

## Essay: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

### Thesis:

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s nonviolent, direct action programs for the purpose of ending racial injustice are sound, logical, and respectable.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s programs of nonviolent direct actions were aimed at bringing an end to racial injustice that was practiced, both legally and socially, in the US. Birmingham, Alabama, at the time King wrote his famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail," was one of the worst places of discrimination against blacks in America. They had a social system, sanctioned by law, that was almost totally segregated. Schools, bathrooms, lunch counters, buses, drinking fountains, and other public places were segregated, not to mention housing and job discrimination. Blacks were prohibited from using the same facilities as whites.

These practices of segregation were done under the sanction of the so-called "separate but equal" law, upheld by the Supreme Court. The "separate-but-equal" law, in-and-of itself, was blatantly discriminatory, but to make it worse, separate black facilities were definitely not equal to white facilities. However, more than suffering injustices from the laws, blacks also suffered physical abuse through bombings of Negro homes and churches, that went "unsolved" and unpunished.

Discriminatory laws were put into effect against the blacks without black representation. Many unfair voter registration requirements were specifically designed to keep black people from voting. Consequently, few blacks were able to vote or have a voice in their own destiny. These discriminatory laws, however, were in direct conflict with the Constitution, as well as the very spirit and principles upon which this country was founded.

Dr. King sought to "help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood" (155). He sought to end the cycle of poverty due to inferior educational opportunities and job opportunities. He sought to end the unfair voter registration requirements so blacks could have a legislative voice. He sought to end the dehumanizing practices of separating black people from white people at public facilities, and at playgrounds and parks for children. In other words, what Dr. King sought was freedom for blacks which he believed was their right under the Constitution and "thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution" (167). He sought human rights and human dignity for all people.

To bring about the changes he sought, Dr. King decided upon a course of action he felt was prudent and, at the same time, would be effective in forcing the issues of injustice into public awareness. He organized, then, a campaign of nonviolent direct action. He said that there are four basic steps in any nonviolent campaign: 1) Collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; 2) negotiations; 3) self-purification; and 4) direct action. If the facts showed that an injustice existed, he attempted to negotiate with leaders to change the injustice. If that failed, then the people prepared to engage in some sort of direct action which "seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue" (154).

Dr. King stressed that the action must be nonviolent. He preached to his people that their discontent was healthy and normal, but needed to be channeled into a creative, nonviolent outlet. Specifically, he advocated breaking the offending unjust law. However, Dr. King said he does not advocate evading or defying the law. Rather, to break an unjust law and to be prepared to suffer the penalty of breaking that law "openly and lovingly" (158) in order to arouse public conscience.

Moreover, Dr. King made a distinction between just and unjust laws, and only the unjust laws he advocated to break. According to Dr. King, "Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that

Brown also makes irrational cause-and-effect connections. For example, he comments:

Almost half of those arrested for committing a crime test positive for the use of drugs at the time of their arrest. Making drugs more readily available could only propel more individuals into a life of crime and violence. (629)

This conclusion escapes logic. Criminals testing positive to drugs at the time of arrest may have no bearing on their criminal actions. The same erroneous conclusion could apply to numerous other substances. If these same people were tested for nicotine or caffeine—even chewing gum—the probability would be very high that the majority would test positive. Would Brown, then, draw the same connection between these substances and criminal activity? He cites nothing to support his far-flung conclusion. Also, he avoids specifying which drugs the "criminals" tested positive for. The implication, of course, is the currently illegal drugs. However, facts show that many of those arrested are merely drunk at the time of their arrest. Significantly, however, nowhere in the speech does Brown implicate alcohol as a dangerous drug.

A look at US government statistics shockingly reveals that a high percentage of those arrested should not be imprisoned. These statistics show that the vast majority are non-violent, minor, or first-time offenders. A study ordered by Attorney General Janet Reno found that 21.5% of inmates in *federal* prisons are non-violent, first-time offenders or low-level drug dealers (Defeis 103). According to the study, many were arrested for nothing more than possessing a small amount of marijuana or cocaine; yet, they have been sentenced lengthy prison terms in federal prisons—prisons meant for hard-core, violent criminals. Many of these non-violent prisoners receive harsher sentences than rapists, murderers, or child molesters. Brown avoids the tragic fact that most so-called criminals are, in fact, nonviolent and were picked up only for possession of a small amount of an illegal substance.

