The Ethics of Vision and Black Theology and Experience

Angelo Sylvester Riley
Loyola University Chicago

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss

Part of the Ethics in Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
Riley, Angelo Sylvester, "The Ethics of Vision and Black Theology and Experience" (2014). Dissertations. 1299.
https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/1299

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.
Copyright © 2014 Angelo Sylvester Riley
LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

THE ETHICS OF VISION AND BLACK THEOLOGY AND EXPERIENCE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN THEOLOGY

BY

REVEREND ANGELO S. RILEY

CHICAGO, IL

DECEMBER 2014
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank all of the people who made this dissertation possible starting with my professors in the Department of Theology at Loyola University Chicago. I would also like to thank my dissertation committee - Dr. William French, Dr. Jon Nilson, and Dr. Susan Ross. Next, I would like to thank my family for their support and understanding when I was not able to attend family gatherings during the writing of my dissertation. In particular, I would like to thank my wonderful daughter Lauren for her patience and for providing me with a much needed cheering section and with necessary distractions allowing me to regroup and come back to the dissertation process refreshed. I thank Denise Jackson-Riley who proved to be an invaluable friend and sounding-board throughout my dissertation. I thank my mother, Lettie Mae Riley, and my sister, Debra, for their unfailing love and unparalleled compassion which provided much hope for me throughout the dissertation process. I also thank my dear friend Rev. Dr. Bernyce H. Clausell, who, at the age of 97, continues to be an inspiration, friend, and mentor. Her unwavering support through my ministry and the writing of my dissertation continues to be priceless. I would also like to thank my church family for their support and prayers, along with the support of my wife Valerie and stepsons, Blake and Douglas, who put up with me toward the end of the dissertation process. I also thank Michael and Lois Lops for their firm support and friendship. And last, but not least, I thank God; for without God, none of this would have been possible.
To Lauren
This dissertation was born out of my desire to help make the world a better place and to conduct a study that speaks to the many felt needs that exist in the world around us. It is my effort to help people see (in the moral sense of see) beyond race, sex and class, and to recognize and appreciate diversity. I am interested in how we might account for what we see, especially when it comes to social, political, and economic responsibility. One of the greatest challenges I had as a pastor was trying to get my congregation to know the “felt” needs of those around them as Jesus did for the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus was able to see beyond her race, sex and class and recognized her needs in such a way that she had to share her experience with the entire community of Samaria. I contend that much human suffering experienced today exists because of the lack of attention directed toward the needs of those who are in pain by those who have the power to alleviate (their) pain but because of neglect, perpetuate a type of violence against those who suffer. This happens, especially, among middle and upper middle class congregations, both Black and White, to the point that some become almost immune to the plight of lower socio-economic individuals in their own communities.

I hold that the ethics of vision helps us to see and act responsively, and, in doing so, our “seeing” can help alleviate much of the suffering that exists in the world today. The ethics of vision allows us to see (in the moral sense of see) what is otherwise
invisible. It directs one’s attention away from one’s self toward the needs of others through a “loving and just gaze,” with the support of moral effort and a moral imagination. It is then this “loving and just gaze,” with moral effort and a moral imagination, which enables one to see that which would otherwise be missed. I employ this understanding of vision as I examine the works of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Christian womanist theologian Emilie Townes in order to provide greater insight into King’s and Townes’s works as I develop select themes to help us see and improve morally in ways that would bring about a better world.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE: THE ETHICS OF VISION AND RESPONSIBILITY</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 An Introduction to the “Ethics of Vision”</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Iris Murdoch’s Life: A Brief Sketch</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Murdoch’s Major Dialogue and Debate Partners</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Murdoch’s Identification and Critique of the “Current View”</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 Murdoch’s Secular Account of Sin and Ethic of Love</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6 Mysticism in Murdoch: The Myth of the Cave</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7 Experience and Consciousness in Murdoch</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8 Ethics of Unselfing</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.9 Murdoch’s Contribution: An Assessment</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.10 H. Richard Niebuhr and the Ethics of Responsibility</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.11 Vision and Responsibility and the Problem of Racial Injustice</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO: ETHICS OF VISION AND MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Major Interpreters of King</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Major Influences on King</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 King’s Encounters with Racism</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Personalism and Its Influence on King’s Thinking</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Ethics of Jesus and Gandhi</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6 Gandhi, Truth-Force, and Campaigns for Right Seeing</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7 The Psychology of Aggression and the Ethics of Vision</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.8 King’s Ethic of Vision: Parallels with Murdoch</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.9 Responsibility in King’s Thinking</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.10 “I Have a Dream”</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.11 Conclusion</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE: ETHICS OF VISION AND EMILIE M. TOWNES</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Brief Sketch of Townes</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Womanism and Its Influence on Townes’s Thinking</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 The Black Women’s Club Movement</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 Townes’s Conversation and Debate Partners and Their Influence</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 Vision and an Ethic of Care</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6 Vision and Responsibility in Townes’s Work</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7 Townes and Murdoch</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

To this day, philosophical ethics and dominant discussions in Christian ethics have paid insufficient attention to how vision shapes the moral life. Too much focus is given to moral decision-making and action, while too little focus is given to the way vision and patterns of attentiveness ground our capacities for genuine morally responsible action. Therefore, in this study, I draw on important works in philosophical and Christian ethics to examine both the ethics of responsibility and the central role that an ethics of vision plays in our attempts to live responsibly. I use the “ethics of vision” as method and correlate it with certain themes of Black theology and experience. In so doing, I focus chiefly on Iris Murdoch to engage Black thought and experience, as it is presented by Martin Luther King Jr. and Emilie Townes. An engagement with these two sets of materials enriches our understanding of vision and expands our concept of moral agency.
INTRODUCTION

This project explores the importance of the “ethics of vision” for Christian ethical reflection. I examine the importance of the training of attention and vision in the moral life. A concentration on the ethical centrality of attention and vision has been given its classic expression in the work of Iris Murdoch, especially in her book, *The Sovereignty of Good*, published in 1970.\(^1\) Parallel to Murdoch’s stress on vision in ethics, H. Richard Niebuhr, in 1963, published an important book, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy*.\(^2\) Together, these two books put forward powerful arguments for a paradigm change in ethics, especially in their critique of the then dominant understandings of moral agency. Both Murdoch’s and Niebuhr’s books engage densely philosophical issues in both normative ethics and in the philosophical and theological anthropology that lies behind and grounds the common understandings about right action and goodness. Both diagnosed what they took to be serious inadequacies in the two influential schools of normative ethics—deontology and utilitarianism.

Both Murdoch and Niebuhr were prolific and complex writers. Murdoch was both a marvelously creative philosopher, who taught philosophy and ethics for fifteen years, from 1948-1963, at St. Anne’s College, Oxford, even as she proceeded regularly to publish a wide array of novels, totaling, eventually, twenty-six. In fact, she gave up her

---


teaching post to concentrate more time on her literary work. Similarly, she published a
number of philosophical books dealing with a broad range of topics, always including
ethical issues. Her interests in philosophy were quite broad, and her key reputation in the
area of ethical theory came from her short masterwork *The Sovereignty of Good* that
called for an important paradigm shift in ethical theory and has caused the name to be
long associated with the “ethics of vision.” While I attend to some of her essays in
ethical theory that appeared in two of her later collections of essays, namely *Metaphysics
1998, I concentrate on her classic statement on the moral importance of vision in *The
Sovereignty of Good*.³ Similarly, while Niebuhr wrote a number of important books in
Christian theology, his most sustained work in Christian ethics remains *The Responsible
Self*. Accordingly, I focus my attention to some of his arguments in this work.

Murdoch, especially, centered her critical attention on the understanding of
human nature and experience that is expressly stated or implied across broad streams of
Anglo-American analytical ethics and Continental existentialist ethical approaches during
the World War II period and the post-War decades. She identified how a number of
streams of modern philosophy came to reinforce a picture of human moral agency as
rooted in acts of will as individuals grapple with moral problems requiring decision and
action. Analytical and existentialist schools of ethics that dominated the scene in those
decades privileged the publically observable and, thus, centered ethics in problems, rules,
decisions, and acts of will. This stress on the publically observable arose, in part, from

---
the broad influence of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s and his followers’ stress on the public character of language and Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialist emphasis on the radical freedom of the self to create meaning and value via decision and action. Both pushed main conversations in philosophical ethics in England and across Europe to turn attention away from the inner world of personal feeling and experience. But, for Murdoch, this erosion of concern for the interior life, the realm of personal experience, and feeling, pulled ethics away from attending to the critical processes of personal transformation and growth in virtue and sensitivity that had long been held among ancient and classic philosophers as the core concern of ethics. In her classic, *The Sovereignty of Good*, she argues forcefully for the primacy of moral attention and vision, as prior to, and foundational for, decision, and action.

Murdoch’s great achievement lies in her careful deconstruction of the cluster of streams in twentieth century philosophical understanding that came to establish a dominant model of moral agency-- as centered in the will, problem-solving, decision and action. In one of her early essays, first published in 1956, she refers to this dominant picture of moral agency as simply the “current view.” She holds that while not all subscribe to its assumptions about the moral life, still it is an accurate account of the dominant thinking about ethics in both Anglo-American and Continental philosophical circles. She argues that this understanding of ethics simply ignores the significance of how individuals in quiet, gradual, and deeply personal ways build up moral attentiveness,

---


sensitivity, and virtues, and sadly, vices prior to any confrontation with discrete moral problems demanding decisions. While appreciative of much of the rigor of philosophical ethical work dominating the scholarly discussions in the first half of the twentieth century, Murdoch draws deeply on Plato’s emphasis of the “transcendence of the good” and Simone Weil’s emphasis on the primacy of moral attention to develop a broader and more complex understanding of moral agency, in which vision and attention are understood as providing both energy and direction for right decision and good action.

Her main contribution in ethics may well be her critique of the generally optimistic picture of the dominant moral image of the “rational moral agent” in control by exerting will and making free decisions in response to moral problems. Murdoch draws on Sigmund Freud’s views to articulate a non-Christian and non-theological account of “original sin.” As she articulates it, the human condition is marked by powerful personal drives that obsessively pull our attention and concern back onto our own self-interest. The psyche, she argues, is an “egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy. . .” Egoism, by pulling attention and concern so obsessively back on oneself, leaves little energy of attention and care left to be engaged outward beyond the self to others and to the greater world. With the energies of attention and care so typically monopolized by the self, Murdoch believes that most of us engage others and the world only as we have already painted them via our personal projections and in colors distorted through the lens of our own self-interest. Thus, we engage not reality but a sphere of self-imposed

---

6 Ibid., 51.

7 Ibid.
illusion. And the failure to see accurately contributes massively to ongoing failures to choose well or to act rightly.

Murdoch is well aware of Christian theological classics and also great works of western mysticism that also discuss egoism and excessive “self-love” as a corrupting energy, but her main agenda is to develop a philosophical vision that can speak to the many people of her day for whom classic religious terminology and appeal have ceased to be persuasive. But, surely, one of the reasons that many Christian theologians and ethicists remain attracted to Murdoch’s ethical understanding lies in how much her non-theological Freudian influenced view of “sin” shares with ancient and core understandings of Christianity. Jesus’s words about the importance of love of the neighbor and of the enemy remain so challenging across the centuries, because they call for an overcoming of excessive self-love that blocks attention to and concern for others around us and, especially for our adversaries. Augustine, famously, in The City of God stressed, like Murdoch, the tendency of the self’s love and interests curving back inward and pulling all love and attention away from God and our neighbors. This, for Augustine, is the key mark of the “Earthly City.” Murdoch holds, like Augustine, that this propensity toward self-love and egocentrism is the core problem of the moral life. In her view, we are so structurally blinded by egoism that seeing others and the world around us as they really are is a profound moral achievement.

---

8 Stanley Hauerwas was one of the first Christian theologians to try to draw other theologians and Christian ethicists to attention to the importance of Murdoch’s work. See his essay “The Significance of Vision: Toward an Aesthetic Ethic,” in his book Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection (Notre Dame: Fides/Claretian, 1974), 30-47.

Murdoch’s central theme in *The Sovereignty of Good*, her most sustained and influential work in ethics, critiques the modernist reduction of ethics as a reflection on rules and principles to guide agents confronting problems. Realism, for Murdoch, is such a profound achievement, because egoism is such a dynamic system of energy that so persistently corrupts our vision. And, as our vision becomes corrupted, our decision and action become biased and distorted. Accordingly, for Murdoch, the key goals of moral development and schemes of moral education are to increase capacities for the extension of clear attention and vision beyond one’s self-interested fixations outward to others and to the world beyond. In Christian vocabulary, it is the achievement of seeing neighbor needs and loving both the “neighbor” and even the “enemy.” Even as Murdoch emphasizes a non-theological account of “sin,” her core ethics lies in her praise for an extension of attention, care, and moral concern outward beyond the self to others and to the rest of the world. This she refers to as a non-theological account of “love.” It should not be so surprising that many Christians find Murdoch’s analyses so compelling, for she charts out core Christian emphasis on sin and the challenge of the command to love.10

In ways quite parallel with Murdoch’s views, Niebuhr, one of America’s most prominent Protestant theologians, focused his book *The Responsible Self* as a strong critique of the tendencies of the dominant deontological and utilitarian approaches to normative ethics to concentrate on distinctive moral problems and to view ethics as offering agents “action-guides” for points where decision and action are required. He

examines how deontology and utilitarianism hold divergent pictures and assumptions about moral agency. Underlying the utilitarian tradition, Niebuhr believes there lies a powerful understanding of the self as “man-the-maker.” The core understanding of the self is one who acts “for an end.” Underlying the deontological tradition, with its stress on obligation and duties, Niebuhr argues, there is a powerful picture of “man-the-citizen, living under law.”

While both understandings of moral agency, rooted in these powerful pictures, have broad explanatory power, Niebuhr still critiques both schools for inadequately capturing the dynamism in the moral life in which persons act always in responsiveness to situations, challenges, and concerns before them. Niebuhr attends to Aristotle’s emphasis on the “fitting response” to highlight how the moral life is fundamentally a life lived within a web of relationality. It includes occasions of activity and agency, but, also, equally important, occasions of receptivity. It includes times of decision and action, but, also, times of quiet attentiveness, seeing, and listening.

Accordingly, Niebuhr holds that the category of “responsibility” better captures the heart of the moral life, for it better accounts for the dynamism of agents engaged with people and the world around us in a complex sequence of being aware of action and demands on us and the need for us acting fittingly in response. The ethics of responsibility, for Niebuhr, insists that the first question in ethics is not “What shall I do?” but rather “What is going on?”

So, it is clear that his stress on “responsibility” includes an affirmation, like Murdoch’s, on the critical importance of moral attentiveness and vision.

---


12 Ibid., 60-61.
Both Murdoch’s and Niebuhr’s agendas are on a high level of theoretical and constructive philosophical work. But I am convinced that their shared emphasis to place moral vision and attention at the core of our understanding of ethics offers an important lens for interpreting the operative ethical theory employed by many liberationist ethical thinkers and activists engaged in criticizing patterns of structural violence and in promoting policies of social justice. Liberationist thinkers have long understood how violence and oppression can become institutionalized and structured into the “business as usual” practices of everyday life in societies and nations. Because these practices are so widespread, they often appear simply as normal, as basic “givens” of social or national life that are just part of reality. As such, they often go unattended to and systematically ignored by the dominant media and the eyes of general society. Liberationist voices often refer to such patterns of oppression as “covert” violence, because they tend to remain “hidden” from mainstream society in the sense that mainstream society has developed powerful capacities for turning a blind eye to such glaring problems and injustices.\(^{13}\)

While this project is centered on the contributions of Murdoch’s insights in her “ethics of vision,” I do wish to engage Niebuhr’s reflections on “responsibility” to suggest some of these writers’ shared convictions about the need to rethink our model of moral agency. I argue that Murdoch’s “ethics of vision” and Niebuhr’s “ethics of responsibility” offer important hermeneutical lenses for helping us to understand some of the distinctive features of the ethical theories and agendas of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

and those of Emilie Townes, a noted Womanist theologian and ethicist. King and Townes share a commitment to unmasking practices and understandings that sustain the structural violence of racism and injustice. Their agendas carry forward a strong critique of patterns of social injustice that continue to cause needless pain and suffering to so many.

While Murdoch’s early essays on moral issues and her book *The Sovereignty of Good* are widely appreciated, still many find strong tensions in her overall attempts to link a defense and celebration of the individual in all of our particularity and denseness of personal experience with an appropriation of many Platonic themes that structure so much of Murdoch’s moral agenda. Martha Nussbaum, for one, raises concerns that Murdoch’s Platonism pulls her vision of the moral life toward a contemplative model concentrating on the generalistic account of the challenges of selves needing to overcome egoistic distortion to clarify their personal vision. For Nussbaum, Murdoch has a rather abstract universalist account of the core obstacle to moral honesty and responsibility, and seems to show little sustained interest in social justice concerns or the way political systems and societal and economic systems shape and condition individuals’ capacities for moral vision.\(^{14}\)

Accordingly, in chapters two and three, where I examine the ethics and leadership of King and Townes, respectively, I employ Murdoch’s and Niebuhr’s stress on moral vision to help highlight key moral elements in their respective agendas of liberation and in their operative understanding of ethics. But I believe that Nussbaum’s critique of

---

Murdoch’s agenda is generally fair, so I employ my focus on the liberationist ethical agendas of King and Townes to illustrate how strong social justice agendas draw from an ethics of vision, but, also, add a critically important illustration of how such moral philosophical and psychological emphases, like Murdoch’s stressing vision and attention, must be opened up to broader ranges of social, political, and ecclesial concerns for social justice and human rights. This dissertation, by engaging the models of ethical theory of Murdoch and Niebuhr, offers a lens for helping us to discern distinctive features of the social justice agendas of both King and Townes even as their thinking and focus on concrete areas of societal oppression and the concrete realities of racial bias and violence highlight areas where Murdoch’s and Niebuhr’s programs can be developed and thickened.

King is certainly acknowledged as a great preacher, activist, and leader, but many, I believe, miss how-- across the decades-- he sustained a core ethical agenda of moral education centered in helping to nudge white Americans to attend to, and see, the suffering of the African-American community under the legacy of racist laws and prejudices. Central to his leadership of the Civil Rights Movement was a careful attention to the need to help white American society come to focus attention upon and to see—to get it—that racist laws cause vast real suffering to fellow citizens. I argue that the ethics of vision and responsibility analysis provides a most helpful lens for interpreting and appreciating a distinctive and sustained agenda in King’s practices, preaching, and speeches. King was a moral educator par excellence and a moral paradigm focusing on vision and responsibility allows us to appreciate the ethical
sophistication of his actions and words. Likewise, I believe that King’s moral education agenda, rooted in helping white America to see, helpfully concretizes key aspects of the ethics of vision approach. While Murdoch advanced her thinking primarily by engaging the philosophical discussions of her age, it seems that her emphasis on moral attention and vision has broad and concrete implications for social ethics and for liberationist movements.

In chapter three, I argue that the work of Emilie Townes also is best understood in light of Murdoch’s ethics of vision and Niebuhr’s reflections on the centrality of attention and responsibility. Townes, an African-American theological ethicist, helpfully widens the range of attention to a number of issues of structural violence that confront Black Americans in the decades after the successes of the Civil Rights movement.
CHAPTER ONE

THE ETHICS OF VISION AND RESPONSIBILITY

Introduction

This study explores how the ethics of vision and responsibility illuminate ideas in the works of two Black liberationist thinkers, Martin Luther King Jr. and Emilie Townes, in ways that move from theory to practice as they expose how concrete forces, such as appetites, motives, and fears in divided communities, condition one’s moral response to the world. This exploration also demonstrates how vision and attention provide energy and direction for making the right decisions and actions and how attention helps moral agents gain a truthful depiction of what is happening in the world to have the best tools to respond appropriately. Throughout the history of Christianity, there has often been concern about powerful personal drives pulling one’s attention back to the self. In fact, much of human suffering experienced today exists because people who have power to alleviate pain do not pay attention to the needs of individuals who are in pain. Those who ignore the pain of others perpetuate a type of violence against those who suffer. This is because those who ignore the pain of others are quick to focus on their own needs. This insensitivity continues to be one of the major problems in America in terms of race.

Although most racism today may be subtle, racism continues to be a corrupting energy that distorts our vision. Similar to classism and genderism, racism reinforces the obsessive pulling back of the ego not only to one’s self, but also to one’s group or race, at
the expense of others. Racism, like egoism, leaves little energy to be engaged with others in the outward, greater world, which is beyond the self of one’s group. Racism exhausts the perceiver’s energy because it becomes the lens through which the agent sees. It distorts the agent’s vision because it creates what Christian womanist ethicist Emilie Townes calls a fantastic hegemonic imagination. Attention and care are typically monopolized by racial concerns. This suggests that most racists engage others and the world only as they have already painted it, which can be through personal projections and in colors distorted through the lens of self, class, or race. Failure to see accurately contributes greatly to ongoing failures to choose well or to act rightly, resulting in irresponsible action. Racism, therefore, highlights our failure to demonstrate responsible actions toward one another; this failure has plagued America for centuries. Although vision is not the only moral tradition, when we attend to the role vision plays in the moral life as a precondition to responsible action, we enrich our opportunities to become moral agents and to see others as they really are, namely, as human.

In this chapter, I move from theory to practice as I consider how we might account for what we see, especially when it comes to social, political, and economic responsibility. This chapter explores how the practical application of an ethics of vision can increase our capacity for the extension of clear attention and vision beyond self-interest, outward to others and to the world beyond, something that liberationists have sought to do over the years. Because liberationist thinkers have long understood racism and other forms of oppression can become institutionalized and structured into the “business as usual” practices of everyday life in societies and nations, an ethics of vision helps to highlight some of the distinctions of their approaches to the moral life. The
liberationist approach provides a lens that exposes unjust structures that often are systematically ignored by the dominant media and the eyes of general society.

**An Introduction to the “Ethics of Vision”**

In this chapter, I introduce the ethics of vision and discuss in detail the contributions of one of its most accomplished proponents, Iris Murdoch. Examining her contributions to an “ethics of vision” will assist me in highlighting and evaluating some of the distinctive moral contributions in the works of Black liberationist thinkers Martin Luther King Jr., and Emilie Townes, in later chapters. In this chapter, I introduce Murdoch’s and other scholars’ emphasis on an “ethics of vision” and note its close connection to what H. Richard Niebuhr and others call the “ethics of responsibility.” Both approaches to ethics reject the standard philosophical ethical approaches of deontology and utilitarianism as too reductionalistically focused on decision-points and discrete moral problem-solving.\(^1\)

As Murdoch argues, too much of the ethical reflection of her day concentrates on human agency, exertions of will, and decision making.\(^2\) Standard approaches to ethics in the 20\(^{th}\) century then understandably depict ethics as primarily an affair of making right decisions and engaging in right action. As Charles Taylor, a student of Murdoch’s, notes, much of “Anglo-Saxon moral philosophy has tended to see morality as concerned with questions of what we ought to do and to avoid questions about what it is good to be or

---

1 Both approaches are also central to Christian ethics and both share a common interest in truth, justice, freedom and love. In this way, Murdoch’s work is useful to Christian ethics because it recognizes the value of such concepts and seeks to preserve them in making our lives better. Also, I must note that deontology and utilitarianism are not the only two approaches to ethics today.

2 Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 7-14. This is still true now although it probably was more true in the 1950s and 60s.
what it is good to love. The focus is on ‘obligatory action.’ In this endeavor, Murdoch’s
great contribution is the unmasking of a reductionistic account of the self that pervades
much of 20th century Anglo-American ethical theory. Namely, Murdoch concludes that
major streams of Anglo-American ethics have uncritically accepted an existentialist-informed understanding of the moral life as one punctuated by discrete dramatic moral
problems requiring an imposition of radical will in a moment of decision-making and
agency. Where will, decision, and agency are highlighted, other equally foundational
dynamics of the moral life are ignored, such as a focus on one’s inner life, one’s
consciousness and one’s vision. Murdoch’s achievement is based on her highlighting the
core role that attention and vision play in the moral life. Prior to right decision and right
action, she argues, we must have a sustained and trained attention and habits of careful
vision. Whereas decision and action are perhaps dramatic highlights of the moral life,
Murdoch, in her classic, The Sovereignty of Good, seeks to make manifest the equally
important drama and function of the training of moral attention and vision. Before we
can decide and act well, we must first “see” clearly.

---

3 See Charles Taylor, “Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy” in Maria Antonaccio and William
Schweiker, eds., Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness (Chicago and London: University of

the name that Murdoch gives to the activity of mind, which affects the transformation of the self, and,
thereby, helps one to achieve a truthful depiction of reality. Attention, in the words of Murdoch, is the
characteristic of the moral agent. The concept of vision refers to a whole range of mental activities which
form the backdrop to one’s actions and choice. Its content consists of the “ramification or ramifications” of
concepts that determine one’s moral outlook or total vision. As Bridget Clarke states, “A person’s total
vision… reflects her character and everyone has a total vision insofar as everyone has a character.” For a
valuable discussion, see Bridget Clarke’s The Lens of Character: Aristotle, Murdoch and the Idea of Moral

5 As she describes her main argument in Picturing the Human, Antonaccio, on page ix, states:
“The book [meaning Antonaccio’s Picturing the Human] advances the claim that Murdoch’s philosophy is
best characterized as a form of ‘reflexive’ moral realism, rather than a naïve or simple version of realism.
A second distinctive modern movement in philosophical and Christian Ethics has stressed the category of “responsibility,” and this movement parallels many of the insights of those, like Murdoch, who espouse an “ethics of vision.” In the 1950s and 60s, those stressing responsibility argue in similar fashion that the standard modern account of Anglo-American ethical theory concentrates on decisions, will, and action. A key leader in popularizing an “ethics of responsibility” was H. Richard Niebuhr, a Protestant theologian who taught at Yale. His book, *The Responsible Self*, was published in 1963, and it made a strong impact on a generation of Christian theologians and ethicists. Other voices joined Niebuhr in emphasizing how “responsibility” captures an important aspect of the dynamic relationality that marks human decision and action, as we engage the needs and realities of others around us. Bernard Häring, a major Catholic moral theologian, for example, published a widely influential three volume work, *The Law of Christ*, in which he argued that the core of life lies in “God’s call” and the human individual’s “response.” Accordingly, he argued that ethics should not be centered in obedience to rules or moral principles, but rather in a morality of “responsibility.”

Similarly, Hans Jonas, a major German philosopher, came to emphasize the importance

---

Interpreting Murdoch, in this light, makes sense of the fact that she continued to defend the idea of moral truth as something real and objective, even as she acknowledged that the human grasp of truth is never direct or transparent, but always mediated through the structures of language and consciousness. The central insight that emerges from reading Murdoch’s realism reflexively is that what we perceive as real or true is always at least partly our own fabrication, both for good and for ill.” See Maria Antonaccio, *A Philosophy to Live By: Engaging Iris Murdoch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), xi.


8 Ibid.
of an “ethics of responsibility” for an age witnessing the vast extension of raw human powers of action.  

Like the “ethics of vision” school, those stressing the primacy of “responsibility” in the moral life argue that the foundation of the quality of our “response” lies in the accuracy and truthfulness of our patterns of attention and vision. As H. Richard Niebuhr puts it, prior to the question of “What must I do?”—often described as the core question of ethics—we have the question of “What is going on?” Niebuhr’s major point is that the moral adequacy of our “doing” depends upon the adequacy of our attention, seeing, and receptive understanding. Thus, those ethicists and theologians stressing the “ethics of responsibility” typically focus on the key categories highlighted by Murdoch and others of the “ethics of vision” school. Both approaches critique the decision-point model of the moral life as reductionistic, and both stress that responsible moral decision-making and action depend on the adequacy of our moral attentiveness and sensitivity.

In this chapter, my aim is to examine the significance of the ethics of vision approach as it challenges many entrenched assumptions built into the moral understandings of wide streams of 20th century religious and philosophical ethics. I engage in a close reading of Murdoch’s early writings, especially her collection of three essays in her masterwork The Sovereignty of Good, that highlight her arguments for the importance of vision and attention as core energies of the moral life. Since the publication of The Sovereignty of Good in 1970, two other major philosophical works of

---


11 Ibid.
Murdoch’s have been published. Murdoch was asked to present the prestigious Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh in 1982. In 1992, these were published as *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals.* In 1997, Peter Conradi edited a broad collection of Murdoch’s writings, including the essays that make up *The Sovereignty of Good,* under the title *Existentialists and Mystics.* These two books offer further elaboration on Murdoch’s core critique of the picture of moral agency offered by both Anglo-American analytical ethics and continental existentialism and her elaboration of an alternative approach. But Murdoch’s analysis in *The Sovereignty of Good* remains her core and most powerful articulation of an understanding of the moral life.

However, before I continue this study, it should be noted that certain terms used by Murdoch such as “imagination,” “image,” and “imagery” are, as in the words of Altorf, notoriously difficult to define or describe. This point is clearly evident among many Murdochian scholars, including Maria Antonaccio, Marije Altorf, and Charles Taylor. I agree with Altorf, who argues that Murdoch’s philosophical arguments change according to the use of indescribable terms, featuring images, imagery, and metaphors, receiving their fullest expression in Murdoch’s understanding of imagination and fantasy in relation to her understanding of Plato’s concept of the Good. Here, her understanding

---


14 For further discussion on this matter, see Sharin N. Elkholy who contends that “Murdoch's notion of the ‘Good’ is hard to decipher and the reader will not gain a definite sense of this idea in Altorf's study. Perhaps, however, this is not so much Altorf's fault as it is a problem in Murdoch's work, since Altorf also expresses her frustration over what she perceives as Murdoch's ‘empty character of the Good.’ (112) Altorf writes, ‘In preferring the universal to the actual, Murdoch at times appears as a philosopher who has only just returned to the cave and whose eyes still need to adjust to the darkness.’ (111)” For further discussion on his matter, see, Sharin N. Elkholy, “Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imaging,” review of *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imaging,* by Marije Altorf, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews,* June 24, 2009,
of the Good is central but vague. I believe Murdoch is clearly aware of this as she struggles to demonstrate the indefinability and the indescribability of Good in light of Plato’s Myth of the Cave. I will focus on this term, in light of Murdoch’s understanding of the moral life, as it relates to the concept of vision. Vision, too, is also vague, but illuminating.

Thus, I engage a close reading of Murdoch’s *The Sovereignty of Good*, knowing that the three essays are not only unsystematic, but are three lectures presented over a number of years, and that they were not written to be presented together as one cohesive text. In many cases, therefore, the arguments overlap in many ways and, at times, can seem redundant. However, it is necessary to note that all three essays are written to address the contemporaries of her day. On this note, *The Sovereignty of Good*, compared to her most recent *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, remains the most influential constructive account of ethics. As noted by Antonaccio, many moralists have read the first of the two. *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* is very difficult to read. Here, I agree with Altorf that reading Murdoch’s text can be an exhilarating and also exasperating activity, but, as she notes, Murdoch’s *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* is an especially difficult text. Altorf argues, and I agree, that “she refers to many different texts, from philosophy and literature to theology, and . . . the reader encounters various unfamiliar arguments, ideas and thinkers, which are often referred to only in passing.

---


David Tracy notes how some critics argue the *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* lacks the “systematic drive” that “seems more present in the briefer but more methodical arguments of *The Sovereignty of Good* and the highly focused interpretations of Sartre in *Romantic Rationalist* or of Plato himself in *The Fire and the Sun.*” See David Tracy, “Iris Murdoch and the Many Faces of Plato,” in Antonaccio and Schweiker, eds., *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, 66.
Understanding of these ideas and thinkers seems assumed, but it would be impossible to study all these different ideas, as well as Murdoch’s use of them.”\(^{16}\)

As I engage these texts, I am mainly concerned with how Murdoch approaches the subject of vision. What is of great interest to me is her core question. “How do we make ourselves morally better?”\(^{17}\) I comment on her essays as they are developed in *The Sovereignty of Good* and, then, focus upon key themes that are essential to her thought. This is an exploration neither of her novels nor of the influences of her novels upon her philosophical work or vice-versa. I am only interested in Murdoch the moral philosopher. Thus, although I may cite some of her other work, an exploration of her novels is not necessary for this work.

I intend to show that Murdoch’s understanding of vision is one approach among many that can help illuminate African American moral thought as it is reflected in the works of Martin Luther King and Emilie Townes. I am inspired by Murdoch’s contributions as a way of helping to systematize some of the prominent ethical concerns of the African American religious thought as it provides concrete illustrations of her theoretical positions. Further, I attempt to enrich the concept of vision with the help of H. Richard Niebuhr. Niebuhr’s ethics of responsibility focuses both upon vision and fitting action within societal interaction and it enriches Murdoch’s ethics of vision.

In sum, this work will explore the role of vision in the moral life when it comes to two critical questions addressed by Murdoch in her first essay: how to live morally, and how to improve morally. I will also examine the power of imagery, metaphors, concept,

\(^{16}\) Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imaging*, 17.

\(^{17}\) Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 51.
conception, perception, and consciousness, realities that are both hard to describe and to define. For instance, the concept of the Good and the myth of the Cave are key elements in this study. “Good” is described by Murdoch as indefinable, indescribable, and transcendent. Further, one can talk of “loving Good,” but it is hard to understand Murdoch’s meaning of loving the Good. These concepts are vague. In Murdoch’s words, they cannot be “taped.”

In this way, my discussion will be unusual, because, with the vagueness of certain concepts, I will also be discussing imagery, story, and ideal types, including the Myth of the Cave, Murdoch’s classic example of an experience between a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law, her discussion of the “Kantian man,” and the scrupulous man among others. In the words of Altorf, “Such examination may seem unusual, as it can go against the grain of the text or of ordinary interpretations.” In doing so, I use the blending of two approaches: one that traces the development of Murdoch’s thought; the second, a conceptual approach, that identifies significant themes in Murdoch’s work and elaborates them to give a thicker understanding of what Murdoch is doing.

Antonaccio uses this blended approach for interpreting Murdoch in *Picturing the Human*.  

---

18 The nature of Good is that it cannot get “taped.” This in a true sense is the” indefinability” of Good. Ibid. 61-68. As a result, Murdoch’s depiction of Good is vague.

19 Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imaging*, 17-18. What Altorf means is that Murdoch’s ample use of imagery makes many challenges about the supposition of modern philosophy that may be misunderstood.


21 Maria Antonaccio, *Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch* (New York:
My goal is to trace the development of the ethics of vision and examine it, to show how “vision” and patterns of attentiveness ground our capacity for responsible action. It is my belief that character grows out of vision and that vision is one of the chief elements that makes responsibility possible. While I concentrate my focus on Murdoch’s early writings, toward the end of this chapter I note how Niebuhr’s stress on the dynamics of responsibility offers a constructive description of moral agency that integrates vision and attention into human response, decision, and action in a broader social context. I believe that Niebuhr’s discussion of the dynamics of “responsibility” directly complements Murdoch’s stress and offers a helpful clarification regarding the sort of active moral agency that Murdoch advocates.

Iris Murdoch’s Life: A Brief Sketch

Murdoch was born in 1919 in Dublin to middle class Irish Protestant parents. Soon after her birth, her family moved to London where she grew up. Her parents later sent her to the progressive Badminton School in Bristol. In 1938, when she was 19 years old, she was accepted into Somerville College, Oxford, where she read the “Greats,” a famous regimen of study in ancient history, Greek, Latin, and philosophy. During her years of study at Oxford, as World War II’s tragedies grew, she developed close friendships with a remarkable set of young women studying philosophy, among them Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley, and Elizabeth Anscombe. After the war, they all became major philosophers and ethicists in their own right. During her undergraduate years, she also became interested in politics and joined the Communist Party, and, for a short while, became very vocal about the party’s objectives and concerns. After Murdoch graduated

Oxford University Press, 2000). Antonaccio’s Picturing the Human is the first systematic account of Murdoch’s philosophical writings.
in 1942, she worked as Assistant Principal at the Treasury from 1942-44. From 1944-46, she became an officer with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), where she worked with war refugees in Belgium and Austria. This experience had a profound impact on her novels and moral philosophy, especially concerning her views on the uniqueness of individual personal experience, a concern that would form the core commitment in her philosophical and literary work.22

After the war, Murdoch attended Cambridge for one year, 1947-1948, where she studied the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, who unfortunately had just stopped lecturing. Still, Cambridge gave a wonderful stimulus to Murdoch’s thinking and career. In 1948, she was chosen to receive a Teaching Fellowship at St. Anne’s College, Oxford, and she taught and wrote both novels and important philosophical works there for fifteen years, until 1963, when she gave up her position to devote her full energies to writing. She became a well-known author with twenty-six novels and five books in philosophical ethics. She has also become the subject of many writers who have sought to understand her novels and philosophical works. Although she is primarily known for her fiction, a recent renewed interest in her philosophical works has emerged because of its impact upon several philosophers and theologians, such as Charles Taylor, Alasdair McIntyre, Maria Antonaccio, Stanley Hauerwas, and Craig Dykstra, among others.23 Hauerwas


played a critical role in drawing the attention of Christian ethicists to the significance of Murdoch’s agenda. In *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*, Stanley Hauerwas states,

Murdoch’s powerful critique of contemporary philosophy’s pretensions to objectivity in the name of analysis seemed to me decisive. Moreover, her emphasis on vision as the hallmark of the moral life struck me as exactly what was missing from most accounts of the virtues. While I had some difficulty with Murdoch’s account of how we come to see, in particular, her Platonic tendency to treat language as always distorting truthful vision, she, nevertheless, helped me understand how the virtues teach us to see the world without illusions or false hopes.\(^{24}\)

Her philosophical breadth quickly became visible in her powerful writings, ranging from her engagement with continental existentialism to her encounter with Anglo-American analytic philosophy shaped so powerfully by G. E. Moore’s and Wittgenstein’s emphasis that ethics is centered in language, and by her long abiding love for Plato.\(^{25}\) Her philosophical breadth is conveyed in *The Sovereignty of Good* and her most recent work, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*.

Drawing from G. E. Moore, Wittgenstein, and Plato, with help from Simone Weil and Sigmund Freud, Murdoch offers what she calls the technique of vision to give a better account of the moral life. Murdoch also presents a depiction of the moral life based on a pessimistic view of humankind, where the greatest enemy of the moral self is the

---


ego. She believes being moral has much to do with conquering one’s ego through the power of careful attention. In so doing, rather than over-emphasizing an autonomous will, Murdoch vehemently criticizes her contemporaries concerning their depiction of the moral life and calls for an understanding of the person as involved in degrees of freedom as opposed to being totally free, with freedom existing in the will. In other words, Murdoch puts forth a call for an enriched conceptualization of life beyond consolation and fantasy. In this way, she is a realist who believes that morality begins with the self and that one’s personal experience is a fundamental core of morality. This puts her in direct conflict with what she calls the “current view” of her contemporaries. Rather than accept their view, Murdoch presents her own philosophy, described by Antonaccio as an attempt to “preserve as irreducible the value of the individual and its freedom from deterministic modes of existence.”

Murdoch’s Major Dialogue and Debate Partners

Murdoch’s periods of study at both Oxford and Cambridge and her experiences with war refugee work in Europe provided her with a remarkably broad mastery of diverse philosophical and ethical traditions and contemporary conversations. George Steiner has rightly suggested that there are five major philosophical “partners in discourse” that Murdoch engages across the decades and that this breadth of argument and perspective is one of the main reasons that her project is so creative and distinctive. First, Murdoch draws on the “Greats,” the canon of classics that she closely studied during her years of study at Oxford. She sustains a life-long admiration for the power of

Plato’s philosophical agenda and for the power of the way he does philosophy in a highly literary and expressive way. As she expresses it in an extended interview, “Plato is not only the father of our philosophy, he is our best philosopher.” She, likewise, stresses that Aristotle, Kant, Hume, and Mill remain giants and deeply influential in her understanding of the moral life.

A second school of dialogue partners for Murdoch are the “moralists, logicians, and language analysts among her predecessors and contemporaries” dominating the scene at Oxford and Cambridge. Among this cluster of figures are G. E. Moore, whom Murdoch, at one point, dubs “the father of modern philosophy” and Ludwig Wittgenstein whose emphasis on the function of language pulled so many of his Cambridge students into an overall emphasis on language as the key to moral decision-making and agency.

Those among this group are Stuart Hampshire, Richard M. Hare, A. J. Ayer, and Gilbert Ryle, whose work Murdoch understands as supporting an inadequate account of moral agency that leaves out the inner life—the realm of personal experience, thoughts, and emotions—and depicts the center of ethics as lying in the publicly observable and describable terrain of engagements with discrete moral problems via exertions of will guided by rules.

A third major conversation partner for Murdoch is the powerful writing of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and other continental existentialist writers. This dynamic movement spoke to the sense of a loss of meaning experienced by the generations who

---


29 Steiner, “Foreword,” xii.

had experienced the chaos and destruction of two major wars in Europe. Murdoch met Sartre briefly in 1945, and was deeply impressed by his political commitments and the way he passionately developed his philosophical statements in a remarkable literary way. In fact, her first book, *Sartre, Romantic Rationalist*, was published in 1953 and was one of the first works to introduce existentialist thinking to the English speaking world. Her title suggests that, while she has great respect for much of Sartre’s agenda, she still holds strong reservations regarding the adequacy of his picture of human agency, as rooted in a rugged individualist model of a self unencumbered by relationships or personal history.

Murdoch’s fourth main dialogue partner, Steiner rightly notes, is Simone Weil with her emphasis on “attention” and the importance of meditation as a technique for calming egoism and achieving a clarity of vision of other people and the world around us. In 1956, Murdoch published a review of Weil’s *Notebooks*, and, in this essay, Murdoch interprets Weil as a Platonist who holds that “Good is a transcendent reality, and that Good and Evil are connected with modes of human knowledge.” Murdoch sees Weil as offering us a “psychology whose sources are in Plato, in Eastern philosophy, and in the disciplines of Christian mysticism. . .” Weil holds that “we do not know what we are” and that our energies are “at the mercy of mechanical forces” that, like “gravity,” pull us

31 See Broackes, “Iris Murdoch, Philosopher,” 3 and Steiner, “Foreword,” xiii.
33 Iris Murdoch, “Knowing the Void,” in *Existentialists and Mystics*, 158-160. See also Steiner, “Foreword,” xiii-xiv.
34 Ibid.
down. Murdoch also admires Weil’s deep compassion for the victims of war. It is clear that Murdoch, while not agreeing with all of Weil’s views, was strongly shaped by Weil’s emphasis on techniques for dampening egoism and illusion and Weil’s tremendous compassion for those suffering.

A fifth source of inspiration for Murdoch are the powerful visions of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. It is the wide influence of the Marxist vision that forces Murdoch and others to engage in defining a liberalpluralist alternative view. But the impact of Freud is, perhaps, more directly seen in the way Murdoch, in her novels and philosophical works, takes Freud as offering us a post-religious account of a “fallen humanity,” whose natural energy is misdirected and tightly constricted by egoist drives. Freud’s account of the dynamism of self-interest allows Murdoch to connect moral blindness to a failure to love and to extend basic care for others.

