

TO SHAPE
A NEW WORLD

Essays on the Political Philosophy of
MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

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For Ayana, Christopher, and Ella

condemned, renunciation is not the spirit in which religious joy is pursued. One can see this clearly in the nature of the music that animates and energizes American evangelical traditions. So King would not have been wise strategically to portray himself as a Gandhian ascetic or to preach *brahmacharya* (sexual renunciation). Philosophical views cannot move people if they are translated insensitively from one culture to a completely different culture, and King was a savvy strategist. And then there is of course the man himself, whose erotic personality and widely known love affairs may well have played at least some role in his popular appeal.

Taking on anger means taking on a central plank in the normative platform of American masculinity. The preacher of non-anger and nonviolence risks being seen as weak and effeminate. So we might say that an American male leader exemplifying non-anger needs to attend carefully to his masculinity credentials. It would surely be fatal for such a leader to represent himself as forgoing passion. If he is an African American leader attempting to attract a multiracial following, he must certainly be attentive to white paranoia about the black man as sexual aggressor: so he must walk a careful line, and for the most part King succeeded brilliantly in representing himself as neither unmanly nor a predator. This fascinating topic needs more exploration than I can give it here, but fortunately others have explored it already.⁶⁸

For a variety of reasons, then, Stoicism was neither a strategic course for King nor one to which his own views and inclinations led him.

To conclude: King is in some respects less philosophically explicit than Gandhi. In other ways, however, he fleshes out and further develops Gandhian ideas, but also contributes creative insights of his own. And in the two areas in which he departs from Gandhi—his qualifications about violence in self-defense and his refusal of a total Stoicism about emotions—he appears to me to have the more philosophically defensible position.

The Prophetic Tension between Race Consciousness and the Ideal of Color-Blindness

RONALD R. SUNDSTROM

Martin Luther King, Jr., did not leave behind many references to the term “color-blindness.” There is little trace of that phrase in his published books and collected papers, although he made direct reference to it as a distant ideal in a 1965 interview with Alex Haley, during which he spoke of a future when the nation “is stricken gloriously and incurably color-blind.”¹ There is also a record of a critic chastising him and then recommending that he publicly adopt the phrase, but it does not appear he replied or was moved by the demeaning comments of the critic (a certain Mrs. W. Brown).²

King, accordingly, did not adopt the idea of color-blindness as a leading concept in his civil rights advocacy. In this chapter, I review the evidence for this claim and argue that, in contrast, he explicitly supported color-conscious politics. In addition to the well-documented historical evidence that King supported color-conscious civil rights remedies, I discuss two reasons he took this position, one moral-psychological and the other conceptual, both of which indicate the influence of Reinhold Niebuhr’s Christian Realism on King’s thinking. First, King held that there are serious limits to human rational capacities that affect ethical decision making, particularly where group-based interests are involved. Although King offered prophetic ideals, he warned against trusting them alone, and advocated for practical realistic strategies to achieve those ideals. The second reason builds from the first, and invokes his view of the prophetic nature of

society's most transcendent ideals. In King's view, we can't expect to realize the color-blind ideal in the world because of humanity's inherent flaws; we need such ideals to guide and motive our actions, but their full realization is possible only through the intervention of God's grace—just as a good Protestant would believe. This deserves emphasis for two reasons: although King did not explicitly support color-blindness as a practical idea, there is a significant overlap between his leading concepts and a transcendent version of the ideal of color-blindness. The ideals that he appealed to can be understood only by reference to the transcendent, which gives them their normative force. I conclude this chapter by sketching some implications of this analysis on three prominent topics in contemporary black political theory: character, embodiment, and pessimism.

August 1963

"Color-blindness" was, for much of its modern history, a phrase of art in jurisprudence regarding the U.S. Constitution.³ It originates from Justice Marshall Harlan's dissent in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision and his declaration that the U.S. Constitution was color-blind.⁴ Harlan's constitutional interpretation was subsequently employed by many civil rights advocates, as it was by the attorneys who led the NAACP's legal fights, and who were slow to warm to King's extralegal civil disobedience tactics.⁵

King is associated with the idea of color-blindness because of a line from his "I Have a Dream" speech, delivered at the 1963 March on Washington.⁶ In that speech King proclaimed he had a dream that one day his children, and all black Americans, would be judged by the "content of their character" rather than the "color of their skin."⁷ It was repetition of a formulation of his dream that he offered on other occasions, including in his 1960 speech "The Rising Tide of Racial Consciousness."⁸ Did King champion color-blindness as an approach to racial and social justice? Did he believe in color-blindness as an ethical, social, and political ideal?

Well, yes, if we follow the historian Eric J. Sundquist, who in his book *King's Dream* associates the idea of color-blindness with King's clear and frequent supportive references to legal and political equality, including the equal provision and defense of the rights of African Americans.⁹ Likewise, one may think, as I have, that King supports a robust version of color-blindness that goes beyond legal and political considerations and extends the ideal to the social and intimate spheres of life.¹⁰ This is an easy move, given his many and powerful references to another arguably parallel ideal

he frequently mentions, that of a "beloved community," which provides an additional reason to think that King's dream is color-blind. His idea of a "beloved community" is grounded on his theological belief in the fundamental unity of humanity as created in God's image—a humanity, every member of which, without racial (or any other) distinction, is a recipient of divine love.¹¹

And yet, *no*, King did not support color-blindness if one thinks of it primarily as a practical means to achieve legal and political racial equality. As I will discuss below, King repeatedly and publicly supported "racial consciousness" and advocated for several explicitly color-conscious programs focused on reparative and distributive justice to achieve racial equality. Nor did King oppose racial solidarity to counter racial discrimination, advocate for justice, or celebrate traditions or achievements. For example, he would have emphatically disagreed with Chief Justice Roberts's claim in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* that "the way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race," as if a quitting cold-turkey approach to color-blindness would work to the benefit of all in educational or residential desegregation or integration policies.¹²

Is there a conflict between King's ideal end and the means he advocated? The contrast is striking if the fullness of his dream is taken seriously. The conceptual tension, or contradiction, cannot be easily dismissed by considering color-consciousness as a means to a color-blind end, because the social and theological facets of his dream are not ordinary ends. Plus, it is fruitful to *not* dismiss this tension. It calls to mind the distance between King's prophetic ideals and our limitations, and consonant with his spirit, such a tension encourages humility. For that reason, I do not reconcile King's dream with his practical political strategy, but I do offer a bridge between them.

Gloriously and Incurably Color-Blind

There is a fascinating temporal proximity between King's dream that African Americans would be judged by the "content of their character" rather than the "color of their skin" and the legal idea of color-blindness that partially accounts for the two ideals' close association. The NAACP Legal Defense Fund filed a brief in *Anderson vs. Martin*, on August 26, 1963, arguing that the U.S. Constitution was color-blind, and two days later, on August 28, Martin Luther King, Jr., gave the "I Have A Dream Speech." In the words of James Lindgren, "Within days of each other, both the political

and legal leaders of the civil rights movement had called on the nation to give up its centuries-old practice of judging people by race. It was during this period—marked by the 1963 March on Washington and the Civil Rights Act of the following year—that the color-blind ideal reached its high water mark.¹³ Note that King was a *religious*—a Christian—leader as well as a political leader of the civil rights movement. It is important to keep this in mind, because his ontological-theological conception of personhood is key to understanding his view of whether we as individuals, or a society, ought to be conscious of or “blind” to ethnic and racial distinctions.

