

THEOLOGIAN OF SYNTHESIS: THE DIALECTICAL METHOD OF
MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. AS REVEALED IN HIS
CRITICAL THINKING ON THEOLOGY,
HISTORY, AND ETHICS

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Dedicated to

Elder Joseph W. McCoy

Friend, Mentor, Confidant, and Patron Saint

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- CPR* Imanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by Norman Kemp Smith with a new introduction by Howard Caygill. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- MLKP-MBU* Martin Luther King Jr., Papers, 1954-1968, Mulgar Library Boston University, Boston, MA
- STL (1963)* *Strength to Love*. New York: Harper & Row, 1963.
- STL* *Strength to Love*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. 1981.
- STF* *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*. New York: Harper, 1958.
- TOC* *The Trumpet of Conscience*. New York: Harper & Row, 1989.
- WDWGFH* *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* New York: Bantam, 1968.
- WWCW* *Why We Can't Wait*. New York: Harper & Row. 1964.

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines Martin Luther King Jr.'s dialectical method, as particularly developed from his reading of G. W. F. Hegel¹, and extended and modified in his own views on theology, history, and ethics. Although King, has been studied through a wide variety of lenses that range from intellectual history, cultural studies, social history, and social ethics, few have mapped the forms of rationalization that controlled how King understood and developed his own account of religious thought, historical movement, and ethical rationality. In this dissertation, I identify the form of rationality that best captures how King understood theology, history and ethics as dialectical, that is, the synthesis of two conflicting views, movements, and actions. From these lenses, King's rational processes and activities form a unity of thought and actions. This interpretation opens to the idea that both critical thinking and social actions, are, for King, instances of praxis. Conclusively, this study will suggest a way of understanding praxis and theology as entailing a unity of critical reason/rationality and social action as these were displayed in King's dialectical thinking on religious thought, history and ethics.

For the last three decades King scholarship has primarily focused on historical/biographical issues,² what he thought and his intellectual development,³ or his

¹Martin Luther King Jr. *Stride Toward Freedom: the Montgomery Story*. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1986), 100-101. King studied Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* at Boston University under Edgar Brightmann and Peter Bertocci. He notes that he spent his spare time reading Hegel's *Philosophy of History* and *Philosophy of Right*. These texts along with his class notes should help develop the points of contact with Hegel's dialectic.

²Lewis V. Baldwin. *There is a Balm in Gilead: The Cultural Roots of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991). David J. Garrow. *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Leadership Christian Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986). David L. Lewis. *King: A Critical*

praxis (civil rights leadership or oratorical skills).⁴ Very little attention has been given to understanding how he thought, or his method of thinking. This neglect can be attributed to the fact that King wrote no systematic treatise on his thought and work. Furthermore, his work as a major leader in the Civil Rights Movement and his tremendous gift of oratory eclipsed any substantive interest in his method of thinking. However, the lack of attention to his method has led to a number of concerns in understanding King as a creative intellectual.

The first concern is that the failure to recognize and understand King's method of thinking and acting has led to a view that King was an eclectic pragmatic thinker appropriating thoughts from a variety of sources as it suited his agenda.⁵ This assumption leads to the conclusion that he only engaged sources on a superficial level. Thus, what guided his decisions about the sources he used were primarily practical concerns. However, when his method of thinking is taken seriously, one must conclude that his critical thought process drove his practical actions. There was indeed a method to his eclecticism.

The failure to attend to King's method also has led to the fragmentation of King scholarship. Because of the wide range of sources and influences on King's thought there

Biography (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970).

³John J. Ansbro. *Martin Luther King Jr.: The Making of a Mind* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982). Frederick L. Downing. *To See the Promise Land: The Faith Pilgrimage of Martin Luther King, Jr* (Macon, GA: Mercer University, 1986). James P. Hanigan. *Martin Luther King Jr. and the Foundations of Nonviolence* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984). Kenneth L. Smith. *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1974).

⁴Keith D. Miller. *Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King Jr. and its Sources.* (New York: The Free Press, 1992.) Mervyn Warren. "Rhetorical Study of the Preaching of Martin Luther King Jr., Pastor and Pulpit Orator" (Dissertation. Michigan State University, 1966). Peter J. Paris. *Black Leaders in Conflict: Joseph H. Jackson, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcom X, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1978). Richard Lischer. *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Word that Moved America.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁵Chester M. Hedgepeth. "Philosophical Eclecticism in the Writings of Martin Luther King Jr." *Martin Luther King Jr.: Civil Rights Leader, Theologian, and Orator.* David J. Garrow, editor. (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1989), 541-548.

have been a number of claims placed on him. King has been labeled a Black theologian,⁶ process thinker,⁷ personalist,⁸ etc. Each label is offered as a key to unlocking the power of King's life and thought, each label provides only a partial understanding of his thoughts and actions. A more complete and balanced understanding of King cannot be uncovered in what he thought or what influenced his thoughts, nor in how he acted. To gain an holistic view of these fragments, it is important to understand how he used the dialectical method to synthesize various streams of information and translate them into practical actions.

Much of the earlier scholarship focused on historical-biographical concerns, thus bypassing any discussion or concern about method. Although such scholars as David Garrow and Lewis V. Baldwin acknowledged King's use of the dialectical method, their primary interest was historical, therefore, they did not require an extensive development of King's methodical approaches. While other scholars, such as Ervin Smith and John Ansbro, explore King's intellectual influences, their primary interest was in tracing the development of his thought (Smith) or the wide range of sources that shaped his thoughts (Ansbro).

Scholars such as Noel L. Erskine miss the point altogether, when they contend that "King was not . . . overly concerned about method in theology for the sake of articulating a theological system."⁹ While it is accurate in a literal sense, Erskine's observation fails to discern that King was very concerned about method. His concern

⁶ Paul R. Garber "Martin Luther King Jr.: Theologian And Precursor of Black Theology" (Dissertation. Florida State University, 1973).

⁷ Moses Gregory. *Revolution of Conscience: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Philosophy of Nonviolence* (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1989).

⁸ Warren E. Steinkraus. "Martin Luther King's Personalism and Nonviolence." *Martin Luther King Jr.: Civil Rights Leader, Theologian, and Orator*. David J. Garrow, editor. (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1989), 891-906.

⁹ Noel L. Erskine, *King Among the Theologians* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1994), 131.

implicitly courses throughout his writings and speeches via his use of the dialectical method. This method was consistently present in his theological reflections, historical analysis and his moral action. This dismissive posture significantly undercuts Erskine's effort to situate King in dialogue with other theologians. Perhaps the most fruitful point of contact for such a project could have been with dialogue on the issue of method with such theologians as Karl Barth and Paul Tillich.¹⁰

In recent scholarship, there is a move towards the issue of method. Luther D. Ivory's approach is intriguing and useful, but he does not explicitly develop King's use of the dialectical method.¹¹ However, he provides an understanding of King that does not dichotomize King as a thinker and an activist. He attempts to resolve what he sees as an identity crisis in King scholarship by casting him as a "theologian of radical involvement." He argues –correctly- that one of the major reasons behind the public confusion about King stems from little credence given to date to King as a serious creative thinker. Ivory's answer to this dilemma is to uncover the "conceptual underpinning" that informed King's life and work. While agreeing with Ivory's premise, I take issue with his answer. I will contend that it is uncovering his methodological approach to those concepts that will provide the basis of recognizing King as a creative thinker. The missing element is that Ivory does not connect the thinking and action to one process. Although one can argue that King had core convictions, his thinking was not static but was ever-evolving, and his actions were also ever-evolving.

Michael G. Long examines King's response to the state, concluding that he

¹⁰ It would have been interesting to compare and contrast how King, Barth, and Tillich were dialectical theologians. They all used the dialectical method in a different way. It was their method that provided the guide for the development of their thought.

¹¹ Luther D. Ivory, *Toward a Theology of Radical Involvement: The theological Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997),14.

consistently adopted a dialectical attitude --against us, but for us-- to the state.¹² Long traces the development of King's dialectical response from his high school days until his death. His argument, however, suggests that King's dialectical response was bipolar in nature. That is, the "no" and "yes" are held in opposition to each other without resolution. The argument in this study is that King's dialectic is not complete until there is a resolution. King consistently pushed for a synthesis of the polar opposites.

The significance of this project to the overall theological enterprise will be twofold. First, it will serve as a corrective to those trends in King scholarship that have over emphasized King as an activist and orator. This emphasis is understandable given that King's public life spanned only thirteen years and his thoughts evolved in the turbulence of leading the Civil Rights Movement. The recognition that King, as a thinker and an activist, was guided by a commitment to a particular method, i.e., a dialectical method, provides the basis for understanding his thoughts and actions. It also provides a way of constructing a plausible conception of his views on matters about which he did not write systematically. This approach will allow King to be viewed and understood based on his own self' understanding, his pattern of thinking and his approach to conflicting concepts and actions.

Second, when understood in this manner, King can serve as a model for an holistic approach to "doing" theology. The theologian will not have to be cloistered in the ivory towers of academia to have credibility as a thinker. This is not to say that all theologians must conform to King's model of the public theologian-activist. However, it opens up the possibility for a variety of ways for theologians to define their role in the

¹²*Against Us, But for Us: Martin Luther King Jr. and the State* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2002).

church and society. King's model can provide a model of thinking that flows out of the involvement of life situations and activism, preceded by critical intellectual reflections. This model will provide a means of recovering the prophetic function of the theological enterprise that contributes to the transformative activities in society through critical reflection and personal praxis.

While the larger part of this dissertation's method can be appropriately described as a theological constructive approach, it will necessarily involve methods that will include: (1) historical archival research to establish from published and unpublished academic papers the claim that King was exposed to, embraced and modified Hegel's dialectical method; (2) exegesis and analysis of King's published and unpublished writings and speeches to demonstrate the use of the dialectical method; and (3) critical examination of these sources to determine that there was a fundamental logic to King's dialectical method of critical thinking and activism.

This dissertation is divided into five chapters with an introduction and a conclusion. The introduction maps the parameters of the dissertation providing an overview of the subject, problem and significance of Martin Luther King Jr.'s use of the dialectical method. The conclusion summarizes and suggests some tentative direction that King scholarship may develop based on his methodology.

Chapter I establishes King's use of the dialectical method by first examining his existential context that made the dialectical method an attractive and a natural development as a result of King's contact with Hegel's method. This chapter reveals the underlining dialectic that existed in his life (dialectics of parents, dialectic of personality, and dialectics of siblings) and historical context (dialectics of race, class, and faith).

Chapter II explores King's appropriation of the dialectical method by way of Hegel. It examines how King critically engaged the nineteenth century philosopher modifying and creating his method his own method of rationality. This chapter will build on foundation laid in King's biographical and historical chapter to assert that King was drawn to Hegel's dialectical method because of the desire to reconcile the dialectics of his life experiences to that point.

Chapter III reconstructs King's theological views on God, humanity and the church using his dialectical method. This chapter demonstrates how his method allows him to gather up conflicting views to create a more holistic view of God, humanity, and the church. It shows that there was indeed a critical stance on his part in deciding what he used and what he dismissed within his reading and study of other thinkers.

Chapter IV reconstruct King's view of history and historical movements through the dialectical method. If it can be argued that Karl Marx placed Hegel's spiritual dialectical view of history on its head with his material dialectic, then it may be said that King did not place Hegel back on his feet, but on his side. This chapter shows how King operationalized his philosophy of history in the development and the unfolding of the Civil Rights Movement under his leadership. It is the quintessential example of how his theory was cojoined with his actions.

Chapter V examines King's moral philosophy through the lenses of his dialectical approach to theology and history. Particular attention will be given his concept of the Beloved Community. The Beloved Community, understood as a regulative idea, provides the cognitive frame for exploring King's use of the dialectical method as he explicates such themes as integration, social democracy, and power, and nonviolent direct action.

CHAPTER I

DIALECTICS OF MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.'S LIFE

Introduction

Martin Luther King Jr. is perhaps the most documented and researched African-American in the twentieth century. There are thousands of books, articles, and dissertations written about him and his thoughts.¹³ There have been a number of works that critically examine his methods as a civil rights leader and preacher/orator, but not as an intellectual thinker. There have been a number of scholars that have looked at intellectual influences, while others examined a particular aspect of his thoughts.¹⁴ There has been no sustained and critical examination of his intellectual method. The absence of establishing King's intellectual method is one reason for the devaluation of King as a thinker.

King died at age thirty-nine while the leader of a major Civil Rights Movement. His public life spanned only thirteen years, from 1956 to 1968. During this time he was a husband, father, pastor, civil rights leader, and a speaker in great demand. He also taught from time to time a few courses on college campuses.¹⁵ He wrote several books

¹³ Besides the online index (<http://www.stanford.edu/group/king/mlkpapers>) of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project at Stanford University, there are several book length bibliographies of articles, books, and other documents created by King and about him. Note: Deborah J Tucker and Carolyn A. Davis, *Unstoppable Man: A Bibliography, Martin Luther King Jr.* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University, 1994), 57 pages; Sherman E. Pyatt, *Martin Luther King Jr.: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 154 pages; William Harvey Fisher, *Free at Last: A Bibliography of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1977), 169 pages.

¹⁴ An example of the former is David J. Garrow's *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King Jr., and the South Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: W. Morrow, 1986) and John J. Ansbro's *Martin Luther King Jr.: The Making of a Mind* (Matyknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982) is an example of the latter.

¹⁵ King taught a course at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, and from time to time a few courses at

recounting various aspects of the Civil Rights Movement which he led.¹⁶ Because of the demands on his time and his premature death, he was not afforded the opportunity for quiet reflection and thinking about abstract concepts hammered out in the rigor of intellectual debate or cloistered in the halls of academia. His thoughts were developed in the midst of a busy life, and refined in the throes of conflict with individuals opposed to his activism. It was not his original life plan to be a civil rights activist. His plans were to be a college president at a historically black institution.¹⁷ Had this occurred, perhaps he would have provided the public a well-defined treatise on theological method. He, however, left resources to extrapolate an approximation of his method.

Harry Settanni, in *Five Philosophers: How Their Lives Influenced their Thought*,¹⁸ provides a helpful approach to understanding the relationship between philosophers' life experiences and historical environments to their philosophical ideas emerged. His thesis is that very often:

a philosophy or philosophical system is the result of a philosopher's attempt to synthesize or possibly just to reconcile an underlying dualism. That dualism or duality will constitute a problem for a philosopher—a problem he tries to solve, sometimes by synthesis. The source of that duality may spring from any source in the philosopher's life and/or times. For example, there may be an underlying opposition between the philosopher's life or upbringing and his times, and this will constitute a duality. Or, in other cases, a duality may arise from two very opposed or simply different social or political movement in the time or century in which the philosopher lived. Finally, the duality may appear as a result of

Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia.

¹⁶ King published four books while living and one book posthumously. They are: *Stride Toward Freedom The Montgomery Story [STF]* (New York: Harper, 1958); *Why We Can't Wait [WWCW]* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964); *Strength to Love [STL]*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981.); *Where Do We Go From Here? [WDWGFH]* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967.); *Trumpet of Conscience [TOC]*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).

¹⁷ Clayborne Carson, "Introductory Essay." *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. by Clayborne Carson, vol. 2, *Rediscovering Lost Values, July 1951-November 1955* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 28. Here after this volume and each of the volumes are referred to as *Papers*, with the specific volume identified by its number followed by the page number of that volume.

¹⁸ (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992.)

different influences in the philosopher's upbringing. All of these combinations are possible . . .¹⁹

Settanni's assessment is also valid for theologians. Settanni's argument is that it is essential to understand the life and times of a person in order to grasp that person's philosophy or philosophical ideas. This is an important starting point for uncovering King's methodology. Settanni contends that a philosopher is motivated by a need to synthesize or reconcile some underlying duality in the person's life or times. He cites examples of a number of sources for this duality. He concludes that there may be any combination of these examples that is the motivation behind the person's philosophy. Martin Luther King Jr.'s theological and ethical method is precisely motivated by a need to reconcile a combination of issues. This would also be consistent with King's own approach to such a topic. In an essay on his religious development, King argues that, "It is impossible to get at the roots of one's religious attitudes without taking in account the psychological and historical factors that play upon the individual."²⁰

This chapter will examine two important foundational concerns for understanding Martin Luther King Jr.'s methodology. The first section examines King's life and immediate *familia* existential context to understand the underlying dualities, or problems, in his religious life, racism in America, and the economic divisions in capitalism that plagued him most of his life. He will attempt to resolve these conflicting experiences both intellectually and concretely. It will be apparent that any discussion of King's method or theology must address these dualities. These dualities will be obvious at times, while oblique at other times, as his theology, philosophy of history, and moral philosophy

¹⁹ Ibid., i.

²⁰ "An Autobiography of Religious Development" in *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. by Clayborne Carson, vol. 1, *Called to Serve. January 1929-June 1951* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 360-361. Here after this volume is referred to as *Papers*, vol. 1

are examined. The second section of this chapter will explore King's intellectual quest for a method that began at Morehouse College and concluded at Boston University. His academic training provides the intellectual framework and vocabulary to critically think about the dualities of religion, race, and economics. However, the method he found in his academic training will be refined and validated in the context of his struggle for justice and equality in America for African-Americans and the economic disadvantaged.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s Dualities in Personal Context

A close examination of the pre-Montgomery life of Martin Luther King Jr. reveals that there were three formative contexts that shaped his life and thought. They were his family, church and community, and school. These contexts provided concrete dualities that he will attempt to resolve. His family and church provided the foundation for a sense of personal worth and value, while his academic pilgrimage provided the intellectual method to reconcile the tensions that he found in the community, namely racism and poverty. In short, it was by reconciling the dualities within his personal context and integrating the institutional influences of home, church and school that gave him the intestinal fortitude to meet the demands of leadership in the Civil Rights Movement.

Parents: Dialectic of Personality

Martin Luther King Jr. was born on January 15, 1929 to the Reverend Michael King Sr. and Alberta Williams King. His given name at birth was Michael Lewis King Jr. Growing up, he was known as "M. L." or "Mike." He later changed his name to Martin Luther to reflect his father's name change to Martin Luther.²¹ He was the middle child;

²¹ Martin L. King Sr., *Daddy King: An Autobiography*, (New York: William Morrow & Co., Inc.), 87-88. Daddy King was called Michael until he was grown. He recounts that his father, James Albert King,

he had an older sister, Christine, and a younger brother, Alfred Daniel, known as “A. D.” They grew up in a relatively comfortable and secure home. They were not wealthy, but neither did they struggle financially.²² Despite his relatively sheltered life in his parents’ home, Martin was not able to avoid various tensions that would serve as the creative driving force in his life.

The most obvious influence on King’s life was his immediate family. His personality was shaped by the personalities of his father and mother. Martin Luther King Sr., known as “Daddy King”, was essentially a self-made man. He came from a humble beginning as the son of sharecroppers in Stockbridge, Georgia.²³ By his own admission he was rough, raw and country.²⁴ Daddy King was impatient and had a temper.²⁵ However, he was driven by a desire to better his condition and to ensure that his family would not suffer the deprivations that he experienced growing up. He had moved to Atlanta, Georgia, to pastor two small churches. While pastoring, he completed his high school education. Because of the poor quality of his schooling in rural Georgia, he was placed in the fifth grade even though he was nearly twenty-one years old.²⁶ After completing his high school requirements he was encouraged to attend Morehouse College. He graduated from Morehouse in 1930.²⁷ He became the associate pastor at one of Atlanta’s most promising Black Baptist Churches, Ebenezer Baptist Church. This

insisted that he named him on the day of his birth, Martin, for one of his brothers and Luther, for another brother. Daddy King’s father’s dying request was that he officially change his name to what he had named him at birth. After his father’s death in 1933 he took out the official papers to change his name to Martin Luther King. His son, who was Michael Jr. was already five. Michael Jr. would later change his name to Martin Luther King Jr.

²² *STF*, 90.

²³ *Daddy King*, 23.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 13.; See Lewis Baldwin, 111.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 130.

²⁶ *Daddy King*, 18. This was not unusual during this time. He mentions that there were many older students in much lower grades.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 88-89.

church was pastored by his father-in-law, the Reverend A. D. Williams.

Alberta Williams King, Martin's mother, on the other hand, was from an established family in the Atlanta community. She was the daughter of a minister, A. D. Williams, the pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church.²⁸ She was a compassionate person with a mediating personality.²⁹ Philip Lenud, one of Martin Luther King Jr.'s friends, describes Alberta King as "an absolute angel."³⁰ She came from a strong intellectual tradition. She was already enrolled in Spellman Seminary to be trained to be a teacher when Daddy King met her.³¹

Martin Luther King Jr.'s personality reflected both parents' personalities. The two parental personalities were synthesized in Martin. His sister, Christine Farris, describes Martin as having characteristics of both parents. She observes that he received his mother's "love, compassion and ability to listen to others." He also possessed his father's "single-minded determination, faith and forthrightness."³² Lerone Bennet Jr. echoes Farris's assessment. He notes that Martin was "an exquisite cross between" his father's quick temper temperament and his mother's calm temperament. Reflecting these dual characteristics, Bennett recalls Martin King's characterization of himself as an "ambivert –half extrovert and half introvert."³³

Martin did not consciously choose what aspects of his parent's personality he would make his own. It was more of an intuitive phenomenon based on a complex number of factors that included the nature of his relationship with each parent and his

²⁸ Ibid., 13.

²⁹ Ibid., 130 - 131.

³⁰ Baldwin, 113.

³¹ *Daddy King*, 19. See also Baldwin, 114.

³² Christine King Farris, "The Young Martin: From Childhood to College," *Ebony*, January 1986, 57.

³³ Lerone Bennett Jr., 18

own temperament.³⁴ Daddy King's depiction of Christine and A. D. suggests that their personalities had dominant characteristics of one or the other parents. Christine, he observed, rarely received corporal punishment because she "was exceptionally well-behaved, serious, and studious."³⁵ These were the qualities that were more characteristic of Alberta King than that of Martin King Sr. A. D., on the other hand, was more like his father. The similarities between father King and A.D. were apparent to both parents.³⁶ Martin, parenthetically the middle child, reflected aspects of both parents in his personality. It is important to observe, however, that, in many ways, although his parents were opposites, they were not combative or incompatible. They demonstrated that different personalities could cohabitate in a creative and positive context, with one personality drawing strength from the other personality and vice versa. Speaking of himself, King states:

In my own life and in the life of a person who is seeking to be strong, you combine in your character antithesis strongly marked. You are both militant and moderate; you are both idealistic and realistic. And I think that my strong determination for justice comes from the very strong, dynamic personality of my father, and I would hope that the gentle aspect comes from a mother who is very gentle and sweet.³⁷

Martin King's mediating personality reflects his natural orientation towards synthesis. This predisposition to finding the worthwhile values in opposites will be his basic fundamental method as a civil rights leader, theologian, and activists. Lerone Bennett's provides the following insightful observation, ". . . the tension between these two strains [in his personality structure], the extrovert [his father's personality] and the

³⁴ See Baldwin, 103-107.

³⁵ *Daddy King*, 130.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 127, 131.

³⁷ Martin Luther King Jr. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.* edited by Clayborne Carson. (New York: Warner Books, 1998), 3. Here after referred to as *Autobiography*.

introvert [his mother's personality] is probably a root element in the oak of his greatness."³⁸ If his family of origin and how it shaped his personality is not taken seriously, one would be left to accept the idea that King's method and thoughts were shaped exclusively by white protestant liberal academics.

The Black Church: Dialectics of Faith and Reason

According to King, the Ebenezer Baptist Church was his second home. This was largely because his father was the pastor of that church and his home was in close proximity to the church. He was at church every Sunday. He observed that Sunday school was where his best friends were; it was where he developed the capacity to get along with people.³⁹ It was also in Sunday school that he was taught the basic teachings of his church. He described his Sunday school teachers as "unlettered," given to a fundamentalist approach to the Bible.

His baptism did not come as a result of a deeply emotional or spiritual experience. At age five, he was baptized because his sister joined the church and he did not want his older sister to out-do him by getting baptized. Neither was his baptism a deeply intellectual decision. He admits that he "had never given this matter a thought, and even at the time of my baptism I was unaware of what was taking place."⁴⁰

However, this did not prevent him from having to wrestle with issues of faith. As early as age twelve, he demonstrated a predilection to critical thinking. He observes,

I had always been the questioning and precocious type. At the age 13 I shocked my Sunday school class by denying the bodily resurrection of Jesus. From age thirteen on doubts began to spring forth unrelentingly. At the age of fifteen I entered college and more and more could I see the gap between what I had learned in Sunday School and what I was learning in

³⁸ Lerome Bennet, 18.

³⁹ *Autobiography*, 6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

college. This conflict continued until I studied a course in Bible in which I came to see that behind the legends and myths of the Book were many profound truths which one could not escape.⁴¹

Although, it appeared to be a conflict between the Sunday school version of biblical interpretation and the academic version of biblical interpretation, the center of this issue was fundamentally the conflict between faith and reason.

Another issue of concern for the young Martin King was the black church worship style. This was an issue of reason and emotion. The worship style of his upbringing was a source of embarrassment.⁴² He expressed doubts about the relevance of a worship experience based on emotionalism.⁴³ The model of black religion that emphasized emotions and intonation in preaching rather than ideas had little appeal. The focus on individual salvation in the afterlife rather than social justice in this present life caused him to consider law or medicine as the best method for making a meaningful contribution to society.⁴⁴ Lerone Bennett describes King as “deeply divided within himself” because he was committed outwardly to pursuing law and he wanted to be a minister, but was unable to reconcile himself to “the ‘emotionalism,’ hand-clapping, ‘amening,’ and shouting of the Negro church.”⁴⁵

The faith of King’s early religious experience was uncritical and overly emotional. From King’s perspective, in retrospect his childhood religious church experiences were fundamentalist in nature.⁴⁶ Keith Miller cites five facts that provide a nuanced counter to this characterization of Ebenezer Baptist Church, and Daddy King in

⁴¹ Martin Luther King Jr., “An Autobiography of Religious Development” *Papers*, vol. 1, 357-358.

⁴² Stephen Oates, 3-4, Baldwin, 278, Coretta King, 98.

⁴³ Reddick, *Crusader*, 62.

⁴⁴ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 37.

⁴⁵ *Autobiography*, 15. cf. Lerome Bennett, 27.

⁴⁶ Martin Luther King, “Autobiography of Religious Development” *Papers*, 1, 361.

particular, as fundamentalist. He argues first, Daddy King's desire to win converts caused him to preach in a manner that would allow him to connect with his audience. Second, he was a Morehouse graduate where the religion faculty was far from fundamentalist in thought. Third, he was a very close friend with Morehouse's president, Benjamin Mayes, the first president with an earned PhD from the University of Chicago. Dr. Mayes, a preacher of considerable intellectual prowess, was a frequent guest preacher at the Ebenezer Church. Fourth, Daddy King was appointed to the Board of Trustees of Morehouse College which would not likely have happened had he been a fundamentalist in thought. Fifth, Daddy King was conservative in personal morals and ethics. However, this can be accounted for pragmatic reasons rather than ideological reasons.⁴⁷

While Miller's argument may be convincing, it does not ameliorate Martin King Jr.'s clear assessment to the contrary. King clearly articulates his understanding of the theological orientation within his Sunday school as being "quite in the fundamentalist line." He specifically connects this characterization with the idea that the Sunday school teachers never "doubted the infallibility of the scriptures." He buttressed this contention with the observation that most of them had never heard of biblical criticism.⁴⁸ What is important here is that what he was exposed to in church –through Sunday school, worship services and preaching at Ebenezer-- created dialectical tension between his questioning and critical young mind. Stephen Oates describes the internal tension with his father as "a mixture of awe respect, intimidation, and embarrassment. He thought Daddy was awfully emotional."⁴⁹ King stated that he had great admiration for his father as a pastor and role

⁴⁷ Keith Miller, *Voice of Deliverance*, 38, 222 ff56. Miller appears to have a greater appreciation for the subtle nuances of King's understanding and experiences than Garrow.

⁴⁸ King, "Autobiography of Religious Development," 361.

⁴⁹ Stephen Oates, 3-4.

model, however, they “differed a great deal theologically.”⁵⁰

While the Black Church provided a place that sheltered King from many of the harsh realities of the wider white community in the segregated South, it did not address satisfactorily his natural critical mind. While it affirmed the value of his personhood, it did not stimulate his intellectual curiosity. The tension between his “given’ faith and his maturing intellectual powers produced doubts that he states were unrelenting until his sophomore year of college.⁵¹ He observes:

I had seen that most Negro ministers were unlettered, not trained in seminaries, and that gave me pause. I had been brought up in church and knew about religion, but I wondered whether it could serve as a vehicle for modern thinking, whether religion could be intellectually respectable as well as emotionally satisfying.⁵²

Classism: Dialectics of Haves and Have Not’s

Another formative experience that King had to reconcile was that of the differences in class. He had to reconcile his own status as a child of a middle-class home and the abject poverty that the other black children experienced in his surrounding community. Although his home on Auburn Avenue was in a quiet business district, it was only up the hill from a poor black ghetto area. The proximity to those less fortunate than himself had a profound affect on his sensibilities for the poor. Lewis Baldwin observes, “King developed an early awareness and sensitivity to the impact of poverty on large numbers of his peoples in the 1930s and 1940s.”⁵³ King noted the impact of his awareness of the poor had on him. He would write years later, “Although, I came from a home of economic security and relative comfort, I could never get out of my mind the

⁵⁰ King, “Autobiography of Religious Development,” 363.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 361-362; cf. *Autobiography*, 15.

⁵² *Autobiography*, 15

⁵³ Lewis Baldwin, 19.

economic insecurity of many of my playmates and the tragic poverty of those living around me.”⁵⁴

The dichotomy between his personal security and comfort on the one hand, and the economic deprivation and insecurity of many of those around him, on the other hand, created an inner tension that would drive him to attempt to understand firsthand the plight of the poor by working as a common laborer during the summer months of his college days.⁵⁵ These combined experiences would provide the basis for his critique of capitalism via a Marxist analysis.⁵⁶

Racism: The Dialectics of Black and White

Not only was King keenly aware of class distinctions at an early age, but he was also confronted with race distinctions as a young child. He had developed a close friendship with a white child, the son of the owner of the grocery store across from his home. From about age three to about age six, they were able to freely play together. After they both entered school, the parents of his playmate prohibited him from playing with little Martin. When he asked his mother why his playmate’s parents had prevented them from playing, Alberta King took him into her lap and began explaining to him for the first time about the history of racism in America.⁵⁷ This revelation was so traumatic that Martin King Jr. determined to hate every white person. As he reflected on this experience he pondered, “How he could love a race of people who hated me and who had been responsible for breaking me up with one of my best friends?”⁵⁸

Although the wider community attempted to devalue King because of his skin

⁵⁴ *STF*, 90. See also Lewis Baldwin, 19.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 18-19. See also “An Autobiography of Religious Development,” 362 -363.

⁵⁸ “An Autobiography of Religious Development,” 362-363.

color, his home life affirmed the dignity of all human personality. His mother, in telling the story of racism in America, was careful to affirm that he was as good as anyone. She told him not to be impressed by prejudice around him. He was admonished not to think that there was something that made others better than him, especially because of his skin color.⁵⁹ His father modeled and reinforced what his mother attempted to explain about his own dignity and self-worth. There are two experiences that Martin King Jr. recounts that demonstrated his father's unwillingness to submit to white racism devaluation of him. The first experience was when his father walked out of a store because the clerk refused to serve them unless they went to the rear of the store. The other experience was when his father challenged a white policeman for calling him "a boy."⁶⁰ The latter experience affirmed that even in the face of white racist authority, you can still maintain your dignity by challenging their authority to demean and devalue you.⁶¹

Martin Luther King Jr.'s formative childhood experiences within his family and community set up for him at an early age a dialectical existential reality. It was unavoidable for him, even on an unconscious level, to experience the tensions that were created in the different personalities of his parents, the conflicting reality between the "haves" and the "have nots," and the devaluing of his being by white racism and the affirming of his essential worth by his home and community. Even the black church failed to provide an intellectually tension-free zone as he grappled with the issues of

⁵⁹ *STF*, 19. Also see *Daddy King*, 130.

⁶⁰ *STF*, 19-20.

⁶¹ The encounter with the police was significant because King was accustomed to seeing the brutality against helpless blacks in their community. *Ibid.*, 90. It is also interesting how Martin King Jr. characterized the ending of the two incidents. In recounting the incident with the clerk he ends it with his father "muttering" to himself. *Ibid.*, 19. He concludes the story with the policemen with how the policeman "wrote the ticket *nervously*, and left the scene as *quickly* as possible." *Ibid.*, 20 (emphasis supplied). The first incident focused on his father's response to the clerk. The second experience focused on the policeman's response to his father. The common theme to both experiences was that his father did not passively accept the place that the white community had assigned him.

faith, experience and reason. On a conscious level there were attempts to reconcile these opposite concepts and experiences. Lewis Baldwin provides a cogent summary of this dimension of his development:

Rarely had King experienced anything without also encountering its opposite. His family, church, and neighborhood constantly dinned into his mind the idea that he was as significant as anyone else, whereas white society conspired to instill in him the corroding notion that he was worthless. His father preached and struggled against segregation, whereas his white childhood friend's father worked to keep him and his friend apart. He had an economically secure and comfortable childhood, but his playmates and workmates lived in poverty and insecurity. . . . All of these experiences, which might have broken the spirit of the average perceptive and sensitive child, produced an individual so driven to think and learn that King left high school at the end of his sophomore year and entered college at the age of fifteen.⁶²

It was King's existential situation that drove him to seek answers to the conflicting realities that existed in his own experience. After discovering Hegel's dialectical methods some years later, King could articulate this existential tension more clearly. He writes that in order for the negro to answer the question "Who am I?," he/she must confront and accept the reality that he/she is "the child of two cultures – Africa and America." Echoing DuBois's "twoness" of the black forks, he uses the Hegelian synthesis to argue that "the American Negro is neither totally African nor totally Western. He is Afro-American, a true hybrid, a combination of two cultures."⁶³ This is an important insight into King's self-understanding. He never saw himself in a simplistic, one dimensional manner.

Intellectual Development – A Quest for a Method

Martin Luther King Jr. began college at the age 15. At age 19, he began seminary,

⁶² Baldwin, 24-25.

⁶³ King, *WDWGFH*, 53.

and at the age of 26 he had completed his Ph.D. in Systematic Theology. He did not consciously begin this phase of his journey with the idea of finding a method that would resolve the conflicting issues of race, economics, and faith. However, his post-high school education carried him through a process that would end with him embracing a method that he had been intuitively using. This process can be divided appropriately into the three periods of his post-high school education – Morehouse College, Crozer Seminary, and Boston University. Each period builds on and expands the previous period. Each period’s contribution to shaping King’s intellectual development is equally important.

Morehouse: Continuity and Change

King’s Morehouse years are perhaps the most understated period of his intellectual training. Most of the earlier biographers and historians essentially ignore this period by treating this period as a part of his family influences or give it only perfunctory acknowledgement.⁶⁴ There may be several reasons that account for this lack of attention to his years at Morehouse as an important phase in his intellectual development. First, King was a commuter student and was still under the immediate oversight and care of his parents, particularly his father.⁶⁵ Thus it is easy to simply label this period as a continuation of his family experience and influence.

Second, during this period there was nothing outstanding about King as a student.

He did not distinguish himself academically. Neither did he rise to any level of

⁶⁴ Among the African-American biographers of, Martin Luther King Jr., Lawrence D. Reddick, who wrote the first biography (published in 1957) of Martin Luther King Jr. devoted separate chapters on King’s community (Atlanta, GA), family, and Morehouse College. Subsequent biographers, such as Lerone Bennett Jr., a Morehouse alumnus and King’s classmate, treated King’s home, community and Morehouse years as one. (1964, *What Manner of Man*, Chapter 1, “Soil”). David L. Lewis’ 1970 biography followed Bennett’s pattern (King: *A Biography*, “Doctor, Lawyer – Preacher?”). The definitive work uncovering the significance of King’s Morehouse College experience is yet to be written.

⁶⁵ Lerone Bennett, 27.

significant position of leadership on the Morehouse campus. His professors viewed him as only an average student. His freshman philosophy teacher, Samuel Williams, observes, “. . . I would not say that he was the most outstanding student we had, he was not.”⁶⁶

Furthermore, there are only a few extant papers from his Morehouse years; therefore there are not many documentary resources for probing his thoughts during this period.

Perhaps the most significant reason for scholars’ neglect of this period is King’s own neglect to give his Morehouse years any prominence in his writings. He glosses over the significance of Morehouse in his “Pilgrimage to Non Violence” with only a cursory comment that he read Thoreau’s *Essay on Civil Disobedience*, which provided his first encounter with the theory of non-violence. This is contrasted with the next line (which begins the next paragraph), where he states, “Not until I entered Crozer in 1948, however, did I begin a serious intellectual quest for a method to eliminate social evil.”⁶⁷

These reasons notwithstanding, it is crucial to understand the impact of the Morehouse years in order to appreciate and understand his Crozer and Boston University years with respect to his intellectual development. There were four significant developments during this period that were critical for his future development. They were 1.) His freedom from the shackles of fundamentalism; 2.) His deepening economic critique; 3.) A corrective in his view of the race issue; and 4.) His commitment to his life’s vocation.

