

Martin Luther King, Jr.: Ethics, Nonviolence, and Moral Character

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One way to study Martin Luther King, Jr.'s development of nonviolence as moral resistance to segregation is to focus on the tactics, strategy, and organization that King helped to create within the civil rights movement. Here the emphasis turns upon the boycotts, marches, sit-ins and other forms of protest. Another approach examines the larger moral dimensions of King's appropriation of nonviolence—for example the role of suffering love. Although these are important and significant elements in the study of King's thought, there is also another less fully analyzed dimension to King's understanding of nonviolence. Character, especially moral character, plays an essential role in King's theory of nonviolence. Moral character and King's belief that it entails a commitment to nonviolence establishes a connection between personal integrity and social change.

Like Gandhi, the foundation of King's moral and social vision is his religious commitment. King's description of character unfolds from his understanding of God. The vision of God fuels his perceptions of who we are, of who we ought to be, and of how society ought be structured. King viewed God as the source of creation, a God of power, strength, and love who acts to fulfill the creative purpose, which is the establishment of community.

One of the central aspects of King's religious understanding of the human condition is the bond between God's purpose and human history; that is, the historical pattern of personal, social, political, and economic relationships reveals God's design. God acts in history to reveal the need for justice. King believed that human actions which uphold justice express the divine will. His explanation of the bus boycott followed the same path. The concrete events of protest become the realization of God's time in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1956:

There is a creative power that works to pull down mountains of evil and level hilltops of injustice. God still works through history His wonders to perform. It seems as though God had decided to use Montgomery as the proving ground for the struggle and triumph of freedom and justice in America.¹

¹Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), pp. 69–70. King explains that Rosa Parks's arrest is the visible expression of a time and a people meeting in history in order to change the future. "She had been tracked down by the Zeitgeist—the spirit of the time," *ibid.*, p. 44.

This understanding of God led King to conclude that the worth of individuals is simply part of the givenness of creation. The belief in God as with and within humankind reinforces the moral and personal significance of the person. Divine embeddedness grants value and demands that persons be seen as having worth; however, it also includes the necessity of response. For King, the vision of God includes a human existence in partnership with God, a "cosmic companionship" of vibrant obedience that unites God and humanity.² This relationship, in and of itself, confers value upon all humanity and places upon believers the responsibility to live according to the conditions of the relationship. God chooses and guides but also expects a response that bears witness to the ethical context of creation—the realization that the universe, as God's creation, has a moral basis. Kenneth Smith and Ira Zepp argue that King "insisted upon the moral foundation of reality. That belief is perhaps more central and determinative for his thought than any other."³ The moral order supplies the justification for the universal norm of moral law that defines human existence. King identifies the universal norm as love. Two consequences follow.

The first is that the moral order, since it is infused with God's movement toward justice, establishes the conditions of resistance to injustice. Because creation has a moral base, "we have a mandate from God to resist evil."⁴ Second, although the moral order is external to human desires, its ethical requirements are not the oppressive, tyrannical whims of an impersonal deity. Instead the moral order, the moral law, is God's revelation of what it means to be human. Thus the moral order has implications for character as well as action. Our lives must conform to the moral basis of our existence; that is, our lives ought to move in the direction of love and nonviolence.

There is a law in the moral world—a silent, invisible imperative, akin to the laws in the physical world—which reminds us that life will work only in a certain way.⁵

Thus King argued that being human entails living a certain way not just in a mechanistic, external pro forma obedience to the law, but in the more profound manner of being a certain sort of person. The gap between who we are and who

²Ibid., p. 106.

³Kenneth Smith and Ira Zepp, *Search for the Beloved Community* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1974), p. 111. King also wrote: "We must finally believe in the ultimate morality of the universe, and believe that all reality hinges on moral foundations," in King, *Trumpet of Conscience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 75.

⁴King quoted in Lerone Bennett, Jr., *What Manner of Man* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., 1968), p. 98.

⁵King, *Strength to Love* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1963), p. 103.

we ought to be judges our existence. For King, obedience to the moral law cements the partnership with God; it conforms one's whole life (not merely outward actions) to the moral basis of creation, thereby transforming the person. The moral law of God, along with the unity of humankind, demands that we act in a certain way, that we act as persons with moral character. Although King was well aware of the need for legislation to eliminate segregation, his ultimate goal was to change the character of oppressed and oppressor alike, for it is here that the moral community will begin. Understanding King's vision of God, then, takes more than a cursory reading of the moral law; his vision drives the analysis to an examination of moral character and its expressions of nonviolence and courage.

