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Martin Luther King, Jr., and the American Dream

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Abstract

Martin Luther King, Jr., was a champion of great principles, laboring mightily and in the end sacrificing his life to advance the cause of equal rights for all. At the level of first principles—in his commitments to natural rights, democratic government, and the irrelevance of race to moral personhood and just social deserts—King's political thought might properly claim a consensus among virtually all American citizens. But with respect to the relation between those first principles and the programmatic means for effecting them, his thought leaves much ground for legitimate dispute. A careful analysis of King's political teaching shows that these two elements of his thinking are in tension with one another and thereby account for the persistent divisions over how to understand his legacy.

On August 28, 1963, delivering the culminating address at the greatest mass-protest demonstration in U.S. history, Martin Luther King, Jr., summoned all of his listeners to think anew about the heritage and promise of America. Speaking in the "symbolic shadow" of the most revered American of all, he ascended the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to remind them of the centennial year of Emancipation.

King extolled the promise that inhered in Lincoln's momentous Proclamation and prior to that in "the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence." He confronted the nation with its failure to honor its promise of equal liberty for all, even as he implored his fellow protestors and all of his fellow citizens to understand that their destinies as Americans were indissolubly bound together. Envisioning an America whose children could all sing with new and true meaning the proud claim "sweet land of liberty" in its namesake hymn, he brought his speech to its unforgettable crescendo with his refrain: "I have a dream"—a dream not apart from or against, but rather *of, from*, and *for* America—"a dream deeply rooted in the American dream."

Fifty years later, King's signature speech and his overall career of eloquent activism must be judged an enormous success. The "Dream" speech itself is commonly regarded as a treasure in our rhetorical heritage, unrivalled among 20th-century American speeches.[1] Likewise, King himself, in his own day a controversial "extremist"[2] for justice, has become for us an icon of mainstream America, revered

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across partisan and ideological boundaries and honored by a national holiday and a monument in the nation's capital not far from Lincoln's own. Still more generally, the civil rights movement as a whole has acquired a virtually unchallengeable moral authority as 20th-century America's glorious revolution, a worthy successor to the original American Revolution and a model for further reform movements.

A careful analysis of King's overall understanding of the American dream and of the specific measures required for its realization will show that important elements of King's thinking are indeed in tension with one another.

It is important that we remember and all too easy for us to forget this common ground of admiration for King and his ennobling cause as we work our way through the racially fraught controversies that recur in our political life. Yet it is also important that we reflect more deeply on our divisions—our persisting, seemingly ever-renewable divisions—on matters involving race. We are divided on race, and we are also divided on King. One may hope that as we reflect on King's life and thought a half-century later, a clearer understanding of this transcendently important figure will aid us in the pursuit of a clearer understanding of the larger problem of race in America.

Despite his stirring idealism, the durability of our divisions on race would not have surprised King. The striking fact at present, however, is that decades after the triumphs of the civil rights movement, decades after King's death and apotheosis, divisions among the broad class of King's *admirers* persist and even intensify. Our common admiration for King appears on a high plane of generality, as we admire his faith in America and democracy; but as we descend to specifics, we divide.

To admirers on the political right, King's core virtue appears in his devotion to America's founding principles in their essential universality—a devotion that, along with his Christian faith, inspired him to become America's preeminent apostle of moral and political "colorblindness."[3] To those on the left, King's virtue appears rather in his commitment to an expansively egalitarian conception of justice, yielding not only his tireless agitation against formal segregation, but also his increasingly radical critique of U.S. inequality in both racial and socioeconomic dimensions.[4]

Many in the latter camp commonly contend, however, that commitments to the Founders' universalism and to a radical, expansive vision of socioeconomic equality are both authentic dimensions of King's thinking and, therefore, that conservatives are wrong to claim from King any significant support for their own position—are guilty, whether cynically or merely obtusely, of an act of misappropriation. In their view, to extol King for his moral universalism while ignoring or dismissing his more radical, substantive egalitarianism is to distort his thinking.[5]

In the contention that he strongly affirmed both moral universalism and substantive egalitarianism as integral to his thinking, King's admirers on the left are certainly correct. King regarded his broader egalitarian vision as the fulfillment of his moral universalism. But was King, and are his left-leaning admirers, justified in that belief?

1. Eric J. Sundquist, *King's Dream: The Legacy of Martin Luther King's "A Have a Dream" Speech* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 2, reports that a 1999 survey of scholars of public address placed King's March on Washington "Dream" speech at the very top of their list of the 100 best political speeches of the 20th century.
2. This was King's frequent self-description; see, for example, his famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," in *A Testament of Hope*: *The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), pp. 297–298.
3. Anti-preferences activist Ward Connerly, for instance, well aware of the complexities of King's position on compensatory policy, holds that King's principle of "judging people by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin…was at the very core of [California's anti–race preferences] proposition 209." Ward Connerly, *Creating Equal*: *My Fight Against Race Preferences* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2000), p. 196.
4. Michael Eric Dyson, for instance, lauds King as the greatest American ever, especially by virtue of the relative radicalism of his last few years, which Dyson regards as a bold departure from King's earlier civil rights vision. Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Free Press, 2000), pp. ix–x, 1–29, 78–100.
5. See, for example, ibid., pp. 3–7, and Drew Hansen, *The Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Speech That Inspired a Nation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), pp. 222–226.

Here is the proper focus of partisan disputation over King. If those two main dimensions of his thought proved mutually inseparable or at least compatible, then the objection to conservatives' claims upon King would be well founded. If, on the other hand, they proved mutually incompatible, or if solid grounds for doubting their compatibility were established, then conservatives' claims of fidelity to what is best in King would gain substantial credibility.

No conclusive resolution of this question in all its various aspects is possible in a relatively short essay. Within present confines, however, a careful analysis of King's overall understanding of the American dream and of the specific measures required for its realization will show that important elements of King's thinking are indeed in tension with one another. The tensions come to light in particular upon consideration of the relation between the two phases of King's campaign to reform America. To provide background and context for that consideration, a brief review of the essentials of King's life story is in order.

The Life and Times of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Unlike some other giants in the tradition of black American protest, Martin Luther King, Jr., is not properly described as a self-made man. To the contrary, it might seem that King was destined from birth for eminence as a minister and activist.

He was born Michael King, Jr., on January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, the first son of the Rev. Michael Luther King and Alberta Williams. (The name change to Martin occurred during King's early boyhood, following that of his father. The elder King's name evolved over a period of years from Michael to Michael Luther to Martin Luther. The finalized form emerged in the mid-1930s, likely inspired by a visit to Germany.[6])

Young M.L. was the son and grandson of Baptist ministers. His maternal grandfather, A.D. Williams (whose own father, though enslaved, seems to have done some preaching in a Baptist church in Greene County, Georgia), rose to prominence as pastor of Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church, helped organize various regional and national Baptist associations, was active in the Georgia Equal Rights League (whose leadership included the outspoken minister Henry McNeal Turner along with W.E.B. Du Bois), and served as president of the newly organized Atlanta branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Upon Williams's death in 1931, M.L. King, Sr. ("Daddy" King), assumed leadership of Ebenezer Baptist, in time surpassing his father-in-law as a leader in Atlanta's black Baptist community and an anti-discrimination activist.[7]

Due to the influence of his father and to experiences of his own, King, Jr., came early on to detest the regime of racial segregation that ruled the South throughout his youth. In an account of his religious development written as a theology student, he recalled an incident in which, as a six-year-old, he lost a white playmate, a close friend for three years, when the latter's father for racial reasons forbade any further association between them. "I never will forget," King wrote in 1950, "what a great shock this was to me."[8]

In his formal schooling during his boyhood, he seems generally to have displayed middling ability, but oratory was, unsurprisingly, a strong suit. As a junior in high school, he won his school's public speaking contest, thus qualifying for a statewide competition for black students. His subject was "The Negro and the Constitution," on which he sounded some principal themes of his later activism. "The spirit of Lincoln still lives," he stated in closing. "America experiences a new birth of freedom in her sons and daughters.... My heart throbs anew in the hope that inspired by the example of Lincoln, imbued with the spirit of Christ, they will cast down the last barrier to perfect freedom."[9] On the bus ride returning to Atlanta, young King and his teacher were cursed by the white driver for a delay in sur-

6. Clayborne Carson, "Introduction," *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992–), Vol. 1, note 98. Cited hereafter as *Papers of MLK*.

