

**Prophet of Prudence:
The Practical Wisdom of Martin Luther King Jr. as a Model for Justice Education**

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Abstract: Rarely is Martin Luther King Jr. remembered for his prudence. Yet as practical wisdom, this virtue was critical to his achievements. Tracing the roles of justice and prudence in Aquinas' thought, this paper considers King as an exemplar of practical wisdom. His witness challenges religious educators to promote not only a passion for liberation but also the prudent discernment of effective action. With examples from service-learning in the parish and higher education contexts, this paper identifies obstacles and opportunities in cultivating an active and sustainable faith that does justice.

Each January we remember Martin Luther King Jr. for his courage, his compassion, and his commitment to justice. This is indeed appropriate; King embodied each of these qualities to an exceptional degree. Rarely, however, is prudence identified as a defining characteristic of his life and ministry. Largely, this is due to the cautious, scheming, or even cowardly tone that the word carries with it today. Like patience, prudence is seen as a virtue invoked by the complacent to maintain the status quo; a practice King laments in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (1964). Yet when we recall its classic understanding as practical wisdom, we come to see the central role of this virtue in King's moral character. As religious communities strive to foster a people of justice, we must acknowledge that merely willing the good is never sufficient. With King as our exemplar, we recognize the vital role of prudence in leading us from good desires to right action.

Guided by Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, this paper will explore the role of prudence in the formation and expression of the virtue of justice. Any virtue finds its proper meaning within a system of virtues, and the moral framework that Aquinas develops in this opus continues to be a fruitful source for theological reflection centuries later. This authority is not solely the product of historical legacy or internal coherence. Aquinas' insights continue to resonate with our contemporary moral experiences. The prudence of Martin Luther King Jr. was

central to his emergence as a civil rights leader, and demonstrates important connections and distinctions within Aquinas' scheme.

Nor is this paper merely an exercise in the retrieval and application of medieval texts. Appreciating the role of prudence in working for justice has practical implications, particularly within the realm of religious education. Programs such as service-learning courses and immersion experiences have, when implemented thoughtfully, proven successful at kindling a fire for justice in the hearts of their participants. Yet many of these students complete their studies with little training or resources to assist them in translating good will into effective action. They may be able to offer a thoughtful reflection on what it means to render unto Cesar what is Cesar's, but not know the names of their local legislators. Though they can articulate the *jus in bello* criteria for a just war, they may be paralyzed with uncertainty over how to respond to the proliferation of drone strikes. A prudent, practical justice is necessary today. Our current political climate demands the ability to recognize deceptive rhetoric and anticipate the effects of policy on the poor, voiceless, and marginalized. In social movements such as #Occupy and the Arab Spring, 'diversity of tactics' remains an ongoing debate. More immediately, our churches, schools, and faith-based nonprofits need leaders that are capable of thoughtful, effective, and sustainable engagement in a broken world.

Thinking Systematically About the Virtues

The past few decades have witnessed a resurgence of the virtues in ethical reflection and moral formation. Yet too often, these works do little more than observe a particular situation and propose one or two character traits that could help. This haphazard approach perhaps rightfully earned Lawrence Kohlberg's dismissal as a relativistic "bag of virtues" approach to moral

education (1970, 59). An examination of the virtues ought not to begin with the virtues themselves, but rather the end (*telos*) toward which they direct the agent. It is this goal that drives our being and actions. The virtues and vices are those inclinations which advance or frustrate the pursuit of our ends. What, though, is our true end? Aristotle offers happiness as the ultimate *telos* toward which all our acts are directed. This is not the subjective well-being of contemporary psychology, however; it is a vision of the human person fully alive and flourishing. For Aquinas, genuine happiness is only possible beyond our temporal existence, where we may fully participate in the divine love of the trinity (Ia IIae, q. 3, a. 8). The theological gifts of faith, hope, and love (*caritas*) are gifts of grace and necessary aids in our striving toward this end.