The explanation of the statement that King is just as concerned with the moral character of both individuals and the protest as a whole as he is with the types of actions undertaken by the civil rights movement traverses his analysis of possible responses to oppression. On the surface, these replies to injustice are methods or techniques of action—something is done in order to deal with the oppressive situation. King, of course, did not reject the active nature of the various responses but, in addition to revealing what was done, he also uncovered the importance character has in the performance of action. Although it is not explicitly stated, King seems to have been arguing that one's character determines the form of the response. Thus the ways in which we meet oppression is a function of our character. The reverse also holds. That is, the type of action serves to reinforce the boundaries of character, which then works to limit possible future responses to injustice. A fully aware moral action requires the presence of moral character.

King split the confrontation with injustice into three categories. The first is acquiescence, the empty powerlessness that resigns itself to what is perceived as a hopeless situation. Acquiescence guarantees the continuation of oppression. Second, the reaction moves toward and accepts the use of violence as a cure for social grievances. The gamut of nonviolent action—boycotts, sit-ins, marches, voter registration, court suits—is the third option available to the victims of oppression. Obviously, King rejected the first two methods in favor of a non-violent alternative. Part of the rationale for his choice involved a concern for character. King holds that acquiescence “is the way of the coward,” that violence “thrives on hatred. . . . it creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers.”⁶ Both cowardice and hatred preclude the possibility of developing moral character. Nonviolence, on the other hand, is an appeal to both sides to become different sorts of persons; it is an exhortation that “something

⁶King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, pp. 212, 213.

must happen to touch the hearts and souls of men that they will come together, not because the law says it, but because it is natural and right."⁷ For King, nonviolence is bi-directional. It seeks to change the character of the oppressor to include a broader vision of humanity, and, more important, nonviolence results from oppressed peoples' awakening sense of their inherent dignity and self-respect. Being nonviolent resides in this strength of character that King hopes to sow among all involved in the civil rights struggle, especially within the black community.

In addition to the religious basis of King's declaration of individual value, the impact of personalism also governed his efforts to redefine and align character with an awareness of self-respect and dignity. The notion of dignity is where the social significance of Martin Luther King's nonviolent theory begins; it is the realization that social change, the vision of justice, lies within the transformation of character from an abject passivity to a sense of worth. A major portion of King's involvement in the struggle for civil rights was the effort to alter the elements of character, to develop a moral character that is capable of rejecting violence.

The cumulative impact of historical and social forces on the black community has produced, King argued, a situation in which most blacks accept the conditions of their lives as a given. A pall of inertia has been cast over the community. Although he is clearly aware of earlier and present moves by black leaders to challenge the power of discrimination, King viewed the contemporary situation as stagnant; it lacked the compassionate intensity of a popular movement. He did not intend this observation as an indictment of previous efforts, but merely wanted to point out the difficulty that the struggle for justice faces as a result of racist political and social policies: "The tragedy of physical slavery was that it gradually led to the paralysis of mental slavery."⁸

The reversal of the immobility requires an assault on the parameters of black self-perception by empowering people with the strength to "bury the psychology of servitude," which, in turn, will destroy the myth of black inferiority as well as the "white mystique of invincibility."⁹ The first step toward the fulfillment of these goals is to introduce a different notion of worth, a new measure of

⁷Ibid., p. 220.

⁸King quoted by Stephen Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), p. 100. Coretta King makes a similar claim with regard to southern politics and society: "The whole idea was to impress upon the Black people that we were an inferior race, to reduce us, not to slavery again, but to being less than men," in Coretta King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), pp. 23-24.

⁹King, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 111; C. Eric Lincoln, ed., *Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Profile* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1970), pp. xii-xiii.

self-respect to the character of a people who have been rendered faceless by centuries of exploitation. From Montgomery to Memphis, King accentuated the importance of self-respect for the realization of the black community's demands. David Halberstam, traveling with King on a campaign to Cleveland in 1967, has described a meeting between King and a group of black nationalists.

While he spoke of nonviolence to them he did tell them to be proud of their black color, that no Emancipation Proclamation, no act of Lyndon Johnson, could set them free unless they were sure in their own minds they liked being Black.¹⁰

For King, freedom is also a process of self-liberation attained by the recognition of individual dignity and the imposition of the claim dignity exerts on the actions and policies of others. King, then, tied the dream of freedom to the reality of black self-respect.

