Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X:

Who was more successful?

Stafford Perry

Beloit College

Class of 2017

The Civil Rights Movement was the largest rights movement in the history of the United States of America. It is well known for its highlighted protests that made national news, and the lasting impact that it had on the African American community. Some of the most important legislation that gave blacks the rights they had been asking for since the states were formed nearly 200 years prior to the movement. The Civil Rights movement is also known for the radical leaders who lead multitudes of people to protest the suppression of the whites in different ways. My paper seeks to identify two of the more famous Civil Rights Leaders, Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, and their different methods that they used to protest during the movement. From there I will identify what Plato's Allegory of the Cave for the sake of my argument. After that I will develop my literature review which will feed into what defines success and my own views of success. To finish I will apply my own view of success to the methods of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X to identify if either is more successful or successful at all in escaping Plato's theoretical Allegory of the Cave.

**I. Who are Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.?**

Martin Luther King Jr.(MLK) and Malcolm X(MX) are two men who led multiple civil rights movements during the 1960's.[[1]](#footnote-2) These movements ranged from small local sit-ins to large-scale marches on major cities. While both leaders can be seen as successful in their own movements, they both went about achieving their goals in different ways. MLK for example advocated more for non-violent actions and to confront the White population through peaceful speeches and protests by appealing to their sense of Christianity and empathy.[[2]](#footnote-3) MX on the other hand advocated treating the White man as they have treated him and his people.[[3]](#footnote-4) While not directly advocating for violence he did not prevent violence if it did occur.[[4]](#footnote-5) So while both of these men are considered leaders in their respective movements, they both had very different means of attaining their main goal of equal treatment of both the white and black population in the United States.[[5]](#footnote-6) This paper will focus on comparing both MLK and MX, based on their methods, on whether one of them can be considered to have obtained success and whether they succeeded at escaping Plato's Allegory of the Cave and the shadows that were cast upon the African American community by the majority group of Whites.

**II. What is Plato's Allegory of the Cave?**

Plato's Allegory of the Cave is a concept that is mentioned in *The Republic* which is a book written by the philosopher Plato. The book is set in Ancient Greece with the main narrator being Socrates, Plato's teacher in the art of philosophy. Socrates is roaming the city of Kallipolis with his friend Glaucon talking about politics and philosophy when the idea of the Allegory of the Cave is brought up.[[6]](#footnote-7) Socrates tells Glaucon to imagine people being chained in a cave to prevent movement or further observation of the cave so they may only watch the shadows that are cast in front of them.[[7]](#footnote-8) The shadows that the people are watching are being controlled by a group of higher classed individuals who use a fire to cast the images onto the wall.[[8]](#footnote-9) Socrates then contends that one prisoner is freed and can see around the cave.[[9]](#footnote-10) While Socrates believes that many people would be unable to handle the light of the fire and return back to the shadows that are normal and comforting to them, Socrates also toys with the idea that one person may want to seek the truth further and attempt and escape.[[10]](#footnote-11) He then explains how this one individual will make it out of the cave and after a period of time be able to see and understand the world outside of the cave.[[11]](#footnote-12) The individual will believe that the outside world is much better than the world they knew in the cave and that they would pity those left inside the cave.[[12]](#footnote-13) This can also be interpreted as the prisoner attaining enlightenment as to what they real world is. Upon returning to the cave in order to aid his fellow prisoners, the original prisoner would be blinded by the darkness of the cave.[[13]](#footnote-14) The prisoners still in the cave will believe that the outside world harmed the original prisoner and anyone who would attempt to take these prisoners outside of the cave would be killed by the prisoners who never left.[[14]](#footnote-15) In this paper the two Civil Rights Leaders, MLK and MX, are seen as the prisoners who originally attempt to escape the cave. The shadows in the cave refer to the societal beliefs that the White population has cast upon the African American population of the United States. The question becomes whether MLK and MX were successful in even escaping the cave in the first place and if they were, were they successful in returning to the cave to free their fellow cave prisoners.

