

The Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr.

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1. Introduction

When the question of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s philosophical legacy arises in the academy, so far, the question remains open-ended (though as I will shortly argue, the question has already been answered by King himself).¹ Beyond his presence in public American consciousness, King left behind speeches, sermons, correspondence, and writings that inspire both philosophical and theological reflection. However, King is also interpreted on the merits of the biases and philosophical traditions that we scholars navigate. Such biases and philosophical traditions mediate our experience of encountering King, and this mediation can impact our understanding of what exactly King's philosophical legacy is.²

Accordingly, we should seek to reconstruct King's thoughts in the philosophical vocabulary King employed rather than displacing King from his own agency and contexts that shaped him.³ Serious misunderstanding occurs every January with light fluff pieces in major newspapers and websites from authors that do not read King's corpus.⁴ Consider Martha Nussbaum and her glaring error and omission in her recent contribution to the newest book that purports to look at King as a philosopher, "Although a religious man, [King] did not advance in his political writings a comprehensive and religious doctrine, as Gandhi did."⁵ Nussbaum completely neglects any historical consideration or development or where King describes himself as a personalist.⁶ Like others, Nussbaum disregards King's own self-description. This disregard is tantamount to a silent and implicit racism that results in scholarly efforts that

deprives King of his own intellectual agency when interpreting his work. This tendency prevails in both philosophy and theology departments, and this neglect has also been the larger challenge of African American philosophy gaining more acceptance as a field of philosophical inquiry.⁷ My efforts in this article are to put an end to continual misreadings of King. King is a personalist.

There are four pieces of evidence that King is a personalist: (1) King's own words, (2) family background, (3) influence of personalist ideas on his writings, and (4) the tradition of King's reception by other Boston personalists. First, King describes himself in his own words as a personalist. This is perhaps the biggest piece of evidence why we should read King as a personalist. Second, King was influenced by personalism earlier than studying Brightman's philosophy with Gregory Davis at Crozers Theological Seminary.⁸ Before Morehouse College and Crozers Theological Seminary, according to Rufus Burrow, homespun personalism emerges out of King's upbringing within the Black Church. Scholars should not doubt that King synthesizes personalist influences with how he was raised.⁹ Moreover, given that King choose to go to Boston University to study with Brightman where Boston personalism was known to be strong, all of these facts prove that King was a personalist.¹⁰ In this talk, I will pay attention to King's self-description passage and interpreting several of his writings through Brightman.

2. What is Personalism?

No doubt this may be the first time you have heard the term 'personalism.' I will define it in a moment. For now, let's take a look at the examples of how strong the personalist interpretation of King is. Rufus Burrow's *God and Human Dignity: Personalism, Theology, and Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (2006) is still the best scholarly work on the personalist interpretation of King, and it is built of the same mortar and bricks as the evidence I am presenting to you here. The personalist thinkers that knew King have maintained and interpreted

his writings in this ethico-theological tradition. Walter G. Muelder interpreted specific examples of King's sermons as exemplifying Edgar Sheffield Brightman's moral law system. John J. Ansbro sees Brightman's eleven moral law system principles included in a few of King's books like *Why We Can't Wait* and *The Trumpet of Conscience*, and Rufus Burrow reveals Brightman's moral principles implicit in King's anti-militarism in relationship to the Vietnam War.¹¹

For now, personalism is simultaneously two things: 1) an ethical system in which the person has infinite worth and dignity and 2) a metaphysics that insists persons are an irreducible whole and a precondition of experiencing the world. In other words, starting with Border Parker Bowne (1847-1910), then next with Edgar S. Brightman (1884-1953) and extending all the way through the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968), persons have the traits of selfhood, self-knowledge, and self-direction precisely because in the Boston Tradition, persons are identified with the relational processes of consciousness.¹² Next, according to Bowne in his *Principle of Ethics* (1892), persons possess "an inborn ideal of human worth and dignity," and this trait extends deeply into how King and Brightman conceived of the person.¹³ The ideal of human worth and dignity of the person starts with Bowne and is never abandoned by Brightman, King, or Muelder.