One of Brown's most indicting and misleading statements refers to black men. He says, "when we look at the plight of many of our youth today, especially African American males, I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that legalizing drugs would be the moral equivalent of genocide" (629). The surface appearance of this comment seems like genuine concern for the plight of the black male population. A closer look, however, discloses a subtle, but degrading and demeaning suggestion. The statement leaves the impression that black males lack moral strength to resist the allure of drugs. By extension, then, legalization will lead most black men to increase usage of drugs, and consequently, by Brown's own erroneous cause-and-effect relationship of drug use to criminal activity, deepen their inclination towards criminal activities. The natural conclusion, then, infers that black men are the cause of the violence and crime he rants about.

Another impression falsely conveyed by Brown's statements allows the assumption that drug users are almost exclusively black men—a patently erroneous fact. This idea plays well to people with a prejudicial bent against blacks. After heightening emotions and arousing prejudicial attitudes, Brown offers his listeners assurance of how he and the government will protect their children and families with such phrases as: "We intend to punish those who insist on breaking the law. . . [put] more police officers on the street . . . [and] strong law enforcement measures" (629). He says nothing new, just typical political rhetoric. Despite the appeasing intent of these comments, they ignore federal government statistics—the same government he represents—which clearly show the miserable failure of our drug "war." Increased law enforcement and increasingly harsher sentences have proven ineffective in reducing crime associated with the illegal drug trade. Instead, harsher sentences have resulted in clogging and overwhelming the courts and prisons with many people who are not criminals. Shamefully, America incarcerates the largest percentage of her population than any other country in the world. Sadly, a heavy proportion of the incarcerated are black males—thus, artificially supporting the myth that blacks are more criminally motivated than other races.

Since the prohibition on drugs began, the American public has been conditioned to the unjust demonization of the word "drug." The "Economist" states that:

Three-quarters of a century of prohibition has ingrained in the public mind the idea that, outside a medical context, a drug is by definition an illegal substance, and that what is not illegal (such as tobacco) is therefore not a drug. (20)

The customary use of the word "drug" associates it with crime and violence; thus, conditioning the public mind. Over time, the word has come to signify the evils which specifically developed from drug prohibition—not drug use. Brown takes advantage of and perpetuates this association by consistently ignoring the presence of *legal* drugs, such as alcohol, nicotine, and caffeine. Since his use of the word "drug," selectively applies only to *illegal* drugs. The extended application of his use of the word, then, necessarily eliminates alcohol and nicotine from consideration when discussing drug testing of criminals. Like many politicians, he steers completely clear of associating tobacco and alcohol as a drug; and, in turn, their possible reference with crime and violence.

When Brown promises to incarcerate and punish drug users and sellers, he obviously intends exclusion of manufacturers, retailers, and users of alcohol, tobacco, and caffeine products. Although, according to the scientific definition of drugs, manufacturers and retailers of alcohol, tobacco, and caffeine products have no other function than as "drug pushers." When he exclaims, "We need to make clear in no uncertain terms that *drug use* is not acceptable *at any level [italics mine]*" (628), his intended exclusion of tobacco and alcohol, in fact, makes his statement problematical since he emphatically includes *all* drugs. Considering this, then, how many people at this conference were drinking coffee and smoking tobacco during the speech, or who later went out for alcoholic drinks after the meetings? Curiosity arises, also, to know how many of the attendees ever drove under the influence or were ever arrested for drunk driving. The totality of his statement also begs the question if any of the attendees were searched for drugs (cigarettes) before they entered the conference? Were any arrested for the possession of or usage of "drugs" (i.e., nicotine or caffeine)?

Probably the strongest component, and indeed, the heart, of the anti-legalization rhetoric concerns "morality." Brown claims that:

We have a solemn obligation to our citizens to propose and enact policies for the *common good [italics mine]* . . . [and] drugs are illegal because they are harmful—to both body and mind. (629)

Again, Brown's argument selectively and illogically determines elements for inclusion or exclusion, without consideration to scientific facts. By his argument, such things as ice cream, Twinkies, and nacho cheese dip, to name only a few, would have to be made illegal. In fact, of all things, Twinkies should be considered exceptionally dangerous, based on the Dan White verdict. One wonders if anyone at the conference was overweight, had high blood pressure or heart problems. Oddly enough, of all the arguments made by prohibitionists, this one is the weakest to support but engenders some of the strongest allegiance.