King agreed with advocates dating back to the abolitionists who argued that the U.S. Constitution is color-blind, that it grants rights, duties, and obligations to all men and women without racial distinction, and that it does not presume or condone a racial state or state-sponsored racism. Additionally, King also recognized a broader, more robust version of the ideal of color-blindness that in its abstractness applied to all spheres of this life. In exactly one instance he labeled this “glorious” ideal “color-blind.” All the same, we cannot assume that King advocated for universal color-blindness. King did not encourage insensitivity to racial or ethnic categories in private, social, or public life or political affairs, or in national law in the real, nonideal world, and particularly not in the world in which King himself lived. That he did not has been well established by political theorists and historians.¹⁴ The plentiful evidence of this stretches from his earliest pastoral and civil rights work in Montgomery, Alabama, to his call for a social and economic Bill of Rights for the poor and disadvantaged in his *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*¹⁵ King emphatically called on the United States to tend to the injustices imposed upon black Americans and other victims of the nation’s discriminatory domestic policies. He urged the nation to adopt reforms to address inequalities with respect to segregation and disparities in the funding of schools; to adopt a “jobs first” policy specific to hiring the unemployed and additional support through vocational training and job certification; to expand government-funded human services to help the ranks of unemployed blacks find jobs; to increase the democratic participation and political voice of recipients of social services, through welfare and tenant unions, as a means to enfranchise those populations with respect to community planning and self-advocacy; to reform discrimination in housing policy, including predatory renting and sale of property, and indeed to dismantle segregation in housing across the nation; to facilitate the social mobility of blacks locked in ghettos to grant them access, through fair housing protections and sub-

sidies, to better funded and properly resourced urban neighborhoods and suburbs. He advocated in no uncertain terms, in his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech and in the “World House” chapter of *Where Do We Go from Here*, for the work of an egalitarian-minded welfare state, attuned to the history and lingering harms of racial discrimination, that would attend to its domestic and international responsibilities with a cosmopolitan intent.¹⁶

Even if there is an abstract legal or moral ideal of color-blindness in King’s writings, it would not be unreasonable to think that it was absent in his pastorally and theologically informed civil rights work. It is not a leading concept in his work as a practical ideal to apply to everyday human actions and public policy. Yet there are reverberations of it in his writings, sermons, and speeches. Eric J. Sundquist has labeled this set of ideas, especially the legal and political ones, as King’s dream and an ideal of color-blind justice.¹⁷ The core of this dream is King’s goal of legal and political equality, and particularly the equal application of rights, duties, and protections of the U.S. Constitution to all citizens regardless of race.

This is the focus of King’s sole recorded positive reference to color-blindness in his 1965 interview with Alex Haley, in a section where they were discussing the increase in black demonstrations for civil rights. Given its importance for understanding King’s relation to the idea of color-blindness it is worth extensively quoting:

If the Constitution were today applied equally and impartially to all of America’s citizens, in every section of the country, in every court and code of law, there would be no need for any group of citizens to seek extra-legal redress.

Our task has been a difficult one, and will continue to be, for privileged groups, historically, have not volunteered to give up their privileges. As Reinhold Niebuhr has written, individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily abandon their unjust posture, but groups tend to be more immoral, and more intransigent, than individuals. Our nonviolent direct-action program, therefore—which has proved its strength and effectiveness in more than a thousand American cities where some baptism of fire has taken place—will continue to dramatize and demonstrate against local injustices to the Negro until the last of those who impose those injustices are forced to negotiate; until, finally, the Negro wins the protections of the Constitution that have been denied to him; until society, at long last, is *stricken gloriously and incurably color-blind*.¹⁸

King's evocation of a world struck "gloriously and incurably color-blind" looks like an endorsement of the ideal of color-blindness and the appropriate label for his dream. It accords, as well, with the theological ideas that were his leading concepts: *agape* or the universal love of God, grace, redemption, preferential treatment for the poor, and human personhood.

Clearly for King, God's love and grace are extended to all regardless of ethnic, racial, and class distinctions, but even on the other side of the "mountaintop"—within sight of the promised land—color and class mattered quite a lot to the realization of love and justice (to counter our social immoral tendencies) on the way to real-world promised land of a just society.¹⁹ Therefore King, in "The Rising Tide of Racial Consciousness," explicitly advocates for the idea of "racial consciousness" and paired it with the ideal of "racial equality."²⁰

What do we make of his reference to the vision of a society struck, as King states, gloriously and incurably color-blind? It could be seen as an anomaly since it ignores all the practical color-conscious methods he supported in the civil rights movement and the policy ends he worked toward. It could be seen as a touch cynical; as in, "we will live in a color-blind world, when society is no longer racist," or "we will be post-feminist when the world is post-sexism," or "we will be post-racial, when we are post-racism." That position would be consistent with the political Left's distancing of King's legacy from the idea of color-blindness.

But such cynicism is not apparent in King's words, although he applied his version of Niebuhr-inspired Christian Realism to the dream. He went on to tell Haley, "I confess that I do not believe this day is around the corner. The concept of supremacy is so imbedded in the white society that it will take many years for color to cease to be a judgmental factor. *But it is certainly my hope and dream.* Indeed, it is the keystone of my faith in the future that we will someday achieve a thoroughly integrated society. I believe that before the turn of the century, if trends continue to move and develop as presently, we will have moved a long, long way toward such a society."²¹

Michael Eric Dyson has argued that it is a mistake to see King as an advocate of a color-blind society. Dyson is plainly wrong on this narrow point; in this interview King identified a color-blind society as synonymous with his hopes and his dream. Yet, Dyson is correct to note "what King understood as a culture blind to color is a universe away from contemporary refusals to take race into account in creating a just society."²²

This is the tension: King's dream has color-blind aspects, but King most certainly did not advocate for color-blind practical politics.

