


2010

# A Philology of Liberation: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as a Reader of the Classics

Thomas E. Strunk  
*Xavier University - Cincinnati*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://www.exhibit.xavier.edu/classics\\_faculty](http://www.exhibit.xavier.edu/classics_faculty)

 Part of the [Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity Commons](#), [Ancient Philosophy Commons](#), [Byzantine and Modern Greek Commons](#), [Classical Archaeology and Art History Commons](#), [Classical Literature and Philology Commons](#), [Indo-European Linguistics and Philology Commons](#), and the [Other Classics Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Strunk, Thomas E., "A Philology of Liberation: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as a Reader of the Classics" (2010). *Faculty Scholarship*. Paper 16.  
[http://www.exhibit.xavier.edu/classics\\_faculty/16](http://www.exhibit.xavier.edu/classics_faculty/16)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Classics at Exhibit. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Exhibit. For more information, please contact [exhibit@xavier.edu](mailto:exhibit@xavier.edu).

## ***A Philology of Liberation: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a Reader of the Classics***

Thomas Strunk, Ph.D.  
Xavier University

### **Abstract**

*This paper explores the intellectual relationship between Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the classics, particularly the works of Plato, Sophocles, and Aeschylus. Recognizing Dr. King as a reader of the classics is significant for two reasons: the classics played a formative role in Dr. King's development into a political activist and an intellectual of the first order; moreover, Dr. King shows us the way to read the classics. Dr. King did not read the classics in a pedantic or even academic manner, but for the purpose of liberation. Dr. King's legacy, thus, is not merely his political accomplishments but also his example as a philologist of liberation.*

### **Obama and the New America**

In the autumn of 2008, I happened to be teaching a course on ancient Greek civilization in which we read, amongst others, Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Sophocles' *Antigone*, and Plato's dialogues on the trial and death of Socrates. Throughout the course of the semester I felt that many of the ideas we read about and discussed were somehow charged with the *Zeitgeist* of the presidential election and the attendant rhetoric and analysis of what it meant for the United States to elect a black man as president. I was delighted that this course on an ancient civilization could so easily join in conversation with the present.

America has come down from those precipitous heights where we were in November 2008 and January 2009, and once again we are living in the comfortable and familiar dregs of modern American politics where we fight over important matters like healthcare reform, unemployment, and military strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan. But I would like to return briefly to November 2008 and

January 2009. I feel those are important days for us to remember as Americans. For what was achieved was not merely the election of a Democrat or the inauguration of a black man, or more specifically a man of mixed race, as president. But rather what I feel, and what I think many others feel, is that America as a country overcame an impediment placed before us by our ancestors who established race-based slavery in the United States. We have been relieved of a great burden, much more quickly than anyone, black or white, really imagined was possible. Within the last decade there have been movies, such as Chris Rock's "Head of State" (2003), about a black president, as if this were fantasy. But this is not fantasy; in truth we have rapidly come to find that we are not that racist, or at least that we are not racist in the way we thought we were. I do not mean to gloss over any still-existing manifestations of racism or pretend that since we elected an African American president that we are suddenly free from our past. We are not; studies continue to reveal that African Americans disproportionately lack access to adequate resources in education, healthcare, and housing. Nonetheless, it is hard to deny that political life in America is somehow profoundly changed by the election of 2008.

"We have been relieved of a great burden, much more quickly than anyone, black or white, really imagined was possible."

John McCain (2008) himself recognized this in his concession speech, saying:

This is an historic election, and I recognize the special significance it has for African-Americans and for the special pride that must be theirs tonight. I've always believed that America offers opportunities to all who have the industry and will to seize it. Senator Obama believes that, too. But we both recognize that though we have come a long way from the old injustices that once stained our nation's reputation and denied some Americans the full blessings of American citizenship, the memory of them still had the power to wound.

A century ago, President Theodore Roosevelt's invitation of Booker T. Washington to visit -- to dine at the White House was taken as an outrage in many quarters. America today is a world away from the cruel and prideful bigotry of

that time. There is no better evidence of this than the election of an African American to the presidency of the United States.

I would like to suggest that in this new light we might better understand our past and our dialogue with it. It is a commonplace that Barack Obama has reaped the rewards of an earlier generation's struggle for civil rights. We have heard repeatedly that Barack Obama's election is a direct result of the civil rights movement and individuals like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Such sentiments have been expressed by such diverse individuals as Tom Brokaw (Rose, 2008), a trusted, mainstream voice of traditional *gravitas*, and Michael Eric Dyson (2008), an outspoken African American professor of sociology at Georgetown University (Pratt, 2008). I would like to argue that Barack Obama has also, perhaps unwittingly, reaped the rewards of an earlier generation's intellectual struggle.