Murdoch’s Identification and Critique of the “Current View”

In her essay “Vision and Choice in Morality” published in 1956, Murdoch gives a sustained description of the two dominant schools of philosophy and ethics of her day, namely, the “Oxbridge” analytical philosophers and language-analysts influenced by G. E. Moore and Ludwig Wittgenstein and the continental existentialists influenced by Sartre and Camus. Where most observers stressed the broadly divergent origins of these two schools, Murdoch sees surprising parallels in their shared understanding of the moral

---

35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Simone Weil, Gravity and Grace (London and New York: Routledge, 1963), 105. There, she states: “We have to try to cure our faults by attention and not by will.”
life as rooted in the will, in decision making, and in action. Murdoch acknowledges that, while these two philosophical schools have divergent styles, ethical claims, and focal concerns, they share and promulgate a common understanding of moral agency. Murdoch refers to this understanding as simply the “current view.”

In “The Idea of Perfection,” the first essay in The Sovereignty of Good, Murdoch begins her critique of the privileged status of the “current view.” It ignores “certain facts” and imposes a “single theory” that “admitted no communication with or escape into rival theories.” In so doing, she holds that this dominant model of ethics offers a deeply inadequate understanding of moral agency. It does not address activity of the mind and the “inner life.” Further, it ignores forms of morality that are just and loving absent of outside observers; and lastly, it provides no response to rival philosophies. Murdoch constructs a “picture of ‘the man’ of modern moral philosophy” in part by drawing on Stuart Hampshire’s Thought and Action. She holds that his views offer a clear summary of the prevailing understanding held by so many of her contemporaries. In so doing, she attempts to display the assumptions in the “current philosophy of mind” that “underlie the inarticulate moments of modern ethics.” Hampshire and so many others, Murdoch argues, privilege a view of a “continual flow of intention into action.” For Murdoch,


40 Murdoch, The Sovereignty of Good, 1. The rejection of the fact-value distinction is a major theme in Murdoch’s work. For valuable discussion, see Cora Diamond “We are Perpetually Moralists”: Iris Murdoch, Fact, and Value,” in Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker, eds., Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996.), 79-109.

41 Ibid.

42 Murdoch, The Sovereignty of Good, 3-4.

43 Ibid.
this view holds that “Nothing counts as an act unless it is a ‘bringing about of a recognizable change in the world.’”\(^{44}\) For Murdoch, the power of Wittgenstein’s emphasis that there are no “private languages” has influenced a generation to concentrate attention on the publicly observable features of human experience and to question the moral significance of the realm of human interiority. As Murdoch puts it, this dominant understanding holds: “What is ‘real’ is potentially open to different observers. The inner or mental world is inevitably parasitic upon the outer world; it has a parasitic and shadowy nature.”\(^{45}\) For Murdoch, this broadly held account in the philosophy of mind has pushed philosophers to understand the core of the moral life as centered in intention and will as they are channeled into the assessment of problems, the making of decisions, and overt acts. To Murdoch, this understanding holds that “Our personal being is the movement of our overtly choosing will. Immense care is taken to picture the will as isolated. It is isolated from belief, from reason, and from feeling and is yet the essential center of the self.”\(^{46}\) As Murdoch puts it, “Morality is a matter of thinking clearly and then proceeding to outward dealings with other men.”\(^{47}\)

Murdoch gives a bold summary of the key characteristics of the moral psychology that grounds the general consensus view. In Murdoch’s words, “It is behaviorist in its connection of the meaning and being of action with the publicly observable, it is existentialist in its elimination of the substantial self and its emphasis on the solitary

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 5.
\(^{45}\) Ibid.
\(^{46}\) Ibid., 7.
\(^{47}\) Ibid., 8.
omnipotent will, and it is utilitarian in its assumption that morality is and can only be concerned with public acts.”

It is also . . . “a democratic view, in that it suggests that morality is not some esoteric achievement, but a natural function of any normal man.”

For Murdoch, this dominant view, on display in the works of Hampshire, R. M. Hare and many other Oxbridge philosophers, arises from a “happy and fruitful marriage of Kantian liberalism with Wittgensteinian logic solemnized by Freud.”

Murdoch’s critique of this dominant picture of the self is eloquent and forceful. It presents an “alien and implausible” understanding of human life. She has “empirical objections” to this picture—she believes it is reductionistic and inaccurate. She has “philosophical objections,” because she finds the arguments weak, and she has “moral objections,” because she believes damage is done by this entrenched “current view.”

Murdoch contends that this “current view,” by stressing the moral significance of “will,” “decision,” and “action,” pulls attention away from the ordinary ranges of personal experience that make up the bulk of people’s lives. Thus, we lose any sense that it is in these quiet times and experiences of ordinary life that important aspects of moral development can occur.

---

48 Ibid., 8-9.

49 Ibid., 9.


51 Ibid. Antonaccio discusses Murdoch’s “contrast between types of moral theory, the liberal view and the natural law view.” In so doing, Antonaccio argues that Murdoch seeks to chart a “middle course” between these two approaches. See Antonaccio, “Form and Contingency in Iris Murdoch’s Ethics” in Antonaccio and Schweiker, eds., Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness, 14, 16.

52 Antonaccio states: “Murdoch believes that the elimination of metaphysics from ethics in the
Murdoch illustrates her point by suggesting a case of a mother-in-law “who feels hostility to her daughter-in-law.” In Murdoch’s telling, over time the mother-in-law comes to closely observe her daughter-in-law and to change “her mind” regarding her first impression of the younger woman. Where once the mother-in-law thought the daughter-in-law “brusque, sometimes positively rude,” and “always tiresomely juvenile,” now, the mother-in-law, after training “careful and just attention” upon the younger woman, comes to understand her as “delightfully youthful” and “refreshingly simple.” Murdoch argues that the mother-in-law, while not engaged in publicly observable action, has, in fact, been engaged in critical moral action rooted in the focusing of her attention. The moral significance lies in that the mother-in-law is not just trying to see the daughter-in-law “accurately, but to see her justly or lovingly.” For Murdoch, the mother-in-law is “engaged in an endless task” in a progressive opening up in “love” and “justice.” And, this “idea of progress” connects to the “idea of perfection.”

Murdoch notes that her own understanding of morality, based on vision, in a modern period has meant the impoverishment of a richly creative area of human thought. . . . Murdoch has always connected metaphysics with the attempt by human beings to ‘picture’ themselves and the world. In a classic early essay titled ‘Metaphysics and Ethics,’ for example, she described the human being as a creature who ‘makes pictures of himself and then comes to resemble the picture.’” Antonaccio, Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch, 125.

53 Murdoch, The Sovereignty of Good, 16-36.

54 Ibid., 17-18.

55 Ibid., 19-20.

56 Ibid., 22. Here, as suggested by Clarke,”lovingly” and ”justly” are terms of art for Murdoch. Although these terms may, at first, convey a sense of conflict in that to be just and to be loving may conflict with one another, Murdoch has a different understanding. As Clarke suggests, love and justice designate a single frame of mind: “it is natural to the particular kind of creatures we are that love should be inseparable from justice” (Ibid., 34). See Bridget Clarke’s The Lens of Character: Aristotle, Murdoch and the Idea of Moral Perception, 76.

57 Murdoch, The Sovereignty of Good, 23.
progressive attempt to see reality, is not a new view, but one rooted in much of Plato’s writings and in much of Christian ethics down through the centuries. Murdoch acknowledges her debt to Simone Weil whose stress on the critical moral significance of “attention” inspired Murdoch’s concentration on an “ethics of vision.” Against the optimistic view of the “current view” about the individual’s employment of rationality in moral agency, Murdoch holds that real moral development for individuals is a strenuous process and a real moral achievement. Vision is key to moral agency because, as Murdoch holds, “I can only choose within the world I can see.” In her view, the “existentialist behaviorists” model of agency is reductionist in that it highlights discrete problems and decisions, and that it “identifies freedom” with the moment of choice and action. For Murdoch, however, a stress on how vision is the progressive development of agency diminishes a stress on the category of free choice. She holds:

But if we consider what the work of attention is like, how continuously it goes on, and how imperceptibly it builds up structures of value around about us, we shall not be surprised that at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over. ... The exercise of our freedom is a small piecemeal business which goes on all the time and not a grandiose leaping about unimpeded at important moments. The moral life ... is something that goes on continually.  

58 Ibid., 28.

59 Ibid., 33, 40.

60 Murdoch would later demand this through the use of Plato’s image of the Cave. There, she will focus upon clarifying Plato’s conception of Good as it relates to the ethics of vision.

61 Ibid., 35-36. Here, seeing, I believe, has much to do with a careful study of one’s reality. In other words, for Murdoch, seeing requires hard work. One does not only open one’s eyes and automatically see what is going on. Seeing means that one perceives truth while, at the same time, suppressing the self.

62 Ibid., 37.
Murdoch’s Secular Account of Sin and Ethic of Love

Murdoch believes that the “current view” paints too optimistic a view of people applying reason to cases of decision and action. She holds that both the portrayal of a heroic, rugged individual of the existentialist writings and the portrayal of the rational moral agent of the Anglo-American analytic school fail to engage the core obstacle of the moral life, namely, the dynamic power of egoism. If one has an optimistic view of human rationality, then an “ethics of vision” sounds easy and somewhat irrelevant, because it may be viewed as a given or ignored. But Murdoch’s stress on the power of egoistic energies systematically to distort our attention to the world and others in it highlights the great necessity of such a stress on the achievement of clear vision.

In “On ‘God’ and ‘Good,’” the second essay in The Sovereignty of Good, Murdoch draws heavily upon Sigmund Freud’s understanding of the powerful energies of the ego to parallel an account of what Christianity has long described as “original sin.” The “current view,” with its description of what she calls “linguistic analytical man,” stresses “freedom,” “rationality,” and “self-awareness,” but makes “no mention of sin, and no mention of love.” Murdoch, however, holds that Freud offers us a “realistic and detailed picture of the fallen man.” As she puts it,

Freud takes a thoroughly pessimistic view of human nature. He sees the psyche as an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy, largely determined by its own individual history, whose natural attachments are sexual, ambiguous, and hard for the subject to understand or control. . . [F]antasy is a stronger force than reason. Objectivity and unselfishness are not natural to human beings.  

---


64 Ibid., 50.

65 Ibid.
In her words, “In the moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego.” She argues that moral philosophy once sought to discuss this energy of selfishness and also along with religion sought to recommend “techniques” for the defeat of the ego. She holds that a key question of moral philosophy must be “[A]re there any techniques for the purification and reorientation of an energy which is naturally selfish in such a way that when moments of choice arrive we shall be sure of acting rightly?” She notes that Plato and much of classic religious teaching shared this generally pessimistic view of the powers of selfishness and delusion and that both recommended ways of overcoming egoism. Historically, religion, she argues, has attempted to break the ego by calling people to “prayer,” which Murdoch calls an “attention to God which is a form of love.” But she asks, is there a comparable “technique” available “in a world without God?”

In distinctive fashion, Murdoch explores what might count as a moral substitute for God for a society in which many no longer believe in God. For Murdoch, the “Good” understood rightly can help sustain the techniques of unselfing once sustained by religious traditions. “I shall suggest that God was (or is) a single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention; and I shall go on to suggest that moral philosophy should attempt to retain a central concept which has all these

---

66 Ibid., 52.
67 Ibid., 53.
68 Ibid., 53-54.
69 Ibid. Although Murdoch does not believe in a traditional God, she contends “that God, attended to, as a powerful source of energy, is a psychological fact and one of importance in moral philosophy, that we can all receive moral help by focusing our attention upon things which are valuable. . .” This expression will be important in the latter part of my study.
characteristics.” 70 For Murdoch, the “Good” is that reality that requires a pulling away from illusion and fantasy to train attention beyond the self. “I would suggest that the authority of the Good seems to us something necessary, because the realism (the ability to perceive reality) required for goodness is a kind of intellectual ability to perceive what is true, which is automatically, at the same time, a suppression of self.” 71 In this way, she holds that “realism . . . [is] a moral achievement.” 72 The core of Murdoch’s understanding of moral agency lies in her affirmation that “true vision occasions right conduct.” 73

Joining her secular understanding of sin, Murdoch develops a secular version of the Christian ethical stress on love, both love of God and love of neighbor. The energies of the ego compulsively pull attention back onto the self’s concerns and interests, and, thus, leave little energy for an extension of careful attention out into the world beyond the self. But through struggle and techniques wherein we develop a reorientation of attention and care beyond ourselves, we can grow in our capacities to love. For Murdoch, “The direction of attention is, contrary to nature, outward, away from self which reduces all to a false unity, towards the great surprising variety of the world, and the ability so to direct attention is love.” 74

Murdoch, as noted earlier, is at pains to debunk the notion that moral significance

70 Ibid., 54.

71 Ibid., 64.

72 Ibid. Realism is a moral achievement, because it requires defeating one’s ego.

73 Ibid.

primarily resides in the occasions when a discrete problem confronts us with the need for decision and action. Her stress on vision highlights the moral importance of our sustained habits and practices of attention. These can empower both virtue and true vision of others in the world of vice and selfishness. “[O]ur ability to act well ‘when the time comes’ depends partly, perhaps largely, upon the quality of our habitual objects of attention.”\textsuperscript{75} This is why Murdoch feels that habits of clear vision can be developed and secured by attention to God and neighbor (for those to whom religion still speaks), to the “Good” that transcends the self, and to the beauty of nature or great art or kind people. The stilling of the ego, as we stand before great art, helps train us in a habit of seeing beyond our own self-interest. Prayer to God, meditation on realities beyond the self, friendship—all of these can become important steps on a progressive path of moral development. For Murdoch “[A]rt is an excellent analogy of morals, or indeed that it is in this respect a case of morals. We cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else, a natural object, a person in need.”\textsuperscript{76} The training of attention to the real can occur in diverse ways in people’s lives and all these have direct bearing on our building up or diminishing our moral capacities.

Murdoch draws deeply upon Plato to suggest how the “idea of realism” is linked to the “idea of transcendence.”\textsuperscript{77} She holds that the “Good” is connected to the idea of perfection.\textsuperscript{78} Murdoch believes that Plato’s Myth of the Cave offers a helpful insight into

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 55.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 58.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 60.
the Good. She agrees with Plato that the Good is “the source of light which reveals to us all things as they really are.”

She also believes that the reality is connected to a type of “mysticism” which she holds is a “non-dogmatic essentially unformulated faith in the reality of the Good. . .”

**Mysticism in Murdoch: The Myth of the Cave**

In her essay “The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts,” the concluding essay of *The Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch returns to her appropriation of Plato’s Myth of the Cave to help illustrate her understanding of Good as a transcendent reality and a moral ideal. Here Murdoch argues that her ethics of vision is grounded in the light of the transcendent Good and yet is a deeply realistic ethic. The core obstacle in ethics, she submits, lies in the “refusal to attend.” As she puts it,

> Of course virtue is good habit and dutiful action. But the background condition of such habit and such action, in human beings, is a just mode of vision and good quality of consciousness, which is something that must be achieved. As a result, it is a task to come to see the world as it is.

---

79 But, as said earlier, Murdoch is loose and sometimes vague in her understanding of the “transcendence of the Good” and how the moral life engages reality like the spiritual practices or exercises of the mystics attempted.

80 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 68.

81 Ibid., 72. On Murdoch’s stress on mysticism, I discuss the influences of Plato, Simone Weil, and Wittgenstein. In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Murdoch has her second essay titled “Fact and Value” and she relies heavily on Wittgenstein as a dialogue partner. On page 29, she notes “This running up against the limits of language is ethics.” At the bottom of page 30, she discusses Wittgenstein and says: “The morality recommended in the last part of the Tractatus is for all its coldness not without an intensity which might be called religious, or aesthetic.” At the top of page 31, Murdoch quotes Wittgenstein’s Tractatus saying “Not how the world is, is the mystical, but that it is.” In my version of Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 73, the sentence reads: “It is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists.” Murdoch, like Wittgenstein and Plato, sees the world as mystical, a world defined by symbols and imagery.


83 Ibid., 89.
Contending that the “image of Good, as a transcendent magnetic center, seems to be the least corruptible and more realistic picture to use in reflecting upon the moral life,” Murdoch turns her attention to explaining her understanding of Good in the Myth of the Cave. The myth is one of many images used by Plato to express his understanding of the moral life. Thus, Murdoch, in recasting Plato’s understanding of the moral life, draws from Plato’s cave myth as an instructive device to depict the moral life in a way that demonstrates the image of Good as a “transcendent magnetic center.” In so doing, she uses the myth to address the core question of her writings: “How do we make ourselves morally better?”

The image of the Cave is “not something coldly intellectual, [rather] it is something that involves the whole man.” For her, the myth also “attaches value to the most ‘concrete’ of everyday preoccupations and acts.” That is, she holds that the myth “concerns the continuous detail of human activity, wherein we discriminate between appearance and reality, good and bad, true and false, and check or strengthen our desires.” She also contends that the cave myth captures the whole of morality in its totality and thus can serve as a primary motivation and framework for recapitulating the moral life as well as human existence. This is because Murdoch believes that “morality is a sort of unesoteric mysticism, having its source in an austere and unconsolled love of the

---

84 Ibid., 51.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
Good.”88 In her words, the myth shows that the “good and just life is thus a process of clarification.”89 She holds that the good and just life is also “a movement toward selfless lucidity, guided by ideas of perfection which are objects of love.”90 Here, the supreme object of perfection is the Good. An understanding of its reality helps to lead the pilgrim to a greater faith, a progressive path of moral development. Put another way, according to Murdoch’s understanding of Plato’s parable, “the moral life is a spiritual pilgrimage inspired by the disturbing magnetism of truth, involving ipso facto a purification of energy and desire in the light of a vision of what is good.”91 That is, the parable, Murdoch contends, shows that one’s conception of reality begins as shadows cast upon the wall of a cave and that, as one’s cognitive awareness develops, one moves through several stages of consciousness that with “attention” allow one to see more clearly and truthfully.92

For Murdoch, this is a normative process that involves the agent and the agent’s response to surrounding reality. According to her interpretation of the parable, the Cave represents a condition of reality in which the agent finds himself or herself. In the “Cave,” at first, because the shadow is all that the pilgrim sees, the pilgrim perceives


90 Ibid.

91 Ibid. David Tracy is interested in and impressed with Murdoch’s emphasis on the Freudian understanding of egoism and its power. As Tracy puts it, “Iris Murdoch never domesticates Freud’s steady, indeed relentless, insistence on the powerful reality of the unconscious on all consciousness nor his vision of the fragility of the ego in any search for the good life—or, even, as in *Civilization and Its Discontents* in any human search for a decent, civilized life.” David Tracy, “Iris Murdoch and the Many Faces of Plato” in Antonaccio and Schweiker, eds., *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, 60.

himself as a shadow cast upon the wall of the cave in the light of the fire. Here, the fire represents the “old unregenerate energy of the psyche,” while the shadow represents the complete reality of the pilgrim. Then, through a progressive change in “quality of consciousness,” the pilgrim “turns around and sees the fire” that “threw the shadow,” and, then, with additional progress in “quality of consciousness,” the pilgrim eventually notices the light of the sun beyond the fire. The sun represents the transcendent Good, the supreme power that gives unity to form. Thus, the pilgrim focuses his or her attention upon the sun and journeys toward it. In the words of Murdoch, through a process of striving ascent, the pilgrim journeys through several levels of consciousness and is able not only to see himself differently but also, through the use of experience along the journey, to discover his or her way out of the cave, and, eventually, by raising his or her

---

93 Ibid.
94 Ibid., 98.
95 Antonaccio notes, “The images of sun and light, so prominent in Plato, recur throughout [Murdoch’s] philosophy and signal the ambiguous power, as she understood it, of the good—its ability to illuminate the dark void of suffering, misery, or despair that attends every human life to some degree; but equally, its tendency to burn away the false consolations one reaches for in such circumstances” (Antonaccio, Picturing the Human, vi). However, Antonaccio notes that “Murdoch’s philosophy of good does not console us in our suffering, or save us from the pain of loss or shattered hope. Rather, it burns and sings with the knowledge that ‘almost everything that consoles us is a fake’ including, sometimes the idea of goodness itself” (Ibid., vi). In this way, Murdoch’s depiction of the Good is vague and her understanding appears to have gaps. In the words of Antonaccio, the idea of goodness, Murdoch believed, “must remain open even to the reality of its own absence in any particular human life” (Ibid). It is not taped down and presented in all its detail, something that she is very much aware of. Good is indescribable and indefinable. It transcends us, yet it is near to us.
96 Murdoch, Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals, 10. In the words of Murdoch, “Plato uses myths to explain his conceptions of human life. His most famous picture is the Cave (Republic, 514), wherein people facing the wall at the back see first shadows, then, turning around, the objects, themselves imitations of real things, which, in the light of the fire, have cast the shadows. Some of us venture on, glimpsing another light beyond, and emerge into the sunlight, where we are dazzled and can only look down at the shadows and reflections, then, raising our heads, see the real things themselves and then (if finally enlightened) the sun. At each stage, we see at first the shadows of what is more real and true.”
head, to look up at the sun. However, what the pilgrim sees are the “converging edges” of the sun rather than its “magnetic center.” The magnetic center escapes the pilgrim’s view because, in the words of Murdoch, “it is not like looking at other things.” As a result, the pilgrim does not and cannot know and conceptualize what the sun is like in its center. There is a sense of trying to look, but what is seen is only false doubles.

Here, Murdoch holds that the Good is “indefinable,” “indescribable,” and a “unifier of forms.” She believes that the Good is also inseparable from knowledge and is the focal point of “attention” when one’s intention to achieve virtue coexists with a desire for clear vision. In this way, as I said earlier, Good is that reality that requires a pulling away from illusion and fantasy to train the attention beyond the self. In short, the sun is the source of light, which reveals to us all things as they really are, all “just

---

97 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 97. Murdoch believes that it is impossible for the agent to look directly at the sun. The Good is not visible, but Plato pictures the good man as able to look at the sun. However, this agent represents one among many in a community of pilgrims, as depicted in the note above. All do not progress at the same rate. Only those who are enlightened are able to advance, which involves turning around, climbing up, and raising our heads. Implied is no demand to help others to see the light. Only those who are enlightened are called to be responsible agents. Such agency inspires an attitude that leads those who are enlightened to assist those who are unenlightened that all may see the light and become responsible.

98 Ibid.

99 Ibid.

100 Ibid., 97-98. For example, there may be a false sun.

101 Plato’s Form Theory deals with logic and moral questions. Plato’s Forms are models, archetypes, demigods. In the ethical role, the forms are moral ideas active in our lives, radiant icons, and images of virtue (Murdoch, “On ‘God’ and ‘Good’,” *The Sovereignty of Good*, 68). According to Murdoch, beauty is the most vivid sense of form. She argues that “we see and love beauty more readily than we love good.” Like Plato, she argues that beauty is the spiritual thing to which we are most attracted. Plato pictures the human soul as having been able to see the spiritual Forms with perfect clarity, a vision of which the incarnate soul retains a shadowy memory. The sun may be far away, but its reflection in beauty is near and so is the light (Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 14).

“Just vision” represents an accurate and “loving” depiction of “reality or realities” without “prejudice.” A truthful depiction of reality is achieved because, as Murdoch contends, “an increased (loving) awareness of the Good brings with it an increasing awareness of the unity and interdependence of the moral world.”

For example, the sun cast the shadow of the pilgrim upon the wall of the cave. The agent sees himself as a shadow. The shadow represents the “lowest level of awareness,” the fundamental “Form” of our moral condition. However, with experience and reflection, the pilgrim, by attending to the Good, strives through several levels of consciousness and is able to see the shadows more clearly in the light of the sun at each progressive level of the process and, inspired by truth, finally emerges from the cave to look at the sun. “The moral pilgrim emerges from the cave and begins to see the real world and at last of

---

103 Ibid. For Murdoch, as Anne Rowe states, “This process is clearly not only beneficial to the moral being of individuals, but society as a whole” (Rowe, “Introduction,” in Anne Rowe and Avril Horner, eds., Iris Murdoch and Morality (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 2. Anne Rowe is the Director of the Center for Iris Murdoch Studies at Kingston University.

104 Murdoch, Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals, 10. Here, one’s experience is commensurate with one’s moral life. “Justice relates to truth” (Ibid). Moral forms are inter-related: truth, justice, accuracy, humility, realism, courage as the ability to sustain clear vision, love as attachment or even passion without sentiment of self (Murdoch, The Sovereignty of Good, 87).

105 Murdoch, Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals, 10. Here, I reflect upon one, the agent. But the agent is one of many pilgrims in the Cave.

106 Ibid.

107 Murdoch, The Sovereignty of Good, 68; See also Murdoch, Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals, 14. In Murdoch’s words, the myth of the Cave envisages possible emergence into the sunlight, but this emergence is something to be achieved, if at all, by individuals. It is not, as in Hegel, a final totality in which all entities are ultimately (logically) fused. We, inside the cave, are intuitively aware of many things, whose presence and proximity we may “feel” but which we cannot or cannot yet fully explain or inspect. Our sense of the presence of a vast extra-linguistic reality may be said to be one such thing, as is our sense of history and of unrealized moral possibilities.
all, is able to look at the sun itself.”¹⁰⁸ In short, the sun is seen at the end of a journey, which, according to Murdoch, involves “reorientation and an ascent.”¹⁰⁹

[The sun] is real. It is out there, but very distant. It gives light and energy and enables us to know the truth. In its light, we see the things of the world in their true relationships. Looking at the sun itself is supremely difficult and is unlike looking at things in its light; the sun is a different kind of thing from what it illuminates.¹¹⁰

Here, according to Plato’s conception of human life, the self is a place of illusion. “Goodness is connected with the attempt to see” a purification of the old unregenerate energy of the psyche through what Antonaccio calls an “ethics of unselfing.”¹¹¹ An ethics of unselfing is an ascetic process that allows the pilgrim to “see and to respond to the real world in the light of a virtuous consciousness.”¹¹² What this means is that the pilgrim is able to perceive truthfully what is happening to make the appropriate response to reality in light of a selfless state of consciousness. It is here that Marije Altorf contends that the answer to living better is found in “understanding consciousness in relation to an external reality.”¹¹³ Here, the external reality is the Good, represented by the sun. In short, the

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.
¹¹⁰ Ibid. Implied here is an enlightened awareness brought on by the power of the sun, which results in a “change of consciousness.” In other words, Plato posits a scale of refined personal awareness, which demands the concept of “change of consciousness.” Such “states of being” or “states of mind” are implied throughout the spiritual pilgrimage (Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 174).
¹¹¹ Ibid., 91.
¹¹² Ibid. Here, “attention is rewarded by a knowledge of reality” that leads us away from ourselves toward something alien which our consciousness could not take over as an exercise of virtue” (Ibid., 87). We sense forms of reality alien to us that we cannot make unreal or swallow up, such as the study of a foreign language (Ibid.).
process represents an “endless struggle” and is the “attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is.”

However, for Murdoch, a truthful depiction of reality is achieved only by those who can rightly differentiate between the “real good” and its “false double.” The love which brings the right answer is an exercise of justice and realism and really looking.

For Murdoch, the struggle involves keeping one’s focus secure upon the condition one is confronted with and on the “consolation” of Good to escape despair. “Consolation of Good” means that the moral agent must strive to love Good in the same way that Christians strive to love God. This expression conveys Murdoch’s efforts to retain certain religious values that she sees as essential for living the moral life. Here, God, as an object of attention, consoles, and Murdoch would like for Good to replace God as the consoling object of attention. The bottom line is that the moral agent must find comfort in Good.

However, the parable of the Cave, as an instructive device, presents the “journeying soul as ascending through four stages of enlightenment, progressively discovering at each stage that what it was treating as realities were only shadows or images of something more real still.” At the end of this quest, the “soul reaches a non-hypothetical first principle, which is the form or idea of the Good, which enables it then

---

114 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 91. The struggle is endless because, as one looks and moves, the world is constantly changing. Therefore, what one sees is changing as well. In addition, because of human nature, the self is in constant struggle with the ego, its greatest enemy, to rid itself of fantasy.

115 Ibid.

116 Ibid., 89. This involves a “double movement, away from the private and personal and then back again,” something that “may remind us of Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer, . . . who do not make philosophical theory out of immediate awareness in a Cartesian sense, but attach an ultimate importance to the continuous lived existence of the individual beings” (Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 174).

to descend and retrace its path, but moving only through the forms or true conception of that which it previously understood only in part” (Republic, 510-11). In short, Plato’s conception of the complete life of an individual is a mix of “knowledge and illusion,” submerged in a “reality” that extends beyond it, apprehending or failing to apprehend, in countless ways, the dissimilarity “between true and false and good and evil.” Here, Murdoch takes a metaphysical stance without being able to give clarity to that stance. As Luisa Muraro contends,

[Murdoch] describes “a metaphysical position but no metaphysical form.” … Her remarks have something in common with those of the mystics who speak of God and then add; what I’ve said is false. They undermined certainty in order to make a comparison between the inexhaustible wealth of the presence of their beloved, which they had understood through direct experience, and wanted to convey to others as their own devoted but incomplete knowing. . . . Her intent is to prevent philosophical thought, her own first and foremost, from taking that “authority” (her word) that is the province of reality as it presents itself to experience informed by love, whether in the moral life of good people or in the fruition of beautiful things.120

---

118 Ibid. For Murdoch, here at its summit, the reflective capacity of the mind is demonstrated. As a result, the mind “can see concepts” through which it has ascended. The agent can see how virtues are related and that there is a hierarchy of forms, such as Good, truth, knowledge, and courage. This hierarchy introduces “order into our conceptions of the world.” For instance, with a deeper notion of virtue, here, courage, which was once seen as a separate virtue, now becomes an “operation” of love and wisdom. This transformation, Murdoch holds, results from seeing the world in the light of the Good and reflecting upon it, revisiting one’s true vision or “more true vision” and conceptions formerly misconceived (Ibid. 93). Murdoch contends that this picture of the moral life seems complex, but the concept of the Good stretches through the whole of the moral life and gives the moral life the only kind of shadowy unachieved unity that it can possess (Ibid. 94-5). According to this view, the area of morals can be seen as “covering the whole mode of living and the quality of relationship with the world” (Ibid., 95).

119 Murdoch, Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals, 148-49. Plato’s moral vision involves a “slow shift of attachments wherein looking (concentrating, attending, attentive discipline) is a source of divine (purified energy)... a progressive redemption of desire. The movement” is a patient and continuous change in “one’s whole being in all of its contingent detail, through a world of appearance toward a world of reality” (25).

Murdoch holds that, in being conscious, we are valuing creatures, perpetually valuing and focusing our efforts on the world around us in ways that shape and are shaped according to how we unselfishly and truthfully comprehend such value. In this view, as Bridget Clarke states, “simply in virtue of having a consciousness, Murdoch believes one is constantly evaluating and directing one’s attention to reality in ways that shape and are shaped by one’s moral understanding.”121 Murdoch believes perception is a mode of moral evaluation. All is moral. Thus, because the way one perceives the world is inseparable from one’s state of consciousness, restoring consciousness, in light of the role experience plays in the moral life, is at the core of Murdoch’s philosophical writings. Next, I turn my attention to understanding these two important features in Murdoch’s philosophical writings.

**Experience and Consciousness in Murdoch**

Murdoch believes that understanding the concept of “experience,” especially in its relationship to God and Good, is the key to understanding the moral life. In this view, experience is so intricately related to consciousness that, in the words of Murdoch, “experience is consciousness.”122 Antonaccio notes, “Against the displacement of the notion of consciousness in favor . . . of language, Murdoch retrieves consciousness as the fundamental mode of human moral being.”123 For Murdoch, consciousness involves

---


one’s perception of reality as an evaluative process of knowing. She holds that this entails much more than a shadowy substance, something she equates with “merely a daydream” or an “impersonal thought.”

Murdoch contends that consciousness “is deep and complex; it has density, thoughts and perceptions and feelings are combined in the swift movement of our mode of existence.”

Pictured as consciousness, experience is “a stream punctuated by objectified memorable events,” the significant moments or occurrences in our lives. According to this view, our experience makes a difference in how we see the world. In fact, it deepens our awareness according to degrees of understanding.

As a result, our spirituality is commensurable to our experience, and our experience is intrinsic to our understanding of the moral life. In this view, there is no separation between knowledge and the good.

Goodness is connected . . . with a refined and honest perception of what is really the case, a patient and just discernment and exploration of what confronts one, which is the result not simply of opening one’s eyes but of a certain perfectly familiar kind of moral discipline.

---

124 For interesting discussion on shadowy substance, see Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 5, 11, 16.


126 Ibid.


129 This is linked to Plato’s concept of education. For him, education is moral education.

130 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 37. Here, for Murdoch, the discipline of a moral agent becomes synonymous with that of an artist, as the artist trains his or her attention toward the object of affection. Like the moral agent, the artist becomes less as his or her subject becomes the focus of his or her attention. Here, the artist looks beyond the self to see the beauty in his or her subject. Here, beauty is the only visible aspect of the Good. It can only be grasped in part as the artist strives toward its perfection (Ibid., 78-89).
This is a discipline that includes both moral effort and a moral imagination (akin to that of an artist) under the authority of an absolute value, Good or God. Directing one’s attention to the reality of the Good brings clarity of vision, and it is the key to our becoming morally better. As a result, “knowledge informs the moral quality of the world.” Here, for example, virtue is found by the “careful scrupulous, benevolent, and just” person who, Murdoch holds, “sees” the world differently from the “callous” individual.

This stress on experience highlights a “progressively changing quality of consciousness.” The moral agent “begins to see different objects” and gains a “deeper,” “wider,” and “wiser understanding of the world.” In other words, for Murdoch, the agent produces a helpful “series of acts” and “mental states.” He or she can better “see people’s faces and leaves on trees” as they are. It does not happen immediately at the moment of choice. Rather, it happens gradually over time. Therefore, for Murdoch, “what happens in between such choices is indeed what is crucial” to the moral life.

---


132 Ibid. The “careful scrupulous benevolent just” person sees because he is acquainted with Good (Ibid).


134 Ibid.

135 Ibid.

136 Ibid.

137 Ibid., 36. This is because Murdoch believes that “it is a task to come to see the world as it really is” and the “love that brings the right answer is an exercise of justice and realism and really looking” (Ibid., 89).
Like Plato, she believes that morality is circular and that ultimate reality resides in its center as the “idea of perfection.” This is another way to say that the conscience of the moral agent is oriented toward Good as his or her center of value. The agent’s orientation toward such a rubric is intrinsic and best expressed as a form or process of aesthetic evaluation inhabiting the mind of the agent. As a result, any form of cognition, because it contains order, involves a prior form of value through which moral acts are measured, an aesthetic value, built into the conscience of the agent. This sense of value that Murdoch identifies as Good gives unity to the self. Thus, Murdoch notes, Good is not merely a descriptive term; rather, Good is an aesthetic value, a type of value that resides in the arts. What this means for Murdoch, as Antonaccio states, is that “other disciplined acts of understanding could provide similar insights and perhaps good art above all.”

Good art helps us to “purify our imagination” of illusion. We submit ourselves unconditionally to its authority. We recognize its “hierarchy,” its “degrees of merit,” “heights,” “distances,” and so on. “Art shows us how difficult it is to be objective by showing us how differently the world looks to an objective vision.” According to Murdoch, moral agents do not create moral value; rather, like great artists, they recognize moral value through sustained attention and trained vision. Here, “freedom” is discovered as the “disciplined overcoming of self,” and humility, in the words of Murdoch, is

---

139 Ibid.
140 Ibid., 86.
141 Ibid., 82-94.
142 Ibid., 86, 83.
“selfless respect for reality.”\textsuperscript{143} For the moral agent and artist, a truthful depiction of reality “combines just modes of judgment” with an “increased perception of detail.”\textsuperscript{144} With the recognition of such value, both agent and artist seek to orient their lives around it. However, for Murdoch, such recognition of value comes only through the process of “unselfing.” This is a core theme throughout her work.

I will spend the rest of this chapter focusing upon deepening our understanding of Murdoch’s concept of vision through “unselfing.” After discussing unselfing as a process for achieving the moral life, I discuss how vision relates to an ethics of responsibility and show how an ethics of responsibility adds a missing dimension to Murdoch’s ethics of vision. I do this using Niebuhr’s ethics of responsibility. For example, I demonstrate that responsibility lies in the moral agent who not only sees but also “stays with his [or her] action, who accepts the consequences [of his or her] action in the form of reactions and [who] looks forward in a present deed to the continued interactions.”\textsuperscript{145} That is, I show that the moral agent is held “socially accountable” for his or her acts, which adds a social and political dimension to Murdoch’s work. This means that being responsible beyond “seeing” is to act in “solidarity with others” in an ongoing community where everyone is accountable.\textsuperscript{146}

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 93.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{145} Niebuhr, \textit{The Responsible Self}, 64.
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid.
Ethics of Unselfing

Murdoch believes that virtue involves a desire for the achievement of “truth” and “reality,” and that this comes through “unselfing,” a term she draws from Simone Weil. For Murdoch, exemplars of virtue are “unselfish mothers of large families,” “saints,” “heroes,” and “hero-saints,” individuals who, as Tony Milligan, rightly notes, “sacrifice themselves for the sake of the other.”¹⁴⁷

Unselfing is a term that Murdoch uses to emphasize the practice of pulling attention away from the self and directing it toward others. It is a practice that demands a sacrificial commitment on the part of the moral agent.¹⁴⁸ To be virtuous, the moral agent must place others first. That is, the agent must think of others from the outset. In many cases, this involves suffering. Such a sacrificial commitment distinguishes Murdoch’s understanding of virtue from that of Aristotle. For Aristotle, virtue itself is rewarding. For Murdoch, there is no reward or telos (end). In fact, virtue is an achievement tied up in one’s perception of goodness. Murdoch’s classic example of “unselfing” is demonstrated in the illustration noted earlier of the mother-in-law, M, and her daughter-in-law, D. For example, M had a change in her attitude of mind with respect to her temperament toward D. The change of being or change of consciousness is brought about by the “deep process of unselfing” as M sought to attend to D lovingly and justly. In using this illustration, Murdoch demonstrates that she is cognizant of the fact that moral change demands a reorientation of mental energies, the purging of illusions, and the disrobing of “idolatrous


¹⁴⁸ Ibid. 168-189.
images” and their “false consolations” to perceive reality truthfully. As Antonaccio notes, Murdoch seems to be well aware that “moral transformation requires the expunging of self-seeking fantasies, the stripping away of idolatrous images, and their attendant false consolations, in order to gain a truthful perception of reality and others.”

It is here that Antonaccio contends that Murdoch’s notion of “unselfing” is carefully aligned with her attempt to eliminate elements viewed as mythic from religion and to redirect “psychic energies.”

What Murdoch seems to be interested in is the energy generated in attention as a formula for generating such energy to be used in ascetic practices. Central to this process of moral development is what Antonaccio calls *askesis*. It involves a type of transformation that Murdoch sees in artistic practice, and it serves as a reoccurring theme in her understanding of virtue. Although, *askesis* (or ascesis) is “commonly associated with religious practices devoted to the renunciation or mortification of bodily desires for the sake of some spiritual aim,” Murdoch’s use of it is closely connected to its root meaning, “exercises.”

As such, Murdoch uses the term to refer to an extensive assortment of ways that human beings shape their existence in relation to an “ideal good.”

---

149 Antonaccio, *A Philosophy to Live By: Engaging Iris Murdoch*, 8. This represents a religious dimension in Murdoch’s thinking. Here, the real basis of morality is the love and worship of the good. As Antonaccio states, “We have to come to it and let it change us; religion is spiritual change, absolute spiritual change” (Ibid., 33).

150 Ibid., 109.


152 Ibid., 8.

153 Ibid.
the “presence of a renunciatory element.”\textsuperscript{154} Being virtuous requires the purging of “self-seeking fantasies.”\textsuperscript{155} Only through the removal of such fantasies can a truthful perception of reality and others be achieved.\textsuperscript{156} The removal of these fantasies requires a redirection of psychic energies, something that the ordinary person can most confidently achieve.\textsuperscript{157}

Therefore, it is not surprising to see why Murdoch holds that “modern psychology supports the ordinary person’s or ordinary believer’s instinctive sense of the importance of his states of mind and the availability of supplementary energy.”\textsuperscript{158} As a result, I believe that this explains her hope that modern psychology would prompt contemporary behaviorist philosophers to re-examine their discarded concepts of “experience and consciousness.”\textsuperscript{159} To do so would manifest a more accurate depiction of the human condition and point to unselfing as a process for making people’s lives better. Psychology helps with this by exposing to us the dynamics involved with redirecting an energy that is naturally selfish. However, she makes it clear that unselfing requires more than just opening our eyes to see clearly. In her view, seeing clearly requires work because we are in battle with the “fat relentless ego” that continually fabricates and falsifies what the

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 8-9.
\item \textsuperscript{155} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{156} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{157} Ibid. Antonaccio develops this analysis more in chapter 5, titled “The Return of Spiritual Exercises” (126-151), and chapter 6, “The Ascetic Impulse” (152-173).
\item \textsuperscript{158} Murdoch, \textit{The Sovereignty of Good}, 81. The ordinary person and the believer instinctively know that being moral requires help from external forces.
\item \textsuperscript{159} Ibid.
\end{enumerate}
world is really like. It is this selfish nature in the human person that brings forth different qualities and often distortions of consciousness. As a result, “each of us pictures the world in a variety of ways that may differ in quality depending upon our vantage point.” We are not excluded from “fantasy” and “reveries” due to our attractions, needs, and desires. Many of these aspects of our nature are profoundly connected with our energies and our ability to choose and act. Fantasy and reveries blind us. To see clearly, we must work to be completely free of illusion.

In the words of Murdoch, “if quality of consciousness matters, then anything that turns consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity, and realism is to be connected with virtue.” According to this view, virtue results from unselfing, which involves a process of letting go objects of love. “Unselfishness” is one’s attention turned outward away from one’s self toward others as an expression of love. Objectivity here is unlike scientific objectivity that aims at neutrality. Objectivity, for Murdoch, is the building up of selective detachments as one struggles to see what is before one. It involves directing one’s love through a gradual building up of affection that comes with “clear vision.” For Murdoch, realism has much to do with “seeing” as a careful study.

---

160 Ibid., 82. See pages 20-23.

161 Ibid.

162 “The problem,” as noted by Antonaccio, “is how do we distinguish false impositions of from or unity on reality from true ones (or, put differently, how do differentiate fantasy from imagination).” See Antonaccio, A Philosophy to Live By, (198). Here, one must keep in mind Murdoch’s attempt to demythologize religion and speak of loving Good as loving God. With the collapse of religion, it was her attempt to save this unique feature. For valuable study, see Antonaccio, A Philosophy to Live By, 174-201.

