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Ends And Means: An Inter-Relationship

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Abstract

This article examines the complex ethical interplay between 'ends' - the objectives of human action and 'means' - the instruments used to achieve them. The discourse is traditionally framed by the tension between consequentialist and deontological frameworks. Utilitarianism, as proposed by Jeremy Bentham, often suggests that the "end" of social utility justifies the "means," whereas Kant's "Formula of Humanity" mandates that people should never be viewed as merely tools, but rather as ends in and of themselves.

The analysis further integrates Henry Hazlitt's perspective, which argues that while intermediate ends are pluralistic, they are ultimately subordinate to the ultimate end of social cooperation. This is complemented by Mahatma Gandhi's "organic" view, which posits that means and ends are as inseparable as a seed and a tree; impure means inevitably contaminate the final result.

By investigating these diverse philosophical traditions, the article illustrates how the ends-means relationship has evolved from localized survival instincts to a rational system of universal justice. It highlights that the choice of means is not merely a technical necessity but a moral statement that defines the integrity of the agent and the society. Ultimately, the work concludes that a stable ethical life requires the alignment of methods and goals, where the purity of the process reflects the virtue of the objective, ensuring that human dignity remains the core of all purposeful action.

Key words: Ends and Means, Moral Philosophy, Social Cooperation, Human Dignity, Henry Hazlitt, Ethical Frameworks, Instrumental Value, Intrinsic Value.

INTRODUCTION

Any action or plan of action and therefore any method of inquiry aims at some purpose, goal or end. To achieve that end human beings need to organise themselves into a society which conforms to a value-based conceptual framework of any action or plan of action. This value-based framework may sometimes be explicit but most of the time is implicit. However, there is no such unified single framework, instead there are a host of competing frameworks; each staking its claim to regulate and organise the society. The competing frameworks carry their own visualised goals, consequences or ends and consideration of means to attain them. In other words, man imagines and speculates the ends, means, and the interrelation between them bringing the whole issue under the philosophical discourse. This philosophical discourse of

ends and means and their inter-relation either helps to understand the problem or leads to the frustration of the organising practice of man.

A discourse on ends and means concerns everyone in the way the terms are used to connote 'good' and 'bad', which touches our concerns here. For instance, it is said that we may not use bad means in order to achieve a good end. When some theorists says that the goal justifies the methods, even when the accusation is frequently more political than philosophical, as we will see later, these theorists are accused of being Machiavellian or being tainted with 'Jesuit' morality.

CONCEPT OF ENDS AND MEANS

The term 'means' is ordinarily understood not as a separate category with its criteria of determination but as intertwined in an inseparable way from the 'ends' that may be generated. 'Means' refers to a subject's engagement with the goal of achieving specific 'ends.' Therefore, it may be argued that 'means' cannot be treated normatively in isolation but only conjointly with 'ends', which ordinarily signifies intended or proposed purpose, goal or aim of a person or group of persons.

However, the terms 'purpose', 'goal' or 'aim' are used interchangeably and may sometimes even be used as synonyms. The lexical meaning of the term 'purpose' as cognitive awareness of a goal, for example, gymnasium is for the purpose of physical training; 'goal' as suggesting an idealistic or remote purpose, for example, one of the goals is to learn French; and 'aim' stresses the direction in pursuit of an end, for example, the aim of making money. The relation of the terms 'purpose', 'goal' or 'aim' with 'end' is that 'purpose' is an end with an aim or objective, but an 'aim' has no definite criteria for completion or achieving something, for example, making money; 'goal' on the other hand has a definiteness, for a target has definite criteria or definite period of time for its attainment, like, one's election to a legislative assembly. Therefore, an end may be a purpose or a goal, that is, depending on whether there is some definiteness. In other words, 'end' may have definiteness or indefiniteness depending upon its tendency of relating with purpose or goal.

The word 'means' imply the processes of achieving something and it may or may not appear to be appropriate to achieve an 'end'. 'Means' may include tools, objects, or people that are typically utilised for reaching an 'end'. If we say that something is a 'means' to an end, we mean it enables or facilitates in achieving the end and has only an instrumental value. For example, marketing is only a means to an end of procuring the necessities of life. An end is something we wish to accomplish, and the means are the means by which we do so.

