

“Before it move, hold it, Before it go wrong, mould it,

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You can deal with what has not happened, can foresee Harmful events
and not allow them to be.***

– LAO TSU

MEANS AND ENDS

In a time of widespread political apathy and disturbing acts of collective violence, a commitment to ethical principles and the practice of non-violence may seem too difficult and not relevant to contemporary life. However, an honest examination of the relationship between means and ends can reveal the central importance and indeed the necessity of choosing ethical means of pursuing both personal and public goals. The following paragraphs from a chapter on “Means and Ends” in *Parapolitics* by Raghavan Iyer explain the priority of choosing ethical means and of recognizing a tolerant approach to seeking truth in a morally progressive community. Professor Iyer was co-founder of the Institute of World Culture and author of *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*. Gandhi’s birth anniversary is observed on October 2nd.

“Parapolitics requires a radical rethinking of the relations and relative weights of submerged moral and political concepts--sincerity, tolerance, truth, civility, empathy, and non-violence. If we believe that we possess truth in full measure, we risk becoming intolerant or despotic and may foster the delusion that truth is readily discovered or enthroned. On the other hand, to abandon the quest for truth altogether is to invite technological usurpation of our ethical prerogative. Mere sincerity without earned truth could result in the moral collapse of a permissive society and so encourage the dangerous inroads of messianic authoritarianism. In a time of crisis, even an open democracy can be destroyed by massive voting for a totalitarian government. The philosophical balance required to discriminate and deploy such concepts as sincerity and civility is reflected in the *sophrosyne* necessary to rediscover the elusive connection between means and ends. Most political and social thinkers, however, have been primarily concerned with the desirable or necessary goals of a political system, or with the common and competing ends men actually seek, and then pragmatically considered the means available to rulers and citizens. Even those who have sought a single, general, and sovereign criterion of decision making have postulated the ultimate ends and then shown more concern with the probable costs and consequences of social and political acts than with consistent application of standards of intrinsic value. It has become almost a sacred dogma in this age of apathy that politics, centered on power and conflict and the quest for legitimacy and consensus, is essentially a study in expediency. It is viewed as

a tortuous discovery of makeshift compromises that can reconcile contrary claims and secure a common if minimal goal or, at least, provide conditions in which different ends could be freely or collectively pursued...

“ ...The acceptance of any goal requires the recognition of the means to it as well as the potentials of individuals who may attain it. The mental posture of those aspiring toward some goal, the attitudes they show toward themselves and each other and also to the end in view, may affect and even restrict the means which they can adopt. The chasm between means and ends is bridged by these concepts with the resultant possibility of harmonizing an unconditional loyalty to ultimate ends with an explicit political responsibility in relation to every means. This suggests the possibility of finding ethical solutions to the fundamental problems of politics. Gandhi seems to stand almost alone among social and political thinkers in his firm rejection of a rigid dichotomy between ends and means and in his moral preoccupation with the means to the extent that they provide the standard of reference rather than the ends. He was led to this position by his early acceptance of truth and non-violence as twin moral absolutes, and by his consistent view of their close relationship. In *Hind Swaraj* he wrote that even great men who have been considered religious have committed grievous crimes through the mistaken belief that there is no moral connection or interdependence between the means and the end. The means may be likened to a seed, the end to a tree, and there is just the same inviolable connection between the means and the end as there is between the seed and the tree. Violence and non-violence are not merely alternative means toward the same end. As they are morally different in quality and essence, they must necessarily achieve different results. The customary dichotomy between means and ends originates in, and reinforces, the views that they are two entirely different categories of action, that their relationship is mainly a technical matter to be settled by considering what will be effective and possible in a given situation. The ethical problem of choice is reduced to an initial decision regarding the desired end, leading to obligatory acceptance of whatever steps seem necessary or likely to secure it. Gandhi, however, was led by his faith in the law of karma—the law of ethical causation or moral retribution linking all the acts of interdependent individuals—to the conviction that the relationship between means and ends is organic, the moral quality of the ends being causally dependent upon that of the means.

“The psychology of human action in a morally indivisible community of apparently isolated units demands that the means-end relationship be seen in terms of consistent growth in moral awareness of individuals and communities and not in relation to the mechanical division of time into arbitrary and discrete

intervals. If there is no fundamental wall of separation between means and ends, this is because in politics-as in all spheres of human action-we reap exactly what we sow. A clear formulation of the means-end relationship may be derived from the following statements of Gandhi, which overlap and yet express several distinct ideas:

1. It is enough to know the means. Means and ends are convertible terms.
2. We always have control over the means but not over the end.
3. Our progress toward the goal will be in exact proportion to the purity of our means.
4. Instead of saying that means are after all means, we should affirm that means are after all everything. As the means so the end.

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“One could argue from the proposition that all men have some idea of truth but no adequate conception of Absolute Truth to the prescription that society should regard the pursuit of truth as a common end. Gandhi held that in seeking the truth, we cannot help being true to our "real" nature (identical with that of all others) and exemplifying a measure of non-violence in our attitudes and relations. It is possible if questionable to argue that the unhappiness of some is required to maximize collective happiness, that individual citizens have to be coerced for the sake of general freedom, and that the maintenance of public virtue sometimes requires subjects to choose or support a privately corrupt but efficient and outwardly respectable ruler. It would, however, be difficult to contend that the collective pursuit of truth is compatible with the adoption of dishonest devices or the condoning of untruth. This could be advanced only if a preordained, collectivist conception of truth were imposed on the members of a society, a dogmatic ideology propagated by dishonest and ruthless methods. Since none can speak convincingly in the name of Absolute Truth, all are entitled to their relative truths and each must necessarily see truth differently at any given time. Truth in this sense is identical with integrity or fidelity to one's own conscience, and no man can pursue greater integrity while sacrificing his existing integrity. The test of immediate moral integrity is authenticity in the active pursuit of truth, and this requires a high degree of non-violence. If we understand the concept of relative truth and accept its pursuit as a common end, we cannot make a hard-and-fast distinction between this end and the means toward it. On the other hand, if we particularly regard the promotion of happiness as the whole duty of man, we may in the name of efficiency become careless about the means and violate the laws of morality. The polis is essentially the domain in which all persons are free to gain skill in the art of action and learn how to exemplify

commitments to truth and non-violence; the arena in which the individual quest could be furthered and the social virtues displayed among masses of citizens in a climate of tolerance and civility. A morally progressive community is one in which neither the State nor any social organization is allowed to flout with impunity the sacred principle that every man is entitled to his relative truth, and no one can claim the right to coerce another, to treat him as a means to his own end.”

Raghavan Iyer, *Parapolitics*