Aquinas reserves true happiness for the afterlife, but does maintain that a degree of flourishing is possible on Earth (Ia IIae, q. 5, a. 3). Though the theological virtues can contribute to the pursuit of this imperfect happiness, Aquinas did not believe that they were necessary. Rather, pursuit of the good life is primarily aided by the cardinal virtues, which are available to believers and nonbelievers alike. Following the etymological root, the cardinal virtues are literally the ‘hinge’ upon which all other virtues turn. Their articulation communicates an underlying anthropology. Borrowing from Aristotle, Aquinas offers justice as the virtue governing the will and sets prudence over the intellect. The agent is further marked by natural inclinations toward the pleasure of some objects and away from the difficulty in attaining others (the concupisibile and irascible appetites). Thus the happy person is further in need of temperance and fortitude. It is only when all four of these virtues operate in unison that the agent can act meaningfully toward the attainment of her or his end.

In contrast, James Keenan S.J. (1995) offers a new set of cardinal virtues rooted in an anthropology of relationality. Rather than seeking individual perfection, Keenan suggests that much of the moral life *hinges* on how we navigate different sets of relationships. Because we are related universally to all, we require the virtue of justice. Yet, we also have particular relationships that comprise our roles as spouse, parent, neighbor, or teacher. Thus, we need to cultivate the virtue of fidelity in our lives. Finally, we have a unique relationship with ourselves, demanding the virtue of self-care. Rather than functioning as a golden mean between two vices, these virtues each hold an absolute moral claim on our lives. We can never fully satisfy the demands of justice or complete the cultivation of our interior lives. It falls to the virtue of prudence to balance the claims of one virtue against those of another. Against Aquinas' harmony amongst the virtues, Keenan's formulation acknowledges the possibility of moral tragedy.

A Prudent Justice

It should not be surprising to see justice and prudence on both theologians' lists. These virtues are deeply entwined in moral discernment and action. In its most basic form, Aquinas defines justice as "the perpetual and constant will to render each one his [or her] right" (IIa IIae, q. 58, a. 1). Two observations are immediately apparent from this short definition. First, justice's primary concern is our relation to others and fulfilling the rights that they are due. Second, as an attribute of the will, justice is ultimately a matter of concerted desire. It is the role of prudence to translate this general desire for justice into concrete actions. This paper will highlight four essential tasks prudence must perform: a) envisioning the good; b) discerning context; c) determining means; and d) negotiating moral claims.

a) *Envisioning the Good.* An initial task for prudence is determining what in fact is the human right. Immediately, the example of Martin Luther King Jr. illustrates this primary function of prudence in seeking justice. Throughout King's words and writings, there is a pervasive sense that he not only recognized the injustice of segregation, but sustained a vision of the beloved community in which all enjoyed the rights endowed to them by the creator. King was sustained by hope in a radically new future. Yet, this vision was clearly not self-evident. There were many in both the South and North that denied the vision of justice King articulated. Far from unavoidable, prudence must cultivate a clear vision and the capacity to recognize where rights are denied.

b) *Discerning Context.* Beyond setting the ultimate end of justice, prudence considers the "singulars" and discerns how the broad vision applies to a specific context (IIa IIae, q. 47, a.3). This is true both in interpersonal relationships and government systems. Authentic prudence evaluates the moral worth of a social system and recognizes opportunities to secure the common good. Looking at King's life more closely, two specific examples highlight this aspect of prudence. First, King gradually learned the importance of focusing on one specific aspect of an unjust system. In his interview with *Playboy* magazine, King reflects on earlier missteps in Albany, Georgia: "The mistake I made there was to protest against segregation generally rather than against a single and distinct facet of it. Our protest was so vague that we got nothing, and the people were left very depressed and in despair" (Washington 1986, 344).

