**The Drum Major Instinct:**
**Martin Luther King, Jr's Theory of Political Service**

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## <u>Abstract</u>

In this project I explicate Martin Luther King, Jr's theory of political service. King's theory of political service, I argue, was composed of the following three central components: First, it requires the cultivation of an ethos of care and concern for others. Second, it is a moral responsibility that requires all members of society to work collectively toward combating structures of injustice rather than private and supererogatory acts undertaken by individuals. Finally, marginalized peoples' struggles against injustice are considered an essential aspect of service, thereby empowering the oppressed.

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In loving memory of

Hannah Teklemariam

## **<u>Chapter 1</u>**
### **Introduction**

"Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter. I won't have any money to leave behind. I won't have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind. And that's all I want to say."

--Martin Luther King, Jr .

On a serene Sunday in October of 2011, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial was officially unveiled on the National Mall. The newly erected monument made King not only the first black American, but also the first non-president to be granted such a privilege. However, the monument was not without its critics. Specifically, the poet Maya Angelou, who was one of the consultants for the memorial, took issue with an inscription etched into the north side of the towering statue, which read, "I was a drum major for justice, peace and righteousness." Angelou charged that the quotation made King "look like an arrogant twit" (Weingarten and Ruane, 2013). The problem with the statement was that it was a paraphrasing of a much longer quote from King's 1968 "The Drum Major Instinct" sermon, in which he beseeched, "If you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness" (King, 1986, p. 267). According to Angelou, "[King] had a humility that comes from deep inside. The 'if' clause that is left out is salient. Leaving it out changes the meaning completely" (Weingarten and Ruane, 2013). Others agreed, and, bowing to growing criticism, the Department of the Interior finally decided to remove the quotation altogether.

Angelou's critique of the memorial is instructive for any discussion about the importance of King's contribution to the struggle for justice. For, she is insisting that we must move beyond quaint quotes that highlight King's personal attributes and instead grapple with the true meaning behind those quotations. Furthermore, Angelou is making the claim that in order to understand the true meaning behind King's quotations, it is necessary that we return to the text; for context is everything. Following Angelou's example the aim of this project is to return to King's "The Drum Major Instinct" sermon among his other sermons, public speeches and written texts to gain a fuller understanding of one of his greatest contributions to the struggle for justice—his theory of political service.

**King's Theory of Political Service**

In order to fully understand King's theory of political service, it will be helpful to begin by examining King's 1968 "The Drum Major Instinct" sermon. King's homily was based upon a biblical story in which two of Jesus' disciples—James and John—approach him inquiring what it will take for them to sit beside him in heaven. In response to his disciples' naked ambition to be the best, Jesus taught that whoever wants to be great must become a servant to all of humanity. Drawing upon this story, King used James' and John's zeal as an opportunity to highlight how all humans possess this very same drive to be out front. King labeled this desire the drum major instinct, since drum majors are the leaders who parade in the front of marching bands. Left unchecked, King feared that the drum major instinct could lead to conspicuous consumption habits, racial domination or even war between nations.

Despite his misgivings about the drum major instinct, King also believed that, if properly channeled, it was actually a good trait to possess. During the course of his sermon King highlighted two important features of Jesus' measured retort to his disciples. The first was that Jesus redefined greatness. In King's words: "…Jesus gave us a new norm of greatness. If you want to be important—wonderful. If you want to be recognized—wonderful. If you want to be great—wonderful. But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant." The second was that service is egalitarian. King explains, "[B]y giving that definition of greatness, it means that everybody can be great, because everybody can serve" (King, 1986, p. 265). Therefore, just as Jesus suggested that in order for his disciples to be great they must learn to serve all of humanity, King taught his parishioners that not only was it within their capacity to be great, but that the only way for them to become great was by being out front in the service of others—especially the least well off. Politically, King's theory of service requires that individuals exhibit an ethos of care and concern for others by collectively working to transform structures of injustice.

With this in mind, it is only fitting that any memorial dedicated to King would seek to incorporate the words from his "The Drum Major Instinct" sermon. This is because as King stood before Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church he took advantage of the opportunity to articulate what he viewed as his greatest contribution to mankind.  Toward the end of his sermon, a portion of which would be played at his funeral, King paused to reflect upon his impending death. As he contemplated his own mortality, King pled with those who might survive him to be equally as cognizant of his many struggles to harness his own drum major instinct. He instructed them to do so by downplaying what he viewed as his trivial accomplishments and material possessions. Seeking to exemplify Jesus' lessons

about greatness, King requested that his eulogizer "mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others." After providing examples of how he served others, he summed up his life thusly, "I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity" (King, 1986, p. 267). In other words, as King stared into the face of death, he hoped that his commitment to service would live on forever.

Fortunately, the link between King and service has been apotheosized on a national scale. In 1994 the US federal government sought to underscore the importance of service to both King's historical legacy and to the democratization of America when it transformed the national holiday in his honor into a day of nationwide service. With the passage of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Federal Holiday and Service Act, the King Holiday, according to the Corporation for National and Community Service, became a call "for Americans from all walks of life to work together to provide solutions to our most pressing national problems." When members of the national community honor King's legacy by engaging in service, the Corporation claims that it, "empowers individuals, strengthens communities, bridges barriers, creates solutions to social problems, and moves us closer to Dr. King's vision of a 'Beloved Community'" (The Official MLK Day of Service Site, 2013). In other words, the Corporation promotes an understanding of King's vision of service as a collective, political undertaking aimed at addressing issues of injustice.

Given the political dimensions of King's theory of service, it is imperative that an account is given of how it fits into his overall political thought. Without doing so, we will miss his contributions as a political thinker and, more specifically as a black political thinker. I want to stress the fact that not only is King a black political thinker, but that he is a radical black political thinker. While many scholars have noted the "radical" turn in

King's thought (Dawson, 2001; Shulman 2008; Howard-Pitney 2005), I have something quite different in mind. By considering King a radical black thinker, I am commenting on what Anthony Bogues (2006) considers the core of radical black thought—the "quest for a new definition of the human being" (Bogues, 2006, p. 419). King's theory of political service, I contend, is at heart a redefinition of what it means to be a human being. By positing that all human beings have been created such that they can only reach their fullest potential by serving others, King's theory of service cannot be understood within the boundaries of traditional American political thought.

As scholars have observed (Bogues 2006; Dawson 2001), black political thought does not merely work within the confines of the two dominant strands of American political thought—liberalism and republicanism—but it also critiques and expands upon them. When engaging black thinkers, Bogues suggests that we "pursue a line of inquiry which examines the *ways* in which African-American political thought changed some of the foundational concepts in political thought or added new categories (Bogues, 2006; 418). To see this point more clearly, consider that within the American liberal discourse, service is viewed as a form of volunteerism (Barber, 1992). In this sense, service is a private, individualized and supererogatory activity that merely promotes doing good deeds, while leaving structures of injustice wholly intact. This is because liberalism is founded upon the belief that the individual precedes the society. However, as a political actor actively engaged in securing freedom and equality for black Americans, King theorizes service in a way that stresses an individual's moral obligation to serve others by engaging in a collective struggle aimed at transforming structures of injustice.

As a black radical thinker, King's theory of service remains helpful in evaluating even those explicitly political theories of service, as well. For instance, according to political theorist Benjamin Barber, who has written extensively on political service, "To the extent, then, that service has been reduced to charity, and civic obligation and civic service have lost their place in our nation's political vocabulary, it is because we long ago bankrupted our practice of citizenship" (Barber, 1992, p. 236). Barber's conception of service is republican, in as much as he is concerned that citizenship has lost its value in America because the nation is largely made up of individuals who see themselves as the bearers of rights, but who have few or no reciprocal responsibilities. However, Barber believes that the duty to serve is owed by all democratic citizens as a means to preserve their freedom. He states, "Service to the neighborhood and to the nation are not the gift of altruists but a duty of free men and women whose freedom is itself wholly dependent on the assumption of political responsibilities" (Barber, 1992, p. 246). For Barber, serving others is not a supererogatory act; rather, it is a central component of democratic citizenship.

Despite the fact that Barber offers a politicized notion of service, he views himself as primarily writing for an audience who are taking the rights that come along with citizenship for granted. In fact, his driving concern is that "as the compass of citizenship has expanded, its significance has contracted" (Barber, 1992, p. 246). Living as a black American in the middle of the twentieth century, King was operating in an era in which black Americans were still struggling against many of their white peers to gain first-class citizenship. This meant that, unlike Barber, who views service as an obligation owed by rights bearers, King's conception of service obligated black Americans to sacrifice prior to

the equal enjoyment of many of those rights. Furthermore, King follows a long line of black political thinkers, who viewed the obligation to seek and preserve their freedom as something that is not simply the duty of a citizen of a nation-state, but as a "black freedom" dream that exceeds the boundaries of any one particular nation (Kelley 2002; Singh, 2004). This, then, is another way to read King as a radical black thinker. Bogues offers: "While connecting with larger struggles globally, radical African-American thought enters into dialogical conversations with other elements of American thought" (Bogues, 2006; 431). Upon entering into dialogue with American political thought, black radical thought "challenges the categories of mainstream American thought, oftentimes creating something distinctive" (Bogues, 2006; 431). King, I argue, offers a distinct conception of political service that forces us to step outside the boundaries of the dominant strands of American political thought and to raise critical questions about the foundations upon which they rest.

However, there are some political thinkers who question whether service is an effective tool in the struggle for freedom, or if it actually hurts those who employ it. One such critic is democratic thinker, activist and former special assistant to King, Harry Boyte. In particular, Boyte is skeptical about the ability of service, as popularly practiced, to address asymmetrical power dynamics. He seems to believe that this deficiency is inherent to the very conception of service. As Boyte explains:

> An etymology of service illustrates the problem. Service is from the Latin *servus*, meaning slave, associated with 'servile' and 'serf.' In one of its meanings, 'performing duties connected with a position,' service is a useful bridge for reconnecting with the world. Yet in all meanings, service is associated with other-directedness. The service giver, in focusing on the needs of those being served, adopts a stance of selflessness or disinterestedness. Service is the paradigmatic stance of the outside expert. But interests and people working to further their interests are the elemental particles of politics (Boyte, 2004, p. 12).

However, in direct contrast to Boyte's concern about the language of servitude, King conceives of service as not only a bridge to connect with the world, but also as a means to politicize others. As a Baptist minister, King understood his life's vocation as that of a suffering servant sent to serve his God and humanity. Furthermore, he gave this Christian notion of service a political salience by encouraging Americans with no Christian affiliation to understand their duties as human beings as that of the suffering servant sent to redeem the soul of the nation as well.

King's firmly held belief that the suffering of black Americans in their struggle for justice would ultimately be redemptive is derived from the role that he accords the Christian love ethic, *agape*. King defined *agape* as "understanding and creative, redemptive goodwill for all men" (King, 2010, p. 46). Rooted in God's love of all God's creations, King insists that blacks extend redemptive goodwill to whites since "agape is the love of God operating in the human heart…we love every man because God loves him" (King, 2010, p. 46). In addition to providing a basis to extend goodwill to those who oppress you, political theorist George Shulman views King's commitment to *agape* as also grounding his concern for securing justice for the least well off. "To be oriented by God is to be animated by love; to enact love is to identify with those who suffer unjustly and to embrace suffering on their behalf" (Shulman, 2008, p. 108). To embrace suffering on behalf of those who suffer unjustly, means struggling side-by-side with them while building reciprocal relationships of empowerment.

Shulman is helpful in illuminating these two important components of King's political thought. The first component sought to cultivate an ethos of goodwill amongst all human beings, and that also implored all of society to identify with those who suffer

unjustly. The second strand sought to motivate democratic action on behalf of those who suffer unjustly. Shulman contributes greatly to our understanding of King's political thought by articulating these two strands of attentiveness beyond difference and working for justice; but, since he is more concerned with the prophetic dimensions of King's thought, he does not provide the reader with a way to combine these two strands into a democratic ethos geared toward action. In his reticence on the matter, I use the term "political service" as a means of marrying these two strands in King's thought.

Yet, the idea of the oppressed engaging in a form of service, as Boyte points out, conjures up images of subservient, passive beings. King, though, radicalized the term in an attempt to get the oppressed to recognize and then exercise their political agency. Therefore, King's theory of service highlights the limitation of Boyte's conception. Whereas Boyte views service as simply the empowered aiding the less fortunate, King taught that the oppressed were in fact providing a service to their nation and the world by pursuing justice. He consistently made the case that by suffering in the cause for justice, black Americans, would be the ones to help America fulfill the dream of a more just, democratic society.

King's radicalization of the term service can be seen in the ending of his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail":

> One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters they were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream and the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, and thusly, carrying our whole nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the Founding Fathers in the formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence (King, 1986, p. 302).

In this passage King was making an explicit connection between the decision by black Americans to pursue their own interests in the form of justice and their service to the nation

by helping America redeem its promise of liberty, equality and human dignity for all its members. To be clear, King believed that it was *all* Americans' responsibility to work for justice, but he often referred to the redemptive ability of black Americans because they, by default, were the ones who had to struggle for justice on their own behalf. Although King became what Michael Dawson calls a "disillusioned liberal" he never lost faith in the ability of white Americans to join in the struggle for social justice, and consequently he did not close off the possibility that they too would help redeem the soul of the nation. "However", as Dawson explains, for disillusioned liberals, "white racism is considered to be fundamentally entrenched among whites (Dawson, 2001, p. 17) As a result, toward the end of his life, King became increasingly convinced that the majority of white Americans would not extend full equality to black Americans without being coerced.

Despite the nobility of the cause and the radical edge that King was giving to the idea of service, his call for black Americans to help make America more just would still require that blacks—just as they had under the exploitative system of slavery—sacrifice for the betterment of America; sometimes paying the ultimate price of giving their lives. What distinguished the type of sacrifice that I am calling service from that of slavery was that King was seeking to empower black Americans to exercise their political agency by consensually sacrificing. In the institution of slavery, blacks were sacrificed without their consent, and without reciprocity. But by consensually sacrificing black Americans were asserting themselves as full-fledged members of the democratic community even though they were not accorded full citizenship. As political theorist Danielle Allen explains, while illegitimate sacrifice is a symptom of an ill society, a true democracy "should distinguish between those who give up their interests consensually and suffer something they

understand and those who do not, between sacrificers and victims; the democratic objective should be to reduce the category of victim to insignificance" (Allen, 2004, p. 111). For King, agency was to be found in a form of sacrificial service. According to his logic, suffering and sacrifice were not the results of a passive acceptance of domination; instead, they were the results of a positive challenge to domination.

King's use of service raises an obvious question. Namely, if black Americans were struggling for their own justice, then why is this considered a form of service? The answer is that King referred to the black American struggle for justice as a form of service because suffering and sacrifice were not simply endured for self-centered reasons, but were very much concerned with the other. In King's final book-length manuscript *Where Do We Go from Here*, he argues, "In winning rights for ourselves we have produced substantial benefits for the whole nation" (King, 1968, p. 133). Moreover, King saw the black American struggle for justice as extending beyond the confines of his nation. King called upon blacks to give their "ultimate allegiance to the empire of justice," by doing so they would imbue the "nation with the ideals of a higher and nobler order" (King, 1968, p. 134). King's trumpeting of an allegiance to the empire of justice had global implications. King explicitly made this connection: "However deeply American Negroes are caught in the struggle to be at last at home in our homeland of the United States, we cannot ignore the larger world house in which we are also dwellers." He continued, "Equality with whites will not solve the problems of either whites or Negroes if it means equality in a world society stricken by poverty and in a universe doomed to extinction by war" (King, 1968, p. 167).

King's beliefs about the conversion of black Americans from victims to willing sacrificers were deeply embedded in King's endorsement of the strategy of nonviolent direct action. Nonviolent direct action, for King, meant that individuals should take up the cause for justice by way of a peaceful collective process. While nonviolent direct action is not synonymous with service, it is one way in which individuals can collectively join together to transform structures of injustice. King preferred nonviolent direction because it was compatible with the way in which he theorized service as combining the concern for cultivating an ethos based upon *agape* with the action necessary to correct structural injustice. As was discussed above, King believed that the pursuit of justice by black Americans, demanded that they embody an ethos of *agape*. Yet, it must be noted that King always distinguished between three types of love: *eros*, *philia* and *agape*. Both *eros* and *philia* were described by King as being derived from some form of sentimentality. *Eros* was a love that was predicated on a strong desire for an object or a person, while *philia* was derived from some likeable quality that the other person possessed. It is this absence of a sappy sentimentality that distinguished *agape* from the other types of love since it is the only "love that seeks nothing in return" (King, 1963, p. 45). To King, a love that sought nothing in return was necessary in the struggle for justice because black Americans were not merely trying to gain full equality, but they were also seeking to transform white Americans in the process.

King's emphasis upon transforming white Americans put him at odds with other black political thinkers—particularly those who, like Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, who espoused a "by any means necessary" brand of Black Power. According to these thinkers, the primary concern was that black Americans successfully

pursue their own self-interest with little to no concern about transforming white Americans in the process. Furthermore, they deemed it unwise to rule out the ability for black Americans to defend themselves from white Americans who consistently proved that they had no reservations in employing violence against black people. Pushing back against this line of thought, King argued that violence was neither moral nor was it practical. Nonviolent direct action, King claimed, was able to appeal to the conscience of white Americans. In *Where Do We Go from Here*, he explains: "Some Black Power advocates consider an appeal to conscience irrelevant." Replying to one such advocate who told him: "To hell with conscience and morality. We want power," King offers, "But power and morality must go together, implementing, fulfilling and ennobling each other." King said, "Nonviolence is power, but it is the right and good use of power. Constructively it can save the white man as well as the Negro" (King, 1968, p. 59). The morality of nonviolence was that it did not "substitute one evil for another," in the same way that violent retaliation did. Ultimately, King believed that engaging in immoral violence not only inflicted pain upon others, but it also damaged one's own soul. "I am concerned that Negroes achieve full status as citizens and as human beings here in the United States. But I am also concerned about our moral uprightness and the health of our souls" (King, 1968, p. 64).

More practically, King held that without the transformation of whites, America could never become a truly integrated society. While violence may have been effective in certain colonial struggles where the ultimate goal was the vanquishing of the oppressor, King believed that America was different since it was a multi-racial democracy. To King the interdependence of the races meant that "liberation cannot come without integration and integration cannot come without liberation" (King, 1968, p. 62). By integration King

meant "true intergroup, interpersonal living," as well as "the mutual sharing of power." It was not enough for black and white Americans to simply cohabitate, there needed to be coexistence predicated upon the sharing of power between the races. King felt that not only would white Americans be more resistant to sharing power if violently coerced, but that true integrated coexistence could not result from violent upheaval. He proclaims, "In the struggle for national independence one can talk about liberation now and integration later, but in the struggle for racial justice in a multiracial society where the oppressor and the oppressed are both 'at home,' liberation must come through integration" (King, 1968, p. 62).

Therefore the goal of nonviolent direct action was to create a scenario that caused a confrontation aimed at dramatizing the suffering of the least well off in society. The method was successful, according to King, because as he explains in his 1964 "American Dream" speech, it "disarms the opponent, it exposes his moral defenses, it weakens his morale and at the same time it works on his conscience…" (Drew University 2013). While the overall aim of the method was to win justice for the oppressed, it also sought to convert the opposition into fellow seekers of justice. The sentiment of this position was expressed in King's 1965 "American Dream" speech when he channeled the voice of black Americans in response to their oppressors: "'But be assured that we will ride you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we will win our freedom, but we will not only win freedom for ourselves, we will so appeal to your heart and your conscience that we will win you in the process.' And our victory will be a double victory (King, 1998)." In sum, while King's theory of political service is first and foremost concerned with seeking justice for the least well off, it is also always concerned about the well-being of the other. In this way, King's

theory of political service is epitomized by the desire to gain a double victory in the struggle for justice.

At this point, we can distill the following three central components of King's theory of political service. First, it requires the cultivation of an ethos of care and concern for others. Second, it is a moral responsibility that requires all members of society to work collectively toward combating structures of injustice rather than private and supererogatory acts undertaken by individuals. Finally, marginalized peoples' struggles against injustice are considered an essential aspect of service, thereby empowering the oppressed.

In the pages that follow I will flesh out various aspects of these three components. I should note that I begin with the belief that many of King's thoughts about service can be found in his early writings and sermons. As a Baptist preacher and a public speaker, who had sermons and speeches that he would preach repeatedly, King provides scholars with a unique opportunity to chart the development of his thoughts by examining the change in specific sermons and speeches over time. Consequently, in most chapters I isolate a particular sermon, speech or theme for the purpose of explaining how King's views on service developed over the course of his life. For instance, in the second and third chapter I will discuss King's "American Dream," and his "Three Dimensions of a Complete Life," respectively. Most chapters also rely heavily upon King's final book-length manuscript, *Where Do We Go from Here.* I believe that this text along with some of King's later speeches provide us with his most mature thoughts on service.

This project unfolds in the following manner: In the second chapter, I examine the development of King's "The American Dream" speeches in order to argue that King used the American dream as a call to all Americans—but particularly black Americans—to

serve themselves and their nation by engaging in the struggle for justice. The third and fourth chapters work in tandem. Having fleshed out King's call to service, in the second chapter I explore King's moral argument for service. Furthermore, I explain how King's theory of service developed from an understanding of the need to struggle for justice generally, to a more pointed call for efforts focused on combating structural injustice more specifically. I do this by providing a close reading of one of King's most oft-preached sermons, "The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life." In the third chapter, I focus solely upon King's first two dimensions of a complete life. These two dimensions are the length and the breadth, which are the dimensions that articulate an individual's selfish pursuit of fulfillment and the need for individuals to serve others, respectively. By placing King into conversation with contemporary political theorist, Iris Marion Young, I argue that, King's account of human flourishing provides us with a moral argument to struggle against structural injustice—especially in the form of racialized, residential segregation. Like Young, I claim that King views individuals' responsibility to engage in collective action as being triggered by their participation in structures of injustice that privilege some and dominate others. Based upon my reading of King, I conclude that it remains every individual's responsibility to engage in collective action aimed at transforming structures of injustice.

