Celebration and Betrayal: Martin Luther King's Case for Racial Justice and Our Current Dilemma

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Abstract: During the American Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King's principal arguments reasoned from theological ethics, appealing to natural law, *imago Dei*, and *agape* love. Today in the United States, with the prevailing ideal of public reason, such arguments are unacceptable in the public square. In lieu of King's theological arguments, are there philosophical principles or values adequate to sustain the cause of racial justice, establishing both a secure *rational foundation* for racial justice and providing sufficient *moral incentive* for citizens to work self-sacrificially for this cause? I assess the prospects of the major philosophical alternatives, specifically utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, virtue ethics, contractarianism, and the anti-theory option. I conclude that each of these approaches fails to provide the necessary conceptual resources to sustain the cause for racial justice. This presents a disconcerting dilemma: either we readmit theological considerations into the public square or surrender hope for the achievement of lasting racial justice in the United States.

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Every Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Americans celebrate the legacy of a man whose work profoundly advanced the cause for racial justice in the West. King was a man of many admirable attributes—an eloquent orator, adroit strategist, and visionary leader. But most importantly, he was morally principled. His case for racial justice and the civil disobedience this required was rationally grounded and rigorously defended in his many speeches and publications. But how many of our memorials and celebrations recall the precise nature of those arguments? Indeed, how many Americans today are aware of, much less capable of articulating, the essence of King's case for civil disobedience and, ultimately, the social and legal changes his work brought about in the United States?

King's principal arguments for desegregation pivoted on ideas that are much less popular in the U.S. than they were a half-century ago, for they essentially reasoned from theological ethics, specifically natural law, the concept of *imago Dei*, and *agape* love. Today, to cite a higher moral law or transcendent values in public political debate is more likely to elicit winces, ridicule, or dismissive hand waving

than a serious critical response. After all, appeals to such concepts contradict the standard of "public reason," endorsed by the likes of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, which stipulates that the moral and political principles which guide public life must be acceptable to everyone to whom the laws and policies dictated by those principles will apply.[1] This standard, currently heralded by many, perhaps most, political theorists, has produced what Richard John Neuhaus called the "naked public square"—a public square "stripped" of the sorts of theological rationales for public policy which were central to King's case for racial justice.[2]

So, to review King's arguments, which served as the intellectual engine of the Civil Rights Movement, is at once to appreciate the genius of one of America's greatest moral reformers and to throw into sharp relief how much American culture has changed in the last half century in terms of our currency of public discourse. Now this is not a mere matter of historical interest but potentially has implications for public debate and policy decisions regarding civil rights issues. For if our secular society has scuttled King's theological rationale for racial justice, then what philosophical foundation is adequate to take its place? Are there alternative moral principles, values, or ideals which are sufficient to sustain this cause? In what follows I consider this question, ultimately arriving at the disconcerting conclusion that none of the major moral theoretic options available offer the necessary conceptual resources to philosophically ground an adequate conception of racial justice and provide the moral incentive needed to motivate people to work toward that end.

1. King's Case for Racial Justice

When making the case for desegregation, King repeatedly appealed to natural law. For example, in his historic essay "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," King expounds upon the concept in relation to the Jim Crow laws which he aimed to overturn:

> A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality.[3]

In taking this approach, King took his place in a long tradition of natural law ethicists that includes not only Aquinas but also the likes of Augustine, John Locke, and many of the American founding fathers. Like so many of his forbears, King recognized that the genius of natural law thinking lies in its capacity both to adequately ground and provide a means of assessing civil law. Furthermore, natural law provides an enduring *motivation* to achieve moral goods too lofty for civil law. As King puts it,

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[1] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996); and Jürgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, ed. C. P. Cronin and Pablo De Greiff (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 1998.

[2] Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

[3] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper, 1986), 293.

> unenforceable obligations are beyond the reach of the laws of society. They concern inner attitudes, genuine person-to-person relations, and expressions of compassion which law books cannot regulate and jails cannot rectify. Such obligations are met by one's commitment to an inner law, written on the heart. Man-made laws assure justice, but a higher law produces love.[4]

The binding nature of this law on all humans everywhere is guaranteed by another idea essential to natural law ethics: the universal kinship of humankind. This, for King, has a theological basis: the *imago Dei*. This is the idea that human beings possess an inherent dignity because we all bear "the indelible stamp of the Creator." And this inherent worth "is universally shared in equal portions by all men. There is no graded scale of essential worth; there is no divine right of one race which differs from the divine right of another."[5]

King understood the power of this idea as a motivation for non-violent resistance. Because those involved in the movement regularly faced severe mistreatment, it was crucial that they resist the temptation to respond in kind. King recognized that the natural human tendency to demonize one's oppressors leads to a violent recourse, and violence is never constructive. "To seek to retaliate with violence," says King, "does nothing but intensify the existence of evil and hate in the universe."[6] Therefore, this impulse must be defeated at its root—in the very way that the oppressor is *conceived*. By emphasizing the universality of the *imago Dei*, King enables his fellow civil rights activists to eschew the demonizing thought. Rather than the irredeemable "white devil" so despised by Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and others in the Nation of Islam movement, King saw white racists as fellow children of God pathetically distorted by their fear and ignorance and therefore in need of help, not hatred. Rather than pure powers of evil to be defeated by the same violent means they employ, white oppressors are brothers and sisters led astray and therefore worthy recipients of our love and generous refusal to fight back. Thus, King declares, "our aim must never be to defeat or humiliate the white man, but to win his friendship and understanding."[7] In this way, the oppressed overcomes the temptation to counter-oppression through a redemptive reconception of the oppressor.

