Moral Disengagement and the Impact of Power

Mains: *GS II – International relations| GS IV - Ethics*

Why in News?

The concept of moral disengagement, shows relevance in the present day world filled with conflicts and wars.

What is Moral Disengagement?

- **Moral disengagement** – It refers to the cognitive processes through which individuals justify or rationalise harmful actions, allowing them to act against their moral standards without experiencing guilt or moral conflict.
- Importantly, moral disengagement operates not only at the individual level but also collectively within institutions, particularly among power elites.
- Through shared language and institutional practices, responsibility is diffused and scrutiny is minimized.
- Despite the existence of legal frameworks and social norms aimed at regulating ethical conduct, violence and unethical behaviour persist across societies.
- A key reason for this persistence lies not only in individual deviance or structural inequalities, but also in the way harmful actions are psychologically and socially justified.
- **Origin of theory** – Developed in the 1990s, the theory explains how people reorganise their moral reasoning to make unethical conduct appear acceptable or even necessary.
- **Founder** – Introduced by psychologist Albert Bandura, provides a powerful lens to understand how individuals and institutions rationalise unethical behaviour while maintaining a self-image of morality.

What is the mechanisms of moral disengagement?

- **Moral Justification –** Harmful actions are framed as serving a greater good, such as national security or economic development.
- **Advantageous Comparison –** Actions are portrayed as less harmful when compared to more extreme alternatives, presenting them as the "lesser evil."
- **Displacement of Responsibility –** Individuals justify their actions by claiming they are merely following orders or institutional directives.
- **Diffusion of Responsibility –** Responsibility is spread across multiple actors, making accountability unclear or diluted.
- **Distortion of Consequences –** The harmful impact of actions is minimised, ignored, or made abstract.

- **Dehumanisation –** Victims are portrayed as less human or undeserving of empathy.
- **Attribution of Blame –** Victims are blamed for their own suffering, shifting moral responsibility away from perpetrators.
- Together, these mechanisms allow individuals and institutions to engage in harmful actions without perceiving themselves as immoral.
- **Euphemistic Labelling and the Power of Language –** A critical tool of moral disengagement is euphemistic labelling, where harmful actions are described using neutral or technical language to reduce their emotional impact.
    - **For instance**, terms like "collateral damage" instead of civilian deaths or "enhanced interrogation" instead of torture sanitise the reality of violence.
- Language thus becomes a mechanism for moral neutralisation, enabling individuals and institutions to justify unethical practices while avoiding public outrage.

What is the role of media framing and public perception?

- **Role of media** – The role of media in reinforcing moral disengagement is significant.
- As explained by Erving Goffman through the *Media Framing Theory*, the way information is presented influences how audiences interpret events and assign moral responsibility.
- **Consequences** – Media framing can:
    - Shape narratives that favour powerful institutions
    - Downplay the severity of harmful actions
    - Use language that obscures power imbalances and coercion
- **For example**, phrases like "underage girls" or "sex with a minor" soften the gravity of crimes such as child sexual abuse, while bureaucratic terminology can make exploitation appear procedural rather than violent.

How moral disengagement works in contemporary contexts?

- **Geopolitics and Warfare** – Military actions are framed as "security operations," masking civilian suffering.
- **Colonial and Historical Narratives** – Violence against indigenous populations was justified as "civilising missions."
- **Gender-Based Violence** – Harassment and abuse are trivialised, while victims are blamed.
- **Technology and Artificial Intelligence** – Data exploitation and job displacement are framed as inevitable outcomes of progress and development.
- In each case, the perception of morality is shaped by who holds power, how actions are described, and how narratives are controlled.
- **Role of power structures –** Moral disengagement becomes particularly entrenched within hierarchical systems such as states, militaries, corporations, and bureaucracies.
- These institutions:
    - Fragment responsibility across levels
    - Use technical and procedural language to obscure ethical concerns
    - Justify harmful policies in terms of larger goals like security or growth
- As a result, individuals within these systems may comply with unethical practices without fully recognising their moral implications.

How to deal with moral disengagement?

- **Critical Awareness** – Educating citizens about psychological and linguistic mechanisms of justification.
- **Ethical Media Practices** – Promoting accurate and responsible reporting.
- **Accountability Mechanisms** – Strengthening institutional transparency and responsibility.
- **Language Reform** – Encouraging the use of precise and ethically grounded terminology.
- **Civic Engagement** – Empowering individuals to question dominant narratives and demand justice.

What lies ahead?

- Moral disengagement does not imply the absence of morality; rather, it reveals how moral reasoning can be reshaped to legitimise unethical actions.
- In a world marked by complex power structures and mediated realities, understanding this concept is essential for fostering ethical awareness and accountability.
- Recognising and challenging these mechanisms is crucial for building a more just and morally conscious society.

Reference

The Hindu| Moral Disengagement

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