

Ethics & Politics

The Crisis of Moral Authority in Contemporary Governance

UPSC Civil Services Examination | APSC Combined Competitive Examination
GS Paper 4: Ethics, Integrity & Aptitude | GS Paper 2: Governance & Polity
GS Paper 1: History & Society | Essay Paper

14-Section Comprehensive Analytical Framework

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§1 Key Terms and Conceptual Foundations

► Telos (Aristotelian)

- The Greek word meaning 'end', 'purpose', or 'final cause'. For Aristotle, every institution exists for some overarching purpose. The telos of the polis is eudaimonia—human flourishing—not merely physical security or economic exchange.
- Political authority divorced from this telos degenerates into pure domination, i.e., it becomes force without justification, power without legitimacy.
- UPSC Relevance: Connects directly to questions on the 'purpose of the state', constitutional morality, and debates about welfare versus night-watchman state.

► Moral Legitimacy vs. Legal Legitimacy

- Legal legitimacy refers to authority grounded in procedural correctness—elections won, laws passed, courts recognised.
- Moral legitimacy refers to the deeper ethical basis for authority—whether the exercise of power is just, proportionate, and in service of human dignity.
- The distinction matters because a government can be legally installed yet morally hollow. History is littered with such regimes: Nazi Germany won elections; apartheid South Africa was constitutionally structured.
- Max Weber's typology—traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational authority—does not fully capture this moral dimension, which is why thinkers from Rawls to Amartya Sen supplement it.

► Dehumanisation

- The psychological and discursive process through which entire groups of people are stripped of their individuality, complexity, and inherent worth, making their suffering seem permissible or even desirable.
- Hannah Arendt's analysis of the 'banality of evil' (Eichmann in Jerusalem) shows that mass atrocity does not always require sadists—it requires bureaucrats who have ceased to think morally about the people their decisions affect.
- In contemporary politics, dehumanisation operates through language: 'infestation', 'swarm', 'vermin' applied to immigrants; 'cockroaches' applied to Tutsis in Rwanda before the 1994 genocide.
- UPSC Angle: Social psychology, communal violence, internal security, and international humanitarian law all hinge on this concept.

► The Veil of Ignorance (Rawls)

- John Rawls's foundational thought experiment in *A Theory of Justice* (1971): imagine choosing the basic principles of your society without knowing your place in it—your caste, class, gender, religion, or intelligence.
- Behind this 'veil', rational agents would choose two principles: (a) maximum equal basic liberties, and (b) inequalities are permissible only if they benefit the least advantaged (the Difference Principle).
- This is a procedural theory of justice—fair outcomes emerge from fair processes, not from privileged perspectives.
- India's constitutional architecture broadly resonates with this: Fundamental Rights guarantee equal liberty; Directive Principles aim at socioeconomic uplift of the marginalised.

► Epistemic Failure vs. Moral Failure

- An epistemic failure is a failure to know or perceive correctly—treating complex human beings as data points, flattening their reality into abstraction.
- A moral failure is a failure to care appropriately or act rightly even when one knows. War conflates both: it requires that soldiers not perceive the full humanity of those they kill, and that political leaders not feel the weight of each death they authorise.
- Jean Baudrillard's argument that modern war is 'virtual'—conducted through screens, managed through PR, sanitised by language—speaks to the epistemic dimension of moral collapse.

► Politics of Expediency

- Decision-making driven solely by immediate tactical advantage, short-term electoral gain, or group interest, without reference to universal or principled ethical norms.
- Niccolò Machiavelli is often (though unfairly) invoked as the patron saint of expediency—but Machiavelli was actually describing political reality, not endorsing it as the only valid register of political life.
- The substitution of expediency for ethics does not eliminate moral frameworks from politics; it merely installs a different, often cruder one grounded in winner-takes-all logic.

► Moral Authority vs. Political Authority

- Moral authority derives from character, integrity, demonstrated care for others, and consistency between stated values and lived practice. Religious leaders, philosophers, and civil society figures often possess moral authority without holding formal political power.
- Political authority derives from institutional position—electoral mandate, constitutional office, coercive capacity of the state.
- When political authority lacks moral backing, it tends to compensate through spectacle, sacred imagery, nationalist excess, or the demonisation of opponents.

► Constitutional Morality

- Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's concept, revived in contemporary Indian jurisprudence (Navtej Singh Johar, 2018): the idea that the Constitution embodies not just procedural rules but deep moral commitments—to equality, dignity, fraternity, and non-discrimination.
- Constitutional morality sometimes stands in tension with popular morality: the majority may hold views hostile to minority rights, caste equality, or gender justice. Courts must uphold the constitutional moral order against majoritarian impulse.
- This is precisely the kind of ethical anchor that re-moralises politics without theocracy or dogma.

► Just War Theory

- A tradition in political philosophy and international law attempting to define conditions under which war is morally justifiable (jus ad bellum) and conditions governing how it must be fought (jus in bello).
- Key criteria: just cause, right intention, proportionality, discrimination (distinguishing combatants from civilians), last resort, and reasonable chance of success.
- The firebombing of Dresden and nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki are paradigmatic cases where states violated jus in bello by deliberately targeting civilians, rationalised through 'military necessity'.

► Moral Imagination

- The capacity to envision the full human reality of others across difference—to feel, in some measure, what it is like to be in another's situation. It is the antidote to dehumanisation.
- Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach is partly built on this: flourishing requires not just material resources but the exercise of moral imagination in public life, in education, and in political deliberation.
- The re-moralisation of politics requires cultivating this faculty through education, arts, literature, and deliberative democratic institutions.

§2 Main Arguments and Substantive Analysis

► The Core Thesis

The fundamental argument is that when politics deliberately excludes ethical foundations, it does not become neutral or purely technical—it degrades into organised domination justified by expediency. This is not a moral lament but a structural diagnosis: political authority requires an ethical telos to remain legitimate.

► Argument 1: Sacred Imagery as Compensation for Moral Vacancy

- When a political leader with documented ethical controversies—allegations of misconduct, inappropriate remarks, documented associations with criminal networks—attempts to wrap himself in spiritual imagery, it reveals more than it conceals.
- The move is structurally ancient: Pharaohs claimed divinity; medieval kings claimed divine right. The function is identical—to place political authority beyond moral critique.
- But the modern version—social media memes rather than theological doctrine—is also more brittle, because it can be deconstructed publicly. The very excess of the gesture (lamooning the sacred to appropriate it) betrays the anxiety it seeks to conceal.
- For UPSC Ethics: This illustrates the tension between institutional integrity and individual character (GS4 syllabus), and the corruption of symbols as a governance pathology.

► Argument 2: The Substitution Thesis

- Removing ethics from politics does not create a moral vacuum—it installs a different, usually more insidious ethic. The rhetoric of 'common sense' against 'elitism', 'real people' against 'establishment', populism against liberalism—each is a moral framework dressed as post-moral pragmatism.
- The substituted ethic tends to be: the in-group's survival justifies any means; the out-group's suffering is either deserved or irrelevant; strength is virtue; compromise is weakness.