While I briefly discuss King's third dimension (height)—the need to seek God—in the third chapter, I provide a fuller account of the role of God in King's account of humanity in the fourth chapter. There, I argue that King held a strong belief that faith in God could be a powerful resource for those who enlist in the struggle for justice. However, I explain how theistic accounts of humanity suffer from two major defects. First, all human beings

do not believe in God. Second, even though theistic sources help to sustain some in the struggle for justice, they often further marginalize the least well off. Therefore, I critically discuss both complications by placing King into conversation with contemporary political theorist, Stephen K. White, who argues for a non-theistic of account of human equality. By examining King's response to the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, I show how even non-theistic accounts are not impervious to marginalizing others, even as they attempt to serve as a source of equality amongst all human beings.

Finally, in the fifth chapter I discuss how one may go about cultivating an ethos that is conducive to engaging in a form of political service that does not replicate domineering power dynamics. By exploring the use of sin and guilt in King's thought, I argue that King called upon all Americans to share in the guilt of the racism that permeates American society. By acknowledging one's guilt, Americans are then able to disabuse themselves of the urge to dominate, and can begin to affirm their common humanity with those they previously may have "othered." This, I claim, was the goal of King's anti-Vietnam War speech, "A Time to Break Silence." I now turn to a discussion of King's use of the American dream.

## Chapter 2

### The American Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr's Call to Service

*America is essentially a dream, a dream yet unfulfilled. The substance of the dream is expressed in some very familiar words found in the Declaration of Independence. 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.' This is a dream.*
--Martin Luther King, Jr.

Over the several decades since the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., he has become an American hero with many of the nation's highest honors posthumously bestowed upon him by the American government.[1] As many scholars have already noted, these national celebrations of King's life provide a selective reading of King's critique of America's racially oppressive domestic policies and his opposition to the nation's militaristic and imperialistic endeavors abroad (Harding 2008; Dyson 2000). One scholar, Nikhil Singh (2004), worries that by mythologizing King as a "redemptive national icon," the nation has turned him into "a symbol of the universalizing force of American norms and institutions." This mythical image of King, according to Singh, allows Americans to believe that their norms of inclusion and tolerance have been a part of a steady march toward the inevitable achievement of racial justice. Singh, by contrast, argues that the portrayal of King as a champion of America's supposed universal norms ignores his recognition that "the redemptive investment in the force of American universalism may not be so easy to sever from histories of U.S. force and violence in which blacks have stood among the casualties and victims" (Singh, 2004, p. 13). In sum, Singh contends that the mythical image of King is a misrepresentation of not only King's legacy, but that of the contentious and violent

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[1] These honors include the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the Congressional Gold Medal, a holiday in his honor and a monument on the National Mall.

history of struggle by its black population to make America a more inclusive, tolerant and peaceful society.

The temptation to view King's legacy as synonymous with universal American norms is heightened by the fact that King often invoked the symbol of the "American dream." To King, the American dream represented the universal principles of liberty, equality and the recognition of the dignity and worth of all human beings. Singh, himself, acknowledges that King trumpeted the "amazing universalism" of the American dream, but he also suggests that this is something King eventually came to reject (Singh, 2004, p. 5). Singh says, "Attacking the presumptions of the 'amazing universalism' of the American dream he had championed only a few years before, King argued that the U.S. nation-state was neither a stable mediator of social antagonisms nor the ultimate horizon of black hopes for justice" (Singh, 2004, p. 14). Singh's observations that King came to reject the American dream presents a problem, though, for King never, over the course of his life, stopped invoking the symbol of the American dream.[2]

If Singh's position, that King began to attack the universalist presumptions embedded in the American dream, is correct—and I think it is—then there has to be some accounting for why King continued to invoke the American dream at the same time that Singh contends that he was eschewing its problematic universalism. In order to make sense of this paradox one either has to concede that King held two irreconcilable positions; or, one must offer an account which claims that when King invoked the American dream, he meant something radically different from the American universalisms he has come to symbolize. I will offer an account of the latter position.

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[2] King, even in his last speech delivered on April 3, 1968, invoked the "American dream."

This chapter will discuss how King used the symbol of the American dream to make the argument that working toward racial equality in America and, ultimately, global equality between the inhabitants of different nations was a form of service required of all Americans. Yet, I place a special emphasis upon King's call to black Americans to exercise their political agency by taking up their own cause for justice. By analyzing the evolution of King's use of the American dream as a means to call black Americans to service, I make the case that King's explicit invocation of the American dream was, as Singh—echoing Robin D.G. Kelley—puts it, a "black freedom dream," which exceeded "the sanctioned boundaries and brokered compromises of the established political order" (Singh, 2004, p. 4). In other words, King's matured understanding of the "amazing universalism" of the American dream's principles of liberty, equality and the recognition of human dignity and worth were neither simply derived from one's national allegiances, nor limited to them.

Furthermore, by directly linking the American dream to actions that pursue domestic and global justice, I contend that King was denying the position Singh describes as having been attributed to the "mythologized King"—namely, the belief that domestic and global justice would inevitably be achieved without the need to struggle. Instead, I argue that King's use of the American dream was directly tied to his conception of political service as the means to seek justice. In addition to throwing the problem presented by Singh into relief, it is my contention that conceptualizing the notion of political service from the vantage point of the oppressed will provide us with a richer theory of service than that which is traditionally associated with King's legacy. The traditional notion of service encourages a patronizing idea of service as merely the privileged helping the least well off

(Barber, 1992). King, however, offered a radicalized notion of service that encouraged the oppressed to work towards securing justice for themselves and the larger society.

The execution of this chapter is as follows: I will begin with an overview of the American dream as it is widely discussed in American parlance. I will discuss how King defined the American dream, and explore the potential trouble with his use of "fundamental" to describe his conception of the American dream. That discussion is followed by an exploration of how King invoked the American dream as a means to call Americans to serve others by seeking social justice. Finally, I conclude with some remarks about how King viewed the youth movement as the ultimate example of democratic citizens working to create a more just, democratic America.

**The American Dream**

As scholars have noted, just exactly what the term "American dream" means has been interpreted differently across generations and from person-to-person (Hochschild, 1995; Cullen 2003; Hanson and Zogby, 2010). "Nevertheless," political scientist Jennifer Hochschild observes, "the phrase elicits for most Americans some variant of [John] Locke's fantasy—a new world where anything can happen and good things might" (Hochschild, 1995, p. 15). In other words, the American dream posits that America is an exceptional place where success is obtainable by anyone, as long as an individual is willing to work hard enough to achieve it. In contemporary American society, the key assumption seemingly undergirding this conception of the American dream is that with the abolition of legal racial discrimination, America is a fundamentally just nation that upholds the democratic principles of freedom and equality for all of its citizens, regardless of one's race. The importance of the belief that America is a just society to Americans' conception

of the American dream was succinctly captured in a recent report published by the Pew Charitable Trust: "The ideal that all Americans have equality of opportunity regardless of their economic status at birth is the crux of the American Dream and a defining element of our national psyche" (Sharkey, 2013, p.1).

While there may be near consensus among Americans about the importance of the ideal of equality of opportunity, there is little agreement about whether it is in fact a reality in America—especially as it pertains to black Americans' ability to pursue the American dream. As Hochschild (1995) argues, black and white Americans have disparate views about whether or not discrimination remains a barrier to black Americans' ability to successfully pursue the American dream. According to Hochschild, survey data shows that, "Whites believe it works for everyone; blacks believe it works only for those not of their race. Whites are angry that blacks refuse to see the fairness and openness of the system; blacks are angry that whites refuse to see the biases and blockages of the system" (Hochschild, 1995, p. 68). Therefore, when analyzing instances of racial inequality, it is not surprising that, as Hochschild finds, "whites have always been more likely than African Americans to attribute racial inequality to flaws within individual blacks or in the black community. (Hochschild, 1995, p. 65). Ultimately, white Americans believe that the American dream is equally obtainable for black Americans, and that it only eludes those individual blacks who refuse to assume responsibility for their fate. By attributing racial inequality to individual responsibility.

King, however, rejected any interpretation of the American dream that absolved all members of society from pursuing justice for the least well off. King's conception of the American dream, according to theologian James Cone (1991), was a combination of

the "liberal democratic tradition, as defined by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and the biblical tradition of the Old and New Testaments, as interpreted by Protestant liberalism and the black church" (Cone, 1991, p. 66). Drawing from these two traditions King conceived of the American dream as a universal promise of liberty, equality and the recognition of the dignity and worth of all of humanity. Consequently, his public career in the civil rights movement was largely dedicated to invoking the symbol of the American dream in order to motivate Americans to work collectively to transform America into a society that truly upholds these principles. King referred to this conception of the American dream as "fundamental" because he felt that it represented a set of universal ideals that were espoused (although not adhered to) since the founding of the nation.

At first blush King's call for American universalist ideals seems to contradict Singh's claim that King came to eschew the universal values of the American dream in his later years. This is because even in his last book, *Where Do We Go from Here* (1968), King attempted to get Americans to pursue what he considered to be universal principles by comparing America to a character in one of Jesus' parables—the prodigal son. In this parable Jesus tells a story of a young man who came of age and decided to leave his father's house in search of adventure, but the farther he moved away from the house the more he met with despair. The young man eventually ran out of money, and became so desperate for food during a famine that he sought a meal in a pig's trough. One day the young man suddenly came to his senses and realized that he must return to his home. In King's words, "The prodigal son was not himself when he left his father's house"; the young man would only become himself, according to King, when he returned home (King, 1968, pp. 83-84).

To King, America was the prodigal son who had drifted to the "far country of racism," and who had left behind a home that was "solidly structured idealistically."[3] The structure of this home was provided by the values that compose King's conception of the American dream. King laments, "Its pillars were soundly grounded in the insights of our Judeo-Christian heritage: all men are made in the image of God; all men are brothers; all men are created equal; every man is heir to a legacy of dignity and worth; every man has rights that are neither conferred by nor derived from the state, they are God-given." King continues by affirming his belief that it was not too late to make democracy a reality for all. "If America would come to herself and return to her true home, 'one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all,' she would give the democratic creed a new authentic ring, enkindle the imagination of mankind and fire the souls of men" (King, 1968, pp. 83-84). At first glance, King's use of the word "return" seems to suggest that he believed that America once embraced a set of ideals that were untainted by a racist ideology, but eventually moved away from upholding them. However, as I show below, King actually held that America has always been a racist society.

The idea that there are fundamental principles that always existed in America, but were seldom practiced was popularized by the Swedish sociologist, Gunnar Myrdal (1944). Myrdal claimed that despite the fact that many of America's practices were in direct contradiction to its professed creed of equality, the practices would eventually give way to the creed. Myrdal's argument was rooted in a deeply held belief that any human could change if only he or she was presented with facts. Singh, for one, is deeply skeptical of this

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[3] While King uses "the far country of racism" as a contrast to the "idealistically" structured "home," he does not interrogate, for instance, the ways in which this home was also built upon other oppressive values such as patriarchy.

distinction. He charges that Myrdal's theory/practice distinction "has been a powerful intellectual device for shoring up the universal basis of American national norms in the face of contrary evidence ever since" (Singh, 2004, p. 39). Myrdal, according to Singh, created a framework that allowed for racial reform in the United States to be understood "as something that is paradoxically already accomplished and never quite complete." Singh continues, "By identifying the 'American Creed' as the main trend in U.S. history, Myrdal further posited the overcoming of racism in America (and the global realm under U.S. leadership) as a teleological certainty" (Singh, 2004, p. 39).

Political Theorist Joel Olson (2004), like Singh, finds Myrdal's distinction between creeds and deeds problematic; albeit for different reasons. Olson's concern is that the dichotomy between the American creed and its practices works to insulate American democratic ideals from the taint of racism. Rather than viewing such American atrocities as slavery and Jim Crow legislation as unfortunate blips that violated the egalitarian ethos of American democracy, Olson suggests that we understand these episodes as both in violation of democratic ideals, but also constitutive of them. For Olson, "Racial oppression makes full democracy impossible, but it has also made American democracy possible. Conversely, American democracy has made racial oppression possible, for neither slavery nor segregation nor any other form of racial domination could have survived without the tacit or explicit consent of the white majority." Ultimately, Olson concludes, "American democracy is a white democracy, a polity ruled in the interests of a white citizenry and characterized by simultaneous relations of equality and privilege: equality among whites, who are privileged in relation to those who are not white" (Olson, 2004, p. xv).

King's call for a return to a set of universal American principles seemingly upheld Myrdal's problematic distinction between America's creed and its practices. However, as Olson notes, equality and privilege can coexist when that equality is reserved for only some. "When this occurs," Olson says, "Any contradiction between them must be articulated, as the oppressed challenge the oppressor to 'live up to its ideals.'" To Singh's point, Olson suggests that any improvement in race relations was not the result of America's democratic creed inevitably winning out over its practices. Rather, "Slaves and free Black persons had to point out the contradiction between praising the principles of the Declaration while also holding slaves" (Olson, 2004, p. xvi). King, in calling for a return to the principles embedded in the American dream, saw himself as pointing out these contradictions.

King understood that without pointing out the contradictions embedded in American society since before the founding, white Americans would be deluded into believing that America is a fundamentally just society and that racial inequality is simply the result of individual black's failure to take responsible for their life outcomes. Pushing back against this rationale in *Where Do We Go from Here*, King declares, "It would be neither true nor honest to say that the Negro's status is what it is because he is innately inferior or because he is basically lazy and listless or because he has not sought to lift himself by his own bootstraps." Rather than attributing racial inequalities in America to the failures of individual black Americans, King suggests, "To find the origins of the Negro problem we must turn to the white man's problem" (King, 1968, p. 71). King ultimately concludes that the white American problem is that they have never fully admitted to themselves the depth of racism in American society. If white Americans are ever fully to

embrace the principles of the American dream, King argues that they will have to acknowledge that America is and always has been a racist society and then work to correct the effects of racism in society. In order to make this case, King provides what he believes to be a more accurate historical account of racism in American society.

King begins his account of American history by explaining how "white America has had a schizophrenic personality on the question of race. She has been torn between selves—a self in which she proudly professed the great principles of democracy and a self in which she sadly practiced the antithesis of democracy" (King, 1968, p. 68). Despite seemingly upholding a problematic Myrdalian dichotomy between creeds and practices, King went on to offer a more complicated account of American history by charging that America had been crippled by racism from its founding. He demands, "[F]or the good of America, it is necessary to refute the idea that the dominant ideology in our country even today is freedom and equality while racism is just an occasional departure from the norm on the part of a few bigoted extremists" (King, 1968, p. 69). The power of King's critique comes through when he says of racism and democracy, "Of the two dominant and contradictory strains in the American psyche, the positive one, our democratic heritage, was the later development on the American continent" (King, 1968, p. 70). In other words, King was not only suggesting that racism had always existed in America, but that it predated American democracy.

King believed that one need look no further than the fact that the institution of slavery was well in place before the nation's founding to see that racism predated democracy in America. According to King, the effect of the existence of slavery prior to democracy in America was that it contradicted and qualified America's claims to

democracy. King says, "Slavery was not only ignored in defining democracy, but its enlargement was tolerated in the interests of strengthening the nation" (King, 1968, p. 71). King argued that although slavery was initially implemented for the economic enrichment of white Americans it also "had a profound impact in shaping the social-political-legal structure of the nation. Land and slaves were the chief forms of private property, property was wealth and the voice of wealth made the laws and determined politics" (King, 1968, p. 72). With a disproportionate influence over politics white men *democratically* reduced black Americans to "propertyless property" and "stripped [them] of all human and civil rights." If, as King claims, "this degradation was sanctioned and protected by institutions of government," then the inverse is also true; namely, that white Americans' privilege was also sanctioned and protected by those same institutions (King, 1968, p. 72). Even that great document of freedom and equality, the Declaration of Independence was, to King, a celebration of white privilege. He proclaims, "Jefferson's majestic words, 'all men are created equal,' meant for him, as for many others, that all *white* men are created equal" (King, 1968, p. 77).

After examining King's account of racism and democracy in American history, we can see that he had a far more nuanced understanding of the dilemma faced by white Americans than did Myrdal. Rather than viewing the dilemma as a simple dichotomy between creeds and practices, King described the dilemma faced by white Americans as: "the haunting ambivalence, the intellectual and moral recognition that slavery is wrong, but the emotional tie to the system so deep and pervasive that it imposes an inflexible unwillingness to root it out" (King, 1968, p. 76). Therefore, King's description of the dilemma faced by white Americans did not insulate democracy from the taint of racism.

Instead, he believed that white Americans had become so invested in their moral, economic and political privilege that if America was to become a truly democratic society, then white Americans would have to acknowledge their guilt and develop "an honest knowledge of self" (King, 1968, p. 83). That is, white Americans would have to come to grips with the fact that the nation's democracy was founded upon and continues to operate as a race-based democracy.

With this in mind, one can see why King, when quoting Myrdal, italicizes one sentence in particular: "*America is free to choose whether the Negro shall remain her liability or become her opportunity*" (King, 1968, p. 85; emphasis in original). Clearly, King had come to recognize that America's universal norms would not inevitably win out, but that a commitment to justice would only come about as a result of a conscious choice by white Americans to seek justice for black Americans. Yet, unlike Myrdal, King did not feel that this conscious choice would be reached by white Americans once they were presented with the facts of their inconsistencies. Instead he posits, "The Negro has not gained a single right in America without persistent pressure and agitation. However lamentable it may seem, the Negro is now convinced that white America will never admit to him equal rights unless it is coerced into doing it" (King, 1968, p. 90). Unfortunately, to King's mind, if America was ever to become a truly egalitarian, democratic society, then black Americans would have to engage in political service by collectively striving to secure the conditions of equality for all Americans. In the next section I will discuss how King used the symbol of the American dream to call black Americans to serve their nation.

**The American Dream and Service**

It may seem strange that King, as a black American would appeal to the American dream as a source of motivation for black Americans when the promise it represented had been so blatantly denied to them. What King realized, though, was that the American dream was a symbol, and as anthropologist David Kertzer explains, "[Symbols] are a means, indeed the primary means, by which we give meaning to the world around us; they allow us to interpret what we see, and, indeed, what we are" (Kertzer, 1988, p. 4). Although black Americans were excluded from this symbol of Americanism this did not always have to be the case. As Kertzer explains, "Though symbols give people a way of understanding the world, it is people who produce new symbols and transform the old" (Kertzer, 1988, p. 5). In other words, King invoked the American dream in an effort to reshape it so that black Americans could also be identified with it. King, as a member of an oppressed segment of the population, understood that "identifying oneself with a popular symbol can be a potent means of gaining and keeping power, for the hallmark of power is the construction of reality" (Kertzer, 1988, p. 5). Here, I have in mind what George Shulman (2008) describes as King's attempt to blacken those American promises previously held out solely for white Americans. As Shulman explains, "Since a racist culture makes blackness a mark of embodiment that 'stains' the spirit and the political, black entry into the symbolic defeats the abstraction that makes equality 'white' by making rights disembodied" (Shulman, 2008, p. 116).

King, by identifying black Americans with the promises embodied in the American dream, was providing a seemingly powerless people with the psychological tools necessary to exercise their political power (Allen 2004). With this in mind, it makes sense that King's early explicit invocations of the American dream were in his speeches offered to

predominately black audiences. Examples include both his 1960 "The Negro and the American Dream" (King, 2005, pp. 508-511), and his 1961 "The American Dream" speeches (King, 1986 pp. 208-216), which were delivered to several branches of the South Carolina NAACP and to the graduating class of the historically black Lincoln University, respectively.[4] In fact, King even implicitly invokes the American dream as a means to call upon black Americans to exercise their political power in his first speech as president of the Montgomery Improvement Association. Yet, King made a large shift from his 1955 address before the black American community of Montgomery, and his later more explicit appeals to the American dream in the 1960s. It is worth taking a look at this change.

As early as King's 1955 speech at Holt Street Baptist Church he makes explicit his beliefs about the need for black Americans to engage in political service by working to eradicate racial inequality. King, in essence, began his career in the civil rights movement by making a case for service as a central component of what it means to be an American citizen. This can be seen in his explanation of why it is that the black community of Montgomery decided to come together to protest the bus line. King says, "We are here in a general sense because first and foremost we are American citizens, and we are determined to apply our citizenship to the fullness of its meaning." For King, active participation in the cause for justice was the means by which democracy became real. He continues, "We are here also because of our love for democracy, because of our deep-seated belief that democracy transformed from thin paper to thick action is the greatest form of government

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[4] James Cone (1991) and I disagree on this point. While he acknowledges that King invoked the American dream as a means to call black Americans into action, he believes that King primarily invoked the American dream for white audiences. Although he recognizes that King most explicitly invokes the American dream before exclusively black audiences, he doesn't explain how this fits with his claim that King was primarily invoking the American dream for white audiences.

on earth." According to King, a full application of citizenship meant that black Americans must demand justice by exercising their "right to protest for right" (King, 2001).

Notice that on this particular night King did not need to convince his Montgomery audience of the need to engage in political service. The daily assaults on the dignity of black Americans by their white peers had reached a boiling point, and many in the black community had already assumed responsibility for seeking justice. Accordingly, King's employment of the American dream was merely an attempt to sustain the black community's determination to continue their boycott by assuring them that they were justified in their cause. "We are not wrong in what we are doing. If we are wrong, then 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" (King, 2001).

King's rhetorical strategy of justifying the actions of the boycotters by invoking the Supreme Court and the Constitution was meant to convey that the American dream held out a promise of legally protected rights to all American citizens. The reason that this was a source of motivation amongst Montgomery's black community was because it directly contradicted the way in which they had been relegated to second-class citizenship by their white peers. King's speech sought to confirm that black Americans were in fact citizens of the United States, and that the decisions handed down by the Supreme Court, and the laws articulated in the Constitution applied as equally to them as they did to white Americans. It is important to note that King's conception of justice had not yet developed into a call for complete integration of the black and white races; in fact, King was not even calling for the end of segregation. King said, "All we are seeking is justice and fair treatment in riding the buses" (As cited in Marsh, 2005). Therefore King's use of the American dream

was subtle and was not being employed in order to make straightforward appeals for power sharing between black and white Americans. The form of justice that King initially called for was simply that black Americans be treated fairly under the law.

