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Trends. Human Rights and Mental Health: What Happens When the Right are Wrong?

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The professed ends of those who seek to prevent human rights violations or to attenuate suffering are in the right according to many ethical and moral criteria. But what happens when the means of those seeking right ends may be in the wrong?

Take the release of Wei Jingsheng by authorities of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Events leading up to the release suggest that the United States President and his Administration were roundly attacked by most human rights organizations for not publicly launching vehement diatribes against PRC leaders concerning the unhappy plight of Wei. Instead, the President and his staff employed so-called "engagement" and "quiet diplomacy." And seemingly these policies worked. Right? Not according to Amnesty International USA which professes that it still favors "a more outspoken American policy" and that "'What worked were the loud voices of the American people'".

Or take the Ft. Bragg Demonstration Project that exhaustively and comprehensively studied the effectiveness of children's mental health services. This "large, well-designed, well-implemented, well-analyzed study" found significant support for the null hypothesis--that the services judged to be the most effective by most experts were not effective. So, are mental health professionals applauding the study and going back to the drawing board to develop better techniques? No. Most are attacking the study. Would anything change their minds that business as usual should not continue?

Dogmatism concerning bad means is as significant an enemy of good ends as the insistence on outstanding instead of good ends. The right going wrong--whether through intuitionist moral misperception, illusory correlation, causal misattribution, cognitive rigidity, reactance, psychodynamic conflict, and/or egoism and narcissism--is a tragedy that needs to be righted. (See Davies, M. F. (1993). Dogmatism and the persistence of discredited beliefs. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 19, 692-699; Leone, C., Taylor, L.W., & Adams, K.C. (1991). *Personality and Individual Differences*, 12, 233-240; Hunsberger, B., Alisat, S., Pancer, S.M., & Pratt, M. (1996). Religious fundamentalism and religious doubts: Content, connections, and complexity of thinking. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 6, 201-220; Meredith, R. (November 18, 1997). China dissident Wei Jingsheng remains in hospital for tests and treatment. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Sechrest, L., & Walsh, M. (1997). Dogma or data: Bragging rights. *American Psychologist*, 52, 436-540.)