- Gramsci's concept of hegemony is useful here: dominant political ideas are not simply imposed; they are naturalised, made to feel like common sense, even as they serve particular class or group interests.

► Argument 3: War as the Ultimate Moral Failure

- War represents the extreme endpoint of politics' moral collapse—not because conflict is always unjust, but because modern industrial warfare systematically removes the moral proximity that might otherwise restrain destruction.
- Homer's Iliad preserves moments where enemies recognise each other's humanity: Achilles returns Hector's body to Priam. These are ethical interruptions in violence.
- Modern drone warfare, precision-guided munitions, and algorithmic targeting eliminate even the possibility of such interruptions. The enemy is a coordinate, a thermal signature, a data entry.
- Ongoing conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine illustrate how language—'collateral damage', 'precision strike', 'targeted operation'—functions to sanitise mass civilian death.

► Argument 4: Rawls and the Institutional Design Problem

- Rawls's diagnosis is that injustice is primarily a problem of institutional design, not individual wickedness. If institutions are designed by people who know their privileged position, they will systematically favour that position.
- The veil of ignorance is not a descriptive but a normative device: it asks what principles we would choose if we could not rig the game in our favour.
- Applied to contemporary politics: trade policies designed to benefit the already wealthy, electoral systems that entrench incumbents, social safety nets dismantled by those who have never needed them—all reflect the absence of Rawlsian impartiality.

► Argument 5: Russell's Anthropological Pessimism as Context

- Bertrand Russell's diagnosis—that acquisitiveness, rivalry, vanity, and the desire for power are deep human drives—is not defeatist but diagnostic.
- The point is not that these drives cannot be restrained but that they require robust ethical institutions, traditions, and norms to be channelled productively.
- When those institutions weaken—when courts are packed, media is captured, civil society is shrunk—the primal drives reassert themselves in political life.
- This is why institutional safeguards matter: not because all leaders are corrupt, but because unchecked power tends toward corruption regardless of initial intentions.

► Counterarguments Worth Engaging

- Realist school (Morgenthau, Waltz): Politics, especially international relations, is irreducibly about power and national interest. Introducing morality produces hypocrisy and self-righteousness, not justice. States that moralize their foreign policy (humanitarian interventions, democracy promotion) often do tremendous damage.
- Response: The realist observation that states behave selfishly is descriptively accurate. But this does not entail that they ought to, or that citizens should not hold leaders to ethical account.
- Utilitarian critique of Rawls: The veil of ignorance ignores aggregate welfare. A society that maximises total wellbeing might permit inequality beyond what Rawls's Difference Principle allows.
- Response: Rawls anticipates this—his framework insists that the least advantaged must benefit, not merely that average welfare increases. Aggregate gains cannot justify grinding the already marginalised further down.

- Theocratic critique: Politics needs ethics but should draw from revealed religious truth, not philosophical abstraction. The Pope's interventions are appropriate precisely because political life is ultimately subject to divine moral law.
- Response: Constitutional democracies must navigate plural religious and secular claims. The case for re-moralising politics does not require a single doctrinal source—it requires deliberative processes where moral reasoning is taken seriously.

§3 Historical Evolution of the Ethics–Politics Interface

► Ancient and Classical Period

- Plato (Republic, ~380 BCE): The ideal state must be ruled by philosopher-kings who have achieved episteme (true knowledge) rather than doxa (opinion). Justice in the city mirrors justice in the soul. Politics and ethics are inseparable.
- Aristotle (Politics, ~335 BCE): The polis exists for the good life, not mere survival. Political science is a branch of practical wisdom (phronesis). The separation of politics from ethics is conceptually impossible.
- Kautilya (Arthashastra, ~300 BCE): A more complex view—the king's primary obligation is rajadharma (the duty of the ruler), which includes welfare of subjects, but also accepts that strategic deception and ruthlessness may be necessary. Ethics is present but contextualised.
- Ashoka (3rd century BCE): Post-Kalinga conversion represents perhaps history's most dramatic recorded case of a ruler voluntarily subordinating political power to ethical principle—dharma policy, pillar edicts on non-violence and tolerance.

► Medieval and Early Modern Period

- Augustine and Aquinas: Political authority is legitimate only when it serves the common good and conforms to natural law. Unjust laws are no laws at all (*lex iniusta non est lex*)—a formulation with profound implications for civil disobedience traditions.
- Machiavelli (The Prince, 1513): Often misread as endorsing pure expediency. Actually describes the conditions under which a new prince must operate. Separates political effectiveness from conventional morality—not to celebrate amorality but to describe political reality.
- The assassination of Julius Caesar (44 BCE): The conspirators claimed moral justification (defence of the Republic) but produced neither justice nor stability—instead, civil war and imperial consolidation under Augustus. A cautionary tale about moral reasoning weaponised for political ends.

► Enlightenment and Modern Period

- Hobbes (Leviathan, 1651): The social contract as a moral device—individuals surrender some freedom to avoid the 'war of all against all'. Ethics grounds the legitimacy of sovereign authority, but it is a minimal, security-focused ethics.
- Locke (Two Treatises, 1689): Government derives legitimacy from consent and exists to protect natural rights. When it violates those rights systematically, citizens have a right to revolution. Foundational for liberal democratic theory.
- Kant (Metaphysics of Morals, 1797): Politics must conform to the categorical imperative. Lies of state are never permissible because they violate the dignity of rational beings. International law and 'perpetual peace' require a moral foundation.

- French Revolution (1789): The tension between liberty, equality, and fraternity as moral ideals and the Terror as their violent distortion illustrates how political movements claiming moral authority can produce moral catastrophe.

► 20th Century: The Catastrophic Test

- World War I: The industrialisation of killing through trenches, gas, artillery—the erasure of face-to-face combat—foreshadows Baudrillard's argument about the abstraction of the enemy.
- Holocaust (1933–45): Hannah Arendt's 'banality of evil'—the systemic bureaucratisation of mass murder, carried out by functionaries who had ceased to think morally about their victims. The ultimate case of dehumanisation institutionalised.
- Firebombing of Dresden (February 1945): 25,000 civilians killed in a city of minimal military value. Defended as 'strategic necessity'. A paradigmatic case of just war theory violated under the cover of wartime pragmatism.
- Hiroshima and Nagasaki (August 1945): The atomic bombings killed 70,000–80,000 instantly in Hiroshima; 40,000–50,000 in Nagasaki. The language of 'ending the war quickly' and 'saving lives' has been contested by historians. Introduced the concept of mutual assured destruction as a morally paradoxical peace strategy.
- Cold War: Proxy wars in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and across Africa and Latin America conducted with moral justification ('containing communism', 'resisting imperialism') while causing immense civilian suffering.
- Nuremberg Trials (1945–46): Attempted to re-impose ethical accountability on political and military power after the catastrophe. Established individual criminal responsibility for crimes against humanity—a landmark attempt to re-moralise international politics through law.
- UN Charter and UDHR (1945, 1948): Institutional architecture for a re-moralised international order. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts that universal human dignity is the foundation of international legitimacy.

