KING, LÉVINAS, AND THE MORAL ANATOMY OF NONVIOLENT TRANSFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

This essay overcomes the division between "principled" and "strategic" approaches to nonviolence studies by demonstrating that ethical analysis is key to understanding movement strategy. I show how the moral phenomenologies of Martin Luther King Jr. and Emmanuel Lévinas, figures usually treated by scholars of principled nonviolence, possess genuine insight for nonviolent strategists. With reference to each thinker and supporting evidence from the *#BlackLivesMatter* movement, I argue that nonviolent resistance makes a moral appeal through the medium of the body to the conscience of those bearing witness. Analysis of the way King combined moral reflection and strategic action recovers his legacy for the pragmatic tradition of social thought, while Lévinas's theory of the face offers additional considerations for nonviolent practitioners aiming for moral transformation at the local level. Studies that elucidate the complex moral dynamics by which nonviolent movements either succeed or fail will make the field a greater asset to practitioners.

KEYWORDS: *Martin Luther King Jr., Emmanuel Lévinas, Nonviolence, American Pragmatism, Black Lives Matter*

Therefore I suggest that the philosophy and strategy of nonviolence become immediately a subject for study and for serious experimentation in every field of human conflict.
—Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here?*

Mass mobilizations in response to climate change, autocratic rule, racial injustice, and economic crisis call for scholarly inquiry into strategies of social change, especially the possibilities and limits of nonviolent transformation. Inquiry into nonviolence, however, is stymied by an unwarranted distinction in the field between "principled" and "strategic" approaches to the subject.[1] Scholars of principled nonviolence tend to focus on the method's moral and religious bases, whereas

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[1] These terms and the field itself go by a variety of names. "Nonviolence studies" is also called "civil resistance studies" or simply "resistance studies" and enjoys significant overlap with peace studies. "Principled" approaches are sometimes referred to as "philosophical" or "ethical," and "strategic" approaches are also discussed in terms of "pragmatic" or "tactical." Despite these differences in terminology, scholars across the field(s) tend to accept the distinction between principle and strategy as a way to organize work in the field.

scholars of strategic nonviolence examine its practical effectiveness.[2] This distinction divides the field along traditional disciplinary lines, severing philosophical humanists from empiricists and perpetuating the myth that morality has nothing to do with a realistic politics.[3] The division, moreover, saddles each side with an overly reductive view: while principled nonviolence, by neglecting questions of effectiveness, fails to demonstrate its public relevance, strategic nonviolence often fails to consider the role of moral dynamics in movement success.[4] The distinction between principled and strategic nonviolence therefore impedes progress on both sides of the divide.

This essay overcomes the division in nonviolence studies by demonstrating that ethical analysis is key to understanding movement strategy.[5] I demonstrate the interrelation of ethical and strategic concerns by showing how the moral phenomenologies of Martin Luther King Jr. and Emmanuel Lévinas, figures usually treated by scholars of principled nonviolence, possess genuine insight for

[2] The division between principled and strategic nonviolence seems to have its origins among practitioners who debated whether nonviolent resistance should be an absolute commitment to a way of life (a form of moral pacifism) or a strategy of practical action (a form of political realism.) The choice seems to hinge on whether and under what circumstances nonviolence can be abandoned. Is it an immutable principle, or is it merely a tactic? Notice that characterizing the division in this way has to do with nonviolent actors' motivations. By contrast, I am concerned in this essay with how this division gets adopted in the literature to differentiate a *scholarly* focus on either principles or strategies. While I assume that there are good historical reasons that practitioners developed a division between principles and strategies, I find the adoption of this same division by scholars of nonviolence to be problematic insofar as it impairs the ability of nonviolence studies to address how moral dynamics play a fundamental role in movement strategy. On the history of the distinction between principled and strategic nonviolence, see Nico Slate 2021.

[3] At the same time that empiricists ignore the normative side of the field, they tend to import their own set of moral values and assumptions, typically conforming to a utilitarian ethic that determines relative risks and tradeoffs. For examples of this, see the work of Gene Sharp 1973 and Peter Ackerman and Christopher Kruegler 1994 early theorists of strategic nonviolence who assume and perpetuate specifically utilitarian modes of ethical reasoning in their promotion of nonviolent methods. I wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

[4] Nonviolence studies enjoy contributions from philosophers, religionists, political scientists, psychologists, sociologists, and historians, although a review of the literature reveals how the field fragments along disciplinary lines, with normativists and social scientists seldom interacting.

[5] Several other scholars have attempted to overcome the principled/strategic divide, although they do so in terms of actors' motivations rather than in terms of the way nonviolence studies divide work in the field. For example, Chaiwat Satha-Anand 2015 and Stellan Vinthagen 2015 point out that human action is intrinsically goal-directed, which means that strategic action is always normative in a general sense. And Eli McCarthy 2012 offers a virtue-based approach to nonviolence by which peacemakers can transcend rule- and strategy-based alternatives. In n2 above, I observed that practitioners may have developed the distinction for good reasons and distinguish my own project as one that aims to overcome this divide in the field of nonviolence studies. While these authors show how nonviolent practitioners can be both principled and strategic when adopting a nonviolent stance, they sidestep the more salient question of how nonviolent strategists can benefit from ethical analysis.

nonviolent strategists.[6] Reviewing what King learns about mounting effective public campaigns through his experimentation with nonviolent resistance and what Lévinas discovers about the character of ethical demand, I argue that it is a mistake to analyze nonviolent strategies apart from the moral dynamics through which they work. Studies that elucidate the complex moral dynamics by which nonviolent movements either succeed or fail will make the field a greater asset to practitioners.