Since the publication of Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of a Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1982), wherein he recounts his furtive and illegal attempts to gain knowledge, the intellectual life of African Americans has been recognized as contested terrain. The question of what is the proper subject of study for African Americans was hotly debated at the turn of the nineteenth century made famous by thinkers such as W.E.B. Dubois (1999) and William Sanders Scarborough (2006), who argued for higher learning with a classical curriculum, and Booker T. Washington (1995), who maintained the need for an industrial education. In this paper, I am focusing on the intellectual background of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. specifically.

To the question of influences on Dr. King's intellectual formation, there are some obvious answers that take precedence over all the others: there are the lived experiences of those who were direct ancestors in the civil rights struggle, those women and men, black and white who fought against racial discrimination for generations long before Dr. King and Rosa Parks came along; the African American church as an institution and the writings of the Old and New Testaments, which surely strengthened and inspired many to take such bold and

“By no means am I attempting to argue that Dr. King's thought and subsequent actions are purely derivative from classical learning.”

decisive action, placing themselves before angry mobs and in dirty jail cells, or worse; there are also the non-violent teachings of Mohandas Gandhi, Henry David Thoreau, and Bayard Rustin. I would like to explore another less-considered intellectual influence: the classical tradition. I want to consider how Dr. King read the classics, in particular those authors I mentioned earlier: Plato, Sophocles, and Aeschylus.

First a caveat. By no means am I attempting to argue that Dr. King's thought and subsequent actions are purely derivative from classical learning. Rather I hope to show the breadth of learning that Dr. King acquired and how he incorporated that learning into his life's work. I hope the reader will accept what follows as a further demonstration of Dr. King's claim to being regarded as a first-rate intellect and not as an effort to re-appropriate his accomplishments for a particular discipline. Such a life cannot be confined to any narrow interpretation.

### **Dr. King and Plato's Socrates on Nonviolence**

I would like to start with Dr. King's philosophy of nonviolence. King wrote that he first encountered the concept of non-violence in a book, which he correctly saw as a conversation with the past about the present. The book was Thoreau's *Essay on Civil Disobedience*, which King read while a freshman at Morehouse College (2010a, p. 78). There is an important point here worth emphasizing: Dr. King was not solely an activist; he was a reader and intellectual who developed into someone we should consider both a theologian and philosopher. Through the combination of King's reading of Thoreau and later Gandhi and then his interactions with Bayard Rustin and his experiences during the Montgomery bus boycott, Dr. King developed a philosophy of nonviolence based on six principals as outlined in *Stride Toward Freedom* (2010a, pp. 90-95), King's earliest book. They are worth summarizing here.

1. "Nonviolent resistance is not a method for cowards; it does resist."

"America today is a world away from the cruel and prideful bigotry of that time."

2. Nonviolence “does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win his friendship and understanding”.
3. “The attack is directed against forces of evil rather than against persons who happen to be doing the evil”.
4. Nonviolence includes “a willingness to accept suffering without retaliation, to accept blows from the opponent without striking back”.
5. Nonviolent resistance “avoids not only external physical violence but also internal violence of spirit”; the resister should be motivated by love in the sense of the Greek word *agape*, which “means understanding, redeeming goodwill for all men”.
6. Nonviolent resistance “is based on the conviction that the universe is on the side of justice”.

I cite these principals and Dr. King’s mention of Thoreau to show the fruit that reading the great works of human literature can bear. Alexander Pope’s words from *An Essay on Man* (2003 p. 281), often in the minds of men like Du Bois and Scarborough, apply here: “The proper study of mankind is man”.

These ideas on nonviolence presented as they are by King suggest few parallels with the Greco-Roman world pervaded by war, the violence of slavery and the gladiatorial arena. Yet there are affinities, nonetheless, with works King read as a student at Crozer Seminary in his course on Greek religion, namely Plato’s *Apology* and *Crito* (West, 2000). We can compare Plato’s (trans. 2003) account of Socrates in his own jail cell conversing with Crito, to whom he says,

Do we say that there is no way that one must ever willingly commit injustice, or does it depend upon circumstance? Is it true, as we have often agreed before, that there is no sense in which an act of injustice is good or honorable? Or have we jettisoned all our former convictions in these last few days? Can you and I at our age, Crito, have spent all these years in serious discussions without realizing that we were no better than a pair of children? Surely the truth is just what we have always said. Whatever the popular view is, and whether the consequence is pleasanter than this or even tougher, the fact remains that to commit injustice is in every case bad

“To be certain, Dr. King and Socrates at this point are talking about two slightly different things: violence and injustice.”

