Ethics & Morality · GS - IV

Edward Snowden, a computer expert and former CIA administrator, released confidential Government documents to the press about the existence of Government surveillance programmes. According to many legal experts and the US Government, his action violated the Espionage act of 1971, which identified the leak of State secret as an act of treason. Yet, despite the fact that he broke the law, Snowden argued that he had a moral obligation to act. He gave a justification for his “whistle blowing” by stating that he had a duty “to inform the public as to that which is done in there name and that which is done against them.” According to Snowden, the Government’s violation of privacy had to be exposed regardless of legality since more substantive issues of social action and public morality were involved here. Many agreed with Snowden. Few argued that he broke the law and compromised national security, for which he should be held accountable.

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Do you agree that Snowden’s actions were ethically justified even if legally prohibited? Why or why not? Make an argument by weighing the competing values in this case.

EXAM YEAR	PAPER	SUBJECT
2018	GS - IV	Ethics & Morality

MARKS	WORD LIMIT
20	~250 words

Answer Hint

Whistleblowing; public interest; privacy and civil liberties; national security; rule of law; transparency; accountability; proportionality; moral courage; responsible disclosure

Model Answer

Introduction

Edward Snowden’s disclosure raises a fundamental ethical conflict between the public’s right to know and the government’s responsibility to protect national security and confidential information.

Ethical Evaluation

1. Arguments Supporting Snowden

- **Public Interest:** Exposing potentially excessive surveillance can help citizens understand government actions undertaken in their name.
- **Protection of Civil Liberties:** Unchecked surveillance may threaten privacy, freedom of expression, and democratic participation.
- **Accountability:** Whistleblowing can reveal institutional wrongdoing that might otherwise remain concealed.
- **Moral Courage:** Reporting serious abuses may demonstrate commitment to constitutional values and public welfare.

2. Arguments Against Snowden’s Actions

- **Rule of Law:** Public officials and employees are expected to comply with applicable laws and lawful confidentiality obligations.
- **National Security:** Uncontrolled disclosure may expose intelligence methods, operational details, or information that endangers individuals.
- **Proportionality:** Releasing extensive classified material may go beyond what is necessary to expose alleged wrongdoing.
- **Institutional Accountability:** Unilateral disclosure can bypass established oversight and review mechanisms.

3. My Ethical Position

I would regard whistleblowing as potentially ethically justified when it exposes serious wrongdoing, serves a compelling public interest, and follows a proportionate approach. However, the moral value of transparency does

not automatically justify every disclosure.

A responsible course would involve protected reporting channels, independent oversight bodies, or responsible journalists wherever feasible. Any disclosure should minimise harm to national security and innocent individuals. Legal violations must be assessed through due process, considering the circumstances, public interest, and applicable law.

Conclusion

Snowden’s case illustrates that legality and morality can come into tension. Ethical judgement requires balancing transparency, privacy, national security, and accountability rather than treating any one value as absolute. Whistleblowing should protect democratic interests while minimising avoidable harm.

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