My thesis for how nonviolent resistance works is relatively simple: nonviolence makes a moral appeal through the medium of the suffering body to the conscience of those bearing witness. King understood the intrinsic moral power of suffering bodies. His genius was to develop techniques to broadcast and dramatize the suffering, bringing unprecedented pressure on unjust social practices and political institutions through popular support for reform. It is, moreover, a certain phrasing of the body that makes the strongest appeal, and here is where Lévinas lends perspective. The power of nonviolence depends on the *vulnerable* body, the frailty of which underscores its ability to suffer and becomes, through nonviolent means, its moral strength.[7]

In the first section, I offer an overview of nonviolence studies to suggest how my theory, should it bear out empirically, unifies "principled" and "strategic" efforts in the field. I argue that attention to the moral dynamics of nonviolent resistance is essential to understanding its practical strategies. The next section presents King as an exemplar of this integration, showing how he combines moral and strategic concerns into what some scholars have called a tradition of "moral praxis."[8] I contend that this way of characterizing King places him in the broader tradition of social thought known as American pragmatism. Quarreling here with Cornel West, who inexplicably wrote King out of this tradition, my point is that King exemplifies the practice of moral reflection, social experimentation, and empirical analysis in which the field of nonviolence studies could participate if it overcame its internal divisions.

[6] Comparison of King and Lévinas on the question of nonviolence is surprisingly rare since the nature of violence and possibilities of nonviolent encounter occupy a central place in each thinker's work. To my knowledge, only Scott Davidson and Maria del Guadalupe Davidson 2012 have attempted such a comparison. Their discussion, however, remains theoretical rather than practical, analyzing whether King or Lévinas was more committed to nonviolence and is therefore a more appropriate resource for peace studies. For a recent work on Lévinas as a resource for nonviolence, see Judith Butler 2020.

[7] In saying this, I do not mean to discount nonviolence as a restorative procedure. The nonviolent practitioner may well achieve a sense of "somebodiness," as King liked to say, just as the witness to nonviolent action—whether they be a sympathetic supporter, indifferent onlooker, or oppositional perpetrator of systemic violence—may be led further down the path of liberation as they achieve more meaningful involvement with a moral cause. These are signs that nonviolence is working. Nor do I mean to suggest that other ploys and tactics are of lesser importance. Divesting and striking are also effective nonviolent means of forcing institutional change.

[8] See Mark Engler and Paul Engler 2016 as well as Lambelet 2019b.

The last section clarifies the moral power of suffering bodies using Lévinas's theory of the face. The face, a revelation forced through nonviolent means before public eyes, disrupts the pervasive common sense of everyday morality to put into question customary modes of social and political existence. While the final goal of nonviolent resistance is formal justice, the face illustrates how suffering bodies begin to renegotiate social norms by making a more visceral ethical demand. Additionally, the face allows us to see how this demand is reinforced by the aspect of vulnerability. Bodily vulnerability highlights the moral power of innocence and suffering, while also explaining the difficulty of enacting change at the local level.

Throughout, I use examples from the *#BlackLivesMatter* movement to support my interpretation of King and Lévinas. The combination of moral theory, textual analysis, and case studies provides a template for moral-pragmatic studies of nonviolent resistance that couple evidence-based theory and empirics. In conclusion, my own study calls for more "empirical ethics" (Moret 2021) of this kind: fine-grained analyses of public experiments in nonviolence that can be further tested in the realm of practical action.

1. Principled and Strategic Nonviolence

Despite King's constant admonishment to understand nonviolence as *agape*—a powerful and transformative kind of love distinct from sentimental feelings of attachment—there is often a temptation to dismiss nonviolent methods as wishful and utopian. This frequent misunderstanding of nonviolence may have been Gene Sharp's impetus when in 1973 he redefined the field with his magisterial three-volume work. *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* abandoned the field's prior focus on the religious and ethical bases of nonviolence, which were central to Mahatma Gandhi and King's advocacy of the method, to focus instead on nonviolent tactics as a viable strategy of political reform. Sharp's heavy use of military metaphors reinforced his major claim that nonviolence, regardless of the moral motivations of its proponents, is often more effective than violent means for bringing about political change. In Sharp's hands, nonviolence studies took on a multinational and definitively pragmatic orientation designed to challenge any lingering doubts about the efficacy of nonviolent methods.

Commentary on the field describes Sharp's intervention as a shift from principled to strategic nonviolence where "principled" refers to moral concerns, and "strategic," used interchangeably with "pragmatic," brackets morality to question whether the method works (Cortright 2008). This central division in nonviolence studies was emboldened by Sharon Nepstad's overview of the field's development according to which Sharp's "purely pragmatic approach" was further entrenched by a third wave, starting around the turn of the century, that moves from documenting and comparing successful movements to offering empirical verification for theories in political science (Nepstad 2015, xii). Nepstad locates her own

contribution within this third wave of scholarship, which uses large-N samples of civil resistance movements to identify the causal factors leading to campaign success and failure. In the hands of hard-nosed empiricists, the study of nonviolence appears to be moving away from ethical analysis and toward questions of political strategy (see for example, Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; and Orazani and Leidner 2019).

Rigorous empirical study of the conditions that conduce to the success of nonviolent strategies is an important development for the field. This development is thwarted in its designs, however, if it neglects the moral side of the equation. Early proponents of nonviolent methods like Gandhi and King considered the intimate relation of moral and practical dimensions to be key to the method's success. Moral commitment to nonviolent methods helps practitioners prevail when the going gets tough, a phenomenon that King meditated on at length. Furthermore, movement success hinges in large part on its ability to force the public to make a moral choice, a process that I will explore later on. Empiricists who ignore the moral channels through which nonviolence works risk missing out on these important features of the method.