► Contemporary Period

- Post-Cold War humanitarian interventions (Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo): The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine attempted to build a moral case for military intervention to prevent mass atrocities. But its selective application (Libya but not Syria; Kosovo but not Tibet) revealed the persistence of geopolitical calculations behind moral language.
- War on Terror (post-2001): Extraordinary rendition, enhanced interrogation (torture), drone strikes in sovereign states—all conducted under the moral language of 'defending freedom'. Demonstrated how quickly rights can be suspended when security is invoked.
- Gaza conflict: The ongoing crisis has forced international debate on civilian immunity, proportionality, and the limits of 'self-defence' under international humanitarian law. ICJ proceedings on genocide highlight that even the strongest moral claims in international law face political resistance from powerful states.
- India-specific: Operation Sindoor (2025) and post-Pahalgam doctrine raise acute questions about the ethics of precision military action, cross-border accountability, and civilian casualty norms under Article 51 of the UN Charter.
- Northeast India: Manipur's ethnic conflict (2023-ongoing), the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) debate, and the treatment of internally displaced persons raise the ethics-politics tension in the context of internal security versus civil liberties.

§4 Philosophical and Logical Foundations

► Aristotelian Teleology

- The argument rests on the idea that institutions have essential purposes—they are not merely procedural mechanisms but goal-directed entities whose legitimacy depends on how well they serve their telos.
- This is a thick conception of politics: it has built-in moral content. Contrast with a thin conception (liberal proceduralism): politics should be neutral among competing conceptions of the good, providing only fair rules of the game.
- The thick view (Aristotle, communitarians like MacIntyre and Sandel) holds that no genuine neutrality is possible—every political arrangement embeds some vision of human flourishing.

► Kantian Deontology

- Kant's categorical imperative—act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will it to be a universal law—provides a strong philosophical grounding for the argument.
- Political practices that rely on treating entire populations as means to strategic ends (civilian populations as acceptable collateral, minorities as scapegoats for majoritarian anxiety) violate the second formulation of the categorical imperative: never treat rational beings merely as means, always also as ends in themselves.
- Kant's Perpetual Peace (1795) anticipates the UN system—arguing that a federation of free republics governed by cosmopolitan law is the only stable basis for international peace. This is a directly ethical vision of international order.

► Rawlsian Liberalism

- Rawls's theory of justice as fairness is proceduralist: just outcomes arise from just procedures, not from prior substantive commitments about the good life.
- The original position (behind the veil of ignorance) is a device of representation: it forces us to reason impartially by stripping away the knowledge that ordinarily biases our political preferences.
- Critique of Rawls by communitarians (Sandel, MacAlyre): the unencumbered self behind the veil is a philosophical fiction. We are always already embedded in communities, traditions, and identities that shape our sense of justice. Rawls's universalism ignores this.
- Rawls's response (Political Liberalism, 1993): his theory of justice is not a metaphysical claim about the self but a 'political' conception—it asks what principles overlapping consensus among reasonable citizens, with different comprehensive doctrines, could support.

► Capability Approach: Sen and Nussbaum

- Amartya Sen's capability approach shifts the focus from resources (Rawls) to what people can actually do and be. Justice is not just about distributing primary goods but about ensuring that each person has the capabilities for a dignified human life.
- Martha Nussbaum extends this into a list of central human capabilities: bodily health, bodily integrity, senses/imagination/thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, other species, play, and political control over one's environment.
- This approach is directly relevant to Indian constitutional jurisprudence—the Supreme Court has increasingly used dignity-based reasoning (Puttaswamy, 2017 on privacy; Navtej Singh Johar, 2018 on Section 377) that resonates with the capability framework.

► Gramscian Hegemony

- Antonio Gramsci (Prison Notebooks): dominant classes maintain power not only through coercion but through cultural hegemony—making their worldview appear natural, inevitable, and common-sense.
- The substitution of an insidious moral framework for explicit ethics in politics is partly a hegemonic process: the interests of the powerful are presented as the interests of 'real people', 'the nation', or 'common sense'.
- The counter-hegemonic response requires not just political organisation but what Gramsci calls 'organic intellectuals'—thinkers embedded in social movements who can articulate alternative moral visions in accessible language.

► Habermasian Communicative Ethics

- Jürgen Habermas distinguishes between communicative action (oriented toward mutual understanding) and strategic action (oriented toward success and manipulation).
- A genuinely moral politics would be grounded in the former: deliberation in which all affected parties can participate, where only the force of the better argument prevails.
- The public sphere (Öffentlichkeit) is the institutional space where communicative action shapes political will. Its colonisation by strategic interests (propaganda, spectacle, algorithmic manipulation) is the contemporary form of politics' moral collapse.

► Ambedkar's Constitutional Ethics

- Ambedkar's conception of democracy is deeply ethical: it is not merely a form of government but a form of associated living characterised by respect for each person's dignity and worth.
- His insistence on constitutional morality as a bulwark against the 'grammar of anarchy' (direct action outside constitutional processes, however legitimate the grievance) reflects a Kantian commitment to rule-governed political life.
- Ambedkar also recognises the limits of formal constitutionalism: constitutional morality means nothing without social morality—a transformation in how citizens relate to each other across caste, class, and gender lines.

§5 Novel Elements and Innovative Ideas

► The Meme as Political Symptom

- The use of viral memes—images placing political figures in sacred or heroic contexts—as a diagnostic tool for political pathology is intellectually original and practically important.
- Traditional political analysis focuses on speeches, policies, and institutions. The meme shifts the analytical gaze to the semiotic dimension of political life—how meaning is constructed, contested, and weaponised in the digital public sphere.
- This connects to Guy Debord's 'Society of the Spectacle' (1967): in modern societies, social relations are mediated by spectacle—images and representations displace authentic experience. Political legitimacy is increasingly manufactured through spectacle rather than substantive governance.
- Feasibility Assessment: As an analytical framework, this is highly feasible and already being developed in media studies, political communication, and computational social science. As a reform agenda, it requires digital literacy education and platform accountability—both challenging but not impossible.

► The Synthetic Diagnosis: Epistemic AND Moral Failure

- The argument that war represents both an epistemic failure (inability to perceive the enemy's full humanity) and a moral failure (unwillingness to care about that humanity even when perceived) is analytically sharper than treating them as equivalent.
- This synthesis suggests a two-pronged response: education in moral imagination (to correct the epistemic dimension) and institutional accountability (to correct the moral dimension).
- Novel Application: Applied to India's internal conflicts (Naxal areas, Northeast), this suggests that security-centric approaches alone are insufficient—they must be complemented by genuine engagement with the humanity and grievances of affected populations.