7. There are numerous biographies of King. My account of King's life relies on Carson, "Introduction" to *Papers of MLK*; David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Random House, 1986); and Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–1963* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988).

8. *Papers of MLK*, Vol. 1, pp. 362–363. A slightly different account appears in Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (1958; repr., Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), pp. 4–5.

9. *Papers of MLK*, Vol. 1, p. 111.

rendering their seats to newly boarding white passengers; they were forced to stand for the duration of the trip. The adult King recalled, "It was the angriest I have ever been in my life."[10]

The event that launched King's career came in December 1955, when Rosa Parks, secretary of the NAACP's Montgomery branch, was arrested for violating local and state statutes by refusing to surrender her bus seat to a white man.

King matriculated in 1944 at Atlanta's Morehouse College, an institution rising under the leadership of Benjamin Mays, a scholar and civil rights activist whom King would salute as "one of the great influences in my life."[11] An undergraduate sociology major, King decided during his senior year to enter the ministry. He was ordained a minister shortly after turning 19 and then, in fall 1948, began graduate study at Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania, an integrated institution where he would eventually be elected student body president and honored as class valedictorian. At Crozer, he became acquainted with the work of Walter Rauschenbusch, whose social-gospel tract *Christianity and the Social Crisis* he ranked among the handful of books that influenced him the most.[12]

From Crozer, King went on to pursue a doctorate in systematic theology at Boston University.[13] In Boston, even as he considered a career in teaching and scholarship, his guest sermons at local churches developed his reputation as an unusually skilled preacher. As his studies neared completion, notices came his way of prominent southern churches potentially interested in his services. His wife, Coretta (they married in 1953), was uneasy about returning south, but despite her misgivings, King accepted a position as pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, in spring 1954.

At Dexter, the young pastor's reputation grew quickly, and he took up the cause of equal rights almost immediately. The event that launched his career came in December 1955, when Rosa Parks, secretary of the NAACP's Montgomery branch, was arrested for violating local and state statutes by refusing to surrender her bus seat to a white man. A group of Dexter congregants immediately initiated a boycott of Montgomery's buses, and clergymen and other community leaders convened to formalize the planning. They founded the Montgomery Improvement Association and elected the 26-year-old King its leader. At a mass meeting that same evening, he addressed several thousand attendees:

> We are here because first and foremost we are American citizens.... [T]he great glory of American democracy is the right to protest for right.... If we are wrong, the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong.... If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong.[14]

In the face of a coordinated campaign of public and private intimidation that included the bombing of King's own home, Montgomery's black citizens sustained their boycott for over a year. Their determination paid off in late 1956, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the bus segregation statutes were unconstitutional. The victory in Montgomery sparked further civil rights protests and elevated King to a position of national prominence. In early 1957, he joined with other southern ministers to form a regional civil rights organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which elected him its first president.

In the aftermath of Montgomery, however, anti-segregation campaigns achieved uneven results. A notable setback occurred in Albany, Georgia, where King was invited in late 1961 to support a local deseg-

10. King, "*Playboy* Interview (1965)," *A Testament of Hope*, pp. 342–343.
11. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, pp. 136–137.
12. MLK to Lawrence M. Byrd, April 25, 1957, *Papers of MLK*, Vol. 4, p. 183.
13. The reader should be aware of a consensus among King scholars that King plagiarized his doctoral dissertation along with some course papers during his career at Boston University. For a review of the evidence, see Carson, "Introduction" to *Papers of MLK*, Vol. 3, pp. 6–8, 25–26.
14. *Papers of MLK*, Vol. 3, pp. 72–73; Carson, "Introduction" to *Papers of MLK*, Vol. 3, pp. 4–6.

regation effort. Promptly jailed for demonstrating without a permit, he was released upon the securing of a noncommittal settlement and left Albany amid media reports of his embarrassing defeat there.[15] By 1963, he worried that the movement was stalling.

The turning point came in Birmingham, a particular stronghold of segregation, where King joined a locally initiated anti-segregation campaign in spring 1963. The violence unleashed by Birmingham's now-infamous police commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor dramatized to a national audience segregation's brutality, and although a desegregation settlement brought no end to anti-black violence there,[16] the victory brought renewed prestige to the SCLC and King. To capitalize on this regained momentum, movement leaders decided next to bring pressure to bear directly upon the federal government.

Veteran labor and civil rights leader A. Philip Randolph, along with nonviolent activist Bayard Rustin, had long envisioned a march on Washington as an effective means to this end. Believing that "the greatest weapon is the mass demonstration," King readily agreed.[17] The March proved a huge success, attracting over 200,000 nonviolent demonstrators in support of equal rights and supplying the occasion for the most memorable speech in King's career.

Federal action soon followed. A new Civil Rights Act, which would prove to be the most effective civil rights legislation in U.S. history, was signed into law in July 1964. In late autumn, King was awarded the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize. The following year, a voting rights march to Montgomery was initially suppressed in Selma, Alabama, by an assault by state troopers on "bloody Sunday," but a reorganized march did reach Montgomery, and President Lyndon Johnson publicly denounced the violence and called for voting rights legislation. In August, he signed into law the landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965, legislation that fully secured black citizens' voting rights for the first time in the nation's history.

To King, these momentous victories were only a beginning. For some time, he had planned to expand the movement, setting its sights on segregation and the urban poverty that afflicted many blacks in the northern states, but he was shocked by the hostility he encountered, especially among working-class whites, in Chicago, where his campaign achieved minimal results.

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Still worse, mere days after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, rioting broke out in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, resulting in 34 deaths and much larger numbers of injuries and arrests. The riot, which would be succeeded by hundreds of riots in cities across the country in the next few years, perplexed and angered President Johnson and alarmed King, who feared that such outbursts of rage, coincident with the rise of radical critics of nonviolence and integration such as Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael, would destroy the movement's moral authority and political power.

A further complication was King's own increasingly public radicalism. His opposition to the Vietnam war, announced in spring 1967, divided him from erstwhile allies in the Johnson Administration and much of the mainstream civil rights leadership. Feeling isolated, exhausted, frustrated, and frightened by the course of events, he confessed in his Christmas Eve 1967 sermon that "not long after talking about that dream I started seeing it turn into a nightmare."[18]

Struggling to regain his and the movement's moral authority, he proposed another march on Washington. Amid his organizing of this projected Poor People's Campaign, he agreed to appear in Memphis in support of striking black sanitation workers. A first march degenerated into violence and looting, and a few days before a second march was to

15. Branch, *Parting the Waters*, pp. 548–561.

16. A few months after the settlement with Birmingham business owners was reached and barely two weeks after the March on Washington, a dynamite explosion in Birmingham's Sixteenth Street Baptist church killed four young girls who were there attending Sunday school.

17. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, p. 265.

18. Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Trumpet of Conscience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 76.

be scheduled, King spoke to an evening audience at Memphis's Mason Temple. He reaffirmed his gratitude for the opportunity to live during a period of profound moral reform. He called on his audience to develop a "dangerous unselfishness" and told them he was no longer concerned about his mortality because he had "seen the promised land."[19]

The following day, April 4, 1968, he was murdered. James Earl Ray, a white career criminal from the state of Missouri, pled guilty to the murder (though he later recanted that plea) and was convicted of it in 1969. A congressional report in 1979 concluded that Ray was indeed King's assassin, likely acting in conspiracy with two of his brothers and likely motivated (though the Rays were hostile to racial integration) by an expectation of financial gain.[20]

The grand aspiration to which King devoted his life is captured in these lines by the poet Langston Hughes, written nearly three decades before King's signature speech: "Let America be America again ... the land the dreamers dreamed ... the land that never has been yet—and yet must be—the land where *every* man is free."[21]

From first to last, King insisted that his dream was a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. The specific meaning of this claim, however, varies significantly in the different phases of his activism.

