

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Ethic of Love": Virtues Common and Rare

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INTRODUCTION

For more than a decade now, public schools across the United States have, as in earlier eras, adopted character development and moral education programs, and there is renewed interest in ethics and moral philosophy among professional philosophers. For the most part, neither of these efforts has taken into account the ethical thought of Martin Luther King, Jr. Perhaps this is because King himself never claimed to have articulated an ethic. After all, even though he was well read in the classics and philosophy, King was a pastor and social activist, not an academic philosopher. Yet King's speeches, sermons, letters, and other papers reveal his own ethical commitments, which he exemplified for others who, during the 1950s and 1960s, witnessed the struggle for social justice and human dignity.

Like other ethical orientations, King's is concerned mainly with questions about how one should act (conduct) and the kind of person one should strive to be (character). At least *some* such questions are discussed in all of King's published works; other works are dedicated almost solely to ethical matters. When pieced together, what emerges from this literature is what I call King's "ethic of love." I named this ethic after a collection of King's sermons, *Strength to Love*.¹ While King, like academic ethicists, was concerned with conduct and character, what most clearly distinguishes his ethic is its emphasis on conduct and character in relation to achieving social, economic, and political justice. It should be recalled that most of the sermons and speeches in which King extolled certain values were given to predominantly African American audiences. In speaking to these audiences, King was not indicting the morals of African Americans, but rather trying to shore up those qualities that he believed were necessary, not only for being a "good Christian," but also for engaging in the struggle for civil rights. King knew that rights for African Americans would be hard won *by* African Americans, not granted by the white establishment as an act of generosity. His ethic of love comprises the qualities that he no doubt hoped would embolden that struggle.

The purpose of this essay is twofold. The first part of the essay offers a systematic account of King's ethic that, as it was originally expressed, is scattered among the many works he authored. In my view, even though this ethic promotes values (such as economic equality) that some would regard as instrumental, it is nevertheless best characterized as an ethic of virtue. While different thinkers conceptualize virtue somewhat differently, there is a family resemblance between these conceptualizations that enables one to distinguish an ethic of virtue from alternative ethical orientations. First, in contrast to rule or principle based orientations, an ethic of virtue emphasizes traits of character — virtues — as essential to the moral life and to human flourishing or well-being generally. In addition to love, the virtues that largely constitute King's ethic include courage and hope and —

perhaps surprisingly — nonconformity and impatience. Second, virtue theorists often conceptualize virtues as “means” between two extremes, or vices. One of King’s unconventional virtues, “impatience,” for example, can be viewed as a mean between the extremes of rashness and complacency. Similarly, what is entailed in enacting any particular virtue depends on the circumstances at hand. Courage, for instance, differs considerably whether one is facing an angry street mob or taking a tough exam in school. Third, the acquisition of virtue is generally conceived by virtue ethicists as a process of habituation; as famously (and seemingly paradoxically) expressed by Aristotle, one becomes virtuous by acting virtuously. The road to moral maturity begins, in this view, by modeling and approximating the conduct of persons of good character; with practice, and the kind of understanding that develops through reflection and study, a person becomes increasingly morally mature.

The second part of the essay discusses some of the ways in which the ethic of love may be regarded as educationally significant. Beyond its curricular implications, King’s ethic highlights the need to attend to the social, economic, and political conditions that shape human character and provides a critical perspective from which to consider contemporary school practices undertaken in the name of “character development.”

THE VIRTUES OF KING’S ETHIC

At the heart of King’s ethic is the virtue, “love.” While love is a dominant theme in many of King’s writings, some of his most engaging discussions of this virtue are found in his sermons. In these works, love is not conceptualized in its more familiar romantic or sentimental manifestations; instead, King discusses a variety of love that is robust and tenacious. King often uses the Greek word *agape* to express his conception, and said in the sermon “Loving Your Enemies” that this love is “understanding and creative, redemptive goodwill for all men (*SL*, 52). It might even be said that, for King, love constituted a kind of power, indeed *the* power that is adequate to the task of overcoming oppression. In this same sermon, King interprets the biblical command to “love one’s enemies” in almost pragmatic terms: “Have we not come to such an impasse in the modern world that we must love our enemies — or else? The chain reaction of evil — hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars — must be broken, or we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation” (*SL*, 53). Given his theological orientation, there can be little doubt that King embraced love as an unqualified good to be nurtured for its own sake. But as the quote above suggests, King also seemed to believe that love has a certain instrumental value. Love, in this view is an end in itself, as well as a means to good ends.

