

Ends and Means: Modern Philosophical Discourse

Dr. Samsul Alam Choudhury

Assistant professor & HoD
Department of philosophy
Govt. Degree College, Longtharai Valley, Dhalai, Tripura, 799275

Abstract:

The debate over ends and means has continued to be a major issue in moral philosophy, posing persistent queries regarding ethical coherence, rational agency, and moral justification. This argument centers on whether morally admirable goals can excuse the employment of dubious or detrimental methods or whether the morality of deeds must be evaluated separately from their results. This article revisits the ends-means debate and critically analyzes traditional and modern philosophical stances that have influenced the conversation, such as virtue-based, teleological, and deontological approaches to moral reasoning.

While deontological viewpoints concentrate on the inherent moral character of methods and frequently premise moral limitations in duty, rights, or moral laws, teleological theories highlight the importance of ends and consequences in judging moral actions. By emphasizing moral character and practical skill in matching methods with morally admirable aims, virtue ethics, on the other hand, provides a mediating framework.

The article makes the case that deeper philosophical differences regarding moral value, agency, and accountability are the root cause of the ongoing conflict between ends and means. The paper shows that neither the unthinking acceptance of instrumental justification nor the absolutist rejection of consequential reasoning offer an acceptable solution by examining important arguments and counterarguments. Rather than viewing ends and methods as hierarchically antagonistic, the article offers a complex philosophical approach in which they are viewed as morally interdependent. This viewpoint allows for contextual moral assessment while maintaining moral integrity. Clarifying the ends-means problem's conceptual underpinnings and reiterating its ongoing significance within normative ethical theory are the goals of the reevaluation.

Keywords: Ends and Means; Moral Justification; Normative Ethics; Teleology; Deontology.

INTRODUCTION

The debate over the morality of ends and means was then revived in the modern age. The discussion over modernity begins as a dispute between teleology and deontology within the liberal philosophy. By connecting them to morality, Kant distinguishes between the goals and the means in deontological moral theory. Consequentialism is also known as teleological moral theory, links objectives, and methods to consequences while favouring certain moral means.

Philosophy in general is at least as old as moral philosophy. The two may have the same articulation, yet their histories of origin may differ. For the basic reason that it directly impacts human lives and persons, the primary human concern is best appropriate to an examination of moral philosophical issues. The two primary opposing ideas of modern moral philosophy are teleology and deontology. According to deontologists, an act's fundamental qualities –such as its objectives or ends –determine whether it is right or wrong.¹

According to deontologists, certain categories of behaviour are unquestionably right or wrong. For instance, a deontologist would argue that lying and cheating are immoral even if doing so might result in a positive end, such as, saving one's life. They assert that lying and cheating are wrong because of its inherent nature, which remains the same regardless of the purpose or end. Teleologists, on the other hand, focus on ends and directly link right and wrong behaviour to ends, objectives, or consequences.

What is currently referred to as consequentialist ethics or ethics of consequences is the teleological viewpoint. Teleologists view acts as a means to an end or a strategy for achieving to a purpose. They argue that acts are evaluated based on whether they to achieve something or fail to accomplish the desired ends. An experienced pilot, for instance, will be aware of the most effective way to go in order to get the aircraft to its destination; his quality is determined by the outcome rather than the methods used. For teleologists, the methods are taken into consideration in order to accomplish a purpose, and the means must be good in order to realise a good end.

However, in contrast to deontologists, teleologists allow unethical methods to accomplish beneficial ends in certain situations, such as lying to save someone's life. Once more, teleology contends that using the proper methods is the best approach to accomplish the purpose; those who lack this understanding are more likely to select the incorrect methods or carry out improper actions. While deontology places more focus on means, teleology emphasises ends without ignoring the means. Deontology rejects the saying "end justifies the means" because it maintains that a good end or purpose does not excuse a bad deed. On the other hand, teleology asserts that occasionally the results of an action justify it.²

Deontologists assert that a promise should be honoured just because it is morally proper to do so, regardless of whether the end is favourable or unfavourable. The moral precepts involved determine the promise's correctness. According to deontologists, punishment for certain crimes, like violating the law, should be meted out because they are wrong and deserving of it, not because it will prevent future crimes. Contrarily, teleology maintains that we should only fulfill our commitments when doing so will provide greater outcomes than the alternatives. Teleology will make use of factors like crime prevention and criminal rehabilitation when discussing punishment.

