Martin luther king JR’S intellectual journey to hegelianism and the philosophy of non-violence

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In his *Autobiography*, King mentions Hegel last in the list of the thinkers who exerted influence on his social philosophy. Yet the fact that Hegel came last in King’s recognition of indebtedness to the German master does not mean that he was the least important of all the influential figures that he listed. Indeed, even if Hegel was cited last in his work, Hegel’s dialectic of thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis presided over its writing. In other words, King looked through Hegelian lenses at his life to make a synthesis of the dominant strands of social thought of his time, a synthesis that made him assume the leadership of the Civil Rights Movement in the late 1950s and the early 1960s. In the manner of Hegel, King considered that his tendency to synthesise is an inherent trait that grew out of his family background. Writing about his ‘Early years,’ King says that

In my life and in the life of a person who is seeking to be strong, you combine in your character antitheses 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. (Emphasis mine 2000:13 All further references included in this text are to this edition.)

After announcing that he was the synthesis of his father and his mother, King gave a short biography of his parents to illustrate further his point. He tells that “Daddy” was the son of a sharecropper who one day, after discovering that his father’s boss was cheating him “out of hard-earned money” (p.4), decided to leave rural Stockbridge for the capital city of Atlanta in order to avoid the miserable life of his father. There against all the odds, he worked and studied hard to fulfil a promise he made to himself after being denied entrance through the front door of a white friend’s house. According to King, “Daddy” became a major force in Atlanta’s Black community. He assumed the leadership of the local branch of the NAACP in Atlanta involving himself in both the economic struggle to equalise teachers’ salaries and in the social struggle to eliminate Jim Crow elevators in the courthouse. In King’s eyes, “Daddy” had epic proportions. He tells us he weighs about 220 pounds and his will was so strong that he never adjusted himself to Jim Crow laws. He even won the grudging respect of white people. In short, for King “Daddy” was simply an ideal father from whom he learned not only essential American values like thrift, work and perseverance but also resistance to racial injustice and the principle not to bend one’s back to the oppressor. Such was the thesis that King developed about Daddy.
“Dear Mother” whose name is Alberta Williams King appeared as the “anti-thesis” of “Daddy”. King recounts that unlike his father, his mother was “soft-spoken and easy-going”. Spared the “worst blights of discrimination” (p.3) because of her relatively comfortable circumstances, she managed to transmit to her own children that sense of ‘somebodiness’, i.e. self-respect. What King remembered most about his mother were not the fairy tales that white mothers generally read to their children, but history lessons that explained the origins of slavery and segregation. These historical stories, he reports, were not told in order to accommodate him to the segregated social system of the day, but to make him understand that “the divided system of the South was a social condition rather than a natural one” (p.3) and as such must never let him feel inferior. Thus, the care that King received from “Dear Mother” softened the passage from the family to the segregated world outside and prepared him to question it later in his life.

King continued to use the Hegelian dialectic method in speaking about his childhood. He lets us know that he was baptised at the age of five in imitation of his sister, and how he and a white boy his age across the street became friends. This episode in his life constitutes another thesis in the development of his identity. It was war marked by an emphasis on love in both the family circle and the Sunday school and his friendship with a white boy. However, doubt about such values started to creep into King’s mind when one day his white friend “told me that his father demanded that he would play with me no more”. (p.7) King noted that this antithetic socialisation began at the age of 6 when he and his friend entered segregated schools. This episode, in King’s life reminds us of a similar episode in Garvey’s life and that of DuBois. King avows that it had a ‘tremendous effect on my development’ (p.6). It led to question the family’s advice that “he should not hate the white man” (p.7). King recounts several other incidents in his childhood that made him hate the segregated system and the white people. One of these was the slapping that he received from a white lady in a department store while shopping with his mother. The other was travelling in segregated buses to high school on the other side of the town suggestively named the Booker T. Washington High School.