163 Murdoch, The Sovereignty of Good, 82.
Murdoch’s Contribution: An Assessment

In this work, I have made no attempt to conduct a complete or comprehensive study of the entire works of Murdoch. The most recent comprehensive reading of Murdoch’s work was done by Maria Antonaccio, as indicated below. However, this study shows that Murdoch’s writings are broad, complex, unsystematic, and sometimes vague; her writings also cover a wide range of materials including both philosophy and fiction. She does not footnote, but she demonstrates that she has a firm grasp of the materials as she moves from argument to argument with ease. The problem is that she also assumes that her readers have a grasp of the materials of those she refers to in her argument, including Descartes, Hume, Kant, Mill, and Marx. For example, she says little to nothing about Marx in her essays but assumes that the reader knows Marx’s agenda. In fact, the discussions in her three essays include discussions on ethics, art, literature, Platonic ethics, virtue theory, and the debate over the relation between philosophy and literature, the retrieval of moral realism in ethics, critiques of liberalism, and the relationship between ethics and religious discourse. In short, Murdoch boldly and brilliantly challenges the major minds of her time.

Writing in an age that she described as scientific and anti-metaphysical in which the dogmas, images, and precepts of religion had lost much of their power, Murdoch demonstrates her concern regarding the inability of her contemporaries to see the great loss of an accurate picture of the human condition inasmuch as these moral philosophers

---

164 Antonaccio provides the most extensive study of Murdoch’s ontological proof in two books: *Picturing the Human* and *A Philosophy to Live By: Engaging Iris Murdoch*.

165 Altorf contends that the reader encounters various unfamiliar arguments, ideas, and thinkers, which are often referred to in passing. Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imaging*, 17.
all supported a narrow conception of human moral agency, something she called the “current view.” Here, as Charles Taylor believes, Murdoch was “criticizing the narrowness of moral philosophy.”¹⁶⁶ Thus, what she was writing against was a reductionistic account of the human individual.

At the heart of her concern is a worry about the effect of this loss on our ability to theorize adequately about the reality of human beings. In short, she is concerned about how we picture the human person.¹⁶⁷ She insists that morality must endeavor to be a form of metaphysical realism, and she is wary of appeals to consensus or community as an easily corruptible standard for moral claims.¹⁶⁸ In so doing, she depicts the human person with “inward depths and experiences that cannot be reduced to a system of public or collective meanings.”¹⁶⁹

However, to understand Murdoch’s work, one must know that she uses a conceptual approach to understanding morality that is radically different from standard philosophical arguments.¹⁷⁰ The conceptual approach is a form of metaphysical realism that calls for the imaginative construction of ideas, thoughts, and language built upon pictures. Murdoch uses this form of metaphysical realism as a way of understanding the moral life that can depict the moral agent with inward depths and experiences. In so

¹⁶⁶ Taylor, “Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy” in Antonaccio and Schweiker, eds., Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness, 5.

¹⁶⁷ Antonaccio, Picturing the Human, 32.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 4.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

doing, Antonaccio notes,

Murdoch provides conceptual schemes and explanatory pictures of human moral being in relation to the good. These pictures of the human have retained their explanatory force and evocative power over several decades and through cultural and philosophical shifts that might have rendered them obsolete. This testifies to the depth and insight of Iris Murdoch’s moral imagination.\footnote{Antonaccio, \textit{Picturing the Human}, 194.}

The conceptual approach provides an accurate picture of the condition of humankind described by Murdoch as a “creature of pictures.” Ultimately, her writing is framed through this understanding as she seeks to provide a normative account of human agency against a background soaked in value. Plato’s love of the Good and Freud’s pessimistic view, although they did not fully agree, together provide an adequate framework for understanding such a condition. As Tracy states:

Of course, neither Murdoch nor any other good interpreter of eros and the Good would claim that Plato and Freud share the same view of our situation. But Iris Murdoch does show their affinities by her careful interpretation of central factors in both Plato’s and Freud’s different but oddly related notions of the need for therapy in the soul before any objective truth or goodness can be claimed.\footnote{Tracy, “Iris Murdoch and the Many Faces of Plato,” in Antonaccio and Schweiker, eds., \textit{Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness}, 61.}

Murdoch excludes structural violence in her philosophical understanding of the individual self, so much so that she misses the role that structural violence plays in distorting society’s vision of whole classes of others. Social justice issues were not her concern. In fact, in Martha Nussbaum’s critique of Murdoch, she holds that “political and social determinants of a moral vision” seem to escape Murdoch’s “interest.”\footnote{Martha C. Nussbaum, “When She Was Good,” in review essay of Peter J. Conradi’s book \textit{Iris Murdoch: A Life}. \textit{The New Republic} (December 31 & January 7, 2002), 32.}

Nussbaum goes on to say that “all too rarely does Murdoch suggest that goodness
requires reflection about social justice.” As a result, the lack of a more adequate political and social world diminishes the relevance of her ideas to complex social situations.

Niebuhr adds a distinctive element that Murdoch misses by filling this void. Niebuhr’s concern for the social self and social solidarity points us in the direction of social justice. Niebuhr’s “man the answerer” responds to actions upon him as a “part of a total action, something which means the total action or derives its meaning from the whole.” The moral agent’s responses are personal and social. The agent’s action “exists in responses . . . to others who as Thou’s are members of a group in whose interactions constancies are present in such a way that the self can interpret present action and anticipate future action upon it.” As a result, Niebuhr’s ethics of responsibility actually broadens our understanding of vision as it relates to responsible action. In this way, he directs our attention toward acting fittingly. With Niebuhr, “vision” occasions right action, but the focus is not on the individual; it is rather on the community of which the individual is a part.

---

174 Ibid.

175 Ibid. However, it must also be stated that for Murdoch self-love is a concern. Egoism automatically loves the self in excess and thus paints pictures of fantasy. Built in is a standard of somebodiness that begins with the self. In fact, this standard is super imposed upon the self and thus gives the self a grandiose attitude, a superiority complex.

In contrast to Murdoch’s self, African-Americans do not have a problem with self-love. The problem has much to do with a lack of love received. Such a deficit of love imposes an inferiority complex upon the minority agent. It is this lack of love of neighbor that prevents one from not only seeing themselves but from seeing others. For African Americans, ethics begin with self-love. However, there is no dualism between love of self and love of others. They are one and the same because the self is viewed as being socially constructed, and, in order to love oneself one must love others. In this way, to exist is to recognize the existence of others. Value begins with the recognition of the image of God and moves outward others. It is both personal and communal.


177 Ibid., 78.
Murdoch’s focus is almost completely upon the individual and her stress is on attention and vision. Niebuhr, however, focuses on the individual and society, and his stress is upon attention and how it requires response and action. He develops social attention to broad issues of justice, and Murdoch focuses on a moral psychology of the self. Murdoch says that, if one sees accurately, right action will follow, but she is vague on what the action may require. In this way, while her work helps to provide accuracy in our ability to see the significance of the texture that makes up human lives, Murdoch never really tells us what to do when certain conditions are identified. In the words of Nussbaum, “Murdoch tends to veer sharply away from those questions, and even to suggest that in the end they did not matter, that the only important thing was each person’s struggle for self-perfection.”178

While I deeply appreciate much of Murdoch’s agenda, I must agree with Nussbaum’s highlighting of the significance of the issues and concerns that Murdoch tends to ignore. Murdoch is short on analysis of action and social justice. Niebuhr’s ethics of responsibility brings in a social awareness that enriches our understanding of vision and action in ways that help to move toward social justice. Thus, my engagement with Niebuhr is driven by his affirmation of the importance of vision, and he had a social agenda. This agenda involves the task to “analyze ‘ethos,’ to lay bare the roots and fundamental character of a community’s moral life” in order to “[understand] what ought to be done.”179 He explores how we see clearly, respond fittingly, and express our commitment to be accountable to others, ourselves, and God. Lifting up these important

178 See also Antonaccio, *A Philosophy to Live By*, 32

themes helps to engage the work of Martin Luther King Jr. and Emilie Townes. Niebuhr’s focus upon fitting action has provided a way to discuss social justice issues and in a more concrete way to express the connection between clear “vision” and “right action.”

H. Richard Niebuhr and the Ethics of Responsibility

Like Murdoch, Niebuhr criticizes utilitarian and deontological models of agency as being reductionistic. He celebrates the many contributions made by the “Man the Maker” and “Man the Citizen” images at “enabling us to understand broad ranges of human existence” and at offering us helpful “guidance in making complex decisions,” but he points out the failure to move beyond “images” and “hypotheses” to fully capture “truthful copies of reality.” He correctly asserts that the old images of “Man the Maker” and “Man the Citizen” reduced human moral existence to a set of rules, laws, and goals. Niebuhr, focusing on the social self and social solidarity, sees the agent as homo dialogicus, a claim that implies the “notion that conceptions of human existence are deeply bound to cultural forces shaping how the world is structured and how goodness is understood.” The Maker and Citizen images fail to capture this aspect of reality. Niebuhr states that “Man as Maker subordinates the giving of laws to the work of constructions. The right is to be defined by reference to the good.” Moral action is connected to the “attainment of a desired or desirable end” sought through utilitarian

180 Ibid., 56.
181 Ibid.
182 Ibid.
rules designed as “means to an ends.” Niebuhr claims that Man the Citizen seeks “equally to subordinate the good to the right.” When the Citizen image is used to depict the moral life, moral action is connected to the “right life.” The focus is on the now. There is “no future ideal” and the right life is the good life. When both deontological and utilitarian images are analyzed together to apprehend our existence, the images create a conflicting “double theory” involving an extension of practical questions. For example, the practical question “What shall I do?” or “What shall we do?” becomes the question “What is required and by whom is it required?” These questions present the moral life as an explanation and justification of laws and authority.

Moreover, the Maker and Citizen images fail to capture the “material of our own actions,” which is the part of our actions that defines who we are as individuals and groups. For example, we are responsive beings. We address each other and engage in dialogue in response to questions, to defend ourselves from both verbal and physical attacks, to make injunctions and to meet challenges and so on. These are common experiences that are not depicted in the “old images,” and for Niebuhr, they provide evidence that our actions have the characteristics of being responsible. That is, we constantly respond to forces that act upon us. Niebuhr vehemently claims that the image of “responsibility brings into view aspects of our self-defining conduct that are obscured

---

183 Ibid., 55.
184 Ibid.
185 Ibid., 55-56.
186 Ibid., 56.
187 Ibid. Dialogue is one example of actions that define who we are that cannot be expressed in the old images.
when Man the Maker and Man the Citizen are used.”

Unlike the Man the Maker and Man the Citizen images, “responsibility” causes us to “feel fear, confidence, appetite, anger, and pity at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way.”

By connecting Murdoch’s ethics of vision with Niebuhr’s ethics of responsibility, the close relation between the two approaches becomes evident. For example, at a fundamental level, both approaches assert that human agents are not simply responsive beings. Human agents are influenced by values that transcend the physical world. Human agents respond to sacred values that are more spiritual than physical. Like Murdoch, Niebuhr’s view suggests that the transcendent “center of value” to which moral agency is ordered is not only the rubric by which all things are measured and ordered around but that the moral agency is also God. Niebuhr argues that God intimately involves Himself or Herself with humans by interacting with them spiritually. The Divine interacts with humanity as humans respond by consent to the authority of the Scriptures, the Church and the Christian community. Divinity is revealed in the “Son” and is best expressed as “God with us.” On this note, Niebuhr states that “moral action is human action in response to the governing action of God.” Thus, Niebuhr contends that God acts upon

---

188 Ibid., 57.
189 Ibid.
190 For a useful discussion on H. Richard Niebuhr’s Theology, see C. David Grant, God the Center of Value: Value Theory in the Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1984).
191 Niebuhr, The Responsible Self, 24-25.
192 Ibid., 32.
the agent, and the agent answers by responding to God with a “fitting” response, which is done with the help of not only a moral effort and a moral imagination but also with the help of God and others.193

According to Niebuhr, God is both ruler and sustainer.194 Divine grace influences the agent’s response when the agent fixes his or her attention on God.195 God, as ruler and sustainer, forms the heart of Niebuhr’s theory of ethics. Divine grace drives the agent toward morality. The responsible self is driven to respond within the boundaries of the Christian community and to all God’s actions in history and in nature. The responsible agent must respond in solidarity with his or her community, while responding to God’s creative power as interpreted by both the agent and the community to which he or she belongs. Therefore, the agent’s expressed solidarity is anticipated, because the agent develops a pattern of responses as he or she becomes engaged in patterns of interaction within the community.196

The concept of vision is significant here because, as Niebuhr states, in order to respond appropriately, humans must not only perceive the world, but also pose the

193 Ibid.

194 Niebuhr, The Responsible Self, 33.


196 Because the agent participates in patterns of ongoing interactions, the agent responds to past interactions in the present while anticipating interaction from future participants. One’s interaction is time sensitive. A recognition of this aspect of human agency also escapes “man the maker” and the “law-consenting man” images. See Niebuhr, The Responsible Self, 90-107.
question at the core of Niebuhr’s thought: “What is going on?” This question not only involves being able to give a detailed account of the things that make up one’s environment, but it also emphasizes the importance of self-knowledge, both internally and externally.\textsuperscript{197} Internal self-knowledge refers to the interiority of the person performing the action. “Who am I” and “what am I becoming”\textsuperscript{198} are questions concerning the agent’s entire being (ontologically and epistemologically). Thus, an ethics of being is concerned with the agent’s inner self. It implies that God’s actions are heart-related, so one must respond from the heart if one is to respond appropriately.\textsuperscript{199} This involves a process in which patterns of action reveal identities; a person’s inner-self or character is exposed. There is an intrinsic relationship between conduct and character. Therefore, conduct is a reflection of character. As a result, the question of accuracy of vision becomes important in accurately interpreting what is going on in order to respond fittingly. A moral response identifies the character of the person, and a moral person’s response stems from character.

The ethics of vision and responsibility are concerned with the interior and exterior of a person and focuses on accuracy of moral response. In other words, discipleship supports and specifies what religion discloses about the relational nature of the person,

\textsuperscript{197} Niebuhr, \textit{The Responsible Self}, 60.

\textsuperscript{198} For a discussion on interiority and exteriority concerning an ethics of being and an ethics of doing, see Richard M. Gula, SS., \textit{Reason Informed by Faith, Foundation of Catholic Morality} (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 6-9.

\textsuperscript{199} This means that God’s actions are sensitive. The Divine is concerned about persons, and, as a result, every human being should be treated with dignity and respect. For a valuable study, see Richard M. Gula, SS., \textit{Reason Informed by Faith: Foundations of Catholic Morality}. Gula also adopts H. Richard Niebuhr’s “ethics of responsibility.” Gula rightly holds that actions are wrong because they are not properly responsive to what God enables and requires. For him, this distinguishes the morality of persons who live by religious beliefs from those who do not (Ibid, 8).
and a person’s life is lived in absolute openness and self-giving to God and to other people, which is rarely achieved, according to Murdoch.\textsuperscript{200} For Niebuhr, one primary concern is “gaining clarity of vision.”\textsuperscript{201} In fact, he considers it the fundamental task and purpose of moral theology. He states that theology is a “reflection on the action and nature of God,” while “ethics is the response of man to the action and nature of God.”\textsuperscript{202} In other words, moral theology is concerned with teaching people to see and act responsibly within ongoing patterns of interactions. Niebuhr believes that seeing is essential in leading a moral life. As a result, accuracy of vision leads to a truthful depiction of reality, and clear vision results in right actions. If one sees clearly, one responds correctly. The problem is that sin (or ego) attempts to obstruct the moral path as a result of both internal and external forces.\textsuperscript{203} Divine grace provides empowerment and the drive to engage internal and external forces as individuals and as communities.

**Vision and Responsibility and the Problem of Racial Injustice**

In this chapter, I have focused on an “ethics of vision” as it is understood in the work of Iris Murdoch, who not only argues that moral good should be conceived through vision but actually recasts the work of Plato, specifically his understanding of Good, the

\textsuperscript{200} Individuals Murdoch describes as moral are Christ, Socrates, certain saints, perhaps some simple people, and mothers of large families. According to Murdoch’s views, there is always room for improvement regarding morality. See Murdoch, “On ‘God’ and ‘Good’,” in *Sovereignty of Good*, 51-52.

\textsuperscript{201} Häring, *The Law of Christ*, 7.

\textsuperscript{202} Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 40.

\textsuperscript{203} Ibid., 142. To be moral as a Christian, discipleship requires that the moral agent must not only overcome a “self-centered” personalism but the agent must also recognize that he or she is a social being who must live in faithful devotion to his or her community amongst diverse communities that share conflicting interests and loyalties to which the agent will never respond fittingly.
Cave, and perception. This study is based on her understanding of vision, which is supported by those scholars who have been influenced by her work.

The ethics of vision asserts that morality is a form of metaphysical realism. In other words, morality consists of adequate conceptions and interpretations of situations that correspond to reality and offers a technique for analyzing the “inner life” in the sense of personal attitudes and visions that do not take the form of choice-structured arguments.\(^\text{204}\) It is a realist approach to moral problems, involving seeing reality clearly. It conveys a type of evaluative knowledge, or awareness, directed toward an object of interest and assisted by moral imagination and moral effort.\(^\text{205}\)

Therefore, the ethics of vision involves a way of seeing directed under the authority of the Good with the Good being an idea of perfection.\(^\text{206}\) This perfection is the “center of value,” and it not only represents the rubric by which all things are measured, but it also provides the source of energy that sustains all things. This approach bases virtue on perceiving and interpreting what one sees before acting.\(^\text{207}\) It is to perceive reality and understand reality truthfully. Emphasis is placed on ‘seeing’ as a moral

\(^{204}\) Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 80-81. A conceptual approach, which is a type of metaphysical realism, is not only used by Murdoch. It is also used by Maria Antonaccio and Marije Altorf in order to understand the work of Murdoch.


\(^{206}\) The term consolation is used to convey a sense of loving Good as in loving God. For Murdoch, it is natural for one to love God and to speak in terms of loving God before one considers loving Good. Murdoch uses Good as a substitute for God. Her theory is that the love of Good would lead one to clarity of vision. Here, Good is consoling as an object of attention. It helps one to apprehend the “individual and reality (41).” Put another way, the consoling power of Good lies in its ability to allow one to apprehend the reality of one’s surrounding.

\(^{207}\) Murdoch uses a conceptual-centered approach for conveying her understanding of a moral life. Antonaccio and Altorf also use this approach in understanding Murdoch’s work. However, some may see this approach as being a luxury.
discipline. Morality is striving to discover the truths that exist without being recognized. Perceiving truth directs actions by eliminating choices.

The ethics of vision is also linked to the Greek culture and is discussed in the *Republic* as well as *Nicomachean ethics*; however, its more recent use represents a shift in moral thinking from an act-centered approach that focuses on structures and functions to a more person-centered approach that focuses upon activities, as discussed previously in this chapter. The concept of experience is central to both works. In their work, Iris Murdoch and H. Richard Niebuhr view the world as a mystery in which truth is to be discovered. Experience plays a significant role not only in a perception of the world but also in encountering the world and being encountered by the world. Truths are intrinsically knowable through a moral imagination and deep discernment. One responds to the world and is shaped by the world as he or she participates in shaping the world, which is achieved by attending to “particulars.” Attending allows one to not only see clearly but to also mirror what one sees and to use one’s imagination to impact what is seen. This implies that the agent is deeply involved within his or her relationship with the world and that he or she must strive to correctly participate in it.

---

208 A treatment of these two approaches can be found in the work of Bridget Clarke, who developed an account of moral perception rooted in the writings of Aristotle and Iris Murdoch (Clarke, 2003, p. iii). She stresses that the concept of vision has been offered in recent years as an alternative to principle-centered accounts of virtue and practical reason. Also see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II. 4.1105a30. Ethics of vision is implied where Aristotle declares that an agent “must be in a certain condition” in order for certain acts that are in accordance with virtue to be just and temperate. The agent must aim to be between two extremes.

209 This is something that is also evidenced in Thomistic ethics. See Aquinas’ discussion in the *Summa Theologica* on “relation.” “[Relations] signify a respect that affects a thing related and tends from that thing to something else” (*ST* Ia Q 28 A 2).
Therefore, “ethics of vision” is an approach that has been used in both Christian ethics and moral philosophy to stress the importance of seeing as a device for interpreting and valuing the things that impact our lives. A fitting response is accommodated by the agent’s interpretation and values the reality that the agent is confronted with. The reality that moves the agent out of isolation and places the agent in a relationship with others within a historical setting or context forms the background of the agent’s response.210 Here, the moral agent uses all his or her faculties to gain insight about a situation in order to interpret and respond to the reality around him or her.

Unlike Niebuhr, Murdoch emphasizes that vision is the totality for all moral striving. For her, vision itself is a moral achievement. To see clearly, humans must overcome self-deception. The self must overcome the ego in order to see clearly and to see things as they are. Thus, the ethics of vision imply that if one is to discover the hidden truths of the world, then one must exercise a life of selflessness. Therefore, it is through conquering ego and valuing the world that one is able to truly see the world and become virtuous. Instead of asking the question “what is happening,” Murdoch believes that it is a given that one already apprehends more than one can handle from one’s surrounding. The problem for the agent is seeing clearly in order to move beyond fantasy.211 Thus, Murdoch’s question becomes a question of clarification. If the agent sees clearly, the right action inevitably follows when the agent acts out of obedience to what is seen.

210 Here, ethics attempts to help us “understand ourselves as responsible beings” and “our world as the place in which the responsible existence of the human community is exercised. Its practical utility is in its clarification, its interpretation, and its provision of a pattern of meaning and understanding in which human action can be morally responsible.” Niebuhr, The Responsible Self, 18.

Therefore, Murdoch asserts that morality is born out of “attention,” which is a loving and just gaze directed toward another using a moral imagination and moral effort. It is the quality of one’s ability to attend to others through deep loving and just discernment without prejudicial motives that determines the moral quality of one’s response.

Therefore, “ethics of vision” consists of evaluation guided by aesthetic values and principles, which concern a grasp of particulars. It reveals the relationship between judgment and values and combines Christian ethics with moral philosophy. There is a combination because Christian ethics and moral philosophy share common values. For example, Christian ethics and moral philosophy are concerned with morality and virtue and both perceive morality as a spiritual task. 212

In using the technique of vision, the agent questions his or her ability to see clearly, which is a question concerning particulars. The other-directedness which involves the agent directing his or her attention toward others is an exercise of love or empathy, which is achieved through virtue and places the agent in proximity to the Good. 213 It is a principle-based ethical approach that involves a relationship between love, justice, and freedom. Character is identified as the unified self. It is a consummation of perceptions and responses stamped upon the soul of the individual self, which gives the individual a sense of being or somebodiness. There is a close relationship between being and doing, and both are intimately related to vision. Thus, character is the unified identification of self, a self that is inevitably, deeply involved in the mystery of the world. After being moved by a desire to know truth, the agent encounters reality and responds...

---


213 Attention produces virtue only when it is other directed. This is the exercise of love. Virtue then increases one’s ability to attend. In this way, virtue empowers the moral agent.
by freely asking the question: “Am I seeing correctly?” The agent’s freedom is primarily in his or her ability to see rather than his or her ability to choose, and clarity of vision results from demonstrating justice and love toward others. To love others is to see others as mysteries and not as equations with finite conclusions (or outcomes). This involves seeing others as ends in themselves as opposed to a means to some personal gain motivated by selfishness. A moral response will always result in an elimination of choices and a correct response. The notion that moral people see and are seen is correctly implied, which means that moral people respond lovely and justly; and, their efforts are experienced by others. Niebuhr affirms this assertion and moves us toward a more socially conscious vision. He asserts that being responsible demands not only that we see others but that we also respond as a community of solidarity. He envisions humans engaged in a dialogue in which the moral agent begins a journey of self-understanding. According to Niebuhr, the self is social.

In contrast, Murdoch’s view is limited to the individual self. She fails to consider the moral dynamics associated with the social self, especially regarding issues of social justice. Niebuhr’s work is more comprehensive regarding the social self and social justice. Although he emphasizes vision and action, he argues that other dynamics are also essential. First, the moral agent is tied to a community or communities to whom he or she must be responsible. Second, the self is only a self as related to other individuals. Third, the moral agent must respond to cultural and moral forces that shape him or her. Fourth, the agent must transform internal and external forces that negatively affect the self. As a result, the world shapes the agent as the agent shapes the world in a community of

\[214\] See citation above.
relationships. Thus, to respond correctly, the individual must both see in the moral sense and respond in light of that ability to interpret ongoing patterns of interactions. A moral response is a virtuous response that fits within the fabric of the ongoing relationship between the individual and the community. Vision is intrinsically connected with virtue and plays a major role in shaping the agent and therefore the world around him or her. Although “seeing” occasions the right action and freedom is the experience of accurate vision, responsibility is the core of moral life. In fact, responsibility demands not only clear vision but an accurate interpretation of a situation in solidarity with the group to which one is accountable in light of a transcendent Good or God. The freedom experienced is not only a freedom from fantasy and blinding self-centered aims and images, it is also a freedom experienced in harmony with other human beings and the Divine.

Although becoming selfless eliminates fantasy on an individual level, it does little to transform unjust structures that violently return attention to the social self. Responsibility drives the moral agent to see clearly and to help others see clearly through acts of social justice. Social justice holds the agent and the community accountable to one another. It challenges concepts that induce blindness, such as racism, sexism, and classism. Racism, like sexism and classism, impairs judgment. It is a type of blindness that produces irresponsible action. By disguising truths, it prevents the moral agent from seeing what is really there to see. In fact, racial injustice significantly contributes to ongoing failures in seeing clearly and choosing correctly. Thus, racial injustice denies freedom to the moral agent and the individual whom he or she fails to see clearly. Racism is a distortion that imposes inaccurate portrayals of human beings and dehumanizes the
agent and those around him or her. It also creates and sustains covert structures of violence that perpetually blind the oppressed and the oppressor and creates superiority and inferiority complexes. Through the works of Niebuhr and Murdoch, the presence of these structures is exposed. For example, the ethics of vision and responsibility can help individuals see and understand unjust practices that are widespread and often appear normal because they are basic “givens” of social or national life and a part of reality. Murdoch and Niebuhr illustrate the importance of seeing and responding fittingly in the work of King and Townes, whereas the work of King and Townes demonstrates in a concrete way why the significance of Murdoch and Niebuhr’s understanding of vision is so important.

Liberationist thinkers like King and Townes are responding to forces that are acting upon not only them but also their communities. King is responding to the issues of race and economic oppression from deep inside a community which has suffered from centuries of racial violence because of society’s failure to see the harm it has inflicted on itself. An ethics of vision and responsibility helps King better grasp a truthful depiction of the realities of his world. For instance, it helps him identify the specific needs and desires of those around him with an increasing awareness of what is going on and allows him to be sensitive to such realities. It allows King to name and describe the condition of his time, “social leprosy,” and to address such a condition as he became aware of the appetites, motives, fears, and pities of divided communities, summed up in inferiority and superiority complexes. Identifying and rightly responding to such time-sensitive conditions, which pull our attention, when distorted, away from our neighbors, allows us to escape the reach of utilitarian and deontological accounts of human agency. In chapter
two, an ethics of vision helps us account for these aspects of human agency.

Likewise in chapter three, Townes’s time-sensitive approach to human agency is a response to the conditions of her times.\textsuperscript{215} She complements King’s time-sensitive approach while broadening its reach in addressing multidimensional levels of oppression experienced by those whose suffering reaches beyond racial and economic oppression. Declaring herself to be a Niebuhrian and using a reflection and action model to depict a truthful grasp of reality, she affirms the work of Murdoch and Niebuhr while simultaneously exposing structures of violence involving race, class, gender, homophobia, and age.\textsuperscript{216} An ethics of vision and responsibility helps her unmask what she calls “cultural productions” both visible and invisible that block our vision and brings about irresponsible action. An exploration of such forces provides concrete evidence of the significance of the theoretical work of Murdoch and Niebuhr. Townes addresses issues of health care, fantasy, and hegemony—aspects of human agency that escape utilitarian and deontological models of agency. In this way, the work of Murdoch and Niebuhr will be very helpful in highlighting distinct aspects of the work of King and Townes.

In this chapter, I have discussed the origin of “the ethics of vision” as it is related to Christian ethics and moral philosophy to make a connection between Murdoch’s work and Niebuhr’s work, which will be further developed in later chapters. I focus on this because I am curious about the ethics of vision as it relates to Christian ethics, and I plan

\textsuperscript{215} A time-sensitive approach to human agency means that human agency is historically conditioned. Humans are time-sensitive beings. People travel with their history. As a result, people respond to the world in light of their experiences. This is clearly demonstrated in Chapters Two and Three.

to highlight the significance of Murdoch’s work in understanding human existence and exploring its significance for shedding light on the insights and agendas developed by King and Townes.
CHAPTER TWO

ETHICS OF VISION AND MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

In this chapter, I correlate Murdoch’s understanding of the centrality of vision and H. Richard Niebuhr’s stress on attention and responsibility with the life, leadership, and writings of the great civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I believe King offers a historic example that highlights the distinctive role that vision plays in the moral lives of individuals and whole societies. I argue that the ethics of vision and responsibility presents a paradigm or frame of understanding about how ethics function that offers a distinctive vantage point for appreciating the logic, function, and theological and ethical sophistication of King’s leadership, speeches, sermons, and writings.

While I appreciate Murdoch’s creative achievements in her articulation of a critique of the main streams of modern ethical theory and her emphasis on the role of vision in the moral life, I also agree with Martha Nussbaum’s critique noted earlier that Murdoch focuses too tightly on the individual and seems uninterested in understanding how societal shaping of individuals constructs and sustains patterns of societal-wide exclusion, bias, and injustice. Whereas Murdoch reaches to Freud to articulate an account of egoism as the primary obstacle in the moral life, King, raised in the American Black church tradition and schooled in Christian theology and ethics, has the broader concern to link egoism with analyses of social oppression, economic injustice, a history of deep
racial oppression, and Gandhi’s critique of colonialism. Murdoch is weak on any interest in or discussion of how communities and societies shape individuals.

In short, Murdoch, in reaching to Freud, reaches to psychology and develops a focus on moral agency as rooted in an overcoming of individual egoism. King, like Niebuhr, is rooted in the Christian scriptural and theological accounts that stress how the individual participates within a broader community and how such communities often can be biased and corrupted by group identification and a denigration of other social groupings. In short, where Murdoch reaches to philosophy and psychology to concentrate on a generic account of the individual person, King appropriates the Hebrew Bible’s prophetic tradition of social critique as well as the New Testament’s emphasis on Jesus’s ethic of love. He reaches to the sweep of biblical accounts of Israel’s Exodus out of Egypt to understand the power of slavery and social oppression and to the New Testament accounts of Jesus to reflect on his ethic of love. Nussbaum is right that where Murdoch is focused on the individual self-overcoming egoism and extending care as love outward to others, she pays almost no attention to broader sociological understandings of the need to promote social justice and just social policies.

King is arguably best understood as a moralist of vision. It is true that he would have American society live according to its duties and obligations to respect the common humanity and personhood of all as the deontological heritage of ethics maintains, and he calls Americans to live out a better range of society-wide consequences flowing from civil rights and a commitment to more equitable social policies as the utilitarian ethical tradition emphasizes. I believe, however, that in terms of ethical theory, naming King as a deontologist or a utilitarian simply misses too much of what is distinctive of and most
creative and central to King’s life mission and his choice of practices aimed at promoting
social change. King is most helpfully understood, I believe, through the lenses of the
ethics of vision and responsibility. King’s life and works centered on helping American
society come to see (in the moral sense of seeing) that all of reality hinges upon moral
foundations, in which moral laws of the universe, like physical laws, must be abided by.¹

King believed that American society could come to see the vicious injustice of racism
and segregation and that a true “beloved community” could be realized.² Likewise, I
believe that King’s nonviolent agenda in the civil rights movement and its profound real-
world impact offer concrete illustrations of the pragmatic societal significance of the
rather generalistic and philosophically theoretical accounts of the dynamics of vision and
responsibility offered by Murdoch and Niebuhr.

Murdoch and Niebuhr, I believe, give us a most helpful new lens on the work and
writings of King that let us appreciate the true sophistication of his Christian ethical
understanding and agenda. In turn, King’s life and writings illustrate a number of the
concrete practices designed for focusing society’s attention and mobilizing its sense of
responsibility. Where Murdoch’s and Niebuhr’s reflections on the ethics of vision and

¹ Carson, Clayborne, “Martin Luther King Jr. and the African American Social Gospel,” in *African
American Religious Thought: An Anthology*, ed. Cornel West and Eddie C. Glaude Jr. (Louisville and
London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 710. This is to have clarity of vision, to see things as the
way they are. This is, in Murdoch’s words, “just vision.”

² Here, the “beloved community,” a sign and symbol of the reign of God’s kingdom, is a
conceptual motif that King adopts from Walter Rauschenbusch as rightly suggested by Luther Ivory. Ivory
contends that King “implemented two important concepts from Rauschenbusch that enabled him to arrive
at significant conceptual clarity,” Rauschenbusch’s “notion of the ‘beloved community’ subsumed under
his broader conceptual motif of the kingdom of God, humanity organized according to the will of God”
(99–100). These concepts helped King to “envision and articulate an eschatological goal with historical
concreteness and specificity” (100). For a valuable discussion, see Luther Ivory, *Toward a Theology of
Radical Involvement* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997). Also, implied here is King’s unwavering
belief in America and that right action will follow correct vision.
responsibility are on a broadly generalistic level of ethical theory, King’s life and writings display in concrete detail what we might call the “praxis of vision and responsibility.” Thus, a correlation of the ethics of vision and responsibility, as understood by Murdoch and Niebuhr on the one hand, and King’s mission and agenda on the other, enriches our understanding of each.

In short, I argue that the ethics of vision and responsibility offers a perspective that grasps the distinctive moral sophistication and power of King’s life, his nonviolent campaigns for social justice, his insight into the importance of demonstrations and marches to attract and focus moral attention, and his words so carefully chosen to help dominant White society “see” the full humanity of African Americans. First, his agenda of civil rights required powerful social change to push new national legislation to protect the voting rights of African Americans. To achieve this, King and his colleagues helped mobilize the hopes, discipline, and courage of Black Americans to take concrete actions toward civil rights.

This movement required a moral educational outreach via words and deeds to broad ranges of White American society to attend to something that for too long had easily been ignored—namely, the reality of the vast suffering inflicted upon Black American citizens by America’s racist policies of segregation. King and others staged powerful and dramatic demonstrations, sit-ins, and marches that pulled the attention of Middle America and helped it begin to “see.”

---

3 Luther Ivory, *Toward a Theology of Radical Involvement: The Theological Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997). It is a conception of God as “love in action,” which Ivory calls the linchpin of King’s theological framework. In the words of Ivory, it is the axis upon which King’s theological program turns. Here, attention and responsibility are central to King’s concern. Implied is an ethics of responsibility (46–65).
Second, King’s and his fellow civil rights leaders’ advocacy of nonviolent resistance to segregation played a pivotal role in this movement’s pedagogy of vision. From his study of Gandhi and the Indian Independence movement, King knew that any violent resistance to oppression by the oppressed typically triggers violence in response. If a resistance movement opts for violent resistance, this will typically and quickly mobilize a sense of justification of the use of violence by the established authorities—the oppressive system. In the cases of India under British colonial rule and of Black Americans in segregated America, the ruling governmental authorities held a near monopoly on the means of mass violence.

Also, a liberation movement that resorts to violent resistance too easily allows the dominant society to depict the oppressed as mere wild and dangerous troublemakers. It is much more difficult for mainstream society to come to see the justice of the cause of the oppressed if mainstream society is being confronted with rocks or bullets. A nonviolent approach to social reform, however, works well by its disciplined avoidance of occasions that would encourage the British or the American White society to feel massively threatened. With a disciplined avoidance of any hyped sense of dangerous threat, nonviolent resistance campaigns allow for a calmer process of educational attention to begin and develop. These sorts of campaigns helped American society begin to be forced to concentrate attention on the scale of the suffering of Black Americans caused by America’s racist laws. It helped America focus its attention on the shocking ethical gap between our expressed constitutional ideals of equality and freedom and the harsh ugliness of our discriminatory practices. The civil rights marches, demonstrations, and speeches put on clear display the full humanity and basic dignity and courage of Black
Americans. In these ways, King’s actions and words make concrete and vivid, in an important way, how significant and practically relevant Murdoch’s and Niebuhr’s rather general descriptions are of the moral life. The civil rights movement centered on a process of moral pedagogy in which events and words were carefully chosen to prompt a process of attention and new seeing.

For several decades now, King’s writings and achievements have been widely admired across American society and, indeed, around the world. His life and teachings are examined in elementary, middle, and high schools across our country and in college, university, and seminary classrooms. He is admired primarily as a great religious leader and activist of historical importance, but not so much as a theological innovator or theological ethicist. In academic theological circles, King is acclaimed for his social justice work, but he is not generally regarded as a significant moral theologian or Christian ethicist. This is because he never developed a formal analysis of religious ethical theory, nor did he typically write in a formal academic way, displaying clear mastery of the classic literature of the field and citing sources via footnotes. King neither developed a comprehensive theory of Christian ethics, nor did he elaborate a sustained formal ethical account of the moral principles needed for engaging a range of moral problems. This is not at all surprising for one so busy with heavy responsibilities that were thrust upon him at such a young age.

---

4 I would say that this is specifically because many theologians have not considered the theological efforts of King, as suggested by James Cone, who, along with King, was identified as one of the major theologians of the twentieth century, “Black or White,” by Peter Paris, a leading Christian ethicist. For valuable discussion, see Peter Paris, *Black Leaders in Conflict: Joseph H. Jackson, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Adam Clayton Powell Jr.* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1978).

In this chapter, I draw on many sources, but especially on *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr.* (hereafter *The King Papers*) and James M. Washington’s *A Testament of Hope.* These works, especially *The King Papers*, demonstrate that a personalist understanding of agency is central to King’s moral perception. This is important because a personalist understanding of moral agency represents the starting point for King’s ethics of vision. I explore these claims and examine how King’s moral agenda can be most helpfully interpreted along the lines of the ethics of vision and responsibility examined in Chapter One.

**Major Interpreters of King**

In this section, I articulate the diverse views of major interpreters of Martin Luther King Jr., including Peter Paris, James Cone, Robert Franklin, Luther Ivory, and Samuel L. Roberts. In doing so, I identify the interpretation of “ethics of vision and responsibility” as it is reflected in some of these different understandings of King. Their interpretations of King demonstrate that King’s life as a moralist involved what Niebuhr calls “fitting actions.” For example, although King was not a perfect man, Paris and Franklin identified King as an “exemplar of virtue ethics”—types of moral excellence such as beneficence, forbearance, practical wisdom, improvisation, long suffering,

---

6 Clayborne Carson, Ralph E. Luker, and Penny A. Russell, eds., *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr.*, vol. 1, *Called to Serve, January 1929–June 1951* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992) (hereafter *The King Papers*). The Martin Luther King Jr. Papers Project documents the family’s longstanding ties to Ebenezer Baptist Church and the social gospel ministries of his father and grandfather, and suggests that the current trend in scholarship may understate the extent to which King’s African American religious roots were intertwined with the European American influences of his collegiate years. It provides a new understanding of King’s graduate school experiences and demonstrates reliable expressions by King of his evolving *weltanschauung*. It makes clear that King’s academic experience did not separate him from his historical heritage—transracial leadership—deeply influenced by his childhood immersion into religious life. (Ibid., 32) Also see Washington, James M., ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986).

forgiveness, and justice, that are essential to an ethics of vision and responsibility. In fact, each of these particular virtues represents King’s ability to hit a mean between two extremes after focusing his attention toward something greater than himself—God. These interpreters stress that it is this type of life, resulting from King’s understanding of God and his demonstration of an ethic of love modeled after Christ.

It is in this light that Paris, like Cone and Franklin, sees King not only as a moralist but also as one whose theology exemplifies the Black Christian tradition *par excellence* because of his commitment to the vision of the Black Church to establish an interracial society. For Cone, establishing an interracial society was at the heart of King’s agenda, and it is in this light that Cone sees King as an integrationist following in the tradition of Fredrick Douglas. His efforts emphasized that the Christian vision is one of justice and love, which asserts that people should live lovingly and justly.

Niebuhr highlighted concepts that are central to this vision, such as redemption, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Paris, Cone, Franklin, and Ivory have found these concepts to be of great importance to King, the Black Church, and the Black community.

For Paris, Cone, and Franklin, God forms the heart of King’s theology, which—

---


like the theology of Niebuhr—presents God as a creator, governor, and redeemer.¹¹

Moreover, because God’s governorship is central to both Niebuhr and King, Niebuhr’s work helps to illumine King’s efforts by demonstrating that King’s deeds were driven by God’s “actions upon” him. In this manner, King’s selfless deeds are responses to God’s actions upon him. For example, in the work of these interpreters, King was driven to respond lovingly and justly to others as though he was responding to God—Niebuhr’s Thou—who is a member of an interacting community.¹² All other important themes, or concepts, pervading King’s work—“nonviolence, love, justice, human dignity, freedom, and morality—are either explicitly or implicitly related to his understanding of God.”¹³

Thus, these interpreters of King demonstrate that his core vision of life and society is rooted in his affirmation that God is the ground and essence of all reality. For example, Paris quotes King as saying,

> God has been profoundly real to me in recent years. In the midst of outer dangers I have felt an inner calmness. In the midst of lonely days and dreary nights I have heard an inner voice saying, “Lo, I will be with you”... So in the truest sense of the word, God is a living God. In him, there is feeling and will, responsive to the deepest yearnings of the human heart; this God both evokes and answers prayer.¹⁴

Thus, for Paris, such a declaration not only demonstrates that King directed his attention toward God, but also that King had the ability to see the interrelatedness of humanity and, consequently, consistently expressed a “message of hope and redemption.” In fact, such

---


¹² Ibid., 56–79.


hope and redemption form the background for the way King viewed the world and for the deeds he inspired others to demonstrate in the world.

Cone rightly contends that “King felt that it was imperative that theology be integrally related to the concrete issues of social injustice in general and to the pursuit of racial justice in particular.”15 He contends that “King viewed theology as prophetic because of the ministry of Jesus.”16 I believe Cone’s assessment is correct and would only point out that the approach of ethics of vision and responsibility reminds us that a central function of prophetic critique is to help draw attention to injustice and oppression that have remained ignored for too long.

On this note, Franklin asserts that King’s importance to us is not only in the fact that he believed that all human life is sacred and interdependent, but also in that “his civic and moral achievements and virtues” are within the grasp of common people.17 “This fundamental moral commitment” in King’s theology aligns with Niebuhr’s view that human agents are called to be administrators of society’s justice. Central to his view is the belief that the agent must “resist and transform social institutions and practices that violate the sacred and relational aspects of human beings.”18 Such a violation is a refusal to love and places humans in conflict with one another. Moral agents have a responsibility to love not only their neighbors but also their enemies.19 Ivory rightly

---

16 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 8.
19 Ivory argues that King’s “activism was based upon an ethics of community, and this ethics was informed by structured theological formulation on how love radically involves itself in the affairs of human
demonstrates that “King was oriented, motivated, and guided by an eschatological vision of a future human community characterized by inclusivity, justice, love, and peace.”

