

## Article

# Self-Purification and Social Dramatization; from Simone Weil to Martin Luther King Jr.

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**Abstract:** This article begins with an analysis of Simone Weil’s notion of “impersonality”, which implies disengagement from earthly attachments, deep introspection, and connection with an “anonymous” God, that is, with an imagined spiritual force of purity, located beyond the observable secular world. “Impersonality” encourages *purification* (or *catharsis*) from frantic passions (excited by such attachments); it inspires love, which Weil associates with respect and selfless devotion to social justice. My goal is to identify a shared set of similarities between Weil and Martin Luther King Jr. on the issue of individual *catharsis*, acknowledging also important divergences. King—contra Weil—claimed that rejection of frantic passions is incited through connection with a “personal” (rather than “anonymous”) God, with a high moral power, which responds to individual prayers and leads men and women into the path of love. Like Weil, King associated love with mutual respect and social justice. Both Weil and King believed that individual *catharsis* should lead to civil disobedience, whose ultimate objective is collective *catharsis*, that is, the abandonment of deeply rooted attitudes and beliefs (on behalf of a collectivity) that (sometimes unknowingly) perpetuate injustices, causing great suffering. By reflecting on the viewpoints offered by these thinkers, the present study will attempt to shed light on the process by which collective *catharsis* shifts public attitudes. The aim of civil disobedience, I will explain, is to *dramatize* social evils (such as racism and social exclusion), making large portions of a society aware of their passive reproduction of attitudes that contribute to the perpetuation of such unjust practices.



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## 1. Introduction

The principal focus of this article is Simone Weil’s *Human Personality*, published in the late winter and early spring of 1942–1943. My goal is to identify a shared set of fundamental concerns present in Weil’s oeuvre with Martin Luther King Jr.’s philosophy and theology of resistance. In this essay (*Human Personality*), Weil focuses on the notion of *impersonality*, which implies a connection with an imagined (and “anonymous” or “impersonal”) divine realm, located beyond the observable secular world (Weil 2005a, p. 77). “Our personality”, Weil wrote, “is the part of us which belongs to error and sin” (p. 75). Therefore, to relieve ourselves from sin, we must “become impersonal”; that is, we must yield to God, to an “anonymous” force, which “purges” from our minds and hearts all sorts of frantic passions that (often explicitly) encourage moral transgressions (otherwise known as *hubris*).<sup>1</sup> Impersonality inspires love (Weil 2005a, p. 292), which Weil (1951) associates with respect and selfless devotion to social justice (pp. 139–40). King also believed that introspection and divine guidance could purify minds from “sinful” thoughts and pursuits. His emphasis on nonviolence, forgiveness, and love (or *agape*), through which he sought to overthrow the regime of racial segregation in the American South, required commitment to “a continuous process of self-purification” (Burrow 2014, p. 275). To a degree, his political pacifism derived from Gandhi’s emphasis on “silence and meditation”, which Gandhi himself “considered to be means of self-purification in preparation for nonviolent direct

action campaigns” (p. 233). While self-purification (or *catharsis*) in Weil’s mind is made possible through procedures of deep introspection and connection with an “anonymous” (or “impersonal”) God, in King’s theology, righteousness, conscience and morality derived from the realm of God, who is considered to be a “personal . . . benign power” (p. 40); God is a living being with free will and feelings; God responds to individual pleas, to the “deepest yearnings of the human heart” (ibid.). Weil, on her part, would not feel at ease with this idea; to say that God is personal, she believed, is to attach to God the finiteness and limitations of human personality; it is to draw away from the idea of God as an objective moral power and to reduce divine moral perfection to subjective personal standards, that is, to individual biases which the same process of *catharsis* ought to eliminate. As we understand, Weil’s and King’s stances on the issue of individual *catharsis* spring from insights rooted in different theological schools of thought. On the other hand, both authors relate moral conscience and purity to political activism.<sup>2</sup> More to the point, those who are touched by the impersonal realm are “charged with a responsibility toward all human beings” (Weil 2005a, p. 77) to redeem them from frantic passions (pp. 77–78), to inspire love and mutual respect. Likewise, King’s efforts for self-purification aimed at the creation of social relations based on love and political equality. Both Weil and King were concerned about oppression, exclusion, neglect, and suffering. Weil lived and wrote during World War II; her philosophical texts echo concerns related to the *hubris* of fascism and totalitarianism (against which she fought in the Spanish Civil War). King experienced the brutality of racial segregation in the American South, the exploitation, marginalization, and maltreatment of African Americans. Through self-purification (*catharsis*) and divine guidance (as explained in section three), King pushed away his resentment stimulated by his traumatic experiences as a member of a neglected minority. Thus, he became an exponent of love (or *agape*), advocating universal brotherhood and mutual respect. He attempted to implant this spirit of *agape* in the heart of the civil rights movement.