Freedom from the Shackles of Fundamentalism

Given the fact the Martin King Jr. was fifteen when he began college, Morehouse was an ideal setting for this period of his maturation. It provided continuity and change at

⁶⁶ David Lewis, 20.

⁶⁷ *STF*, 91.

the same time. It was in Atlanta, which allowed him to commute while still under his parental care. It was a familiar place for him, as He had been on campus a number of times during his childhood. He knew a number of the men who were in his freshman class. Furthermore, his father and maternal grandfather, Rev. A. D. Williams, were alumni of Morehouse.

Morehouse presented a context for change that would not cause a radical break from his home and church roots. It provided a safe distance from the overbearing influence of his father to exercise his natural predilection to critical analysis. It was during this period, he recounts, that “brought many doubts into my mind.” It was through this process of working through his doubts that he could assert, “It was then that the shackles of fundamentalism were removed from my body.”⁶⁸ According to Clayborne Carson, George Kelsey, a professor of Religion at Morehouse, was very helpful in assisting King in this process. Carson observes that Kelsey “provided some of the intellectual resources King needed to resolve the conflict between the religious traditions of his youth and the secular ideas he had learned in college.”⁶⁹ In his course with Kelsey, King was able to resolve the conflict by being convinced “that behind the legends and myths of the Book were many profound truths which one could not escape.”⁷⁰

King was convinced that it was the Morehouse experience that prepared him to accept the liberalism of Crozer and Boston University. Because of the continuity of Morehouse with his home, church, and community, it was perhaps easier to develop his critical intellectual faculties without having a sense of betraying his father. He could

⁶⁸ *Autobiography*, 15.

⁶⁹ Clayborne Carson, “Introduction” *Papers*, vol. 1, 42.

⁷⁰ *Autobiography*, 16. See “Autobiography of Religious Development,” 362.

admit in a paper in 1950 that while he admired his father, they differed “a great deal” theologically.⁷¹

Corrective of the Race Issue

Another important development for King, during his Morehouse years was his softening attitude towards white people. Because of his earlier experiences with racism, he had determined to hate all white people. However, two experiences, during his Morehouse years would cause him to reevaluate his harsh stance towards all white people. The first experience was his trip to work on a Connecticut tobacco farm with a group of Morehouse students. This occurred in the summer of his freshman year at Morehouse. This was his first trip out of the segregated South. He was amazed to discover that black and white were not separated by the conventions of Jim Crowism. Black-and-white not only worked together, but also rode public transportation side by side, ate at the same restaurants, and attended church together.⁷²

King’s Connecticut experience forced him to reconsider how he saw white people universally. He began to consider the possibility that racism was primarily a southern white problem.⁷³ This change in perspective about white people also had a profound affect on how he viewed his home community. Lawrence D. Reddick contends, “Martin’s world was expanding in other ways too. He began to look at Atlanta more steadily and more critically, noting its paradoxes and contradictions.”⁷⁴ His Connecticut

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Lerone Bennett, *What Manner of Man: A Biography of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Chicago: Johnson Pub. Co, 1976), 25-26.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Reddick, Lawrence D. *Crusader Without Violence: A Biography of Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: Harper, 1959), 75.

experience also prepared him for a crucial encounter with white peers in the interracial Intercollegiate Council in the Atlanta area. King observed,

As soon as I entered college, I started working with organizations that were trying to make racial justice in reality. The wholesome relations, we had in the Intercollegiate Council convinced me that we had many white persons as allies, particularly among the young generation.⁷⁵

He reflects, it was only after his encounters with his southern white peers, that “my resentment [of whites] was softened, and a spirit of cooperation took its place.”⁷⁶

Deepening Economic Critique

It was during his Morehouse years that Martin Luther King Jr.'s economic critique progressed from existential cognitive dissonance to a reflective evaluation of the economic differentiation between race and class. There were two critical components to this deepening critique. One component was theoretical and the other component was experiential.

Martin King settled on a major sociology which provided a theoretical framework in which to reflect on the economic plight of people in America. Professor Walter Chivers, King's academic advisor, was characterized as “a relentless analyst of socialist systems.”⁷⁷ While Chivers contented that racism was the African-American's primary problem in America, he argued that economics was the root issue of racism.⁷⁸ Describing Chivers's position, Clayborne Carson notes:

[Chivers]...praised social reformers, such as Harlem's, militant minister, Adam Clayton Powell, but offered caustic criticisms of cautious “talented tenth Negro leaders.” Although his discussion of working-class issues

⁷⁵ King, *Autobiography*, 14.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ David Lewis, 19.

⁷⁸ Lerone Bennett, 28. See also David Lewis, 21.

were clearly influenced by Marx, Chivers did not openly advocate socialism, and he rejected communism as akin to totalitarian fascism.⁷⁹

The second component came by way of his personal experience working as a common laborer. According to Lerone Bennett, King could have worked with his father or used his father's contacts to work in an office. He chose, however, to work as a laborer. Bennett, further observes that he “wanted to work with the masses to ‘learn their plight and feel their feelings.’”⁸⁰ He worked during his vacation periods in several different contexts over the course of his years at Morehouse. In Atlanta, he worked at the Atlanta Mattress Factory and the Railway Express Company.⁸¹

Each work experience deepened and broadened his perspective on the plight of the working class which validated and confirmed Professor Chivers’s position about the relationship of race to economics.⁸² At the Atlanta Mattress Factory, King progressed from a dock hand, to a straw boss, to an office worker. He observed, in this context however, that blacks and whites were treated essentially the same. It was only a matter of degree of insult and exportation. They were equally over worked, disrespected, and underpaid. King's experience at the Railway Express Company was so unbearable and offensive to his personal dignity that he quit.⁸³ Although he could quit, his experience only heightened the sensitivity for those persons who did not have the option. As a college student supported by middle-class parents, he had an option. However, if the other workers were to support their families they had to endure the insults.

⁷⁹ Clayborne Carson, “Introduction.” *Papers*, 1, 41.

⁸⁰ Lerone Bennett, 28.

⁸¹ David Lewis, 21.

⁸² Lerone Bennett, 28. While King does not directly attribute to Chivers his understanding of the relationship between class and race, he does recount the affect seeing the exploitation of poor white and black while he was working in a plant that hired both blacks and whites. *STF*, 90.

⁸³ David Lewis, 21.

Life's Vocation: A Call to Serve Humanity

Martin Luther King Jr. asserts that it was during his high school years that he felt the urge to enter the ministry. However, those urges were muted by his crisis in faith and his perception of African American ministers. He described this sense of calling on his life as a call to serve humanity. The generalization of this call provided the emotional distance to pursue, at least in his mind, other vocational interests. He rationalized that he could serve humanity by becoming a physician, or perhaps an attorney. Very early in his matriculation at Morehouse, he realized that he was not suited for the precise rigors of the scientific track.

Eliminating pre-medicine as course of study, left him with pre-law track. With law in mind, he settled on sociology as his major. King's biographer, David Lewis, provides a very helpful and insightful rationale for sociology as King's choice of majors. He notes:

Perhaps his unsuitability for the premedical sciences and is demonstrated talent in the humanities commended the discipline to him as an ideal compromise between the firm methodology of the sciences and the exciting imprecision of the arts. Sociology purported to be an exact discipline requiring mastery of disagreeable statistics, but its data was derived from the vibrant stuff of human into action. Moreover, a major sociology was thoroughly acceptable to law school, and his aptitude pointed to a brilliant career in the legal profession.⁸⁴

These elements of sociology were an excellent synthesis of issues that he struggled with in an attempt to evade the ministry, which is, faith and ministry models.

Perhaps the most significant influence on his vocational decision was the ever present models of the ideal Negro ministers in the persons of Dr. Benjamin Mays and Dr. George Kelsey. In King's own words, these men were “both ministers, both deeply

⁸⁴ David Lewis, 20-21

religious, and yet both were learned men, aware of all of the trends of modern thinking.” He concluded, “I could see in their lives the ideal of what I wanted a minister to be.”⁸⁵ King credits Kelsey as the one who helped him work through his period of doubt and skepticism, reconciling his critical probing intellectual nature with the simplistic uncritical biblical narratives. The significance of Mays and Kelsey is that they forced to face his call to ministry without the distortion of religious doubt's or inadequate models for ministry.

However, he did not submit to ever growing sense of conviction to enter the ministry until he returned from his summer job in Connecticut in 1947. King was very involved in leading out in the religious services. Perhaps this experience came at the right moment, when the frustrations and inner conflict were contrasted with the ease, naturalness, and satisfaction he experienced as he led out in the religious services through song and sermon. At any rate, it was in the tobacco fields of Connecticut that Martin Luther King Jr. submitted to the irrepressible inner urge to enter the ministry.⁸⁶

It was this fact that makes King's Morehouse years as crucial to his intellectual development at Crozer and Boston University. It set him on an irreversible path to becoming a public figure of mythic proportions. David Lewis aptly sums up the critical juncture in King's life:

Had he persisted in his aversion to the ministry, he would have become an incompetent physician whose beside manner might have spared him the wrath of the community. With far less effort, he would have become a trial lawyer in the mold of William Jennings Bryan. He might even have become an inspiring sociology chairman in a segregated college. But he was subtly impressed by George Kelsey and Benjamin Mays. Kelsey demonstrated the old biblical literalism and the almost carnival pulpit dramaturgy that disturbed Mike in his formative years as being entirely

⁸⁵ *Autobiography*, 16.

⁸⁶ Clayborne Carson, “Introduction,” 45.

irrelevant to the contemporary minister's mission of spiritual salvation and social amelioration. The good pastor, Kelsey maintained, is also a good philosopher.⁸⁷

King's Morehouse years are still the hidden years of King's development. They are largely ignored. However, the Morehouse years are critical for providing the needed continuity and change from the years prior. They provided the necessary foundation for what was to happen in his seminary and graduate student years. Without breaking free from the shackles of fundamentalism and finding a faith grounded in a critical understanding of the biblical stories while at Morehouse, King may not have become a minister. Without the experiences as a laborer within the reflective environment of his sociology courses, he may not have developed an appreciation for a theoretical underpinning for social action.

Crozer Theological Seminary: A Turn Towards Liberalism

While Martin Luther King Jr.'s Morehouse years provided a balanced mix of continuity and change, his Crozer Seminary years provided a radical change of seminary experience. It was a northern, theologically liberal, predominantly white seminary over six hundred miles from Atlanta. It was a period of coming of age for the young Martin. He enter seminary at the age of nineteen, making him considerably younger than most of his classmates.⁹⁰ There are several important reasons Crozer provided an ideal setting for his development at this stage. First, Crozer was an outstanding liberal theological seminary that would allow King to broaden the theological-intellectual horizons in which his Morehouse education had already begun to expose him. This reality was not lost on his father who discouraged his son from doing advanced training and especially at a

⁸⁷ David Lewis, 23.

⁹⁰ Lawrence Reddick, 77.

northern liberal institution. The father King's resistance stemmed in part from his fear the younger King would lose his desire to return south.⁹¹

Second, he is, for the first time, completely removed from the physical presence, control, and influence of his father. He could make his own day-to-day decisions about his life. He, as Lawrence D. Reddick describes, "was no longer divided between home and campus." He could devote more focused attention to his studies without the distractions of home and the Atlanta social scene.⁹² This fact is evidenced by his improved academic performance while at Crozer.⁹³

Third, Crozer's small student body along with the faculty living on the picturesque, cloistered campus provided a nurturing environment for King to get to know his fellow students and faculty.⁹⁴ In addition to the support of the small intimate campus, he had the benefit of his family's extended Baptist connection in the person of Rev. and Mrs. J. Pius Barbour. Rev. Barbour, a Morehouse graduate, was the first to complete studies at Crozer Theological Seminary. He pastored a prominent Baptist church in Chester, Pennsylvania, only a few miles from the campus. The Barbours' home provided the familiar southern culture expressed in hospitality and good food. It was his home away from home; it provided him with a sense of place in a strange land.⁹⁵

⁹¹ King, *Daddy King*, 144-145, cf. Baldwin, *There is a Balm in Gilead*, 125.

⁹² Carson, *Papers* 1: 47. See King Jr. to Alberta Williams King, October 1948, *Papers* 1:161.

⁹³ Lawrence Reddick, 78. Cf. Lerone Bennett, 36. Reddick and Lerome Bennett overstate King's academic record by contending that he was an "A" student all three years at Crozer. A review of his transcript does not support their claim. However, it does reveal that his academic performance greatly improved over his Morehouse record. Furthermore, he did receive A's in all of his courses in his third and final year of study at Crozer. See *King's Papers*, vol. 1, 48 for list of his courses and grades from Crozer.

⁹⁴ Lawrence Reddick, 77. Clayborne Carson, "Introduction," *Papers*, 1: 47. See Charles E. Batten to King Jr., October 1946. *Papers*, 1: 126.

⁹⁵ Lawrence Reddick, 83. Lewis Baldwin, *There is a Balm in Gilead*, 125. Lewis Baldwin provides an extended description of the significance of J. Pius Barbour to the young King. He contends that in part, Barbour's recommendation was of the reason that King came to Crozer. While at Crozer, Barbour provided a home away from home where King could "hang out, eat, and watch television. Barbour was a mentor in ministry and intellectual sparring partner, arguing the finer points of theology and social justice issues.

This northern liberal Baptist Seminary provided the context in which King could expand and deepen his understanding of the conflicting tensions religion, race, and poverty that his Atlanta experience – home, church and community had created for him. Crozer would provide three significant encounters that he would build on as he sought a means to address the issues of fundamentalism, racism, and classism. These encounters are liberal theology, northern racism, and Marxism.

Turn Towards Liberal Theology

Morehouse had begun the process of removing from King the “shackles of fundamentalism.” It was Crozer that provided liberal theology as the answer to fundamentalism. King observes that what he learned at Crozer knocked him out of his “dogmatic slumber.” He recalls that liberal theology was so satisfying that he came perilous close to uncritically accepting everything that liberal theology taught. It was the liberal view of humanity that resonated with King. He was “absolutely convinced of the natural goodness of man and the natural power of human reason.”⁹⁶

King would not completely turn to a liberal view of humanity; he would only turn “towards” liberal theology. While at Crozer, his encounter with the Niebuhrian pessimistic view of the sinfulness of man helped prevent him from completely embracing liberal theology. This encounter came by way of arguments with Professor Kenneth Smith at school and J. Pius Barbour after school time.⁹⁷ He would eventually reconcile the liberal and neo-orthodox conception of humanity.

Barbour provided fatherly counsel that helped King avoid a number of critical problems. He even rescued King from some potentially embarrassing social situations. See also David Lewis, *King: A Biography*. 26, 27-28, 30-33.

⁹⁶ Martin Luther King Jr. *Strength to Love*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 147.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 147-148.

A second aspect of liberal theological thought that captured King's attention and imagination was Walter Rauschenbusch's social gospel as expressed in *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. Rauschenbusch's contention that the church must be concerned about the whole "person" was particularly interesting to King. This concept emanated from a particular notion of humanity's natural goodness. Once again Reinhold Niebuhr would serve a corrective to what Barbour and others saw as a naive view of humanity.

King's introduction to the life and views of Mahatma Gandhi was in this context of grappling with his understanding of what it means to be human, while reflecting on the role that church must play in uplifting of humanity from its low estate. Because of King's subsequent use of Gandhi's nonviolent approach as a philosophical commitment and tactical strategy for eradicating racism and segregation Gandhi's impact on King at this stage of his development is probably overstated. To be sure his exposure to Gandhi at Crozer was important for his latter development. However, while at Crozer, issues that Gandhi raised for him were in the context of his view of the natural goodness of humanity and the social responsibility of the Christian church to address the physical needs of humanity, along with humanity's spiritual needs.

Northern Racism

At Crozer, Martin Luther King Jr. was in an educational context that was, for the first time interracial. He had a limited, well-defined interracial experience while at Morehouse with the Collegiate Interracial Council. However, he was not in class and competing for grades with white students. Additionally, Crozer had only eleven African-American students out of a student population of about ninety students. On the surface, the North was free of the racial tensions and subjugation that were common in the South.

However, King would come to understand that was not merely a southern problem, but an American problem. His encounter with racism in the North would also challenge his liberal notion of the goodness of humanity.

One experience in particular would bring this reality clearly into focus. King and several friends were driving through a small town in New Jersey and stopped at a restaurant to eat. Because there were anti-discrimination laws in New Jersey, they did not anticipate any problems. To their surprise, they were refused service and encouraged to leave at gunpoint by the restaurant's owner. They left and returned with a police who arrested the owner and secured the commitment from three white University of Pennsylvania students to serve as witnesses to the incident. The matter was turned over to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Camden, New Jersey, to pursue legally. The case was eventually dropped in part because the white student witnesses reneged on the commitment to testify.⁹⁸

The affects of racism on King were also psychological. For the first time, King had to compete with white students academically. He felt the internal pressure to measure up to the lessons taught in his home, church, community, and at Morehouse to prove that he was as capable as any white person. He was determined to defy the white stereotypes of African-Americans.⁹⁹ This pressure caused him to become more formal and stiff to the point that he was viewed as "reserved and humorless."¹⁰⁰ He excelled in academics as well as extra-curricula pursuits, becoming the valedictorian and class president.¹⁰¹ He was widely respected within the Crozer community among students and faculty.

⁹⁸ Lawrence Reddick, 82-83. See also Lerone Bennett, 35, and David Lewis, 33-34.

⁹⁹ Lerone Bennett, 34. See also David Lewis, 28.

¹⁰⁰ David Lewis, 28.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 32, 37-38.

However, his celebrated status was not enough to overcome the problem of race when it came to his interracial relationship with one of the daughters of a Crozer's staffer. He had fallen so deeply for this young lady that he wanted to marry her. However, persons of both races discouraged him. Eventually the young woman was sent away by her parents and the relationship ended.¹⁰² His Crozer experience had brought him to the summit of racial toleration only to pull him back to the reality and depth of the race problem.

Marxism's Critique of Christianity

King states that during the 1948 Christmas break, he took up the task of reading Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* and *The Communist Manifesto*. He set his mind to carefully scrutinize these writings. He also read other commentaries on Marx's writings along with works on Lenin.¹⁰³ Although, King could not embrace Marx's atheism or communism's totalitarianism, Marxism challenged him on two levels. The first level was that the presence of Marxism was an indictment against Christianity for having nothing to say about the exploitation of the poor by the rich. Marxism grew out of a protest against the glaring injustices perpetrated by the wealthy on the weak and helpless. King concluded that such a protest is consistent with Jesus's understanding of his mission as reflected in Luke 4:18.¹⁰⁴

Second, Marxism challenged the materialism of capitalism, which was the cause of the ever-increasing gulf between the rich and the poor. Marx's critique of the modern bourgeois culture resonated with his own sensibilities as a teenager. Marx provided King with the means to critique capitalism's emphasis on judging success by material

¹⁰² Ibid.,33.

¹⁰³ *STF*, 92.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 93-94.

acquisitions.¹⁰⁵ King was so passionate in his use of the Marxist critique of capitalism that J. Pius Barbour feared that he had become an economic Marxist.¹⁰⁶

King's Crozer years were significant because it was during these years that he came of age. When he came to the end of his theological training, he had gained the necessary confidence as a student and the critical intellectual stimulation to decide to further his education by pursuing a Ph.D. at Boston University, one of the premier schools in the country. Furthermore, he had matured enough as a man to resist his father's pressure to return home to assume the role of his associate at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta.¹⁰⁷

Boston University: Back to the Future

In 1951, Martin Luther King Jr. enrolled into Boston University to do advanced studies in Systematic Theology and philosophy. His successful tenure at Crozer gave him the confidence and stimulation to pursue the doctorate of philosophy degree. Although, there were those who did not see the benefit or necessity to continue his education beyond his seminary training, his father agreed to provide moral and financial support to attain this goal. His father's support was both driven by paternal pride and practical professional concerns.¹⁰⁸ As Clayborne Carson aptly describes, "... his son's theological studies provided a gloss of erudition." That was a source of deep pride for Daddy King. Practically, Daddy King thought that while his son was young he could get his education out of the way, then he could assume his responsibilities at Ebenezer as his co-pastor without distraction. Then the senior King could begin the process of retiring while the

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 94.

¹⁰⁶ David Lewis, 36.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 87.

¹⁰⁸ *Daddy King*, 147. See also Lawrence Reddick, 86-87.

younger King was prepared to succeed him as he had succeeded his father-in-law, thus continuing the family dynasty.¹⁰⁹

King cites the reason for continuing his education: It was to equip him to teach on a college campus or a school of religion. His studies at Crozer had awakened in him a desire to research and produce scholarship that would address the issues facing the African-American church and community.¹¹⁰ With the examples of his Morehouse professors, he did not see that his aspiration to teach and produce scholarship was incongruent with his fundamental call to preach and pastor.

King's Boston University experience was significant because it provided him a way "back to the future." That is, it allowed him a way to move towards his future while connecting with his roots; he was able to rationally confront the contradictions of his childhood and youth, while affirming his own sense of authentic personhood. There were three important developments for King during this period. In his description of Boston University's contribution to his pilgrimage to non-violence, he observes that it contributed two important intellectual foundations for him. First, he refined his theological foundations through a sustained study of Personalism. Second, he found a methodology of rationality that he would apply to all areas of his thought and praxis.¹¹¹ However, the third significant development while at Boston was not intellectual; it was profoundly personal, but no less important. He found a life's mate in Coretta Scott, a fellow southerner. Each of these developments was, in their own way, his way "back" to his "future."

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. See also Clayborne Carson, "Introduction," *Papers*, 2: 1.

¹¹⁰ Martin Luther King Jr., "Fragment of Martin Luther King Jr.'s Application to Boston University," *Papers*, 1: 390. Here after referred to as "Fragments."

¹¹¹ King, *STF*, 100–101.

Personalism

King was drawn to Boston University because of the appeal of the personalistic philosophy of Edgar Sheffield Brightman.¹¹² His professor, Raymond J. Bean, a graduate of Boston University, greatly influenced him to pursue studying at Boston University under the mentorship of Brightman.¹¹³ Furthermore, Boston University had a reputation for being a place conducive for African-Americans to do graduate studies because of their supportive staff and sizable community of African-American graduate students who had come to study at institutions in the wider Boston area.¹¹⁴

King observes that while studying personalism at Boston University under Edgar Brightman and L. Harold DeWolf, two basic philosophical and theological convictions were strengthened – a personal God and the “dignity and worth of all human personality.” This basic philosophical position remained foundational in his theological worldview.¹¹⁵ Clayborne Carson argues that personalism “satisfied King’s desire for both intellectually cogency and experiential religious understanding.” King had increasingly come to appreciate personalism as a helpful way to reconcile his childhood religious experience with his need for intellectual satisfaction.¹¹⁶ Carson contends that “King’s discovery of personalist theology had both strengthened his ties with African-American Baptist traditions and encouraged him to pursue further theological study at Boston University.”¹¹⁷

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ “Fragments,” *Papers*, 1: 390.

¹¹⁴ Clayborne Carson, “Introduction,” *Papers*, 1: 4.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 100.

¹¹⁶ Clayborne Carson, “Introduction,” *Papers*, 1: 56. See also Martin Luther King Jr., “A Conception and Impression of Religion Drawn from Dr. Brightman’s Book Entitled *A Philosophy of Religion*,” *Papers*, 1: 411, 415-416.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 57.

Method of Rationality

King states that his study of the philosophy of Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel under Brightman (and, after his death, with Peter Pertocci) provided him with a method of rational coherence. Additionally, King observes that Hegel's "analysis of the dialectical process, in spite of its shortcomings, helped me to see that growth comes through struggle."¹¹⁸ The significance of Hegel's dialectical method will be the subject of a more thorough discussion in the next chapter. However, at this point, it is important to note that it was at Boston University that King found in the dialectical method, the intellectual means to resolve his theological, philosophical, and ethical contradictions.

Coretta Scott: A Partner in Life

Martin L. King Jr.'s relationship with Coretta Scott was an important development while at Boston University. First, it provides a clue into the significance of issues of race and poverty that he was concerned about since childhood. He notes that besides her beauty, one of the most striking characteristics of his future bride was her ability to meaningfully discuss the issues of race, class and war. He was additionally impressed that she was already involved in movements that were addressing these issues. It was important that he was able to communicate to his wife on matters that were of deep concern to him.¹¹⁹ Mrs. King describes her spiritual pilgrimage in much the same manner as King's, namely, she was seeking a religious experience that was intellectually satisfying and socially relevant.¹²⁰

As Martin and Coretta's relationship evolved they discovered that the similarity

¹¹⁸ *STF*, 100-101.

¹¹⁹ *Autobiography*, 35.

¹²⁰ Coretta Scott King, *My Life with Martin Luther King Jr.* revised edition (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1993), 51.

and differences in the pilgrimages were providentially preparing them for each other.¹²¹ They came from strong nuclear families, with parents who modeled courage and strength. Both had fathers with dominant personalities: they were self-made men. Their mothers, however, were quiet and reserved women. Being from the South, both experienced some of the harsh realities of the southern racism. They both journeyed to the North to be prepared for their chosen professions. They had a desire to return to the South to make a difference for their fellow African-American brothers and sisters.¹²²

Martin Luther King Jr.'s courtship and marriage to Coretta Scott represented an important development in his personal maturity. It reflected his becoming a man and breaking free from the orbit of his father's influence. Coretta tells of Martin sharing with her, early in their relationship, about an engagement arranged by his father with a young woman. The young lady was from an important family in Atlanta, Georgia. His father and the young lady's parents expected him to marry her. Martin, Coretta recounts, confided in her that his father did not want him to marry, but his father was committed to support him and his wife while he was in school. However, he had made up his mind that he wanted to marry her. He avowed: "I am going to make my own decisions: I will choose my own wife."¹²³ Although his father came around and gave his blessing and support to the marriage, Martin's marriage to Coretta was a defining moment. He was transformed from "Martin, Junior" to "Martin, the man."

Coretta Scott King provided the blend and balance of all the ambivalence that Martin King had with respect to women. Intellectually, he believed that women were as capable as men and could aspire and succeed in leadership. However, in his personal life,

¹²¹ Ibid., 48

¹²² Ibid., 50-58. cf. Lawrence Reddick, 90-106; David Lewis, 40-42.

¹²³ Ibid., 57.

he was more traditional in his expectations of a wife.¹²⁴ She was not only beautiful, but she was also intelligent. Although, she was attentive when Martin spoke about philosophy, theology, and economics, she had her own opinions on such matters. She was able to negotiate the worlds of sophisticated culture of art and music and the simple culture of “Aunt Janie.” She knew how to stand by his side when called upon; she was equally comfortable standing in his shadow without losing her sense of worth, value and personhood.

Summary

A review of Martin Luther King Jr.’s life and times reveals the underlining tensions, contradictions, and concerns of religion, race, and class that motivated his thoughts and actions. Building on the foundation of his home, church, and community he set out on an intellectual quest to resolve these tensions which would led to his chose of career and a life’s companion. The intellectual and practical tensions between faith and reason, black and white, rich and poor, war and peace would be ever present in thoughts and activism.

If Martin Luther King. Jr.’s method of rationality is to be uncovered and understood, it is necessary to first expose the underlining tensions or dualities in his life. This chapter revealed, consistent with Harry Settanni’s premise that philosophers, (in this case, theologians) systems are the results of their effort to resolve underlying dualism in their lives, that were a number of dualisms in King’s formative years that set him on a path to resolve them. They were the dualisms of faith and reason (religion), black and white (race), and rich and poor (class). King’s mediating personality (which was dialectic

¹²⁴ Ibid.

of his father and mother's personalities) reflects the manner in which he would typically approach the dualities of his life. Additionally, his home and extended family, the church and his Auburn Avenue community, provided a relative secure environment that nurtured his religious faith, personal dignity, and intellectual curiosity.

Morehouse College provided a critical context for change and continuity, especially for a sixteen year old entering in to college. There the shackles of fundamentalism were removed providing the foundation for King to grow intellectually and discover his life's calling – the Baptist ministry. Determined to be a preacher of substance intellectually, he attended Crozer Seminary, a northern white liberal institution, outside Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. His stay at Crozer provided the opportunity to widen his experiential and intellectual horizons with respect to the dualism of his childhood and youth – religion, race, and class.

Although committed to the ministry, his preparation would not be complete until he attended Boston University to pursue a Ph.D. in Systematic Theology. Boston University would be significant intellectually and personally. Intellectually, he would sharpen his analytical skills as a thinker and develop the theological meaning for the categories and myths of his childhood religion. Personally, King is prepared when he takes to himself Coretta Scott of Marion County, Alabama, as his bride. His marriage represented the necessary break from his father's control on his life.

CHAPTER II

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR'S AND THE DIALECTICAL METHOD

Introduction

In the previous chapter, following Harry Settanni's thesis that a person's philosophical approach is an attempt to resolve dualities that exist in their personal lives, social/historical movements, and intellectual influences, Martin Luther King' Jr.'s life and historical context were examined to uncover the dualities that existed in his home, church, and community. A number of factors within these contexts created dialectical tension between faith and reason, black and white races, and the rich and the poor. Given King's mediating personality and temperament, he intuitively sought to resolve these tensions through synthesis.

His educational and intellectual odyssey brings him to an appreciation of the nineteenth century German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. King states that Hegel's "contention that 'truth is the whole' led me to a philosophical method of rational coherence." Furthermore he continues, "His analysis of the dialectical process, in spite of its shortcomings, helped me to see that growth comes through struggle."¹²⁵ King would modify and use effectively this dialectical approach to bring together his eclectic array of sources to formulate his theological and philosophical concepts. His dialectical understanding of historical processes will provide him a critical understanding of the times in which he lived. It was the perspective gained through this dialectical analysis

¹²⁵ *STF*, 101.

that was crucial in developing his strategies during the Civil Rights Movement, which he led.

This chapter explores and examines King's use of the dialectical method. Although it was through studying Hegel that King gained a critical introduction to the dialectical method, it is important to understand that the dialectical method is not an invention of Hegel; it has a long history in the Western philosophical tradition. In order to situate King's use of the dialectical method, as appropriated from Hegel, it will be necessary to discuss Kant's epistemology in order to adequately set the context for Hegel's philosophical program.

The next section focuses on King's introduction to the dialectic, his understanding of the dialectic, and his appropriation of the dialectic as his method of rational reflection and action. This section provides a description of King's dialectical method. Understanding his dialectical method is the key to unlocking the pattern of his eclectic array of intellectual sources. There was more to his reasoning than a simple pragmatic appropriation of sources. He used varied concepts and ideas in the free play of oppositions to get at what he saw as a more complete truth.

Paul Tillich reminds us that "every methodological reflection is abstracted from the cognitive work in which one actually engages." Theological method is preceded by theological engagement.¹²⁶ The implication of this reminder for the examination of King's theological/philosophical methodology is that while King did not live to provide coherently developed and articulated theoretical statement about method, his body of

¹²⁶ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I: "Reason and Revelation, Being and God." (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 34.

intellectual work, i.e., books, sermons, articles, speeches, etc., has inherent imprints of his method of rationality.

Kant, Hegel, and the Roots of King's Dialectical Method

Any attempt to provide a definitive definition or description of the term “dialectic” is a major undertaking and to do it within the pages of this chapter is impossible. This section, therefore, will limit itself to a very narrow view of the dialectic to elucidate the main concern of this dissertation, which is to understand King's use of the dialectical method. In order to achieve this goal, it is necessary to see the points of contact his dialectic has with the tradition of its use in contemporary western philosophy by way of Kant and Hegel.

Towards a Definition of Dialectic

To develop a fundamental working understanding of the term “dialectic,” there are two issues to take into consideration. First, the basic definition and etymology of the word will provide its broadest meaning. The word dialectic comes from the Greek compound word *dialegomai*, which carries the basic meaning of “discourse” or “conversation.” In its classical Greek and Hellenistic usage, it primarily meant to converse or to discuss. In its ordinary meaning dialectic is simply the give and take of conversation and discourse, where two or more persons would give point and counterpoint to clarify, explain and/or persuade the other to his or her point of view.¹²⁷ It is often associated with the art of argumentation with two persons arguing opposing

¹²⁷ Strong, James. *Greek Dictionary of the New Testament in Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*, compact edition. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1982,22. For a fuller discussion of the Greek usage see Gerhard Kittell,, editor. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Translated and Edited by Geoffrey Bromiley. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eermans Publishing Company, 1964-1976), 2: 93-95.

viewpoints.¹²⁸ From this basic meaning as a foundation, the term was appropriated by philosophers to have a more technical and nuanced meaning. Terry Cross accurately observes that, “at its core, every definition of dialectic consists of some form of binary opposition – contradictory relations that are held in some kind of tension.”¹²⁹

The second consideration is how this basic definition has been used to derive a variety of understandings. Again, Cross provides helpful insights with his comment, “dialectic defies general definition because each philosopher or theologian appropriates it uniquely.”¹³⁰ With its beginnings with such classical Greek philosophers like Zeno, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, how the dialectic functions, is interpreted and its relative importance is altered “widely in the course of the history of philosophy depending on the epistemological position of the philosopher in question.”¹³¹ For this reason, it is important to understand some of the historical antecedents of the historical use of the term in order to clarify how King used the term.

Kant, Hegel and the Dialectic of Understanding

Immanuel Kant’s significance in the history of the dialectic is not in contributing to a new development in understanding, defining or using the dialectic. Rather, his importance is in his attempt to demonstrate that the dialectic is not adequate in assisting reason to know anything beyond the phenomenal world. It was in response to Kant that Hegel would give the dialectic its modern shape by defining and using the dialectic to attempt to overcome the limitations that Kant placed on reason.¹³² Thus, in order to

¹²⁸ A. Pablo Iannone, *Dictionary of World Philosophy*. (New York: Routledge, 2001), 153.

¹²⁹ Terry Cross, *Dialectic in Karl Barth’s Doctrine of God*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 2.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ William L. Reese. “Dialectic,” *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion: Eastern and Western Thought*. New and enlarged edition. (Atlantic Heights, New Jersey: Humanities Press), 174.

¹³² George Stack, “On the Notion of Dialectic,” *Philosophy Today* 15 (1971), 278-279.

understand Hegel and his appropriation of the dialectic, it is important to understand what he was reacting to in Kant.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*,¹³³ Kant clearly set forth his intentions to set limits on reason's ability to make claims of knowing the world beyond experience.¹³⁴ Kant, having been influenced by the rationalism of his day, was awakened from his dogmatic slumber after reading the empirical philosophy of Hume.¹³⁵ He wanted to create space for scientific inquiry to reach its full potential by removing the impediments of fallacious metaphysical thinking. In other words, Kant's goal was to avoid, on the one hand, rationalism's claims of being able to speak about transcendental ideas that went beyond the boundaries of reason. And on the other hand, he wanted to avoid empiricism's skepticism that claims you could say nothing for certain about reality.¹³⁶ Garret Thomas describes Kant's strategy as "brilliant." By providing a positive theory of experience and knowledge in the first part of the *Critique*, he was able to challenge the tenets of empiricism, while setting the stage to critical rationalistic metaphysics in the second part.¹³⁷ Kant's critique is developed in the first part, "Transcendental Doctrine of Elements" (with elements being the three parts of cognition – sense, understanding and reason), which is the transcendental aesthetic (sense), the transcendental analytic (understanding), and the transcendental dialectic (reason). His positive theory of experience and knowledge is developed under the first two elements (aesthetic and analytic), and his negative use of the dialectic is discussed under transcendental dialectic.

¹³³ Translated by Norman Kemp Smith with a new introduction by Howard Caygill (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). The establish abbreviation for *Critique of Pure Reason* (CPR) with the original pagination A (1781 edition) and B (1787 edition) will be employed and NKS trans. to designated the 1929 translation by Norman Kemp Smith.

¹³⁴ CPR, A xi fn –Axiii, cf B xix – B xxii fn

¹³⁵ Garret Thomson, *On Kant*. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2000), 3.

¹³⁶ CPR, B19-24,

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 5-6

Kant argues that all that we know about the world is through the senses. However, he posits that if it is possible to demonstrate that there existed *a priori* synthetic truths, he could then make a case for contending that we could know something about the world in which we live, thus effectively circumventing empiricism's skepticism. For Kant, human knowledge is derived from sense and understanding. The one apprehends the appearances of objects by way of sensible intuitions, and the other interprets and organizes that which is apprehended into concepts. Sensible intuition and understanding are made possible by *a priori* conditions. The *a priori* conditions of sensibility are time and space; the *a priori* conditions understanding are the categories of quality, quantity, relations, and modality. All that humans are capable of knowing must conform to these necessary conditions of experience. Any effort to go beyond the bounds of these limitations produces only vacuous ideas.¹³⁸ Thus, it is only possible to know things as they appear through the *a priori* conditions of experience and not things in themselves.

After establishing the limits of human knowledge, Kant is now prepared to critique reason as the organ of deduction. Kant's dialectic as the instrument of reason serves a negative and a positive purpose. The negative purpose of the dialectic is to expose the logic illusions that reason has created. However, the positive function of the dialectic is to provide the rules by which reason can know when it is passing the boundaries of its own limitations. Kant uses four antinomies to demonstrate the validity of his arguments. These antinomies set forth four contradictory statements that even if they both were false would not affect the facts of sensible intuition or the concepts of understanding.¹³⁹ It is impossible to know anything about the noumenal realm – despite

¹³⁸ CPR, A51, B75; NKS, 92

¹³⁹ CPR, A59-64, B84-88, NKS, p. 98-101.

the rationalist claims that through reason alone we can know something about God, immortality of the soul, and the universe.