As mentioned, Brown avoids the use of facts. When referring to a possible discussion of the facts, he makes a most peculiar statement:

We are not going to be distracted by silly arguments about why drugs should be legalized. There is no need to debate the facts. The facts are well-known, and we have no intention of seeing these facts manipulated and twisted into a mistaken conclusion. (628)

Though purposely vague, he alludes to certain "well-known" facts. A sly form of intimidation, this tactic does the reverse of eliciting dialogue. Since the unspecified "facts" are supposedly "well-known," few would tempt showing their ignorance by inquiring what facts he refers to. The statement, in fact, contradicts itself and makes no sense, but its intent is clear. It distinctly suggests that the pro-legalization people manipulate and twist facts. Later in the speech, he makes another insinuation:

The legalization gurus shamelessly advance a laissez-faire attitude about drugs, at a time when we need to be unequivocal with our youngsters that drugs should never be a choice for them. . . Why would we. . . accommodate a frustrated few who want to let drug abuse run amok through our society? (628)

This short passage teems with hyperbole, absolutisms, and falsities. Both passages contain not a shred of proof, and the insinuations approach slander. The wording, purposely vague, suggests gross negligence and evil intent by the opposition. He presents the two sides as extreme opposites—good and evil: "They," the "good" prohibitionists, represent a positive, though unequivocal and firm, direction for youth; whereas, "Them," the "evil" opposition, represents wanton desire, severe lack of self-discipline, and extreme permissiveness towards youth. Such gross mischaracterization of the pro-legalization advocates and their position goes beyond a simple ignorance of that position. Rather, it shows willful malevolence. Brown knows the opposition does not advocate free usage of *any* drug by *anyone* at *any* age, which he tries to sway his listeners to believe. This kind of rhetoric serves one purpose: to provoke strong emotional reactions.

When discussing the correlation of crime to drug use, Brown is again guilty of faulty logic. He claims that:

Without laws that make drug use illegal, some experts estimate that we could easily have three times as many Americans using cocaine and crack. This has a direct correlation to the crime and violence that grips so many of our neighborhoods and communities. (629)

Together with the falsities Brown promotes, lurking in this fascinating statement lies the truth that he tries to deny. Brown attempts to draw a direct correlation that usage of cocaine and other substances causes crime and violence. If merely using drugs were the cause, then crime and violence would have been a major problem prior to prohibition—a time when they were legally available. The fact is, crime and violence directly result from drug prohibition, driven by the huge profits gained by the sale of black market drugs. Brown correctly assesses that usage would increase as a natural consequence if drugs are legalized. The question is, to what degree, for how long, and what would be the harm? As Barbara Ehrenreich writes in *Time*:

Yes, legal drugs. . . which could mean more people sampling them out of curiosity. But this danger has to be weighed against the insidious marketing dynamic of illegal drugs, whose wildly inflated prices compel the low-income user to become a pusher and recruiter of new users. (70)

Another common argument by the prohibitionists, seen also in Brown's speech, again shows faulty logic. Brown claims, "One of the things that bothers me most about the legalization argument is the mixed message it sends to our young people" (628). Brown seems oblivious to the mixed messages that youth receive directly from drug prohibition. This country's biggest drug problem continues to be alcohol, probably the most enfeebling and dangerous of all the drugs—legal or otherwise. In addition, as stated in the *Economist*:

Cigarettes seem to turn almost all users into addicts, and to be bad for their health at any dose. . . But others (marijuana) are less damaging, if they are harmful at all, and are nonetheless illegal. (20)

What kind of message can we expect our youth to receive from these serious inconsistencies? Less addictive and less harmful substances are illegal, while more addictive and more dangerous substances are legal. Awareness of this contradiction contributes to confusion, a lack of respect, and willingness to flaunt the laws. That the most benign drug—marijuana—is illegal, yet alcohol, a highly disabling drug, *is* legal, tells them our laws can't be trusted. John Galliher writes in *Law & Society Review*, "The law, as it stands today is being subverted. It's being met with a lot of cynical amusement by the young people today" (45).