Yet, as King's understanding of the cause of justice expanded beyond the initial limited demands, it required that he actively recruit black Americans who were on the fence to serve their nation by participating in the struggle for their own equality. It is at this point that we see King move away from a subtle invocation of the American dream to a more explicit appeal to the great American symbol. Evidence of this can be seen in King's 1961 commencement address at Lincoln University entitled the "American Dream." King would deliver some variation of this speech several times over the next several years. In these speeches King provided an explicit argument about Americans' responsibility to engage in political service by remaking America into a society that truly upholds the principles of liberty, equality and the dignity and worth of all human beings. In his 1961 address he opened by describing America as an unfulfilled dream. Unlike his 1955 speech, in which he appealed to the Supreme Court and Constitution—since he was more concerned with fairness under the law—here he claimed that the substance of this dream can be found in the Declaration of Independence's acknowledgement that every human being was equal and that they all have God-given human rights. King claims, "The American dream reminds us that every man is heir to the legacy of worthiness," and therefore all men should be treated with equal respect (King, 1986, p. 208).

King's decision to shift the texts that provided the substance of his understanding of the American dream had several implications. First, by moving away from the Constitution to the Declaration, King was enabled to argue that the principles of freedom

and equality were human rights and not simply rights that were conferred by the state. King observes, "One of the first things we notice in this dream is an amazing universalism. It does not say some men, but it says all men. It does not say all white men, but it says all men, which includes black men" (King, 1986, p. 208).[5] Recall King's aforementioned claim in *Where Do We Go from Here*, that when Jefferson penned the Declaration of Independence he only intended to extend equality to white men. Therefore, it is clear that King is being subversive by extending the principles of freedom and equality to black men. But King goes further and claims that it really does not matter what the Founders had in mind because the American dream "says that each individual has certain basic rights that are neither conferred by nor derived from the state. To discover where they came from it is necessary to move back behind the dim mist of eternity, for they are God-given" (King, 1986, p. 209).

This shift to God-given rights, as opposed to constitutional-based rights, shows why King's use of the American dream later in his life does not conflict with Singh's claim that King rejected American universalism. King, in essence, transformed the American dream into a black freedom dream, which called for equality not only for black Americans, but for all human beings no matter where in the world they resided. Consequently, King offers, "God is interested in the freedom of the whole human race and in the creation of a society where all men can live together as brothers, where every man will respect the dignity and the worth of human personality" (King, 1986, p. 215). This meant that the "American

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[5] Here King is utilizing Abraham Lincoln's reading of the Declaration of Independence. As Garry Wills notes, "For most people now, the Declaration means what Lincoln told us it means, as a way of correcting the Constitution itself without overthrowing it" (Wills, 1992, p. 147). Elsewhere, King cites Frederick Douglas' reading of the Constitution: "Frederick Douglas stated the same truth in his lecture on the Constitution of the United States. He says, 'Its language is, "We the people," not we the white people, not even we the citizens, not we the privileged class…" (King, 1986, p. 119).

dream will not become a reality devoid of a larger dream of a world of brotherhood and peace and good will" (King, 1986, p. 209).

King's shift from an American dream rooted in the Constitution to one rooted in the Declaration of Independence also had implications for King's notion of justice. Unlike his 1955 speech in which the American dream was the promise of equal rights held out to all American citizens, the 1961 speech stressed the democratic principles of freedom and equality. The principle-based dream provided him with a basis for a more robust, open-ended conception of justice. Whereas, the rights-based justification limited King to asking that blacks have equal protection under rights already possessed by whites, a principle-based conception of justice invited black Americans into a debate over what the application of these very principles would mean. As a result, King's thoughts on the meaning of freedom and equality continued to evolve as he became more aware of what conditions would be necessary for black Americans to fully flourish in the American society. For instance, whereas King started off by simply calling for equality under the law, by 1962, he argued that equality meant: "equality of opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed…" (King, 1986, p. 105).

By the time he wrote his final book, King's views on the matter had grown even more. In *Where Do We Go from Here* King provided a deceptively simplistic definition of justice, which he said meant giving black Americans their due. But then King fleshed this concept of justice out: "There is nothing abstract about this. It is as concrete as having a good job, a good education, a decent house and a share of power." King knew that a call for affirmative action on behalf of black Americans would conflict with white Americans'

belief that America is a just society that upholds the ideal of equality of oppotunity; consequently, he argued that this was reason enough to discard it:

> It is…important to understand that giving a man his due may often mean giving him special treatment. I am aware of the fact that this has been a troublesome concept for some liberals, since it conflicts with their traditional ideal of equal opportunity and equal treatment of people according to their individual merits. But this is a day which demands new thinking and the re-evaluation of old concepts. A society that has done something special *against* the Negro for hundreds of years must now do something special *for* him, in order to equip him to compete on a just and equal basis (King, 1968, p. 90; emphasis in original).

King was adamant, though, that in advance of whatever new rights, privileges and entitlements black Americans demanded be granted as a necessity to flourish, black Americans still had a responsibility for making the American dream a reality.

Returning to the structure of King's "American Dream" speeches, one can see that after highlighting the universalism of the American dream, he would then note America's lack of commitment to making the dream a reality. As pointed out above, King did not believe that the American creed would undoubtedly win-out; therefore he stressed the need for black Americans to play a central role creating the conditions for the American dream to become manifest. In 1961 it was a prominent theme in his address to the newly minted graduates. If the American dream was to come to fruition, King argued, "[W]e must continue to engage in creative protest in order to break down all of those barriers that make it impossible for the dream to be realized" (King, 1986, pp. 212-213). He cautioned against the belief that social justice would somehow roll in on the "wheels of inevitability." Instead he stressed that it will only be achieved "through the tireless effort and the persistent work of dedicated individuals." King sounded a note of optimism about the results that could be obtained if black Americans took up their responsibility, "…I believe that we will be able to make a contribution as men of good will to the ongoing structure of our society and

toward the realization of the American dream." He then implored the graduating class to leave campus and engage in political service by becoming active participants in the struggle for justice: "And so, as you go out today, I call upon you not to be detached spectators, but involved participants, in this great drama that is taking place in our nation and around the world" (King, 1986, p. 215).

Just as King's notion of justice continued to evolve, so too, did his idea of what service would look like. According to King's 1961 "American Dream" speech, blacks needed to engage in what he identified as "creative protest." Creative protests were the mobilization of the masses in the form of a nonviolent protest instituted to draw the attention to the plight of the least well off. However, in his 1965 "American Dream" speech, King had begun to call upon black Americans to develop an "action program" in order to make the American dream a reality. The shift from "creative protests" to "action programs" coincided with King's recognition of the limits of a singular focus upon mobilization and his gradual movement toward positions similar to adherents of the Black Power ideology, such as Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton. In fact, in *Where Do We Go from Here*, King explains his new emphasis upon organizing in a manner that sounded eerily similar to positions articulated by Carmichael and Hamilton. He says about the black community, "Our nettlesome task is to discover how to organize our strength into compelling power so that government cannot elude our demands. We must develop, from strength, a situation in which the government finds it wise and prudent to collaborate with us" (King, 1968, p.145). Later he offers, "We must frankly acknowledge that in the past years our creativity and imagination were not employed in learning how to develop power. We found a method in nonviolent protest that worked, and we employed it enthusiastically.

We did not have leisure to probe for a deeper understanding of its laws and lines of development." But ultimately, he concludes, "Although our actions were bold and crowned with successes, they were substantially improvised and spontaneous. They attained the goals set for them but carried the blemishes of our inexperience" (King, 1968, p. 145).

Therefore, King's call for action programs required that the black community begin to organize the political strength, and engage in economic boycotts. An example of a form of creative protest was SCLC's Operation Breadbasket, which engaged in massive boycotts of businesses that refused to hire a proportional amount of black employees, and that did not invest in black owned banks. In sum, whereas protests draw attention to unjust conditions, programs required that black Americans begin to accumulate their own political power to transform the unjust conditions. Yet, King understood that politics required that black Americans become educated about how power worked in society. As a marginalized people, though, he believed that black Americans were "too rejected by the culture to be part of any tradition of power." For this reason, King observed, **"**Necessity will draw us toward the power inherent in the creative uses of politics" (King, 1968, p. 154). By encouraging black Americans to engage in a creative use of politics, King meant that they had to study the levers of power in society and challenge those sources of powers with the meager means available to them. He assessed, "In our society power sources are obscure and indistinct. Yet they can always finally be traced to those forces we describe as ideological, economic and political" (King, 1986, p. 138). In the case of economic power King called upon blacks to boycott companies that exploited them and to pool their money in banks that invested in black communities. And in the case of political power, King urged

blacks to exercise their right to vote, and to form political organizations that would remain consistently active in supporting an agenda that secured justice for black Americans.

However, in regards to ideological power King acknowledged the limited influence black scholars had been able to exert on mainstream American thought through their writings alone. Rather than lament the fact, King highlighted the way in which black Americans had created an anti-elitist marriage of theory and practice between the scholar and the ordinary citizen. He says, "Nevertheless Negroes have illuminated imperfections in the democratic structure that were formerly only dimly perceived, and have forced a re-examination of the true meaning of American democracy." King notes, "By taking to the streets and there giving practical lessons in democracy and its faults, Negroes have decisively influenced white thought." Being shut out of traditional channels of power, "Negroes have had to write their most persuasive essays with the blunt pen of marching ranks" (King, 1968, pp. 138-139). Therefore protest was a form of creative politics, which did not demand that blacks choose between organizing (read: politics) and mobilizing (read: protest); if they were going to challenge America's power structures they would need both weapons at their disposal. In other words, King's shift in language signaled, not a dichotomy, but the continuum between the points of protest and politics.[6]

The marginalization of black Americans also meant that they could not succumb to biases within their own community. For example, King felt that a politics of respectability had forced some in the black community to accept middle-class prejudices toward the labor movement" (King, 1968, p. 143). Furthermore, stating a position long held by other activists such as Septima P. Clark and Ella Baker, King, also suggested, "We must involve

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[6] It is likely that King was pushing back against Bayard Rustin's dichotomy in "From Protest to Politics" (Rustin, 2003, pp. 116-129).

everyone we can reach, even those with inadequate education, and together acquire political sophistication by discussion, practice and reading." This would require that black Americans transform typically apolitical spaces into political classrooms. "Informal discussions and reading at home or in the streets are educational; they challenge the mind and inform our actions" (King, 1968, p. 155). King realized that even if black Americans could jettison their class and educational biases, it was more likely that pure self-interest would prevent people from heeding his call to serve themselves and others by becoming "intensive political activists" (King, 1968, p. 154). Therefore he implored, "There must be a climate of social pressure in the Negro community that scorns the Negro who will not pick up his citizenship rights and add his strength enthusiastically and voluntarily to the accumulation of power for himself and his people" (King, 1968, p. 156). Perhaps no sentence better captures the goal of King's use of the American dream. By laying out the conditions necessary for a better America, King was trying to create a climate of social pressure that forced democratic citizens, especially the oppressed, to take up their responsibility to serve their nation and the world by acting collectively toward the goal of justice.

**Conclusion**

In other accounts of King's use of the American dream far more attention is paid to how he used the American dream as a means of highlighting to white Americans the large gap between their principles and their practices (Cone, 1991). In this essay, I have instead focused on his message to the oppressed. But this seems to place too much of a burden on an oppressed people, while somewhat absolving white Americans of their responsibility to work for justice. However, this is precisely why I have termed King's notion of collective

action "service" as opposed to "solidarity" or "public work." As a notion of service, collective action is not just concerned with obtaining a better situation for one group over another; service requires that one work to transform the other group in the process. For a better understanding of this it will be helpful to take a look at King's assessment of the youth movement in his later years.

In the last months of his life, King displayed a great appreciation for the contributions that the "youth movement" was making to American society.[7] He claimed that the more radical element amongst the youth bequeathed a great lesson of service to the nation, which he described as their call for "action—direct, self-transforming and structure-transforming action" (King, 1972, p. 9). King read the youth movement as not only seeking justice for themselves by transforming structures of injustice, but that they were also shedding old values and in the process transforming the values of society and their peers. It will be necessary to quote King at length to get the full potency of his reading of the youth movement's service to the nation:

King observed:

> When [the Negro youth] took their struggle to the streets, a new spirit of resistance was born. Inspired by the boldness and ingenuity of Negroes, white youth stirred into action and formed an alliance that aroused the conscience of the nation. It is difficult to exaggerate the creative contribution of dynamic young Negroes of the past eight years. They took non-violent resistance, first employed in Montgomery, Alabama, in mass dimensions and developed original applications—sit-ins, freedom rides and wade-ins. To accomplish these ends they first transformed themselves. Young Negroes had traditionally imitated whites in dress, conduct and thought in a rigid middle-class pattern. Gunnar Myrdal described them as exaggerated Americans. Now they ceased imitating and began initiating. Leadership passed into the hands of Negroes, and their white allies began learning from them (King, 1972, p. 9).

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[7] Highlighting King's praise of the youth movement should not be read as a means to obscure their differences. Yet, it must be acknowledged that in spite of—or perhaps because of—the youth movement's harsh critiques of King, he repeatedly singled out their role in the forefront of the civil rights movement.

In this passage King is explaining how, by taking up their responsibility for justice, the black youth transformed the white youth and also renegotiated the existing power dynamics between the two groups.

In sum, King reversed the traditional idea of service as the empowered helping the least well off. When the oppressed engage in service, King suggested, it is a form of empowerment that can be a force for personal, interpersonal and structural change. King so admired the youth's commitment to service that even in his last public address he reemphasized how it was they who "were really standing up for the best in the American dream" (King, 1986, p. 286). Ultimately, it is not a coincidence that King delivered his "American Dream" speeches at college campuses all across America. King seemed to understand that the quest for justice would not be a sprint; rather, that it would be a long-distance, relay race.

## Chapter 3

### The Dimensions of a Complete Life: The Moral Argument for Service

*And there are three dimensions of any complete life to which we can fitly give the words of this text: length, breadth, and height. Now the length of life as we shall use it here is the inward concern for one's own welfare. In other words, it is that inward concern that causes one to push forward, to achieve his own goals and ambitions. The breadth of life as we shall use it here is the outward concern for the welfare of others. And the height of life is the upward reach for God. Now you got to have all three of these to have a complete life.*
-Martin Luther King, Jr.

In the last chapter I argued that King invoked the symbol of the American dream to motivate Americans—especially black Americans—to engage in a form of political service that required them to collectively struggle for justice at home and abroad. There I was primarily concerned with the means that King used to motivate others to take up their responsibility for service. King, though, was faced with a dilemma. While black Americans had an incentive to serve their nation by seeking their own justice, what, if any, incentive did they have to seek justice for those beyond their borders. Likewise, many white Americans did not believe that service to black Americans was truly their responsibility. It is true that some white Americans believed it was their duty to serve black Americans when the stakes were relatively low, but as King continued to demand that they share their economic, political and social power with black Americans, many of them became less convinced about their duty to serve black Americans. This chapter seeks to unpack King's moral argument for why it was *all* individuals' duty to collectively work toward seeking justice both within and beyond their borders by combating structural injustice. I do so by exploring King's views of one of America's most persistent, pervasive and pernicious forms of structural injustice—segregation.

Nearly five decades since the assassination of King, President Barack Obama, in his second inaugural address, declared, "We are true to our creed when a little girl born into the bleakest poverty knows that she has the same chance to succeed as anybody else, because she is an American; she is free, and she is equal, not just in the eyes of God but also in our own" (Obama, 2013). Judging by Obama's criteria, one could conclude that America is not living up to its creed; especially as it pertains to black Americans. Consider a recent Pew Charitable Trust report, which found that fifty-four percent of black Americans who are born to parents in the bottom economic quintile will remain there. It also notes that for those black parents who are fortunate enough to ascend to the top three quintiles in American society, they can expect that four out of five of their children will experience downward mobility (Sharkey, 2013). In other words, it remains the case that black children who are born in the bleakest of poverty do not have the same chance to succeed as anybody else; and even when black Americans do escape poverty, their success is more fleeting than that of their white peers.

One of the main reasons that America is not living up to its creed is because it has failed to deal effectively with the enduring effects of the racial segregation of its residential neighborhoods. As the Pew report explains, "Neighborhood poverty alone accounts for a greater portion of the black-white downward mobility gap than the effects of parental education, occupation, labor force participation, and a range of other family characteristics combined" (Sharkey, 2013, p.3). This finding is even more startling when one considers that: "Only one out of ten blacks in the current generation has been raised in a neighborhood with less than 10 percent poverty, compared to six out of ten whites." Or that presently, "thirty percent of black children experience a level of neighborhood poverty—a rate of 30

percent or more—unknown among white children" (Sharkey, 2013, p.10). These statistics suggest that a major reason black Americans are unable to secure and maintain the material conditions that will enable them to enjoy the promises of freedom and equality is their confinement to high poverty, racially segregated neighborhoods.

King dedicated his entire public career as a civil rights activist working towards eradicating segregation in America. Segregation laws, popularly referred to as Jim Crow laws, required that Southern black and white Americans carry out their political, economic and social lives in practically separate spheres. The efforts by King and the many other participants in the civil rights movement to eradicate segregation laws in the South resulted in the passage of the 1964 Voting Rights Act and the 1965 Civil Rights Act. However, shortly after the passage of these landmark civil rights laws, many Americans, including King, were forced to acknowledge the discontentment of black Americans living in the North and West, when the Watts section of Los Angeles erupted in six days of riots. *Newsweek* suggested that the Los Angeles riot demonstrated that "the orthodox civil rights movement of the South has not reached the black masses in the wilderness of the urban North" (cited in Fairclough, 1987, p. 275). King himself acknowledged, "Civil rights leaders had long thought the North would benefit derivatively from the Southern struggle. They assumed that without massive upheavals certain systemic changes were inevitable as the whole nation reexamined and searched its conscience. This was a miscalculation" (King, 1968, p. 20).[8] King was not suggesting that he and other civil rights activists were misguided in dedicating their energies towards the eradication of segregation laws. Rather, what the Watts riots demonstrated, in very dramatic fashion, was that the effects of *de facto*

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[8] King does not clarify what other civil rights leaders he had in mind. However, it is clear that he is indicting himself.

segregation were just as devastating to black Americans outside of the South as *de jure* segregation was to blacks residing in the South.

In 1966, King decided to move with his family to Chicago's Lawndale ghetto. While in Chicago, King joined with local Chicagoans in an effort to push for an open housing policy that would challenge the existing racist practices amongst private homeowners and realtors who discriminated against black Americans seeking to buy homes or rent apartments in all-white communities (Ralph 1993). Unfortunately, these efforts were largely stymied by white opposition and the shrewd maneuverings of Chicago's mayor, Richard Daley (Branch, 1998; Fairclough, 1987; Garrow, 2004). Despite King's lack of success, he repeatedly reflected upon his brief stay in Chicago's Lawndale ghetto in *Where Do We Go from Here*. These remarks can be found during his explanation of the structural dynamics of residential segregation. While King was certainly not the first to highlight the structural dynamics of residential segregation, it is necessary to explore his thoughts on the matter in order to better understand his theory of service. For this reason, I pay special attention to King's ruminations about the ills of residential segregation. The picture that emerges from King's discussion is that Chicago's *de facto* segregation was the result of a white American racist ideology that demonstrated little or no regard for black life. Ultimately, King concluded that if white Americans were ever going to come around to addressing the structural nature of *de facto* racism, they would have to first come to grips with the meaning of humanity.

Whereas I examined King's more secular "American Dream" speeches in the last chapter, in this chapter I will examine King's "The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life" sermon. This is one of King's most enduring homilies. He preached it in 1954 as a trial

sermon for Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, and many elements of the sermon were present in his final sermon, "I See the Promised Land," which was preached nearly fourteen years later. It is important to explicate King's "Dimensions" sermons, I believe, because they contain his most pronounced and enduring articulations of what it means to be human. I argue that in order to fully comprehend King's condemnation of the ills of segregation—whether *de jure* or *de* facto—it is necessary to understand his conception of humanity. However, understanding King's account of humanity is more important than just understanding his gripe with segregation. Rather, I show how his argument for all individuals' responsibility to engage in collective efforts to combat structural injustice more generally, but especially as it is manifest in racial, residential segregation comes out of his account of humanity. Although I situate this chapter within the context of King's "Dimensions" sermons, I also focus heavily on his later writings—especially his final book, *Where Do We Go from Here*—which I believe contain his most mature political thought.

Over the course of this chapter, however, I will only focus on King's articulation of the first two dimensions of a complete life. I leave the third for the next chapter in order to highlight some potential problems with the role of God in King's account of humanity. Presently, I begin with a discussion of the parallels that King draws between racial segregation and the selfish dimension of humanity, which King refers to as the "length of life." I then introduce King's requirement for all humans to resist attempts to restrict their freedom. This requirement, I suggest, is overwhelming, and requires a belief in God. In the next section, I explain how King's understanding of the second dimension of a complete life—the "breadth of life"—provides a more manageable and secular claim, that all of

humanity is responsible for combatting structural injustice because they participate in those very structures. In the third section of the paper, I address the question of what King meant when he called for structural transformation of residential segregation. Ultimately, I suggest that, for King, the only remedy for residential segregation was true integration, which required interpersonal living and the sharing of power between groups. I now turn to his discussion of the first dimension—the length of life.

**The "Length of Life"**

In 1954, as King stood before Dexter Avenue Baptist Church's congregation giving his trial sermon, he made the case that there are three dimensions of a complete life. He explained that a fully three-dimensional life requires that love of oneself (length) be complemented by serving others (breadth) and searching for God (height). Piecing together the different versions of the "Dimensions" sermons, King's theological understanding of the human being can be summed up in the following way: First, as a Baptist minister, King began with the premise that there is a God who created the world and all of humanity. According to King's Christian worldview, God is the Father and all human beings are His children—consequently all humans are brothers and sisters. In creating humanity, though, God gave all of his children an innate desire to reach their fullest potential. The goal of reaching one's fullest potential begins with the pursuit of one's own ends. Yet, God has structured the world, according to King, so that all of humanity is naturally interdependent and consequently one cannot reach his or her fullest potential without serving others. Finally, in order to reach one's full potential, one must also continually seek God.