In addition to his appeal to natural law and the *imago Dei*, King frequently used an argument from New Testament ethics. A major aspect of this derived from the command to love your enemies, as propounded by Jesus Christ in the Sermon on the Mount. In numerous speeches and essays, King develops the idea by distinguishing divine *agape* love from merely human forms of love, such as *philia*, or friendship love, and romantic *eros* love. *Agape*, argues King, "does not begin by discriminating between worthy and unworthy people or any qualities people possess. It begins by loving others for their sakes. It is entirely 'neighbor-regarding concern for others,' which discovers the neighbor in every man it meets. Therefore, *agape* makes no distinction between friends and enemy; it is directed toward both."[8] Though conceptually distinct, this argument is vitally connected to the previous two arguments,

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[4] 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 M. Washington (New York: Harper, 1986), 123.

[5] King, "The Ethical Demands for Integration," 119.

[6] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Walk for Freedom," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper, 1986), 83.

[7] Martin Luther King, Jr., "An Experiment in Love," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper, 1986), 17.

[8] King, "An Experiment in Love," 19.

since the universal human kinship based in our sharing the divine image functions as the necessary and sufficient ground for *agape* love. Our fellow humans, even those who mercilessly abuse us, actually *deserve* our love and gracious non-violence, though they deserve it not in and of themselves. Rather, they warrant our love and grace because of the divine spark within them, that same spark which binds us as one collective people, God's children, notwithstanding our ethnic and cultural differences.

Another recurrent New Testament ethical theme in King's writings pertains to the redemptive power of suffering. In a way similar to Ghandi's use of the concept, the idea is deployed by King to remind civil rights activists of the power in voluntary weakness to effect dramatic social change. As King explains, "self-suffering stands at the center of the non-violent movement and the individuals involved are able to suffer in a creative manner, feeling that unearned suffering is redemptive, and that suffering may serve to transform the social situation."[9] King's words here echo a theme in the New Testament, especially the Pauline letters, where we are told to "rejoice in our sufferings," because we know that suffering produces tremendous goods, including character and hope (Rom. 5:3–4) and even sharing in Christ's resurrection (Phil. 3:10–11) and eternal glory (Rom. 8:17). By applying this paradoxical concept in the socio-political realm, King created a formula for social revolution. Though neither soteriological nor eternal in nature, the hope and glory of the Civil Rights Movement was nonetheless profound—pervasive social justice. Although not concerned with the utter extermination of evil from the human heart, it did hope for the extinguishing of evil social structures. King's intuition seemed to be that if suffering can be redemptive unto eternal goods, then *a fortiori* it is useful for temporal goods. If it is effective for human salvation, then how much more so for bringing about racial justice in a civil society.

2. Philosophical Alternatives and their Problems

This is just a sampling of ways in which King made his case for racial justice using arguments from natural law and biblical theology. Now this is all well and good but, the critic might complain, such arguments aren't necessary to make the case for social justice when it comes to race and ethnicity. Though King effectively used theological ethics during the Civil Rights Movement, need we do so today? Perhaps there are other conceptual resources which may provide an adequate foundation for the cause. Let us consider the major philosophical alternatives to theological ethics, namely utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, Aristotelian virtue ethics, and social contract ethics. In doing so, we must keep in mind that the principal resources necessary for the cause of racial justice are both philosophical and motivational. Philosophically, the essential moral concepts are *equality*, *justice*, and *duty*. We need an adequate basis for affirming the equal inherent value of all human beings, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or any other contingent facts about them. We also need grounds for thinking that it is just to treat people accordingly and that we in fact have a duty to do so. Motivationally, it will be essential to provide an adequate *moral incentive* to work for the shared vision of a racially just society, an incentive so strong that people will see it as worth significant self-sacrifice, even to the point of suffering and potentially dying for the cause.

2.1. Utilitarianism

One major alternative to theological ethics is utilitarian ethics. As conceived by Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill and their intellectual descendants, the utilitarian vision for society is one characterized

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[9] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper, 1986), 47.

by maximal human happiness. As Mill puts it, "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain."[10] In aiming for such a state of affairs, the utilitarian wants to motivate individuals to use the principle of utility as a criterion for personal choices but also vies for social structures and institutions to be arranged according to this criterion. If such were achieved, then everyone would benefit, regardless of their race and ethnicity. Clearly, this is an attractive aim, which has the strength of universal appeal. Who doesn't want a society that is maximally happy?

Rarely have scholars attempted a rigorous utilitarian defense of non-discriminatory social practices. A noteworthy exception is the American economist Gary S. Becker, who argues that there are significant economic costs incurred in any capitalist system where discrimination is prevalent.[11] Becker begins with the idea that some people exhibit a "taste for discrimination," that is, a willingness to pay to avoid personal contact with people belonging to a particular social group. Such taste for discrimination is captured in Becker's concept of a "discrimination coefficient" (DC). Where there is a high DC within a particular community's population, this will raise the wage rate for labor services of the non-discriminated group, which in turn will increase overall costs for goods and services within that community. Becker goes on to argue that the overall effect of the DC is to reduce per capita income for members of all people groups within the community. Thus, it would appear that high levels of racial discrimination within any community are ultimately bad for everyone, not just those who are the direct targets of discriminatory practice.

While Becker's analysis was groundbreaking and remains highly influential, it is not without its problems. Some have critiqued various aspects of his methodology (e.g., Becker's use of fixed relative income weights and his ignoring of the effects of regional disequilibrium on African-American employment data).[12] Secondly, some complain that Becker's notion of a "taste for discrimination" is far too broad and fails to distinguish between a variety of discrimination practices. Thus, Donald Dewey writes, "Most whites have not one but many tastes for discrimination which are not necessarily consistent."[13]

More recently, Harel and Segal have shown that when it comes to arguing for or against segregation practices, utilitarian considerations are essentially inconclusive. Thus, regarding segregation in the sphere of higher education, they write:

> If, as is usually the case, individual preferences are unobservable, then we cannot claim that utilitarian considerations support the establishment of black colleges or Hassidic-only neighborhoods while, at the same time, oppose exclusion of blacks or Jews from white or Christian neighborhoods. But … the opposite is also false: in general, utilitarian considerations do not support the establishment of white colleges or the exclusion of Jews from Christian neighborhoods.[14]

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[10] John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism and Other Writings*, ed. Mary Warnock (New York: William Collins and Sons, 1962), 257.

