

## Of Means and Ends

You don't have to be an ethicist to be familiar with the notion that the end justifies the means. Insofar as means are means to an end, it pretty much goes without saying that the means receive their justification from their ends. Or not!

If the ends are not themselves justified, if they are seen as bad or wrong, then clearly they do not and cannot justify the means.

What's often overlooked in this way of thinking is the more basic fact that the means determine the ends. If this basic fact were more prominent in our thinking, I suspect it would alter our judgments, and even change our behavior, in many ways.

The view that the ends justify the means is especially prominent in our political policy discourse. And these days there seems to be no end more important than national security. For the sake of national security, resort is being made to all sorts of means, many of which would seem at least questionable if not altogether unacceptable were they not "justified" by their purported ends. So we have massive unwarranted surveillance, drone attacks, extrajudicial assassination, indefinite detention, extraordinary rendition, torture, and numerous other infringements on civil liberties and human rights supposedly for the sake of national security.

But the thinking about this is perversely skewed and truncated. If the focus were on the means, and the fact that the means determine the ends, a very different picture might emerge.

Occasionally it is noted that the so-called war on terror has generated more terrorists than it has destroyed. You ever wonder why? Maybe the means by which we are fighting this war are not conducive to the ends that have been envisioned! Maybe these means are the cause of most of our problems, rather than the solution. Maybe violations of civil and human rights, human dignity, national sovereignty, and human decency are counter-productive if we want to make the world a better, safer place. Maybe it's more important to try to do the right things than to spend billions trying to stop and destroy the things we don't like.

Maybe doing the right things, honoring and respecting other human beings, their laws, their customs, their national sovereignty, their rights and liberties, will go further toward the ends we seek than anything else we can attempt. The means determine the ends. It's hard to see how law and order can result from disruptive, barbarous, and illegal methods, how safety and security can be produced by invasive surveillance and covert violence, or how peace can be made from war.

Evil means should never be counted on to produce good ends. Talk about a fool's errand! Our current national security policies are a global disaster. It's time to get real – and change the course of our country. The means always – always – determine the ends. To paraphrase Gandhi, We must be what we want ourselves and the world to become.

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