King taught that the first dimension of a complete life begins with acknowledging that God, in creating humanity, has given all individuals different talents and abilities and

that there is an "onward push to the end of realizing [one's] inner capacity" (King, 1960, p. 399) He called this the length of life, which he viewed as the selfish dimension that displays an "inward concern for one's own welfare" (King, 1960, p. 397). King was not suggesting that there was anything inherently wrong with this selfishness. In fact, he acknowledged that there is such a thing as "rational and moral self-interest" (King, 1960, p. 398). However, King warned that there was a potential danger that came along with humanity's pursuit of the length of life; namely, a situation in which individuals solely pursue their own well-being, and "try to live as if nobody else lives in the world but themselves." He feared that when wholly self-indulgent individuals do engage others, it is only in order to use them "as mere tools to get to where they're going" (King, 1998)

While King's 1954 "Dimensions" sermon was aimed at getting individuals to engage in introspection about how to complete their own lives, one notices a marked change in his 1960 version of the sermon. By this point he began to use it to weigh in on the way in which white Americans collectively pursue the length of life at the expense of black Americans. In his renamed sermon, "The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life," King explains that the bulk of America's racial problems were the result of white Americans' dangerous pursuit of the length of life. He states, "And my friends, I am convinced that this is the basis of our problem in the area of race relations today. This is our problem in the South, and this is our problem over the United States. Many of our white brothers are concerned only about the length of life, their preferred economic positions, their political power, their so-called way of life" (King, 1960, p. 400). In his 1962 speech, "The Ethical Demands for Integration," King explains how white Americans' pursuit of the length of life, as manifest in the system of segregation, affected the way in which they

conceptualized black humanity: "The tragedy of segregation is that it treats men as means rather than ends, and thereby reduces them to things rather than persons." Consequently, the "traditional southerner is fond of 'his Negro' as he is of a pet or a finely-tooled fire arm. 'It' serves a purpose or gets a job done" (King, 1986, p. 119). To King, Jim Crow laws epitomized white Americans' racist belief that black Americans were nothing more than mere objects solely meant to help white Americans reach their fullest potential.

Yet, it must be noted that King did not view southern segregation laws as the only manifestation of white American racist ideology. King's understanding of the damaging ways that whites outside of the South pursued the length of their lives at the expense of black Americans was brought into clear focus during his stay in Chicago's Lawndale ghetto. King's time in Chicago had been so moving that by 1967, he began to define what it meant to be black American in terms of inhabiting a racially exclusive ghetto. He says, "Being a Negro in America means being herded in ghettos, or reservations, being constantly ignored and made to feel invisible." In addition to a ghetto being exclusively inhabited by most of the black community, King observes that once confined to ghettos it is nearly impossible for black Americans to escape: "A few individuals can break out, but the vast majority remain its prisoners" (King, 1968, pp. 118-119). Pushing back against the belief that the ghetto is entirely composed of impoverished black Americans, King proclaims, "No Negro escapes this cycle of modern slavery. Even the new Negro middle class often finds itself in ghettoized housing and in jobs at the mercy of the white world" (King, 1968, p. 127). King's description of ghettos as spaces where blacks are "herded," enslaved, and held in prison-like conditions demonstrates his belief that America's ghettos

are the result of racist white Americans' attempts to pursue the length of life at the expense of black Americans.

To be clear, King was concerned with the plight of the poor no matter their skin color, but the ubiquity of the ghettoization of black Americans in America's cities led him to surmise, "There is only one possible explanation for this situation, and that is the racist blindness of city planners" (King, 1986, p. 326). To King's mind, poverty took on a new dimension when it was founded upon racism. This is because, as defined by King, "Racism is a philosophy based on a contempt for life. Racism is total estrangement. It separates not only bodies, but minds and spirits." What made the charge of racism more damning than a race-neutral, class antipathy was King's belief that racism inevitably "descends to inflicting spiritual or physical homicide upon the out-group" (King, 1968, p. 74). For King, d*e facto* residential segregation rooted in racism, meant that white Americans were not just hoarding opportunities out of ethnocentrism (Anderson, 2010), nor were they merely seeking to gain a competitive advantage over black Americans; ultimately, King concluded that all forms of segregation were meant to kill off black Americans.

In order to understand King's claim that segregation was a means to kill off black Americans it will be helpful to consider parallel passages from two of his most important writings. The first is his widely read "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." In his letter, King denounces southern Jim Crow laws, claiming that "[a]ll 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" (King, 1986, p. 293). To King, one consequence of the false sense of superiority that segregation laws bestowed upon white Americans, was the wanton disregard for black life. King identified

some of the physical abuses suffered by black Americans, such as having "vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim," or having "hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity." In response to physical violence, King defined blackness in the American South as being "harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance never quite knowing what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentments." All of this resulted in the need for black Americans to be "forever fighting a degenerating sense of 'nobodiness…'" (King, 1986, pp. 292-293).

Now, consider a second passage, from *Where Do We Go from Here*, where King articulated the threat of death that *de facto* residential segregation represented to black Americans:

> Being a Negro in America means trying to smile when you want to cry. It means trying to hold on to physical life amid psychological death. It means the pain of watching your children grow up with clouds of inferiority in their mental skies. It means having your legs cut off, and then being condemned for being a cripple. It means seeing your mother and father spiritually murdered by the slings and arrows of daily exploitation, and then being hated for being an orphan. Being a Negro in America means listening to suburban politicians talk eloquently against open housing while arguing in the same breath that they are not racists. It means being harried by day and haunted by night by a nagging sense of nobodyness and constantly fighting to be saved from the poison of bitterness. It means the ache and anguish of living in so many situations where hopes unborn have died (King, 1968, p. 127).

When comparing this quote to the aforementioned passage from King's "Letter," the one thing that immediately jumps out is his shift from discussing the physical killing of black people, to his repeated references to the psychological or spiritual dismemberment of black people. In essence, King was making the case that, whereas *de jure* segregation gave whites a false sense of superiority, which empowered them to physically terrorize and

consequently kill black Americans, Northern *de facto* segregation led white Americans to engage in a form of psychological and spiritual terror of black Americans that had the same consequences—the death of black Americans. To understand King's logic it will be helpful to revisit his 1962 speech "The Ethical Demands for Integration."

In addition to King's claim that white Americans utilize segregation as a means to strip blacks of their human worth by relegating them to mere objects, King also posits that segregation robs black Americans of their freedom. According to King, freedom is made up of the capacity to deliberate, decide and respond—all of which are cut off by segregation. This is because segregation predetermines where one can live, how much an individual can earn or even the types of tasks one can pursue. Segregation, to King, operates such "that someone or some system has already made these *a priori* decisions for me, and I am reduced to an animal." When this occurs, King explains, "I do not live; I merely exist. The only resemblances I have to real life are the motor responses and functions that are akin to humankind. I cannot adequately assume responsibility as a person because I have been made a party to a decision in which I played no part in making" (King, 1986, p. 120). King admits that he is being a bit hyperbolic, but that he is only doing so in order to "underscore what actually happens when a man is robbed of his freedom. The very nature of his life is altered and his being cannot make the full circle of personhood because that which is basic to the character of life itself has been diminished" (King, 1986, p. 121). Ultimately, King concludes, all forms of segregation, whether *de jure* or *de facto*, are means by which white Americans strip black Americans of their humanity. As King proclaims, "This is why segregation has wreaked havoc with the Negro. It is sometimes

difficult to determine which are the deepest—the physical wounds or the psychological wounds" (King, 1986, p. 121).

The argument that individuals are obligated to engage in a form of political service that seeks to eradicate segregation is derived from King's understanding of humanity. The theological scholar Rufus Burrow, Jr. (2006) provides us with a helpful account of the socio-political implications of King's conception of humanity. According to Burrow, King believed that "persons are called into existence by God as free beings with the capacity to be self-determining moral agents" (Burrow, 2006, p. 173). Consequently, "If to be a person is to be free and to possess infinite, absolute dignity and worth, then persons are obligated to protest against all that undermines their humanity and dignity." He continues, "Concretely, this means that persons are always and forever obligated to take steps toward removing any obstacles to the realization of complete personhood" (Burrow, 2006, p. 176). Since King believed that segregation was a means by which whites sought to strip blacks of both their worth and freedom—and therefore their humanity—then it follows that it is their obligation to do everything in their power to resist segregation.

However, Burrow is careful to point out that there is a difference between metaphysical forms of freedom—such as freedom of will—and sociopolitical freedoms—such as the ability to choose where one lives. He cautions, "It should be remembered that metaphysical freedom does not necessarily translate into the sociopolitical freedoms that persons need in order to function fully as persons in the world" (Burrow, 2006, p. 176). This is an important distinction to keep in mind when interpreting what King means when he says that segregation strips black Americans of their freedom. He is not saying that as a result of segregation, blacks no longer possess a metaphysical form of freedom. For, if that

were the case, he could not then hold black Americans culpable for failing to discharge their responsibility to resist segregation. It is precisely because of this distinction between metaphysical and sociopolitical freedom that King can demand the following of blacks living under conditions of segregation: "We must make full and constructive use of the freedom we already possess. We must not wait until the day of full emancipation before we set out to make our individual and collective contributions to the life of our nation" (King, 1986, p. 134). Here, King is clearly stating that even if black Americans' sociopolitical freedom has been taken away, their possession of metaphysical freedom requires them to resist segregation.

Although King held that black Americans were obligated to resist segregation, he did not believe that they were the only one's obligated to resist segregation. As Burrow points out, "In addition" to the active resistance of potential victims, King's account of humanity "means that the moral agent is obligated to act on behalf of the best interests of the moral subject who may or may not be a moral agent" (Burrow, 2006, p. 173). In regards to segregation, King's position meant that white Americans were also obligated to do everything in their power to dismantle the institution of segregation. However, the implications of King's position extend far beyond segregation. For instance, King's position implies that all human beings are obligated to fight for others' freedom wherever injustice exists. This is the upshot of King's oft-repeated phrase, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Yet, one can imagine that this obligation is too large and consequently one that nobody can fulfill. Furthermore, it also requires that an individual believe in a God that has created human beings. These points raise the question of whether or not King gives us any guidance about how we should think about this obligation in a

more manageable and secular fashion. In the next section I argue that by asking us to think about our obligations to serve others in terms of our participation in structures of injustice, King does just that.

**The "Breadth of Life"**

The "breadth of life" is King's conception of serving others. He postulated that one has not truly begun to live until he or she has moved beyond the myopic concern for oneself and developed a genuine concern for the well-being of others. King seemed to suggest that serving others would provide a check to the excessive individualism that is inculcated in one's pursuit of the "length of life." Accordingly, in his 1954 homily, King advised the Dexter congregation to develop an other-regarding disposition by learning to pray daily in the following manner: "'Lord teach me to *unselfishly* serve humanity'" (King, 2007, p. 154). However, as King began to speak out against whites' collective pursuit of the length of life at the expense of blacks in his 1960 sermon, he had to find a means to get members of both races to develop an ethos that was conducive to creating a more just society. Toward this end, King encouraged Americans to embrace an ethos that promoted political service, which he called "dangerous altruism."[9]

King conveyed his conception of "dangerous altruism" in his "Dimensions" sermons by drawing upon one of Jesus' parables entitled the "Good Samaritan." In this Biblical story a man is left for dead by a gang of robbers on the side of a very dangerous road. In spite of his grave condition two men passed him by pretending not to notice him.

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[9] In recent decades the emphasis upon ethos has found its way back into mainstream contemporary political theory See: Stephen K. White (2009). One recent example is Danielle Allen's efforts toward cultivating the healthy habits amongst democratic citizens that can overcome racial distrust. Allen's discussion is instructive in reading King because of her emphasis upon the utility of rhetoric in cultivating a healthy democratic ethos. For instance, she argues that the rhetorical strategy of using metaphors is helpful in providing an image to which a democratic people should aspire. See: Danielle Allen (2009).

However, the third passerby—a Samaritan—not only stopped, but he also administered aid to the man in need. King speculated that perhaps the others did not stop out of sheer fear. According to King, the fear caused those who passed him by to ask, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" The difference between them and the "Good Samaritan" was that the Samaritan reversed the question, and asked, "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?" King concluded, "Therefore, he was a great man because he had the mental equipment for a dangerous altruism. He was a great man because he could rise above his self-concern to the broader concern of his brother" (King, 2007, p. 400). By having the Samaritan engage in an altruistic act toward someone he did not know and in a dangerous context, King was interpreting Jesus as suggesting that one's neighbor is "anyone who lies in need at life's roadside" (King, 1963, p. 31). In this way, the "Good Samaritan" was meant to be an example that taught individuals the important lesson that service was to extend to those beyond one's race or religion no matter what the consequences.

Notice, though, that King's idea of service appears to be teaching that service merely requires that one perform a supererogatory act of kindness. Yes, the Samaritan engaged in a noble act, but at the end of the day it amounts to little more than charity. The Samaritan was altruistic, but King's lesson does not suggest that he was obligated to act. Consequently, the "Good Samaritan" can lead one to believe that a healthy ethos requires that individuals recognize the humanity of others in order to engage in voluntary acts of kindness. However, I want to argue that, for King, the idea of service was not a supererogatory action, but was a moral requirement.

In order to understand how service, according to King, is a moral requirement, it will be helpful to consider Iris Marion Young's recent work, *Responsibility for Justice* (2011). In her final book she offers a description of contemporary manifestations of structural injustice, which she says, "exists when social processes put large groups of persons under systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities, at the same time these processes enable others to dominate or to have a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercising capacities available to them." Young makes it clear that contemporary instances of structural injustice often are not "the wrongful action of an individual agent or the repressive policies of a state." Rather, she explains, "Structural injustice occurs as a consequence of many individuals and institutions acting to pursue their particular goals and interests, for the most part within the limits of accepted rules and norms" (Young, 2011, p. 52). What Young is trying to get us to see is that the nature of structural injustice today is such that as members of a nation-state or even a global society we are all participants in the social processes that create unjust conditions for others. Consequently, she feels that it is all of our responsibility to do the work necessary to correct structural injustice.

Young's account of responsibility is derived from what she calls the social connection model of responsibility. According to Young:

> [I]ndividuals bear responsibility for structural injustice because they contribute by their actions to the processes that produce unjust outcomes. Our responsibility derives from belonging together with others in a system of interdependent processes of cooperation and competition through which we seek benefits and aim to realize projects…All who dwell within the structures must take responsibility for remedying injustices they cause, though none is specifically liable for the harm in a legal sense. Responsibility in relation to injustice thus derives not from living under a common constitution, but rather from participating in the diverse institutional processes that produce structural injustice (Young, 2011, p. 105).

It is my contention that if we apply the basic framework of Young's social connection model to the King's thought, we can begin to see how he was making the case for one's responsibility to serve others by means that were not wholly dependent upon his theistic account of humanity.

King's argument for responsibility based upon one's participation in structures of injustice is not readily apparent in his early "Dimensions" sermons. On the surface of these sermons, one can read King as suggesting that the reason that individuals have to develop a concern for others is because God structured the human condition in such a way that one can never reach one's fullest potential without others. Here, King seemed to be trying to inculcate an ethos similar to what Tocqueville called "self-interest properly understood" (Tocqueville, 1969). Evidence of this can be seen in his imploring humanity not to "forget in doing something for others that you have what you have because of others" (King, 1998). Seemingly, his early use of the "Good Samaritan" metaphor while modeling an admirable ethos does not provide a forthright argument for the moral requirement to serve others.

However, if we dig beneath the surface we can see that as early as his 1954 sermon King was attuned to how global capitalism and international commerce have structured the world in such a way that the typical American is dependent upon people all across the world for their survival. This is illustrated in King's wonderful description of the typical American's dependence upon the rest of world before leaving the house each morning:

> You get up in the morning and go to the bathroom, and you reach over for a bar of soap, and that's handed to you by a Frenchman. You reach over for a sponge, and that's given to you by a Turk. You reach over for a towel, and that comes to your hand from the hands of a Pacific Islander. And then you go on to the kitchen to get your breakfast. You reach on over to get a little coffee, and that's poured in your cup by a South American. Or maybe you decide that you want a little tea this morning, only to discover that that's poured in your cup by a Chinese. Or maybe you want a little cocoa, that's poured in your cup by a West African. Then you want

a little bread and you reach over to get it, and that's given to you by the hands of an English-speaking farmer, not to mention the baker. Before you get through eating breakfast in the morning, you're dependent on more than half the world (King, 2007, p. 155).

King introduces this anecdote as a means to make the claim that: "All life is involved in a single process so that whatever effects one directly affects all indirectly" (King, 2007, p. 155). By advancing the premise that all of humanity is involved in a single process, King was laying the groundwork for the ensuing moral claim that we are all responsible for combating the forms of injustice that are produced by our being tied into this process.

To better understand this point, consider that in King's 1960 version of his "Dimensions" sermon, he told of his recent trip to India. He recounted how he had become depressed as he witnessed such deep poverty during his travels throughout the country. Rather than chalking up the poverty to lack of individual effort on behalf of the Indian people, or a corrupt Indian government, he assumed responsibility for their plight as an American. Recalling the poverty, King told his parishioners that he asked himself whether Americans had a responsibility to alleviate the woes of the Indian people. He concluded that they did "because the destiny of the United States is tied up with the destiny of India." This, at first, sounds like a "self-interest properly understood" argument. But, King continues, "And, therefore, we should use our vast resources of wealth to aid these undeveloped countries that are undeveloped *because* the people have been dominated politically, exploited economically, segregated, and humiliated across the centuries by foreign powers" (King, 2007, p. 401). We can now see that King's use of "destiny" in reference to the US and India was not an abstract reference to some point in the future. Instead, King was suggesting that India's current and past pursuit of its destiny was, and is, inextricably bound to America's imperialist pursuit of its own destiny. King concluded

that Americans were morally obligated to serve Indians by alleviating the poverty that resulted from American participation in structural injustice. Therefore, King provides both a more manageable and secular moral argument for an individual's obligation to serve others.

It must be noted that the lesson King derives from his India story was that even though individuals and collectives have a moral obligation to those harmed by structures of injustice, it only required that they use their "vast resources to *aid*" those in need. However, over time King came to realize that providing "aid" as a form of service in the face of structural injustice was only a temporary and inadequate solution. As King's political thought matured, he became more concerned with the need to radically transform structures of injustice. So much so that by 1967 he drastically rearticulated the lesson to be taken away from the "Good Samaritan" metaphor. He said:

> A true revolution of value will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. We are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be beaten and robbed as they make their journey through life. True concern is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it understands that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring (King, 1968, p. 198).

Here King has not abandoned the lesson that individuals need to extend kindness beyond racial and religious boundaries. However, he expanded upon this lesson in a way that demonstrates his preoccupation with structural injustice. Whereas in the past versions of this metaphor, the Jericho Road was the setting for a chance encounter that enabled the Samaritan to *aid* the man in need, in this passage the Jericho Road has become the *cause* of the man's need. In other words, King transformed the Jericho Road into a metaphor for the social processes of life, which are structured in such a way that it allows some to travel the road relatively unencumbered (the Priest, Levite, Samaritan, Americans, White

Americans) while others are severely constrained (the man in need, Indians, Black Americans).

As a result of King's more radical analysis, he correspondingly radicalized his notion of service. By radical I mean to get to the root causes. In this case, King's analysis was concerned with getting to the root causes of structural inequality. Therefore the call to serve others was not merely a call to give charity to someone in need, as it had been in the past; rather, it was required that individuals do the work necessary to transform those structures of injustice. In the first instance, King realized that one is simply helping to ameliorate someone's plight within structures of injustice, while in the second instance the goal is to transform those structures, which cause his or her plight in the first place. In the next section, I explain how King believed that individuals should be working toward a form of true integration as a means to correct structural injustice. To King, true integration meant interpersonal living, but also the sharing of power. If black Americans were ever to overcome their plight it was going to require that they be fully empowered politically, socially and economically.

**Integration as a Form of Structural Transformation**

King was always an ardent champion of racial integration. However, like other aspects of his thought, his views about integration continually evolved over time. Take, for instance, King's discussion of the differences between the concepts of segregation, desegregation and integration from the early 1960's. King observed that although "desegregation and integration are often used interchangeably, there is a great deal of difference between the two. In the context of what our national community needs, desegregation alone is empty and shallow. We must always be aware of the fact that our

ultimate goal is integration, and that desegregation is only a first step on the road to the good society" (King, 1986, p. 118). King defined integration in contrast to desegregation, which he said is a negative concept that merely seeks to eliminate the "legal and social prohibitions" that have become systematized in the form of segregation. "Integration," though, "is the positive acceptance of desegregation and the welcomed participation of Negroes into the total range of human activities. Integration is genuine intergroup, interpersonal living" (King, 1986, p. 118). In other words, early on, King understood that in the quest for justice, desegregation is necessary, but not sufficient. But notice how King also stresses both white's "acceptance" and their welcoming the participation of black Americans. This preoccupation with whites was largely eschewed by advocates of Black Power as a form of assimilation.

These points will come into sharper focus if we consider the challenge to integration leveled by perhaps the most articulate spokesmen of the goals of the Black Power movement—Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Toure) and Charles V. Hamilton (1967). These two thinkers dismissed integrating with whites as a means to real power accumulation by black Americans for two reasons. First, they believed that instead of seeking power for all black Americans, integration was a ploy for a few successful blacks to be able to live in white neighborhoods. According to Carmichael and Hamilton, the kind of integration that is championed by the black middle-class, "has meant that a few blacks 'make it,' leaving the black community behind, sapping it of leadership potential and know-how" (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967, p. 53). They argued that black Americans needed to obtain real political, economic and psychological power as a unit if they were to truly become self-determining human beings. However, they felt that the type of integration that

was advanced by privileged black Americans, benefitted them as individuals, but had little or no positive effect upon black Americans as a collective unit.