As Walter Muelder details in his article "Philosophical and Theological Influences in the Thought and Action of Martin Luther King, Jr.," between 1952-1962 "in that decade and beyond half of all doctorates in religion awarded to Negroes in the U.S.A. were earned at Boston University."¹⁴ Regarding welcomeness of Boston University, King wrote:

My particular interest in Boston University could be summed up in two statements. First, my thinking in philosophical areas had been greatly influenced by some of the faculty members there, particularly Dr. Edgar S. Brightman. For this reason, I longed for the possibility of studying under him. Secondly, one of my professors at Crozer was a graduate of Boston University, and his great influence over me turned my eyes toward

his former school. I had gotten some valuable information about Boston University from him, and I was convinced that there were definite advantages there for me.¹⁵

In the passage above, King is referring to his professor, Gregory Davis at Crozers Theological Seminary and the welcomeness it possessed institutionally for American Negroes (e.g. Boston University was the first university to award a doctorate in theology to a Black Man, John Edward Wesley Bowen in 1887 supervised by no other than Border Parker Bowne, the first Boston Personalist). In Davis's classes, King had written many theology papers, and they contained a great many references to Brightman's thought and other personalist writings.

3. Burrow's Propositions for Kingian Personalism

Let's transition our discussion to what Kingian personalism is by looking to what Burrow claims are the essential propositions of Boston personalism he finds underlying King's thoughts.

These propositions are:

1. Reality is personal
2. Persons are the highest intrinsic values
3. Reality is social.
4. An objective moral order [exists] at the foundation of the universe.
5. [We need] to protest social injustice and to work for the establishment of the community of love.¹⁶

For brevity, I will only take up 2 and 4 together: persons are the highest intrinsic values that exist and that a moral foundation exists in the universe. In other words, the moral foundation of the universe persists because both finite persons and the Infinite Person are ontologically basic and a commitment that all personalists share is that persons are the ones who realize values into being through action. The Infinite Person is the Divine source of all value, and finite persons aim toward that Source of value. Values cannot help but be revealed in our experiencing inter-

personal relations since they are already pre-reflexively constituted in relations. The act of valuation, whether it proceeds from *the will* for one group of personalists or from consciousness as Bowne-Brightman-King tradition, is ontologically constitutive of what it means to be a person and have experience in the first place.¹⁷ The moral universe is a consequence of all extant persons and the inescapable way persons experience the world as already saturated in value.

Dignity is the property of having infinite loving worth. Thus, wrongness and injustice occur in any setting where depersonalizing occurs and dignity is denied. In other words, no person is a thing, and the lesson of slavery and Jim Crow's transhistorical wrongness is in the constant devaluation of persons. Since persons exist as the ontologically basic fact of the universe, reality is a social interdependent whole to which all objectification of the person denies what is basic to reality itself. In that whole, the universe is friendly to the fact that values exist and persons should have infinite worth. As Brightman expressed, religion is an experience of value primarily and religion "is a faith in the friendliness of the universe to value."¹⁸

The system of interrelated persons, then, underlie a moral order to the universe for all persons, and as a theistic philosophy, the inherent dignity of persons is guaranteed by an all-loving God. As King observed in his "The Ethical Demands for Integration" (1962), "In the final analysis, says the Christian ethic, every man must be respected because God loves him. The worth of an individual does not lie in the measure of his intellect his racial origin, or his social position." It's for this reason King ends that passage with, "Whenever this is realized, 'whiteness' and 'blackness' pass away as determinants in a relationship and 'son' and 'brother' are substituted."¹⁹ Accordingly, colonialism operates and is out of "harmony with the moral laws of the universe."²⁰ For King, all oppressive systems are in denial of the absolute and infinite worthiness of a person's dignity. Hence the corollary, racist oppression is out of harmony with

the moral laws of the universe. The moral law demands the absolute dignity and infinite worth of all human beings. Personal dignity is a moral absolute independent of any human constructed identity, including race. Many might want, then, to disavow the existence of race as part of our experience, but King's activism corrects the denial of personal dignity at the heart of racism. So we should be careful not to jump the moral ontological gun for a Kingian aspiration of a color-blind and post-racial society when it is the concrete conditions of racial injustice that motivated King's philosophizing in the first place. Kingian personalism is a response to the racist denial of recognized infinite worth and dignity of raced persons.

