

BOOK REVIEW: *TO SHAPE A NEW WORLD*

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Shelby, Tommie and Brandon Terry, eds, *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 464 pp. ISBN: 9780674980754 (Hardcover, \$35).

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Martin Luther King Among The Philosophers

This new book commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of Dr. King's assassination on April 4, 1968. In his brief life, King had various roles from preacher to activist to political thinker. King placed his activism and nonviolent quest for justice squarely within the context of his religious and philosophical commitments. A Christian minister, King's philosophy included theism, a belief in the ultimate reality and value of each human person, and a belief in natural law. Philosophers who influenced King include Socrates and Plato, Augustine, Kant, Hegel, Royce and his "beloved community," the American personalists, Reinhold Niebuhr, Buber, and Gandhi. King knew the work of the American Transcendentalist and social reformer Theodore Parker (1810–1860). King derived his eloquent summation of belief from Parker which elliptically refers to many of King's philosophical concerns: "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." King was concerned with the nature and achievement of justice, and with how, if at all, questions about God and the nature of reality are important to human justice. The central place these questions held in King's work is the theme of this new book.

The volume consists of fifteen essays framed by Shelby's and Terry's Introduction, "Martin Luther King, Jr. and Political Philosophy", and by Jonathan Walton's Afterword, "Dignity as a Weapon of Love." It is valuable to read the essays which comprise the heart of the book in light of the goals of the book as addressed in both the Introduction and the Afterword. Thus, focusing on King's political thought and on the nature and achievement of justice, Shelby and Terry write that the book explores what King's thought teaches about building a more just, peaceful world and about political morality, judgment, and practice. They argue that philosophers have insufficiently studied King, due to the iconic, romantic stature he has assumed in American culture and due to the popular, non-academic

character of King's writings. The "romantic" vision of King tends to obscure the radical nature of his understanding of equality and of economic justice. Many of the essays in this book show that King's thought still has the ability to provoke discomfort. The contributors to the volume closely examine King's writings, including the five books he published during his lifetime and two posthumously-published collections of essays. Shelby and Terry maintain that King is, indeed, a "systematic thinker" (5-6) who will be shown "even in, or perhaps *especially* in disagreement—to be an important and challenging thinker whose ideas remain relevant and have surprising implications for public political debate" (7).

In the Afterword to this volume, the scholar of religion Jonathan Walton looks back on the book's fifteen essays. Walton writes in part in the context of the current political Administration and of the Black Lives Matters movement, but his discussion is broader and emphasizes King's religious vision. Walton tries to connect King's religious and political commitments while recognizing the independent value of King's political thought for those who do not share his religious, metaphysical convictions. Walton sees King as fulfilling the two great tasks of philosophy – exploring who we are and how we should live -- that sometimes get obscured through academic specialization. He finds that King articulated a philosophy that was "neither theoretically derivative nor materially reductionist" (341) that recognized both the kingdom of God and the material requirements of a just society.

Contrary to many thinkers, Walton argues that religion properly has a place in public life and that King showed how this may be achieved. Religion may properly play a role in the public sphere when its stated commitments are "not inconsistent with the normative values of modern democracy" (342). The values of human equality, equal treatment under law, and checks and balances in government are woven into the fabric of the United States' governing documents. King affirmed these values through his deep religious commitment to the belief that man is created in the image of God and through his personalistic idealism's stress on the dignity of every human being. Thus, Walton argues, King's thought philosophically

ties together his religious and social commitments while providing a separate basis for the latter in an appeal to the governing documents of a secular United States for those rejecting the religious aspect of King's thought. With this discussion of the goals of the volume as set out in the Introduction and Afterword, I look briefly at the content of the book itself.

The book's fifteen essays are divided into four parts. The first part, "Traditions" includes Robert Gooding-Williams' examination of the influence of Dubois and Booker T. Washington on King as shown in King's 1958 book *Stride Toward Freedom*. Bernard Boxill offers a historically-informed essay on "The Roots of Civil Disobedience in Republicanism and Slavery." Karuna Mantena's essay discusses King's development of his philosophy of nonviolence and the influence of Gandhi. Paul Taylor's essay, "Moral Perfectionism," discusses King's commitment to personalistic idealism and explores how King's ethical position and political commitments might be restated for those without a commitment to theism or personalistic metaphysics. He argues for an answer based on Emerson and Cavell which stresses the need for continued self-examination and self-reassessment in order to reconstruct both self and society.