The first synthesis unity that King made was in Morehouse College. It was there that he discovered that white people were not necessarily enemies of the Black people. “The wholesome relations in the Intercollegiate Council convinced me that we had many persons as allies”. (p.14) With the Morehouse College commitment to seek for a solution to the racial ills, King shifted from resentment against white people to racial cooperation. Hate was redirected from white people to the racial system leaving enough elbow room for love to grow between white and black people, who after all are both victims of the same system. While in Morehouse College, King informs us, he made another synthesis in matters of religion, a synthesis that took him beyond the emotionalism and fundamentalism of the Black church. With the help of Dr Mays, president of Morehouse College, and George Kelly, a professor of philosophy and religion in the same school, King quieted his theological doubts and made him hold to the ideal of ministry.

At the age of 19, King entered the Crozer Theological Seminary. At this point, King’s life intersects with that of Hegel who also entered the Tubingen Seminary at nearly the
same age. Like Hegel, it was while he was at the Seminary that King undertook a serious study of the major Western thinkers going as far back as Plato and Aristotle in his quest for a “method to eliminate social evil” (p. 17). The first social thinker that he mentions is Walter Rauschenbusch. King tells us his study of *Christianity and the Social Crisis* strengthened an earlier belief that no religion could be separated from social concerns at the peril of its demise. Born in the Great Depression, and having witnessed the breadlines, King was particularly receptive to Rauschenbusch’s social gospel to become one of its advocates later in his life. However, in a characteristically Hegelian manner, King begged to differ with Rauschenbusch when it comes to what he called “the cult of inevitable progress” on the one hand and his “superficial optimism in human nature” on the other (p. 18). He also reproached Rauschenbusch for “identifying God with a particular social and economic system”. (Ibid.)

Contrary to Rauschenbusch, King identified himself neither with Marxism nor with capitalism. In his argumentation, King first exposed the main theses of these systems. He then criticised each of them separately taking care each time to supersede the partial truths of each before ending with the following synthesis:

My reading of Marx […] convinced me that truth is found neither in Marxism nor in traditional capitalism. Each represents a partial truth. Historically capitalism failed to see the truth in collective enterprise and Marxism failed to see truth in individual enterprise. Nineteenth-century capitalism failed that life is social and Marxism failed and still fails that life is individual and personal. The Kingdom of God is neither the thesis of individual enterprise nor the antithesis of collective enterprise, but a synthesis which reconciles the truths of both. (p. 22)

This combination of partial “yes” and partial “no” illustrates best the dialectic method that King continued to observe in his reading of the great thinkers as he went through college. King tells us that while he was at the Crozer Seminary he came in contact for the first time with the pacifist thought. Dr. A.J. Mutse was the professor who initiated him to this thought that made him question his former belief that war can sometimes “serve as a negative good in the sense of preventing the spread and growth of an evil force”. (p. 23) But it did not completely unsettle it to make him hold the belief that love constitutes the wherewithal for the resolution of social problems. While in high school, King read Henry David Thoreau’s *Civil Disobedience* from where he learned the moral necessity of not cooperating with evil. But Thoreau did not exclude the recourse to violence, so King continued to think that “the only way we could solve our problem of segregation was an armed revolt”. (p. 23) Mutse’s pacifism did not take hold of him because it read as if Christian love was a workable solution only in cases of individual relationships, not in those involving social conflicts. Mutse’s pacifist thought stands as an antithesis to the thought of Nietzsche that King was also reading at the time. Nietzsche’s thought contradicts Mutse’s in its affirmation that the Christian ethic of love grew out of weakness and impotence. Instead of making virtue out of necessity, Nietzsche says that God is dead and it was the time to follow our will to power. The ideal man for Nietzsche was the
superman, a superman who would surpass the ordinary Christian man, just as the latter surpassed the ape.