He came out of his struggle integrated only slightly in the external society but powerfully integrated within. This was the victory that had to precede all other gains.¹¹

Ensuring the victory, however, means more than having respect for oneself as an individual. It might be the case that self-respect could simply end in personal satisfaction without any further concern for the creation of moral character.

In his effort to prevent the corruption of self-respect, King argued for a proposal similar to Stanley Hauerwas's assertion that to have character is to be self-determining.¹² That is, the quality and direction of character is largely the result of our own choosing for which we can be held responsible even within the framework of limited options. The perception of character as self-determining allowed King to argue for a vision of character as the union of self-respect and freedom. If liberation is to become a reality, character cannot remain unchanged and respect cannot be used as an excuse for inaction; liberty and justice are also matters of self-involvement. Thus King wrote that blacks "must gain the respect of the white man by improving our own standards which lag behind because of segregation."¹³ This comment is not a denial of social and political forces, nor a smug bootstrap theory. More forcefully, the statement is a recognition of the connection between moral character and moral social change.

Just as Gandhi places social reform on a foundation of a purified character,

¹⁰David Halberstam, "The Second Coming of Martin Luther King," *Harper's*, August 1967, p. 45.

¹¹King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, p. 16.

¹²Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Fides, 1974), p. 67.

¹³King quoted by Gerald Muller, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Civil Rights Leader* (Minneapolis, Minn.: T. S. Denison and Co, 1971), p. 126.

King, although not endorsing all of Gandhi's recommendations, clearly stressed the need to strive for the excellence of the self, to be "the best of whatever you are,"¹⁴ as part of the moral task that surrounds the struggle for justice. Although some criticize King's exhortations to reform character, he was unwilling to disassociate the struggle for civil rights from the effort to form moral character. For example, David Lewis writes that for many blacks, King's emphasis on self-improvement "was heresy. The question of black occupational responsibility and excellence was not to be touched upon until the race had achieved an optimal quota in all metiers in American society."¹⁵ Claiming that King was enmeshed in middle-class values may miss the point. He was not seeking to set up a conflict between classes, except perhaps for his criticisms of the upper class's neglect of the struggle. Instead, King was trying to articulate the virtues he believed would lead to the creation and stability of community. The issue is not hatred of the lower class. Rather the problem lies in behavior and self-perceptions that lead to communal breakdown, which can be present across class divisions.¹⁶ King, then, seeks to combine the emphasis on personal virtues with a demand for social justice. The creation of justice demands no less than a total liberation—both a personal and social transformation.

The concern for individual character must also expand to include social vigilance and repair. Moral character exists if and only if it restlessly flows toward social justice. King bitterly censured those liberals who perpetuated the charade that they could be persons of character without, at the same time, being actively committed to ending injustice. Character is a significant part of the ethical life only if character unfolds into morally significant action. Thus an ethically aware character incorporates both the moral self and moral action: "This is no day to pay lip service to integration, we must pay life service to it."¹⁷ The unity of self and action creates a dialectic between character and justice. Character recognizes the necessity for justice, which, in turn, increases the demands on character. What holds character and justice together is King's insistence that nonviolence is the only moral connection between the self and social action.

Purely as a manifestation of individual character, nonviolence "ennobles the man who wields it."¹⁸ The commitment to be nonviolent gives one's character

¹⁴King, "Facing the Challenge of the New Age," *Phylon* (April 1957): 29.

¹⁵David Lewis, *King: A Critical Biography* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), p. 252.

¹⁶Adam Fairclough briefly discusses King's middle-class virtues in "Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Quest for Nonviolent Social Change," *Phylon* 47 (Spring 1986): 12–13. Although I disagree with his emphasis, Fairclough is certainly correct that King did not want to substitute middle-class virtues for legislative and government intervention.

¹⁷King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 200.

¹⁸King, *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 26.

the strength to accept violence without striking back. Facing the world nonviolently requires tremendous personal fortitude. Yet, King was not content to let the matter rest here, for without the demand for social justice, even the nonviolent strength that refuses to retaliate can degenerate into passive nonviolence, the nonviolence of acquiescence that King disowned. A truly nonviolent life entails living within the dialectic of character and justice.

The Negro's method of nonviolent direct action is not only suitable as a remedy for injustice; its very nature is such that it challenges the myth of inferiority. Even the most reluctant are forced to recognize that no inferior people could choose and successfully pursue a course invoking such extensive sacrifice, bravery, and skill.¹⁹

For King, then, self-respect, self-examination, and the quest for justice combine to form a nonviolent character. It was King's belief that those who possess this character will have the moral stamina to resist and overcome the falsehoods of racism. A truthful, moral character cannot accept segregation.