**III. Literature Review**

One particular theorist named Dean Inge takes a unique stance on what success may be. Inge does not believe that success is a physical item or being. He believes that success is more of a moral type of item. [[15]](#footnote-16)In order for this to be proven, Inge starts to ponder about what can lead to success. At first, Inge thinks about whether happiness is what leads to success.[[16]](#footnote-17) After all, for centuries now, the goal of life for many people is to attain happiness so if one achieves happiness which is a goal, would that not mean that one has achieved success as well?[[17]](#footnote-18) Inge dismisses this, however, because he believes that it is rather hard for one to achieve happiness without drastically changing one's standards or morals.[[18]](#footnote-19) Inge then broadens his thoughts to include fame and popularity being the key to success.[[19]](#footnote-20) He states that fame and popularity would give a person a moral success due to the life style that they now lead giving them a heightened state of mind.[[20]](#footnote-21) However, Inge is unable to prove his point reliably and ends up dismissing fame and popularity as a route to success.[[21]](#footnote-22) The last position that Inge tries to debate about is if religious motives can prove to be a path to success.[[22]](#footnote-23) Inge, however, decides that he does not need to explore this path much as he dismisses religious motives rather quickly since he believes outside motives are a poor way for one to find and achieve success.[[23]](#footnote-24)

Another case that advocates for a different type of success comes from the minds of Roland J. Pellegrin and Charles H. Coates. Pellegrin and Coates studied and interrogated multiple supervisors and executives. Though their study was rather unique and focused on success in the business world alone, the results still prove success can be seen in different ways.[[24]](#footnote-25) Pellegrin and Coates decided to ask individual executives and supervisors what success meant to them.[[25]](#footnote-26) Both groups maintained a standpoint that their goals both personally and company wise being achieved would give them success.[[26]](#footnote-27) Both groups also state that goals can shift over time therefore being successful may be obtained multiple times.[[27]](#footnote-28) Many of these goals, they state, are physical rewards such as making a million dollars.[[28]](#footnote-29) The only difference between the two groups of supervisors and executives is that the supervisors tend to set goals for the company to accomplish.[[29]](#footnote-30) On the other hand the executives tend to think of more personal goals. Both groups also do set moral goals much like what Inge talks about but they also say that they prefer to complete the physical goals.[[30]](#footnote-31)

Both of these authors present valid points on how success can be obtained and achieved. While Inge's points about moral success are valid and can be applied to certain situations, Pellegrin and Coates argument can be more readily applied to situations in the real world and more people are motivated by a physical representation of success compared to morally knowing you have achieved success. My own view of success is based partly on Inge's argument and Pellegrin and Coates' argument. I for one believe that Inge's point of moral success due to fame and popularity along with obtaining happiness is a point I would like to expand upon. I believe that Inge is incorrect when he states it would be difficult to obtain success through happiness simply because if the goal of life is to obtain happiness, then if one achieves happiness, they will have achieved their goals and therefore they will have been successful in their lifelong endeavor. I also believe that success through fame and popularity is not as farfetched as Inge would like to believe since fame and popularity do change a person's life normally for the better and if someone starts living their life then they can be assumed to have been successful in their endeavors. On the side of Pellegrin and Coates I firmly agree with what was mostly articulated about the study between supervisors and executives. Many human beings are driven everyday by physical rewards such as money and gadgets to make their lives easier. In my mind, these humans are attempting to achieve their goals and be successful on a physical level. For instance when working hard all day at a job, a person is given money for their efforts which they can then use to obtain a gadget to make their lives easier. If their goal is to obtain a specific gadget and they do, that person was successful in obtaining a physical reward.

All of that being said, I also think it is important to talk about comparing one type of success to another. The question in this particular case is whether physical success is greater than moral success. I believe that it is impossible for two different types of success to be compared to each other that are not of similar nature. For example if someone was comparing success based on physical properties that two different people have obtained, then it can be reasonable to say that one particular person has obtained more success than the other as they have proven they are more successful based on being in possession of another gadget. However, if one person attempts to claim that they have obtained moral success more so than a person who has achieved physical success, then it becomes a theoretical battle that cannot be resolved.