Mutze’s thesis of Christian pacifism and Nietzsche’s antithesis of anti-Christian resentment are resolved in the higher synthesis that King discovers in the Ghandian philosophy of non-violence. Mordecai Johnson, President of Howard University, was the catalyst that brought out the change in King’s outlook. King attended one of his sermons at the Fellowship House of Philadelphia that triggered his interest in the Ghandian teachings about non-violence. Johnson’s preaching of Ghandian philosophy, which came as a result of a visit to India, found a reverberating echo in King who after leaving the meeting “bought half-dozen books on Ghandh’s life and works”. (p.23) King did not cite the titles of these books, but among these books figures Richard Gregg’s *The Power of Non-violence* (1944) that he read for a research paper at the Crozer Seminary. He even wrote a foreword to the 1959 edition, where he spoke about the Montgomery Boycott. Gregg knew about the Ghandian philosophy of non-violence from the inside as he lived nearly four years in India, from 1925 to 1929, and spent several months in Ghandi’s ashram. It was this self-same Gregg, as Richard Attenborough’s film *Ghandi* shows, who covered the non-violent protest of the Indians against the British forces for the *New York Times*. From Gregg, King learned that non-violence and love, contrary to the negative affirmation of Nietzsche about “turn the check philosophy”, can be potent forces against social evil. Gregg’s book, as it will be argued later in this chapter, was at the root of the synthesis that King made of Hegel’s *Aesthetics* (1820) and his master and slave dialectic from the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*.

In accordance with Hegel, King does not stop at one synthesis once it is made. Every synthesis he makes is in its turn broken down anew to give place to a new dialectic move from thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis. Hence, the synthesis of the contradictions between the Christian pacific positions and those of Nietzsche through the thought of Gandhi becomes a thesis when it is viewed against Reinhold Niebuhr’s ethical theory. Neibuh was a Christian pacificist, but he broke away from pacifism when he saw its limits. For example, he considered that non-violent resistance of the Gandhian type could work only in situations when the groups they resist were endowed with some degree of moral conscience. He excluded its applicability in totalitarian regimes where this moral conscience is supposed to be non-existent. Furthermore, Niebuhr saw no difference whatever between violent resistance and non-violent resistance when it comes to morality. Both of them involve coercion and thus the difference between them is a matter of degree. As usual, King admitted that his encounter with Nyberg’s ethical thought temporarily confused him, but his deeper reading of this social theologian soon convinced him about some of its shortcomings. Niebuhr, according to King, distorts the truth about pacifism when he considered it as an “unreal submission to evil power”. Siding with Gandhi, King countered Niebuhr by affirming that the former “resisted evil with as much vigour and power as the violent resister, but he resisted with love instead of hate”. (p.26) It follows that there is a world of difference between non-violent resistance and violent resistance when they are put on the scale of morality. The final result of the former is a change of
heart that brings reconciliation between the opponents whereas the final outcome of the latter is an increase of their bitterness and resentment.

In working out a synthesis out of reading of Niebuhr’s thought against Gandhi’s, King retained Niebuhr’s rejection of the false idealism characteristic of the Protestant liberalism of the pacifist. He made him hold a balanced view about human nature. Niebuhr made real him man’s potential for evil. For Niebuhr, man is essentially moral when he considered as an individual entity, but as a member of a group he is liable to sin and corruption because society is basically immoral. The sinful character of man in society necessitates the intervention of government for regulating man’s lust for security and ensuring social and economic justice. According to King, many Christian pacifists of his time failed to “recognize the complexity of man’s social involvement and the reality of collective evil,” (p.27) that Niebuhr made him see. King defined his pacifism as a “realistic” pacifism, a pacifism that took him beyond the “unwarranted optimism” of Protestant liberalism. Niebuhr made real the truth in some of the dilemmas of Christian non-pacifists like Niebuhr and to commit himself more deeply to the struggle for social and economic justice.