Their second concern with the goal of integration was that rather than serving as a means of sharing power with black Americans, Carmichael and Hamilton viewed integration as a way for white Americans to maintain a firm grip on their power. Additionally, they charged that the black Americans' goal of moving into white neighborhoods only served to undermine blacks' attempts to equalize their social standing with white Americans. They say, "[Integration] is based on complete acceptance of the fact that in order to have a decent house or education, black people must move into a white neighborhood or send their children to a white school." They continue, "This reinforces, among both black and white, the idea that 'white' is automatically superior and 'black' is by definition inferior. For this reason, 'integration' is a subterfuge for the maintenance of white supremacy" (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967, p. 54). In sum, Carmichael and Hamilton maintained that integration would only benefit a few privileged blacks, and it would do nothing to disrupt the stranglehold of power that whites enjoyed over blacks or challenge white norms.

If Carmichael and Hamilton are correct, then the effects of integration upon the black community are the same, if not worse, than those that King has described as being derived from segregation. In both instances, black Americans are firmly subordinated in relation to white Americans. However, one can make the case that Carmichael and Hamilton are able to reach this conclusion because they are not in fact talking about integration; instead, what they are describing is assimilation. Assimilation is the idea that in order to achieve any semblance of equality, black Americans must wholly adopt white

Americans' values and culture. The paradox, as Carmichael and Hamilton correctly point out, is that as blacks adopt the white's values and culture in order to gain social standing they are, in turn, furthering their own subordination. For this reason, Carmichael and Hamilton believed that the avenue to black empowerment was for black Americans to gain control over their own communities; thereby integrating with white Americans on more equitable terms—if at all.

In part because of the challenge of Carmichael and Hamilton and others, King, over time, began to change his tenor when discussing integration. In 1967, King retained his belief that integration is "true intergroup, interpersonal living." However, he added that integration required "the mutual sharing of power." In this sense, King was building upon his earlier conception of integration. King says, "I cannot see how the Negro will be totally liberated from the crushing weight of poor education, squalid housing and economic strangulation until he is integrated, *with power*, into every level of American life." It is important to underscore that King is identifying true integration as a complete transformation of American society in which black Americans are politically, socially and economically empowered. Realizing that white "acceptance" and their embracement of the "welcomed participation" of black Americans was not enough, King critiqued his earlier notion of integration: "I think in the past all too often we did it that way. We talked of integration in romantic and esthetic terms and it ended up as merely adding color to a still predominately white power structure" (King, 1986, p. 666). What King gradually came to understand, was that integration, as it was implemented in the 1960's, denuded blacks of power. He cites as an example those blacks, who held positions of power within all-black organizations—such as teachers associations—but were forced to give up their power once

they integrated into all-white organizations. In response, King demands, "We don't want to be integrated *out* of power; we want to be integrated *into* power" (King, 1986, p. 666).

As we can see, King fully agreed with Carmichael and Hamilton about the need for blacks to accumulate power. According to King, "Power, properly understood, is the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political or economic changes" (King, 1968, p. 37). However, Carmichael and Hamilton believed that blacks needed to build up separate bases of power prior to any consideration of integration. Since they were beginning with the premise that black Americans were colonized by white Americans, their overall goal was to break the relationship of black's dependence upon whites. Therefore, Carmichael and Hamilton understood the goal of Black Power as the need to "correct the approach to dependency, to remove that dependency, and to establish a viable psychological, political and social base upon which the black community can function to meet its needs." They believed that blacks could enter into alliances with whites, but they did not view this as a primary concern. As they succinctly put it, "Black Power simply says: enter coalitions only *after* you are able to 'stand on your own'" (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967, p. 81). King, on the other hand, was convinced that blacks could not accumulate enough power to transform structures of injustice without help from other races. He concludes, "In short, the Negroes' problem cannot be solved unless the whole of American society takes a new turn toward greater economic justice" (King, 1968, p. 51). Where King and the advocates of Black Power disagreed was not on the issue of coalition building, per se, but about what it would take to get the American society to make that turn toward economic justice.

Carmichael and Hamilton believed that the greater American society would embrace economic justice for black people once blacks, themselves, possessed enough power to force the issue. They explain, "The concept of Black Power rests on a fundamental premise: *Before a group can enter the open society, it must first close ranks*. By this we mean that group solidarity is necessary before a group can operate effectively from a bargaining position of strength in a pluralistic society" (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967, p. 44. Emphasis in original.). They went on to cite the various ethnic groups that immigrated to America as examples of their approach; a point, which King vociferously denied. He rebutted that these groups did not, in fact, rise to power through separatism. They did so, he contended, by forming alliances with other groups. King declares, "To succeed in a pluralistic society, and an often hostile one at that, the Negro obviously needs organized strength, but that strength will only be effective when it is consolidated through constructive alliances" (King, 1968, p. 51). Yet, as King grew increasingly frustrated with white's unwillingness to confront their own racism, he admitted that "there are some situations where separation may serve as a temporary way-station" (King, 1986, pp. 666-667). King, though, remained unequivocal in his belief that separatism was meant to be a "bargaining position to get to that ultimate goal, which is a truly integrated society where there is shared power" (King, 1968, p. 666). Even as he incorporated the language of the Black Power movement, King did not advocate full withdrawal from the larger society. Building up a separate power base was meant to complement efforts toward integration, not to supersede those efforts.

What are the implications of King's views on separation and integration in the realm of segregated housing? At first glance it is not clear how the adoption of a separatist

position could even be helpful in the realm of housing. For, as it was noted above, many of the problems that plagued black Americans resulted from their residing in separate communities in the first place. However, this need not be seen as simply a radical Black Power position. There are contemporary scholars, such as Young (2000), who also advocate for a benign form of ethnocentric self-segregation. For Young, like Carmichael and Hamilton, the imperative is not to integrate neighborhoods, but rather to equalize benefits amongst different neighborhoods. In response, Elizabeth Anderson, who argues in favor of integration, charges that Young's model is not "grounded in a realistic appraisal of the material and social conditions for advancing racial equality." Anderson posits, "For blacks to achieve racial equality, blacks need to change, whites need to change, and we need to change. These changes can happen only through racial integration." Her rationale is that black Americans lack more than just material resources, they also lack social and cultural capital. Anderson argues that these forms of capital can be "acquired only through interracial interaction" (Anderson, 2010, p. 186).

Anderson's position is not simply that blacks must change. She also believes that whites must change, and that the best chance for this to occur is in integrated settings. After reviewing several studies showing the positive effects of integration upon a "well-functioning democracy," Anderson concludes: "The evidence cited here shows that the disposition of individuals to live up to the demands of democracy is situational." She continues, "Functioning in integrated, diverse groups enhances individuals' democratic competencies, especially with respect to exercising the primary demand of democratic institutions, to treat all citizens as equals" (Anderson, 2010, p. 131). Certainly, spatial integration alone does not necessarily lead to a change in white's public opinion formation.

However, several recent studies have shown that whites' proximity to blacks tends to reduce the role of prejudice in public opinion formation about key issues of racial justice for black Americans, while racial isolation heightens the role of prejudice amongst white Americans (Kinder and Mendelberg, 1995).

Returning to King, we will notice that he stakes out a position somewhere between Anderson and Young. On the one hand he championed integrated residential neighborhoods in a manner similar to Anderson. On the other hand, he realized that whites' failure to own up to their own racism meant that blacks would need to build up the ghettos as they worked toward creating a more integrated American society. To understand King's delicate position, consider that he vehemently denounced what he viewed as the dual housing market—one black, one white—in every city, which would seem to be remedied by calling for the complete integration of each city. Yet, as a solution he proposed:

> In every city, to deal with this unjust dualism, we must constantly work toward the goal of a truly integrated society while at the same time we enrich the ghetto. We must seek to enrich the ghetto immediately in the sense of improving the housing conditions, improving the schools in the ghetto, improving the economic conditions. At the same time, we must be working to open the housing market so there will be one housing market only. We must work on two levels. We should gradually move to disperse the ghetto, and immediately move to improve conditions within the ghetto, which in the final analysis will make it possible to disperse it at a greater rate a few years from now (King, 1986, p. 667).

Here, King remains committed to his position of integration as the end goal, but he makes an allowance for a temporary, fully-empowered, self-segregated, black ghetto.

King's position is understandably complicated because he was grappling with two conflicting realities. One reality, was that whites' racism—both explicit and implicit—was so deeply embedded in American society that any form of interracial living would come at a steep psychological price for black Americans. This was a reality the advocates of Black Power had already reached, but King was initially hesitant to accept. However, what King

realized, that advocates of Black Power did not, was that in order for a whites' attitudes to change in a way that would enable structural transformation, they must be in close enough proximity to interact with blacks. If, as was argued above, *de facto* residential segregation severely lessened the interactions between the black and white races, this also hampered any chances for white's to change their attitudes on issues of racial justice. Consequently, King had to make what he believed was a pragmatic argument that embraced a temporary form of self-segregation while blacks sought to equalize their material resources with whites living in all-white neighborhoods. In the meantime, the gradual disbursement of blacks from the ghettos was intended to increase the exposure of black and white Americans. In essence, King is arguing for both, temporary separation and temporary desegregation as strategies toward achieving permanent and complete integration.

The logic of King's position was that as blacks were disbursed from the ghetto, the possibility that temporary desegregation could help lead white Americans to support legislation that would inevitably improve the lot of their black peers. As King explains, "Desegregation will not change attitudes but it will provide the contact and confrontation necessary by which integration is made possible and attainable" (King, 1986, p. 123). The gradual disbursement of blacks from the ghettos was considered mere desegregation to King because, "It vouchsafes the lack of restriction against one's freedom but it does not prohibit the blocking of his total capacity" (King, 1986, p. 121). King further explains, "I may do well in a *desegregated* society but I can never know what my total capacity is until I live in an *integrated* society. I cannot be free until I have had the opportunity to fulfill my total capacity untrammeled by any artificial hindrance or barrier" (King, 1986, p. 121; emphasis in original). It's important to note that white American's support was crucial for

King because of his belief that true integration required the removal of artificial barriers. These artificial barriers meant providing blacks with the material conditions necessary to share power between the two races.

As was argued above, King believed that all members of society were responsible for doing the work necessary to abolish America's ghettos and to promote integrated housing because all participated in the social processes that served to dominate black Americans. On the individual level this meant that all members of society had the responsibility to not discriminate against blacks in their quest for open housing. However, this was the minimum that was required of society's members. Since the problem of *de facto* segregation was too much for members of society to eradicate through their own individual efforts, King believed that there needed to be a collective effort manifested through government action. Since government action represented the collective will of the people this required that individuals band together in collective action to pressure the government to take the steps necessary to eradicate all forms of structural injustice. As Young notes, "the state's power to promote justice depends to a significant extent on the active support of its citizens in that endeavor." Young suggests that this requires that citizens assume responsibility of paying for the positive actions necessary to correct structural injustice, and to "debate about the ways to do it and hold diverse private actors as well as public agencies accountable for enabling or impeding effecting coordinated action to minimize structural injustice" (Young, 2011, p. 169).

Since all members of society are involved in the social processes that enable whites to fully pursue the length of their lives while leaving blacks susceptible to domination, King held that even black Americans, although oppressed by the formation of ghettos, had

the responsibility to "unite around power action programs to eradicate the last vestiges of racial injustice" (King, 1968, p. 136). Rather than seeking to assimilate, King subversively viewed black Americans' effort to integrate America as a form of service, which in seeking gains for themselves would change white Americans' relationship to power. He explains, "Let us, therefore, not think of our movement as one that seeks to integrate the Negro into all the existing values of American society." Instead, King called upon black Americans to be "those creative dissenters who will call our beloved nation to a higher destiny, to a new plateau of compassion, to a more noble expression of humaneness" (King, 1968, p. 142). Similarly, white Americans needed to "continue to support and work in the civil rights movement." Even if the amount of white Americans who would initially be committed to such a cause was small, King proclaims, "That creative minority of whites absolutely committed to civil rights can make it clear to the larger society that vacillation and procrastination on the question of racial justice can no longer be tolerated." Underscoring how the effort to transform structures of injustice is a form of service, King declares, "It will take such a small committed minority to work unrelentingly to win the uncommitted majority. Such a group may well transform America's greatest dilemma into her most glorious opportunity" (King, 1968, p. 101).

As a form of some concluding remarks to this section and this chapter, it may be helpful to quote King's critique of Black Power at length:

> In the final analysis the weakness of Black Power is its failure to see that the black man needs the white man and the white man needs the black man. However much we may try to romanticize the slogan, there is no separate black path to power and fulfillment that does not intersect white paths, and there is no separate white path to power and fulfillment, short of social disaster, that does not share that power with black aspirations for freedom and human dignity. (King, 1968, p. 54).

Not only does this passage underscore King's unyielding commitment to integration, but it also brings us full circle to his "Dimensions" sermons. Although, critiquing the advocates of Black Power, King is really making an appeal to all Americans to realize that the sole pursuit of the length of one's life comes at the expense of dominating others. Consequently, individuals and races need to recognize their interdependence and band together to collectively combat those forms of structural injustice that privilege some and inhibit others. Unfortunately, nearly five decades since King's death, the lack of true integration between the black and white races remains one of America's foremost challenges. Therefore, just as it was during King's lifetime, it is incumbent upon us all to do our part in transforming structural injustice.

**Chapter 4**

**Life's Final Common Denominator: The Importance of God and Death in King's Theory of Political Service**

*And yet they died nobly. They are the martyred heroines of a holy crusade for freedom and human dignity. And so this afternoon in a real sense they have something to say to each of us in their death…They say to us that we must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderers. Their death says to us that we must work passionately and unrelentingly for the realization of the American dream.*

In the last chapter, I explored various iterations of King's sermon, "The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life." Focusing on the first two dimensions—the length and the breadth—I laid out the moral argument for King's theory of political service. Again, King's theory of political service required that every individual take up his or her responsibility to serve humanity by collectively working to combat those structures of injustice that prohibit others from enjoying a free and equal standing in society. Even when working to secure justice for oneself, King's theory of service holds that one's efforts must always be other-oriented.

Despite King's belief that all individuals share responsibility for seeking justice, he also realized that the least well off in society oftentimes, by default, have to take up a larger share of the burden in the struggle for justice. However, it is no coincidence that the most subordinated members of society, also tend to possess the least amount of political efficacy. As discussed in the last chapter, one function of structures of injustice is that they tend to deprive groups of people the political, social and economic resources necessary to enjoy an equal standing in society. Also, the least well off are typically members of a group that is viewed as an "other" by those in power. At the very least, this means that if members of society are serious about working toward justice, then those in power will have to cultivate

a healthy ethos that recognizes the claim to equality by the least well off. But, it will also require that the subordinated populations recognize and then exercise their own latent political agency. The problem, though, is that the means to accomplish these two tasks may be at odds with one another. In other words, members of society must be careful that their efforts to cultivate a healthy ethos amongst those in power do not impede the attempts by the least well off to recognize and exercise their political agency.

One way to help members of society to cultivate a healthy ethos is by providing an account of humanity's relationship with a God figure in such a way that it animates a sense of care and concern for others. It is with this in mind that I want to turn to what King identified as the third dimension of a complete life in order to give it fuller treatment. For, it is clear that despite the largely secular reading that I provided of King's theory of political service in the last chapter, one cannot understand King's account of humanity without grappling with his faith in God. King underscored the centrality of God to his understanding of what it means to be human in his 1954 "Dimensions" sermon when he says, "Now one more dimension of the complete life still remains, viz the Height. The Height of life is its reach upward toward something distinctly greater than humanity: Man must rise above earth to that great eternal reality who is the source and end of life" (King, 2007, p. 154). By claiming that God is the source of life, King was saying that God created all of humanity and that God, therefore, stands in relation to all human beings as their Father. God's love for his creation, *agape* was also meant to be shared amongst his children.  As a result, King viewed all men and women as his brothers and sisters who commanded equal dignity and respect from him regardless of their skin color, religion or

nation of origin. Ultimately, King's sense of care and concern for others was animated by the role of God in his account of humanity.

Following from King's belief that God created all of humanity was his claim that God is the end of life. Here, he was suggesting that humans possessed a *telos* to seek God. As King put it, "We were made for God and we will be restless until we find rest in him" (King, 2007, p. 156). Admittedly, it is not clear what, if any, connection King's third dimension has with the quest for justice in his 1954 sermon. However, by his 1960's "Dimensions" sermon King began to tie the quest for justice with the quest for God. In response to a reporter who queried whether King feared the many threats made against his life in the struggle for justice, King recalls, "And I said to him, 'I have but one answer. First, I think that this cause is right. And since it is right I believe that God is with it because God is on the side of right. And therefore, I can go on with a faith that because God is with the struggle for the good life, victory is inevitable'" (King, 2007, p. 404). Not only was King suggesting that when individuals seek justice that they are moving ever closer to God, but he was also promoting faith in God as a source for the least well off to draw upon in their service to the nation and the world. By assuring the least well off that God was on the side of justice seekers, King meant to help them to recognize and to exercise their political agency; especially in the midst of seemingly insurmountable odds. In this way, King held that if individuals placed their faith in God they would not only have an account of humanity upon which to cultivate an ethos of care and concern for their peers, but that the least well off would have the necessary resources to begin and sustain the work needed to transform structures of injustice.

King's belief in God, although seemingly admirable, runs into two major complications that plague many theistic accounts of humanity. The first complication is that all humans do not believe in God. The second complication is that the presence of a God figure in King's account of humanity, while useful in extending a sense of care and concern, could also potentially lead to oppression of the most vulnerable populations. For instance, even though those who draw upon the Christian God as a source of sustenance may claim to love all of humanity, they may also marginalize those who do not uphold certain Christian norms and are therefore *othered* with the label of "sinner." In response to the fact that not all humans believe in a God, scholars in contemporary political theory have suggested that we explore ways of conceptualizing humanity, which do not require a belief in God, but that can still cultivate a healthy ethos amongst fellow human beings. Theorists such as Stephen K. White (2009), Judith Butler (2004) and William Connolly (1991) all offer accounts of humanity that view human beings as being equally subjected to death, violence and/or mourning in a way that could potentially form the basis for a sense of equality amongst all of humanity. The goal is to provide a means and motivation for humans to resist the urge to label fellow humans as an "other" that is somehow different and therefore not deserving of equal dignity and respect.

Although these accounts provide some promise in the goal of animating the moral reach of non-theists, they do not evade the second complication. For, they tend to focus upon those individuals for whom life is seen as a project to master, and therefore could benefit from coming to grips with the limits that death imposes on all humans. These accounts rarely consider the phenomenological dimensions of finitude from the perspective of those for whom death is viewed less as a distant contingency, but rather as something

that is imminent and therefore potentially (if not actually) politically debilitating. I have in mind those populations who are on the receiving end of lethal violence that is employed with the aim of purposefully disconnecting them from the rest of society. For these peoples it is the very foreknowledge of their potential death that is meant to extinguish all forms of their political agency and to drive a wedge between them and others. Consequently, the use of finitude as a basis for equality amongst all human beings, while a plausible alternative to a theistic account of humanity, may only serve to further marginalize those who live under the threat of violence.

In the first section of the paper I explore White's use of finitude as potential source of equality. Drawing upon the experience of black Americans who live under the constant threat of violence at the hands of white Americans, I go on to point to the limitations of White's use of finitude. Next, by placing him into conversation with King I point to some lessons that scholars such as White can learn from King's responsible use of agency as a means to balance against the potentially deleterious effects of his use of finitude. By reading King and White in dialogue, I show how King can enhance the way in which finitude is conceptualized and discussed so that it is not debilitating to those populations living under the fear of death, and in a manner which helps them to recognize and exercise their political agency.

**Finitude's Political Salience**

As technology and international trade continue to contribute to the globalization of the world, citizens of liberal democracies are increasingly interacting with individuals who are conceived of as an "other." This has led political theorist Stephen K. White to chime in on the ongoing discussion about whether or not non-theists have the philosophical

underpinnings necessary to extend their commitments of dignity, equality and respect to all human beings beyond their geographic and cultural borders. In particular, White worries about the theistic critique, which claims that "if the liberal constellation of dignity, equality, and respect arrayed around the value of autonomous agency is felicitous, then it possesses that quality only because of an *unacknowledged* theism that haunts its basic assumptions (White, 2009, pp. 53-4).[10] This critique undoubtedly forces non-theists who uphold liberal principles to defend their account of humanity as an autonomous, capacious agent in which a God being is absent. The removal of God from the liberal non-theist's account of humanity has led theists to charge that these secular liberals[11] do not possess a robust enough source to fulfill their large commitments to human rights and global justice. This is a charge that White argues the liberal non-theist cannot dismiss as easily as they might think; rather, he encourages them to take seriously the theistic challenge, and ultimately offers his own non-theistic account of humanity.

For White, the ultimate importance of the theists' position is not just the philosophical challenge to liberalism that it poses, but, more importantly, the worries that non-theists lack the necessary motivational resources to help cultivate an ethos that would encourage citizens of liberal nation-states to extend their liberal commitments beyond their borders. According to White, the way non-theists conceptualize what it means to be human has profound socio-political implications. For as White notes, "… nontheists do owe the other agent respect, but this way of imagining the initial connectedness of human beings collapses merely into an imperative to back off from the other and her projects. This by itself is not an effective enough source of connectedness." He continues, "It embodies

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[10] For more on the theistic critique see: Jeremy Waldron (2002) and Charles Taylor (1989).
[11] Hereafter referred to simply as "liberal."

nothing that enlivens the sort of ethos of attentiveness and concern for the other that can coax our moral imagination across cultural and geographic borders" (White, 2009, pp. 56-7). White holds that non-theists need to provide an account of humanity that places limits upon the actions that agents can take against one another while also providing the means to cultivate an enlivened ethos of concern for others resulting from the connectedness of agents.

The question remains: if there is no God being in the liberal non-theist's figuration of humans then what sources, if any, can provide them with the experience of a sincere sense of connectedness with other individuals—a connectedness that affirms that the other is truly worthy of equality, respect and dignity? White argues that liberal non-theists have relied too heavily upon the human capacity for agency[12] as a means to accord all men equal respect and dignity. The problem is that the liberal figuration of man as an autonomous, capacious being fails to produce a convincing claim to human equality. Once liberals are able to identify a property that establishes a being's initial claim to equal treatment, then they have to explain why it is that individuals who possess more than the threshold do not warrant claims to inequality. For instance, as Jeremy Waldron (2002) points out, if we take humans' capacity to reason as an example, we have to acknowledge the disparate variation in individuals' abilities to reason. If this is the case, then it only follows that our assessment of the dignity and moral worth of individuals should also vary. From this it is not clear that the liberal non-theistic account of man has succeeded in establishing a justifiable basis for the claim of the equality of all human beings.