[11] Gary S. Becker, *The Economics of Discrimination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1957.

[12] M. W. Reder, Review of *The Economics of Discrimination* by Gary S. Becker, *The American Economic Review* 48 (1958): 495–500.

[13] Donald Dewey, Review of *The Economics of Discrimination* by Gary S. Becker, *Southern Economic Journal* 24 (1958): 495.

[14] Alon Harel and Uzi Segal, "Utilitarianism and Discrimination," *Social Choice and Welfare* 42 (2014): 368.

Harel and Segal extend this point to any "asymmetric norms," whether favoring or disfavoring minorities: from a purely principled standpoint, "one cannot reject or promote segregation-related policies based on utilitarian arguments."[15]

However, supposing Becker's analysis—or for that matter, any similarly utilitarian analysis—works in demonstrating that racial discrimination leads to unwanted economic and other social consequences, does this suffice as a foundation for achieving racial justice? Unfortunately, no. This is because, we will recall, what is needed is not merely a factual analysis of the likely or real social consequences of systemic racism but also an adequate grounding for deontological concepts, including notions of duty, justice, and personal rights.

The problem is that utilitarianism lacks an adequate deontology. While we all may desire pleasure and the diminution of pain and we may also be strongly motivated accordingly, the utilitarian focus on happiness fails to ground deontological concepts. From the fact that a certain act brings more pleasure than pain, we cannot infer that that act is just or that people have a right to it. From the fact that a given policy produces more pain than pleasure, it does not follow that we have a duty to avoid instituting that policy. Indeed, this point constitutes the Achilles heel of utilitarian moral theory, as critics have long pointed out that a utilitarian can coherently *defend* unjust practices, ranging from violations of privacy to the killing of innocent people (in order to, say, prevent a riot). The fact that defenders of Jim Crow laws often employed utilitarian arguments is historical testament to the fact that appeals to what will yield the greatest happiness for the greatest number can be plausibly made in defense of all sorts of injustices. Thus, it appears that the principle of utility cannot philosophically ground our conception of racial justice. If the utilitarian is to operate with a conception of justice at all, she must get it from somewhere else.

2.2. Kantian Ethics

Perhaps our prospects will be better with Kantian ethics. After all, this ethical theory is heralded for its strong emphasis on deontology, providing a sturdy foundation for concepts of duty, rights, and justice. According to Kant, the universal moral principle is the Categorical Imperative (CI), which he develops under a few different formulations. One of these is that you should only act in such a way that you could will that the maxim or principle behind your action be a universal law. Another version of the CI says you should always "treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only."[16] In other words, we must respect people's inherent worth and avoid merely using them. Now these two formulations of the CI, appealing to universalizability and respect for persons, respectively, appear to provide a strong foundation for thinking about racial justice. Thus, we might say that it is wrong to discriminate against a person of color, because no one could will such discrimination universally, since no one wants to be discriminated against.

The problem here, however—traditionally, a nagging one for Kantians—is that so long as one specifies one's maxim sufficiently, one can universalize certain injustices. Jonathan Harrison expresses the problem like this: "Is it the case that, if an action is wrong, no maxim which would enjoin it can be universalized? Against this there is a very formidable objection, which I am not sure can be answered. It is this: Given any wrong action, you can find a maxim for it which is so specific that it enjoins the action

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[15] Harel and Segal, "Utilitarianism and Discrimination," 367.

[16] Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals,* trans. and ed. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill), 47.

and no other."[17] Thus, while I cannot universally will the maxim to steal, I certainly can universalize the maxim to lie to steal in order to feed a starving child. To illustrate the problem as regards the issue of race, consider the matter of a Kantian landlord reviewing a rental application of some ethnic minorities. What might prevent her from reasoning that although she cannot universalize a general maxim to refuse rentals to people of color, she could nevertheless universalize a specific maxim that says, for example, *in this neighborhood* people of color should not be allowed to rent an apartment? Unjust as this is, a faithful Kantian could consistently take such an approach, which shows that this version of the CI won't suffice when it comes to grounding our concept of racial justice.

But what about the other formulation of the CI? Racial discrimination appears to constitute disrespect for persons, since all such discrimination fails to treat people as ends in themselves. So, isn't the Kantian on secure ground here? Not really, since it is not obvious that such discrimination really treats a racial minority as a *mere means*. After all, a Kantian could coherently insist that while unfair, the practice of racial discrimination can be done in a respectful way. A segregationist during the 1960s could coherently argue that Jim Crow laws do not treat black Americans as mere means. On the contrary, the fact that, say, drinking fountains are specially designated *for* them shows that they are being treated with respect.

This highlights a problem often cited by critics of Kantian ethics, specifically that the theory critically lacks a proper attention to and emphasis on moral *feelings*, which are of crucial importance when dealing with moral contexts calling for compassion and empathy. For all of Kant's concern for respect of the moral law and abiding by abstract universal law, he diminished the importance of loving one's neighbor *for* him or herself. Thus, Lewis Gordon goes so far as to claim that "Kant can ... have a moral misanthrope who can hate humanity to his heart's content as long as he acts fundamentally from duty-in-itself."[18] This claim might seem to be borne out in the fact that Kant himself was a concerted racist, maintaining that "Humanity is at its greatest perfection in the race of the whites. The yellow Indians do have a meager talent. The Negroes are far below them and at the lowest point are a part of the American peoples."[19] Clearly, Kant saw nothing in his own moral principles which mandated anything like racial equality. He did condemn the *slavery* of non-Europeans,[20] but this is consistent with segregation and other forms of racially discriminatory social structures. The problem with the CI, however formulated, then, is that it is too abstract; so, as a guide to concrete moral living, it is unreliable,

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[17] Jonathan Harrison, "Kant's Examples of the First Formulation of the Categorical Imperative," *Philosophical Quarterly* 7 (1957): 60. W. D. Ross alternatively analyzes the difficulty as a problem of ambiguous levels of abstraction when it comes to formulating the maxim to be tested. He writes, "The test of universalizability applied at one level of abstractness condemns the act; applied at another level of abstractness it justifies it. And since the principle itself does not indicate at what level of abstractness it is to be applied, it does not furnish us with a criterion of the correctness of maxims, and of the rightness of acts that conform to them" (W. D. Ross, *Kant's Ethical Theory* [London: Oxford University Press, 1954]. 33). For an extensive discussion of this problem in Kant's ethics, see Nelson Potter Jr.'s "How to Apply the Categorical Imperative," *Philosophia* 5 (1975): 395–416.