The bridge between these positions that I offer is to point out that the color-blind features of King's dream are more complicated than what an instrumental analysis uncovers. Achievement of the legal, social, and political features of his dream would require practical color-conscious means; but beyond a means-ends relation between the two ideas, King's theological views also deeply inform what color-consciousness and color-blindness means in this approach. Take, for instance, his conception of personhood, from which his view of human dignity is derived. Simply assuming that color-blindness is implicit in King's view of personhood is to beg the question. King expressed an ontological-theological conception of personhood that was both embodied and transcendent. Insofar as persons are alive *in the flesh*, they are characterized by the beauty, abilities, and limitations of the body, and their lives are interdependent in their mutual efforts to flourish; their differences, however, are transcended as they approach God. This conception is sensitive to the contexts and circumstances of individuals in the world, the meaning and effects of their differences, and it is sensitive to race, specifically the manipulation of race to dominate and oppress black Americans. Such a conception of personhood views human life as individual, yet complementary and "ultimately identical" in its relation to the divine.²³

This view led King to embrace a Christian liberal egalitarianism, deeply informed by transcendence and the identities and contexts of individual lives, with evangelical as well as cosmopolitan ambitions—to join in world fellowship and to realize justice across what he called the "world house."²⁴ Paired with his and the work of many others in the civil rights movement, King's ideas challenged the racist and exclusionary conceptions of "person," "human," and "citizen" that masqueraded as universals and undergirded the American racial state from post-reconstruction through the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and beyond.²⁵ In league with the civil rights movement and in the tradition of black political thought, King expanded the meaning of those universals and the moral imagination of the nation and the world.²⁶

To characterize King's view of race and racial justice in America as simply "color-blind," then, is to mischaracterize the complexity of his ideas. At times Sundquist makes this mistake in his otherwise impressive history of King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Sundquist notes that distance is put between King's ideal of racial equality and the idea of color-blindness

by the American political Left, but he writes as if this distancing is unfaithful to King's ideas: "For those on the political Left, King's dream became associated less with colorblind 'equal opportunity,' what was once the core value of democratic liberalism, than with race-based (and sometimes class-based) programs designed to achieve diversity, usually defined as proportionately equal outcomes, the new core value of democratic liberalism."²⁷

Sundquist assumes that "equal opportunity" or equal justice can be equally associated with color-blindness, which ignores the many color-conscious means, and in particular, policies, required to guarantee and enforce equal opportunity, or even the more demanding idea of fair equal opportunity; and King, as even Sundquist recognizes, supported color-consciousness as a way to understand national racial problems and organize resistance and to support color-conscious policies to realize justice.

The common, mistaken view is that King's comment that black Americans generally should be judged by the "content of their character" rather than the "color of their skin" expressed a version of color-blindness that can be ideologically paired with Justice Marshall Harlan's color-blind principle from his dissent in 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. Harlan rejected the idea that the Constitution grants *legal* recognition of racial caste or the dominion of whites over citizens of other races. In his words, "citizens are equal before the law" and the "law regards man as man."²⁸ Concurrently, Harlan was perfectly content with the *social* recognition of racial castes, and of course with the political ramifications of that racial stratification; for example, after arguing for the legal equality of blacks and whites, Harlan went on to complain that whereas blacks were segregated on train cars, the Chinese were allowed to sit wherever they pleased, even though, he claimed, the Chinese were too alien to be admitted as citizens or to be granted civil rights.²⁹

In contrast to Harlan's legally narrow and hypocritical view of color-blindness, King's view of common human fellowship was broader and sensitive to the history of race and its enduring effects in America. In thinking that King's racial sensitivity was closer to the idea of color-blindness, I had in a previous work called it "ambitious" because it held that race was a morally irrelevant or illegitimate social identity that should *ultimately* make no moral, social, political, or legal difference in a person's life.³⁰ Reading King's color-blindness as robust is consistent with his hope and dream that America "will someday achieve a thoroughly integrated society."³¹ But arriving at such an ideal means being sensitive to the contexts that require color-consciousness for the sake of realizing an ideal and

distant color-blind world. This view is reinforced by King's reference to the suggestive "dream of a land where men do not argue that the color of a man's skin determines the content of his character" at the end of his analysis and advocacy of color-consciousness in "The Rising Tide of Racial Consciousness" from 1960.

The ideal of color-blindness that King evokes overlaps with color-consciousness, wherein they share the same ends of equal citizenship and justice in a society marked by mutually beneficial cooperation. Color-blindness, however, ultimately impedes the realization of fairness because it refuses to understand and confront the legacy of racial oppression. The best way then, as Amy Gutmann has put it, to express the basic moral insight of color-blindness is through the application of liberal conceptions of color-consciousness.³² Moral, political, and legal color-consciousness is justified for the sake of the proximate realization of the ideal of color-blindness, where the end of color-blindness is, of course, simply fairness. This point deserves emphasis: that color-consciousness, especially in the context of law and public policy, is an important means to rectify past racial wrongs, to police against current racism and discrimination, and to think forward into the future to guide and assist current and future citizens in the building of a just society.³³ King's robust conception of color-blindness, which he explicitly tied to race consciousness for the sake of the realization of love and justice in the "beloved community," made this exact point. It is embedded in the logic of "The Rising Tide of Racial Consciousness."³⁴

The flaw of the ideal of color-blindness is that it prompts its proponents to focus on the implications and applications of the ideal as if it were accomplished already, resulting in protestations such as Chief Justice Roberts's "the way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race." Roberts's absolutism on color-blindness is an insistence on the purity of legal ideals in application that evokes the absolutism of religious ideals, which King and Niebuhr rejected on grounds of human fallibility. Such absolutism rejects the complementarity of human life in favor of a conception that insists upon an unrealistic strict identity and unity.³⁵

It is no surprise that reactions to such false universalisms adopt an opposite but equally strict realism, and criticize absolutist applications of legal ideals in a nonideal world as a "reification" and "deification" of them. This was the point of Derrick Bell's racial realism, which is forcefully expressed in the title of his influential book, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*.³⁶ The apotheosis of legal, moral, and

political ideals, such as color-blindness, enables them to be regarded as morally pure while preserving unjust conditions on the ground. Such idolizing of the ideal of color-blindness, with its blindness or insensitivity toward human suffering, has drained it of its appeal, especially among African Americans and Latinos.³⁷ All the same, there are dangers in rejecting normative and transcendent ideals in favor of wariness and realism. This can result in pessimism and cynicism toward narratives of progress and reasonable means to ameliorate injustice, and in a darker turn toward vengeful hatred against real and perceived opponents.³⁸

For these reasons, King cannot easily be associated with racial realism, because the pessimism about the possibility of racial justice or the ceasing of anti-black racism associated with racial realism does not square with King's emphatic embrace of hope, redemption, and transcendence through the grace of God. But King was a realist of sorts—and he adopted elements of Niebuhr's Christian Realism, as seen even in his sole reference to color-blindness—indicating he was wary of human limitations and the idolizing of ideals.

The Content of Character

The meaning of King's dream that one day his children will live in a nation "where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" and its place in an ideal nation "struck gloriously and incurably color-blind" deserves further exploration. The judgment King spoke of was not simply one of rational administrative procedure on the part of individuals or institutions. It involves not merely a utilitarian calculus or measuring a person's typical (and socially determined) character traits to the complete exclusion of their "color"; instead it is a process that involves the recognition of the sacredness of personhood, the limitations of human judgment, the conditions of human suffering and oppression, the virtue of charity, and the role of grace. Judging the content of a person's character is hardly the faceless, ahistorical, quantifiable, and meritocratic calculation that some have misconceived it to be.