Why is it that Brown and others like him stubbornly maintain their positions and refuse to recognize the double standard and double-edged messages young people receive, and of the "drug war's" distinct failure, coupled with its devastating economic factors? The answers are several fold. As head of this country's drug policy, the legalization of drugs would clearly jeopardize Brown's job. Furthermore, this so-called "drug war" has expanded into a behemoth multibillion dollar industry, obviously supporting a tremendous number of workers. Many people, then, have a vested interest in the continuation of this senseless "war."

In addition to job security, money also plays a major role in the continuation of drug prohibition. The tobacco and alcohol industries steadfastly refuse to admit the true nature of their products, pumping huge sums of money into a political machine which keeps tobacco and alcohol from being labeled as drugs. They stand to benefit economically by keeping other drugs illegal. If their products were classified as drugs, they would fall under much stricter regulation by the FDA, something they're vehemently against. Stimulated by large lobbying efforts from these manufacturers, the government ignores the fact the medical establishment proclaimed many years ago—that tobacco and alcohol *are* drugs. Thus, the highly powerful and effective lobbying groups and the enormous contributions from these two industries strongly influences the way legislators see things. The Economist reveals why these industries fight so assiduously to keep their products free from the label of "drugs":

If cigarettes were recognized as the oral equivalent of syringes—delivering a controlled dose of a mood-changing drug in order to satisfy a user's addiction—then the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which encouraged the subcommittee's hearings, would be able to regulate them as it saw fit, without any change in the law. (20)

FDA regulation of tobacco and alcohol would be as damaging to legislators who receive—well, let's face it—drug money, as it would be to the cigarette and alcohol industries. FDA regulation would greatly impact the easy access these drugs now enjoy, curtailing sales and, therefore, impacting profits significantly.

Rather than risk the loss of significant campaign contributions, and instead of facing the disastrous reality of drug prohibition, Brown and other politicians point the finger of blame at poor black and other poor minority neighborhoods as perpetrators of crime and violence from using and selling these illegal drugs. Politicians, then, find this explanation of the problem politically expeditious. However, scrutiny of the uncomfortable truth about drug prohibition reveals that the poor are, in fact, the true victims of it. Ehrenreich points to the sad effects of this insane policy:

The billions we spend a year on drug-related law enforcement represents money not spent on improving schools and rebuilding neighborhoods. Those who can't hope for the lasting highs of achievement and self-respect are all too often condemned to crack. (70)

The abysmal circumstances of poverty are primarily to blame for pushing many into crime. Most nonviolent criminals were raised in poverty and struggle all their lives at the survival level. Drugs provide an escape from their miserable lives. The excessive cost of illegal substances forces them into petty criminal activity to pay for their addictions. Thus, the poor are not inclined to criminal behavior, as many people prefer to believe. The education available to the poor is shamefully inadequate. Lacking a decent education profoundly limits their chances of obtaining adequate employment. Compounding this situation, most poor people are members of a minority group and must bear the weight of racial or other discrimination, which adversely affects their opportunities. The poor, then, tend towards drugs because, for them, the alternatives are exceptionally bleak. These are people without futures to look forward to. Brown neglects to recognize this factual and crucial piece of information. Unfortunately, much of what he does say about the poor is slighting and misleading.

What, though, causes non-politician moralists to cling so vehemently to the idea of drug prohibition? In a word: POWER. Power is intoxicating. Controlling the behavior of others produces a feeling of power—a common reason people seek political offices. Power, for many righteous prohibition advocates, is the mind-altering drug of their choice. Many are no less addicted to power than heroin addicts to their drug. In

addition, most who demand control over particular drugs partake freely of others; namely, tobacco, caffeine, and alcohol. This double standard escapes their notice, the same as the double standard that the youth do recognize about drug prohibition. Strong "moralistic" attitudes towards the illegal drugs would, no doubt, quickly turn 180 degrees if the popular, now legal, drugs were also put under prohibition. Otherwise law-abiding citizens might find themselves on the street corners illegally trying to obtain alcohol, tobacco, or caffeine to satisfy their addictions.

The prohibitionists entrust to themselves exclusive judgment over what's right and wrong. Because they consider their particular beliefs as "moral," they feel justified forcing those beliefs onto others. Essentially, they distrust everyone else's ability to make "moral" decisions—or, more pointedly, they consider only their own point of view as valid. They regard their own drugs of choice as socially acceptable and all others non-acceptable, eschewing facts or logic.