and dishonorable for the person who does it. (*Crito* 49a3-b6)

To be certain, Dr. King and Socrates at this point are talking about two slightly different things: violence and injustice. A few lines later in the dialogue, however, Socrates asks Crito to clarify his position,

I want even you to consider very carefully whether you share my views and agree with me, and whether we can proceed with our discussion from the established hypothesis that it is never right to commit injustice or return injustice or defend one's self against injury by retaliation; or whether you dissociate yourself from any share in this view as a basis for discussion. I have held it for a long time, and still hold it. (*Crito* 49d5-e3)

I would not want to argue that Socrates (or Plato) was a philosopher of nonviolence. After all, we do know that Socrates served as a hoplite and fought bravely in several battles during the Peloponnesian War, specifically the Potidea campaign and at Delium in 424 B.C.E. (*Symposium* 219d3-221c1). However, it should be noted that he did refuse to participate in the execution of the generals after the battle of Arginusae in 406 B.C.E. under the democracy and the execution of Leon of Salamis in 403 B.C.E. under the Thirty Tyrants (*Apology* 32c3-e2). Nonetheless, Socrates' point in the *Crito* resonates with Dr. King's fourth principle of non-violence: the willingness "to suffer without retaliation". Furthermore, Socrates' words to Crito harmonize with Dr. King's philosophy of nonviolence and point to the radical nature of one of the fundamental tenets of Socratic-Platonic philosophy: we would do better to suffer injustice than to commit injustice (*Gorgias* 474b1-475e6). I have a difficult time reading those words without images coming to mind of attack dogs and fire hoses turned against African Americans in Birmingham or young students, black and white, defiantly yet calmly enduring the taunts of an angry mob at a lunch counter in Jackson, Mississippi – images made famous by the photography of Bill Hudson and Charles Moore. When we see such images we can readily identify who is

"I want even you to consider very carefully whether you share my views and agree with me."

committing the injustice and who is demonstrating a certain nobility of spirit and virtue of fortitude.

According to Plato (trans. 2003), Socrates himself seems to have captured the essence of those images in words he reportedly spoke shortly before his own death:

Neither Meletus nor Anytus can do me any harm at all; they would not have the power, because I do not believe that the law of God permits a better man to be harmed by a worse. No doubt my accuser might put me to death or have me banished or deprived of civic rights; but even if he thinks as he probably does (and others too, I dare say), that these are great calamities, I do not think so; I believe that it is far worse to do what he is doing now, trying to put a man to death unjustly. (*Apology* 30c-d)

Neither Socrates nor Dr. King sought to retaliate or escape the use of force by their enemies. Socrates remained in his jail cell, just as Dr. King sat in his jail cell rather than eluding the law, using force or money and influence to escape. And in the end Dr. King and Socrates have been proven right in their judgments. Socrates held the Athenians responsible for their decision, which they have labored under ever since, just as Dr. King condemned Birmingham, Alabama 1963 to the international reputation of Bombingham, America's most segregated city.

“King’s arrest came  
on Good Friday,  
April 12<sup>th</sup>.”

### Direct Action

I would like to focus now on Dr. King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, which King wrote in April 1963 in response to “moderate” clergy who criticized his activities in Birmingham and later included in his account of the Birmingham campaign, *Why We Can't Wait*, from which I cite. King was in Birmingham as part of the local campaign to protest the city's segregation laws (King, 2000). The desegregation campaign began just after the mayoral election of the moderate Albert Boutwell, who beat out the notorious segregationist and commissioner of public safety “Bull” Connor. The campaign included all the actions we now



associate with the tactics of the civil rights movement: lunch-counter sit-ins, marches, boycotts, and the like. King's arrest came on Good Friday, April 12<sup>th</sup>, after he participated in a march without the proper permit. He was kept in solitary confinement without access to books and paper, yet during that confinement written in the margins of the *Birmingham News* he scribbled his epistle, which has rightfully become one of the fundamental writings of American democracy. Moreover, King did this while his wife, Coretta, was back home in Atlanta, Georgia tending to their two week old daughter. Once enough bail money was raised, King was released on April 20, 1963 after a week in jail. By then the letter was being mimeographed and published as a pamphlet by the American Friends Service Committee.

Among the many points King raised in his letter is the question of direct action, which brought much tension and strife to the cities he visited. In his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, King wrote (2000),

But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word 'tension.' I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood. (p. 90)

"If you put me to death, you will not easily find anyone to take my place."