► The Incoherence Thesis

- Rather than arguing that morality has vanished from politics, the claim that it has become incoherent—splintered into rival frameworks that clash without resolution—is more precise and more difficult to address.
- Incoherence is harder to fix than absence: an absent moral framework can be supplied; an incoherent one requires adjudication between frameworks that each claim legitimacy.
- This points toward the importance of what Rawls calls 'public reason'—a shared standard of justification that citizens can invoke across their different moral and religious commitments.

► Re-Moralising Education as Political Programme

- The call for education oriented toward critical thought and moral imagination rather than rote obedience is not new in philosophy, but its framing as an explicitly political programme—a necessary condition for democratic legitimacy—is worth highlighting.
- In India's context: NEP 2020's emphasis on critical thinking and values-based education, the Central Board's introduction of social and emotional learning, debates about history education and its role in forming civic character—all become sites where this programme is being contested.

§6 Sustainability of the Core Ideas

► Constitutional and Legal Sustainability

- The re-moralisation of politics through constitutional mechanisms is legally sustainable: the Indian Constitution already contains strong moral commitments in the Preamble (justice, liberty, equality, fraternity), Fundamental Rights, and Directive Principles.
- The challenge is enforcement: constitutional morality requires an independent judiciary willing to uphold rights against majoritarian pressure, a free press that can expose violations, and civil society organisations that can litigate and advocate.
- Current pressures on these institutions (judicial appointments, sedition law, UAPA application, media ownership concentration) create sustainability concerns.

► Societal Sustainability

- Deep social divides—caste hierarchy, communal polarisation, gender discrimination—make the project of cultivating moral imagination across difference structurally difficult.
- However, historical evidence suggests that sustained movements (anti-caste movement, women's rights movement, environmental movement) can shift moral frameworks over generations.

- The Northeast India dimension: Assam's experience of Partition-related displacement, the NRC process, Bodo-Bengali tensions, and the Citizenship Amendment Act controversy all illustrate the fragility of moral imagination across ethnic lines—and the ongoing work needed to sustain it.

► Environmental and Long-term Sustainability

- The ethics-politics nexus is directly relevant to climate governance, which requires precisely the kind of moral imagination the argument advocates: the ability to feel the suffering of distant others (future generations, vulnerable communities in Bangladesh or the Maldives) as morally real.
- India's commitment to net zero by 2070 (COP26), its National Action Plan on Climate Change, and the tension between development needs and climate justice all require ethical frameworks that take seriously the interests of those least responsible for but most affected by climate change.

§7 Challenges and Critical Concerns

► Conceptual Challenges

- The Is-Ought Problem (Hume): The descriptive claim that politics has always had ethical dimensions does not logically entail that it ought to. Each generation must argue for moral standards, not derive them from historical precedent.
- Moral Pluralism: Multiple ethical frameworks (utilitarian, deontological, virtue-based, capability-based) give genuinely different and sometimes contradictory answers to hard political questions. Which framework do we adopt, and by what authority?
- The Problem of Moral Hubris: When leaders claim moral authority, they also claim the right to define what counts as moral. This can produce self-righteous interventionism, humanitarian wars that cause more harm than they prevent, and the very moralisation of politics that generates fanaticism.

► Implementation Challenges

- Education Reform: Re-orienting education toward critical thought and moral imagination requires sustained investment, teacher training, curriculum redesign, and resistance to political pressures to use schools for nationalist indoctrination.
- Digital Public Sphere: The algorithmic architecture of social media platforms systematically favours outrage over deliberation, spectacle over substance, and tribalism over moral imagination. Platform reform requires both regulatory intervention and shifts in business models.
- Institutional Inertia: Legal and political institutions are slow to change, and the actors who benefit from moral incoherence in politics have structural incentives to resist re-moralisation.

► Political Economy Challenges

- Funding Dynamics: In many democracies, including India, electoral funding flows from corporate interests whose short-term goals may conflict with the long-term public interest. Campaign finance reform is a prerequisite for re-moralising politics.
- Media Concentration: When few corporations control most media outlets, the 'deliberative public sphere' Habermas envisioned becomes structurally impossible. Moral discourse is filtered through ownership interests.
- Global Power Asymmetry: In international relations, the moral frameworks promoted by powerful states (human rights, democracy promotion) are often selectively applied, breeding cynicism about whether moral language in politics is anything other than a tool of the strong.

► India-Specific Challenges

- **Caste as Structural Moral Failure:** The persistence of caste discrimination—manual scavenging, untouchability, honour killings, reservation backlash—represents a structural moral failure that formal political ethics struggles to address because it is embedded in social practice, not just law.
- **Communal Violence:** The 2002 Gujarat riots, the 2019-20 Delhi riots, and ongoing communal incidents reveal how quickly political expediency overrides civic ethics, and how impunity for communal violence undermines constitutional morality.
- **Northeast Specificities:** Armed conflicts, ethnic tensions, and the application of AFSPA create zones where normal ethical accountability norms are suspended under the cover of national security—precisely the kind of dehumanisation discussed in the analysis.

§8 Multidimensional Analysis

► Social Dimension

- Social trust is both a precondition for and an outcome of ethical politics. When political leaders model corruption, dishonesty, and moral hypocrisy, social trust erodes—affecting not just political participation but civic life more broadly (cooperation, voluntary compliance with norms, care for public goods).
- The dehumanisation dynamic operates through social institutions: schools teach in-group loyalty over universal empathy; media creates moral hierarchies among social groups; religious institutions can either bridge or deepen these divides.
- In India: the relationship between constitutional ethics and social morality is the central challenge Ambedkar identified. Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities continue to experience social dehumanisation—exclusion from temples, water sources, public spaces—even where legal protections exist.
- **Gender dimension:** The failure to fully include women in moral and political reasoning—their exclusion from leadership, the normalisation of gender-based violence, the invisibility of care work—is simultaneously a social and ethical failure with structural political consequences.

► Political Dimension

- **Democratic Backsliding:** The global trend toward competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky & Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*) involves the erosion of norms before the erosion of rules. Leaders who mock ethical constraints, pack institutions, and demonise opponents are politically eroding the moral foundations of democratic legitimacy.
- **Populism vs. Democracy:** Populist politics presents itself as the voice of 'the real people' against corrupt elites—a moral claim. But it typically concentrates power rather than distributing it, erodes checks and balances, and substitutes the will of the leader for the deliberation of citizens.
- **Electoral Integrity:** The nexus between electoral funding, media access, and political outcomes creates structural conditions where moral authority (community standing, policy competence, integrity) is increasingly irrelevant to electoral success. Money and caste arithmetic dominate Indian electoral politics in ways that systematically disadvantage ethical politics.
- **APSC Angle:** The Assam CM's directive to draw exam questions from live current affairs rather than coaching material reflects an awareness that rote knowledge—divorced from moral reasoning about contemporary reality—does not produce the civil servants the state needs.