For Franklin, it is this understanding of King’s efforts that is not fully captured in Black theology. From my study of Murdoch and Niebuhr, I add that a careful training of attention outward, beyond the self, is a key step in empowering integration.

Franklin asserts that “King balances integration of economic goods and political goods, for gaining access to others, and the goods of personal development to make possible a beloved community.” He did this to realize his vision of a kingdom that would “secure equal justice for all.” I contend that King’s genius lies in how his leadership centrally consists of helping Whites see the harshness of racism and African Americans see hope in the actual possibilities of nonviolent social change.

Like Franklin, I believe that King’s moral efforts can broaden the appeal of moral philosophy by correcting and expanding the perspective of such theorizing in a culturally pluralistic nation. Academic philosophers can strengthen the efforts of Black moralists by helping to systematize Black folk wisdom and render it accessible to a wider public.

---

20 Ibid., 99.

21 Franklin, Liberation Visions: Human Fulfillment and Social Justice in African American Thought, 9. Social psychologist Allison Davis observed that “knowledge of this society was ground into King by his daily experiences in Atlanta. But between his nineteenth and twenty-fifth birthdays, he was educated in a different climate, in university classes on religion and philosophy at Crozer, at Harvard University, and at Boston University.” Allison Davis, Leadership, Love, and Aggression: Psychological Factors in the Making of Four Black Leaders (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 191.

22 Ibid., 9.

23 Ibid., 110. Franklin argues that “the most elaborate and systematic statement of King’s vision of human fulfillment is found in his 1958 address to the United Church of Christ. Here, we find a sketch of King’s thoughts about the formation of moral character. In the language of academic ethics, the vision is an aretaic ethic, an approach to thinking about the moral life and person that focuses on the specific virtues, habits, intentions, and behaviors that good people ought to manifest.”
Indeed, Murdoch’s insight is a helpful resource for understanding both King’s deeds and words, and much of Black folk wisdom relies centrally on an ethics of vision. My use of the ethics of vision helps to explain how King’s eschatological vision of the future and the beloved community shaped his actions and was the driving force behind his deeds.

Finally, the connection between King’s agenda and the interpretation of the ethics of vision is made more explicit in Samuel Roberts’s interpretation of King. Roberts demonstrates that responsible action leads King to a “new piety that bridges the gap between thinking and faithful existence, which leads inexorably to an enlivened praxis (a true praxis), the interplay between critical reflection and informed action.”

Here, the term piety has to do with “discerning the contours of a life in which Christian thought and living come together to form a harmonious whole. Piety is a way of living in the world with the sure and certain knowledge that God is present.” He holds that African Americans must form a “piety” that truly represents the interchange between “thought and mediation,” thinking and divine restfulness, serious discourse and the mutual reassurance of comrades, male and female, who share a common fellowship. Roberts holds that a way must be found to meld the hard work of thinking through issues of faith and feeling the vibrancy and intensity of faith. On this note, according to Roberts,

The modest demands of the civil rights movement [were] merely about being treated like other Americans and the nature of the movement determined the strategies used to [achieve those rights]. The movement’s essential strategies were to appeal to the universal legal values embedded in the sacred documents of the American Republic…. The movement was anchored in the “great wells of


25 Ibid., 292.

26 Ibid.
democracy which were dug deep by the Founding Fathers in the formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence,” [of which each was designed to secure a vision for the American populace.] Hoping to change white Americans through moral suasion, the specific tactics used by the movement were nonviolent resistance, peaceful protests and the right use of the media, particularly print and television. The objective was to change the hearts of white Americans. [The theology of the movement] affirmed a God that made no distinction between persons, or races, and championed the “brotherhood of man” as the ideal relation between human beings. God’s ultimate will was to bring about justice, perhaps slowly, but inexorably to bring it about.27

Roberts rightly contends that King maintained that nonviolent direct action is the one ethical and “practical sound way” available for the liberation of an oppressed people, and that nonviolence is the “key” to long-term and thoughtful change—for peace, goodwill, and justice.28 In this manner, Roberts holds that the movement had no other option but to petition the “goodness of human hearts within the context of interracialism” to meet its demands.29 It is to this end that King’s work, in the words of Roberts, became a mission of ending Black suffering under segregation according to his perception of God’s will in history and to God’s vision. This is where an ethics of vision becomes essential for shedding new light upon King’s efforts. It helps to demonstrate why “seeing” is so important to King’s work as well as the tools used to bring about such a method. Seeing and responding accurately or fittingly to what is seen is the core of King’s work. This chapter develops this claim.

27 Ibid., 14.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., 15.
Major Influences on King

King was raised in a family that had multigenerational connections to the Black church. His father, grandfather, and great-grandfather were Protestant preachers.30 In 1846, King’s great-grandfather was an exhorter, “an old slavery time preacher,” who “entered the Baptist church during the period of religious and moral fervor that swept the nation in the decades before the Civil War.”31 Adam Daniel (A.D.) Williams, King’s maternal grandfather, followed in the footsteps of his father and was eventually ordained and received his license to preach. He remained Baptist and accepted several invitations to preach before becoming the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1894. On October 29, 1899, he married Jennie Celeste Parks, and together the two served Ebenezer for 40 years.32 During this time, Martin Luther King Sr., who married A.D. Williams’s daughter, was the pastor of several churches before he joined Williams and eventually continued Williams’s legacy as the pastor of Ebenezer.33

King was born in Atlanta in 1929. He was the second of three children.34 In his family’s home, King, his brother, and his sister lived a stable life with two very protective, loving, and busy parents who were heavily involved in church affairs.35 His mother was a Sunday school teacher and choir director; his father was the highest-paid

30 See Carson et al., The King Papers, 1:1.
31 Ibid., 1.
32 Ibid., 18–25.
33 Ibid., 25. Upon returning from a trip to Europe, Michael Luther King changed his first name to Martin, thereby becoming Martin Luther King Sr. His father, Jim King, preferred the name Martin, after his brothers Martin and Luther. See citation 98 (Ibid., 31).
34 Ibid., 29.
35 Ibid., 1, 29.
pastor in the community and had enormous influence as a successful community leader and organizer. While the Great Depression brought deep economic hardship across the land, King’s family was spared its harshest effects due to the continuing income from his parents’ leadership positions in the church. Though times were tough, the work of King’s parents provided the family with solid middle-class security. The children’s maternal grandparents also lived in the King home and had an enormous influence upon King’s early religious and moral development. He had an exceptionally close relationship with his grandmother, and upon her death he began to think deeply about immortality and life after death.

King’s grandparents created a legacy for his parents to follow through their 40-year commitment as pastor and first lady of Ebenezer Baptist Church and through their unwavering leadership in the Black community at the local, state, and national levels. The family’s three generations of leadership of the historic Ebenezer moved them from an early struggle with poverty into relative economic security and solid middle-class stability and leadership of important civic and religious circles.

The theological movement known as the Social Gospel Movement was a powerful shaper of King’s grandfather and father. A number of important Protestant pastors and theologians began to call for Christian efforts to be engaged directly in the Gospel’s vision of social justice and an activist attempt to help build the kingdom of God through a program of humanitarian reform. The movement’s major spokesperson was Walter Rauschenbusch, who helped found the Federal Council of Churches (now the National Council of Churches) in 1908. His books *Christianizing the Social Order* (1912)

and *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917) were the most influential articulations of this emerging movement of Christian social reform.\(^ {37}\)

As one of its pioneering advocates, Williams built a large congregation through “forceful preaching that addressed the everyday concerns of poor and working-class residents.”\(^ {38}\) Through “charismatic leadership” extending “beyond purely spiritual concerns,” Williams became actively involved in the community and served in local, state, and national capacities. In doing so, throughout his pastorate of Ebenezer, he played a leading role in Baptist affairs at the state and national levels. For example, he was also one of the organizers of the National Baptist Convention, the largest Black Baptist organization in the United States.\(^ {39}\) As a pioneering advocate of the social gospel, Williams “took the lead in responding to W. E. B. DuBois’s call for civil rights activism by joining five hundred other Georgians in 1906 to form the Georgia Equal Rights League.”\(^ {40}\) In 1917, Williams helped to organize the Atlanta branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Soon after, he became president of the local branch and mobilized “newly enfranchised African American women” in a drive to register Black voters.\(^ {41}\) He also led a fruitful initiative to force White administrators...
into “improving educational facilities for Black children.” His efforts brought about the founding of Booker T. Washington High School, a Black high school that Martin Luther King Jr. would later attend.

Martin Luther King Sr. continued the legacy of Williams and the “tradition of social gospel activism.” King Sr. was a self-made man who had lived a hard life but pulled himself up by the bootstraps and obtained an education at Morehouse University in Atlanta. He eventually became one Atlanta’s leading preachers and a strong pioneering advocate of the social gospel. In sum, King Sr. “identified himself as a social gospel preacher who believed that his ministry should be focused on the everyday needs of his congregation.” King Sr. “had been exposed to the liberal theological ideas of C. D. Huber, who headed [the Morehouse] theology program.” King Sr. also expanded the scope of Williams’s politically engaged ministry.

In 1935, he organized meetings to encourage blacks to register to vote, and despite resistance from more cautious clergymen and lay leaders, [King Sr.], organized a march to City Hall. A year later, he became chairman of the Committee on the Equalization of Teachers’ Salaries, which was formed to protest against discriminatory policies that paid higher salaries to white teachers than to equally qualified blacks. In spite of receiving threatening hate letters, he played a leading role in the sustained struggle for pay equity. King’s firm insistence that the Christian church should participate in civil rights activities set him apart from political conservatives, [both] scriptural and fundamentalists.

In light of such activism, the success of King’s grandfather and father—along with their wives’ equally successful roles as first ladies of Ebenezer Baptist Church,

42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., 1:17–18.
44 Ibid., 19–25.
Sunday school teachers, and choir directors—created a home-church environment that
created the backdrop for King’s moral and religious development and an environment for
his success as a civil rights activist. According to The King Papers, because his family
had such close ties to the Ebenezer Baptist Church, participation in the church simply
was a central part of King’s life. Consequently, the religious heritage he absorbed during
his youth was derived from daily contact with family and church life rather than from
formalized (or book-learned) theological reflections, something that he subsequently
realized during his college years.

Growing up in the church provided a substitute for orthodox theological
convictions; born a Baptist, he never felt the need to affirm all the tenets of the
denomination. In his “Autobiography of Religious Development,” he explained:
“Conversion for me was never an abrupt something…. Religion has just been
something that I grew up in.”

In fact, he never had an emphatic religious experience and joined the church only
because he wanted to keep up with his sister. In short, King writes, “Conversion for me
has been the gradual in-taking of the noble ideals set forth by family and my
environment, and I must admit that this in-taking has been largely unconscious.” In
other words, his moral and religious development was not wrapped up in his choices; it
was based on his growing ability to attend to the particulars of his environment, both
consciously and unconsciously. In this manner, his moral development seems to be in
parallel with much of what Iris Murdoch has suggested regarding the importance of the
quiet and gradual buildup of structures of value in people. This means that when it comes

46 Ibid., 702.

47 See King Jr., “Autobiography of Religious Development,” in Carson et al., The King Papers,
1:361. See also Carson, “Martin Luther King Jr. and the African American Social Gospel,” in African
American Religious Thought, 702.
to action, they feel that they must act not so much out of some discrete moral decision in response to some identified problem, but rather feel compelled to act out of the commitment to the persons that they have become. The key work in ethics, as Murdoch reminds us, is not so much the drama of free decision but rather the quiet buildup of patterns of sensitivity and vision.

**King’s Encounters with Racism**

Like many African Americans, King had to deal with the unfortunate reality of race at a young age. This had a profound impact on his moral development. King began to establish a moral outlook at age five when he questioned his mother regarding why a large number of people were standing in bread lines during the Great Depression, which, he claims, affected his negative attitude toward capitalism.

At age six, King had a more lasting experience. This occurred when a White playmate he had known for three years entered Atlanta’s segregated school system. His friend’s father told his son that he could no longer play with King. King recalled, “I never will forget what a great shock this was to me.” He remembered discussing the matter with his parents and realizing “the existence of a race problem” for the first time. At that time, “King’s parents told him the ‘tragedies’ of racism and recounted ‘some of the insults they themselves had confronted on account of it.’” In response, King said, “I was greatly shocked, and from that moment on I was determined to hate every white person,”

---

48 Ibid., 362.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid., 32.
even though his parents told him that he should not hate White people.\textsuperscript{51} They also told him that it was his duty as a Christian to love Whites. Of course, like many African Americans who encountered similar situations, King was not satisfied. He said, “The question arose in my mind,” as it did in the minds of many Black Christians, “how could I love a race of people who hated me and who had been responsible for breaking me up with one of my best childhood friends.”\textsuperscript{52} King would eventually address this experience during his college years. It also played a major role in his conception of God, the nature of God, and the nature of humankind. It would help him to see the potentiality of humankind for good and evil and to experience humankind’s limitations. However, this was not King’s only experience regarding this moral dilemma. There were more experiences that were just as profound, although they would not be negative, such as his summer visits to the North, specifically Washington, DC, and Connecticut.

Writing to his father, he commented on things he “never [anticipated] to see.” Upon traveling north from Washington, D.C., he observed “no discrimination at all.” Whites were “very nice. We go to any place we want to and sit anywhere we want to.” A letter to his mother referred to his attendance at a church service in Simsbury: “Negroes and whites go [to] the same church.” After a weekend trip into Hartford, he told his mother about the lack of discrimination in public places. Having eaten at one of Hartford’s “finest” restaurants, he commented, “I never [thought] that a person of my race could eat anywhere.” These experiences in the North increased King’s already strong resentment of racial segregation.\textsuperscript{53}

Exposure to such experiences had a major impact on King’s moral development. It also presented him with a paradox regarding the different attitudes toward race in the North versus the South.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 362–363.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{53} Carson et al., The King Papers, 1:36.
Although I emphasize only one of many experiences that shaped King’s attitude toward race and his understanding of the moral life, it represents the kinds of experiences that many Black and White children had to endure—that is, the experience of losing a childhood friend because of racial segregation.

Ebenezer provided a sanctuary for King to escape such experiences. For him, the church was like a second home. He spent much time there and made most of his childhood friends from among the congregation. He became intensely involved in church life, and the church gave him a sense of belonging. He attended Sunday school and participated in many of the church’s social gospel ministries, which were involved in providing clothes, food, day care, and medicine for those in need. As a result, he was strongly affected by a ministry that conveyed a conception of a God who provided for every need, a conception of God that his father emphatically preached about throughout his ministry and encouraged King to do the same. According to his father, King “absorbed attitudes . . . and skills . . . that would prepare him for a preaching career.”

He loved to sing and often accompanied his mother in song. He had a talent for singing and preaching and by early adolescence had gained an intimate knowledge of the details of church life, including congregational governance, ward meetings, church finances, and social events. He was also aware of the legacies of his grandfather and father, as both men were powerful role models for King, and he would subsequently strive to live up to their examples.

---

In fact, “during King’s childhood and teenage years, he became increasingly aware of his father’s vocal opposition to segregation.”\textsuperscript{55} As a result, King Sr.’s activism shaped his son’s understanding of the ministry and presaged King’s own career. Along with other “progressive” Black Baptist preachers, the elder King emphasized the need for an educated, politically active ministry. “The elder King not only engaged in individual acts of dissent, such as riding the ‘White only’ City Hall elevator to reach the voter registrar’s office, but also was a leader of organizations such as the Atlanta Civic and Political League and the NAACP.”\textsuperscript{56}

As a result of his father’s influence, by the time King entered graduate school, he had already developed a moral outlook on the world that would eventually move him into national acclaim. Such a moral outlook was not derived from abstract theories or his ability to make decisions based upon standard methods of ethical theories of his time. His moral outlook was acquired unintentionally as he attended to the social and ecclesial challenges around him and responded to them. In many cases, his moral outlook developed “unconsciously” as his life and religion became one, which led him to write in a paper regarding his religious development that there was no separation between his life and his religious development, a phrase that indicates the fact that King’s moral development involved his entire life’s experiences.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{55} Carson et al., \textit{The King Papers}, 1:36.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 33.

\textsuperscript{57} King, “An Autobiography of Religious Development,” in Carson et al., \textit{The King Papers}, 1:359–63. In this paper, King insists that his basic religious and social views developed decisively, not by his academic training but by his formative experiences. He said his father’s “noble” example and the influences of his childhood had led him to enter the ministry. See note 172, “The social reaction in the home is of primary importance in a child’s religious dev. This is because out of experience grows concepts and only through finding mutual love between parents can the child conceive of a God of love … Rel. Finds the beginning of its ethical quality in the early soc. situation which involves distinction of right and
Additionally, King’s college years and educational experiences put him in contact with a new range of close family friends who were also socially and politically engaged religious leaders, such as Reverend William Holmes Borders, who built Wheat Street Baptist Church, the largest Black church in Atlanta. Borders “possessed the academic credentials that King’s own father lacked.” Like King Sr., Borders fought through poverty to graduate from Morehouse College, but he went on to obtain a divinity degree from Garrett Theological Seminary and a master’s degree from Northwestern University. He then returned to Atlanta, taught religion at Morehouse, and became an “outspoken preacher of Wheat Street Baptist Church.” King and other friends studied his sermons.

King was also influenced by Benjamin Elijah Mays, a family friend and the president of Morehouse University. He was the kind of committed, intelligently refined religious leader that King wished to imitate. Succeeding John Hope, Mays was the first Morehouse president with a PhD. As president of Morehouse, Mays enthusiastically used his efforts to push a social gospel agenda and called for students to use their skills on behalf of the Black community. In doing so, “Mays often used his talks to the student body as occasions to express his commitment to social gospel values.” He also “challenged Morehouse students to struggle against segregation rather than accommodate

---

59 Ibid., 700.
60 See Carson et al., The King Papers, 1:37
61 Ibid.
themselves to it.”"62 Shortly before King became a 15-year-old student of Morehouse, Mays, along with an increasing number of Black Americans, became a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi upon returning home from a trip to India. Like Mays, King would also become a disciple of Gandhi, the famous Indian liberation leader, who believed in nonviolence. “[King] later described Mays as ‘one of the greater influences in his life.’”63

When King attended Crozer Seminary he came to be influenced by his professor George D. Kelsey “who reassured him that behind the legends and myths of the Book (the Bible) were many profound truths which one could not escape.”64 Kelsey also “published an article arguing that the problem of race is indeed America’s greatest moral dilemma” of the time.65 This essay had a powerful impact on King’s growing vision and indeed gave him a set of themes that he would later play out more deeply in his book, Stride toward Freedom (1958).66 Kelsey and Mays, as well as others, provided King with role models of academically trained ministers, and their example inspired him to continue his theological studies. Through sustained vision and careful habit, King came to say, “I can see in their lives an idea of what I wanted a minister to be.”67 Both were ministers, and both were religious, learned men aware of all the trends of modern thinking.

King was also directed to liberal schools for his training, such as Morehouse

---

62 Ibid.


64 See Carson et al., The King Papers, 1:42.

65 Carson, “Martin Luther King Jr. and the African American Social Gospel,” 701.

66 Ibid.

67 See Carson et al., The King Papers, 1:44.
College in Atlanta, and eventually Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania and Boston University, where he earned his PhD. At these schools, King was further influenced by social gospel advocates and personalist theologians who helped deepen his inherited beliefs. For instance, after being introduced to personalism by George Davis, a former professor at Crozer who placed emphasis on combining “social gospel teachings with a critical understanding of modern theology,” King became an admirer of Edgar Brightman, a personalist scholar and professor at Boston University who mentored King’s until his untimely death. According to King, the emphasis personalism placed “on the reality of personal religious experience validated King’s own belief that ‘every man from the ordinary simple hearted believer to the philosophical intellectual giant, may find God through religious experience.’” It also validated the religious experience of his tradition by suggesting that his earlier cynicism might not have undercut his religious heritage. Brightman’s personalist view confirmed for “King that he had experienced” the powerful presence of God in his own life, even without the benefit of an ecstatic “religious experience.”

As the centrality of the person became the focus of King’s theology, he grew increasingly convinced that “experience as well as intellectual reflection” could be the

68 Rufus Burrow, God and Human Dignity: The Personalism, Theology, and Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2006).

69 See Carson et al., The King Papers, 2:3.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid., 4. See also Brightman, Philosophy of Religion (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1940), 17.
foundation of one’s “religious belief.” Personalism became the tool for King’s understanding of the moral life and his lens for constructive criticism of the work of others. King used it to guide him through his civil rights career. Not only would he later write about this, but he also was sure that God was in his presence and on his side.

For King, God is a personal spirit. To support this claim, King used eclecticism, a writing strategy commonly practiced among Black Baptist clergy. King drew from the best of liberal and neo-orthodox theological views and synthesized his own theological perspective. In this way, he used his academic experiences not to supplant the religion of his youth but to deepen it. In so doing, with the help of Brightman and other personalists, King criticized Luther, Calvin, Barth, Bultmann, Wieman, and Reinhold Niebuhr (the brother of H. Richard Niebuhr) and drew from the best of their works to synthesize the religion of his heritage.

In sum, he criticized neo-orthodox theology for its overemphasis on the sovereignty of God at the expense of losing sight of God’s divine love. He also rejected its view of God as a strict judge who has little concern and respect for humankind, but he praised its emphasis on sin. On the other hand, King criticized liberal theology for its lack of an adequate anthropology, stating, “Any theology which does not have an adequate anthropology is not worth the name.” On the other hand, he praised liberal theology for its efforts in addressing issues concerning racial equality and economic justice. Moreover, King rejects both neo-orthodox and liberal theology’s positions on the nature

73 Ibid., 4.

74 Martin Luther King, Jr., “How Modern Christians Should Think of Man,” in Carson et al., The King Papers, 1:274.

75 See Carson et al., The King Papers, 2:93.
of humankind and the problem of good and evil, while accepting their views of a personal God. This was due to his experience with “a vicious race problem,” through which he was able to see the worst of humankind, but with “the gradual improvements of this same race problem,” in his words, he was able to see the best of humankind.\(^76\) Thus, King concluded that humankind was neither good nor evil, but had the propensity to be both. In this way, race and eclecticism played essential roles in helping King to construct a fitting response between extreme philosophical and theological views.

**Personalism and Its Influence on King’s Thinking**

Personalism emphasizes the uniqueness, significance, and inviolability of personality.\(^77\) It is a school of thought that became popular in the first half of the twentieth century, although it was developed during the

… nineteenth century as a reaction to perceived depersonalizing elements in Enlightenment rationalism, pantheism, and Hegelian absolute idealism. The centrality of the person is the primary locus of the investigation for philosophical, theological, [and ideological studies.] The person is the ultimate epistemological, ontological, and axiological principle of all reality.\(^78\)

Two of the theologians who influenced King’s understanding of the moral life were Edgar Sheffield Brightman, a leading personalist scholar, and L. Harold DeWolf, Brightman’s protégé. Both were professors at Boston University. Boston exposed King to the writings of Brightman and DeWolf. Brightman was a disciple of Borden Parker Bowne, the first prominent American supporter of personalism and a colleague of

\(^76\) Ibid., 3.


Boston’s faculty until his death in 1910. Brightman taught at Nebraska Wesleyan University from 1912 to 1915 and at Wesleyan University from 1915 to 1919. He returned to Boston University as professor of philosophy in 1919 and “held an endowed chair at Boston named for his mentor” from 1925 until his death.\(^79\) His works include *Introduction to Philosophy* (1925), *The Problem of God* (1930), *The Finding of God* (1931), *Moral Law* (1933), *A Philosophy of Religion* (1940), and *Nature and Values* (1945). “[He] is noted for his theistic finitism, and particularly his view that God’s power to combat evil is limited.”\(^80\) According to this view, God is not “fixed.” The Divine is still “growing and expanding,” which implies God is not only finite, but that the Divine lacks the knowledge of some things. For Brightman, God is still working out problems in both the spiritual and the physical realms.\(^81\) This is something Brightman taught in his philosophy of religion course, assigning his own work, *A Philosophy of Religion*, as the required text. Such instruction had a major influence on King’s growing theological and ethical visions.

“Under Brightman’s guidance, King continued the development of his theological outlook by critically evaluating the ideas of leading theologians from personalist perspectives.”\(^82\)

Personalism’s insistence that only 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

---

\(^79\) See Carson et al., *The King Papers*, 2:5.


metaphysical basis for the dignity and worth of all human personality.\textsuperscript{83}

Brightman’s emphasis on the dignity and centrality of the personal “dovetailed” closely with the traditions that King had “absorbed” from his upbringing in Black Church circles. Under Brightman’s influence, King wrestled with the diversity of models of God. Finally, King came to rigorously examine and reject a number of ways of understanding God, and this exercise helped King to clarify his own religious beliefs and articulate them forcefully. Through his academic training, King developed a reinforced personalist conception of God; this conception of God was passed onto him by his ancestors and preached from his father’s pulpit in Ebenezer Baptist Church. It is a conception of a God who not only sees and acts responsibly but also creates a society of people who see and act responsibly. In so doing, God acts according to God’s ability to love, which not only limits God’s divine power but also empowers a society of people to act out of their ability to love. Love becomes a tool for seeing and acting responsibly out of one’s freedom.

In 1953, DeWolf became King’s mentor, following Brightman’s death. King took six courses with DeWolf. Under DeWolf’s guidance, he clarified his personalist views and found the opportunity to express his theological ideas. This is evident in King’s Boston essays, which trace the course of his theological development and reveal how he constructed an identity by carefully selecting insight from perspectives similar to his own.\textsuperscript{84}

However, the theological perspective to which King was exposed throughout his life emphasized touching every phase of the community life. For example, drawing from

\textsuperscript{83} King, \textit{Stride toward Freedom}, 100.

\textsuperscript{84} See Carson et al., \textit{The King Papers}, 2:3–5.
the Bible, King asserted its concern for the broken-hearted, the poor, the unemployed, the captive, the blind, and the bruised. In other words, the theological perspective aggressively addressed the concerns of the oppressed in its midst and unceasingly struggled on their behalf for freedom, justice, and equality, which, for King, was the essence of discipleship.\textsuperscript{85} The Black churches have a vision that directs their thought and action, specifically a vision of a nonracist society. King would adopt such a vision of a kingdom. The independent Black churches struggled steadily on behalf of the oppressed for freedom, justice, and equality in an effort to realize a vision of a better world, a world where social, political, and religious concerns are intimately related to one another.\textsuperscript{86} For King, this would become his “beloved community,” which he would strive to realize throughout his life. I contend that this framework of thinking shaped King’s thoughts and actions. It also formed the thoughts and actions of many in the Black community. The independent Black churches formed the heart of the Black community, and this seems to be borne out in King’s life experiences. King’s efforts were not in isolation, but were communal in nature and involved an individual and communal vision. In other words, his efforts were grounded and inspired by a vision that involved seeing, interpreting, and envisioning a better world.

\textbf{The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Ethics of Jesus and Gandhi}

King first achieved national and international prominence in 1955, when, at age 26, he became president of the Montgomery Improvement Association in its effort to achieve desegregation of the bus system in Montgomery, Alabama. The high drama of


\textsuperscript{86} King, “My Trip to the Land of Gandhi,” in \textit{A Testament of Hope}, 23.
this opening chapter of the civil rights movement drew the world’s attention to
Montgomery and the efforts of its Black citizens to push for social justice and an end to
racial segregation. The pace of King’s life was remarkable. On September 1, 1954, he
became pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery. In June 1955, he earned
his doctorate in systematic theology from Boston University. That November, he and his
wife, Coretta Scott King, celebrated the birth of their first child, Yolanda Denise King.

Across the South, many Blacks were increasingly ready to take risks to end
segregation and unjust exclusionary laws and practices. On December 1, 1955, Rosa
Parks refused to give up her seat and move to the back of a local bus in Montgomery and
was arrested. This match lit a fire. The next day, Montgomery’s Black religious and civic
leaders met and called for a one-day bus boycott to be held on December 5. That first day
was so successful in achieving widespread Black participation that attendees at an
afternoon meeting agreed to form a new organization, the Montgomery Improvement
Association, to carry on the bus boycott, in part, by employing Black taxi companies to
help ferry people to and from their jobs. King was chosen to be its president. He now
found himself thrust into a position of being a key leader and spokesperson of the first
large-scale and sustained organized effort to push for the civil rights of Black people
across America. For 381 days, the African American community of Montgomery
boycotted the local bus system in this highly dramatic opening act of the civil rights
movement. They initiated a boycott of the city bus system to put political and economic
pressure toward promoting a change in the practice of requiring Blacks to sit at the back
of the bus. 87

87 See King, “Stride Toward Freedom,” in A Testament of Hope, 423–467. For a helpful account,
From its beginning, King and others rushed to educate Montgomery about the practices of nonviolent civil disobedience and the importance of nonviolence in the campaign for social reform. Under King’s leadership, the practices and disciplines of a nonviolent campaign for social justice, civil rights, and public policy change were discussed and given high prominence through a sustained series of workshops devoted to how nonviolent protests work and how nonviolent protest efforts must engage with great discipline to commit to nonviolent practices, even when their marches or boycotts trigger violence aimed back at those marching and protesting. As King later wrote,

At the beginning of the protest, the people called on me to serve as their spokesperson. In accepting this responsibility my mind, consciously or unconsciously, [I] was driven back to the Sermon on the Mount and the Gandhian method of nonviolent resistance. This principle became the guiding light of the movement. Christ furnished the spirit and motivation while Gandhi furnished the method.  

Along with the sources listed above, a number of other important sources influenced King’s ethic of vision grounded in the core Christian ethic of love. First, for four years, King served as an associate pastor at his father’s church, the historic and prestigious Ebenezer Baptist Church of Atlanta—one of the major Black churches in the country. For three summers, King, Jr., had been its sole preacher. These experiences honed his preaching and rhetorical skill. Second, as discussed above, King was pulled toward Social Gospel values by his father and his reading of Walter Rauschenbusch’s *Christianity and the Social Crisis* at Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester,

---

88 Martin Luther King Jr., “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” in *A Testament of Hope*, 38.

Pennsylvania. The Social Gospel Movement stressed that the mission of Jesus was committed to building the kingdom of God on Earth through Jesus’s ethic of love, which directly entailed a commitment to expanding justice in earthly societies.

Third, King’s education at Crozer helped to deepen his theological beliefs by exposing him to the writings of Reinhold Niebuhr, especially Moral Man and Immoral Society. This was first published in 1932; King read it in 1950. From Niebuhr, King came to appreciate the power of sin, the importance of what Niebuhr called “Christian realism,” and the need to avoid utopianism but to push hard for ever better achievements of social justice in societal life. In fact, Niebuhr’s emphasis on the profound moral gap between the ideal and the real helped reinforce in King a powerful awareness of the need to always push for ever-better social justice policies.

Thus, while King continued to appreciate the Social Gospel and Christian liberalism as important remedies for some of the emotionalism and constraints of fundamentalism, his encounter with the Christian realism of Niebuhr, with its emphasis on the sustained power of human sin, helped him see that too often liberal theology, like the Social Gospel, depicted an overly optimistic understanding of human reason and too much confidence in social progress founded in education and inevitable advancement. King became strongly influenced by Niebuhr’s emphasis on the continuing dimensions of human sinfulness and the continuing need to recognize that the push to social justice

---


92 Branch, Parting the Waters, 81–87. See King’s “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” in A Testament of Hope, 35–40, where he notes his debt to Walter Rauschenbusch and to Reinhold Niebuhr.
requires an exertion of power and that the defense of justice in society requires checks and balances of real power.\textsuperscript{93}

For Niebuhr, expressions of “love” are not enough; in the social sphere, justice is the closest approximation we can come to of the Christian love ethic. In his book \textit{Moral Man and Immoral Society}, Niebuhr, while voicing a strong criticism of some forms of religious pacifism, gives a strong endorsement of nonviolent campaigns in certain circumstances. As he puts it: “Nonviolence is a particularly strategic instrument for an oppressed group which is hopelessly in the minority and has no possibility of developing sufficient power to set against its oppressors. The emancipation of the Negro race in America probably waits upon the adequate development of this kind of social and political strategy.”\textsuperscript{94} It is clear that King read deeply in Niebuhr’s \textit{Moral Man and Immoral Society}, and it is equally clear that he delivered what Niebuhr envisioned.

Fourth, King was first introduced to the vision, tactics, and insights of Mahatma Gandhi, when he attended Crozer Theological Seminary.\textsuperscript{95} There, King studied the writings and examples of Gandhi and his leadership of the Quit India movement, which decades earlier struggled to free India from British colonial oppression. In light of the Quit India movement, the Montgomery bus boycott was guided from the start by the insistence of King and others that it remains a nonviolent effort like Gandhi’s in India. As

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{94} Niebuhr, \textit{Moral Man and Immoral Society}, 251–252.

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 74.
King put it, “While the Montgomery boycott was going on, India’s Gandhi was the guiding light of our technique of nonviolent social change. We spoke of him often.”

King and the other leaders of the civil rights movement were close students of Gandhi’s agenda and tactics, employing dramatic performances of boycotts, marches, and civil disobedience aimed at reminding Black Americans that they are “somebodies” and not second class and not deserving of segregationist policies of exclusion. Also, like Gandhi’s agenda, a core agenda issue for King’s leadership of the bus boycott and other, later civil rights marches and efforts lay in the construction of highly dramatic actions that would help pull the attention of the nation and indeed many in the world to the suffering caused by racist segregation of Black Americans. As King wrote in “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence”:

Then I was introduced to the life and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. As I read his works, I became deeply fascinated by his campaigns of nonviolent resistance. The whole Gandhian concept of satyagraha (satya is truth which equals love and graha is force; satyagraha means truth-force or love-force) was profoundly significant to me. As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi, my skepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished, and I came to see for the first time that the Christian doctrine of love, operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence, is one of the most potent weapons available to an oppressed people in their struggle for freedom.

King described how, while he was deeply moved intellectually at Crozer Theological Seminary when he was introduced to Gandhi’s writings and achievements, it took the experience of the Montgomery bus boycott to solidify his understanding of the dynamics and power of nonviolence.

---


98 Ibid.
In sum, King’s increasing participation in the church became a central part of his life, and the religious heritage he absorbed during his youth was derived from daily contact with family and church life rather than from formalized (or book-learned) theological reflections. In this manner, King’s home-church environment created the backdrop for his moral and religious development and his subsequent success as a civil rights activist. The Black church provided the background for his fundamental convictions, and his moral development was a “gradual intaking of the noble ideals” set forth by his family and environment. For example, King was influenced by Christian efforts that directly engaged in the Gospel’s vision of social justice and activist efforts to help build the kingdom of God through humanitarian efforts. These efforts were expressions of love that addressed the actual needs of people. Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel Movement helped King to see that the mission of Jesus was committed to building the kingdom of God on Earth through Jesus’s ethic of love, which directly entailed a commitment to expanding justice in earthly societies. In this light, Gandhi and the Quit India movement became the guiding light behind King’s efforts toward nonviolent social change, efforts that lay in the construction of highly dramatic actions that would help pull the attention of the nation and indeed many in the world to focus on the suffering caused by racist segregation of African Americans.

Gandhi, Truth-Force, and Campaigns for Right Seeing

If, as Murdoch puts it, the capacity to extend attention and vision beyond the cares of the self toward the cares of others—their needs and vulnerabilities—is a fundamental moral achievement, then it is a doubly difficult achievement to promote this in a

---

sustained fashion in times of oppression or conflict. Gandhi’s struggle in India’s independence movement required that he and the movement engage in a double unmasking effort, a double educational outreach aimed at getting people to see. While the extension of British colonial rule over India was justified by the British people’s sustained affirmation of the empire’s noble civilizing mission and program of economic and social development for simpler people (i.e., more “backward” dark-skinned people), this sustained ideology justified the stark oppression and violence to Indians as an act of civilizing altruism. This ideology of oppression came to mold the minds of both oppressors and the oppressed. If over the decades the British became comfortable in the generosity and basic goodness of their project in India, their “jewel in the crown,” Indian boys and girls grew up believing in the inevitability of British superiority and advancement and in Indian weakness and dependency. They came to assume that the British had all the power and the weapons and that they had none. At bottom, the ideology of domination attempts to educate the oppressed in the inevitability of their condition because of the victims’ basic inferiority.

Gandhi titled his autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. The title is an apt description because much of his nonviolent campaigns against the British was rooted in his experiments mobilizing the hopes and growing confidence of Indians that they too had dignity and full humanity. Simultaneously, he experimented with marches, demonstrations, boycotts, and strikes, all designed to dramatically turn the attention of the British public and the world to the stark realities of British imperial rule. Civil disobedience campaigns are certainly sustained efforts at building pressure to force societal change. From an ethics-of-vision perspective, they can also be understood as
educational efforts to help the worldwide community, but especially the British, to come to see the ugly structural violence and oppression on which their imperial rule over India was really built.

For instance, Gandhi’s decision in 1930 to lead a group on a twenty-four-day “salt march” of some 240 miles to the Indian Ocean, where they let seawater evaporate in the sun to get salt, was the kind of educational effort that an ethic of vision highlights. This gesture, with the accompanying massive media buildup, focused India’s and the world’s attention to the British tax on salt and announced to all that the civil disobedience campaign had begun in earnest. In carrying out this gesture, Gandhi timed his arrival at the sea to coincide with the anniversary of the British massacre of hundreds of Indians at Amritsar, thereby layering the event with multiple strata of emotional, religious, and political symbolism and associations. As a result, Indians and others around the world understood the Salt March as a religious “pilgrimage,” as civil disobedience, as an educational lesson on British taxation policies, and as a demonstration of Indian organization and dignity. It was a carefully planned dramatic performance whose design and execution drew the attention of Indians, the British, and people around the world to the British colonial regime and the fact of rising Indian efforts at home rule.

The world’s attention was further galvanized by Britain’s subsequent arrest of Gandhi and the Indians’ demonstration at the British-controlled Dharasana Salt Works. A Gandhi-trained group tried to nonviolently take over the salt works but was stopped by Indian troops under British officers who beat unarmed men over the heads with wooden staves. The high drama and bloodshed of this planned civil disobedience performance riveted the world’s attention to how British imperial rule rested—despite all the
celebration of a civilizing mission—on a foundation of imperial violence. Where before, a salt works seemed like a benign economic benefit, the Gandhian demonstration forced public disclosure of the violence that sustains the colonial system. It made the quiet and hidden covert structural violence manifest for all to see.

The ideology of colonialism seeks to justify imperial hegemony via a stratagem of covering over the realities of stark violence and oppression with a canopy of moral justification, denial of reality, and systemic practices of misnaming and deception. Gandhi’s efforts at creating performative acts of dramatic civil disobedience attracted the world’s attention. Having gained its attention, he and his satyagraha movement—truth-force or soul-force—could begin a dual-sided educational program. This program centered on showing Indians that they have equal dignity, agency, and rights as the British and other Westerners, and that, although they may not have the guns and rifles that the British have, they do, if organized, have profound force and power.

Likewise, Gandhi and the Quit India movement, also centrally tried to help the British people see that their so-called “civilizing mission” in India is, at bottom, a pack of lies sold to them by their political leaders and elites. A central goal of the campaign was to help the British finally see the scale of the suffering that they caused. It is a testament to Gandhi’s greatness that he long preached the importance of maintaining the discipline of criticizing British imperial policy and still refrained from demonizing the British people or its leaders. During his time studying law in London, Gandhi had grown to

---


know the British and to admire much about their system of law and their society in
general. For Gandhi, the British were not fundamentally evil people, but rather were good
people who did not yet see the suffering they were causing. He had every confidence that
after they came to see, the path to Indian independence would be secured. In short,
liberationist campaigns like Gandhi’s seem centered on important ways in the ethics of
vision.

The Psychology of Aggression and the Ethics of Vision

If, as it has been said, “in war the first casualty is the truth,” the same is true in
most situations of human conflict. Conflict and violence tend to provoke emotional
reactions that in turn produce a strong emotional bifurcation between the opponents. If
Murdoch is correct about how basic egoism is a powerful engine of moral blindness and
insensitivity to others, then it is also surely correct that conditions of social conflict
between groups, tribes, or nations add powerful emotions of fear and paranoia that
promote heightened tendencies for falsely seeing our opponents as utter adversaries and
demonic threats. The sense of threat mobilizes powerful emotions of fear, anger, and
hatred and an overgeneralization that the opponent is a “monster” and solely “other,” not
human like us, an enemy having no human compassion. Such a depiction is a distortion
of reality that reaches beyond individual egoism to group egoism.

---

102 The origin of this quote is uncertain. Although it is often accredited to a speech delivered by
U.S. Senator Hiram Warren Johnson from California in 1917, it is also attributed to Greek writer-poet
Aeschylus who lived from 524 B.C. to 456 B.C. and a host of other writers.

103 See Sam Keen, Faces of the Enemy: Reflections of the Hostile Imagination (San Francisco:
Harper & Row, 1986), 16–88. For a valuable discussion on individual bias and group bias, see Bernard
Lonergan, The Lonergan Reader, ed. Mark D. Morelli and Elizabeth A. Morelli (Toronto Buffalo London:
Violent resistance to oppression allows the forces of oppression to depict the resistors as the sources of violence and societal-wide disruption. This justifies in the dominant media and societal conversations a framing of the movement for social justice as a destructive and threatening force deserving of violent crackdown and oppression. This violent mode of confrontation for social justice simply plays into what has been rightly called the “spiral of violence” whereby oppression and injustice trigger a revolt, which in turn provides justification for “repression.” As Robert McAfee Brown puts it, “Confronted with revolt, those who hold power put down the revolt by whatever repressive means are necessary to ensure that their power is not threatened.”¹⁰⁴ Lonergan further supports this claim. Group bias, whenever it is threatened, uses whatever means possible in any “manner” possible to achieve its end.¹⁰⁵ It seeks to defeat all efforts of common interest.

Much of the power of nonviolent resistance campaigns derives from their disciplined attempt not to project hatred against their opponents. Nonviolent resistance movements, like those of Gandhi and King, know that attack, violence, the threat of violence, and disrespect will entrench a defensive posture and fear in the majority population that has been lax in focusing on the issue of social justice for all.

A key theme in Murdoch’s ethics of vision is relevant here. Recall her reference to Sigmund Freud’s notion of the self as inevitably and daily pulled into self-interested concerns that tend to block our ability to extend attention to, and interest in, the realm beyond ourselves—namely, other people or other parts of our world. She is eloquent on

¹⁰⁴ Brown, Religion and Violence: A Primer for White Americans, 10–11.
how this powerful dynamic of self-concern absorbs so much energy that little is left for an extension of care or attention outward. This is a helpful observation for understanding what often happens in conflict situations. Self-concern is the driving energy of broader senses of participation in community. Self-concern gives rise to a sense of identification with broadening circles of loyalty and commitment beyond the self, namely, to family, a web of friends, local neighborhood, state, nation—in short, to “our people.”