The terms 'means' and 'ends' are complementary to each other, likewise, up and down, right and left, inner and outer, black and white, so that one cannot be understood without the other. Only in connection to "ends" can "means" be defined, and vice versa.¹ We domesticate animals for food, for instance. Cows are not raised for their own sake, but only to generate milk. However, the relation of 'ends' and 'means' are not constants but vary from situation to situation. For example, we eat to live, as much as the requirements; however, since eating is one of life's pleasures, we also exist to eat.

An end is something we wish to achieve, and a means is how we try to achieve it. Occasionally, the goal is transformed into a means to an end. For instance, we grow paddy in the field to ensure that we have enough food. Paddy farming is the means, and food is the end. Again, we also require food to survive and so food becomes the means and survival becomes the end. In this sense Dewey argues, "Ends are, in fact, literally endless, forever coming into existence as new activities occasion new consequences. "Endless ends" is a way of saying that there are no ends – that is no fixed self-enclosed finalities".²

Means have no intrinsic value but only instrumental value, which is essential and necessary in order to achieve an end. However, what is good may be an end in itself, which is a central idea held by the classical moralists and philosophers. The 'end' may be Plato's eternal and absolute 'justice' or pleasure, the highest level of overall enjoyment, or Kant's 'good will'. However, for a pre-Marxist materialist, from Epicurus' harmony to Feuerbach's universal love, good is all too frequently a state of mind or a fleeting pleasure. For Marxists, it can mean nothing more or less than people leading fulfilling lives, improving their financial and cultural circumstances, and having greater freedom to realise their own potential in accordance with everyone else's.³

In Geek philosophy, Aristotle used, "the term 'end' in technical sense and defined ends as good to be achieved by action' or at which everything aims. He also defines the 'ends' as that for the sake of which a thing is done. For Aristotle, every end is good and every good is an end. An end is sought if it is somehow good for the seeker, and the good by being sought is the end or purpose of the seeker's motivation. No activity is possible except for the attainment of some end, that is, for the sake of some good. Hence for the principle of certainty, every agent acts for an end, is implicit in the principle of adequate reason and the concept of force or power and act. If every agent acts for an end, the human agent certainly does so."⁴

Stumpf argues that action aims towards an end. In addition to instrumental ends—acts carried out as a means of achieving other objectives—and intrinsic ends—acts carried out for their own sake—he defines two major categories of ends. Aristotle says, "there is a series of special kinds of acts, which have their own ends but which, when they are completed, are only means by which other ends are to be achieved."⁵ Duval also points out that when something is desired for its own sake then it is intrinsic value or is an end in itself. Kant had therefore asserted that people should never be viewed as a means to an objective, but rather as ends in and of themselves. Thus, according to Kantian approach, to treat a person as a means is to regard that person only as a tool to achieve a desired result. When one considers that an item may be 'beneficial as a method of achieving both good and bad purposes, the contrast becomes more apparent. Fagothey argues, "...human conduct must always be directed toward the good...but...this is not always the moral good. To determine the moral good, it is necessary to link up the various intermediate and subordinate ends man may have into some ultimate and all-inclusive end. Not only must single acts be directed to an end, but also the sum total of one's acts, one's whole life, must be directed to some last end and highest good".⁷

There is another kind of 'ends' which, according to Fagothey, is *intermediate ends*. He explains that the same thing may be both goals and means in different ways since it may be sought for its own sake as well as for the sake of anything else. Means always lead to an end, and their employment may bring the agent to the end. However, "there may be a long series of such intermediate ends, for example, as when we want A in order to get B, B in order to get C, C in order to get D, and so on"[Italics in the original].⁸ This view is further argued by Hazlitt as, "We strive for *intermediate ends* that in turn become means toward still further ends. It is therefore not always possible to say *precisely* how much we value something "intrinsicly". But it is always possible to be clear-headed about the distinction. Morality must be valued primarily as a *means* to human happiness. Because it is an *indispensable* means, it must be valued very highly. But its value is *primarily* "instrumental" or *derivative*, and it is only confusion of thought to hold that value is something wholly apart from, and independent of, any contribution it may make to human happiness"[Italics in the original].⁹

Hazlitt tries to assert that activities or things might be evaluated as final ends, subordinate ends, or means. He argues, "Activities are valued purely for their own sake, as ultimate ends, are said to have intrinsic value and are valued merely as means to ends may be said to have merely instrumental or derivative

value, which have both instrumental and intrinsic value.”¹⁰ In this respect we take an example, an eye is useful because it is useful as a tool, but its intrinsic worth is the same as when it is separated from the body. When something is valued for its own sake rather than as a means to an end, it is said to have intrinsic value. As a tool for seeing, we cherish the eye. Seeing could be a way to when it shows us something.