Frederick Beiser aptly summarizes Hegel's grand philosophical program with a single statement, "Hegel affirms what Kant denies."¹⁴⁰ This is especially true in the area of epistemology and understanding the nature and function of the dialectic in Hegel's philosophy. Kant had effectively destroyed any possibility of reason being able to say anything meaningful about God that lies outside the realm of experience. Hegel would interpret the dialectical process in such a way that he could overcome the chasm that Kant had created between sense and understanding. In order to understand and appreciate Hegel's dialectical idealism, there are two important myths that need to be addressed.

One of the most persistent myths concerning Hegel is the reduction of his dialectic to the thesis-antithesis-synthesis triadic method. There is a growing consensus that Fichte is the originator of this formula, while recent Hegelian scholars have acknowledged that Hegel is not the originator.¹⁴¹ It is significant that Hegel did not even label his dialectical process in this manner. The triad of thesis-antithesis-synthesis is useful shorthand for caricaturing his dialectic as long as one is clear that it is being used as such.

The second myth is that the triad thesis-antithesis-synthesis constitutes a Hegel heuristic device for the development of his philosophical program. This view suggests that Hegel simply imposed on his content this structure and forced every concept to conform to the thesis-antithesis-synthesis model. This position is perpetuated by a

¹⁴⁰ Frederick Beiser, *Hegel* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 156.

¹⁴¹ Gustav E Mueller, "The Hegel Legend of 'Thesis-Anti-Synthesis'" *The Hegel Myths and Legends* edited by Jon Stewart. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 301-304.

number of philosophical dictionaries and encyclopedias.¹⁴² Beiser argues that Hegel took issue with any philosopher who would impose an *a priori* method on his or her philosophy. His position was that the method must be the result of one's evaluation and investigation into of the phenomena on its on terms.¹⁴³ Beiser describes Hegel's use of the term "dialectic" as:

The 'self organization' of the subject matter, its 'inner necessity' and 'inherent movement'. The dialectic is what follows from the concept of the thing. It is flatly contrary to Hegel's intention, therefore, to assume that the dialectic is an a priori methodology, or indeed a kind of logic, that one can apply to any subject matter.¹⁴⁴

Thus the form of the method and the method itself is the source of much misunderstanding in Hegelian philosophy. However, the source of this confusion may be the result of Hegel's penchant for structuring his text and lectures in triplets; triads are ubiquitous in Hegel's texts.

The other reason this myth is so persistent in Hegelian studies is Hegel's own description of the three stages inherent in the unfolding of the dialectic itself found in the *Encyclopedia of Logic*. He writes:

With regard to its form, the *logical* has three sides: (α) *the side of abstraction or of the understanding*, (γ) *the dialectical or negatively rational side*, [and] (β) *the speculative or positively rational one*.¹⁴⁵

Hegel, however, continues in his exposition on the form of the logical

These three sides do not constitute three *parts* of the Logic, but are *moments of everything logically real*; i.e., of every concept or of everything true in general. All of them together can be put under the first moment, that *of the understanding*; and in this way they can be kept

¹⁴² Some examples are William L. Reese. "Dialectic," *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion: Eastern and Western Thought*. New and enlarged edition. (Atlantic Heights, New Jersey: Humanities Press), 174. Iannone, A. Pablo. *Dictionary of World Philosophy*. New York: Routledge, 2001, 153. Thomas Mautner, "Dialectics" *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*. 2nd Edition (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 159.

¹⁴³ Beiser: 159-160.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.: 160.

¹⁴⁵ Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, §79 (italics not supplied).

separate from each other, but then they are not considered in their truth. – Like the division itself, the remarks made here concerning determinations of the logical are only descriptive anticipations at this point.¹⁴⁶

These three stages of Hegel’s logical development appear to fit neatly in Fichte’s thesis (moment of abstraction)-antithesis (negatively rational moment)-synthesis (positively rational moment) triad.

In the first moment – the moment abstraction and of understanding – is the function of thinking. It is the universal made concrete, making clear distinction between things. Inherent in this abstract understanding is that a thing can exist in isolation and unto itself. To exist in abstraction has an absolutizing affect.¹⁴⁷ However, there is the inevitable second moment where that abstract is confronted with its dialectical opposition. The contradiction is inherent in the concept itself made manifest by its very being. Hegel contends, “One thing holds and the other does also... it sublates itself by virtue of its own nature, and passes over itself, into its opposite.”¹⁴⁸ The third moment—the speculative or positively rational moment – brings about a unity of the opposites by way of an elevation.¹⁴⁹ In this stage, according to Beiser, Hegel argues “this whole is unconditioned relative to its parts since it does not stand in relation to them as they stand in relation to one another.”¹⁵⁰ Beiser describes the teleological impulse of Hegel dialectic as follows:

The dialectic will go on until we reach the absolute whole, that which includes everything within itself, and so cannot possibly depend upon anything outside itself. When this happens the system will be complete, and we will have achieved knowledge of the absolute.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. (italics not supplied).

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., § 80, addition.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., § 81, addition 1.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., § 82, addition 1.

¹⁵⁰ Beiser, 168.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 168-169.

Benedetto Croce correctly notes, “to speak accurately, in the dialectical triad we do not think three concepts, but one single concept, which is the concrete universal, in its own inner nature and structure.”¹⁵² It is important to emphasize that what Hegel was describing, was to his mind, consistent with the content of the subject itself, i.e., reason. He was only describing how he had come to understand how reason functioned, thus it was not an external method being imposed in the subject matter. His contention was that because Kant imposed certain *a priori* necessities on sensibility and understanding, it was inevitable that he would draw the conclusion that reason could not comprehend anything meaningful about the true nature of reality.

Martin Luther King Jr. and the Dialectic

In 1956 Tom Johnson, reporter for the *Montgomery Advertiser*, wrote that King claimed that Hegel was his favorite philosopher.¹⁵³ In 1967 King contends, “The old Hegelian synthesis *still offers* the best answer to many of life’s dilemmas.”¹⁵⁴ At the beginning and near the end of his public ministry, King acknowledges the significance of Hegel for him. The Hegelian synthesis was attractive to King and influential on King’s thought and praxis because the Hegelian synthesis reflected King’s own existential reality. In other words, King’s affinity to Hegel’s synthesis was not because of its

¹⁵² Benedetto Croce, *What is Living and What is Dead in the Philosophy of Hegel* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1984), 22.

¹⁵³ Tom Johnson, *Montgomery Advertiser*. Johnson’s statement may be an overstatement on Johnson’s part. A close reading of Johnson’s article suggests that the aim of the article may have been to be provocative. The use of the term “boss” to describe King’s role in the leadership of the bus boycott certainly carries with a pejorative shade. Furthermore that there are several other turn of phrases that carry a similar tone. However, Lerone Bennett’s, King’s Morehouse classmate and biographer, validation of Johnson’s attribution in *What Manner of Man: A Biography of Martin Luther King Jr.* provides some credibility to Johnson’s statement. See Bennett, 72.

¹⁵⁴ *WDWGFH*, 53 (emphasis supplied).

rationality alone, but because it conformed to how King existed. It provided the language and categories to describe what he was already living. Hegel did not revolutionize King's thought and praxis. King found in Hegel's dialectic that which confirmed his experience. Garth Baker-Fletcher correctly observes that King selectively applied the "elements of Hegel's dialectic, logic, and philosophy of history" to the civil rights struggle because they "resonated with his own interpretation of what was occurring historically."¹⁵⁵ It was King's personal experience that opened him up to the Hegelian synthesis. The pattern of King's thinking and temperament were compatible with a thesis-antithesis-synthesis conception of reality, intellectually and historically. Before discussing Hegel's dialectic as King was taught at Boston University, it would be helpful to look at King's relationship to Hegel's over-all system.

King and Hegel

King's first exposure to Hegel was at Morehouse College as an undergraduate student. While at Crozer Seminary, he began to study Hegel more seriously. However, it was at Boston University where King received his most intense examination of the thoughts of Hegel.¹⁵⁶ He enrolled in a Hegel seminar with Edgar Brightman in the fall semester of his second year (1952-53) at Boston University. The primary text for this course was Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*. During this term King studied on his own Hegel's *Philosophy of History* and *Philosophy of Right*.¹⁵⁷ According to the seminar minutes, Brightman became ill after the second session and by the fifth session it was apparent that Brightman was not going to be able to return. He died before the semester

¹⁵⁵Garth Baker-Fletcher, 93.

¹⁵⁶L. Harold DeWolf, "Martin Luther King Jr., as Theologian," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 4: 11 (Spring 1977), 7.

¹⁵⁷King, *STF*, 100.

ended. Peter Bertocci began filling in for Brightman by the third session and finished as the seminar convener for the balance of the course.¹⁵⁸

Martin Luther King Jr. summarizes his position on Hegel in his intellectual autobiographical chapter in *Stride Toward Freedom* entitled, “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence.” He states succinctly:

Just before Dr. Brightman’s death, I began studying the philosophy of Hegel with him. Although the course was mainly a study of Hegel’s monumental work, *Phenomenology of Mind*, I spent my spare time reading his *Philosophy of History* and *Philosophy of Right*. There were points in Hegel’s philosophy that I strongly disagreed with. For instance, his absolute idealism was rationally unsound to me because it tended to swallow up the many in the one. But there were other aspects of his thinking I found stimulating. His contention that “truth is the whole” led me to a philosophical method of rational coherence. His analysis of the dialectical process, in spite of its shortcomings, helped me to see that growth comes through struggle.¹⁵⁹

To be sure, King was not presenting this statement as a technical assessment of Hegel’s philosophy. However, this statement, along with documentation from the Hegel seminar¹⁶⁰ can provide some depth perspective of King coming to grips with Hegel’s thoughts. Furthermore, Professor Brightman’s position on Hegel can provide additional insights on King’s thoughts. Harold DeWolf, King’s dissertation advisor, commenting on

¹⁵⁸R. C. Godwin, secretary. “Thirty-Fourth Annual Seminar in Philosophy: Hegel’s Phenomenology of Mind” Minutes, BU. A summary of the each session was recorded and circulated by the seminar secretary. There are 10 of the 11 recorded minutes extant. Although the seminar was twelve sessions, the eleventh session was a social event, therefore there were no minutes recorded. There is also extant a detailed course outline provided by Brightman that provides some insights into Brightman’s understanding of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind*. See also John Ansbro, 120.

¹⁵⁹ STF, 100-101.

¹⁶⁰ There are five of six short papers written by King for the two-semester Hegel Seminar. One paper, “An Exposition of the First Triad of Categories of the Hegelian Logic – Being, Non-Being, Becoming” is published in *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr.* volume II Rediscovering Precious Values, July 1951-November 1955. There are four additional papers extant. They are “The Development of Hegel’s Thought as Revealed in His Early Theological Writings,” 1 October 1952; “The Transition from Sense-Certainty to Sense Perception in Hegel’s Analysis of Consciousness,” 15 October 1952; “The Transition from Sense-Perception to Understanding,” 29 October 1952; and “Objective Spirit,” 4 February – May 22, 1953. Additionally, there are seminar minutes and a detailed course outline extant. All of these documents are on deposit at the Boston University’s Mulgar Library designated as Martin Luther King papers Mulgar Library Boston University here after referred to as MLKP-MBU: Box 115.

the above statement, makes the observation, “neither Brightman nor King accepted Hegel’s metaphysics, social philosophy, or philosophy of religion. Both, however, were fascinated with Hegel’s dialectical method of thought.”¹⁶¹ Thus it is reasonable to believe that King’s brief published statement on Hegel’s can be unpacked using King’s graduate papers and his professor’s writings.

King and Hegel’s Absolute Idealism

The most significant insight derived from the above statement is that King clearly makes a distinction between Hegel’s system and his method. King’s reference to Hegel’s “absolute idealism” is short hand for Hegel’s philosophical system.¹⁶² King does not elaborate or clarify what he means by “absolute idealism” except to say that he rejects it because it “was rationally unsound to me because it tended to swallow up the many in the one.” This statement, when evaluated in light of his affirmation of personalism, one paragraph prior in the same essay brings into focus the framework in which he evaluates Hegel. With respect to personalism he states:

I studied philosophy and theology at Boston University under Edgar S. Brightman and L. Harold DeWolf. Both men greatly stimulated my thinking. It was mainly under these teachers that I studied personalistic philosophy – the theory that the clue to the meaning of ultimate reality is found in personality. This *personal idealism* remains today my basic philosophical position. . . it gave me a metaphysical and philosophical grounding for the idea of a personal God, and it gave me a metaphysical basis for the dignity and worth of all human personality.¹⁶³

On the one hand, he rejects Hegel’s *absolute idealism* because its devaluation of the individual or the personal was “rationally unsound.” On the other hand, he embraces

¹⁶¹L. Harold DeWolf, “Martin Luther King Jr., as Theologian,” *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 4: 11 (Spring 1977), 7.

¹⁶² Frederick Beiser comments, “Hegel’s metaphysics is often summarized and labeled with the phrase ‘absolute idealism.’ He provides an in depth examination of the phrase as associated with Hegel’s philosophical system in the chapter “Absolute Idealism” in *Hegel* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 53-79.

¹⁶³ *STF*, 100 (emphasis supplied).

personal idealism's metaphysics which provides a means of affirming a personal God and human dignity.

King use of the terms *personal idealism* for the philosophical position of his professors, Brightman and DeWolf, and *absolute idealism* for Hegel's metaphysics is consistent with Edgar Brightman idealism typology.¹⁶⁴ Brightman, in an effort to clarify and define idealism, identified four types of idealism within western philosophical intellectual history –Platonic Idealism, Berkeleian Idealism, Hegelian Idealism, and Lotzean Idealism.¹⁶⁵ In Brightman's writings Hegelian Idealism was interchangeable with "absolute idealism," "absolutism," and "speculative philosophy." Lotzean Idealism was the same as personal idealism or personalism. Commenting on absolutism he notes:

The most typical and original absolutist...was Hegel, who had an immense influence on nineteenth- and twentieth-century thought. For him, the Absolute is one rational mind, forever in process of dialectical development, and including within itself all reason, all nature, all science, history, art, religion and philosophy.¹⁶⁶

King's use of Brightman's "idealism" typology is suggestive that he is also appropriating the meaning behind the typology. King observes in a paper written for his Hegel Seminar:

The task which Hegel undertakes in the Logic is, therefore, this: to give an account of the first reason of the world; to show that every single category necessarily and logically involves every other single category; and finally to show that all the categories, regarded as a single whole, constitute a self-explained, self-determined, unity, such that it is capable of constituting the absolutely first principle of the world...Just as in formal

¹⁶⁴ For a complete examination of Brightman's discussion of idealism see "Modern Idealism" *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*. 17:20 (September 23, 1920), 533-550; "The Definition of Idealism." *The Journal of Philosophy*. 30:16 (August 3, 1933), 429-435; and *A Philosophy of Ideas*. (New York: Henry Holt and Co, 1928).

¹⁶⁵ "The Definition of Idealism," p. 431. cf. "Modern Idealism," 539. In his introductory philosophy text, Brightman lists six types of idealisms –Platonism, Absolutism, Berkeleianism, Panpsychism, Existentialism, and Personalism. See *An Introduction to Philosophy* 3rd edition revised by Robert N. Beck (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1963), 308-314.

¹⁶⁶ *An Introduction to Philosophy*, 311

logic the conclusion flows necessarily from the premises, so in Hegelian logic the categories are logically deduced from each other.¹⁶⁷

King concludes that one of Hegel's original contributions to philosophy was his "explanation of how it was logically possible for two opposites to be identical while yet retaining their opposition."¹⁶⁸

King's rejection of Hegel's "absolute idealism" on the basis of its rational unsoundness – because it tended to "swallow up the many in the one" – is consistent with Brightman's personalistic critique of absolutism's monism. He writes:

There are real difficulties in monism. Monism does not follow logically, as absolutists have supposed, from the coherence theory of truth, unless epistemic monism can be shown to be true. To say that truth is coherent means that contradictories cannot both be true, and that there are systemic interrelations in reality. Yet there might well be interrelations among terms or beings that are not the same individual or parts of the same individual...Extreme monism leads naturally to the position that every part is completely determined by the whole, thus denying any sort of freedom, initiative, or novelty in the parts...If it be conceived as a self, there is irreconcilable difference between the point of view of the Absolute, which all-inclusive and all-wise, and the point of view of the finite, which is ignorant and limited...Extreme monism is therefore unsatisfactory.¹⁶⁹

King's ability to separate Hegel's method from his system allowed him to use the method to embrace "a philosophical method of coherence... [And] to see that growth comes through struggle."

King and Hegel's Dialectic

In King's summary statement of Hegel's contribution to his pilgrimage to non-violence was his affirmation of Hegel's dialectical method. King's positive assessment of Hegel's doctrine of "truth is the whole," providing him with a philosophical method of

¹⁶⁷ "An Exposition of the First Triad of Categories of the Hegelian Logic –Being, Non-Being, Becoming," *Papers*, 2: 198-199.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 201

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 340-341.

rational coherence, is, in fact, acknowledgement that the dialectical method is his method of rationality. Hegel's assertion must be placed in the context of his contention that "the whole, however, is merely the essential nature reaching its completeness through the process of its own development."¹⁷⁰ The process of its own development is a dialectical process. Reality has an internal dialectic that makes it, for Hegel, the process of becoming. As previously cited, King notes that Hegel is able to logically deduce all other categories from his first category. The means by which he was able to accomplish this was the dialectical method. It is the Hegelian dialectical method that exposes the interrelatedness of reality that is driven by the need for rational coherence.

W. T. Stace, who is credited with popularizing the Hegelian dialectic as thesis-antithesis-synthesis and who King read and appropriated, writes:

The three members of a triad are some times called the thesis, antithesis, and the synthesis, respectively. The synthesis being reached now posits itself as new assertion, as an affirmative category which thereby becomes the thesis of a new triad....This process can not stop. It must go on until a category is reached which does not give rise to any contradiction.¹⁷¹

The Boston University faculty accepted as normative W. T. Stace's triadic schema of Hegel's dialectic as thesis-antithesis-synthesis. According to Godwin, Brightman summed up Hegel's dialectic in two words, "move on." He then summarizes Brightman's description of Hegel's dialectic as:

One must never stay where he is, but must consider what has been left out. The thesis is the starting point, antithesis the neighboring point moved to, and synthesis the relation between or generation of the two. An application of the dialectic, Hegel's broadest triad first seeks the most universal attribute of reality. Hegel found this to be *sein*, "it is," thus representing the thesis. But to utter "it is" without saying what it is, is to utter nothing; thus "nothing" is the antithesis. An examination of this dialectic discloses

¹⁷⁰ *The Phenomenology of Mind*, 81.

¹⁷¹ *The Philosophy of Hegel: A Systematic Exposition* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1955), 93.

the process which related thesis and antithesis. Thus, the synthesis is discovered to *werden*, “becoming.”¹⁷²

This description was the basic pattern in which Brightman structured his whole approach to the *Phenomenology of Mind*.¹⁷³ As noted in the previous section, recent Hegelian scholars will concede that Hegel had a penchant for triads, however, triads do not mean oppositional or dialectical.

Peter Bertocci followed Brightman’s course outline and assignments.¹⁷⁴ This in itself does not indicate agreement, but perhaps a convenient approach given the untimely manner in which he had to take up the responsibility for the seminar. However, he uses the categories of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis to describe Hegel’s dialectic as well.

Godwin records:

Prof. Bertocci discussed PHAN [*Phenomenology of Mind*] as a whole by pointing out Hegel’s divisions of the dialectic in this book: (1) The thesis is “Consciousness” (including the thesis “Sense-Certainty,” antithesis “Perception,” and synthesis “Force and Understanding”). (2) The antithesis is “Self-Consciousness.” (3) The synthesis is “Free Concrete Mind.” The Starting point, “Consciousness,” is not arbitrarily chosen, but is based on what is evident in the mental process. We always find the dialectical process going on in thinking. . . . The synthesis of PHAN, “Free Concrete Mind,” is the essential result of the dialectical process.¹⁷⁵

Although Brightman introduced the concept of Hegel’s dialectic in the first session of the Hegel seminar, it was Peter Bertocci who developed the concept. He devoted an entire session for the discussion of the dialectic¹⁷⁶ and another session for the application of the dialectic specific to the *Phenomenology*.¹⁷⁷ It was during the session on the dialectic that Bertocci “initiated the discussion of dialectic by showing its necessity

¹⁷² Godwin, Session #1 (September 24, 1952).

¹⁷³ See Edgar Brightman, Hegel Seminar Outline, 1952-1953 (MLKP-MBU Box 115)

¹⁷⁴ Godwin, Session #5.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, Session #4.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., Session #3.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., Session #4.

for one of Hegel's basic conclusions, 'truth is the whole'." There were several important insights that Bertocci highlighted with respect to this basic conclusion. First, Hegel's dialectical whole included thought and experience. Second, the whole should never be understood as complete. Life and thought is ever-reaching for the more complete state. "The essence of dialectic is tension, a combination of groping for expression and serenity." And third,

The whole is not an all-embracing, placid state of perfection, but a continual state of tension. It has been characterized as whole in which everything vanishes but nothing ever passes away; Hegel's use of the verb "aufheben" (part. "aufgehoben") translated by B[rightman] as "to die and rise again," expresses the idea of a larger whole in which the thesis and antithesis are not completely lost but transcended.¹⁷⁸

This statement reveals that Bertocci, although he used the categories of thesis-antithesis-synthesis to describe Hegel's dialectic, understood that such a characterization was merely shorthand for a highly complex and nuanced epistemology, logic, and metaphysics.

Although King embraced the concept of triadic formula of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, he was aware of the fact that Hegel's dialectic was more nuanced. He describes Hegel's dialectical method in the conclusion of his discussion of the Hegel's categories of being, non-being, and becoming. He writes:

Thus we have three categories. We began with Being. From that we deduced Nothing. And from the relation between the two we deduce Becoming. Being is the thesis. Nothing is the antithesis, and Becoming is the synthesis. The synthesis of this triad, as in all other Hegelian triads, both abolishes and preserves the differences of the thesis and antithesis. This two-fold activity of the synthesis is expressed by Hegel by the word *aufheben*, which is sometimes translated "to sublimate." The German word has two meanings. It means both to abolish and to preserve. In short, the thesis and the antithesis both die and rise again in the synthesis.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., Session #3

¹⁷⁹ "An Exposition of the First Triad of Categories of the Hegelian Logic – Being, Non-Being, Becoming," *Papers*, 2: 200-201.

King's Dialectical Method

King essentially appropriates the triadic format for his dialectical method. Harold DeWolf confirmed this description of King's dialectical method when he wrote, "King never tired of moving from one-sided thesis to a corrective, but also one-sided antithesis and finally to a more coherent synthesis beyond both."¹⁸⁰ King's dialectic consistently followed the thesis-antithesis-synthesis triadic structure. The essential characterization of King's dialectic is captured in his introduction to the sermon, "A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart." King comments:

But life at its best is a creative synthesis of opposites in fruitful harmony. The philosopher Hegel said that truth is found in neither the thesis nor the antithesis, but in an emergent synthesis which reconciles the two.... Jesus recognized the need for blending opposites.¹⁸¹

Unlike Hegel, King's dialectic was shaped by a "pragmatic" idealism and not an absolute idealism. He does not conceive the dialectic in organic terms as Hegel. He was not preoccupied with shadows and forms as Plato, but with the impact of ideas on everyday real-life situations. To be sure, he was convinced that if individuals thought clearly, they could properly orientate their lives towards the creation of a better life, family, community, or world. It is recognizing his "orientation towards" pragmatic issues (though not driven by only the pragmatic) that his fondness for the dialectic as thesis-antithesis-synthesis can be understood.

King begins with a thesis – an original position or thought – which may be a fact of his experience or the limit of his understanding. An example of his thesis may be that the world in general and people in particular were intrinsically good. Such an understanding was shaped by his earlier experiences of growing up in a home where

¹⁸⁰ L. Harold DeWolf, 8.

¹⁸¹ *STL*, 7.

physical and emotional needs were adequately met, sheltering him from the harshness of the world. Another example maybe the rejection of the idea of the bodily resurrection of Jesus because it was inconsistent with what he had seen.

The second element of King's dialectic is the antithesis. While by definition the antithesis is necessary if there is to be dialectic at all, King's antithesis takes on a rhetorical quality. DeWolf's description above reveals that the antithesis was a one-sided corrective of King's original experience or position. King viewed this move as necessary and vital for moving his thinking and perspective forward. Garrow reports that Andrew Young revealed that in South Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) staff meetings King needed that tension that was generated by staffers arguing passionately for opposing positions. Garrow, reporting comments from King's SCLC aides, wrote:

“He [King] had a remarkable facility for sitting through long, contentious meetings and then summarizing what everybody had said and synthesizing that” into a conclusion that appealed to all. That skill was not happenstance, but a repeated practical application of the Hegelian method of thesis-antithesis-synthesis that King had been fascinated with and attached to ever since graduate school. Andrew Young understood the format. “He would want someone to express as radical a view as possible and someone to express as conservative view as possible. We kind of did this sort of like a game and it almost always fell to my lot to express the conservative view....He figured...the wider variety of opinions you got, the better chance you had of extracting the truth from that.”¹⁸²

The antithesis is a necessary transitional moment in King's dialectic.

In his sermonic development, King often set up an original position only to introduce an antithetical position as a rhetorical device to move to the third moment – the synthesis. In his collection of sermons, *Strength to Love*, there are numerous examples of his synthesizing dialectical method. King's dialectical process is not complete until there is a synthesis or a reconciliation of opposites. He synthesized mind and heart (or reason

¹⁸² Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 464-465.

and emotion) with the embodiment of a person with a tough mind and a tender heart.¹⁸⁴ The “transformed nonconformist” is the synthesis of “conformity” and “nonconformity.”¹⁸⁵ A socially conscious church is a church that synthesizes emotional fervor with rational insights.¹⁸⁶ Evil in the world will not be eradicated through human effort *or* divine intervention alone, but through human effort and divine power.¹⁸⁷

King’s synthesis or the third moment of his dialectic is not always achieved in the sense that there is an annulment and elevation to create what would be a new thesis to continue the process. Sometimes King is only able to proceed to no more than the free play opposites held in balance generating creative tension. What is important is that his dialectical method strains towards a synthesis. Thus the first two moments focus on difference. The third moment’s goal is not to eradicate difference, only the negativity or weakness contained in the different positions or concept. This moment is what he calls “creative synthesis of opposites in fruitful harmony.” King dialectic can thus be described in Brightman words, as “a movement which allows and requires opposites to come to expression and then to become reconciled in a higher synthesis.”¹⁸⁸

Summary

The first chapter sets in context the personal dualities of Martin Luther King Jr. As Settani argues in general, these dualities serve as the existential tension that King – through his academic pursuits – attempted to resolve. This chapter argued that King

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., “A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart,” *STL*, 13-20.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., “Transformed Nonconformist,” *STL*, 29-31.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, 64-65.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 127-136

¹⁸⁸ Edgar S Brightman. “Hegel’s Influence in the Contemporary Social Situation,” *The Crozer Quarterly* 12:1 (January 1935), 56.

found in the Hegelian dialectical method the means by which he could intellectually resolve the existential tension created by these dualities. Foundational to understanding King's dialectical method is establishing a basic meaning of the term dialectic. Dialectic is understood in the broadest philosophical terms as dialogue between two opposing viewpoints to get at some basic truth. Although the term defies precise definition, it will always have an element of binary opposition.

In order to place King's dialectic in context with the western philosophical tradition, it was necessary to look at Hegel's dialectic, in as much as Hegel's dialectical method was his point of contact with the tradition. Hegel's dialectical approach was a direct response to Kant's epistemology. In Kant the dialectic had essentially a negative function, .i.e., to expose the fallacy in human reason's effort to go beyond its limitation to know an object in itself. Hegel's whole philosophical system was an attempt to overcome the limitations placed on reason by Kant. Hegel asserted that through dialectical reasoning one could indeed know something about reality because the inner nature and structure of reality is dialectical in character.

While at Boston University, King critically engaged the philosophy of Hegel. He rejected Hegel's philosophical system while embracing the significance of his dialectical method. It was by way of the Hegelian dialectic that King found a method of rationality that allowed him to read, understand and incorporate the thoughts and ideas of other philosophers and theologians into his own reflection about theology, historical development, and moral concerns. King modified Hegel's method in two important ways. First, King's dialectical method did not presuppose an inner dialectical nature of concepts, that is to say that King's dialectic presupposed the external conflict of ideas or

historical movements. The second difference is predicated on the first. King's dialectical method's goal was to provide a synthesis through mediation. It could not occur with conflict and opposition. The next three chapters will examine how the dialectical method is used in King's theology (Chapter III), his philosophy of history (Chapter IV) and his moral philosophy (Chapter V).

CHAPTER III

DIALECTICS IN MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.'S CONCEPTS OF GOD AND HUMANITY

Introduction

The logical starting place for exploring the veracity of the assertion that Martin Luther King Jr.'s method of rationality as a dialectical synthesizing process is his theology. First, King was an ordained Baptist preacher and academically trained in theology and philosophy. Theological questions laid at the center of his quest to resolve some of the dialectical issues that he confronted in his life. Furthermore, theology grounded his worldview, his account of historical processes, and his ethics. This is understandable when one considers how important the church was in shaping his view of the world. As noted in the previous chapters, Ebenezer Baptist Church was an extension of his home and the center of his communal life.

This chapter exposes the underlining tensions within King's theological conceptions and how he attempts to reconcile these conflicts into a coherent idea that maintains important aspects of opposing views. The scope of this work does not permit an exhaustive treatment of any of the categories chosen. However, to demonstrate his methodological approach to theology, this chapter looks at his concept of God and humanity. These two categories are chosen because of the significance they hold in King's thinking and their centrality in King's philosophy of history and his moral philosophy. This chapter examines the internal tensions in each category. However, it is

not advancing a systematic approach to King's theology. The intent is more modest, namely, to suggest that there is a consistent use of a synthesizing dialectical method in King's theological reasoning. To the extent that this is accomplished, this dissertation provides a foundation for such a future systematizing project in theology.

Concept of God

King's concept of God is shaped by the dialectical tension between faith and reason experienced in his childhood and teenage years, and the dialectic of faith in a God that affirms the value of his personhood and the reality of a wider society that attempted to devalue his personhood. His theological perspective grew out of the need to say something about the God derived from his African-American Baptist religious heritage in the context of a scientific modern world. He was particularly driven by his concern with God's relationship to the world and humanity and the transformation of the world (its structures or institutions that devalued human personality) and human being.

There are three issues that unlock King's concept of God. The first is: How can one know anything about the God of the Bible within the context of a modern scientific world? In other words, what is the basis for one's saying anything about God with some certainty? The second issue has to do with God's relationship to the world: Is God involved in the world processes in any meaningful way? The third issue is: How does one understand God's goodness and power in the face of pervasive evil in the world? These issues can be stated in dialectical terms: the dialect of reason and revelation, the dialectic of God's transcendence and immanence, and the dialectic of God's goodness and power.

Sources for King's Concept of God

King's concepts of God and humanity are a synthesis of African-American traditional religious conceptuality and Western philosophical rationality as expressed in personalistic philosophical and theological thought. While the intellectual influences on King's thoughts were varied and perhaps eclectic, the two dominant influences that formed the matrix for his thought are African-American religion, as reflected in the Black Baptist tradition, and Boston personalism. The dominant themes in these two perspectives are God and humanity and their relationship to concrete reality. An examination of these two important influences is crucial for understanding the significance of the synthesis of dialectical concepts in King's understanding of God and humanity.

Concept of God in African-American Religion

Benjamin Mays' *Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature* is a helpful resource for understanding the concept of God as projected in the African-American community during King's formative years. King acknowledges Mays as an influential person in his life. Dr. Mays was the kind of preacher-intellectual that helped him resolve his aversion toward becoming a minister.¹⁸⁹ He was directly exposed to Mays' views through his chapel presentations at Morehouse College when King was a student.

African-American traditional religious concept of God as expressed in Benjamin Elijah Mays's *Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature* was dominated by two opposite emphases.¹⁹¹ The one he labeled as a compensatory and other-worldly view. In

¹⁸⁹ STF, 145. *Autobiography*, 16. See also *Daddy King*, 140 and Coretta Scott King, *My Life with Martin Luther King Jr.*, 83.

¹⁹¹ Benjamin, Mays, 14-15. Mays actually provides three views of God in Negro literature –compensatory, constructive, and atheist. The third approach is not used for the purpose of this study, because atheism was

this concept of God, God was savior of humanity's soul. The afflicted and the oppressed would be compensated for their troubles in this life. Usually, but not always, God would make all social wrongs right in the next life. There was justice in the cosmic sense, but not always in this world. African-Americans were encouraged to make sure that they experience personal salvation in this world and leave the justice to the next world.¹⁹² The other conception of God was labeled constructive. This view saw God as acting in human history to bring about social transformation. It has a predominantly "this worldly" orientation.¹⁹³ God is concerned about the well-being of all humans in the here and the now. The constructive viewpoint was more socially conscious of the economic and material state of the African-American. However, all compensatory thought is not "other-worldly" and neither is all constructive thought "this worldly."

Mays's study contends that these two trajectories were consistent in what he calls "mass" literature (spirituals, sermons, prayers, and Sunday School literature)¹⁹⁴ and "classical" literature (slave narratives, biographies, autobiographies, novels, poetry, and the writings of social scientists)¹⁹⁵ during the periods examined, i.e., 1760 – 1937. Acknowledging the qualification concerning the "other-worldly" and "this-worldly" emphasis, the "mass" literature was predominately compensatory while the "classical" literature was consistently constructive.

not or ever an option for King. It is also important to note that Mays was aware of the problem any typological approach in that the delineation between the compensatory and the constructive views was not always sharply differentiated. He observes, "Though discovering these three major developments of the idea of God in Negro literature, the writer is well aware that it is not always possible to draw a sharp line of demarcation, for example, between a compensatory idea and one that is socially derived." *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 14-15.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

Mays's conclusion was that the concept of God during this period had a dialectical nature that emphasized both the compensatory and constructive views of God. African-Americans viewed God as just, loving, impartial, and compensatory. While, there may have been a difference of perspective regarding the time in which God would make things right and human participation in that process, consistent was the theme that God was concerned about African-Americans' well-being and would provide justice. This certainty was based in their understanding of God's relationship with humanity. This relationship was rooted in the notion that all humans are God's children, regardless of race or geographical origin. All humans are made in the image of God. The very nature of this relationship informs all other relationships. The entire human race is one family, one blood, and one origin.¹⁹⁶

Dr. Mays essentially argues that the African-American's conception of God consistently demonstrates a pragmatic element. Their view of God accommodated their need to survive and even thrive during their long and difficult history of slavery and segregation. There was no great burden for abstract conceptualities. They needed a concrete God to get them through the living of this life. They were not primarily concerned with logical and intellectual coherence.¹⁹⁷ The fundamental factor that shaped the African-American concept of God was their existential struggle within a context that attempted to devalue their humanity and limit their potential as children of God. Whether slavery or Jim Crow, the critical issue was how to view God's essential goodness and/or power in the face of the evils of racism.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 249-250.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 255.

During King's formative childhood and teenage years, his home, church, and community shaped his concept of God as compensatory and constructive. The compensatory dimension is reflected primarily in his belief in the immortality of the soul. At the age of nine when his maternal grandmother died, he found comfort in the belief that she was in a better place and that she continued to exist beyond this life. He would later reflect on that experience:

I was particularly hurt by this incident mainly because of the extreme love I had for her. As stated above, she assisted greatly in raising all of us. It was after this incident for the first time that I talked at any length on the doctrine of immortality. My parents attempted to explain it to me and I was assured that somehow my grandmother still lived. I guess this is why today I am such a strong believer in personal immortality.¹⁹⁸

His belief in personal immortality and the compensatory nature of such a concept is reflected in his answer to the belief in the goodness of God in the face of personal tragedy. He wrote in his qualifying examination for Systematic Theology:

It is true that without immortality the universe would be somewhat irrational. But by having faith in the immortal life we are assured that God will vindicate the righteous. I would assure [the person] that the Christian faith in its emphasis on immortality assures us that the ambiguities of this life will be meaningful in the life to come.¹⁹⁹

This compensatory dimension of life was made tenable only with a concomitant belief in a God who could guarantee that things will be made right in the end. As seen in these two statements, King clearly embraces such a compensatory view.

However, King's view of God was perhaps dominated by the constructive view. It was the example of his father and other socially-conscious preachers that nurtured this view in King. In his father, he saw a preacher that was not only concerned about saving souls for the hereafter, but was also involved in attending to the needs of bodies in the

¹⁹⁸ "Autobiography of Religious Development," *Papers*, 1: 262. cf. *The Autobiography*, 7.

¹⁹⁹ "Qualifying Examination Answers, Systematic Theology," *Papers*, 2: 229.

here and now. His father was instrumental in desegregating the courthouse elevators and water fountains in Atlanta (Fulton County), Georgia. He provided support and leadership in gaining equal pay for African-American teachers in the Atlanta school system.²⁰⁰ His activism was grounded in the recognition that God was on the side of justice, but God was not going to come from the sky and do the work that humanity was capable of doing. In other words, Martin Luther King Jr. learned through his father's example that God was involved in the struggle for the right with humanity.