We should also understand the necessity of not only seeing King as an activist, but the necessity of Boston personalism as a philosophy to animate King's activism. To simply focus on activism and his words as both rhetoric and propaganda for such activism is to leave the ideas unexamined that undergird white supremacy. Unquestioned ideas, like segregation and slavery, can never be defeated. According to King, "even philosophical logic was manipulated to give intellectual credence to the system of slavery...So men conveniently twisted the insights of religion, science, and philosophy to give sanction to the doctrine of white supremacy."²¹ Without articulating a philosophical and intellectual vision, King could not both address the physical forces and the cultural forces of white supremacy simultaneously. For this reason, King sought out the tools of philosophical theology of Boston personalism.

While Burrow does talk about how most personalists affirm the dignity of other persons "more than all of his academic personalist forebears, King applied the principles of personalism in his efforts to achieve a world community of love in which every person will be treated justly, with dignity and respect."²² Because King's personalism addressed racism, the exploitation of the poor, and militarism in US foreign policy, the texture of personalism very much looks

different from those varieties in academic works. For this reason, Burrow writes that Kingian personalism was something different than a conceptual framework that many of his teachers adhered to. Instead, Boston personalism was “a faith and life that he *lived* in a way and to a degree that others did not.”²³ We must remember that to live a life on uncompromising principle is itself exemplified in King’s radicalism. To be inspired by King and to claim the mantle of personalism means that one’s actions are consistent with the principles set forth in Brightman’s moral law system and in the agapic love of Christ. From both those principles and agapic love, King’s personalism is working against and upending white supremacy.²⁴

4. The Self-Description Passage

Since I only have time for one source of evidence, I will now review the largest piece of evidence that King is a dedicated personalist. Let me reproduce this famous passage from “My Pilgrimage to Nonviolence” under discussion,

I studied philosophy and theology at Boston University under Edgar S. Brightman and L. Harold De Wolf. 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 personalism remains today my basic philosophical position. Personalism's insistence that personality---finite and infinite---is ultimately real strengthened me in two convictions: 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.²⁵

In King’s own self-description, personalism is his basic philosophical vision and that A) it gave him a metaphysical grounding for theism and B) the basis for the dignity and worth of all personality. When King says that the “clue to the meaning of ultimate reality is found in personality,” King is speaking of personality in an active relational way, and I should explain the term how King intends to use the term: *personality*.

Personality is not a psychological term, but an ontological term. Ontology is the field of philosophy that studies the category of being, so personality refers, then, to the very basic

essence of *who* and *what* we as persons are. On this question, it seems, King never abandons the central insight that started with Bowne that persons possess “an inborn ideal of human worth and dignity.” For the personalist, the very being of a person is found in experiencing the relations of life and the moral law and our dignity is discovered in personalism’s relational ontology.²⁶ Thus, we might better translate the key to ultimate reality as a type of personing, the process of actively being in relation to and experiencing reality alongside other persons.²⁷ To be in relation is to be actively engaged with and therefore experiencing reality such that the moral laws can be discovered in our shared experience.

In experiencing reality, finite persons exist along with the infinite person God in relationship. Consider King’s words from an essay “The Answer to a Perplexing Question,” King writes, “To know God, a man must possess this latter type of faith [the heart’s faith as opposed to intellectual mind’s faith], for the mind’s faith is centered in a Person... Faith is the opening of all sides [of the Person] and at every level of one’s life to the divine inflow.”²⁸ In other words, the personal experience of God cannot help but be *a person* with whom relation occurs in “divine inflow.” Love is the medium of that relation in King, and love is a mental act that always relates to a personal other in those relations of “divine inflow.”

