

## **Ethical Communication and the Leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr.**

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### **Abstract**

Martin Luther King, Jr was the most recognisable face of the African American civil rights movement whose message of racial equality helped to end the generations of legal discrimination against blacks in the American South. Apart from his political achievements King is best known as a communicator and orator whose message of equality and peace was most famously expressed in his 'I have a dream' speech on the steps of the Lincoln memorial in 1963. Although King strived to act as both an ethical leader and communicator throughout his life he nevertheless made many compromises to political realities in his speeches and writings to American audiences. King, for example, deliberately minimised the influence on his thought of his background in the black church in favour of foregrounding his reading of white philosophers and theologians in order to appeal to mainstream white audiences. Similarly, he at times softened his public criticisms of American involvement in the Vietnam War to avert criticism of himself and the civil rights movement by the Johnson administration and other influential white leaders. This paper will consider the ethical decisions King made to fashion his identity to win white support in his first book *Stride Toward Freedom*. This work, King's first book, was central to developing his persona among liberal whites after the success of the Montgomery bus boycott. I will use deontological theory, as well as considering the personal motivation for King's communication choices and the political circumstances he faced to analyse the ethics of his rhetorical decisions in *Stride*.

Martin Luther King, Jr is not only the most recognisable face of the African American civil rights movement his life has become an international symbol of successful ethical leadership. King's unwavering philosophical and political commitment to non-violence in the face of vicious attacks from southern segregationists and northern racists and his moral stand, despite the political costs, against American involvement in the Vietnam War are just some of the reasons for which King has been justly praised as a moral leader.

Although King sought to act morally throughout his life the close scrutiny he has been subjected to since his death have inevitably uncovered actions that could be described as ethically questionable. The discovery by the King Papers Project at Stanford University that King 'plagiarised' significant sections of his PhD thesis as well as the revelations, partly drawn from the many years of illegal FBI surveillance, of King's marital infidelities are just two of the most publicised examples (Martin Luther King, Jr. papers project, 1991, Garrow, 1986b and 1991). More recently, however, King scholars have also discovered inconsistencies in the message King communicated to his audience about his life and intellectual development (Miller, 1992, Lischer, 1995, Sharman, 1999a).

This paper will analyse some of the key stories King told about his life and the origins of his philosophical outlook in his book *Stride Toward Freedom* (King, 1958). It will demonstrate that King fashioned stories about his life and intellectual development to appeal to a northern white liberal audience. I will illustrate how King communicated a distorted vision of his intellectual development in *Stride*, including his conversion to non-violence, and ignored, for political reasons, the significance of his upbringing in the black church on his thought and rhetoric. The focus on *Stride Toward Freedom* is justified as it was the primary source of information for scholars and supporters of King alike about his early life. Some of the stories King told in *Stride* were central in developing his position as the moral leader of the civil rights movement. Upon demonstrating the ethical choices that King made in seeking to communicate to a mainstream white audience – the primary audience for King's success as a national civil rights leader (Miller, 1992) – the paper will consider the ethical implications of these choices and the extent to which they were justified by the political circumstances in which King sought to develop his leadership of the civil rights movement from 1955 to 1968.

*Stride Towards Freedom* was published in the aftermath of King's successful leadership of the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama from Nov 1955 to Nov 1956. The boycott by Montgomery blacks of the bus system and its segregated seating pattern focused national attention on the injustice of the racial segregation of public facilities that had existed throughout the South since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. King's successful challenge to the system, that involved both a non-violent boycott of the buses and an eventually successful Supreme Court challenge to the constitutionality of local segregation laws, received widespread coverage in national media.

*Stride*, published in 1958, was the first opportunity for many northern whites, who had supported King during the year long Montgomery campaign, to get to know the man Martin Luther King who they had seen and read about during the boycott and this heightened the significance of the work to the establishment of King's leadership. King was well aware of the work's significance and spent considerable time, along with his ghostwriters, working on the text to be included in the book. One of the centrepieces of the work was an essay on his intellectual development entitled, 'Pilgrimage to Non-violence' (King, 1958, pp. 90-107). This essay was influential in fortifying King's leadership amongst a group central to his

achievements as a civil rights leader – northern white liberals. (See Ansbro, 1982, Zepp, 1989).