[18] Lewis R. Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1995), 68.

[19] Immanuel Kant, "Physical Geography," in *Race and Enlightenment: A Reader*, ed. Emmanuel Chukwudi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 63.

[20] Immanuel Kant, *Peace and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 118.

ambiguous at best. This is true as regards all aspects of the moral life, but glaringly so when it comes to this issue.[21]

Some have challenged this claim, insisting that Kant's CI, when properly construed, may actually preclude racist thinking and behavior. Thus, Arnold Farr has argued that the categorical imperative is serviceable as a "first principle of a philosophy of race."[22] The problems noted above all arise from the Kantian "abstraction requirement," that we think of fellow human beings in abstract terms when applying the CI. Farr challenges the traditional approach to this requirement, noting that there are at least two other interpretations of the abstraction requirement which are congenial to a defensible philosophy of race. One of these interpretations understands the abstraction requirement "as a demand for intersubjectivity or recognition." So construed, says Farr, "the abstraction requirement simply demands that in the midst of our concrete differences we recognize ourselves in the other and the other in ourselves. That is, we recognize in others the humanity that we have in common."[23] Another interpretation of the abstraction requirement encouraged by Farr is to see this "as an attempt to avoid ethical egoism in determining maxims for our actions." He recommends this perspective because "to avoid ethical egoism one must abstract from (think beyond) one's own personal interest and subjective maxims. That is, the categorical imperative requires that I recognize that I am a member of the realm of rational beings."[24]

In these ways, then, Farr concludes that the categorical imperative actually "contravenes racist ideology" and thus has merit for a philosophy of race. Farr's treatment of the Kantian abstraction requirement is innovative and might succeed in demonstrating that alternative interpretations of the CI are available which make it consistent with a racial equality and justice. However, this is far from showing that what he offers is *the only reasonable interpretation* of Kantian moral principles. It is not enough to show that some versions of Kantian ethics oppose racist ideology or have merit for developing a constructive philosophy of race. This is far too thin a foundation when it comes to the project of pursuing racial justice. What is needed is an unambiguous moral mandate, an unequivocal set of moral obligations to respect racial equality. Only this will provide an adequate philosophical grounding for racial justice and provide the necessary moral incentive to do the sacrificial work necessary for this end. The Kantian ethical approach appears to fall well short of providing this.

2.3. Virtue Ethics

Aristotelian virtue ethics offers a perspective very different from that of utilitarianism and Kantian ethics. Recent decades have seen a resurgence of interest in virtue ethics because of the promise it holds to overcome many of the limitations of these modern moral theories. Rather than thinking about the moral life just in terms of principles, the virtue ethicist focuses on character traits. Rather than asking how to assess the morality of particular *actions*, virtue ethicists ask what sort of *person* one should strive to be. Aristotle proposed that the ideal person, morally speaking, is someone who displays an array of

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[21] For a fuller discussion of Kant's racism, see Matthew C. Altman, *Kant and Applied Ethics: The Uses and Limits of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

[22] Arnold Farr, "Can a Philosophy of Race Afford to Abandon the Kantian Categorical Imperative?" *Journal of Social Philosophy* 33 (2002): 29.

[23] Farr, "Can a Philosophy of Race Afford to Abandon the Kantian Categorical Imperative?" 29.

[24] Farr, "Can a Philosophy of Race Afford to Abandon the Kantian Categorical Imperative?" 29.

excellent traits, or virtues, such as temperance, courage, generosity, and friendliness.[25] One advantage of this approach is that it is more sensitive to context and human relationships and thus avoids some of the pitfalls plaguing theories like utilitarianism and Kantian ethics, whose universal abstractions lead to moral absurdities. Virtue ethics also enjoins serious consideration of the role of feelings, motivations, and imagination in the moral life.

Recently, several moral philosophers have brought virtue theoretic resources to bear on race relations. So, it is worth considering whether this moral framework offers a potentially sufficient foundation for the cause of racial justice. Most virtue theorists have focused on the negative side of the issue, analyzing specific moral vices involved in racism. Thus, Kwame Appiah has distinguished between a variety of forms of racism based on propositional and dispositional factors. Most basically, there is what Appiah calls "racialism," the belief that there are *innate differences* between races—"traits and tendencies" that constitute "a sort of racial essence," such differences being constituted by moral and psychological *inequalities* and the belief that these apparent differences justify differential treatment of the various races.[26] Two other forms of racism presuppose this fundamental racialism, says Appiah, which he dubs "extrinsic" racism and "intrinsic" racism. Extrinsic racists "make moral distinctions between members of different races because they believe that the racial essence entails certain morally relevant qualities."[27] In contrast, intrinsic racists "believe that each race has a different moral status, quite independent of the moral characteristics entailed by its racial essence." On this view, "the bare fact of being of the same race is a reason for preferring one person to another."[28] Appiah notes that all forms of racism involve a tendency to assent to false propositions about races, and this disposition is what constitutes the essence of racial prejudice.