DEONTOLOGY

The first and most well-known philosopher to completely develop and clarify deontological moral philosophy is said to be Kant. The "realm or kingdom of ends" is the ideal society that Kantian moral philosophy argues can only be attained by moral laws. The realm can only exist if all of its members accept each other as autonomous agents who pursue various personal goals, and if they actively work to further each other's goals. According to Kant, these two elements make up the moral ideal, which will develop provided everyone abides by the 'categorical imperative,' the cornerstone of moral law. The categorical imperative states that in order for a maxim to become a universal law or principle, one must simply act in accordance with it.

But according to Kant, the categorical imperative and the hypothetical imperative are related. In order to satisfy one's desires or potential desires, the "hypothetical imperative" postulates the practical dimensions of possible action. The 'categorical imperative' is defined as requiring goals and actions independent of other ends. In this regard, Fagothey contends, "If the action is good only as a means to something else, the imperative is hypothetical; but if it is thought of as good as itself, and hence as necessary in a will which of itself conforms to reason as the principle of this will, the imperative is categorical..."³

According to Fagothey, the hypothetical imperative has a conditional end, meaning it depends on the means, as we are also arguing. Kant suggests that when the goal is stated, the methods must be taken into account in a hypothetical imperative. However, since there is no clear-cut goal to support the means, the categorical imperative is independent of the means. According to Kant, all hypothetical imperatives are depends on the ends or goals since everyone has an objective in mind. As a result, a hypothesis can be formulated to propose the optimal course of action to be taken from the different options accessible to accomplish that end. He contends that ends-means reasoning justifies such imperatives. Therefore, they only tie us if we want the end, which is their condition, rather than unconditionally.

According to Kant, only rational humans are able to understand the law that governs everything in nature and intentionally control their behaviour in accordance with principles, that is, by volition or common sense. The law that restrains the will is part of the practical reason. These imperatives can be categorical, such as ‘you must do this absolutely,’ or hypothetical, such as ‘you must use these means if you want this end.’ But Kant asserts, “...the will as the objective ground of its self-determination is the end, and if this is assigned by reason alone, it must hold for all rational beings. On the other hand, that which merely contains the ground of possibility of the action of which the effect is the end, this is called the means”.⁴

In addition, Kant divides ends into two categories, i.e. subjective and objective, “...subjective ends require action in accordance with hypothetical imperatives for their realisation, e.g. roses blooming in one’s garden in winter, objective ends do not”.⁵ People are therefore objective goals in his view since they are the source of categorical imperatives and do not need to be further realised.

By stating the Kantian explanation of the ideas of “ends and means may be expressed much more simply and plainly if one believes that an end is the direct motive of an act of the will and means are the indirect motivation. According to Kant, man is an end in and of himself. Only in relation to a will, which is fundamental to the things, can any end exist.”⁶ Haezrahi emphasises Kant's perspective and contends, “...ends which are also duties like performing moral actions for the sake of duty. But products of moral actions are not absolutely good, and morally good actions are not absolutely good, such supreme goodness belonging only to the will. Since the end cannot be less perfect than the will, only rational agents as far as they are possessed of a will itself capable of being a good will actuated by the idea of the law, can be the ends of a categorical imperative”.⁷ According to Kant, morality mandates the acceptance of ends, like other people's happiness, rather than being concerned with ends themselves. Even morality itself may have a conditional value of serving the purposes if, morality is the condition of the ‘kingdom of ends.’

