Meena Krishnamurthy and Political Emotions

Christiane Wisehart, host and producer: I'm Christiane Wisehart. And this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, The Zeppelin]

Christiane: What is the role that emotions play in politics and civic life? Do feelings like rage, happiness or tension get in the way of political progress, or are they tools in the fight for social justice? With me on the show today is Meena Krishnamurthy, a philosopher whose work explores the value of political emotions.

Meena Krishnamurthy: Emotions are really central to our own lived experiences. I think all of us are sort of emotional, uh, creatures. And so, understanding the emotions gives me understanding about myself and other people. But also, as somebody who is a democratic theorist, whose long thought about the value of democracy, the next question for me is like, how do we really realize a true and genuine form of democracy that's robust and long lasting? Um, and from people like King, Gandhi, all these people who were involved in organizing, you see a really strong emphasis on moral emotions as being part of the path to progress. So if you care about sort of moving past the problems we see, then we have to start really thinking about the role of the emotions play and how to cultivate the right sorts of emotions, in our fellow citizens, so that we can keep making progress in the right direction. So I think it really comes from a concern of moral progress and how do we get there.

Christiane: Stay tuned for my interview with Meena Krishnamurthy on today's episode of Examining Ethics.

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Martin Luther King, Jr.: My Dear Fellow Clergymen: While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities "unwise and untimely." Seldom do I pause to**…**

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Christiane: Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" is one of the most powerful and effectual pieces of writing to come from the Civil Rights Movement. It's King's passionate defense of direct action in the face of injustice.

He wrote the letter in response to criticism he had recently received about his way of protesting segregation policies in Birmingham, Alabama. He organized sit-ins, demonstrations, and boycotts. But a group of white religious leaders thought that a better way to fight segregation

would be through electoral politics. They argued that King's methods were too confrontational, too upsetting.

The letter of course is directed at all white moderates, not just this one particular group of clergymen. King criticizes moderates and centrists for their avoidance of confrontation, of tension, of emotion. Here's an excerpt from the letter, read aloud by King himself, about these centrist political figures.

Martin Luther King, Jr.: First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice, who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action'; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a 'more convenient season.' Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

Christiane: It's this letter to and about the lukewarm, the shallow, the tension-avoiding white moderates that our guest, Meena Krishnamurthy, discusses with me. Much of her scholarship explores political emotions, and she helps me understand the emotions that run through, and inform, much of King's work. She's an assistant professor of philosophy at Queen's University. We spoke in February of 2021.

[interview begins]

Christiane: We are going to talk about political emotions. For those of us who might not be familiar with that term, what, what is a political emotion?

Meena Krishnamurthy: So I think sometimes, uh, the phrase is used is civic passions. So they're usually the kinds of emotions that we think that, um, are worth fostering in citizens. And so, they're like appropriate emotions that we think are an important part of being a good citizen in a democratic, um, society, for example. And, um, like just like kind of almost like a back step one, is to think a little bit about, what is an emotion? And there's a lot of debate about what exactly an emotion is. So some people think that emo- emotions are affective attitudes, so they might just be like a feeling, about a particular object. And that could be something physiological, like you're angry that something. Your heart rate might increase, you might have an adrenaline response. So that might be what some people think is an emotion.

But for others, uh, people believe that emotions are not just the aspect of attitude, where there's all this feelings-y stuff happening, but a cognitive attitude, like a belief that something. So if you think that you're angry, um, you know, at, uh, injustice, there's a belief that something is unjust,

for example. That's sort of a component part of the emotion. And then civic emotions or political emotions are the kinds of emotions that we think are worth encouraging, because we think they have an important role to play in fostering good citizenship.

Christiane: Your, your argument is that, political emotions are part of what helps us be better citizens, right?

Meena Krishnamurthy: Right. And that can go awry. Like I think the thing that's tricky about emotions, and I'm sure we'll get to this more as we keep talking, but they can go awry and lead us in the wrong direction. So kind of like, thinking a bit about Aristotle or the idea of habituation, the thought is we wanna habituate good and appropriate emotional responses in the ci- in your citizens so that they go in the right direction. We all have feelings, of course, but we want them to push in the right direction towards equality, democracy, and justice rather than something else.