Fundamental to King's view of character was his adoption of the social gospel and the broad philosophical-theological idea of personalism. The Christian social gospel movement emphasized the application of Christian ethics to large social problems and was often progressive. The proponents of the social gospel that influenced King were Walter Rauschenbusch and Howard Thurman; both Rauschenbusch and Thurman emphasized social

responsibility to address social ills.³⁹ Thurman, moreover, was a black minister and theologian who directly tied the social gospel to the lives and civil rights struggles of African Americans, and promoted love as an ethical response to racial oppression in his influential book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*.⁴⁰

The social gospel demands that Christians, and society as a whole, recognize, respect, and support human dignity, and actively work to stop, reverse, and address the suffering of, in Thurman's words, the dispossessed and disinherited. At the heart of this view is the ideal of an inviolable human dignity, which involves respecting the self-respect and personal dignity of individuals. Without "self-respect and personal dignity," according to Thurman, "man is no man."⁴¹

The centrality of self-respect and human dignity in this view is shared by, and likely was derived from, the broad school of thought labeled personalism; its many variants include a strong sense of essential and universal human dignity, promote anti-materialist conceptions of human personhood, are contentedly anthropocentric, and emphasize the central role of human subjectivity and fallibility in ethical decision making.⁴² King's view of personalism was formed through his studies at Boston University with his professors Edgar S. Brightman and L. Howard DeWolf. "It was mainly under these teachers that I studied personalistic philosophy—the theory that the clue to the meaning of ultimate reality is found in personality. This personal idealism remains today my basic philosophic position. Personalism's insistence that only personality—finite and infinite—is ultimately real strengthened me in two convictions: it gave me metaphysical and philosophical grounding for the idea of a personal God, and it gave me a metaphysical basis for the dignity and worth of all human personality."⁴³

The idea of personalism appears in his work throughout his life and frequently in relation to his repeated references to human dignity, as in *The Measure of Man* (1959), "The Rising Tide of Race Consciousness" (1960), "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (1963) (where it appears in his use of Martin Buber's formulation of "I-It" versus "I-thou" relationships in his distinction of just from unjust laws), "Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech" (1964), "Christmas Sermon on Peace" (1967), and *Where Do We Go from Here* (1967). Furthermore, King's view of the social gospel and the idea of personalism were filtered through his appreciative tangles with the work of Reinhold Niebuhr, whose Christian Realism, as communicated through his *Moral Man and Immoral Society* and *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, runs through much of King's writings.⁴⁴

Essentially, Christian Realism holds that religion, and in particular Christianity, provides a necessary moral unity and transcendent explanation of life; it is "realist" insofar as it emphasizes the limitations of human emotions, capacities, and character. It rejects a transcendent view of the human person whereby "personality" can only be understood in terms of the person's relation to divinity and apart from their embodiment. It also rejects a solely materialist conception of the human person. Likewise, while recognizing the principal role of rationality in all aspects of human life (such as, and importantly, the ethical and political), it recognizes the *fleshy* and egoistic—particularly in social contexts—limitations of human reason.

King's utilization of this view is clear in his evocations of realism. He opens *The Measure of a Man* by juxtaposing two views: "There are those who look upon man as little more than an animal" versus "There are those who would lift man almost to the position of a god." In contrast to those views, he offers a third, realistic view that "avoids the extremes of pessimistic naturalism and an optimistic humanism." This view is essentially that of Niebuhr, whom he directly references.⁴⁵

King recognized that humans are rooted in "nature" and subject to their physiology and psychology, but that they are also creatures of spirit, which, *with their rational capacity*, allows them to access the "realm of freedom."⁴⁶ It is very important to notice, especially for contemporary philosophers uncomfortable with theism, that King did not fully equate *spirit* with *reason*, or reduce it to some materialist conception of mind.⁴⁷ Those are not interchangeable for King; reason can fail to follow spirit. This is the point of the distinction between "finite personality" and "infinite personality" that King referred to in his reflections on his studies.⁴⁸ This view was explicitly stated in his 1953–1954 essay, "The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr": "At one and the same time man is under the dominion of nature and also transcends nature. Man's self transcendence forbids him to identify meaning with causality in nature; his bodily and finite particularity equally forbids the loss of the self in a distinctionless absolute of mind or rationality. God as will and personality is, therefore, the only ground of individuality. As creature, man is made in the image of God."⁴⁹

King's own Christian Realism contextualizes his references to the other conceptions of human dignity, such as his citation of Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative, the "humanity formulation" in "The Ethical Demands for Integration." In that speech, in a section titled "The Worth of Persons," he cites the biblical idea of "*the image of God*," the Declaration of Independence, Frederick Douglass, Kant's formulation, and Buber to convey his view of the "sacredness of human personality."⁵⁰

He wrote, criticizing segregation: "It debases personality. Immanuel Kant said in one formulation of the *Categorical Imperative* that 'all men must be treated as *ends* and never as mere *means*.' The tragedy of segregation is that it treats men as means rather than ends, and thereby reduces them to things rather than persons. To use the words of Martin Buber, segregation substitutes an 'I-It' relationships for the 'I-thou' relationship."⁵¹ That passage is worth noting, because philosophers are tempted to see King's conception of human dignity and personhood in entirely rationalistic or even materialistic terms, as if this and his other leading concepts (love, the beloved community, and his dream) could be folded neatly into contemporary variants of liberalism.

King also distanced himself from the full implications of Niebuhr's views, especially Niebuhr's ultimate rejection of pacifism and nonviolence, and, relatedly, his pessimism. King accepted to a degree Niebuhr's realism and the idea of the fallen-ness of humanity and their capacity for sin.⁵² Sin, for King, was the negation of our fundamental being, and, following Paul Tillich, in "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" he defined it as separation from God. Separation of ourselves from God was made material, in King's analysis, by segregation because it is "an existential expression of man's tragic separation, an expression of his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness."⁵³ Yet King criticized Niebuhr for ultimately surrendering hope by not leaving enough room for transcendence in the form of grace. "It was at Boston University that I came to see that Niebuhr had overemphasized the corruption of human nature. His pessimism concerning human nature was not balanced by an optimism concerning divine nature. He was so involved in diagnosing man's sickness of sin that he overlooked the cure of grace."⁵⁴

King absolutely agreed with Niebuhr on the powerful, essential role of religion to provide humanity with moral ideals, but Niebuhr seems to restrict transcendence to the role of expanding or powering the moral imagination. In his own analysis of Kant, which may inform our understanding of King's employment of Kant, Niebuhr stated:

The dimension of depth in the consciousness of religion creates the tension between what is and what ought to be. It bends the bow from which every arrow of moral action flies. Every truly moral act seeks to establish what ought to be, because the agent feels obligated to the ideal, though historically unrealized, as being the order of life in its more essential reality. Thus the Christian believes that the ideal of love is real in the will and nature of God, even

though he knows of no place in history where the ideal has been realized in its pure form. And it is because it has this reality that he feels the pull of obligation. The sense of obligation in morals from which Kant tried to derive the whole structure of religion is really derived from the religion itself. The “pull” or “drive” of moral life is a part of the religious tension of life. Man seeks to realize in history what he conceives to be already the truest reality—that is, its final essence.⁵⁵

Except that King, unlike Niebuhr, had a confidence that humanity, through the grace of God, could follow through on the arc of the arrow of moral action.⁵⁶ “The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.”⁵⁷

How do personalism and Christian Realism bear on King’s hope that blacks would be judged by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin? Notice, first, that King did not uncritically and incautiously accept the high ideals he intoned. From his study of Niebuhr, he appreciated the role of prophetic, “impossible” ideals that drive humanity across the arc of the moral universe, yet he remained a realist (but not a cynic) about them.⁵⁸ They were yet to be realized, society would frustrate them, so they were not to be naively applied. This position keeps an appreciative eye on the normative core of color-blindness, but justifies a skeptical stance toward it.