One could further extend the commitment to the personal reality of God to what we might call King’s personalist political theology. By ‘political theology,’ I mean the application of theological principles to concrete social and political problems. As the theological and philosophical are intertwined in personalism, to abandon these levels of King’s thinking is not to read King at all in his own terms since it is only from the proper source of that cosmic love that calls us out of our own finitude to serve something more in relationship to the higher ideals of the moral laws. As Rufus Burrow makes clear,

Nevertheless, there is no question that King was by his own admission, both a metaphysical and ethical personalist. That is, he believed in a personal God who is the source of all things. In addition, he lived by the conviction that every person is sacred, because every person is loved by God. Therefore, when his house was bombed during the Montgomery Bus Boycott he counseled angry black residents not to retaliate and love their enemies.²⁹

Burrow is maintaining that these personalist convictions immediately gave rise to King's understanding of the Sermon on the Mount as it applied not only when someone threatened his home, but for all the other times when King was tested by that same white racist hatred over and over. For King, the role these insights play are orthopraxic. Orthopraxy refers to thinking of religion as concerned with right conduct (*ortho*-right and *praxis*-conduct) rather than thinking being religious means having the right belief (*ortho*-right and *doxy*-belief/opinion). In his unpublished notes of a talk Walter Muelder gave on his memories of King, Muelder defined personalism as "an activist metaphysics of love."³⁰ Many skeptics of religion often regard religion as a matter of ideology and unreflective propositions that make up an orthodoxy.

Next, the metaphysical grounding of dignity comes out of being related to a personal God. For both Brightman and King, reality is intelligible because it is rational, sustained as it were in the processes of God as the supreme and cosmic person. In this way, God is the source and sustainer of why values continue to be sustained (and why there are moral laws discovered in experience at all). God "is the source of all being" who is unceasingly striving for nothing but the best possible good.³¹ For this reason alone, King can say later on in *Stride Toward Freedom* that the oppressed person practicing nonviolence based on love "knows that in his struggle for justice that he has cosmic companionship." This cosmic companionship can take multiple forms and include non-Christians. For the non-Christians, the processes of relation are the same. For "even these people believe in the existence of some creative force that works for universal wholeness." King continues. "Whether we call it an unconscious process, an impersonal Brahman, or a

Personal Being of matchless power and infinite love, there is a creative force in the universe that works to bring the disconnected aspects of reality into a harmonious whole.”³² Certainly, King’s reference to “a Personal Being of matchless power and infinite love” is his personalism shining through. King’s activism is a philosophy born of struggle that seeks to integrate the immediate parts of with the whole.³³

5. The Personalistic Moral Law System

Walter Muelder was invited to present on King at his alma mater, Morehouse College in March 1983. What’s more, Lawrence Carter, a faculty member in the Philosophy and Religion Department at Morehouse College, makes his students learn the moral law system to this day. This commitment to seeing King as a personalist goes all the way down even to how faculty at King’s alma mater understand his thought. This institutional acceptance at Morehouse College rings true in Kipton Jensen’s “Pedagogical Personalism at Morehouse College.”³⁴ Jensen’s article argues that personalism plays a pedagogical role during the golden age of Morehouse College that also complements the time King spent on this earth, 1945-1967.

Rufus Burrow warns us to be careful. “In his use of [of the personalist Brightman moral law] system, King nowhere names the laws and then proceeds to the concrete application of them as academic personalists have.”³⁵ For this reason we can look at similar passages all throughout King’s writings and see these moral laws operating *a tergo*. Because my remaining time in this essay is talk is short, I will mention only a handful of examples of writings comparable to Brightman’s moral law system that I, Muelder, and other Boston Personalists find lurking throughout King’s writings.