Christiane: In a lot of your work, Martin Luther King Jr. serves as a, as an exemplar, would that be fair to say for you?

Meena Krishnamurthy: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Christiane: ...in terms of, political emotions and fostering political emotions. And you've written a lot about King's letter from Birmingham Jail, um, which he wrote in April of 1963 while he was in jail because he was participating, well, because he led a, a non-violent, um, demonstration down in Birmingham, Alabama. Before we get too deep into the political emotions in the letter, what's the kind of political context for this moment?

Meena Krishnamurthy: So it's always important to kind of remember that the letter was written in response to a statement that was made by eight clergymen, um, who were sort of counseling King and his supporters to wait patiently for racial justice. Asking them to kind of stop all their demonstrations and wait for the courts to do what they were supposed to do. And King in the letter is, you know, forcefully responding, saying, "No, we can't keep waiting anymore." And in fact, you know, the letter later, it becomes part of this book called, *Why We Can't Wait*. And the whole book is sort of a treatise on why we can't just keep waiting, um, patiently. And in fact he believes that the courts have to be forced by these demonstrations and through political pressure to actually do what they ought to do. So that's kind of the perspective that King is writing from.

Christiane: There a lot of emotions running through this letter, right? When I read the letter, again, kind of thinking about your work I started to notice all of these emotions almost in every paragraph. And one of the emotions that he talks about that I just had never thought about before, was tension. I-Is that an emotion? Am I okay in saying that tension is an emotion?

Meena Krishnamurthy: Yeah. I think, I think ... That's a good question. I mean, I think that itself is a really interesting philosophical question, but let's just start with that assumption that it isn't emotion. Yeah.

Christiane: And so, I'm gonna, I'm gonna read a line and maybe you can help us understand this line through the lens of your work. So he writes, "Nonviolent direct action 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."

Meena Krishnamurthy: I think what King is trying to do is to force a kind of psychic tension. And a lot of the work that I've been talking, like writing about regarding King is that, he believes that the white moderates are suffering from a kind of an affected ignorance. So on the one hand, they believe that racial inequality, racial segregation is morally wrong and unjust, but the other hand, they don't believe that immediate action to alleviate that injustice is necessary. And, you know, they give lots of spurious justifications for, for why they should keep being passive, right? And that's kind of what comes out of the letter from the eight clergyman. And so in a way, there should be a tension 'cause on one hand, you have these commitments, you're professing, but then you're not acting on them. So you should feel a tension because you're not doing what you think you should.

But the moderates are giving all of these reasons, to kind of alleviate the tension and the, the kind of contradiction between these two things. King sometimes talks about this as a moral schizophrenia, that there are these two components that are in tension, psychic for the white moderates. And in a way, he's trying to sort of force the white moderates to confront the tension between their professed values and then their political inaction. And to see that three things are actually in juxtaposition or tension with each other. And for King, the emotions are really pivotal in highlighting this kind of contradiction or tension.

And then the hope is through, going through that process of tension, seeing it, confronting it, engaging it, there'll be almost a kind of, there is a kind of pressure to finally act on the values that they say that they have, which is that they believe in racial equality and racial justice.

Christiane: And I find that interesting that he and his movement want to foster tension. Um, and, and then, and, uh, later I believe he even says he wants to create it, he wants to create a feeling of attention. And I feel like for some folks in the audience, that might seem at odds with his, uh, um, professed value of, of nonviolence. So I wonder, does that seem like hypocritical to you at all or can we make sense of that?

Meena Krishnamurthy: Well, I think his thought is that he's gonna create this constructive tension through non-violence, by putting non-violent pressure on people. So for him, you know, he can still maintain a deep commitment to non-violence. Um, but non-violence doesn't mean there won't be any pressure or force on people. And that is actually something that he gets directly from Gandhi, who talks about the kind of force that's involved in non-violence, is what he calls “soul force.” Or I think a better description is actually the Sanskrit word, which is “satyagraha,” which like you're standing firm with truth, like at your back or behind you. And then you're trying to bring truth to light, but of course, you're putting pressure on other people so they will see this truth, because of the truth that they've long denied.