The First Phase: Civil Rights

In King's analysis, the first phase of the movement began in the mid-1950s and ended with the landmark legislative accomplishments of the mid-1960s. He characterized it in simple and general terms as a "demand [for] our citizenship and manhood."[22] A more specific statement of first-phase demands appeared as early as 1946:

> the right to earn a living at work for which we are fitted by training and ability; equal opportunities in education, health, recreation, and similar public services; the right to vote; equality before the law; some of the same courtesy and good manners that we ourselves bring to all human relations.[23]

These first-phase demands have obvious roots in the American political tradition. Though long denied in practice, black Americans' claims to the full array of civil and political rights guaranteed to American citizens was solidly grounded in the U.S. Constitution.

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King's respect for the nation's great legal charter was long-standing, and during its first phase in particular, the movement depended crucially on the Constitution as applied by the federal judiciary to secure its right to protest and to invalidate key elements of the segregation regime.[24] Though his faith in the federal judiciary was not absolute, King liked to recall the moment he learned of the Supreme Court's bus segregation ruling that brought victory to the Montgomery boycott, when a voice from the rear of the courtroom enthused: "God Almighty has spoken from Washington!"[25]

19. Martin Luther King, Jr., "I See the Promised Land," in *A Testament of Hope*, pp. 279–286.
20. House Report No. 95-1828, Part 2, *Report of the Select Committee on Assassinations*, U.S. House of Representatives, 95th Cong., 2nd Sess., March 29, 1979, pp. 371–373. According to the same House report, a St. Louis lawyer named John Sutherland was known to have offered, beginning in late 1966 or early 1967, a large cash reward for the killing of King. One person testified that Sutherland had offered him $50,000 to murder King. The select committee uncovered circumstantial evidence that James Earl Ray's brothers were likely acquainted with Sutherland and aware of the offer. Ibid., pp. 360–370.
21. Langston Hughes, "Let America Be America Again," in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), p. 191.
22. King, *Trumpet of Conscience*, p. 5.
23. *Papers of MLK*, Vol. 1, p. 121.
24. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, pp. 151–152.
25. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), pp. 67-68. In another sermon, King remarked that in the seminal *Brown v. Board* ruling, the Court had "parted the Red Sea." Ibid., p. 82; see also *Papers of MLK*, Vol. 3, p. 261.

In King's view as in that of the Founders, however, the rights of American citizens had roots deeper than American citizenship. At bottom, they were not merely civil or political rights but *natural* rights, grounded in our "membership in the human family."[26] King viewed the Declaration of Independence, the revolutionary fathers' profession of natural-rights principles, as "the most eloquent and unequivocal expression of the dignity of man ever set forth in a sociopolitical document."[27]

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In the "Dream" speech, it was first and foremost the Declaration that signified the Founders' "promissory note" to their descendants.[28] The promise in that promissory note was at once uniquely American and broadly humanitarian: to secure the equal rights of all persons within its jurisdiction, irrespective of race, color, or any other morally arbitrary classification. From this core vision of natural rights and human dignity proceeded several specific corollaries concerning means and ends, giving shape and direction to King's first-phase activism.

Self-Improvement. An indispensable element of human personality and dignity, in King's understanding, is the power of moral agency: the power to *act* as a free, responsible, self-governing and rights-bearing individual.[29] Among the great evils of segregation was its corrosion of this power, inducing in many of its black victims a false sense of inferiority and a passivity in the face of injustice.[30] Conversely, the reassertion of this power in the form of anti-segregation protests signified to King a marvelous revelation of a "new Negro," actuated by a "new sense of dignity."[31]

King's greatest predecessor, the 19th-century abolitionist and rights advocate Frederick Douglass, never tired of saying, "He who would be free, must himself strike the blow,"[32] and King, though insisting that the blow be nonviolent, enthusiastically agreed: "[I]f first-class citizenship is to become a reality for the Negro he must assume primary responsibility for making it so."[33]

In mid-20th century Jim Crow America, blacks' rising in dramatic protest against the long train of abuses they suffered was not, for King, the only mode in which they must manifest their power of moral agency. "The Negro must work on two fronts," he argued. Direct-action protests against injustice must be accompanied by "a vigorous effort to improve his personal standards."[34]

On this point, King echoed fellow agitators Douglass and Du Bois but also echoed Booker T. Washington, who made the point most emphatically in his famous speech in the Atlanta of King's grandfather: "It is important and right that all the privileges of the law be ours, but it is vastly more important that we be prepared for the exercises of these privileges."[35] Likewise King: "Opportunities stand before us now.... And the great challenge before the Negro at this hour is to be ready to enter these doors as they open."[36] Though the ultimate causes of black disad-

26. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 32.
27. King, *Strength to Love*, 1963 edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 68.
28. King, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" and "I Have a Dream," *A Testament of Hope*, pp. 302 and 217.
29. King, *Where Do We Go from Here? Chaos or Community?* (1968; repr., Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), p. 104.
30. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, pp. 23–24.
31. King, *A Testament of Hope*, p. 145; *Papers of MLK*, Vol. 3, pp. 323–324, and Vol. 4, pp. 170–171.
32. Frederick Douglass, *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, ed. John W. Blassingame and John R. McKivigan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979–1992), Series 1, Vol. 2, p. 86, and Vol. 3, p. 202; *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, ed. by Philip S. Foner (New York: International Publishers, 1950–1975), Vol. 4, p. 381.
33. Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Rising Tide of Racial Consciousness," in *A Testament of Hope*, p. 148.
34. Ibid., pp. 148–149; *Papers of MLK*, Vol. 4, p. 335.
35. Booker T. Washington, "Atlanta Exposition Address," in *Up From Slavery: The Autobiography of Booker T. Washington* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1993), pp. 223–224.
36. *Papers of MLK*, Vol. 4, p. 336.

vantage lay in segregation and poverty, he contended, it was necessary to correct the effects as well as to attack the causes—better still, to understand that attacking the causes most effectively *required* correcting the effects.

By his call for the improvement of personal standards, King meant both the elimination of vices and the cultivation of virtues. "Let us be honest with ourselves," he implored in 1957:

> Negroes constitute ten percent of the population of New York City, and yet they commit thirty-five percent of the crime. St. Louis, Missouri: the Negroes constitute twenty-six percent of the population, and yet seventy-six percent of the persons on the list for aid to dependent children are Negroes. We have eight times more illegitimacy than white persons. We've got to face all these things.[37]

On the constructive side, King called for the cultivation of excellence among all classes and in all fields of endeavor:

> We must achieve excellency in our various fields of activity.... In this day we are going to compete with people, not Negro people. So don't set out to do a good *Negro* job.... No matter what this job is, you must decide to do it well.... If it falls your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Raphael painted pictures; sweep streets like Michelangelo carved marble; sweep streets like Beethoven composed music; sweep streets like Shakespeare wrote poetry; sweep streets so well that all the host of heaven and earth will have to pause and say: "Here lived a great street sweeper, who swept his job well."[38]

Civil Disobedience and the Higher Law. In addition to his calls to self- and society-improving action, a second corollary of King's natural-rights principles derived from the status of those principles as the highest source of law. Specifically, King affirmed "civil disobedience" as a means of protesting unjust positive laws.

According to the venerable tradition of Western political philosophy to which the Founders as well as King were heirs, the moral law grounded in the ordering of nature (and ultimately in the design of nature's Creator) carries an authority superordinate to that of merely positive law. The positive law, consisting in the enactments of human legislators, is properly designed to give effect to the natural law in concrete, particular circumstances and, at a minimum, must not contravene the higher law if it is to retain its authority. This is the cardinal principle of the original American Revolution, and it has provided crucial inspiration to a long and varied American tradition of protest against governmental or societal injustice—which, as noted above, King ranked among the great glories of American democracy.

King's objective in the practice of civil disobedience was to dramatize injustice by filling the jails with manifestly decent, characteristically law-abiding people, thereby producing a "creative tension" to pressure public authorities into negotiations.

At the level of general principle, King affirmed one implication of this higher-law standard of political legitimacy in a pure and simple form: "I would agree with Saint Augustine that 'An unjust law is no law at all.'"[39] A positive law that contravenes the higher natural or divine law lacks binding or obligatory force, so its purported subjects have no duty to obey and thus a right to disobey it. King's interpretation of this higher-law principle is distinctive, however, in his attempt to broaden and domesticate its revolutionary applications.

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37. Ibid., pp. 335–336; also King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, pp. 218-220.