"Descriptively, a narrow focus on effectiveness fails to adequately account for the reasons that nonviolent actors act," laments religious studies scholar Kyle Lambelet (2019a) about the shortcomings of strategic nonviolence in his book *¡Presente!*. "Without an adequate description of the ethical dynamics of the politics of nonviolent action, we cannot constructively engage the processes that lead to social change" (2019a, 80). The principled/strategic binary, according to Lambelet, sidelines complex moral dynamics that are an important piece of the puzzle when interpreting how nonviolence works. Inadequate descriptions, in turn, impede the ability of scholars to intervene constructively in nonviolent movements. "The evasion of ethics," Lambelet concludes—referencing West's skirmish with the pragmatic tradition in *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (West 1989)—"deprives us of much-needed pedagogical tools that would enable the conditions for the formation of nonviolent actors in the future" (2019a, 80–81). The separation of ethics from politics impoverishes our understanding of the moral dynamics at work in nonviolent resistance, thus limiting what scholars can contribute to actual efforts on the ground.

Lambelet's study of contemporary faith-based nonviolent organizing paves the way for a fourth wave of nonviolence studies that recovers a role for ethical analysis. In *¡Presente!*, Lambelet attends to the way SOA Watch organizers in the Southern United States balance principles of "faithfulness" and "effectiveness" in their strategic deliberations. Importantly, ethical analysis reveals qualitative dimensions of effective organizing that large statistical studies of nonviolent movements leave out. Indeed, while quantitative analysis may be uniquely suited to determine *that* nonviolent resistance has been, historically, a viable strategy of political change, understanding *how* it works in specific contexts seems to require empirical methods that paint with a finer brush. As Lambelet observes: "Statistical analysis, though indispensable in identifying patterns of probability over time,

cannot get at the fine-grained moral dynamics at play in nonviolent movements" (2019a, 89).

Lambelet's extended case study demonstrates the relevance of ethical analysis to understanding how nonviolence works. Religious ethicists in particular will be interested in connections he draws between interreligious liturgical practices and the formation of an intersectional and broad-based movement. Of more general significance to religious studies scholars of nonviolence is the question of how movement solidarity is sustained across religious differences. Lambelet's empirical study of how a movement coalesces and sustains itself has much to offer scholars of nonviolence across the principled/strategic divide.

Where I think Lambelet's efforts to bridge the field reach their limit is in his return to traditional normative practices. Whereas he criticizes strategic scholars of nonviolence for being descriptively incomplete, he fails to apply equal criticism to the principled side of the field, attempting to reform one but not the other. Lambelet seems to imagine that description remains divided from and subservient to normative tasks where descriptions authorize scholars to tell practitioners how to think and what to do. In the quotation above, Lambelet argues that inadequate descriptions impede scholars' ability to "constructively engage the processes that lead to social change" and, in a note on methodology, he characterizes the purpose of description as follows:

> In this chapter, and in the book as a whole, I use the extended case study method as a way to round out the epistemological blind spots of the turn to strategic nonviolence. As a Christian theologian and ethicist, my aim is to elicit the norms that are operative in the context of this nonviolent movement, to make them explicit through critical juxtaposition with systematic scholarly treatment of those norms, and to demonstrate how they function. More than this, I also aim to render judgments about the adequacy of the movement's embodiment of these principles. Lambelet 2019a, 89

According to Lambelet, his aims to "elicit norms" and "make them explicit" are groundwork for "rendering judgment" on them. Description, in other words, serves the further goal of normativity. This agenda, I think, is bound to alienate strategic colleagues in the field. What is more, it reinstates the principled/strategic division that he seeks to overcome.

Whereas Lambelet's empirical analysis of SOA Watch organizers demonstrates how ethics plays a crucial role in the formation of nonviolent practitioners and coalitions, his return to conventional practices of ethics puts him at odds with scholars of strategic nonviolence who may fail to see how rendering judgment of movement norms supports movement success. It also makes him subject to the same criticism that he levels at them: that his project is descriptively incomplete. The common kind of normative work in philosophical and theological ethics, to which Lambelet's project finally conforms, assumes rather than demonstrates that its discourse influences the people and problems that it studies. Just as strategic nonviolence fails to describe moral dynamics that play

an important role in nonviolent strategy, principled nonviolence fails to describe how its theories help to support movement actors. This omission allows normative scholars to advance moral theories without ever explaining how those theories interact with grassroots struggles on the ground.[9] This descriptive incompleteness weakens Lambelet's claims on proponents of strategic nonviolence, who may find his moral criticism irrelevant to their scholarly endeavors.

My proposal is to stay with the descriptive task in a way that demonstrates how ethical analysis can improve our contextual understanding of how nonviolence works. To be sure, this will include empirical studies of moral motivations, formations, and faith commitments that buttress campaign success, a task with which religious ethicists are uniquely suited to help, but also cross-comparison of these factors across multiple movements and large data sets, which calls on the expertise of data scientists. Understanding the inner workings of nonviolence is necessarily an interdisciplinary endeavor. Practitioners, moreover, are not the only worthy subjects of ethical analysis. If we widen the aperture beyond the usual domain of normative ethics we will observe other moral dynamics at play in nonviolent struggles, including how parties who witness nonviolent action are affected. The conversion of oppressors was of central concern to Gandhi and King. Describing how nonviolence works as a moral strategy must necessarily include reflection at this register of social change.