One of Murdoch’s most distinctive emphases lies in her affirmation that the center of morality lies in the quiet processes of attention and vision that build up structures of value and commitment. As she argues, “But if we consider what the work of attention is like, how continuously it goes on, and how imperceptibly it builds up structures of value round about us, we shall not be surprised that at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over.” As she notes, however, often “psychic energy flows … into building up convincingly coherent but false pictures of the world, complete with systematic vocabulary. … Attention is the effort to counteract such states of illusion.”

In her own way, Murdoch, like Gandhi, believes in “truth-force;” what Gandhi calls satyagraha. Where Murdoch is pulled into her reflections on the moral person, Sam Keen and other psychologists of aggression stress the large-scale blindness of groups, peoples, and nations when engaged in violent clashes and how such blinding

---


108 Ibid., 36.

109 Ibid.
occurs through the reification of us-versus-them thinking. If Murdoch is correct that a key obstacle to clear vision and love of our neighbors living in the world lies in our obsessive ego drives, then Keen and others, who study social conflict and violent conflict between peoples, are similarly right that the ego drives get broadened via our identification with larger groups—namely, with “our people” as opposed to “those people.” This social scale of group egoism can be seen in the blindness of the British to the suffering caused by their imperial rule over India and by White American society’s blindness to the realities of life for Black citizens living under American segregationist laws.

King’s efforts at developing an educational process for social reform center on coming up with dramatic events that concentrate people’s attention in new ways and in creating a climate of nonviolent resistance that remains relatively unthreatening enough so that the intended audiences of these events can remain calm and relatively comfortable while coming into new insight. In this sense, we can think of King and the civil rights movement as presenting pedagogy for the appreciation of the reality of injustice that, like a mode of social therapy, helps people come to see under nonthreatening circumstances. Moral development and the growth of attention, insight, and compassion do not flourish in the heat of violent threats when communities are clashing and understandably spiraling into a polarizing stance of distrust, resentment, and paranoia. Nonviolent approaches to social reform seek to reduce this mobilizing of conflict and paranoia by their disciplined effort at communicating to the other side that the conflict is not between good people and evil monsters, but rather between basically good people on one side and basically good people on the other. Nonviolent campaigns seek to heighten attention and promote mutual respect and, in this way, create a relatively safe social space for a relaxing of
tension and an increased opportunity to attend to the claims of the oppressed and to see.\footnote{110 See Krishna Kripalani, ed., \textit{Mahatma Gandhi: All Men Are Brothers} (New York: Continuum, 1990); and Louis Fischer, \textit{The Life of Mahatma Gandhi} (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950).}

Across his career, King frequently described the importance of keeping to the discipline of vocalizing a strong critique of the evil of the system of segregation, but never engaging in any personal attack on individual human beings caught up in these dramatic times. As King put it, “[T]he attack is directed against forces of evil rather than against persons who are caught in those forces. It is evil we are seeking to defeat, not the persons victimized by evil. Those of us who struggle against racial injustice must come to see that the basic tension is not between the races.”\footnote{111 King, “Nonviolence and Racial Justice,” in Washington, ed., \textit{A Testament of Hope}, 8.} Elsewhere he noted, “In your struggle with justice, let your oppressor know that you are not attempting to defeat or humiliate him, or even to pay him back for injustices that he has heaped upon you. Let him know that the festering sore of segregation debilitates the White man as well as the Negro. With this attitude you will be able to keep your struggle on high Christian standards.”\footnote{112 King, “The Most Durable Power,” in \textit{A Testament of Hope}, 10.} In his essay “The Power of Nonviolence,” he repeats, “[O]ur aim is not to defeat the White community, not to humiliate the White community, but to win the friendship of all of the persons who had perpetuated this system in the past. … A boycott is never an end in itself. It is merely a means to awaken a sense of shame within the oppressor but the end is reconciliation, the end is redemption. … Then we had to make it
clear also that the nonviolent resistor seeks to attack the evil system rather than individuals who happen to be caught up in the system.”  

Nonviolent resistance techniques have the ability to clearly and publically define the aims of the campaign and the motives of the agents of the campaign in nonthreatening ways. Because nonviolent resistance is redemptive, it seeks to transform the heart of the oppressor and the oppressed in a community of relationships in an effort to bring forth a new community based on an ethic of love that transforms “self-interest” into “common interest.” As a fitting response, nonviolent resistance helps defuse the ratcheting up of the egoistic self-defense mechanisms that Freud and others have noted. By avoiding a stance of violent attack, it does not prompt the British or White America to escalate into overwhelming emotions of fear, anxiety, and paranoia that would energize a reification of a strict “us”—we are good versus “them”—and a “they” who are disruptive, threatening, and violent. Such thinking is fantastic. It distorts reality and disadvantages one group over another. If, as Murdoch puts it, “True vision occasions right conduct,” King is correct to stress that “true vision” is nurtured by the trust and the comfort afforded by nonviolence as the hallmark of reaching out to the other side. Nonviolence encourages people of goodwill, whom Lonergan calls progressives, to aim to both correct existing distortions and find means to prevent their recurrence.  

Where violent resistance to oppression poses a direct threat and, thus, sadly triggers justifications of fear and the retribution of repressive violence, nonviolent resistance campaigns seek to trigger a relaxation of tensions, a clear communication to and affirmation of the full humanity of


one’s opponents. It creates, in short, a kind of educational therapeutic context that helps prompt insight and possibility for growth of moral vision.

As Gandhi’s campaigns illustrated, nonviolent resistance has the capability of focusing attention on the dignity and courage of the resisters by the drama of the stagecraft of the great Salt March and other marches, boycotts, and demonstrations. It can do this without triggering the mobilization of the opponent’s defensive energies that would serve as a powerful obstacle to any growth in clear attention and moral vision. If one feels one is being attacked, such development in insight and vision is almost certain to be cut off. A sense of immediate attack triggers powerful emotional postures of defense. The conflict and perceived threat immediately polarize the two parties, and the one threatened finds it difficult not to see “them”—those people, as attacking “us.” As Lonergan rightly suggests in his study on group bias, the dominant groups in their reactionary efforts seek to “block any correction of the effects of group bias, and they employ for this purpose whatever power they possess in whatever way they deem appropriate and effective.”¹¹⁵ If one does not feel so directly attacked, then “just vision,” as Murdoch puts it, is quite possible. The nonviolent approaches employed by Gandhi and King adopt a path that seeks to highlight that oppressed and oppressors are not two enemies, but rather at bottom are actually one community. They stress the importance of never attacking or demeaning those who benefit and sustain the levers of oppression, and argue that the whole system—be it British colonial rule or American segregationist laws and customs—creates victims on both sides.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 135.
A key part of the “truth-force” or satyahagraha approach of the nonviolent path is a sustained affirmation of the common humanity and dignity and, indeed, the shared fate of both sides. Against the polarized understanding that flows from oppression and the paths of violent resistance that reifies a sharpened emotional understanding of the radical differences between “us” versus “them,” the nonviolent approach affirms that there finally is only “us”—one community. This is what King called the “beloved community”—a growth in the understanding of both sides of a conflict situation that ultimately they are all “brothers and sisters.”

**King’s Ethic of Vision: Parallels with Murdoch**

Murdoch and King illumine the works of the other in important ways as we explore massive parallels between Murdoch’s diagnosis of egoism as the chief obstacle in the moral life and King’s emphasis on the corrupting powers of self-interest, moral blindness, and ideological justifications for racist oppression and economic and societal injustice. Similarly, there are similar and sustained parallels between Murdoch’s notion that love is the antidote to egoism and King’s sustained call for the building up of the “strength to love.” Egoism is a force that constricts our attention and concern to self and our narrowly defined group. Love, for Murdoch, is the extension of attention and moral concern outward beyond self-interest. King, as a Christian preacher and leader, draws on the core emphases of historic Christian ethical reflection to preach and write powerfully on the dynamics of sin and the need for love to help reform American society.

---

116 Kripalani, ed., *Mahatma Gandhi: All Men Are Brothers*. The end of nonviolence is the “creation of the beloved community.” See King, “Facing the Challenge of a New Age,” in *A Testament of Hope*, 141.

117 Attention results in an expression of love only when it is other directed.
by the promotion of civil rights for all.

Some of King’s most famous and often-repeated sermons are collected in his book *Strength to Love*, published in 1963. They display King’s understanding of how excessive self-interest pushes moral blindness and a lack of concern for the suffering of others. His sermons are rich with imagery of “seeing” and “not-seeing.” In his sermon “A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart,” King, echoing Reinhold Niebuhr’s emphasis, calls us to be both “idealistic” and “realistic.” As he puts it, “Our minds are constantly being invaded by legions of half-truths, prejudices, and false facts. One of the great needs of humankind is to be lifted above the morass of false propaganda.”¹¹⁸ In his description of the “hardhearted person,” he centers his description in their failure to really see people: “The hardhearted person … passes unfortunate men every day, but he never really sees them. … The hardhearted individual never sees people as people. … He depersonalizes them.” King describes the “rich fool,” noting that “he was condemned” because “he was not tender-hearted. Life for him was a mirror in which he saw only himself, and not a window through which he saw other selves.”¹¹⁹

In his sermon “On Being a Good Neighbor,” King reflects on the Good Samaritan story. While others failed to see the needs of the neighbor wounded on the road to Jericho, King notes, “When he (the Samaritan) saw the wounded man, he was moved to compassion….” King reflects how such failures to see needy neighbors get reinforced by how egoism extends and mobilizes identification with certain groups or nations. This psychological and sociological dynamic of identification with broader groups and


communities builds walls between in-groups and out-groups. For King, the power of the Good Samaritan story in great part lies in how the Samaritans were somewhat estranged from the Jews, and yet it is an individual who breaks through this in-group versus out-group frame, who reaches across in true moral care and responsibility to a needy individual.

As King puts it, “The Samaritan had the capacity for a universal altruism. He had a piercing insight into that which is beyond the eternal accidents of race, religion and nationality. One of the great tragedies of man’s long trek along the highway of history has been the limiting of neighborly concern to tribe, race, class, or nation.”120 The visual metaphor for moral sensitivity dominates this sermon. As King notes, “The real tragedy of such narrow provincialism is that we see people as entities or merely as things. Too seldom do we see people in their true humanness. A spiritual myopia limits our vision to external accidents. … But the Good Samaritan will always remind us to remove the cataracts of provincialism from our spiritual eyes and see men as men.”121

In his sermon “Love in Action,” King reflects on Luke 23:34, where Jesus on the cross states, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” King’s dominant theme is “blindness,” a failure to see, and thus a failure in ability for a compassionate and human response. “Jesus’ prayer on the cross” is “an expression of Jesus’ awareness of man’s intellectual and spiritual blindness. ‘They know not what they do,’ said Jesus. Blindness was their trouble; enlightenment was their need.” “The men who cried,

---

121 Ibid., 29.
‘Crucify him,’ were not bad men, but rather blind men.”122 This teaching applies, King believes, directly to America. “Slavery in America was perpetuated not merely by human badness but also by human blindness.”123 “The tragic blindness is also found in racial segregation, the not-too-distant cousin of slavery.”124 King moves beyond a concentration on individual egoism and personal blindness, however, to analyze how the history of slavery and racial injustice is rooted in a societal-wide blindness of dominant White America to the basic humanity and suffering of Black people.

In his powerful “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” King distinguishes between “negative” and “positive” peace. Like Augustine before him, King notes that societies can on the surface appear quiet and orderly, but that peaceful appearance can be rooted in injustice and oppression. This surface-level peace masks and hides an underlying system of ongoing violence, what many today refer to as “structural violence.”125 He is upset that too many “white moderates” seem “more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice” and prefer “negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.”126

For King, the appropriateness of nonviolent direct action campaigns lies in how they break through dominant society’s complacent sense that the status quo is good. It is not surprising that those who benefit from the status quo arrangements of societal order come to think that order is part of the natural order of things and thus something to be

123 Ibid., 41.
124 Ibid., 43.
125 Brown, Religion and Violence, 10–11.
taken for granted. Those who engage in boycotts, sit-ins, marches, and demonstrations are thus understandably, from the perspective of the privileged, labeled as “disturbers of the peace,” but King argues that the only peace they are disturbing is the “negative peace” that hides its face in injustice and thus deep violence. King argues that those engaging in nonviolent direct action are “not the creators of tension,” but rather are agents attempting to focus the nation’s and the world’s eyes on the structural violence that has gone on unnoticed and unexamined for too long. King’s core ethic, it seems, is an ethic of vision.

As King puts it, “We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured as long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its pus-flowing ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must likewise be exposed with all of the tension its exposing creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.” The drama of nonviolent direct action campaigns grabs the media’s and people’s attention and makes possible a moral educational process whereby White moderates’ eyes can be opened in shame to the injustices of America’s racist inequity.

Using Murdoch’s terms, I argue that King’s dominant efforts to create dramatic nonviolent “direct actions” are attempts to capture the attention of the nation to something it has generally been too happy to ignore. The Montgomery bus boycott, the march on Washington, and the “I Have a Dream” speech with thousands gathered at the Lincoln Memorial are all dramatic and theatrical events constructed and planned to help

---

127 Ibid.
draw the attention of the nation and the world. Once the world is focused on the drama of the events, then spokespersons like King and other civil rights leaders can use the occasion as a massive teaching moment. The drama of the events grabs attention, and the sermons, writings, conferences, and speeches help develop the moral education and “seeing.”

King’s “Letter from the Birmingham City Jail” is an eloquent example of his attempt to open the eyes of White America to the lived experience of Black America. Following is the full quote of the most remarkable sentence in one of America’s most iconic works of literature. King states:

I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, “Wait.” But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, and brutalize and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in the airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you finally find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can’t go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking in agonizing pathos: “Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?”; when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated by day in and day out by nagging signs reading “white” and “colored”; when your first name becomes “nigger” and your middle name becomes “boy” (however old you are) and your last name becomes “John,” and when your wife and mother are never given the respected title “Mrs.”; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly on tiptoe stance never quite knowing what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a
degenerating sense of “nobodiness”; then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.128

In this powerful sentence, King attempts to reach out to moderate White America in terms that they could appreciate. He simply shares with them a number of the concrete life experiences imposed on America’s Black population by the system of segregation. He speaks about the impact on families and how daughters and sons are affected and how mothers and fathers are affected. He speaks about the suffering imposed on Black bodies forced to sleep in their cars during road trips, and on the Black minds and souls who develop in distorted and fearful ways from simply growing up in racist America. This brilliant sentence, which King constructed while in jail, is designed carefully to touch the hearts of White America and to help us see what it feels like to be Black in our segregationist system. His rhetorical choices express sadness and suffering and highlight to White America what it feels like to be a Black parent and how Black children grow up in a deeply unfairly constricted universe.

In terms of ethical theory, this is not deontology or utilitarianism but clearly a profound attempt to marshal rhetoric and narration to focus White America’s attention and vision and begin to grasp the simple, basic, real humanity of Black people—people with kids, and cars and needs to sleep, and sadness when daughters are hurt. By enumerating experiences in Black life that White America can relate to, King offers a powerful bridge for cross-racial understanding and a moral growth in awareness.

In a central theme of his letter, King expresses his deep disappointment at the

128 King, A Testament of Hope, 292–293. This letter was originally directed towards other clergy, White and Black.
“appalling silence of the good people.”\textsuperscript{129} He notes that America will have to repent for the hatred of entrenched White racists, but feels more deeply let down by “the White moderate” like the White religious leaders asking him to slow his pressing for rapid social change.\textsuperscript{130} He embraces the charge that he is an “extremist” but argues that so were Amos, Paul, Martin Luther, John Bunyan, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, and even Jesus Christ—Jesus being an extremist for “love, truth, and goodness.”\textsuperscript{131} As he puts it, the “South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists. I had hoped that the White moderate would see this. Maybe I expected too much.”\textsuperscript{132} Few Whites can appreciate the scale of the suffering rained down on Black Americans, and “still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent and determined action.”\textsuperscript{133} At his core, I submit, King is an ethicist of vision and responsibility.

**Responsibility in King’s Thinking**

The ethics of vision and responsibility in Martin Luther King Jr.’s thinking open our eyes to see that living morally requires the effort of interdependence, which points to the necessity of responsibility. In other words, King’s efforts demonstrate for us that building God’s kingdom requires both an individual and a collective effort on behalf of the whole community. Here, King, like Niebuhr, recognizes that morality is social.\textsuperscript{134} As

\textsuperscript{129} King, “Letter from the Birmingham City Jail,” in *A Testament of Hope*, 296.

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 298.

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{133} Ibid.

Paris suggests, one could not be moral in isolation. Thus, while there are parallels between King and Murdoch, there are also substantial parallels between Niebuhr’s emphasis on responsibility and King’s thoughts on human nature and destiny as they relate to injustice and exploitation, self-respect and justice, goodwill and brotherhood, and nonviolent resistance. Niebuhr’s stress on the importance of seeing affirms Murdoch’s stress on vision. However, because King reaches beyond Murdoch in that he focuses on both the individual self and the social self, Niebuhr helps to offer further structure to King’s thoughts and actions. Niebuhr affirms King’s stress on vision and action. For King, “it is midnight in our world. The darkness is so deep that we can hardly see which way to turn … This midnight in man’s external collective life is paralleled by midnight in his internal individual life. It is midnight … psychologically [and] … morally.”

Like Niebuhr, King balances his concerns for both seeing and acting. For him to respond to such conditions, moral agency requires responsible action. America must repent because it has written a “bad check.” Responsibility and solidarity are at the very core of King’s ethics. It is not surprising, therefore, to see that he has a concern for both the individual self and the social self. Midnight is upon both. Blacks and Whites must respond to the world outside of themselves under midnight conditions. In short, they are called to be custodians with caretaking functions that point to an inescapable moral obligation to make real God’s kingdom upon Earth. Here, God acts, and Blacks and Whites respond to God’s actions upon them. Thus, drawing from biblical revelation, philosophical anthropological personalism, and the social sciences, King establishes a

---


critical correlation between divine sovereignty and responsibility. In this way, the responsibility ethics of Niebuhr become helpful because he sees humans as responding directly to the actions of God. Here, Niebuhr’s man the answerer becomes the image that best illustrates King’s understanding of humanity when related to the function of humanity in the universe. Here, life consists of dynamic positive interactive forces: sacred and profane, divine and human, personal and social, life and death, justice and interests, integration and disintegration, and reconciliation and fragmentation.

The individual is both personal and communal. One exists because the other exists. We are who we are because of our relationships with our family, our community, our nation, the world around us, and the dynamic of responsiveness that forms the very heart of Niebuhr’s ethics of responsibility. For instance, King concretely demonstrates the *Homo dialogicus* nature of humanity in that he calls us to respond not only to one another as human beings but also to God. King’s theology is shaped by his understanding of God as the cosmic companion of the universe who surrounds us with justice and embraces us with grace. At the heart of King’s work is an I-thou relationship. For him, as for Niebuhr, we are employed as co-creators with God. We respond to others as though we are responding to God. “We are engaged in a dialogue.”137 In fact, King embraces a vision of the divine narrative and builds upon it. It is his way of bringing about God’s justice and God’s call of justice to be a lived out reality in the lives of people upon the earth not only for the Black community but also for the world. As a Christian, King centers his theological concerns on the lived practices or involvement of theology in

---

137 Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 56.
human affairs (orthopraxy). For King, at issue is the relevance of religion for one to live morally and to improve morally under midnight conditions. Therefore, King seeks to “ascertain the liberative potential of theology for reshaping the conduct of human beings in the daily affairs of living.” In this sense, King “defies rigid, traditional, Western characterizations” of theology. In short, “his theology represents a significant departure from the ‘norm’ of classical theological formation of doctrine (orthodoxy).” Yet, King had solid grounding in the conceptual framework of classical Western theology while reshaping this tradition accordingly.

For King, we answer others in our reactions. We respond not only to one another but also to something beyond ourselves. In this way, the ethics of vision and responsibility better captures King’s understanding of human existence than utilitarian and deontological ethical models, because it more adequately highlights the responsiveness that lies at the core of moral agency. For example, he demonstrates that personal suffering serves to shape our thinking. Recognizing that one could be self-centered in one’s denial and self-righteous in one’s self-sacrifice, he reluctantly refers to his personal sacrifices but moves on to say in his article on *Suffering and Faith*:

> But I feel somewhat justified in mentioning them in this article because of the influence they have had in shaping my thinking. … I have been arrested five times and put in Alabama jails. My home has been bombed twice. A day seldom

---

138 Ivory, *Toward a Theology of Radical Involvement*, 45.

139 Ibid.

140 Ibid.

141 Ibid.

142 To see a virtue model of King’s ethics, see Peter Paris, *Virtue and Values: The African and African American Experience* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).
passes that my family and I are not the recipients of threats of death. I have been
the victim of a near fatal stabbing. So in a real sense I have been battered by the
storms of persecution. I must admit that at times I have felt that I could no longer
bear such a heavy burden, and have been tempted to retreat to a more quiet and
serene life. … As my sufferings mounted I soon realized that there were two ways
that I could respond to my situation: either to react with bitterness or seek to
transform the suffering into a creative force. … Recognizing the necessity for
suffering I have tried to make of it a virtue. If only to save myself from bitterness,
I have attempted to see my personal ordeals as an opportunity to transform myself
and heal the people involved in the tragic situation which now obtains. I have
lived these last few years with the conviction that unearned suffering is
redemptive.143

Nonviolence soaked in love infuses King’s actions. This is due to the fact that
central to King’s thinking is that we are purposive beings responding to a creator,
sustainer, and redeemer who governs the universe and is a conserver of human beings.
Personality is central. Here, a study of personalism provides King with a philosophical
grounding for saying that the problem is that the universe necessitates the operations of
certain fixed, immutable, unbreakable laws. In this school of thought, God, who sustains
and governs the universe, sets these wheels in motion. To achieve God’s plan, God sets a
multiplicity of laws in motion to ensure the perpetuation of what King refers to as the
moral foundation of the universe. Clear vision involves incisive thinking, realistic
appraisal, and decisive judgments. Vision is sharp and penetrating, breaking through
legends and myths and sifting the true from the false. Clear vision is astute and
discerning. Clear vision eliminates choices and leads to responsible action. Choices that
promote injustice are in disharmony with God’s will. Here, unjust laws and practices are
in rebellion against God. Every person is made in the image of God and must be
accountable to God’s deep concern for human dignity. As a result, moral agency must

143 Martin Luther King Jr., “Suffering and Faith,” in A Testament of Hope, 41.
begin with the recognition of every human person in relation to God. Clearly implied is the notion that both Niebuhr and King have a concern for the Christian community. As a result, the texture of human life for King is essential in his work. The concrete needs of people inform King’s theology and the centrality of the person is at its heart.

God is concerned with human society, both individually and collectively. Relationality, interdependency, sensibility, solidarity, selflessness, and goodness are essential to human agency. Interaction, response, community, struggle, and seeing are themes that are central to Niebuhr. With this image of human agency, it is no surprise the question of vision is central. Responsible action requires that one first see “what is happening.” As Murdoch suggests, an individual could only respond within the world he or she sees. The question of vision and responsibility is the central question for King. Such vision captures the material of one’s actions, thoughts, feelings, intentions, attitudes, purposes, and so on.\textsuperscript{144} King’s response is timely. He seeks to respond in the right place, at the right time, with the right means, directed toward the right audience, be it Black or White. He wants Whites to see their Black brothers and sisters, and Blacks to see that nonviolence is the only way to build a truly peaceful community. It is this concept that underlies King’s commitment to nonviolence. Nonviolence is the fitting action. For King, nonviolence combines the characteristics of tough-mindedness and tenderheartedness, and it avoids the complacent do-nothingness of the soft-minded and the violence and bitterness of the hardhearted. He aims to oppose the unjust system and, at the same time, to love the perpetrators of the system. God is both tough-minded and tenderhearted, with the qualities of both sternness and gentleness. God expresses tough-

\textsuperscript{144} Niebuhr, The Responsible Self, 7.
mindedness in justice and wrath, and expresses tenderheartedness in love and grace. God surrounds us with justice and embraces us with grace. God is the provider of justice who punished Israel for its wayward deeds and is the forgiving father whose heart was filled with unutterable joy when the prodigal son returned home. At issue is the necessity for love and justice, which are two major themes in the work of Murdoch, who declares that the moral life must involve a relationship between love, justice, and freedom. King concretely demonstrates the relationship between love, justice, and freedom in his work.

For King, “love provides the conceptual clue for ascertaining the nature and purpose of God and derivatively, the meaning and end of life.” For King, love is the basis for freedom, responsibility, and genuine community. For him, love is the fuel that empowers the moral agents for social change. Reaching to Gandhi’s understanding of true force, as interpreted in light of his heritage, love becomes for King the heart of the nonviolent movement for social change. For King, love is also foundational to Christian discipleship and the basis for divine and human co-responsibility in working toward God’s kingdom of justice in human history. In short, love is the principle catalyst, and nonviolence is the tool King uses to make God’s notion of justice a reality. For him, God’s justice and command of justice lead to a beloved kingdom.

Love motivates King and others to make choices for justice, and it encourages them against compromising with injustice, motivated by their ability to see according to the vision of God. In this way, for King, nonviolence, as an expression of love and as an educational tool, helps people to see justly and respond fittingly. As a result, people of goodwill engage in radical acts of divine self-giving through their faith and commitment.

---

145 Ibid.
to God’s vision of a better world. Love demonstrates itself in a caring God, whose interests rest upon deliverance and justice for the oppressed, a central theme in the work of King. Here, love becomes a force for “unselfing” as expressed in the work of Murdoch. Like Murdoch, King believes that virtue involves a desire for the achievement of truth and reality, and he believes that such could only come about through outward attention. King’s desire for truth parallels Murdoch’s understanding of “unselfing.” However, King takes suffering to a different level and seeks to use it as a powerful and creative force for social change. He is interested in unmerited suffering, which becomes the transformative tool for “unselfing.” Although he does not use the term “unselfing,” it is implied throughout his work as he strives to encourage Whites to see the suffering that segregation inflicted upon Black Americans. Thus, King encourages nonviolent participants to be unselfish and institute an educational program to transform human agents for change. These agents of goodwill become heroes as they sacrifice themselves for the sake of others through selfless deeds. It is through such suffering that some are transformed, while it is due to shame and educational programs that others are transformed, as they direct their attention to God and to the poor.

King encouraged his participants to pull attention away from themselves and direct energy toward others. He encouraged them to put others first. This sacrificial commitment confirms King’s understanding of virtuous living, as it does for Murdoch. However, King’s agent is rewarded, or the agent stands the chance of being rewarded, if not in this life, then in the afterlife. This is because unselfishness leads to heavenly

---

rewards. There is a telos. One hopes to see God.

King’s understanding of “unselfing” is not only demonstrated as it relates to the individual. It is also demonstrated as it relates to the social self. King’s example is the Samaritan’s expression of neighborly love. Love does not only energize the agent; it also opens the agent’s heart and heightens the agent’s sense of the world around him or her. The results are not only transformative but also redemptive. In other words, freedom provides the ability to see and interpret the world, and love enables the redemption of the human community. Here, the relationship between freedom, justice, and love is made real in the agent’s ability to express selflessness. God and love remain in harmony as the moral agent carries out God’s will for justice. The object of attention, God, demands right action from the agent. Niebuhr’s notion of accountability is implied. Like Murdoch, King is cognizant that moral change demands a reorientation of psychic energies, the purging of illusions, and the disrobing of “idolatrous images” and their “false consolations” in order to depict a truthful reality. King is also aware that addressing group bias is more demanding because of its soft-minded nature. A group with a soft-minded nature prejudices and acts out of fear before any consideration of facts. It functions through distortions. For Murdoch:

Moral transformation requires the expunging of self-seeking fantasy, [when it comes to group bias it also requires the recognition of the structures of violence that reinforce such fantasies.] The stripping away of idolatrous images, and their attendant false consolations, in order to gain a truthful perception of reality and others, [requires a deeper level of commitment that not only transforms the agent, but transforms others encountered by the agent. Unselfing must reach beyond the

---

147 Maria Antonaccio, *A Philosophy to Live By: Engaging Iris Murdoch* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 8. This represents a religious dimension in Murdoch’s thinking. Here, the real basis of morality is the love and worship of the good. As Antonaccio states, “We have to come to it and let it change us; religion is spiritual change, absolute spiritual change” (Ibid., 33).
personal into the social.\textsuperscript{148}

Nonviolence is an expression of open love and is the tool for transformation. Here, King’s ethics of vision and responsibility express love as the greatest good. God becomes the focus of attention as in the work of Niebuhr. Love, as expressed in the Christian gospel, becomes an expression of God and the very essence of God working to establish just relationships in the created order. In this way, for King, love also works as an educational tool to open people’s eyes and to help people overcome hate-producing fears, confront forces of darkness, defeat evil, convert enemies into friends, and create a just community.\textsuperscript{149} In this respect, divine grace fuels moral agency. It empowers the moral agent and drives the agent toward the object of his or her affection. Such is the case for Murdoch’s pilgrim in her depiction of Plato’s Cave. A force that is beyond the agent energizes the pilgrim. It is identified as a spiritual force that works analogous to the agent’s experience. As the pilgrim advances from one level of consciousness to the next, the force is at work bringing forth change in the agent and the agent’s environment. It is to say that the divine is active in the world, helping people to see. In this excerpt, the work of King sharpens Murdoch’s view because King sees God as an active participant in the world whose efforts are concrete. King believes that God is a creative force of power and love, always at work in the universe to restore harmony to the disconnected fragments of history. The belief that God is at work gives King a steadfast hope in God’s ability to prevail against injustice. Like Gandhi, King expresses an unwavering confidence in the ability of love to transform the hearts and minds of people to bring

\textsuperscript{148} Ibid. I am adding to the author’s words here.

\textsuperscript{149} Ivory, \textit{Toward a Theology of Radical Involvement}, 45.
about moral change.\textsuperscript{150} For both, involvement in the world collapses the past, present, and future, which is to say that we respond in the present in hope for a better tomorrow as a result of the past. Our history has much to do with our present actions and desires for justice. Acting in love points us toward justice and hope. In this way, justice is made real through human efforts.

If Blacks and Whites gain a truthful picture of the horrors of segregation, the dehumanizing impact that it has on human dignity, and the fact that all people are brothers and sisters called to live in a community of love through reconciliatory and transformative ways, divine grace will lead them to become responsible agents of change. In this way, King’s concern for the social self begins with self-reflection: who is the agent in relation to others, and what does this say about the agent? Understanding the social self as it relates to others empowers the agent to function in a community. Thus, understanding oneself in relation to others is at the very heart of King’s theological agenda. In addition, the only way to bring about such a reality is through “uns elfing,” directing one’s attention to God. It is to become “convinced of the reality of God.”\textsuperscript{151} “Unselfing” involves loving another for their sake. It involves understanding the redeeming goodwill of all humankind. “It is to experience the love of God in the human heart,” to express disinterested love.\textsuperscript{152} It is to seek the good of one’s neighbor. It is entirely neighborly to have concern for others, which exposes the neighbor in every

\textsuperscript{150} Roberts, \textit{African American Christian Ethics}, 293.

\textsuperscript{151} Paris, \textit{Black Religious Leaders}, 100. See also King, \textit{Strength to Love}, 94.

human it meets. It makes no distinction between friend and enemy. In this sense, King speaks of a God who values persons. Love becomes visible in a reform movement that, through a process of working in tension with people of goodwill, helps to open the eyes of White Americans to the needs of Black Americans. In this way, God’s command for justice is expressed in what Ivory calls “radical love.” Here, love and justice work as one underlined by a moral imagination of the divine. Love, like nonviolence, becomes courageously confrontational and radically disruptive in the pursuit of peace and in its demand for justice. Here, love becomes demonstrative. Love is made visible, as justice is visible. For instance, nonviolence and reform efforts become love in action, whether it is expressed in the movement by Blacks, or by Whites out of goodwill. Their efforts become a fitting response to God’s actions in the world. People become God’s hands and feet. As God participates in human history and throughout the universe, implied are the notions of solidarity, accountability, interpretation, and response. These themes are central to Niebuhr’s ethics of responsibility and implied in King’s “I Have a Dream” speech.

“I Have a Dream”

King and the civil rights movement led a march on Washington that emblazoned powerful words and images onto the American consciousness. The key to the ethics of vision is attracting attention to a powerful teaching moment so that the general vision of the dominant society can be sharpened and expanded through an educational process. What could be more visually riveting than to have King, the leader of the civil rights

---

153 Ibid.

154 Ivory, Toward a Theology of Radical Involvement, 133–47.
movement, bring a huge crowd of Blacks and Whites together to hear a major speech at the Lincoln Memorial, the shrine to the president who enacted the Emancipation Proclamation? On August 28, 1963, scaffolding and a podium were set at the feet of the grand statue of Abraham Lincoln in America’s closest approximation of the Parthenon in Athens. This building and its steps look eastward across the Reflecting Pool toward the Washington Monument and the Capital.

With the eyes and ears of the nation turned toward him, King gave a speech that arguably stands as the only rival to Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address as the most famous and moving speech in all of American history. In it, King shared with his audience and the nation a broad vision of American ideals and how the nation has deep greatness and goodness but has fallen deeply short. He briefly explained the structural violence of segregationist laws and the general aim and methods of nonviolent campaigns for social justice. One of King’s major themes was his attempt to get America to see the huge gap between its originally expressed values of universal human rights and dignity and its starkly unjust concrete laws and general practices. He uses a banking metaphor of Blacks being offered a “promissory note” by America’s most fundamental affirmations that “all men”—really, “all persons”—are equal. But this has not been actualized. As he puts it, “So we’ve come here today to dramatize a shameful condition. In a sense we’ve come to our nation’s capital to cash a check.” King draws attention to the gap between the current segregationist rallies (America’s realities) and the envisioned future of the “beloved community” (America’s ideals) that King portrays in his great “dream.”

On April 3, 1968, King gave his last sermon, “I See the Promised Land.” The next day he was shot and killed for telling the truth and trying to help White America to see
clearly and act justly. Remarkably, this sermon concludes with King in a rather resigned expression, stating that he doesn’t know what is going to happen now, but that it doesn’t matter, because he has

… 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’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. 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. And 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.155

Even in his death, King drew attention to the gap between America’s ideals and its realities and to the structural violence of normal everyday American laws and practices that sustain segregation.156 To the end, his campaign and sermon and speeches are rooted in and display the power of the ethics of vision and its immediate call for a loving and just response. The night before King’s murder, his sermon dealt centrally with “seeing” the Promised Land, and his last public sentence uttered, “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”157 The attracting of attention, the training of vision, and the promotion of a moral responsibility were central to King’s agenda.

Conclusion

Through nonviolence, King provided an alternative that forced people to confront issues without destroying life or property. Through workshops, nonviolent marshals were trained to assist in nonviolent protest. For King, nonviolent demonstrations brought Blacks and Whites together to solve problems. As a result, “In Montgomery, Alabama,

155 Ibid., 286.

156 For valuable discussion, see Michael Eric Dyson, April 4, 1968: Martin Luther King Jr.’s Death and How It Changed America (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2008).

when we had a bus boycott, the crime rate in the Negro community went down 65 percent for a whole year." People found ways to slough off their self-hatred, and they had a channel to express their longings in a war to be fought nonviolently.

King holds that such a movement was needed to bring about togetherness among Blacks and Whites. In the light of an ethics of vision and responsibility, he writes,

We have come to the point where there is no longer a choice now between nonviolence and riots. It must be militant, massive nonviolence, or riots. The discontent is so deep, the anger so ingrained, the despair, the restlessness so wide, that something has to be brought into being to serve as a channel through which these deep emotional feelings, these deep angry feelings, can be funneled.

Nonviolent direct action provided a way for Black Americans to channel their deeply angry feelings constructively, creatively, and peacefully. King writes, “I see this campaign as a way to transmute the inchoate rage of the ghetto into a constructive and creative channel” for the best interest of the nation. King was wholly devoted to nonviolence. Thus, he argues,

I am committed to nonviolence absolutely. … I plan to stand for nonviolence because I have found it to be a philosophy of life that regulates not only my dealing in the struggle of racial justice but also my dealing with people, with my own self.

The advantage of nonviolence, for King, is that it prevents guerrilla warfare. Nonviolence draws attention away from the self and directs it toward others. It empowers the moral agent to express neighborly love while providing a space for both personal and social transformation. In a more concrete way, it empowers the poor through peaceful

---

158 Ibid., 68.
159 Ibid.
160 Ibid. One could say that these were some of the most violent years in U.S. history.
means to place problems of injustice at the seat of government of the wealthiest nation in the history of humanity. It encourages that government to acknowledge its debt to the poor while holding the governing administration accountable to “living up to its promise to insure life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness to its citizens.” In a concrete way, the success of nonviolence is measured in the creation and implementation of social policies and programs geared to remove structures of violence and to empowering the oppressed. For instance, for King, it is measured by the gaining of “an economic bill of rights, for the disadvantaged, requiring about ten to twelve billion dollars,” and the creation of a specific number of jobs to abolish unemployment. It was also measured in the creation of programs to supplement the income of those in poverty.

In addition, the success of nonviolent direct action is measured in the creation of affordable healthcare programs and policies. For instance, King sought to bring Medicare within the reach of both Black and White poor, who were aware of its great advances but were unable to afford them. He seeks to pull attention away from the rich and to direct it toward the hundreds of thousands of sharecroppers who have no work or food. He points out that

… children are actually starving, while large landowners place their land in a soil bank and receive millions of dollars not to plant food or cotton. No provisions are made for the life or survival of the hundreds of thousands of sharecroppers who … [are] driven off land, and are forced into tents, [while] the rich are given sophisticated welfare handouts, as parity, subsidies, and incentives to industry.

162 Ibid., 69.
163 Ibid., 70.
164 Ibid., 71
165 Ibid.
Thus, in King’s words,

We have, through massive nonviolent action, an opportunity to avoid a national disaster and create a new spirit of class and racial harmony. We can write another luminous moral chapter in American history. All of us are on trial in this troubled hour, but time still permits us to meet the future with a clear conscience.\(^{166}\)

For King, the path of nonviolence made the idea of segregation the enemy. Thus, King fought against the idea of segregation as opposed to fighting the segregationist. The segregationist was a victim of an idea brought about by generations of abuse of freedom. For King, it is an understanding of the moral life grounded in his ancestors’ understanding of God and their own religious experience.\(^{167}\) King’s ancestors understood God to be their parent and themselves to be God’s children, and as such that they must conduct themselves as one ever-increasing family. In other words, all humanity was connected in a global web in which every member played a part. Each had value as a person, and no single person’s value as a human being was to exceed that of another’s. Each person was to be treated with dignity and respect. To do so was the beginning of being moral and thus of being a human person. It also implied the necessity of freedom, duty, responsibility, commitment, solidarity, and community, characteristics that were rights, duties, and privileges endowed by the creator. Basic freedom was an inherent part of the universe endowed to each individual to be devoted and faithful to the God of the universe, who was the most essential aspect of the moral life. To be in harmony with God required complete devotion.

\(^{166}\) Ibid., 72.

\(^{167}\) Thus, the concept of nonviolence as promulgated by King was not alien to the Black churches. According to Peter Paris, none resisted it. In fact, King merely explicated and implemented the traditional means of protest long practiced by the Black churches under the Black Christian tradition, as mentioned above. Paris, *Social Teaching of the Black Churches*, 24 (see note 21).
In short, King’s picture of nonviolence turns out to be a way to love and to improve morally. It was his way to make a better world. However, his approach to nonviolent resistance was based upon a prescription of the moral life that resulted from the navigation of two essential themes that, more than anything, shaped his understanding of God and God’s will: (1) the problem of race, and (2) the solution of agape love.

These two themes are pivotal to King’s moral theology—that is, in his life and work—and serve as threads throughout his life. In other words, race and agape love permeate his understanding and awareness of the moral life—from the moment he appears to recognize the differences between right and wrong, as he became aware of the race problem at age six and the way it was handled by his parents, to the moment of his death—as well as the civil rights work that led to his death. Thus, it is clear that these two themes directed his life and were based on his understanding of God and the moral life.

This is demonstrated by the way he synthesizes his understanding of God by drawing from the best of liberal and neo-orthodox theologies and presents his conception of God and the nature of humankind. What distinguishes his view from that of others is his understanding of race and his understanding of love. These concepts were introduced to him in his youth as he became aware of segregation and the race problem. King argues that humankind is neither sinful nor evil but has the potential to be both. The example he gives to support this view is the problem of race. Through race, he saw the worst of humanity, but he also saw the best of human nature, which showed him the propensity of humankind to do well. This understanding of the nature of humanity set him apart from both the liberal and the neo-orthodox positions and made his conception of God unique, although it represented a view of God that he inherited from his ancestors, a view closely
related to African American thought and experience. What makes it unique is that it is a time-sensitive view of God derived from sustained attention and careful vision as a response to a truthful depiction of reality interpreted from a number of forces that provide the material content of King’s actions.

The second aspect that makes King’s position unique is his perception of God as a preserver of value, interested in preserving his greatest value: humanity. King’s concept presents a view of God that deals with the issue of good and evil and is also grounded in the concept of love as it relates to power. Several essential themes stand out as a consequence: the themes of freedom and order, love and justice, aspects of the moral life that resulted in both moral and physical evil, and the importance of individuality and relationality. These concepts, King says, are essential in the structure of a universe that demands unity. It is from reflecting more on these themes than on others in relation to the goodness of God that he derives his understanding of God and the moral life. It was as a result of such an analysis that King concludes that God is the conserver of the universe. Central to this is the idea of the divine as a personal spirit who creates a community of persons, employs them as co-creators, preserves them, and works in their best interests, while simultaneously protecting them because of their propensity to fall victim to their own sins and the world, a propensity caused by the fact that sin blinds humankind and supports irresponsible action, an abuse of humankind’s freedom. In short, in King’s view, segregation is sin. It prevents both blacks and whites from seeing things as they are.

An ethics of vision was essential to King’s understanding of the moral life. His core agenda was to share his vision of a beloved community as the final goal of all human endeavors. Moreover, for King, seeing is important because of its relevance to the
moral life and what it means to be truly human. Seeing has ontological, sociological, theological, and epistemological implications. By ontological, we mean that seeing has to do with one’s “sense of self” or one’s “I am–ness,” the picture one has of one’s “self as a being made in the image of God” as an extension of God’s personality (a person, somebody). Here, for King, as it was for Murdoch, identity is prior to culture; therefore, it is immoral for institutions and their safeguarders to abuse the powerless on the grounds that they are nobodies. No human being is a nobody. “Sociologically our seeing means that humans are social beings intrinsically intertwined in a network that links all human creatures together, a network that is essential for survival.” This means institutions as well as human relationships. This global, human, and relational web is central to King’s thought. It is in this network that we express our God-given somebodiness, a somebodiness that is interrelated to all other somebodinesses in ways that affect the value of each individual. In this network, each individual receives his or her personhood, or somebodiness, directly from God, an innate prepotency that shapes and defines human identity formation and that, if frustrated by culture, results in pathology, caused by discouragement, the major social cultural trigger of racial violence. Vision shows that the two are interdependent and mutually inclusive. My “nobodiness” discourages and degrades your somebodiness. You cannot rightly claim to be somebody when you cause or tolerate my “nobodiness.” In other words, the self is embedded ontologically and

---

168 This is deduced from King’s constant efforts to get people to see and understand not only his message but also the world around them. Much can be accomplished through seeing and understanding. This message appears throughout his work.