The virtue of love is allied with King’s commitment to nonviolence — a commitment that was strengthened by his study of the work of Gandhi: “As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi...I came to see for the first time that the Christian doctrine of love, operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence, is one of the most potent weapons available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom” (*SL*, 150). The method of nonviolence is no doubt simpler in principle than in practice. At its most basic, nonviolent protest entails the peaceful breach of unjust laws and social customs. The sit-ins at segregated lunch counters, boycotts of

segregated public transportation, and mass marches are perhaps the most familiar demonstrations of nonviolent protest. The principle of nonviolence required African American (and sympathetic white) protestors to refrain from retaliating against verbal taunts and even physical assaults.

The outward self-control required of nonviolent protesters was obviously tremendous, but added to that was the requirement to protest in the "right spirit." Protesters were called on to view those against whom they were protesting not as enemies, but rather as individuals who were caught up in an unjust system. As understood by King, nonviolence cannot be motivated by a desire to humiliate or defeat others, no matter how repugnant their ideas and actions may be. Instead, it must be motivated by love. King explained: "At the center of our movement stood the philosophy of love [and the] attitude that the only way to ultimately change humanity and make the society that we all long for is to keep love at the center of our lives"²² Indeed, love and justice are closely linked in King's ethical thought: "Justice is really love in calculation. Justice is love correcting that which revolts against love."²³ Love and justice are also linked with power in King's formulation, which is apparent in his 1967 speech, "Where Do We Go From Here?" where he says, "Power...at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love" (CC, 186).

As conceptualized by King, the love that should motivate nonviolent protest does not entail complacency or tolerance of plainly intolerable degradation. The point of such protest is to push those in positions of power toward acknowledging the existence of injustices. In King's words:

Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored....So the purpose of direct action is to create a situation so tension-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation" (HD, 86-87).

King saw love as serving another of the central virtues in his ethic: courage. His most succinct definition of courage is the "power of the mind to overcome fear" (SL, 118). Throughout their history on this continent, African Americans have been given good reason to be fearful. It is only sensible to fear the master's whip and the Klansman's rope. These and other real threats that have faced African Americans are all too familiar. As conceptualized by King, however, courage does not entail indifference to danger any more than it entails an absence of fear. To be courageous, in this view, is to persevere even in the *presence of* fear and danger.

Hope is the third main virtue in King's ethic. Given African Americans' history of oppression, it comes as no surprise that, like courage, King saw hope as a virtue. All virtues are difficult to develop and to maintain as part of human character, otherwise there would be no reason to classify these qualities *as* virtues. Achieving and maintaining a state of hopefulness is especially difficult for people who are regularly psychologically degraded and physically abused. To be hopeful under slavery or segregation would require tremendous will and effort. Yet, in King's view, a lack of hope would almost certainly doom African Americans to continuing oppression. As noted in the introduction of this essay, King recognized that freedom

would not be presented to African Americans as a gift; if freedom were to be achieved, this would be the result of African Americans' own efforts. As expressed by King: "We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed" (CC, 87). But lacking hope that freedom could become reality, there would be no motivation to engage in the struggle. In this sense, King believed that the failure to hope for a better world served those who sought to maintain oppressive social relations.

King discussed the experiences of enslaved forebears to illustrate the human capacity for hope in the face of apparently insurmountable obstacles:

They had no alternative except to accept the fact of slavery, but they clung tenaciously to the hope of freedom. In a seemingly hopeless situation, they fashioned within their souls a creative optimism that strengthened them. Their bottomless vitality transformed the darkness of frustration into the light of hope" (SL, 93).

