



Debate on Ends and Means in Political Thought: A Comprehensive Study of Gandhian Thought

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between ends and means has been a central issue in moral and political philosophy. This paper examines the concept of ends and means with special reference to classical, Marxist, Fascist and Gandhian perspectives. It explores the fundamental question of whether the end can justify the means and analyses the ethical implications of this debate in contemporary society. Classical thinkers such as Kautilya and Machiavelli supported the idea that political stability and success may require the use of force, deception and other non-moral means. Similarly, Marxist theory justified revolutionary violence as a necessary tool to establish a classless and exploitation-free society. Fascist ideology further strengthened this view by prioritizing the state over individuals and openly supporting the use of violence for achieving national goals. In contrast, Utopian Socialists and thinkers like Aldous Huxley emphasized the importance of ethical means and rejected the justification of immoral practices. However, it is the Gandhian perspective that provides the most comprehensive and morally grounded approach. Gandhi argued that ends and means are inseparable and compared them to a seed and a tree, asserting that pure ends can only be achieved through pure means. His concepts of truth (Satya), non-violence (Ahimsa), and Satyagraha offer a practical and ethical framework for social and political action. The foregoing analysis demonstrates that the doctrine of 'ends justify means' poses serious ethical dangers when applied without moral restraint. Gandhian philosophy presents a viable alternative by integrating ethics into action, making it highly relevant in the modern world characterized by conflict, violence and moral crisis.

Keywords: Ends and Means, Gandhian Philosophy, Non-violence (Ahimsa), Satyagraha, Political Ethics, Marxism, Fascism, Moral Philosophy.

Introduction:

The debate over ends and means has always occupied an important place in moral and political philosophy. Every human action is connected with a particular goal, but the methods used to achieve that goal are equally important. In daily life as well as in politics, people often face situations where they have to choose between moral values and practical success. In today's



fast-changing and highly competitive world, greater importance is often given to achievements and results rather than ethical principles. This has made the discussion on ends and means more relevant in contemporary society. The issue therefore raises a serious moral question: whether a good end can truly justify the use of wrong or unethical means. The relationship between ends and means is one of the most enduring and significant concerns in moral and political philosophy. It focuses on the ethical evaluation of human actions and raises a fundamental question: whether the desirability of an end can justify the use of questionable or immoral means. This issue has been widely discussed by philosophers and political thinkers across different periods, reflecting its continuing relevance in both personal conduct and public life. In the contemporary world, this question has gained even greater importance. Rapid social change, technological advancement, and increasing competition have often encouraged individuals, institutions, and states to prioritize immediate success and visible outcomes over ethical considerations. As a result, the tension between moral values and practical achievements has become more evident, making it necessary to revisit and critically examine the connection between ends and means. Ends refer to the goals or objectives that individuals or groups seek to achieve, while means denote the methods or actions employed to attain those goals. Although conceptually distinct, the two are closely interconnected in practice. The methods adopted in the pursuit of any goal shape not only the process but also the character and long-term implications of the outcome. In this context, it has been argued that the quality of means plays a decisive role in determining the true worth of the end achieved (Huxley, 1937: 12).

Classical Realist Approach to Ends and Means

The idea that ends can justify means has deep roots in both Indian and Western political thought, where political realism often takes precedence over moral idealism. In ancient Indian political philosophy, Kautilya, in his discussion of statecraft in the Arthashastra, supported the use of practical and, at times, harsh methods to maintain political order, stability, and security. He advised rulers to adopt strategies such as diplomacy, espionage, and even deception when required, in order to safeguard the state and protect its interests. For Kautilya, the survival and strength of the state were of utmost importance, and ethical considerations could be adjusted in accordance with political necessity (Kangle, 1965: 215). Similarly, in Western political thought, Niccolò Machiavelli presented a realistic and pragmatic view of politics in *The Prince*. He argued that rulers must be willing to employ force, deception, and manipulation to preserve power and ensure stability. According to him, a successful ruler cannot always adhere to conventional morality and must learn “how not to be good” when circumstances demand it. He



emphasized that fear can often be a more reliable basis of control than love, and that the ultimate responsibility of the ruler is to maintain authority and order within the state (Machiavelli, 2008: 61). From this perspective, success tends to be given greater importance than morality, and actions are judged primarily on the basis of their outcomes rather than their ethical nature. As a result, unethical means are often justified if they contribute to the achievement of political goals. This classical view, therefore, establishes a clear preference for effectiveness and practicality over moral purity, laying the foundation for later debates on the relationship between ends and means.