My outline for nonviolence studies, albeit in embryo, collapses principled and strategic sides of the field onto one another, aligning the strengths of different disciplines to common tasks. The new alignment gives political purpose to religious ethics scholarship on nonviolence, while augmenting the methodological range of social scientists who wish to understand how nonviolence works. The collaborative enterprise that results will also productively respond to recent calls in religious ethics for scholarship that includes ethnographic and other empirical methods (see for example, the *JRE* focus issues 42.3 and 47.1 for work in this direction).

The articulation of nonviolence studies integrating moral and strategic aims corresponds to the practice that Gandhi and King envisioned. While true that Gandhi and King hoped for the moral conversion of their oppressors, they did not rely on this outcome alone. To do so would have been ludicrous and deadly. Both figures combined profound moral commitments with tactical cunning. Both used strategic insights into the complex moral dynamics of nonviolent campaigns to achieve practical success. King maintained that the just society could not be built on violence. To separate principles from strategies seems to forget his lesson that the ends must be present in the means.

[9] It is telling that nowhere in Lambelet's extended case study does he provide evidence that SOA Watch organizers were influenced by his constructive theological engagements of nonviolent concepts and practices. If Pauline meditations appear remote for faith-based organizers, how much more so for social scientists evaluating the terms on which nonviolent campaigns succeed?

I have refrained from using the word "pragmatic" to refer to scholarship on the strategic side of nonviolence studies (although, as I noted, commentary on the field typically conflates these terms.) This restraint reflects my sense that "pragmatic nonviolence" aptly describes the project I have in mind, one oriented to what works while also understanding that nonviolence works in part through moral force, or what Gandhi called *satyagraha*. Rather than reduce strategy to crude, instrumental calculation, pragmatic study of nonviolent resistance includes ethical analysis.[10]

The tradition of American pragmatism has resources for rebuilding nonviolence studies around a capacious understanding of how morality and strategy coincide. As the school of philosophy that is invested in how ideas inform action, pragmatism can lend philosophical acumen to the empirical study of nonviolent experimentation.[11] As I will argue in the next section, King is an exemplar of the pragmatic tradition of social thought, allowing his moral values to shape his strategic thinking and bringing his experience to bear on his moral thought. King viewed nonviolence as a moral strategy that warranted empirical testing, so he gave the idea life through courageous leadership and social experimentation. Pragmatic ideas, however, are always open to revision. Hence King, reflecting on experience, continued to sharpen the idea of nonviolent resistance so that its strategies might better serve the cause of justice.

2. The Pragmatic King

This section demonstrates how King's nonviolent thought and practice furnish resources for the pragmatic study of nonviolence. It should come as no surprise that King has much of value to say to strategists of nonviolence since he was a skilled practitioner of the method as well as one of its most thoughtful and articulate proponents. That said, my goal in what follows will be to elicit from King's writings an empirically verifiable theory of how nonviolence works. This reading departs from those that aim to elucidate the moral and theological underpinnings of his views. While King's moral theology is at some level inseparable from how he interpreted the power of the method and its chances for success, my aim is rather to examine how he was an astute observer of human moral psychology, which he put to brilliant use in his nonviolent campaigns. It is his knack for sophisticated reflection on empirical events that makes King's approach pragmatic.

[10] Compare to Andrew Fitz-Gibbon's *Pragmatic Nonviolence* 2021, where he offers an account of nonviolence as "a practice that, whenever possible, seeks the well-being of the Other by refraining from violence and acting according to lovingkindness" (3). As this definition suggests, Fitz-Gibbon views nonviolence primarily as a personal ethic rather than a political movement and he contributes little to understanding how it works, morally or otherwise. See also Daniel Ott 2018 for analysis of King's pragmatic *arguments* in support of nonviolence.

[11] Lambelet notes that pragmatic thinkers have contributed to the study of ethics, going so far as to say that "the phrase *pragmatic nonviolence* to indicate a solely instrumental orientation to nonviolence and a rejection of moral consideration is simply a terminological failure" (2019a, 81).

King's pragmatic orientation, however, is not a given. When, in *American Evasion of Philosophy*, West appropriated Richard Rorty's brand of American pragmatism as cultural criticism, adding to it his own tradition-bound and tragic "prophetic" flair, West also, inexplicably, wrote King out of the tradition. At the end of *American Evasion*, he remarks: "the social movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. represents the best of what the political dimension of prophetic pragmatism is all about," and yet: "King was not a prophetic pragmatist" (1989, 234–35). West declines to elaborate, leaving Judith Green to speculate about this claim. Perhaps West does not see King as a pragmatist because West thinks King is "committed to fixed and unchanging antecedent political, moral, and spiritual ideals" rather than the protean and flexible ideals of pragmatic praxis (Green 1999, 136). A distinction between fixed and flexible commitments often leads critics to misinterpret pragmatism as a philosophy without a moral backbone.[12] It would likewise be mistaken to ascribe to King an unreflective and immobile ethic. Just as this section recovers the pragmatic strain in King's thought, so too does it display how his thinking changes over time.

