Martin Luther King, Jr.: Jeffersonian; Champion of Natural Law Philosophy

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Abstract
Martin Luther King, Jr. is celebrated in mainstream American culture as a champion of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. He is also lauded in the halls of academia for his growing political radicalism prior to his assassination in 1968. Neither view of the man, however, generally acknowledges his deep-rooted political philosophy of Natural Law. This aspect of King, which informed his civic protest, speeches, and political ideology, has been given short shrift in recent decades. While popular culture credits his integrity and intellectuals admire his advocacy for significant reforms in domestic and foreign policy, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s principle tenet has been largely removed from public memory. This should be corrected, as King’s arguments for civil rights, including the right to protest and equal protection under the law, were steeped in Natural Law philosophy.

Keywords
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Martin Luther King, Jr. is celebrated in mainstream American culture as a champion of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. He is also lauded in the halls of academia for his growing political radicalism prior to his assassination in 1968. Neither view of the man, however, generally acknowledges his deep-rooted political philosophy of Natural Law. This aspect of King, which informed his civic protest, speeches, and political ideology, has been given short shrift in recent decades. While popular culture credits his integrity and intellectuals admire his advocacy for significant reforms in domestic and foreign policy, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s principle tenet has been largely removed from public memory. This should be corrected, as King’s arguments for civil rights, including the right to protest and equal protection under the law, were steeped in Natural Law philosophy.

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The King Memorial
The Martin Luther King Memorial monument in Washington, D.C., which opened to the public in August of 2011, stands southwest of the National Mall and within the sightline of the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials. While King has been the first African-American to be memorialized in statue form in the tourist/historic area of the nation’s capital city, the monument’s symbolism reaches far past this historic significance. Nothing in Washington D.C.’s aesthetic design is left to chance. Unique for being the only city specifically created by the American Founders, and its very location the result of a political compromise between Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton—from the very beginning, symbolism would loom large in the concepts and designs (both abstract and aesthetic) of the city. The King Memorial monument speaks to this symbolism. King stands, arms crossed, looking across the Tidal Basin directly at the Jefferson Memorial. His expression is stoic. King holds in his hand a rolled-up sheet of paper many would believe to be a copy of one of his speeches. It may just as well be something else: a promissory note. The monument expresses perfectly the philosophical underpinnings which drove much of King’s arguments. King looks to Jefferson with apparent impatience; frustration. The human symbol of modern African American equality and dignity (King) looks to the human symbol of the nation’s founding (Jefferson) with expectations of the country living up to its moral and philosophical pledge. The juxtaposition of the King monument looking across the basin to the Jefferson monument underscores King’s political philosophy and illustrates it for those willing and able to see: Martin Luther King, Jr. was a Natural Law Jeffersonian.

King and Natural Law
King’s legacy as a champion of Natural Law philosophy has been almost lost to history. It is a disservice to his memory that his championing of Natural Law has been de-emphasized in the circles of academia and in the broader public memory. In turn, King’s quintessential appeals to inherent individual rights have been largely forgotten. Even a cursory examination of his writings and speeches reveal King’s Natural Law ideology quite evidently. This work will demonstrate Martin Luther King, Jr.’s devotion to Natural Law and how it informed some of his strongest arguments for racial equality and individual dignity. This work will further establish that King appealed to a long tradition of American Natural Law tenets which had been championed by Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln before him.

The achievements of Martin Luther King, Jr. in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s are well documented and have been widely discussed for decades. His most prominent role as an activist for racial equality and proponent of Civil Rights legislation, as well as his less-discussed speeches which railed against economic disparity and the American military industrial complex, put him into a special class of persons who helped shape modern American culture. From the bus boycotts to the March on Washington, to his protest over
U.S. involvement in Vietnam, Martin Luther King has been heralded and celebrated as an important American icon. His political philosophy, however, in recent decades, has become overshadowed by a combination of his historical achievements and political groups who have co-opted the language of Dr. King for their own ends. This hybridization of reverence for a hero and the borrowing of his words have caused the actual political philosophy of Martin Luther King to be quite forgotten, misplaced, or wholly abandoned. While many may readily speak of Dr. King’s approach to political equality as having been influenced by Mahatma Gandhi’s practice of civil disobedience and nonviolent protest, the most pervasive element of Dr. Martin Luther King’s political thought was classical liberalism.