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[12] White defines agency as, "the capacity to frame and potentially revise a life plan" (UC 145).

To be clear, White does not think that all is wrong with the non-theistic account of human beings. In fact, he likes that liberal non-theists configure humans as beings who possess agency. Agreeing with human rights scholar, Michael Ignatieff (2001), White argues that seeing beings as agents allows us to view the other as a rights-bearing individual and not merely as an individual who is dependent upon our beneficence. White, though, would like for liberal non-theists, in addition to figuring humans as capacious agents, to add another layer to their account of humanity. His suggestion is that we conceptualize humans as being subject to mortality (White, 2009, p. 65).

White views mortality as a basis of equality since it is the one condition that all humans must equally face. The particular emphasis lies in the fact that we are "consciously subject to death in a world without transcendent guarantees." White suggests that when humans are conceptualized solely as capacious beings, then their aim is to triumph over their entanglement with other beings. This one-sided push for sovereignty over one's dependence on others can be counteracted, White says, by purposefully grappling with our own finitude. White offers, "When we allow the foreknowledge of mortality to have a persistent vividness in our life, it continually highlights the deception involved in the self-image of untrammeled capaciousness." He continues:

> The task at hand is to reconfigure the pain and anxiety that we feel in the face of our dependence on the other. In this reworking, our discomfort becomes the occasion not of immediate flights or hostility but rather of a more pervasive feeling of our mortality, our non-sovereignty. In short, our everyday experiences of finitude would be felt, as least partially, as persistent reminders of our mortality. The cultivation of such an ethos would aim at interrupting and slackening the momentum of the self that would be sovereign. By 'ethos' I simply mean a consciously cultivated, cognitive and affective disposition that sustains a repertoire of ways of acting and reacting, continually bearing witness to or gesturing toward our mortality. This repertoire would function as a quiet, but ever-present, companion to the bold figure of capacious agency (White, 2009, pp. 68-9).

The particular ethos that White promotes is one of "presumptive generosity." He describes presumptive generosity as a "disposition that neither automatically scripts the emergence or becoming of the other as alien and hostile nor flees from an encounter with it" (White, 2009, p. 69). In sum, he contends that the foreknowledge of one's death serves as a constant reminder that the quest for ultimate sovereignty over the human condition cannot be achieved; consequently, the capacious being must come to grips with his continued dependency upon others.

White is clear that the recognition of one's dependency upon others along with presumptive generosity will not sufficiently place limits on the actions of one against another; nor will it engender an ethos of concern for that other. At most it will help to engender a disposition that is not immediately hostile toward those who are different. However, White wants to take this figuration one step further. His particular emphasis on the fact that we are equally *subjected* to our knowledge of mortality is to introduce a connectedness of agents. White firmly holds that, "[f]or the nontheist who operates with both agency and subjection to mortality as her sources of the self…the rudiments of connectedness come to life quite differently. They are vivified through a cultivation of the *experience of* common *subjection*, rather than through a recognition that we *possess* the same *capacities or powers*" (White, 2008, pp. 161-2; italics in original). In essence, White views the experience of a common subjection to death as a means to achieve a connectedness that enlivens the sense of care and concern for others—one that is not present in the singular figuration of a capacious agent.

While White is correct to point out that liberals' reliance on the conceptualization of the capacious agent is insufficient, it must be noted that since he views himself as

speaking to those individuals who already possess a robust sense of their own agency, he takes this figuration for granted. But, what about those populations for whom the political capacity to frame and revise a life plan cannot simply be taken for granted? I have in mind those populations who have the extraordinary experience of being subject to mortality in a way that White calls "robust." He describes robustness as, "those moments of intense dread of death, which everyone experiences from time to time." He claims that these moments can be "thoroughly debilitating," and that they are "typically squeezed aside by more affirmative experiences of agency." A method he thinks places too much of a reliance upon capaciousness. Instead, he suggests, "We might figure it less as that before which we stand momentarily in intense dread and more as a burden under which we continually struggle, and for which we seek a mode of comprehension that embeds the awareness of that struggle in our everyday life as a countervailing force to the momentum we draw from our sense of ourselves as capacious agents" (White, 2009, p. 66). In the end, the goal is to balance these two sources.

It seems to follow from White's discussion, that there are moments when one should aim to affirm another's agency. In particular, for populations who experience lethal violence aimed at causing a chronically intense dread of death, affirming one's agency would not only be recommended, but may be necessary to mitigate the harmful effects of a robust sense of death. In the next section I want to show how King used finitude as a means to encourage the recognition and the exercising of agency amongst a population who experienced such violence.

**Integrating Bombingham**

When King, then president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, was invited in 1963 to participate in the efforts to desegregate certain sectors of Birmingham by the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, he knew it would be a volatile situation. King, personally, was no stranger to violence. By 1963 he had been stabbed, brutally assaulted, had his house bombed several times, and was subject to death threats on a daily basis. Yet, as a leader, he was asking others to put themselves in harm's way by participating in a campaign being carried out in one of the nation's most violent cities. In fact, Birmingham had become commonly referred to as "Bombingham" because of its numerous racially charged bombings. Many of these bombings took place in the Fountain Heights section, where black families had moved into a predominately white neighborhood, earning it the nickname of "Dynamite Hill." The most notorious of these racially charged bombings was that of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church (Garrow, 2004; McWhorter, 2001). The early morning blast killed four young girls—Denise McNair, Cynthia Wesley, Addie Mae Collins and Carole Robertson—ranging from ages eleven to fourteen as they attended Sunday school. Although their specific deaths sparked outrage all across the nation, it must be understood that this bombing took place in a context of systemic intimidation meant to extinguish blacks' capacity as political agents. In this section, I argue that in response to these potentially debilitating attacks King invoked the concept of finitude as a means to help the blacks of Birmingham remain active political agents.

Although Eugene "Bull" Connor, Birmingham's Public Safety Commissioner, rightfully garnered much attention for his willingness to deploy fire hoses and police dogs on peaceful marchers, his violence was purposefully manipulated by the leaders of the

Birmingham movement's push for desegregation. Certainly, his violence was meant to discourage blacks from exercising agency, but it was the movement's participants' very own agency that instigated his violence. The public marches of "Project C" (as the campaign in Birmingham was titled, in which "C" stood for confrontation) were staged in order to garner as much media attention and national outrage as possible (Garrow, 2004). The campaign's manipulation of the media meant that Connor's violence was, in some sense, welcomed.

What was perhaps most troubling about Connor was not so much the violence that he personally authorized, but his turning of a blind eye to violence used by other white citizens of Birmingham. Birmingham's systemic violence against those who sought to desegregate the city was well documented. An article published as early as 1960, in the *New York Times*, described how violence from extremists had silenced anyone who spoke up for desegregation, while another article in a national magazine referred to Birmingham as "A City in Fear" (as cited in Garrow, 2001, pp. 231-2). It is unclear how effective the violence deployed was in discouraging blacks from participating in Project C. Despite the threats, it is estimated that approximately 10% of Birmingham's total black population was directly involved in the Birmingham campaign (Garrow, 1989). However, the point remains that whites adopted lethal violence as a means to extinguish black political agency. Alabama governor, George Wallace, in an interview with the *New York Times* just weeks before the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, succinctly captured the whites' strategy. In response to a question about blacks' attempts to exercise their political agency, Wallace replied, "What this country needs is a few first-class funerals, and some political funerals, too" (as cited in Carter, 1995, p. 174)

For whites who held such views, they simply did not conceptualize blacks as humans, and therefore black Americans' deaths did not have moral significance. The best illustration of this position is that held by "Connie" Lynch. Lynch was a professional race baiter who made his living by offering speeches that reinforced white's resistance to blacks. Speaking just days after the bombing, Lynch made the following comments at a public rally in Florida:

> Someone said, 'Ain't it a shame that them little children was killed?' In the first place, they ain't little. They're fourteen or fifteen years old—old enough to have venereal diseases, and I'll be surprised if all of 'em didn't have one or more. In the second place, they weren't children. Children are little people, little human beings, and that means white people.
> There's little dogs and cats and apes and baboons and skunks and there's also little niggers. But they ain't children. They're just little niggers.
> And in the third place, it wasn't no shame they was killed. Why? Because, when I go out to kill rattlesnakes, I don't make no difference between little rattlesnakes and big rattlesnakes, because I know it is the nature of all rattlesnakes to be my enemies and to poison me if they can. So I'll kill 'em all, and if there's four less niggers tonight, then I say, 'Good for whoever planted the bomb!' We're all better off…I believe in violence, all the violence it takes either to scare the niggers out of the country or to have 'em all six feet under (as cited in Wade, 1987, p. 326).[13]

Lynch's speech embodies the existential threats that both blacks and whites posed to each other. To many whites, blacks' very existence—just as that of the rattlesnake—was viewed as a serious threat and, therefore, they believed that blacks needed to be exterminated. Although his views were extreme, they were a part of a larger system of violence called for by the Governor, condoned by the Public Safety Commissioner, and carried out by authorities and citizens alike. Consequently, for the black population of Birmingham living in such a violent climate, the idea that they could feel a sense of connectedness with their fellow whites by recognizing their equal subjection to death would have seemed like a preposterous proposition. This is why under the threat of such violence, I argue, that rather

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[13] Certainly, Lynch had a penchant for hyperbole, but it should be noted that immediately following his speech several black men who were found to be eavesdropping on the event were severely beaten.

than dwelling on their equal subjection to death, King needed to encourage the black population to recognize and exercise their political agency.

That King would seek to motivate blacks to become active political agents is thoroughly expected, especially as a leader in a movement predicated upon citizens exercising their rights to demonstrate for what is right. What is puzzling, though, is *how* he sought to motivate them. For his tactic was to lay blame on certain members of the black community for not attempting to integrate society. On the day of the bombing King was asked who killed the four little girls. Even before a formal investigation had been completed, it was obvious that whoever the culprit was, it was more than likely a white extremist. Anyone familiar with King would not have expected him to treat the bombing as an isolated incident, instead one would have expected his response to reflect that of a white attorney in Birmingham, Charles Morgan, who declared that the entire white community shared guilt for the bombing since they both tolerated and encouraged racial hatred (Branch, 1988, p. 891). King had already made a similar argument in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in which he charged that the white moderate, and not the Ku Klux Klan was the great stumbling blocks in black Americans' path to freedom. Furthermore, King sent a telegram to Governor Wallace declaring that there was blood on his hands in regards to these murders. Yet, contrary to these expectations, he publicly responded, "What murdered these four girls? The apathy and complacency of many Negroes who will sit down on their stools and do nothing and not engage in creative protest to get rid of this evil [system]" (as cited in Branch, 1988, p. 891).[14]

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[14] Branch indicates that King may have had G.A. Gaston, a resident of Birmingham and one of Alabama's wealthiest blacks, in mind when he made these comments

The idea that one would blame the victims of systemic racial violence for one of the most heinous crimes perpetrated against them appears to be counterproductive, if not outright disrespectful.  But this interpretation is too narrow and does not take into account how King utilized the threat of death as a means to motivate black Americans to exercise their political agency. In the last chapter, I explained how political theorist Iris Marion Young argues that assigning guilt for structural injustice to an individual or to a group absolves others of their responsibility. However, King was blaming inactive blacks for the bombing, precisely because he did not think that they were taking up their responsibility to combat the structural injustice of segregation in Birmingham. Recall, that he was addressing a population who had the unique experience of living under conditions in which lethal violence was being used as a means to forcefully disconnect them from others. Consequently, they experienced finitude in a way that was potentially debilitating. This is precisely the aim of those who deploy such lethal violence; they want the dread of death to become so robust that it causes their enemies to lose all sense of agency. Therefore, I am arguing that in order for the use of finitude to be politically salient under these circumstances it must be employed in a way that mitigates against those moments of intense dread. Understood in this way, it becomes clear that King is inverting the white extremist's use of the threat of death in order to get blacks to begin to, or, to continue to exercise their political agency. By denying them the label of victim, and by charging inactive blacks with the murder of the four little girls, he was, in essence, calling upon them to become political actors in the struggle for justice.

The logical conclusion of Lynch's aforementioned speech, declaring that blacks were not humans and, as a result, their lives were expendable, is that whites have dominion

over the lives of blacks and can decide when it is appropriate to preserve or to extinguish their lives. By extension, the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church had a logic of its own. In essence, the logic was as follows: if blacks persist in attempting to integrate society, then they will continue to be murdered. This was exactly the message that Wallace meant to get across when he called for a few high class funerals; and, it was one that blacks in Birmingham understood all too well. Knowing that in the aftermath of the bombing the subjection to death might possibly become debilitating for blacks, King sought to invert this logic. Instead of saying that if blacks persisted in attempting to integrate society, then, they would continue to die, he was proclaiming that *unless* blacks continued to work toward integrating society they would continue to die. In other words, black's efforts to integrate society were not the cause of the bombing; rather, it was their lack of effort to integrate society that had caused the deaths.

Culpability by lack of action implies capacious agency. For instance, no one would find a dog culpable for failing to do more with its life. This is because one does not typically think of dogs as agents capable of envisioning a life plan and adhering to it in any meaningful way. By blaming blacks for the deaths of those who were murdered in the bombings, King was arguing that blacks possessed political agency, but that they were failing to exercise it. He was now calling on them to become political agents, and he believed that the way to do this was to work toward integrating Bombingham. In addition to inverting the white extremist's logic, King also inverts White's argument. Instead of utilizing all of humanity's equal subjection to death as a means to mitigate the potential dangers of a robust sense of agency, King used the threat of death as a means to mitigate the potential dangers of a robust sense of death.

It is important to note that even though King was blaming black Americans in order to encourage them to become politically engaged, he was not absolving whites' of their responsibility to work toward combating structural injustice. In the next section I will provide a reading of King's eulogy for three of the four young girls who were killed in the church bombing. There, I will argue that King's eulogy was crafted in a manner that aimed to both underscore black political agency, while also seeking to move America beyond individual or group blame for the bombings. His goal was to shift the focus of the nation's attention back upon the structural conditions that bred violence and hate in the first place. I now turn to King's funeral oration.

**Integrating Death**

Thus far, I have argued that King's initial reaction to the bombings was to blame inactive members of the black community for the deaths in order to get them to exercise their political agency. However, the claim is not that in the face of such brutal violence, simply assigning blame to the black community would be enough to mitigate the effects of said violence. Recognizing this fact, at the funeral for three of the four young children who were killed, King drew upon his theistic account of humanity as a source of strength in the face of the imminent danger that came along with working to combat structural injustice. Just as he had in his "Dimensions" sermons, King assured the congregation that God is there for those engaged in service. What is unique about King's invocation of God during the funeral, however, is that he used the death of the four young children as evidence of God's presence in the lives of those who seek justice.

King opened his eulogy for those killed in the bombing, by playing up the fact that these "unoffending; innocent and beautiful" children were the "victims of one of the most

vicious, heinous crimes ever perpetrated against humanity" (King, 1986, p. 221). Yet, instead of conforming to the narrative that Denise, Carol, Cynthia and Addie Mae, were merely passive victims, King claimed that they "died nobly" as "martyred heroines of a holy crusade for freedom and dignity" (King, 1986, p. 221). King's transition from victimhood to heroism in his description of those who were murdered, signals his recognition that it was the young children's participation in the demonstrations that were largely responsible for breaking the back of segregation in the city. Recall, that King was resisting the white supremacists' attempts to suppress black political agency. Therefore, King was arguing that death in the struggle for justice should not be taken as an indication that God had abandoned black Americans. In fact, King made the case that the young girls were agents acting on God's behalf. As he explained, "God still has a way of wringing good out of evil" (King, 1986, p. 221). According to King, by dying in midst of a battle for justice, the children's death had the potential to "lead our whole Southland from the low road of man's inhumanity to man to the high road of peace and brotherhood." He continues, "These tragic deaths may lead our nation to substitute an aristocracy of character for an aristocracy of color. The spilt blood of these innocent girls may cause the whole citizenry of Birmingham to transform the negative extremes of a dark past into the positive extremes of a bright future" (King, 1986, p. 221).

King's use of such tentative language as "may," was meant to underscore the fact that his goal was to prod the entire nation into learning how to serve humanity like the young children. Through the actions and the deaths of Birmingham's youth, King was arguing that the youth were the agents responsible for initiating an action that could only be fully carried out if everyone else took up his or her responsibility to engage in political

service. Whereas King blamed inactive black Americans for the bombing during his initial remarks, he sought to call attention to the ways in which all Americans were responsible for the bombing because of their involvement, whether tacit or explicit, in the social processes that enabled racism to flourish. He did so by shifting the blame for the deaths unto the structures of injustice rather than onto any particular individual or group. King pointed out that the young, black, political agents "have something to say to us in their death" (King, 1986, p. 221). After going through a litany of various groups who might be considered blamable for the deaths, King put all of these aside, and, concluded, "They say to each of us, black and white, that we must substitute courage for caution. They say to us that we must be concerned not merely about WHO murdered them, but about the system, the way of life and the philosophy which PRODUCED the murderers." Invoking a symbol that was meant to call Americans to serve their nation by collectively working toward justice (see chapter two), King continues, "Their death says to us that we must work passionately and unrelentingly to make the American dream a reality" (King, 1963, p. 221; emphasis in original).

Notice, that King's eulogy for the three young girls, then, is not a complete departure from his initial response to the bombings. By positioning the young girls as political actors, King was still pointing to the ways in which emphasizing black agency, can serve as a means to mitigate the potentially debilitating effects the threat of violence posed to the black community. However, by claiming that the children had only initiated a form of action, King challenged the entire community to be the finishers of this action. This is why King shifts the nation's attention to the overall structure in which the bombing took place; because everyone was somehow involved in allowing these structures to

flourish. As a consequence, King argued that it was everyone's responsibility to collectively serve the nation by combating this vicious form of structural injustice—known as segregation.

Quite understandably, King feared that blacks would not seek integration, and that they would lose faith in the uncooperative white Americans. Therefore, he implores, "We must not become bitter; nor must we harbor the desire to retaliate with violence." He continues, "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" (King, 1986, p. 222). Despite King's call for interracial collective action, he had to come to grips with the fact that, unlike those he was addressing with his initial remarks, he was now standing before an audience of black Americans who *were* involved in the struggle for justice, and who lost people they loved as a result. King felt compelled to encourage these community members to press on in the battle even if many white Americans presented themselves as uncooperative. He did so by stressing that all human beings are equally subjected to death. Notice, that earlier in this chapter I claimed that King sought to get blacks Americans to become political agents by blaming black Americans for the bombing in order to mitigate the potentially harmful effects of a robust sense of death; thereby inverting White's logic. Now, however, I appear to be suggesting that King is doing exactly what White initially calls for—stressing that all human beings are equally subjected to death. The key difference between what King was up to and that which White is recommending, is that King was stressing that all humans are equally subjected to death in order to *increase blacks' sense of their own agency*; whereas, given his audience, White's

aim was to stress the need for *humans who already have a robust sense of their own agency to recognize its limits*.

Given the fact that King and White are concerned with two different groups of people, who are facing two very different challenges, it is no surprise that they would discuss the imminence of death with two different goals in mind. King keenly perceived that his audience was composed of those who felt that they were disproportionately subjected to death at the hands of white Americans. Consequently, his goal was to remind black Americans that death is not reserved just for them. King most potently made this point as he attempted to assuage the pain of those who had the most reason to resent whites—the families of the heroines. As he turned his attention to them, King commenced by admitting the great difficulty that comes along with trying to console those struck by tragedy. However, instead of soothing the families by offering them pleasant platitudes, he emphasized that all humans must die. King offers:

> May I now say a word to you, the members of the bereaved families. It is almost impossible to say anything that can console you at this difficult hour and remove the deep clouds of disappointment which are floating in your mental skies. But I hope you can find a little consolation from the universality of this experience. Death comes to every individual. There is an amazing democracy about death. It is not aristocracy for some of the people, but a democracy for all of the people. Kings die and beggars die; rich men die and poor men die; old people die and young people die; death comes to the innocent and it comes to the guilty. Death is the irreducible common denominator of all men (King, 1986, p. 222).

Notice, that by stressing that all human beings are equally subjected to death, King was trying to encourage the family members to remain committed to the struggle for justice by highlighting that whites must ultimately die as well. In other words, he was rebuffing the white extremists' logic, which pointed to the deaths of the four young girls as evidence that white Americans possessed dominion over blacks' lives. In fact, King was arguing that

whites do not even possess complete dominion over their own lives. Instead, King articulated his belief that ultimately God is the only being with dominion over human life.

With this in mind, he explained to those in attendance, that for Christians, death is "an open door which leads man into life eternal." He implores, "Let this daring faith, this great invincible surmise, be your sustaining power during these trying days." Certainly, many of those attending the funeral agreed with King that life is "as hard as crucible steel." However, he reminded them that "through it all, God walks with us. Never forget that God is able to lift you from fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope, and transform dark and desolate valleys into sunlit paths of inner peace" (King, 1986, p. 222). In other words, as was noted at the outset of this chapter, King drew upon the third dimension of life as a source to sustain those who struggle for justice against the most overwhelming odds.

Undoubtedly, some will view the seemingly admirable goals of King's eulogy as tainted by its peroration. King ends his remarks by offering the following observation about the nature of the young children's death: "Where they died and what they were doing when death came will remain a marvelous tribute to each of you and an eternal epitaph to each of them. They died not in a den or dive nor were they hearing or telling filthy jokes at the time of their death. They died within the sacred walls of the church after discussing a principle as eternal as love" (King, 1986, p. 223). King's description of a church in contrast to a dive or a den, is an example of the separation that often accompanies Christians' cloak of holiness in contradistinction to others they deem as sinners. A theistic account of humanity, while a potentially positive source that unites and sustains people in the struggle for justice, simultaneously serves to marginalize members of the community who do not follow—in the case of Christianity—the dictates of biblical scriptures. In the next chapter,

I show how King actually used the notion of sin as a means to form a sense of solidarity amongst all human beings, and not as a wedge to be driven between those who are deemed pure and those who are stained by sin.