It may be in part due to West's enigmatic and unsubstantiated remark that intellectuals seldom dwell on King as an exemplar of the pragmatic tradition.[13] Green, meanwhile, looks to King's letters, and especially his last book *Where Do We Go From Here?* (King 2010 [1967]) to underscore his contributions to "a *prophetic and pragmatic* theoretical model of political transformation" (Green 1999, 137, emphasis in original). While it is helpful to review King's ever-evolving political thought, it is equally revealing to focus on what he did. Fortunately, recent treatments of Kingian nonviolence are attentive to the events that shaped King's career rather than merely his life in letters.[14]

King's own understanding of the hidden dynamics of nonviolence was, by his own admission, somewhat vague. In "The Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," he writes: "The experience in Montgomery did more to clarify my thinking on the question of nonviolence than all of the books I had read. . . . Many issues

[12] This is not the place to discuss whether pragmatism is a relativist moral philosophy, although I will say briefly that pragmatist thinkers tend to emphasize how values and moral views change over time, which is a descriptive and not a normative claim. That said, pragmatists are sometimes guilty of engaging in metaethical debates where they represent values as subject to change rather than as fixed entities, which critics are only too happy to dismiss as some form of moral relativism. I would respond that it is to human creatureliness that descriptions of changing values refer rather than to any cosmic point of view.

[13] Neither Eddie Glaude 2008 or Joseph Winters 2016, who position their work in the tradition of "prophetic pragmatism" that West first canonized, looks to Martin Luther King Jr. for inspiration, and recent commentary by pragmatic scholars in a special issue of *The Journal of Religious Ethics* on moral exemplars hardly mentions King's name (Jennifer Herdt, et al. 2019). However, Jeffrey Stout 2010 in *Blessed Are the Organized* and Willis Jenkins 2013 in *The Future of Ethics* each invoke King as exemplar of the pragmatic combination of intelligence and action.

[14] Engler and Engler 2016, for example, are much more invested in biographical details about King's life than in his literary expressions.

I had not cleared up intellectually concerning nonviolence were now solved in the sphere of practical action" (1986, 38). King, who was already assured of the moral soundness of the method, found further reassurance in its practical efficacy. For the pragmatic King, it was the experience of practical success more than theoretical coherence that compelled him to continue his nonviolent experiments.

This point is not trivial, since King was well aware of the dangers of nonviolent methods. And yet his remarks on the inner workings of nonviolence are spare. Most of King's reflections describe what nonviolence is not: nonviolent resistance is not passive, it is not a method for cowards, it does not aim to defeat or humiliate its opponent, and it is not directed against persons but rather against the forces of evil that take hold of persons. This basically apologetic posture is even reflected in the name: non-violence.

Positive expressions of what he thinks nonviolence is or does are harder to come by. In the early days, King emphasized the strength of nonviolence to stir the conscience of the opponent of racial and economic justice. In later writings, having soured somewhat on the promise of racial reconciliation, he came to emphasize nonviolent resistance as a strategy for making gains in the political arena. As he wrote in 1966, "The nonviolent strategy has been to dramatize the evils of our society in such a way that pressure is brought to bear against those evils by the forces of good will in the community and change is produced" (1986, 58). As this explanation of nonviolence makes clear, morality is not excluded from the picture. Good will figures centrally in how change is produced, which is activated by a "dramatization" of evil. Leaving aside the particularly Christian tenor of King's depiction of these dynamics, what he is claiming is that nonviolence works through the exhibition of social injustice, which comes to act as a force for social change.

In another rare passage defending his choice of methods, King examines the persuasive force of nonviolent resistance. From the jail in Birmingham, King writes: "so we had no alternative except that of preparing for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and national community" (1986, 291). Here King's fascinating claim is that bodies make an appeal to the conscience when customary modes of action like oral arguments and legal institutions fail. As with dramatizations of evil, this mode of address is direct, an appeal not just to intellect but also to conscience. Hearts as well as minds are involved. A wordless appeal is made from the body of the oppressed to the conscience of the oppressor. This process uses a different logic than rhetorical persuasion. Where words may fall on deaf ears, this visceral kind of logic cannot be stifled or otherwise ignored.

It is worth dwelling for a moment on King's assertion in this passage that bodies make a claim on the *local* as well as the national conscience. The desire for change at the local level is an essential requirement of racial reconciliation. Writing those words in 1963, King had not yet come to terms with the South's entrenched racial

hatred and recalcitrance in face of change. In a 1958 monograph attributed to King, we discover how he may have originally imagined the process of conversion:

> Faced with this dynamic unity, this amazing self-respect, this willingness to suffer, and this refusal to hit back, the oppressor will find, as oppressors have always found, that he is glutted with his own barbarity. Forced to stand before the world and his God splattered with the blood of his brother, he will call an end to his self-defeating massacre. King 1986, 485

Here are several important claims at once. First, it is the moral posture of the nonviolent actor that piques the conscience. A refusal to strike back combined with the innocence and strength of the one who receives the blows psychologically disarms opponents, removing the fear and hatred that makes violence permissible. The absence of fear makes a genuine encounter between the two possible for the first time. According to this passage, the moral disparity between the nonviolent actor and the perpetrator of violence forces the perpetrator to repent, restoring them to right relationship with self, God, and others. While this passage focuses on the process of conversion at the local level, we might also glean moral insight at the national and international levels: it is the clear demonstration of moral disparity between the oppressor and oppressed that rallies public support to the cause of justice.

Hence, second, this passage teaches how dramatizations of social evil work with the persuasive force of bodies to make moral claims on conscience. It is precisely those dramatic representations of violence meted out on innocent bodies that make the starkest moral argument. King knew this well and put this strategy to test, despite some initial hesitation, in the case of Birmingham where youth protesters were called on to expose the brutality of white supremacy. Images depicting young boys and girls being ferociously attacked by police dogs, hosed down by high-powered water cannons, and knocked to the ground by batons circulated in the news media, shocking national and international publics into recognition of racially motivated violence. King also used the innocence of victims in his speeches, heralding, for example, the four little girls—"unoffending; innocent and beautiful"—who tragically lost their lives in the 16th Street bombing of the Baptist Church in Birmingham (1986, 221). While racism and violence persist in more insipid forms, King understood that violence must be dramatized. Nonviolent protest offered a way to set the scene.