The essay in *Stride* provides a detailed description of King's immersion, whilst at graduate school at Boston University, in the philosophical and theological texts of western Christian liberalism and the centrality of the ideas contained in these works on his philosophy and thought. King quotes approvingly from Plato, Hegel and Aristotle as well as the influential American theologians Reinhold Niebuhr and Walter Rauschenbusch as evidence of his reverence and critical acceptance of the canon of liberal Christianity. Additionally, King described his impassioned response to reading the work of Mahatma Gandhi and the effect the work had in converting him to the philosophy of non-violence (See King, 1958).

The following passage from *Stride* illustrates King's explanation of the immediate impact reading Gandhi whilst at graduate school had on his philosophy and political strategy:

Dr Johnson had just returned from a trip to India, and, to my great interest, he spoke of the life and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. His message was so profound and electrifying that I left the meeting and bought a half-dozen books on Gandhi's life and works... the non-violent resistance philosophy of Gandhi, I came to feel was the only morally and practically sound method open to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom (King, 1958, p. 97).

After describing his initial exposure and subsequent commitment to the Gandhian philosophy of non-violent resistance upon reading his work, King devoted much of the rest of the chapter to outlining the principles of the philosophy and its significance for the civil rights movement.

The enthusiasm with which King described his immediate, and apparently total, commitment to the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence whilst at graduate school would have appealed to many white liberals. Although Gandhi was not white his ideas and philosophy had become very influential among liberal whites after the success of his Indian campaigns. Liberal pacifist groups such as the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) and American Friends Services Committee had been greatly influenced by the apparent application of Christian notions of love and turning the other cheek into a viable mechanism for achieving social change as well as averting violence. These groups and their influential networks had provided strong support for King and the Montgomery movement from the early days of the bus boycott (Carson, Burns et al, 1997). The continued support of these pacifist groups and other liberal whites was central to King's rise to prominence as a national civil rights leader.

King's story of his conversion to the philosophy and ways of non-violence in *Stride* would seem, however, to be somewhat less than accurate. FOR leader Glenn Smiley who went to Montgomery to support King's efforts provided a very different perspective on King's early familiarity and commitment to non-violence. Smiley's account, suggests that when he arrived in Montgomery King was unfamiliar with the work of Gandhi and had only a limited knowledge of the ways and philosophy of non-violence. Smiley's description of the events is quoted in David Garrow's Pulitzer Prize winning biography of King, *Bearing the Cross*. Smiley described as follows his initial meeting with King:

“‘I said to Dr King’ Smiley recalled, ‘I’m assuming that you’re very familiar and have been greatly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi.’ Ane he was very thoughtful, and he said, ‘As a matter of fact no. I know who the man is. I have read some statements by him, and so on, but I will have to truthfully say – and this is almost a direct quote ... ‘I will have to say that I know very little about the man’” (Garrow 1986a, p. 68).

Bayard Rustin, a close adviser to King in the early days of the civil rights movement, supports Smiley’s version of King’s lack of awareness of non-violence. Garrow quotes a well-known story of Rustin’s horror at finding a gun on King’s couch half way through the bus boycott. On questioning him on its presence King explained that the bomb threats he had received during the boycott had led him to take out a gun licence. King stated that he intended to harm no one unless violently attacked (See Garrow 1986a, pp. 72-73).

King’s story of his instant conversion to non-violence, apparently embellished for political purposes, was designed to fortify his moral credentials, and those of the blossoming civil rights movement, as well as demonstrate his unwavering commitment to the philosophy as a strategy for achieving social change. This commitment was significant in distinguishing King from more radical black activists, such as Malcolm X, and positioning him as a palatable alternative leader for white liberals supportive of African American civil rights.

The story of King’s conversion to non-violence is not the only story in *Stride* that he deliberately retold for political purposes. Even more significant is the less than accurate account he gave of his intellectual origins in the book. In *Stride* King credited key thinkers within the Western philosophical and theological tradition for inspiring him to an awareness of the social, as well as the spiritual aspects of religion (Rauschenbusch), the evils of humanity (Niebuhr), and the value of disinterested love (Plato). King states that those key ideas, along with his reading of Ghandi, inspired him to a faith in non-violent resistance as a strong, but ethical, means of using religious principals to oppose injustice in the South (King, 1958). As Keith Miller notes, in his philosophical essay in *Stride* King conveyed the impression that it was his ‘ability to synthesize diverse strands of formal Western thought and Gandhian ideas [that] prepared him to guide the Montgomery bus boycott’ (Miller 1992, p. 54).