170 Donald M. Chinula, Building King’s Beloved Community: Foundations for Pastoral Care and Counseling with the Oppressed (Cleveland, Ohio: United Press, 1997), 31.
socially and is derived from God’s personality. Right-seeing is also theologically important. King understands segregation to be a major culprit in the destruction of human identity formed in God’s image and described it as “leprosy,” a debilitating condition that has many implications for the moral life. For him, leprosy is a metaphor for that which destroys human identity, an identity that is simultaneously etched in God’s own. God bestows identity as part of His own image and confers value on it by reason of divine creation alone, as King conveys in his writings and speeches.

The conviction that every person is an heir to a legacy of dignity and worth is deeply rooted in King’s religious heritage. Our Judeo-Christian tradition refers to the inherent dignity of human beings through the use of a biblical term: “the image of God.” Every human being has etched in his or her personality the indelible stamp of the Creator. The worth of the individual does not lie in the measure of his intellect, racial origin, or social position. Human worth lies in our relatedness to God. In short, according to King, an individual has value because he has value to God. God imparts value to the individual, a concept that is central to King’s beliefs.

---


172 Ibid., 121.

173 Ibid., 33.
CHAPTER THREE
ETHICS OF VISION AND EMILIE M. TOWNES

In this chapter, I argue that the work of Emilie M. Townes is best understood in light of Murdoch’s ethics of vision and Niebuhr’s reflections on the centrality of attention and responsibility.¹ While I appreciate the efforts of Martin Luther King, Jr., in enriching the concept of vision in the last chapter, Townes adds another necessary dimension because, unlike King, she includes the experiences of Black women. Townes is the first African American dean at Vanderbilt Theological Seminary, Memphis, Tennessee. Including such experiences gives a thicker understanding of Black liberation thought as it relates to the role vision plays in womanists’ thinking. However, she does this in light of King’s later years as an uncompromising prophet who stood against the Vietnam War, who organized a poor people’s campaign, and who called for a restructuring of the Black community.² Townes explores a dilapidated health and healthcare system, the negative impact of cultural productions upon human agency, and the commodification of Black identity. She joins King as she calls us to return to God, to confront unjust systems of violence, and to embrace a vision of justice and hope. She displays a vigilant moral agency designed to warn the powers that she will not tolerate any form of injustice or injustice or


² Disappointed with progress, King was more vigilant in his later years.

150
unjust social policies. Her goal is to help people see and to question the worth of our cultural values through a praxis of vision.

I explore Townes’s moral outlook in order to provide a more thorough account of human moral agency. I do this by correlating Murdoch’s understanding of the centrality of vision and Niebuhr’s compatible stress on attention and responsibility in the moral life with Townes’s writings. Townes, like King, offers a wonderful demonstration of human agency that highlights the distinctive role that vision and responsibility play in the moral life of both individuals and whole societies. In fact, like many other womanists, Townes holds vision and responsibility as two core characteristics of her work. I argue that the ethics of vision and responsibility presents a paradigm or frame of understanding about how ethics function. It also offers a distinctive set of insights regarding the logic, function, and theological and ethical sophistication of Townes’s writings.

Murdoch and Niebuhr, I believe, offer a perspective on the writings of Townes that lets us appreciate the true sophistication of her Christian ethical understanding and agenda as a womanist. In turn, like King, Townes’s life and writings illustrate a number

---

3 Katie G. Cannon calls this vigilant moral agency “unctuousness,” a quality she describes as steadfastness akin to fortitude in the face of oppression. Cannon uses the term “unctuous moral agent” to capture the way Zora Neale Hurston look[s] at the world with her own eyes, form[s] her own judgments and demythologize[s] whole bodies of so-called social legitimacy.” See Katie G. Cannon, Black Womanist Ethics (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988, 105. Cheryl Townsend-Gilkes describes this vigilant moral agency as “holy boldness.” See also Cheryl Townsend-Gilkes, “If It Wasn’t for the Women”: Black Women’s Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 4, 68.

4 Iris Murdoch, The Sovereignty of Good (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970). Attention is the name that Murdoch gives to the activity of mind, which affects the transformation of the self and thereby achieves a clear vision of individuals. Attention, in the words of Murdoch, is the characteristic of the moral agent. The concept of vision refers to a whole range of mental activities which form the backdrop to one’s actions and choices. Its content consists of the ramification or ramifications of concepts that determine one’s moral outlook or total vision. Bridget Clarke states, “A person’s total vision … reflects her character and everyone has a total vision insofar as everyone has a character.” For valuable discussion, see Bridget Clarke’s The Lens of Character: Aristotle, Murdoch and the Idea of Moral Perception (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 2003).
of the concrete practices designed for focusing society’s attention and mobilizing its sense of responsibility, beginning with Black women. Where Murdoch’s and Niebuhr’s reflections on the ethics of vision and responsibility are on a broad, general level of ethical theory, Townes’s life and writings display in concrete detail what we might call a more socially engaged “praxis of vision and responsibility.” Thus, a correlation of the ethics of vision and responsibility, as understood by Murdoch and Niebuhr on the one hand and Townes’s mission and agenda on the other, enriches our understanding of each.

Unlike Murdoch’s work, Townes’s work is not grounded in an individualistic view of the world; rather, it is grounded in how individuals should live in community. In fact, Townes’s work as she describes “grows out of individual and communal reflection on African American faith and life.” She is concerned with how destructive forces are both imposed and self-imposed upon Black people throughout America, the Caribbean Islands, and Brazil.

Because Townes’s work is intra-communal, a focus upon personal and group interests is central throughout her work. While Murdoch, in looking to Freud, reaches to psychology and develops a focus on moral agency as rooted in an overcoming of individual egoism, Townes, like King and Niebuhr, is rooted in the Christian scriptural and theological accounts that stress how the individual participates within a broader

---

5 Luther Ivory, Toward a Theology of Radical Involvement: The Theological Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997). Ivory identifies King’s conception of God as “love in action.” He holds that it is the linchpin of King’s theological framework and the axis upon which King’s theological program turns. Attention and responsibility are central to this view. Implied is an ethics of responsibility (46–65). Townes shares a similar view.

community and how such communities can often be biased and corrupted by group-identification and a denigration of other social groupings.

Instead of focusing our attention upon only racial and economic concerns, Townes, nearly 46 years after King, broadens our moral vision to include increasing systems of injustice that pull our attention away from others to the self by focusing upon multidimensional aspects of structural violence. As a womanist, she no longer sees racial segregation as the chief obstacle to the moral life (like King does, as seen in the last chapter); rather, Townes sees racism as only one of many blinding forces that distort our vision, dehumanize us, and rob us of our self-worth and self-dignity. In one of her most recent works, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, she identifies these blinding forces as cultural productions (systematic structures of evil) caused by a “fantastic hegemonic imagination,” which is a violent structural force that uses memory and imagination to impersonate history. The fantastic hegemonic imagination impersonates history when it uses site memory to replace living memory. For Townes, these violent blinding forces are created, maintained, and sustained by hegemony, one of the major issues in postmodern thought. She notes, “Hegemony is the set of ideas that dominant groups employ in a society to secure the consent of subordinates to abide by

---

7 These violent structural forces are structures that create illusions. This is to say that, in womanist thinking, these forces are real and must be dismantled because of the destructive impact they have on human bodies.

8 Hegemony creates within us what she calls a “fantastic hegemonic imagination.” A fantastic hegemonic imagination is a process that plays with history and memory to spawn caricatures and stereotypes designed to control and sustain dominance of larger groups over lesser groups. Townes addresses five of these stereotypes in her most recent work. She sees them as cultural productions that give births to isms: racism, sexism, and classism and so on. In other words, they help to creates systematic structural evil originating from group bias. See Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 18.

9 Townes is addressing hegemony as it relates to her understanding of structures of violence.
For example, it is “coercion gained by using the church, family, media, political parties, schools,” and so on. She holds that hegemony “breeds a kind of false consciousness . . . that creates societal values and moralities such that there is one coherent and accurate viewpoint on the world.” She contends that such awareness exists in “Christianity, Islam, Judaism, conservatism, liberalism, and so forth and can be seen as hegemonic in particular societies.” In fact, for Townes, hegemony, not segregation, is the greatest enemy to both the individual and society because, she argues, hegemony gives birth to “isms” and hegemony is in all of us. Hegemony, like egoism, has a life of its own. She contends that hegemony gives birth to racism, genderism, classism, ageism, and homophobia. Townes holds that there is no way to escape hegemony.

Throughout Townes’s work, she offers a number of ways to overcome hegemony. For example, one way to disrupt hegemony is to construct counter-hegemonic forces that generate new values, beliefs, and morality. These forces direct “our energies to advocate an interstructured consideration of class, gender, and race . . . using the strategy of counter-memory” to reconstitute history so “that we begin to see” and appreciate diversity as individuals living in whole communities.

10 Townes, Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil, 20.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., 7. An interstructured analysis means that she examines the issue or problem in layers from as many dimensions as possible before coming up with any conclusion about an issue. She begins with race, class, and gender and may include dimensions regarding age, homophobia, and geographical location and so on. The goal is to examine as many categories as possible regarding the problem in order to gain a truthful depiction of the situation to rightly respond to the problem.
In another way, Townes concentrates our vision and focuses our attention upon the experiences of Black women, beginning with her own personal experiences and relating those experiences to the whole of the Black community. She holds that theology and ethics must be done contextually and contends that any authentic Christian ethical reflection must take the agent’s experience seriously. Drawing from the work of novelist and social activist Toni Morrison, she argues for a “dancing mind,” a place where two equally open minds are provided a space to meet and greet each other in the classroom or in the churches to tease through issues of life in peaceful ways.\(^\text{14}\) This teasing through issues is a process of mediation, a term she borrows from womanist Marcia Riggs, to denote a way to live in community with others who share differences.\(^\text{15}\) Mediation becomes a working metaphor for her along with counter-memory and counter-hegemony, all of which require a sustained habit of concentration and careful vision. Townes’s use of Riggs’s concept of mediation is a wonderful remedy for quieting egoism.\(^\text{16}\) However, Townes moves beyond Murdoch’s discussion of individual’s ego to address hegemony. She also addresses a debate on health and healthcare in the United States, and the interior world of evil.

In summary, where Murdoch reaches to philosophy and psychology to concentrate on a generic account of the individual person, Townes uses her creative,

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 1–2. Confrontation is important to Townes. It means coming together face to face with others to discuss issues of diversity.


poetic, and prophetic imagination to embrace literature.\textsuperscript{17} Like Murdoch, she uses an interdisciplinary approach that allows her to reach to philosophy and psychology while, like King and Niebuhr, Appropriating the Hebrew Bible’s prophetic tradition of social critique and the New Testament’s emphasis on Jesus’s ethic of love, as well as his concern for the oppressed.\textsuperscript{18} Townes draws from Joel, Amos, Obadiah, and Job while reaching to the sweep of biblical accounts of ancient Egypt to understand not only the power of slavery and social oppression but also to reinterpret “spaces in our lives,” and the issues emerging from them, in light of the experience of Black women. She does this after a rereading of the sacred text in light of the Black Women’s Club Movement, a social reform movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.\textsuperscript{19}

Additionally, Townes directs her attention to broader womanist sociological understandings of the need to promote social justice and just social policies. King strives to promote social justice and just social policies, but fails to move us toward and beyond issues of gender discrimination, as well as many other forms of oppression as identified by Townes and other womanist scholars and theologians.\textsuperscript{20} Thus, on issues in which King

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{17} I must note, as I did in the first chapter, that Murdoch is also a novelist, but she states in an interview with Bryan Magee that she separates the writing of her novels from her philosophical work. Recent studies have attempted to bring together Murdoch’s novels and philosophical works in an attempt to understand Murdoch philosophy through her novels and vice versa. In this work, as stated earlier, I am interested in Murdoch the philosopher.


\textsuperscript{19} For a good study on The Black Women’s Club Movement, see Kevin K. Gaines, \textit{Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century} (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996). Also see Riggs, \textit{Awake, Arise and Act: A Womanist Call for Black Liberation}.

\textsuperscript{20} The failure of the Civil Rights Movement to address concerns of Black women is one of the departure points for the birth of Womanist Theology. See Jacquelyn Grant, \textit{White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus: Feminist Theology and Womanist Response} (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989).
\end{flushright}
was silent, Townes, with other womanists, builds upon his contributions with a holy boldness that encourages all people not to be ashamed of their diversity. However, she moves away from King’s earlier contention that unmerited suffering is redemptive and declares that suffering is “outrageous,” claiming that it does not ennoble, enrich, or empower Black people.²¹

Townes is distinct from other scholars and theologians. Like many theorists who are committed to social justice issues, she puts her whole life into her work.²² For example, she consistently reminds us that she is a Black lesbian scholar-preacher who refuses to live by the stereotypes of a lesbian Black preacher; furthermore, she refuses to separate her private life from the classroom, scholarship, and church.²³ In this way, she models the lifestyle of one who suffers from multiple layers of oppression. Although, while like King, she is an African-American Baptist minister, she is rejected by the majority of the members of her denomination because she is female and because she is a lesbian who refuses to hide her sexuality. Further, she is an advocate of same-sex


marriage, and she is interracially married to a female partner.\textsuperscript{24} In this way, while King understandably pulls our attention primarily toward racial concerns, Townes provides a much thicker pragmatic approach to understanding the moral life that involves an exploration of a broader array of dimensions of structural violence. As a womanist, she embodies, embraces, names, analyzes, and critiques issues of class, race, sex, and homophobia in imaginative ways.

She provides a window into what it is to suffer from and to fight multidimensional levels of oppression. While King’s goal is to move us beyond racial concerns in his efforts to bring about a beloved community, Townes’s goal is to simultaneously move us beyond issues of race, class, and sex in her effort to bring forth a new world, another phrase she uses for King’s beloved community. Her primary concern is for Black women, who have suffered tremendously as a result of race and patriarchy. Through their stories, she seeks to help the Black community and the world. Thus, Townes expands King’s call of “We the people” (which lacked the explicit concerns of Black women) to embrace a declaration of “We the people” to include, in Townes’s words, “all of us,” all of humanity, regardless of race, sex, or class.\textsuperscript{25} This was a development of nascent ideas rather than an improvement of King’s ideas. However, this is not to say that women’s issues were not important to him.

Additionally, while bringing attention to the mass suffering that Black women experience as a result of multilevel dimensions of oppression, Townes expands upon

\textsuperscript{24} Townes is very open about her marriage and she discusses it freely. In this way Townes makes her private life public for all to see as praxis.

\textsuperscript{25} Townes, \textit{Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil}, 160.
King’s efforts by employing a womanist methodology that allows her to use an integrated and interstructural analysis as educational methods to get people to see. For example, Townes weaves literary analysis, social history, and cultural studies with ethical and theological theory to emphasize and illustrate the interior life of evil. Thus, while King is a systematic theologian who integrates ethics into his theology, Townes writes from the point of view of an ethicist, whose audience is primarily the academy and church, specifically the Black Church. In this way, method and theory are naturally parts of her work. Because she is a womanist, she has many tools from which she can draw, from poetry to history and from speculative thoughts to reason. For example, she incorporates history with the study of memory to explain the complex social relationship in American society that reflects evil as a cultural production, while at the same time using poetry and novels to address contemporary issues.26

Here, Townes’s application of God’s vision of justice embraces these concerns. Instead of maintaining a hierarchal structure that ranks one mode of oppression above another, Townes, as a womanist, seeks to use each mode of oppression as a window to understand the world in its many dimensions. She seeks to recognize the dignity of every human being, beginning with the recognition of Black women. In this way, like the works of other womanists, Townes’s work is therapeutic to Black women and is designed to recognize that Black women suffer multilevel types of oppression and that, through her efforts to be made whole, she can help make the community whole. In this way, Black women become the community’s savior through the help of divine grace. Through seeing and recognizing their condition and responding to God’s call, they can bring salvation to

26 Ibid., 7-8, 11-27.
the world. They do this in an effort to dismantle unjust structures of evil and assist in creating a “new heaven and a new earth,” according to what Townes calls God’s vision of justice—which is Townes’s search for paradise.27

In this way, I believe that Townes, like King, is a moralist of vision and is most helpfully understood through the lens of the ethics of vision and responsibility. First, her work is fueled by the concept of vision and framed by a concept of responsibility. Second, like Murdoch, Niebuhr, and King in the previous chapters, she demonstrates that the texture of human life has much to do with how one lives morally and improves morally. Third, her work demonstrates that through clarity of vision and an ethic of responsibility, undergirded by womanist social witness, a new heaven and a new earth can be realized akin to King’s Beloved Community. Likewise, I believe that Townes’s womanist agenda and her efforts to bring forth such a community and its profound real-world impact provides a more concrete understanding of the central importance of moral vision and responsibility than the moral philosophical theoretical accounts offered by Murdoch and H. Richard Niebuhr in some of their major works.

In short, I argue that the ethics of vision and responsibility offers a perspective that grasps the distinctive moral sophistication and power of Townes’s life, her efforts for social justice, her insight into the importance of understanding the nature of particularity in the context of people’s lives and its influence, and her poetic and prophetic words so carefully chosen to help people “see” the full humanity of African Americans. To achieve her goals, Townes and her colleagues helped mobilize the hopes, discipline, and courage

of Black women to take concrete actions in exposing stories too horrible to discuss. This movement required a contextual and moral educational outreach to Black women to attend to something that they themselves had to endure for too long—namely, the reality of their vast, multi-layered suffering and the absence of their voices. Townes and others share their stories to pull the attention of people and help them begin to “see” the humanity of all people.

Additionally, the advocacy of Townes and her fellow womanists played a pivotal role in a pedagogy of vision. From her study of the Black Women’s Club Movement, Townes knew that any advocacy on behalf of women must be mediated. Here, mediation means working together with people in spite of differences. Through a process of mediation, differences could be recognized and appreciated.28 As a result, the club women’s aggressive agency centered on a process of moral pedagogy in which events and words were carefully chosen to prompt a process of attention and new seeing that leveled the playing field. As Townes demonstrates, their actions and words make concrete and vivid, in an important way, how significant and practically relevant Murdoch’s and Niebuhr’s rather general descriptions of the moral life are.

**Brief Sketch of Townes**

For several decades now, the writings and achievements of Townes have been widely admired in college, university, and seminary classrooms. She is admired as a womanist scholar and activist of queer rights, and as a theological innovator and ethicist.

---

28 Townes borrows Marcia A. Riggs notion of mediation—“not to see easy reconciliation. As an ethic that is a process of acknowledging seemingly diametrically opposing positions and creating a response that interposes and communicates between opposing sides. It is living with tension rather than aiming at integration, compromise, of reconciliation as ultimate ends. These may be the outcome, but mediating as process occurs whether or not mediation as an end does.” Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 87. See also Riggs, *Awake, Arise, & Act*, 77.
In academic theological circles, Townes is acclaimed for her social justice work and is regarded as a significant moral theologian and Christian ethicist because she develops a formal analysis of religious ethical theory and she typically writes in a formal academic way, displaying clear mastery of the classic literature of the field.\(^{29}\) She develops a comprehensive theory of Christian ethics, and she elaborates a sustained formal ethical account of the moral principles needed for engaging a wide range of moral problems. An understanding of her theories must begin with an overview of her life.

Townes was born in 1955 in Durham, North Carolina, to a middle class Protestant family. She attended Asbury Temple United Methodist Church where she received her earliest formation. Her mother and father were both professors and administrators at North Carolina Central University. Townes also had a younger sister, Tricia, who became a lawyer and after years of success set out to follow her heart as an artist. Townes, on the other hand, would later follow in the footsteps of her parents and become an professor and administrator. Townes grew up in Durham and Southern Pines, North Carolina, where “her mother and mentor in many ways . . . taught [her] the value of truth telling, listening more than you talk, and the importance of learning how to truly look at and see what is going on around you,” something that she carries over into her work.\(^{30}\) In fact, in her early years, Townes’s mother would sit her down in front of the television to see Jesse Helms in action before Helms became a United States Congressman. At the time,

---


\(^{30}\) Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, xv.
Helms was a radio and television personality. Helms was also a “race-baiter; he was no friend of racial justice.”

Townes’s mother would have [her] listen to the things Helms would say including his constant berating of Black people. One day [Townes] asked [her] mother who Helms was talking about with that word ‘niggras’ because [she] didn’t know who ‘the niggras’ were. [Her mother] told [her] that he was talking about us. . . . It was then that [she] knew that [she] couldn’t believe everything on TV, [Townes concluded].

Even though Townes often declares that she grew up in a typical middle class dysfunctional family, she grew up primarily in a loving environment with two protective parents who, with other relatives, encouraged her to carefully explore life and to be the best that she could be. She also received similar encouragement from teachers and church leaders. She was an avid reader who always yearned for more. She became acquainted with a wide variety of literature, including poetry, Greek mythology, stories, and so on.

In fact, with the support of her parents, she decided to read every book in her elementary school library before the start of the fifth grade, a decision that would impact the rest of her life. Nearing the completion of reading the books, she arrived to the S volume of the encyclopedia. After reading what she deemed to be a false and dehumanizing depiction of Blacks, she brought it, with pages marked, to the attention of a number of authority figures, including the librarian, her teacher, and her parents. The matter was taken care of immediately. The book was replaced. What did she find that took the wind out of her in that article? She remembers:


32 Ibid.

33 Emilie M. Townes, 2011 Gilberto Castaneda Lecture - from Chicago Theological Seminary. The lecture can be found at http://vimeo.com/24032682.
Cartoonage and offensive caricatures of Black folk eating watermelons, stereotypes of smiling Black folks working in the fields with tattered clothes, a montage cavalcaded of sambas, mammies and pickaninnies – with all of the righteous indignations that a nine or ten year old can muster, I went to the librarian and the teacher—with my fingers marking the pages in the encyclopedia. They could tell that something was wrong. All I can do was open the page and say this is not right. They too were stunned and assured me that they would deal with this. When I got home that night, I told my parents what I had found at school and we were relieved that their more recent volume did not have those caricatures in it.\(^\text{34}\)

Townes’s actions, already at a young age, demonstrated that she had developed a moral outlook on the world. As she notes, by that time she was already able to understand sit-ins and marches, picketing, and President Kennedy’s assassination.\(^\text{35}\) Her world was expanding according to her growing ability to attend to the particulars of her environment. In this manner, her moral development seems to parallel much of what Iris Murdoch has suggested regarding the importance of the quiet and gradual buildup of structures of value in people. With her moral development, she was being raised by two proud Black parents who took seriously their responsibility for instilling in her and the students they taught at North Carolina Central University the determination to carry themselves with dignity, as did most adults in her community and church. In short, many authority figures in her life took great pride in passing their wisdom on to her. Even today she remembers hearing their voices, at home, at church, at the barbershop, and at the beauty salon. Such experiences continue to echo in Townes’s work—in her teaching, lecturing, and scholarship, in her vision for the church and theological education, and in her deep commitment to integrate spirituality, social justice, and social witness,

\(^\text{34}\) Emilie Townes, Opening Convocation and Installation of the Sixteenth Dean of the Vanderbilt Divinity School, Address can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JMsZlrH-eUQ.

\(^\text{35}\) Ibid.
something that began with her earlier formation at Asbury Temple United Methodist Church.\textsuperscript{36}

Townes continued to reach for more and went on to earn her bachelor’s degree from the University of Chicago and her master’s degree from its Divinity school. She then entered into its Doctor of Ministry and during this time accepted a call into ordained ministry. In 1980, she was ordained a Baptist minister in the American Baptist denomination. In 1982, she graduated with a Doctor of Ministry degree. During this time, she taught at the Chicago Theological Seminary and the McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago. From 1983 to 1987, Townes taught ethics and society at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary and became involved in field education. She also became involved with administration in the Office of Ministry Programs.\textsuperscript{37}

From 1986 to 1989, Townes served as interim pastoral leader of Christ the Redeemer Metropolitan Community Church while completing her doctoral studies in the joint Garrett Evangelical Seminary/Northwestern University program. There, in 1989, she earned her Ph.D. Her doctoral dissertation was based on the work of Ida B. Wells-Barnett, the turn-of-the-century activist in anti-lynching campaigns and co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). From 1989 to 1999, Townes taught at Saint Paul School of Theology, Kansas City, MO, where she was named full Professor of Christian Social Ethics in 1998. In 1999, she became the Carolyn Williams Beaird Professor of Christian Ethics at Union Theological Seminary. Townes

\textsuperscript{36} Townes, 2011 Gilberto Castaneda Lecture - Chicago Theological Seminary, Lecture can be found at http://vimeo.com/24032682.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
has also served as the Andrew W. Mellon Professor of African-American Religion and Theology at Yale Divinity School, with a joint appointment in the African-American Studies Department of Yale University, the Religious Studies Department, and the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Program. She was also Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at Yale.\footnote{Townes’s Curriculum Vitae can be found at the following Yale Divinity School website, http://divinity.yale.edu/sites/default/files/faculty_cv/ETOWNES.pdf.}

Currently, Townes is the Dean of Vanderbilt University Divinity School. Townes is primarily known for her lectures, essays, and books, including \textit{Womanist Justice}, \textit{Womanist Hope; In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness}; \textit{Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African-American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care}; and \textit{Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil}.\footnote{Emilie M. Townes, \textit{Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope} (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993); \textit{In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness} (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995); \textit{Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care} (New York: Continuum, 1998); and \textit{Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil} (Atlanta, GA: Palgrave Macmillan Press, 2006). Townes has also edited two books, \textit{A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering} and \textit{Embracing the Spirit Womanist Perspective on Home, Salvation and Transformation}. She is also on the editing board of \textit{Theology and Sexuality}, the \textit{Journal of Religious Ethics}, \textit{The Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion}, \textit{Second Opinion}, and \textit{Encyclopedia of Women and Religion}. She is the former Carolyn Williams Beaird Professor of Christian Ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York and Professor of Christian Social Ethics and Black Church Ministries at St. Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, Missouri. In 2005, she was elected vice president of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and in 2008 President of AAR. She is also a member of the Society of Christian Ethics and the Society for the Study of Black Religion.} Fueling these works is Townes’s search for paradise, a vision of a new heaven and a new earth, driven by God’s justice and God’s call for justice for the Black community—a vision, she argues, that “explores the tremendous complexities and multiplicities of the nature of realities, truths, lies and damned lies in which African-American critical religion finds its home, offers
strategies of resistance, and seeks to embody a liberating transformatory praxis.”40 It is what she emphatically calls an “apocalyptic eschatological vision,” a vision undergirded by a “social witness,” which brings together past, present, and future.41 It reaches to the wisdom of the past to act in the present in anticipation of building a better future. This vision frames her understanding of theo-ethical reflection. I draw from these works to illustrate Townes’s understanding of the moral life and to explore the role vision plays in Black thought and experiences.

**Womanism and Its Influences on Townes’s Thinking**

According to Peter Paris, during the latter part of the Civil Rights movement, several women theologians “allied themselves with colleagues around the country to demonstrate in their own voice their desire to affirm the major principles of both black theology and feminist theology”42 Among these were Jacquelyn Grant, Katie G. Cannon, and Delores Williams, to name a few. These women were fully aware of the fact that liberation theology, Black theology, and feminist theology presented inherent limitations that, intentionally and unintentionally, oppressed Black women, beginning with the fact that Black women were absent from the discussions.43

Their aim was to create social and religious forms and structures free of sexual

---


41 Emilie M. Townes, *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 176. Townes’s praxis of vision is rooted in a search for paradise, which retains its vision. This notion is reflected in her ethic of care. One’s “future is conditioned on the present and the past” (Ibid.).


injustice and domination. Womanist theology, like other liberation theologies, got its start as the thinking of an oppressed group who, through seeing, hard experience, writing, and studying (and also not hearing their concerns being discussed) became painfully aware of the absence of their voices.\textsuperscript{44} These women sought to offer a corrective to the deficiencies of Black and feminist theologies and, thus, adopted the term \textit{womanist}, first used and definitively explained by the novelist and social activist Alice Walker.\textsuperscript{45} Grant notes, “A womanist is “a strong Black woman who has sometimes been mislabeled as a domineering castrating matriarch. A womanist is one who has developed survival strategies in spite of the oppression of her race and sex in order to save her family and her people.”\textsuperscript{46}

The term \textit{womanist} movement provides new ground and a new framework for understanding and doing theology and ethical reflection. It also empowers Black women and women of color to join the moral debate. \textit{Womanist theology}, as a term for doing theology and ethical reflection, provides new grounds and a new theological framework for a new methodology that involves a multidimensional approach to oppression as opposed to a monolithic one, which provides a simplistic or one dimensional response to complex or multidimensional problems.\textsuperscript{47} That is, instead of creating a methodology that


\textsuperscript{45} Ibid. Also see Alice Walker, \textit{The Color Purple} (United States: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982). Alice Walker is a novelist, poet, womanist, and Pulitzer Prize recipient. While Alice Walker provides the four-part definition and the origin of the term \textit{womanist}, she is not the originator of it.

\textsuperscript{46} Grant, \textit{White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus}, 205.

focuses on race or sex, womanist as a methodology provides an interstructural approach to the moral life that simultaneously focuses on multiple dimensions of oppression in its analysis, such as race, sex, and class. In short, womanist is a term derived from the sense of the word as it is used in Black communities:

Womanist from womanish. (Opp. of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A Black feminist or feminist of color. From the Black folks expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. Serious.

This is to say that a womanist is a woman who is called by God to care about and be responsible for others. In order to do this, she begins with her own experience. She poses questions to dismantle structures of violence. Her being responsible has much to do with being in charge, taking ownership or matters into her own hands; the term conveys working within a pattern of interactions from a grown-up perspective. For Townes, as for other womanists or Black feminists, there are four central aspects to womanism that sets the womanist agenda. This is an abbreviation of that agenda:

The four part definition begins with the origins of the term, [1] the black folk expression womanish or more accurately the expression, You’re acting womanish.” [2] Womanist is communal. The womanist cares about her people—contemporary and historical . . . [which imply a challenge on] the nature of how Black folk are with one another. We are sexual beings who are to be loved, sexually or not. We are oppressed people who have had saviors in our midst… We cannot divorce ourselves from one another without killing ourselves and signing the death warrant for our future generations. We must, the womanist


must, recognize her location and responsibility in a community. [3] The individual is grounded in love. Love of self, love of community, love of the worlds of Black women, love of the Spirit. These are all held together for the womanist—regardless. Spirit, community, and person are held together in a wondrous, if not faithful, circle pointing toward wholeness and hope.

[4] "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.” This signals the move so many Black feminists have made away from feminist preoccupation with gender inequalities without adequate attention and analytical and reflective insight into the interstructured nature of race, gender, and class oppression.

Following in the tradition of Martin Luther King, Jr., Townes writes that the “womanist project is to take a fuller measure of the nature of injustice and inequalities of human existence from the perspective of Black women.” In this way, for Townes, the experience of Black women becomes essential in conducting ethical reflection. It not only forms the grounds of such thought, but creates the entry point and provides the framework for analysis, self-reflections, and exploration. It is to use one’s writings as a praxis of vision to address such issues as self-doubt, self-contempt, self-hatred, and self-flagellation. As M. Shawn Copeland writes,

Thus, the crucial contribution that womanist analysis makes to canon (re)formation is the heretofore neglected subject of the experience of black women. [This means] that womanists take the survival and flourishing of oppressed, excluded, and despised humanity . . . as criteria for evaluation in reading texts. As Katie Cannon explains, “Canon formation is a new way of...

---

49 Townes, In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness, 9–11. Monica A. Coleman notes that one of the problems with the definition of womanist is that it is not a definition. Coleman offers a critique of Walker’s definition as she seeks to fully understand what it is to be a womanist. See Coleman, “Introduction: Ain’t I a Womanist Too?” in Ain’t I a Womanist Too? ed., Coleman, 1–29.

establishing new and larger contexts of experience within which African American women can attend to the disparity between sources of oppression and sources of liberation.”

Here, vision and responsibility become important for informing what Townes calls womanist social witness, a term used to capture and describe the motivation and drive of the thoughts and actions of Black feminists. Undergirding this social witness is the role experience plays in how we respond to the world. Here, experience, specifically the experience of Black women, helps us to “see” in the moral sense of see. The experiences of Black women become the concrete means for understanding the world and thus provide a concrete illustration of the significance of the rather general and philosophically theoretical accounts of the dynamics of vision and responsibility offered by Murdoch and H. Richard Niebuhr in some of their major works. The experience of Black women is used as an educational tool, as well as a framework for a concept of morality based upon sustained attention and careful vision. Womanism provides a way of doing ethical reflection that captures the integrity of the lives of Black women unlike dominant models of ethics. Katie G. Cannon captures this failure of dominant systems of ethics as she writes:


52 In fact, Marcia Riggs rightly suggests that the club women’s understanding “qualifies the Niebuhrian ethic.” She states, “Their ethic insists that the responsible self is a sociohistorical being even as God creates her or him. It seems to me that Niebuhr’s social self-lapses into an ahistorical ethical posture whereas the club women’s does not. This is the case, if I am reading Trimiew correctly in Voices of the Silenced, because Niebuhr’s social self is an ‘empowered’ self rather than a ‘marginalized’ self. Trimiew suggests that marginalized responsible selves extend Niebuhr’s tradition, because they understand appropriate response to God and others as meeting basic human needs coupled with the recognition of basic human rights. In this way, the club movement helps us to see in concrete ways.” See Trimiew, Voices of Silenced, xxi-xvii, 8–9.
The dominant ethical systems implied that the doing of Christian ethics in the Black community was either immoral or amoral. The cherished ethical ideas predicated upon the existence of freedom and a wide range of choices proved null and void in situations of oppression. The real lived texture of Black life requires moral agency that may run contrary to the ethical boundaries of main line Protestantism. Blacks may use action guides which have never been considered within the scope of traditional codes of faithful living. Racism, gender discrimination, and economic exploitation, as inherited, age-long complexes, require the Black community to create and cultivate values and virtues in their own terms so that they can prevail against the odds with moral integrity.  

The point that Cannon makes is that the traditional moral virtues, like truth-telling, may be fatal for Blacks because of the results that could follow from truth-telling in some situations (“Where is that escaped slave?”). The point is that dominant systems of ethics are based in the experiences of dominant groups. 

Womanist Jacquelyn Grant declares that womanists are Black women leaders and activists like Sojourner Truth, Jarena Lee, Amanda Berry Smith, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Marry Church Terrell, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Fannie Lou Hamer. For Jacquelyn Grant, as for Emilie Townes, these women used their own experiences through sustained attention and trained vision to interpret the world around them and to participate in it. Many of these women, receiving a call from God, embarked upon a ministry shaped by their notion of God’s vision. For example, in his essay “And Your Daughters Shall Prophesy: Public Speeches of Maria Stewart, 1832-1833,” Anthony Pinn notes that Maria Stewart embarked upon a ministry which she believed was ordained and sanctioned by

---


54 Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus*, 205. For valuable discussion, see Riggs, *Awake, Arise and Act*, 77–91. These women were committed to “racial uplift and evaluation and a sense of racial obligation and duty. They understood socioreligious ethical responsibility as a unification of religious and social ethical concerns” (Ibid., 82). This involved cultivating character, exhibiting right acts—acts that involved “uplifting those who had less or were without educational, economic, and/or occupational advantages” (Ibid).
God. As part of this experience, and in keeping with the traditions of the Black Jeremiad, Maria Stewart lectured in Boston, spreading her religious and political message. Pinn notes that Jarena Lee, Amanda Berry Smith, and other well-known Black women dared to exercise public ministry, even as they faced the verbal and physical attacks of both Black and White men. These women were not deterred. They “felt ‘called’ by God.” As Townes states,

Black and white women developed a spirituality that took them outside of their daily prayer and reflection time and into the world. Their public work was deeply wedded to their inner and intense reflection. The goal was salvation on earth. Because of their unique role in shaping the moral fiber of society through the family, women took up the challenge of salvation. Religion proved a way to order one’s life and priorities. It also enabled women to rely on an authority beyond.

In this way, these women directed their attention toward God and were led by their notion of God’s vision.

Demonstrations of this vigilant type of moral agency were expressed as these women participated in the club movement. They sought to live out their faith in their efforts to build God’s Kingdom upon the earth. Their experiences provide a model for ethical reflection. Drawing from their examples, the experiences of Black women become important for doing womanist work. For Townes, this is because what undergirds womanist’s work is a piety that “speaks of the nature of being and survival,” that refuses to accept injustice in any form. It is an “embodied spirituality” or faith in practice that is


56 Ibid., 57.

57 Townes, In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness, 35.

58 Ibid., 13. These women used their efforts to dismantle false assumptions concerning the moral
both personal and communal, which holds humanity and divinity in one frame. This praxis of faith provides the energy and framework that drives the agent toward the moral, specifically responsible action.

Thus, in Townes’s work, she attempts to “bring together the historic force of African-American women’s spirituality with the demand of the Spirit to contextualize and live one’s faith.”\(^\text{59}\) This is implied in the four-part definition Alice Walker gives to womanist. Implied in the four-part definition of womanist is an inevitable demand for praxis of vision, a holy boldness and advocacy for all oppressed people, something that is reflected throughout Townes’s work. In short, it is a vigilant type of moral agency geared toward transforming the world in the hope of bringing about a “new heaven and a new earth,” a goal that is analogous to the building of King’s Beloved Community (or Townes’s apocalyptic vision). For Townes, it is through such praxis of faith that the experience of these women forms the framework for womanist Christian ethical reflection. Their faith in practice encompasses both intellectual and practical aims, disrupts all habitual affirmation of the status quo, distinguishes appearance from reality, and exposes the roots of what is.\(^\text{60}\)

In so doing, the club women’s experiences become the lens for seeing and interpreting the world, and their thoughts and actions become the prescription for a new and intellectual capabilities of blacks.


\(^\text{60}\) According to Katie Cannon, womanists engage in a critical critique “debunking, unmasking, disentangling the ideologies, theologies, and systems of value operative in a particular society . . . by analyzing the established power relations that determine cultural, political, and economic presuppositions and by evaluating the legitimating myths that sanction the enforcement of such values.” Katie G. Cannon, *Katie’s Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1996), 138.
ethic. This is due to the fact that, like other liberationists, womanists value the uniqueness of their own experiences as being significant to their own situation. Such experiences are captured in the struggle of Black women as they are presented in the Black literary tradition, in histories, biographies, autobiographies, songs, poems, hymns, stories, tales, and so on.\textsuperscript{61} It is from these literary sources that the uniqueness of Black women’s experiences becomes essential for understanding both the moral life and human nature. They provide the micro histories that not only reclaim our past, but allow us to know that the story of our lives as a people can be told another way. They also provide a much-needed source for the reframing of dominant histories so that we could get at the truth, specifically the true-true—the truth in memory, the truth as one sees it.\textsuperscript{62} This chapter explores the essential role these fragments play in womanist thought, in light of an ethics of vision. Employing this methodology, a methodology that reclaims the experience of Black women, gives us a fuller conception of moral agency and what it means to be a human person.\textsuperscript{63} To do so broadens our moral vision. Next, I will discuss the club movement and its influence upon Townes’s writings.

\textsuperscript{61} However, the fact that womanists use their own experience is not new. What is new is that they call out the fact that traditional ethics has been based on the experiences of privileged white men and has systematically excluded Black women’s experiences. So inclusion of a much broader range of experiences is crucial, in addition, the “epistemological privilege of the oppressed.”

\textsuperscript{62} “Dominant ethics also assumes that a moral agent is to a considerable degree free and self-directing. . . . Due to extraneous forces and the entrenched bulwark of white supremacy and male superiority which pervade this society, Blacks and whites, women and men are forced to live with very different ranges of freedoms.” Cannon, \textit{Black Womanist Ethics}, 2.

\textsuperscript{63} If we recall, this was not included in King’s work. Townes broadens our vision of the moral. It is needed for a better understanding of justice. See Riggs, 85–86.
The Black Women’s Club Movement

Townes is inspired by nineteenth-century Black women’s religious experience, which united the romanticism of domesticity and maternity with the efforts of the secular woman’s movement to encounter the “sexually exclusive spheres.” This movement showed Townes that women’s vigilant moral agency began with a powerful private religious experience involving a “call to salvation,” and they took that call to salvation into the public domain to transform an unethical social world. Referring to the club movement, Anthony Pinn states,

African American women were obligated to exercise their domestic influence so that the requirements for progress would be taken seriously by a new generation. The Black community would achieve its objectives if Black Women made full use of their internal resources—their strength, fortitude, and domestic influence. Women were asked to seek independence and, if necessary, to die in the struggle.

Through their efforts, they emphasized commitment to what they believed to be God’s vision for their lives by the use of biblical figures, such as Ruth and Mary Magdalene. Their efforts in giving voice to the experience and perspectives of Black women affirmed for Townes and other womanists their instrumental role in the community. These women understood the importance of Black women’s influences and create a distinct role for them which brought about the emergence of a “collective Black female consciousness.”

---

64 Townes, _In a Blaze of Glory_, 34.
65 Ibid., 36.
67 Ibid., 60. This collective Black women consciousness concretizes the notion of Niebuhr’s relational web as it affirms Murdoch’s stress on the importance of consciousness. It also provides proof that club women were led by a collective vision.
One of the movement’s most committed advocates was Ida B. Wells-Barnett. Wells-Barnett provided the source material for Townes’s *Womanist Justice and Womanist Hope*, which lays the framework for a new womanist Christian social ethics. Townes argues that Wells-Barnett’s concerns were also the concerns of “the majority of the women in her day. She upheld the need for women to be the moral guardians of African-American society.”68 Townes explains,

She was far from immune to the ideology and rhetoric of the cult of true womanhood. Temperance, morality, education, domesticity, social uplift were of deep concern to her, as she wrote and agitated for justice in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.69

In this effort, the club movement pulled their own attention toward the elevation of rustic women and the enhancement of Negro everyday life.70 For example, one of the club’s main goals was to present the moral values of Victorian family life into the cottages of Georgia and Alabama sharecroppers. Sharecroppers were tenant farmers who shared their produce from their crops with their land owners for the privilege to grow crops on their land.