This anatomical fact about Kingian nonviolence, however, should give us pause, since the third thing this passage reveals about the moral dynamics of nonviolent methods is that these dynamics call for the blood of the oppressed. King called this sacrifice "redemptive suffering"—an extreme example of Jesus's teaching to "turn the other cheek." Quoting Gandhi, he testified that "rivers of blood may have to flow before we gain our freedom, but it must be our blood" (1986, 18). Of the martyrs of the Birmingham church bombing, he said: "the innocent blood of these little girls may well serve as the redemptive force that will bring new light to this dark city" (1986, 222). King's acknowledgment of innocent blood as an essential agent of personal redemption and social transformation speaks to the religious

depths with which he understood and justified his methods. But his unwavering belief in redemptive suffering was guided by his hope for racial reconciliation and his vision of steady moral progress. For those who do not share in his religious commitment to redemptive suffering or who are convinced by the advent of new media that state-sponsored racial violence never really went away, it will be of the greatest importance to know that this suffering is not in vain.

Summarizing what we learn by reading King, nonviolent resistance pits the best of our common humanity against the most barbaric, not to reinforce this disparity and difference, but to restore the humanity of both the oppressor and oppressed. This process transpires through dramatic displays of violence in which nonviolent methods testify to the moral righteousness of one party in contrast to the brute and baseless force of the other. Specifically, nonviolence makes a moral appeal through the innocent and suffering body to the conscience of people bearing witness.

Reportage on nonviolent movements often seems to intuit this formula. For example, a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* describes young Nigerians protesting police brutality in Lagos: "As demonstrators began to sing Nigeria's national anthem, 'Arise O' Compatriots,' the soldiers fired live rounds at the unarmed protesters, leaving a number of people dead and flags stained with blood, and filling Nigerian social-media feeds with images that have prompted condemnation from around the world" (Parkinson et al. 2020). Domestically, the constant barrage of extrajudicial killings lends moral force and credence to the phrase "Black Lives Matter." And as scholar-activist Deva Woodly notes:

> The moment of political awakening to the effects of white supremacy that many experienced on the acquittal of [Trayvon] Martin's killer might have subsided, without blossoming from grievance into movement, if not for three factors. The first is the mind boggling and heart rending regularity of the trauma of black deaths at the hands of either vigilantes or law enforcement. The second, the availability of social media to announce, discuss, mourn, analyze, and demand acknowledgement, accountability, and justice in the face of the endlessly repeating collective ordeal of loss. The third is the skillful and dedicated efforts of individuals and organizations across the country (indeed, worldwide) to turn these moments of trauma and rage into a sustained and sustaining political insurgency. 2016[15]

The graphic display of police and vigilante violence circulates through the media, calling forth moral outrage and uniting public response.[16] Nonviolent methods keep these images in circulation, connect discrete events, and shape public interpretation of them. While the movement's opposition tries to fragment the

[15] For her book-length treatment of the subject, see Woodly 2021.

[16] Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor 2016 points out significant developments in the media between King's day and our own, including the way the production and dissemination of images no longer rely on corporate media: "Where the mainstream media have typically downplayed or even ignored public claims of police corruption and abuse, the proliferation of smartphones fitted with voice and video recorders has given the general public the ability to record these incidents and share them far and wide on a variety of social media platforms" (10).

narrative and challenge the innocence of brutalized bodies, supporters stream to the cause of justice.

This battle of interpretation is how things look from a national and international perspective, whereas things may look different from the ground. The relatively painless exercise of absorbing images, videos, and print media does not diminish the fact that bodies are shedding blood. If nonviolent resistance does not enjoy the same success at the local level, it is necessary for explanatory accounts to determine why. Emmanuel Lévinas, writing at roughly the same time from the other side of the Atlantic, spent his intellectual career examining the basic condition of nonviolent relation. Having written as much as anyone about the moral dynamics of interpersonal encounter, Lévinas enables us to probe further into the subtle operations of nonviolence at the local level.

3. Ethics and the Face

Phenomenology, Lévinas's method of analysis, is a descriptive medium for bringing granular attention to human experience.[17] While early phenomenologists assumed that their experience was universally applicable, scholars who emphasize individual and cultural differences are likely to find that universalists overgeneralize their claims. That experience is mediated does not mean that phenomenological analysis is without value, but only that phenomenology is first and foremost a study of one's own experience. As such, it is a powerful method for what pragmatism's founder C. S. Peirce (1974) called "abduction," or the generation of experimental hypotheses worthy of being tested. I view Lévinas in this light: as a generative source demanding further comparative and empirical verification of moral phenomena he describes. The pragmatic study of nonviolence also needs more empirically sourced and empirically testable hypotheses of the kind he offers.

Lévinas's reflections on ethical experience center on what he calls "the face." The face is the most expressive and distinguishable aspect of another, and it emits, according to Lévinas, the command: "thou shalt not!" Before all moral codes and edicts—and also possibly against them—cognition of the face constitutes the original ethical relation. Whereas Lévinas imagines our normal mode of being as one of solipsistic self-content (this he names "ontology" with reference to his once-mentor-turned-Nazi-sympathizer Martin Heidegger,) ethics begins with an in-breaking of the face.