Boston Personalism

Kevin Schmiesing's essay, "A History of Personalism," provides a helpful overview of the development of personality philosophy.²⁰¹ He contends that the term "personalism" may be used to characterize a wide variety of philosophical and theological thought that places supreme value on human persons. He observes that personalism is not a philosophical system, but a pervasive attitude or emphasis with this central focus. Schmiesing's view explains how a diverse group of philosophers can come under the category of personalism, and he attempts to investigate the history of personalism. However, there is a body of scholarship that takes issue with his assessment. It maybe more accurate to stipulate that personalism is both – a pervasive attitude that places supreme value on persons, and a philosophical system that attempts to work out the implication of such a claim.

Rufus Burrow's *Personalism: A Critical Introduction* attempts to define personalism as a philosophical system and provide a typology of different approaches to

²⁰⁰ *Daddy King*, 124-126.

²⁰¹ See Kevin Schmiesing, "A History of Personalism" Internet: Action Institute http://www.theologyandconomics.org/research/pubs/papers/history_personalism.pdf.

personalistic thought.²⁰² This allows him to broaden the personalism tent while being consistent in his use of the term personalism. He prefers the term “thoroughgoing” personalism instead²⁰³ of Albert Knudson’s term “normative” personalism to describe the American personalistic philosophical school developed by Borden P. Bowne. This school of personalistic philosophy became known as Theistic or Boston Personalism. The term “normative,” as Knudson wants to use it, according to Burrow, is too narrow and exclusive.²⁰⁴ Burrow contends that while there are ten essential tenets of “thoroughgoing personalism,” there are other types of personalistic approaches that may be evaluated based on the number of these essential elements within a particular approach.²⁰⁵ Burrow contends that:

. . . [P]ersonalism in its most typical or thoroughgoing sense must, minimally, exhibit each of these traits: (1) centrality of person, both metaphysically and ethically; (2) fundamentally and thoroughly idealistic; (3) theistic; (4) creationist; (5) freedomistic; (6) radically empirical; (7) coherence as criterion of truth; (8) synoptic-analytic method; (9) active and dualistic epistemology; (10) reality is through and through social and relational.²⁰⁶

So as not to cast personalism as simply an academic exercise, Burrow, agreeing with Schmiesing, elaborates, “Personalism is not, chiefly, a philosophy or doctrine to be taught or written about, but rather is a way of

²⁰² Rufus Burrow, Jr. *Personalism: A Critical Introduction* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1999), 11. According to Burrow, there are at least twelve types of personalisms. There are Atheistic Personalism, Pantheistic Personalism, Absolutistic Personalism, Relativistic Personalism, Ethical Personalism, Theistic Personalism, Realistic Personalism, Political Personalism, Panpsychistic Personalism, Anthropomorphic Personalism, and Afrikan American Personalism. See also Rufus Burrow, “John Wesley Edward Bowen: First Afrikan American Personalist,” 56:3 (*Encounter*), 245.

²⁰³ Rufus Burrow, *Personalism*, 34-35.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 12, 53.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, Burrow gives an expanded clarification of these essentials on pages 85-89.

life – a way of living together in God’s world.”²⁰⁷

Martin Luther King Jr. studied Boston personalism under such prominent Boston personalistic philosophers and theologians such as Edgar S. Brightman, Harold DeWolf, Peter A. Bertocci, and Walter Muelder.²⁰⁸ Brightman was a student of Parker P. Bowne and Bertocci was a student of Brightman. It was because King wanted to study personalism under Brightman that he chose Boston University to do his doctoral studies.²⁰⁹ In his intellectual autobiographical essay, “My Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” King acknowledges the impact of personalism on his philosophical and theological outlook, and how this impact extended well beyond his academic training.²¹⁰

Martin Luther King Jr.’s Personalism

King noted that personalistic philosophy “strengthened me” in my convictions in a personal God and universal human dignity and value by providing “philosophical and metaphysical grounding.”²¹¹ It is significant that in describing the influence of personalism on his intellectual development, King states that it “strengthened” his convictions. He is careful not to say that it “provided” his conviction in a personal God and the dignity and worth of all human beings. These convictions were already given through his African-American religious traditions. However, this is not to dismiss the importance of what personalism provided, namely, the “philosophical” and “metaphysical” grounding for his given convictions about God and humanity. On the

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Rufus Burrow provides a useful summary of the differences between King and his Boston personalist professors. While King took courses with Brightman, Bertocci (philosophy), and DeWolf (theology), Muelder influence was through informal discussions around the issues of social ethical implications of personalism. See Rufus Burrow, *Personalism: A Critical Introduction*, 76-77.

²⁰⁹ King, “Fragment of Martin Luther King Jr.’s Application to Boston University” *Papers*, 1: 390. cf. Rufus Burrow, *Personalism*, 77.

²¹⁰ *STF*, 100.

²¹¹ Ibid.

contrary, this distinction is absolutely crucial in correctly reading King. This statement represents the synthesis of his African-American religious heritage and his Western philosophical training. Personalism provided the philosophical and linguistic tools to articulate concepts that were a source of cognitive dissonance since his childhood.²¹² In personalism, King did not have to abandon his basic concept of a God who is transcendent yet involved in the struggles of humanity. Personalism provided him a way to articulate a belief in a God that was benevolent, powerful, and just, in a manner that would be intellectually satisfying. He could be free of the shackles of fundamentalism without abandoning the faith of his African-American ancestors.

Burrow's critique of African-American personalism²¹³ in relationship to his essential ten tenets of personalism highlights that seven of the ten are evident, while three are either not present (coherence as criterion of truth and synoptic-analytic method) or not clearly developed (epistemology as active and dualistic). While his observations are helpful, it is misleading to say that King was not concerned about coherence as a criterion for truth and that his epistemology was not active and dualistic. As the next section will demonstrate, King was very concerned about coherence and that his epistemology insisted that the mind was not passively shaped by the facts of experience or that the mind and its object were the same. However, Burrow points out that African-American personalism was not a mirror copy of the thorough-going personalism remains valid.

Burrow makes a salient observation concerning Martin Luther King Jr.'s contribution to personalistic philosophy/theology. He notes:

²¹² Rufus Burrow, 76.

²¹³ Rufus Burrow gives a brief summary of Martin Luther King Jr., Wesley Edward Bowen, and J. DeOtis Roberts as representative of Afrikan American Personalists. Therefore any critique of this type is a critique of King's personalism. *Personalism*, 76-85.

King's most original and creative contribution to the personalist tradition was his persistence in translating it into social action by applying it to the trilogy of social problems –racism, poverty/economic exploitation, and militarism – that he believed plagued this country and the world.²¹⁴

King synthesized the constructive element of the African-American concept of God with the metaphysical aspects of personalism's God to conceptualize a God who was personally involved and committed to human flourishing.

Knowledge of God: Dialectic of Reason and Revelation

At the root of King's interest in the relationship between reason and revelation is the dialectical tension between reason and faith. As discussed in the biographical chapter, at a very early age, King began to grapple with how to make sense of the stories of the Bible and with modern scientific understanding of the world in which he lived. The issue for King is not whether God exists, but how one can say anything meaningful about the God of the Bible without denying the validity of human reason. In the concept of progressive revelation, King finds a way of affirming biblical faith, which is faith in the essential revelation of the Bible to which its stories point, and human reasoning capacity. King's concept of progressive revelation is a synthesis of reason, experience, revelation, and Spirit. These four concepts represent the dialectic of the human (reason and experience) and the divine (revelation and Spirit). King does not subscribe to the notion of the incompatibility of revelation and reason. He insists that the knowledge of God does not come by an either/or proposition; rather, it is a both/and proposition. They complement – not contradict – each other.²¹⁵ With these concepts taken together, King's concept of progressive revelation can be defined as God's continued disclosure of God's

²¹⁴ Rufus Burrow Jr., *God And Human Dignity: The Personalism, Theology, And Ethics Of Martin Luther King Jr.* Foreword by Lewis V. Baldwin and Walter G. Muelder. (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2006), 86.

²¹⁵ King, "Qualifying Examination Answers, Systematic Theology." *Papers*, 2: 228.

self through the agency of the Spirit, accommodating the growth of human reason and experience.

Experience and Reason

King is thoroughly convinced of the importance of reason and experience in humanity's understanding of God. Having abandoned any semblance of the fundamentalism of his youth, he consistently takes issue with the neo-orthodox position of Karl Barth that the gap between God and humanity is so wide that humanity cannot come to a knowledge of God through human reason or experience. King asserts that such thinkers have given up their search for God by simply passively depending on God to find and reveal God's self to humanity.²¹⁶

King argues that experience and reason are the two aspects of the human capacity for knowing God. While experience and reason are not the same, they are interrelated. Experience is the subjective side of knowledge, while reason is the objective dimension of knowledge. Experience is "the logical prelude to reason."²¹⁷ Finding support in William James, King observes that there are a wide range of religious experiences. However, he contends that beneath the "variety of religious experiences" is a consistent relationship between the creature and the Creator. He describes it as "the creature standing in relation with the other than self or other than human factor in the universe. It is the 'I' seeking the 'thou'."²¹⁸

Experience is the "primal" way to find God for two reasons. First, it is a universal avenue to access the divine. He argues, "This way is open to all levels of human

²¹⁶ Martin Luther King Jr., "The Place of Reason and Experience in Finding God." *Papers*, 1: 231-232.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 232.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 233. King is following a line of reasoning appropriated from Edgar S. Brightman found in *The Finding of God* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1933), 100-103.

intelligence.” Every person, “from the ordinary simple-hearted believer to the philosophical intellectual giant, may find God through religious experience.”²¹⁹ Secondly, experience is prior to the idea of God. He notes: “The very idea of God is an outgrowth of experience.” Humanity’s “idea” of God is shaped by humans’ interaction with nature where such things as beauty and order in the midst of ugliness and disorder are observed.²²⁰

King appeals to Plato, Jesus, Spinoza, and Edgar Brightman to demonstrate that there is an intellectual lineage for asserting the importance of reason in finding God. He notes:

Now we turn to the realm of reason in finding God. Certainly we are aware of the fact that men throughout the ages have believed in the validity of reason in finding God. We find it in a Plato teaching that God is a rational being to be found by reason. We find it in a Jesus speaking of loving God with our minds. We find it in a Spinoza speaking of "the intellectual love of God." Certainly, this list could go on ad infinitum.... Brightman has reminded us, "if God exists at all, he must be the Supreme Reason, and hostility to reason is one form of hostility to the divine."²²¹

According to King, human reason “examines, interprets and classifies experiences.” King provides three steps that reason takes toward a closer understanding of God. The reasoning person must start his/her search with the facts of experience. The next step is to move beyond the analysis of the experience to understanding the relationship of the experience to the wholeness of the universe. The next step is to apprehend something of the Supreme Rationality behind the eternal values of the universe. This only brings one to a relative knowledge of God. He highlights the contradiction in the neo-orthodox theologians’ use of reason to discount reason as a

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid., 234-235.

means of knowing God.²²² While there is no absolute intellectual certainty about God, one through experience and reason can come to an ever-widening knowledge of God.²²³

Spirit and Revelation

The scriptures of the Hebrews and Christians, known as the Bible, are for King humanity's interpretation of concrete expressions of God's self disclosure to humanity. The term revelation captures the broad sense of God's self-disclosure.²²⁴ The Spirit has a twofold operation in the process of revelation. First, the Spirit is the agency in the world that enlightens humanity's understanding of the complexities of nature and humans. It is because the Spirit is constantly working that humanity is able to make advances in modern sciences. This also includes the scientific study of the Scriptures through the methods of higher criticism. It is the higher critical method, according to King, that provides the tools for scientifically enlightened humanity to overcome the problems of reading pre-scientific scriptures.²²⁵ Secondly, it is the Spirit operating within the faith community of the church that ensures that humanity is steadily moving towards the highest realms of understanding about God, humanity, and the world.²²⁶

Progressive Revelation

King's concept of progressive revelation is God's accommodation to humanity's limited but growing experiential and rational capacity. This approach to reason and revelation allows him to retain what he believes is important in the liberal and neo-orthodox positions concerning humanity's capacity in knowing God. It overcomes the problem of the deification of revelation by the neo-orthodox theologians and the

²²² King, "Qualifying Examination Answers, Systematic Theology," *Papers*, 2: 229.

²²³ King, "Place of Reason and Experience in Finding God" *Papers*, 1: 234 -235

²²⁴ King, "How to Use the Bible in Modern Theological Construction." *Papers*, 1: 254.

²²⁵ King, "Six Talks in Outline" *Papers*, 1: 248.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 249.

deification of reason by the liberal theologians.²²⁷

King's doctrine of progressive revelation further provides a way of understanding Scripture that allows the Scriptures to remain an authoritative referent for Christians without ignoring the pre-scientific elements of the Bible. Scripture becomes humanity's understanding of the concrete expression of God's self-disclosure in history, without denying the possibility of other means of codifying this revelation. This view of progressive revelation, on the other hand, overcomes the neo-orthodox notion that human reason and experience can in no way serve as a means of knowing God. Progressive revelation affirms that humanity is able to find God or know something about God through human experience and reason because God has disclosed God's self in such a manner that accommodates the limitation of human experience and reason. God has placed God's self in a position to be found through the human faculties of reason and experience. While this view takes very seriously humanity's ability to find God, it also accepts the reality that humanity may get it wrong. This is the risk that God takes in entering into relationship with humanity. However, God minimizes the risk by making available the active presence of the Spirit in human history.

Progressive revelation provides a way of understanding humanity's capacity to understand God without reducing God to the scope of human understanding and reason. That is, humanity can indeed know *something* about God that is sure and certain without being absolutely certain. When placed in a broad view, there is continuity in what is revealed about God. Progressive revelation underscores King's assertion that "the search for God is not an achievement but a process."²²⁸

²²⁷ King, "Qualifying Examination Answers, Systematic Theology," *Papers*, 2: 228-229.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 231.

God's Transcendence and Immanence

The second important concept in King's doctrine of God is the dialectic of transcendence and immanence. King describes the issue of God's transcendence-immanence as the dialectic of liberalism's radical immanent view of God and the neo-orthodox's radical transcendent view of God. King describes the liberal/neo-orthodox conflict as follows:

In its attempt to preserve the transcendence of God, which had been neglected by an overstress of his immanence in liberalism, neo-orthodoxy went to the extreme of stressing a God who was hidden, unknown, and "wholly other."²³⁰

In his characteristic synthesizing manner, King desires to retain the positive elements in both positions to derive a concept of God that would be adequate for both the church and one's personal life.²³¹

With the modern scientific understanding of time and space, the old pre-Copernican spatial concepts of God are critically undermined. God can no longer be viewed as monarch on a throne determining everything that happens in the earth. It is, therefore, necessary to reformulate a conception of transcendence and immanence that avoid the one position collapsing into the other. King wants to circumvent falling into the conception of deism, on the one hand, and pantheism, on the other hand. He wants to affirm God's involvement in human history without denying God's transcendence and majesty without making God responsible for the radical evil in the world. This latter issue will be discussed in the next section.

God's Transcendence: God is Above Us

For King, transcendence means that God is objectively and qualitatively different

²³⁰ *STL*, 147.

²³¹ *Ibid.*

from God's creation. His view is rooted in several characteristics of God. First, God is Creator. A consistent phrase that King uses when referring to Absolute Deity is that God is "the God of the Universe." To say that God is Creator, King is asserting that "the good personal spirit lies back of the universe as the ground of its being."²³² This concept of transcendence is amplified in King's written prayer for the radio broadcast he conducted for the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, when he prayed: "O thou Eternal God, out of whose absolute power and infinite intelligence the whole universe has come into being."²³³

King associated God's transcendence with God's ability to stand above the human situation and mete out judgment in the midst of human oppression. Lewis Baldwin captures the significance of God's transcendence in King's thought appropriated from his African-American religious heritage thusly:

The basic message of King's religious heritage was that God is a God of love who creates and sustains the universe and who acts in history for the logical fulfillment of the divine purpose. King's slave forebearers had affirmed, on the basis of their reading of the Bible, that this God works in history to destroy the forces of evil and oppression, and this is why they sang with power and conviction:

He delivered Daniel from de lion's den,
Jonah f'om de belly of the whale,
An de Hebrew chillum f'om de fiery furnace,
An' why not every man.²³⁴

²³² King, "Six Talks in Outline," *Papers*, 1: 244.

²³³ King, "Prayers" *Papers*, 6: 137.

²³⁴ Lewis Baldwin, *There is a Balm in Gilead: The Cultural Roots of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 168. Noel Erskine and Michael Long pick up Baldwin's thought in this regard. Erskine comments that vision of God is "...the God who is in history transcends history and thereby judges history." *King Among the Theologians* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994), 146. Michael Long observes King recognized that there is a potential danger in preaching just the radical immanence of God in history and nature –namely, the destructive possibility that his followers would equate present conditions with the will of God. Thus, though he argued that God is "tender enough" to live in our lives, he also stressed that God is "tough-minded enough to transcend the world." By embracing the doctrine of divine transcendence, King could thus refuse anyone who would dare equate earthly conditions, especially segregation, poverty, and war, with the perfect will of God. Although God is in history, he could argue that history is not God –God is within and yet above history. *Martin Luther King Jr. on Creative Living*. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 31-32.

The second element of King's transcendent view of God is that God is the sustainer of the universe. God as sustainer, King writes: "He who is the original cause is also the perpetual cause, the upholder of all things, who preserves them in existence."²³⁵ God is the Absolute to humanity's relativity. Epistemologically, the totality of who God is will always be outside the realm of human comprehension.²³⁶ King makes the case for this transcendent perspective of God in the sermon, "Our God is Able," by pointing out the incalculable speed in which celestial bodies travel in contrast to the speed in which human-made space crafts are able to travel.²³⁷ God's transcendence affirms that there will always be an unsurpassable gulf between God and humanity in terms of knowledge, power, and essential nature.

The third characteristic of God's transcendence is God's goodness. God's goodness is essential for King's doctrine of God. He describes the concept of goodness as a part of God's character. God's goodness is central to King's concept of God's transcendence and is the key toward understanding God's immanence. He describes what he means by his assertion that God's character is "perfectly good" in a seminary paper, entitled, "Six Talks in Outline." He writes:

- (1) The definition "perfectly good" attributes to God all possible excellence. The use of the word good in this context goes beyond its use in popular venericular-kind[sic] or gracious. Here it reaches its acme, and stands for the highest that the human mind can conceive.
- (2) The goodness of God must not be confused with the goodness of man – the former is absolute and the latter is relative. Indeed the word "good" means the same in both cases, except for God it reaches its highest expression. When the highest conception of good that man can conceive has been set in his mind, it will be found that God corresponds to that conception, and yet he transcends it.²³⁸

²³⁵ "Six Talks in Outline," *Papers*, 1: 244.

²³⁶ King, "Place of Reason," *Papers*, 1: 235.

²³⁷ King, "Our God is Able." *STL*, 108-109.

²³⁸ "Six Talks in Outline," *Papers*, 1: 243.

God's Immanence: God is Around Us

Epistemologically, God's immanence suggests that humans have direct access to God through nature, reason, history, and revelation. King notes that God's presence is seen in the beauty, order and rationality in nature.²³⁹ It is precisely for epistemological reasons that King develops such a negative critique of neo-orthodox theology. By his own admission, King confesses that one of liberalism's indelible imprints on his thinking is his belief in the "natural power of human reason."²⁴⁰

The immanence of God is King's way of affirming that God is present in the world. God is not of part the world, nor is the world a part of God. However, God is not distant and detached from the activity within the world.²⁴¹ King insists that God is actively involved in human history making God's self known and experienced. "Above all, we must be reminded anew that God is at work in his universe. He is not outside the world looking on with a sort of cold indifference," says King.²⁴²

King's basis for God's immanence is embedded in the notion of a personal God.

He writes:

More than ever before I am convinced in the reality of a personal God ... Behind the harsh appearances of the world there is a benign power. To say that God is personal is not to make him a finite object besides other objects or to attribute to him the limitations of human personality... It means simply self-consciousness and self direction. So in the truest sense of the word, God is a living God. In him there is feeling and will, responsive to the deepest yearnings of the human heart: *this* God both evokes and answers prayer.²⁴³

²³⁹ King, "Karl Barth's Conception of God" *Papers*, 2: 108.

²⁴⁰ *STL*, 146. This is consistent with King's statement, "Most of my criticism [of Barth's doctrine of God] stems from the fact that I have been greatly influenced by liberal theology, maintaining a healthy respect for reason and a strong belief in the immanence as well as the transcendence of God." Ref. "Karl Barth's Conception of God," *Papers*, 2: 104.

²⁴¹ King, "Examination Answers, Christian Theology for Today" *Papers*. 1: 291.

²⁴² *STL*, 69.

²⁴³ *STL*, 153.

It is through God as personality that God relates to humanity on a personal and corporate level. It is God as personality that King has the assurance that the God of the Universe is in tune with the heartbeat of his deepest desires. In the accents of his sermonic utterances he would intone: “He’s my mother and my father. He’s my sister and my brother. He’s a friend to the friendless. This is the God of the universe.”²⁴⁴

Cosmic Companion: God is With Us

King’s concept of God’s transcendence and immanence are held together in his idea of God as a Cosmic Companion. It is King’s way of maintaining a view of God that does not collapse God’s transcendence into God’s immanence or make God so identified with a particular group or people that God is not discernable from personal/national interest. God is both transcendent and near, at the same time. The presence of God as Cosmic Companion is most acutely experienced when humanity has aligned itself with the order of the universe in the struggle for social justice and righteousness.²⁴⁵ While God does not do the work of transforming the world directly, God does empower humanity to bring about the necessary changes in society. It is in times of weakness, despair, and discouragement that God walks with struggling humanity.²⁴⁶

God as “Cosmic Companion” speaks to God providing the interior resources of enlightenment, strength, courage, and renewed vigor to aid humanity in resisting the external forces that attempt to prevent God’s ideal world from coming into being. With the expression “Cosmic Companion,” King transforms the concept of God from a

²⁴⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., “The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life.” *A Knock at Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.* Edited by Clayborne Carson and Peter Holloran (New York: Warner Books, 1998), 139.

²⁴⁵ *STL*, 84.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 111.

metaphysical category to a personal reality. It assumes all of the transcendent elements into a deeply personal way of talking about God. The substance of this concept was not birthed from some metaphysical intellectual exercise, but rather in the crucible of trial. King writes that it was through suffering that he developed the unwavering belief in a personal God. In an essay on how his mind had changed over the course of ten years, he writes:

The agonizing moments through which I have passed during the last few years have also drawn me closer to God. More than ever before, I am convinced of the reality of a personal God. True, I have always believed in the personality of God. But in the past the idea of a personal God was no more than a metaphysical category that I found theologically and philosophically satisfying. Now it is a living reality that has been validated in the experience of everyday life. God has been profoundly real to me in recent years. In the midst of outer dangers I have felt an inner calm. In the midst of lonely days and dreary nights I have heard an inner voice saying, "Lo, I will be with you."²⁴⁷

Although in this essay, he provides a sampling of his suffering in general terms (jailed twelve times, home bombed three times, daily death threats, etc.)²⁴⁸, he gives a detailed account of the decisive moment when the epiphany of God as Cosmic Companion occurred in the sermon "Our God is Able." It was during the Montgomery, Alabama Bus Boycott. He had arrived home late one night after his family had gone to sleep. As he slipped into bed and began to fall asleep, the phone rang. On the other end was the voice of a sadistic person threatening his life. Depleted of emotional and spiritual strength, he was acutely frightened. Unable to sleep, he attempted to rationalize a way to back out of the leadership of the bus boycott without appearing a coward. He prayed

²⁴⁷ *STL*, 153. The essay originally appeared in *Christian Century* as a part of it series of contemporary theologians and thinkers expressing how their minds have changed over a ten-year period. It was reprinted as the final chapter in *STL* under the title "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence." The essay reviewed much of the information contained in the chapter with the same title in *STF*.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 152.

intensely to God for deliverance. In that moment he writes:

At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never before experienced him. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice, saying, “Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. God will be on your side forever.” Almost at once my fears began to pass from me. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything. The outer situation remained the same, but God had given me inner calm.²⁴⁹

It is this God who comes near during times of great need in the struggle for righteousness, justice and human dignity and provides interior resources to stand when you do not have the strength on your own to stand. In the face of intractable evil, the God who comes near is a God who is both good and powerful.

God’s Infinite Goodness and Finite Power

The presence of evil in the universe and human experience is a major challenge to any concept of God’s goodness and power. King consistently affirms the objective reality of evil – natural and moral. He asserted:

Is anything more obvious than the presence of evil in the universe? Its nagging, prehensile tentacles project into every level of human existence. We may debate the origin of evil, but only a victim of superficial optimism would debate its reality. Evil is stark, grim, and colossally real.²⁵⁰

However, King does not give up on either God’s goodness or power. He finds adequate the traditional answers to the problem of God in the face of moral and physical evil. He grapples with this issue in a paper written during his study at Crozer Seminary entitled “Religion’s Answer to the Problem of Evil.”²⁵¹ He examines seven “modern answers” to

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 114. Cf. *STF*, 134-135.

²⁵⁰ “The Death of Evil Upon the Seashore,” *STL*, 77.

²⁵¹ King, *Papers*, 1: 416-433. This paper is significant for several reasons. First, although it is written during the early period in King’s theological development, and the basic pattern of development of historical section of the paper is appropriated from H F Rall’s *Christianity: An Inquiry into its Nature and Truth* (New York: Scribner’s, 1940), the development of his answer to the issue of evil appears to be his own. As such it may arguably represent some of his most creative theological insights. Second, with respect

the problem of evil that essentially attempts to address the issue by explaining evil in a manner that maintains God's goodness. King adjudges all seven answers as inadequate.²⁵²

The modern answers and their inadequacies are: (1) "Moral evil is the result of the misuse of human freedom" is inadequate primarily because it does not address natural evil and any adequate theodicy must address both. (2) "Physical evil as punishment for moral evil" collapses for ethical reasons, namely the implication that God harbors resentment. (3) "Evil as a means of discipline" is untenable because the ultimate outcome is uncertain. In other words, everyone does not respond to the chastening of tragedies in a positive and constructive manner. (4) "Evil as an incomplete good argument" is ineffective because one cannot discern the veracity of the claim. (5) "Evil is necessary to establish the good" makes God directly responsible for evil. (6) "The claim that evil is unreal" is deficient because such a position necessarily undercuts all reality. (7) "Theistic finitism maintains the goodness of God while limiting God's power by introducing either an internal dualism in God's nature or an external limit on God's power." This position is untenable to King because it leaves uncertain the ultimate outcome of human history.

Any attempt to minimize God's goodness or God's power is untenable. The most adequate answer to this perplexing problem is to re-conceptualize what it means to say that God is absolute goodness and at the same time that God is absolute power. By re-conceptualizing what goodness and power are, King will be able to maintain a notion of God as absolute goodness and absolute power while avoid making God responsible for

to King's mature answer to the issue of God's goodness and power in the presence of moral and natural evil is essential based on the ideas developed in this paper.

²⁵² Ibid., 417-426. King actually addresses the first six under the heading "Modern Answers" (see pp. 417-22) and devotes a whole section to the seventh modern response to evil under the heading, "The Doctrine of a Finite God" (see pp. 422-426).

evil. Evil, in its many forms racism, classism, militarism, etc., will occupy the thoughts and energy of King during his entire public life. He will constantly draw on his re-conceptualized view of God's goodness and power for strength and courage to persevere.

Re-conceptualizing God's Goodness

King's view of the goodness of God is grounded in his experience growing up in his parents' home, where church and community – by extension – provided a self affirming context. He makes this connection clearly in his religious autobiography while at seminary, noting:

It is quite easy for me to think of a God of love mainly because I grew up in a family where love was central and where lovely relationships were ever present. It is quite easy for me to think of the universe as basically friendly mainly because of my uplifting hereditary and environmental circumstances.²⁵³

While King does not develop the concept of God's goodness to the extent that he does God's power, the notion of God's goodness is understood or implied in his discussion about God. In other words, for King, God's goodness is always assumed.

When King speaks of God's goodness he is simply affirming that "God possesses every excellence that can belong to a personal spirit, unmixed with evil, unweakened by defect, unsurpassable in degree."²⁵⁴ God's goodness then is absolute and infinite.

Additionally, God goodness is characterized by love that is "ethical, redemptive, and creative."²⁵⁵ God's involvement with humanity and the world is one of supreme self-giving for their benefit.²⁵⁶ King buttresses his view of God's goodness with Harris F.

Rall's contention that:

²⁵³ King, "Autobiography of Religious Development," *Papers*, 1: 360.

²⁵⁴ King, "Religions Answer to Evil," *Papers*, 1: 427.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ King, "Six Talks in Outline," *Papers*, 1: 244.

[God's] goodness is good will, that is, it is a high and fixed purpose aiming at the supreme good of man. It is redemptive and therefore set against all evil. It is creative: It is goodness at work, active, unswerving, sparing no toil or pain in itself or in its object, seeking to give its own life to this creature man, not intent on granting pleasure and sparing sorrow, but rather on the creation in men, and the sharing with men, of its own life, the life of truth and wisdom, of holiness and love.²⁵⁷

Commenting on Rall's statement, King asserts that "if we are to deal adequately with the problem of evil, we must come to some such view of the goodness of God."²⁵⁸

With an understanding of goodness in ethical terms, God's absolute goodness is reflected in God's creation on at least two levels. First, God structured in the universe moral laws that reveal a gracious and caring God. Second, God demonstrates God's care for the universe through divine providential care. As King declares, "At the center of the Christian faith is the affirmation that there is a God in the universe who is the ground and essence of all reality. A Being infinite in love and boundless power, God is the creator, sustainer, and conservator of values."²⁵⁹

This aspect of God's goodness is reflected in King's logic for personal immortality. His belief in personal immortality is inextricably linked to his concept of the goodness of God. His logic is basically that a good God is the originator, sustainer, and redeemer of universal values. As such, God would be committed to conserving the highest values in the universe, which are persons. He is convinced that any philosophical argument for immortality must be coupled to such a view of the goodness of God and, conversely, any philosophical theism that has this view of God will affirm personal

²⁵⁷ "Religion's Answer to the Problem of Evil," *Papers*, 1: 427. cf. Harris F. Rall. *Christianity: An Inquiry into Its Nature and Truth* (New York: Scribner's, 1940), 323.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁹ *STL*, 98.

immortality. The concepts of God's goodness and human immortality are mirror concepts. The argument for God's goodness is an argument for human immortality.²⁶⁰

Re-conceptualizing God's Power

God's power is essentially grounded in the goodness of God. King's understanding of the goodness of God is sympathetic to Henry Nelson Wieman's view of God's goodness. He summarizes Wieman's concept of God's goodness:

Wieman contends that God is the only absolute good. As we have seen, he seeks to defend this claim by defining absolute in a fivefold sense. First of all, absolute good refers to that which is good under all circumstances and conditions. It is good that is not relative to time or place or race or class or need or desire. It is good that remains changelessly and identically the same. A second mark of absolute good is that its demands are unlimited. God is good in this sense because he demands our wholehearted surrender. A third mark of absolute good is its infinite value. Fourth, absolute good is unqualified good. Finally, absolute good is entirely trustworthy.²⁶¹

However, King attempts to avoid what he sees as the weakness in Henry Nelson Wieman's emphasis on God's goodness that does not correlate with a concept of God's power. King asserts: "If God is truly God and warrants man's ultimate devotion, he must have not only an infinite concern for the good but an infinite power to actualize the good."²⁶²

King re-conceptualizes God's power to argue that God's power is finite, but in a way that makes it a relative finiteness. It is relative only to God's own self-imposed limitations. It is not relative to human power or any other power in the universe that may attempt to obstruct God's purpose. He wants to continue to assert that God is able to

²⁶⁰ King, "Final Examination Answers, Philosophy of Religion," *Papers*, 2: 107-108.

²⁶¹ King, "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman," *Papers*, 2: 524.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 525.

subdue evil.²⁶³ God's power is finite not because there is a power that is equal to or greater than God's power in the universe. Rather, it is relative finitude, made relative by God's own volition in establishing laws that govern the various realms of reality,²⁶⁴ extending real freedom to humanity. Speaking of human freedom in relationship to God's relative finitude, King writes:

We are responsible human beings, not blind automaton; persons, not puppets. By endowing us with freedom, God relinquished a measure of his own sovereignty and imposed certain limitations upon himself. If his children are free, they must do his will by voluntary choice. Therefore, God cannot at the same time impose his will upon his children and also maintain his purpose for man. If through sheer omnipotence God were to defeat his purpose, he would express weakness rather than power. Power is the ability to fulfill purpose; action which defeats purpose is weakness.²⁶⁵

Thus, his definition of power is not in the classical sense of impotence, but the ability to fulfill purpose.²⁶⁶ However, King further clarifies this understanding of power by asserting that it is the ability to fulfill certain purposes in certain ways that achieve certain results. He notes that, "We must realize that God's power is not put forward to get certain things done, but to get them done in a certain way, and with certain results in the lives of those who do them."²⁶⁷ The manner in which the purposes of God are fulfilled will be consistent with his understanding of God's absolute goodness.

Conversely, based on King's definition of power, weakness is any action that defeats purpose. Because humans are endowed with real freedom, God's power is limited because cannot use God's absolute power to overcome humanity's freedom. God's

²⁶³ *STL*, 108.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 84. See King's sermon "God is Able" in *STL*, 107-114. King argues that God is able to sustain the physical universe, subdue evil, and support humanity in their struggle with evil. God's ability is based in the fact that God is the ground of laws of the physical, moral, and spiritual realms. God created the world in such a way the triumph over evil is inevitable.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 84. See also "Religion's Answer to Evil," *Papers*, 1: 428.

²⁶⁷ "Religion's Answer to Evil," *Papers*, 1: 428.

relative finitude does not render God impotent to deal with the evil in the world. God is involved in humanity's struggle with evil by providing the resources to sustain humanity in the transformation of the world, thereby fulfilling God's purpose.²⁶⁸

God's Purpose for the World Realized

King's insistence on the infiniteness of God's goodness and the relative finiteness of God's power seeks to overcome the basic problems of evil by retaining God's goodness and power in such a way that God is not responsible for evil and humanity's freedom is maintained. God's purpose for humanity and the world will be realized in history. The how is certain. God strengthens, empowers, and reinvigorates humanity in its effort to fulfill God's purpose. Thus, King's concept of the absolute goodness and the relative finiteness of God's power bring together these two important attributes of God in a manner that maintains the integrity of both within divine personality.

In the face of insurmountable challenges in human history, King can still assert that God not only cares for humanity and human flourishing, but that God's caring is made effective in human history through God's power. His concept of God's power has important ramifications for his doctrine of humanity, which will be taken up in the next section. However, for the present concern, what it suggests is the God with us is the God that is dynamically involved in human history, overcoming evil to bring about God's purpose for humankind.

For King, what humans can know about God and God's ways will always be limited and shrouded in mystery. For him, it is not what is unknown that is of supreme importance, rather, what *is* known matters most. We have the assurance that God has made all the necessary provisions to accommodate an authentic relationship with God in

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

the very way that God created the universe. God may be transcendent but God's transcendence does not negate God's capacity to be involved in human history on a cosmic and personal level. This provides the assurance that God's purpose for humanity will be fulfilled in such a way that God's goodness is maintained and human freedom is not eradicated. On the evening of his assassination, King could encourage those assembled in Memphis, Tennessee, in support of striking sanitation workers, that although he might not see the realization of his dream, they would indeed "get to the promise land."²⁶⁹

Doctrine of Humanity

King's doctrine of humanity is critical to his theology. Second to the concept of God, he has probably devoted more attention to this subject than any other theological concept. Central to a personalistic philosophical approach, humanity is the correlative to the Supreme or Ultimate Person, God. King's theology has a Calvinist impression in that any discussion about God must inevitably evoke a discussion about humanity. The converse is also true: Any discussion about humanity must lead a discussion about God.²⁷⁰ Furthermore, King takes the position that the answer to the question, "What is Humanity?" is essential to the issues that modern humans must address.²⁷¹ This section

²⁶⁹ Martin Luther King Jr. "I've Been to the Mountaintop." *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.* Edited by Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard (New York: Warner Books, 2001), 223.

²⁷⁰ John Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John T. McNeil. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 35.

²⁷¹ Martin Luther King Jr. "What is Man?" *The Measure of Man* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 9. The sermon, "What is Man?" was first published in *Strength to Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963). *Strength to Love* was republished by Fortress Press in 1981 with the sermons, "What is Man?" and "The Dimensions of a Complete Life" omitted. "What is Man?" was published in *The Measure of a Man*. Two additional adaptations of this presentation are found in *Papers*, volume VI: *Advocate of the Social Gospel, September 1948-March 1963*. One is entitled "What is Man?" preached at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1954. The other one is entitled, "The Christian Doctrine of Man," preached at the Detroit Council of Churches Noon Lenten service in 1958. While the sermons are

will first describe his “realistic view” of humanity’s essential nature. Then it will explore the implications of this viewpoint with respect to several traditional Christian anthropological categories such as the image of God, sin, and salvation.

