

# ENDS AND MEANS: A CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

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## **Abstract:**

This essay explores the dialectical relationship between the concepts of ends and tactics as well as their philosophical and moral importance. It seeks to clarify how these ideas function within moral reasoning by situating them within the framework of choice and purpose. The primary moral conundrum in the study is whether means should be morally examined before pursuing an objective or whether the legitimacy of an end can justify the use of particular means. This dilemma has long been a focus of ethical discussion, particularly when it comes to political participation, social transformation, and moral obligation.

This essay offers a critical analysis of the late 1930s controversy between Leon Trotsky and John Dewey. Dewey underlines the moral continuity between means and objectives, suggesting that techniques must be morally judged separately since they are intrinsically constitutive of purposes. Trotsky, on the other hand, advocates a revolutionary moral perspective in which the justification of methods is inextricably related to the historical and social purpose of the end pursued. The paper exposes the essential presumptions of different ideas regarding morality, agency, and social change by explaining and contrasting them.

The paper's conclusion makes the case that moral decision-making necessitates a continuous evaluation of both practice and aim, and that the relationship between ends and techniques must be understood dialectically. Thus, the study increases our knowledge of moral decision-making in political and ethical circumstances.

**Keywords:** Ends and Means; Moral Choice; Ethical Purpose; Means–End Relationship; Dewey–Trotsky Debate.

## **Introduction**

The engagement of a subject with the intention of achieving specific "ends" is commonly understood as "means." It is also possible to treat "means" in conjunction with "ends," which often refer to the intended or proposed purpose, goal, or aim of an individual or group of individuals. The process of doing something is implied by the word "means," which may or may not be suitable to reach the desired "end." An "end" is something we wish to accomplish, and the means are how we get there. To put it another way, we may say that an end is something we wish to achieve, and the means are the ways in which we try to do so.

## **Trotsky on Ends and Means**

Trotsky contends that dialectical materialism is ignorant of the duality of aims and means. The means are subservient to the aims, which are determined by the historical movement, which may also be means for other ends. In addition to showing the end, the dialectical view of ends and means also shows the means, which are interconnected and go hand in hand. Marxists express "ends" and "means" only in terms of dialectical interdependence and contend that the methods are determined by the purpose. But the immediate goal could turn into a means to an end.

Marxist dialectical materialism does, in fact, portray a dynamic process that is constantly evolving. The means that result from the proportionate influence and interaction between the ideal and the actual become harmonious with the end through this dynamic process. To put it briefly, the relationship between goals and means in Marxist philosophy never suggests that any end justifies any means, and vice versa. Marxists contend that in a particular historical context, the character of the end dictates the nature of the means. The character of means, whether violent or non-violent, varies according to the nature of the ends because ends and means are inextricably linked.

### **Dewey on Ends and Means**

According to Dewey, means serve as intermediaries, much like the middle term in a categorical syllogism. Dewey also recognises the end of the widely accepted duality of aims and methods. The phrase "means" simply refers to the series observed at an earlier stage, and the term "end" simply refers to a sequence of acts viewed at a distant one. By explaining the ends and means, these two terms refer to the same reality, Dewey was portrayed. The terms do not differentiate between reality and the judgement that determines whether something is moral or immoral.<sup>1</sup>

The term "end" has two meanings in Dewey: the ultimate end that justifies everything, as well as the ends that lead to this hypothetical ultimate end. Dewey notes that Trotsky never asserts that certain aims are only means, although this is undoubtedly implied in the Marxist assertion that some ends result in human dominance over nature, etc.

According to Dewey, there is an obvious temporal relationship between ends and means. He contends that while means are in the now, ends are in the future. Consequently, this suggests that we have control over the means but not the ends.

### **Dewey versus Trotsky Debate**

Dewey in his article "Means and Ends" remarks that the relation of ends and means has been a bargaining issue in moral philosophy, as well as in political theory and practice. Novack says, "For Dewey, ends and means are independent. But he believed that these two terms merely *condition* to one another; either one can determine the other or be predetermined by the sufficient material conditions. The one is as conditional and hypothetical as the other." "For example, exploitation is bad and must be eliminated. But for Dewey it may be uprooted in any number of ways: by class struggle, by class agreement or by a combination of both. None of these means are decisive for accomplishing the desired aim: the abolition of capitalist exploitation such is the abstract theoretical position".<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, Trotsky lays no emphasis on means, "...the means itself can be a matter of indifference but that the moral justification or condemnation of the given means flows from the end. Thus, shooting in itself is a matter of indifference; shooting a mad dog that threatens a child – a virtue; shooting with the aim of violation or murder – a crime".<sup>3</sup> For Trotsky the maxim 'end justifies the means' naturally, this begs the question of what justifies the conclusion. He responded that the aims and the means are always shifting in real life, just as they were in the historical movement. He uses the example of a machine that is being built as a "end" in the production process and when it enters into the factory it may be transformed into a means.<sup>4</sup>