An examination of the structure of King’s Autobiography shows to what extent Hegel’s triadic dialectic of thesis, antithesis and synthesis was influential in shaping the narrative unfolding of his educational growth. In a characteristically Hegelian manner, he looked at this education, ‘Bildung in the words of Hegel, as “a pilgrimage to non-violence”. (p.30) Such a qualification places King’s Autobiography in the category of spiritual autobiography whose best representative is Hegel’s Phenomenology of the Spirit. Like the latter, it traces the growth of a spirit not only of a man, i.e. King but also that of his people. For King, his early education up to high school constituted a thesis in the sense that he nearly fell into the trap of racial hate and belief in the necessity of violence for social change. The second stage, the antithesis, corresponded to his experience with Christian pacifists at Morehouse College and Crozer Seminary where he learned that the white man was not necessarily the enemy of the Black people and that love was the best weapon for fighting the social evil of segregation. His moral growth during these two stages took him all the way from Henry David Thoreau’s famous essay Civil Disobedience, which made him think of the moral reasons why one should refuse to cooperate with an evil system to Ghandi who supplied him with the method for eliminating it.

The third stage i.e., the stage of synthesis in King’s intellectual odyssey came when he read the works of the philosopher Hegel at Boston University School of Theology which he entered in September 1951. During the four years he spent there, King continued to evolve under the influence of Christian pacifists like Dean Walter Muelder and Professor Allen Knight Chalmers who contributed to the deepening of his interest in the theory of non-violence. In terms of the dialectical evolution of his theological thought, King lets us know that it was at Boston University that he definitely reached a balanced view of neo-orthodoxy and theological liberalism. While keeping faith in “certain enduring qualities in liberalism” (p.31), King did not hesitate to see that neo-orthodoxy provided a corrective to
“liberalism that had become all too shallow and that too easily capitulated to modern culture”. (Ibid.p.31) King came back to the critique of Niebuhr, one of the proponents of the neo-orthodoxy, to counter the latter’s pessimism about human nature with an optimism concerning divine nature, and to respond to his emphasis on “man’s sickness” with an equal emphasis on the “cure of grace”. (Ibid.p.31) With this resolution of the theological oppositions between neo-orthodoxy and liberalism, King was ready to divulge to us the Hegelian sources at the heart of his dialectical thought.

Among other things, King tells us that he studied Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit* under Edgar S Brightman, and then under L. Harold DeWolf and Peter Bertocci after the death of the former. King was so interested in Hegel that he spent his spare time reading Hegel’s other works such as the *Philosophy of History* and the *Philosophy of Right*. As it was suggested earlier in this section, King’s placement of Hegel at the end of a list of social thinkers who contributed to the formation of his social philosophy indicates that it was Hegel who provided the methodological tool for the organisation of both his autobiographical narrative and the writing of his doctoral dissertation suggestively entitled *A Comparison of the Conception of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman*. Tillich and Wieman were chosen because, in his opinion, they “represent different types of theology” (p.32) providing an ideal terrain for honing the Hegelian dialectic before its application in the social field. The two most important results that he reached in his doctoral research is that contrary to the one-sided theological views of Tillich and Wieman, the immanence of God is as evident as his transcendence, and that His power is as much felt as His goodness.

King tells the reader that “In 1954 I ended my formal training with divergent intellectual forces converging into a positive social philosophy”. (p.32) Hegel was the last stepping stone in his elaboration of this philosophy whose main tenet of non-violence is like synthesis stage in Hegelian philosophy. It seeks to reconcile the truths of two oppositions in the struggle for freedom and social recognition – acquiescence and violence – superseding the extremes and immoralities of both. Taken in isolation, it was as immoral to acquiesce to evil as to oppose violent resistance to that evil, but the partial truths of these positions can be synthesised in such a way that the non-violent resister recognises the truth in wilful submission to evil and in the necessity of resistance through other means than violence. The “truth is the whole,” King quoted Hegel saying, and King’s truth in this case is non-violent resistance. It grew into a deep conviction because Hegel “led me to a philosophical method of rational coherence”. (p.32)

