

From Means to Ends and Back Again

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“There is no road to peace. Peace is the road.” – M.K. Gandhi

THIS OLD SAYING is occasionally recited by peace activists. It is a commentary on means and ends – in other words, methods and goals – essentially claiming that they shouldn't be separated. Rather than seeing peace as a goal, down the track, to be achieved by whatever methods possible, the saying suggests that people should be trying to live their ideals today.

214 Debates about means and ends have a long tradition (Huxley [1937] 1965). One classic view is that the ends justify the means, commonly adopted by supporters of armed struggle: killing – sometimes massive death – is seen as necessary to achieve liberation from oppression. Gandhians, on the other hand, believe the means should reflect or incorporate the ends: if the goal is a society without violence, then use nonviolent methods.

Those who want to make their methods reflect their goals commonly argue that methods influence the goals. For example, critics of armed struggle argue that it runs a greater risk that the revolutionary movement will be militarised and that success in the struggle will lead to a repressive state. In response, supporters of armed struggle say these problems aren't inevitable. The critics then reiterate that violence makes these outcomes more likely, not that violence leads inexorably to post-revolutionary repression.

Rather than enter these long-standing debates, here I want to address a somewhat different facet of the means-ends connection, namely possibilities for developing better means by reflecting on ends, and vice versa.

Ends into means

Turning ends into means is a well-established practice in social movements. Feminists seek a world of gender equality. "Living the revolution" means practising gender equality right now, as much as possible. Animal liberationists seek a world in which humans live in harmony with other species, rather than killing and exploiting them, and that means becoming a vegetarian or vegan. Environmentalists, following the same logic, try to reduce their personal impact on the natural world, for example by cycling and recycling.

One advantage of seeking to live now according to your visions is helping create the desired world. But, critics allege, this often has a minimal impact. What is the use of an individual recycling their bottles when it would be far more effective to introduce a bottle deposit, which would greatly increase recycling rates? Even a bottle deposit would not address deeper driving forces including consumerism and the search for profits: a few individuals cutting back on their consumption are not going to make much difference.

Another advantage of taking personal steps now is heightening one's awareness of the issues. By doing things a different way, one may be regularly reminded of the need for change, and consequently be better motivated to join campaigns for change. In short, personal behaviour can be a trigger for collective behaviour. Furthermore, taking personal steps can give insight into what is involved in bringing about change.

Finally, personal action adds to the credibility of those taking action. A person who preaches equality but behaves like a bully is not an effective advocate. Living according to one's goals is good politics.

At the collective level, adopting ends as means also can be valuable. If a group's vision of an ideal world includes operating in a harmonious manner – perhaps dealing with conflict in a systematic, respectful manner – then it makes sense to try to do this now. It's possible to explain away today's problems as being due to the fact that we grow up and live in an imperfect society, but it is far more convincing to do a fairly good job of living harmoniously. Nothing is less edifying than bitter feuds and nasty dealings in groups seeking to lead the way towards a better society.

Means into ends

In discussions of means and ends, the main focus has always been on whether means should reflect ends. What about the opposite direction:

should ends reflect means? That's the angle I want to pursue here. A bit of background is needed.

In the study of nonviolent action, an unexpected phenomenon can be observed: violent attacks on peaceful protesters sometimes lead to an increase in support for the protesters. Richard Gregg ([1934] 1966), observing Gandhi's campaigns, called this "moral jiu-jitsu", using an analogy with the sport of jiu-jitsu in which the force of the attacker can be turned against him or her. The attacker uses violence, which is widely assumed to guarantee victory except in the face of greater violence, but people are so upset by violence against peaceful protesters that the attackers lose support. Gene Sharp (1973) broadened the conception of this process, called it "political jiu-jitsu", and cited several historical examples such as the 1960 Sharpeville massacre in South Africa.

Violent attacks on nonviolent protesters are sometimes counterproductive for the attacker – but in many cases they are not: the attackers get away with it. What is going on in these cases where there is no jiu-jitsu effect? I found that perpetrators commonly use five methods to inhibit outrage at their actions (Martin 2007):

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- cover up the action
- devalue the target
- reinterpret the events, including through lying, minimising, blaming and framing
- use official channels to give an appearance of justice
- intimidate or bribe people involved.

I found that these same five methods are used by perpetrators in all sorts of injustices, from sexual harassment to genocide – as well as in cases involving violence against peaceful protesters.