**Chapter 5**
**A Call to Conscience: The Importance of Guilt and Sin to Martin Luther King, Jr's Theory of Political Service**

*Here is the true meaning and value of compassion and nonviolence when it helps us to see the enemy's point of view, to hear his questions, to know his assessment of ourselves. For from his view we may indeed see the basic weaknesses of our own condition, and if we are mature, we may learn and grow and profit from the wisdom of the brothers who are called the opposition.*
-Martin Luther King, Jr.

Throughout this project, I have been arguing that Martin Luther King, Jr's theory of political service called for Americans to collectively join together in the struggle to combat structures of injustice. However, King's theory of political service also required that individuals cultivate an ethos of care and concern for others. King worried that if those who engage in political service do not develop an appropriate ethos, then they may inadvertently replicate domineering power dynamics in their interactions with others. For instance, in an essay published posthumously, King encourages white Americans to join the civil rights movement, but cautioned that they do so in a humble manner. He observes that many white Americans "joined our movement with a kind of messianic faith that they were going to save the Negro and solve all of his problems very quickly." Rather than respecting those whom they were helping, he claims that white Americans tended to be "aggressive and insensitive to the opinions and abilities of the black people with whom they were working; this has been especially true of students" (King, 1986, p. 316). King explains that these young people possessed a form of "white paternalism," which prevented them from knowing "how to work in a supporting, secondary role." Rather than empowering the oppressed, which should be the goal of any efforts aimed at transforming unjust structures, the white students, King charges, further exaggerated their peers' feelings of "black inferiority" (King, 1986, p. 316).

King's observations about well-meaning, white students force us to confront the fact that even when people engage in political service, they may do so in a way that does not empower the least well off. Therefore, the collective pursuit of justice requires the cultivation of an ethos that genuinely seeks to disabuse oneself of the urge to dominate others. In the last chapter I discussed how White sought to develop such an ethos by considering how all humans are equally subjected to death. Although, I raised some concerns about how the dread of death might have an overall negative impact upon particular communities, I want to model White's use of "negative solidarity" to explain how King conceptualized guilt and sin in his theory of political service. Negative solidarity is a means by which we can create a sense of care and concern by acknowledging how human beings are equally subjected to a negative or limiting experience. The upshot of thinking about a sense of equality based upon a limiting aspect of the human condition— as opposed to an affirming experience—is that it can work to rein in an individuals' urge to dominate others. Modeling White's use of negative solidarity, I argue that King did not use the concept of sin as a means to exclude or to marginalize others by labeling them as sinners; rather, I contend, that sin served as a means to form a bond of negative solidarity amongst all of humanity.

Gaining clarity about the role of sin in King's thought, also helps to illuminate King's conceptualization of guilt. Thus far, I have been focusing on King's understanding of responsibility, but I have yet to explore the role of guilt in King's thought. This is in large part because I used Iris Marion Young's social connection model to flesh out King's theory of service. Young, however, is far more interested in getting all individuals to take up their responsibility for combating structural injustice, than she is in ascribing blame to

individual actors. King, though, assigns guilt more freely than would Young. These differing views on the assignment of guilt, raise questions about the role of guilt in King's thought. In particular, it must be asked whether or not King's willingness to blame others hinders collective action aimed at working toward combating structural injustice. In other words, does the use of guilt drive a wedge between people who could or should be potential allies?

It is my contention that King's conception of guilt is akin to the notion of sin in his account of humanity. Ultimately, I argue that the way in which guilt and sin function in King's thought is meant to form a common identity amongst human beings rather than as a means to divide individuals, as might be supposed. I execute this argument by beginning with a discussion of three different ways that King assigns guilt for racism in American society. In the next section, I then show how King's conception of sin can be seen as a means to form a sense of connectedness amongst all humans in a manner that requires individuals to disabuse themselves of the urge to dominate others. After teasing out the parallels between guilt and sin in King's thought, I argue that King used a sense of shared guilt to get all Americans to question "our" involvement in the Vietnam War.

**Guilt in King's thought**

In chapter three I argued that King's use of the Good Samaritan parable has similarities to Young's social connection model of responsibility for justice. In particular, they both have a shared understanding as to who is responsible for combating structural injustice—everyone. Although similar, King differs from Young in that he continuously assigns both individual and shared guilt for structural injustice. Young is not opposed to assigning guilt for those specific wrongs where it can be easily determined that some

person or group acted in a way that was meant to cause an intentional harm. However,

since Young's social connection model is forward looking, she is far more concerned with

making a case for why it is that we are all responsible for working towards correcting

structural injustice, than she is in assigning blame to any particular party. Young's position

is, in part, derived from her belief that: "Blaming some agents implies absolving others"

(Young, 2011, p. 180). It seems that Young reaches this conclusion because she limits the

assignment of guilt only to those instances where an individual can be deemed liable

because his or her *action* directly harms another. She explains, "Responsibility in that

liability sense should be reserved for persons who can be specifically identified as causing

the harm, usually knowing what they are doing." (Young, 2011, p. 104).

Yet, as Martha Nussbaum points out in the Foreword to Young's *Responsibility for*

*Justice*, there are instances when assigning guilt to others may be productive. She offers:

> [T]here is another way of ascribing guilt that is general: it says that all of us (or almost all) participate in a wasteful lifestyle, and we all need to change. This is the sort of guilt that Martin Luther King Jr. skillfully evoked in his white audience, when he spoke of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence as a 'bad check' that has come back marked 'insufficient funds,' or as a 'promissory note' on which the United States has 'defaulted so far as her citizens of color were concerned' (Young, 2011, p. xxiv).

Nussbaum goes on to note that even though King assigned guilt to white Americans, he did

not harp upon it. "But," she explains, "it was important that the ascription of guilt was part

of the mix, for the situation of black Americans was bad, and white Americans, through

their inaction and negligence, even if they were not malicious ringleaders, bore the guilt

for that ongoing situation, one hundred years after Lincoln signed the Emancipation

Proclamation" (Young, 2011, p. xxiv). Nussbaum says that while King did ascribe a certain

form of guilt to white Americans, he did not harp on this guilt. Yet, she still maintains that

without assigning guilt, "his ["I Have a Dream"] speech would have had less power to

motivate constructive engagement than it in fact did" (Young, 2011, p. xxiv). Nussbaum's underlining point is that one may use guilt in a responsible manner that actually spurs others to action.

Here, I want to explore three ways that King assigned guilt for racism in American society. In order to do so, I want to return to the discussion of racialized residential segregation that I began in chapter three. Recall, that King viewed ghettoes all across America as a complex form of structural injustice, which worked to oppress black Americans while privileging white Americans. To King, an example of this systemic oppression could be found in Chicago's school system, which only spent $266 per pupil for its black ghetto dwellers compared to nearly $450 to $900 on its white pupils attending suburban schools. In *Where Do We Go from Here* King argues that these disparities were evidence that "the system conspires to perpetuate inferior status and to prepare the Negro for those tasks that no one else wants, hence creating a mass of unskilled, cheap labor for the society at large" (King, 1968, p. 122). King understood that by herding blacks into ghettos, white Americans were enabled both to perpetuate blacks' subordinate status and then to justify their poor treatment of blacks. He notes, "Already in childhood their lives are crushed mentally, emotionally and physically, and then society develops the myth of inferiority to give credence to its lifelong patterns of exploitation, which can only be defined as our system of slavery in the twentieth century" (King, 1968, p. 122).

King's claim that the exploitation that accompanies residential segregation is the "system of slavery in the twentieth century," brings into sharper focus what Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton meant when they claimed that: "Residential segregation is the institutional apparatus that supports other racially discriminatory processes and binds them

together into a coherent and uniquely effective system of racial subordination" (Massey and Denton, 1993, p. 8). This is because if you were black living in a ghetto, not only were you at a disadvantage when it came to what schools you could attend or what jobs were available to you, but you were at a disadvantage in almost every facet of life. King cites how, just because of where they resided, blacks were forced to "pay more rent in the substandard slums of Lawndale than the whites must pay for modern apartments in the suburbs" (King, 1968, pp. 122-123). And for those blacks who were fortunate enough to be in a position to purchase a house, King explains that a "color tax is applied in every step of the transaction." Right off the bat, the price of the house would be inflated since blacks were forced to live in closed communities causing the demand to far outstrip the supply. "Next it is applied by the banking and lending institutions, who declare the Negro a poor credit risk and charge him exorbitant interest rates or refuse him traditional loans and thereby force him to buy homes on 'contract'" (King, 1968, pp. 123-124).[15]

In addition to higher rents and mortgages, King highlighted the fact that black ghetto residents were also charged five to twelve cents more than residents of suburbs for the same consumer goods. Despite charging more for groceries than suburban markets, the stores in the ghettos were often stocked with spoiled vegetables and meats—depriving blacks of the nutrition necessary to lead healthy lives. King explained how the institution of residential segregation was so effective at exploiting black Americans, thusly:

> This exploitation is possible because so many of the residents of the ghetto have no personal means of transportation. It is a vicious circle. You can't get a job because

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[15] Unable to secure home mortgages from lending institutions, black bought homes on "contract" from speculators who would buy homes cheaply and sell them to blacks at inflated prices. Black Americans would make a down payment for a property, pay taxes, insurance and any maintenance for the property, but the catch was that the title remained with the speculator, who would not turn it over until the house was paid for in full. The speculator could, and often did, evict the potential home owner if they missed a single payment.

you are poorly educated, and you must depend on welfare to feed your children; but if you receive public aid in Chicago, you cannot own property, not even an automobile, so you are condemned to the jobs and shops which are closest to your home. Once confined to this isolated community, one no longer participates in a free economy, but is subject to price-fixing and wholesale robbery by many of the merchants of the area (King, 1968, p. 123).

Stated another way, King's claim is that black Americans were forced to participate in a series of social processes that were explicitly designed to exploit them by racist whites. In other words, King is assigning guilt to white Americans who constructed and maintained America's ghettos by creating racist policies and engaging in racist practices. Therefore, King, in this first instance, is ascribing guilt directly to white Americans for their racist actions.

However, another way that black ghettos are maintained is by the phenomenon known as "white flight." White flight, of course, is the mass exodus of whites from previously all-white neighborhoods in response to a black resident moving onto their particular block. A generous understanding of this phenomenon, posits that when a black American resident moves into a home on a previously all-white block, all of the white home owners are faced with a dilemma. For instance, each individual home owner can claim that he or she is not a racist, and insist that he or she is very much committed to equality for black Americans. However, each home owner must also fear that the other neighbors may be racist. As a result, the neighbors may sell their property for a low price; thereby driving down everyone else's property value.[16] Consequently, each home owner will attempt to beat his or her neighbors to the market; purportedly, not out of racism, but solely because of the potential decrease in home property values. The whites who flee these areas will more than likely purchase new homes in areas that will increase in value, while

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[16] This fear was preyed upon by unscrupulous realtors in the practice of "blockbusting."

the homes that they sold to black Americans will depreciate in value. The end result will be a widening gap in the wealth of the two races.

In opposition to this understanding of white flight, King assigns a second form of guilt. In this instance, King charges that the white American home owners are guilty of a form of subconscious racism when they sell their homes in response to the presence of a new black resident. King observes, "The potential presence of a Negro in a previously all-white neighborhood often arouses hostility and panic selling" (King, 1968, p. 125). Despite this fact, King says, "Many whites who oppose open housing would deny that they are racists." To justify their positions, whites "turn to sociological arguments—the crime rate in the Negro community, the lagging cultural standard, the fear that their schools will become academically inferior, the fear that property values will depreciate—in order to find excuses for their opposition" (King, 1968, p. 126). King denounces the argument that blacks are the cause of property depreciation. He cites several studies which suggest "that it is usually the other way around. When Negroes move into a neighborhood and whites refuse to flee, property values are more likely to increase." He continues, "It is only when blockbusting takes place and whites begin to move out that property values decrease" (King, 1968, p. 126). If it is true that property values actually increase when blacks move into an all-white neighborhood, then why is it that white Americans would participate in white flight and oppose open housing? King answers, "However much it is denied, however many excuses are made, the hard cold fact is that many white Americans oppose open housing because they unconsciously, and often consciously, feel that the Negro is innately inferior, impure, depraved and degenerate." He succinctly concludes, "It is a

contemporary expression of America's long dalliance with racism and white supremacy" (King, 1968, pp. 126-7).

In order to understand King's claim that this is a contemporary expression of racism, consider what social psychologists call "aversive racism." Aversive racists tend to uphold principles of egalitarianism when there is a presence of strong social norms against racial discrimination, while "the non-conscious feelings and beliefs that aversive racists also possess will produce discrimination in situations in which normative structure is weak, when the guidelines for appropriate behavior are unclear, when the basis for social judgment is vague, or when one's actions can be justified or rationalized on the basis of some factor other than race" (Peason, Dovidio, and Gaertner, 2009, p. 5). In other words, white individuals can participate in social processes in ways that seemingly do not violate social norms against racial discrimination, even as they discriminate against black Americans.

While King is forthright in his charge that whites were guilty of subconscious racism, it is unclear whether or not Young's conception of shared responsibility, as presented in her social connection model, provides us with the means to charge white Americans with being racist for fleeing their communities. The example of white flight would appear to comport with Young's description of contemporary structural injustice in which each individual is acting within the social norms, and yet producing an outcome that we would consider unjust. If I have read Young correctly, then she would charge that each individual—black or white—is responsible for correcting this form of structural injustice, but that it is *possible* that nobody is guilty of any specific wrongdoing. Yet, it would seem

that in the case of structural injustice, we would want the means to proactively assign guilt, rather than to reactively call for shared responsibility.

To understand this point, consider that another important feature of Young's conception of contemporary structural injustice is that one is not responsible for correcting a form of structural injustice that does not yet exist. Consequently, it would not be until we can establish that the pattern of home selling caused by white flight has contributed to black Americans' continued diminution in relation to white Americans that we can then claim that anybody has an obligation to correct the outcome of the rapid sell off. Notice, that at that point it is not clear what the remedy would be. Particularly, since Young, in *Responsibility for Justice*, provides us with no real means to critique each individual's decision to sell his or her home because each individual purportedly sold his or her home for purely economic purposes. Instead she claims, "Those who participate by their actions in producing and reproducing structural injustice are usually minding their own business and acting within accepted norms and rules. They bear responsibility for unjust outcomes, which they may regret, without being specifically at fault" (Young, 2011, p. 106).

As we can see, King ascribes guilt to individual white Americans in two ways. First, he charges that whites who engage in practices that are purposefully meant to subordinate black Americans are guilty of a form of racism. Secondly, he contends that whites can be guilty of a form of subconscious racism that also works to subordinate black Americans. However, King goes on to assign guilt in a third manner. In his 1968 sermon, "Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution," King proclaims, "And I can see nothing more urgent than for America to work passionately and unrelentingly—to get rid of the disease of racism." He continues, "Something positive must be done, everyone must share in the guilt

as individuals and institutions. The government must certainly share the guilt, individuals must share the guilt, even the church must share the guilt" (King, 1988, p. 270). Unlike the other two forms of guilt, King's shift of guilt to the entire community seemingly undermines the potential benefits of singling out white Americans for their role in racism. Articulating Hannah Arendt's views on collective guilt, Young says, "Guilt loses its meaning if applied to a whole group or community related by association to a wrong. 'Where all are guilty,' [Arendt] says, 'nobody is. Guilt, unlike responsibility, always singles out; it is strictly personal'" (Young, 2011, p. 76).

However, I want to suggest that guilt need not always be personal. Instead, I posit that there are instances in which a sense of shared guilt is necessary for building a coalition for progressive politics. I agree with Young that the language of guilt and blame "often impedes discussion that will end in collective action, because it expresses a spirit of resentment, produces defensiveness, or focuses people more on themselves than on the social relations they should be trying to change" (Young, 2011, p. 114). In other words, by charging that someone is blameworthy for something, one lessens the possibility of joining forces with that person in order to enact the change necessary to combat structures of injustice. In this way, I see the language of guilt and blame, as functioning similar to the language of sin in Christianity. That is, the language of sin, like guilt implies that someone is blameworthy for their actions or inactions. In fact, one often charges another of being guilty of committing a sin. Therefore, the language of sin and guilt can damage efforts aimed at collective action by driving a wedge between those who wish to join forces. In the next section, I show how King's conception of human beings as being forever entangled

in sin, parallels his use of guilt. Ultimately, my claim is that King's use of sin and guilt was meant to create a sense of shared identity rather than as a means to divide.

**King's Conception of Sin**

Recently, the scholar Michael G. Long made headlines when he claimed, "Dr. King never publicly welcomed gays at the front gate of his beloved community. But he did leave behind a key for them—his belief that each person is sacred, free and equal to all…others" (Blake, 2012). Meanwhile, others believe that King's activism for democratic inclusion was tempered by his Christian commitments. This is exemplified by Bernice King's—Martin King's daughter—suggestion that he "did not take a bullet for same-sex marriage" (Blake, 2012). What these opposing positions, which are attributed to King over a contemporary civil rights issue, point to is the seemingly contrasting nature of King's Christian beliefs. In one sense his Christian beliefs provide the basis for his theory of service, which champions social justice for the oppressed. Yet, they also appear to reinforce patriarchal, heterosexual and other domineering norms that work further to oppress others.

Political theorist, George Shulman (2008), helps to explain why King's theistic beliefs should be a point of concern in our contemporary political moment. Although, Shulman recognizes that King invokes a prophetic form of Christianity to encourage the oppressed to become agents in their struggle against domination, he also expresses some wariness about King's tendency to "moralize politics" and black agency in ways that are problematic (Shulman, 2008, p. 106) According to Shulman, King's moralization of politics required that the "sinner" seek a form of salvation that was found in his trope of rebirth, "which posits a *pure* condition to be reached; an 'after' that redeems an injured, subordinated, impure 'before'; and a 'higher' that redeems a 'lower' of particularity,

aggression, desire—of sin" (Shulman, 2008, p. 128). In other words, by naming certain actions as sin, and therefore certain actors as sinners, King seemingly contributes to the divisions between groups of people by defining one's identity over and against an "other," who was labeled a sinner and who therefore needed to be purified.

Shulman's reading of King helps him to form a contrast between King and James Baldwin, of whom he says, he "also speaks of redemption, but not of rebirth. We do not *purify* ourselves of corruption (by sinful impulses, unjust conduct, or idolatrous culture) to *recover* a prior purity, first principles, or a lost revolutionary treasure." He goes on to claim that "Rebirth implies transcending a historical embodiment at once carnal and social, whereas redemption for Baldwin is (generated by) 'accepting' (*wrestling with* rather than *purifying*) our incompletion and abiding need for others, our willful partiality toward them and obscurity to ourselves, our suffering as embodied, mortal, historical beings" (Shulman, 2008, p. 133; emphasis in original).

Whereas Baldwin encourages acceptance of the human condition, Shulman reads King's thought as one that teaches the importance of overcoming evil by purifying oneself in order to achieve salvation. More specifically, as evidence of King's drive to subordinate the lower to the higher in an effort to purify oneself, Shulman claims that King closets his sexual life. "For he is a *prophet* who lives and dies for the *redemption* of human desire in the love of the other; his office and persona require him to embody the righteousness that elevates the base into the sublime, the carnal into the moral." Therefore, King cannot admit to his carnal desires for, "impurity discredits the authority of the prophet by reducing him to unredeemed particularity." More important for our purposes is Shulman's claim that

"Such unmasking also subverts King's political project by staining the redemptive universalism he (and blacks) must exemplify" (Shulman, 2008, p. 133).

Shulman is correct that there are moments in King's thought where he discusses sin as a personal transgression that one must seek to overcome. In a 1965 sermon, King told his Ebenezer Baptist Church congregation, "Each of us is two selves, and the great burden of life is to always try to keep the higher self in command. Don't let the lower self take over…Every now and then you'll be unfaithful to those that you should be unfaithful to" (As quoted in Garrow, 2004). Here, King's use of sin as something that is debasing, has the potential to be oppressive if ascribed to another. However, King's understanding of sin was more complex than just viewing it as a set of biblical dictates that draw a line between the saint and the sinner. Instead, King understood sin as a fundamental aspect of what it means to be a human living in society.

The complexity of King's notion of sin is clearly seen in one of his early sermons, entitled "Man's Sin and God's Grace."[17]  In this sermon, King observes that even "the saint always recognizes that he's a sinner, and the worst sinner in the world is the man who feels that he isn't a sinner. That is the point at which he's the greatest sinner" (King, 2007, p. 386). King, citing Reinhold Niebuhr (1960), grants that if an individual was alone in the world, it is possible that she or he could seriously mitigate her or his sinful behavior. However, as he often does, King moved the issue beyond the individual to the larger social processes in which all human beings are involved. He explains, "But you know this thing of sin grows even worse when we go out to the social dimensions of it, when we pass from

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[17] The sermon was delivered circa 1954-1960, but the precise date is unknown.

the person to the social" (King, 2007, p. 386). King sums up his understanding of the

interplay between, sin, society and the human condition thusly:

> Man can never escape evil in his life. He is a part of the structure of society and so he must be a part of all the greed in society, he's a part of all the wars of society, and even if he's a pacifist, he's still contributing to the very thing that he's revolting against. This is the tragedy of collective and social life—that man *never* gets out of sin because he's caught up in society, and he can't get out of society because if he got out of that he wouldn't be man (King, 2007, p. 387; emphasis in original).

Put simply, for King, to be a human is to be a sinner. Therefore, in King's thought, the

label of "sinner" is not a means to define oneself over and against another, but rather it is

a label that confirms one's common humanity with others.