But that doesn't mean that there's any kind of violence inherent that non-violence is key to this, this process of enlightening people.

Christiane: Another, another sort of emotion or something that's in the world of emotions that he also is discussing is what he calls the “lukewarm acceptance of white moderates.” Um what's wrong with being ambivalent or being not quite so emotional?

Meena Krishnamurthy: So in some ways, when you look at the kind of a dialogue between the clergymen and King, what you kind of get is, the clergyman saying, "We need to be calm, we need to be patient." And King very much denying that. That actually, again, the thought is there's a grave, grave injustice at stake. And actually the belief that there's a grave injustice at stake is in tension with the thought that we should be calm. Why would we wanna be calm about a deep injustice, if there's racial segregation or kids being locked up in cages? Why would the right response be being calm? In fact that it feels like the exact wrong response.

So King is really thinking it's really easy to, to sort of, in words, to say, "I believe something. I believe that in, you know, racial equality is a good thing, I believe racial segregation is an injustice," but, um, that is almost too weak for him to just say it. You need to live it through action and carry out, you know, act on your commitments in a way that will actually foster change and progress. So just believing it sort of, passively, is, you know, yeah, not good enough for King, it's never gonna solve the problems that we face.

Christiane: I feel so drawn to that idea because of what's happening now, right? And I just, I just feel like the same arguments are playing out, right? I mean, it seems like the lukewarm acceptance, the white moderates, hey're the ones that are talking to Black Lives Matter protesters and saying like, "Let's tone it down, you know, take it, take it down a notch." Um, is that part of what inspired your work on this or did it kind of start before that?

Meena Krishnamurthy: It's a good question 'cause I was working on King even before I was back in the U.S. So I think I was more like looking at the letter with fresh eyes and I suddenly thought like, yeah, King is not as fuzzy and optimistic and utopian as everybody seems to think. Like when you really look at the letter with fresh eyes, it's been a long time since I re-read it, when I first started this project, I thought, this is reading very differently to me. There is a kind of, um, not a pessimism, but a deep sense of realism, I think that's present in King's work, that I think is so often ignored. It isn't just utopian and about the dream, um, he was looking at problems and looking at the barriers to solving those problems. And saw this kind of lukewarm acceptance of this idea that I was saying before about this kind of, we wouldn't love, we wouldn't wanna use the term schizophrenia now, but I think the thought of having a divided mind, is the way the King sometimes talks about it.

And he sees this, you know, this divided mind where you're saying one thing, but doing another, is maybe one of the biggest barriers to injustice. And he has a very complex story about what gives rise to this divided mind, and it's not a pretty picture that King gives of the white

moderates. He thinks that their identity and their desire to maintain a kind of social status as white people, with, you know, skin being the right color, um, in his words, you know, is something that they want to secure. And also the economic and political benefits that come from that status. And that is actually what's driving this divided mind.

So one of the things I've tried to point out in my own work is that, in many ways, King sees a lot of overlap between the white moderates and the segregationists. Meaning that their own self-interest is really wrapped up in maintaining white supremacy in different ways. The main difference is you've got the white moderates professing these commitments and the segregations are not even professing them, because they really don't believe them. And so, um, I think we get a, a much darker picture of white moral psychology from King than most people really recognize.

Christiane: So yeah, what's the role of, of shame in this letter? And again, I don't know if that's, (laughs), necessarily an emotion, but shaming certainly brings up emotions in people, right?

Meena Krishnamurthy: Yeah, absolutely. I think shame is a moral emotion and, um, the way that people typically talk about shame, is that there's a sense that there is a bad self who's failing to live up to one's own commitments. And these are typically commitments we share with other people we see as being in a moral community, um, with us. On one hand, it's a recognition of these shared commitments we have with other people, but we feel like there's something wrong with ourselves. And then that's from the, an emotion of shame is sort of elicited. And so King is definitely trying to shame the white moderates. "So if you keep saying you share these commitments with me, and yet you fail to live up to them again and again and again and again, and there are a lot of broken promises. Um, so you should feel badly about the fact that you're failing to live up to these commitments that you say that you have, and that you potentially share with me and the rest of my, my fellow black Americans."