What has happened to Plato's "Virtue of Moderation"? Are we no longer believers? Is each person no longer master over himself? Two of the strongest drugs—nicotine and alcohol—now line the aisles in supermarkets, drug stores, and other retail establishments, in addition to their ready availability in many eating establishments, hotels, and other entertainment centers. Most people use these drugs responsibly and in moderation, including many prohibitionists. Would the legalization of currently illegal drugs cause sensible users to abruptly change their natures and abuse only those drugs?

It seems that some view Plato's "Virtue of Moderation" selectively, as applicable to certain things and not to others. In his keen wisdom, Plato makes no qualifications—as long as one causes no harm to others. Is it anyone's place to stipulate what others can or cannot do if they cause no harm to others? Moderation is the key to Plato's code of moral conduct. Each individual has the responsibility to make their own choice whether to follow it: a straightforward and simple concept.

Humans possess free will to make their own choices. Automatically built into the concept of free will is the punishment factor. Those who abuse to excess inflict harm or discomfort onto themselves. St. Augustine explains that, "moral conduct is only possible by free will" (143). The freedom of making decisions to gain experience provides each person with knowledge: the knowledge necessary to make sensible decisions. One needs to understand—often, first hand—the consequences of excess before they can apply that valuable understanding to their own lives. Milton prudently observes:

Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather: that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary. . . what wisdom can there be to choose, what continence to forbear without the knowledge of evil? (728)

Humans cannot live simply by the word of someone else. Our empathy and sympathy towards others become enhanced through our own sufferings and trials. Lessons gained through suffering tend to be the most memorable and valuable.

Believers of the Genesis story, which Milton depicts so beautifully in his "Paradise Lost," certainly understand that free will is God's unique gift to man. To punish Adam and Eve for disobedience, God did not take away their free will; nor did he remove the apple tree. In fact, God made no limits at all on their choices, just as before they disobeyed. Do those individuals presume to be wiser than God who, through their claim of superior knowledge of the evils, assign themselves the authority to control and limit the decision-making process of others, thereby, denying others the use of their own free will? Curtailing the free will of others slams against the very foundation of the religious beliefs that the majority of moralizers profess. Their actions deny a precious gift that God gave to *all* humans—not to a select few.

But, beyond religious considerations, other crucial questions must be asked. Does drug prohibition stop people from wanting drugs? Does drug prohibition improve our society? Does drug prohibition make life safer? Does drug prohibition make people wiser? Does drug prohibition decrease crime? The answer to each question is a resounding, "NO!" What, then, is the benefit of drug prohibition? Certainly, it perpetuates and guarantees some types of jobs; it provides the poverty-stricken and disenfranchised with some means of income; and, it lines the vaults of organized crime with gold. The most blatantly obvious

question about prohibition—so obvious it escapes most people, pro and con—is: After decades of utter failure, why does this so-called "war" continue unabated? The answer to this question represents the most compelling reason why prohibition should be ended: it has not, cannot, and will not work.

If logic and rationality can't convince the prohibitionists, perhaps they need to seriously consider the startling comments of tobacco company executives:

The bosses of America's cigarette companies could not quite bring themselves to admit what everybody else has known for years; that nicotine is addictive and that smoking is bad for you . . . when they were questioned last week by Henry Waxman, the chairman of a health subcommittee of America's Congress. But they did make one telling point. An outright ban, or even draconian taxation, would have one sure effect. A black market would spring up that would be even less regulated than the existing legal one. At least today's smokers know what they are inhaling. Street-corner cigarettes could contain anything. (Economist 20)

If the idea of smoking cigarettes cut with a myriad of unknown substances (which could run the unregulated gauntlet from totally benign to absolutely lethal) doesn't cause the body follicles to react, then reality bears the same truth as the prohibitionists' arguments. The comments by the tobacco company executives mock the effects of drug prohibition. Alcohol prohibition in the 1920s was a raging success—to organized crime. The negative effects on the rest of society were so profound the government repealed prohibition a short time later. Sadly, today it seems that many citizens and government officials now remain immune to these very harsh lessons of our own history, their minds leaping at erroneous conclusions, sadly missing the safety nets of Socratic and Platonic logic.

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