Here, King suggested what might be regarded as a "psychology of hope," a method for remaining hopeful in the face of disappointment and degradation. In part, this requires resisting two equally paralyzing alternatives: bitterness and fatalism. Bitterness almost always hurts the person who is bitter and rarely, if ever, does anything to remedy its causes. Fatalism, the belief that a situation is inevitable and unalterable, all but ensures that the situation will in fact remain unchanged. As difficult as this is, the alternative, King argued, is to realize that even the most challenging of circumstances may contain opportunities: "To guard ourselves from bitterness, we need the vision to see in this generation's ordeals the opportunity to transfigure both ourselves and American society" (SL, 93). Hope, is thus not blind, but rather a creative capacity for imagining possible alternative futures.

Many philosophers in a wide variety of traditions have considered love, courage, and hope to be virtues, although different thinkers have conceptualized these attributes somewhat differently. In his constellation of virtues, King included a quality that, at first glance, seems an odd candidate for virtue status: this quality he called variously "nonconformity," "maladjustment," and "dissatisfaction." Specifically, he called on listeners to be maladjusted to segregation and discrimination, to mob rule, to physical violence and to "tragic militarism" (HD, 33).

"Nonconformity as virtue" is a central theme of one of King's more famous (and more radical) writings, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (HD, 83-100). There King takes to task Christian ministers who had failed to engender sufficient "maladjustment" among their parishioners, arguing that the alternative is a deadening complacency. This is the condition of those very few African Americans of King's time who had achieved middle class status, and in the process of doing so, became callused toward the suffering of the vast majority of their less fortunate peers. King recognized that poor African Americans were also vulnerable to complacency — a state of "adjustment" — to their situation resulting from longstanding oppression.

King's criticism of his fellow pastors focused not only on the relation between the clergy and their congregations, but also on the relation between the churches and their local communities: "Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent and

often vocal sanction of things as they are" (*HD*, 97). King stopped short of calling such complacency a vice, but his message was clear: churches abet an unjust social order when they withhold their criticisms of it, and worse, conform to it.

In the speech "Where Do We Go From Here?" this virtue is called by the name "dissatisfaction" (*CC*, 165-99). This speech is concerned mainly with unemployment, poverty, and other manifestations of economic inequality, in regard to which King's audience was reminded of the legitimacy of their dissatisfaction. King began his enumeration of a list of twelve social conditions that he thought *ought* to be regarded with dissatisfaction with these words:

And so I conclude [this speech] by saying today that we have a task, and let us go out with divine dissatisfaction. Let us be dissatisfied until America will no longer have a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds.... Let us be dissatisfied until integration is not seen as a problem but as an opportunity to participate in the beauty of diversity" (*CC*, 96).

The fifth of King's virtues, "impatience" is a logical companion of nonconformity, maladjustment, and dissatisfaction, and like these qualities it is not generally regarded as a virtue. In his address at the freedom rally in Cobo Hall King responded to moderates' pleas for patience, to "'Slow up' and 'Cool off'":

They say, "Why don't you do it in a gradual manner?" Well, gradualism is little more than escapism and do-nothingism, which ends up in stand-stillism.... And so we must say: Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy.... Now is the time to get rid of segregation and discrimination (*CC*, 65).

Elsewhere in connection with the virtue of impatience, King discussed the "myth of time," according to which African Americans should wait for a later date to achieve freedom and equality on the grounds that everything will be made right — in time. This myth, Kings argued, represents a "tragic misconception of time. It is the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills" (*HD*, 92). Here, King stated the problem fairly delicately; but in his Cobo speech, it is clear King believed that by making a virtue out of patience, some were attempting to forestall equality and social justice.

