The relationship between personal interests and collective welfare has been debated by philosophers for centuries.

A. John Stuart Mill and individual liberty

John Stuart Mill defended individual freedom and argued that coercive restrictions on liberty require justification, particularly to prevent harm to others. His harm principle offers a useful way to balance personal

autonomy with social responsibility.

An individual should generally remain free to make personal choices, but that freedom cannot automatically justify actions that cause significant harm to others.

B. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the social contract

Rousseau's social contract emphasised the relationship between individual citizens and the collective political community. Legitimate social arrangements must consider the common good rather than merely the private interests of powerful individuals.

This perspective highlights why citizens accept certain common rules: cooperation and shared institutions can protect interests that isolated individuals cannot secure independently.

C. Mahatma Gandhi and trusteeship

Gandhi's concept of trusteeship encouraged those possessing wealth and resources to regard them as carrying social responsibilities. Wealth creation was not inherently objectionable, but its use should consider the welfare of others.

This idea offers an ethical framework for responsible business, philanthropy and inclusive economic development.

D. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and social democracy

Ambedkar stressed the importance of liberty, equality and fraternity. Individual freedom cannot be meaningful when social structures deny people equal dignity or opportunity.

His perspective suggests that a society must protect individual rights while actively addressing social exclusion and structural inequality.

Together, these ideas demonstrate that individual liberty and collective welfare need not be enemies. The challenge is to establish principles and institutions that enable both to flourish.

4. Economic Development: Private Profit and Public Welfare

Markets and entrepreneurship play a vital role in generating employment, innovation and economic growth. Individuals pursuing economic opportunities can contribute significantly to society. However, economic activity produces socially beneficial outcomes only when appropriate institutions and ethical standards guide it.

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For instance, a company that invests in research, provides fair wages and develops useful products can create both private wealth and public value. In contrast, a company that exploits workers, avoids taxes or damages the environment may privatise its profits while transferring its costs to society.

The distinction can be addressed through:

- **Fair taxation:** Ensuring that individuals and corporations contribute appropriately to public services.
- **Corporate social responsibility:** Encouraging businesses to consider their social and environmental impacts.
- **Competition policy:** Preventing monopolies and protecting consumers from exploitative practices.
- **Labour protection:** Safeguarding fair wages, workplace safety and workers' dignity.
- **Responsible investment:** Promoting economic activity that supports long-term social and environmental sustainability.

India's constitutional commitment to social and economic justice provides a broad framework for balancing economic freedom with public welfare. The objective is not to suppress private enterprise, but to ensure that prosperity is generated and distributed in ways that strengthen society.

5. Environmental Sustainability: A Clear Example of Conflicting Interests

Environmental protection illustrates particularly clearly why individual benefit may conflict with collective welfare.

An individual may find it convenient to dispose of waste improperly, consume excessive resources or use polluting fuels. A business may increase short-term profits by avoiding environmental safeguards. However, the cumulative consequences include polluted air and water, biodiversity loss, climate change and public health risks.

The benefits of environmentally harmful behaviour may be immediate and private, while its costs are dispersed across society and future generations.

A sustainable approach requires:

- Responsible consumption and reduced waste.
- Enforcement of the polluter-pays principle.
- Protection of forests, rivers and biodiversity.
- Investment in clean energy and sustainable transport.

- Intergenerational equity in the use of natural resources.

The principle of intergenerational justice is especially important. Present generations do not possess an unlimited moral entitlement to exhaust resources that future generations will need.

Consequently, responsible environmental behaviour requires individuals, businesses and governments to consider consequences beyond immediate personal advantage.

6. Public Health and Collective Responsibility

Public health is another domain where individual decisions can affect the wider community.

Personal lifestyle choices may have predominantly individual consequences, but some health-related decisions also create broader risks. For example, irresponsible antibiotic use contributes to antimicrobial resistance, while the spread of infectious diseases can affect people beyond those initially exposed.

Public health emergencies may therefore require cooperation, accurate information and proportionate collective measures.

At the same time, the pursuit of public welfare must respect individual dignity and rights. Restrictions should be evidence-based, necessary, proportionate and subject to appropriate oversight.