As someone who was brought up in the South and experienced first hand the evils of segregation and racial abuse it is hard to believe that King only became aware of the reality of evil by reading Niebuhr. It is equally hard to believe that given the involvement of both his father and maternal grandfather as leading ministers within the Atlanta black church and as strong supporters of civil rights, that King developed his belief in the need for a social gospel from Rauschenbusch (Miller, 1992). In fact, as Miller persuasively illustrates, King’s claim that he received his philosophical and moral education from erudite white thinkers is undercut by the fact that he used the words and ideas of folk preachers, both black and white, to explain what he had learnt from philosophers and theologians (Miller, 1992). King’s identification of himself with the work of respected white thinkers was a central vehicle in crafting his moral leadership of the civil rights movement among white audiences. By minimising the formative influence of the black church on his thinking King sought to show white audiences that he was one of them at the same time as demonstrating that the force of their own values and beliefs necessitated a commitment to the civil rights cause.

These and other examples illustrate the extent to which King deliberately sought to establish a persona in *Stride* to appeal to a mainstream white audience. Throughout his life

King remained acutely aware of the need to fashion his rhetoric to appeal to this audience. His many conversations with his adviser, confidant and ghost-writer Stanley Levison, recorded for posterity by the FBI (Garrow, 1986b), attest to his ongoing desire to fashion his books and speeches to the emotional needs of his audience.

How though are we to assess the ethical dimensions of King's self-representation in *Stride*? Utilitarian theories of ethical behaviour associated most closely with Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill (Bentham, 1876 and Mill, 1998) have sought to evaluate ethical behaviour in terms of the consequences of a person's actions for social happiness. In its simplest form, 'act utilitarianism,' asserts that the morality of an individual's behaviour can be judged on the basis of whether it promotes the 'greatest happiness for the greatest number.' Deontological theories on the other hand eschew consideration of the consequences of individual decisions in favour of acknowledging the universal duties that people owe to one another regardless of the outcome in terms of happiness (Tavani, 2004). Initially associated with the work of Immanuel Kant these theories argue that concern only for the consequences of an action leads to the potential for people to be treated only as a means to end rather than ends in themselves. This can lead to absurd, and morally indefensible, outcomes. For example, under a utilitarian ethical system if slavery benefited more people than it hurt then it could be considered not just morally defensible but morally mandated. Deontological systems escape such contradictions by focusing on the universal duties that people owe to each other. Such duties are arrived at by considering two key principles - whether an act can be justified in all circumstances and whether it avoids treating any individual as a means to an end.

The problem for deontological theories, however, occurs when in considering the ethical basis of an action a person is confronted with conflicting duties. One could argue that Martin Luther King, Jr. faced such a dilemma in making decisions about how to represent his intellectual origins in *Stride*. One ethical duty that King had was not to lie and as is clear from the material I have presented in this paper that he chose, on this occasion, to ignore that duty. It could also be argued though that King had a moral duty to seek justice for his people. David Ross (1930) acknowledged justice, along with honesty, as a *prima facie* duty in his book that attempted to evaluate how people should act when faced with a conflict of duties. Unlike many political leaders, however, King's primary motive in leading the civil rights movement was to improve the conditions of African Americans and later in his career all people who were disadvantaged in American society. Although King was not immune to the temptations of flattery and was at times concerned about his own standing as a leader personal ambition was not the main motivation for his leadership (Garrow, 1968b).

As many scholars have acknowledged King was often reluctant about his role as a leader and at times felt guilty about, what he believed to be, the unwarranted accolades he received for the movement's success (Garrow, 1986a). As Garrow (1986a) and Cone (1991) demonstrate although King was not free of personal ambition and vanity he nevertheless remained committed throughout his life to winning a better deal for African Americans. His modest lifestyle and refusal, despite the urgings of his family, to take financial advantage of his reputation and fame provide just one testament to the commitment King had to a leadership that placed service to others, rather than personal aggrandisement, at its centre.

The brief analysis of King's leadership points to the positive intention that he had in the ethical decisions he made in his communication. In weighing the conflicting ethical duties King was faced with the intention to do good must have some place in our evaluation. Whilst

King's decision to misrepresent aspects of his intellectual and political development clearly involved an abrogation of one of the primary duties of honesty, given the choices and historical circumstances that King was faced with his positive intention, along with the outcomes he helped to achieve, may lead to a positive evaluation of his ethical choices.