38. *Papers of MLK*, Vol. 4, pp. 336–338 (emphasis in original).

39. King, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," *A Testament of Hope*, p. 293. See also Martin Luther King, Jr., "Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience," ibid., pp. 48-49.

40. Ibid., pp. 291–292; also King, *Why We Can't Wait*, pp. 79–80.

this practice, some, including but not limited to segregationists, raised an objection whose roots in the Western tradition trace at least as far back as Plato's *Crito*.[41] The objection is that a license to disobey laws that one believes to be unjust must prove in the end anarchic, as it would tend to corrode the authority of all laws, just and unjust alike.

King held that positive law plays an important part in the formation of moral and civic character. "When the law regulates behavior," he argued, it forms habits and thus helps to mold public sentiment.

King did not allay such concerns by expressing his admiration for Henry David Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience," which he ranked among the handful of books or essays that influenced his thinking most strongly.[42] In the essay that King so admired, Thoreau made plain his contempt for both democracy and law, asserting that the basis of majority rule is nothing better than sheer physical force and that "[l]aw never made men a whit more just." The effect in Thoreau's case was a romanticized posture of radical opposition: "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly"—under any humanly imperfect government, it would seem—"the true place for a just man is also a prison."[43] King added that if the cause requires it, the righteous, nonviolent protester enters the jailhouse "as a bridegroom enters the bride's chamber."[44]

King's considered response to the objection in question, however, shows greater prudence and discernment than might appear in his occasionally incautious rhetoric. In assessing his practice of civil disobedience, one must first consider that its practitioners in this instance were a group of people for most of whom the right to participate in the regular, electoral process of legislative reform was not available.

In contrast to Thoreau, King expressed great respect for democratic government. In his powerful sermon "Loving Your Enemies," he called democracy "the greatest form of government ... that man has ever conceived."[45] When he said that the civil disobedient should enter the jailhouse as a bridegroom enters a bridal chamber, he meant that such disobedience is to be understood not as an affectation of self-righteous, defiant apartness but rather as a constructive, community-forming act—a vow of allegiance to a democracy of friends and fellow citizens.

The same holds true for King's attitude toward law. Again in contrast to Thoreau, King held that positive law plays an important part in the formation of moral and civic character. "When the law regulates behavior," he argued, it forms habits and thus helps to mold public sentiment.[46] Appreciating the need for positive law, he emphatically disavowed the principle and practice of anarchy. "We will be guided," he told the organizational meeting for the Montgomery bus boycott campaign, "by the highest principles of law and order."[47] In his most famous writing, his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," King insisted that the properly conscientious practitioner of civil disobedience was "in reality expressing the very highest respect for law."[48]

The objection that civil disobedience is effectively anarchic, however, reflects an expectation that even the most principled and respectful disobedience will prepare the way for unprincipled and disrespectful disobedience, as the distinction between the two will inevitably prove difficult to discern and to maintain in practice. But King was confident that the distinc-

41. Plato, *Crito*, in *Four Texts on Socrates*, ed. Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 99–114. Cf. Abraham Lincoln, "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions," in *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings*, ed. Roy P. Basler (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2001), pp. 76–85.

42. King to Lawrence M. Byrd, April 25. 1957, in *Papers of MLK*, Vol. 4, p. 183. See also King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, pp. 39, 78.

43. Henry David Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience," in *Thoreau: Walden and Other Writings*, ed. Joseph Wood Krutch (New York: Bantam Books, 1962), pp. 86, 94.

44. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 91; also King, *Why We Can't Wait*, p. 30.

45. *Papers of MLK*, Vol. 4, p. 317, also ibid., p. 307.

46. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 211. See also King, *Strength to Love*, p. 22; King, *A Testament of Hope*, pp. 49–50, 100–101.

47. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 51.

48. King, *A Testament of Hope*, p. 294.

tion could be made sufficiently clear to reduce the risk to an acceptably low level. "One who breaks an unjust law must do it *openly, lovingly*," he wrote, "and with a willingness to accept the penalty."[49] It is the acceptance of the prescribed penalty, the commitment not to defy or evade the law, that identifies the conscientious lawbreaker as such. The crucial identifier for King was the element of sacrifice or suffering.

By virtue of its universal, humanitarian scope, the natural-rights principle to which the republic originally dedicated itself entailed a commitment to a broadly integrated America.

By accepting the penalty and its attendant suffering, one shows that one's law-breaking is in the service of a cause higher than mere personal interest or appetite—in effect, in the service of a higher law. In this way, even in the act of breaking a positive law, one displays the character of a lawful person who honors the higher law by conforming to its demands and attempting to bring the lower law into fuller conformity with it.

Integration. Third among the corollaries of King's natural-rights principles that gave shape and direction to his activism's first phase is his abiding commitment to integration. By virtue of its universal, humanitarian scope, the natural-rights principle to which the republic originally dedicated itself entailed, as King and other great exemplars of the mainstream black American protest tradition interpreted it, a commitment to a broadly integrated America.

The mission of the U.S. as a nation, Frederick Douglass proclaimed a few years after the end of the Civil War, is to supply "the [most] perfect national illustration of the unity and dignity of the human family that the world has ever seen."[50] In a 1962 address, King supplied a concentrated statement of the idea he would use to transfix a national audience the following year:

> We are simply seeking to bring into full realization the American dream. A dream of equality of opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed ... of a land where men no longer argue that the color of a man's skin determines the content of his character.... This is the dream. When it is realized, the jangling discords of our nation will be transformed into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.[51]

The language of brotherhood that King used here and in many other instances signals the expansiveness of his integrationist vision. To see this more clearly, we must consider that he derived his idea of moral personhood from a source he believed to be even more authoritative than the rationalist natural-rights argument summarized in the Declaration.

King was above all else a minister of the Gospel, and his idea of personhood was formed most profoundly by his Christian upbringing and vocation. We are by nature free and dignified beings, he believed, primarily because we are God's children, created in His image. By the same light, we can see that God loves all of His children impartially, without reference to such morally accidental distinctions as those of race, color, or nationality. Finally, we can see that God commands us likewise to love our neighbors, our fellow human beings, as ourselves.

"Who is my neighbor?" King asked, and answered by paraphrasing the Apostle Paul: "He is neither Jew nor Gentile; he is neither Russian nor American; he is neither Negro nor white." The virtue of the Good Samaritan consists in "the capacity for a *universal altruism*," a capacity to see "beyond the external accidents [to] those inner qualities that make all men human and, therefore, brothers."[52] The modern freedom movement was born, King thought, when the "Negro masses" took this dignifying, liberating religious teaching fully to heart.[53]

49. Ibid. (emphasis in original); King, "Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience," *A Testament of Hope*, p. 49.
50. Douglass, *Frederick Douglass Papers*, Vol. 4, p. 253.
51. Martin Luther King, Jr., "An Address Before the National Press Club," in *A Testament of Hope*, p. 105.
52. King, *Strength to Love*, pp. 31–33 (emphasis in original); also *Papers of MLK*, Vol. 3, p. 418, quoting Galatians 3:28; King, *Trumpet of Conscience*, p. 72.
53. *Papers of MLK*, Vol. 3, p. 282.

To a Montgomery audience in late 1956, King declared, "there is nothing in all the world greater than freedom."[54] Here he overstated, if understandably. King held freedom to be a very great but not the highest human good. He expressed his deepest, truest conviction in his sermon "Paul's Letter to the American Christians": The "*summum bonum*" or "highest good" in life is love, for the simple reason that "God is love."[55]

In its ordering toward this highest good, King's vision of integration subsumed and transcended the classical liberalism, anchored in natural-rights principles, of the Declaration. His grand ambition, even beyond reforming America into a multiethnic, multiracial society of citizens equal in freedom under law, was, as the SCLC's motto proclaimed, to "save the soul of America."[56] In his sermon "The Birth of a New Age," he explained: "We must go into the new age with the love that is understanding for all men ... with a forgiving attitude ... to look deep down within every man and see within him something of Godliness.... The end is the creation of a beloved community."[57]

To King's insistence on loving and forgiving the adversaries of black freedom and equality in the U.S., Malcolm X responded with scornful derision:

> The only revolution based on loving your enemy is the Negro revolution.... That's no revolution.... A revolution is bloody.... Revolution overturns and destroys everything that gets in its way.... And you, sitting around here like a knot on the wall, saying, "I'm going to love these folks no matter how much they hate me."[58]

King's rejoinder was that the "Negro Revolution" was indeed distinctive, and therein lay its great virtue. Malcolm's skill in articulating many urban blacks' discontent was undeniable, but his objection was ultimately nihilistic. The posturing as violent revolutionaries that he and other black nationalists affected, if taken seriously, "would certainly end in bloody, chaotic, and total defeat" for black Americans. The more fundamental point, however, was that they simply misconceived the struggle's proper objective. "The Negro Revolution," King insisted, must take as its goal "integration, not independence. Those fighting for independence have the purpose to *drive out* the oppressors. But here in America, we've got to live together."[59]

At the deepest level, King believed, segregation is wrong for the same reason that violence in response to it is wrong and that black-nationalist calls for division or separation are wrong: All represent forces of disintegration rather than integration, destruction rather than creation of community.