Humanity’s Essential Nature: A Realistic View

King’s concept of humanity attempts to harmonize biblical mythological symbols with the modern evolutionary scientific understanding of human nature.²⁷² He sees the primary conflicting viewpoints as pessimistic naturalism and optimistic humanism. King describes “pessimistic naturalism” as basically a view that contends that humanity is no more than an animal. It is human animalistic impulses for food, water, shelter, sex, etc., that drive human’s actions. Humanity is no more than a “cosmic accident” and that life can be reduced to human materiality.²⁷³ Although King does not suggest that the neo-orthodox view of humanity is the same as pessimistic naturalism, he insists that they share the same negative appraisal of human nature. Neo-orthodoxy tended to emphasize the existential nature of humanity, focusing on humanity’s capacity to sin.²⁷⁴

At the other extreme, “optimistic humanism” exaggerates humanity’s status to the point of making humankind gods.²⁷⁵ This perspective is consistent with what King calls the liberal view of humanity, which emphasizes the essential goodness of humans. King’s reading of Reinhold Niebuhr convinced him that the liberal view of humanity was too sentimental and superficial, over-emphasizing the goodness of humanity. He says that

essentially the same in content and structure there are some adaptations in each one because of the audience and/or the media for presenting the message. Because of this I will make use of all four versions distinguishing them by the year published 1963, 1988 and in the case of the text in the *Papers* by the year preached (1954) along with the title of the sermon. For obvious reasons such reference will not be needed for “The Christian Doctrine of Man.”

²⁷² King’s comment in rejecting Luther’s and Calvin’s view of original goodness is based on his view of human evolution. *Papers*, 2: 190.

²⁷³ King, “What is Man?” (1988), p 9.

²⁷⁴ King, *STL*, 147-148.

²⁷⁵ King, “What is Man?” (1988), 9-10.

“Niebuhr helped me recognize the complexity of man’s social involvement and the glaring reality of collective evil.”²⁷⁶ The presence of human abuse of other human beings further persuaded him that a correct understanding of human nature must account for the good as well as the bad in humanity.²⁷⁷

King calls for a synthesis of these two perspectives, which he labels as a “realistic” view of humanity.²⁷⁸ He states the position thus:

There are those who, seeking to be a little more realistic about man, which to reconcile the truths of these opposites, while avoiding the extremes of both. They contend that the truth about man is found neither in the thesis of pessimistic materialism nor the antithesis of optimistic humanism, but a higher synthesis. Man is neither villain nor hero; he is rather both villain and hero. The realist agrees with Carlyle that “there are depths in man which go down to the lowest hell and the heights which reach the highest heaven, for are not both heaven and hell made out of him, everlasting miracle and mystery that he is?”²⁷⁹

A “realistic” view of humans, as King uses the term, is simply an understanding of humanity that takes serious the good and the bad in humanity. There are three dimensions to King’s “realistic” view of human nature. They are the biological, rational, and moral. It is important to note that these aspects are interrelated in a holistic manner. He does not place one aspect of humanity’s being as intrinsically evil and another part intrinsically good and thus in conflict with the each other as in Platonic thought. Humanity is an integration of the physical, spiritual, and moral.

Humanity as a Part of Nature

When King speaks of humanity as biological, he is simply acknowledging that humanity is a part of the natural processes. Humanity is bound by the same natural

²⁷⁶ King, *STF*, 99.

²⁷⁷ King, *STL*, pp.147-148. See also “How Modern Christian Should Think About Man,” *Papers*, 1: 275.

²⁷⁸ King, “What is Man?” (1988), 9.

²⁷⁹ King, “What is Man?”(1963), 88.

necessities as any other animal. There are natural or physical impulses that are driven by a need for food, shelter, security, water, clothes, etc.²⁸⁰ Humanity's corporeal nature is not bad; but, King asserts that God pronounced that humanity was very good. According to King, "there is nothing wrong with the body."²⁸¹ This basic view of humanity's physical nature distinguishes it from Greek thought. Correspondingly, it is not intrinsically wrong to pursue these necessities of nature. He would insist that it is the Christian's responsibility to attend to the physical needs of those affected by poverty.²⁸²

To be a part of nature also means that humanity is confined to time and space.²⁸³ As such, humans are finite creatures. Therefore, humans are limited in perspective, limited in knowledge, and limited in freedom. Human finitude is the basis for humanity's potential for evil. He observed that "Jesus was nailed to the cross not simply by sin but also by blindness. The men, who cried 'Crucify him,' were not bad men but rather blind men."²⁸⁴ While finitude does not cause one to act in a certain way, the inability to see the full magnitude of one's actions may affect one's decisions.

Humanity Transcends Nature

While King insists that humanity is a part of nature in his physicality, he wants to equally insist that through humanity's rational nature, humans transcend nature. Humanity's rational capacity is the same as humanity's spiritual nature. It is humanity's rational nature that separates this species from other animals.²⁸⁵ It is through the human rational capacity of imagination that humanity can envision the future. Humanity can

²⁸⁰ King, "What is Man?" (1954), 176.

²⁸¹ King, "What is Man?" (1988), 13.

²⁸² King, "What is Man?" (1954), 176.

²⁸³ King, "What is Man?" (1988), 10-11.

²⁸⁴ King, "What is Man?" (1963), 43.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 17. cf. "How Modern Christians Should Think About Man," *Paper*, 1: 276.

anticipate challenges that will prevent the realization of future goals and overcome potential obstacles. Through the mind, humanity cannot be constrained by time and space. To be sure, humanity can only physically exist in the present while physically bound by circumstances, yet one's spirit remains free. King observes:

Man is God's marvelous creation, crowned with glory and honor, and because of this you can't quite hem him in. You put him in Bedford's prison, but somehow his mind will break through the bars to scratch across the pages of history of a *Pilgrim's Progress*. You can bring him down to wretched old age, with his body broken down and his vision all but gone, and yet in the form of Handel, he will look up and imagine that he hears the very angels singing, and he will come back and scratch across the pages of history a "Hallelujah Chorus."²⁸⁶

Human rationality has the capacity both for good and pride and self-sufficiency.²⁸⁷ This notion of human capacity and potential is important for King's anthropology. As discussed in the previous section, human finitude is the context of wrong choices and actions, but human finitude does not make human nature intrinsically evil or depraved. The limitation of human knowledge and perspective make human evil possible, but not inevitable. As will be shortly observed, King's concept of sin allows him to discuss humanity in a way that maintains an evolutionary perspective that accounts for sin without making God responsible for the sin and evil in the world.

Human Responsibility for Nature

For King, human freedom is absolutely essential. Freedom is not only the basis for human responsibility for the self, but for other persons and lower creatures. Human capacity combined with human freedom ensures that humans can act on their dreams, thoughts, and ideas. Humanity is capable of acting in such a way as to experience fulfillment in their capacity to mold and shape human history. Human freedom, however,

²⁸⁶ King, "What is Man?"(1988), 17-18.

²⁸⁷ King, "How Modern Christians Should Think About Man," *Papers*, 1: 277.

is limited and finite by natural necessities, limited knowledge, and limited experience.²⁸⁸

Despite these limitations, King asserts that humans have the capacity through the will to assert their freedom and realize the fullness of human potential. Human freedom makes us ultimately responsible for human progress and the well-being of the planet.

King contends:

Man has within himself the power of choosing his supreme end. Animals follow their natures. But man has the power of acting upon his own nature almost as if from without; guiding it within certain limits; and modifying it by the choice of meaningful ends. Man entertains ideals, and ideals become his inspiration. Man can be true or false to his nature. He can be a hero or a fool. Both possibilities, the noble and the base alike, indicate man's greatness.²⁸⁹

The negative aspect of human freedom is humanity's potential to misuse their freedom for those things that are less than worthy of human endeavor. Just as humans can use their freedom to harness the power of the atom for constructive purposes, human freedom can be used to harness the atomic power for destructive purposes. It is precisely this reality that makes King's concept of humanity "realistic." Here, humanity is not all biology or all spirit, but human capacity for evil and goodness is dependent on the use of human freedom. Thus, humanity is ultimately responsible for humanity's destiny.

King's doctrine of humanity is grounded in his "realistic" view of humanity. It seeks to take seriously three dimensions of human creatureliness: bodily creature, spiritual creature, and responsible creature. Through his notion of human responsibility (or will/freedom), King holds together the dialectic of the earthy nature and the transcendent nature of humanity in creative tension. This conception serves as the basis for how King ultimately understands the relationship between God and humanity.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 276.

²⁸⁹ King, "What is Man?" (1954), 178.

A Modern Christian Theological Anthropology

King's commitment to a realistic view of humanity serves as the template from which he makes his judgments about theological issues. He insists that a one-sided generalization about humanity is an inadequate description of human nature. The imprint of the biblical fundamentalism of his childhood prevents him from abandoning certain theological categories and concepts, even if outdated in a scientific age. Therefore, King takes the categories of neo-orthodoxy and their essential meaning and reformulates them based on his understanding of the essential nature of humanity and God's relationship to the world.

The Imago Dei

King contends that the fundamental question in Christian anthropology is: "What does it mean to be created in the image of God?" King's answer to this question asserts that there are two aspects of human nature that reflect the image of God. The primary characteristic of humanity that reflect the image of God is found in humanity's rational capacity. As discussed earlier, King contends that humanity's spiritual essence is human rationality. Humanity's ability to think provides god-like qualities of imagination, creativity, and transcendence. The image of God is also reflected in human capacity to make choices. Human freedom, King writes:

The *imago dei* has been interpreted by different thinkers in terms of fellowship, responsiveness, reason, and conscience. An abiding expression of man's higher spiritual nature is freedom. Man is man because he is free to operate within his destiny. He is free to deliberate, to make decisions, and to choose between alternatives. He is distinguished from animals by his freedom to do evil or to do good and to walk the high road of beauty or tread the low road of ugly degeneracy.²⁹⁰

Human spiritual nature and freedom of choice combined provides humans with

²⁹⁰ King, "What is Man?" (1963), 90.

the “unique ability to have fellowship with God.”²⁹¹ It is the fact that humanity was created and called to a particular relationship with God that we can say that humans are in the image of God. King avoids committing to the idea that the image of God in humanity gives humanity some kind of divinity or goodness. Humanity’s goodness is never inherent and inevitable. It is always “potential” and uncertain. He is clear that humanity is “neither good nor bad by nature, but has the potential for either.”²⁹² The terms “capacity,” “potential,” and “freedom” are critical in King’s description of humanity. Humanity has the capacity for good, the potential to live a life above all impediments of natural impulses, and the freedom to choose to pursue God’s purpose for humanity. It is this realization that inspires human determination to live up to their divine purpose.²⁹³

King takes issue with the reformers, Martin Luther’s and John Calvin’s notion that through humanity’s sin, the image of God has been so totally effaced that humanity’s will is in complete bondage. He rejects the idea that the human will is only capable of only choosing evil. While acknowledging that the image of God has been “terribly scarred” in humanity, King rejects any idea of the image of God being so completely destroyed in humanity that humanity is unable to move towards God. He contends that there remains in humanity a hidden goodness that may draw humanity to reach its full capacity for good. He argues that there is “some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us.”²⁹⁴ However, King recognizes that human reasoning has been distorted by sin and argues that any belief in the inevitable constructive program of human society is flawed.

²⁹¹ King, “What is Man?”(1988), 18.

²⁹² King, “How Should a Christian Think About Man.” *Papers*, 1: 277.

²⁹³ King, “Six Talks in Outline” *Papers*, 1: 281.

²⁹⁴ King, “Loving Your Enemies.” *STL*, 51.

King also takes issue with the concept of a catastrophic fall from original goodness. On this point, his logic is consistent. If there were no original goodness, then there could be no fall from goodness. Influenced by an evolutionary perspective, King insists that the fall of humanity is one way of suggesting that humanity, through the misuse of freedom, has relapsed into animalism.²⁹⁵ Original sin for King is humanity's failure to reach the capacity of good in human potential.²⁹⁶

Humans as Sinners

King recovers the concept of sin in theological discourse. He writes that “we must admit that many of the ills in the world are due to plain sin.”²⁹⁷ He asserts that modern humans would like to eradicate term “sin” and replace it with more acceptable and less offensive psychological parlance such as “error of nature, absence of good, false concepts of mind.”²⁹⁸ Any honest, sensible person must admit that sin is a fact of the human experience. King locates the principle of sin neither in the body nor the rational dimension of human nature, but in the human will.²⁹⁹ He asserts that sin occurs because of humanity's misuse and abuse of human freedom.³⁰⁰ Because the image of God in humanity is reflected in the rational and the will (of human freedom), King argues that through human sinfulness the image of God is marred but not eradicated.³⁰¹ This is evident primarily in the fact that humans – though sinners – are free.

We just accept that as a presupposition that man can choose between alternatives. He isn't guided by instinct as the lower animals merely. But

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 275.

²⁹⁶ King, “A Comparison and Evaluation of the Theology of Luther and Calvin,” *Papers*, 2: 190.

²⁹⁷ King, “How Modern Christian Should Think of Man,” *Papers*, 1: 278.

²⁹⁸ King, “What is Man?” (1963), 90.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 89.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 9. cf “The Christian Doctrine of Man,” *Papers*, 6: 334.

³⁰¹ King, “What is Man?” (1954), 178. Cf. “A Comparison and Evaluation of the Theology of Luther with that of Calvin” *Papers*, 2: 190.

he's free: he can choose between the high and the low, the good and the evil. But man has misused his freedom.³⁰²

However, there is still within humanity an awareness of its dependence on God "as the source of all being and all goodness," says King.³⁰³

The misuse of the human will also accounts for the origin of sin, in King's view. He rejects the idea of an original fall and the transference of sin and guilt through heredity in the Augustinian sense. He further dismisses what he sees as the neo-orthodox theologian's use of the concept of original sin as a mythological category to speak of the universality of sin. The inevitable question is "How can one be responsible and guilty of something that he hasn't committed?"³⁰⁴ King argues:

It seems much more logical to find the origin of sin in man's free will. Sin originates when man misuses his freedom. A few theologians have tried to show how sin originates in misunderstood freedom. The child emerging from non-moral irresponsibility to the awareness of moral consciousness attempts to assert himself to prove his freedom and in so doing he feels a sort of false autonomy...All of this further validates the fact that the origin of sin is found in man's free will.³⁰⁵

King's emphasis on human freedom is important because it takes from God the responsibility for moral evil in the world. It is also important in his understanding of human salvation, which will be taken up in the following section.

There is also a relational dimension of sin in King's teachings. Humans are created to have a dynamic relationship with themselves and God. King argues that a perversion of any one of these relationships is sin. There are specific outcomes or consequences when one or all are ruptured. On the subjective level, sin produces

³⁰² King, "Christian Doctrine of Man," *Papers*, 6: 334.

³⁰³ King, "How Modern Man Should Think of Man," *Papers*, 1: 275.

³⁰⁴ King, "Qualifying Examination Answers, Systematic Theology" *Papers*, 2: 230.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 230-231.

disloyalty. When interpersonal relationships are corrupted, it produces selfishness. And when there is a break in our relationship with God, there is disbelief.³⁰⁶

Human Salvation: Cooperation between God and Humanity

King's doctrine of human salvation is rooted in his concept of God and humanity. On the one hand, King rejects any notion that humanity has the ability to eradicate evil or save itself. While acknowledging humanity's advancement in the area of scientific progress, he argues that no human advancement has been able to eradicate the stubborn human weaknesses of hatred, racism, and selfishness. He adamantly asserts that: "Man by his own power can never cast evil from the world. The humanist's hope is an illusion, based on too great an optimism concerning the inherent goodness of human nature."³⁰⁷

On the other hand, King wants to avoid any conception of God as having absolute sovereignty. Salvation will not come by God alone. King's concept of God, having relative finite power and unlimited goodness, is important to his understanding of human salvation. This view helps King to overcome the problem of human motivation in dealing with such issues as war, racism, poverty, and disease. While God is involved in the struggle for justice and bringing in a new age, King, from the very beginning of his involvement in the Civil Rights Movement reminds his listeners:

...I must correct what might be a false impression...I have talked about the fact that God is working in history to bring about this new age. There is the danger, therefore, that after hearing all of this you will go away with the impression that we can go home, sit down, and do nothing, waiting for the coming of the inevitable. You will somehow feel that this new age will roll in on the wheels of inevitability, so there is nothing to do but wait on it. If you get that impression you are the victims of a dangerous optimism. If you go away with that interpretation you are the victims of an illusion wrapped in superficiality. We must speed up the coming of the

³⁰⁶ King, "QE Answers, Systematic Theology." *Papers*, 2: 230.

³⁰⁷ King, "An Answer to a Perplexing Question." *STL*, 121.

inevitable... We must continue the struggle against segregation in order to speed up the coming of the inevitable.³⁰⁸

King contends that human salvation on a social level can only come with God and humanity working together. God and humanity are not collapsed into a single unity, but they are united in “purpose.” King describes this unity of purpose as “an overflowing love as a free gift of himself on the part of God and by perfect obedience and receptivity on the part of man, can transform the old into the new and drive out the deadly cancer of sin.”³⁰⁹

While King’s overwhelming concern about human salvation is on the social level, he addresses the issue of personal salvation in much the same manner. His conception of personal salvation is explicated in a paper he wrote while at Crozer, entitled: “A View of the Cross Possessing Biblical Spiritual Justification.” In this paper, King explores the historical development of the doctrine of atonement. He reviews three periods that represent three types of thoughts and emphasis. The first period is the early church period identified as the patristic period influenced by Greek thought. The predominant theory during this period was labeled the ransom theory of atonement. This theory basically argues that God paid a ransom to Satan, who was the rightful owner of humanity because of sin. The second period is launched by Anselm in the eleventh century until the middle ages. Anselm advanced what is identified as the satisfaction theory of the atonement. Although, there were several derivations of this theory, they essentially contended that Jesus Christ’s death on the cross was satisfaction for God’s claim for justice. Thus, Jesus Christ rescued humanity from God. The third period of the history of the doctrine of the atonement was from the middle ages to the present time. This period introduced the

³⁰⁸ King, “Facing the Challenge of a New Age.” *Papers*, 3: 460.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 133.

moral influence theory. This theory essentially contends that Christ's death on the cross was to provoke in humanity a sense of God's love for humanity thereby drawing humanity to God's self.³¹⁰

King contends that the moral influence theory was the most compatible with modern thinking about God and humanity. This theory is appealing to King because it makes God totally responsible for human salvation. There is something in humanity that has the capacity to respond to God's love. He observes: "The cross represents the eternal love of God seeking to attract men into fellowship with the divine."³¹¹ God calls to that hidden goodness in humanity and humanity has the responsibility to respond to God's call. Not only does God speak to the potential good in humanity, but, as was noted in the discussion on his doctrine of God, God becomes humanity's "Cosmic Companion," providing the internal resources for humanity to respond to and be faithful to God's call. He writes:

Despite man's tendency to live on low and degrading planes, something reminds him that he is not made for that. As he trails in the dust, something reminds him that he is made for the stars. As he makes folly his bedfellow, a nagging inner voice tells him that he is born for eternity. God's unbroken hold on us is something that will never permit us to feel right when we do wrong or to feel natural when we do the unnatural.³¹²

Humanity must participate in its personal salvation through its choice based on an inner human desire to live above the "low and degrading planes" and experience human transcendence and flourishing. In King's doctrine of personal salvation, human freedom is maintained and God's infinite goodness and relative finite power are asserted. In the end, God is not responsible alone for the personal destinies of human beings. People are.

³¹⁰ King, "A View of the Cross Possessing Biblical and Spiritual Justification." *Papers*, 1: 263-264.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 266.

³¹² King, "What is Man?" (1963), 91.

Summary

Martin Luther King Jr.'s theological concepts of God and humanity are the interplay of concepts in which their dialectical tensions are resolved in synthesis. King synthesizes the given of his African-American religious concepts of a compensatory and constructive God, on the one hand, with the metaphysical grounding of his personalistic academic philosophy. This synthesis opens to the dialectics of transcendence and immanence in God as Cosmic Companion. God's goodness and power are dialectically rendered so as to affirm his faith that the purposes of God are realized in history without making God responsible for evil, but empower human freedom to overcome evil.

Finally, human freedom is critical in the dialectic of human nature and salvation. In King's dialectical reasoning, it is in the positive creative exercise of human freedom that humanity is the most reflective of God, while it is the abuse of human freedom that is the source of most evil in the world. For King, it is humanity's responsibility to God to experience and participate in the fulfillment of human salvation. It is the context of the co-operative relationship within the dynamic movement of the divine-human dialectic that moves history. The next chapter explores King's philosophy of history.

CHAPTER IV

GROWTH THROUGH STRUGGLE: KING'S DIALECTICS IN HISTORY

Introduction

One of the neglected areas in Martin Luther King Jr. scholarship is his philosophy and theology of history. Little has been written about this important area of his thought. Most of what has been written is limited to the concept of providence. This is regrettable because it may be his most creative contribution to the study of theology and philosophy.³¹³ Unfortunately, this chapter will not provide a definitive assessment of his philosophy of history. Rather, it will be limited to demonstrating and establishing King's dialectical understanding of historical movements.

King's philosophy of history was perhaps one of his most critical concepts in his struggle for human dignity and freedom. It is what sustained in him in his many confrontations with entrenched and well-resourced opponents. Although he never wrote a treatise on his philosophy of history, his thoughts on the subject were ubiquitous. At every junction his critical question was: "Where do we go from here?" This question is implied in the whole span of historical movement, the past, present, and future. He was constantly trying to locate historically the Civil Rights Movement to provide encouragement, motivation and vision for those who followed him.

The first section of this chapter examines three influences in the development of

³¹³ Luther D. Ivory, in his text *Towards a Theology of Radical Involvement: The Theological Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.* (1997), calls King a theologian of radical involvement. While this is an accurate description of his praxis, Ivory reduces King's thoughts to his actions, thus collapsing the distinction between the King's actions and his philosophical concepts that informed his actions.

King's philosophy of history: G. W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, and personalism. These influences helped him to make sense out of the currents of historical development. The second section will look at how King's view of history shaped his own self-concept as a leader in the Civil Rights Movement. It also will show how his philosophy of history influenced his approach toward moving history in a certain direction.

Making Sense of History: Dialectics of God and Humanity

This section looks at three influences that helped to develop King's philosophy of history. These influences must be understood in the context of his theological views of God and humanity and the influences that shaped his understanding of God and humanity. By focusing on Hegel, Marx, and personalism, this chapter does not exclude how the Jewish and Christian scriptures inform his view of history. In this regard, the previous chapter, which discusses his concept of God and humanity, is crucial as a background for understanding why concepts such as freedom, justice, non-violence are important for his philosophy of history.

King, Hegel, and History

C. Eric Lincoln, a noted African-American sociologist of religion, wrote in 1970 that there was nothing in Hegel that would have prepared Martin Luther King Jr. for his confrontation with racial hatred.³¹⁴ However, in the present state of King's scholarship, it is acknowledged that the German philosopher, Hegel, and others had a significant influence on King and consequently on his ability to lead the Civil Rights Movement

³¹⁴*Martin Luther King Jr.: A Profile*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984), xi. Lincoln's statement is so inconsistent with King's own testimony and the subsequent scholarship that it can only be concluded that Lincoln's comment was really a rhetorical device.

from the mid-1950s to the late 1960s.³¹⁵ They have, however, limited that influence only to King's use of the Hegelian dialectical method in his logical thought processes. This section argues that King also was influenced substantively by Hegel's philosophy of history.

Scholars often invoke King's comment on Hegel in *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* where he rejects Hegel's "absolute idealism" as rationally unsound because it tends to "swallow up the many in the one." However, King found helpful Hegel's contention that "truth is the whole," and this led King to "a philosophical method of rational coherence." King further observed that Hegel's "analysis of the dialectical process in spite of its shortcoming, helped me to see that growth comes through struggle."³¹⁶ This statement along with other positive statements by King concerning Hegel's dialectical method has caused scholars to conclude that King essentially rejected the substance of Hegel's thought while retaining Hegel's methodical tool, namely, the triadic dialectical method of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. This conclusion has caused scholars to foreclose the substantial ways in which Hegel influenced King's thought.

While King clearly states that he rejects Hegel's metaphysics, he was open to certain aspects of Hegel's philosophy of history. Hegel's philosophy of history was indeed helpful and influential in shaping King's understanding of the development of the Civil Rights struggle and his role in that struggle. It was King's conception of the

³¹⁵See John Ansbro. *Martin Luther King Jr.: The Making of a Mind*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982), 119-128. Garth Baker-Fletcher. *Somebodyness: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Theory of Dignity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 86-94. Lewis V. Baldwin. *There is a Balm in Gilead: The Cultural Roots of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 181-182. Stephen B. Oates. *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King Jr.*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 38-39.

³¹⁶(New York: Harper Sanfrancisco, 1986), 100-101.

progress in history that sustained and nurtured his belief that a world of racial harmony would one day exist.

This section draws on two sources. First is King's reading of Hegel's philosophy of history, and second, his speech "Facing the Challenge of a New Age."³¹⁷ This article provides the clearest and most sustained view of King's philosophy of history early in his role as a civil rights leader. Till the end of his life, King consistently held the basic concepts articulated in this article with respect to his philosophy of history.

Dialectical Progress of History

One of the most vital concepts that King appropriated from Hegel was that growth comes by way of struggle. King acknowledges this debt to Hegel in 1956 in the speech to the First Annual Conference on Non-violence for Social Change entitled, "Facing the Challenge of a New Age,"³¹⁸ and also in 1958 in his book, *Stride Towards Freedom*. Although scholars are aware of this debt, there has been little attention given to it in relationship to its profound impact on King's understanding of history. For King, this notion of growth through struggle became a sustaining principle for him in the civil rights struggle. By examining these two references, one can get a better understanding of how important this notion is to King.

King delivered "Facing the Challenge of a New Age" in Montgomery, Alabama approximately a month after the United States Supreme Court ruled against the segregation laws of Alabama, thus ending the 381-day Montgomery bus boycott. In this speech, he attempted to locate where the African-American Civil Rights Movement was

³¹⁷ *Testament of Hope: The Essential the Writings of Martin Luther King Jr.* Edited by James W. Washington. (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 124-137. Originally published in *The Phylon Quarterly*, 18:1 (1st Quarter, 1957), 25-34.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 135-144.

historically in the struggle for justice. By doing so, he would be able to give those that were assembled a sense of hope that would help them commit to a course of social change through the use of non-violence. King contended that they were standing “between two worlds – the dying old and the emerging new.”³¹⁹

It was by setting forth his philosophy of history, informed by Heraclitus and Hegel, that King attempted to convince his listeners that the charge by some that they “lived in the most ghastly period of human history” was a misdiagnosis of the times. It was not that they were describing the current events accurately, but they were not interpreting them correctly. In King’s view, the Civil Rights Movement and Americans were not retrogressing but progressing towards a new social order.³²⁰ Citing Hegel and the Greek philosopher Heraclites, King argued that tension was not to be seen as negative but as the inevitable pain that occurs with the birth of a new age. It was “indicative of the fact that a new world order is being born and the old order is passing away.”³²¹ In *Stride Toward Freedom*, King’s brief statement that, “[Hegel’s] analysis of the dialectical process, in spite of its shortcomings, helped me to see that *growth comes through struggle*,”³²² illuminates the 1956 statement. Explicit in the 1956 speech is a description of the dialectical process of history, the antithesis of the old order clashing with the thesis of the new order, bringing to pass the synthesis of a new age of justice and equality.

Hegel contends in *The Philosophy of History* that the progress of history is consistent with the dialectical nature of the Idea. Universal History is the “development

³¹⁹ “Facing the Challenge of a New Age,” 135.

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Ibid.

³²² *STF*, 100-101 (emphasis supplied).

of the consciousness of Freedom on the part of the Spirit.”³²³ Hegel describes this development as successively transcending its previous forms while gaining a “richer and more concrete shape.”³²⁴ This process involves an annulment that is, at the same time, conserving something of the old and elevating it to something new and improved.³²⁵ Thus for Hegel, the movement of history mirrors the development of thought.

King suggests that the civil rights struggle is not merely physical confrontation, but also the confrontation of ideas. It is when the ideas of freedom and justice of the new social order confront the ideas of segregation and discrimination, which are characteristic of the old social order. Only then will those who embody the ideas of freedom and justice “be able to speed up the coming of the new world.”³²⁶ The inevitable destruction of segregation and other oppressive structures will be precisely because of the illogicalness of the existence of segregation and oppression. The struggle and conflict that arise from the thesis of the new order with the antithesis of the old order is a necessary moment in the onward march of progress. Consistent with this reality, King warns that “every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle.”³²⁷

Years later, King would appeal to this Hegelian notion of progress through struggle to provide a sense of hope necessary to continue the struggle. In *Where Do We Go From Here?*, he observes that progress is never in a straight line. There are inevitable counter movements to impede the efforts of progress.³²⁸ King saw the “white backlash” as natural response to blacks becoming more empowered. He contends:

³²³ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*. Revised edition with prefaces by Charles Hegel and the translator, J. Sibree (New York: The Colonial Press, 1900), 63.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

³²⁶ “Facing the Challenge of a New Age,” 144.

³²⁷ *STF*, 144.

³²⁸ *WDWGFH*, 12.

The inevitable counterrevolution that succeeds every period of progress is taking place. Failing to understand this is a normal process of development, some Negroes are falling into unjustified pessimism and despair. Focusing on the ultimate goal, and discovering it is still distant, they declare no progress at all has been made.³²⁹

Echoing Hegel, King further contends that it is not through one giant leap that African-Americans will be able to realize their goal of full citizenship, but rather through a number of short-term successive encounters that full victory will come.³³⁰

In the Grip of the *Zeitgeist*

Another important concept for King that was appropriated from a concept of the development of history is captured in the Hegelian term *Zeitgeist*. The term is shorthand for *der Geist der Zeit*, the spirit of the age or time. *Zeitgeist* is a phase in the development of the *Weltgeist* (world spirit). The world spirit for Hegel is the manifestation of the Absolute Spirit in history. Hegel argues that the development of history although not seamless, has rational coherence because it is governed by a single Spirit. The spirit of the age, or *Zeitgeist*, then becomes a way of talking about the concretization of a common cultural expression of a single people in relationship to the movement of the *Weltgeist* at a given time.³³¹

Hegel contends that “the History of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom.”³³² There are three elements that structure the historical movement of the world spirit. They are the nature of the Spirit, the means of actualization, and the State as the final and complete embodiment of Spirit.³³³ The

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Ibid., 11-12.

³³¹ *Hegel Dictionary*, 275-276.

³³² Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, 19.

³³³ Ibid., 17.

essence of Spirit is Freedom.³³⁴ Spirit longs to be actualized. Hegel uses the metaphor of seed to illustrate the nature of Spirit. Like the seed that contains “the whole nature of the tree, the taste and form of its fruit, so also the first traces of the Spirit virtually contain the whole of history.”³³⁵

This idea would remain only potential without its actualization in history. Hegel argues that it is human will that provides the power that drives the Idea from its potential being into actuality.³³⁶ The human will is human activity in the broadest sense encompassing human needs, instincts, inclinations and passions. Hegel asserts that “nothing has been accomplished without interest on the part of the actors, and . . . that nothing great in the World has been accomplished without passion.”³³⁷ Hegel brings together the Idea and human activity in the metaphor of fabric. He sees the two elements of history as the warp (Idea) and woof (human passions) of the fabric of history. Peter Hodgson's description of the relationship between the Idea and human activity is helpful. He notes that the idea of freedom (Divine Idea) is that which “impels history towards its goal” while human activity (passions) “is the historical bearer or instrument of the idea.”³³⁸ Human activity becomes the tool of the world spirit in its quest towards the actualization of the consciousness of freedom.

Hegel discusses four categories of particular individuals in relationship to the world historical process. They are the citizen, the person, the hero, and the victim.³³⁹ Limitation of space will not afford a treatment of each one of these categories, however,

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Ibid., 18.

³³⁶ Ibid., 20-22.

³³⁷ Ibid., 23.

³³⁸ Peter C. Hodgson. *God in History: Shapes of Freedom*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 120.

³³⁹ Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 24 -37.

for the purposes of this chapter, a few words about the hero or the world historical person will be helpful. Heroes, although pursuing their own interests and desires, have a sense of the spirit of their age.³⁴⁰ They are single-minded, decisive actors on the stage of history. They may or may not be aware of the goal of the World-Spirit, but they are nevertheless agents of the World-Spirit. Hegel describes them as follows:

Such individuals had no consciousness of the general Idea they were unfolding, while prosecuting those aims of theirs; on the contrary, they were practical, political men. But at the same time they were thinking men, who had an insight into the requirements of the time – *what was ripe for the development*.³⁴¹

Another characteristic of world historical individuals is that they are compelled to follow their passions without regards to personal happiness or enjoyment. Hegel argues that they are void of happiness and full of labor and trouble. They may derive some sense of satisfaction (but not necessarily happiness) in pursuing “their master-passion.” His description of their end was a morbid one. “When their object [master-passion] is attained they fall off like empty hulls from kernels,” Hegel writes. “They die early, like Alexander; they are murdered, like Caesar; transported to Helena, like Napoleon.”³⁴² Absolute Spirit enters into history becoming the World-Spirit or World-History finding actualization in a people, thus defining an age. This is taken up in world-historical individuals moving the world-historical process to its inevitable goal, the consciousness of Freedom.

While rejecting communism’s materialistic interpretation of history, King affirms

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 29 (emphasis not supplied).

³⁴¹ Ibid., 30.

³⁴² Ibid., 31.

an Hegelian notion that “history is ultimately guided by spirit.”³⁴³ King prefers to talk about God in personalistic terms. He declares that “God still works through history His wonders to perform.”³⁴⁴ Like Hegel’s Idea, King is convinced that the concrete manifestation of Divine participation in human affairs is realized in history. He observes:

I am convinced that the universe is under the control of a loving purpose, and that in the struggle for righteousness man has cosmic companionship. Behind the harsh appearances of the world there is a benign power. To say that God is personal is not to make him a finite object beside other objects or attribute to him the limitations of human personality.³⁴⁵

What language we use to describe the “God” reality in history is not crucial for King. Rather, he argues that what is important is “the conviction that the universe is on the side of justice.”³⁴⁶ If there is order in the universe, then history must also have a goal. For King, that goal is the actualization of a just society manifested in a truly integrated world. Betraying perhaps a Hegelian influence, King contends that even a person who has difficulty talking about a personal God “believes in some creative force that works for universal wholeness.” This force, he argues, “works to bring the disconnected aspects of reality into a harmonious whole.”³⁴⁷

With the notion of Divine participation in historical processes, King attempts to give some explanation for the inextricable forces that brought the Civil Rights Movement into existence. In Hegel, he found the language to interpret the events that unfolded subsequent to the arrest of Rosa Parks. Some of the critics of the Montgomery bus boycott accused the NAACP of planting Ms. Parks to instigate an event that would

³⁴³ *STF*, 92.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

³⁴⁵ *STL*

³⁴⁶ *STF*, 106.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

provoke the African-American community to action. King's response to this charge was:

She was not "planted" there by the NAACP, or any other organization; she was planted there by her personal sense of dignity and self-respect. She was anchored to that seat by the accumulated indignities of days gone by and the boundless aspirations of generations yet unborn. She was a victim of both the forces of history and the forces of destiny. She had been tracked down by the *Zeitgeist* – the spirit of the time.³⁴⁸

King personifies the term *Zeitgeist* in a similar way that Hegel does the term *Weltgeist* when he talks about the “cunning of reason.” By doing so, King and Hegel are able to give a more dynamic conception of the relationship between the *Zeitgeist* (for King) and *Weltgeist* (for Hegel) and their human subjects, the person(s) of destiny for King and the world-historical person for Hegel.

King recognized that the warp (the Divine) and the woof (the human) of history are necessary for the continued development of the historical process. He does not want to leave the impression that all humanity has to do is to let God do everything or that history will automatically bring humanity into what he calls the Beloved Community. He contends there is a danger that one would conclude that since God is in control and the old world order is passing away, there is nothing to do but to sit back and wait on the inevitable. Humanity, he argues, has the responsibility to speed up the inevitable.³⁴⁹ He contends that the “belief that God will do everything for man is as untenable as the belief that man can do everything for himself.”³⁵⁰ He observes:

Even a superficial look at history reveals that no social

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 44. King casts Rosa Parks as a “victim” of the forces of history. He departs from the Hegelian category here. Ms Parks, although she would not be defined as a hero, would probably fall in the category of a “person.” The victim of history for Hegel was a person primarily concerned with his or her own personal success.

³⁴⁹ “Facing the Challenge of a New Age,” 144.

³⁵⁰ *STL*, 133.

advance rolls on the wheels of inevitability. Every step towards the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals.³⁵¹

The relationship between God and humanity for King, however, is different from Hegel. King contends that humans must surrender to the move of God in faith. Humanity must invite God to help in our struggle. Hegel, on the other hand, sees the Idea, through the cunning of reason, manipulating humans through humanity's own passions to achieve the goal of the world spirit. However, they both would probably agree that the world historical processes require the divine and the human to actualize freedom in history.