Very often critics of King have contented themselves with pointing out the similarities between King’s non-violent philosophy and that of Gandhi overlooking the differences in terms of both their genealogies and their contents. However, a brief look at his *Autobiography* shows that if Gandhi’s thought exerted a shaping influence on King it did not constitute the whole truth for him. Gandhi was just another important moment in his growth as a social thinker. It could be affirmed that Hegel played the most crucial role in the distinctions that can be easily be established between King and Gandhi. We have
already said that the non-violent resistance corresponded to the synthesis stage in Hegelian philosophy. When Hegel graduated from Boston University, his social philosophy was already full-fledged. King says that at the time he had “no firm determination to organize (non-violent resistance) in a social effective situation,” (p.32), but this affirmation shows to what extent King was convinced that he had reached the “Absolute philosophy” before its application in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The case was different with Gandhi whose philosophy was forged and refined in the process of his non-violent campaigns in both South Africa and India. No matter his affirmation about his disagreement with Hegel about his ‘absolute idealism’, King, contrary to Gandhi, seemed to have grown as ‘absolute’ in his philosophical beliefs as Hegel himself.

Once established in the academic world, King proceeded to their application without thinking about their revision even in the most difficult moments of the Civil Rights Movement. On 24th January, 1954, King delivered a trial sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Alabama, and became officially pastor of Dexter 10 months later in 31st October of the same year. In accordance with the social philosophy that he formalised during his long process of education, he joined the local branch of the NAACP in Montgomery and took an “active interest in implementing its programme in the community itself”. (p.48) He also enrolled in the activities of another civil rights organisation known as the Alabama Council on Human Relations. Just a few months after this enrolment, he was elected to the office of vice-president of this organisation. The strategies of the NAACP diverged from those of the Alabama Council on Human Relations. The former emphasised legislation and court action whereas the latter underlined the importance of education. But truthful to his Hegelian dialectical turn of mind, King sought to reconcile the two different brands of strategies without seeing any inconsistency in his “dual interest” in two organisations. In similar fashion as when he confronted the contradictions of the social thinkers that he read at school, King proceeded to expose the false assumption that made the supporters of the NAACP and the Alabama Council on Human Relations think that “there was only one approach to the solution of the race problem”. (p.49) Then, he argued that a double allegiance to both organisations was not only possible but necessary. Such a synthesis of principles rests on his belief that “through education we seek to change attitudes and internal feelings [whereas] through legislation and court orders we seek to regulate behaviour”. (p.49)

During the Montgomery Bus Boycott, King was elected as President of the Montgomery Improvement Association. In this position, he worked with both E.D. Nixon, the chairman of the NAACP local branch who took in charge the case of Mrs Rosa Parks whose refusal to leave her bus seat triggered off the boycott, and such white members of the Council on Human Relations as Jo Ann Robinson, a teacher, and Miss Juliette Morgan. According to King, it was the latter who vulgarised the social thought of Gandhi to the grassroots by writing a letter to the editor of the *Montgomery Advertiser*. In this letter, Miss Juliette Morgan compared the bus protest with the Ghandian movement in India. Seemingly, the educational work that Morgan did was so well that “People who had never heard of the little brown saint of India were now saying his name with an air of...
familiarity”. (p.67) King made it clear in his Autobiography that the dialectic method was as efficient in the world of academia as in the real world. Through the synthesis of the strategies of the NAACP and those of the Council on Human Relations, the Movement Improvement Association (MIA), he managed to have the Supreme Court declare bus segregation laws unconstitutional on 13th November, 1956. When the MIA voted to end the boycott just a month later, King was one of the first passengers to ride a desegregated bus.