The decay of character, which the blindness of hatred engenders, is perhaps the most appropriate definition of racism. It is the assumption that one's race stands above all others in social value, which then justifies oppressive attitudes and policies toward the "unworthy" races.²⁰ Racism as an expression of character is simply the unwillingness to see truthfully, to rejoice in the presence of other races, and to recognize their inherent value.

Morally, the issue is how to struggle against evil without increasing its territory. Violence, the eye-for-an-eye, cannot reduce the scope of destruction; it only generates pressure for retaliation, for more violence that "would leave everyone blind."²¹ For King, violence is self-inflicted blindness, and if moral blindness, the inability to see good, is one cause of evil, the remedy does not lie in the violent destruction of evil or the accommodation of its demands. Evil is overcome by the restoration of sight, the formation of a truthful character that is able to see clearly. King wanted us to begin to think about ourselves and our participation in and responsibility for segregation in entirely different ways. James Baldwin recognizes King's connection between civil rights and a revolution in perception.

¹⁹Ibid, p. 121.

²⁰See John Ansbro's definition of a racist: "He looks upon his race as the value center that illuminates all other values. Hence the racist does not raise questions about the rightness or wrongness of his race. The racist believes that the members of his race, the 'in race,' simply because they are members, possess goodness and worth. The 'out race' is, by definition, defective and to be eliminated or separated," in *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Making of a Mind* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books), p. 106.

²¹King, *Strength to Love*, p. 28.

It need scarcely be said that our racial situation is far more complex and dangerous than we are prepared to think of it as being—since our major desire is not to think of it at all—and King's role in it is of an unprecedented difficulty.²²

King's role was to further the revolution by forcing us to see what we do not want to see. Having the virtues necessary to overcome self-deception allows us to say truthfully who we are and what it is we are doing.

Since a character that is unable to see truthfully sustains self-deception, we avoid the pain of recognition by substituting a false, but firmly believed, rightness in place of an awareness of what it is we are actually doing. Consequently King claimed that "in human relations the truth is hard to come by because most groups are deceived about themselves."²³ Meeting with Montgomery city officials and bus company representatives during the bus boycott, King grew increasingly aware of the power of deception in American life.²⁴ These people could not truthfully say what they were doing because they did not have the character that would allow them to see who they were. They could not articulate the realities of segregation because doing so would force them to give up their own sense of identity. Ten years after the boycott, King still perceived the deception.

[F]or the good of America, it is necessary to refute the idea that the dominant ideology in our country even today is freedom and equality while racism is just an occasional departure from the norm on the part of a few bigoted extremists.²⁵

By exposing the deception, King courted the wrath of people who did not want to be told they were unjust; he was attacking the convictional structure of the nation through his demand that character must become more ethical. The danger lies in the fact that some people will resist, often with violence, any suggestion that they are not who they believe themselves to be, that their characters are a sham. Others accept the challenge and begin the process of social change. Although the boycott and later protests were not immune to controversy and internal disagreement, Montgomery was a watershed in black perceptions of character. C. Eric Lincoln has predicted:

²²James Baldwin, "The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King," *Harper's*, February 1961, p. 34.

²³King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, p. 67.

²⁴See King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, pp. 114–122.

²⁵King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, p. 69.

It may well be the final judgment of history that Martin Luther King's greatest contribution to Black freedom was made in Montgomery when he helped Black people free themselves from self-doubt and self-abasement.²⁶

Yet the freedom from self-doubt, if it is to be more than just individual, personal fulfillment, requires a commitment to action. For King, freedom arrives through a reorientation of character based on the refusal to be bound by oppressive, externally imposed definitions of humanity. This refusal translates into a willingness to change the self and society. He rejected the prison of segregation and offered a freedom based on the courage of nonviolent character and noncooperation with evil.

One of the most important reasons for the Montgomery bus boycott was King's imperative of noncooperation with evil. He argued that the assistance we give to the requests of evil only serves to facilitate its presence and continuation. The moral task, then, is to refuse to cooperate. "So in order to be true to one's conscience and true to God, a righteous man has no alternative but to refuse to cooperate with an evil system."²⁷ Speaking from the steps of the state capital building in Montgomery, King called out to the people: "We ain't goin' to let nobody turn us around."²⁸ One could interpret the above statements as rhetorical bravado whose purpose is to enrapture the audience. King's remarks, however, are not mere embellishments; they denote the intimate association of action and character. Not turning around, not cooperating with evil are external acts that depend upon one's character, upon whether or not one has a righteous conscience or is at least capable of questioning the precepts of self-recognition. The ability to withstand evil and not be turned around requires a character of humility, patience, and hope. But the specific fuel of the protest is found in King's union of nonviolence and character with the demand for courage. Without courage, the remaining inner resources do not have the power to generate the action of resistance.