King, Marx and History

King states that he studied Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* and *The Communist Manifesto* during the Christmas break of 1949. In addition to these texts, he also studied some undisclosed interpretive works on Marx and Lenin. His primary reason for carefully scrutinizing Marx's text was to "try to understand the appeal of communism for many people."³⁵² Consistent with those during his day, King equated Marx's writings with the economic ideas of communism. He made no clear distinction between Marxist-Lenin ideologies from the writings of Marx. Therefore, the two are interchangeable in King's writing.³⁵³ Marx's influence on King is more apparent in his radical economic philosophy than on his philosophy of history.³⁵⁴ Therefore, it is necessary to say a word about why

³⁵¹ *STF*, 97.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 92.

³⁵³ This collapsing the distinction between Marx, Marxism, and communism, although understandable considering the time in which King lived and wrote, is perhaps the basis for confusion in King's writing with respect to Marx's importance. It is often either understated or overstated. See Tom Rockmore, *Marx After Marxism: The Philosophy of Karl Marx*. (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2002) for the importance of understanding Marx on his own terms verses through the writings of Marxists or communistic political writings, especially the section, "On Distinguishing Between Marx and Marxism," 1-4.

³⁵⁴ See Adam Fairclough, "Was Martin Luther King a Marxist?" *History Workshop Journal* pp.301-309.

Marx would be included in any discussion of King's philosophy of history. Before turning to the significance of Marx on King's conception of historical movement, it is necessary to disclose the resources in which this section will base its observations.

The primary sources for developing the ideas expressed in this section are King's essay on "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence" in *Stride Toward Freedom*³⁵⁵ and his sermon, "How Should a Christian View Communism" in *Strength to Love*.³⁵⁶ In "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," King provides a summary position in philosophical terms, while in the sermon, he provides a more developed argument in theological terms. In the former, he attempts to provide his views in a wider context of his intellectual development; in the latter, he develops explicitly his position from a "Christian" point of view.

There are other sources in which King provides a critical assessment of Marxism or communism where he uses communism as a critique of capitalism. These sources are either an enlargement on the position articulated in these two presentations or a more explicit statement of the concepts contained therein. While his fundamental position does not change over time, King's rhetoric and call to action becomes more radicalized.³⁵⁷ The essays "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence" and "How Should a Christian View Communism" are adequate sources for the purpose of establishing how Marx helped to shape King's view of history.

The significance of Marx on King's understanding of the movement of history is

³⁵⁵ *STF*, 92-95.

³⁵⁶ *STL*, 96-105.

³⁵⁷ This is apparent when the version of the essay, entitled "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," that is included in the collection of sermons *Strength to Love* does not have any statement about Marx or communism in it. This is significant because this essay was submitted previously as a part of Christian Century's series, "How I Changed My Mind." Prominent thinkers are asked to reflect on how their views had changed over the last ten years. Therefore, if he had anything of significance in terms of a shift in his thinking he more than likely would have included it here. This becomes even more prominent when he obviously appropriated not only the title but a significant portion of the content from the previous essay.

essentially negative. That is, King does not primarily use Marx in a constructive manner. He uses Marxist views as a way of counter-balancing Hegelian idealist historicism, deconstructing capitalism, and affirming his own personalistic convictions of the Divine-human cooperative approach to historical development. King's negative utilitarian approach to Marx, along with his positive constructive conceptuality of history, provides a critical background for his own activism. To appreciate fully King's philosophy of history's debt to Marx, it is important to examine what he rejects in Marxism.

King articulates three basic criticisms of Marxism. He rejects Marxist materialistic interpretation of history, Marxist ethical relativism, and he opposes communism's political totalitarianism.³⁵⁸ Unfortunately, King only superficially describes the Marxist position in both presentations. It is left up to the reader to understand his shorthand description of Marx's thought. However, King consistently and vigorously insists that he could not, as a Christian, overcome these issues to become a Marxist. "A true Christian cannot be a true communist." He continues in strong language that "the two philosophies are antithetical and all the dialectics of logicians cannot reconcile them."³⁵⁹ Although he points out King's strong socialistic convictions, Fairclough correctly concludes that it would be extreme to contend that King was indeed a radical Marxist thinker.³⁶⁰ Each of King's criticisms of Marxism should be explored in terms of King's understanding of Marx and his understanding of the relationship between God, humanity and historical movements.

The first criticism proposed by King is that Marxism has a "material"

³⁵⁸ "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," *STL*, 92. In "How Should a Christian View Communism," King keeps this order of his critique. *Ibid.*, 97-99.

³⁵⁹ "How Should a Christian View Communism," p. 97.

³⁶⁰ Adam Fairclough, "Was Martin Luther King Jr. a Marxist?," 306.

interpretation of history. By material interpretation of history, King means that Marx has no place for God or religion in his understanding of historical movements. Marxist philosophy is, according to King, “avowedly secular and atheistic.”³⁶¹ King’s rejoinder that “history is ultimately guided by spirit, not matter” provides a clue to his view that Marx’s philosophy of history is atheistic.³⁶² He is reacting to Marx’s dialectical materialism that argues that history is moved solely by human actions without regard to divine activity. In contrast to Hegel’s idealism, Marx contends that it the material world that is prior to the thought world. Thus, the world is changed not by thought or some non-material entity but by human labor and productivity.³⁶³

The theological basis for this argument is essentially that “at the center of Christian faith is the affirmation that there is a God in the universe who is the ground and essence of all reality.”³⁶⁴ History has meaning because there is a benevolent, infinite God who creates and sustains all human values. God – and not the “push and pull of economic forces” – guides the flow of history.³⁶⁵ Furthermore, King has a lower view of human powers. He contends that humans are trapped by their own sin and finiteness and are incapable of saving themselves. This has obvious implications for understanding the nature of history. Human activity would have no existence or meaning without the presence of the divine.

Second, King takes issue with what he calls the ethical relativism of communism. He contends that communism exposes a philosophy of “by any means necessary” or the

³⁶¹ “How Should a Christian View Communism,” 97.

³⁶² “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” *STL*, 92.

³⁶³ See Allan Wood and Ted Grant. *Dialectical Philosophy and Modern Science* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2002.), 27-29.

³⁶⁴ “How Should a Christian View Communism,” 98.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

“ends justifies the means.” He attributes to Lenin the admonition “that lying, deceit, or violence” justifies “the ends of the classless society.”³⁶⁶ This philosophy is based on expediency instead of principles. This philosophy, according to King, is a logical consequence of communist atheism. If there is no divine government, there can be no absolute moral order. Therefore, anything is appropriate (murder, lying, stealing, etc.) if it is in the service of righteous ends.³⁶⁷

King rejects ethical relativism on theological grounds. He contends that God has built into the structure of the universe moral laws. Therefore, there exists a moral absolute that must govern the manner in which goals are achieved. He appeals to his Kantian mantra that “the end is preexistent in the mean.”³⁶⁸ Secondly, he rejects this position on a historical basis. He argues that “Destructive means cannot bring constructive ends, because the means represent the-ideal-in-the-making and the-end in-progress.”³⁶⁹ Thus, for King, you cannot move history towards the Beloved Community by using means that are inconsistent with the goals of the Beloved Community. The brief history of communism had already confirmed King’s contention. “Modern History,” he says, has already “known many tortuous nights and horror-filled days” because of this philosophy.³⁷⁰

The third criticism of communism that King raises is its political totalitarianism. Although King admits that Marx saw that the State was an interim arrangement on the way to a totally classless society, he is concerned with the fact the State in communism’s

³⁶⁶ Ibid. See also, Martin Luther King Jr. “Love, Law and Civil Disobedience” in *Rhetoric of Racial Revolt* Edited by Roy L. Hill. (Denver, CO: Golden Bell Press, 1964), 347

³⁶⁷ “Pilgrimage to Non Violence,” p. 92.

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

³⁶⁹ “How Should a Christian View Communism,” p.98.

³⁷⁰ Ibid.

political arrangement is the end and not humanity. The critical issue is that in this arrangement, individual freedom is completely disregarded. Any rights that individuals have are not intrinsic to their being but conferred upon them by the State. Restrictions are placed on such freedoms as the press, assembly, and voting. Furthermore, “art, religion, education, music, and science come under the gripping yoke of governmental control.”³⁷¹

King objects to totalitarianism because it first replaces the State for God. Humanity is created in God’s image, and as such, humans are not directed purely by economic and material forces. Humans are spiritual beings endowed with freedom and guided by higher values. However, the crucial problem is that communism robs humanity of what is essential to being human – freedom. To strip humans of freedom is to reduce humans to objects or things.³⁷² It is the free play of human creativity in cooperation with God that history is able to progress towards the divine ideal. Freedom is an absolute necessity or humanity will regress into darkness, superstition, and low aspirations.

A Personalistic Philosophy of History

There is no developed personalistic philosophy of history that King could access. To date, there is no fully developed philosophy of history from a personalist point of view. However, Edgar S. Brightman wrote an essay entitled, “A Personalistic Philosophy of History”³⁷³ in which he set forth some preliminary essentials for a philosophy of history informed by personalism. This essay serves as a basis for understanding how personalism informed King’s view of historical development.

³⁷¹ Ibid.

³⁷² Ibid., 98-99.

³⁷³ *Journal of Bible and Religion*. 18:1 (January 1950), 3-10, 88.

Brightman acknowledges the difficulty of developing a philosophy of history because history is largely interpretation of human activity in the past that is unrepeatable. Therefore, it is not subject to the same kind of scientific investigation of the natural sciences. Logic, epistemology, and metaphysics have a referent that is pliable by human intellectual endeavors, whether they are universal principles, traits of knowledge, or traits of being respectively. This fact is further complicated by the fact that there have been a number of differing notions of historical development.³⁷⁴ In spite of these challenges, Brightman's goal is to suggest some ways that a personalistic view of history can help to make sense of some of the chaos and despair present in the twentieth century.

Brightman contends that "the sole constituents of history are persons." Persons, for which he speaks, are God and humanity. "One person, God," he argues "is a participant in every historical occasion."³⁷⁵ He argues against Marx, arguments put forth by the Reformation theologians (Calvin and Luther), and Hegel in his assertion that "history does not consist of persons and a materialist environment or persons and fate, persons and impersonal deity or force."³⁷⁶ Human persons are not the extension of God and God is not the sum of human minds. Each is separate and distinct and bound by cooperative action and mystical love.

Brightman articulates three theories of history. They are impersonal, pluralistic, and personalistic. He provides a sketch of the first two theories to provide a basic contrast for his personalistic theory. Brightman suggests that the impersonal theory of history contends that all personal forces are simply the products of some impersonal force. It is

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 3.

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 4.

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

fatalistic in its assessment of humanity's activities.³⁷⁷ In the pluralistic theory, he argues that there is a plurality of forces that drive history. There is, however, no unity of purpose in historical movement. Although in this view, humanity is not fated, we cannot with certainty know what the best direction to focus on human activities is. Humanity can only do its best and hope for the best.

Personalist's theories of history have at least four approaches. They are delineated by their emphasis on either God or man. There is the "great-man theory" that sees history as reflected of the activities of great men.³⁷⁸ Second is the "all-men theory" that believes that history is simply what humanity does. It leaves God out altogether. It is not atheistic as much as it is humanistic.³⁷⁹ The third personalistic theory is the God-alone theory. This theory suggests that God determines all human activity. God is essentially the great puppeteer.³⁸⁰

It is the fourth personalistic theory, the interpersonal or cooperation theory that Brightman offers as the most adequate theory for a personalistic philosophy of history. This theory posits that all history is seen as "a system of interpersonal relationships on widely varying levels among all kinds of persons – both human persons and the Divine Person — with the goal of increasing cooperation in the achievement of the highest values."³⁸¹ There are several key concepts that are important in order to correctly understand this view of history. First is the progress of history. The notion of "possibility" is open to success as well as failure. However, Brightman insists that the co-operative relationship between God and humanity guarantees the inexhaustibility of

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 5.

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

the possibilities for the realization of God's desire in human history. Furthermore, God guarantees that possibilities of progress are greater than the possibilities of failure. While this is a progress theory of history, it is fundamentally different from other theories of inevitable progress on several points. First, it does not assert that progress is an uninterrupted guarantee. It contends only that there are "inexhaustible possibilities" for progress.³⁸² Second, this approach "excludes materialistic norms of progress in terms of wealth, territory or power." The norms for progress then are replaced by three factors: "the types of personal value realized in history; the number of persons who prize and attain ideal values; and the degree of possible improvement that is available in any situation."³⁸³

The second concept is that all reality is historical. Brightman argues that all "reality is historical for the simple reason all reality is personal."³⁸⁴ Metaphysically, there is nothing external to history. There are two terms that needs clarification in order to clarify his reasoning. The first is epochs. When one talks of epochs, "broad divisions of human history' are being referred to. They have a beginning and an ending. The one constant in history is the One Divine source of all histories that precedes and continues after all histories."³⁸⁵ The other term is "arenas of history." This is the "more immediate environmental situations of historical process."³⁸⁶ This is the arena of human activities via nation states and the arenas of the natural and the supernatural.³⁸⁷ Brightman sums up his argument thus:

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ Ibid., 6.

³⁸⁴ Ibid.

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

All epochs and arenas are in, of, and for persons. They have one purpose – rational love, logos and agape. History is essentially one, at all times, in all arenas. There is no superhistory. There are simply different stages, phases; aspects of one history. Faith in that spiritual unity that underlies all history provides rational insight to the mind and imparts integrity to character.³⁸⁸

It appears that the most crucial concept for Brightman is the concept of purpose in history. The core issue is the role of God in historical processes, that is, does God have an ultimate destination in which God is moving history? Correlative to that question is the question of meaning, with respect to events on the individual and the cosmic level. Essentially, Brightman argues that meaning and purpose are achieved through the action of the totality of personalities (individuals and societal institutions) towards the actualization of some universal ideal value. This requires some concept of an over-arching providential hand in historical processes. Because human personality and freedom are real and vital, history must be open and at the same time guided.³⁸⁹ However, in the very nature and personality, according to Brightman, “there can never be an *eschaton* in time; no last event, no end of all God’s world when time and purpose shall be no more.”³⁹⁰ He concludes that “The eternal purpose which history is actualizing is that of inexhaustible creativity, including endless variety in control of the Given, endless growth in individual powers, community, and love.”³⁹¹

Brightman can now assert that essentially history is not only interpersonal but also rational coherence.³⁹² It is rational because it possesses inclusiveness and systematic

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 7.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 8.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 9.

³⁹¹ Ibid.

³⁹² Ibid.

unity.³⁹³ When considering all the facts of history, the good, the bad, and the indifferent, “it always evidences of the power of a controlling purpose that opens possibilities for cooperative love, no matter how dark and hateful the situation maybe.”³⁹⁴ There is continuity not in governments or societal/cultural institution, but in people’s aspirations in spite of failures and the indomitable spirit that pursues higher values in spite of oppression, injustice and evil in the world. It is not a single event or phase in history that warrants such faith, but the overall direction of history.³⁹⁵

Dialectic of God and Humanity in Hegel, Marx, and Personalism

In Hegel’s philosophy of history, the relationship between God and humanity was essentially one-sided. Through the cunning of reason, God trapped humanity to do God’s will. Individual persons, except the world historical persons, are not important to God with respect to historical movements. This view emphasized the divine to the exclusion of the human in history. It differed from Marx’s concept of historical movements in that Hegel at least had a God that existed and was involved in human history, Marx could not make any allowances for God to be involved in historical processes. Hegel’s concept differed with personalism in that Hegel’s God was impersonal and unconcerned with individual persons.

Marx’s philosophy of history has an utopian element that suggests that history is moving toward a classless society. Through Lenin, Marxism advocated the use of any means necessary to achieve that end. While this approach was an anathema to King, it at least affirmed that there was a concrete conception of a just society. However, King insisted that the ends could never justify the means. The end is preexistent in the means.

³⁹³ Ibid., 10.

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

³⁹⁵ Ibid., 88.

In other words, Marxism supporters could not achieve a just society that they were attempting to achieve by using unjust methods. Marx's view of history required that God and religion be excluded. They were the creation of the upper classes to render the lower-class capital and mere products of capitalistic machinery. Marx's materialistic view of the driving force of history was a counter to Hegel's Absolute Spirit in history and personalism's Absolute Person of history.

Personalism brought together the significant elements of Hegel's (the spiritual) and Marx's (human) philosophy of history. Personalism emphasized the God's participation in history while affirming humanity's necessary involvement in changing human conditions. God is personal and infinite goodness, while finite in power. Humanity, endowed with freedom, must take up the responsibility for the human condition. Personalism provided a means to empower humans in their quest to move history toward achieving a higher level of existence. Consistent with a Hegelian view of history, it argues that there is no final *eschaton* or destination of history. King could not embrace such a position. He consistently contended that history is moving towards a goal. His famous "I have a Dream" speech expressed his initial view of history's goal, a completely integrated society. The night before his death, he once again affirmed his conviction that history had a final goal. After attempting to place the "movement" in some historical context, King expressed the *telos* of history in the parlance of his African-American religious heritage: "I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promise land."³⁹⁶ His mature vision of the

³⁹⁶ Martin Luther King Jr. *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*. edited by James M. Washington. (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 203.

telos of history (“the promised land”) not only included racial integration, but also a society without war or class distinctions.

King, History, and the Civil Rights Movement

Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Conception of History

Martin Luther King Jr.’s conception of history and historical movement is a synthesis of Hegelian idealism, Marxist utopianism, and personalistic theology. Through the dynamic interplay between persons at every level with human efforts and divine power, history moves towards its ultimate goal. Appropriating insights from each of these sources, King’s conception of history consistently reflects three essential elements. First, God has structured the universe with moral laws. Therefore, history must be governed by those laws. Second, humanity must be an active participant with intentionality if the goal of history is to be achieved. Third, there is an ultimate goal for history. King articulated these convictions in various ways and contexts. However, he did not abandon either of them. They were inextricably tied together.

Personalism provided the theological context in which a multiple of streams of influences could coalesce into a cogent conception of God and humanity. That a personal God created and valued persons requires that God be involved in the well-being of individual persons. For this reason, King rejected the part of Hegel’s absolute idealism that “tended to swallow up the many in the one.”³⁹⁷ God created and structured the universe in such a way that personality would be able to flourish. Despite the social and systemic evil that existed in the world, humanity could overcome it because God created the world to be governed by moral laws. God is also humanity’s cosmic companion

³⁹⁷ *STF*, 100.

providing encouragement and internal resources to confront and subdue structured evil. This deeply held conviction is precisely why King could not and would not be a thorough-going Marxist, which would not allow the presence of God in human historical processes.

A common theme of King's was that progress would not "reel in on the wheels of inevitability."³⁹⁸ There must be human involvement and activity. A part of that activity must be to confront the entrenched ideas and practices of the old order. As his view of social justice issues expanded, the tenacity in which the old order holds on was reevaluated. King consistently attempted to locate the present position of the Civil Rights Movement in relationship to its past and future. In doing so, he was attempting to encourage people to continue the struggle. He could assert that there has been progress even when it was not obvious. He could list concrete examples where improvement was accomplished. His earlier immature optimism was shattered towards the end of his life. However, he would not abandon the notion that humanity must continue to struggle to bring about the kind of world that reflects the values of the kingdom of God.³⁹⁹

King was convinced that history was moving towards a specific goal. The clearest demonstration of this was his continued optimism about the future towards the end of his life. Despite the obvious challenges that he was facing with the triple evils of racism, materialism, and militarism that threatened America's ability to realize its vision of being the land and the home of the brave, King could affirm that he still had a dream of a land where men and women of all races, religions, economic status would be able to live as a

³⁹⁸ "Facing the Challenge of a New Age," 141.

³⁹⁹ *TOC*, 76.

family.⁴⁰⁰ On the night before his death he affirmed that African-Americans would one day get to the promised land. The concept of the promised land, drawn from the biblical narrative of the land of liberation and sufficiency compared to Egypt, their land of bondage, was a familiar metaphor to the African-American religious community he addressed that night. He was speaking not only to the fact that their cause would be vindicated, but also the nature of their future existence.

Martin Luther King Jr. as World Historical Person

In his resignation from the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, King attempted to provide a rationale for his decision by using an implied Hegelian notion of the *Zeitgeist*.⁴⁰¹ The primary reason for his resignation was that the path on which the Montgomery bus boycott had set him was at odds with his responsibility as the pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. He lamented: "I can't stop now. History has thrust something upon on me which I cannot turn away. I should free you now."⁴⁰² John Ansbro accurately interprets this comment as King's realization that he had been gripped by the *Zeitgeist*.⁴⁰³

King's life was reminiscent of Hegel's hero or world-historical person. He was sensitive to the drumbeat of his times and he ordered his movements consistent with that beat. He was always ahead of his contemporaries, which resulted in him being frequently misunderstood. The power of King's oratory was not merely his eloquence, but his message that resonated with the age. He sacrificed his personal happiness, comfort and eventually his life for his irrepressible passion for freedom. He rose above the narrow

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ See pages, 109-114 in this chapter for clarification of the Hegelian notion of *Zeitgeist*.

⁴⁰² Lerone Bennett, Jr. *What Manner of Man: A Biography of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., 1968), 106.

⁴⁰³ John Ansbro. *Martin Luther King Jr.: The Making of a Mind* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982), 126.

confines of the concerns for “his” people to embrace a vision of freedom for all humanity. He possessed the courage to act decidedly on his convictions. He was fond of saying that true leaders do not take a consensus poll to determine what is right. He is not molded by consensus, but is a molder of consensus. In the end, like Hegel's heroes, he was assassinated — he fell off like “the empty hulls from the kernel.”

King not only saw individuals caught in the grip of the *Zeitgeist*, but he also thought African-Americans as a people were caught by the *Zeitgeist*. He contended that "Consciously or unconsciously the American Negro has been caught by the black *Zeitgeist*."⁴⁰⁴ By “black” he is not referring to the color of the spirit of the age, but the prevailing disposition of all the peoples of African descent in the Diaspora in the Americas. In Hegelian terms, he is speaking of the significance of Blacks in the historical processes in the mid-1900s. He states: “This is the great hour for the Negro. The challenge is here. To become the instruments of a great idea is the privilege that history gives only occasionally.”⁴⁰⁵

Martin Luther King Jr., The Civil Rights Movement, and the Dialectic of History

King became the symbol of the Civil Rights Movement in America during the late 1950s to the 1960s. As noted in the previous section, he was clearly aware of the historical significance of the movement of which he was a part. Although there was an attempt to define him narrowly as a civil rights leader, his self-understanding as a minister of the gospel defined the scope of his calling beyond the strictures of race, region, and civil rights concerns. Therefore, a “Human Rights” activist may perhaps,

⁴⁰⁴ "Dreams of Brighter Tomorrows" *Ebony*, March 1965, 35.

⁴⁰⁵ *STF*, 224.

most appropriately, describe his activism.⁴⁰⁶ King's historical consciousness combined with his sense of calling in the context of the historical forces of his day (racism, poverty, and the Vietnam War) shaped the evolution of the movement he led through the organization of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Three interrelated trajectories will be examined below to show the dialectical nature of the movement. The three interrelated trajectories are the broadening geographical scope of his movement (and with it the widening stature of his leadership), King's expanding consciousness of the issues of social justice, and the radicalization of his nonviolent method.

The Broadening Civil Rights Movement and King's Leadership

The Montgomery bus boycott marks the first phase of the human rights movement under Martin Luther King Jr.'s leadership. The initiative was local in scope, however. It was not intended to create a national movement. It was a movement that was led by local leaders under the guidance of an organization formed to meet the challenge of maintaining the momentum of the boycott. The name decided on for the organization was the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). The very name highlighted the narrow scope of the organization's mission. The leadership was strategically thrust upon King because he was new in the area and the local white power structure would not have any influence over him. Moreover, he was not identified with any cliques in the African-American community.⁴⁰⁷ As Vincent Harding contends, he was indeed an inconvenient hero.⁴⁰⁸

The local power structure was not convinced easily to accede to the requests of

⁴⁰⁶ Note Garrow's presentation of King's comment at the SCLC Frogmore retreat, "We have moved from the era of civil rights to an era of human rights."

⁴⁰⁷ Lerone Bennett, *What Manner of Man*, 64-65. See also Lewis, *Martin Luther King Jr.: A Critical Biography*, 56, and King, *STF*, 56.

⁴⁰⁸ *Martin Luther King Jr.: An Inconvenient Hero* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 1-22.

the MIA. The white community used threats of financial reprisals, jail, and physical harm to intimidate the African-American community and its leadership. They also used the segregated laws, the courts, news editorials, and subterfuge to thwart the efforts of the MIA. However, each tactic of the white community was met with increased determination on the part of the African-American community to see the boycott through. Instead of diluting their resolve, it bolstered their commitment to keep up the pressure on the bus company and the city of Montgomery.⁴⁰⁹

The final outcome of the bus boycott was settled in the courts. On November 13, 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled to uphold a lower court decision that the Alabama laws requiring bus segregation was unconstitutional. The decision came on the day that the local court would rule on the legality of the transportation system that the MIA established to help the boycotting Negro passengers. As expected, the judge ruled against the MIA. The Supreme Court's ruling made the local decision of non-effect. However, without the Supreme Court's ruling, the MIA would have been dealt a devastating blow.⁴¹⁰ Although, the MIA was unable to gain concessions from the white community through their efforts, they had achieved something much more significant. For over a year, they were able to withstand every tactic of the white community to discourage and debilitate them in their quest for human dignity, and the nation took notice.

With the success of the Montgomery bus boycott came national attention to its successful outcome and Martin Luther King Jr., the young educated and powerful orator.

⁴⁰⁹ Note Garrow's description of King's statement on page 54. "They [white Montgomery city officials] appear determined not [to] settle this protest in our favor even though it appears that we are right. It seems that the mayor is use to having colored people coming to him begging for things; well, we are demanding (emphasis supplied) our rights."

⁴¹⁰ *STF*, 158-160.

On January 10 and 11, 1957, ministers from around the South met at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta to discuss the possibility of extending the Montgomery Movement throughout the South. Out of this meeting, the SCLC was formed with Martin Luther King Jr. as its president.⁴¹¹ This marks the second phase of the human rights movement under King's leadership. The demands on King's time, as a speaker and advisor to other communities and organizations, as president of the SCLC required him to eventually resign his position as pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery and move to Atlanta to assume the co-pastorate with his father at the Ebenezer Baptist Church.

The movement has now moved from a local movement to a regional movement, focusing on ending segregation in the South. During this phase, several southern campaigns were initiated. The Birmingham (1963) and Selma (1965), Alabama movements solidified King and SCLC as the preeminent civil rights organization in the South. These campaigns served as catalysts for getting the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 passed. These campaigns were the beneficiaries of lessons learned from an ineffective campaign in Albany, Georgia.⁴¹²

The Albany Campaign ended without "accomplishing the goals of the movement."⁴¹³ While there were a number of factors that contributed to the lack of concrete victories, the primary causes were twofold. The first factor was Albany Police Chief, Laurie Pritchett who orchestrated a nonviolent counter-attack. Having read King's book *Stride Toward Freedom*, Pritchett realized that without violence on the part of the

⁴¹¹ Martin Luther King Jr. *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*. Edited by James M. Washington. (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), xxv.

⁴¹² King, *WWCW*, 43.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*

city, King would not be able to get the necessary national coverage and support. He made arrangement with the surrounding city and county jails to accommodate the mass arrests that he anticipated, thus avoiding the problem of overcrowding jails.⁴¹⁴ The second cause was the growing division between The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the SCLC.⁴¹⁵ The third and perhaps the most significant cause of the Albany failure was due to a lack of specific concrete goals.⁴¹⁶ Consistent with King's approach to understanding truth, as neither in the thesis or the antithesis but in synthesis, Albany (the antithesis to Montgomery) provided a clearer understanding of how to effectively execute a campaign in a community in which he was not personally a resident. Albany provided insights that would help to solidify his stature as a southern civil rights leader.

Although King was nationally and internationally known and called upon to address issues of civil rights across the country, it was not until he went to Chicago at the invitation of Al Raby, the chairman of the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations (CCCO), and undertook the Chicago campaign that he was confirmed as a national leader. The CCCO was formed in 1962 to coordinate the efforts of various civil rights organizations in Chicago to combat a number of issues facing the African-American community. By the summer of 1966, the CCCO had diminished in effectiveness and felt that Martin Luther King Jr. and the SCLC could energize their efforts. King and the SCLC decided to take up of the Chicago Campaign after a northern tour earlier in the year to get a sense of the issues of the northern African-American communities. Although it did not achieve fully the desired results, King's presence

⁴¹⁴ Juan Williams. *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years 1954-1965* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 169.

⁴¹⁵ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 196-97, 201-202.

⁴¹⁶ WWCW, 54.

energized the Chicago Freedom Movement, through speeches, rallies, marches, and negotiating with the city leadership. Chicago's contribution to King's development, like Albany, was learning what worked as much as learning what did not work.

It was King's stand against the war in Vietnam that launched him and the SCLC into the international political arena. This stance alienated him from the mainstream civil rights leadership, the Lyndon Johnson's presidential administration, and many financial supporters. King's public stand against the war in Vietnam began with a statement at Howard University in March of 1965.⁴¹⁷ By the time of the Annual SCLC convention in August of that year, there was division within the executive board membership over whether to endorse King's public statements on the war. SCLC board's formal statement conveyed that the SCLC leadership did not support the idea of expending any resources to protest the war. They affirmed the original purpose of the organization, which was to address issues that prevented African-Americans from full participation in the American society. The board made it clear that King could express his personal opinions on any matter of which he held strong conviction.⁴¹⁸

In 1967, King escalated his involvement in the peace movement. There were two speeches that would bring about a final and irrevocable break with the Johnson administration. The first was King's speech against the Vietnam War at the Nation Forum on February 25, 1967 in Los Angeles.⁴¹⁹ Second and more significantly was King's speech on April 4th to the Clergy and Laymen Concerned group at the Riverside Church in New York. His participation in an anti-war protest on April 15th sponsored by Spring Mobe only certified his complete commitment to the peace movement (Spring Mobe,

⁴¹⁷ David Garrow, 394.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 437-438.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 545.

short for Spring Mobilization, was the first mass mobilization against the Vietnam War in New York City). King led a demonstration of more than 125,000 persons from Central Park to the United Nations Building, where he was the key speaker for the rally.⁴²⁰ When challenged and criticized because of his stand against the war, King would argue that his call to ministry and the Nobel Prize gave him the credentials for his activism in any moral issue.⁴²¹ Although, King received the Nobel Prize in 1965, it was because of his involvement in the peace movement that he had come to a settled understanding of the international implications of the honor.

Broadening Consciousness of Social Justice

Over the course of King's thirteen-year public ministry, his view of pressing social justice issues broadened from the need for integration in the South to global peace. The journey from Montgomery to Memphis was a tortured, agonizing passage. It exemplified a rational course in the Hegelian dialectical sense. As the Civil Rights Movement under King's leadership, i.e., MIA and the SCLC, progressed from a local movement to a movement with international significance, so did his awareness of the complexity of the obstacles to realizing the Beloved Community.

The initial social issue that King confronted was that of integration. The Montgomery bus boycott, the Freedom Rides, the sit-ins, the Albany Movement and the Birmingham Campaign had as their central aim the elimination of segregation in its various manifestations. King's perspective was essentially naive to the depth of the issues that race masked. He argued that when blacks and whites are able to get together and understand one another, then many of the issues that prevented African-Americans from

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 556-557.

⁴²¹ Ibid., 552-553.

becoming full participants in the American society would be removed.

As it became apparent that all the vestiges of racism would not be removed until there were, at the various levels of government, persons who were sensitive to the plight of African-Americans, the focus expanded to include the inequities in the political system. The heart of the American political system was the vote, and the essential logic is the deployment of the African-American vote to put in office political leaders who would pass laws that affirmed the dignity of all human personality. This would remove the inherent insecurity of political leaders caused by the need to please the people who put them in office. The disenfranchisement of African-Americans extended beyond whether they could sit on a bus; nothing less was at stake than the very essence of the American ideal – the freedom of self-government. Thus, King's focus moved from the purely social stigmatization of segregation to political disenfranchisement. To be sure, the issue of integration was not abandoned. King and the SCLC leadership added to issues of political justice the demands of social justice.

When King's movement traveled to the North, he became aware of another important issue in social justice. It was the issue of economic justice. He discovered that northern racism was more subtle and hidden than racism in the South. It was evidenced in the economic fabric of northern communities. The issue of open fair housing and the perpetuation of impoverished ghettos in northern cities brought to the surface latent racism. Northern blacks were not confronted with the overt racism of segregated bus, restaurants, hotels, and the like or the inability to exercise the right to vote. They were

constrained by the inability to earn the same kinds of income of their white counterparts. Thus, they were limited not by laws but by economics.⁴²²

It became apparent to King that if the economic issues were adequately addressed, all of other issues would also be addressed. Economic justice would provide a comprehensive approach to society's ills. He began to call for a guaranteed minimum income and work for all Americans.⁴²³ The only way for this to happen was to restructure the American economic system. He was convinced that social democracy was the direction that the United States must go if economic justice was to be achieved. On the issue of economic justice, King thought that he had at last come upon the root issue of society's problems.⁴²⁴

One major obstacle stood in America's way toward being able to ensure all American's a job and a guaranteed income. King was absolutely convinced that the United States government had the financial resources, if only the president and the Congress had the will to adjust their priorities. The war in Vietnam, King contended, was consuming the resources that could be available to fund the War on Poverty program that the Johnson administration had announced. The more King reflected upon the plight of poor people in America, black and white, and observed the money spent on what he felt was an unjust war, the more he was compelled to lend his voice and influence to the peace movement.⁴²⁵

Thus, the issue of global peace, namely in Vietnam, did not dislodge the issues of social, political, or economic justice. King linked the issues of racism, classism, and

⁴²² *TOC*, 9-11.

⁴²³ *WDWGFH*, 162-163.

⁴²⁴ David Garrow, 581.

⁴²⁵ *TOC*, 22-23.

militarism as the triple evils of American culture.⁴²⁶ As King addressed in the mythical Hegelian thesis-antithesis-synthesis model, his broadening social consciousness evolved in a similar manner. The thesis of integration encountered the anti-thesis of political justice, which was synthesized into economic justice. In turn, economic justice, the new thesis, encountered the antithesis of militarism.

From Nonviolent Passive Resistance to Civil Disobedience

Three distinctive phases marked the development of King's nonviolent protest strategy for social change: nonviolent passive resistance, nonviolent direct action, and nonviolent civil disobedience. The path to civil disobedience followed essentially the same development of the two trajectories previously discussed, the Civil Rights Movement from a local movement to an international movement and the broadening of King's social justice consciousness from simply equal accommodations to economic justice issues.⁴²⁷ Each phase was precipitated by some resistance to his basic approach that rendered it less effective. The core principle to his strategy was nonviolence. However, with each push back from those opposing nonviolence, King was challenged to escalate his nonviolent action. The first phase was nonviolent passive resistance. Next was nonviolent direct action, and the third was nonviolent civil disobedience.

The Montgomery bus boycott and the Montgomery Improvement Association did not have very radical goals. The Montgomery movement did not begin with the notion of integration. The primary goal was only to have the African-American passengers be treated with respect and allowed to be seated on the bus beginning in the rear to the front. They did not insist that African-Americans should sit on the same seats with white

⁴²⁶ Martin Luther King Jr. *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*. Edited by James M. Washington (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 148.

⁴²⁷ See the previous section.

passengers. They also requested that African-Americans bus drivers drive on predominantly African-Americans routes. King insisted that the movement would be non-violent in nature.⁴²⁸ His method was nonviolent “passive” resistance.

The Montgomery bus boycott was characterized as much by its passivity as its nonviolence. The basic strategy was to withdraw black support from the bus system through a boycott. There were no marches or demonstrations. There were rallies to keep the community informed, encouraged, and motivated to continue the boycott. There were negotiations with the city leadership and the bus company. Their intentions were not to create a confrontation with the white community. Only because the white community refused to accept what the MIA thought was “reasonable” requests did the group begin seeking genuine social change and the eradication of segregation of the buses.

The Montgomery Movement confirmed experientially a fundamental concept that would be a permanent part of King’s philosophy of history, which is: “Growth comes only through struggle.” Those in power never give up their privileged position without being forced. Associated with the idea of “growth through struggle” was the concept that the aggrieved community must not use violence as a means to stimulate the necessary growth. These two concepts would serve as the consistent framework for King’s evolution from passive nonviolent resistance to active nonviolent resistance to civil disobedience.

Between the Montgomery bus boycott (1956) and the Birmingham Movement (1963), there were two important developments that stimulated the next step in the radicalization of King’s nonviolent method. First was the development of the student Civil Rights Movement, and second was the failure in Albany, Georgia. The student

⁴²⁸ STF, 63. see Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 52, 53-54

movement demonstrated the effectiveness of confrontation, while the Albany movement – through the counter moves of Sheriff Pritchett – validated this point. The significance of Albany was discussed in the previous section.⁴²⁹ This section will address the significance of the student movement.

The Civil Rights Movement's progression to nonviolent active (direct action) resistance was initiated spontaneously on February 1, 1960 by four college students in Greensboro, North Carolina. The students decided to challenge the segregation laws by sitting down at the lunch counter for service at the F. W. Woolworth department store. This tactic quickly extended throughout Greensboro and the southern region. This movement became known as the student "sit-in" movement.⁴³⁰ King, recognizing the significance of what was happening by way of these sit-ins and the importance of having the energy of the youth in the Civil Rights Movement, responded positively to the request to assist in helping them organize and chart their future.⁴³¹ A delegation of college students from around the South converged on the campus of Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina to decide the direction that this new student movement would go. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was formed at this meeting. Although King agreed to serve as an advisor to SNCC, it was not formally connected with SCLC.⁴³²

The significance of SNCC in the evolution of King's radicalism cannot be overstated. After an initial Freedom ride, spearheaded by James Farmer, president of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), and members of SNCC, was truncated because of

⁴²⁹ See pages 133-134.