King recognized that not all manifestations of nonconformity, maladjustment, dissatisfaction, and impatience are virtuous. In regard to "nonconformity," for example, he said, "Nonconformity in itself, however, may not necessarily be good and may at times possess neither transforming nor redemptive power. Nonconformity per se contains no saving value and may represent in some circumstances little more than a form of exhibitionism" (*SL*, 26). And in certain circumstances — in many interactions with small children, for example — impatience generally would also not be seen virtuous. In what sense might these qualities, which are usually considered to be undesirable, be regarded not merely favorably, but as *virtues*? For King, at least, Christianity provided the foundations upon which these qualities had virtue status. In regard to the virtue of nonconformity, King quoted the Book of Romans: "Be not conformed to this world" (*SL*, 21). And Jesus himself, King pointed out, was "maladjusted" to his time and was, beyond that, an impatient "extremist" (*HD*, 94).

While it is important to understand that, for King, these unconventional virtues are rooted in Christian doctrine, there are other, secular, strands in the tradition of

virtue ethics according to which these qualities may be counted as virtues as well. Aristotle, for one, thought that all virtues acquired their stature in relation to particular circumstances; virtues, in this sense, are context dependent. As noted earlier, the virtue of courage, for example, will appear and be manifested quite differently whether one is, physically threatened or faced with a tough decision. In light of this interpretation of virtue theory, is not unreasonable to conclude that nonconformity and impatience should indeed be counted among the virtues under circumstances such as those experienced by King and other African Americans. The context in which King lived was oppressive and unjust, and failure to “adapt” to this context, let alone to strive for its transformation, carried monumental risks. From an Aristotelian perspective, these risks also contribute to the status of the qualities King named as virtues. Beyond, that, however, it should be recalled that virtue ethics is ultimately concerned with human flourishing. For African Americans to flourish, racial oppression had to be undone, and “impatience, nonconformity, maladjustment, and dissatisfaction,” while not sufficient alone, are qualities of character necessary to achieving that end.

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN KING’S VIRTUES

For the sake of clarity, the virtues that largely define King’s ethic have been discussed singly, yet the virtue of love can be viewed as permeating or augmenting all the virtues. First, love provides a motivational lever that enables those who possess the virtues to act in accord with them. Take “courage,” for example. Love, whether for another person or for an idea (such as justice or equality) is emboldening, even in the presence of real danger. Love, which for King was a love for humanity, also provides an intellectual foundation for these virtues. As conceptualized by King, love is, *by reason*, tied to courage, hope, nonconformity, and impatience. And were these qualities not permeated with love, there is some doubt as to whether they should be regarded as virtues at all; courage, hope, nonconformity, and impatience can serve bad purposes as well as good ones, and they can diminish human character as well as enlarge it. It might be said that love points these qualities in the right direction, toward the good.

Both conceptually and practically, these virtues are connected in another way as well; each virtue serves to modify or check other virtues. For example, all by itself nonconformity will typically not lead to social change. But when nonconformity is allied with, say, courage, the result is more likely to entail active participation in efforts to bring the desired change to fruition. When love is added to this mix, motivation and sense of direction are strengthened further.

THE MATERIAL DIMENSION OF KING’S THOUGHT

So much of the contemporary discourse on virtue and character dichotomizes the moral and the material sides of life, as if good character can be willed into existence no matter what the circumstances. (And it is worth noting that oppressed and poor people are practically always the ones whose characters are thought to be in need of improvement.) In contrast, the ethic of love has a strong material dimension that has implications for the character of oppressor and oppressed alike. As noted earlier, like all ethicists, King was concerned with human conduct and character. But to a greater extent than most, King recognized that conduct and

character are shaped by material context. Repeatedly, King asserted the same basic concern for material conditions as that expressed in this excerpt from the magazine *Christian Century*:

The gospel is at its best when it deals with the whole man, not only his soul but his body, not only his spiritual well-being but his material well-being. Any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them and the social conditions that cripple them is a spiritually moribund religion awaiting burial (*HD*, 58).

King's point is not that moral shortcomings of individuals will be corrected automatically through improved social conditions; it is rather that social injustice is morally degrading to all humans. Thus not only did King account for the relation between character and material context, but also between individuals in an oppressive social order. In language that anticipated the work of Paulo Freire, King discussed how unjust social relations diminish the character of all parties involved, including those who, in some sense, benefit from injustice:

All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority, and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. . . . So segregation is not only politically, economically, and sociologically unsound, but it is morally wrong and sinful (*HD*, 89).

EDUCATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF KING'S ETHICAL THOUGHT

There are many different ways in which King's ethical thought might be regarded as educationally significant; here I discuss but three. This first of these is connected to the acquisition and creation of knowledge and understanding. To the extent that King's ethic shaped the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, our students' (and our own) understanding of the Movement will be enhanced through a study of that ethical thought. It is perhaps not too great a stretch to suggest that one's understanding of events subsequent to the Movement will benefit from an analysis of King's ethic. And to the extent that the ethic of love informed King's commitment to nonviolence, insight into that approach to social and political change will be deepened as insight into the ethic is also deepened. The implication is largely curricular: there are good reasons to include the study of King's ethic in courses where the Civil Rights Movement, U.S. history, and the process of social change are taught.

King's ethic is also educationally significant in highlighting the material dimensions of character and morality more generally. King reminds us that oppressive and unjust social conditions can have terrible moral consequences for everyone involved. King's own work, as well as that of Freire and Franz Fanon, among others, has brought to light the psychology of oppression, which can induce such things as horizontal violence and self-destructiveness, among other harms. Oppressive social relations are bound to negatively affect the character of those who oppress as well. This is obvious in cases where injustice is intentionally perpetuated. But morally speaking, problems arise in subtler cases as well. Ignorance of the privileges that accrue on the basis of white skin or middle class status is hardly a virtue, and to the extent that such ignorance is willed, may be regarded as a vice.

The implication of King's thought in this regard is that if we as a society are serious about the character of youth (and of our society broadly) then we ought to

attend much more closely to social, political, and economic injustices that shape all our lives. Indeed, achieving greater equality in these spheres may well have a more morally beneficial influence than would any character education program the schools can offer.

King's ethic is also educationally significant in that it provides a critical reference against which to consider "character education" as it is typically conceptualized and practiced in schools today. No doubt, many teachers approach their charge to promote students' character development in meaningful ways. But anecdotal evidence suggests that what passes for character education often consists of little more than telling students that they ought to be honest, respectful, courteous, and so on, and, perhaps displaying posters depicting such virtues as a helpful reminder. It is unlikely that this pedantic approach will engender much virtue among students, and may actually promote cynicism, especially among students particularly sensitive to the fact that these virtues are in short supply in society at large.

In contrast, while King certainly also told (in the form of preaching no less!) parishioners and others that they ought to embrace the virtues, beyond that, he was engaged *with them* in activities in which these virtues were made manifest. Love, courage, hope, nonconformity, and impatience were *embodied* in the sit-ins, boycotts, and marches, in which King himself was often a participant. King was not the first to adopt a participatory approach to moral education, but the example he set serves as a powerful reminder of the efficacy of that approach. King explained: "The nonviolent approach does something to the hearts and souls of those committed to it. It gives them strength and courage that they did not know they had" (*SL*, 151). Indeed, judging from commentaries of those who lived through the Civil Rights Movement, King may also be regarded as an exemplary public educator. Although he "taught" in the streets and from the pulpit, it would be difficult to overstate King's moral influence.

CONCLUDING COMMENT

This essay has sought, first, to describe some of the basic elements of what I have called King's "ethic of love" as this ethic is represented in his sermons, letters, speeches, and other writings and, second, to discuss some of the ways in which King's ethical thought may be regarded as educationally significant. Both of these efforts are preliminary. Perhaps, however, this essay will help spark further exploration of a body of work that has been largely overlooked in the philosophy of education literature. The evolution of King's ethical thought over time, the ways in which it was influenced by Gandhi, as well as criticisms of King's thought are but a few of the topics remaining to be explored.

1. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963). This book will be cited as *SL* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. Martin Luther King, Jr., *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 31. This book will be cited as *HD* in the text for all subsequent references.

3. Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson (New York: IPM, 2001), 11. This book will be cited as *CC* in the text for all subsequent references.