UPSC MAINS · ANSWER PRACTICE

Essay · Essay

Philosophy of wantlessness is Utopian, while materialism is a chimera.

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काल्पनिक आदर्श (युटोपिया) है,

जबकि भौतिकता माया है।

EXAM YEAR

2021

PAPER

Essay

SUBJECT

Essay

MARKS

125

WORD LIMIT

~1200 words

Answer Hint

Human desires and the pursuit of happiness; distinction between needs and wants; consumerism and material prosperity; wantlessness as an ethical ideal; Buddhist philosophy and the Middle Path; Gandhi’s idea of limiting wants; materialism and the illusion of fulfilment; economic growth and human development; technological progress and environmental sustainability; ambition versus greed; moderation and contentment; welfare state and equitable development; balancing material progress with spiritual well-being

Model Answer

Introduction

Human civilisation has evolved through the continuous interaction between material needs and the desire for a meaningful life. From the search for food and shelter to modern ambitions for wealth, status and technological advancement, human beings have constantly sought to improve their conditions. Yet, despite unprecedented economic growth and material comfort in many parts of the world, dissatisfaction, anxiety and social inequality remain widespread. This raises a fundamental philosophical question: does happiness depend on acquiring more, or on learning to desire less?

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The statement that “Philosophy of wantlessness is Utopian, while materialism is a chimera” presents two apparently contradictory ideas. Wantlessness, understood as freedom from excessive desire, may appear unrealistic because desire is deeply embedded in human nature. Materialism, meanwhile, promises fulfilment through possessions and consumption but may ultimately prove illusory because material accumulation cannot satisfy every human aspiration.

A balanced interpretation requires recognising that complete freedom from desire may be impractical, while unrestrained materialism can be deeply misleading. The real challenge is to pursue material progress without becoming enslaved by material possessions.

Understanding wantlessness: An ideal of inner freedom

Wantlessness refers to a state in which an individual is not controlled by endless cravings for wealth, power, possessions or recognition. It does not necessarily mean abandoning all needs, ambitions or productive activity. Rather, it means distinguishing between necessary desires that support life and excessive desires that create dependence and dissatisfaction.

Human beings need food, shelter, healthcare, education, security and meaningful relationships. Aspirations for better living conditions can motivate innovation, entrepreneurship and social progress. However, the desire for improvement can become an endless competition in which every achievement generates a new demand.

A person who wishes to provide a secure life for their family may pursue education and employment constructively. But if the pursuit of wealth becomes an obsession with status and comparison, even substantial success may fail to produce contentment.

The philosophy of wantlessness seeks to break this cycle. It encourages individuals to evaluate whether their desires genuinely improve their lives or merely intensify their dependence on external possessions and approval.

Why complete wantlessness appears utopian

The idea of complete wantlessness may appear utopian because desire performs several essential functions in human life.

First, desire motivates survival and development. The wish for food, security and comfort encourages individuals to work, innovate and cooperate. The aspiration to overcome poverty drives educational

attainment, scientific research and economic activity.

Second, ambition has historically contributed to human achievements. The desire to understand nature has advanced science, while the desire to reduce suffering has inspired medical discoveries and social reforms. A society in which every aspiration disappeared could struggle to sustain creativity and collective improvement.

Third, human beings are social creatures. They seek belonging, affection, dignity and recognition. These desires cannot simply be eliminated without affecting important dimensions of human experience.

Fourth, the meaning of a reasonable desire varies with circumstances. A person struggling to meet basic needs cannot be expected to regard the desire for adequate housing or nutrition as an unnecessary attachment. For disadvantaged communities, aspiring to material improvement is often a demand for justice rather than an expression of greed.

Therefore, complete wantlessness may be difficult to achieve universally. However, this does not make the underlying philosophy meaningless. Ethical ideals often guide human conduct even when they cannot be perfectly realised.

The pursuit of justice, equality and non-violence also encounters practical limitations, yet societies continue to value these principles as standards against which their actions can be assessed.

Materialism: The promise and illusion of possessions

Materialism, in the context of this topic, refers to the belief that material possessions, wealth and consumption are central sources of happiness and fulfilment. It is important to distinguish this philosophical attitude from the legitimate need for economic development and material security.

Material prosperity has undoubtedly improved human life. Advances in agriculture, sanitation, transportation, communication and medicine have reduced suffering and expanded opportunities. Economic growth can generate employment, support public services and enable individuals to live with dignity.

However, materialism becomes a chimera when possessions are treated as a permanent solution to dissatisfaction. A chimera is an illusion or an unrealistic expectation. The materialistic promise of complete happiness through continuous acquisition is illusory because human desires can expand alongside income and wealth.

A person may purchase a new device and experience temporary satisfaction, only to desire a newer model soon afterwards. A higher salary may improve security but also raise expectations about lifestyle. Social comparison can make achievements seem inadequate whenever someone else possesses more.

Thus, material acquisition may satisfy particular needs without necessarily producing lasting contentment. When happiness becomes dependent on an ever-increasing standard of consumption, fulfilment continually moves beyond reach.

The psychological cost of endless consumption

The pursuit of material possessions can influence mental well-being, relationships and personal identity.

Consumer culture often associates success with visible indicators such as expensive homes, luxury products, prestigious occupations and exclusive experiences. Individuals may begin to judge themselves through these external measures, even when they conflict with their genuine interests and circumstances.

This can create financial pressure, anxiety and dissatisfaction. People may work excessively to maintain lifestyles they cannot comfortably afford, sacrificing rest, relationships and health in the process.