⁴³⁰ David Garrow, 127.

⁴³¹ Ibid., 128-129, 131-134.

⁴³² Ibid., 132, 133.

white violence, members of SNCC determined that the full ride through the South would happen. The Freedom Rides, according to Farmer, were specifically designed to create a confrontation with white hatred and bigotry to dramatize the need for the federal government to act.⁴³³ During this period, King had not come to the position of using direct action; SCLC focused on issues like training in nonviolence, voters' registrations, and the like. Rather, through the sit-ins and the Freedom Rides, it was, SNCC that demonstrated the effectiveness of taking a more active approach to nonviolent resistance. The Freedom Rides indeed provoked anger and violence in the white communities which forced the Kennedy administration to enforce the laws that prohibited the practice of segregation in interstate travel and bus terminals.

After the ineffectiveness of their efforts in Albany on the background of the sit-ins and the freedom rides, SCLC was convinced that if they were to be successful in the Birmingham campaign there needed to be a confrontation. The SCLC named the Birmingham campaign, "Project C." The "C" was for confrontation.⁴³⁴ It was indeed the violent response of Bull Connor, Birmingham's Commissioner of Public Safety, to the nonviolent demonstrators that created national and international support for the efforts of the Civil Rights Movement in Birmingham. The Birmingham initiative was in part the catalyst for getting the Civil Right Act of 1964 passed. It was the violence that erupted in Selma, Alabama as a result of direct action that served in the same manner as one of the factors that helped get the Voter Rights Act of 1965 passed.

King's move towards civil disobedience, the third phase in the evolution of his nonviolent resistance strategy, was precipitated by several factors. First, there was the

⁴³³ Ibid., 156.

⁴³⁴ WWCW, 54-55.

changing mood among the nation's younger blacks towards the idea of redemptive suffering and nonviolence as King articulated them. This was evidenced by the riots of 1965 and the swelling call for Black Power. The militant younger activists's call for Black Power did not include a call for nonviolence. They advocated taking power, even if by force. Some of the advocates of Black Power contended that nonviolence as a strategy was in the past. This position appeared to be validated by the eruption of riots in some of the major urban centers.⁴³⁵ The second factor was what was termed the "white backlash," i.e., the white community hardening stance against civil rights.⁴³⁶ A third factor was the growing disillusionment with the federal government's resolve to take the necessary actions to make the needed changes fast enough without a dramatic confrontation.⁴³⁷

When King was assassinated in 1968, he was planning for a Poor People's March on Washington. In late 1967, on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation station, he shared his plan to bring three thousand poor people from select urban and rural communities from across America to Washington, D.C., to camp out until the government responded to the issues of poverty in the country. King comments on the goals and methods of the Poor Peoples' Campaign did not reveal the extent of the confrontation that they were planning and the effect it would have on the government. Garrow provides a detailed account of the SCLC discussions and plans, which included shutting down some of the government agencies through massive sit-ins. The impoverished citizens would, if necessary, practice massive civil disobedience to disrupt and even shut down the federal government until Congress was prepared to address the

⁴³⁵ *WDWGFH*, 57-58.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*, *TOC*, 9-10.

⁴³⁷ *TOC*, 55.

issues of poverty in the United States.⁴³⁸

Responding to the dialectical tension of the Black Power Movement and the White Backlash, King writes earlier:

The Negro has been wrong to toy with the optimistic thought that the break down of white resistance could be accomplished at small cost. He will have to do more before his pressure crystallizes new white principles and new responses. The two forces must continue to collide as the Negro aspirations burst against the ancient fortress of the status quo. This should not be construed as a prediction of violence. On the one hand, there will certainly be new expressions of nonviolent direct action on an enlarged scale. If 100,000 Negroes march in a major city to a strategic location, they will make municipal operations difficult to conduct; they will exceed even the most reckless government to use force against them; and they will repeat this action daily if necessary.⁴³⁹

This direct response to the dialectical forces, King admitted that his response must escalate the force of nonviolence in order to overcome white resistance to gain results. The only way that a nonviolent approach would continue to have currency within the Civil Rights Movement is to demonstrate results.

While the above quote suggests massive civil disobedience that could shut down multiple city governments, King announced plans on the Canadian Broadcast Corporation station to have substantially fewer demonstrators (from 1,000 to 3,000) at one single strategic location, namely, Washington, D.C. The difference in strategy can be accounted for by the fact that King was determined to demonstrate that a disciplined army of nonviolent soldiers would be able to make radical social changes in America and the world. Therefore, it was necessary to involve only those who have been trained in the discipline of nonviolence prior to participating. Causing a confrontation in the nation's capital would be able to get the most done in the least amount of time.

⁴³⁸ Ibid, 60-61. See also Garrow, 581-584.

⁴³⁹ *WDWGFH*, 20.

Summary

At the center of King's philosophy of history is that the movement of history is dialectical in nature. He embraced Hegel's notion that history is guided by ideas, while rejecting that humanity is only a pawn of cunning of reason. He rejected Marx's notion that history is only guided by human material interests, while accepting his claim that history is moved by human actions. King's philosophy of history was rooted in the idea that history is moving towards a positive future where humanity will exist in a community of mutual respect. However, history's *telos* will not be realized without human activity. Through human actions, history will only move towards its goal through struggle. It is through the clash of ideas and will that the path towards history's goal will be clarified and realized.

Because of his understanding of the movement of history towards its goal, King could conceive of and commit to strategies that fostered confrontation with the prevailing order of the status quo, to intentionally move history towards its inevitable goal of world peace and a community without the limitations of race, class, and gender. His activism separated him from Hegel and Marx in that he sought to move history towards its goal. King understood himself to be inextricably in the grips of historical forces as an agent of historical change. He operationalized the idea that "growth comes through struggle" to forge creative tensions and conflicts to produce change. With each confrontation and movement of history, King also changed in the Hegelian dialectical sense, that is, there was sublimation and an elevation of his own thinking and acting.

The next chapter will examine the dialectics in King's moral philosophy, which

provides insights into his understanding of where history is moving and the underlining moral principles that must guide human actions toward pursuing history's goal.

CHAPTER V

CHASING THE WIND: DIALECTICS IN MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.'S MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Introduction

The realization of the Beloved Community is the teleological vision of Martin L. King Jr.'s moral philosophy. Kenneth Smith and Ira Zepp correctly state that it is the capstone of all his thought and the organizing framework of all his thoughts and activity.⁴⁴⁰ As the previous chapters have set forth the dialectics in his theology and philosophy of history, one may say that it was his view of God, humanity, and history that shaped his conception and belief in the viability of the Beloved Community. Informed by his view of God, humanity and history, King's commitment to making it a reality became a consuming passion until the day of his assignation.

Unfortunately, there has been very little attention given to King's concept of the Beloved Community as part of King's rational discourse, even after Zepp and Smith's important work established the significance of the Beloved Community in King's thought.⁴⁴¹ While Zepp and Smith examined the intellectual sources for his concept of the Beloved Community, they did not provide a systematic presentation of the Beloved

⁴⁴⁰ Kenneth Smith and Ira Zepp, *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Valley Forge, Pa: Judson Press, 1998), 129.

⁴⁴¹ A few examples of scholarship devoted to some aspect of King's idea of the Beloved Community are: Walter E. Fluker, *They Look for a City: A Comparative Analysis of the Ideal of Community in the Thought of Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King Jr.* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989), Lewis V. Baldwin, *Toward the Beloved Community: Martin Luther King Jr. and South Africa* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1995), Donald Chinula *Building, King's Beloved Community: Foundations for Pastoral Care and Counseling with the Oppressed* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1997). John Ansbro devotes a section to the King's Beloved Community in the *Making of a Mind* renamed *Martin Luther King Jr.: Nonviolent Strategies and Tactics for Social Change*. New Introduction by the author (New York: Madison Books, 2000) pp. 187-197.

Community. This lack of attention perhaps can be accounted for by two reasons. The first reason there may be a lack of attention is perhaps his thoughts concerning the Beloved Community appear to be scattered and very fluid. Although King's use of the term is ubiquitous, he did not write a systematic treatise containing a comprehensive description of the Beloved Community. King came close to such a presentation in two texts, *Where Do We Go from Here? Community or Chaos* in the chapter entitled, "The World House," and *A Trumpet of Conscience*, published posthumously based on a series of speeches recorded for the Canadian Broadcast Corporation. However, the term "Beloved Community" may be seen as merely a rhetorical device with no real substantive qualities.

Another problem getting a grasp of what King meant by the term "Beloved Community" is that he used a number of terms interchangeably with Beloved Community. For example, while the term "Kingdom of God" has a strong similarity to the "Beloved Community," he did not use these terms in a strictly technical matter. However, a careful reading of King would suggest that these terms are not identical, but that each provides an additional clue to his overall concept of the Beloved Community. For instance, the Kingdom of God speaks to only one element of the Beloved Community, but the Beloved Community is not the Kingdom of God. To complicate his discourse on the Beloved Community further, terms like integration, justice, and non-violent resistance were ever-evolving. There was a core essence to these terms when King used them at any point, to be sure, providing continuity. However, the contextual setting provides a nuanced understanding of each term. These terms will be explored later in this chapter to provide an adequate description of King's Beloved Community.

The second reason for ambiguity over the Beloved Community is that his concept of the idea is often dismissed as utopian, a goal to be pursued without the possibility of its realization. Princeton political theorist, George Kateb historically describes how the terms “utopia” or “utopian” came to conjure negative connotations.

. . . sometimes the words [utopia and utopian] are used as terms of derision and sometimes with a vagueness that robs them of any genuine usefulness. For example, a proposal that is farfetched or implausible is often condemned as “utopian,” whether or not the proposal has any idealistic content. In another, closely related pejorative use, “utopian” designates that which is unacceptably different from the customary or is radical in its demands. The connotation of a complete impracticality serves to discredit a threatening idealism. Similarity, daydreams and fantasies – necessitous, frequently bizarre expressions of private ideals – are called “utopian,” as if wishful thinking and utopia are synonymous. Even when these words are used neutrally, their coverage is enormously wide. Almost any kind of thoroughgoing idealism – a view of the good life, a statement of fundamental political principles, a plea for major reform – can earn the title “utopian.”⁴⁴²

Ira Zepp’s concluding statement, in his monumental dissertation, reflects this almost dismissive tone with respect to the “dream” quality of King’s Beloved Community. He observes that: “It is needed to inspire men, as well as to qualify all their attempts at true human community. But nevertheless remains a dream . . . never to be totally realized in history.”⁴⁴³ The characterization of King’s concept of the Beloved Community with his “dream” underscores Kateb’s observation of the pejorative manner in which utopian ideas are viewed.

Furthermore, the manner in which King died, through the violent act of assassination, while an undaunted advocate of peace and affirming belief in the African-American’s getting to the promised land, highlights what appears to be an absurdity in

⁴⁴² Paul Edwards, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. (New York: McMillian Publishing Co., Inc., 1967). George Kateb, “Utopia and Utopianism,” 895-896.

⁴⁴³ Ira Zepp, *The Social Vision of Martin Luther King Jr.* Preface by David J Garrow (Brooklyn, NY: Carson Publishing Co., 1989), 234.

such a belief. It is precisely because of such issues that King's utopian views must be considered. It is in the philosopher's description of the ethical life (whether individually or socially) that the abstract ideas of theology and philosophy of history are made relevant and useful for human existence. However, it is at the point of the philosopher-theologian's concrete proposals for how humanity should live in community that most, if not all idealists, metaphysicians, and ethicists are most vulnerable to critique.⁴⁴⁴

King's dialectical approach is critical for understanding this capstone of his moral philosophy. It is his dialectical approach that accounts for the evolutionary dynamic in his intellectual development. Furthermore, this approach provides a crucial means for him to bring together the ideal and the concrete as forces for change in a world gone mad with hatred, greed, and war. It is through King's use of this dialectical method that he could inspire a subjugated people to assert their will to embrace the fullness of their human dignity. His dialectical approach allowed him to be hopeful and embrace the goodness found in humanity without being Pollyannaish. In other words, the Beloved Community, a synthesis of his theology and his philosophy of history, served as a regulative ideal that orientated him towards the ideals he envisioned.

This chapter examines the importance of the dialectical method in King's moral philosophy by examining the Beloved Community as a regulative ideal. The first section establishes the basis for making such a claim. Building on the notion of the Beloved Community as a regulative ideal, the second section provides the best possible description of King's concept of community. This is achieved by way of mediating and synthesizing the dialectics of race, class, power, and faith. The final section examines

⁴⁴⁴ One such example is Hegel's concept of the state. Hegel contends that the goal of history is realized in the concrete manifestation of the state know. Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, which contains the definitive presentation of his concept of how the ideal state functions, is perhaps his most controversial work.

King's belief in the realization of the Beloved Community and the path to its achievement.

The Beloved Community as a Regulative Ideal

King's concept of the Beloved Community may appear to serve merely as a utopia. However, on a carefully reading of King's ethical views, one must dismiss such a conclusion. While such a framing device may be useful as a hermeneutical tool, it would not only distort King's concept of the Beloved Community, it would also mute the force and power of the idea to motivate his followers to confront hostile segregationists, dogs, fire hoses, and even death. Kant's notion of regulative ideals is a more appropriate way of understanding how King's Beloved Community functions in his ethics. While there is an element of utopianism in his conception of the Beloved Community, to frame King's Beloved Community as utopian would distort, rather than enhance, an understanding of the concept. The Beloved Community as utopic is limited by the categories of time and space, but as a regulative ideal, it transcends such categories. Understanding King's Beloved Community as a regulative ideal allows it to serve as the mediating concept in the dialectical elements of race, class, power, and faith, which, in turn, are constituent characteristics of the Beloved Community.

Although King did not use the term "regulative ideal" to explain his concept of the Beloved Community, I think it is the best way to understand his communitarian concept. In order to advance the fundamental argument of this chapter, it is necessary to turn to Kantian ethics to explicate this term. While King did not often directly cite Kant in his many articles, books, and speeches, Kant's influence courses through his thought.

A seminal principle of King's personalistic ethics contends that persons are never to be viewed as means to ends, but are ends in themselves, and as such the means are pre-existent in the ends. He would often argue that the means and the ends must be compatible. In other words, an unjust means could not be made acceptable by a just ends. This position is grounded in the Kant's categorical imperatives.⁴⁴⁵

Kantian ethics is grounded on epistemological foundations established in his paradigmatic text, *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant's essential goal was to establish a scientific basis for the study of metaphysics. He argues that if there can be established a basis for examining metaphysical concepts in a rigorous manner based on a priori principles, it would then be possible to create a condition by which metaphysical thought could keep pace with the scientific advancement of his day.⁴⁴⁶ He argued that there were synthetic *a priori* truths which could provide the principles for guiding such an enterprise. Although they are experienced, they do not rise out of human sense-experience. It is the *a priori* conditions of space of time that makes human perception of objects possible. Time and space are not based on human experience but are the ground or condition that makes human sensible knowledge possible. Additionally, the *a priori* categories of understanding provide the matrix by which the sense data apprehended by human perception is able to order the data in some unified matter, thus making it intelligible to the human mind. Although Kant contends that there were limits to human reason insofar as humans could not know a thing in itself, he insists that it is possible to know something about God, the universe, and humanity in the examination of the limits of human reason.

⁴⁴⁵ WWCW, 93-94, cf. Immanuel Kant *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*. Translated and analysed by H. J. Patton, 3rd edition (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1956), 95-96.

⁴⁴⁶ CPR, Aviii-Axii.

After undercutting the transcendental logic that claims to say something definite about God, Kant introduces and develops the concept of regulative idea as a way to affirm the usefulness of concepts such as God, the soul and freedom while acknowledging that they are not subject to scientific investigation.⁴⁴⁷ In the “Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic” in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he contends that:

The transcendental ideas have a superb and indispensably necessary *regulative* use: viz., to direct the understanding to a certain goal by reference to which the directional lines of all the understanding's concepts converge in one point. And although this point of convergence is only an idea (*focus imaginarius*), i.e., a point from which – since it lies entirely outside the bounds of possible experience – the concepts of understanding do not actually emanate, it yet serves to provide for these concepts the greatest unity, in addition to the greatest extension.⁴⁴⁸

Dorothy Emmett provides a helpful way of understanding regulative ideals as unrealizable. She argues, consistent with the Kantian notion that the transcendental ideas provide direction and orientation, that they are ultimately unrealizable. They provide the impetus for human reasoning to push back the horizons of human understanding, although never reaching the limits suggested by the idea.⁴⁴⁹ Emmett contends that Kant’s “Regulative Ideas” do not have to address issues of existence because they can be bracketed and one can act “as if” they existed.⁴⁵⁰ She observes that “Regulative Ideals are concepts of what would be the final state of practice according to some absolute standard.”⁴⁵¹

⁴⁴⁷ *CPR*, A643/B671

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁹ Dorothy Emmett, *The Role of the Unrealisable: A Study in Regulative Ideals* (New York: St. Martin’s Press), 2.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

The critical aspect of the regulative ideal is that it orientates human behavior or activity towards a particular goal. While the ultimate goal is unattainable, the regulative ideal provides correct use of reason towards the goal. Thus, the Regulative Ideal gives rise to what Kant calls regulative principles.⁴⁵² The relationship between the ideal and the principle is reciprocal. The regulative ideal provides the orientation and direction, while the principle provides the appropriate rules that guide human activity towards the teleological impulse contained in the ideal. However, the regulative principle provides the means by which the boundary between the real and ideal can be narrowed, although never touching. Emmett provides the following insight:

Regulative Principles provide rules while Regulative Ideals provide archetype standards, and it is a delusion to think that they can be fully attained. But we can go forward on the assumption that behind the infinite variety of nature ‘there is a unity of fundamental properties – properties from which the diversity can be derived through repeated determination’⁴⁵³

The relationship between the regulative ideal and the regulative principles is consistent with the relationship between the ends and the means. The ends provide the norms for the selection of the means to achieve the ends. King’s development of the regulative principles (means) of integration, democratic socialism, justice, and nonviolent direct action are framed by the Beloved Community as a regulative ideal (ends). While the regulative ideal may not be realizable in the absolute sense, it may be realizable in a limited sense if the principle by which human efforts are orientated is in a manner consistent with the ideal.

⁴⁵² CPR , A692-693/B 720-721.

⁴⁵³ Dorothy Emmett, 11.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s Beloved Community

Martin Luther King Jr.'s conception of the Beloved Community was clearly a response to the dialectical tensions of his earlier childhood and adolescence experiences. The issues of race, poverty, reason, and faith spurred him to attempt to resolve them intellectually as well as pragmatically. As noted earlier, utopian ideals are often dreams of what one desires in light of what is. It should, therefore, be no surprise that issues of race, class, and a reasonable faith are important elements of the Beloved Community.

King's vision of the Beloved Community was never expressed in definitive concrete manner in the same manner as was Hegel's conception of the state or Rauschenbusch's Kingdom of God. However, over time, the Beloved Community becomes clearer and more concrete. The symbol is not only addresses fundamental issues that King confronted in his childhood and youth, it also confirms the positive self-affirming experiences of his home, community and church, muted the dehumanizing affects of race and class. This section contends that King's concept of the Beloved Community is in reality a description of how the world in which issues of fundamentalism, race, class and power are resolved. King's view ultimately evolved as a synthesis of the dialectics of his thoughts and praxis. In other words, King's the Beloved Community is the product of his theology and philosophy of history played out on the world stage. It was ever-expanding in scope and clarity, the more his efforts met resistance and failed to gain the desired ends of a truly integrated society.

Personalism provided a philosophical and theological foundation for King's concept of the dignity and worth of all human personalities. It was his existential reality as a black person growing up in racist America that shaped his insistence that the

Beloved Community must symbolize an integrated society. Racism expressed in the form of legal segregation in the South and economic segregation in the North contradicted the sense of self-worth affirmed in his home, church and community. Because racism was the first existential crisis challenging his sense of worth and value, to put an end to racism in the form of segregation set King on a journey to find the method to end this blight on the American psyche.

Speaking in Nashville, Tennessee at a church conference in 1962 King, declared that integration is “the ultimate goal of our national community.”⁴⁵⁴ This statement and other statements may give the impression that the Beloved Community is essentially a colorless society. However, it is important to understand how he used the term “integration” with respect to human communities. King describes a truly integrated society as one where there is “the positive acceptance of Negroes in the total range of human activities. Integration is genuine inter-group, interpersonal doing.”⁴⁵⁵ King delineates the difference between the terms “segregation,” “desegregation,” and “integration” to clarify what he means by an integrated society.

Segregation, Desegregation, and Integration

King observes that “segregation represents a system that is prohibitive: It denies the Negro equal access to schools, parks, restaurants, libraries and the like.”⁴⁵⁶ The immorality of segregation is not merely based in the fact that it physically limits the African-American access to public accommodations. Rather, it is the psychological trauma that it afflicts on the African-American psyche. It limits human capacity by

⁴⁵⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., “The Ethical Demands for Integration,” *Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King Jr.* Edited by James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 118. Originally published in *Religion and Labor* (May 1963), 1,3-4,7-8.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

limiting human interaction. It re-enforces the belief that African-Americans are inherently inferior to whites.⁴⁵⁷ King asserts that “[s]egregation is diametrically opposed to the sacredness of human personality.”⁴⁵⁸

Desegregation simply removes the legal obstacles that segregation constructs between the races. It is “eliminative and negative” in that it destroys these barriers. The barriers that segregation sets up – political, economic, and socially – prevents humans from interacting in ways they naturally would, if the barriers were not present. Thus these barriers are not natural constituents of the human psyche, but artificial social constructs to ensure the dominance of a particular race. However, if these barriers are removed and humans will naturally interact and remove the fears and animosity that have developed because of the separation.⁴⁵⁹

However, desegregation can only go so far in progress towards true integration. King contends that it is possible to have physical proximity while distance in spirit and heart.⁴⁶⁰ Authentic integration does not occur unless there is true interaction between the races. At best, desegregation is the necessary intermediary step between segregation and integration. While desegregation will not change human prejudices and bigotries, it will provide the necessary context for integration to become possible. In other words, while integration may not occur simply because of the desegregation of buses, lunch counters, and neighborhoods, integration cannot happen under legal segregation. Desegregation is only a provisional, strategic step in creating the ideal society.⁴⁶¹

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., 121.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., 119.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid, 123.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., 118. cf. *STF*, 119-200.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid., 123.

Thus integration is the voluntary decision of the individuals to cross the torn-down barriers of segregation to enter authentic relationship. Integration means social interaction that respects the worth of all human personality. Each person stands on the same plane regarding human capacity, potential and value. Therefore, one is not above learning and receiving from the other. King contends that this is something that the laws or state cannot do. In this sense, integration lies outside the realm of the legal. It is in the domain of the spiritual, the moral, and the ethical. Desegregation is a negative and deconstructive moment in the process of resolving the race problem, while integration is a positive constructive moment in this process transcending all considerations of race distinctions. Thus establishing the differences between the terms, segregation, desegregation and integration, King asserts that integration is the ultimate goal.⁴⁶²

King is not suggesting that the goal of integration is merely to have the races sitting next to each other on buses, at restaurants, in class rooms, and as neighbors. His view of true integration is expressed in his dream of persons being “judged by the content of their character and not by the color of their skin.”⁴⁶³ Recognizing the significance of these distinctions has caused scholars such as Zepp and Smith to clarify what King had in mind when he advocated integration. It was this transcendent element in his concept of integration that provides the dynamic element of his evolutionary understanding of what the Beloved Community must ultimately look like.⁴⁶⁴ The next sections argue that King’s concept of integration will evolve to include the dissolution of class and national distinctions as well.

⁴⁶² Ibid., 118, 123.

⁴⁶³ Ibid, “I Have a Dream,” 219.

⁴⁶⁴ Zepp and Smith, 130.

Classism: Economic Segregation

The second childhood psyche trauma was for King the awareness of the differing available material goods and necessities among those in his community. His later experiences helped him realize that class distinctions transcended racial and ethnic lines. King's consciousness of the class distinction in America and its impact on the race issues grew to the point that his last campaign was to dramatize that class problem in the United States. Throughout his public life, the issue of class is perhaps the most controversial and problematic for King. His civil rights activism occurred during the time of Cold War tensions, which was a time when there was a fierce ideological battle between democracy and its economic cohort, capitalism, and communism and its economic orientation, Marxism. King's proclivity towards dialectical synthesis is perhaps seen clearest as he attempts to think through a way meaningful to resolve poverty issues without violating some of his basic theological convictions about humanity.

Perhaps one the clearest characteristics of the Beloved Community that King developed as a synthesis of opposites is his vision of social democracy.⁴⁶⁵ King does not label the synthesis of capitalism and communism as social democracy. However, Douglas Sturm's essay, "Martin Luther King Jr. as Democratic Socialist," argues cogently that King's orientation was towards democratic socialism very early in his life. While King avoided the use of the term "social democracy" in public print and speeches, in private it is reported that at a retreat of the SCLC King contended that "America must more toward democratic socialism."⁴⁶⁶ He preferred to call his eco-political position a "socially

⁴⁶⁵ *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 18 (Fall 1990), 79-105.

⁴⁶⁶ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 537.

conscious democracy.”⁴⁶⁷ It addresses the dialectic of the economic classes of the wealthy and the poor. In his essay, “Pilgrimage to Non-violence,” published in 1958 as a chapter in *Stride Toward Freedom*, he places capitalism and communism as polar opposites.⁴⁶⁸ He argues that each has a partial truth. Both capitalism and communism have strengths, but they also have weaknesses.⁴⁶⁹ His argument that “the Kingdom of God is neither in the thesis of individual enterprise [capitalism] nor the antithesis of the collective enterprise [Marxism], but a synthesis that reconciles the truth of both,” hints at the possibility of a synthesis, although he does not provide a description of that synthesis.⁴⁷⁰

King’s difficulty with communism can be summarized by his assertion that: “The trouble with Communism is that it has neither a theology nor a Christology; therefore it emerges with a mixed-up anthropology.”⁴⁷¹ King’s criticism of communism consistently turns on these two issues, namely, its atheism and its devaluation of the person. communism’s atheism poses two essential problems for King. The first problem is historical. Marx contended that history was driven purely by human necessity. It threw out any notion of a spiritual dimension to the movement of history. Humanity, therefore, is left to struggle alone. This led to the second problem which is ethical relativism. In Marxist theory there is no higher moral authority in the universe. Essentially, King saw Communism advocating the ends justifies the means.⁴⁷²

⁴⁶⁷ *WDWGFH*, 50.

⁴⁶⁸ See *STF*, 92-95 for his treatment of communism by way of his reading of Marx during his first Christmas break while in seminary at Crozer.

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.* cf. *STL*, 103-104.

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*, 92, cf. *STL*, 98.

The devaluation of the person, expressed in the individual, is subjugated to the state. In communistic practices, according to King, humans were created for the State instead of the State being created for humans. Human freedom is restricted to the point that only the State's existence matters.⁴⁷³ Communism strips persons of human dignity transforming them into "cogs in the turning wheel of the state" thus persons are reduced to things.⁴⁷⁴ Such a view of human worth and dignity was consistently abhorrent to King.

King consistently presented communism as the antithesis of capitalism. This is significant because King saw capitalism as being most compatible with his basic personalistic theological and philosophical orientation. It further was consistent with his fundamental optimistic view of human nature. However, in a number of his presentation on the subject, he presents his case against Marxism, which he uses interchangeably with communism, before presenting his thoughts on capitalism.⁴⁷⁵ In a sermon, "How Should a Christian View Communism," King takes an interesting dialectical approach to communism. He makes his toughest argument against communism, while, at the same time, providing a sympathetic view of it. He contends that: "Communism and Christianity are fundamentally incompatible." "A true Christian cannot be a true Communist, for the two philosophies are antithetical and all the dialectics of logicians cannot reconcile them."⁴⁷⁶ Such a statement is unusual for King, who attempts to find a way to reconcile or synthesize antithetical viewpoints. Such a statement can be accounted for by suggesting that King was making a point that as a Christian he could not be a communist. King's development of his sermon makes this point abundantly clear.

⁴⁷³ Ibid, 92-93.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 93.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., 92-95, cf *STL*, 97-106, and *WDWGFH*, 186-191.

⁴⁷⁶ *STL*, 98.

However, in the same sermon, he cites elements in communism, such as social justice and a classless society, which theoretically is not only compatible with Christianity, but is a recovery of Christian revolutionary values and concepts. That is, for King, the concept of social justice espoused by Marx reflects his Jewish and Christian heritage found in the teachings of the eighth-century prophets in the Hebrew scriptures and the teachings of Jesus resident in the Christian scriptures.⁴⁷⁷ The classless society reflects the Christian affirmation of “the unity in which we have in Christ, for in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, bond nor free, Negro nor white.”⁴⁷⁸ King attempts to reconcile this apparent inconsistency by making a distinction between the communism’s practice (which is irreconcilable with Christianity) and its theory (which recovers Christian revolutionary values). “The *theory*, though surely not the *practice*, of Communism,” King asserts, “challenges us to be more concerned about social justice.”⁴⁷⁹ He continues:

Communism *in theory* emphasizes a classless society. Although the world knows from sad experience that Communism has created new classes and a new lexicon of injustice, in its *theoretical formulation* it envisages a world society transcending the superficiality of race and color, class and caste. Membership in the Communist party *theoretically* is not determined by the color of a man’s skin or the quality of blood in his veins.⁴⁸⁰

This distinction allows King to then use Communism as a means of critiquing, on the one hand, the church in this passage and, on the other hand, conversely, capitalism in other presentations. In King’s discussion of the dialectic class he contends that communism provides a useful critique of capitalism, although it is not an acceptable alternative to

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 100-101.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., 101-102.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., 100 (emphasis supplied).

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid., 101 (emphasis supplied).

capitalism.⁴⁸¹ King's primary use of Marxism/communism in the dialect of class is negative. Although he usually presents his view of communism first, it is in reality used as the antithesis to capitalism. It is the negative moment in the dialectic of class. However, his distinction between theoretical Marxism and the practice of Marxism in the form of communism, he is able to find elements that can both critique capitalism and the Christian church to develop a position of social democracy.

Although King would not equate capitalism with Christianity, its emphasis on personal creativity, freedom, and industry appear to be compatible with his personalistic leanings. King does not provide a clearly articulated affirmation of capitalism in the same manner in which does for communism. Thus one is left to abstract the partial truth from his Christian ethics and his critique of capitalism. Thus the most compelling basis for King's favorable attitude towards Capitalism is the democratic ideals such as freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of religion.

King's primary criticism of capitalism was its tendency to create alienation within the human experience through promoting fierce competition. This had, in many ways, the same affect as communism but only in reverse; the individual – instead of the state – becomes the center of moral authority. He writes:

The profit motive, when it is the sole basis for an economic system, encourages a cut-throat competition and selfish ambition that inspires men to be more concerned about making a living than making a life. It can make men so I-centered that they no longer are Thou-centered. . . Capitalism may lead to a practical materialism that is as pernicious as the theoretical materialism taught by Communism.⁴⁸²

⁴⁸¹ *STF*, 95, cf. *STL*, 103.

⁴⁸² *STL*, 103.

By 1967, King modified the previous statement as follows: “The good and just society is neither the thesis of capitalism nor the antithesis of Communism, but a socially conscious democracy which reconciles the truths of individualism [Capitalism] and collectivism [Communism].”⁴⁸³ This modification does not alter the core structure of his dialectical synthesis. It does, however, reflect two important developments in his understanding of the Beloved Community. First, King’s view of the Beloved Community is expanded to be more inclusive. It is more than just a Christian community expressed in the concept of the Kingdom of God. The Beloved Community is a good and just society. It is not limited by ethnicity, religion, or political orientation.

The second important development is his exposure to other economic models other than American Capitalism and Soviet Communism, particularly in the Scandinavian countries of Norway and Sweden. During his 1964 trip to Oslo, Norway to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, King observed:

This was, for most of us, our first trip to Scandinavia, and we looked forward to making many new friends. We felt we had much to learn from Scandinavia's democratic socialist tradition and from the manner in which they had overcome many of the social and economic problems that still plagued far more powerful and affluent nations. In both Norway and Sweden, whose economies are literally dwarfed by the size of our affluence and the extent of our technology, they have no unemployment and no slums. Their men, women, and children have long enjoyed free medical care and quality education. This contrast to the limited, halting steps taken by our rich nation deeply troubled me.⁴⁸⁴

No doubt what he observed in these Scandinavian countries provided him optimism that social democracy would be a natural progression in the United States, if it was serious about the eradication of poverty. In 1967, King published concrete recommendations for

⁴⁸³ *WDWGFH*, 187.

⁴⁸⁴ *Autobiography*, 259.

the eradication of poverty in the appendix of his book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*⁴⁸⁵ Moreover, in *Why We Can't Wait* (1964), he proposes the concept of a Marshall Plan for dealing with poverty in America in which he argues for a “Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged,”⁴⁸⁶ which was similar to the GI Bill of Rights. The key elements of the Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged were a guaranteed income, quality education, and decent housing. These recommendations reflect what he learned from socialized democracies.

A third factor that contributed to King’s push for economic reform was a growing realization, after the Selma Campaign, his campaigns in the North, and the riots in the urban centers, that the right to vote and equal access to public accommodations would not solve the Negro’s problems without the ability to economically provide for basic economic needs while retaining their sense of dignity and self-worth. This would require education and training to ensure that the blacks had the necessary skills for employment in the changing economy.⁴⁸⁷ Selma and the realization of the Voting Rights Acts, according to King, marked the end of one phase of the Civil Rights Movement. It was an important crossing point for blacks and the sympathetic white community. Before Selma, he observed that they had been united in the elimination of “barbaric conduct.” However, after Selma, there was no consensus between the two on how to actualize the equality implied in the newly affirmed civil rights.⁴⁸⁸ King, describing the post-Selma period and the need to shift focus, noted that the change that they would be seeking was moving beyond the U.S. Constitution. He insightfully declared that: “We have left the realm of

⁴⁸⁵ *WDWGFH*, 193-202.

⁴⁸⁶ *WWCW*, 136-140.

⁴⁸⁷ *WWCW*, 138-139. cf *WDWGFH*, 188-189.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

constitutional rights and we are entering the area of human rights... The Constitution assured the right to vote, but there is no such assurance of the right to adequate housing, or the right to an adequate income.”⁴⁸⁹

King’s concept of the Beloved Community can be described as a community where the worth and value of all humans is affirmed through genuine interpersonal inter-group relations. This is what true integration means to King. Race, ethnicity, and class are transcended through humans’ emphasis on the care and love for one another. The Beloved Community, on the one hand removes, or minimizes institutional hindrances, such as legal segregation, that prevent genuine interpersonal relationship, while, on the other hand, provides the resources (education, guaranteed income, fair housings, etc.) for the development of the full potential of the individual. The Beloved Community is the regulative ideal that orientated King – and the Civil Rights Movement he led – to persevere. The next section will explore the dialectics of the concepts of love, justice, and power, and their significance to his concept of the Beloved Community.

The Dialectics of Love, Justice, and Power

From the very beginning of his public career, Martin Luther King Jr. argued for non-violence based on the concepts of love and justice. These two concepts were not only central but connected. At his first public speech at the Montgomery Improvement Association mass meeting on December 5, 1955 he makes it clear to his audience, “. . . we are going to work with grim and bold determination to gain justice on the buses of this city.”⁴⁹⁰ Later he would contend that one cannot talk about love without talking about

⁴⁸⁹ “Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom” *Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.* Edited by James M. Washington (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 58-59.

⁴⁹⁰ “MIA Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church,” *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr.*, edited by Clayborne Carson, vol. 3, *Birth of a New Age December 1955-December 1956* (Berkeley, CA: University

justice. They are essentially different sides of the same concept. He contends that:

“Justice is really love in calculation. Justice is love correcting that which revolts against love.”⁴⁹¹ This section will examine how these two concepts are synthesized with King’s concept of power to develop the foundation for the radicalization of his method of non-violence resistance. King’s conception of nonviolence takes in his dialectic of power, love and justice, forming an important regulative principle that is guided by the regulative ideal of the Beloved Community.

King’s views on love, justice and power are informed by Paul Tillich’s ontological analysis of these concepts as reflected in Tillich’s texts *Systematic Theology* and *Love, Power and Justice*. King does not readily cite Tillich in his speeches and writings, although his dissertation research on Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman’s conception of God is evident in his articulation of the relationship between love, justice and power.⁴⁹² King’s concept of love, justice, and power are constituent elements of his method of nonviolence that brings into existence the Beloved Community.

The Priority of Love

The concept of love is essential in understanding King’s ethical discourse. It is perhaps one of the most consistently used and defined terms in the King lexicon of terms. He distinguishes between three Greek words translated “love” in the English language: *eros*, *philia*, and *agape*. While King finds each word helpful and necessary in human interactions, he dismisses *eros* (romantic love) and *philia* (reciprocal love) as unsuitable

of California Press, 1992), 71.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid.