From Classical Realism to Revolutionary Justification: Marxist Perspective

The Marxist perspective on ends and means is rooted in its analysis of class struggle and historical materialism. Thinkers such as Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and later Vladimir Lenin viewed society as essentially divided between the ruling class and the working class, where the former exploits the latter. In this context, they argued that radical transformation through revolution is not only justified but also necessary for the establishment of a classless and egalitarian society. Since the ultimate aim is the emancipation of humanity from exploitation, the use of force and revolutionary violence came to be regarded as legitimate and, at times, essential means. Lenin, in particular, emphasized that actions should be judged in terms of their role in advancing the historical movement toward socialism. However, in practice, the implementation of these ideas, especially under regimes such as that of Stalin, resulted in large-scale repression, coercion, and violence. This created a clear gap between the ideal of a just and equal society and the harsh realities of its execution, thereby raising serious ethical concerns regarding the justification of means in the pursuit of revolutionary ends (Lenin, 1964: 45)

Fascist Ideology and the Absolute Justification of Ends over Means

The question of ends and means has been interpreted differently by various political ideologies according to their objectives and values. Fascism, in particular, adopts an extreme position by giving absolute importance to the authority and interests of the state. In fascist ideology, the achievement of national goals is considered more important than moral or ethical considerations. As a result, the use of force, violence, and strict control is often justified for maintaining state power and national unity. This approach clearly reflects the belief that ends can justify means. Fascism strongly upholds the doctrine that ends justify means. It advocates the idea of a powerful centralized state under a single leader and regards the nation as the ultimate end. In this framework, individuals are often treated merely as means to achieve the objectives of the state. Mussolini openly supported the use of violence as an effective



instrument for attaining political goals and preserving national unity. He considered force and authority as essential for maintaining order and strengthening the state. This approach gives priority to power and control over ethical considerations and reduces human beings to mere instruments of the state, thereby justifying any means in the pursuit of national objectives (Mussolini, 1935: 84).

Utopian Socialist Thought and Ethical Foundations of Means and Ends

Utopian Socialists such as Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, and Robert Owen rejected the use of violent or coercive means and emphasized the importance of peaceful and ethical methods for social transformation. They believed that society could be improved through cooperation, mutual understanding, and rational persuasion rather than through conflict or revolution. Instead of advocating sudden and radical change, they supported gradual reform based on moral principles, education, and the creation of ideal communities. Their approach reflected a deep faith in human goodness and the possibility of achieving social harmony through non-violent means.

In a similar vein, Aldous Huxley argued that the nature of the means used directly shapes the character of the ends achieved. He maintained that violent methods cannot produce peaceful outcomes, as they tend to generate further conflict and instability. According to him, ethical and humane means are essential for achieving results that are not only effective but also sustainable and morally sound. This perspective highlights the inseparable relationship between ends and means and emphasizes that lasting social change can only be achieved through morally justified actions (Huxley, 1937: 27).

Comprehensive Study of Gandhian Thought

In contrast to realist, Marxist, and fascist perspectives, which often justify the use of questionable means for achieving desired ends, the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi provides a deeply moral and ethical foundation for understanding the relationship between ends and means. Gandhi firmly believed that a moral life is the essential basis for the realization of truth. According to him, the pursuit of truth requires discipline, self-control, and detachment from materialistic pleasures. This process must be guided by the observance of fundamental vows such as truth, non-violence, celibacy, non-possession, and non-stealing, which are necessary for the purification of the individual's conscience (Gaur, 1977: 37).

For Gandhi, an individual who fails to practice these moral principles cannot develop a clear conscience and is therefore unable to perceive the "inner voice" that guides one toward truth. Truth, in his philosophy, is inseparable from ahimsa (non-violence). While truth represents the ultimate end, non-violence serves as the indispensable means to achieve it (Mathews, 1989:



70). Gandhi emphasized that truth resides within every individual and can only be realized through non-violence. If violence is adopted as a means, the realization of truth becomes impossible. Violence, arising from anger, selfishness, and greed, leads individuals away from truth and promotes hatred, social disorder, and ultimately anarchy (Singh, 1983: 39).