Digital platforms intensify this tendency by displaying carefully curated images of success. Individuals compare their everyday lives with the most attractive moments of others, creating unrealistic expectations.

Moreover, when personal worth becomes closely linked to possessions, people with fewer resources may experience humiliation or exclusion. Materialism can therefore weaken both individual well-being and social solidarity.

The problem is not the enjoyment of comfortable living. It is the belief that a person’s worth depends on what they own. A meaningful life requires sources of fulfilment beyond consumption, including relationships, creativity, service, learning and moral purpose.

Indian philosophical traditions and the moderation of desire

Indian philosophical traditions provide valuable perspectives on the relationship between desire and fulfilment.

Buddhism identifies craving and attachment as important sources of suffering. Its emphasis on the Middle Path rejects both excessive indulgence and extreme self-denial. The objective is not to abandon responsible living but to reduce the craving that makes happiness dependent on constantly changing circumstances.

The Bhagavad Gita emphasises disciplined action without excessive attachment to the fruits of one's efforts. This approach does not discourage work or ambition. Instead, it encourages individuals to perform their duties sincerely without allowing success, failure or possession to dominate their inner stability.

Jain philosophy places considerable emphasis on *aparigraha*, or non-possession and restraint in accumulation. This principle encourages individuals to limit unnecessary attachments and recognise the ethical consequences of excessive acquisition.

Mahatma Gandhi similarly argued that the earth provides enough to meet human needs but not unlimited greed. His emphasis on simple living, self-restraint and trusteeship challenged the assumption that limitless accumulation should be the principal goal of economic life.

These traditions differ in their specific doctrines, but they share an important insight: desire requires ethical direction. Material resources can support human flourishing, yet attachment to them can undermine freedom and contentment.

Material progress remains essential for human dignity

A balanced essay must also recognise the dangers of glorifying wantlessness in a society marked by poverty and inequality.

For a family without adequate food, a desire for secure nutrition is not an obstacle to spiritual development. For a child without access to education, the aspiration to attend school represents an opportunity for empowerment. For a patient unable to afford treatment, the desire for medical care is an urgent human necessity.

Consequently, advocating the elimination of desire without considering social conditions can become insensitive or even unjust. It may encourage disadvantaged people to accept deprivation while leaving structural inequalities unchallenged.

Material development is indispensable for ensuring dignity, reducing poverty and expanding human capabilities. Public investment in

healthcare, education, housing, sanitation and infrastructure can transform lives.

The objective should therefore not be a society without material aspirations, but a society in which legitimate needs are fulfilled and excessive accumulation does not deprive others of opportunities.

Economic growth should be evaluated not only by the quantity of goods produced but also by its impact on nutrition, health, education, equality, environmental quality and human freedom.

Reconciling ambition with contentment

The apparent conflict between wantlessness and materialism can be addressed by distinguishing constructive ambition from uncontrolled greed.

Constructive ambition seeks to develop abilities, solve problems, improve living conditions and contribute to society. Greed, by contrast, pursues accumulation without regard for consequences or sufficiency.

A scientist who seeks a cure for a disease may be driven by ambition that benefits humanity. An entrepreneur who creates employment and develops useful products can contribute to social prosperity. A public servant who seeks administrative excellence demonstrates a desire for improvement that serves collective welfare.

Wantlessness need not eliminate such motivations. It can instead help individuals prevent ambition from turning into obsession.

This balance can be cultivated through financial discipline, mindful consumption, gratitude, meaningful relationships and reflection on personal priorities. Individuals can pursue professional success while recognising that wealth is a means rather than the ultimate purpose of existence.

At the societal level, responsible business practices, fair taxation, social protection and environmental regulation can help align material progress with collective well-being.

Environmental sustainability and the limits of consumption

The conflict between endless wants and finite resources has become especially significant in the context of environmental degradation and climate change.

A consumption-driven model that encourages continuous extraction, production and disposal places pressure on forests, water resources, biodiversity and the atmosphere. The environmental costs are often borne disproportionately by poorer communities and future generations.

Wantlessness, understood as restraint in unnecessary consumption, can contribute to sustainability. Repairing products, reducing waste, conserving energy and choosing durable goods can reduce environmental pressure without compromising essential living standards.

However, individual restraint alone cannot resolve structural environmental problems. Governments must promote clean energy, sustainable transport, circular economic systems and responsible resource management. Businesses must incorporate environmental costs into production decisions.

The broader principle is that prosperity should not depend on unlimited material expansion. Human development must operate within ecological limits while ensuring that all people can meet their essential needs.

Conclusion

The philosophy of wantlessness may appear utopian if understood as the complete elimination of every human desire. Materialism becomes a chimera when it promises permanent happiness through endless accumulation. Yet, neither extreme provides a sufficient foundation for a just and fulfilling society.

Human beings need aspirations to survive, innovate and progress. They also need restraint to prevent their desires from becoming sources of anxiety, exploitation and environmental destruction. The objective should be to fulfil legitimate needs, encourage meaningful ambitions and reduce unnecessary attachment to possessions and status.

Indian philosophical traditions remind us that inner freedom depends not merely on what we possess but also on how we relate to what we possess. Modern economic thinking, meanwhile, reminds us that material security is essential for dignity and opportunity.

Ultimately, the way forward is not the rejection of material progress but its ethical direction. A successful society must create prosperity without glorifying greed, encourage ambition without encouraging obsession, and promote consumption without undermining sustainability.

True progress lies in achieving a balance between material sufficiency and inner contentment—a life in which individuals possess the resources to live

with dignity without allowing possessions to determine their worth.

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