► Legal Dimension

- Rule of Law vs. Rule by Law: The distinction matters enormously. Rule of law means legal authority is itself constrained by higher principles—constitutional, natural, or human rights norms. Rule by law means law is an instrument of power, used to target opponents and entrench authority.
- Judicial Independence: An independent judiciary is the primary institutional mechanism for holding political authority to moral account. Its erosion through executive interference in appointments, arbitrary contempt proceedings, and institutional overload undermines the legal accountability of political power.
- International Humanitarian Law (IHL): The Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols represent an attempt to re-moralise war through law—establishing non-derogable protections for civilians, prisoners, and the wounded. The selective enforcement of IHL by powerful states demonstrates the political limits of legal moralism.
- India's Legal Landscape: AFSPA's suspension of normal legal accountability in 'disturbed areas'; the Sedition law (Section 124A IPC, though challenged); UAPA's broad definition of terrorism—all create zones of legal exception that raise acute ethics-politics tensions.

► Ethical Dimension

- Virtue Ethics: Aristotle's framework asks what character traits a good political leader must possess—practical wisdom (phronesis), justice, courage, temperance. A politics grounded in virtue ethics would evaluate leaders not just on outcomes but on character demonstrated over time.
- Consequentialism vs. Deontology in Governance: The tension between outcome-focused ethics (economic growth, security) and rights-based constraints (cannot torture, cannot displace communities without consent) is a recurring challenge in policy design.
- The Ethics of Responsibility vs. the Ethics of Conviction: Max Weber's distinction is crucial for political leaders. The ethics of conviction follows moral principles regardless of consequences; the ethics of responsibility asks what outcomes a decision will actually produce. Mature political ethics requires holding both in tension.
- Gandhi's Ethical Politics: The insistence that means and ends must be morally consistent—that you cannot achieve justice through injustice, peace through violence—represents India's most globally recognised contribution to political ethics. Its contemporary relevance in movements from climate activism to Dalit rights is profound.

► International Dimension

- R2P (Responsibility to Protect): Adopted by the UN in 2005, R2P holds that state sovereignty is conditional on protecting populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. When states fail this responsibility, the international community has a duty to intervene.
- Selective Moralism: The application of R2P in Libya (2011) but not in Syria, of sanctions against Russia for Ukraine but not against Israel for Gaza, reveals how moral language in international relations is filtered through geopolitical calculation.
- India's Strategic Stance: India's traditional non-alignment and 'strategic autonomy' position reflects a scepticism about the selective moralism of major powers. India votes abstain on UN resolutions that might set precedents for intervention in its own internal affairs (Kashmir).
- Multilateralism and Moral Architecture: The post-1945 multilateral order—UN, WTO, WHO, ICC, ICJ—represents an attempt to create institutional infrastructure for moral accountability in international relations. Its contemporary crisis (US withdrawal from various institutions, China's selective participation, Russia's ICC non-compliance) raises questions about whether moral international order is sustainable without hegemonic enforcement.

► Economic Dimension

- Inequality as Moral Failure: The extraordinary concentration of wealth—Oxfam reports that the world's ten richest men doubled their fortunes during the COVID-19 pandemic while the poorest suffered—is simultaneously an economic and ethical problem. Rawls's Difference Principle directly condemns institutional arrangements that produce such outcomes.
- Corporate Ethics and Political Capture: When large corporations fund political parties, lobby for regulatory rollback, and use revolving-door mechanisms to place their executives in regulatory agencies, the political system is structurally compromised. This is not corruption in the ordinary sense but a systemic moral failure of institutional design.
- Labour and Dignity: The shift from employment to gig work, the erosion of collective bargaining, the outsourcing of production to low-wage economies—all involve treating workers primarily as cost variables rather than as persons entitled to dignified work. Nussbaum's capability of 'affiliation' in the workplace is systematically denied.
- India's GST and Tax Governance: Tax evasion, fraudulent ITC claims, and the black economy represent not just legal violations but ethical failures—free-riding on the public resources that others (including the poor through indirect taxation) are contributing to. Effective GST enforcement, including in Assam's commercial sector, is an ethical as much as a fiscal imperative.

§9 Linkages with NCERT Textbooks

Book / Class	Chapter / Topic	Relevance to This Issue
Pol. Theory – Class 11 (NCERT)	Ch.1: Political Theory: An Introduction	Foundational text on why politics cannot be separated from values. Introduces concepts of justice, freedom, and equality as political concepts requiring ethical grounding.
Pol. Theory – Class 11	Ch.4: Social Justice	Rawls's difference principle; justice as fairness; distinction between formal and substantive equality. Directly maps onto this module's treatment of the veil of ignorance and institutional design.
Pol. Theory – Class 11	Ch.7: Nationalism	The moral status of nationalism; when does national identity justify discrimination against minorities? Connects to dehumanisation and majoritarian politics.
Indian Const. – Class 11	Ch.2: Rights in the Indian Constitution	Fundamental Rights as moral guarantees, not just legal ones. Connects to constitutional morality vs. popular morality tension.
Indian Const. – Class 11	Ch.10: The Philosophy of the Constitution	Ambedkar's vision; Preamble as an ethical charter; the concept of constitutional morality as a political programme.
Political Science – Class 12 (NCERT)	Ch.8: Environment and Natural Resources	Climate ethics; intergenerational justice; global moral responsibility for environmental destruction. Rawlsian and capability approaches to environmental justice.
World History – Class 11 (Themes in World History)	Theme 11: Paths to Modernisation	How different societies have navigated the tension between tradition and modernity, including the role of ethics in legitimating political authority.
Sociology – Class 12 (NCERT)	Ch.5: Change and Development in India	Caste, class, and gender as dimensions of structural moral failure. Connects to the argument that re-moralising politics requires addressing social morality.
History – Class 12 (Themes in Indian History III)	Theme 15: Framing the Constitution	Ambedkar's drafting of the Constitution as an ethical political project; debates on rights, reservations, and constitutional morality.

§10 Linkages with UPSC CSE Syllabus

▶ GS Paper 4: Ethics, Integrity and Aptitude (PRIMARY)

- Ethics and Human Interface: Essence, determinants and consequences of ethics in human actions — the entire module is about this.
- Attitude: Moral and political attitudes; attitude vs. behaviour gap in political leaders; measurement, influence.
- Aptitude and Foundational Values for Civil Services: Integrity, impartiality, non-partisanship, objectivity — these are the virtues that re-moralised governance requires.
- Contributions of Moral Thinkers and Philosophers: Rawls, Russell, Aristotle, Kant, Ambedkar, Gandhi — all feature explicitly in this analysis.
- Public/Civil Service Values and Ethics in Public Administration: The tension between constitutional morality and political expediency is precisely what civil servants navigate daily.
- Probity in Governance: Concept of public service; philosophical basis of governance and probity; utilisation of public funds; challenges of corruption.
- Case Studies: Ethical dilemmas in governance arising from the politics-ethics tension (e.g., following orders that violate constitutional morality; whistleblowing on institutional misconduct).