The face offers an interesting addendum to the discussion so far, because it centers our attention on the ethical event. Unlike treatments of morality that

[17] Phenomenologists will debate whether the method is empirical or, as the method's founder Edmund Husserl claimed following Immanuel Kant, "transcendental." Without taking a stand, it seems clear that Lévinas, who offers phenomenological analysis with respect to ethics, was at least partway an empiricist, beginning with analyses of his own moral experience and moving toward transcendental realms from there.

determine formal obligations and rules of conduct, ethics for Lévinas is experiential and direct. Ethics disrupts the normative order; the face stands against moral common sense. Its appearance forces a reckoning with accepted moral norms, a challenging of unreflective views, and, in that rupture, an offering of possibilities for deeper ethical relation. The face of the other then issues a demand that calls into question customary modes of existence along with their supporting social and political institutions. Here Lévinas's exploration of the face comes strikingly close to King's highest hopes for what nonviolent resistance might accomplish. It is the insistent appearance of the face that reveals injustice and may lead to a revaluation of morality and the renewal of ethical relation.

Phenomenology is nothing if not intuitively resonant. The faces of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor come to mind. In their wordless candor, quietly staring back at us from beyond the grave, we feel their presence as a moral indictment of the world to which they no longer belong, and we acquire strength to carry their message forward. Yet it is not their faces that beseech us, but some magisterial presence behind them. Like the posters and images that will not let us forget the memory of Black lives, Lévinas chose the face because it is evocative, and not for its specific physical contours. Thus, Lévinas also spoke of the face as a trace of the transcendent, and in the title of his book it is "infinity."[18] Butler, reflecting on the possible condition for a Jewish ethic of nonviolence, says that the face can be a "human back, the craning of the neck, the raising of the shoulder blades like 'springs,'" which tend "to cry and to sob and to scream . . . wordless vocalization of suffering . . . the sound of language evacuating its sense" (2006, 133–34). King speaks of this liminality in all of us using the language of Bostonian Personalism. Sermonizing, he says:

> As you presently gaze at the pulpit and witness me preaching this sermon, you may immediately conclude that you see Martin Luther King. But then you are reminded that you see only my body, which in itself can neither reason nor think. You can never see the me that makes me me, and I can never see the you that makes you you. That invisible something we call personality is beyond our physical gaze. Plato was right when he said that the visible is a shadow cast by the invisible. Quoted in Smith and Zepp 1998, 109

[18] Lévinas's primary treatment of the face can be found in *Totality and Infinity* (1963, especially pages 199–203). In a densely worded passage that pulls many of these themes together, he writes: "To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. But this also means: to be taught. The relation with the Other, or Conversation, is a non-allergic relation, an ethical relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching. Teaching is not reducible to maieutics; it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain. In its non-violent transitivity the very epiphany of the face is produced" (51).

In their different theological dialects, Lévinas, Butler, and King refer to the body as a conduit for what it communicates, which Lévinas aptly names the face. The face itself is a synecdoche for what demands moral response, leading to—if countenanced—nonviolent relation. Relation to the face is relation to what transcends physical appearances and earthly orders. Whereas the body acts as a *medium* for what it evokes, it is this further something that nonviolence makes present. Circulating in street protests, at town halls, in news and social media outlets, and around the dinner table, it may be usefully interpreted as what Lévinas calls the face.

Ethical analysis of the face further illuminates how nonviolence works. As Lévinas describes the encounter with the face, in a way that clarifies King's irrefutable logic of bodies taking to the street: "the being that expresses itself imposes itself, but does so precisely by appealing to me with its destitution and nudity—its hunger—without my being able to be deaf to its appeal" (1969 [1961], 200). Paradoxically, it is the vulnerability of the face that makes the most forceful moral claim. The face exposes its frailty, admitting its suffering (what Lévinas poetically renders as "destitution and nudity,") calling for a moral response. Vulnerability is at once indicting and disarming: it seems to trigger responsibility without casting blame. In this most human act, signifying the very possibility of erasure, vulnerability invites the renewal of ethical relation.

Lévinas's notion of the face reveals the dimension of vulnerability that King, if only for rhetorical reasons, may have underplayed with respect to the moral dynamics of nonviolence. If we look at empirical examples, we see how nonviolence pairs images of human dignity with images of abject suffering in disturbing counterpoise. Think of George Floyd, now a gentle smile as he takes a selfie, now lying prostrate on the asphalt. The former image reinforces his humanity, and the latter image dramatizes the indefensible violation of his humanity, sparking public outrage at the crime. It is by juxtaposing images of power with vulnerability, brutality with innocence, that nonviolence is able to deliver its unassailable demands.[19] Faces and names are then iconized, widely disseminated, and ritualized. Their repetition establishes a public vigil that calls for erasure of systemic violence. The brilliance of nonviolent praxis is to make the face into a social program, to flood the media and fill the streets. Nonviolence puts the face on relentless and inescapable public display, turning it into a disruptive politics aimed at systems-level change.[20]

[19] We might make a contrasting analysis in the case of Breonna Taylor who was shot in her place of residence where she was asleep. This case underscores how the vulnerability of Black life—even in one's home, while asleep—finally makes the injustice intolerable to those who do not have comparable experience. I thank a reviewer for pointing out ways in which this case contrasts with that of George Floyd.

[20] Whereas Lévinas famously struggled to derive the notion of justice ("the third") from what always appeared in his writing as a dyadic relation ("the face-to-face,") Kingian nonviolence may help Lévinas scholars understand how a plurality of individuals responding to the face begin to work out the demands of justice. For a fascinating analysis of how the public assembly of bodies "speaks," see Judith Butler 2011.