Alternatively, Jorge Garcia has offered a more affective or attitudinal analysis of racism, describing it as a vice involving race-based ill-will or disregard of certain people. Racism, says Garcia,

> in its central and most vicious form … is a hatred, ill-will directed against a person or persons on account of their assigned race. In a derivative form, one is a racist when one either does not care at all or does not care enough (i.e., as much as morality requires) or does not care in the right ways about people assigned to a certain racial group, where this disregard is based on racial classification. Racism, then, is something that essentially involves not our beliefs and their rationality or irrationality, but our wants, intentions, likes, and dislikes and their distance from the moral virtues.[29]

A strength of this account is its attention to feelings and attitudes as essentially involved in racism, whether or not those dispositions ever culminate in harmful or spiteful behavior toward members of the disliked racial group. This comports with ordinary usage of the term "racist," as the term is often applied to people who do not engage in overt racist speech or conduct.

To date, the most complete application of virtue theory to race relations comes from Lawrence Blum. In addition to noting distinctive racial vices (racial antipathy, racial inferiorizing, and racial disregard),

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[25] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*.

[26] Kwame A. Appiah, "Racisms," in *Anatomy of Racism*, ed. David T. Goldberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 5.

[27] Appiah, "Racisms," 5.

[28] Appiah, "Racisms," 5–6.

[29] Jorge L. Garcia, "The Heart of Racism," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 2 (1996): 6.

he identifies three distinctively racial virtues. These include recognition, civic racial egalitarianism, and treating persons as individuals. The racial virtue of recognition, as Blum explains it, is the trait of recognizing a person of another race "as a peer—as someone with, and already possessed of, standing equal to one's own in the context in question—and behavior toward the recognizee expresses that peer regard."[30] Civic racial egalitarianism involves "regarding the other as deserving of all the rights and privileges of a citizen of one's polity," such as in the form of political expression and participation.[31] And the virtue of seeing others as individuals "means being vividly aware of particularities about the person in question not shared by other members of the group. It means not making unwarranted assumptions about the individual based on her group membership."[32]

These are rich accounts of both the negative and positive traits associated with race relations. More could be said in terms of the relevance of more traditional virtues in the context of race relations, including kindness, sympathy, generosity, and compassion. The virtue ethicist could also argue that our society will flourish if we demonstrate these traits toward people of all races, both in our individual actions and in the social policies we put in place. But virtue ethics has its limits and problems that extend well beyond its application to the issue of racial justice and which are at least as besetting as those plaguing utilitarianism and Kantian ethics. Despite its strengths in recognizing the importance—and even inspiring the development—of excellent character traits, virtue ethics is deontologically destitute, providing no basis for thinking in terms of duty and rights.

Aristotle did explore the deontological concept of justice, which he conceived simply in terms of proportionality (distinguishing between three different forms of justice—distributive, remedial, and commercial). But he identified no compelling rational *foundation* for justice, in the sense of showing why or how we are morally bound to pursue justice. The same goes for the deontological concepts of duties and rights. This might explain why, for all of his extraordinary moral insight, Aristotle so wildly missed the mark when it came to slavery, maintaining that "from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule."[33] His justification of the practice goes so far as to fold the role of the slave into his conception of the family, noting that "a possession is an instrument for maintaining life. And so, in the arrangement of the family, a slave is a living possession, and property a number of such instruments; and the servant is himself an instrument which takes precedence of all other instruments."[34]

But returning to the accounts of Appiah, Garcia, and Blum, these are certainly insightful analyses of racial virtues and vices, and improvements on Kantian ethics (and perhaps utilitarianism) from a motivational standpoint. But their accounts *assume* rather than demonstrate the immorality of the vices they so carefully describe. Furthermore, virtue ethics theories generally, and these accounts specifically, being focused on personal character traits, say little to nothing regarding the rightness of particular

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[30] Lawrence Blum, "Racial Virtues," in *Working Virtue: Virtue Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems,* ed. Rebecca L. Walker and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Oxford: Clarendon, 2009), 232.

[31] Blum, "Racial Virtues," 239.

[32] Blum, "Racial Virtues," 242.

[33] Aristotle, *Politics* 1.5 (*The Basic Works of Aristotle,* ed. Richard McKeon [New York: Random House, 1941], 1132).

[34] Aristotle, *Politics* 1.4 (*The Basic Works of Aristotle,* 1131).

actions, social policies, or civil statutes. Such assessments are absolutely crucial to the work of racial justice.[35]

2.4. Social Contractarianism

Given the failure of these three major moral traditions to ground a concept of racial justice, one might consider the alternative of social contract ethics. This is roughly the approach that places the burden of substantiating political obligations on the shared values of members within a civil society. In many forms of contractarianism, our ultimate moral guidelines, including justice, are determined by the choices that perfectly rational individuals would make. Early modern contractarians, such as Hobbes and Locke, defended their choice of principles by appealing to natural law. More recent social contract theorists defend their choice of principles in other ways which are potentially compatible with the sort of fully secularized foundation for racial justice we are looking for. John Rawls's version of social contract theory is our best candidate. Rawls appeals to what a rational person would choose if positioned behind a "veil of ignorance," which temporarily blinds them to their particular personal characteristics, including their sex, age, physical traits, family relations, and socio-economic class, though they do know general truths about human nature and the various conditions in which human beings may find themselves. Rawls maintains that even fully self-interested persons would choose the following principles as guidelines for all aspects of society:

1. The Principle of Equal Liberty: "each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others."[36]
2. The Difference Principle: "social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged and (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity."[37]

Arguably these principles are amenable to the cause for racial justice. The critical question, however, is whether, if followed faithfully, Rawls's principles would *guarantee* racial justice throughout society. David Wills has strenuously challenged this notion, insisting that although the principle of equality of opportunity properly attends to individual justice, it fails to effect true *group* justice in the economic sphere, as is evident in the fact that the liberal political system in the United States essentially observes the principle of equality of opportunity yet there are demonstrable persistent income differentials between races. Thus, says Wills, "the idea of equality of opportunity, conventionally understood, is of limited use in defining the meaning of racial justice—particularly economic justice between the races."[38] Wills goes on to claim that the only way to achieve just treatment of racial groups is to scuttle the American liberal tradition of defining economic justice in individualistic terms, and he believes the best

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[35] An additional line of critique is developed by Maureen O'Connell, who argues that the deployment of virtue ethics in the cause of racial justice is inherently compromised by the fact that there are "personal and impersonal aspects of white supremacy in virtue ethics itself" (Maureen H. O'Connell, "After White Supremacy? The Viability of Virtue Ethics for Racial Justice," *Journal of Moral Theology* 3 [2014]: 84). She contends that failure to rigorously critique the virtue ethics tradition and also to develop an alternative set of virtues will "run the risk of perpetuating a culture of white supremacy in the very language and application of virtue ethics itself" (O'Connell, "After White Supremacy?," 86).