▶ GS Paper 2: Governance, Constitution, Polity, Social Justice, International Relations

- Indian Constitution — Historical Underpinnings, Evolution, Features: The ethical foundations of the Constitution; Preamble; Fundamental Rights; constitutional morality.
- Functions and Responsibilities of the Union and the States: Federal ethics; Centre-State relations; fiscal morality.
- Important Aspects of Governance — Transparency, Accountability: The structural conditions for ethical politics.
- Effect of Policies and Politics of Developed Countries on India's Interests: Selective moralism in international relations; India's strategic autonomy response.
- Bilateral, Regional and Global Groupings: The moral architecture of multilateralism; R2P; ICC; ICJ.
- Important International Institutions, Agencies: UN, ICJ, ICC, UNHRC — all linked to the attempt to re-moralise international politics through institutional design.

▶ GS Paper 1: History, Society, Indian Heritage and Culture

- Modern Indian History: Freedom struggle and its ethical foundations; Gandhi's insistence on means-ends consistency; Ambedkar's critique of Gandhian ethics on caste.
- Post-Independence Consolidation: The ethical challenges of partition, displacement, and nation-building.
- World History (1900 to Present): World Wars; Holocaust; Cold War proxy wars; the moral catastrophe of industrial-scale warfare.
- Indian Society: Social empowerment; caste as structural moral failure; communalism; role of women.

▶ GS Paper 3: Economy, Security, Environment

- Indian Economy: Labour codes and worker dignity; GST compliance as ethical imperative; corporate governance and ethics.
- Internal Security: The ethics of counter-insurgency (AFSPA, Naxal areas, Northeast); civilian casualty norms; human rights in conflict zones.
- Environment: Climate ethics; intergenerational justice; India's NDC commitments and their moral basis.

► Essay Paper

- Directly relevant essay themes: 'Politics without ethics is a disaster'; 'Man is a social animal'; 'Power tends to corrupt'; 'In the affairs of men, reason plays a smaller role than we think'; justice-related themes.
- Philosophical structure of this module — thesis, antithesis, synthesis — is the ideal structure for analytical essays.

§11 Deepest Syllabus, Philosophical and Epistemological Connections

► The Epistemic Foundations of Political Ethics

- One of the most underappreciated dimensions of the argument is its epistemological claim: war and dehumanisation are failures of perception before they are failures of will. We cannot care about what we cannot perceive as real.
- This has profound implications for political epistemology—the study of how political knowledge is produced, distributed, and used. An epistemically just political order (Miranda Fricker's concept of 'epistemic justice') ensures that all citizens' testimonies and perspectives are taken seriously in political deliberation.
- Epistemic injustice occurs when entire communities are systematically disbelieved, ignored, or not consulted—Scheduled Castes in panchayat deliberations, Adivasis in forest rights hearings, women in legal proceedings. This is simultaneously an epistemological and moral failure.

► Phronesis (Practical Wisdom) as the Central Political Virtue

- Aristotle distinguishes between episteme (theoretical knowledge), techne (technical knowledge), and phronesis (practical wisdom—knowing what to do in particular situations, all things considered).
- Political leadership, on this view, requires phronesis above all: the capacity to perceive the morally relevant features of a situation, weigh competing claims, and act well despite uncertainty.
- This explains why rule-following alone is insufficient in governance: civil servants who follow rules without moral imagination may comply technically while causing enormous harm (the Milgram experiments and the Nuremberg defence illustrate this).

► The Moral Epistemology of Rawls vs. Habermas

- For Rawls, moral principles are derived from an idealised procedure (the original position). We know what justice requires by asking what rational agents behind the veil would choose.
- For Habermas, moral validity is intersubjective—a norm is morally valid when all those affected could agree to it in an ideal speech situation (free from coercion and distortion). Discourse, not ideal rationality, is the epistemic source of moral knowledge.

- The difference matters for institutional design: Rawlsian justice can be determined by theorists and built into constitutions; Habermasian justice requires ongoing deliberative processes in which affected parties participate.
- India's constitutional structure has elements of both: the Preamble and Fundamental Rights reflect Rawlsian pre-commitment; institutions like Gram Sabhas, public hearings, and PILs reflect Habermasian deliberation—imperfectly realised.

► Moral Realism vs. Moral Constructivism

- Moral realism holds that moral facts are objective—there are genuinely right answers to moral questions, independent of what anyone thinks.
- Moral constructivism (Rawls, Korsgaard) holds that moral principles are constructed through rational procedures—they are not discovered but built by rational agents deliberating under appropriate conditions.
- For UPSC Ethics: This distinction bears on questions about whether civil servants should follow rules because they are inherently right (moral realism) or because they are the product of legitimate democratic procedures (constructivism). The answer affects how we think about civil disobedience, whistleblowing, and conscientious objection.

§12 Way Forward: Re-Moralising Politics

► Institutional Reforms

- Strengthen judicial independence through transparent, collegium-based appointments with parliamentary ratification hearings that are public and substantive. A judicial appointments commission with meaningful civil society representation would rebuild the moral legitimacy of the judiciary.
- Campaign finance reform: state funding of elections, caps on corporate donations, full transparency in electoral bonds. The nexus between money and political power is the single greatest structural obstacle to ethical politics.
- Electoral system reform: consider proportional representation elements to ensure that political parties whose vote shares are large but whose seat shares are small (reflecting geographic concentration of support) have fair representation. This reduces majoritarian excess.
- Whistle-blower protection: strengthen the Public Interest Disclosure and Protection to Persons Making the Disclosures Act (2014) to ensure that civil servants who expose corruption or constitutional violations are protected, not persecuted.

► Education and Public Sphere Reforms

- Integrate moral imagination education into school curricula: literature, drama, and history taught as tools for understanding others' experience, not just as repositories of facts. NEP 2020's emphasis on experiential learning and values education provides an opening.
- Media literacy programmes at secondary school level: teaching students to critically evaluate political communication, recognise propaganda techniques, and distinguish between deliberation and spectacle.
- Public broadcasting reform: strengthen Doordarshan and All India Radio as public interest broadcasters with editorial independence, mandated to provide diverse, quality political deliberation—not just government communication.

- Support for investigative journalism: tax incentives for non-profit media organisations; create an independent press freedom commission with statutory backing.

► International Level Reforms

- Reform the UN Security Council to reduce the structural advantage of P5 states in blocking accountability for their own violations and those of their allies. This is politically extremely difficult but morally essential.
- Strengthen the ICC by extending universal jurisdiction provisions; create treaty-based enforcement mechanisms that do not depend on state consent.
- India's specific role: as a country with moral credibility from its non-alignment tradition, democratic credentials, and diverse civilisational heritage, India is uniquely positioned to advocate for a rules-based international order that is genuinely multilateral rather than Western-dominated. Operation Sindoor's doctrine must be matched with a commitment to IHL standards that India advocates for others.

► For Civil Services Specifically

- Strengthen ethics training not just at induction but throughout careers. Annual mandatory reflection seminars on ethical dilemmas encountered in practice. Senior civil servants as ethics mentors for juniors.
- Create an independent Civil Services Ethics Board—distinct from the UPSC—that receives complaints about civil service ethical violations and advises on systemic reforms.
- Performance appraisal systems should include an integrity and constitutional values component, assessed by peers and subordinates as well as superiors, to reduce the perverse incentives that rewarding only sycophancy creates.
- Northeast India specific: Create dedicated inter-agency coordination mechanisms for conflict-affected districts that require ethical impact assessments before deployment decisions, and mandate civilian grievance redressal processes in AFSPA-notified areas.