Although not wanting to revert to a simple utilitarian model to assess the ethics of King's communication decisions his willingness to create a shared vision of a better America was a powerful agent for change. As David Hume (1975) made plain 'fellow feeling' is a powerful human emotion and one that has considerable force in generating action. King's ability to communicate with his audience in a way that created a sense of 'fellow feeling,' a shared unity or dream of a better world, was predicated on white society's acceptance and identification with his leadership. As Miller notes, without his identification with mainstream white intellectuals King would not have been able to develop the standing he did among liberal whites.

Had he [King] credited his father and his community for nurturing his ideas and leadership, white readers of 'Pilgrimage' would never have admired him or have granted him a philosophical persona. They would have regarded him as merely another black preacher objecting to segregation (Miller, 1992, p. 65).

King's misrepresentation of his background to generate a positive emotional and intellectual response in his audience also raises the issue of whether the use of rhetoric in the services of political leadership can ever be reconciled with ethical conduct. Ever since Plato's critique, through the voice of Socrates, of the Sophists' use of rhetoric to engage the emotions in order to disguise the logical fallacy of their arguments, rhetoric has had a bad name in philosophical circles (Plato, 1960). Despite the criticism, in recent years a number of writers have offered spirited defences of the art of rhetoric. The Cockcrofts (1992) have suggested that freedom of political expression and the use of rhetoric are essential components in the maintenance of political freedoms. Similarly, Billing (1987) argues that rather than disguising the truth rhetoric can enable political dialogue to be established encouraging the free flow of ideas and preventing rigid generalisation about reality.

Whilst it is inevitable that political leadership and rhetorical strategy will involve at least some simplification of the truth and an appeal to the emotions, as well as the intellect, rhetoric can also, as the experience of the civil rights movement would suggest, be a powerful instrument for stirring people to positive social action. Like an exciting and passionate lecturer may inspire a previously reluctant student, skilful use of rhetorical strategy can get people to listen and identify with different ways of seeing the world.

Even though the examples of the negative consequences associated with political rhetoric are equally numerous King's ability to inspire thousands of people to action and support for the civil rights movement transformed the political culture in America. The rhetoric and action of the civil rights movement also inspired a generation of white youth to work to transform what they saw as the increasingly materialistic and military culture that had come to dominate American society during the post-war period (Rossinow, 1998 and Gitlin, 1987).

Although one could equally argue that King's willingness to lie in the services of a political purpose again illustrates the moral limitations of rhetoric my preference would be to see his conduct as an example of the ethical ambiguity of significant aspects of political action. Whilst ethical theories can be useful in focusing attention on what we regard as moral

action like all theoretical positions the complexity and moral ambiguity of life often defeats their best attempts to evaluate behaviour. The crisis that King faced in race relations in the South was more than 400 years old and despite the various attempts at reconciliation, seemed as intractable in the early 1950s as it had since the civil war. Whilst it is not my intention to condone a blanket rule for deception in public life King's ability to use political rhetoric in the services, at least in intent, of social betterment must be considered as ethically ambiguous if not wholly defensible.

King's decision to misrepresent his identity to appeal to a broader audience is clearly not unique. Kevin Rudd's recent use of stories about the struggle his family faced during his childhood, the veracity of which have been questioned (Ramsey, 2007), are just one potential example of how important politicians believe it is to deliver a saleable message about their early life in a mediated world. In King's case the fact that he also sought to develop his identity as a moral, as well as a political, leader may cause us, however, to question further the ethics of his decision to misrepresent his intellectual background. On the other hand the difficulties faced by dissident groups in attracting media attention without flamboyant or violent actions (Gitlin, 2003 and Halloran, 1970), give credit to King's success in developing the image of the civil rights movement, of which his leadership was a significant part, as a great moral crusade to save the soul of America (Burns, 2005). This movement was able to non-violently transform American society after centuries of inaction on racial issues.

This paper has sought to demonstrate the contradictions within the ethical persona of Martin Luther King, Jr. I have argued that whilst King intended to act ethically and in the services of the people he represented political circumstance led him to make choices in his communication that were ethically questionable. Whilst deontological theories of ethical behaviour raise questions about the morality of King's actions the difficulties he faced in seeking to turn around the centuries of injustice experienced by African Americans in the South made his communication choices more difficult than may first appear. The challenges King faced and the positive intention he had to act on behalf of others means that one cannot be too critical of the decisions he made to try and communicate more effectively with white Americans.

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