[36] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1971), 60.

[37] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 83.

[38] David Wills, "Racial Justice and the Limits of American Liberalism," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 6 (1978): 194.

alternative in this regard is to turn to some form of socialism. Now supposing this is a practical option to effect group economic justice for the races—an approach which would considerably diverge from a Rawlsian model—we might ask how the case for socialist reforms could be effectively made in a deeply capitalistic society such as our own. Wills's answer to this question is telling, as he laments, "We cannot, of course, go back to [Martin Luther] King.... All we can do is hope for black leaders able to reconstitute a movement with a roughly similar orientation."[39] Yet what was King's "orientation" but a fundamentally theological one—both in its rationale and motivation? Yet, as with so many scholars, Wills appears virtually oblivious to this.

There is a more fundamental reason why a Rawlsian social contractarian approach is problematic when it comes to providing an adequate rational foundation for racial justice, and that is the fact that principles and values that are merely *agreed upon* by a majority of citizens or their representatives are not necessarily rationally compelling or personally motivating. Even if they would in fact be chosen by an ideally rational individual behind veil of ignorance, this fails to provide the *logos* such principles require as ultimate justifications of their truth if they are to be of any use in persuading large numbers of people to abide by them, much less to provide sufficient moral incentive to do the hard work for racial justice.[40]

And so it goes for all social contract theories. Which specific principles ought to guide society? How do we prioritize them? In the case of conflicts of principles, which trump which? Rigorous answers to these questions bring us back to moral theories such as the ones we've already discussed, returning us to square one in the quest for an adequate philosophical foundation for thinking about racial justice. It is no wonder that so many contractarians have appealed to natural law ethics to ground their choice of socio-political guiding principles. Perhaps here lies the practical wisdom of the American founding fathers in preferring this approach.

3. The Anti-Theory Option

Throughout the foregoing discussion, I have restricted my attention to particular moral traditions that, for the most part, aim to reduce all moral guidance to certain moral principles. However, one might wonder about the prospects of pursuing a non-theoretical approach to this whole matter. What if we opted for an eclectic "anti-theory" approach which combines the best features of these unique

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[39] Wills, "Racial Justice and the Limits of American Liberalism," 215.

[40] The problems with the Rawlsian scheme run far deeper than what I have noted here. For a rigorously detailed critique, see David Lewis Schaefer's *Illiberal Justice: John Rawls vs. the American Political Tradition* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007). Schaefer's final assessment is that Rawls's "theory and the approach to political life that it embodies, far from offering meaningful guidance on how to fortify liberal institutions, threatens to worsen our situation in numerous respects" (p. 315). Others have focused their critiques on Rawls' conception of "public reason," which stipulates his guidelines for a properly secularized public square. See, for example, Shaun P. Young's "Rawlsian Reasonableness: A Problematic Assumption?" *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 39 (2006): 159–80. And see especially, Justin Buckley Dyer and Kevin E. Stuart's "Rawlsian Public Reason and the Theological Framework of Martin Luther King's 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail,'" *Politics and Religion* 6 (2013): 145–63, where they argue that Rawls' ideal of public reason is fundamentally at odds with King's "theologically rich" case for racial justice. Their argument demonstrates that far from securing an adequate foundation for the cause of racial justice, Rawlsian ideals would preclude serious public discussion of the very arguments that made the Civil Rights Movement a success in the United States.

moral traditions? Anti-theorists argue that systematic normative theories are ultimately impossible and, even if such were possible to achieve, they are unnecessary for moral living.[41] For example, Bernard Williams, a major figure in this movement, insists that human life is too complex for all of our ethical mandates to be captured by a single theory or ultimate principle. In ordinary human life, we bring all sorts of considerations to bear on the issues that face us rather than appealing to a single ultimate standard or value. Thus, Williams argues that this "reductive enterprise … has no justification and should disappear."[42] Rather, there is a plurality of norms, and our moral decision-making should reflect this, as it often actually does.

Suppose, then, we adopt an eclectic anti-theory approach to the issue of racial justice. We may back up the cause by appealing to considerations of utility, Kantian deontology, personal virtues, *and* Rawlsian equal liberty and fair equality of opportunity. All of these principles and values, in various ways, reinforce certain aspects of the cause for racial justice. Though each has its limitations and problems considered on its own, an eclectic approach benefits from their combined strength while compensating for their particular weaknesses. So why limit ourselves to just one moral tradition or foundational principle when we can use them all and deploy the best principles of all moral theoretic worlds?

For all of its attractiveness, the anti-theory option is deeply problematic and ultimately useless when it comes to the quest for racial justice.[43] For, to put it simply, if each of the moral norms recommended by the major philosophical ethical systems fails *individually* to provide an adequate grounding for the cause of racial justice, then why should we expect a *combination* of these same norms to do the trick? No adding or multiplying of zeroes will produce anything but more zeroes. And the fact that major moral principles often clash or point in different directions, only compounds the problem. As we have noted, with regard to the race issue, the principle of utility can be, and often has been, used to justify slavery and Jim Crow laws, and the Categorical Imperative and Rawlsian equality of opportunity can permit certain forms of racism. So, do we simply ignore this lack of conceptual integrity and toss out those principles that do not unequivocally rule out racial injustice (if any such principles are to be found)? But then, we may ask, what is our rational justification for *this* selection of principles? If there is no justification, then our choice is random and non-compelling. But if there is supposedly a justification then what must that be? Presumably, such would be some higher, ultimately prioritized moral principle. And this leads us right back to moral theory and the quest for an ultimate moral norm.