This balance demonstrates that collective welfare should not become an excuse for unlimited state control. Ethical governance must protect society while respecting individual autonomy.

7. Constitutional Democracy and the Balance of Rights and Duties

A democratic society recognises individual rights while acknowledging that citizens live within a shared political and social framework.

The Indian Constitution protects fundamental rights, including equality before the law and freedoms guaranteed under Article 19, subject to constitutionally permitted reasonable restrictions. These protections prevent collective interests from becoming a justification for arbitrary interference in individual liberty.

At the same time, constitutional provisions and institutions promote public welfare, social justice and responsible citizenship.

Fundamental Duties under Article 51A encourage citizens to promote harmony, safeguard the environment, protect public property and develop scientific temper.

This balance has several implications:

- The state must protect individual rights and prevent unjustified restrictions.
- Citizens must exercise their freedoms without violating the rights of others.
- Public policies should pursue collective welfare through constitutional means.
- Majority preferences cannot automatically override fundamental rights.
- Individual interests should not receive unfair priority merely because their holders possess greater wealth or influence.

Constitutional democracy thus seeks neither unrestricted individualism nor unlimited collectivism. It aims to establish a framework in which individual dignity and social responsibility reinforce each other.

8. The Importance of Individual Freedom

The argument that individual interests may conflict with social welfare must not be interpreted as a justification for sacrificing individuals to an undefined collective good.

Individual freedom is essential for creativity, innovation, personal development and democratic participation. Society benefits when people can express dissent, pursue meaningful occupations, develop different ideas and make choices about their lives.

Excessive collectivism can suppress diversity, restrict legitimate freedoms and enable authoritarian rule. Governments may invoke public welfare to silence critics or discriminate against minorities.

Therefore, the relationship between individual and collective interests must be governed by certain safeguards:

- Fundamental rights must be protected.
- Restrictions on freedom must have a legitimate and proportionate justification.
- Minority rights must not be sacrificed to majority convenience.
- Collective decisions should be transparent and democratically accountable.
- Individuals must have access to remedies when public authorities act unjustly.

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A society becomes stronger when it protects individual autonomy while preventing the misuse of freedom to harm others.

9. Building a Balance Between Individual and Collective Welfare

Achieving harmony between personal aspirations and public welfare requires action at multiple levels.

At the individual level: People should practise empathy, honesty, self-restraint and civic responsibility. Everyday choices, such as respecting traffic rules, avoiding waste and paying taxes honestly, contribute to collective well-being.

At the institutional level: Organisations should adopt transparent procedures, fair employment practices and accountability mechanisms. Ethical conduct must be encouraged rather than penalised.

At the governmental level: Effective regulation should address market failures, protect vulnerable groups and provide essential public goods. Policies must be designed through evidence, consultation and constitutional safeguards.

At the community level: Cooperation through local institutions, voluntary organisations and citizen groups can address common problems that individuals cannot solve independently.

At the international level: Climate change, pandemics and global economic instability require countries to cooperate rather than pursue narrow national gains at the expense of others.

The ultimate goal is to create conditions in which socially responsible choices are practical and rewarding, while harmful conduct is appropriately discouraged.

Conclusion

The statement that what is best for an individual is not necessarily best for society highlights the limitations of narrow self-interest. Personal choices occur within an interconnected social system, where private gains can sometimes produce public costs. Environmental degradation, corruption, inequality and the misuse of shared resources demonstrate the consequences of ignoring this interdependence.

Nevertheless, collective welfare cannot be pursued by disregarding individual rights. Human dignity, freedom and diversity remain essential foundations of a just society. The real challenge is to create institutions and ethical frameworks that reconcile legitimate personal aspirations with

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the common good.

A mature society does not demand that individuals abandon their ambitions; it encourages them to pursue those ambitions responsibly. When entrepreneurship creates useful employment, freedom respects the rights of others and prosperity supports social justice, individual success becomes a source of collective progress.

Ultimately, the best social order is one in which individuals can flourish without undermining the well-being of others. Personal fulfilment and social progress become mutually reinforcing when guided by empathy, justice, accountability and a shared sense of responsibility.

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