The sequence of aims and methods is closed when an action is pursued for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else. For instance, obtaining an academic degree ends one's education, yet education itself serves further purposes throughout life. However, the last or the absolute end signifies that which is directed to no further ends. A being must be the highest good and the ultimate end since the ends and the means are determined. In terms of ultimate purposes, however, Hazlitt presents the argument in a different way. He contends that there are disagreements over ultimate aims on “what are ultimate ends and what are merely means or intermediate ends and how appropriate or effective these means or intermediate ends are in achieving ultimate ends.”¹¹ Hedonists, such as Epicurus, while identifying ‘end’ with ‘good’ speak of happiness as the ultimate good. However, the Hedonists define happiness as a life of pleasure. Aristotle, on the other hand, speaks of happiness as self-realisation. Aristotle thought that happiness is the ultimate end of human action, since it is not desired for the sake of anything else, but everything else is desired because of it. Aristotle also thought that other commodities, like knowledge, were desirable as ends in and of themselves since they were necessary for a happy life. The various philosophers categorised "ends," which may be immediate or ultimate, in a variety of ways, including essential and desirable, short-term and long-term, actual and utopian, etc.

On the other hand, if we look at ‘means’ it is classified only as theoretical and practical. However, the discourse on ‘means’ invariably contain discussion on moral implications of ends. In contrast there are propositions which insist that moral considerations have no bearing on the ‘ends’ and ‘means’ relation; they argue that ‘the end justifies the means.’¹² Hartland-Swann attempts to break out of this bi-polar debate and introduces the notion of being personal and the social. For him, while some consider in terms of personal perfection, self-fulfillment, or maximising individual enjoyment, morality requires us to promote the welfare of the society or the reduction of human suffering. Priorities, however, can occasionally change within an individual as well as between individuals. Certain ends seem to be moral, while others are not; some are societal, some are personal, and some are a combination of both.¹³

Hazlitt interestingly insists that ends may be pluralistic, only if we acknowledge that this relates to intermediate or subordinate purposes. However, he contends that ends are never irreducibly pluralistic because we are always forced to choose between subordinate purposes, and this decision is inevitably influenced by a preference for one over the other. This preference stems from our perception that one of these "ends" is closer to our ultimate goal than the other, or at the very least, a more effective way to achieve it.¹⁴

However, in order to avoid one of the most important problems of moral philosophy, modern moral philosophers have contended that ends are pluralistic and wholly incommensurable. Moral philosophy has engaged itself with taking of moral in practice in daily life which faced with conflicting ‘ends’. But Hazlitt disagrees and argues that ends are not necessarily incommensurable, otherwise there would be no way to pick one over the other. This is another way of stating that humans are unable to have varied or "pluralistic" ultimate aims. We should avoid the misunderstanding that one of the two "ultimate" ends is actually a means to the other when faced with two or more purported ultimate ends, or two or more purported "parts" of an ultimate end, neither of which can be reduced to the other or expressed in terms of the other. Muirhead, on the other hand, understands the problem of ends and means as a question of

universal and particular phenomena reflected as the expression of a general character in an individual act. For Muirhead, the particular object is realised by appropriate selection of the means.¹⁵

THE RELATIONSHIP OF 'ENDS' AND 'MEANS'

The desire to attain a certain 'end', according to Muirhead, requires particular 'means', thought or felt most likely to achieve the 'end'. In other words, the relation of ends and means involves probability as a criterion for deciding on the means to be adopted, which appears to be analogous to cause and effect relationship. The analogy between the means-ends and the cause-effect relationship has serious practical implications. There can be no blame or praise for something being the cause of something else, but if that something is a means to obtain something else, irrespective of whether it is its natural effect or otherwise, it is blameworthy or praiseworthy. For example the giving of money to a poor person to motivate him to vote for the donor or his candidate in an election makes it a means and is therefore blamed. Therefore, there is a sharp distinction between 'cause and effect' and 'ends and means' relationship requiring that the two should not be confused. The ends and means relationship, unlike the cause and effect, may suffice to say here, includes the moral agent.