Let’s take a look from an address titled “Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience” he gave at the Fellowship of the Concerned on November 16, 1961. This group was one of those societies

of white liberals that were critical of the sit-ins and freedom riders. King gave a speech to the largely white Southern liberals. King argued the strategy of student protesters must decide on what law they should obey and those laws that they should not. King says,

[A] law is a law that squares with a moral law. It is a law that squares with that which is right, so that any law that uplifts human personality is a just law. Whereas that which is out of harmony with the moral is a law which does not square with the moral law of the universe. It does not square with the law of God, so for that reason it is unjust and any law that degrades human personality is an unjust law.³⁶

As Edgar S. Brightman stated, “the civil and religious law are both logically dependent upon the moral.”³⁷ For this reason, the moral law, discoverable by rational criticism and consulting moral experience can suggest higher moral laws in which people may decide to obey or disobey the civil law. Brightman’s the Law of Autonomy seems to apply here. “*All persons ought to recognize themselves as obligated to choose in accordance with the ideals which they acknowledge; self-imposed ideals are imperative.*”³⁸ In other words, young people must impose ideals through their freedom. They must decide which is higher. In addition, this personalistic claim that the moral law is higher than the civil law of the state is also echoed in King’s *Letter from the Birmingham Jail* (1963) two years later. From the *Letter*, “Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any human law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the human soul and damages personality.”³⁹

What’s more, King firmly believes in a moral universe following Brightman’s example. The moral laws structure the universe. In his “A Christmas Sermon on Peace” (1967), King states, “If there is to be peace on earth and good will toward men, we must finally believe in the morality of the universe, and believe that all reality hinges on moral foundations.”⁴⁰ The moral foundation of the universe is the relationship between God, the Source of what is Good, and human beings aiming to bring about what is good from God. In Brightman’s eleventh law, the

Law of the Ideal Personality seems to apply here: *All persons ought to judge and guide all of their acts by their ideal conception in harmony with other Laws of what the whole personality ought to become both individually and socially.*⁴¹ The moral foundation crystallizes into the coherence of relevant moral laws discoverable in experience. “There is a law in the moral world—a silent, invisible imperative, akin to the laws in the physical world—that reminds us that life will work only in a certain way.” The “certain way” spoken of here is the normative ideal found in relationship with God and other persons. We all are guided by these ideals for what every person ought to become and the fact that moral laws are like physical laws indicates that King is thinking of more than one as a system—that is as Brightman’s moral law system.

God’s love for every single human person admits a love that as we have seen already washes away the social determinants of race and replaces the terms of our relation with others with metaphors drawn from the human family with the most universal metaphor being universal brotherhood established through agapic love. For King is adding his own moral law to be found in the fourth chapter of *Strength to Love* (1963). In opening ourselves up to what he calls “creative love,” we transform our enemies into children of the father and practice a spiritual maturity.⁴² Such divine love is transformative for both individuals and society as a whole, and in so far as the moral law system is a theistic system, King’s Christocentricity is at its heart more clearly than either Bowne or Brightman for that matter.

6. Concluding Remarks

In this short lecture, I have attempted to situate King in his own words and choices he made to enjoin himself with Boston personalism. In so doing, there is ample scholarly evidence that King should be regarded as a personalist whenever someone attempts to engage his social, political and ethical philosophy. While I did not have time to go over all pieces of the evidence

from which this talk is taken, it is my hope that a future course at the University of New Orleans in examining the thought of Boston personalism and King's claims made in his writings. Thank you for listening.

About the Lecturer

Dr. J. Edward Hackett is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Southern University and A&M College in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He researches ethics, Continental philosophy and American philosophy, which include attention to Black philosophers and theologians who should be read as part of the canon of American philosophy. Recently, his work in American religious thought includes William James, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Alfred N. Whitehead, Edgar S. Brightman, Benjamin Elijah Mays and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s roots in personalism.

Hackett is the author of *Persons and Values in Pragmatic Phenomenology: An Exploration of Moral Metaphysics* (2018) with Vernon Press, and coedited *Phenomenology for the Twenty-First Century* (2016) with Aaron Simmons published with Palgrave Macmillan and was the editor on *House of Cards and Philosophy* (2015). His writings on pragmatism and phenomenology have appeared in Spanish and Russian translation. He received his Ph.D. from Southern Illinois University in 2013 where he wrote a dissertation on the phenomenological ethics of Max Scheler, and he earned an MA in analytic philosophy from Simon Fraser University in 2008. In the 2020-2021 year, he has lectured to the Muncie Public library, India and Mexico.