The four essays in Part II, "Ideals," include Ronald Sundstrom's study of the tension between racial consciousness and color blindness in King, while also insightfully exploring the relationship between the religious and the political components of King's thought. Danielle Allen's "Integration, Freedom, and the Affirmation of Life" also stresses King's religious vision and argues that his political thought is a corrective to the work of liberal thinkers such as Isaiah Berlin and John Rawls. Derrick Darby's essay offers a close examination of the right to vote. He argues that the importance of the right to vote is rooted in a conception of individual dignity even more basic than the constitutional protection of the Fifteenth Amendment. Thus Darby's exploration of the right to vote weaves together religious and political considerations in examining the right to vote while also providing for their separability. Martha Nussbaum's splendid essay, "From Anger to Love: Self-Purification and Political Resistance" draws heavily on her earlier books to discuss the nature of anger and hatred and how they

are to be controlled. Nussbaum works to a careful comparison of King's views with those of Gandhi to find that King's thought left more room than did Gandhi for recognizing the value of feelings such as erotic love and friendship and also was more nuanced in leaving room for self-defense and the just war in the context of a philosophy of nonviolence.

Part III, "Justice" includes Tommie Shelby's "Prisons of the Forgotten: Ghettos and Economic Injustice," which examines the phase of the Civil Rights Revolution that began after the enactment of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Curry examines King's concept of economic justice following the riots in northern cities. Shelby recognizes the theological commitments of King's thought, but he argues that King also was a public philosopher who defended his views on the necessity for economic change by secular arguments and by empirical evidence. Shatema Threadcraft and Brandon Terry consider King's often-criticized attitude towards women in their essay "Gender Trouble: Manhood, Inclusion, and Justice" and suggest using King's own position against himself to develop a more egalitarian, less male-dominant view of gender relationships. Lawrie Balfour's "Living in the Red" combines a careful reading of King's 1967 book *Where Do We Go From Here?* with her own analysis to explore the thorny question of political reparations to blacks and other disadvantaged groups. Lionel McPherson's provocative essay "The Cost of Violence" compares King's approach to military action with that of President Barack Obama. He finds that both King and the former president relied in part on pragmatic considerations in the use of military force. He argues that King's approach was superior in that it was grounded in a "pragmatic skepticism" about the use of force and also because it relied heavily on non-pragmatic moral considerations.

The final part of the book, "Conscience", begins with Michele Moody-Adams' reading of King's work as developing "The Path of Conscientious Citizenship". Drawing on Royce's vision of the beloved community, Dewey's philosophy of art and of democracy, and on Socratic dialogue, Moody-Adams understands King's work as showing what it means to participate as a conscientious citizen of a democracy. Her essay stresses the seminal importance to King of his

religious commitments. Brandon Terry's "Requiem for a Dream" begins in 1966 with James Meredith's Mississippi March and explores the philosophical issues that arose between King and advocates for Black Power. As did King, Terry takes seriously the arguments of black thinkers supporting Black Power. Terry emphasizes the coercive nature of many of the nonviolent strategies utilized by King, including boycotts. Terry argues that King's rejection of violence was based in part on pragmatic considerations in that he believed violence would be unsuccessful to attain results in the United States and would provoke and increase hostility in the white majority. The final essay in the volume, Cornel West's "Hope and Despair: Past and Present" offers a moving, eloquent portrait of King in his last years and develops the personal, political, and philosophical considerations which led King close to disillusionment and to nihilism. Drawing parallels between King and Du Bois, West argues that both leaders ultimately overcame despair "with a deep sense of calling that yielded a tangible hope through courageous action, subtle reflection, and subversive memory" (337).

With its many thoughtful essays, the book's greatest impact was in returning me to King's writings. After reading this book through, I read or reread King's own books before turning to reread and review this volume. King's works are the best source of what he means with the work of scholars serving as a guide. King properly holds an iconic place in American life. Fifty years after his untimely death, King's thought deserves to be pondered and read.