**IV. What is Success?**

In order to be able to identify if either of the two leaders obtained success, it is important to first identify and define what success is or what it might be. It must be noted that success appears to be relatively subjective based on individual beliefs and biases. This is shown by the study conducted by Ralph W. Hood Jr., Ronald J. Morris, Susan E. Hickman, and P.J. Watson, in which low-income African Americans and low-income White Americans were asked to rate both MX and MLK based on evaluative and potential performance.[[31]](#footnote-32) These studies showed that both parties viewed MX as having more potential.[[32]](#footnote-33) However, when it came to evaluative performance, the African American population biased towards Malcolm X while the White population biased towards MLK.[[33]](#footnote-34) This test is not important because of the actual data that is used or its statistical significance due to there only being 53 people surveyed in the study. However, it is a valid source for my argument because it shows on multiple levels that success is subjective to an individual's personal beliefs. It shows that success is determined not by what you do but rather if others view you as successful or not. The fact that success is considered subjective makes identifying both MLK and MX's accomplishments and whether they did or did not escape Plato's Allegory of the Cave subjective as well since one needs to be successful in order to first leave the cave and eventually return.

**V. Comparing Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.**

As stated before both of these civil rights leaders were successful in their own movements and endeavors. It is important now to identify which type of success each had and whether it helped them escape the Allegory of the Cave.

Martin Luther King Jr. was well known as a pacifist who promoted the use of non-violence in protests. He is arguably the most well known Civil Rights Leader in history and his "I Have a Dream" speech may also be arguably the most famous speech of the 20th century. MLK was a devout Christian and attempted to use his belief to his advantage during the Civil Rights Movement. The questions with MLK about his success start with his popularity and fame. Judging by my own definition of success, I would say that MLK was more morally successful than physically successful. MLK appealed to not only the African American population, but also to the White majority of the United States. He appealed to the White's sense of empathy and the religious motives to rapidly become popular amongst the white majority and become successful and speaking out about the injustices and insecurity of the typical African American man in the 1960's. MLK did not waver in his ways even as his life was coming to a close. On April 4th, 1967 MLK gave the most powerful speech of his lifetime. In MLK's *Beyond Vietnam: A Time To Break The Silence* speech, he attempted to persuade his followers to join him and boycott the United States' involvement in the Vietnam war.[[34]](#footnote-35) He advocates for peaceful protests much like the Civil Rights Movements that he had been leading.[[35]](#footnote-36) Although it is not directly related to the Civil Rights Movement, this speech in itself shows that MLK was still attempting to help others escape the cave. Even though it was a different cave, MLK was still enlightened and knowing that what the shadows were showing the population was wrong and that they needed to reach enlightenment as well. The speech also showed that MLK stuck true to his non-violent methods throughout his life no matter the subject matter.

Malcolm X was a member of the Nation of Islam and routinely was seen on the news portrayed as a violent individual who could not control himself or his followers. While the majority of America did not support MX, it is hard not to say that he was not successful. I also believe that MX's success was largely moral much like MLK's. MX was very instrumental in changing the perception of the African American individual in the eyes of the nation from a weak unimportant person to a strong able-bodied person who can and is willing to stand up for their own well-being. Unlike MLK, MX changed the older he became. Towards the end of his life, he decided that his time with the Nation of Islam was up and that he should move on to identify solely with the Civil Rights Movement. It was a large turning point in MX's life that everyone paid attention to. He also gave a speech titled *The Ballot or the Bullet* in which he stated that blacks should go and exercise their right to vote and that if the white majority still decided to make it difficult for them to exercise that right, that it was up to them to rise up against the whites even if it meant taking up arms.[[36]](#footnote-37) This showed that MX was still attaining enlightenment and attempting to help others find the light despite not completely forsaking his past but still attempting a new route that did not involve as much violence as before.

The question at hand then becomes if it is possible to compare the two leaders and their respective successes. Normally, as I stated above, I would think there is a way to compare the two types of success since they are both moral types of success. However, in this particular case I believe that it is impossible to compare the two leaders. If success was based upon whether or not the two leaders were able to finish their work and see the results of their work, then neither of them would have succeeded since both of them were assassinated far before the Civil Rights Movement ended and African Americans received the rights that they deserved. On the other hand if success is simply measured by popularity than MLK would clearly have obtained more success than MX based on multiple factors. For instance when learning about African American history, most schools omit MX completely and if they do not he is scarcely mentioned. Also, there is a national holiday in January called Martin Luther King Jr. day in order to honor all of the work that MLK did. There is no Malcolm X day. Finally, Martin Luther King could actually have gained his success due to Malcolm X's actions. It is not that hard to imagine that while these two leaders with one promoting non-violence and the other not caring if violence is used, the public would be more likely to support MLK and his non-violent, Christian approach opposed to a man that they see as violent State of Islam member which they know almost nothing about. So in this particular case judging by their ability to impact the Civil Rights Movement successfully and effectively is the correct way to judge them. Based off of that criteria, it is impossible to say that one of them was more successful than the other.