Weil and King have not been comparatively studied from a theoretical angle. In addition, King’s self-purification deserves more attention than it has hitherto received. Thus, I intend: (1) to explore, elaborate upon, and further develop an understanding of the concept of individual *catharsis* sketched by King’s personalism as well as by Weil’s notion of “impersonality”; (2) to evaluate the practical impact of individual *catharsis* in society, explaining how this process prompts persons to engage with acts of civil disobedience against *hubris* (that is, against social injustices, such as racism). This will allow me to move to the next step, where I will shed light on the process by which civil disobedience encourages collective *catharsis*, promoting love (or *agape*, in King’s case) and mutual respect. Weil’s approach to Homer’s *Iliad* lays much of the groundwork for us to understand how individual *catharsis* shifts public attitudes. In section four, I dig deeper into this analysis, introducing to the discussion Euripides’ famous work *The Trojan Women*. As Castoriadis (Καστοριάδης 2007) explains, many works of drama and poetry (including those of Euripides) in ancient Athens were weapons of civil disobedience; they were means of and public critique of the *hubris* of the *demos* itself (p. 63). I will also explain (in section four) that King’s efforts to win the attention and sympathy of the public regarding the *hubris* of racial segregation (inspiring collective *catharsis*) followed methods of “public dramatization” similar to those employed by ancient poetry and drama. James Colaiaco (1988) recalls King’s insistence on his efforts to “dramatize” the suffering of the African Americans, “etching in the minds of millions of Americans the brutality of Southern racism” (p. 64). In the next section, I will submit to scrutiny Weil’s concept of “impersonality”.

## 2. Weil’s “Impersonal Realm” and King’s “Personal God”

For anyone who is preoccupied with Weil’s thought, the encounter with Plato is immediate and inevitable. Thus, to meet the first aim, I will have to consider Platonic references in Weil’s view of impersonality (and self-purification). To begin with, purification “consist in . . . separating, so far as possible, the soul from the body and teaching the soul the habit of collecting and bringing itself together from all parts of the body, and living,