Gandhi's concept of ahimsa was not merely negative in the sense of abstaining from physical violence; rather, it was a positive moral principle embodying love, compassion, and the spiritual unity of all living beings. Ahimsa extends beyond physical conduct and requires mental and emotional purity, including the absence of hatred and ill-will even towards opponents (Puri, 2004: 65). Gandhi also distinguished between true and false non-violence, arguing that non-violence practiced out of fear or weakness lacks moral value. True ahimsa must be rooted in courage, sincerity, and inner moral strength.

Nonviolence is not used as a weapon of challenge but as a sincere expression of inner truth. It is an endless practice of devotion to Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, arising spontaneously without any show. Gandhian nonviolence is an introspective challenge that enables a person to assess, purify, and rearrange thoughts and actions. It is not a passive force but a disciplined strategy based on self-preparation, evaluation, and awareness of outcomes. Rooted in love, it aims at victory over oneself by eliminating fear, anger, and arrogance, leading to self-purification and the upliftment of humanity (Chakrabarti, 1994: 48).

At the same time, Gandhi's philosophy was not rigid or dogmatic. He maintained that moral principles must be applied in accordance with practical situations and changing social realities. His approach is characterized by flexibility, where truth and non-violence are interpreted contextually to address contemporary challenges (Singh, 1983: 39). Nevertheless, Gandhi remained unwavering in his commitment to these principles, asserting that he would not sacrifice truth and ahimsa even for the sake of his country or religion (Jones, 1963: 107). Although Gandhi acknowledged that in extreme situations violence may be preferable to cowardice, he consistently upheld that non-violence is infinitely superior because it reflects moral courage rather than physical force.

The central element of Gandhian philosophy lies in the inseparable relationship between ends and means. Gandhi strongly rejected the doctrine that "ends justify means," insisting instead that "means are after all everything" and that "as the means, so the end." He compared the relationship between means and ends to that of a seed and a tree—just as the quality of the seed determines the nature of the tree, the purity of the means determines the quality of the outcome (Saxena, 1988: 148). Since human beings possess control over their actions and methods rather



than final outcomes, Gandhi argued that moral responsibility primarily lies in the choice of ethical means (Unnithan, 1979: 38).

In the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi, the relationship between means and ends is inseparable, as both are “convertible terms” like two sides of a coin. Gandhi rejected the dualist approach, asserting that just as a seed determines the nature of the tree, pure ends can only emerge from pure means. Since truth and non-violence are intrinsically interconnected, non-violence becomes the essential means for realizing truth. He argued that immoral or violent methods inevitably corrupt the desired outcome, making it illogical to expect good results from tainted actions. This principle finds its fullest expression in satyagraha—literally “holding on to truth”—which Gandhi described as truth-force or soul-force. Satyagraha does not seek to coerce or destroy the opponent but aims to transform him through moral force, openness, and ethical conduct. A central element of this method is self-suffering, which Gandhi regarded as a powerful instrument capable of awakening the conscience of the oppressor. (Seshachari, 1969: 91). Thus, Gandhian non-violence replaces physical force with moral strength, seeking not to destroy evil violently but to overcome it through truth, sacrifice, and inner conviction.

This principle was clearly demonstrated in Gandhi’s political practice. His decision to suspend the Non-Cooperation Movement following the violent incident at Chauri Chaura reflected his uncompromising commitment to non-violence. Gandhi believed that any political movement contaminated by violence loses its moral legitimacy and cannot produce just and sustainable outcomes (Chavan, 1996: 28).

Gandhi operationalized his philosophy through the concept of satyagraha, which literally means “holding onto truth.” Satyagraha was not merely a political technique but a moral method grounded in self-discipline, self-purification, and ethical consistency. Through satyagraha, Gandhi sought not to coerce the opponent through force, but to transform them through truth, moral persuasion, and self-suffering (Shah, 1973: 46). According to Gandhi, disciplined satyagraha possessed immense value in political life, unlike superficial adherence to non-violence (Singh, 1994: 108).