The Promissory Note

Time and again Martin Luther King wrote about and spoke to Jeffersonian principles of self-determination and appeals to Natural Law. King aimed to hold the United States of America not by radically new ideas about freedom and equality, but to hold the nation, and the nation’s government, to the long-standing principles laid out in the Declaration of Independence: that every individual is endowed by his or her Creator (not by government or others) with certain inalienable rights, and that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It was no mere coincidence, nor was it simply a rhetorical flourish, that King, in his “I Have a Dream” speech, asserted the Declaration of Independence, and its proclamation of the equality of all men, as a promissory note which had come time to be paid. This crucial aspect to King’s philosophical arguments have been essentially lost to the general public, which is tragic. The rendering of King in stone has matched the public memory of him as well. King has had his Natural Law edges smoothed down and fundamentally erased. “When initial renderings for the new Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial were first unveiled, they included a prominent place for the promissory-note metaphor, but as the project went forward the quotation was deemed ‘too confrontational’ and dropped from the final design.”¹

How unfortunate it is that Martin Luther King’s message has been so distorted and misrepresented. “With the opening of a new monument to King on the nation’s most symbolically significant land, King has been burned into something almost unrecognizable, and the promissory note has disappeared from the record.”² To understand why this is important, terms must be defined so their philosophical significance can be properly unpacked. To do so, it is necessary to explore and unpack the notion of Natural Law.

American Natural Law: Locke and Jefferson

Jeffersonianism is defined here as an American belief in Natural Law. It gives credence to seventeenth-century political theorist John Locke’s concept of individual rights as defined by life, liberty, and property. Thomas Jefferson, however, adapted this and argued that rights are endowed by the Creator of the universe, which informs how free societies should operate. As the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy states, “The ideological frame that allows for social stability is in the ‘Declaration of Independence’, in which Jefferson lists two self-evident truths: the equality of all men and their endowment [by their Creator] of unalienable rights.”³ King appealed to this same classical liberal, classically American proposition. “‘Equality’ for Jefferson comprises equality of opportunity and moral equality… and seeks to level the playing field through republican reforms such as introduction of a bill to secure human rights… for the self-sufficiency of the general citizenry.”⁴

While Jefferson helped to Americanize, the man himself freely admitted that he was not appealing to anything fundamentally new. Instead, he was calling back to some of the greatest thinkers the world had ever known. Concerning this, Jefferson wrote to Henry Lee in 1825, explaining as such, “[The Declaration was neither] aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion.”⁵ Jefferson makes clear here that Natural Law principles are as solid and reliable as any of the best wisdom of the ancient world, referencing a figure of such stature and intellectual heft as Aristotle to show the veracity of Natural Law notions. “Aristotle,

⁴ Ibid.  
developed the system of ethics from which the tradition of natural law theorizing emerged... [H]e writes of an unchanging 'law based on nature.' Practical reason, in Aristotle’s ethical writings, is concerned with discovering this law by rational inquiry and putting it into effect in human affairs.”6 Jefferson appealed to the Aristotelian view of law based on nature and synthesized it with John Locke’s arguments of just governments and individual rights.

Locke himself argued that true liberalism and individual sovereignty was predicated on the fact that freedom shares an equal measure of liberty and responsibility. This concept may well be the major distinction between classical liberalism and the modern variant. “Autonomy meant the combination of personal independence and moral responsibility that was central to the ideas of John Locke and Adam Smith, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson.”7 King’s assertion of a promissory note in need of payment, past due, challenging claims of insufficient funds, is a Lockean argument of responsibility; a virtue the American Founders shared in principle, if not necessarily always in practice. “[T]he founders’ defense of self-sacrifice and unselfish patriotism has clear roots in Christian asceticism, which is at the heart of Locke’s liberalism as well.”8 Self-sacrifice and unselfish patriotism, which could be defined as the defending of one’s country against its government, is precisely Dr. King’s legacy.

Abraham Lincoln and the Declaration of Independence

The first Republican President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, similarly argued the precepts of Natural Law—which would also prove to be an influence on King. Easy as it would to presume that King’s reverence for Abraham Lincoln was due to the emancipation of American slaves, it is an accurate but crudely incomplete supposition. It may be enough for an African American civil rights activist to honor Lincoln for his eventual fight to end slavery in the United States, but Dr. King was an intellectual as much as he was an activist and his respect for Lincoln was also owed to a shared reverence for the nation’s founding document. This is because it is the Declaration, not the Constitution, which stands as the icon of Natural Law philosophy in the United States. “The young Lincoln argued as early as 1838 that the key document of nationhood was the Declaration and, implicitly, not the Constitution... Lincoln’s demand for filial piety centered upon pledging obedience to the ‘patriots of seventy-six.’”9