Character should be understood in light of the conception of good character that King received from his moral tradition and his theological and philosophical training, and not by the tainted light of market-based or American-exceptionalist conceptions of character. From the vantage of King’s view, character is to be judged by the virtues of charity, compassion, and forgiveness, all guided by the example of God’s grace. And from his experience as a black man and leader in the African American wing of the American Baptist Church, judgment also means bringing to bear a wealth of historical and sociological understanding. His analyses include constant criticisms of anti-black racism, and explanations of the enduring effects of slavery and the harms of segregation and their effects on the life-chances and the spirit of blacks, along with evocations of self-empowerment, improvement of personal standards, and the engendering of initiative. The development of character, for King, is to be understood through the history and practice of “color” in America, so to cleave color from character and to see in King the demotion of the history and effects of “color” is to do violence to his legacy.

This is how we should read King’s dream: a long arduous road involving personal discernment, the admission of sin, conversion, and transformation by living the demand of *Imago Dei*. This is hardly a color-blind process. The beloved community cannot be achieved by being blind to the pain of the suffering of others. He ends “The Rising Tide of Racial Consciousness” with these words:

We must work assiduously and with determined boldness to remove from the body politic this cancerous disease of discrimination which is preventing our democratic and Christian health from being realized. Then and only then will we be able to bring into full realization the dream of our American democracy—a dream yet unfulfilled. A dream of equality of opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed; a dream of a land where men will not take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few; a dream of a land where men [d]o not argue that the color of a man’s skin determines the content of his character; a dream of a place where all our gifts and resources are held not for ourselves alone but as instruments of service for the rest of humanity; the dream of a country where every man will respect the dignity and worth of all human personality, and men will dare to live together as brothers—that is the dream. Whenever it is fulfilled we will emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man’s inhumanity to man into the bright and glowing daybreak of freedom and justice for all of God’s children.⁵⁹

The fulfillment of the dream is not simply color-blind either. For King, God was omniscient and not blind; all have equal worth as persons but their histories, circumstances, and contexts matter. The beloved community ought to have its eyes open too.

Glowing Daybreak

In the sections above I attempted to bridge the tension or apparent contradiction between King’s color-conscious social and political strategies and the color-blind aspects of his ideal of racial equality, and in doing so I stressed his theological influences and commitments. Those commitments provide an additional reason, on top of the historical record, to believe he did not support color-blind practical politics, and that his views were inconsistent with such politics. Moreover, his theological commitments ensure that his dream, insofar as it may be labeled as color-blind, was not naive or superficial. To

conclude this analysis, I will sketch how his conception of color-consciousness and his dream interact with three prominent topics in contemporary black political theory: character, embodiment, and pessimism.

As Sundquist noted, the political Left has opposed the association of King's dream with the idea of color-blindness; and given my analysis above, it is correct to disassociate his views from the project of color-blindness as it has been carried out by the American political Right. The obtuse and willful ignoring of racial practices and the enduring practice and effects of racial discrimination are not consistent with King's legacy. There is much in King's critiques that aligns with those who focus on the ways anti-black institutional and personal racism produce the intergenerational and concentrated poverty and attendant social ills that afflict poor African Americans. Yet, in his evocations of "character," King likely would not have entirely shied away from values- and character-based criticisms of the poor, whether black or white; that is evident in his references to "personal standards," and "initiative" in, for example, his "The Ethical Demands for Integration."⁶⁰ Black liberals and conservatives have been criticized for citing King's legacy in "culture versus structure" debates, but King's words are flat-out precedents for their chastisements, and King's legacy as a whole supports their advocacy of moral traditions and the traditional institutions (family, community, church, public service) that inculcate, nurture, conserve, and transfer intergenerationally.

Secondly, in regard to embodiment and blackness specifically, King did not ignore the fact of blackness and its meaning and operation in America, just as he did not ignore the fact of embodiment. In a discussion rooted in W. E. B. Du Bois's idea of double-consciousness, Frantz Fanon's existential-phenomenological analysis of the "lived experience of the Black," and James Baldwin's critiques of American racism, the idea of the black body—how it is experienced and how it is perceived (by those who perceive and are perceived)—is the focal point of understanding the meaning of blackness and anti-black racism. The question is whether King's view of race, given his personalism, is consistent with this theoretical approach. King did think that humanity is more than body, more than mere flesh, but his ethical view was concrete and incarnational. It moved between God and the flesh—and because the flesh he was fighting to secure rights for was black, he certainly did not discount blackness. King's ethical view of the raced body is fairly represented in a trinitarian structure and reflects complementarity: God recognizes and is the foundation of human equal worth, individuals ought to act toward one another guided (as with

the Holy Spirit) by the knowledge of our individual yet shared sacred personhood, and in doing so we encounter others in the flesh (as with God incarnate). King did not emphasize blackness in his theological ethics, as James Cone did in his, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, but King's view paves the way for a Cone-style innovation.⁶¹

It may seem that a singular focus on blackness in an incarnational encounter with the other is on thin ice theologically. For example, early in his theological education King explicitly promoted what he called the "bigness of God." He noted that the idea of God should not be limited by exclusively associating God with a denomination or a particular race.⁶² This view is seemingly inconsistent with James Cone's prophetic-provocation that "God is Black."⁶³

This leaves us wondering how King would have responded to the contemporary politics of embodiment, as best represented in the Black Lives Matter movement's "unapologetically Black" guiding principle: "We are unapologetically Black in our positioning. In affirming that Black Lives Matter, we need not qualify our position. To love and desire freedom and justice for ourselves is a necessary prerequisite for wanting the same for others."⁶⁴ This principle has essentially two parts; the first is an unshamed and unqualified declaration that black lives matter, and the second sets a necessary condition for the reciprocal recognition that all lives matter. We can be fairly confident that King of 1968 would have analyzed this in the same way he analyzed the Black Power movement, although I imagine he wouldn't have stuck to his strict reading of a nonracialized theology that he held as a divinity student; that was, after all, a rejection of the assumption of the whiteness of God.

He might have found its foregrounding of blackness and its backgrounding of the universal to be at odds with his view of personhood that "human worth lies in relatedness to God" rather than in "racial origin."⁶⁵ What is foregrounded, for King, is the universal in God as the foundation of being. Or he might have recognized that black-somebodiness denied leads to separation and, in turn, separation leads to further loss of black-somebodiness. This, in the language of recognition, is the denial of black subjectivity, which then makes intersubjectivity between whites and blacks inconceivable to the white gaze; the result is that the black is objectified and denied inclusion in the universal. To borrow Charles Taylor's phrasing, foregrounding the universal emphasizes "unity-through-identity" at the cost of suppressing "unity-across-difference."⁶⁶ The remedy to this misrecognition is to hold that God and the universal

are in fact ontologically foregrounded but rhetorically backgrounded in the idea of reciprocity embedded in Black Lives Matter's principle of unapologetic blackness.

