

First Prize Essay New Mexico Ethics Watch

Written by By Elijah Nix Volcano Vista High School - senior
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Means to an End

By Elijah Nix
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In 1945, the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Japan, bringing a swift end to WWII. This action, however, came at a cost: many thousands of Japanese citizens died from the explosion, and many more died from radiation poisoning. Today, we are still left with the questions, *“Was that the right move? Were the means justified by the end?”* Regardless of any answer, there is no way to judge without a standard by which to make that judgement.

If we are to determine means that truly justify the end, we must gather all information on the subject, define who or what defines correct ethics, and conclude what a true end looks like.

Good-hearted people working without information will usually yield results that contradict their efforts. Using the current pandemic as an example, we see how the lack of knowledge is impacting decision-making. Many seemingly moral people find it acceptable to engage in non-essential interactions, due to a common rationale: *“I’m young and healthy so I’m not at risk of getting sick.”* Perhaps they are correct in that regard, but more information might bring a change in perspective.

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If they knew that it is possible to spread Covid-19 to others, even though they themselves are not experiencing symptoms, and that the increased spread of the virus is burdening hospitals and impacting care for all patients— not just Covid-19 patients— they might choose to adopt a stricter quarantine strategy. This, of course, is a small-scale example. However, when considering a larger population, exponentially more information is needed to make an informed decision. When seemingly moral governors are deciding to open counties and cities in this current time, information regarding countless fronts is required. *What economic problems are we facing? How will this impact healthcare? How is the environment impacted? What is public opinion?*

All of these queries are extensive, but are necessary questions to answer, and each query requires information to arrive at a satisfactory answer. If one side lacks moral representation due to a shortage of data, the conclusion is flawed and should be amended. To come to a perfect conclusion, one would need every available piece of information. This rarely happens.

Yet even when it does, who is to say which data matter more than others?

To point the information in an ethical direction, an objective source of what is ethically correct is the next step to justifying the means. Where do correct ethics come from? Some might say that the largest group has the correct ethics. However, if this were true for every situation, the majority of Americans who supported Manifest Destiny in the 1800s were not in the wrong for expanding on Native American territory. Of course, the modern person might find this unacceptable.

Some say that nature governs ethics, but if this is true then every natural inclination which humans experience must also be permissible. This would include bursts of anger against others and affairs that could potentially break relationships. Does a higher power govern ethics? The question then becomes, "Which higher power?"

With the millions of different gods humans believe in, which one or ones would be in the right, and how could you prove so? Clearly, objective justice is nearly impossible to find, and exponentially more impossible for all to agree upon. However, if we did have an ethics compass to work with, where would the final destination be?

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Correct means are only beneficial if the end is also correct. Using Covid-19 as an example once again, we find many different ways to define what the end of the pandemic would be. Some might say that the end comes when businesses are reopened or when travel is once again permitted. Others might say that the end comes when Covid-19 is eradicated or when an effective vaccine is found.

Still others might say the end comes when the economy has fully recovered from the lack of commerce. Which of these ends is the best? Even when the answer is agreed upon, unprecedented circumstances may arise causing the predicted end to be compromised or unresolved. Of the three aspects of moral decision-making addressed in this paper, this one seems to warrant the most difficulty.

Even with all knowledge of the present backed by a correct morality, reaching a good ending is not guaranteed. It is a predicament of lacking the ability to look into the future.

With this all laid out, we see that the question posed is truly quite difficult to answer. Not every piece of information is available, the true ethics is never a consensus, and the true ending always blurred. What, then, is to be done? It is the nature of society to disagree and make mistakes.

This is how humanity has always functioned. We are by no means perfect. However, we are also capable of collectively making good decisions from time to time. When means are being produced for an end, it is up to each person to ensure that their perspective is heard.

History would have it no other way.

Second prize essay winner New Mexico Ethics Watch competition

The Path versus the Destination

By Mariluz Lebkuechner Gonzalez-Aller
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Do the ends ever justify the means? Although this idea sounds somewhat confusing, it really is quite simple. To reach a certain goal one must take a journey to get there. This idea contemplates whether or not the goal achieved can justify the journey and the actions that were taken to get there.

By keeping in mind that a path might be as important as its destination, we can better make ethical decisions.

Sometimes the ends achieved can dramatically impact people's lives. There have been many occasions throughout human history where violence has freed enslaved and suffering people. For example, many argue that without the battles fought in World War II, the Nazis would have ruled Europe. Although the journey to peace during the Second World War was not fair or just, it was necessary to protect those in suffering.

Many say that you can only fight fire with fire, fight violence with violence, and fight fear with fear. And so, this proves that the ends can justify the means.

However, when we consider our everyday lives, this view might change. Envision a student running for an officer position in their school's Student Council. The path he or she takes to win the election includes bribing fellow classmates and ruining the images of opponents. Nevertheless, as an officer the student is able to bring good changes to the school, provide volunteer service to charities, and connect with the surrounding community.

So do these good deeds that the student did as an officer justify the unfair actions taken to win the election?

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Ethically speaking, this is not just. The student could have found other means to win the election, such as using good advertising. Even if the student's opponents had used similar methods in their campaigns, it was not an honorable path to take. This could have led to losses such as broken ties with classmates who felt cheated.

Millions of different paths exist to reach the same destination. Some may be easier than others, however that does not mean that they are the ones that should be taken. The development of electronics and of the internet lead to a greater accessibility to information for all people and helped further democracy. Behind this great accomplishment, however, were millions of people in developing countries who were denied fair working conditions and salaries, building these technologies.

The progress that the internet brought does not justify the mistreatment of workers who made it possible. This opens our eyes to the possibility that as the internet freed some, it enslaved others.

The internet brought information and education to many, yet this continues to be something that is not always accessible. Success can depend heavily upon education, which relies upon financial security. In 2019, the governor of New Mexico, Michelle Lujan Grisham, proposed a plan to make higher education free for all. This could help make the world a more even playing field, but one must consider the means taken to get there.

This plan would depend upon funding from oil revenues in the state. This means is unjust, because it furthers the destruction of the planet through the use of fossil fuels. The achievement of accessible education would not justify the dreadful means used to get there.

As the scope of these situations becomes larger, it is harder to discern which paths are just and which are not. As Pauline Phillips, the writer behind the 'Dear Abby' advice column, once wrote: "People who fight fire with fire usually end up with ashes." This can explain why there are always great losses when conflict is involved. This includes military and civilian casualties in wars, the oppression of one people to free another, and even damaged relationships between people due to small but unjust actions.

Considering this idea that the ends cannot justify the means, ethically speaking, makes it very

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difficult for ordinary people to lead completely just lives. In today's world, the success most people experience depends on their access to money, technology, and so on. Due to globalization, many of the products people have access to depend on the cheap labor of workers in developing countries. These workers are frequently denied safe working conditions and just compensation.

If the statements expressed beforehand are consistent, then this makes the consumption of common necessities by people unethical.

Now one must consider: if it is unethical to buy common necessities, how is it possible to lead a fair and just life? In this world, it may not be possible. Our current society depends too heavily upon the hardship of other humans. However, it is the responsibility of people to advocate and fight for a system that does not rely on these hardships.

When all are given fair rights and people do not depend so heavily on the exploitation of the planet, it will finally be possible to live an ethical life. This life would favor a just path that would not need to be justified by its end. This could allow the means to justify the ends.