Second, prudence's attention to singulars is essential to the logic of civil disobedience. Anyone seeking justice must comprehend the relative merit of human law in relation to divine and natural law. In fact, King cites Aquinas specifically in justifying his legal transgressions: "To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in

eternal and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statues are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality” (1964, 102–103). King recognized the need not only to violate unjust laws, but just laws that were used for unjust purposes. As Aquinas confirms: “To follow the letter of the law when it ought not be followed is sinful” (IIa IIae, q. 48, a. 2, ad. 1).

c) *Determining Means*. It was not enough for King to cultivate a vision of the good or recognize the demands of justice in a given situation; he had to determine how to realize his goals in the right way. Determining appropriate means is perhaps the most familiar task of prudence, yet this is not the cold calculation than many assume. Rather, prudence is a font of creative thinking and imaginative strategies. Creative prudence draws on past experience and projected outcomes in cultivating a rich repertoire of possible actions. Yet growth in prudence can also limit the list of possible means toward achieving an end. To the virtuous, unique possibilities are readily apparent while other options (such as violent coercion) are literally unimaginable. Truly prudent justice seeks to most efficiently accomplish the good while minimizing evil. For King, the most effective course was the path of nonviolence.

Identifying nonviolence as the prudent course of action raises important implications for our understanding of King’s life and work. King was not a strict pacifist. He embraced nonviolent direct action because he perceived clearly that it was the only means of securing genuine aims. Though King flatly rejected the use of violence in the Civil Rights struggle, his belief in the potential of nonviolence rendered the question superfluous. Throughout King’s texts there is an unflinching belief in the promise of nonviolence:

Nonviolence is a powerful and just weapon. It is a weapon unique in history, which cuts without wounding and ennobles the man who wields it. It is a sword that heals. Both a practical and moral answer to the Negro’s cry for justice,

nonviolent direct action proved that it could win victories without losing wars, and so became the triumphant tactic of the Negro Revolution of 1963 (1964, 26).

Particularly within an historical context in which the oppressed were viewed as incapable of reasonable or responsible action, nonviolence revealed the dignity of its practitioners while exposing the irrationality of their opponents. Nonviolence was not chosen for reasons of aesthetical purity, but because it works.

Nevertheless, King was well aware that even this powerful weapon must be wielded wisely. The text of *Why We Can't Wait* outlines the many deliberate decisions that guided the campaign in Birmingham. The direct action was preceded by weeks of meetings and hours of training, including an assessment of the human and material needs they would need to sustain the effort (yes, fundraising was necessary). King tells of delaying action twice so as not to inadvertently swing the mayoral election to Bull Connor. Further, King understood direct action as a coordinated compliment to seeking legal recourse. Against those who would seek justice solely in the courts or streets, King contended: "Direct action is not a substitute for work in the course and the halls of government... Indeed, direct action and legal action complement one another; when skillfully employed, each becomes more effective" (1964, 42). Identifying and cultivating effective means toward realizing justice is in part the work of education.

d) Negotiating Moral Claims. Before addressing this challenge, we must identify one last aspect of practical wisdom. It is a further task of prudence to coordinate and integrate the virtues and moral claims they represent. For Aquinas, this task was plain, for him, all virtues were subservient to the claims of justice. Yet, as Keenan, along with many contemporary ethicists observe, this solution inadequately addresses the complex network of roles and relationships in which we find ourselves. For every effort toward which we commit our efforts, there are countless others we necessarily neglect. To borrow Keenan's cardinal virtues, the work of

justice can often only be accomplished by sacrificing some degree of self-care and fidelity. With perfect realization no longer possible, the task of prudence is now to discern how to best approach an authentic and integrated life.