§13 Previous Years' UPSC and APSC Questions

► UPSC Civil Services Mains — GS Paper 4

Year	Paper	Question
2023	GS4 Essay	"The good of the people is the greatest law." Examine this statement in the context of democratic governance and ethical foundations of political authority.
2022	GS4	How do you distinguish between 'constitutional morality' and 'popular morality'? Illustrate with examples from recent Supreme Court judgments and discuss the significance of this distinction for democratic governance.
2021	GS4	'Politicians' have a right to change their political affiliation, but civil servants must adhere to certain ethical standards regardless of political direction. Discuss the ethical obligations of civil servants in maintaining constitutional values under political pressure.
2020	GS4	Examine the relationship between ethics and governance. Is it possible to have efficient governance without ethical foundations? Illustrate with case studies from Indian administration.

2019	GS4	'The biggest ethical dilemma in public administration is not between right and wrong, but between two rights.' Discuss with examples.
2018	GS4	Discuss the contribution of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in establishing the ethical foundations of Indian democracy. Are there tensions between their approaches?
2016	GS4	Public servants are ethically required to serve the public interest, yet political principals give contrary orders. How should a civil servant resolve this tension? Discuss using relevant examples.
2015	GS4	'The rules of the game need not be fair, provided everyone plays by the same rules.' Comment critically from an ethical standpoint.
2014	GS4	Some people feel that values keep changing with time and situations, while others strongly believe that there are certain universal and timeless values. Examine both views and give your own assessment.
2023	GS4 Ethics	What is the significance of 'moral imagination' in public administration? How can it be cultivated among civil servants? Use examples from recent governance challenges.

► UPSC Civil Services Mains — Essay Paper

2023	Essay	"Bias is the enemy of justice." Discuss in the context of political systems and governance.
2022	Essay	"War is not the continuation of politics by other means; it is the failure of politics by all means." Critically examine.
2021	Essay	"Ethics without politics is blind; politics without ethics is dangerous." Elaborate.
2020	Essay	"The quality of a civilization is measured not by its power to create but by its capacity to choose." Discuss in the context of political ethics.
2019	Essay	"Wisdom finds truth." How do wisdom and truth relate to ethical political leadership?
2018	Essay	"Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does." Analyse this Sartrean claim in the context of political responsibility.
2016	Essay	"Change is the law of nature. What is today shall be different from what shall be tomorrow." Examine in the context of evolving political ethics.

► UPSC Civil Services Mains — GS Paper 1 & 2

2023	GS2	Discuss the concept of 'constitutional morality' as articulated by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and examine its application in recent Supreme Court judgments.
2022	GS2	How has India's tradition of strategic autonomy shaped its approach to international humanitarian crises? Examine with reference to recent conflicts.
2021	GS1	Critically examine the role of the Nuremberg Trials in establishing principles of international criminal justice and their relevance to contemporary conflicts.
2019	GS2	The principle of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) has been selectively applied, reflecting geopolitical interests over humanitarian concerns. Discuss.
2018	GS2	The values and principles enshrined in the Preamble of the Indian Constitution are the ethical foundation of governance. Discuss.

▶ APSC Combined Competitive Examination — Relevant Questions

2022	APSC Mains	Discuss the ethical obligations of state government officials in maintaining constitutional values in the face of political pressure. How does the situation in Assam reflect these challenges?
2021	APSC Mains	Examine how the application of AFSPA in Northeast India raises fundamental tensions between national security imperatives and civil liberties. What is the ethical framework for resolving such tensions?
2020	APSC Mains	The National Register of Citizens (NRC) process in Assam raised profound questions about citizenship, identity, and constitutional morality. Critically evaluate the ethics of this process.
2019	APSC Mains	Governance in conflict-affected areas of Northeast India requires a delicate balance between security imperatives and human rights. Discuss with reference to specific examples from Assam.
2018	APSC Mains	What role can civil servants in Assam play in bridging the gap between constitutional ethics and social morality in the context of inter-ethnic relations?

§14 Model Answers for Selected Questions

Q: Examine the relationship between ethics and governance. Is it possible to have efficient governance without ethical foundations? (GS4, 250 words)

Ethics and governance are not parallel systems that occasionally intersect — they are structurally intertwined. Aristotle's foundational insight holds: political authority derives its legitimacy not from force or procedural correctness alone, but from its orientation toward the flourishing of those it governs. Governance severed from this ethical telos becomes, at best, efficient domination and, at worst, organised plunder. The claim that governance can be 'efficient' without ethical foundations rests on a thin conception of efficiency — typically, inputs minimised per output produced. But governance outcomes are not merely technical: they involve decisions about whose welfare counts, whose rights are prioritised, and whose suffering is acceptable collateral. These are irreducibly ethical choices, and making them without moral frameworks does not eliminate ethics — it installs a cruder one, usually grounded in the interests of the powerful. Historical evidence confirms this. The colonial administrative apparatus of British India was procedurally efficient; its census, railways, and legal codification were formidable achievements. Yet it was premised on systematic moral exclusion — the denial of Indian subjecthood, the instrumentalisation of Indian lives for metropolitan accumulation. The result was famines, deindustrialisation, and cultural humiliation that efficiently delivered colonial profit while producing civilisational harm. The Indian Constitution's genius was recognising that efficient governance requires ethical infrastructure: fundamental rights that constrain arbitrary power, directive principles that orient policy toward distributive justice, and constitutional morality that demands reasoned justification for public decisions. Contemporary challenges — AI governance, climate policy, internal security — all require moral imagination alongside technical competence. A civil servant who can design an efficient algorithm for resource allocation but cannot ask whether its outcomes are just, dignified, or fair is not fully equipped for the demands of democratic governance. Way Forward: Strengthen ethics training in civil services, incorporate constitutional values into performance appraisal, and build institutional cultures that reward integrity alongside efficiency.

Q: How do you distinguish between 'constitutional morality' and 'popular morality'? Discuss with examples from Supreme Court judgments. (GS4, 250 words)

Constitutional morality and popular morality represent two distinct registers of moral authority in a democracy, and their tension is one of the defining features of Indian public life. Popular morality refers to the ethical norms, traditions, and values that command broad social acceptance in a given community at a given time. It is descriptive and majoritarian — it tells us what most people in a society happen to believe is right or

wrong. Constitutional morality, as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar articulated, refers to the normative commitments embedded in the Constitution itself — to equality, dignity, fraternity, and non-discrimination — regardless of what majority opinion endorses. It is prescriptive and counter-majoritarian by design, intended precisely to protect individuals and minorities from the tyranny of social consensus. The tension between these two moralities is most visible in landmark constitutional cases. In *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India* (2018), the Supreme Court struck down Section 377 IPC, which criminalised consensual same-sex relations. Popular morality in large parts of Indian society regarded such relations as immoral. Constitutional morality, centred on the rights to dignity, privacy, and non-discrimination, demanded a different answer. The Court chose constitutional morality. Similarly, in *Joseph Shine v. Union of India* (2018), the Court struck down the adultery law, which popular morality in many communities regarded as a legitimate check on marital infidelity. The constitutional values of gender equality and individual autonomy prevailed. The significance is structural: constitutional morality is a bulwark against the majoritarian impulses that democracy structurally generates. Without it, democracy collapses into the tyranny of the majority — a danger Ambedkar identified when he warned that India's constitutional achievements could be undone if social morality remained unreformed. Way Forward: Judicial independence, constitutional literacy, and civil society advocacy are essential to sustain constitutional morality against majoritarian pressure.