So he is really trying to kind of call the hypocrisy of the white moderates for professing one thing, and then doing another. And he is hoping, at least, I argue in my own work, to shame them. But in that, there is a kind of hopefulness that King has, and we can talk about whether this hopefulness is still warranted today. But I think he believed that, shame was a moral emotion, because once we recognize that the self is bad, and that we're failing to live up to our commitments, the hope is that, under the right conditions anyways, um, we're going to try to change the bad self so that we can do better and actually live up to those commitments we say we have, and that we share with other moral individuals.

And so, King's hope in sort of calling out the hypocrisy and the white moderates it's them to inspired them to be better, and to do better and to actually act on their principles, not just keep stating them. Um, so there's a lot of hope, I think, in King's appeal to shame.

Christiane: Do, do you think it worked, do you got a sense that it, that it worked?

Meena Krishnamurthy: I think there's a big debate to be had about whether it did work. I think, here's what I think about King. I think King thinks that different things work for different people. And I think that he thinks shame definitely worked on at least a group of people. I think there were lots of other things motivating, you know, people at the time, some it was economic pressure, through economic boycotts, that also just worked, (laughs), um, but some it was this kind of, I think, the moral appeal to shame. And you do see Kennedy, um, use language of shame, sort of saying that we should be ashamed of what we've been doing. So you see some of King's language after letters published, being picked up by JFK later. Um, some people see that as evidence that King's language sort of impacted Kennedy, other people see that as strategic. I think there's a lot of debate to be had about that.

And at the time, people like Stokely Carmichael, author of *Black Powe*r really thought that, you know, that shame really didn't work. His view was that, white America lacked a conscience, and without a conscience, you can't feel shame. Because if you did feel shame and you did have a conscience, things would have changed long ago. So even at King's time, there was a lot of debate about whether this was actually a worthwhile pursuit to try to shame the white moderates into action. Um, then some people like Stokely Carmichael thought this was a waste of time and it was unlikely to be effective.

Christiane: There are so many parallels between what's happening today in America specifically, and what's happening in this letter and the things that he's talking about. Do you have some political emotions that you would name for our moment?

Meena Krishnamurthy: Yeah, I think there are a lot of them. I guess one of the ones I've been thinking about and writing about and talking about lately is the emotion of fearlessness. So King really thought, in his speeches and his writing, one of his goals in many ways, and I think this comes from Gandhi too, is to sort of foster a sense of fearlessness, among the racially oppressed. Because to stand up to racial injustice and to fight for a better world, you have to be fearless. And I think we see that again. So when we look at all the protests that have been happening and think about Black Lives Matter over the last, you know, few years, there is a kind of dignified fearlessness that the protesters and the organizers of the movement for black lives are expressing, and I think we see that.

And it's been inspiring a lot of other people, I think, to also be fearless and to stand up as allies or comrades and to stand up for justice as well. So on the one hand I see fearlessness and courage, um, especially coming from the racially oppressed, but also their comrades, but then we also see something else which is the, you know, the kind of white terror of the insurgents at the Capital riots. Um, on one hand, they're inspiring a lot of fear through their actions. Their violent kind of, uh, breaking into the building and so on, but also like, I think we also see that

they're also experiencing a kind of white fear, which is sort of, you know, connected to status, right?

So the thought is like, you know, the status of whites might be being threatened by current movements and the progress we're seeing. The fact that there were 9,000, um, protests over the summer, where in most cases, many of those protestors were actually white as well, um, happening in small suburban communities all over the country in the United States, that is threatening. 'Cause now you've got a bunch of, of black folks, brown folks and white folks questioning the status quo around racial justice. And I think in many ways, when we look at the insurgence, that is a response.

But it's a, it's like a, a response of fear, I think, in a way, to losing one status. Not being, having, uh, you know, authority, unquestioned authority, uh, that is, you know, causing a lot of, (laughs), uh, I think, fear among white folks and then also in turn, these violent responses. Um, so I think we're seeing different emotions at stake, uh, this summer, I think we're, and we're learning a lot about the kind of psychology of people on both sides. I think in a way.