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[41] See David McNaughton, *Moral Vision: An Introduction to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988); Michael Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," *The Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976): 453–66; and Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1985).

[42] Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 17.

[43] Aside from the problems I note here which are specifically related to the inadequacy of an anti-theory approach to the issue of racial justice, there are further problems related to the anti-theorists' critique of major moral theories. As Robert Louden and Margaret Little have argued, anti-theorists' arguments often caricature or otherwise poorly represent major moral theories and the project to identify or establish foundational moral principles. Yes, the abstractions of many moral theories are often far removed from ordinary human life, and most people might, at least implicitly, appeal to diverse moral norms as they make moral decisions. But this doesn't mean that *all* moral theories are mistaken in their recommendations regarding which moral norm is ultimate or most foundational or that the ultimate norm isn't sufficient for guidance regarding all practical affairs. See Robert B. Louden, *Morality and Moral Theory: A Reappraisal and Reaffirmation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) and Margaret O. Little, "On Knowing the 'Why': Particularism and Moral Theory," *The Hastings Center Report* 31 (2001): 32–40.

A similar problem arises in the context of a need for moral incentive to work for racial justice. If the only norms driving us are those which we have randomly selected or only selected because they happen to cohere with or reinforce our predetermined preferences, then all that is really motivating our work is our shared personal desires and preferences for a certain kind of world. And desires and preferences, however strong they might be, are never enough to endure the long and sometimes excruciating work of racial justice.

4. Comparing Philosophical Foundations

I have provided here a relatively brief adumbration of the difficulties with major philosophical ethical perspectives when it comes to effectively grounding our concept of racial justice. Some will suggest that this could be achieved by somehow revising one of these theoretical traditions in such a way as to overcome its problems. I am confident all such attempts are doomed to failure because each theory, considered on its own or in concert with another theory or theories, lacks the requisite *philosophical* foundation for the conviction that all human beings, regardless of contingent facts about them, have equal and inestimable moral worth. Such is essential to make the case for racial justice. Utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, virtue ethics, and social contractarianism fail to provide this. In contrast, Martin Luther King's Christian theological ethics—natural law ethics combined with a biblical theology of *imago Dei* and *agape—does* provide this crucial philosophical foundation. Arguably, this is a major reason why the Civil Rights Movement was a success.

I have also argued that the philosophical ethical alternatives fail when it comes to the *motivational* component—the need for workers to have an adequate incentive, not just to labor tirelessly for the cause but also to be personally willing to suffer and sacrifice for it. Philosophical moral theories offer abstract ideals of general happiness, universal justice, liberty, fairness, equality, and flourishing communities, but these won't sustain a person's resolve to do the really hard work for racial justice. That kind of resolve requires unconditional love. And such love is best motivated by something transcendent—a sense of the reality of God, an awareness that even one's oppressors are God's children, a spiritual inspiration by a suffering but triumphant moral exemplar, such as the Christ of the New Testament, and a hope in the promise of eternal reward for those who love their enemies, even unto death. Such is the stuff of adequate incentive when it comes to non-violent civil disobedience. King knew this. And that's why he was uncompromising in making his case for racial justice distinctively Christian. As historian David Chappell has said, "It is hard to imagine masses of people lining up for years of excruciating risk against southern sheriffs, fire hoses, and attack dogs without some transcendent or millennial faith to sustain them."[44] The preceding discussion has been aimed at reinforcing this intuition.

Before concluding, it is critical that we dive a little deeper into the philosophical foundations of King's case for racial justice, since his arguments from natural law, *imago Dei* and *agape* were reinforced by a more complex matrix of ideas. Working out the precise character of those influences is a controversial and difficult—perhaps even impossible—task. David Garrow has observed that when it comes to the debate over King's influences "much of the literature can be characterized as a multi-party

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[44] David Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 102.

tug of war, with different scholars seeking to claim King" for various schools of thought.[45] During his years studying at Crozer Theological Seminary and Boston University, King engaged a wide variety of thinkers. Among these were the philosophies of Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche, Walter Rauschenbusch's social gospel, Reinhold Niebuhr's hamartiology, Mahatma Gandhi's satyagraha brand of non-violence, and the personalist idealism of Edgar Brightman, Harold DeWolf, and Peter Betocci.[46] Yet, for all of the appreciable influence these thinkers and ideas had on King, it cannot be emphasized enough that they essentially supplement and reinforce the theological framework King already had in place when he commenced his graduate studies. As Garrow persuasively argues, "the two traditions which actually exerted the greatest formative influences on King's thought and action [were] the biblical inheritance of the story of Jesus Christ and the black southern Baptist church heritage into which King was born."[47]

Still, it is worth highlighting some of the more significant influences on King's thought and how they likely served to fortify his theological case and personal resolve regarding racial justice. First, consider Walter Rauschenbusch's social gospel, which aimed to alert Christians to the ways in which human sin is manifest in the form of systematic oppression of people through corrupt institutions and unjust social practices. The redemptive influence of the Christian gospel, he argued, is not properly limited to individual salvation but should also renew and reorder unjust social structures.[48] King frequently testified to the impact Rauschenbusch had on his own thinking. For example, in *Stride Toward Freedom* he notes, "It has been my conviction ever since reading Rauschenbusch that any religion which professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the social and economic conditions that scar the soul, is a moribund religion."[49] Rauschenbusch's social gospel did not supplant King's basic Christian theological convictions but rather expanded his sense of their practical reach. The social gospel transformed and enlarged King's concept of what Christian love *means* in a context of systematic injustice and oppression. And this expanded practical theology no doubt provided additional motivational support for King's work and sense of calling in the struggle for racial justice.