The pragmatists seem to agree with the Marxist and argue that those who argue that the idea that "end justifies the means" is immoral, Dewey on this point asks that if 'end does not justify the means' then what does? According to Dewey, the methods can only be justified by the end.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, Marxists argue that only the ends can be taken into consideration; means have no moral significance or place on the moral scales. Novack argues, "Many liberal moralizers contended that, if means were

justified only through their usefulness in achieving ends, the most vicious practices were licensed and the gates opened to the totalitarian abominations of Stalinism”.<sup>6</sup>

Trotsky can be cited as representative of Marxist view. Trotsky had the quality of being not only a Marxist with worries about setting up a practical regime but was a thinker in his own rights. The differences between Stalin and Trotsky sprang from this very dispute that latter was involving himself in interpretative exercise. Trotsky could therefore argue that only those tactics that actually resulted in human freedom were appropriate in the class fight. Novack points out Marxists view and argues, “Permissible and obligatory are those means, we answer, which unite the revolutionary proletariat, fill their hearts with irreconcilability to oppression, teach them contempt for official morality and its democratic echoers, imbue them with consciousness of their own historic mission, raise their courage and spirit of self-sacrifice in the struggle”.<sup>7</sup>

Trotsky categorically explains that to achieve an end the permissibility of means depends on its removal of social oppressions which can only be achieved through revolution. These philosophical gendarmes of the ruling class irreconcilably oppose religious doctrine as well as several idealistic obsessions. It derives a code of conduct from the laws of social growth, mainly from class conflict, and this is the law of all laws.<sup>8</sup> Here Dewey points out, “This increase of the power of man over nature, accompanying the abolition of the power of man over man, seems accordingly to be *the end* –that is, an end which does not need itself to be justified but which is the justification of the ends that are in turn means to it” [Italics in the original].<sup>9</sup>

The pragmatists then view the Marxist justification of means through the notion of liberation of man from which therefore, not all methods are acceptable to Marxists as has been misunderstood by non-Marxists. Dewey’s reading Trotsky on this point is cared for Trotsky argues, “When we say that the end justifies the means, then for us the conclusion follows that the great revolutionary end spurns those base means. And ways which set one part of the working class against other parts, or attempt to make the masses happy without their participation; or lower the faith of the masses in themselves and their organization, primarily and irreconcilably, revolutionary morality rejects sterility in relation to the toilers, that is, those characteristics in which petty – bourgeois pedants and moralists are thoroughly steeped”.<sup>10</sup>

Trotsky settles the liberals inquiry on whether the Marxists insist on all methods are acceptable in the class war against the capitalists, including murder, betrayal, lying, and frame-ups. Trotsky maintains that a means can only be justified by its end and contends that the base ends will justify the base means, rejecting the idea that the end justifies any or all means.<sup>11</sup> Dewey, however, not satisfied argues against the Trotsky on the ground of inevitability and historicity present in the Marxists view, “...examination of history – just as an assertion that the Newtonian laws are the final laws of physics would preclude further search for physical laws – it would not follow, even if it were *the scientific law of history*, that it is the means to the moral goal of the liberation of mankind. That it is such a means has to be shown not by “deduction” from a law but by examination of the actual relations of means and consequences; an examination of mankind as end, there is free and unprejudiced search for the means by which it can be attained” [Italics in the original].<sup>12</sup>

Novack argues that every law deals with its own nature as a human and historically evolved formulation that has a relative and conditional character, which may be one component of its content, and is constrained by the nature of reality. The law is absolute for the processes and occurrences that fall under its purview if we presume that it is true. For instance, Marxists' understanding of the laws governing class conflict is only applicable in class societies. These laws were not only unfathomable but also inapplicable prior to primitive culture, when society was separated into classes. At the other end of the