King's mention of Socrates' gadfly-like activities in Athens refers to Socrates' defense, where Socrates says,

If you put me to death, you will not easily find anyone to take my place. To put it bluntly (even if it sounds rather comical) God has assigned me to this city, as if to a large thoroughbred horse which because of its great size is inclined to be lazy and needs the stimulation of some stinging fly. It seems to me that God has attached me to this city to perform the office of such a fly; and all day long I never cease to settle here, there, and everywhere, rousing, persuading, reproving every one of you. You will not easily find another like me, gentlemen, and if you take my advice you will spare my life. But perhaps before long you may awake from your

drowsing, and in your annoyance take Anytus's advice and finish me off thoughtlessly with a single slap; and then you could go on sleeping till the end of your days, unless God in his care for you sends someone to take my place. (*Apology* 30e1-31a7)

Socrates' description of his activities in Athens provided King with a useful exemplar (Fulkerson, 1979). For Socrates does not shy away from portraying his activities as shaking the Athenians out of their torpor and rousing them to more virtuous behavior. And is not this activity the basis of democratic citizenship? Democracy is vibrant when there is tension, when there are gadflies about. Earlier I wrote that America has come down from our dizzying heights of the election and inauguration back to the dregs of everyday democracy. But isn't it wonderful to be here where there is wrangling over our health-care system, where there is wrangling over just and unjust wars. We might all enjoy a period of respite and silence, and those are necessary for reflection, but the day that we cease to have agitation and strife, when decisions are made smoothly and quietly by the unquestioned wisdom of one person or perhaps a few, is the day that we no longer live in a republic. So we want to see and even to encourage the agitation of which Socrates and Dr. King speak.

“The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust.”

### **Just and Unjust Laws**

Well, what is all this agitation and tension over? The “moderate” clergy who opposed the direct action of King did so on the basis that King was breaking the law. They raised a natural objection to King's willingness to break some laws, such as marching without a permit, while insisting on obedience to other laws, such as the *Brown vs. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision against segregation in public schools in 1954. King responded that the actions of civil rights demonstrators were not in contradiction by arguing that a distinction had to be made between just and unjust laws. In the letter King writes (2000),

One may ask: “How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?” The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just

and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that ‘an unjust law is no law at all.’ Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? 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. (pp. 93-94).

Several paragraphs later he reinforces the point (2000):

I hope you are able to see the distinction I am trying to point out. In no sense do I advocate evading or defying the law, as would the rabid segregationist. That would lead to anarchy. One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law. (pp. 95-96)

“One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty.”

Although we might find affinities with Socrates’ words in the *Crito* or even the writings of Cicero, the *locus classicus* on this subject is Sophocles’ *Antigone* (1994), wherein Antigone disobeys King Creon’s edict not to bury those traitors who attacked the city of Thebes. Antigone, whose brother Polyneices led the attack on Thebes, is conflicted by this edict which does not square with the moral law that requires one to bury the dead, particularly one’s own kin. To heighten Antigone’s dilemma, her other brother Eteocles, who remained loyal to Thebes, is given a hero’s burial. Antigone, who disobeyed the order of Creon and defiantly buried her traitorous brother Polyneices, admits her actions and famously justifies them with the following words (Sophocles, trans. 1994),

It was not Zeus who published this decree,  
Nor have the Powers who rule among the dead  
Imposed such laws as this upon mankind;  
Nor could I think that a decree of yours –  
A man – could override the laws of Heaven  
Unwritten and unchanging. Not of today  
Or yesterday is their authority;  
They are eternal; no man saw their birth. (450-457)

These lines had a long lineage well before Dr. King read them in his Greek religion course while at Crozer Seminary (Becker, 2000). To take such inspiration from Antigone's famous lines was not unique to Dr. King. These lines were quoted by Aristotle in the century after they were performed as the basis of his discussion on the nature of law (Sussman, 2002); in his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle (trans. 1941) echoes the affinities between Sophocles' Antigone and Dr. King's reasoning:

It will now be well to make a complete classification of just and unjust actions. We may begin by observing that they have been defined relatively to two kinds of law, and also relatively to two classes of persons. By the two kinds of law I mean particular law and universal law. Particular law is that which each community lays down and applies to its own members: this is partly written and partly unwritten. Universal law is the law of nature. For there really is, as everyone to some extent dives, a natural justice and injustice that is binding on all men, even on those who have no association or covenant with each other. It is this that Sophocles' Antigone clearly means when she says that the burial of Polyneices was a just act in spite of the prohibition: she means that it was just by nature. Not of to-day or yesterday it is, but lives eternal: none can date its birth.

(1.13)

King himself cites as his source St. Augustine, who undoubtedly had come across the idea in Sophocles' *Antigone* and most likely also Aristotle's *Rhetoric*.