According to Townes, the club women connected personal and communal transformation to affect salvation in an effort to bring in the new heaven and new earth.71 What makes their efforts unique is that social agency took a special shape among Black club women, as they lived by consent in harmony with their beliefs in the Divine. These

---


69 Ibid.

70 Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory*, 41. One of these club organizations was the National Association of Colored Women. According to Townes, “This organization focused on the uplift of the Black peasant woman and the improvement of Negro family life.”

71 Ibid., 40.
women “rejected the racist and classist connotation in Victorian ethics. To counter they argued that Black women were true women; it was their historical situation that determined their condition.”\(^{72}\) As vigilant moral agents, these women sought perfection and advocated social reform in the framework of a piety that esteemed life and took seriously their responsibility to help craft and preserve an impartial and ethical communal mandate.

Although they maintained the traditional roles handed to them, these women lived a piety that led them to reshape and reform those roles in harmony with their beliefs in the Divine.\(^{73}\) For example, Townes explained that, “as ministers of their homes and the moral guardians of their families, their religious beliefs revolved around the dictum that a ‘woman’s true calling is to make people’s lives better,’ which led to an aggressive campaign to convert the ‘fallen woman’ and public denunciation of any man who frequented her company.”\(^{74}\) In so doing, they conflicted very little with the teaching of the Black church, which declared women essentially domestic beings. However, through a praxis of vision, they pulled their attention toward God’s vision of justice and directed that vision toward the conditions of their time and what was required of them to transform such conditions to bring God’s vision of love, hope, and justice to the world. This means that Black women used God’s vision of justice to impart middle class values to the Black community in a way to uplift the moral standing of Blacks. As a result, the

\(^{72}\) Pinn, “And Your Daughters Shall Prophesy: Public Speeches of Maria Stewart,” 59.

\(^{73}\) Townes, \textit{In a Blaze of Glory}, 36.

\(^{74}\) Ibid., 34.
club women enlarged the concept of family life to include other areas of interests which involved discussions on children, culture, and social purity.

In summary, the club women saw themselves as the moral guardians of the community, specifically the Black community, and sought to live out God’s vision of justice and God’s command of justice for the Black community in concrete ways. It is this understanding of their roles that began to lay the grounds of their vigilant moral agency and their understanding of the Bible. The Bible became a weapon for them and a tool to moral agency as they modeled themselves after biblical characters like Paul, Deborah, and so on.

They described themselves both as “homemakers and soldiers.”75 These women were obligated by a profound faith to exercise a vigilant moral agency that mirrored “the values of their piety,” in which their combined efforts became the communal “expression of the individual work” they did in the home and the moral teaching of “children and husbands.”76 In short, these women’s vigilant moral agency was in direct response to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century religious revival, in which Protestants directed their efforts to counter the “religious indifference, rationalism, and Catholicism of the day” to form a lasting ethical “social order.”77

The club “women took up the challenge to spread the promise of salvation on earth” through their call to shape the “moral fabric of society through family.”78 In

---

75 Ibid., 34
76 Ibid., 35–37.
77 Ibid., 35.
78 Ibid.
demonstrating this praxis of vision, their notion of God’s vision provided a way to order their priorities and their lives on earth. A praxis of vision enabled these women to trust in a power separate from the domain of men—“to eliminate the sin of licentiousness, which appeared in the lust of men and the prostitution of women” and to “reform and resurrect fallen women.”79 The focus of the club women was on the local as an arena to solve larger universal problems. Christian symbols helped them make sense of their experiences of marginality, and built and kept alive a hope for salvation through freedom.80 For example, “The heavy identification with the Exodus story and the suffering servant Jesus became poignant touchstones for people enduring [oppression].”81 It is clear that the club women’s demonstration of vigilant agency provides the grounds for Townes to enter into the moral debate.

**Townes’s Conversation and Debate Partners and Their Influence**

Townes discusses the multidimensional oppression experienced by oppressed people. In so doing, she admits that she is in debt to a host of womanist scholars, including Jacquelyn Grant, Katie Cannon, Shawn Copeland, Karen Baker-Fletcher, Patricia Hunter, Delores Williams, Frances Wood, Leslie Williams, Joan Martin, Jacquelyn Renita Bynum, and Barbara Christian. She sustains a long admiration for the womanist social witness agenda and for the power of the way it addresses multilevel dimensions of oppression, as well as affirming her stress on particularity as she demonstrates throughout her work.

79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
Townes puts her own multilayered experiences in dialogue with the wisdom of the womanist community. She recognizes that womanist wisdom springs out of the experiences of African American women as they have been daughters, wives, partners, aunts, grandmothers, and mothers and reaches to those experiences as they are depicted in autobiographies, narratives, stories, songs, folklore, poetry, and so on. Recognizing the multilayered experiences of other Black women in contrast to her own helps her to see that the stories of Black life in America not only consist of fragments, but can be told in many ways. Although each fragment is a story of survival, each story represents a piece of a larger narrative and provides a window into Black life. Thus, recognizing that their collective experience is unique and that each woman’s experience is necessary because it forms its own angle of vision, she engages in dialogue with the broader womanist community, using as a standard the multilayered experiences of her ancestors, specifically Black women in the club movement.82

Townes sustains a lifelong admiration for the power of Ida B. Wells-Barnett’s ethical agenda and for the power of the way Wells-Barnett does womanist work in not only a highly literary and expressive way, but also with a social agenda for the oppressed. She recognizes Wells-Barnett as a fearless anti-lynching crusader, suffragist, and women’s rights advocate and journalist, who, she contends, exercised an uncompromising leadership and devotion to democracy. In doing so, Wells-Barnett

82 The collective experience of Black women is unique because they have experienced multilayers of oppression, more so than any other group on earth. However, each individual’s experience is not unique but necessary. Black women’s experience adds immeasurably to the fabric of social ethics and is necessary and may also challenge some of the major priorities of “standard” (white male) ethics. The point is that, as a group, no other group of women has suffered such oppression. This is what makes their collective experience unique but their individual experiences necessary. See Dolores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013).
provides not only inspiration for Townes, but also acts as a mentor and role model for doing womanist work. Wells also offers Townes a model for doing contemporary ethics. Townes likewise stresses a similar admiration for folklorist and novelist Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960), whom she also holds as one of the pre-eminent writers of the twentieth century. Other womanists that have helped to shape Townes’s life are Katie Cannon, Jacquelyn Grant, Delores S. Williams, and Patricia Collins. They remain significant and deeply influential in her understanding of the moral life.

The next sets of dialogue partners for Townes are the many voices in her community who passed on wisdom. As Townes notes, throughout her work she draws from the wisdom and humanity of a community of “old souls” that have influenced her along life’s journey. These include her family, friends, church members, and a variety of individuals from academic and nonacademic communities, specifically people of faith, including her father, mother, aunts and uncles, and her cousins Willie Mae, Mrs. Wayne, Mr. Butler, Miss Rosie, and Mrs. Montez. Joining these extensive influences is the particularity of the Black church. These people help her to see, be responsible, and appreciate life.

The next set of dialogue partners for Townes include a wide variety of philosophical, theological, literary, sociological, historical, and psychological “partners in discourse” that Townes has engaged across the last four decades and this breadth of argument and perspective is one of the main reasons that Townes’s project is so creative and distinctive. She holds that good writers help her to see new worlds. Her work is

83 Townes, In a Blaze of Glory, 47–67.
84 Townes, Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil, xv.
poetic and prophetic. For instance, her most recent book, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* is described by Dwight N. Hopkins and Linda E. Thomas as a book of dancing words and a thinking book.  

For example, they contend that “the words dance as they coax, berate, and persuade as we encounter hope in argument and artistic pose,” direct and sideways. It is dancing words in the tradition of enslaved African Americans who approached the Bible as a talking book. Although they could not read or write, these enslaved African Americans listen to the words dance from the speaker’s mouth to their ears and hearts. Her writing is tight, loving, and envisioning a better world. Townes’s choice of writers helps her to see writing as a spiritual enterprise that involves fighting and loving and envisioning that a better world is possible, powerful, meaningful, and challenging. Among the cluster of writers she reaches to include literary greats like James Baldwin, Carter G. Woodson, W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, Franklin E. Frazier, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison.

For Townes, Du Bois provides an excellent example of Black counter-memory as reconstructive strategy. Recognizing that history subordinated the Black experience to the point of making it virtually unknown in dominant history writing, Du Bois set out to reconstitute this history by providing a clear picture of the facts of Black life. Drawing on Baldwin, she elaborates on the struggles and joys of humanity used to understand evil. Using his “Many Thousands Gone,” she explores the rise and fall of capitalism and what it means to be a Negro, and she concludes with Baldwin that “dehumanization is not a one way street [and] that the loss of identity has consequences far beyond those who are

---

85 Dwight N. Hopkins and Linda E. Thomas, “Preface” in *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, x.
the immediate victims.”

Like Baldwin, she sees the loss of identity as “a crime against ourselves.”

The essay affirms for her that the story of Blacks in America is an unattractive story. It is what Baldwin calls a “story of shadows that exist in the dark places of our minds.”

It portrays Black life as a social project, viewed as a set of statistics. Townes brings this conversation to a contemporary study of evil and its impact on identity that takes on different texture, shapes, tones, and tastes in the way of icons and stereotypes. Baldwin’s essay allows her to see that everyone is impacted by structures of violence in one way or another. Throughout her writing, she employs Howard Thurman’s notion of blending head and heart in her efforts to shape a “world of justice and peace.”

Townes is also influenced by both Greek and Roman mythology. She learned a great deal about poets, as can be seen in her writings, specifically from those who do not deal with dense theo-ethical discourse and reflection. She learned about poets and writers such as Elizabeth Alexander, Tina McElroy Ansa, Nikky Finney, Alice Walker, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Ayn Rand, Carson McCullers, and the list goes on.

Several of the most significant writers I see in her work include: Toni Morrison, who introduces her to a dancing mind, a place where two equally open minds meet to discuss issues of life; James Baldwin, who affirms her vision; Marcia Riggs, who offers the term *mediating as process* that is so important to her work; Alice Walker, whose literary work provides an entry point for engaging contemporary issues; and H. Richard

---

87 Ibid., 29.
88 Ibid., 30.
89 Ibid., 159.
Niebuhr, who offers a model that provides structure to her thoughts in the way of his responsibility ethic.

With her novel *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker helps Townes to reflect on the nature of creation, the social witness that flows from it, and its relation to gender roles in the Black community. As she places emphasis on the nature of seeing, Townes reaches to Walker in order to help her understand “cultural images and the ways in which the influence of such images molded and reshaped Black society, and societies as a whole.”

Paule Marshall, through her novel *Praise Song for the Widow*, helps Townes addresses the issue of “identity and the impact of the color caste system within the African-American community” as well as its impact upon “self-worth and self-esteem” through the use of “images of Blackness.” It is through an exploration of such imagery that Townes is able to begin to create a womanist response to what it means to be a moral agent.

In creating an ethic of care, in the midst of a community experiencing a health and healthcare crisis, Townes reaches to Nel Noddings, Mary Jeanne Larrabee, and Nancy N. Rue. Noddings, Larrabee, and Rue provide for her insight on the nature of care and caring to help her create an ethic of care based on compassion and justice. Additionally, she draws from John McKnight and Jon Kretzmann, who help her explore ways community-based approaches can address issues of health and health care.

---

90 Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory*, 12.

91 Ibid. 13.

92 Townes also states that she draws from a rich circle of colleagues, namely Patricia Hunter, Karen Frances Wood, and Leslie Williams. I must note that Townes acknowledges many people by only mentioning their names with little to no further description of their contribution. I have included some of these names, because I want to show that Townes grounds her work in many voices. Other names she
In her exploration of evil, she is influenced by the Harlem Renaissance and the Black consciousness moment as she draws on James Baldwin, Patrick Chamoiseau, June Jordan, Toni Morrison, Sonia Sanchez, and Harriet Beecher Stowe in order to understand the interior worlds of evil and the impact that such evil have on people lives. Her goal is to dismantle it. To discuss memory and history, she reaches to Jacque Le Goff and Matt Matsudo, who writes from the perspective that history and memory are subjective, and expands French historian Pierre Nora’s work. Morrison helps her to set the context for two key aspects of her project, its subject nature and its understanding of evil as a cultural production. Townes combines the interplay of history and memory with the help of Michel Foucault’s understanding of imagination and Antonio Gramsci’s use of hegemony. They help her to explore how the imagination plays with history and memory to spawn cultural productions. Baldwin’s essay “Many Thousand Gone” helps her to explore identity as commodity as she contends that race is an ill-conceived and arbitrary notion. Morrison’s “ Unspeakable Things Unspoken” and Patrick Chamoiseau’s novel Texaco help to contextualize the reparations debate within the reality of empire, while she explores the lack of recognition given to women’s moral autonomy and its actualization in communal formations and public policy. She draws from poet Sonia Sanchez’s “haiku 6” and the Black matriarch and welfare Queen.93

Finally, in displaying her ethics of vision, Townes turns to her own poetic voice and responds to the wisdom of a sermon found in Toni Morrison’s book Beloved.

93 My point for including all of these sources is to show that Townes grounds her understanding of reality in many different voices. These voices are very important because each of them provides a window for her to gain a truthful depiction of reality or reframe her depiction of reality, something that I will build on in the conclusion of this study.
Through this novel, Morrison helps Townes to explore the nature of being and survival, which raises questions about the reformation of the nature of ontology and how this becomes a means to understanding the nature of violence in African American life. The novel allows her to respond to the existing issues of environmental violence and the Black neo-conservative radical restructuring of violent structures in the United States.

For example, it allows her to respond to environmental racism—the disproportionate dumping of toxic waste into Black and Hispanic communities throughout the United States. Townes discusses toxic waste dumping as a form of contemporary lynching and encourages us to love our own hearts, as a way of fighting back structures of domination. She also shows us that to love our hearts is to care about other people’s lives in crucial times.

Next, she shows us that the reality of African American life—social economic and political, is not as simple as it may seem. She demonstrates this with the help of sociologist William Julius Wilson who shows us that each socioeconomic class within African American society faces particular manifestations of racism, sexism, and classism, which impacts the accuracy of neoconservatives’ critiques on Black life and the benefit that public policy provides as a panacea for the injustices and structured social inequality faced by Blacks in the United States.

**Vision and an Ethic of Care**

One of the distinct roles that vision plays in Townes’s work is returning both the individual and the community to God. Townes demonstrates this role in *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death*, as she employs Joel’s vision as a theo-ethical response to the health care crisis in the United States in order to create an “ethic of care” over an “ethic of
death.” In this work, she writes

I propose a womanist methodology in which race, gender, and class are necessary theoretical tools to carry out developing an ethics of care that takes into consideration gender, but as a part of a more rigorous theoethical analysis that seeks a realism about the social order that then moves to a consideration of the steps needed for transformation.94

She does this by first presenting a realistic depiction of the dilapidated health care system in the United States; she traces its development; she examines its inadequacies, using an interstructural analysis which allows her to examine the intersections of race, class, and sex in order to expose its oppressive structures of violence. She then explores cultural models of healing and wellness and employs Joel’s vision as a communal response to the crisis.

In this effort, an ethics of vision fuels her work as she, with the help of Joel, encourages people to see, in the moral sense of see. For her, Joel’s vision helps to shape a vision of ourselves as we become attuned to the world around us and Joel’s vision “helps the community to see the health care crisis as manageable and bearable.”95 Townes sees Joel’s vision as having a deep moral character that also help us to acknowledge and to experience the fullness of our suffering. And, lastly, it moves us to responsible faith—one of praise and thanksgiving and also grief and mourning,” as it helps us to ask questions of justice and keeps the question of justice visible and legitimate.96 Townes then, uses “God’s vision of justice” as the criterion for responsible action, as it is reflected in the vision of Joel. Central to this thought is a demand for people to attend to God. The

---


95 Ibid., 23.

96 Ibid., 24.
community is in a crisis. A plague is in the land and the antidote to defeat it is only within God’s power. Thus, seeing the problem as a communal problem, Joel calls the community together to lament. In doing so, he directs their attention to God. In this process, “attention,” is the key. It perceives responsible action. On this note, Townes writes,

The lament of affliction is directed toward God in the Hebrew Bible, for it is God who can change their suffering, the source(s) of the crisis. Joel’s cry of lament recognizes the power and timelessness of God and the finite quality of his existence…. Humanity’s ability to stop the devastation sits mute as Joel calls the people to realize that human schemes cannot control the scope of this devastation. Rather Judah must return to God.97

The implication is that attention to God brings with it radical transformation and clear vision as a result of God’s grace. God’s grace empowers the moral agent and orients the agent toward the divine. Attention clearly leads to responsible actions. If people could see not only with their eyes but with their hearts, through “genuine repentance,”98 responsible faith would bring with it power to transform the evil system of health and healthcare in the United States. She writes,

We live in structures of evil and wickedness that make us ill. We must name them and seek to repent from the heart. It is only then that we can begin to heal.99

She names the problems: mistrust, murder, withholding treatment, unaffordable healthcare, teen pregnancy, exclusion from medical trails, lack of Medicare coverage, and so on. Townes writes,

---

97 Ibid., 15.
98 Ibid., 24.
99 Ibid., 15.
We are naming the illnesses, the evils, the realities, and the need to seek salvation from the parts of our health-care delivery system that are inhumane and fueled by a crass drive for greater profitability that disregards the preciousness of life.\textsuperscript{100}

In this way, Townes joins Joel as she contends that we must \textit{return} to God—that is, focus one’s attention on God. With the help of Joel’s vision, she presents to us a communal hope that is in God’s grace, which will heal us. For her, grounded in the divine, this hope sustains our lives and overcomes skepticism and doubt. She writes, because we know that God interrupts the mundane and comfortable in us and calls to us to move beyond ourselves and accept a new agenda for living, our efforts demand a covenant and commitment that order and shape our lives in ways that are not always predictable, not always safe, and rarely conventional. She holds that just as this was the case in Joel’s day, it is still the case today. Thus, she contends that God’s grace will drive us to protest with prophetic fury the sins of an inequitable health care system. Grace enables us to find our ways out of “darkness . . .”. This is the case if we in faith direct our attention to God.

Here, I contend that Townes employs a type of ethics of vision and responsibility as “she turns to the broader social constructs of health and healthcare” to develop an ethic of care.\textsuperscript{101} Her goal is to develop an ethic of care in response to the contemporary debates regarding the health care system in the United States. She employs a praxeological (reflection and action) methodology in order to address the issues in a rigorous manner.\textsuperscript{102} Such a methodology allows her to raise the question central to Niebuhr’s responsibility

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 48.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 1.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid.
ethic: What is going on? She raises this question in order to find out what is happening with the healthcare system prior to demonstrating responsible action. The approach allows her to realistically describe, name, and rightly respond to conditions in our dysfunctional healthcare system. In so doing, the question of vision provides concrete practices for the focusing of attention for a sense of responsibility.

She argues that “it is only through employing such a methodology that the possibilities for a relevant ethic of care can emerge.” She proposes a womanist methodology, a methodology fueled by an ethics of vision and framed by an ethic of responsibility, in which race, gender, and class are necessary theoretical tools. She examines race and sees that many Blacks suffer from racial concerns. She examines class and sees that many Blacks suffer from classist concerns. She examines gender and sees that many Black women suffer from gender concerns. She shows us that the health care crisis is not as simple as it may seem if we investigated the problem from only race or perhaps gender. For her, all of these violent structures play a role in destroying health.

So she examines multi dimensions of the problem in order to develop an ethic that seriously considers a realistic depiction of the world that reaches beyond gender in a rigorous theo-ethical analysis. Through this interstructural approach, an approach that allows her to examine the problem in layers, she addresses issues of diversity that may exist as blinding forces in the process of developing her ethic of care. She then goes on to consider the steps necessary for transformation, such as recognizing the conditions, naming the conditions, identifying cultural sensitive models of health that are appropriate

---

103 Niebuhr, Responsible Self, 60.

104 Townes, Breaking the Fine Rain of Death, 1.
to the situation and so on. For example, Townes writes

There are important questions that need to be ask: how are the doctors compensated? What are the review policies? Can the insured go outside the system? If they can, what is the reimbursement rate? What hospitals are involved? And so on.\textsuperscript{105}

For her, this reflection and action framework employs an “interdisciplinary methodology.”\textsuperscript{106} It includes social ethics, biblical hermeneutics, philosophical ethics, social history, public health, and sociology, all tools she contends are necessary to “address the health care system” in order to “shape a womanist ethic of care.”\textsuperscript{107} Here, the African-American community is a “test case” to frame her attempt to accomplish womanist theo-ethical analysis. She begins with the local and moves to the universal as she conveys that what has happened in the Black community can happen in other communities as well.

An ethics of vision allows her to “paint a more accurate and encompassing picture of African-American life in order to set the backdrop for an ethic of care that is both descriptive and prescriptive.”\textsuperscript{108} The concerns of social ethics provide her a lens to consider the nature of health and healthcare. She sees that people have been focusing on rights and privileges for so long that the community is in crisis and the people have forgotten what it is like to come together as a community and face such a crisis. She notes, “Just as the whole community of Judah must lament, so all of us are in this

\begin{small}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 47-48.
\item \textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 1.
\item \textsuperscript{107} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 1–2.
\end{itemize}
\end{small}
together.” The ethic emerges out of the biblical theme of communal lament from the book of Joel in the Hebrew Bible. In summary, she rests her argument upon the notion that genuine “lament,” both individual and corporate, precedes healing. Here, lament is used as an educational tool to help people see. For Townes, lament is designed to open eyes and transform hearts. In a way, this notion of transformation parallels Murdoch’s notion of unselfing, because it energizes, redirects, and changes the agent’s attention in ways that transform the agent’s reality.

Thus, she explores “lament in an integrated way to shape a womanist ethic of care that moves beyond concerns centered solely on identity politics that are exclusively gendered, economic, or racial.” Instead, she focuses on an ethics centered on care and hope. In so doing, Townes examines approaches to healing that are culturally and socially sensitive in hopes to build a “foundation” that not only has “universal dimensions,” but with both educational and pragmatic concerns. She hopes to improve learning in the academy and to provide insight by employing an interdisciplinary exploration that directs the pathway to a laborious methodology. She chooses a methodology relevant to the needs of the Black community and church.

The emphasis is not on health-giving medication that targets and identifies illness

---

109 Ibid., 151.

110 Here, Murdoch’s Myth of the Cave and her understanding of Plato’s Good is instructive. As the agent moves toward the object of attention, the agent sees clearly. In short, Townes “proposes a womanist methodology in which race gender and class are necessary theoretical tools to carry out developing an ethics of care that takes into consideration gender, but as a part of a more rigorous theoethical analysis that seeks a realism about the social order that then moves to a consideration of the steps needed for transformation.”


112 Ibid.
and returns one’s wellbeing. Rather, the emphasis is on both private and communal aspects of health. Under such a view, she argues that “health is a cultural production in that health and illness alike are social constructs and dependent on social networks, biology, and environment.”

Health also includes the “integration of the spiritual”—one’s relationship with God, the psychological or the ability of humans to feel and think—with the corporal, or our biological make up. The subtext throughout her work focuses on the ways the United States is rapidly moving to an “individualistic medical model that obscures . . . the communal aspect of our health.” She contends that healthcare is centered upon wealth and that most disadvantaged people have little access to adequate healthcare because of their lack of wealth. In order to show this, Townes reaches to Joel in the Hebrew Bible and constructs a “context and a pretext” for exploring the rudimentary components one would need to build an ethic of care.

In developing a womanist ethic of care, she presents an example of a “communal lament from Joel” that she holds can help shape our vision as we become increasingly familiar with the world around us; it is a vision that has a yearning ethical appeal that supports the work of social ethics. To demonstrate this, she uses history and culture as

---

113 Ibid.
114 Ibid.
115 Ibid., 3.
116 Murdoch’s and Niebuhr’s stress on vision and responsibility is evident. One must name the conditions in order to direct one’s attention followed by fitting action.
117 Ibid.
118 Ibid., 3–4.
analytical tools to explore “healthcare as a cultural production.”\textsuperscript{119} Beginning with slave culture, Townes explores the certainties, “assumptions and stereotypes that have impacted the Black body–arguing that such continues today.”\textsuperscript{120} She then addresses their realities. She explores three dimensions of healthcare in the African-American community. First, she explores the Tuskegee Syphilis study, which, she believes, crystalizes the structural blindness and is one key reason distrust and suspicion exist among African Americans when it comes to the medical establishment in the United States.\textsuperscript{121} Next, using a historical approach, Townes explores how sexist ideologies were reified in medical opinion, practice, and prescription surrounding clinical trials and the alarming inaccessibility and absence of women in these trials. She concludes that the disproportionate attention given to these women is one of the key reasons that the impact of HIV/AIDS in the Black community is at an alarming level.\textsuperscript{122} Finally, using the Black body as an icon, she explores the alarming statistics of AIDS cases, as well as issues of sexuality and drug abuse in relation to HIV/AIDS, in African-American life and the ways HIV/AIDS has global dimensions. She then concludes that the “lack of HIV/AIDS research for women may be sowing the seeds of Black genocide,” and the Black Church must meet the needs of the Black community resulting from the increasing impact of

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 49.

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 4. The Tuskegee Syphilis study, conducted by the US Public Health Service, involved 400 Black men over a 40-year period, who were denied the truth about their diseased conditions by their physicians and denied treatment for the disease so that the natural development of the disease could be observed for research. The disease resulted in their deaths.

\textsuperscript{122} Townes, \textit{Breaking the Fine Rain of Death}, 4.
AIDS on Black bodies. These are some of the hegemonic forces encountered by Townes in developing an ethic of care. These issues are concrete forces through which the praxis of vision and responsibility must navigate because these forces bring about a pulling away of attention to the self in ways that are detrimental to the individual and the community—resulting in brokenness, hardship, pain, and suffering. Townes redirects our attention through concrete practices to overcome such blinding forces. She redirects our attention toward God.

To address such structural forces, Townes turns to “Communal Repentance.” Like unselfing, Communal Repentance is a device for transforming an individual living in a community. It has a concern for both self-interest and common interest. She turns to Communal Repentance to develop an ethic of care that responds to the theo-ethical issues raised in the book *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death*. In this effort, she develops a praxis of vision and responsibility to address the problems discovered in the debate. For her, the issues discovered in the debate have led to a healthcare crisis in the Black community. She identifies, describes, and names these issues of violence leading to this crisis and suggests that we begin a “process of awareness and repentance.”

For her, transformation comes by awareness and repentance. It is only out of repentance that mourning and suffering are genuine. With this, one can begin the process of healing with a vision of hope and care. Like Joel, she calls for a radical transformation of the social order. Genuine repentance with a culturally based strategy that seeks to

---

123 Ibid., 5.
124 Ibid., 24.
125 Ibid., 5.
maintain an interstructural analysis based on race, gender, and class can help to bring an ethic of care. She holds that an interstructural analysis can help communities address issues of care that pull attention to both body and soul. To demonstrate this, she directs our attention to a number of sermons; then, with an interplay between academic and linear discourse, both lyrical and metaphorical in nature, she develops an ethic of care. In doing so, she employs an ethics of vision to make her ethic of care realistic regarding the realities of social conditions and the impact that such conditions have on Black health. She includes transformative themes and practices that encourage a form of caring that heals the corporate body and soul involving themes of eschatology, salvation, despair, and hope. 

On this note, she writes that, “unlike other prophets, Joel does not mention Judah’s departure from God, nor condemn Judah for its injustices, but Judah laments and sees the problem differently.” In other words, Joel did not mention the irresponsible actions demonstrated by the people that led to their brokenness nor did he condemn them for being irresponsible in demonstrating justice; rather, he lamented with them and they saw the problem differently. She writes,

The problem is not what Judah had done or not done, the problem is the inhumanity and evil of others toward the people of Israel. Joel’s is a plea to God to come to the aid of those who trust in [the Divine,] no matter what the trials and tribulations they face, no matter what the adversity, [he contends that it is time for a lament] about repentance.

126 Ibid.
127 Ibid., 10.
128 Ibid.
According to Townes, “Joel tells the folk to turn to God.”\textsuperscript{129} That is, Joel in the prophetic tradition tells the people to direct their attention to God. In so many words, Joel declares, attend to God with a genuine heart, and God will save. For Townes, Joel pulls their attention away from their brokenness and directs it to God. In doing so, Joel knows that God will respond with hope. She shows that the book of Joel demonstrates “genuine lament and repentance.”\textsuperscript{130} Implied is the notion of unselfing; if one returns to God, divine transformation is inevitable because God will save.\textsuperscript{131} This is due to the fact that, according to her ethics of vision, the Divine is a God of justice, hope, and peace. However, because Townes’s understanding of morality is “we centered” instead of “I centered” or instead of an individualistic understanding of morality, turning one’s attention to God means turning one’s attention toward the self. This is because God is found within the heart of the agent. So to turn one’s attention toward God is to simultaneously turn one’s attention to the self and then outward toward the community. Here, there is a unique bond where common interest and self-interest are one. Unselfing takes place within the dynamics of this bonding. There is no dualism. “It involves a relationship that is beyond and within who we are.” This is best understood as Shug teaches Celie in Walker’s \textit{The Color Purple}.

To begin to believe in a God beyond gender, a God who is Spirit and intimately connected to the fabric of our existences. This fuller understanding of God is not dependent on human beings to be present, to care, to love, to create beauty, to live out the Spirit. This is a God of grace and grit that loves and angers, that expands

\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 11–12.
our understanding of sexuality and loving, that is angered when we fail to see the beauty of creation, in ourselves, and in one another.\textsuperscript{132}

Unlike Murdoch, who shares an individualist understanding of a reality in which the self is separate from the divine, the Divine is found in Townes’s agent. In this way, Townes’s understanding of God creates a gender based, race, and class construct that serves as a companion and confederate to the struggle of Black women’s liberation. And, attention, for Townes, in contrast to attention in the work of Murdoch, represents two diametrically opposing processes associated with unselfing. However, Townes teaches after genuine repentance, God will answer with hope. This is where divine transformation takes place as a result of correct seeing, with the help of God’s grace. Joel’s vision provides a framework for Townes to understand the moral life. The people are directed by Joel’s vision. Their response to Joel implies their response to God. In other words, Joel is an advocate for the Divine, who gives him a vision through which the people respond. However, the people only respond after they gain a truthful picture of what God required through Joel’s vision. God required genuine repentance from the heart. Interestingly, it is clear here that clear vision or right seeing is an achievement as it is for Murdoch. She shows us that one must come to see God’s vision through faith in practice.

Thus, reaching to the Bible, Townes concludes that lament “marks the beginning of the healing process” and people need and want to be healed. If we learn anything from Joel, it is to know that healing of “brokenness and injustice, social sin and degradation, spiritual doubt and fear begins with unrestrained lament.”\textsuperscript{133} Before healing takes place,

\textsuperscript{132} Townes, \textit{In a Blaze of Glory}, 70

\textsuperscript{133} Townes, \textit{Breaking the Fine Rain of Death}, 12.
one must exercise the “lament of faith to the God of faith” in a way that conveys that one sincerely needs help. Townes argues that the key for Joel is that “the lament be a matter of the heart,” genuine lament, and repentance. Ethics is matter of both the head and the heart. Townes writes:

God chooses salvation for all; the plague withdraws; the land becomes fertile again; and the covenant is restored. The future is one of blessings . . . God’s spirit is poured out on all flesh. Joel announces a radical transformation of the social order. All people will become prophets, visionaries, and seers . . . the new people of God, [and] all will live their lives into the future in an intimate relationship with God.

The true sophistication of Townes’s moral outlook rests in her portrait of the individual’s ability to see and respond harmoniously within a divine–human relationship that expresses the agent’s piety in bringing about a new world complete with hope and justice. For Townes, this new world is a world of wholeness. To bring it about requires an endless communal effort between the agent and the fabric of the universe. In the next section, I explore the roles vision and responsibility play in Townes’s work to show that her work is fueled by an ethics of vision and framed by an ethics of responsibility.

**Vision and Responsibility in Townes’s Work**

*In a Blaze of Glory*, Townes further affirms her use of vision and responsibility as she develops the “paradigm for a mediating ethic embodied in the club movement.”

The club movement clearly demonstrates a praxis of vision as the club women navigate

---

134 Ibid.

135 Ibid., 20.

136 Ibid., 22–23.

137 Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory*, 30-67. Drawing from Marcia Riggs, I use this language because I believe that it expresses Townes’s notion of confrontation and affirms her notion of partnership. For valuable discussion, see Riggs, *Awake, Arise & Act*, 78-91.
structural violence according to their notion of God’s vision of justice and God’s command of justice for the Black community. As Marcia Riggs notes,

The club women’s belief in the justice of God and justice for Blacks as a command of God specifies the content of the theological assertion that God of Christ is a liberator of the oppressed. To paraphrase Niebuhr from the club women’s perspective, “God is acting out of God’s justice in all actions upon you. So respond to all actions upon you as to respond to God’s justice.”

Implied in Rigg’s statement is an affirmation of Murdoch’s ethics of vision. This is due to the fact that clearly the club women must see before they can rightly respond to God. In fact, as discussed earlier, the club women were driven by an internal drive to do the will God. In this way, the movement was fueled by the club women’s notion of God’s vision and their notion of responsibility. This is noted in the work of Riggs, who contends that responsibility is theologically and socio-historically defined by and in the community of the oppressed. As noted in an earlier section, responsibility is a core element in womanist thought.

Here, the elements for a mediating ethic are developed by bringing the club women’s understanding of socio-religious ethical responsibility, the mainstream ethical tradition of responsibility, the ethical thought of H. Richard Niebuhr, and Black religious liberation and womanist thought into creative interaction. In so doing, this sharpens not only Murdoch’s understanding of vision, but Niebuhr’s understanding of responsibility, while demonstrating that there is an intrinsic relationship between Murdoch’s understanding of vision and Niebuhr’s conception of responsibility as a response to

---

139 Ibid., 85.
140 Ibid.
God’s action upon us.

The club women sought to make God’s vision of justice and God’s command of justice for the Black community a reality in the world based on their ability to see and act through sustained attention and careful vision.\textsuperscript{141} As a result, their hearts, minds, souls, hands, and feet became tools for a social witness undergirded by a theo-ethic to do the will of God. They did this by “living in tension with” one another, but only after really “seeing.”\textsuperscript{142} Attention empowered them not only to see, but to survive—to live in the everydayness of moral acts.

For club women, “attention” (to paraphrase Murdoch, attention is prayer to God) became a tool for liberation, improving morally, dismantling structures of violence and changing the world.\textsuperscript{143} As embodied persons, their understanding of the moral life was not shaped by abstract ideals, rules, or laws; rather, their understanding of the moral life was shaped by vision and their concrete lived experiences of oppression and suffering provided the guides as they encountered structures of racial, gender, and class violence. Their ability to see and describe the reality of their surroundings, with their ability to make a heartfelt response, resulted in fitting action. This praxis of vision brought together thought and action, through which they created a milieu in order to bring about God’s

\textsuperscript{141} Townes, \textit{In a Blaze of Glory}, 25, 122.

\textsuperscript{142} “Living in tension with” is what Marcia Riggs calls “mediating as process.” Townes adopts this method of moral agency. For valuable discussion, see Riggs, \textit{Awake, Arise & Act}, 82.

\textsuperscript{143} Here Murdoch is instructive; she writes “Prayer is properly not petition, but simply attention to God, which is a form of love. With it goes the idea of grace, of a supernatural assistance to human endeavor which overcomes empirical limitations of personality.” She affirms the power of Grace to change the moral agent. Murdoch, \textit{The Sovereignty of Good}, 51. Murdoch’s theory is validated by the club women as she illuminates their inner religious experiences in Townes work.
vision of a “new heaven and a new earth.”

In light of an ethics of vision, what drives womanist efforts to navigate and to dismantle structural violence is a belief in God and a belief in a divine apocalyptic vision. In Townes’s work, this is an eschatological vision that grows from “crisis and martyrdom by a theoethical, socio-political manifesto that refuses to tolerate injustice.” It is an exercise of vigilant moral agency designed to overcome the illusions and the inconsistent (and attendant foolishness) amid whatever is real and whatever ought to be real. That is, its focus is analogous to that of an ethic of vision in that it seeks to engage the world not only as it is but also as it should be by focusing on the inconsistency between experiential reality and genuine anticipations. That is, like the works of King, it speaks “prophecy and cautions the pyramided towers of evil to beware.” If you do not abide by the laws of the universe (analogous to King’s words), there are consequences. That is, if we do not pull our attention toward God and respond fittingly, irresponsible actions bring consequences. Focusing on the corporate context, Townes reaches to Alice Walker’s novel and writes:

[Womanist social witness] re-appropriates [the character] Miss Celie’s words to Mr. [in Alice walker’s novel The Color Purple] for the corporate context. [She writes,] “I curse you, I say . . . I say, Until you do right by me, I say, everything you touch will crumble . . . Until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail.”

In other words, Walker conveys that, in the corporate context as members in a

---

144 Townes, In a Blaze of Glory, 122.
145 Ibid., 121.
146 Ibid.
147 Ibid.
community, responsible action is essential in the present, but it also has past, present, and future significances. What this means is that our moral agency is closely and intricately related to creation. We are part of the fabric of the universe. In this way, vigilant moral agency demands that we stare down and dismantle structural violence through fitting action as responsible agents beginning with the experience of Black women and men. It is a radical form of moral agency that displays vigilance against all modes of oppression including gender, class, ableness, sexuality, ageism, and militarism. As demonstrated by club women, vigilant agency is concrete, particular, universal, relevant, relentless, self-critical, and communal.

Womanist moral agency is a vigilant praxis of vision, but it is “not monolithic.” It is an inclusive moral agency designed to help individuals live in communities and enable them to embrace and appreciate diversity. In the work of Townes, this vigilant praxis of vision enables the efforts of Black women to move with characters like Miss Celie, Shug, and Albert in Alice Walker’s novel, *The Color Purple*, as they discover ways to live in the midst of structural violence.¹⁴⁸ In Townes’s words, “it dances with Baby Suggs in the Clearing, and it is made whole with Avey Johnson.”¹⁴⁹

In other words, womanist’s beliefs and practices “hold all these individual and corporate realities [concrete, particular, universal, relevant, relentless, self-critical, and communal] in a rigorous hermeneutical circle that moves beyond the known to the unknown and pushes for a rock-steady testament of the faithful who refuse to accept a

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.
¹⁴⁹ Ibid.
world interpreted through the eyes of hegemony.”150 That is, womanists are determined to insistently inquire about the excessive amount of misery that is the portion of the oppressed as a result of sexism, classism, racism, ageism, militarism, life, and death, using a praxis of vision that is concrete, particular, universal, relevant, relentless, self-critical, and communal. In this way, the agent’s practical application of belief and practice is challenged and carried into a renewed understanding of God’s love and God’s divine actions in history. This is to say that, like King, the progressive revelation of God’s love manifests itself in work to end oppressions. In this way, womanist ethical reflection builds upon the work of King in bringing about a beloved community. It is built upon the words of writer and social activist Ida B. Wells-Barnett and many of those before and after her, who raised questions on the nature of suffering. For example, Wells writes,

I have been listening to you for nearly two hours. You have talked, and sung, and prayed about dying, and forgiving your enemies, and of feeling sure you are going to be received in the New Jerusalem . . . But why don’t you pray to live and ask to be freed? . . . Let all of your songs and prayers hereafter be songs of faith and hope that God will set you free. . . . Quit talking about dying; if you believe your God is all powerful, believe he is powerful enough to open these prison doors, and say so . . . Pray to live and believe you are going to get out.151

A womanist “social witness stresses that commitment to God’s moral vision” directs one to living and to believing in a concept of “justice” and hope that “stare[s] down suffering” with a vision of what is morally right, just visions.152 That is, God’s moral vision “does not exhort a kind of fascination of a [‘pie in the sky’] reality distant

150 Ibid.
151 Ibid., 121–122.
152 Ibid., 122
from” the cares and hopes of the present, in which individuals have to deal with the struggle of the everyday. God’s moral prophecy speaks annihilation to “indecisions,” what King describes as “just as evil as evil itself.” It casts off certainty and selects life beyond destruction, recognizing that injustices anywhere threaten the whole community. In other words, the passion of “womanist ethics poses the question much as Micah [of the Bible] poses the question: ‘Is it not for us to know justice?’” In other words, is it not for us to know that the arc of the universe leans toward justice – that by instinct, the world should be built upon a world of love? It does not appeal to the wrathful God of Martin Luther or John Calvin; it appeals to the loving God of King, who is a protecting parent, who conserves the greatest value, his children.

Throughout her writings, Townes contends that immortality and salvation come to those who direct their attention to Divinity. On this note, she holds that attention to God can combat nuclear-powered extinction or environmental recklessness. It brings about a “paradise,” a new heaven and a new earth controlled by the love of God where prevailing norms are tested and demystified, and where a renewed reality and mission for humanity appear.

---

153 Ibid.


155 Townes, In a Blaze of Glory, 122.

156 See Chapter Two, 132-134, 146-147.
Townes and Murdoch

In summary, Townes characterizes a vigilant praxis of moral agency witness that expresses a devoted and thoughtful attitude that is vigorous and challenging. This praxis of vision reflects from the local to the universal and does not assume the universal in considering the particular if there has been no thoughtful reflection on the possibility of praxis used. In other words, Townes expresses a piety that focuses on the contextual experiences of Black women in the African American community and relates these experiences to the broader world; and, in considering views of the broader world, she does not impose broader views upon the Black community without thoughtful consideration. In this way, the womanist social witness sharpens Murdoch’s understanding of vision. A womanist moral vision, according to Townes, demands thoroughness in scholarship and an obligation to the Black community. A commitment to achieve such a vision has a wide terrain to explore; it seeks for serious dialogue that challenges the limits.157

That is, a commitment to achieve such a vision involves an eschatological framework that envisions God accomplishing divine plans within the context of human history and also by means of humans as demonstrated by the club women. In Townes’s words, “God acts within political events and through those in leadership to effect justice in creation.”158 Townes’s praxis of vision places the “prophetic and apocalyptic” in tension. In this way, she responds to the crisis in the Black community to offer an alternative picture of reality and to direct the attention of the community to that reality.

157 Ibid.
158 Ibid.
Like King, it is clear that her praxis of vision is concerned for life, a life which consists of comfort and hope.

In this way, Townes contends that a “womanist social witness informs the church and “stands as a protest against the demeaning and death-dealing status quo. It seeks justice in the midst of evil, peace in the midst of violence, freedom as a counterbalance to oppression, and community rather than injustice.”\textsuperscript{159} The womanist social witness, because it implies unselfing, sharpens Murdoch’s vision because it seeks to tease through the possibilities for renewal and transformation to bring about a more just society for all who seek to live into an apocalyptic vision. For those who seek to live into an apocalyptic vision, historical and spiritual perspectives are keys. These are woven throughout Townes’s writings. Townes makes clear that it is God’s salvation and revelation that empower her praxis of vision and point her toward justice making. Concerning the realization of such justice, she writes:

The master narrative of equal opportunity, equal access, and equality for all in an unjust social order, demands a radical witness against such cruel and death-dealing distortions of the pain and suffering too many of us must endure. [Here,] womanist spirituality console[s] and challenge[s], and offer[s] comfort and demand[s] protest in times like these.\textsuperscript{160}

Townes’s efforts clearly demonstrate that the vigilant moral agent is driven by what she sees and is energized while turning her attention to an inner calling that directs her action, intensifies her concern for hope and justice, and unites her with the reality of both a visible and an invisible world. In this view, everything is sacred. Townes’s efforts affirm the notion that all is moral and, as a result, demands responsible action. However,

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 123.

