

Martin Luther King and Natural Law

Coretta Scott King devoted her life to Martin Luther King's legacy. So with her passing last week it seems appropriate to reflect on this legacy. The part that I want to look is his contribution to public ethics. Specifically, King's "I Have a Dream Speech" and his "Letter from the Birmingham Jail."

The curious thing about these documents is that they are built upon a way of understanding ethics that is no longer widely accepted either in academic circles or in popular understanding. This is an interesting situation. Some of our most important documents of public ethics (as opposed to academic ethics), documents that still inspire and move us, are based on a way of understating ethics that many Americans might find puzzling or antiquated.

Does this situation threaten King's legacy, in regards to his published contributions to public ethics?

Both King's "I have a Dream Speech" and his "Letter from the Birmingham Jail" are squarely in the tradition of natural law theory. Various versions of natural law theory more or less dominated the way people thought about ethics until the 20th century. For example, Thomas Jefferson built the Declaration of Independence on a foundation of natural law theory.

Natural law theory holds that there are moral laws somehow written into the fabric of existence. Humans do not create what is ultimately right or wrong, good or evil. Rather, we discover right or wrong, good or evil as objective Truths. Moral laws are different than physical laws. Physical laws cannot be disobeyed; they are simply general rules describing the way things behave based on our observations. Moral laws can be disobeyed; we do not discover them by observing the way things behave, as people frequently act contrary to moral law. The question, then, is how do we know or discover the moral law? Thomas Jefferson thought that the basic principles of moral law were self-evident. For example, he writes in the Declaration of Independence that "we hold these Truths to be *self-evident*...." In other words, we immediately recognize as objectively true "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." According to natural law theory, this is true for all people at all times in all places. The fact that people more often than not fail to pursue these truths, makes them no less true.

Martin Luther King's, "I Have a Dream" speech builds on the foundation set by the Declaration of Independence. King asserted that the Declaration promises justice to all people, black as well as white, but that America has failed to fulfill that promise. The moral force of King's speech is found in the fact that Americans share a commitment to moral absolutes, and we have callously failed to fulfill that commitment. The fact that the Declaration is built on natural law allows King to convict his fellow Americans for their blatant disregard of the moral law, of Justice.

In his “Letter from the Birmingham Jail” King uses natural law theory to justify civil disobedience. The letter is a response to some of his fellow ministers’ criticisms of him for breaking Jim Crow laws and encouraging others to do the same. King’s response to these ministers comes directly from medieval natural law theory. His answer as to why he breaks segregationist laws “is found in the fact that there are two kinds of laws: there are *just* and *unjust* laws.” He then asserts his agreement with Saint Augustine’s powerful phrase, “An unjust law is no law at all.” King then explains how we identify just laws from unjust laws: “A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is out of harmony with the moral law. Any law that uplifts the human personality is just. Any law that degrades the human personality is unjust.” As in his “I have a Dream Speech”, King points to moral law to show Americans how far short we fall from our commitment to pursue justice.

As noted earlier, arguably most Americans no longer share King’s belief in natural law theory. Particularly, it is widely noted that American students are puzzled by the very idea of objective moral truths. Nonetheless, I think Americans see the pragmatic worth of natural law theory as embodied in King’s works, the Declaration of Independence and the United Nation’s Declaration of Human Rights. As King has shown us, a belief in a common moral law higher than human law can inspire us to do better and can be used to convict us when we fail to try. King has also shown us that a shared belief in moral laws higher than human laws provides a powerful stance to oppose unjust laws that degrade the human personality.

So, is King’s legacy threatened by the current trend to no longer believe in the moral law? Probably not at the moment: paradoxically, while many Americans would not share King’s intellectual commitment to natural law theory, they seem to behave as if the natural law, and objective set of moral truths, were real.

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