### Civil Disobedience

King concludes that just laws should be upheld while unjust laws should be disobeyed with the goal of seeking their repeal. To bolster his argument, King cites, in *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, examples from history of those who also practiced civil disobedience writing (2000):

Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was evidenced sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar, on the ground that a higher moral law was at stake. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians, who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating

“Universal law is the law of nature.”

pain of chopping blocks rather than submit to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire. To a degree, academic freedom is a reality today because Socrates practiced civil disobedience. In our own nation, the Boston Tea Party represented a massive act of civil disobedience. (p. 96)

The civil disobedience of Socrates, to which King alludes, is his insistence on philosophizing and continuing to pursue the examined life. Citing a greater obedience to God, Socrates says in his defense speech,

Suppose, then, that you acquit me, and pay no attention to Anytus, who has said that either I should not have appeared before this court at all, or, since I have appeared here, I must be put to death, because if I once escaped your sons would all immediately become utterly corrupted by putting the teaching of Socrates into practice. Suppose that, in view of this, you said to me, "Socrates, on this occasion we shall disregard Anytus and acquit you, but only on one condition: that you give up spending your time on this quest and stop philosophizing. If we catch you going on in the same way, you shall be put to death." Well, supposing, as I said, that you should offer to acquit me on these terms, I should reply, "Gentlemen, I am your very grateful and devoted servant, but I owe a greater obedience to God than to you; and so long as I draw breath and have my faculties, I shall never stop practicing philosophy and exhorting you and indicating the truth for everyone that I meet". (*Apology* 29b9-d6)

"Gentlemen, I am your very grateful and devoted servant, but I owe a greater obedience to God than to you."

Obedience to God first, disobedience to man if necessary. In fact this passage was directly quoted by another civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, seven years before the Montgomery Bus Boycott in his speech "In Apprehension How Like a God" before the Arch Street Meeting House in Philadelphia (1948). Rustin is perhaps best remembered for leading the 1963 March on Washington, yet is largely an unsung hero of the civil rights movement, who often found himself on the margins as a pacifist, African American, homosexual with communist tendencies, quite a litany of indictments for the times. Yet Rustin (1912-1987), who was a generation older than Dr. King (1929-1968), taught the younger activist the finer points of nonviolent civil disobedience during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, even encouraging King to remove guns from his house and the armed guards posted outside (Rustin, 2003; Pollard, Kates, and Singer, 2002).

But to return to Socrates, we should not question his commitment to his words, for he goes on to say most forcefully,

You can please yourselves whether you listen to Anytus or not and whether you acquit me or not; you know that I am not going to alter my conduct, not even if I have to die a hundred deaths. (*Apology* 30b8-c1)

Such lines Dr. King pondered as he sat in his Birmingham jail cell.

### Persecution and Death

Of course such conduct often comes at a price, a price which, as indicated by the last quote, Socrates and Dr. King were willing to pay. The activities of King and Socrates brought much strife and dissension to their societies and much danger to themselves. Repeatedly King faced the criticism that his actions, though nonviolent, led to violence, just as Socrates' philosophic teachings, though peaceful, led to the corruption of the young. King addresses these criticisms in *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, writing (2000),

In your statement you assert that our actions, even though peaceful, must be condemned because they precipitate violence. But is this a logical assertion? Isn't this like condemning a robbed man because his possession of money precipitated the evil act of robbery? Isn't this like condemning Socrates because his unswerving commitment to truth and his philosophical inquiries precipitated the act by the misguided populace in which they made him drink hemlock? Isn't this like condemning Jesus because his unique God-consciousness and never-ceasing devotion to God's will precipitated the evil act of crucifixion? (p. 98)

“In your statement you assert that our actions, even though peaceful, must be condemned because they precipitate violence.”

King's critics could be accused of using the tension that King brought to the surface to obfuscate the root causes of injustice rather than examining them.

Socrates too had to answer for the tensions he released within Athenian society and to confront accusations against the results of his teachings, namely that his actions corrupted the youth. Clearly he feels this is an incorrect line of argument, since his actions sought to improve the virtues of those with whom he engaged.

To show the absurdity of this conclusion Socrates clarifies what his message to the Athenians, young and old, has been,

For I spend all my time going about trying to persuade you, young and old, to make your first and chief concern not for your bodies or for your possessions, but for the highest welfare of your souls, proclaiming as I go, 'Wealth does not bring goodness, but goodness brings wealth and every other blessing, both to the individual and to the State.' Now if I corrupt the young by this message, the message would seem to be harmful; but if anyone says that my message is different from this he is talking nonsense. (*Apology* 30a7-b7)

The Athenian jurors might have condemned Socrates, but they would have been hard-pressed to disagree with Socrates' message as he describes it, given its moral clarity and the suggestion that he strove to improve the virtues of young and old rather than encourage them to follow their lesser ambitions. Just as Dr. King inspired many to question America's unjust segregation laws, Socrates' teachings inspired the youth to ask inconvenient questions to their own elders.