As it is said earlier, the Hegelian dialectic method exerted such an influence on King that it constituted for him the whole truth. Always with reference to the Montgomery Bus Boycott, King informs us that it was the Sermon on the Mount that “initially inspired the Negroes of Montgomery to dignified social action”. (p.67) The rallying word of the protest movement was “Onward Christian Soldier”. The social philosophy of Gandhi for the Black protesters came in the second stage of a dialectic movement. For King, “Christ furnished the spirit and motivation while Gandhi furnished the method”. (p.67) Even Gandhi’s method was not taken as it stood. It was shaped in such a way as to fit not only the spirit of Christian religion but above all that of America as an independent Christian country. In the words of John J. Ansboro (1992), the changes that King brought to the method of Gandhi had much to do with differences of goals. King sought integration to the mainstream society while Gandhi fought for independence. The divergence in terms of goals led to King’s reshaping of the Gandhian method of non-violence. While keeping some of the Gandhian techniques of non-violence such as marches, he also changed some others in order to make his resistance more suitable to context. For example, King “did not encourage the voluntary closure of shops, raids on property, the voluntary renunciation of property, resignations from political groups, fasting, the usurping of government functions, or the non-payment of taxes”. (p.134) In the Autobiography, he says that even the boycott method, so much praised by Gandhi did not fail to become a moral issue, i.e. whether its use was not also questionable in terms of ethics since it was also used by the White Citizen Council of Montgomery. It was not until Thoreau’s Essay on Civil Disobedience was brought into the consideration of the issue that King declares that boycotting was just another of “non-cooperation with an evil system”. (p.54) Even so, King writes that “From then on I rarely used the word “boycott”. (Ibid) He preferred to use the euphemism of economic withdrawal.

It follows from what has been said above that what distinguishes most King’s social philosophy from that of Gandhi was the fact that it accorded pre-eminence to Hegel’s dialectical thought. Like Hegel, King was busy looking for ways of reconciling apparently divergent social thoughts. Also, in similar fashion as Hegel in his epoch, when King moved from the world of academia to the social world he had already arrived at a “system of definite philosophical and theological convictions about the nature of God, human nature, the direction of history, the mission of the Christian Church, and the role of the state”. (Cf. Op. cit. Ansboro, p.140) In terms of Hegel, we can say that at the time of his entrance to the world of politics, King had already formalised the Truth or the Absolute, ready for implementation. This constituted a world of difference between him and Gandhi
who never stated that he had found the Truth. Apart from the affirmation of non-violence, Gandhi, unlike King had “no fixed or final theological or philosophical system apart from his commitment to the principles of non-violence”. (Ibid.140) I have already stated above the fact that King’s Autobiography like Hegel’s Phenomenology of the Spirit is a spiritual autobiography. It can be added that it also reads as a series of conversion narratives whose final revelation was Hegel’s dialectic method.

It is arguably paradoxical that King was the most Hegelian when he used the dialectical method to criticise Hegel himself. Under the influence of the “Personalistic philosophy – the theory that the clue to the meaning of ultimate reality is found in personality” (p.31), King questioned Hegel’s Absolute idealism. But even in his interrogation of the Truth or the Absolute that Hegel had reached, it was Hegel who provided the method. In applying the Hegelian method to criticise Hegel, King warded off what he and his teachers Edgar Brightman and Dr. Dewolf considered as the pitfalls of Hegelianism which tended among other things “to swallow up the many in the one”. (p.32) The origin of this critique goes all the way back to Soren Kierkegaard who took Hegel to task for having reduced such distinctions as that between God and nature (pantheism), faith and reason, and the one between man and God as a Holy Trinity. Yet even if King followed in the footsteps of his teachers in dismissing Hegel’s Absolute idealism, he shored it up by elevating the Hegelian dialectics of thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis into an absolute form of thought and an ideal way of working out social problems like racial segregation.

Notes and references


Hegel G. W. Frederick (1807), Phenomenology of Spirit, Trans. A.V.Miller, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.

Hegel G.W. Frederick (1822), Philosophy of Right, Ed. Allan W; Wood, Trans. H.B. Nisbet, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.


Hughes Langston(1951), “Montage of a Dream Deferred,” in Arthur P. Davis, From the Dark Tower: Afro-American Powers 1900 to 1960, Washington DC: Howard University Press, 1974. This key poem of the work is prophetic in its implications if we set it within the context of the turbulent period of American history following King’s assassination. It goes as follows: “What happens to a dream deferred?/ Does it dry up/ like a raisin in the
sun? Or fester like a sore- /And then run? Does it sunk like a rotten meat?/ Or crust and sugar over – like a syrupy sweet?/ Maybe it just sags like a heavy load./ Or does it explode.” (pp.64-65)