From the vision of God to the infusion of self-respect and the unmasking of deception, one of King's goals for the movement was to develop the character of the people through the resurrection of courage. The dignity King saw in the black community needs courage to pull it out into the open; courage brings unity and strength to collective action. In what may be seen as a definition, King wrote:

Courage, the determination not to be overwhelmed by any object, that power of the mind capable of sloughing off the thingification of the past, will be the Negro's most potent weapon in achieving self respect.²⁹

²⁶Lincoln, ed. *Martin Luther King, Jr.*, p. xiii.

²⁷King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 51.

²⁸King quoted by Lewis, *King: A Critical Biography*, p. 291.

²⁹King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, p. 123.

The weapon works because courage, in King's view, transports the individual and the community before the face of death without the paralysis of fear. "Death is inevitable. . . . we need not fear it."³⁰ Once the terror of death is conquered, the oppressor loses control of the situation, the injustice is revealed, and the people can prepare to resist.

Throughout his career in the civil rights movement, King was constantly aware of the tension between courage and death. Stephen Oates writes of a "sense of doom" surrounding King and his staff that culminated in a sermon on February 4, 1968, in which King preached his own eulogy.³¹ But, even though the knowledge of death abounds, the doom does not win. King's interpretation of courage as overcoming the fear of death gave him the freedom of mobility and the moral strength to act, the ability to go on. His prophetic speech in Memphis the night before he was killed is replete with a vision that has broken death's grasp. After discussing the history of the movement and pointing out the need for unity in Memphis, King turned to the threats he had received and uttered the words:

Well I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead, but it really doesn't matter with me because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He has allowed me to go up to the mountaintop. And I've looked over, and I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.³²

This comment is more than a religious simplification; it reflects a belief that the possibility of death need not result in despair and inaction.

The proximity of courage to the reality of death suggests a second feature of King's understanding of courage—the contrast between courage and cowardice. If courage invests character with the ability to endure and persist in the struggle with death, then cowardice represents the theft of one's power to act. Cowardice is the diminution of character, the loss of self-determination that allows the individual to act in the first place. If we accept Hauerwas's view that "our character is in effect the cause of our actions, for it is our character that deter-

³⁰King, *Strength to Love*, p. 116. Coretta King recalls a similar meaning in a conversation with her husband: "You know, I cannot worry about my safety; I cannot live in fear. I have to function. If there is any one fear I have conquered, it is the fear of death," in *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.*, p. 302.

³¹Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound*, p. 458.

³²King, "Dr. King's Last Message," *Renewal* 9, no. 4, (April 1969): p. 5.

mines the range of descriptions that we have available to us,"³³ the distance between courage and cowardice grows even greater. A courageous character has a wider descriptive range and thus remains open to the broader possibilities of action, but the coward so narrowly describes what is going on that creative action is almost inconceivable. King expressed this position through his association of courage with personal wholeness and social unity. Courage sustains the self while cowardice distorts personal integrity.

Courage and cowardice are antithetical. Courage is an inner resolution to go forward in spite of obstacles and frightening situations; cowardice is a submissive surrender to circumstances. Courage breeds creative self-affirmation; cowardice produces destructive self-abnegation.³⁴

Socially, King sees courage as the basis of unity and the force behind the community's involvement in the struggle for justice. After learning of the indictments of the bus boycott leaders, King's father, fearing for his son's safety, tried to dissuade him from returning to Montgomery. King recognized the pain, but responded:

My friends and associates are being arrested. It would be the height of cowardice for me to stay away. I would rather be in jail ten years than desert my people now. I have begun the struggle, and I can't turn back. I have reached the point of no return.³⁵

Stopping would have been an admission of defeat and would have licensed the continuation of injustice. At this point the issue is not merely violence versus nonviolence, but the distinction between courage and cowardice. Following Gandhi, King proclaimed, "As much as I deplore violence, there is one evil that is worse than violence, and that's cowardice."³⁶ However, the nonviolence/violence debate with regard to courage cannot be dismissed. As with Gandhi, King faced the task of redefining the path of courage with a destination of nonviolence. Much of King's efforts in the civil rights movement, which became more controversial after the rise of black power, revolved around the effort to equate nonviolence with courage.