Martin Luther King Jr. exemplifies the furthest boundaries of this tension. Working for justice ultimately cost him his life. King displayed a constant struggle to fulfill his obligations to himself and his family, and was well aware of the danger to which his actions exposed those he loved. Constant death threats and bombings were a reality of his work. Moreover, relentless travel and several days in jail denied him the opportunity to be present to his wife and children as they grew. Beyond physical threats and a grueling schedule, King's commitment forced him to sacrifice the private and interior life essential to self-care. It would be particularly *imprudent* to suggest that King offers an example of an integrated life toward which we should all strive. Those who do are seldom able to sustain their effort for more than a few months or years. King's struggles and efforts to live authentically should be honored, however. The inherent tensions that Keenan's model implied cannot be easily alleviated. Finding our way is more akin to discerning a vocation than resolving a conflict. Once again, the need for formation becomes clear.

Implications for Religious Education

If Martin Luther King Jr. is indeed the exemplar to whom we turn in imagining a life of justice, we must acknowledge the essential role of prudence. It was prudence that allowed King to envision a new possibility and it was prudence that translated his intentions into effective action. Yet prudence is not innate, it is a skill that must be learned. This presents religious educators with both an opportunity and a challenge. Authentic prudence is always diligent;

seeking further understanding and opportunities to realize the good. Tracing the Latin root, Aquinas observes, “The more we love [diligimus] a thing the more solicitous are we about it (IIa IIae, q. 54, a. 1, ad. 1). Genuine solidarity entails a desire to understand and effectively confront the sources of injustice. Indeed Christian Churches that resisted King’s efforts under a false banner of patience or prudence were one of the greatest frustrations of his life:

Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct-action campaign that was “well-timed” in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now, I have heard the word “Wait!” It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This “Wait” has almost always meant “Never.” We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that “justice too long delayed is justice denied.”

How though, ought religious educators form communities of fresh and creative practical wisdom? I will conclude with three observations.

First, genuine prudence infuses all aspects of the moral life. To Aquinas, prudence includes memory, reasoning, understanding, docility, shrewdness, foresight, circumspection, and caution (IIa IIae, q. 48, a. 1). This paper identifies four key functions of prudence in the realization of justice. Authentic expression of the virtues is only possible when all four are fully cultivated. It is not enough for religious communities to only articulate a broad vision of the beloved community or aimlessly protest every social ill. Justice education must help communities envision the common good, recognize particular challenges, and discern meaningful steps that will enact concrete change. Moreover, this formation must be holistic, integrated, and sustainable. The path of justice is long, and requires a pilgrim people prepared for the journey.

Second, the virtues always look toward practices. One only becomes temperate by acting with temperance and courageous by acting courageously. Theoretical education is indispensable, but most fruitful when it is a compliment to direct experience. Moreover, practices require a

degree of specificity. Service-learning has proven an invaluable pedagogy for introducing students to the realities of poverty and injustice; yet to a large degree remains dedicated (as the name implies) to service. Students learn to reflect on new experiences and relationships, but are seldom taught the difficult work of social analysis and organization. For example, during my time as director of JVC: Midwest, a full-time post-grad volunteer program, our policy required a minimum of 50% direct client interaction, which we viewed as essential to the formative nature of our program. Yet as I look back, I wonder if the 50% dedicated to more practical tasks was not equally beneficial. It was here that our volunteers began to understand all that was involved in sustaining the work for a nonprofit. The relationships fueled a desire for justice, but the concrete responsibilities prepared our volunteers to be community leaders.

Finally, much remains to be said about particular religious communities' distinctive expression of the virtues. Cardinal virtues offer a skeletal structure of the moral life rooted in an anthropology we all share. Yet each community embodies these virtues in a unique way. As heuristic devices, the virtues reveal a community's ultimate vision of the good. This is obvious in the case of justice, but true for prudence as well. Religious communities must ask how practical wisdom is most faithfully embodied and practiced in their pursuit of justice. What principles guide a Methodist's discernment between competing moral claims? How does a Jewish community recognize when it is necessary to resist government policies? When must Catholics accept the folly of the cross? Far from encouraging withdrawal, our answer to these questions ought to motivate our communities to become faith-fill agents for change in a pluralistic society.

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