King framed his rejoinder to Malcolm X in language that was highly significant for his overall vision. The problem with Malcolm and others like him was that they failed to offer "any positive, creative alternative."[60] The word *creative* appears frequently in King's rhetoric. He employed it often to signify a desirable quality of protests or protesters, but in its most elevated meaning, it signified a divine attribute. God, in King's faith, is Creator of the universe in fullness and goodness and Creator of humankind. The creation of humankind in God's image, represented originally by a single man, means that we are all "bound together" and bound to love one another as to love God. "This," King believed, "is at the very heart of the Christian Gospel."[61]

54. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Facing the Challenge of a New Age," in *A Testament of Hope*, p. 144.
55. *Papers of MLK*, Vol. 3, p. 419.
56. King, *Trumpet of Conscience*, pp. 24–25.
57. *Papers of MLK*, Vol. 3, p. 344; also King, *A Testament of Hope*, pp. 165, 233.
58. Malcolm X, "Message to Grassroots," in George Breitman, ed., *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements* (1965; repr., New York: Grove Press, 1994), p. 9.
59. King, "*Playboy* Interview (1965)," *A Testament of Hope*, p. 365 (emphasis in original).
60. Ibid.
61. *Papers of MLK*, Vol. 4, p. 124.

By endowing us with freedom, however, God also created us with the power to sin—to sever the divinely ordained bonds of love among us and thus to separate or alienate ourselves from God, from fellow human persons, and from our better selves. King approvingly cited the theologian Paul Tillich: "Sin is separation."[62] The redemption of human sinfulness, repairing the love that properly binds us to one another and to God, belongs to God's ongoing creative work in the world. When King called for *creative* protests, he meant protests designed in the image of this divine work—protests designed to integrate, to create or restore the bond of community as the enabling condition of human beings' power to live in love.

At the deepest level, King believed, segregation is wrong for the same reason that violence in response to it is wrong and that black-nationalist calls for division or separation are wrong: All represent forces of disintegration rather than integration, destruction rather than creation of community. Integration was the only way to achieve freedom and dignity for blacks in America, and given the long history of race-based division and injustice, it could be achieved only by a profoundly affecting appeal to moral sympathies harbored by Americans—at best, by all human beings—in common. "Love *must* be at the forefront of our movement if it is to [succeed]," King insisted; "love is the most durable power in the world," and only that power could save America from its most destructive source of division.[63]

King displayed that self-overcoming, forgiving love at the height of its affecting, binding power in his extraordinary responses to two horrific bombings, one at his own Montgomery home in 1956 and the other at a Birmingham church in 1963. From the front porch of his home that night in 1956, he told the angry crowd that had gathered, "Don't get your weapons.... I want you to love our enemies.... Love them and let them know you love them." In 1963, mindful of many other instances of segregationist violence in the intervening years, King eulogized the four young girls murdered in their church by the Birmingham bomber. He told the congregation, "We must not become bitter.... We must not lose faith in our white brothers. Somehow we must believe that the most misguided among them can learn to respect the dignity and worth of all human personality."[64]

The formal rights specific to classical liberalism and to the movement's first phase, King held, were grievously incomplete absent the "real" socioeconomic rights specific to Progressive liberalism.

In this sort of appeal inhered the moral authority that issued in the movement's greatest triumphs, the enactment of the landmark pieces of federal legislation that put an end to the regime of formal segregation that had disfigured much of the republic for the whole of the century to that point. But in King's expansive vision of integration and community—of the fully realized American dream—further problems and further objectives came quickly into view.

The Second Phase: Beyond Civil Rights to the Realization of Equality

King adviser and veteran activist Bayard Rustin saw a turning point in the movement's objectives as early as 1963. The Birmingham campaign, Rustin opined, began a transition from what he called the "classical stage" of the movement to a new phase of its development. What Birmingham made clear was that protesters would not be satisfied with "integrated lunch counters"; they would demand "equal opportunity and full employment," and indeed "total freedom" encompassing "every economic, social, and political right that is presently denied." The focus would extend beyond "*civil rights*, strictly speaking," to the "social and economic conditions" within which most black Americans lived.[65]

This was also how King conceptualized the movement's distinct phases, although he seems to have located the transition at a later point than did Rustin. King regarded the progress signified by the passage

62. King, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," *A Testament of Hope*, pp. 293–294.

63. *Papers of MLK*, Vol. 3, pp. 278, 419 (emphasis in original).

64. Ibid., p. 115; Martin Luther King, Jr., "Eulogy for the Martyred Children," in *A Testament of Hope*, p. 222.

65. Bayard Rustin, "From Protest to Politics" and "The Meaning of Birmingham," in *Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin*, ed. Devin Carbado (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003), pp. 117–118, 110–111 (emphasis in original).

of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act as at once urgently necessary and woefully incomplete. Although those laws promised dramatic gains for southern blacks in particular, he maintained, "in the past decade little had been done for northern ghettos." Thenceforward, King observed, blacks "looked for the second phase, the realization of equality."[66]

As Rustin's and King's language indicates, the movement aimed in its first, "classical" phase to secure equal rights grounded in the natural-rights philosophy of the Declaration of Independence, whereas it derived its second-phase objectives from the expanded ideas of rights that emerged in the American context from the 20th-century Progressive movement.[67] The distinction between the two phases thus reflects the Progressive distinction between *formal* and *real* or *effectual* rights.[68] The first phase concerned the civil and political rights proper to individuals in their formal statuses as persons and citizens, particularly the rights of association and of access to public accommodations, institutions of public education, and employment opportunities, as well as the rights to vote and to seek public office. The second phase concerned socioeconomic outcomes: the *fruitful exercise* of rights as distinct from the legally guaranteed possession of rights, whatever one made of them.

The formal rights specific to classical liberalism and to the movement's first phase, King held, were grievously incomplete absent the "real" socioeconomic rights specific to Progressive liberalism:

> Of what advantage is it to the Negro that he can be served in integrated restaurants ... if he is bound to the kind of financial servitude which will not allow him ... even to take his wife out to dine? Negroes must not only have the right to go into any establishment open to the public, but they must also be absorbed into our economic system [so] that they can afford to exercise that right.[69]

Calling the passage of the Voting Rights Act only "the end of the beginning," President Johnson made the same distinction in his groundbreaking speech at Howard University in 1965: "freedom is not enough.... We seek ... not just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and equality as a result."[70]

To secure these socioeconomic rights, King followed A. Philip Randolph and others in advocating an unprecedented expansion of federal anti-poverty programs.