historical process, these laws will progressively lose their scope and wither at the roots when class society vanishes in the socialist future. But Dewey argues, "...a law of history determines the particular way in which the struggle is to be carried on certainly seems to tend toward a fanatical and even mystical devotion to use of certain ways of conducting the class struggle to the exclusion of all other ways of conducting it...noted that means were deduced from a supposed scientific law instead of being searched for and adopted on the ground of their relation to the moral end of the liberation of mankind".<sup>13</sup> Novack argues against Marxists view, "In reality, class struggle methods are simply inconsistent with his in-between position where he is pulled in opposite directions by the antagonisms, between capital and labor, 'white and black'".<sup>14</sup> He asserts that social relationships can be applied in both absolute and relative ways. The shifting and paradoxical path of social progress from primal collectivism through civilisation to socialism is the foundation of relativity. Marxist absolutism is predicated on the idea that the conflict between class interests is fundamental to the organization and functioning of civilised society.<sup>15</sup> For Novack, in a capitalist society, the actual relationships between classes and their functions are crucial. He asserts, "The ends of classes, and of their members and movements, are actually determined by their material needs and interests. These arise from the parts they play in social production and their stake in specific forms of property. Thus the collective end of the capitalist class in the United States is to preserve and extend their economic system. That is their primary end. And it *determines* the conduct of persons belonging to that class, just as it *conditions* the lives of everyone in our society" [Italics in the original].<sup>16</sup>

Selsam points out that the only reason Dewey and Huxley reject the true socialist movement is because they believe that means determine the end and that the necessary means do not satisfy them. As a result, they continue to be satisfied with the capitalist world with its violent wars, unemployment, and poverty. They overlook the fact that the means required to achieve socialism are a byproduct of capitalism.<sup>17</sup> The point Selsam is trying to emphasize that the means available to attain an end are embedded in the then existing condition and therefore adopting them may amount to accepting them hindering the attainment of the goal.

Dewey argues that for Marxists, the choice of means is not decided on the ground of an independent examination of measures and policies with respect to their actual objective consequences. Means are deduced from an independent source, an alleged law of history which is the law of all laws of social development.<sup>18</sup> But Dewey goes on to argue, "...genuine interdependence of means and ends does not automatically rule out class struggle as one means for attaining the end. But it does rule out the deductive method of arriving at it as a means, to say nothing of its being the *only* means. The selection of class struggle as a means has to be justified, on the ground of the interdependence of means and end, by an examination of actual consequences of its use, not deductively. Historical considerations are certainly relevant to this examination. But the assumption of a *fixed law* of social development is not relevant" [Italics in the original].<sup>19</sup>

Dewey asserts that the idea of interdependence of objectives and means may be compatible with emancipation or liberation. Accordingly, Dewey contends that a careful analysis of the methods is necessary to determine what Marxists' true objective outcomes will be in order to demonstrate that they do, in fact, result in the freedom of humanity. The double importance of end becomes significant at this moment. While measures in their capacity as means are dependent upon the aim in that they must be regarded and evaluated on the basis of their true objective ends, outcomes actually achieved are obviously contingent upon the means used.

Dewey argues that if an end-in-view is based on the means that are thought to be most likely to result in the end, it embodies the idea of final ends. Therefore, the end in view is a means of directing activity in and of itself. For instance, a man's notion for a house to be built is a method of directing action to reach

that aim, but it is not the same as an end in the sense of actual outcome.<sup>20</sup> However, he detailed argues above, "...the idea of the liberation of mankind as the end-in-view, there would be an examination of *all* means that are likely to attain this end without any fixed preconception as to what they *must* be, and that every suggested means would be weighed and judged on the express ground of the consequences it is likely to produce" [Italics in the original].<sup>21</sup> He asserts that the use of means that can be shown by the Marxists are in its nature leads to the ultimate goal or outcome of human liberation.

Novack argues that scientific socialism's revolutionary morality is effective and progressive because it gives the working people the ideals and perspective they need to achieve emancipation. Theoretically, it validates and generalises the cause they pursue. It clarifies the goals of their endeavours and sheds light on the kinds of tools needed to achieve them. Novack points out the ancient moralist view that "you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free."<sup>22</sup> Dewey argues that the means to be employed come from outside sources rather than from thinking about the objective, which is the emancipation of humanity. Therefore, he claimed that the class struggle is the means by which the end-in-view, the emancipation of humanity, is subordinated. The end depends on the means, but the means are not generated from the end, as opposed to ends and means being interdependent. The means, that is, the class struggle, do not need to be critically scrutinised with regard to its actual objective consequences since the conclusion that it is the only way is arrived deductively rather than inductively by examining the means-ends in their interrelation. For Dewey, "The end-in-view, as distinct from objective consequences, justifies the use of any means in line with the class struggle and it justifies the neglect of all other means."<sup>23</sup>