**VI. Did they successfully escape the Cave?**

The question now shifts from whether or not they escaped Plato's Allegory of the Cave or not. Based on what defines escaping Plato's Allegory of the Cave, a person needs to find enlightenment when they leave the cave. Otherwise the light will be too blinding for them and they will return to the cave. In the case of MLK and Malcolm X, I firmly believe that these two leaders in particular were able to see that the shadows that were being cast upon the wall to the African American population by the White majority was not in their best interests. Both of them were freed from their imprisonment and made their way, stumbling around in the dark until they reached the opening of the cave. The crawl and the struggle of leaving the cave was what honed their arguments and motivations and ways until they finally reached the exit. Upon reaching the exit of the cave, both leaders were able to reach enlightenment and were able to withstand the light that greeted their eyes. The understood that the African American was equally entitled to the rights that the Whites had and that the African Americans should no longer be oppressed in the way that they had been.

The trouble comes when both Malcolm X and MLK decide to return to the cave. For in the cave are not only their fellow African American citizens, but also the White Americans who blindly followed what society had told them about the roles of African Americans in society. Both of the leaders attempted to free the prisoners of the United States fire shadows but ran into trouble. Not all of the prisoners were willing to accept help from the two leaders who were attempting to save them and show them the light. They resisted saying that the African Americans had a specific place in United States society and that their role is to stay secondary to the needs of the Whites. The two leaders did not give up, however, and kept attempting to free the other prisoners until eventually the prisoners decided to kill them by assassinating them both. Despite MX's and MLK's success in originally escaping the cave, becoming enlightened, and wanting nothing more than to help the other prisoners of the cave escape the shadow cast upon the African American population, neither of them ultimately succeeded in completely dispelling the shadows and both of them ended up much like Socrates predicted, dead by those they only wanted to see the light.

**VII. Counter-Arguments**

Naturally, there are many arguments to be made about how neither of the leaders ever escaped the Cave. There is undoubtedly an absurd amount of counter-arguments to be made against my own argument, however, I will only be identifying a few of the more large and important topics that I feel need to be addressed.

One of the main counter-arguments that I feel like needs to be addressed the most is that MLK and MX were never in Plato's Cave. It is a possibility that MLK and MX were never in Plato's Cave as prisoners to the shadows. My entire interpretation of the Cave in terms of how it equates to the Civil Rights could be misinterpreted. For instance I understand that both MLK and MX may have actually been the ones that are manipulating the shadows and putting prisoners into the cave. If thinking about it from a standpoint that both of these men were actually leaders, then it can be interpreted that instead of the two originally being prisoners of the cave that they were the creators of the cave. It is possible that MLK and MX were attempting to force their own ideals upon their fellow followers and brainwash them. Thinking about how MLK and MX ended up with thousands of supporters it is quite possible that they had planned for this to happen and that they were attempting to trap the entirety of the United States to follow their shadows. Especially when it comes to MX and his more aggressive tactics. MX may have hoped to use his own shadows to place his ideals of Black Power upon the American population. However, this point is harder to prove with MLK in terms of the entire United States because he preached equality with non-violence so that is harder to perceive as more than his own manipulations to the African American race.

Another major counter-argument is that MLK and MX never escaped the cave in the first place. Since my argument is based on MLK and MX finding enlightenment and then returning to the cave in order to save his fellow African Americans, it is possible to perceive that MLK and MX never achieved enlightenment in the first place. In other words, MLK and MX saw the enlightenment light and could not bear the light so instead of staying there they, like many others, have chosen to return to the comfort of the cave. If they never left the cave then it is possible that the white society that was casting the shadows was still casting the shadows of them leading the Civil Rights movement. What if the Civil Rights Movement was entirely planned by the white majority? One aspect of the cave is that the images that are shown on the wall are automatically considered bad or detrimental to whomever is watching the shadows, but Socrates never states that all the shadows shown on the wall are bad for whomever is watching. Therefore it is possible that the shadows on the wall are showing outcomes that can actually benefit society such as the Civil Rights Movement and that MX and MLK never found enlightenment but were still prisoners being fed information that they had no control over.