All moral actions would prove to be non-rational, if not illogical, if Kant is correct when he asserts that morality is not concerned with the goals that it may or may not achieve. Actually, in accordance with Kant's definition of morality, the best instances of moral behaviour are actions that are obviously moral. Happiness cannot be explained as a completely random goal, and it involves more than just determining how to achieve a presupposed goal; it also involves determining what the goal is. But Hutchings highlights Kant's position and asserts, “Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an End”.⁸

With its three formulations, the categorical imperative is the core of Kant's duty theory, which holds that we should treat people as ends in and of themselves rather than as means. Kant refuted the saying ‘end justifies the means’ made an effort to disentangle the goals or ends from the means by which they were

essential; thus, an attempt to justify the maxim and supports the teleological or consequentialist viewpoint, which is in opposition to the Kantian viewpoint.

TELEOLOGY

As previously mentioned, teleology is frequently referred to as consequentialism, which raises the notion that an action's ends, not its means, determine whether it is moral or evil. To put it another way, consequentialism upholds the moral precept that 'end justifies the means'. According to consequentialism, a course of action is only morally right if it serves the long-term goals of the person or the largest group of individuals with the highest level of happiness as a necessary consequence.

According to consequentialism, the ultimate goal is either the greatest happiness of the largest quantity of individuals or the individual's long-term self-interest. The utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill promotes the communal interest of individuals, whereas Bentham places a strong emphasis on the individual interest, which is associated with Hobbes' ethical egoism theory.

According to ethical egoism, the individual's long-term self-interest should be taken into account when making moral decisions. If this goal can be accomplished through appropriate moral methods, then that action should be taken. Contrarily, utilitarianism holds that the greatest happiness for the largest number of people is the desired aim or end and that any action that accomplishes this goal by morally sound means should be carried out. Though their goals differ and must be taken into consideration, both schools concur on the use of moral methods when, as previously said, it is not an extraordinary circumstance, such as saving another person's life.

Deontology rejects utilitarianism and holds that there can never be a responsibility to maximise good in the first place. According to deontologists, maximising the good is not a goal that can be achieved because there is nothing in utilitarian principles that would compel one to do so. Deontologists contend that utilitarians are taking on the responsibility. Lacey presents a counterargument in this regard, "Utilitarians object that deontology is irrational. If it is my duty not to murder, for instance, this must be because there is something bad or wrong about murder. But if murder is bad, surely we should try to ensure that there are as few murders as possible. If I know that unless I kill someone deliberately, many people will die, how can I justify not killing them by appealing to duty? Surely it is my duty not to kill only because death is bad. So I should prevent more deaths. To insist that/don't do anything 'wrong' seems a perverse obsession with 'keeping my hands clean'".⁹

The Utilitarians contend that the goal or end is not to maximise the good but rather to begin with irrationality. Conversely, Kantian deontologists contend that the principle is illogical if everyone might behave in a way that maximises the good. The teleologists respond that since it is impossible for everyone to act in a way that maximises the good, the deontologists' requirement is illogical. To put it another way, teleologists reject Kantian concepts as standards for judging reason. In contrast to the deontological argument, which solely recognises formal aspects of reason like universality and categorisation, our focus in this thesis is on achieving ends-means reasoning. Kant has come under fire for confusing logic, science, and facts as aspects of practical reason.¹⁰ Because their main focus is on ends, utilitarians isolate the action from the actor and ignore his motivation in the process.

According to Mill, an action's morality is unrelated to its motivation. For him, the main point is that good intentions are typically socially advantageous. He does clarify, though, that habitual regard for a desirable incentive should not prevent us from detecting the badness of an act if it results in an especially unprofitable activity.¹¹ In contrast, Deontologists assert that people are ignored in the utilitarian framework and maintain that without moral motivations, an action cannot be moral. The focus is on the

motivation behind an action, which is said to be an essential component of the ends-means equation and hence cannot be disregarded.

Unlike deontologists, utilitarian judge the activities based on their outcomes rather than their goals or motivations, believing that ‘ends justify the means’. Kant is the antithesis of the utilitarian ideal, believing that an action's justification does not depend on its outcome. He insisted on a highly rigid perspective on how to determine the morality of an action and believed that motive was everything.