Lincoln’s championing of the Declaration of Independence, similar to King a century later, was due to its assertion of Natural Law. Lincoln was certain, as would be Dr. King, that the Declaration’s failure to live up to the principles enshrined within was not an argument against its Natural Law principles. Rather, the failure was due to the citizenry and its elected figures. The fallibility of man is taken into account in Natural Law philosophy. The entire structure of the United States government, including separation of powers into three co-equal branches, was designed specifically because the founders recognized the corruptive influence of power upon individuals. The anti-monarchical arguments, as well as Jefferson’s call for a wall of separation between church and state, stemmed from this recognition of the fallibility of humankind. Thus, the wickedness of slavery was not a blemish upon the Natural Law philosophy of the Declaration. Rather, those in power for the first ninety years of the republic had failed to live up to that standard. The standard itself was merely waiting to be lived up to. “Thus the incompleteness, indeed the hypocrisy of the equality proposition from the standpoint of later generations, does not diminish the boldness of the Declaration as an act of (successful) rebellion.”10 Nor does it negate the truth and power of the principles asserted. “If the official act of foundation of the American regime was the publication of the Declaration of Independence... then at the basis of American republicanism is the explicit recognition of ‘the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God.’”11


Lincoln summoned the spirit of Jefferson’s words in the Declaration time and again to argue in favor of the nation’s inherent Natural Law creed. He held no compunction about making the moral argument against slavery and the treatment of African Americans. Indeed, it was Lincoln’s moral arguments and appeals to Natural Law that held most power—for their ethical high ground, as well as for their logic. “The Declaration asserted the doctrine of self-government as an ‘absolute and eternal right.’” [Lincoln argued] “If the Negro is a man, is it not to that extent a total destruction of self-government to say that he too shall not govern himself?”

Among the most impactful arguments Lincoln would make, which would also have a profound impact on Dr. King himself, was Lincoln’s reference to the nation’s Civil War crisis as a house divided. Not only did it evoke both powerful and accurate imagery of the nation split in two, divided by war and slavery. It also allowed Lincoln to summon biblical prose—again appealing to ultimately moral arguments. “The symbol of a house divided was not lost on the biblically oriented nineteenth-century audience. The phrase Lincoln employed is derived from Matthew… ‘[E]very kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand.’” Lincoln here decided to quote Christ himself; an astonishing plea for decency.

It should be noted that many modern readers may find such biblical references at best archaic, or at worst pseudo-theocratic. This is evidence not of how much the nation has changed in the past century, but the past fifty years. Martin Luther King himself, a minister after all, repeatedly made his arguments through a combination of Jeffersonian/Natural Law precepts and Christian doctrine. This aspect of Dr. King, even though most know him historically as a reverend as well as activist, is very much ignored today. It is unfortunate that due to the modern U.S. population so deeply polarized and divided upon not only partisan grounds, but philosophical and theological grounds as well, that such appeals to morality must be swept under the rug. “Simply summarized, the ‘house divided’ metaphor seeks to show the confusion and desperation that accompany actions undertaken in absence of divine guidance.” One need not be a Christian to recognize the power of Lincoln’s reference to a house divided. Nor does one need to be a follower of the Natural Law philosophy to recognize its historical value and its impact upon some of the most prominent Americans in history, including Dr. King. While it is understandable to be skeptical of politicians who too easily invoke religious sentiment, it is always important to not confuse the message with the messenger. An invocation of the divine or the just need not be taken as an advocacy for theocracy, just as arguments for secularism need not be regarded as anti-religious. The conflation of these perceptions in modern times is troubling, unsophisticated, and leads to deep misunderstandings of motivations, which further increases the polarization of the public.

Abraham Lincoln’s summoning of the precepts of the Declaration of Independence during the Civil War would come to be one of the greatest moral, intellectual, and philosophical influences upon Martin Luther King, Jr. For all of the talk of Mahatma Gandhi’s influence, which King no doubt cited, it can be argued quite reasonably that Jefferson’s influence, by way of Lincoln, may have ultimately been more significant. “The right to ‘alter’ a government which refused to recognize the rights of life, liberty and happiness was the opening King employed to accomplish his task… [A]s Lincoln brought the Declaration to life and re-embalmed it, so did King.” King championed the Natural Law principles housed in the founding charter of the United States of America. He invoked Jefferson, Jefferson’s greatest legacy—the Natural Law virtues stated in the Declaration of Independence, and Lincoln, who himself invoked Jeffersonian values of inherent rights and equality. “They [Jefferson, Lincoln, and King] -and the central philosophic tradition of which they were, in turn, our nation’s principal bearers-argued that the basis of civil rights and liberties was natural law and the natural rights that derive from the natural law.”

The influence of Natural Law upon Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. simply cannot be denied. The amount of evidence in the affirmative, most of all King’s own words, testify to that fact. King could have argued key Natural Law precepts in his writings and speeches while simultaneously denouncing Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence. He did not. Instead, King, like Lincoln, emphasized his belief in the Declaration, and

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14 Ibid., 459.


reminded the country that the virtues and values of the United States are not to be found in the political science of the Constitution, regardless of its merits. Rather, the Constitution itself was born out of the political philosophy of the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson’s Natural Law arguments in the Declaration are paramount. King’s reference to the Declaration as a promissory note, as previously stated, show his belief in the Declaration’s pledge.