When Stokely Carmichael declared the need for black power in June 1966, he not only voiced the concern for economic and political strength but also ex-

³³Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life* (San Antonio, Tex.: Trinity University Press, 1975), p. 113.

³⁴King, *Strength to Love*, p. 111.

³⁵King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 145; see also Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound*, p. 93.

³⁶King in a *Playboy* interview quoted by Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound*, p. 282.

pressed one of the most crucial moral dilemmas that faced the movement—the nature of social change. In Canton, Mississippi, during the march after the shooting of James Meredith, the violence of the police and the white community provoked many blacks to conclude that nonviolence was part of the problem. Nonviolence was portrayed as weak, passive, and cowardly; courage was increasingly identified with the use of violence.³⁷ From the days of the Montgomery bus boycott, King argued for the urgency of reversing the above associations if the civil rights movement was to have a broad social impact. The task, then, was to identify nonviolence with power and strength while exposing violence as a form of weakness and powerlessness.

Although the sources of King's nonviolence are biblical, the moral and social parallels with Gandhi are also clear and intentional. Nonviolence is resistance; it is courage rather than the passive weakness that does nothing. "It is not passive nonresistance to evil, it is active nonviolent resistance to evil."³⁸ King wants to transform nonviolence from a symbol of weakness into a spectacle of courage, an expression, in Gandhian concepts, of fearlessness without the use of violence. For King, the test of truthful character, the fulfillment of courage is the ability to remain nonviolent even when faced with the temptations of violence. The night his house was bombed in Montgomery, King calmed a potentially dangerous and violent crowd by saying:

Now let's not become panicky. If you have weapons, take them home; if you do not have them, please do not seek to get them. We cannot solve this problem through retaliatory violence. We must meet violence with nonviolence.³⁹

In this statement, King proposed a total reversal of the American "frontier tradition"⁴⁰ and its assumption that violence is the supreme manifestation of courage. Gandhi's question reappears: Does violence or nonviolence demand more courage? King hoped to convince the skeptics that nonviolence is not a sign of weakness, that breaking the cycle of violence calls for the courage to be nonviolent.

³⁷For a discussion of the rise of black power and the growing conflict within the civil rights movement, especially between the SCLC and SNCC, see Lewis, *King: A Critical Biography*, pp. 324–28; Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound*, pp. 308, 396–98; Louis Lomax, "When Nonviolence Meets Black Power," in Lincoln, ed., *Martin Luther King, Jr.*, pp. 164–66; David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), pp. 475–525.

³⁸King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 102.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁴⁰King, *Why We Can't Wait*, p. 37.

It is not simple to adopt the credo that moral force has as much strength and virtue as the capacity to return a physical blow; or that to refrain from hitting back requires more will and bravery than the automatic reflexes of defense.⁴¹

Thus King's understanding of nonviolence goes beyond the merely tactical and moves into the realm of moral character, particularly the virtue of courage as a basis for attaining his goal of the beloved community. Character without non-violence or nonviolence without character are not meaningless, but neither alone can reach King's goal.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 37.



It is clear that King had a high regard for the necessity of the juridical state. He knew as Kant had seen that the preservation of liberty is required if men are to have the option to live as moral beings under the moral law. However, he was unwilling to agree with Kant that all forms of this juridical society were to be obeyed. In his approach, the social change agent was still involved in living under the moral law. And, in so doing, he was also under the control of the juridical law. King saw the dangers of living in the "state of nature." In this sense his position was at odds with some other activists who insisted that the laws of the state meant nothing for black people because blacks were not considered to be fully human under many statutes. These people might have argued in Kant's terms that the segregation policies of Alabama were not applicable to them because they were not members of the state's juridical order. Since this situation existed, many civil rights leaders disagreed with King. They maintained that the state had no right to exact punishment from them for disobedience of laws. This significant difference in approach caused a great deal of conflict over strategy within the civil rights movement.

King was aware that in the "state of nature" black people would not have recourse to any legal statutes. In this condition, twenty-five million blacks could be pitted against two hundred million whites in making rights claims. Since this situation is obviously foolhardy, King advised that blacks seek to make the juridical order work in their behalf. The account of King's success is a matter of historical record. However, the profundity of his thinking is illuminated when it is seen in the light of a Kantian moral system.

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