Falk argues, "To apply ends-means analyses to the activities of other living things is to extend them by analogy from their bases of proper application to human action emanating from moral agent."¹⁶ Paton argues, "...the reduction of coherence to a relation between means and end seems to presuppose that the end of an action is to produce something. But this is surely false in case of friendly conversation or playing games, and many men have thought that moral action must be done for its own sake. We must not prejudice this question by a hurried acceptance of the category of means and end. At least some coherent actions seem to be ends as a whole or all the way through...Even where the end – if we accept the term – is to produce something, an action is not necessarily coherent because it actually produces the end".¹⁷

The end is achieved consciously by man that is, by his subjective intervention in the objective processes of which his consciousness itself is the product and outgrowth. Man is the product as well as the maker of the society. He sets to himself social ends and chooses means to attain those ends. Shah has pointed out that the problem of ends, means, and its interrelationship is restricted to the subjective structures of human beings though there are objective grounds occupied by social relations.¹⁸

The subjective and objective dichotomy of ends and means interrogates the primary concern of classical philosophy and religion only with 'good in itself', which provides separation between 'ends' and 'means' and gives their movement a defined direction but with a static status. But this is not the case with progressive social movement, which invariably discloses the dialectical inseparability of ends and means. The organising activities are means to an end. In dynamic organisation the stages of the historical process, ends and means are always related to one another displaying a clear dialectical relation.¹⁹

DIALECTICAL RELATION

The dialectics of ends and means has historical, moral and political significance. The activity of a subject involved in achieving a particular "end" is known as the "means." At first, the "end" is ideal which may be very different from the actual result or outcome of the adopted means. The 'end' is firstly a subjective notion conceived in consciousness as the desired change in the objective world of things. The Marxists argue that human being live in a world which is the outcome of the ends and means dialectics of previous generations. This dialectics is at work since the very earliest stages of human development and is the basis for the formation of thought and language, or conscious practice.

'Ends' and 'means' are processes that are in greater or lesser contradictory dialectical relation with each other throughout their development constituting a learning process of continual adjustment of both ends and means in a form of activity, which is both its own end and its own means. For the continual adjustment of ends and means concept, Ehlers asserts, "Means and ends are correlative aspects of civilized living, and nothing but tragedy occurs when they become separated. Such a tragedy occurs when values and ideals are set apart...In any civilized community, means and ends are logically distinguishable, but they are not actually separable".²⁰

Shelvankar, however, criticises that an end is something we want to attain but dialectically it would mean we have something different from the end, we have the antithesis of the 'means'. The means represent the way in which we may pass from the state of not having attained our end to the state of having attained it.²¹ The argument is primarily that ends and means are distinct and the dialectical relation is not possible. This is a rather naive reading of the argument claiming dialectical relationship between ends and means. Ingle quoting Ferdinand LaSalle shows the dialectical relation of ends and means,

"Show us not the aim without the way
For ends and means on earth are so entangled
That changing one, you change the other too;
Each different path brings other ends in view".²²

DISTINCTION BETWEEN 'ENDS' AND 'MEANS'

The argument that one should not carry out an ill deed for the purpose of a good deed gives rise to the logical distinction between aims and methods. This distinction is associated with the notion that 'end justifies the means', which arises from consequentialist ethics. Consequentialism is easily deducible from the emphasis placed on the outcome of an action and then determining moral correctness by weighing the merit of that action against the merit of the outcome. The consequential ethicist emphasises the distinction between ends and means and argues that the action that maximises happiness for the most number of people is the moral one. The implication of this piece of reasoning is that an immoral act is justified if it is the medium by which greater happiness is accomplished, for example, lying to save someone's life.

The pragmatist philosopher Dewey points out that, "Means and ends are two names of the same reality. The term denotes not a division in reality but a distinction in judgment. Without understanding this fact we cannot understand the nature of habits nor can we pass beyond the usual separation of the moral and non-moral conduct. 'Ends' is a name for a series of acts taken collectively – like the term army. 'Means' is a name for the same series taken distributively – like this soldier, that officer".²³ The distinction between ends and means may be appropriately used as a rigorous and powerful test of moral values, demanding careful examination. Ordinarily the ends and means distinction understands means as benign tools used to settle an outcome but also as a factor that provide their attributes and characteristics to the creation of the outcome.