so far as it can, both now and hereafter, alone by itself, freed from the body”, according to [Plato \(1999\)](#) (*Phaedo*, 67C, p. 233). In short, bodily desires often incite selfishness and rapacity; they deprive the soul, which must separate itself from the human body (its main source of corruption, according to Plato) in order to retain its state of purity. This detachment causes “death”, argues Plato, a symbolic type of death, nevertheless. When philosophers in the pursuit of wisdom and objective knowledge “practice dying,” they desire to have their soul apart from their body (*Phaedo*, 67E, p. 235). They teach their souls to live alone in realms sheltered from the human world, from collective environments, which (in Plato’s thought) excite individual selfishness, exerting influence on individual thinking, depriving moral objectivity in return. In other words, the practice of “death” is the practice of self-restraint, “which consists in not being excited by the passions and in being superior to them and acting in a seemly way is not that characteristic of those alone who despise the body and pass their lives in philosophy” (*Phaedo*, 68C, p. 237). In [Milosz’s \(2013\)](#) words, “Plato compares society to a Great Beast”, where men and women define the “good” according to their selfish pursuits (pp. 51–52) and lose “the possibility of knowing the true good” (p. 52). Weil carried this idea to unprecedented levels. Like Plato, she imagined an anonymous dimension (the *impersonal realm*), which can be discovered by everyone who seeks to “escape from the collectivity” ([Weil 2005a](#), p. 77), by anyone who draws from the public world, which Weil (like Plato) considered a source of selfishness. In other words, “[o]ur personality is the part of us which belongs to error and sin” (p. 75) that conquers our minds and hearts when we “immolate” ourselves “in the collective”, which deprives the “sacredness of the human being” (p. 78) and leaves “the soul . . . in cold and desolate Misery” (p. 79). Weil assumed that men and women “in the clutches of social determinism” are unconscious “worshipper[s] of the Great Beast” ([Milosz 2013](#), p. 52). Society “interposes itself between God and the soul”, supplanting even God while setting “itself up in God’s place” ([Buber 1956](#), p. 309). Redemption from sin is offered when we rise above the personal and the collective level, writes Weil, when we withdraw from the social world, which “strip ourselves of the imaginary royalty of the [secular] world” ([Weil 2002](#), p. 12), when we open ourselves to “the possibility of seeing a true order of values, the eternal order whose source was outside this world” ([Doering 2010](#), p. 127); that is, when we approach divine dimensions where “the highest things are achieved” ([Weil 2005a](#), p. 75) and where “there is no part left” in our soul “to say ‘I’”, because the “I” itself is given to God altogether (p. 99). For Weil, the “I”, is excited by our frantic passion of egotism and egocentricity, which society normalizes and exalts ([Vetř 1994](#), pp. 11, 18). Or as [McCullough \(2014\)](#) summarized: “It is the will in us that says ‘I,’ and this ‘I’-saying is the essence of sin, or voluntary evil. The will is what sins in the creature, for the will as such is sin. It is because we are born with a will that we are born in a state of sin, or voluntary evil, but by the same token it is precisely therein that we are born with the vocation to renounce our sin, which is to say, to abnegate our will” (pp. 171–72). The “I” (in Weil’s thought) connotes selfishness, prestige, inflated pride ([Buber 1956](#), p. 312; [Rozelle-Stone and Stone 2013](#), p. 74), and sometimes sadism, indifference, and arrogance ([Rozelle-Stone and Stone 2013](#), p. 77) that culminate in *hubris*.

[St. John \(1991\)](#) of the Cross wrote poems on the method of attending such impersonal dimensions. His poem *The Dark Night* describes the process of detachment as follows: “I abandoned and forgot myself, /laying my face on my Beloved [God]; /all things ceased; I went out from myself/leaving my cares/forgotten among the lilies”. The “‘I’ is given to God altogether” ([Weil 2005a](#), p. 99); it is “de-created” or dissolved ([Vetř 1994](#), p. 11; [Freeman 2015](#), p. 164); it is surrendered altogether to a purifying (anonymous) force. Through this process (Weil believed) selfishness will give space to humility, which, consists “in knowing that in what we call ‘I’ there is no source of energy by which we can rise. Everything without exception, which is of value in me comes from something other than myself” ([Weil 2002](#), p. 31). Humility, which (according to Weil) “consists, at least in part, in knowing the ego has no energy of its own to create anything of real value” ([Rozelle-Stone and Stone 2013](#), p. 83), leads to grace, which has “its source is supernatural love” ([Doering](#)

2010, p. 238). Thus, “[d]ecreation frees one to love all creatures equally” (McCullough 2014, p. 176). This “unconditional love of neighbor” (p. 186) we find in gospel constitutes an indispensable element of justice (Weil 1951, p. 139). Love incites generosity through compassionate attention to the needs of others (pp. 140, 146), to the need for respect on behalf of those who are suffering in the hands of *hubris* as well as to the need for repentance on behalf of those who commit *hubris*, so that justice could be realized in full.