¹ While this essay has been substantially reworked, the following keynote was originally a public lecture, "King and the Legacy of Boston Personalism" given to Ball State University in conjunction with the Muncie Public Library on February 26, 2020. It was part of the Big Questions and Big Ideas Lecture Series. A debt of gratitude to Kevin Harrelson is in order since some of our discussion no doubt weighs heavily in these revised pages. The latest version of this paper you are now reading has been provided to Steven Mumford and the students of the Justice Studies Ph.D. at the University of New Orleans. These footnotes have been revised due to editing this talk and its retitling as "The Ethics of Martin Luther King Jr." is serving as a way to advertise this the appeal of this lecture to members of

the New Orleans and Baton Rouge community. A longer more developed essay is currently under anonymous peer review, and I ask local colleagues at the University of New Orleans to not cite this version. A penultimate draft is located at my Academia.edu page of the full article if you wish to consult a more comprehensive statement of my article.

² One example is Nora Hanagan's essay "Creative Good Will for All Men: Martin Luther King Jr. the Moralist" in *Perspectives in Political Science* (2021): p. 1-8. Absolutely no mention of King's intellectual biography or formation are mentioned and Hanagan attempts to ask questions about the relationship between ethics and politics by doing what she wants with King's writings than interpreting King correctly. Devoid of personalism, this article exemplifies even the learned trend of ignoring King's explicitly stated personalist thought.

³ I have formulated this principle in my writings as the following: *The Principle of Hermeneutic Charity*: If person(s) P wishes to critique M, where M is understood to be a philosopher no longer alive, with criticism C, where C is understood to be claimed about M, then P should attempt to understand M in relationship to his/her final view in M's historical development and context such that C can be adequately grounded by P. Philosophers should not only seek to be charitable in reconstructing an argument, but also be hermeneutically charitable of the texts, contexts, and languages that shaped understanding what the philosopher is reconstructing.

⁴ As this talk is right after Martin Luther King, Jr. day, Peter Van Buren's article is tone deaf. He argues that King would disapprove of critical race theory. Van Buren seems to not have read the 1967-1968 thought where King argues for three evils of society: imperialism, militarism, and capitalism. King would have taken Derrick Bell out for coffee and said, "How might I help?" <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/if-mlk-were-alive-today/>

⁵ Martha Nussbaum, "From Anger to Love: Self Purification and Political Resistance" in *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King Jr.* ed. Tommy Shelby and Brandon Terry, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2018), p. 123.

⁶ I have another article coming out at *The Acorn* on Paul Taylor in *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King Jr* that pays lip service to personalism but transforms King into something he is not for secularly-minded interests. While there are many points I find wrong with that attempt, Paul Taylor is the only thinker in that whole volume who struggles with King's personalism. He struggles with the personalist King because he listened to King.

⁷ See Stephen Ferguson and John McClendon's *African American Philosophers and Philosophy* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), p. 38 in Chapter 1 on "Professional Philosophy and Academic Racism."

⁸ On this point, see Stephen B Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 35, and Kipton E. Jensen's article, "Pedagogical Personalism at Morehouse College," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* vol. 36, no. 2 (2017): pp. 147-165. As Anthony Neal, another philosopher educated at Morehouse College, told me that he had to memorize and list the personalist moral laws in an exam. It would have been nice for Taylor situate his own personal experiences and to see if Jensen was right.

⁹ See Chapter 1 of Burrow's *God and Human Dignity*, p. 17-31.

¹⁰ Rufus Burrow, *God and Human Dignity: The Personalism, Theology, and Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), p. 24.

¹¹ On this point, see John J. Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Making of a Mind* (Mary-Knoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1983). With regard to Burrow, Chapter 8: The Use of Moral Laws and the Vietnam War, p. 203-242

¹² Rufus Burrow, *Personalism: A Critical Introduction* (Nashville: Chalice Press, 1999), p. 103.

¹³ Border Parker Bowne, *Principles of Ethics* (New York: Great American Book Co., 1892), p. 97.