In most of the contexts the significance of ends and means are clear. However, when used in moral philosophy further clarification is definitely needed, which is the purpose of this thesis. In order to do this we must distinguish means that are merely means, and means that may be both ends and means, that is, means to resemble an end, which in turn refers to an end that serves as a means to another end.

The distinction between ends and means constitute a teleological, if it is not historical, approach for both the traditional and contemporary theories of action. This distinction dates back to Aristotle, who maintained that desire and reasoning, the means with a view to an end, are the basis of choice, which is the origin of action while wish relates only to an end. Accordingly, choice affects the outcome. For example, we want to be healthy; therefore we make decisions that will help us achieve that goal. Therefore, the argument is that we discuss what leads to the ends, which are ultimately about methods, rather than the ends themselves. As a result, we call attention to goals, the methods by which they can be realised, and, if necessary, their implications and side effects. All of these are subject to action, including moral judgement and responsibility as well as theoretical and moral investigation.²⁴

Stumpf points out that like Aristotle, Aquinas considers morality or ethics is the pursuit of happiness. He contends that man's goals or purpose are intimately related to happiness. According to Aristotle, men can attain virtue and happiness by realising their inherent potential or goals. As a Christian, Aquinas added his idea of the supernatural end of man to this. Aquinas, therefore, argued that there are two levels of morality that correspond to the natural and supernatural ends of man.²⁵

It is argued that the distinction between ends and means is essential to any research on humans from which political systems are derivable. If we take democracy we find two ideals involved in it, namely, the open society and the free individual. Since democracy and freedom as ends cannot be attained by authoritarian or undemocratic methods, the primacy of the person cannot be preserved as an aim unless our society also maintains the means by which authority may be constrained.²⁶

Iyer argues that the majority of schools of thought acknowledge a stark contrast between aims and means, asserting that this divide is fundamental to our political, ethical, and psychological lexicon and defines the essence of human behaviour. Because of this, contrasts between immediate and ultimate, short-term and long-term, diverse and common, individual and social, essential and desirable purposes, as well as between achievable and utopian objectives, have been stated on several occasions. It is therefore concluded that the harmful dogma "end entirely justifies the means" is basically an extreme form of the widely accepted notion that moral considerations may only be applied to the means in relation to the ends, or that the purposes are morally superior.²⁷

Hazlitt admitting the distinction between objectives and means, which is essential for living a wise life, is not as objective as the contrast between a room and a table. He asserts that the distinction between ends and means is subjective, since ends and means are significant only in relation to human purposes and human satisfactions, and, for each individual, in relation to his purposes and his satisfactions.²⁸ In this sense Aquinas distinguishes between "subjective" and "objective" ends by seeing God as the objective ultimate goal and human happiness as the subjective ultimate goal.²⁹

However, it is to be pointed out that it is fundamental to distinguish between aims and means logically. To acknowledge that men act with purpose is to acknowledge that they are motivated by goals. In order to accomplish them, they must unavoidably use means. However, some things or activities can serve as both means to other ends and ends in and of themselves. For example, the primary need of a working man may be to earn money, but this does not deny that he may also enjoy the work itself, it could be his "end," and he might see the money he makes primarily as a tool to achieve other goals.³⁰ Paton sees the matter differently and argues, "The distinction of means and ends has the same kind of utility and same kind of abstraction as the distinction of premises and conclusion. Every premise is also a conclusion and every conclusion is also a premise. The act of thinking or inferring is continuous throughout the whole, and is of the same character throughout the whole. Neither, premises nor conclusion are what they are in isolation from one another, and the conclusion is as necessary to the understanding of the premises".³¹

CONCLUSION:

The 'ends' and 'means' relationship is much often talked of in terms of justification. The arguments centre on the issue whether end justifies the means, even if the 'means' are not otherwise acceptable. However, the relationship between aims and methods does not imply that any means are justified by any end. It suggests that the question cannot be answered with a simple yes or no because ends and means are so closely related. People think that some activities are justified by the outcomes they produce, but they also argue that there are some things that should never be done.

In day to day life we act to achieve something, that is, with some purpose, goal or end in mind. However, in order to achieve the intended purpose, goal or end some method or means are adopted. Therefore, to explain the claim to an action as purposive or meaningful, 'ends-means' relationship comes into play. The applicability of the framework of 'ends-means' relationship is not restricted to individuals but also covers group of individuals. However, in either case some moral rules or principles are adopted that affect the individuals and organise and regulate the society as a whole.

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