Another challenge with applying King's dream to contemporary black political theory lies in its prophetic nature. It contains elements of what Niebuhr called impossible ethical ideals, which, though "impossible" given human shortcomings, were ethically necessary as guides for humanity. The ideal of the beloved community and the role of love set too high a bar; they are not what John Rawls, for example, would identify as concordant with a reasonable utopia, constructing a vision of which is one of the aims of political philosophy. A reasonable utopia is a conception of a just democratic society that pushes the limits of the possible, given our historical conditions, circumstances, and tendencies and the fact of pluralism.⁶⁷

The fact of reasonable pluralism means that although we can ask for it, we nevertheless cannot expect the sort of social conversion and redemption that King dreamed of. Love—especially *agape*—is too much to ask for, and it certainly cannot be required because it cannot be compelled. King's dream may be excessive in its intimate and social-affective and epistemological requirements, but as such it resonates with political philosophers who prioritize a radical or liberal politics of shame, conversion, and redemption.⁶⁸ Their view, whether they recognize it or not, is deeply eschatological, because it parallels the linear narrative of fall-apocalypse-redemption that characterizes Abrahamic religions: the fall, confession, redemption (aka revolution), and resurrection (aka rebirth as the new man or woman). In *Where Do We Go from Here*, King in fact laid out a parallel criticism of Frantz Fanon and some proponents of Black Power who focus on violence, rather than love and shame, as the driving force toward rebirth.⁶⁹ This is not the place to fully detail my objections, but such eschatological and perfectionist liberalisms are unreasonable and border on the illiberal—they flout, as John Gray has argued, our historical conditions and circumstances, social tendencies, and reasonable pluralism.⁷⁰ They are the death of reasonable utopias and the birth of new tyrannies.

To set up the dream and the color-blind ideal in a manner that requires attitudinal and affective confession and redemption is to invite disappointment and, eventually, cynicism. Indeed, contemporary black racial realists and their kin, racial pessimists, may resonate more with Niebuhr's pessimistic attachment to impossible ethical ideals: "In the task of that redemption the most effective agents will be men who have substituted some new illusions for the abandoned ones. The most important of these illusions is

that the collective life of mankind can achieve perfect justice. It is a very valuable illusion for the moment; for justice cannot be approximated if the hope of its perfect realization does not generate a sublime madness in the soul. Nothing but such madness will do battle with malignant power and 'spiritual wickedness in high places.' The illusion is dangerous because it encourages terrible fanaticisms. It must therefore be brought under the control of reason. One can only hope that reason will not destroy it before its work is done."⁷¹

Niebuhr's judgment is double-edged, because it applies to faith and reason. His rejection of exceptionalism, and unchecked confidence in faith or reason, echoes other philosophers and public intellectuals, such as Walter Lippman and Max Horkheimer, who warned against the distortion of reason into instrumental and nationalistic purposes. Recall, though, that King was similarly wary about the fallibility of reason and rationalistic ethical and political theories. King, and Niebuhr for that matter, did not wish to leave us in pessimism and at the edge of despair. To paraphrase Niebuhr, one can only hope that reason will not destroy impossible ethical ideals before that work is done. That is the work of King's ethical and political theology of love, justice, and hope. It is the transcendent force in his prophetic and infinitely demanding call: "No, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."⁷²

57. For just one example: "This sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent" in the "I Have a Dream" speech (218), refers to *Richard III*, Act I, scene 1, lines 1–2, "Now is the winter of our discontent/Made glorious summer by this son of York."

58. King, "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," 297.

59. *Ibid.*

60. He did attempt to impose this demand on his children, unsuccessfully; he was a very judgmental and punitive father, displaying Harilal attitudes that seem pretty close to anger. But he applauded Indira Nehru's wedding and wished her well (all the more because she married in a homespun sari woven by her father while in prison).

61. Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi*, 66.

62. Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989 [1946]), 274–275. See Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi*, 66–67, 168–169. Nehru does not mention the connection between fear and violence, but this connection is surely salient for Gandhi.

63. King, "Eulogy for the Martyred Children," in *Testament of Hope*, 222.

64. See Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 376.

65. Gandhi here is no Stoic. The Stoics were not ascetic. They thought bodily desire was fine; what was problematic was its association with personal love. The Greek Stoics valued consensual male-male and male-female relationships that served educational and friendly purposes, but that did not involve possessive personal love. (They opposed marriage when based on such love.) The Roman Stoic conception of marriage is that of a will-governed partnership for reproduction and other valuable ends.

66. As Sorabji shows in *Gandhi and the Stoics*, 32–42, Gandhi's attitude owes a good deal to Christian asceticism, sometimes filtered through Tolstoy.

67. See Martha C. Nussbaum, "The Morning and the Evening Star: Religion, Money, and Love in Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* and *Elmer Gantry*," in *Power, Prose, Purse: Law, Literature, and Economic Transformations*, ed. Alison L. LaCroix, Saul Levmore, and Martha C. Nussbaum (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2018). The female evangelist is a different story, and Lewis's Sister Sharon Falconer, modeled on Aimee Semple McPherson, is careful to conceal evidence of her sexual life. The real-life McPherson was married three times, but apart from that the numerous allegations of love affairs have not been substantiated.

68. See Jonathan Rieder, *The Word of the Lord Is Upon Me: The Righteous Performance of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010); and, more critical of King, Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Free Press, 2001), chap. 8. On the miscegenation fear, see Justin Driver, "Of Big Black Bucks and Little Golden-Haired Girls: How Fear of Miscegenation Informed *Brown v. Board of Education* and Its Resistance," forthcoming in *The Empire of Disgust: Prejudice, Discrimination, and Policy in India and the U.S.*, ed. Zoya Hasan, Aziz Huq, Martha C. Nussbaum, and Vidhu Verma, under review by Oxford University Press, Delhi.

6. THE PROPHETIC TENSION BETWEEN RACE CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE IDEAL OF COLOR-BLINDNESS

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1. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Playboy Interview: Martin Luther King, Jr.," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 374. Outside of the *Playboy* interview, there is no other reference to the idea of color-blindness in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 7 vols., ed. Ralph E. Luker et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992–2014). The paucity of references to color-blindness is confirmed by the lack of association between King and that idea in most of the major academic histories of the period—e.g., Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988); Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963–65* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998); Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965–68* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006); and David L. Lewis, *King: A Biography*, 3rd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

2. See "Letter from Mrs. W. Brown to MLK," King Center Digital Archive, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/letter-mrs-w-brown-mlk>. The date stamp on the document is obscured, but the letter refers to marches and might be a reaction to the demonstrations in Birmingham or Selma.