¹⁴ Walter Muelder, "Philosophical and Theological Influences in Thought and Action of Martin Luther King, Jr." in *Debate and Understanding* vol. 1, no. 3 (Boston: Afro-American Center, Boston University, 1977), p. 183.

¹⁵ <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/publications/autobiography-martin-luther-king-jr-contents/chapter-3-crozer-seminary>. Retrieved on June 2, 2021 from the synthesized Autobiography from the King Institute.

¹⁶ Burrow, *God and Human Dignity*, p. 87.

¹⁷ Randall Auxier in "Fourth Generation Personalism," a special collection on the Philosophy of Thomas Buford, *The Personalist Forum* vol. 10 (2006), I am specifically pointing to pages 62-65 here.

¹⁸ Edgar S. Brightman, *A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1940), p. 86.

¹⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr. "The Ethical Demand for Integration" in *A New Testament of Hope* ed. James Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), p. 122.

²⁰ Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), p. 37.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²² Burrow, *God and Human Dignity*, p. 71.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

²⁴ With the many state laws enacted by conservatives and Republicans in the name of Christianity against what we are calling Critical Race Theory (CRT hereafter) and the tenet of CRT critically questioning how white supremacy lurks underneath the practices of those in our liberal institutions, King would want an open assessment of those institutions. He would want us to give an honest hearing with what Derrick Bell saw as whites stalling integrationism of public school systems post-Topeka-v-Brown. Towards the end of King's life, King was disappointed that he could not love away hate completely. His turn toward addressing the institutions of capitalism and working with the poor are clear indications that openly interrogating the racist structures of our liberalism-based institutions would be given an honest hearing. So if King is weaponized on the grounds of approving of liberal institutions of Western democracy, then such an appropriation is proven false by where King's life was headed to address the ills of poor whites and blacks together. The fact that Republicans are offering up politicized attack on an area of academic discourse proves all too easily that we Americans have room for improvement and that CRT may be striking a nerve that some Americans are in constant denial of the institutionalized racism that animated King's activism and *would still animate King's activism were he alive*. In Kingian spirit, we should be honest about where, why, when, and how the ideals of progress and racial integrationism have failed.

²⁵ Martin Luther King, "My Pilgrimage to Nonviolence" in *The Radical King* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 55.

²⁶ Burrow, *Personalism*, p. 92-94.

²⁷ See for example, Brightman, *A Philosophy of Religion*, p. 346.

²⁸ King, *Strength to Love*, p. 141.

²⁹ Burrow, *God and Human Dignity*, p. 73.

³⁰ I have to thank the Archivist Kara Jackman for providing me these archived materials from the School of Theology's Library at Boston University regarding the Walter Muelder material.

³¹ Edgar S. Brightman, *Personality and Religion* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1934), p. 85-86.

³² Martin Luther King, Jr. *Stride Toward Freedom* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 95.

³³ I want to make absolutely clear that I am in agreement with Leonard Harris on this point. Whereas some philosophers regard philosophy produced by self-reflection in equanimity, Harris has made clear that some philosophy is birthed in human conflict, not the divine plan of the Absolute animating spirit throughout history. On this point, see Leonard Harris's *Philosophy Born of Struggle: Anthology of Afro-American Philosophy from 1917* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Publishing, 2000).

³⁴ See Kipton Jensen's "Pedagogical Personalism at Morehouse College" in *Studies in Philosophy and Education* vol. 36 no. 2 (2017): pp. 147-165.

³⁵ Burrow, *God and Human Dignity*, p. 211.

³⁶ Martin Luther King Jr., "Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience" in *A New Testament of Hope* ed. James Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), p. 49.

³⁷ Edgar S. Brightman, *Moral Laws* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1933), p. 50.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

³⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter from the Birmingham Jail" in in *A New Testament of Hope* ed. James Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), p. 293.

⁴⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr. "A Christmas Sermon on Peace" in in *A New Testament of Hope* ed. James Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), p. 257

⁴¹ Brightman, *Moral Laws*, p. 242.

⁴² King, *Strength to Love*, p. 33.