A corollary of the expansive array of socioeconomic rights that King affirmed was an expansive conception of rights-violation—in particular the injustice of segregation, which he maintained extended well beyond the old South's regime of legal proscription. King held that blacks across the U.S. "live within two concentric circles of segregation. One imprisons them on the basis of color, while the other confines them within a separate culture of poverty."[71] In *The Trumpet of Conscience* (1967), he charged that to deprive a man of a job or income is to say to him, in effect, "that he has no right to exist. You are in a real way depriving him of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."[72]

To secure—or, as President Johnson put it, to "fulfill"—these socioeconomic rights, King followed A. Philip Randolph and others in advocating an unprecedented expansion of federal anti-poverty

66. King, *Trumpet of Conscience*, p. 6, and *Where Do We Go from Here?* pp. 3–4.
67. For a contrast between the two, see Thomas West and William Schambra, "The Progressive Movement and the Transformation of American Politics," Heritage Foundation *First Principles Report* No. 12, July 18, 2007, http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2007/07/The-Progressive-Movement-and-the-Transformation-of-American-Politics.
68. This distinction is at the heart of Progressivism. See "John Dewey and the Progressive Conception of Freedom," Heritage Foundation *Primary Sources*, http://www.heritage.org/initiatives/first-principles/primary-sources/john-dewey-and-the-progressive-conception-of-freedom.
69. King, *Why We Can't Wait*, pp. 135–136.
70. Lyndon B. Johnson, "Commencement Address at Howard University," June 4, 1965, http://www.heritage.org/initiatives/first-principles/primary-sources/from-opportunity-to-outcomes-lbj-expands-the-meaning-of-equality.
71. King, *Why We Can't Wait*, p. 23, also ibid., p. 146.
72. King, *Trumpet of Conscience*, p. 55. Cf. King, *A Testament of Hope*, pp. 168, 315.

programs. From 1963 onward, he called upon Congress to enact "a broad-based and gigantic Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged" as a successor to the post–World War II "GI Bill of Rights."[73]

"The first thing," King said in a 1967 interview, is "that we guarantee every person capable of working a job." But in consideration of those who, for one reason or another, were unemployable, he added, if one really possesses the rights affirmed in the Declaration, "then he has a right to have an income."[74] The economic bill of rights that he envisioned would "guarantee [both] a job to all people who want to work and are able to work," and "an income for all who are not able to work."[75] In the last of his books published during his lifetime, *Where Do We Go from Here?* (1967), he focused on the core proposal: "[T]he solution to poverty is to abolish it directly by ... the guaranteed income." By whatever means, he believed, "the time has come for us to civilize ourselves by the total, direct and immediate abolition of poverty."[76]

In keeping with other social-democratic liberals of his era, King believed that modern societies had solved the problem of producing wealth. What remained was to invest society's wealth in the solution of social problems, beginning with poverty.[77] As poverty became the primary civil rights problem, socioeconomic class inequalities would eventually supersede racial inequalities in his ordering of priorities. This was consonant with his fundamental commitment to integration and moral universalism. Viewed in this light, one can see in King's second-phase thinking the roots of the left-leaning variant of the argument for color-blind social policy advanced in the succeeding generation by the influential sociologist William Julius Wilson.[78]

Yet King's embrace of this argument was significantly qualified. He praised India's adoption of preferential policies to atone for its long history of discrimination against the class of "untouchables" and believed that the U.S. was similarly indebted to black Americans. "[O]ur society has been doing something special *against* the Negro for hundreds of years," he argued. "How then can he be absorbed into the mainstream of American life if we do not do something special *for* him now?"[79]

King was confident that he understood the root causes of the social ills that afflicted many black Americans in the nation's cities, and he was still more strikingly confident as to their remedies. Convinced that "life sapping poverty" rooted in "unemployment and pitiful wages [is] at the bottom of ghetto misery," he expected his "Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged [to] immediately transform the conditions of Negro life.... [T]he decline in school dropouts, family breakups, crime rates, illegitimacy, swollen relief rolls and other social evils would stagger the imagination."[80]

At least since his days in graduate school, King had been convinced that full integration and justice in America required the radical transformation of the nation's political economy into a system of democratic socialism.

King's sense of urgency regarding his anti-poverty program was driven by fear no less than by hope. By 1967, he was convinced that the country faced a "desperate and worsening" emergency, manifested most alarmingly by the wave of rioting in cities across America that had begun in 1965. Believing that a greatly expanded anti-poverty program would end the riots by correcting the conditions that caused them, he considered the immediate enactment of such a program to be the very highest moral

73. King, *Why We Can't Wait*, pp. 136–141.

74. King, *A Testament of Hope*, p. 409; cf. King, *Why We Can't Wait*, p. 24.

75. King, *A Testament of Hope*, p. 67.

76. King, *Where Do We Go from Here?* pp. 171, 175.

77. Ibid., p. 172. A classic statement of this view is John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1958).

78. William Julius Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

79. King, *Why We Can't Wait*, pp. 134–135 (emphasis in original). Cf. King, *A Testament of Hope*, pp. 158–159, 367–368; King, *Where Do We Go from Here?* p. 95.

80. King, *Why We Can't Wait*, pp. 137–138.

and political priority. Failure by the federal government to act on the grand scale required would amount to fiddling while America burned.[81]

From the beginning, however, King experienced frustration in his attempt to construct a national anti-poverty movement on the foundation of his successful civil rights campaign in the South. Reflecting on the reaction he met in Chicago, he wrote that "when Negroes assertively moved on to ascend the second rung of the ladder, a firm resistance from the white community developed." The glow of optimism from the victories of the first phase proved evanescent.

In King's analysis, ever more desperate ghetto conditions produced mounting impatience and anger among impoverished blacks and corresponding militancy and factiousness among those seeking to lead them. It also produced a rising spirit of backlash among whites, with each of those forces drawing energy from the others. But what frustrated him most was the white reaction. "The arresting of the limited forward progress by white resistance revealed the latent racism that was deeply rooted in US society.... The depravity of the white backlash shattered the hope that new attitudes were in the making."[82]

In the end, in response to the resistance he encountered among the country's centrists and conservatives and to the criticisms directed at him from the more radical Left, King judged it a dictate of prudence or principle, or both, to radicalize his public rhetoric. "These are revolutionary times," he wrote in *Where Do We Go from Here?* His post-1965 reassessment of the power of racism in America yielded grimly disappointing conclusions. "America is deeply racist," he wrote in an essay published a few months after his death. "White America must recognize that justice for black people cannot be achieved without radical changes in the structure of our society," informed by "a radical revolution of values." The "black revolution ... is forcing America to face all its interrelated flaws—racism, poverty, militarism and materialism."[83]

That King in those later years called for revolution signified in itself no departure from his earlier position. He had maintained throughout the 1960s that black Americans, having suffered "a long train of abuses," were in a revolutionary situation akin to that of the nation's founders. Moreover, at least since his days in graduate school, he had been convinced that full integration and justice in America required the radical transformation of the nation's political economy into a system of democratic socialism.[84] But in the years after 1965, his estimation of the impending revolution grew significantly broader and deeper, and his rhetoric grew accordingly more grandiose and fervid.[85]

Mindful of Paul's injunction, "Be not conformed to this world" (Romans 12:2), King in those years placed himself in opposition not only to American or Western racism, but also to capitalism[86] and indeed to the animating spirit of the entire modern age, which he condemned as a profoundly misguided, self-destructive faith in human self-sufficiency that issued in moral relativism, materialism, ungoverned acquisitiveness, and lust for eminence and dominion. "Modern man," he warned, "faces a dreary and frightening midnight" in the moral and social order.[87] Inspired by post–World War II anti-colonial uprisings, he came to envision the domestic movement as the spark of a worldwide, all-encompassing revolution. "The American Negro of 1967," he speculated, "like Crispus Attucks, may be the vanguard in a prolonged struggle that may change the shape of the world."[88]

King's grandiose vision of radical revolution was, of course, destined to fail. He would die in a spirit of anxious, frustrated exhaustion, his hopes unsettled by events. Yet to the end, his essential spirit of

81. King, *Trumpet of Conscience*, pp. 14, 55; King, *A Testament of Hope*, pp. 64–65, 248–249, 360–361, 412.

82. King, *Trumpet of Conscience*, pp. 5–10.

83. King, *A Testament of Hope*, pp. 314–315, 240; also King, *Where Do We Go from Here?* pp. 141–142.

84. *Papers of MLK*, Vol. 1, pp. 435–436; King to Coretta Scott, July 18, 1952, in *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.,* ed. Clayborne Carson (New York: Warner Books, 1988), p. 36.