3. Andrew Kull, *The Color-Blind Constitution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 1–6.

4. *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537, 538, 16 S. Ct. 1138, 1138, 41 L. Ed. 256 (1896) overruled by *Brown v. Bd. of Ed. of Topeka, Shawnee Cty., Kan.*, 347 U.S. 483, 74 S. Ct. 686, 98 L. Ed. 873 (1954).

5. See Kull, *The Color-Blind Constitution*, 131–150 ("Separate but Equal"), 151–163 ("*Brown v. Board of Education*"); and Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 143–205 ("The Montgomery Bus Boycott").

6. Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream," in *Testament of Hope*, 217–220.

7. *Ibid.*, 219.

8. King, "The Rising Tide of Racial Consciousness," in *Testament of Hope*, 145–151.

9. Eric J. Sundquist, *King's Dream* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 4–6.

10. Ronald R. Sundstrom, *The Browning of America and the Evasion of Social Justice* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 37–64.

11. King, "Nonviolence and Racial Justice," in *Testament of Hope*, 8.

12. *Parents Involved in Cmty. Sch. v. Seattle Sch. Dist. No. 1*, 551 U.S. 701, 127 S. Ct. 2738, 168 L. Ed. 2d 508 (2007).

13. James Lindgren, "Seeing Colors," *California Law Review* 81 (1993): 1059-1088, at 1059-1060.

14. Mary Frances Berry, "vindicating Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Road to a Color-Blind Society," *Journal of Negro History* 81, no. 1/4 (1996): 137-144; Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Free Press, 2000); Sundquist, *King's Dream*.

15. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010).

16. King, "Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech," in *Testament of Hope*, 224-226; King, "The World House," in *Where Do We Go from Here*, 177-202.

17. Sundquist, *King's Dream*, 4.

18. King, "Playboy Interview," 374 (emphasis added).

19. The iconic "mountaintop" phrase is drawn from King, "I See the Promised Land," in *Testament of Hope*, 286.

20. King, "Rising Tide," 145-151. A related parallel debate is whether King would have supported race-based policies created after his time, such as affirmative action in hiring and admissions. Clarence B. Jones, who was King's personal lawyer and assisted him in drafting "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," argued that King favored a reparations program and would have considered policies like affirmative action a "booby prize." See Clarence B. Jones and Joel Engel, *What Would Martin Say?* (New York: Harper, 2008), 69-100. Jones also claimed that King would agree with black public intellectuals who draw critical attention to the values and character of the young, black, and poor as well as to discriminatory social structures; see *ibid.*, 81-91. For a rebuttal of Jones's reading of King, see Lewis V. Baldwin and Rufus Burrow Jr., eds., *The Domestication of Martin Luther King Jr.: Clarence B. Jones, Right-Wing Conservatism, and the Manipulation of the King Legacy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013).

21. King, "Playboy Interview," 375 (emphasis added).

22. Dyson, *I May Not Get There with You*, 3-4. For Dyson's analysis of why King should not be associated with the idea of color-blindness, see 11-29.

23. This follows the analysis of the idea of redemption and human life in Charles Taylor, "A Catholic Modernity?," in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 167-187. Taylor explains the idea of the complementarity of human life and its relation to unity in God (or "unity-across-difference") thusly: "Redemption happens through Incarnation, the weaving of God's life into human lives, but these human lives are different, plural, irreducible to each other. Redemption-Incarnation brings reconciliation, a kind of oneness. This is the oneness of diverse beings who come to see that they cannot attain wholeness alone, that their complementarity is essential, rather than of beings who come to accept that they are ultimately identical. Or perhaps we might put it: complementarity and identity will both be part of our ultimate oneness" (168).

24. King, "The World House," 177-202.

25. There is a long tradition in black political thought that challenges false universals; see, for example, nearly every entry in *African-American Social and Political*

Thought, 1850-1920, ed. Howard Brotz (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1995). For a contemporary analysis of anti-black racism and false universals, see Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

26. On the challenging and expansion of universals as part of the continual grounding of normative theories, see Thomas McCarthy, *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 36-41. McCarthy's arguments about the recovery of a historically grounded version of the idea of human development provides an alternative to King's theologically based normative foundations. I am thankful to William M. Sullivan for pointing the connection between my analysis of King and McCarthy's argument.

27. Sundquist, *King's Dream*, 4.

28. *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

29. Gabriel Chin, "The Plessy Myth: Justice Harlan and the Chinese Cases," *Iowa Law Review* 82 (1996): 151-182; Frank Wu, *Yellow: Race in America beyond Black and White* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

30. Sundstrom, *The Browning of America*, 40.

31. King, "Playboy Interview," 375.

32. Amy Gutmann, "Responding to Racial Injustice," in *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race*, ed. K. Anthony Appiah, Amy Gutmann, and David B. Wilkins (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 106-178.

33. Bernard R. Boxill, "The Color-Blind Principle," in *Blacks and Social Justice* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1992), 9-18; Ronald Dworkin, "Affirmative Action: Does It Work?" and "Affirmative Action: Is it Fair?," both in Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 386-408, 409-426.

34. King, "Rising Tide," 145-151.

35. Taylor's analysis of such absolutism parallels the common criticism of it as a false universality, but is especially relevant given the theological connections when this debate is applied to King. Taylor wrote about catholicity, by which he means catholicity in the broad sense and not in reference to the specific church. "Our great historical temptation has been to forget the complementarity, to go straight for the sameness, making as many people as possible into 'good Catholics'—and in the process failing of catholicity: failing of catholicity, because failing wholeness; unity bought at the price of suppressing something of the diversity in the humanity that God created; unity of the part masquerading as the whole. It is universality without wholeness, and so not true Catholicism" (Taylor, "A Catholic Modernity?," 168).

36. Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

37. This has also affected its rebranded variant, "post-racialism." For my analysis of the idea and ideal of post-racialism, see Ronald R. Sundstrom, "On Post-Racialism: Or, How Color-Blindness Rebranded Is Still Vicious," in *The Routledge Companion*

to *Philosophy of Race*, ed. Paul C. Taylor, Linda Martín Alcoff, and Luvele Anderson (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

38. See Taylor's analysis in "A Catholic Modernity?," 184. The realist rejection of color-blindness and other similar normative ideals, and even the absolutist or puritanical position toward them, reflects the range of reactions about normative ideals once those ideals face modern challenges. See also Taylor's *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

39. John J. Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Making of a Mind* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982), 27–29, 163–197.

40. Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

41. *Ibid.*, 51.

42. King frequently referred to the philosophical-theological idea of "personalism." This idea stresses the dignity of the human person *qua* person, and has a long history in philosophical and theological debates, but King seems most influenced by Martin Buber's and Reinhold Niebuhr's versions. For more on King's personalism, see Ira G. Zepp, *The Social Vision of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Brooklyn: Carlson, 1989). For more on personalism generally, see Thomas D. Williams and Jan Olof Bengtsson, "Personalism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2016 ed., <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/personalism/>.

43. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride toward Freedom* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 88. This passage was quoted in Zepp, *Social Vision*, 173. For more on King's philosophical and theological formation and views, see Zepp, *Social Vision*; and Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.*

44. See Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013). For Niebuhr's influence on King, see King, *Stride toward Freedom*; King, *The Measure of a Man* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988); Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.*; and Zepp, *Social Vision*.