Dewey points out that traditional Marxists who adhere to the principles of scientific socialism depend heavily on the objective relations of ends and means method of attaining the law of historical change: the class struggle. The set up created by the Marxist attitude derived from the law of deduction from ends to means makes all moral questions, finally to be attained, meaningless and futile. For Dewey human ends are interwoven into the very texture and structure of existence. But Trotsky, as a materialist, asserts that not human ends but under specific historical circumstances, class ends are objectively woven into the very fabric and structure of social existence.<sup>24</sup> Dewey asserts that being scientific about ends does not entail deriving them from social or natural rules. For him, "orthodox Marxism shares with orthodox regionalism and with traditional idealism the belief that human ends are interwoven into the very texture and structure of existence the concept of which is inherited from Hegel."<sup>25</sup>

Dewey explains that increasing the objective appears to be the eradication of man's control over nature; that is, an end that is the justification of the ends that are means to an end rather than an end in and of itself. According to him, Marxists may embrace this interpretation of the end and maintain that it represents society's moral interest, if not its historical interest and not only the proletariat's.

Dewey criticises the Marxist conception of ends that Marxist theory of social practice clearly implies a discontinuity of ends and means. For him, the presumed means are not considered; and the assumption that the means will in fact achieve the expected end is not questioned. Consequently, Marxists regard themselves as absolved from the responsibility of considering the actual ends of promoting class conflict.<sup>26</sup>

Dewey further criticises Trotsky's view that Marxists' use of set laws to justify their methods of social activity is absolutistic. He claimed that because Trotsky imposes his intended goals on social development and acts as though human objectives are woven into the very texture and structure of existence, his perspective is idealistic and theological rather than empirical or scientific.<sup>27</sup>

Trotsky, a materialist, never claimed that the existence of nature is entwined with human aims. However, he claims that under some historical circumstances, class ends are objectively woven into the texture and structure of social existence.<sup>28</sup> Novack explains Dewey's view, "...society does not have to a determinate texture and structure that any general laws on the objectives of class can be obtained from an analysis of social development and subsequently used to calculate their conduct as a basis for action. If there are no definite laws governing the activities of classes, there can be no necessary means, like the class struggle, to attain social objectives. If there are neither ascertainable laws nor prescribed means, then what takes their place...many different kinds of means, and in principle almost any means, may achieve the end-in-view. If you don't know where you are going or what you are really up against, any road will presumably take you there".<sup>29</sup>

Dewey goes on to argue that the Marxists can make no moral sense consistently with their premises or means. If history leads by an inevitable sequence to an inevitable end then there is no determination of ends or means by way of discrimination and selection. However, he argues that the end is the outcome of procedures of judgment than is the end of water spilling over a dam.<sup>30</sup> However, Novack argues that the means used by the opposing forces are determined by the collision of irreconcilable aims. The struggle's historical trajectory culminates in a dramatic confrontation where one of the polar classes triumphs over the other. Marxists actively promote the dominance of the working class.<sup>31</sup>

Even though the representatives of capital and labour, who are required to act in accordance with them by the surrounding circumstances of their socio-economic situations as these develop from one stage to the next, may not always grasp or state them precisely, the class ends are clear and definite. In this sense, Novack argues, "Dewey, too, regarded these [social oppression] as the worthiest of objectives. Trotsky further stated that all those means that contributed to the realization of these aims are morally justified. So far, there was no disagreement between Marxist and the pragmatist".<sup>32</sup> In this sense Novack points out Trotsky's view and asserts, "...the only force in modern society capable of carrying through this job was the organized working class. The only way labor can eliminate oppression and complete the conquest of nature was by developing to the very end its struggles against the capitalist beneficiaries and upholders of economic privilege".<sup>33</sup>

Novack asserts that Trotsky was incorrect to give workers the primary responsibility for social reconstruction in our day. Novack claims that this is a shared concern that is preferable to any particular class interests. To gain collective control over environment and our economy, all good-hearted individuals, from the highest echelons of society to the lowest, should unite.