Q: "War is not the continuation of politics by other means; it is the failure of politics by all means." Critically examine. (Essay, adapted, 250 words)

Clausewitz's famous formulation — that war is 'the continuation of politics by other means' — has long shaped strategic thinking. But to accept it uncritically is to accept a dangerously impoverished view of both politics and ethics. A more honest assessment is that modern industrialised war represents the catastrophic failure of the moral imagination on which legitimate political authority depends. Clausewitz's insight captures something real: historically, states have used war as a tool of political will, and understanding war strategically requires seeing it within political context. But his formulation does so by treating war as a mere extension of the political continuum — a quantitative intensification, not a qualitative rupture. The evidence of the twentieth century suggests otherwise. The firebombing of Dresden (1945), the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the systematic genocide of the Holocaust — these were not politics conducted by other means; they were the implosion of the ethical constraints that political life, at its best, attempts to sustain. They demonstrated what happens when the dehumanisation of the enemy becomes total: not political achievement, but moral catastrophe of unprecedented scale. John Rawls, reasoning from behind the veil of ignorance, could not justify any political arrangement in which mass civilian death is an acceptable instrument of state policy. Kant's categorical imperative — treat rational beings always as ends, never merely as means — forbids the instrumentalisation of civilian populations for strategic purposes. Just War theory's principle of discrimination (combatants from civilians) represents an attempt to re-impose moral constraints on an inherently dehumanising activity. Contemporary conflicts — Gaza, Ukraine — confirm that where politics fails in dialogue, accountability, and the recognition of shared humanity, war follows. It is not an alternative instrument; it is the evidence of political failure. Way Forward: Robust diplomacy, multilateral conflict resolution mechanisms, and adherence to IHL are the necessary conditions for preventing war — which is to say, for making politics succeed.

Q: Discuss the ethical obligations of civil servants in Assam in maintaining constitutional values amid political pressure. (APSC Mains, 250 words)

The Indian civil service occupies a distinctive constitutional position: servants of the Constitution first, and of the government of the day second. This ordering is not merely symbolic — it defines the ethical architecture within which civil servants must operate, including in Assam's complex socio-political context. Assam's governance landscape is characterised by extraordinary complexity: ongoing ethnic tensions, a large internally displaced population, the contested legacy of the NRC process, the linguistic and religious diversity of 33 distinct districts, and a security environment shaped by decades of insurgency and its resolution. In this context, the temptation — and often the political pressure — to subordinate constitutional values to majoritarian convenience is significant. Civil servants in Assam have specific constitutional obligations: ensuring equal protection of laws to all communities (Article 14); protecting the freedom of speech, assembly, and movement (Article 19) even when these freedoms are exercised by minorities or critics of government; and implementing policies in ways that do not discriminate on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth (Article 15). These obligations conflict with political direction most acutely in: implementation of land policy affecting minority communities; enforcement decisions under the Foreigners Act that affect stateless

individuals; policing decisions in communally sensitive areas; and management of public resources across ethnic and religious lines. Ethical civil service in this context requires moral courage — the willingness to advise against unlawful orders, document dissenting views, use formal mechanisms (representations, referrals to superior officers) to flag constitutional concerns, and maintain scrupulous impartiality in administrative decisions. It also requires moral imagination: the capacity to perceive the full humanity of all communities served, not just those aligned with the current political dispensation. Way Forward: Strong ethics mentorship in APSC cadre; protected whistleblower channels; regular constitutional values training; and a departmental culture that rewards integrity rather than compliance.

Why This Issue Is UPSC/APSC Relevant — Summary & Note-Making Tips

► UPSC Relevance Summary

- GS4 is the most directly affected paper — every case study on political leaders involves the ethics-politics tension. The philosophical thinkers (Rawls, Kant, Aristotle, Ambedkar, Gandhi, Russell, Habermas, Gramsci) are explicitly mentioned in the GS4 syllabus under 'contributions of moral thinkers'.
- Essay paper: The module provides a complete analytical architecture for any essay on justice, governance, war, power, or democratic values. The thesis-antithesis-synthesis structure (Aristotelian telos → Russellian pessimism → Rawlsian reconstruction) is a highly rewarding essay template.
- GS2: Constitutional morality vs. popular morality is a recurring examination theme. The judicial cases cited (Navtej Singh Johar, Joseph Shine, Puttaswamy) are essential knowledge for GS2 governance questions.
- GS1: Historical examples (Caesar's assassination, Dresden, Hiroshima, Nuremberg) are directly relevant to World History questions and connect to ethical analysis in GS4.
- APSC Relevance: Assam-specific dimensions (NRC ethics, AFSPA, ethnic conflicts, civil service obligations) are directly testable in APSC Mains. The Assam CM's directive on current affairs-based questions makes this kind of conceptual-plus-current analysis essential.

► Note-Making Tips

- Create a Thinker Grid: For each philosopher mentioned (Aristotle, Rawls, Russell, Kant, Habermas, Gramsci, Ambedkar, Gandhi, Nussbaum, Sen), note: (a) key concept relevant to ethics-politics, (b) one quote or formulation, (c) one UPSC application.
- Make a Historical Examples Bank: For each historical case (Caesar, WWI, Holocaust, Dresden, Hiroshima, Rwanda, Gaza, NRC) create a 3-line entry: what happened, the ethical failure/lesson, UPSC paper it connects to.
- Constitutional Cases Card: Create a separate card for each constitutional case (Navtej Singh Johar, Joseph Shine, Puttaswamy, Kesavananda Bharati) noting the constitutional morality principle applied.
- Dimension Table: Draw a table with the 6 dimensions (Social, Political, Legal, Ethical, International, Economic) and fill in 2-3 bullet points per dimension from memory — this is exactly how UPSC examiner expects multi-dimensional analysis.
- Essay Template Extraction: Extract the core argumentative arc of this module (ethics as telos → Russell's diagnosis → moral collapse in war → Rawlsian reconstruction → re-moralisation programme) and practice writing this arc in 5 minutes without notes.
- APSC Integration: For each major argument, write one Assam/Northeast-specific example in the margin. This differentiation is what distinguishes top APSC scorers.

— End of Module: Ethics & Politics —

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