\textsuperscript{160} Ibid.
responsible action can rightly be achieved only when the agent sees clearly beyond structures of violence that tend to block our way. With God’s grace, responsible action is achievable. In the next section, I examine how Townes addresses structures of violence as cultural productions. I employ an ethics of vision and responsibility to understand Townes’s moral outlook as she encounters such structures.

**Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil**

Townes’s most recent work, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, is a theo-ethical, social political, and cultural endeavor that engages in Niebuhr’s responsibility ethic throughout. It is an exploration of the interior life of evil designed to explore, understand, and dismantle evil. Like *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death* and *In a Blaze of Glory*, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* is fueled by the concept of vision. At the core of this work is the need to see and interpret what is happening in the world before one can act appropriately. Only through seeing can one begin to interpret what is going on, which involves not only describing the conditions but naming them prior to acting on them. In this way, Townes affirms for both Murdoch and Niebuhr that “seeing” is an essential aspect of the moral life. However, Townes does not stop here; rather, she also makes use of Niebuhr’s understanding of response, interpretation, accountability, and solidarity in ways that are not only central to a womanist understanding of ethical reflection but that also marvelously support her claim to be a Niebuhrian. Here, I focus my attention upon her most recent work to illustrate how vision is used in Townes’s writings.

She begins *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* by stating that womanist work is done in the classroom, academy, and church as we reflect on ways we
Seeing is essential to her work for truth-telling, especially when it comes to telling our stories as we see them in order to avoid truncated narratives. For years, truncated narratives have provided a false depiction of Black life that through hegemony have distorted the truth of Black experiences in America. For Townes, telling our stories as we see them allows our experience to be taken seriously, something that is essential to womanists’ ethical reflection. In this way, Townes contextualizes her ethics by beginning with the local and moving to the universal, something that is prevalent in her work. The current work, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, is more expansive and builds upon her earlier work in its attempt to embrace a more global reflection upon human agency. It demonstrates how a contextual understanding of the moral life that focuses upon the concerns of Black women can be used to bring universal hope and transformation to the world.

The newest book is an ongoing attempt to see the world and to reconfigure it, while inviting others who are looking for common ground to participate in the process as they seek hope and justice. It is an exploration grounded upon a focus on particularity. Townes employs this methodology as she studies the particularity of the communities in the United States. For Townes, this is an intra-communal task in which she strives to find ways to understand the assortment of African American life. She holds that Black life is shared with a compendium of coalitions who are not Black Americans. There are Black communities outside of the United States, in places like Africa, the Caribbean, and Brazil and the list go on. But when we investigate Black life, because Black life has been a life of oppression, an exploration of Black life is a discussion about evil. Therefore, because

---

oppression usually accompanied by misery and structures of violence, Townes contends that a key way to study misery is to focus upon particularities.

In this work, she is interested in exploring the depth of male and female African American life as epistemology. She explores how human life and culture become commodities, “marked and consumed: made in American caste hierarchy,” an “unacknowledged and explored . . . connection between empire and reparation . . . genderized and racialized, moralizations into the global marketplace,” and the need to “recognize women’s moral autonomy [as a] factor in developing public policy.”

Particularity challenges her to explore gender to get at her hope for wholeness and to understand how age and body and history that contain stereotypes continue to saturate American culture in video, television, music as well as in the pulpit. She contends that these negative images rest in the imagination of Americans and must be deconstructed and understood as to how they are made into memory and history, especially among those who have suffered from multilayers of oppression and continue to suffer. This is the case for Townes as a womanist; of that, she is very clear. She explores socio-economics, class, and globalization in Black life, paying attention to the environment in which we live. Her main argument is that “the key way to understand the arithmetic of misery that evil invokes and provokes is to concentrate on particularities rather than universals.”

Townes strives to know people on their terms, particularly with regard to how they survived. She holds that she must listen to geographies, bodies, and health to

---

162 Ibid., 3.
163 Ibid., 6.
understand how religion has shaped her and her communities. She does this through the particularities of the womanist dancing mind—an expression she uses to signify the intellectual engagement of two equally opened minds, which challenges her to look at “isms” that are imposed on her and that she turns back on others. She tries to see herself through the eyes of others. She engages in interstructured analysis. She explores evil as a cultural production to understand it and to dismantle it. This leads her to exploring truncated narratives designed to control and dehumanize others and to support and perpetuate structural inequality and forms of social oppression. It is an interdisciplinary task, something rooted in her childhood.

One example of Townes’s affirmation of an ethics of vision is demonstrated in Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil. In this work, Townes reaches to Toni Morrison’s essay “The Site of Memory” to explain several major themes in chapter two of Townes’s work. Morrison helps to introduce imagination, history, the fantastic, and the power of images and memory; all terms that are essential to an ethic of vision.164 Beginning with a discussion of slave narrative, Morrison strives to help see “sordid” life proceedings of the oppressed that, in her words, are too terrible to relate.165 She observed that when the particularity of slave narratives are contrasted with autobiographical narratives of church martyrs, the slave narratives are categorized as biased, inflammatory, and improbable, while the latter are described as experiences of redemptions. For Morrison, such analysis hides truths by distorting reality or covering it up. Morrison concludes that the narratives were written to be acceptable and thus were silent about

164 Ibid., 11.

165 Ibid., 11–13.
many things. This leads her to an exploration of truth and fiction. Morrison concludes that truth is random but fiction is not and that the way to know truth is to move from the image to the text as opposed to from text to the image.\textsuperscript{166} Beginning with the image provides for her a better perception of truth.

Townes employs this methodology in \textit{Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil} as she explores five stereotypes that were created to help shape the mindset of the American public. In so doing, she affirms Murdoch’s work on vision. In addition, she declares herself to be a Niebuhrarian in the introduction of her latest work, posing the question, “What is happening?”\textsuperscript{167} Throughout the work, she moves from the image to the text as she mirrors Morrison’s methodology in getting to the interior worlds of those who endure structural evil, as well as the interior worlds of structural evil itself, to discover what truths may be found there.\textsuperscript{168} She uses “interplay between forms of structural evil stereotypes of Black womanhood and [the] literary guides that frame [her] book to serve as a way to encourage the dialogue that Niebuhr so wished to engage in with moral decision making.”\textsuperscript{169} She states,

\begin{quote}
[Niebuhr] believes like I do, that we must pay attention to what is happening around us and look long beyond the surface of events, theories, and positions. Topsy and other stereotypes I deal with point out that our failure to live and engage in responsible life often produces fractured stories that serve to maintain a grasping social order that consumes us in its desire to possess and control creation.\textsuperscript{170}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 6. \\
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 12. \\
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid., 6. \\
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
For her, moving from the image to the text is the suitable terrain of womanist discourse, which is to unmask and understand the internal realms of those who suffer structural violence as well as the interior worlds of structural violence itself in order to see “what truths may originate there.”\textsuperscript{171} For Townes, such discourse is based on an interstructural analysis that includes race, sex, and class within the framework of social ethics. This means that problems are examined in layers from every dimension possible beginning with class, sex and race before a conclusion is drawn regarding the problem and a recommendation is made. For her, it is to explore what she calls the cultural productions of evil—“critical and analytical ways . . . in which a society can create misery and suffering in . . . systematic . . . ways.”\textsuperscript{172} The concept of vision is important to her because the “images come first and tell her what the memory is about.”\textsuperscript{173} Drawing from Morrison, she recognizes that memory points to the truth of proceedings that may have been too terrible to relate, but must be told. An image of Black women as Aunt Jemima, for example, demands her attention throughout this work. Such images act as “conductors and seeresses.”\textsuperscript{174} They conjure up memory, history, and counter-memory as tools and possible strategies for discovering the truths found in the interior life of evil—how evil is created, shaped, maintained, and dismantled.\textsuperscript{175}

\textsuperscript{171} Ibid., 22.

\textsuperscript{172} Townes, \textit{Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil}, 12.

\textsuperscript{173} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{174} Ibid., 13.

\textsuperscript{175} Ibid.
Uncovering the truth of these images, just as uncovering the truth when it is hidden in geopolitical, social-cultural, and theo-ethical struggles, can help, in the words of Townes, “bring together justice-making and peace-making to dismantle evil.”¹⁷⁶ Employing an ethics of vision and responsibility enables Townes to respond by telling the truth as she sees it, something that she holds cannot be achieved in isolation if justice-making and peace-making are to dismantle evil. Truth telling must be done in community using a mediating ethic framed by an ethic of responsibility. For Townes, this can be achieved only through a mediating ethic involving H. Richard Niebuhr’s “Web of creations” that conveys “we are responsible for each other and ourselves.”¹⁷⁷ She writes,

> We have to give an accounting of our actions and inactions. [We are not alone in this life, and] we are responsible for what goes on in our names. We see that there are false accusations lining the fabric of our lives, accusations that we are involved in an ill designed and misbegotten contest that is deadly. We have expectations, dreams, possibilities, and hope.¹⁷⁸

Moral agency is a call to respond to the challenge and hope inborn individually and collectively. The hope lies in those who refuse to submit to stereotypes and exercise the ability to strategize to resist inaccurate and harrowing definitions of fantastic hegemonic imagination. The hope also is grounded in responsibility to future generations. This hope attaches the human spirit to the present clear vision and truth and pulls the promise of the future into the present—combining challenge and hope to make it possible for us to see the world as it can be, to move us to new places and turn us into a new people. We exercise an enduring hope when we live for tomorrow as we live today.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 162.
¹⁷⁷ Ibid.
¹⁷⁸ Ibid.
Moral agency requires that we stare down cultural productions of evil as we strive to live out the everydayness of moral acts.

**Conclusion: Townes’s Ethics of Vision and Murdoch**

Unlike the modern ethicists who search for universal truths, Townes as a womanist reflects from the particularity of her own experience, as she understands it, in light of the experience of Black women. She specifically draws on the Black Women’s Club Movement.179 This nineteenth-century reform movement provides not only the grounds, but also the entry point for Townes in doing womanist ethical reflection. Reaching to the Black Women’s Club Movement, Townes identifies with Ida B. Wells, whom she sees as a mentor and role model for doing the work of ethics. In short, in deepening her understanding of the moral life, it is the particularities of the experiences of her heritage, under critical analysis, as opposed to universal truths, that form the foundation of her ethical reflection. For example, in *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, she writes, “if there are universal truths” in her work, “they are unintentional.”180 This is due to the fact that, although Townes seeks to speak consciously for particularity, in some cases, this particularity “manifests dimensions of universality.”181 In short, it is the particularity from her own spiritual pilgrimage that grounds her work and creates the framework for her understanding of womanist ethical reflection.

Townes, then, builds upon this particularity with the experience of others within

---


180 Ibid.

181 Ibid. Townes holds that her particularity consists of those institutions and individuals that make up the fabric of her environment.
the context of the Black community. This allows her to contextualize her faith as a member of a living community which she played a role in shaping. In this way, there is no separation between her faith and that of the community of which she is a member. She shapes the community as the community shapes her. In so doing, she reaches to a variety of sources, including various religious institutions and people of faith, such as her grandmother, father, mother, aunts, uncles, and cousins, as well as the particularity of the Black church and the men and women who craft it.\textsuperscript{182} Like other womanists, Townes’s spiritual witness grows out of a “people’s struggle and determination” and in response to the question, “Do you want to be healed?”\textsuperscript{183} This question forms the core of Townes’s work, beginning with Joel’s call for repentance in \textit{Breaking the Fine Rain of Death} and continuing through \textit{Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil}, in her efforts to create an “ethic of care,” as opposed to an “ethic of death.”\textsuperscript{184} The micro stories used to provide the source for these books clearly demonstrate stories of struggles encountered by her community. In fact, Townes’s womanist ethic of care and healing is “Searching for Paradise in a World of Theme Parks,” a topic that she takes from the biblical book of Hebrews 10:19–11:3, which tells a story of a community struggling for wholeness and health.\textsuperscript{185}

Thus, for Townes, a womanist ethic, because it is concerned about the dismantling of structural violence, becomes an ethic concerned with wholeness and thus

\textsuperscript{182} Townes, \textit{In a Blaze of Glory}, 13.
\textsuperscript{183} Ibid., 10.
\textsuperscript{184} See Townes, \textit{Breaking the Fine Rain of Death}, 2.
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid., 168–186.
transcends race, sex, and class, in an effort to address simultaneously all forms of oppression through the conceptualized experiences of Black women.\textsuperscript{186} It localizes ethical reflection in the Black community with a specific concern for Black women, then men and children. It is then her hope that such an effort to achieve wholeness would help other marginalized communities globally, something that is best captured in Townes’s most recent work *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*. Employing the work of Niebuhr, this work expands upon womanist ethical reflection as it seeks to dismantle the system that impacts the global marketplace. As in her other works, central to her efforts is a renewed conception of God, one that emphasizes the parenthood of God as opposed to the maleness of God, which has been used historically as a tool to subjugate women. For Townes, emphasizing the parenthood of God brings with it “possibilities, in spite of the bleak realities of how we are with one another, and opens up the way to do the work of justice.”\textsuperscript{187} It creates a hope toward one vision for all of humanity of a new heaven and a new earth, akin to King’s Beloved Community, in that a hopeful “vision” of God would move us toward a Beloved Community controlled by the love of God.

Such a vision extends love to self and to others and “enables us to cross the yawning chasm of hatreds, prejudice,” and “oppressions into a deeper and richer love of God as we experience Jesus in our lives.”\textsuperscript{188} For Townes, this is the type of love that

\textsuperscript{186} Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 3.

\textsuperscript{187} Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory*, 10.

\textsuperscript{188} Ibid., 11.
“holds a community together.”189 In fact, she argues that this is the type of love that “holds together the individual and the community in a soulful relationship that cannot dwell more on one than the other partner of the relation, but holds both in the same frame.”190 For her, the “wisdom” that expresses this type of love is “found in the moral wisdom of African-American women” and has its roots deep within African American heritage.191 It is a communal understanding of God’s love that sees no dualism between the personal interest of agency and the common interest of the community. They are one and the same. One good example includes the literary works and the life of writer Zora Neale Hurston as they are captured in the work of Katie G. Cannon.192 In her struggle for justice, Hurston shared similar concerns as did the women of her day. Another such example is Wells-Barnett, which is one of the major reasons Townes finds Well-Barnett a role model for doing womanist work.

What makes Townes’s work significant in this study is that it is fueled by a vision of God that impacts the real lives of people, something that is illustrated throughout her work. For example, Townes’s *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death* is “fueled” by a concept of God’s justice from the book of Joel in the Hebrew Bible, while *In a Blaze of Glory* is fueled by a vision of “God’s justice and God’s command of justice for the Black

189 Ibid. These women constantly evaluate and direct their attention to the reality around them in ways that shape and are shaped by their understanding of the world. In this way, attention plays a pivotal role in their moral development.

190 Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory*, 11.

191 Ibid.

community,” as demonstrated in the club movement. Additionally, in Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil, she contends that “the story can be told another way” and asserts that “our world needs a new vision modeled after justice and peace.”

Thus, central to Townes’s work is “God’s vision,” a vision that directs and guides people to God. It is this vision that creates the framework for the role vision plays in Townes’s work. Vision directs our attention to God while, at the same time, uniting God to the concrete realities of human existence through perception. For instance, in Breaking the Fine Rain of Death, God speaks through the prophet to the people, and the people listen to what God has to say. In this way, the people respond to God’s actions upon them. In so doing, two truths emerge: God’s concern for concrete reality, that is, the people and their well-being, and humanity’s recognition of God’s vision and God’s requirement for their obedience. Although this is not unique to Townes, it helps us to better understand the structure of her work and it highlights the significance of Niebuhr’s work.

Murdoch’s ethics of vision provides a helpful way for understanding themes in Townes’s work. Murdoch’s work provides structure to Townes’s work as Townes’s work sharpens Murdoch’s roughly general depiction of vision. For instance, Townes is

---

193 Marcia Y. Riggs, Awake, Arise & Act, 77–92. We can use her almostness as a mediating ethic—not to seek easy reconciliation, but, as womanist ethicist Marcia Riggs suggests, as an ethic that is a process of acknowledging seemingly diametrically opposing positions and creating a response that interposes and communicates between opposing sides. It is living in tension rather than aiming at integration, compromise, or reconciliation as ultimate ends (89).

194 Townes, Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil, 159.

195 God is a conservator of value, which is a theme that carries over from King’s understanding of God. According to Marcia Riggs, Black people were called to be responsible agents who work for just relations within, and justice for, the Black community as a command of God, a command the meaning of which must be determined empirically in a sociohistoric context. Riggs, Awake, Arise and Act, 85.
interested in the real-world import of Joel’s vision upon the lives of people. God calls the people to return to God. Here, experience plays a major role because God is not only concerned about the thoughts and actions of humans; rather, God is concerned about processes that take place between an individual’s thoughts and subsequent decisions to act or not act. Evidence of this is in God’s call for a genuine heart. It is this genuine heart that expresses the sensitivity of the moral agent. Townes strives to be sensitive throughout her work and points out the insensitivity of the modern and postmodern accounts of agency. Through her use of an interstructural approach to understanding the moral life, she shows that she is sensitive to multiple issues impacting human agency including classism, racism, sexism, ageism, and homophobia and so on. She is sensitive in that as she engages structural violence she must also check the hegemony that is in her and that she too may be committing violence. She is sensitive in recognizing the need for an approach to the moral life that provides a safe space where two equally open minds can engage one another to tease through life’s issues, and where two equally open minds can work in tension with one another as a solution to an issue as oppose to coming up with some fixed answer. She is sensitive as she calls us to love our hearts, that is, our hands, feet, neck, shoulders and so on because others really don’t like us. And lastly, she shows her sensitivity as she calls moderns to not only recognize the voices of Black women but to move beyond intellectualizing the Black experience, because blacks are more complex than what was previously thought.

God is interested in a state of being, the significant moments between decision points and choices that make up not only the agent’s experience, but the agent’s history. According to Murdoch, as also reflected in the work of Townes, this is where the moral
work is done. Here, the agent’s moral outlook governs the agent’s thoughts and actions. In other words, God does not only call the people to return, but God calls people to express sensitivity in that they are to return with a genuine heart, identify their predicament, and share this experience with their children from one generation to the next. Here, the significant role of vision and experience play a major part in how one conducts one’s affairs.

There is a call to focus one’s attention to mobilize one’s responsibility. Vision, attention, experience, and responsibility all play key roles in Townes’s work, as they relate to the moral life. Right action accommodates right vision. In short, attention directs one to right action, not the other way around. As a result, Townes’s work neatly fits into the framework of Murdoch’s work on vision.

When it comes to Townes’s use of vision and Niebuhr, Townes, like many other womanists, argues that one cannot adequately engage oneself in the world morally without first posing the question of vision. “What is going on?” is a question that is central to responsibility ethics. She writes,

I have been engaging in H. Richard Niebuhr’s responsibility ethics as I have tried to discern his basics question “What is going on?” by looking at identity as property, uninterrogated coloredness, empire and reparations, and religious values and public policy.

Thus, such a question not only leads Townes to the work of H. Richard Niebuhr,

---

196 One’s state of mind is essential for both Murdoch and Townes as it is for Niebuhr and King in the previous chapter. One’s state of mind opens the door to one’s heart for God to be known. This is where Murdoch’s notion of unselfing takes place. Love, attachment, mercy and grace are implied. Throughout Townes’s work, God’s love is unconditional. Grace leads to responsible action.

197 Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 5.
but it also leads her to declare that she is a Niebuhrian.\textsuperscript{198} Thus, we can see a clear relationship between womanist ethics and the ethic of responsibility, in that, according to the womanist agenda, “the womanist must, recognize her social location and responsibility in a community.”\textsuperscript{199} However, this is no surprise because implied in the definition of the term womanist, as stated earlier, is an ethics of responsibility “Interchangeable with another black folk expression: ‘You trying to be grown.’ Responsible. In charge. Serious.”\textsuperscript{200} Thus, Townes, like Marcia Riggs and many other womanists, grounds her understanding of the moral life upon the historical experiences of the Black Women’s Club Movement. As Riggs rightly suggests,

\begin{quote}
The club women’s ethic was an ethic of responsibility premised upon God’s justice; intragroup social responsibility was a core value in a mediating ethic for Black liberation derived from the central concept of sociohistoric relationality. The ethics thus mediated between the universal and the particular within the struggle for Black liberation. \textsuperscript{201}
\end{quote}

It is in this same light that womanists see themselves as responding to a call from God to not only live a moral life, but to actively involve them in bringing about a new heaven and a new earth—in other words, to engage in Townes’s “search for paradise.”\textsuperscript{202} Thus, Townes, like Murdoch and Niebuhr, understands the moral life as a type of vision to be lived out in community with others. As Riggs suggests,

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{198} Ibid., 5–6.
\textsuperscript{199} Walker, \textit{In Search of My Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Pose}, xi.
\textsuperscript{200} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{201} Riggs, \textit{Awake, Arise and Act}, 86–87.
\end{quote}
There was a theocentric view of justice at the heart of the club movement’s understanding of responsibility. Their understanding of moral good and evil centered upon God’s justice motivated their work for the alleviation of Black oppression from a self-critical stance.203

Such a view allows Townes to draw from Niebuhr’s understanding of interpretation, responsibility, accountability, and social solidarity. Through Niebuhr’s “understanding of interpretations, [Townes has] tried to make sense of structural evil by categorizing and looking for patterns and meaning of life as we have currently constructed it.”204 Having such a vision allows her to see “cultural productions” and the impact of cultural productions upon the lives of people.205 Thus, the act of posing the question of vision and grounding her understanding of reality in experience causes Townes to insist that morality begins with “self-examination, self-exploration, and self-reflection.”206 It is to ground the “individual in love, love of self, love of community, love of worlds of Black women, [and] love of the Spirit, all held together in one bond.”207

Thus, drawing from Niebuhr’s view of solidarity and his emphasis on relationships, Townes, like King, sees the moral life as being relational. For her, this

203 Riggs, *Awake, Arise and Act*, 86–87. Here, for one to live morally or improve morally, he or she has to be in harmony with God’s vision of justice. One has a moral obligation to criticize others who do not live up to this standard. For example, many women of the Black Women’s Club Movement criticized the Black community when it used social stratification as the center of value instead of God’s justice for the entire Black community and society overall.


205 Ibid., 10.


207 Ibid.
understanding of social solidarity is the most pressing part of Niebuhr’s ethics. It conveys her understanding that “life and wholeness are found in our individual interactions with our communities and the social worlds, people, and life beyond our immediate terrains.” It also implies that “responsibility is possible [only] if all the members of a community of moral agents maintain a relatively consistent scheme of interpretations of what is going on.” This focus on knowing what is going on implies the necessity for seeing, naming, interpreting, and stating conditions clearly.

Based on this view, Niebuhr is aligned with Townes in asserting that “we must pay attention to what is happening around us and look long beyond the surface of events, theories, or positions, of many communities,” something that “makes us historical people.” In this way, analogous to Murdoch, Townes’s understanding of the moral life has much to do with sustained and trained habit and clear vision. Here, history is important because it consists of documented evidence of experiences that allow us to construct the past through the use of multiple sources, such as biographies, autobiographies, stories, narratives, poems, and so on. Such materials on Ida B. Wells Barnett provide the source material for Townes’s Womanist Justice and Womanist Hope, which lays the framework for a new womanist Christian social ethics. She helps us to

---


209 Ibid., 6.

210 Ibid., 5.

211 Ibid., 6.

see the necessity for upholding the need for women to be the moral guardians of African American society. Through her experience, we can see, for example, why “temperance, morality, education, domesticity, and social uplift were of deep concern” to women called by God.

In this way, Townes draws from her past history, spirit, community, and person and finds they are held together in a “wondrous, if not faithful, circle pointing toward wholeness and hope.” It is this bond that begins to lay the criteria of the moral. That is, the dynamic way Townes’s past history, spirit, community, and person are held together creates the framework for her understanding of the moral life. It forms the root and conveys the essential aspects of Townes’s understanding of morality: “love, relationships, God, power, community, individuality, solidarity, responsibility, accountability,” and so on. Thus, in declaring that she is a “Niebuhrian,” Townes shows that she not only has a womanist understanding of the moral life grounded in the experience of Black women, but also that her understanding of the moral life, like King’s understanding, has much to do with an ethics of vision.

It is this demonstration of Townes’s conception of the moral life that begins to show us that “vision” plays a major role in womanist ethical reflection. First, it shows that womanist ethical reflection is not built upon choices. Instead, womanist ethical reflection is built upon seeing, looking, and attending to the world around us. Second, it implies that a womanist understanding of the world has much to do with encountering

---

213 Ibid., 33.
214 Ibid., 33–36.
215 Townes, In a Blaze of Glory, 10.
216 Townes, Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil, 5.
and being encountered by the world, and that such encounters have had a tremendous impact in shaping our world. This is clearly demonstrated in Townes’s works. As such, an “ethics of vision” can be useful in giving a more adequate account of her understanding of morality as opposed to an ethic of choice. Thus, Townes sees the world as a mystery, full of truths and revelations needing to be discovered because they are unknown, uncovered because they are hidden, and rediscovered because they are forgotten. An ethics of vision exposes truths that are otherwise hidden. It brings to light experiences, mysteries, perceptions, and seeings that, in many cases, may be too terrible to talk about. It exposes encounters and helps us to discern, direct, and channel our energies to better bring about a world framed by love, justice, and peace.
CONCLUSION

AN ETHICS OF WINDOWS

In this chapter, I draw from my findings in the previous three chapters. This includes a further correlation of ethics of vision with Chapters Two and Three. I then introduce a new concept, “window ethics,” and elaborate on my findings in light of this new concept.

Throughout this project, I have demonstrated that the ethics of vision and responsibility are helpful and novel paradigms for understanding moral action and the moral life, and I have explored the importance of the “ethics of vision” for Christian ethical reflection. In so doing, I demonstrated that an ethics of vision and responsibility, as opposed to an ethics of choice, illuminates aspects of the moral life that deontological and teleological approaches fail to elucidate. I also demonstrate that when a correlation of the works of Iris Murdoch and H. Richard Niebuhr is considered with the works of liberationist thinkers like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Emilie M. Townes, the power of ethics of vision and responsibility is realized. This is because the works of Murdoch and Niebuhr illuminate the works of King and Townes and vice versa. A correlation of the works of Murdoch and Niebuhr, with the works of liberationist thinkers like King and Townes, enriches our understanding of vision and responsibility in both theory and practice. This is illustrated in this study, as Murdoch introduces an individualistic understanding of vision and demonstrates how sustained attention, trained habit, and
careful vision defeat egoism. While Murdoch’s general depiction of vision shows little interest in the social aspects of human agency as it relates to social justice issues as suggested by Martha Nussbaum, Niebuhr affirms Murdoch’s use of vision and expands its focus to include the social dimension of human agency. Niebuhr sees vision as a prerequisite to any morally responsible action on the part of the agent whose efforts to be responsible are driven by divine grace toward issues of social justice. Ethics of vision and responsibility illuminate the relational aspect of human agency and expose its dialogus nature. Niebuhr presents the human person as a responsive creature, who is called to respond to actions taken upon her in an ongoing pattern of interaction as a member of a living community.

A moral agent is called to interpret what is going on, to be accountable for her actions, and to respond in solidarity with the community to which she is a member by means of a fitting response as though she is responding to God in harmony by consent. God is the ultimate authority. Human beings participate in a global relational web under God’s governing action. This rather general depiction of human agency illuminates the work of King as he employs vision as an educational tool to get people to see through the use of dramatic demonstrations—marches, boycotts, and strikes—modeled after Mahatma Gandhi and the Quit Indian movement. Like Gandhi, King used the Gandhian concept of satyagraha and a double unmasking effort, which is a double educational

---

outreach effort to draw the attention of Whites to the suffering they have long inflicted upon Blacks.²

King’s usage of attention as an educational tool, fueled by Gandhi’s concept of love and nonviolence, created new ways for people to see and solidifies Murdoch’s stress on vision and Niebuhr’s stress on responsibility, while demonstrating the importance of several aspects of the moral life highlighted by Murdoch as necessary tools for moral agency ignored by deontological and teleological approaches to agency, namely, the inner life, one’s experience, love, freedom, and justice.³ King, by pulling the attention of White racists away from themselves to the suffering of Blacks through methods of nonviolence demonstrated that, in the words of Murdoch, a loving and just gaze directed away from oneself toward others under the authority of God without prejudice can transform the agent and the environment the agent shares with those around her. Such transformation supports Murdoch’s notion of unselfing as well as Niebuhr’s relational web, and illuminates important characteristics of human agency, including interrelatedness, interdependency, and interconnectedness.

The use of vision and responsibility in King’s work not only illuminates structures of violence, but it also provides the antidote to dismantling the violence that distorts reality and provides a way for people to see and respond neighborly or fittingly. Townes enriches King’s vision by demonstrating that blinding violence resides in all of us. Instead of focusing on race as does King, Townes pulls our attention to something that is


even more deadly—hegemony. Joining other liberationist scholars, she reframes King’s vision as she identifies the intersection of racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia as windows to not only understanding the structures of violence that distort our vision, but also to unmasking the interior worlds of evil as they relate to cultural productions involving a concern for health and human agency. Townes’s efforts confirm that one form of oppression is as deadly as another. Grounding her work on the tri-level suffering of Black women supports Murdoch’s and Niebuhr’s notion that experience is the key to the moral life as well as to understanding human agency. While pulling our attention toward the importance of particularity, Townes further affirms the importance of vision and responsibility and demonstrates that these concepts have deep roots in Black thinking. She sees human agency as trans-generational and calls us to be accountable to past, present, and future generations of people. For her, humanity has been called to draw from the past to inform how we should live in the present to make life better. This is a way of living out God’s vision of justice in the world. In fact, a correlation of the works of Murdoch, Niebuhr, King, and Townes demonstrates that Townes’s work, like the work of many womanists, is fueled by an ethics of vision and shaped by an ethics of responsibility. With the help of Marcia Riggs, she confirms that responsibility is defined in oppressed communities as it was defined by Black women’s club participants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.  

4 Central to the efforts of these women was their ability to see, to interpret the needs around them, and to respond creatively and appropriately to the world as they navigated structures of violence. Their ability to

respond to God’s call, to interpret the reality of their world, to be accountable for their actions, to navigate structures of violence, and to not only respond in solidarity but to work in tension with each other in spite of their differences as a form of mediation affirm Niebuhr’s vision and his ethics of responsibility. It also draws our attention to the importance of the inner life as God’s call through grace changes the agent’s personality and drives her toward a vigilant demonstration of the moral and the aspects of the moral life that further escape deontological and teleological approaches to the moral life.

What does all of this mean? It means that we must consider an enriched understanding of vision and responsibility as an approach that can help us improve morally and give us a better account of what it means to be human. This is something that is also reflected in the works of contemporary race theorist like Maureen H. O’Connell, George Yancy, and Joe Feagin. Their efforts express an enriched understanding of vision and responsibility as it is demonstrated in the works of liberationist thinkers like King and Townes. For example, recognizing the importance of vision and responsibility in virtue ethics and the failure of deontological approaches as adequate responses to the moral life, O’Connell, along with other race theorists, recommends virtue ethics—another name for an ethics of vision and responsibility—as the adequate approach to defeat racism; however, she contends that before virtue ethics could achieve such a task, it must rid itself of “whiteness.” In fact, O’Connell argues that just as feminists use

---


6 Bryan Massingale contends that “whiteness is a culture in that it is learned, formative, informative, and symbolic.” See Bryan N. Massingale, Racial Justice and the Catholic Church (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2010), 21-33.
virtue ethics to illumine structures of violence that oppress women, race theorists point out that it is important for “Whites committed to racial justice to see continually that ‘all actors in a racialized society are affected materially and ideologically by the racial structure’ and to take ‘responsibility for [one’s] unwilling participation in these practices and begin a new life committed to the goal of achieving racial equality’.” In this way, the ethics of vision and responsibility in the efforts of race theorists are synonymous to those of King and Townes in bringing about a new earth and a new heaven. Yancy goes so far as to “exhort Whites to ‘become anti-racist racists’.” For O’Connell, “This strikes her as the language of virtue and leads her to conclude that so long as we diligently attend to its pervasive whiteness, virtue ethics offers the optimal moral approach for Whites to employ when it comes to racial justice.” One reason she suggests is that “virtue ethics take seriously the emotions, whether as expressions of cognitive reasoning or motivations for moral actions, stereotypes, prejudices, and evasive behavior” (dimensions of moral agency that are highlighted in our correlation with King and Townes).

An enriched ethics of vision and responsibility, because of its sensitive approach to the moral life, locates the sentiments and temperament allied with whiteness, such as “fear and guilt, innocence and ignorance, superiority and inferiority,” as the optimal place

---


8 Ibid. See also George Yancy, “Exploring Race in a Predominantly White Classroom,” pedagogy workshop hosted by the Philosophy Graduate Student Association at Villanova University, 20 September 2013.


10 Ibid.
to begin the process of deconstructing what Feagin calls “the White racial frame.”

An enriched ethics of vision and responsibility can easily explain unnoticed sensitive dimensions of White supremacy that need to be mediated in order to move toward racial justice as these unnoticed sensitive dimensions of White supremacy are reflected in the work of Feagin. In fact, Feagin affirms the work of King and Townes as he suggests, “Naming and examining these emotions provides an important place to begin the process of inculcating alternative dispositions” (Murdoch’s states of mind, such as stubborn nostalgia, antipathy, imperviousness, defensiveness, fear and so on).

An enriched ethics of vision and responsibility can provide dominant groups who are committed to social justice with a “fluid, adaptable or even morph-able approach to thinking and likewise to human character that has historically been characteristic” of people who have been forced to navigate blinding structures of violence, be it race, sex, or class. For example, virtue ethics provides Whites committed to racial justice with what Willie Jennings calls a “‘fluid, adaptable or even morph-able’ approach to thinking and likewise human character that has historically been characteristic” of Black life.

An enriched ethics of vision and responsibility can also provide dominant groups who are committed to social justice the possibility of transcending the inelasticity of the

---


13 Ibid.


15 Ibid.
dominating frame and the aptitudes to adjust their imaginative dimensions to practices generally rejected in dominating groups, but embraced in diverse ways of knowing and being. Just as liberationists turned to an ethics of vision and responsibility to challenge an unjust moral social order, dominant groups who are committed to social justice “might use a search for and recovery of the meaning of their own personal and collective identities to begin the necessary work of recovering from the ‘cultural suicide’ of becoming bleached and embrace the ethical dispositions and practices of their own distinct heritages.”¹⁶

In this way, an enriched ethics of vision and responsibility rejects the “arbitrary binaries of whiteness or blackness, (as well as other exclusionary characteristics that undermine human dignity) and illuminate instead a moral multivalent and adaptable context and character of multiculturalism.”¹⁷ This is what I call an ethics of windows, because it is a way of grounding our understanding of the moral life upon the moral outlook of many diverse communities, contexts, and understandings of human agency. I believe that an enriched ethics of vision and responsibility approach to morality consisting of a series of diverse windows of understanding can lead us to adapt a context and character of multiculturalism. This is due to the fact that dominant groups who seek societal justice cannot claim to be just and loving by pointing to a specific set of strategies or goals; rather, dominant groups who seek societal justice must continually desire to become just and loving people themselves by seeing and being responsible. The diverse works of Murdoch, Niebuhr, King, and Townes can remove exclusionary


¹⁷ Ibid.
characteristics that undermine human dignity, including the whiteness of virtue ethics, and enable agents to see imaginatively. Note that Murdoch is a White non-Christian female, Niebuhr is a White Christian male, King is a Black Christian male, and Townes is a Black Christian lesbian. They represent a broad range of diversity.

What does this illustrate? The broad range of diversity included herein, and its ability to remove exclusionary characteristics that undermine human dignity, including the whiteness of virtue ethics, affirm the importance of the collected works of Murdoch, Niebuhr, King, and Townes as a possible approach to moral improvement. In doing so, this approach localizes our understanding of human agency and stresses the significance of context and diversity. It also illustrates the complexity of the moral life.

Each context provides a window for developing a deeper understanding of the moral life. For example, Townes uses the window metaphor consistently throughout her work as she employs it to represent the intersections of race, class, and gender in her interstructured analysis in order to gain a greater understanding of the world of evil and the blinding violence that accompanies it. She then uses a series of windows as “leaning posts” to build a greater understanding of vigilant moral agency as it is reflected in womanist thinking, which provides for us a larger window for understanding the experience of Black women. In my view, Townes’s work, along with that of Murdoch, Niebuhr, and King, and the efforts of race theorists provides a display of windows in many shapes and sizes to give us an ethics of windows, something I call window ethics. This is due to the fact that each contextual understanding of the moral life, be it that of King, Townes, or race theorists, presents a picture of the moral life that provides a
glimpse into their worlds to which the window metaphor, just as the vision metaphor in Murdoch’s work, serves as a natural device for understanding the moral life.

However, Townes does not fully develop the phrase as an approach to ethical reflection. She only uses it as an epistemological tool for seeing. For her, the window metaphor frames different ways of seeing that exposes the agent to new worlds. In this way, different writers and poets provide spaces that, for Townes, illustrate different ways of seeing and open up possibilities for understanding diversity. She often contends that a series of windows are needed in order to understand diverse and complex dimensions of reality. When I view her work from this perspective, it demonstrates to me a type of window ethics or an ethics of windows, which is to say that her understanding of the world is drawn from a consummation of many dimensions of reality. Furthermore, to understand reality, window ethics is a necessity, especially when it comes to the experience of Black women and moving beyond structures of violence. This is illustrated as Townes explores the impacts of multiple dimensions of reality.

An ethics of windows can help deepen our understanding of reality as we are exposed to the worlds of others and become aware of their different situations. It can also help us to see and understand the attempts of particular communities to improve morally while, at the same time, moving us toward a new heaven and a new earth, King’s beloved community. In this way, the use of the ethics of windows is a necessity, especially for drawing our attention toward diversity. As demonstrated in this study, an ethics of windows is essential to our understanding of sensitivity and how such sensitivity can be used to improve our moral understanding or human agency. An ethics of windows allows us to ground our understanding of the moral life in multiple voices in order to highlight
the diversity, richness, and power of the ideas of a diverse community that embrace and appreciate differences as part of a long standing intellectual community. It heightens our abilities to recognize and dismantle the structures of violence that distort our vision and blind us. It can assist us in creating and identifying models of agency that will lead us toward appreciating the diversity amongst us. As race theorists have suggested, it will sharpen our senses to perhaps reframe our understanding of virtue as something fluid and complex.¹⁸

Just as virtue ethics is recommended by O’Connell as the approach for dismantling racism, an enriched ethics of vision and responsibility approaches built upon diversity can be recommended to address the issues of class, sex, and homophobia that exist among those who not only perpetrate such violence but suffer from it. The goal would be to rid ourselves of all forms of hegemony. Window ethics as an approach allows for a framing and reframing of vision and responsibility. For example, each window can provide for us, first and foremost, a way of making meaning about the self, others, and social reality. It will present a way of framing or unifying perceptions that help with cognition and understanding with varying levels of intentionality that embrace Niebuhr’s responsibility model. It will be rooted in the multiple voices of a diverse community, framed on hope, justice, and equality, which draws on the notion of respect, dignity, and positive ideas—emotions, and images of all people regardless of their differences.¹⁹

---

¹⁸Ibid., 83-104.

¹⁹ Ibid., 87. I draw this concept from O’Connell.
When we employ an ethic of windows, the notion of process, as O’Connell suggests, “offers the promise of personal and social liberation through a gradually transformative conversion that is never fully complete.”\(^\text{20}\) We begin to understand the complexity of the moral life, in all of its diversity and work toward identifying and creating models of agency consistent with recognizing and appreciating diversity. In this effort, we begin to grasp what Murdoch suggests, that we respond differently because we see different worlds. One responds according to the world of which one is a member. One’s fitting response, with the help of God’s grace, follows one’s vision, not the other way around. This means that cultural studies and comparative ethics are essential to the moral life and human agency. Such work enriches our vision and directs us toward universalizing certain moral precepts, such as respecting the dignity of every human life, recognizing the sacredness of life, the need to protect the environment, and the need to express benevolence, while giving us a greater understanding of what it means to be human. A work of this nature should be a full life endeavor—from grade school through the university.

Like King and Townes, recognizing the role of vision and responsibility in the moral life at a young age can destine an agent toward creating a world of justice and hope through the display of a vigilant moral agency. This effort would be undertaken as a corrective to oppressive frameworks that have aggressively propagated and adopted blinding structures of violence and that to some degree penetrate the minds of people with hegemony—be it race, sex, or class. It would be an effort through which people of diversity can make a model of their own as they engage other diverse communities in a

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 100.
global world. In this way, an enriched ethics of vision and responsibility will function as a kind of filtering system that sifts out conflicting material or experiences that preserve “stereotypical emotions and judgments, and reject discriminatory treatment of people in interpersonal, social, and institutional contexts in an effort to bring about a just society.”

---

21 Ibid., 87. I get this concept from O’Connell.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Chinula, Donald M. *Building King's Beloved Community: Foundations for Pastoral Care and Counseling With the Oppressed*. Cleveland, Ohio: United Press, 1997.


Hill, Johnny Bernard. *The Theology of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Desmond Mpilo Tutu.*


_________. *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1968.


Scott, Patricia Bell. “Debunking Sapphire: Toward a No Racist and Non Sexist Social Science.” In *All the Women are White, All the Men are All Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave: Black Women’s Studies,* edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith. Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1982.


252


________. Opening Convocation and Installation of the Sixteenth Dean of the Vanderbilt Divinity School. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JMsZlrH-eUQ.


VITA

Angelo S. Riley was born and raised in Tallahassee, Florida. Before attending Loyola University Chicago, he attended Florida A & M University, Tallahassee, where he graduated Summa Cum Laude in 1994 with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Philosophy and Religion. From 1995 to 1999, he attended the Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary, at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, where he received a Masters of Theological Studies and a Masters of Divinity.

While at Loyola, Angelo was elected as student representative to serve the Graduate Student Advisory Committee. From 2005-2006, he taught as Assistant Professor at DePaul University Chicago, teaching courses on African American Religious Experiences and Contemporary Moral Issues. From 2009-2011, he taught Contemporary Moral Issues at Loyola. He also presented a Paper to the Society of Christian Ethics Annual 2010 Conference entitled, “An Ethics of Vision and the Black Christian Tradition.”

Currently, Angelo is seeking a position in Moral Theology. He lives in Skokie, Illinois.