Notice, though, that King is suggesting that human sin is something that humans

cannot escape as long as they are connected to human society. This is an important feature

of King's conception of sin, for it provides a potential basis to cultivate an ethos necessary

for a progressive political coalition. To understand why, consider Charles M. Payne's

discussion of the political activist and thinker Ella Baker. Payne queries, "How shall we

deal with the differences and disagreements among ourselves, real or imagined, without

alienating one another" (Payne, 895)? He observes that this question is an important, but

underappreciated aspect of Baker's thinking on social change. He explains:

> Products of the society we wish to change, we carry within ourselves some of its worse tendencies, including tendencies that will lead to self-aggrandizing and exploitative relationships. Once, in the context of an argument within SNCC over who had the right to participate in the movement, Baker said, 'We need to penetrate the mystery of life and perfect the mastery of life and the latter requires understanding that human beings are human beings.' Unless we do a better job of responding to the human contradictions and weaknesses of the people we work with, we are likely to continue to create politics that are progressive in the ideas expressed but disempowering in the way individuals expressing those ideas relate to one another" (Payne, 896).

Like King, Baker recognizes that as humans we can never fully remove ourselves from the

worse aspects of society. Yet, the goal is to cultivate an ethos that is responsive to

difference by recognizing that the contradictions and weaknesses of others are facts of the human condition. Just as others are a jumble of contradictions and weaknesses, it is imperative that individuals realize that the same is true of themselves. It is only with this recognition of the commonality of all of humanity that one can begin the process of disabusing oneself of the tendency to dominate others.

The key to cultivating such an ethos, is to move beyond the belief that one can ever fully expunge oneself of all of society's ills. In others words, one can never reach a state of purity. In a sermon delivered only a month before his death, one sees King openly wrestling with human incompletion in the face of finitude, in a manner that is very similar to how Shulman discusses Baldwin's understanding of acceptance. In his aptly titled sermon, "Unfulfilled Dreams," King says, "Salvation isn't reaching the destination of absolute morality, but it's being in the process and on the right road" (King, 1998). King's emphasis upon the idea of salvation as being a process is meant to stress the fact that humans can never achieve purity—especially against the backdrop of their own finitude. For this reason, King did not have to mask his sins to preserve the "redemptive universalism" that he sought to exemplify, as Shulman suggests. Instead, for King, exemplifying the possibility of redemption meant looking within and affirming that one is not above the weaknesses that define the human condition. Consequently, King openly embraced his sinfulness in an act of unity with others. "I don't know this morning about you, but I can make a testimony. You don't need to go out this morning saying that Martin Luther King is a saint. Oh, no. I want you to know this morning that I'm a sinner like all of God's children. But I want to be a good man" (King, 1998). It's important to note that,

just like salvation, being a "good man" did not mean having reached a purified destination; instead, it simply meant being on the right road.

We can now see that when King calls for a shared sense of guilt for the racism that exists in America, he is not saying that each member of society is racist, but, that no member can escape the sin that is racism. This is because "the disease of racism permeates and poisons a whole body politic." Therefore, as was mentioned earlier, King saw "nothing more urgent than for America to work passionately and unrelentingly—to get rid of the disease of racism" (King, 1986, p. 270). The first step, King believed, was for each individual to acknowledge their share of the guilt. As Nussbaum notes, in a manner similar to Baker, acknowledging one's guilt may be helpful in conducting a form of self-examination that can mitigate the urge to dominate others. "It seems to me that it's only when we identify and work against our own narcissism, our selfish anxiety, and our desire to lord it over others that we can truly turn toward others, somewhat more free of those powerful impediments" (Young, 2011, p. xxv). Without every American acknowledging their share of the guilt for America's racism, King feared that the drive to dominate others would continue to expand outwards as it had in the case of the war in Vietnam. In the next section I demonstrate how King drew upon a shared sense of guilt for the war in Vietnam as a way to get all Americans to cultivate a healthy ethos.

**A Time to Break Silence**

It may surprise some to know that, even though "A Time to Break Silence" is widely viewed as King's landmark speech on the war in Vietnam, it was delivered two years after he first spoke out against the nation's military actions in Vietnam. Despite initially raising his voice against the war as early as 1965, King eventually muted his

criticisms in response to the overwhelming negative reactions he received. In 1967, when he finally determined that the horrors in Vietnam were too great to bite his tongue any longer, King acknowledged his past fears: "I want you to know that my mind is made up. I backed up a little when I came out in 1965. My name then wouldn't have been written in any book called 'Profiles of Courage'" (As cited in Garrow, 2004, p. 564). Having overcome the betrayal of his silence, by the time that King ascended to the famous pulpit of New York's Riverside Church, he explained that his speech had been tailored to only one audience and that he had a singular focus: "Tonight, however, I wish not to speak with Hanoi and the NLF, but rather to my fellow Americans who, with me, bear the greatest responsibility in ending a conflict that has exacted a heavy price on both continents" (King, 1986, p. 232).

To King's mind, all Americans shared guilt for the atrocities perpetrated by the American armed forces against the people of Vietnam. Therefore as members of society, it was necessary for all to turn inward and to recognize their connection to the sin of war. The inward gaze, King believed, would reveal that the racism that had already poisoned the body politic in the form of racial domination was now being manifested by the war in Vietnam. He proclaims, "If America's soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read Vietnam. It can never be saved so long as it destroys the deepest hopes of men the world over" (King, 1986, p. 234). King was convinced that the inward gaze that comes along with acknowledging how all Americans are connected to the evil of the war in Vietnam, would then enable them to look outward with a disposition that respects difference and acknowledges the dignity and worth of the "other." He offers, "And as I ponder the madness of Vietnam and search within myself for ways to understand and

respond to compassion my mind goes constantly to the people of that peninsula" (King, 1986, pp. 234-235). Ultimately, King knew "that there will be no meaningful solution there until some attempt is made to know them and hear their broken cries" (King, 1986, p. 235).

If Americans searched within themselves, King felt, then they would realize that they were further subordinating the people of Vietnam, as opposed to empowering them. Just like the whites who traveled south to work alongside blacks, Americans were consistently reinforcing Vietnamese inferiority. He proclaims, "The [Vietnamese] must see Americans as strange liberators" (King, 1986, p. 235). What King was suggesting is that despite America's claims to the contrary, from the perspective of the people of Vietnam, it seemed as if America was intent on the colonization of Vietnam. As his speech progresses he continually tries to get his fellow Americans to see just how it was that the Vietnamese could feel this way. He points out how America supported Vietnam's former colonizer France as it sought to regain control of its former colony. With the French unable to recolonize Vietnam, King reminds the audience that America then supported a string of dictators who worked to oppress the people of Vietnam. With this political history as the backdrop, King highlights an ironic image: "All the while the people read our leaflets and received regular promises of peace and democracy—and land reform. Now they languish under our bombs and consider us—not their fellow Vietnamese—the real enemy" (King, 1986, p. 236). He also points out: "They watch as we poison their water, as we kill a million acres of their crops. They must weep as bulldozers roar through their areas preparing to destroy the precious trees." The destruction, of course, was not just limited to the resources vital to sustaining human life. Non-military civilian lives had also been extinguished as a result of the nation's military efforts. King notes that Americans had killed millions of

innocent civilians, and displaced many more. In addition to all of this, he charges, "We have destroyed their two most cherished institutions: the family and the village" (King, 1986, p. 236).

With his constant refrain of "we," King was adamant that no American could disentangle himself or herself from the racist war. With the recognition that all Americans have a share of guilt, King believed that they should then recognize their common humanity with all others. This required then, that they affirm the dignity and worth of those who may have previously been "othered" because they were assigned a label of "guilty" or "blameworthy." He explains, "Perhaps the more difficult but no less necessary task is to speak for those who have been designated as our enemies" (King, 1986, p. 236). Doing so required that Americans consider the perspective of the National Liberation Front (NLF). King asks of his audience: "What must they think of us in America when they realize that we permitted the repression and cruelty of [Premier] Diem which helped to bring them into being as a resistance group in the south? What do they think of our condoning the violence which led to their own taking up of arms" (King, 1986, p. 236)? King concludes, "Surely we must understand their feelings even if we do not condone their actions" (King, 1986, p. 237). With this statement, one sees that King is calling for an ethos of care and concern that would ultimately transcend the prohibitive boundaries of friends and enemies. He pleads:

> Here is the true meaning and value of compassion and nonviolence when it helps us to see the enemy's point of view, to hear his questions, to know his assessment of ourselves. For from his view we may indeed see the basic weaknesses of our own condition, and if we are mature, we may learn and grow and profit from the wisdom of the brothers who are called the opposition (King, 1986, p. 237).

As difficult as it might be, King's theory of political service requires that individuals acknowledge their share of the guilt. Doing so, however, oftentimes requires a form of

patient listening to others views, even—perhaps especially—if they happen to be members of a military that one's nation is currently engaging in war.

King realized that admitting guilt is not easy. He laments, "The world now demands a maturity of America that we may not be able to achieve." He goes on to lay out what this maturity required of all Americans: "It demands that we admit that we have been wrong from the beginning of our adventure in Vietnam, that we have been detrimental to the life of the Vietnamese people. The situation is one in which we must be ready to turn sharply from our present ways" (King, 1986, p. 239).  King, who cowered in response to his opposition in 1965, wanted to ensure that his audience did not commit the same mistake. Therefore he began his speech by admitting his guilt, and now he was correcting his course by being willing to sacrifice his life in protest against the war. He was seeking to cultivate a willingness amongst his fellow Americans to do the same in service to their nation and the people of Vietnam. He implores: "We are at the moment when our lives must be placed on the line if our nation is to survive its own folly. Every man of humane convictions must decide on the protest that best suits his convictions, but we must all protest" (King, 1986, p. 239).

King's call upon Americans to protest the war is instructive about King's theory of service for at least two reasons. For starters, King allows for different people who are differently situated to determine how they will engage in service. For some, this could mean conscientiously objecting to the war; for others it might mean joining street protests or writing to their member of congress. Secondly, while King believed that protesting unjust practices is a form of service, his radical theory of service called for Americans to get to the root of the injustices. Without getting to the root causes of America's injustices,

King believed that Americans would find themselves "organizing 'clergy and laymen concerned' committees for the next generation" (King, 1986, p. 239).

In order to get to the root causes of the nation's many injustices, King felt that America needs to acknowledge "the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism" and consequently undergo a "revolution of values." By engaging in a revolution of values, King was calling upon Americans to do the work necessary to combat structures of injustice. As he claims, "A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies." Once again, King invoked the biblical parable of, "The Good Samaritan," King explains, "On the one hand, we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act." Recall that this biblical story is about a man who is left for dead by a gang of robbers on the side of a very dangerous road. In spite of his grave condition, two men passed him by pretending not to notice him. However, the third passerby—a Samaritan— not only stopped, but he also administered aid to the man in need.

King called this an initial act because, as stated, the parable teaches that service simply requires that one perform a supererogatory act of kindness. However, King expands the requirement of service beyond mere acts of charity when he says, "One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway." Whereas in the original biblical story, the Jericho Road was the setting for a chance encounter that enabled the Samaritan to *aid* the man in need, in this passage the Jericho Road has become the *cause* of the man's need. In other words, King converted the Jericho Road into the unjust global structures that allow some nations to travel life's road relatively

unencumbered, while others are more constrained. To King's mind, the lesson at the heart of "The Good Samaritan" parable is that: "True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring." For King, Americans needed to become cognizant about their roles in the giant triplets of racism, materialism and militarism, in order to truly work for justice at home and abroad. He proclaims: "The Western arrogance of feeling that it has everything to teach others and nothing to learn from them is not just" (King, 1986, p. 239). Ultimately, King believed that if Americans wanted to truly pursue justice, then, they needed to work to empower the people of Vietnam by first admitting their guilt.

The goal of this chapter has been to show the roles of guilt and sin in King's thought. Although, King often called out to his fellow citizens to serve others, he was also very interested in cultivating their ability to be responsive to those who were different. In order to do so, all individuals, I have shown, need to admit their share of guilt in the evils that plague their society. Doing so, will enable them to take up their obligation for collective action in a more responsible manner. This is important to keep in mind when one reaches the end of King's landmark speech against the war in Vietnam. He concluded, "Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter, but beautiful, struggle for a new world. This is the calling of the sons of God, and our brothers wait eagerly for our response" (King, 1986, p. 239). If my reading of King is correct, then his audience could only respond adequately to the inhabitants of Vietnam's call to service if those in attendance sufficiently admitted their guilt and openly acknowledged their common humanity with those beyond America's borders.

**Concluding Remarks**

Several years after making a decision that would carry him and Coretta Scott to Montgomery, Alabama, where they would participate in the black community's boycott of the local bus company, King offered insight into their thought process in his first manuscript *Stride Toward Freedom* (1958). In it King introduced us to the 1950's version of himself as a graduate student who was finishing up his PhD and weighing his career options. He went on the job market deciding between either working in a university or becoming a preacher. He was invited to give several job talks, and at one particular talk he waxed philosophical about the perils faced by modern society. Having impressed the search committee, he was offered the job. Like many young philosophers King continued to develop his critique of modernity. The catch, of course, was that he did not choose to philosophize within the ivy covered walls of a university, or to the north of the Mason-Dixon Line. Instead, at a crossroads in his life, King decided that he could best serve humanity by opting to speak out against the ills of modern society within the stain-glassed windows of a church in the heart of the Jim Crow South—a decision that has forever changed the way in which American democracy is practiced.

It is only in hindsight that we can credit this decision as one of the most crucial decisions that King and his newlywed wife Coretta made in helping transform the democratic landscape of America. However, it is also important to keep in mind that King also conveyed this image of himself to us in hindsight. It is telling that the hardback cover of King's first book reads: "A leader of his people tells The Montgomery Story: Stride Toward Freedom." While we don't know how much input King had in the wording of the cover, or whether he was even comfortable with it, the one thing that is certain is that King

is telling a story. In this sense he is conscious that he is conveying his identity as a leader in the bus boycott by way of narrative to his readers. As Alasdair MacIntyre notes, "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part'" (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 201)? With this in mind, it is very useful for us to focus in on how it is that King portrayed the story that he was a part of in order to gain an understanding of what it is that he thought it important for him, and those who he sought to influence, to do. For this reason, I pay special attention to the narrative that King lays out in *Stride Toward Freedom*.

King, seemingly uneasy with the spotlight thrust upon his individual efforts in the civil rights movement, would often remind others that even if he had not come along the civil rights movement would have still existed. He was attempting to convey that he happened to be in the right place at the right time, and that he was being pulled along by the Zeitgeist. However, in *Stride Toward Freedom* King provided us with a different interpretation of these attempts to deflect attention away from his self. In it he created a narrative that showed that the decision to be in the right place (the South) at the right time (against the backdrop of a fomenting challenge to Jim Crow laws by blacks) was the result of a conscious decision by the Kings to sacrifice their most desired outcomes in order to pursue what they viewed as their most valued outcome—a more just society.

In this narrative King confessed that initially he and Coretta had been wary about returning to the South where both of them had grown up in the throes of segregation. Part of their hesitation was a matter of personal ambitions. Having both attended college in the North they had the chance to take advantage of many opportunities previously denied them in the South. In particular, Coretta was convinced that a northern city would afford her

more of an opportunity to pursue her music career than any city in the South would have. Meanwhile, Martin[18], whose childhood experiences under the Jim Crow laws had hardened into an abhorrence of the unjust system, saw his impending career decision as a "chance to escape from the long night of segregation" (King, 1958, p. 21). More importantly to them, as future parents they had to consider whether or not they wanted to provide their future children with a childhood different from their own. This meant a future that was free of the burdens of legal segregation that they would inevitably have to endure in the South.

As Martin recounted his conversations with Coretta, he articulated two competing desires. One set of desires were comprised of the ability to pursue their personal aspirations and to make a better life for their children. The other desire was to live a life of service. After carefully weighing the options, Martin recalled the decisive moment thusly, "Finally we agreed that, in spite of the disadvantages and inevitable sacrifices, our greatest service could be rendered in our native South. We came to the conclusion that we had something of a moral obligation to return—at least for a few years" (King, 1958, p. 21). While deciding between their competing desires the Kings were engaged in a moment of critical reflection during which they were attempting to articulate what it was that they held most valuable in their lives.

The critical reflection that the Kings were engaging in is what political theorist Charles Taylor calls a "strong evaluation." According to Taylor's definition strong evaluations do not just take into account the outcome, but also the "quality of our motivations." In other words, in the case of strong evaluations we are "concerned with the qualitative worth of different desires" (Taylor, 1985, p. 16). Those, who make decisions

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[18] I use "Martin" in paragraphs where I also mention Coretta, so as not to confuse the two. Otherwise, "King" is a referent to Martin King.

based solely upon preferences are said to be weak evaluators. Weak evaluators, despite possessing a will and having the ability to reflect and evaluate, lack what Taylor calls depth. The issue of depth is important to Taylor for it signals a level of articulacy about our decisions. As he explains, "Strong evaluation is not just a condition of articulacy about preferences, but also about the quality of life, the kind of beings we are or want to become. It is in this sense deeper" (Taylor, 1985, p. 16).

Although Taylor does not believe that a strong evaluation is solely about being able to articulate one's preferences, he stresses its importance in the process of a strong evaluation. For, as Taylor notes, our desires are not simply given; instead: "We give it a formulation in words or images. Indeed, by the fact that we are linguistic animals our desires and aspirations cannot but be articulated in one way or another" (Taylor, 1985 p. 36). This is because "articulations," according to Taylor, "are attempts to formulate what is initially inchoate, or confused, or badly formulated. But this kind of formulation and reformulation does not leave its object unchanged. To give a certain articulation is to shape our sense of what we desire or what we hold important in a certain way" (Taylor, 1985, p. 36).

For the Kings, undergoing the process of a strong evaluation helped them to become more articulate about their desire to return to the South. Upon completion they were enabled to claim with confidence that returning to the South to bring about more just conditions by serving others was a far more superior decision than remaining in the "comforts" of the North. We see that the process of critical reflection helped the Kings reach a new level of depth about the types of people they wanted to become when Martin explained, "The South, after all, was our home. Despite its shortcomings we loved it as

home, and had a real desire to do something about the problems that we had felt so keenly as youngsters. We never wanted to be considered detached spectators" (King, 1958, p. 21). Interestingly, the language of detached spectator is meant to convey a lack of action. Therefore to gain depth, for Martin, meant not only to articulate one's values, but to act in a way that reflects these values.

Yet, the challenge of moving beyond the role of detached spectator raises the question of whether or not articulation is in any way instrumental to bringing about action. Martin believed that the practice of becoming more articulate about one's most deeply held values could help one change himself or herself as a necessary first step toward changing their society. This would be especially necessary for the Kings, since their hesitancy to serve in the South was deeply influenced by their past experiences of living under an oppressive Jim Crow regime. Initially, these experiences disallowed them to have an open disposition toward the South, which would have prevented them from moving south to serve. However, according to Martin's recounting of their decision to move to Montgomery, the process of critical reflection had a profound impact upon Coretta's outlook. Martin observed, that since Coretta had lived outside of the South since her teens, when they returned to take a visit of their soon to be new city, she "looked at Montgomery with fresh eyes." The South that she returned to was still governed by the same Jim Crow laws that she had deplored growing up. Despite this fact, Martin noted that although the conditions she lamented in the South had not changed, she had. "And with her sense of optimism and balance…she placed her faith on the side of the opportunities and the challenge for Christian service that were offered by Dexter and the Montgomery community" (King, 1958, p. 23; emphasis mine). Martin was making a link between critical

reflection and action by suggesting that Coretta had undergone a post-decision evolution, which enabled her to overcome those past experiences that previously would have prevented her from acting.

From his observations about Coretta, we know that Martin was sympathetic to the way in which our environment can place limits on our ability to do the work necessary to change that environment, but that he also had a firm belief that the process of critical reflection could help one overcome the effects of a society. This became instrumental to Martin as a leader in the civil rights movement, when he would consistently encounter audiences who seemingly could not overcome, or even recognize, the stultifying effects of their present conditions. This is why he was able to have compassion for whites who grew up in a racist society that told them that they were superior to blacks and resulted in their discriminating against blacks. Likewise he was also able to have patience for those blacks, who, having grown up in a racist society that sought to deny them political agency, failed to exercise their agency. However, while exhibiting this compassion and patience based upon past experiences he also held both groups responsible for failing to change themselves by engaging in critical reflection. And so Martin's theory of political service required that a responsible citizenry consistently engage in critical reflection in order to break hold of their current conditions and cultivate the dispositions conducive to democratic action.

King built upon this notion of understanding and responsibility over the course of his public career. This is especially true in the case of one of his most widely read tracts, "Letter from Birmingham City Jail." While King was engaged in a form of critical reflection about the identity of his interlocutors throughout, his ability to be both compassionate and yet hold others responsible is on full display when he turned his

attention to the Christian church. In this letter King expressed great disappointment at the church's overwhelmingly timid stance on the injustices faced by blacks in the South. Yet, instead of simply condemning the church, King provided a wonderful model of the process of critical reflection for the church and all citizens to emulate.

King began by questioning the identity of the church. He asked, rhetorically, of the churches he encountered all throughout the South, "'What kind of people worship here? Who is their God?'..." (King, 1986, p. 299) After questioning the values of the church he then compassionately extended his love to it: "Yes, these questions are still in my mind. In deep disappointment, I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love. Yes, I love the church…" King, 1986, p. 299). But King seemed to love a particular church, one that did not simply reflect the values of an unjust society. He reminded the current church: "There was a time when the church was very powerful–in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society" (King, 1986, p. 300). According to King, the church had changed. It no longer critically reflected upon its values, and therefore it was often the "archdefender of the status quo." Instead of challenging the unjust structures of society that did not comport with its values, King claimed that "the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent–and often even vocal–sanction of things as they are" (King, 1986, p. 300). By showing the church both compassion and reprobation King was acknowledging the ways

in which environments can inhibit our recognition of how far we have strayed from our values, but also, how we can get back on track by way of critical reflection.

I wanted to end this project by analyzing how King came to fully embrace a life of service in his private life. I began my discussion about King's political theory of service in the shadows of the larger-than-life monument that was built in his honor. However, it's important to remember that like everyone else King was a human being who also had competing priorities. Ultimately he decided to side with justice and dedicate his life to political service. His legacy calls out to us to engage in our own form of critical evaluation and to prioritize service to others. By doing so, we, too, can enact change. Perhaps there won't be any statues erected in our honor; but, if you recall, King didn't want to be remembered by statues or for his many awards. Instead, he just wanted to be remembered for leaving a committed life behind. Now it's our turn.

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