45. King, *Measure of a Man*, 9–10, 23.

46. *Ibid.*, 18.

47. King is ambiguous on this point. In his *The Measure of a Man*, the distinction is blurred, if it is there at all: "This is man. He is God's marvelous creation. Through his mind he can leap oceans, break through walls, and transcend the categories of time and space. The stars maybe marvelous, but not so marvelous as the mind of man that comprehended them. . . . This is what the biblical writers mean when they say that man is made in the image of God. Man has rational capacity; he has the unique ability to have fellowship with God. Man is a being of spirit" (18). The relation of spirit to reason, their separation in the modern age, and the aftermath of that divorce is examined in Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

48. King, *Stride toward Freedom*, 88.

49. King, "The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr," *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project*, 272–273, http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images

/Volo2Scans/269_Apr1953-June1954_The%20Theology%20of%20Reinhold%20Niebuhr.pdf.

50. King, "The Ethical Demands for Integration," in *Testament of Hope*, 118–119 (emphasis in the original).

51. *Ibid.*, 119 (emphasis in the original).

52. King, "Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr," 272–273.

53. King, "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," in *Testament of Hope*, 294.

54. King, *Stride toward Freedom*, 88.

55. Niebuhr, *Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 8–9.

56. King, *Stride toward Freedom*, 88. The idea that Niebuhr neglected the idea of grace may be incorrect—Niebuhr states that the realization of love's triumph in the world depends on God's intervention; see Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 82. Niebuhr also thought that no society could ever be just, because society would always frustrate the moral ideals of humanity, which were more secure in the hearts and minds of individual persons.

57. King, "Our God Is Marching On!," in *Testament of Hope*, 230. Compare this with his statement in his "Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech" (225), wherein he stated that he accepted the award "with an abiding faith in America and an audacious faith in the future of mankind. I refuse to accept the idea that the 'isness' of man's present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal 'oughtness' that forever confronts him."

58. Niebuhr's *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* included a chapter entitled "The Relevance of an Impossible Ethical Ideal" (103–135). King referred to this text in his essays on Niebuhr. According to Niebuhr, "Prophetic Christianity . . . demands the impossible; and by that very demand emphasizes the impotence and corruption of human nature, wresting from man the cry of distress and contrition, 'The good that I would, do I do not; but the evil that I would not, that I do . . . Woe is me . . . who will deliver me from the body of this death'" (103). See, as well, the conclusion to *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, where Niebuhr refers to the necessity for, yet vulnerability of, such ideals (277).

59. King, "Rising Tide," 150–151.

60. King, "Ethical Demands for Integration," 117–125.

61. James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).

62. King, "The Bigness of God," *Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project*, 326–327, http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/Volo2Scans/326_1951-1955_The%20Bigness%20of%20God.pdf. See also, King, "Ethical Demands for Integration," 117–125; King, "Religion and Race," speech delivered to The Conference on Religion and Race, January 17, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. Library and Archives, King Center for Nonviolence, Atlanta.

63. Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*.

64. See "Guiding Principles," *Black Lives Matter*, <http://blacklivesmatter.com/guiding-principles/>.

65. King, "Ethical Demands for Integration," 122.

66. Taylor, "A Catholic Modernity?," 168.

67. John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, ed. Erin Kelly (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 4.

68. For examples of such political theories, see Christopher J. Lebron, *The Color of Our Shame: Race and Justice in Our Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Sharon A. Stanley, *An Impossible Dream? Racial Integration in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

69. King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 56–69.

70. John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

71. Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 277.

72. King, "I Have a Dream," 218–219.

7. INTEGRATION, FREEDOM, AND THE AFFIRMATION OF LIFE

1. Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Ethical Demands for Integration," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990), 117–125.

2. I provide an extensive treatment of the sacrifice-ability of the positive liberties in the liberal tradition in Danielle Allen, "Difference without Domination," in *Difference without Domination: Justice and Democracy in Conditions of Diversity*, ed. D. Allen and R. Somanathan, under consideration, University of Chicago Press.

3. Melvin Rogers, "Race, Domination, and Republicanism," in Allen and Somanathan, *Difference without Domination*.

4. *Ibid.*

5. All parenthetical page references in this essay refer back to King's "Ethical Demands for Integration."

6. Allen, "Difference without Domination."

7. For a thorough treatment of the means–ends relationships required by Gandhian nonviolence, see Chapter 4, by Karuna Mantena; also Mantena, "Another Realism: The Politics of Gandhian Nonviolence," *American Political Science Review* 106 (2012): 455–470.

8. See Allen, "Difference without Domination," for a detailed account of where this position emerges in Rawls's landmark work, *A Theory of Justice*.

9. Heather Gerken has provided compelling arguments about how decentralized structures of political decision making can empower minorities within a democracy, with reference to gay rights movements (Heather Gerken, "The Loyal Opposition," *Yale Law Journal* 123 [2014]: 1958–1994) and with reference to race (Gerken, "Second-Order Diversity: An Exploration of Decentralization's Egalitarian Possibilities," in Allen and Somanathan, *Difference without Domination*).

10. For the categories "deliberative," "adversarial," and "prophetic" in political speech, see Danielle Allen, "Reconceiving Public Spheres," in *From Voice to Influence*, ed. Danielle Allen and Jennifer Light (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 178–207.

11. Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 17.

12. For a critique of *Talking to Strangers* that proceeds along this line, see Juliet Hooker, "Black Lives Matter and the Paradoxes of U.S. Black Politics: From Democratic Sacrifice to Democratic Repair," *Political Theory* 44, no. 4 (2016): 448–469.

13. This is Harvard, of course, but I name it here in the note rather than in the text because I think that, in the abstract, the points apply to any number of institutions.

14. Harvard University, "Statement of Values" (2002), http://www.harvard.edu/president/speeches/summers_2002/values.php.

8. A VINDICATION OF VOTING RIGHTS

I am grateful for discussion of this essay with audiences at Johns Hopkins University, Wayne State University, and New York University School of Law, and at a Harvard University workshop organized by the volume editors. This chapter draws on King's vast corpus of published writings. It also references unpublished material collected in my research at the King Library and Archive in Atlanta. I am grateful to Cynthia Lewis for the invitation. I am also indebted to Elaine Hall for superb research assistance during my visit; my research there would have been much less productive without her guidance in sorting through the massive volume of material. The epigraph is from Martin Luther King, Jr., "People in Action: Literacy Bill Dies," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 26, 1962.

1. For a canonical statement of the nature, scope, and importance of these institutions, see John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971). For evidence of the impact of rights violations on societal stability and violence, see Oskar N. T. Thoms and James Ron, "Do Human Rights Violations Cause Internal Conflict?," *Human Rights Quarterly* 29 (2007): 674–705.

2. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016).

3. See, e.g., Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Carol Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1955* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919–1950* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008).

4. Rex Martin, *A System of Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

5. Derrick Darby, *Rights, Race, and Recognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

6. America arguably has several "fundamental" values. It would be illuminating to consider them one at a time and see what King has to say about them and how he