

The Continuum of Means and Ends

Paul Tatter, Museum of Life and Science, Durham, September 10, 2013

Ends, or goals, are what we aim to do, and means are what we use to do what we aim to do. Our means are the things we use and the actions we take to create our ends. The purpose of an end or goal is not to achieve some imagined or desired future state, but rather to resolve some present challenge. Ends are about the present, not about the future. A present end may not survive into the future, but it might be helpful now. Ends help us to decide what to do in the present; they are useful guides in our activity.

We can imagine that the purpose of an end is to help us practice the means that lead to it. What we do and how we've done it become what we've done. Ends are constituted by the accumulation of their means, so our means always become our ends. And then, what we've done, the end we sought, becomes the means for something else. So our ends become our means. We tend to think of ends or goals as terminations of activity. But we live in a moving world of means, and all our ends are also the beginnings of new activity. An end has lasting value when it becomes the means for something new.

Suppose our end is to build a house. Having this end helps us to organize our activity in the present. It helps us to select, coordinate and adjust our means. The means to that end include what we imagine using the house for, the plans, the building site, the tools and materials for construction, access to utilities, finance, skills, labor, the other people that help us, all the things and activities that end up as a house in a place. In the end, the house is constituted by all the things and actions that went into making it. It is a manifestation of its means. It accommodates the activity we now imagine in it, it has the feel of the materials we used, it has the integrity of its fasteners and construction, it has the quality of its craftsmanship, it has the weight of its debt, it has the esthetic of its place and the spirit of its inhabitants. And now this house that once was our end has become the means for something new, for new activity, for new life, for new ends. It has lasting value.

Values characterize the means we use to travel toward our ends. Values are tools for making decisions or choices about how to do things. They help us choose the means we use to create our ends. There may seem to be many ways to realize an end, but some of these ways may contradict our values. So it is important to question if the means we want to use are consistent with our values. This matters a lot, because the means we use eventually become the end that they created. And the values explicit and implicit in the end are the values that characterized the means to get there. They also are the values carried forward as the former end becomes the means that we use to move toward a new end. The means become the ends; the ends become the means; and the value of the means and ends depends on how we go about using them.