**VIII. Conclusion**

MLK and MX were two well known Civil Rights Movement leaders who had almost completely opposite ideals and methods as to how they went about leading their respective followers.[[37]](#footnote-38) MLK advocated for non-violent and passive protests such as sit-ins and most notably his famous March on Washington in which he rallied thousands to his famous *I Have A Dream* speech.[[38]](#footnote-39) MX on the other hand did not advocate for violence, but he was not opposed to it if necessary. His tactics included meeting the white oppression head on with equal force if necessary to prove that African Americans will not sit down and take the beatings without reacting but rather show that they are willing to fight for their equal rights if possible.[[39]](#footnote-40) Plato's Allegory of the Cave was then introduced to give the reader an idea as to what will be brought up later in paper and will diffuse confusion if by defining the cave. It was then argued that there is a medium to be had between Inge's interpretation of success and the Pellegrin and Coates study on success. Inge's theory is that success is a moral task and not gauged by physical successes.[[40]](#footnote-41) He ponders if happiness, religion, or popularity give one success.[[41]](#footnote-42) In the end he decides that he cannot decide and he simply dismisses the topic all together.[[42]](#footnote-43) Pellegrin and Coates believe that success is of a physical form after their study.[[43]](#footnote-44) They questioned executives and supervisors and found that the majority of them said that they believe success based on achieving goals such as making a million dollars.[[44]](#footnote-45) Achieving these goals brings them success in the business world by being acknowledged by their peers[[45]](#footnote-46). These two arguments brought my own way of determining success. I believe that success is a happy medium between Pellegrin and Coates and Inge. Success from fame and popularity is an important part of our everyday lives as celebrities are considered successful for landing a major role in a movie or making a major magazine. Success is also physical though as looking at Bill Gates and his tremendous fortune proves that success is also based on physical rewards such as money. It is still important to know that success is extremely subjective much like the study done by Ralph W. Hood Jr., Ronald J. Morris, Susan E. Hickman, and P.J. Watson. In the study the four men asked low income white and African American males to evaluate MLK and MX based on what they have done, or evaluative, and what they can still do, or potential.[[46]](#footnote-47) The study showed that both parties think MX has more potential but the African Americans though MX has done more than MLK while the whites believed that MLK has been more influential.[[47]](#footnote-48) Identifying that success is subjective is important for the argument that I made was that MLK and MX both achieved success in escaping Plato's Allegory of the Cave. Both achieved enlightenment prior to leading their respective movements by realizing that the shadows they had been seeing were false. The shadows they had been seeing, of course, were those of the white majority showing the African Americans their "true place in society" where they are oppressed by the white majority and have less rights. Once the two leaders had seen the enlightenment they attempted to return to the cave as Socrates had stated in *The Republic* to retrieve their fellow prisoners and show them the enlightenment. Some of the prisoners were scared and so while helping them escape, MLK and MX were both eventually killed. Obviously there are some counter-arguments to be made such as that MLK and MX were actually the people in the cave that were manipulating the shadows. This is an interesting point that can be argued since both had thousands of followers that were willing to support them at the drop of a hat so it is possible. In MX's particular case, he may have been hoping to not only influence his own followers, but also to eventually drag the white majority into his cave. The other counter-argument of neither of the leaders even leaving the cave has its points as well. It is entirely possible that neither of the two ever left the cave and that both of them were still in the cave watching the shadows until they passed. Since Socrates never stated that all of the shadows were of ill intent, it is possible that the men casting the shadows showed MX and MLK that they were leading the Civil Rights Movement and the African American's fight for equality. Even with courageous leaders like MLK and MX, the African American's did not gain their rights until after they were assassinated. However, their ability to successfully escape the cave and even their attempts at rescue for the other prisoners was enough to impact the future of African Americans and how they stand in society today.

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