If these are standard, indeed predictable, methods used by perpetrators, then it makes sense for opponents to counter each one of them, in other words to seek to increase outrage about what they believe is an injustice. This leads to five counter-methods:

- expose the action
- validate the target
- interpret the events as an injustice
- mobilise support; avoid or discredit official channels
- resist and expose intimidation and bribery.

These tactics are found in many successful campaigns built around challenging an unfair action, for example the so-called McLibel campaign against the McDonald's legal action against two activists, Helen Steel and Dave Morris, over the leaflet "What's wrong with McDonald's?" Rather than restrict their resistance to the legal system (which would mean sticking with official channels), Steel, Morris and their supporters publicised McDonald's legal action, behaved honourably themselves, framed the action as censorship, built an international support operation and continued in the face of legal risks and settlement offers (Jansen and Martin, 2003).

That is all at the tactical level, the level of means. But consider each of these five counter-methods as ends.

Counter-method	Goal, alternative	Relevant movements
Expose the action	Openness, access to information	Anti-censorship
Validate the target	Respect for all	Labour movement, feminist movement, anti-racist movement
Interpret the events as an injustice	Understanding of justice, responsibility, honesty, etc.	Liberation pedagogy
Mobilise support; avoid or discredit official channels	Self-management; participatory democracy	Grassroots action
Resist and expose intimidation and bribery	Nonviolent world; honest world	Nonviolence movement

As the table suggests, each of the five counter-tactics can be turned into an all-encompassing goal or vision. Furthermore, for each counter-tactic, there are one or more campaigns or social movements pursuing goals in that general direction. This small exercise illustrates the potential of turning methods into goals.

Complications

It is worth looking more closely at a few of these. For many people, the most counter-intuitive tactic in this list concerns official channels. Most people think that official channels – like grievance procedures, ombudsmen, experts, tribunals or courts – are designed to dispense justice. However, when powerful individuals or groups do something outrageous, then such channels frequently serve to give only an appearance of justice with little or no substance. The counter-tactic is to avoid or discredit official channels when used this way and to mobilise support, in other words to seek justice through harnessing the force of public opinion.

So if the counter-method is popular mobilisation, what is the associated long-term vision? Surely it doesn't make sense to get rid of all grievance procedures, arbitration systems and courts. The problem arises from inequality, namely the existence of perpetrators, like governments, militaries and large corporations, which are so powerful that the usual agencies are unable or unwilling to bring them to account. One solution is popular justice, which has its own risks. Another is equalising power – for example, promoting participatory democracy and workers' control – so that perpetrators cannot easily minimise accountability. Yet another is to maintain the capacity to mobilise popular support about perceived injustices.

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The point here is that turning means into ends isn't always an easy or obvious process: there can be legitimate differences concerning what is a suitable goal. This mirrors debates about turning ends into means.

Starting with good things

What other means might be turned into goals? It's useful to think broadly about anything that people think of positively, for example politeness, assertiveness, compassion, gratitude, insightfulness, generosity, friendship, commitment and altruism. Most of these are usually thought of as individual attributes, but they can also be characteristics of groups.

I may have jumped a step. Behaviours such as politeness and gratitude are not necessarily thought of as either means or ends – just as worthwhile. As well as goals to be pursued, they can be treated as methods or tactics. Politeness can be a means to obtain a favour but more commonly is a way to maintain relationships, part of a collective reciprocity or good will. To take another example: gratitude, expressed to others, shows

appreciation and can contribute to a willingness to continue behaviours. Expressing gratitude can also encourage others to think about what they are thankful for, thereby encouraging positive emotion.

Conclusion

“The ends justify the means” is the implicit assumption underlying much ruthless behaviour. Many activists turn this around and argue that “the means should reflect the ends”, in a tradition that has been called prefiguration, or living the revolution.

The interplay between ends and means can be developed further. One possibility is to examine current methods being used, decide which ones are worthwhile, and propose these as long-term goals. This can help develop new visions and forge a different connection between means and ends.

The next step is to think of things that are widely valued as worthwhile, such as compassion and gratitude, and to think of what it would mean to turn these into both means and ends.

Going between means and ends is not an easy or automatic process: creative thinking is needed, individually and collectively. Nor is thinking enough: the test of methods is in practice. That is another set of challenges.

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