However, while the face underscores the paradoxical power of vulnerability, Lévinas also offers an assertion that nonviolent practitioners may want to reckon with. The face, according to Lévinas, has a dual character such that its very vulnerability also incites the ultimate offense:

> The relation to the Face is both the relation to the absolutely weak—to what is absolutely exposed, what is bare and destitute, the relation with bareness and consequently with what is alone and can undergo the supreme isolation we call death—and there is, consequently, in the Face of the Other always the death of the Other and thus, in some way, an incitement to murder. 2006 [1991], 89

At the same time that the face invites us to ethical relation, Lévinas warns it also tempts us with the act of murder. Trying to make sense of this strange confession, Butler notes that the face is more easily elided than yielded to. Its liminal character, its possibility of erasure—"that very disjunction that makes representation impossible" (Butler 2006, 144)—often lets us succumb to the face that we have been taught to hate. Butler describes the way the media also circulates the faces of "terrorists" that prepares the way for the legitimate use of violence.

This duality of the face raises questions for King's hope that nonviolent resistance might lead to the beloved community. While dramatizations of violence force the face before the national and the international conscience, sparking moral outrage and public protests, what are its prospects at the local level? Where acknowledging the face requires conversion (and not just moral conversion, but change in power and prestige,) many will be tempted to deny the face, to excuse misrecognition of it, or to succumb to the myths and falsifications that establish an unjust way of life.

King emphasized the power of nonviolence to enact moral reform. In King's day, as in our own, nonviolent resistance generates sufficient political will to become an overwhelming force. But King's hope for the conversion of oppressors depended on a model in which acknowledgment of the human dignity of the oppressed would lead to subtle identification with them and finally to social acceptance and political recognition.[21] Lévinas's account of the face presents us with a different picture. Emphasis on vulnerability helps to explain the particular moral provocations of nonviolent resistance with respect to images of human suffering, yet vulnerability also comes with limitations.[22] While King's model depends on the identification of oppressor and oppressed, the face resists this identity, always remaining otherwise. When confronted by an image of brutality—are you the knee or are you the

[21] Howard Thurman 2003 influenced the way King understood the psychological and interpersonal dynamics at work in nonviolent encounter. For deft analysis of the psychological underpinnings of nonviolent transformation, and rife with references to the face of the other, see his chapter on "Reconciliation."

[22] Martin Berger 2011 offers an excellent study of how civil rights photography played an instrumental role in mounting grassroots pressure for institutional reform. His study supports my thesis that the vulnerable body figures centrally in bolstering claims of justice. Berger argues further that these depictions of vulnerability also reinforced pernicious narratives of Black powerlessness, which may have historically impeded racial and economic reforms.

neck?—the face allows us to turn away in horror, evading this choice ("neither.") As an elusive presence, the face has a weak hold on conscience and is easily expunged. As we witness far too often, perpetrators of violence and their accomplices are able to abnegate responsibility. The public, for its part, too easily forgets.

As one example of how empirical studies of ethics can expand upon our understanding of how nonviolence works, I use Lévinas's notion of the face to investigate the power of images and to offer critical appraisal of the prospects of nonviolence at the local level. Considering the face illuminates the paradoxical power of vulnerability, inviting spectators into deeper ethical relation. At the same time, the face discloses itself as a weak moral force the presence of which is too easily extinguished. Especially in our distracted and media-saturated moment the presence of the face requires constant repetition. This discussion offers important considerations for theorists of Kingian nonviolence and also suggests how King contributes to Levinasian ethics by showing how the face can be made into a social program: while a single face is a weak moral force briefly stirring conscience, the advent of techniques for distributing the face more widely or amplifying a multiplicity of faces in procession may indeed be key to overcoming its inherent weakness. A fuller understanding of these dynamics through more studies and experiments may improve strategies for making perpetrators of violence think twice before they act.

4. Conclusion

Nonviolence uses news and social media to alchemize images of violence into claims of justice. The most potent images depict state-sanctioned violence against vulnerable bodies, counterposing power and vulnerability in its racialized and gendered dimensions. The images ask: Do you accept this blood running in your streets? Do you accept the society that does this—because you, too, are doing and are undone by it? Do you stand with the one on the asphalt or are you with the knee on the neck? How do you stand? Nonviolence keeps these images and these questions before us. Their moral appeal is fundamental to how nonviolence works.

King's own reflections on and experiments with nonviolent resistance move us beyond the stale debate in nonviolence studies between principled and strategic approaches to the subject. It is only through the empirical examination of moral dynamics at play in nonviolent action that we come to appreciate what makes the method effective. As a worldly practice, moreover, nonviolent strategies must work with existing moral dispositions, whereas even genuine moral convictions are bereft of meaning if they lack strategic considerations. King made a similar point when he said that "power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic" (1986, 578). A review of how King wielded moral insight to effect political reform demonstrates the pragmatic quality of his thought and action.

Meanwhile, Lévinas's notion of the face penetrates deeper into these subtle moral dynamics and raises questions about their effectiveness at the local level. The face suggests how the moral power of nonviolent resistance depends in part on depictions of vulnerability where disparities of power make the use of force

indefensible and the injustice that much more outrageous. The face, however, is a weak moral force and easily eclipsed, tempting bad actors at the local level to overpower it rather than yield to its demands. This inherent weakness underscores the moral genius of nonviolent strategy, which forces a public revelation of the face.

Strategists of nonviolence will benefit from more ethical analysis of this kind. Empirical inquiry into the moral dynamics of nonviolence will give practitioners a better grasp on how it works—as well as when and why it fails. Attention to nonviolence at the human scale reveals anatomical facts about the method and strengthens prospects for nonviolent transformation.[23]

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