85. King, *Where Do We Go from Here?* p. 200; also ibid., p. 22; King, *A Testament of Hope*, pp. 98, 193.

86. King, *A Testament of Hope*, pp. 97–100, 103–106. See also King, *Where Do We Go from Here?* pp. 197–202.

87. King, *Strength to Love*, p. 59; also ibid., pp. 21–22, 47, 73–76, 138–319.

88. King, *Trumpet of Conscience*, p. 17.

hopefulness remained unbroken. In his "Christmas Sermon on Peace," delivered just over three months before his death, he recalled his famous words from four years previously and confessed that "not long after talking about that dream I started seeing it turned into a nightmare." But he could not close in despair: "And so today I still have a dream.... I still have a dream this morning that one day every Negro in this country ... will be judged on the basis of the content of his character rather than the color of his skin, and every man will respect the dignity and worth of human personality."[89]

It remains fair to say that King did more than any other to effect the salutary change in federal law and the still more salutary change in public opinion that constitute the civil rights movement's greatest contributions to American public life.

In this essential hope, King to the end could say what he said to the entire country in August 1963: that his was a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

Critical Reflections on King

Martin Luther King, Jr., was a great champion of great principles, laboring mightily and in the end sacrificing his life to advance the cause of equal rights for all. Among the generations succeeding him, he is almost universally revered, accorded a virtually unchallengeable authority as a source of wisdom in matters of race, equality, and rights. Amid such reverence, to achieve a clear-sighted, fair-minded judgment of King's political thought is no easy task. For that same reason, however, to achieve such a judgment is for us a moral and civic imperative.

To gain a proper critical distance, one might begin by considering King's own advice. In his profound sermon "Loving Your Enemies," he counseled all who would achieve that virtue to begin with a critical self-analysis—to consider Jesus's question, "how is it that you can see the mote in your brother's eye and not the beam in your own eye?" King preached regularly on the need for self-criticism and harbored no illusion of his own omniscience. His occasional invocations of Moses notwithstanding,[90] he harbored no wish to constitute the black freedom movement a monarchy.

A second step, a corollary of the first, "is to discover the element of good in [one's] enemy." As King explained, "within the best of us, there is some evil, and within the worst of us, there is some good."[91]

Within the best of us, of course, there is first and foremost great good. To consider the possible shortcomings or failings in King's moral and political vision is by no means to deny its greatness. In fact, an appreciation of the elements of greatness in that vision is needed to prepare a proper assessment of its defects.

King's Achievement. At the level of general principles, all thoughtful admirers of King, whatever their partisan sympathies, will agree on King's steadfast commitments to moral universalism and social integration as essential elements of his greatness. "All honor to Jefferson," Lincoln said, "who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence ... introduce[d] into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times ... that to-day, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of reappearing tyranny and oppression."[92]

What Lincoln said of Jefferson is, in its essential spirit, also properly said of Lincoln and King. All three shared the convictions that just government must be dedicated to the universal principles of natural human equality and natural rights. All three agreed that when tyranny and oppression reappear, as in the course of human events they inevitably will, it is the highest duty of statesmanship to rededicate society to those guiding principles.

It was King's distinctive glory, however, to articulate a vision of human brotherhood more far-reaching than that of either Jefferson or Lincoln. He called the nation not only to secure equal natural rights for

89. Ibid., pp. 76–77.

90. See, for example, King, "I've Seen the Promised Land," *A Testament of Hope*, p. 286.

91. *Papers of MLK*, Vol. 4, pp. 317–318.

92. Abraham Lincoln, "Letter to Henry L. Pierce," April 6, 1859, in *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings*, p. 489.

all, but also to give life to a vision of social integration that transcended lines of race, color, or any morally arbitrary identification.

Though there is a portion of justice in the point made by his fellow activist Ella Baker that "[t]he movement made Martin rather than Martin making the movement,"[93] it remains fair to say that King did more than any other to effect the salutary change in federal law and the still more salutary change in public opinion that constitute the civil rights movement's greatest contributions to American public life. By his magnificent interweaving of the nation's political creed with its biblical heritage, King fashioned a contribution to America's civil religion unequaled by any other save Lincoln. With extraordinary courage and rhetorical force, he led black Americans and all Americans in a novel mode of Great Awakening and so into a new era in their country's moral and political life. "The drama of freedom and justice is unfolding today," he remarked, "in a way unprecedented before."[94]

The Problem of Race Consciousness. Just as King held, however, that there is some bad in the best and some good in the worst of us, he also held that within even the greatest virtues and glories—perhaps especially within those—are contained the seeds of vice and corruption. "Every affirmation of greatness is followed," he preached, "by a comma punctuating its nagging partialness."[95]

Herein lies a source of insight into the relation between the glorious triumphs of the civil rights movement's first phase and the frustrations and failings of its second phase. Just as virtue carried to an extreme often becomes vice,[96] King's zealous commitment to principles of moral universalism, the very heart of his greatness, is also in a sense the source of the most significant difficulties in his thinking and of the unsettled, contested character of his legacy.

Among the most interesting aspects of the post–civil rights era is the coincidence of a widespread reverence for King, prophet of moral universalism and color-blindness, with the widespread valuation of racial and ethnic diversity, with its particularized focus on group identities and differences, as a positive good. King's ascendancy as a moral authority for our times has coincided with the ascendancy of significant elements of the black nationalism that he opposed.

When we think further into the nature and causes of this coincidence, we find that the urge to affirm group diversity represents a development to which King contributed both wittingly and unwittingly. Interpreting the rise of black nationalist and "black power" appeals partly as expressions of misdirected anger, King sought not to suppress the anger, which he thought entirely justified, but instead to depersonalize and deracialize it. He tried to direct it against the sins of segregation and discrimination, not against the white sinners who committed or enabled those practices. For proponents of moral universalism and integration, this was to his great credit.

The urge to affirm group diversity represents a development to which King contributed both wittingly and unwittingly.

However, his effort to deracialize that anger, as an element of his larger effort to diminish and defuse the power of racial identity in the minds of all Americans, was complicated by his support for race-based preferences as a way to correct for the persisting effects of long injustice. It is important to note his ambivalence about such policies. He seemed to prefer class-based (thus color-blind) measures to specifically race-focused correctives, and he advocated the latter as properly temporary in design—as means of repairing blacks' powers to compete effectively in the U.S. socioeconomic order.

Nonetheless, as indicated above, King explicitly and repeatedly advocated race-focused compensatory measures, now commonly known as race-focused affirmative action policies.[97] He did

93. Quoted in Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, p. 625.

94. *Papers of MLK*, Vol. 4, p. 230.

95. King, *Strength to Love*, 1963 edition, pp. 68–69.

96. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106a25–1107a27.

97. King, *A Testament of Hope*, p. 158; King, *Why We Can't Wait*, p. 134; King, *Where Do We Go from Here?* p. 90. For his ambivalence, see *A Testament of Hope*, p. 367.

so because he believed such measures to be, in the prevailing circumstances, consistent with and even required by the principles of moral universalism and equal rights—necessary to repair at least some of the damage wrought by a chronic regime of segregation and discrimination and instrumental to the full integration of blacks into American society. King's endorsement of race-focused affirmative action thus exemplifies an argument now common among later proponents of such policies who yet profess allegiance to the creed of moral universalism. In the words of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun, "In order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race."[98]

One must wonder whether King, even as he attempted to dispel the disillusionment that marked the mid- to late 1960s, actually contributed to it by his suggestions that the far more complicated problem of repairing blacks' socioeconomic disadvantages could be resolved with similar dispatch by a federal government determined to do so.

Fifty years later, the advocates of race preferences defend them with significantly greater tenacity and less ambivalence than did King, and they ground their defenses in arguments that would entail their perpetuity. Had he lived to see it, King himself might or might not have approved of this development.

However that might be, in assessing the likely effects of those policies, he would have done well to consider more carefully the relevance of a general insight he applied to the defenders of white privileges: that the beneficiaries of any established privilege can never be expected freely to relinquish it.[99] He would have done well, that is, to consider more carefully the danger that such policies would ossify into chronic stimulants of race consciousness at odds with his larger purpose to weaken racial identity as a divisive force in American social and political life.

The Problem of Impatience. A further point is pertinent along the same line. King interpreted black assertions of the moral primacy of racial identity also as expressions of disillusionment, reflecting a loss of faith in white Americans' willingness in any nearly foreseeable future to do justice to their black fellow citizens.[100] In his later years in particular, his response was equivocal, at once rejecting such disillusionment and agreeing that blacks had substantial reason for it. But he may have contributed to that disillusionment in other, more basic ways as well.