**King’s Letter from Birmingham Jail**

Dr. King’s letter from Birmingham jail is itself, in part, an essay on Natural Law philosophy. “The entire letter [from Birmingham jail] … is a meditation on natural law and civil rights.” This assertion is indisputable. In his letter from Birmingham jail, King proclaims his appeal to Natural Law philosophy quite plainly, “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.” Thus, King argues in his Birmingham Jail letter the Natural Law sentiment that an unjust law is no law at all.

It is fair to say that one does not understand the legacy and meaning of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. without understanding his advocacy of Natural Law. King spoke of the general values of the American founding and deftly showed the cause for Civil Rights to be a cause for America itself. Without the context of Natural Law and America’s custom of it, King’s words provide far less intellectual weight. People are simply not giving the man his due as a political thinker otherwise. His advocacy of Natural Law in his Birmingham jail letter, and his reference to the promissory note, lose much of their moral and intellectual meaning when taken out of context.

**Conclusion**

In the modern culture of political divisiveness, figures in academia and the press—particularly (though not exclusively) on the political left—have sought to own the legacy of Dr. King. They can only be allowed to do so by denying the factual history, which is that Martin Luther King was a champion of classically liberal values. The language of his speeches and the nature of his arguments which called for a better, freer, and more just society prove this claim. It appears that some avoid Dr. King’s more religious references, and perhaps even his assertion of Natural Law, because it makes them uncomfortable. It is a mistake to confuse Natural Law concepts with religious ones, for they are not the same. Going back to Aristotle, beliefs in inherent rights were never confused with religious orthodoxy whatsoever. “[T]he early natural law philosophers were ignorant of the revealed teachings of Sacred Scripture. Therefore, we may put to rest the oft-expressed objection that belief in natural law is a sectarian religious doctrine.” Furthermore, the American founders’ devotion—most notably, Jefferson—to religious liberty and secular law similarly invalidates such apprehensions.

Both King’s faith and his political philosophy have been washed away—even though they are what informed his actions and motivated his cause. Today, people want to honor King’s legacy, but ignore the influences which compelled him to take the actions he took. It is a disservice to history and a disservice to his memory. King was far more nuanced and sophisticated in his thinking than many of his modern-day champions. The King Memorial monument in Washington, D.C., when seen in its entire context, is similarly more interesting and intellectually-rich. The figure of King, standing and looking over to Jefferson, with Lincoln also within the sightline, represents King not only as a beloved American icon, but also as a rightful heir of the American Natural Law tradition. This tradition is currently out of fashion among the mainstream intelligentsia, and because of this, much of Dr. King’s thoughts and ideas are evaded and ignored. It is ironic, of course, because Dr. King’s appeal to a higher law, to Natural Law, is precisely how he was able to change the nation for the better—and yet, modern politicians are mute on this matter. “[W]e await the next Jefferson, Lincoln, or Reverend King to recall us to the higher law that each of them so eloquently invoked in the cause of ordered liberty and civil rights.”

For a number of reasons, Natural Law has become an unpopular philosophy within academic political thought as well as within the political press. This is despite the fact that arguably the three greatest figures in American political history, who so greatly influenced the nation we live in today: Thomas Jefferson during the American Revolution, Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War, and Dr.

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Martin Luther King, Jr. during the tumultuous Civil Rights Movement, were all defenders of Natural Law philosophy. The cognitive dissonance of the culture, especially within academia, concerning this is appalling. There is a tendency to, especially in Dr. King’s case, honor the man but not the philosophy which informed his moral arguments. It is at best a lack of logic and at worst a deliberate refusal to give Natural Law philosophy its due. Dr. King was the most important advocate of Natural Law of the twentieth century and, arguably, the most important champion of it since Abraham Lincoln. His legacy should be honored by also honoring the moral, intellectual, and political views which energized his campaign for justice and equality for all.

References Cited

Figure 1. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial monument in Washington, D.C. The figure looks across the Tidal Basin. This photograph’s perspective is from the Jefferson Memorial across the water.

Figure 2. The monument displays an image of King with arms crossed. He holds a rolled-up sheet of paper in his hand. Is it a copy of one of his speeches, or is it a promissory note?
Figure 3. The aesthetic inspiration for the monument was provided by the words from one of King’s speeches: “Out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope.”

Figure 4. Across the Tidal Basin from the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial stands the Jefferson Memorial. Thomas Jefferson, a slaveholder his entire life, wrote the immortal words of the Declaration of Independence which argued the fundamentals of Natural Law and the equality of all men. King championed Jeffersonian principles, even though the man who established them in the Declaration in 1776 did not himself live by them.