

Martin Luther King, Jr., Moral Contexts, and Moral Education

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I fully agree with what I take as the central tenet of Suzanne Rice's paper, namely that King's work is overlooked in academic philosophy as well as in education and that both are the worse for this omission. In this response I address whether the characterization of King's ethical thought as a form of virtue ethics is productive given Rice's practical goal of improving the quality of moral/character education in public schools. I also briefly critique virtue ethics as an overarching philosophical position. Finally, I suggest a pragmatic approach to moral education. As a good pragmatist, I do not offer this argument in an attempt to definitively label King's work but rather to seek a fruitful way to contend with the problem at hand, that of strengthening moral education. Ultimately, I argue that inclusion of King in the virtue tradition runs the risk of leading us farther down a road that Rice does not wish for moral education to travel — the reduction of moral education to a list of platitudinous character traits to be imparted to students in a formulaic manner.

Rice's account of King's ethical thought focuses on speeches and writings through which King articulated a series of desirable characteristics, or virtues. Love, as evidenced in Rice's title, is the most prevalent virtue, but not the only one. Courage and hope as well as the nontraditional virtues, nonconformity and impatience, are also present in King's work. Nonconformity and impatience are not typically thought of as Aristotelian virtues, but they are certainly in keeping with a New Testament take on the virtues. Rice even points out that King often referred to Jesus' impatience and nonconformity.

While virtues are thought of primarily as ends in themselves, Rice acknowledges that King's virtues possess instrumental dimensions.¹ At times, however, she seems to downplay this facet of his thought. In King, I read a stronger focus on the virtues in question as means and not primarily as ends. If I am right, then Rice's claim that King's ethical orientation is "concerned mainly with questions about...conduct and...character" needs to be amended to include King's concern for pragmatic and material conditions (a topic that Rice does acknowledge later in her essay).

Even love is not above the fray. Rice pointed out that "given his theological orientation, there can be little doubt that King embraced love as an unqualified good to be nurtured for its own sake." She goes on to say that love is a partially instrumental value to King; it is both end and means. In a 1957 article, King expressed this unique blend of pragmatic instrumentalism and New Testament turn-the-other-cheekness:

At the center of nonviolence stands the principle of love. In struggling for human dignity the oppressed people of the world must not allow themselves to become bitter or indulge in hate campaigns...someone must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate. This can be done only by projecting the ethics of love to the center of our lives.²

Like many religious, socially oriented reformers of the Civil Rights era and beyond, King saw possibilities for using the pulpit to mitigate the material disparities of his

day. Rice touches on the material dimensions of King's thought and provides a brief yet eloquent explanation of this connection. As noted above, the description of King's concern for the effects of material conditions on morality seems at odds with King the virtue ethicist, as virtue ethics tends to focus much more on what one is or ought to be on the "inside" rather than the conditions in which one lives. Dewey's pragmatic approach seems a better fit here. He criticizes Aristotle's "isolation of economics from ideal ends" explaining:

economics has been treated as on a lower level than either morals or politics. Yet the life which men, women and children actually lead, the opportunities open to them, the values they are capable of enjoying, their education, their share in all the things of art and science, are mainly determined by economic conditions. Hence we can hardly expect a moral system which ignores economic conditions to be other than remote and empty.³

I also question whether the virtue tradition does justice to King's notion of love. In Aristotelian terms, how does love relate to the golden mean? If, as Rice claims, impatience is a virtue situated between the vices of rashness and complacency and the other virtues similarly are means between extremes, between which two vices does love reside? Is it possible to love too much? In King's own words, (agape is) "an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return."⁴ If there is no excess of love, it becomes difficult to call it a virtue.

Regardless of the fit of King's thought with virtue ethics, I argue that accenting virtues is not a particularly productive way to handle moral education. Abstracting virtues or character traits from specific situations can render them lifeless. Thought of in this way, my problem is less with Rice's characterization of King as a virtue ethicist than it is with the value of virtue ethics to moral education in general.

From Rice's conclusion I surmise that we have similar concerns about and hopes for character education. She is right to note that many teachers do ably tend to the moral development of their students, but that there are some worrisome trends, including the implementation of prefabricated programs touting the importance of absorbing various desirable traits in embarrassingly thin "word-of-the-week" formats. We also share the belief that a richer character education can only come about if the *contexts* of moral activity are explored. Rice notes that King did more than just talk about the virtues, he "embodied" them, engaging in participatory moral education through "sit-ins, boycotts, and marches." Likewise, I believe that meaningful moral activity needs to be rooted in the actual moral lives of our children. Students exist in an atmosphere rich in moral material and school should be seen as a reasonably safe place to grow experientially in more than just narrowly intellectual ways.

It is my belief in the importance of practical experience as a component of moral growth that leads me to propose that King's ethic is best viewed in pragmatic terms. A pragmatic ethic discourages the abstraction of virtues from our actual experience, instead, as Todd Lekan notes, conceiving of moral theory as "a set of theoretical tools that result, more or less deliberately, from efforts to understand and resolve problems in our practices."⁵ Exploring King's ethical legacy by considering how he dealt with vexing social, political, and personal problems of his time helps ensure that his life is not reduced to some laundry list of virtues. Furthermore, this

contextualization of King's ethic helps sidestep potential church-state issues that might emerge if we use character education to suggest that students should emulate King's virtues, Christian and otherwise. Exploring how and why King did what he did necessitates some level of understanding regarding his Christianity. Loving your enemies makes more sense in light of the New Testament and its influence needs to be included in any account of King's social activism. Discussing King's Christianity in this context seems less tending toward indoctrination than does virtue-based scrutiny of King's life.

The pragmatic approach to studying King's legacy also opens doors to exploring instrumental facets of his virtues. King had a very distinct social reform agenda and recognizing that impatience was a virtue cultivated to help achieve particular ends makes more sense than extolling the virtue of impatience abstracted from actual experience. Viewing King in this light will help overcome the very real danger that children might perceive him as an irrelevant two-dimensional icon trotted out to demonstrate how they should live their lives. Instead, the pragmatic approach can help children see him as a genuine human being seeking workable solutions to real problems. In this way, King is not so different from them and I propose that connections ought to be forged between the real moral lives of children and their moral education. Dewey explains this connection between moral development and children's experience:

moral education centres about this conception of the school as a mode of social life...the best and deepest moral training is precisely that which one gets through having to enter into proper relations with others in a unity of work and thought. The present educational systems, so far as they destroy or neglect this unity, render it difficult or impossible to get any genuine, regular moral training.⁶

Pragmatism requires that we take seriously the moral importance of seemingly innocuous and trivial classroom phenomena, as it is the raw stuff of a meaningful moral education. However, teachers cannot passively wait for opportunities for moral development to emerge. Instead, teachers need to construct their classrooms with moral growth in mind. A pragmatic approach to moral education emphasizes the ethical significance of contextualized experience, be it in the classroom or when scrutinizing the moral significance of the life and work of moral exemplars, including Martin Luther King, Jr.

1. Often, virtues are circularly characterized as means toward becoming virtuous or toward the Aristotelian "good."

2. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Nonviolence and Racial Justice," *The Christian Century* 6 (1957): 165.

3. John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (New York: Minton, Balch, 1929), 282.

4. King, "Nonviolence and Racial Justice," 167.

5. Todd Lekan, *Making Morality* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003), 5.

6. Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1916), 231.