According to utilitarians, the goals are distinct and definable states of affairs that have no inherent relationships with one another. An agent uses his actions, which are the means, to accomplish a goal or bring about an outcome. They continue by arguing that human life is assessed and viewed as a sequence of acts that are intended to achieve specific goals, some of which may then become means to other goals. There are a number of different relationships between human behaviours and their goals, according to arguments made against utilitarian.¹² Every goal attained in life contributes to the agent's overall good or well-being, which is a collection of goals dispersed during the course of a lifetime. The series is composed of separate elements that only together make up the well-being.

According to the utilitarian perspective, an action is taken in order to achieve a goal, and the action that achieved the end is its means. Therefore, they contend that an action's efficacy as a means to an end determines its goodness or badness, or its normative character. It goes without saying that there are various alternate ways to accomplish a goal. Once more, utilitarians contend that an action's value can only be assessed in terms of the advantages it provides as an agent's goals frequently conflict with one another. Therefore, according to utilitarians, action is value neutral and lacks any inherent normative qualities that come from evaluating the agent's goals.

Human beings are unequal when evaluated as means, according to the notion of usefulness as value in establishing human worth. Not every human being is equally valuable; some are more valuable than others. Men are rated differently as more or less valued depending on how well they work as tools to achieve the goals of others. However, this type of assessment simply does not apply if people are regarded as goals rather than means. It is clear that the arithmetic of efficacy does not apply when people are treated as goals rather than means, as creatures whose own purposes—that is, their choices and desires—are to be respected.

The utilitarians plan does not take the ultimate goal into account. Only when something is demonstrated to be a means to a goal that is acknowledged to be good that is, when the ends are actually good – is it considered good. It's unclear from a reading of Mill whether he is saying that happiness and pleasure are the only ends or that they are good ends in and of themselves. He is undoubtedly making the case, though, that some things should be viewed as ends in and of themselves; otherwise, there would be nothing to desire. According to Hartland-Swann, “...ends are...what things are desirable. The utilitarian doctrine is, that happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable, as an end; all other things are only desirable as means to that end”.¹³

Mill is trying to convey that pleasure is desired as a goal in and of itself, whereas other things are helpful as a means to an end. Moore argues that Mill has not distinguished between "end" in the sense of what is desired and "end" in the sense of what is desired. Desirable, in his opinion, is not what is desired or possible to be desired, but rather what should or deserves to be sought. According to Moore, desires are not always desirable because people may have negative desires. Mill may justify himself by arguing that the wanted, not the desirable, is the good.

However, Moore contends that motivating people to act morally would be easy if good were the desired outcome. Shaw contends, “Whether happiness be or be not the end to which morality should be referred...to and *end* of some sort...the morality of actions depends on the consequences which they tend to produce, is the doctrine of rational persons of all schools; that the good or evil of those consequences is measured solely by pleasure and pain, is all of the doctrine of the school of utility, which is peculiar to it”.¹⁴

According to Bentham, the primary goal of advancing human pleasure must be achieved via the application of reason and morality.¹⁵ Happiness, he contends, is the goal that justifies all methods. Iyer disagrees, arguing that the maxim ‘end justifies the means’ can occasionally be detrimental to society. Instead of saying that all measures are never justified by power, Iyer says this formula should be viewed as being similar to Machiavelli's claim that gaining power frequently requires committing some really dreadful acts.¹⁶

Flemming contends that if Kant is correct in prohibiting the whole use of man as a tool for achieving goals, then “...teleology is in trouble. Egoism not only permits but requires that an agent use other for his own good. Utilitarianism does not at first seem so badly positioned, since it can use Bentham's rule to give each person equal consideration in the utility calculus and then include among intrinsic goods whatever is thought valuable in persons”.¹⁷

Moore contends in *Principia Ethica* that utilitarianism is inconsistent since it does not differentiate between pursuits that enhance happiness as an end in and of themselves and acts that make people happy now in order to be happy later. Moore goes on to say that each person's pleasure cannot be an end in and of itself, as utilitarians believe, since the happiness of one individual serves as a pathway to the happiness of the greatest number of individuals. Moore argues that pleasure cannot be regarded as an aim in and of itself if it is viewed as a means to an end, implying that it is neither a goal nor an end in and of itself.