Given their teachings and the tensions they created in their societies, we should not be surprised that Socrates and Dr. King were executed for their troublesome activities. But what is revealing is their attitudes toward their early deaths, which they seemed to accept as the wages of their life's work.

Dr. King even suggests that we seek out that for which we are willing to die: "And I submit to you that if a man has not discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live" (2001a, p. 67).

For Socrates, we recall the image of him in the *Phaedo* reassuring his students that the soul is immortal and not to fear death. The death of the body does not frighten Socrates; he is worried about another kind of death, which comes from a life that is not authentically lived. So in his apology, he says,

If on the other hand I tell you that to let no day pass without discussing goodness and all the other subjects about which you hear me talking and examining both myself and others is really the very best thing that a man can do, and that life without this sort of examination is not worth living, you will be even less inclined to believe me. (*Apology* 38a1-6)

["I just want to do  
God's will."]

Here we have Socrates' description of what precisely he was willing to die for: the necessity to live the examined life. For King and Socrates, their philosophic disregard for death was rooted in their firm belief that they were carrying out the will of God. This put them beyond the reach of the harm their fellow citizens could inflict upon them. As King prophetically spoke on the night before he was killed, "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will" (2001b, p. 222).

King's peaceful disregard for his own death is mirrored by Socrates' lack of concern over his death. In the *Apology*, after his conviction he says,

I suspect that this thing that has happened to me is a blessing, and we are quite mistaken in supposing death to be an evil. I have good grounds for thinking this, because my accustomed sign could not have failed to oppose me if what I was doing had not been sure to bring some good result. (40b6-c2)

A few lines later, Socrates elaborates on this point:

You too, gentlemen of the jury, must look forward to death with confidence, and fix your minds on this one belief, which is certain: that nothing can harm a good man either in life or after death, and his fortunes are not a matter of indifference to the gods. This present experience of mine does not result from mere earthly causes; I am quite clear that the time had come when it was better for me to die and be released from my distractions. (*Apology* 41c8-d7)

"But just as Socrates tried to soothe the grief of his students, there were those who spoke for moderation in the aftermath of Dr. King's murder."

### **Bitter Wisdom**

Although Socrates and Dr. King could speak about their imminent deaths free of anxiety, their followers had a much more difficult time mirroring their teacher's philosophic detachment. The *Phaedo* records the emotional reactions of Socrates' disciples once he drank the hemlock (117c1-118a). The history books also tell of the mass riots after the assassination of Dr. King. But just as Socrates



tried to soothe the grief of his students, there were those who spoke for moderation in the aftermath of Dr. King's murder.

Robert F. Kennedy perhaps put it most eloquently in his speech in Indianapolis on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1968 (Kennedy, 1999):

But we have to make an effort in the United States, we have to make an effort to understand, to get beyond these rather difficult times.

My favorite poet was Aeschylus. He once wrote: Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.

What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness, but is love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black." (pp. 42-44)

He goes on to say,

Let us dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: "to tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of this world." Let us dedicate ourselves to that, and say a prayer for our country and for our people.

Kennedy's words are a paraphrase of Edith Hamilton's (1930) translation of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* lines 179-83 from the Chorus' *Hymn to Zeus*.

God, whose law it is that he who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep pain that cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despite, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God. (p. 186)

The closing passage is quoted from Edith Hamilton's *The Ever-Present Past* (1964, p. 34; Casazza, 2003). Kennedy was giving his speech to a large audience mostly of African Americans who had not yet heard the news of King's assassination. Like Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy, which told how the cycle of violence within the house of Atreus came to an end, Kennedy's speech sought to

"And even in our sleep pain that cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God."

defuse the potential violence and anger that might arise, and ultimately did arise following King's violent death (Sussman, 2008).

