Why Martin Luther King, Jr. is an American Philosopher

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Assignment Description: This is an argumentative assignment; develop your own thesis and support that thesis in the essay. Your thesis should reflect an aspect of the course that interests you. You may draw inspiration and support for your thesis from the work of James, Royce, DuBois, or King.

Martin Luther King Jr. may not be the first name we think of when we think of great American philosophers, but he definitely belongs on a list along with the likes of James and Royce. King was as, if not more, influential than the already impressive names mentioned above. He isn’t without his own influences though. By reading his Letter from Birmingham Jail, it’s easy to see that many of the themes of James and Royce shine through the text. These themes include James’ belief that the truth is ever changing and his hypothesis about decision making, and Royce’s belief about the idealization of suffering and the perfection of the community. The echoing of these themes, whether intentional or not, is why I will argue that King can and should be considered an American philosopher.

King understood that for the white community in America what was true was that black people were not equal to white people, and as such, they did not deserve equal rights. King recognized, like many others, that the laws that stripped many black people of their basic rights were set in place by a white minority. They were imposed upon the black community by the white community without any consideration for whether or not they were good or worked for the black community. They lacked the pluralistic voice necessary to ensure that the laws were just for all. King wasn’t calling for a new type of legislation run completely by black people, he was only pleading that another point of view, one that wasn’t a white male’s, be present when laws were being created and amended. Allowing for at least a black voice to be heard during the legislative process would allow a chance for there to be a radical change in the law-making community. This in turn would cause many of the values that the law-making community once held to be changed for the better.

Evidence of James’ hypothesis about decision making is also present in King’s work. In James’ words his hypothesis was that “…pure insight and logic, whatever they might do ideally, are not the only thing that do produce our creeds.” (James 205). In our terms we can take this to mean that when we cannot make a decision based upon reason, intellect, and/or logic we must make one based upon our passions, that is, the beliefs and truths we hold dearest to us. In the work of King we can see this idea when he speaks about whether or not a law should be broken. When King’s fellow clergymen voice their disappointment in him for seemingly ignoring logic and reason, and willingly breaking laws he goes on to explain that many of the laws that he has broken are unjust laws. They are “… human law[s] that [are] not rooted in eternal and natural law” and they degrade human personality (King 542). While King knows what will come when he breaks these unjust laws, he also knows that much more is lost by listening to the clergymen’s calls to
reason. His passion for justice and equality led him to disregard “better judgment” and act not in his own self-interest, but in the interest of his community as a whole. Along with James, traces of the work of Josiah Royce can be found throughout King’s “Letter From Birmingham City Jail.” Ever-present are Royce’s ideas about the idealization of sorrow, and that through suffering the community can move closer to perfection. Royce examined the role that sorrow plays in the life of man. When he speaks of sorrow, Royce says “…I here mean an experience of ill which is not wholly an experience of that which as you then and there believe ought to be simply driven out of existence” (Royce 1055). We can take this to mean that the sorrow we are speaking of is truly a terrible one, but it is not one that we wish would have never happened. Instead it is one that we can look back on, and recognize the good that came before it. It is one that allows us to develop into better human beings, so long as we properly idealize said sorrow.

In order to idealize a sorrow we must respond to a specific sorrow in a creative and constructive way, rather than completely destroy it. When we seek to destroy the sorrow, we seek to end everything good that made the sorrow so terrible upon its departure, and every possible good thing that could have followed. A very light example of this would be wishing a failed relationship to have never happened. If said relationship could indeed be erased not only would the crushing heartache that came as a result of its end be gone, but the feeling of falling in love in the first place would be erased as well. One possible solution to this dilemma is to reduce the chance of any possible breakup to zero by not avoiding a relationship of any kind. By choosing this path the failure of the relationship is indeed avoided, but a new sorrow emerges. This new sorrow then takes the place of the sorrow that never was. Dealing with the sorrow in a constructive way is only half of the formula to idealizing sorrow. In order to complete the process, we must also focus on one specific sorrow at a time. If we are not focused on the specific sorrow that currently haunts us, we will never truly escape it, and therefore we will never make any progress. Also, it is impossible to plan in advance for a certain sorrow. No one can know the future before it is the present, and by trying to do so we will inevitably create a sorrow that we could have never expected. Royce goes on to argue that because these criteria are so difficult to meet, truly idealizing sorrow and properly dealing with it is extremely rare and should be regarded as an act of genius. So what does it look like then when sorrow is properly idealized?

I believe that Royce would offer King as a prime example of sorrow idealized. King knew specifically which sorrow had to be dealt with. He knew that so long as black people in America were denied equal rights they would never be able to develop to their full potential. He knew not to let obstacles get in the way of his movement’s ultimate goal. It is also evident that MLK’s response was highly creative. Non-violent direct action was, and I believe it still is, something that most people faced with any sort of oppression would never think of. It also goes without saying that the results that followed from King’s actions were not anything other than constructive.

Royce’s second idea present in King’s work is that through suffering, the community moves ever closer to perfection. While this may sound very similar to Royce’s idealization of sorrow, know that it is not the same thing. The two are in fact related, but when speaking of sorrow, I was mainly speaking of how it pertained to King individually. In this case we see that the community as a whole is the main focus.
Royce states that when we suffer, so too does the community. Through this suffering, individuals within the community are able to escape their own narrowness of view and get a glimpse of the community as a whole. In doing so, said individuals become aware of the interconnectedness of themselves and other individuals within the community, and through this interconnectedness they are better able to empathize with others around them.

This idea of interconnectedness wasn’t lost on King. He goes on to say “I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” (King 539). King recognized that as long as even one person in his community was suffering the community as a whole was suffering, but through that suffering they were able to recognize that they were not alone and in fact belonged to a larger community. They were able step outside of their original, narrow field of view and get a glimpse of something bigger, and by doing so they were able to help move the community closer towards perfection by taking the actions necessary to overcome their sorrow. This idea can be expanded even further to include members of the white community who recognized that when the black community suffered, the American community as a whole suffered as well.

I feel that I have laid out enough evidence to suggest that not only are many of the themes of great American philosophers clearly present in the work of Martin Luther King Jr., but also that King belongs on that list himself. Whether it is because he pushed a nation to the negotiating table at a time when it seemed all hope was lost for an entire race’s civil rights, or because of his radical acts of genius, it is clear that King is more than worthy to be mentioned with such great men. I am sure that if they were alive to see King’s work first hand, they would be more than ready to accept him as one of their own with open arms.
References

James, William, and Giles B. Gunn. 
*Pragmatism and Other Writings.*

King, Martin L., Jr., and James P. Sterba. 