⁴⁹² King’s dissertation, “A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman,” (here after referred to as Dissertation) examines Tillich’s views on love and justice (informed by Tillich’s texts *Systematic Theology* and *Love, Power and Justice*) on pages 359-443 in the sub-section entitled Divine Love and Divine Justice found in Martin Luther King Jr. *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr.* vol. 2, *Rediscovering Lost Values, July 1951-1November 1955*. Edited by Clayborne Carson (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 339-544.

foundations for meeting the challenges of the new age. He argues that *agape* uniquely qualifies as the love that will bring about the necessary change in humanity and society.

He asserts:

Agape means nothing sentimental or basically affectionate. It means understanding redeeming goodwill for all men. It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. It is the love of God working in the lives of men. When we rise to love on the agape level we love men not because we like them, not because their attitudes and ways appeal to us, but because God loves you. Here we rise to the position of loving the person who does the evil deed while hating the deed that the person does. With this type of love and understanding goodwill we will be able to stand amid the radiant glow of the new age with dignity and discipline.⁴⁹³

By offering a concept of love stripped of sentimentality and emotions, King sought to establish love as an ethical principle to be lived with all of its difficulties and counter-intuitive demands. In a sermon, “Loving Your Enemies,” King argues contrary to Nietzsche’s contention that such love is weak, impractical and idealistic that *agape* is “absolutely necessary” for human survival. King makes it clear that Jesus’s command to love your enemy was not some idealistic suggestion, but bluntly declared that Jesus “meant every word of it.” It is, therefore, “our responsibility to discover the meaning of this command and seek passionately to live it out in our daily lives.”⁴⁹⁴ *Agape* is not for the weak or the faint of heart; it is for those who are courageous.

Consistent with this concept of love, King in his sermon, “On Being a Good Neighbor,” describes genuine *agape* as manifesting excessive altruism. It compels persons to go “far beyond the call of duty.” Referring to Harry Emerson Fosdick, King makes the distinction between enforceable and unenforceable laws. Enforceable laws are the laws that the governments legislate, adjudicate, and enforce. They deal with such

⁴⁹³ “Facing the Challenge of a New Age,” *Papers*, 3, 459. cf. *STL*, 52.

⁴⁹⁴ *STL*, 49-50. See Paul Tillich, *Love Power and Justice*, 3-6.

matters as desegregating buses, lunch counters, and schools, while unenforceable laws have to do with “inner attitudes, genuine person to person relations and expressions of compassion.”⁴⁹⁵ Love’s demands a person to go beyond that which is required by human laws, whether moral or political in nature.

The power of love is also manifested in the ability to forgive. Love sees the good in each person and refuses to defeat an enemy but to transform him/her into a friend.⁴⁹⁶ Informed by what Tillich labels creative justice,⁴⁹⁷ King calls this love the graces of forgiveness. King argues that *agape* gives the injured person the capacity to forgive. It does not ignore or obviate the injury. However, it does not allow it to remain a barrier to the creation of a new constructive relationship. Love is crucial to breaking down the barriers that separate persons, communities, and nations. King, reflecting Tillich, asserts that: “Forgiveness means reconciliation, a coming together again.”⁴⁹⁸

The ultimate antithesis to love is hate. With its concomitant violence, hate unleashes a “chain reaction of evil,” “with hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars” with the potential of plunging humanity “into the dark abyss of annihilation.”⁴⁹⁹ Additionally, hate does not just lash out externally to dominate and destroy the other, but it also has a destructive affect on the one who hates. “Hate is just as injurious to the person who hates,” he warns. He describes hate as a cancer that “corrodes the personality and eats away at its vital unity.”⁵⁰⁰ Thus, King could enjoin his followers to love their enemy for practical self-affirming reasons.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 36-37.

⁴⁹⁶ STL, 50-52.

⁴⁹⁷ King, *Love, Power and Justice*, 64-66.

⁴⁹⁸ STL, 50-51. Tillich in *Love, Power, and Justice*, argues that, “Loves is the drive for reunion of the separated.” p. 69.

⁴⁹⁹ STL, 53.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid.

The most significant aspect of King's insistence on *agape* is its transforming power in human lives, not only of those who love but also on the loved, and, by extension, the transformation of the society. He noted it is *agape*, not the methods of the nascent Civil Rights Movement such as boycotts and marches, that was the underlining means of transformation. Through love those involved in the Civil Rights Movement would be able to bring about reconciliation, redemption, and the Beloved Community by turning enemies into friends.⁵⁰¹ Preston Williams summarizes this thought well when he states that King's concept of love, when "properly understood and practiced enabled persons and groups to recognize their dignity and shun acquiescence in their own oppression."⁵⁰²

Justice: Making Things Right

Although justice is a key issue for Martin Luther King Jr., he does not provide a clear definition. This is because the term evokes a variety of understandings. Additionally, as with many of King's key concepts, one has to draw their meanings from a wide variety of his writings and speeches. Thus a term such as "justice" will often appear fluid in its use. His understanding of justice is informed by the eighth-century Hebrew prophetic tradition as communicated through African-American preaching. He often quoted the prophets Amos and Isaiah. Amos: "But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream."⁵⁰³ Isaiah: "Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall

⁵⁰¹ "Facing the Challenges of a New Age," *Papers*, 3: 458-459.

⁵⁰² Preston N. Williams, "An Analysis of the Conception of Love and Its Influence on Justice in the Thought of Martin Luther King Jr." *Journal of Religious Ethics* vol. 18 (Fall 1990), 20.

⁵⁰³ Amos 5:24. cf *TOC*, 77. *STF*, 210

see it together...”⁵⁰⁴ His understanding of justice was refined by his reading and studying of such figures as Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Rauschenbusch, and Tillich in the Western philosophical tradition.

King agrees with Tillich that the ontological basis of justice is love. He argues that without love there is no true justice.⁵⁰⁵ He contends that justice and love were two sides of the same coin. This characterization of the relationship between love and justice undercuts the notion that, for King, love and justice are to be viewed in a dialectical manner. From the very beginning, he viewed them as difference dimensions of the same concept. He argues that standing besides love is always justice. Connecting the two forms of Aristotelian partial justice of distributive justice and corrective justice, King explains, “Justice is really love in calculation. Justice is love correcting that which revolts against love.”⁵⁰⁶

Towards the latter years of his life, King shifted in emphasis on love to that of justice. This is not to say that he abandoned love, far from it, he insisted on love as foundational to the Civil Rights Movement. However, caught between the cross fire of the Black Power advocates, the white backlash of the conservatives, and the capitulation of the white liberals to the white southern conservatives, King found it necessary to clarify the terms of justice for African-Americans in America. In clear terms King declares: “...absolute justice for the Negro simply means, in the Aristotelian sense, that

⁵⁰⁴ Isaiah 40:4-5 (KJV)

⁵⁰⁵ King, Dissertation, *Papers*, 2: 439-440. Cf Tillich, observes that “the ontology of love gives the answer [to the question of freedom in liberalism and equality in the democratic idea]. If justice is the form of the reunion of the separated, it must include both the separation without which there is no love and the reunion in which love is actualized.” – *Love, Power, and Justice*, 62.

⁵⁰⁶ MIA Mass Meeting, *Papers*, 3: 71. cf: Delba Winthrop, “Aristotle and Theories of Justice,” *The American Political Science Review*, 72: 4 (December 1978), 1204-1205.

the Negro must have ‘his due.’⁵⁰⁷ This is perhaps the most noteworthy statement that King has made with respect to the philosophical underpinning of his theory of justice. Aristotle’s concept of justice, as interpreted by Tillich, is critical for understanding the demands that justice placed on African-Americans, whites, and the government from King’s point of view.⁵⁰⁸ King’s concept of justice is derived from Aristotle’s concepts of distributive and corrective justice.

Distributive justice essentially contends that each person should receive his/her portion of the community’s goods based on their contribution to the common good.⁵⁰⁹ Tillich describes three forms of distributive justice as “tributive justice” – distributive, attributive, and retributive justice. He observes that tributive justice “is a calculating justice, measuring the power of being of all things in terms of what shall be given to them or what shall be withheld from them.”⁵¹⁰ Delba Winthrop describes Aristotle’s corrective justice as:

The principles applied in the courts of law when contracts must be rectified. Here persons are not taken into account, but the gain reaped from afflicting loss on a partner in contract is to be equalized by a judge who, again with impressive mathematical rigor, imposes a fitting loss on the one who has gained unjustly.⁵¹¹

For King, justice was always expressed in concrete terms. In Montgomery, justice was expressed in equality on the buses. In Selma, it was expressed in the right to vote. In his later years, justice was expressed in terms of having “a good job, a good education, a decent house and a share of power.” In order for justice to become a reality, there must be both distributive and corrective justice. He contends “that giving a man his due may often

⁵⁰⁷ *WDWGFH*, 90.

⁵⁰⁸ Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice*, 62-64.

⁵⁰⁹ Winthrop, 1204.

⁵¹⁰ Paul Tillich, 63.

⁵¹¹ Delba Winthrop, 1204.

mean giving him special treatment.” The basis for such an assertion, King argues, that “a society that has done something *against* the Negro for hundreds of years must now do something special *for* him, in order to equip him to compete on a just and equal basis.”⁵¹²

King’s concept of distributive justice challenged both the white and African-American communities but in different ways. To the white community, he emphasized what the African-American contributed to the economic and cultural development of the American society. Not only were the African-Americans entitled to certain benefits long denied them, but it was necessary to make special concessions so that the African-Americans could overcome the “cultural lag” that would perpetually keep them from accessing what was due them. On the other hand, he constantly challenged the African-American community to strive for excellence. The exhortation reflected the underlining principle of distributive justice, namely, equal share for equal persons and unequal shares for unequal persons.⁵¹³ King’s concept of distributive justice was not based on having a hand out or welfare, but based on the historical contribution made by the African-American to the American life. This is reflected in his famous “I Have a Dream” speech when he intoned that they had come to the capital to cash a check or promissory note written by the United States founding fathers that all men “would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” However, he would continue, America has defaulted on the promissory note as far as the blacks were concerned. He challenged America through its agent, the federal government, to honor

⁵¹² *WDWGFH*, 90 (emphasis is not supplied).

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*

the promissory note and cash the “check that will give us on demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.”⁵¹⁴

Power, Love and Justice

King’s basic definition of power is “the ability to achieve purpose.”⁵¹⁵ In graduate school and prior to the emergence of the call for Black “power,” King primarily applied this concept to his understanding of God’s power and humanity’s personal struggles. However, with insistence on the part of the younger generation of civil rights protesters’ call for Black Power and with it the implied call for violence, King was compelled to draw out the implications of his basic understanding of power as it related to achieving the goals of the Civil Rights Movement and the SCLC in particular. It was especially necessary to describe the part that power played in bringing into existence the Beloved Community. King writes:

Power, properly understood, is the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political or economic changes. In this sense power is not only desirable but necessary in order to implement the demands of love and justice... What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.⁵¹⁶

Echoing Tillich, King connected the concept of power as achieving purpose with the concept of love and justice. “One of the greatest problems of history,” he wrote, “is that concepts of love [and justice] and power are usually contrasted as polar opposites.” Power must be synthesized with love and justice in order for power to be directed towards the creation of genuine interpersonal relationships whether personally or within

⁵¹⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., *I have a Dream: Writings and Speeches That Changed the World*, 102.

⁵¹⁵ *WDWGFH*, 37.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.* King provides an extensive historical account of the origins of the use of the term “Black Power” in the Civil Rights Movement read pages 23-32.

human institutions. However, power must be present with love or love is reduced to sentimentality and weakness.⁵¹⁷

King argued that “power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.” Here King expresses how the effective use of power will be directed towards not only benefiting the possessor of power, but the community of humanity. The use of power has both a material and spiritual dimension. Power uses its strength to ensure that each person or group gets their due (material) and removes anything that prevents authentic interpersonal and inter-group interactions (spiritual).

King argues that the problem, particularly as it related to the racial problem in America, is that blacks and whites have placed an emphasis on either love or power without due emphasis on both. The African-American had advocated achieving his or her goals through “moral suasion devoid of power.” On the other hand, whites had followed the path of power without “love and conscience.” He feared that the rhetoric of the Black Power advocates was charting a collision course between “immoral power and powerless morality” that will only result in destruction for both. Even if blacks achieved their goal of overthrowing their white oppressors, they would have achieved only replacing one form of tyranny for another. He insisted that black oppression is just as evil as white oppression.⁵¹⁸

Clearly King was not opposed to idea that African-Americans needed power. It is only through power that purpose could be achieved. Speaking of the way the United States government uses its power in Vietnam, he contended that unless America changed

⁵¹⁷Ibid. cf. Paul Tillich, *Love Power, and Justice*, 11.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid.

its course, it would finally be placed in history's pantheon of nations that "processed power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight."⁵¹⁹ The implication of his statement is that power, might and strength are not intrinsically wrong, but they must be combined with the virtues of compassion, morality, and wisdom. He argues that:

Power is not the white man's birthright; it will not be legislated for us and delivered in neat government packages. It is a social force any group can utilize by accumulating its elements in a planned, deliberate campaign to organize it under its own control.⁵²⁰

It was not enough to passively wait for those in power to give up power without being persuaded to do so. One of the problems with the call to Black Power was that those who had power did need to call for it. Those who have power do not have to call for it, they simply exercise theirs. The fact that the advocates of Black Power were calling for power as if they were going to take it, suggested that they were not aware of the power they already possessed.⁵²¹ Hence, they are unable to exercise it. He advocated that African-Americans must make full use of the levers of power they already have in their hands. By properly using these levers of power, they could influence the course of events not only to affect their existence, but also to affect the existence of others.⁵²² King observed that there were three basic levers of power in America that influenced the course of events: ideological, economic, and political power.⁵²³

By ideological power, King was referring to public intellectual discourse through books, editorials, and the media. Because the other avenues have not been readily

⁵¹⁹ *TOC*, 34.

⁵²⁰ Martin Luther King Jr. "Black Power Defined", *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches That Changed the World*. Edited by James M. Washington (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1992), 165.

⁵²¹ *Ibid.* See also *WDWGFH*, 30.

⁵²² *Ibid.*, 62.

⁵²³ "Black Power Defined," 154.

available to the African-American, the primary way that the African-American has been able to affect public discourse was through public protest.⁵²⁴ King notes that the debate between the Black Power advocates and the counter position was blown out of proportion by the media that needed a protagonist and an antagonist to create some sensation in their coverage. The issues raised by the Black Power advocates were no more than the natural ideological ebb and flow of any movement. Part of the confusion in the public arena could be minimized by the development of the African-American intellectuals with access to the national media.⁵²⁵

The lever of economic power of the African-American resides primarily in two areas, labor and consumerism. He observes that the African-American makes up approximately twenty percent of organized labor while comprising only ten percent of the population. By strategically exerting their influence in organized labor, despite some of the inherent racial problems within the labor movement, the African-American can amplify his or her influence on social changes in America. "As co-workers there is a basic community of self-interest," he writes, "that transcends many of the ugly divisive elements of the traditional prejudice."⁵²⁶ As consumers African-Americans have already demonstrated their ability to exert pressure on business to effect social changes in the Birmingham, Alabama campaign. Through the Operation Breadbasket, a program initiated by the SCLC, the collective buying power of African-Americans was used as leverage with businesses to gain more and better jobs for blacks.⁵²⁷

⁵²⁴ Ibid., 154-155.

⁵²⁵ *WDWGFH*, 32.

⁵²⁶ "Black Power Defined," 156.

⁵²⁷ Ibid., 157-158

The third lever of power is in the political arena. King observed that the African-American in the North and South was on the brink of wielding considerable political power. In the North, white flight from the urban centers was leaving an African-American majority to capture the political power of these urban centers. He notes that the cities have long been the epicenter of national elections. On the other hand, the growing numbers of African-Americans registering to vote are forcing white politicians to court African-Americans in order to win elections.⁵²⁸ However, King offers three suggestive areas for needed improvement if African-Americans are to effectively gain and use political power. African-Americans must create political leaders “who embody virtue that they can respect. They must “master the art of political alliances.” And they must become engaged more fully in the political processes as activists.⁵²⁹

The dialectic of love, justice, and power provides the motivation, orientation and the means of moving humanity towards the goal of the Beloved Community. As in the regulative principles of integration and social democracy, the regulative principle of the love-power synthesis provides means of evaluating the progress and proximity of humanity’s realization of the Beloved Community. The levers of power must be in the hands of persons who have been transformed through love, which heightens their awareness of the mutuality of humankind. It affirms that there are no separate paths to power, one for blacks and another for whites.⁵³⁰ Referencing to Cicero, King declares that “Freedom is participation in power.” Therefore, he argues that “Negroes should never want all power because they would deprive others of their freedom.” However, he continues, by contending, that “by the same token, Negroes can never be content without

⁵²⁸ Ibid., 158-159.

⁵²⁹ Ibid., 160.

⁵³⁰ *WDWGFH*, 52.

participation in power. America must be a nation in which its multiracial people are partners in power.”⁵³¹ He insists that there must be a partnership in power at “every level of American life.”⁵³² This kind of power sharing will only occur when “power is infused with love and justice.”⁵³³

Nonviolence Resistance: The Path to the Beloved Community

Martin Luther King Jr. wrote that nonviolence was the only path to freedom. His concept of nonviolence essentially takes in all aspects of his intellectual discourse on theology, history, and ethics. It is the regulative principle that is guided by the regulative ideal of the Beloved Community. This section is an expansion of the previous discussion of the regulative principles of integration, social democracy, and power. The principle of nonviolent resistance is grounded in the ideal of the Beloved Community.

Nonviolence Resistance: Dialectic of Acquiescence and Violence

King clearly articulates that his principle of nonviolence resistance is the synthesis of the polar opposites of passivity and violence. Passivity is based primarily on the idea that persuasion over time will bring about the needed social reforms in America. In the extreme, pacifists are committed to doing nothing even in the presence of glaring evil. On the other hand, advocates of violence argue that evil or unjust structures must be overthrown by any means necessary. King develops the synthesis of nonviolent resistance to overcome the deficiencies in both positions while retaining those elements that were valid. “With the person relying on persuasion,” he writes, “we must agree that we will not violently destroy life or property; but we must balance this by agreeing with the person of

⁵³¹ Ibid., 54.

⁵³² Ibid., 62.

⁵³³ Ibid., 60.

violence that evil must be resisted.”⁵³⁴ This synthesis takes up within itself the basic structure of the synthesis of love, justice, and power. King contends that: “Nonviolence is power, but the right and good use of power. Constructively it can save the white man as well as the Negro.”⁵³⁵

Nonviolent resistance combines that *means* to achieve the Beloved Community with the *ends* that reflects the Beloved Community, the realization of a human community based on love and respect for human dignity. King opposed any argument that attempts to justify using methods inconsistent with the demands of love, by making the goals for which the methods are employed most important. The means and the ends are inseparable. “Means and ends must cohere because the end is preexistent in the means, and ultimately destructive means cannot bring about constructive ends.”⁵³⁶ King consistently argued that it is impossible to bring about a just society with unjust methods, peace through violent means, or a Beloved Community through hate, revenge, and retaliation. Nonviolence resistance provided coercive pressure on government structures to enact and enforce laws that would provide the context for equality and justice. While at the same time, the method of nonviolence conveyed to the white community that the African-American desire was not to defeat, destroy or exact revenge. This would remove the fear and the opportunity for both communities to find creative solutions to the problems of racism, materialism and militarism.⁵³⁷

King insists that nonviolence resistance is both a philosophical theory and method or tactic. He writes: “Admittedly, nonviolence in the truest sense is not a strategy that one

⁵³⁴ *WDWGFH*, 129.

⁵³⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁵³⁶ *TOC*, 71.

⁵³⁷ *Ibid.*, 70-71

uses simply because it is expedient at the moment; nonviolence is ultimately a way of life that men live by because of the sheer morality of its claim.”⁵³⁸ As theory, nonviolence orientates one’s life.

Nonviolence resistance is not complete except in praxis. In a harmonious manner, it combines reflection and practice to achieve specific goals of freedom, justice, and reconciliation. Greg Moses provides an insightful assessment of the relationship between theory and praxis in King’s approach to nonviolent resistance. He argues that: “The genius of nonviolent direct action is made most apparent only when we appreciate how the tactics of a particular movement have been chosen in response to critical analysis of structural problems at hand.”⁵³⁹

Redemptive Suffering

A critical underpinning for the dialectic of theory and praxis is King’s concept of redemptive suffering. Redemptive suffering contends that any suffering in the course of confronting structures of injustice and oppression is redemptive. Anthony B. Pinn correctly characterizes King’s view when he states that the redemptive suffering places its emphasis on the consequence of suffering and not the content of suffering.⁵⁴⁰ That is to say that suffering, although not sanctioned by God, is used by God to ennoble the sufferer and prick the conscious of the one inflicting the pain. Thus, both are redeemed. The concept of redemptive suffering is predicated on three key ideas. First, the suffering must be unearned in order to be redemptive. Some suffering is the direct result of

⁵³⁸ *STF*, 89.

⁵³⁹ Greg Moses, *Revolution of Conscience*, 148.

⁵⁴⁰ Anthony Pinn, *Why Lord: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 77.

violating the laws of the universe, whether natural or moral. However, there is no intrinsic value in suffering for suffering's sake.⁵⁴¹

Second, redemptive suffering results from challenging structures of evil and injustice such as the unjust laws. Unlike the anarchists, who desire to violate laws and avoid its consequences, such as in the night riders and the Klu Klux Klan who clandestinely break the laws to avoid prosecution, advocates of nonviolent resistance are prepared to suffer the consequences of breaking unjust laws.⁵⁴² The transformation of breaking "unjust" laws into an act of redemption takes away the fear and stigma of going to jail. Furthermore, the concept of redemptive suffering provides the rational basis for going on the offensive when it would result in suffering.⁵⁴³

The third component of redemptive suffering is the assertion that God, who is the creator of a moral universe, is the power that transforms one's suffering into a redemptive experience. This is the critical key to any meaningful acceptance of the notion of nonviolent resistance in the midst of overwhelming pain, despair, and hopelessness. It affirms that the God of the universe was on their side. That is why King could admonish those who mourned over the death of four young innocent girls who were victims of a church bombing on September 15, 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama, while they attended Sunday School, not to harbor hatred and bitterness with the desire to perpetrate violence. He affirmed:

They did not die in vain. God still has a way of bringing good out of evil. History has proven over and over again that unmerited suffering is redemptive. The innocent blood of the little girls may well serve as the redemptive force that will bring new light to this dark day.⁵⁴⁴

⁵⁴¹ *STL*, 152.

⁵⁴² "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," *WWCW*, 82-83

⁵⁴³ *STF*, 103.

⁵⁴⁴ "Eulogy for the Martyred Children." *Testament of Hope*, 221-222.

Redemptive suffering, guaranteed by the creator of the moral universe, provides the rational, psychological and spiritual motivation for King and his followers to wear down those that hate them with the capacity to suffer. By enduring suffering, he contends that they will not only gain freedom but will “so appeal to their oppressor’s heart and conscious” that they will win them in the process.⁵⁴⁵

The Pursuit of the Beloved Community

Perhaps the clearest evidence that the Beloved Community functioned as a regulative ideal for King is in understanding his view of the possible realization of the Beloved Community in history and how such a possibility orientated his life and work. John Ansbro takes the position that King did not believe that the Beloved Community would be realized in history.⁵⁴⁶ On the other hand, Smith and Zepp, however, take the position that King did believe that the Beloved Community would become a reality in history.⁵⁴⁷ Rufus Burrow suggests a third position that provides, perhaps, a middle position. Burrow states King’s position with a greater understanding of the nuance of King’s position when he writes: “Although he clearly did not believe there would ever be a perfect manifestation of this community in the world, he was also convinced that there could be greater approximations of it.”⁵⁴⁸

While Smith and Zepp correctly locate King’s position in the historical and intellectual crossfire of conservative and liberal eschatology,⁵⁴⁹ they fail to take into account King’s dialectical method of reasoning and overstate King’s belief in the

⁵⁴⁵ “A Christmas Sermon on Peace,” *TOC*, 75.

⁵⁴⁶ John Ansbro, 188, 190; fn 176, 320.

⁵⁴⁷ Rufus Burrow, *God and Human Dignity: The Personalism, Theology, and Ethics of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 169. cf. Smith and Zepp, 154-156.

⁵⁴⁸ Rufus Burrow, *God and Human Dignity*, 169.

⁵⁴⁹ Smith and Zepp, 153-154.

actualization of the Beloved Community in history. King appropriated the conservative apocalyptic sensibility that God was indeed moving history towards God's purposes without embracing the extreme notion that God's Kingdom would come into being exclusively because of God's action in bringing about a radical break with human history. On the other hand, King clearly accepted the liberal optimistic view of humanity's ability to transform society, bringing into history the Beloved Community through education, economic reform, *agape* love, and nonviolent confrontation of social evils.

The dialectic of the God-Human action accounts for what King called the "schizophrenic" rhetoric of optimism and pessimism regarding the realization of the Beloved Community in human history. A closer examination of King's pessimistic statements, however, reveal that King is speaking from his doubts about humanity's willingness to exert its collective will toward overcoming issues of race, class, and power through the use of nonviolent methods. Yet, he maintains belief that God's purposes will ultimately be realized. Consider his sermon, "A Christmas Sermon On Peace." There are those who highlight King's description of his dream turning into a nightmare with the bombing of the Birmingham church killing of four young black girls, awareness of the abject poverty across the nation affecting black and whites, urban riots, and the escalation of the war in Vietnam.⁵⁵⁰ Despite the nightmares, King nevertheless affirms:

Yes, I am personally the victim of deferred dreams, of blasted hopes, but in spite of that I close today by saying I still have a dream, because, you know, you can't give up in life. If you lose hope, somehow you lose that vitality that keeps life moving, you lose that courage to be, that quality that helps you go on in spite of all. And so I still have a dream.⁵⁵¹

⁵⁵⁰ TOC, 75-76; cf Rufus Burrow, *God and Human Dignity*, 169.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

His nightmare was the result of humanity. He admonished his listeners that “we have cosmic companionship.”⁵⁵² On what would be his final speech, he affirmed this belief when he encouraged the assembled group in Memphis, Tennessee, “I’ve seen the promised land, and I may not get there with you. But I want you to know that we as people will get to the promised land.”⁵⁵³ King recognized that the future was not dependent on his leadership. He was ultimately simply an instrument in the hands of the force that propels history towards its goal. It was a belief that the historical process was on the side of those who were struggling for freedom and justice. And this awareness was a powerful source of strength and courage in the face of the most daunting situations.

Summary

King’s ethical thoughts have been perhaps the most studied and examined of his intellectual views. None of his ethical insights captures and frames in a comprehensive manner more than his concept of the Beloved Community. It was therefore important to examine how his dialectical method is at work in the development of the capstone of his thoughts. Kant’s notion of the regulative ideal provides the best possible way of understanding how the concept of the Beloved Community functioned in King’s thoughts. As a regulative ideal its lack of existence – presently or in the future – does not mute its force in motivating humans to orientate their lives and actions in a certain way. The principles that guide human decisions and actions will be consistent with the ideal that is pursued.

⁵⁵² Ibid., 74-75.

⁵⁵³ “I See the Promise Land,” *Testament of Hope*, 286.

It is in the development of the regulative principles of integration, democratic socialism, and social justice that King's dialectical method is most evident. Integration is the synthesis, or the third moment, in his dialectic of segregation and desegregation where the white and black American transcend the superficial evaluation of each other's humanity based on skin color. Democratic socialism synthesizes the best of capitalism and Marxism in the American context where individual creative and ingenuity is valued and needed to ensure that basic resources (food, housing, water, education, etc.) are needed for human flourishing. King's notion of justice is the synthesis of love and justice, on the one hand, and power, on the other hand. It is power motivated by *agape* love in the pursuit of a just society, where power is shared and not a means of domination.

King consistently insisted that a global human community where there was a genuinely integrated human interaction, resource and power sharing could not come into existence unless the means by which such a society was built was consistent with its ideal. For this reason he was committed philosophically and tactically to nonviolence. Nonviolent direct action was a synthesis of the ideas of proponents of passivity and the proponents of violence. While King became more militant and strident in his rhetoric and actions, at the core was always a commitment to nonviolence. For King it was the only way to realize – even in a limited sense – the Beloved Community. The Beloved Community is to be realized through a peaceful means predicated on the value and worth of all humans.

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I have argued that King's theological and philosophical method is a synthesizing dialectic. I examined King's use of the dialectical method as appropriated from the German philosopher George W. F. Hegel. Recognizing the key elements in his personality (middle child with a mediating personality), family of origin (dominating assertive father and acquiescing compassionate mother) and early childhood experiences (religious fundamentalism, racism, and classism) that created dialectical tensions, it is not difficult to understand why synthesis, verses the destruction of the thesis or antithesis through adopting extreme polar position, was appealing to King.

King's short and tumultuous career did not afford him opportunity to develop his thought in a systematic and abstract manner. Therefore, through a method of close reading of his academic papers, published speeches, articles, and books, it was necessary to uncover his dialectical method and provide a sufficient description of how his method operated in the development of his theological thought, historical insight and ethical commitments. Such a reading revealed that King affirms Harry Settanni's assertion that a philosopher's motivation is to resolve underlining dualisms that she/he confronts in his/her life. King's whole life was devoted to addressing the dualism of race, class, and power.

From the archival research, it is clear without doubt that King studied Hegel in some depth and was introduced to his dialectical method, while at Boston School of Theology. King appropriated Hegel's method and modified it to conform to the Ficthean triadic, namely, the thesis-antithesis-synthesis model. In order to support the basic claim

that the fundamental methodological approach of King is a synthesizing dialectic, it was necessary to examine the full spectrum of his thought, his theology, philosophy of history, and moral philosophy. In other words, it was important to demonstrate that the synthesizing dialectical method was consistently applied to all of the categories of his thinking. The critical issue is not the validity of King's thoughts or conclusions, but whether, if it is possible, to discern his philosophical or theological method as dialectical.

The core doctrines in King's theology, his philosophy of history, and his moral philosophy are his doctrine of God and humanity. While it may be possible to look at a number of other doctrines such as his view of the church, eschatology, Christology, etc. to expose his dialectical method, the doctrines of God and humanity provide a substantial starting point for supporting my thesis. King's theological concepts of God and humanity are the interplay of concepts in which their dialectical tensions are resolved in a synthesis. The dialectics of transcendence and immanence in God is synthesized into God as the Cosmic Companion. God's goodness and power are dialectically rendered to affirm his faith that the purposes of God are realized in history without making God responsible for evil while empowering human freedom toward overcome evil.

Freedom is an important constituent of what it means to be human. It becomes important in King's understanding of human sin and salvation. In King's dialectical reasoning, it is in the positive creative exercise of freedom that humanity is most reflective of God. However, it is the abuse of human freedom that is the source of evil in the world. For King, it is in responsibility to God that humanity experiences and participates in the fulfillment of human salvation. This co-operative relationship, within the dynamic movement of the divine-human dialectic, drives the flow of history.

The dialectical nature of history is at the center of King's philosophy of history. He synthesized Hegel's spiritual dialectic of history and Karl Marx's material dialectic of history. He embraced Hegel's notion that history is guided by ideas, while rejecting the idea that humanity is only a pawn of cunning of reason. He rejected Marx's notion that history is only guided by human material interests, while accepting his claim that history is moved by human actions. King's philosophy of history was rooted in the idea that history is moving towards a positive future where humanity will exist in a community of mutual respect. However, history's *telos* will not be realized without human activity. Through human actions, history will only move towards its goal through struggle. It is through the clash of ideas and willpower that the path towards history's goal will be clarified and realized. Because of his understanding of the movement of history towards some determinate goal, King was able to conceive of, and commit himself, to strategies that fostered confrontation with the prevailing hegemonic order in order to intentionally move history towards its inevitable goal of world peace and community without the limitations of race, class, and gender.

The cornerstone of King's moral philosophy is his concept of the Beloved Community. The Beloved Community, understood as a regulative idea, provides the cognitive frame for exploring King's use of the dialectical method as he explicates themes of racial integration, social democracy, power, and nonviolent direct action. In the Beloved Community, the dialectical tensions between race, class, and power are resolved in the synthesis of integration, social democracy, and power infused with love and justice. Nonviolent resistance, the synthesis of violence and passivity, provides the moral means consistent with the ends of the Beloved Community.

The significance of this dissertation for theology is threefold. First, it serves as a corrective to those trends in King scholarship that overemphasize King as an activist and orator. While understandable, given that King's public life spanned only thirteen years and his mature thinking evolved in the turbulence of leading the Civil Rights Movement, the recognition that King was guided by a commitment to a particular method, i.e., a dialectical method, provides the basis for both understanding his thoughts and action and critique of King within the black intellectual tradition. Understanding his dialectical method provides a way of constructing a plausible conception of his views on matters about which he did not write systematically. This approach allows King to be viewed and understood based on his own self-understanding, his pattern of thinking, and his approach to conflicting concepts and actions.

Second, if King's dialectical method is taken seriously, King scholars would have to evaluate their own readings of King in the context of his method. For instance, Michael Long's description of King's view of the state as being "for us, but against us" is a bipolar dialectical stance.⁵⁵⁴ By understanding King's dialectical method, such a reading of King would be pressed to account for the absence of a synthesized or third position that is able to incorporate the "for" and the "against" in a holistic view. To be sure, I concede that there may not be a third, synthesizing moment in every idea that King espoused, however, King scholars are challenged to account for its absence, given its prominence in his theology, philosophy of history and ethics.

Third, where King's dialectical approach is taken seriously as a method appropriate for a theologian or philosopher activist, it serves as a model for a holistic

⁵⁵⁴ Michael G. Long, *Against Us, But for Us: Martin Luther King Jr. and the State*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2002)

approach for doing Theology. The theologian need not be cloistered in the ivory towers of academia to be a credible religious thinker. This is not to say that all theologians must conform to King's model of the public theologian. However, King's critical practices opens the possibility for a variety of ways for theologians to define their role in the academy, church, and society. King's dialectical discourse provides a model of thinking that flows from involvement in life situations, and activism preceded by critical intellectual reflections. This model of the public theologian provides a means of recovering the prophetic function of Christian theology that may contribute to the transformation of society through critical reflection and personal praxis.

To conclude this dissertation, it must be noted that there are four areas that limit the work of this dissertation. These limitations point to possible topics for further research, study and development. First, this study was not intended to be comprehensive regarding the sweep of King's thought. It is not a systematic examination of all the theological categories that make up King's theology and ethics. The findings of this study may make possible the construction of a systematic theology that is based on King's writings. Second, this study is limited to the dialectical nature of King's evolution from a local to an international leader, and the evolution of King's application of nonviolence resistance from passive resistance to advocating civil disobedience. However, King scholars such as Greg Moses⁵⁵⁵ and Michael Long have already provided an evolutionary approach toward looking at King's thinking in the areas of his philosophy of nonviolence and political philosophy. However, uncovering the dialectical nature of King's thought in

⁵⁵⁵ Greg Moses, *Revolution of Conscience: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Philosophy of Nonviolence*. (New York: The Guilford Press, 1997).

these areas confirms the findings of these scholars, and, hence, serves as an aid to present King scholarship.

Third, this study may further lead to exploration of how best to read King in relation to other theologians. Although Noel Erskine's *King Among the Theologians*⁵⁵⁶ hints at such an approach, Erskine does not place King in critical dialogue with theologians in which the dialectical method was most operative. In this regard, Rufus Burrow's discussion of how King contributed to personalistic philosophy and enriched its relevance for social justice is an example of the kinds of possible conversations that can be envisioned between King and other critical theologies, both North Atlantic and Diaspora.

Finally, most needed in the area of criticism of King is a closer look at his relationship to women. This study does not address King and the gender issue. The application King's dialectical method to the study of King and gender relations would supply a major gap in King studies. Because King died prematurely, we do not have benefit of his mature thought on this issue. Scholars may speculate how he would have broadened the human rights movement to include gender and sexual orientation discrimination. However as one speculates on such issues, understanding his dialectical reasoning may show scholars the path that he has already charted and allows for a more informed hypothesis as to the possible manner in which he would have taken up these issues. Such an approach could provide in a manner consistent with his authentic voice and practices.

A friend and mentor to Martin Luther King Jr., Dr. Gardner C. Taylor quoted the recently widowed Coretta Scott King in declaring that it would be at least fifty years after

⁵⁵⁶ Noel Leo Erskine, *King Among the Theologian*. (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1994).

King's death before the full appreciation of his work will be realized.⁵⁵⁷ Indeed, forty years after his death, King scholarship is just becoming mature and expansive thanks to *The King Papers* Project, which is a collaborative effort of the King Center in Atlanta, Georgia, Stanford University and the King Estate. The goal of *The King Papers* Project is the publication of fourteen volumes of significant “correspondence, sermons, speeches, published writings, and unpublished manuscripts.”⁵⁵⁸ With these expanding archival materials, the establishment of King's method of dialectical reasoning will become increasingly important.

557 Gardner C Taylor, “The Strange Ways of God.” *The Words of Gardner Taylor*. compiled by Edward L. Taylor (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1999), 100.

558 http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/about_the_project/index.htm. Six volumes of papers, book of sermons, a book of speeches, and an autobiography have been published to date.

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