



Ends, means and government

“The ends justify the means” is a well known proverb.

It’s one that Immanuel Kant took issue with: according to his ethics, you cannot differentiate between the two. Someone has termed this: “the means is the end” i.e. while a utilitarian would argue that it’s good to, say, murder a lone terrorist, if that means he or she doesn’t get the chance to explode a bomb that would kill ten others, that wouldn’t work for Kant. For him, you go wrong as soon as you start killing: even if ten people could have been saved, it was wrong to do the murder in cold blood to achieve that end, because murdering in cold blood is inherently wrong. I have rather simplified his position, and, at any rate, this is one of those philosophical games, which rarely have a real world application. But watching politics recently, I have come to realise that I am more of a Kantian than I had previously thought.

This may be unfair, but I always had the sense with David Cameron that he had become Prime Minister because politics was an interesting way to live his life, not really because he was fired up by a passionate desire to change the nation for the better. Kant would take issue with it, but some might argue this lack of passion made him a better Prime Minister, because outcomes have little to do with the passion of a leader. To my mind, the apogee of this attitude is Boris Johnson: I suspect he didn’t care overmuch whether Britain stayed in or out of the European Union: but he did (and does) like the idea of becoming Prime Minister, so it was convenient for him to argue

that case. Perhaps I’ve been unfair: I’m happy to be proved wrong by him in the future.

My unease became clear to me after the Referendum result. For what it’s worth, I voted to Remain, but I can see the arguments the other way. But I felt anger afterwards. None of mine, at least, was targeted at Nigel Farage: he may have helped lead the country in a different direction from what I would have done, but I feel that he genuinely believes in the cause. Rather, I have felt anger towards Boris Johnson because he used his talents to make a key intervention in the debates, and sway the country to leave *when he didn’t actually care about it himself*. Rather, it was a useful issue on which to plot a course to Number Ten. For him, it was just a means to an end.

As Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn slugged it out the other day over grammar schools in the House of Commons, my heart was strangely warmed. For a while, I couldn’t figure out why. Then I realised: they were each arguing out of conviction. They had different conclusions, but they were each passionate about raising the life chances for the under privileged. They were each rooted in moral certainty.

In terms of outcomes, this shouldn’t matter: you bring the grammar schools back or you don’t. But my feelings towards a government aren’t dependent necessarily on the outcome; I have been won over just by the fact that their desired policy is drawn out of heartfelt belief rather than political tactics. The means count as much as the end.

September 2016. *Thought for the Train* is a short column written by the Reverend Robert Stanier, the vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train, or elsewhere. www.surbitonchurch.org.uk. You can find this online at <http://surbitonchurch.org.uk/category/thought-for-the-train/>