Next, there is the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, which is well-known for its sober assessment of human nature, highlighting both how great and how wretched is our species. Regarding his hamartiological emphasis, Niebuhr traces the depths of human corruption at every level of society, from the individual to entire political regimes.[50] This "realism" deeply impacted King, who remarked that Niebuhr's theology

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[45] David J. Garrow, "The Intellectual Development of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Influences and Commentaries," *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement: Controversies and Debates*, ed. John A. Kirk (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 39.

[46] While this is a fairly standard list of major influences on King, multiple other thinkers had a significant impact on his thinking as well, though they are typically unacknowledged or underappreciated by King and his biographers. Keith D. Miller highlights seven of these who were especially influential: Harry Emerson Fosdick, Robert McCracken, William Stuart Nelson, Harris Wofford, Richard Gregg, George Kelsey, and Paul Ramsey. See Miller's "Composing Martin Luther King, Jr.," *PMLA* 105.1 (1990): 70–82.

[47] David J. Garrow, "The Intellectual Development of Martin Luther King, Jr.," 39–40.

[48] Among his most Rauschenbusch's most influential works are *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1907), *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), and *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1917).

[49] Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), 91.

[50] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

is a persistent reminder of the reality of sin on every level of man's existence. These elements in Niebuhr's thinking helped me to recognize the illusions of a superficial optimism concerning human nature and the dangers of a false idealism. While I still believed in man's potential for good, Niebuhr made me realize his potential for evil as well. Moreover, Niebuhr helped me to recognize the complexity of man's social involvement and the glaring reality of collective evil.[51]

Niebuhr's theology of human nature was likely attractive to King, among other reasons, because it so well accounted for the recalcitrance and pervasiveness of the injustices in American society that he was committed to addressing. Such dark realism about the depths of human evil can provide a helpful bulwark against demoralization in the long struggle for racial justice. Balancing belief in the possibility of divine redemption with the conviction that sin is an inveterate aspect of human nature is crucial for any Christian mission, as it preserves hope in the midst of despair over human resistance to change. This was likely helpful to King from a motivational standpoint during his many dark nights of the soul during the Civil Rights Movement.

Finally, consider the philosophy of personalism, which emphasizes the person as the ultimate metaphysical reality and ground of value. Personalists maintain that it is personhood (or personality) which is properly the first and final consideration in all reflection on moral, social, and political issues. The particular brand of personalism to which King was exposed at Boston—under the tutelage of Brightman and DeWolf—was "personal idealism," which stresses consciousness as definitive of being itself. Like most forms of personalism, theirs was deeply theistic but was especially influenced by Hegelian idealism. Later King would assert,

> This personal idealism remains today my basic philosophical 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.[52]

To declare any doctrine to be one's "basic philosophical position" is quite significant. When one considers the implications of personalism regarding the value of human beings and how well it dovetails with King's theological convictions, it is easy to see why he would so deeply embrace this philosophical perspective.[53] There are several ways in which personalism reinforces King's theological case for civil rights. The personalist conviction that, as persons, human beings have supreme inherent worth synchs perfectly with natural law concepts of universal kinship and a higher, transcendent moral standard.

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[51] King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 99.

[52] King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 100.

[53] For some helpful studies of the role of personalism in King's life and thought, see Warren E. Steinkraus, "Martin Luther King's Personalism and Non-violence," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 34 (1973): 97–111; Rufus Burrow, Jr., "Martin Luther King, Jr., Personalism, and Moral Law," *The Asbury Theological Journal* 52 (1997): 27–42; Lawrence E. Carter, Sr., "The African American Personalist Perspective on Person as Embodied in the Life and Thought of Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 20 (2006): 219–23; and Lewis V. Baldwin, "The Unfolding of the Moral Order: Rufus Burrow, Jr., Personal Idealism, and the Life and Thought of Martin Luther King, Jr.," *The Pluralist* 6.1 (2011): 1–13.

And when set in a broader theistic context as it was among King's mentors at Boston, personalism also provides an ideal philosophical footing for the biblical doctrines of *imago Dei* and *agape* love.[54]

5. Conclusion

The philosophical and theological themes in Rauschenbusch's social gospel, Niebuhr's hamartiology, and personal idealism served as powerful reinforcements of the natural law ethics and New Testament theology, which constituted the primary rationale for Martin Luther King, Jr.'s case for racial justice and the motivational engine for his tireless devotion to the cause of racial justice in America.[55] Each of these doctrines, even if not thoroughly Christian, is at least deeply theistic. Therefore, the supplemental role of these concepts in King's work in no way detracts from my overarching point that only a theological ethics such as that deployed by King is adequate to sustain the moral case for racial justice. No purely philosophical ethics will do.

This raises an ominous question. If theological resources have effectively been banned from American political discourse when it comes to the forming of public policy and the arrangement of laws and institutions, then what are our prospects as a country for realizing King's dream? Assuming that *some* moral rationale for racial justice is needed for this, then our prospects would appear grim. The next pressing question, then, is what can be done to reestablish the force of King's arguments in our country's political discourse to ensure that his dream of lasting racial justice is eventually realized rather than finally betrayed? But this is essentially to ask how we might religiously reclothe our now virtually naked American public square—a daunting prospect indeed. In any case, this appears to be our current dilemma: either we must readmit theological considerations into the public square or surrender hope for the achievement of lasting racial justice in the United States. While the former option will surely be intolerable to many, the latter alternative should be unacceptable to all.[56]

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[54] Another key inspiration for King's his appeal to *agape* love was Anders Nygren, whose work on the subject significantly influenced King's much emphasized notion of the "beloved community." For a helpful study of Nygren's work in this area, see Colin Grant, "For the Love of God: Agape," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 24 (1996): 3–21.

[55] For an in-depth analysis of the conceptual and motivational connections I summarize here, see John W. Rathbun, "Martin Luther King: The Theology of Social," *American Quarterly* 20 (1968): 38–53.

[56] I want to thank an anonymous referee for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.