Christiane: Does it seem like, like maybe a good sign that the white response to a lot of the protests over the summer has been ... Certainly it's not a good thing that they responded with violence, but the sort of heightened emotions, I wonder if that, if that means that, um, you know, the aims of Black Lives Matter are actually getting somewhere, right? That they are actually gathering some power.

Meena Krishnamurthy: Yeah. So I think one thing that King really worried about was the white backlash on his last book, *Where We Go From Here: Chaos or Community*, he has a chapter on the white backlash. And in a way, the white backlash is a result of the progress that's being made. But the problem with the backlash, is that it can be so powerful. And again, it's a backlash of people who already have the most power, um, that it can set the movement back years and years. And so, we have to look at it with the long-term consequences of the election of Trump and that the insurgence and the growing ... You know, it's not like the group of supporters that he had is going away, it's growing in fact, and I think in some ways, with a global wave of authoritarianism and anti-democratic movements, it's a phenomenon we're looking at globally. It isn't just the United States.

And we do see a clamp down on democracy and the expression of democratic rights, like rights to protest and freedom to associate, that is a scary, a scary thing. So the worry is like, you're right, this is an emotional response because there's progress being made. But that response, you know, sometimes it can be very forceful and we have to worry about what the end results of a backlash like that would be like. And King really thought a lot about, like what we should try to do and how do we respond to the backlash? And I mean, for him, the thought is we have to

keep engaging in the movement. And even if it's going to get pretty messy or pretty violent, like the non-violent resistance movement still has to keep continuing in fighting.

But today, we're having a bit of a different discussion, because a lot of people are asking the question of, how long do nonviolent protestors stay nonviolent? And is there a threshold at some point, if there is a violent insurgents or clap back, when do people get to themselves? And in a way, we're seeing a debate that happened at the time of the civil rights movement, with, uh, Black Power and Malcolm X making, asking similar questions. Um, and I think in many ways, the current movement takes very seriously this question, it's not just assuming that the King is right. And I think we're having those conversations about violence versus non-violence all over again.

Christiane: So why, why do you care about this? Why is this work important to you?

Meena Krishnamurthy: Yeah, so I think partly just like emotions are really central to our own lived experiences. I think all of us are sort of emotional, uh, creatures. And so, understanding the emotions gives me understanding about myself and other people. But also, as somebody who is a democratic theorist, who has long thought about the value of democracy, the next question for me is like, how do we really realize a true and genuine form of democracy that's robust and long lasting? And from people like King, Gandhi, all these people who were involved in organizing, you see a really strong emphasis on moral emotions as being part of the path to progress.

So if you care about sort of moving past the problems that we see, then we have to start really thinking about the role of the emotions play and how to cultivate the right sorts of emotions, in our fellow citizens, so that we can keep making progress in the right direction. So I think it really comes from a concern of moral progress and how do we get there.

Christiane: And do you have any suggestions for moral emotions that, if we also care about a robust democracy that we might start to cultivate?

Meena Krishnamurthy: I actually think there's so many. So a part of my own work is kind of looking at the package of emotions that we need to cultivate. Some of it is courage and fearlessness, some of it is love. Um, some of it is rage. So I think it's a real mixed bag. Some of it's distrust. Um, so they're not all fuzzy. And I think that's actually, maybe the first step is recognizing that a just society isn't just about love and compassion, it is also about rage at injustice. It is also sometimes about disappointment and distrust when people fail to live up to our expectations. All of these emotions are part of a package, I think for fostering good citizenship, but also then, leading to moral progress. And I think maybe just taking a more nuanced view to that sort of picture, is maybe most thing I'd wanna emphasize most.

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Slate]

Christiane: If you want to know more about Meena Krishnamurthy's other work, check out our show notes page at examiningethics.org.

The Prindle Institute for Ethics also produces a podcast called Getting Ethics to Work. You can find it at prindleinstitute.org/getethicstowork or wherever you find your podcasts.

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