

## Is it alright to use people merely as a means to an end?

### Abstract:

Several philosophers inveigh against using people merely as a means to their own end. In their view, this necessarily involves a rights violation. The present paper takes the opposite tack, and defends this activity.

**Key words:** means; ends; rights; liberty; freedom

**JEL category:** P16

## I. Introduction

The ends and the means, and their relationship, have an interesting role to play in philosophical analysis. One version of this concept refers using people merely as a means to their ends. We will analyze this claim in section II. The burden of section III is to make the case that it is important to critically analyze the claim that justice resides in treating people not only as means, but also as ends. We conclude in section IV.

## II. Is it alright to use people merely as means?

There are numerous philosophers who reject this alternative. Perhaps the most famous rendition of this sentiment is offered by Kant (1785), who stated: “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means.”

Here is Streeten’s (1994) take on this matter: “We certainly have to use others as means and do so all the time. How else would we get our mail delivered, our food cooked, our cars serviced, our articles published. The whole division of labor is based on using other human beings as means.” This is all well and good. But then Streeten adds: “But Kant said, ‘never as means *only*.’”

This will not save the Kantian prescription. As Streeten so aptly puts the matter, very often, virtually always, we treat the people around us only as means. This refers not only those who deliver our mail, cook our food, fix our cars, edit our essays, but to those with whom we are intimate: children, parents, spouses, friends. Are we thus evil in thumbing our noses at Kant, in effect? Hardly.

Forget for the moment whether it is good or virtuous to treat people as an end in themselves. For ought implies can. If we *cannot* treat others as ends in themselves, it is hardly incumbent upon us to do so. Therefore, we ask a more basic question: is it even *possible* to do so? How would one accomplish this herculean task? Suppose you feed your baby; you do this since you love him. You are of course treating him as a means. As a means to your happiness, since you want him to grow up and prosper. As a means to his well-being which you fervently desire. As a means to all sorts of other goals, such as earning points with your wife. So we see how you can treat your young child as a means. But, how can you treat him as an end in himself?

If we are to take Mises (1949) seriously,<sup>1</sup> you cannot do any such thing. It is a logical impossibility, we can go so far as to say. For the essence of human action is to render the future better from the point of view of the actor's economic welfare than it would otherwise have been without the action now being contemplated, or, better yet, undertaken. Namely, the economic actor is utilizing his own time, other people, natural resources, capital goods, etc., as means toward the end of improving his own well-being. He can *only* do this. That is, he is limited to using scarce resources to promote his own ends. He can logically do no other. To "use" people supposedly as ends, therefore, is to necessarily use them as means to his ends.<sup>2</sup> That is, if he attempts to use them as "ends" he will necessarily fail. He can use them, only, as a means to his own end.

Nor can we gainsay this splendid insight of Mises by calling into question his concept of human action. For the very act of questioning it is itself an instance of human action. Please don't throw me into the briar patch.

Here is the view of Wright (2002, p. 275), in contrast. He states "...to the extent that they are capable of free and autonomous thinking and of genuine moral deliberation, people possess dignity, or worth, as ends in themselves."

But this statement literally has no meaning. It seems impossible to contemplate the notion that the average person derives no pleasure whatsoever from dignity, or worth. Why else would he seek it, were it not a means to this end? Perhaps it is thrust upon a person, with no effort on his part. There are those who are lucky in this manner. But, still, such a man would attain satisfaction from such a state of affairs. Suppose he does not. It is still unclear as to what the treatment as an end would mean.

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<sup>1</sup> And how else are we to do so?

<sup>2</sup> Dean (1994) asks a very important question: "What should we treat as an end in itself?" but does not answer it. Instead, he discusses "humanity."

Perhaps the most typical interpretation of the Kantian dictum is to not engage in coercion against people. This is all well and good. No libertarian<sup>3</sup> could possibly object. By why, then, all the obfuscation about means and ends? These have little to do with the non-aggression principle of libertarianism. Why not come straight out and decry initiatory aggression against innocents? Why the very large cottage industry concerning Kantian means and ends? Apart from being a full employment act for philosophers, it has little value.

According to Walden (2016): “Depending on how you count, there are between three and 92 formulations of the Categorical Imperative in Kant’s Groundwork. One can make a convincing case that the most useful of these for ethical theorists is the Formula of Humanity: ‘Act so that you use humanity, as much in your own person as in the person of every other, always at the same time as end and never merely as means.’” Walden does not document “92 formulations” but there can be little doubt that he is at least in the correct ballpark with this estimation. There are indeed more versions of this than you can shake a stick at.

Walden (2016) continues: “I may treat my bus driver solely as a means to getting to work, but if he clutched his chest and gasped, an inclination to help would probably be aroused in me. To treat someone merely as a means, by contrast, is to be bereft of concern for them – aside from their usefulness as an instrument.”

The difficulty, here, is that suppose that one indeed rushes to the aid of the bus driver who is in need of medical attention. It is not clear that this, either, rises<sup>4</sup> to the level of using this chauffeur as an end. A case can easily be made out that this, too, is to use him as a means: as a means of virtue signaling, about scoring points with onlookers, part and parcel of wishing to save driver from crashing the bus, and, even, so as to promote his good health. What about the latter? Is that not, at least, using him as an end? Not a bit of it. Why, pray tell, would the rescuer engage in his act of mercy apart from all these other reasons? So as to feel good about oneself. In other words, the first aid giver would now be using the bus driver as a means of personal gratification.

### III. Importance

Why is it important to criticize the Kantian prescription? This is because it is in direct conflict, or, at least, competition with, the libertarian doctrine of the non-aggression principle (NAP). Both are an attempt to set up a basis for just law. To the extent that one holds sway, the other is lessened. The one must then share the spotlight with the other. It is my contention that the NAP is a necessary and sufficient precondition for justice in law. No other prescription, even the much vaunted Kantian one under discussion, can

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<sup>3</sup> See on this Rothbard (1973, 1982); Nozick (1974)

<sup>4</sup> Or falls.

fit this bill. That is to say, that latter in effect undermines the former, and, since it is fallacious, there is no justification for diminishing the libertarian NAP as the center piece of proper law.

Here we have an either or situation. Either we see the NAP of libertarianism as the foundation for just law, or we accord this role to the Kantian distinction between ends and means. This is not the time nor the place to defend nor expound upon the former.<sup>5</sup> My sole aim in the present paper is to criticize the latter.

#### IV. Conclusion

The means – ends dichotomy is an attempt to improve behavior; instill righteousness; set up a foundation for proper law. We have seen the flaws in this method. A much better means toward this very worthy goal is the NAP of libertarianism. It is not subject to these flaws.

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<sup>5</sup> See on this Bergland, 1986; Block, 2008, 2013; Hoppe, 1993; Huebert, 2010; Narveson, 1988; Nozick, 1974; Rockwell, 2014; Rothbard, 1973, 1978; Woods, 2013; Woolridge, 1970



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