Dewey claimed that additionally, Trotsky erred by relying solely on the prosecution of the class struggle to achieve his objectives. For Dewey, methods and strategies other than intensifying the conflict between capitalists and labour will not only be beneficial but also yield better outcomes.<sup>34</sup> Dewey argues against the Marxists view of using the logical method and scientific procedure, and points out that Trotsky's way of thinking is flawed because he inferred the means of the class struggle based on his interpretation—or misinterpretation—of the social development process. Instead of allowing the ends to dictate the means, Trotsky essentially subordinated the ends to a specific means by illegally establishing the class struggle as the ultimate and absolute law of history and he has determined the means by analysing the real effects of its application. This is the only truly scientific method that considers the two aspects' actual connection.<sup>35</sup>

Here Novack argues that in deduction is the process of drawing specific conclusions from broad guidelines. Dewey opposed the induction process, which makes generalisations based on repeated or duplicated examples. However, Novack points out for Dewey, Trotsky did actually just use the deductive technique to determine his means arbitrarily. Novack argues, "To be sure, Trotsky did

explicitly evaluate means by reference to the laws and needs of the class struggle. These laws, however, were not freely created and imposed upon society by the Marxists. They had been drawn from a prior comprehensive study of social processes over many generations by strictly scientific methods. The laws of class struggle are first of all *empirical* generalizations developed from analysis of the *facts* presented by the history of civilizations..." [Italics in the original].<sup>36</sup>

Novack interrogates the grounds on which one can select a set of means over others. Dewey responds that the selecting process should make use of prior knowledge and experience. However, these are never sufficient or conclusive. Only what results from their use demonstrates its significance. Only when the choice of means is chosen do the ends become apparent. However, the question is why the lessons learned from the familiar ends of the past cannot direct and define the choice of means. No amount of predetermination is too decisive for the pragmatist; determination only occurs after the act and only for that specific act.<sup>37</sup>

Dewey's understanding is that each person operates within a certain socioeconomic framework and that public norms of conduct are linked to personal morality. According to him, moral decisions are ultimately determined by societal goals. However, what should and does determine what methods will result in the intended outcomes? Then Dewey asserts "...informed or "creative intelligence" has to step in and do the job".<sup>38</sup> As a philosophical representative of those liberal middle class elements that aspire to be the ultimate mediators and moderators of class struggle in our society, Dewey fulfilled a certain social function through the choice of methods and disguising of aims. The revolutionary Marxists for whom Trotsky spoke also fulfil their responsibility as defenders of the basic, long-term interests of the working masses in their choice of objectives and means. In reality, their class roles and allegiances dictate both the methods and the ends.<sup>39</sup> Novack points out that the middle classes' ultimate historical demise which is according to Dewey's conception of the subject. He then argues on the point, "In the domain of theory their function is to deny the crucial importance of the class struggle, its necessity and its fruitfulness if properly organized and directed. In practice, they usually strive to curb its development by the working class while its enemies remain unrestricted and powerful. This is a hopelessly reactionary task in social science, politics, economics – and morality".<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

In the 'ends-means' controversy debate, however, we have found that both Dewey and the adage "end justifies the means" and the interdependence of 'ends' and 'means' are agreed upon by Trotsky. Dewey on the maxim 'end justifies the means' argues that neither ends nor means can be justified by the alleged deliverances of reasonable standards of consequence, or some sort of timeless truths, or a moral sense. They can only be justified by their actual outcomes, and he maintains that the only rationale for the methods used is the end in the sense of consequences. The results of their utilisation are the only thing that can determine if a means is good or terrible.<sup>41</sup>

Liberals insist on the morality of goals and means debate because they see it as a useful political instrument to wield against Marxists in order to maintain their position of power in society. Marxists unmistakably maintain that when one picks the goal, one also selects the means. The methods are selected because they are suitable and appropriate for achieving the desired results. To put it briefly, the relationship between goals and means in Marxist philosophy does not entail that any end justifies any means and vice versa. According to Marxist theory, means and aims are inextricably linked in such a way that the nature of methods—violent or nonviolent—varies according to the nature of the ends. Marxists say that the liberals' formulation of morality as a relationship between ends and means undermines the interdependence between ends and means. Marxists contend that the Liberals' break is the reason why means must be justified apart from the ends.

Marxists believe that in order for society to advance and become free from exploitation and class oppression, it must change. As a result, they believe that understanding the terrestrial origins of morality is essential. They have questioned the liberal concept of morality and favoured what they refer to as 'human morality', which is evolving in society. As a result, the maxim 'end justifies the means' is not relevant to Marxists; rather, it is a liberal catchphrase used to point the finger at their opponents, the Marxists, which is therefore political rather than moral.

In the current discussion on the morality of goals and means, the differences between liberal and Marxist perspectives are political in nature. It is a discussion about the most effective ways to achieve human emancipation. However, the political side of the ideological war and the confusion that resulted from it, which persists to this day, cannot be ignored by morality or the corollary morality of ends and methods. The political nature of the discussion on the morality of objectives and means has been made evident by the current debate, which has further cleaned the clutter.

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