The explanation is that awareness of pleasure needs to be coupled with awareness of other things in order to be genuinely enjoyable. Consequently, Moore contends, “...pleasure alone is good as an end, since you imply that something else, something which is not present in all pleasures, is also good as an end. It is plain that if you say ‘colour alone is good as an end’, then you can give no possible reason for preferring one colour to another”.¹⁸ He asserts that pleasure is the one goal we should pursue, the only thing that is worthwhile as a goal and pursued for its own purpose.¹⁹

All forms of utilitarianism, however, contend that moral behaviour is beneficial and good as a means. Screwing down the thumbscrew, for instance, is a good or effective means to inflict pain, but its effectiveness or usefulness for that goal does not make it ethical. Acts that are beneficial, effective, and done for noble goals or objectives are considered righteous. According to Bentham, Mill, and Sidgwick's classical utilitarianism, the only goals that matter are generating happiness or pleasure and avoiding or preventing suffering or depression. Since the only things that are good are pleasure and suffering, it is the only goal that matters in and of themselves, as well as excellent and awful as ends.

According to classical utilitarianism, often known as hedonism, pleasure is a worthwhile goal in and of itself. Moore and other ideal utilitarians emphasise that virtues like virtue, love, wisdom, and beauty are good objectives in addition to pleasure. Because they both hold that an action is only morally justified if it is beneficial in achieving outcomes that are inherently good, both schools are utilitarian.²⁰

Marx asserts that the theory of utility adds nothing substantial or meaningful because it is accurate by definition alone. According to Marx, it is necessary to look into what kinds of goods are beneficial for people, and the first step in doing so would be to comprehend our true nature as alienated by capitalism. Furthermore, he draws attention to Bentham's failure to consider how people's personalities change and, consequently, what is beneficial to them. Because he thinks that all significant claims depend on specific historical circumstances, he criticises utilitarianism. Marx argues that since human nature is dynamic rather than static, the idea of a universal utility is unhelpful and one-dimensional. He goes on to critique utilitarians for refusing to acknowledge that happiness varies over time and that different things make different individuals happy. Marx contends that because the utilitarian's approach contradicts their entire philosophy, they should never downplay the significance of research into what maximises utility.

In the argument over whether 'end justifies the means,' consequential or teleological perspectives on the 'ends-means' relationship have demonstrated a preference for the maxim. Despite this tendency, they also make arguments that emphasise the significance of means in achieving a goal. Utilitarians attempt to demonstrate that only acceptable means that achieve moral goals are acceptable. Consequently, consequentialist theory holds that the ends justify the means.

CONCLUSION

The dispute reappeared in the modern era as a conflict between utilitarian and Kantian principles or between deontology and teleology, following the historical basis of the dictum 'end justifies the means,' as found in medieval period. Nonetheless, the two theories are essentially based on the same analytical premise, with just occasional shifts in emphasis. These two theories have been criticised by Marxists, while their proponents have taken their presentation as supporting the idea that 'end justifies the means'. The materialisation of primarily ideological disagreements between Marxists and Liberals is what is reviving the debate over the morality of ends and means. The Marxist perspective supports the saying 'end justifies the means', but only in situations of societal oppression – a fact that fanatical liberals seem to completely overlook.

Most of the liberal philosophers believe that the end does not justify the means and criticised violence as a means to an end. The utilitarians, also known as consequentialist, are an exception. They contend that the dictum 'end justifies the means' cannot be rejected in general since there are instances in which end justifies the means. Nevertheless, their methodology persists and is recognised as liberal due to its emphasis on the individual.

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