Closely associated with satyagraha were the methods of non-cooperation and civil disobedience. Gandhi viewed non-cooperation as a moral obligation, emphasizing that non-cooperation with evil is as essential as cooperation with good. Similarly, civil disobedience referred to the disciplined and non-violent violation of unjust laws. It was not an act of lawlessness, but a morally justified resistance rooted in conscience and responsibility (Pyarelal, 1950: 202) Gandhi, however, did not regard these methods as automatically moral in themselves; their ethical validity depended upon intention, discipline, and context. While he



permitted peaceful resistance such as strikes and demonstrations, he categorically rejected violence, hatred, and dishonesty in all forms (Tahtinen, 1979: 94).

Truth occupied the highest place in Gandhian philosophy. Gandhi regarded truth as the ultimate reality, synonymous with God, and the foundation of all moral existence. Although human beings can perceive only relative truth, the continuous pursuit of absolute truth remains the highest moral goal. This pursuit requires constant discipline, self-sacrifice, and ethical commitment. For Mahatma Gandhi, Truth is the sovereign and ultimate principle, inseparable from God and the foundation of all moral life. He regarded Truth not merely as truthfulness in words but also in thought, and extended it to the idea of Absolute Truth, which he identified with the Eternal Reality or God. While acknowledging that individuals can only grasp relative truth, Gandhi emphasized the continuous pursuit of Absolute Truth as the highest goal, even at the cost of personal sacrifice. (Hingorani, 1963: 53). This Truth, charged with infinite power, serves as a guiding force or moral compass in human life, directing actions and decisions. Thus, for Gandhi, adherence to truth is not only a philosophical ideal but also a practical path that shapes ethical conduct and spiritual progress.

Gandhi also emphasized the long-term impact of means on outcomes through comparative historical examples. He observed that although both India and Indonesia achieved independence, the consequences of their struggles differed significantly. India's non-violent struggle resulted in relatively harmonious post-independence relations with Britain, whereas Indonesia's violent struggle created prolonged hostility with the Dutch. This comparison illustrates Gandhi's belief that impure means adversely affect the quality and sustainability of the final outcome. Gandhi opposed the idea that the end justifies the means and emphasized that the nature of means shapes the outcome. This is evident in the contrasting experiences of India and Indonesia; while India achieved independence through non-violent moral struggle, Indonesia resorted to armed rebellion. Though both attained freedom, India developed cordial relations with Britain, whereas hostility persisted between Indonesia and the Dutch. This difference highlights that impure means can diminish the nobility and stability of the end. For Gandhi, truth and non-violence were the only appropriate and noble means to achieve lasting and meaningful goals (Unnithan, 1979: 38).

Ultimately, Gandhi opposed all ideologies that justify unethical means, including communism, fascism, and certain strands of political realism. He firmly believed that no lasting good can emerge from violence, exploitation, or untruth. Every action inevitably produces a corresponding result; therefore, moral ends can only be achieved through moral means. Gandhi opposed Communists, Fascists, and practical statesmen who supported the idea that "the end



justifies the means.” He argued that even if the end is lofty, it cannot be realized or enjoyed unless the means are equally pure. He rejected all violent methods and did not believe in any short-cut to success, insisting that permanent good can never come from untruth and violence. According to him, every action produces a corresponding result; good actions lead to good outcomes, while immoral means ultimately corrupt the end (Prabhu and Rao: 126).

In the contemporary world, marked by conflict, inequality, environmental degradation, and moral uncertainty, Gandhian philosophy continues to hold immense relevance. Gandhi envisioned a non-violent social order based on justice, equality, harmony, and respect for human dignity, rejecting exploitation in all forms (Mishra, 1996: 237). His philosophy demonstrates that lasting peace and social transformation cannot be achieved through coercion or unethical practices, but only through moral courage, truth, and non-violence.

Thus, Gandhian philosophy offers a comprehensive ethical framework in which ends and means are inseparably connected. By grounding political and social action in truth, ahimsa, and moral responsibility, Gandhi provides a powerful alternative to outcome-oriented approaches that prioritize success over ethics. His ideas continue to serve as a timeless guide for reconciling ethical integrity with practical action in both personal and public life.

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