One must imagine that King, who read the *Oresteia* while at Crozer Seminary, found inspiring Aeschylus' notion that communities must ultimately solve their problems by means other than violence. Dr. King expressed most eloquently the need to end the cycle of violence not with more violence but with love in his work *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community* (2010b):

The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. So it goes. ... Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that. (pp. 64-65)

### Our Modern World

As a conclusion, I would like to come to the subject proper of my paper and draw ourselves into this story a bit, not as philologists and educators, professors and scholars as such, but rather as perhaps Socrates and Dr. King would prefer, as citizens and intellectuals. I am only marginally interested in these slight connections between Dr. King and Socrates that I have been examining. What I am supremely interested in is Dr. King as a reader of Plato, Sophocles, and Aeschylus. When asked in an interview with *Playboy* in 1965 which book he would want to have on a deserted island, the Bible aside, King's response was Plato's *Republic* saying (1986),

I feel that it brings together more of the insights of history than any other book. There is not a creative idea extant that is not discussed, in some way, in this work. Whatever realm of theology or philosophy is one's interest – and I am deeply interested in both – somewhere along the way, in this book you will find the matter explored. (p. 372)

“I would like to come to the subject proper of my paper and draw ourselves into this story a bit, not as philologists and educators, professors and scholars as such, but rather as perhaps Socrates and Dr. King would prefer, as citizens and intellectuals.”

These words once more remind us of the power of books and the ability of their ideas to change people and thereby the world. We know that Dr. King did read the *Oresteia*, *Antigone*, the *Crito*, and *Apology* in his Greek Religion class at Crozer Seminary (Becker, 2000). He read the *Republic* in his Platonic philosophy course at Harvard University as part of his graduate work at Boston University (Becker, 2000, pp. 185-186).

I make this point not to argue that King's thought was merely derivative from classical antiquity, but rather to demonstrate that King has a lot to teach us about why and how we should read. If we consider how Dr. King became a voice for nonviolent social change, we see that Dr. King did not get there solely by attending a workshop on how to get arrested without throwing a punch at a police officer, necessary as such trainings are. Dr. King started that journey by encountering dangerous thoughts in the great books of the Western and Eastern humanist tradition. Dr. King never met Gandhi; he never met Thoreau or Plato or Socrates in the flesh. Instead, he communed with them through their written words, and upon reflection on those words he was moved to action. For Dr. King, activism followed his studies which provided an intellectual foundation for his life's work.

Dr. King's method of reading puts certain demands upon our studies that they should stir our souls to action. I would describe Dr. King's reading as a *philology of liberation*. Philology is often viewed as a pedantic and antiquated practice of reading texts dispassionately and detached from contemporary meaning. Yet Dr. King provides a philology and a study of the humanities that lives up to its name as a liberal art and is so thoroughly engaged in our lives that it liberates us from parochial thought; a philology that is in constant conversation with our present, while at the same time freeing us from our own narrow time and place.

This is not a new idea; rather it is a very old idea that traces its roots to ancient educators such as Plato, Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian. Plato wrote

dialogues for this very purpose, so that as readers we would be brought into the conversation. We are a participant and our reactions matter. This is an argument against pedantry, against objective distance. When we read Plato's *Crito* or King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, we need to get into that jail cell with Socrates and Dr. King. And when we walk out of that jail cell, we must search our hearts for what is different in us.

We professors are very capable of presenting the text, at teaching our students to analyze information, to identify similes and rhyme schemes. But I do not think we are very good at getting them into the prison cell, or to be less politically focused, into the artist's studio, into the theater of the playwright. To do this we need imagination and reflection, and though the imaginative and reflective powers of our students may be weak, they may be impaired, and their results may be provincial, we need to encourage our students to form and mold those abilities to imagine and to reflect as much as the ability to recognize irony or a metaphor.

We need to cultivate readers who reflect with imagination and then act. The humanities must be seen as a living tradition and not encountered as traditionalism. I fear we will have fewer Dr. Kings and more pedants who are socially disengaged and more social activists who are intellectually ungrounded, until we buttress our actions with intellectual rigor, and until we are willing to move our classrooms, out to the agora, The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy and into the prison cells.

Lastly, I want to suggest that Dr. King deserves to be held in the same company of poets, philosophers, and theologians I have been discussing. Dr. King's reading, reflection and actions, which included authoring several books and numerous published speeches and letters, make him a formidable intellectual who should be considered a profound theologian and philosopher meriting shelf space next to Plato, St. Augustine, and Thoreau.

"The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy and into the prison cells."