One possible source appears in King's insistent demand, iterated and reiterated in his most famous speeches and writings, not only for much-needed reform, but for *immediate* reform.

- "We have also come to this hallowed spot," King said in the "Dream" speech, "to remind America of the fierce urgency of Now.... Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy."

- In the "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," he rejected white ministers' call for patience: "For years now I have heard the word 'Wait!'... We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights.... I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience."

- In his speech at the completion of the Selma to Montgomery march in 1965, he repeated, with building rhetorical intensity, "How long?... How long will justice be crucified, and truth bear it?... How long? Not long, because you shall reap what you sow.... How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."[101]

In his insistence on immediate reform, King resembled the previous century's radical abolitionists demanding an immediate end to slavery.

98. *Regents of University of California v. Bakke*, 438 U.S. 265 at 407 (Blackmun concurring and dissenting opinion).

99. See, for example, King, *A Testament of Hope*, p. 292.

100. King, *Where Do We Go from Here?* p. 45–47.

101. King, *A Testament of Hope*, pp. 217–218, 292–293, 230.

As a general rule, such a response to profound and chronic injustice appears to be perfectly necessary and proper. This judgment seems particularly reasonable with respect to King's first-phase demands so far as they concerned injustices remediable by relatively simple (though fiercely resisted) changes in law and in the enforcement of law.

With respect to his second-phase demands, however, one must wonder whether King, even as he attempted to dispel the disillusionment that marked the mid- to late 1960s, actually contributed to it by his suggestions that the far more complicated problem of repairing blacks' socioeconomic disadvantages could be resolved with similar dispatch by a federal government determined to do so. Perhaps thinking of its propriety and effectiveness in phase one and certainly moved by his alarm at the outbreak of widespread rioting in those years, King in phase two applied the rhetoric of Now, of impatience for radical change, to a set of problems to which its application was ill-conceived and possibly harmful—problems whose resolution required not only wisely crafted public policy, but also an extended, patient, laborious effort at self-elevation by the erstwhile victims of injustice, who would have been better served by rhetoric designed to inspire and sustain such an effort.

King's critics on this point must take care to temper their criticism properly. Even as his public positions took on a decidedly more radical aspect, he never simply renounced or discarded the exhortations to self-improvement that had been a staple of his early rhetoric. In his final and most radical book, *Where Do We Go from Here?*, King urged his black fellow citizens to initiate "a constructive program," through the agencies of churches, families, and other private community institutions, "which will vigorously seek to improve our personal standards.... We must not wait until the day of full emancipation," he maintained; despite the obstacles that remain, "we must work assiduously to aspire to excellence."[102]

Yet such appeals, less frequent in his later years, remain in tension with King's insistence that material poverty, with the various social pathologies that attended it, was subject to prompt abolition by redistributive public policies. His arguments thus remain exposed to the objection that by applying the rhetoric of Now to the socioeconomic problems targeted by his movement's second phase, King raised unrealistic, inevitably disillusioned expectations of deliverance by the external agency of government and vitiated his own calls for "a double battle," no less against "pathology within" than against "oppression without."[103]

The Problem of Moralism. A further source of tension in King's thinking appears in the distinctively moral focus of his appeal. Again like the abolitionists of old, King interpreted the great controversy of his day as a contest of first principles, of fundamental moral antinomies. "Segregation," he declared, "is nothing but slavery covered up with certain niceties of complexity. [It] is a blatant denial of the unity which we all have in Christ Jesus." It is "basically evil."[104]

The conflict as King framed it was a conflict of Liberty vs. Slavery, Justice vs. Injustice, Good vs. Evil, God vs. Satan. Judged in the light of the nation's founding principles, so it truly was, and victory over the Jim Crow regime was a profound and glorious moral victory. But the moral glory of that first-phase victory naturally generated a powerful temptation to view the issues of the second phase in similarly moralized and simplified terms, and King was no less powerfully inclined by his own character and experience to take such a view.

In pressing for second-phase reforms, King referred to unemployment as psychological "murder,"[105] to poverty as an "economic holocaust,"[106] and to governmental failure to enact redistributive measures as a provocation.[107] He assailed a "fanatical right wing" in the U.S. as willing or eager to kill in the service of "western materialism" and declared that a victory by Republican Senator Barry Goldwater in the 1964 presidential election would have "destroyed America

102. King, *Where Do We Go from Here?* pp. 133–134.

103. Ibid., p. 121.

104. King, *A Testament of Hope*, p. 142; King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 184.

105. King, *Trumpet of Conscience*, p. 55.

106. King, *Where Do We Go from Here?* p. 146.

107. King, *Trumpet of Conscience*, p. 59.

as we know it."[108] He characterized opposition to his anti-poverty and reparation proposals as evidence of a "white backlash" against black progress.[109]

What King certainly did was to moralize and racialize complex socioeconomic questions concerning the causes and remedies of material poverty and the conditions of widespread opportunity and prosperity, along with broader questions concerning the proper scope and limits of constitutional, republican government.

It was certainly contrary to King's larger purpose to feed an already growing spirit of alienation, particularly among impoverished blacks who would be hardly more likely to undertake the practical labors and psychological risks associated with integration so far as they believed themselves to be surrounded still and forever by an incorrigibly hostile white majority. But in presenting his case in such Manichaean terms, he might well have done so.

What he certainly did was to moralize and racialize complex socioeconomic questions concerning the causes and remedies of material poverty and the conditions of widespread opportunity and prosperity, along with broader questions concerning the proper scope and limits of constitutional, republican government—issues about which people of good faith may and do disagree. Treating disputes over means as though they were disputes over ends or first principles, he rendered legitimate partisan disagreements occasions for moral accusation. In these various ways, King's sometimes imprudently moralized rhetoric stands in tension with his overall efforts to promote hopefulness and a spirit of moral community.

Conclusion

It bears repeating, in conclusion, that our discussion of tensions or partialities in King's thinking need not be taken to diminish his stature as a gifted and inspiring moral reformer. We take note of the limitations of his thinking not to diminish but rather to advance his good works.

As we noted at the outset, it is a fact of the post–civil rights era that Americans are divided about King himself, at least about how to understand him, as we remain divided about race. In this fact there is nothing scandalous. Even as he raised our aspirations and energies toward the creation of a perfected democratic community, a community bound in humanitarian love, King's counsel that we proceed in a spirit of self-critical humility remained consonant with the wisdom of James Madison: "the latent causes of faction are ... sown in the nature of man."[110] As King further insisted, this applies to the greatest no less than to the least of us. In the moral-political visions of our greatest statesmen and leaders, there inevitably appears some incompleteness or partiality, some legitimate ground for contestation. As it has been for the Founders and Lincoln and others, so it is for King.

To apply this dimension of King's thinking to King himself may serve in an indirect way to advance the cause of integration that he so cherished. It may help to soothe the partisan anger in our persisting divisions over race and over King in particular to consider not only that those divisions are rooted in our basic nature as political (speaking, opinion-forming) beings, but also that they are legitimate properties of King's legacy, products of some genuine tensions within his thinking.

At the level of first principles—in his commitments to natural rights, democratic government, and the irrelevance of race to moral personhood and just social deserts—King's political thought might properly claim a consensus among virtually all American citizens. With respect to the relation between those first principles and the programmatic means for effecting them, however, his thought leaves much ground for legitimate dispute.

108. King, *A Testament of Hope*, pp. 55, 373.

109. King, *Trumpet of Conscience*, pp. 5–10.

110. *Federalist* No. 10, in Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter (New York: New American Library, 1961), p. 79.

To understand this is to accept the thoughtful citizen's responsibility to address King less in a spirit of reverence than in one of reflection and choice. Let us assume that responsibility, secure in the conviction that we can admire King without sanctifying him and can subject his thinking to critical scrutiny without betraying the nation's ideals or the noble cause for which he gave his life. Thus to scrutinize King's arguments, even as we use them to scrutinize our own, would be in the highest sense to take those arguments in the spirit in which he intended them, as invitations to think seriously, and to act upon our thinking, about what is right and good—for blacks and whites, for the wealthier and the poorer, for Americans as individuals and as a nation, and ultimately for all humankind.

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