## References

- Aristotle. (1941). *The basic works of Aristotle*. (W. Rhys Roberts, Trans.; Richard McKeon Eds.). New York: Random House.
- Becker, T. H. (2000). A source for ideology: The classical education of Martin Luther King, Jr. *Classical Bulletin*, 76.2, 181-189.
- Casazza, J. (2003) "Taming the savageness of man": Robert Kennedy, Edith Hamilton, and their sources. *CW*, 96.2, 197-99.
- Douglass, F. (1982) *Narrative of a life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave, written by himself*. London: Penguin Books. (Original work published 1845)
- Dubois, W.E.B. (1999). *The souls of black folk*. (H. L. Gates Jr. & T. H. Oliver, Eds.). New York: W.W. Norton & Company. (Original work published 1903)
- Dyson, Michael Eric. (October 21, 2008). Race is a tough tightrope for Obama: An interview with sociologist Michael Eric Dyson. Retrieved July 12, 2010, from <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,585563,00.html>
- Fulkerson, R. P. (1979). The public letter as a rhetorical form: Structure, logic, and style in King's Letter from Birmingham Jail. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 65, 121-136.
- Hamilton, E. (1930). *The Greek way*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Hamilton, E. (1964). *The ever-present past*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Kennedy, M. T. (Ed.). (1999). *Make gentle the life of this world: The vision of Robert F. Kennedy*. New York: Broadway Books.
- King, M. L., Jr. (1986). *Playboy* interview: Martin Luther King, Jr., January 1965. In J. M. Washington (Ed.), *A testament of hope: The essential writings and speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (pp. 340-377). San Francisco: HarperOne.
- King, M. L., Jr. (2000). *Why we can't wait*. New York: Signet Classics. (Original work published 1964)
- King, M. L., Jr. (2001a). Address at the freedom rally in Cobo Hall. In C. Carson & K. Shepard (Eds.), *A call to conscience: The landmark speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* (pp. 57-73). New York: Warner Books. (Original speech delivered 1963).
- King, M. L., Jr. (2001b). I've been to the mountaintop. In C. Carson & K. Shepard (Eds.), *A call to conscience: The landmark speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* (pp. 201-223). New York: Warner Books. (Original speech delivered April 3, 1968 at Bishop Charles Mason Temple [Church of God in Christ Headquarters], Memphis, TN)
- King, M. L., Jr. (2010a). *Stride toward freedom*. Boston: Beacon Press. (Original work published in 1958)

- King, M. L., Jr. (2010b). *Where do we go from here: Chaos or community*. Boston: Beacon Press. (Original work published in 1967)
- McCain, J. (November 5, 2008). Concession speech. Transcript provided by Federal News Service. Retrieved July 12, 2010 from [http://elections.nytimes.com/2008/results/president/speeches/mccain-concession-speech.html?ref=john\\_mccain#](http://elections.nytimes.com/2008/results/president/speeches/mccain-concession-speech.html?ref=john_mccain#).
- Plato. (2003). *The last days of Socrates*. (H. Tredennick & H. Tarrant, Trans.). London: Penguin Books.
- Pollard, S. (Producer), Kates, N. (Producer/Director), and Singer, B. (Producer/Director). (2002). *Brother outsider: The life of Bayard Rustin* [Motion picture].
- Pope, A. (2006). *The major works*. (Pat Rogers, Ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1733).
- Pratt, C. (Executive Producer). (Sunday January 18, 2009). *Face the Nation* [Television broadcast]. Washington, DC: Columbia Broadcasting Service.
- Rock, C. (Writer/Director) and Rotenberg, M. (Producer). (2003). *Head of state* [Motion picture]. United States: DreamWorks.
- Rose, L. (April 4, 2008). Tom Brokaw on King. *Forbes.com*. Retrieved July 12, 2010, from [http://www.forbes.com/2008/04/03/television-brokaw-king-biz-media-cx\\_lr\\_0404brokaw.html](http://www.forbes.com/2008/04/03/television-brokaw-king-biz-media-cx_lr_0404brokaw.html).
- Rustin, B. (1948). In apprehension how like a god. Philadelphia: The Young Friends Movement. Retrieved July 12, 2010 from <http://www.quaker.org/pamphlets>.
- Rustin, B. (2003). Montgomery diary. In D. W. Carbado and D. Weise (Eds.), *Time on two crosses: The collected writings of Bayard Rustin* (pp. 58-65). San Francisco: Cleis Press.
- Scarborough, W. S. (2006). The negro and higher learning. In M. V. Ronnick (Ed.), *The works of William Sanders Scarborough: Black classicist and race leader* (pp. 213-218). Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1902)
- Sophocles. (1994). *Antigone, Oedipus the King and Electra*. (H.D.F. Kitto, Trans. & E. Hall, Ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sussman, L. A. (2002). Similarities between Antigone and Martin Luther King, Jr.: An unjust law is no law at all. *Classical Bulletin*, 78.1, 43-66.
- Sussman, L. A. (2008). The oratory of tragedy: Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy April 3-4, 1968. *Classical Bulletin*, 84.2, 65-75.
- Washington, B. T. (1995). *Up from slavery*. (W. L. Andrews, Ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1901)
- West, W. C. (2000). Socrates as a Model of Civil Disobedience in the Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. *Classical Bulletin*, 76.2, 191-200.