To rise above the collective and the personal, one needs to identify symbols of high moral power, to which he/she will have to pay full *attention* (Weil 2002, p. 117). A single prayer, for example, “consists of attention. It is the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable toward God” (Weil 1951, p. 105); an intense prayer “is enough for such a contact [with impersonal domains] to be established” (ibid.). “Attention consists in suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object” (p. 111). However, it also means “holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of. Our thought should be in relation to all particular and already formulated thoughts, as a man on a mountain who, as he looks forward, sees also below him, without actually looking at them, a great many forests and plains” (ibid.). According to Freeman’s (2015) interpretation, in this particular passage, Weil clarifies that self-purification implies “self-emptying” rather than “full-scale annihilation of the self” (p. 165). It “requires . . . a kind of holding [the “I”] in abeyance” (ibid.), that is, muting personal temperaments that (could potentially) incorporate elements of *hubris*. Consequently, when we rise above the personal and the collective in order to access the impersonal realm of God, in order to “purify” ourselves from frantic passions, we still pass through our memory, through our personality and biography (ibid.). Vető (1994, p. 154), cites Buber’s (1956) critique on Weil, suggesting that her anti-personalism, her insistence on “slay[ing] the “I””, on approaching “impersonal” divine realms, motivated a deep yearning to escape from a social reality that “had become intolerable to her”, considering that “God was the [only] power which [could lead] her away from it” (p. 312). Such a fierce anti-personalism, Vető (1994) claimed, could push us beyond the limits of “self-emptying”, of simply holding the “I” “in abeyance” (without annihilating it), prompting us (even unwittingly) to annihilate our own “I”, that is, our own memory and biography, or (in simple terms) our own physical existence (p. 154). Thus, the “death” one experiences when he/she detaches his/her soul from his/her body ceases being a “symbolic death”; instead, it ends up a real physical death. Such a motivation, writes Vető, could constitute the rejection of “the human condition” as such an imperative objective, “in favor of a purifying reduction”, where “one must confront what we would fearfully call “resentment against being”” (ibid.).

This “longing for absolute self-effacement” in Weil (Thibon 1953, p. 114), this pessimistic incentive which allegedly pushed herself toward the desire for self-destruction (Vető 1994, pp. 25, 154), is present in several variants of religious mysticism, according to observations made by intellectuals in the field of religious studies, including Reinhold Niebuhr (1960), who was one of King’s major influences (Branch 1988, p. 87; Burrow 2014, p. 200). The “strong and theologically far-reaching negation of life, leading to the negation of the individual as well as of society as a whole” that (Buber 1956, p. 308) has identified in Weil’s theory, Niebuhr (1960) believed is due to the conflation of selfishness and egoism with the “will-to-live” (pp. 55–56). In short, the mystic considers egocentrism, self-interest, greed, self-love, and passion for domination to be essential characteristics of the existence of human personality. Thus, the desire to eliminate egoism indirectly prompts him/her to annihilate his/her own personality, that is, his/her own physical existence. “The mystic”, writes Niebuhr, often “involves himself not only in the practical absurdity of becoming obsessed with the self, in the very fever of the effort to eliminate it, but in the rational absurdity of passing judgment upon even the most unselfish desires as being selfish because they are desires” (p. 56). Religious introspection could, of course, “encourage judgment of past actions and attitudes in the light of an absolute moral power”

(p. 60). Through this process, persons become aware of their need to orient themselves according to the standards of a “high moral ideal”, fulfilling an obligation: to desire and express “nothing but good, in its pure state” (Weil 2005a, p. 86). On the other hand, religion, in order to inspire action against the “injustices of society”, must not degenerate “into an asocial quest for the absolute”, where the soul only “seeks the perfection of God in either quietistic absorption or aesthetic withdrawal from the world” (Niebuhr 1960, p. 70). If Weil’s approach of individual *catharsis* rests on the assumption that morality and conscience require detachment from the secular world, because society (as she supported) implants *hubris* to individual minds, one could arrive at the following conclusion: Weil’s recipe, as Buber (1956, p. 309) pointed out, encourages escapism and minimizes the importance of interhuman relations. From a Niebuhrian standpoint, we could assume that Weil’s recipe, when it comes to the issue of social justice, has limited capacity. Social justice (in Niebuhr’s mind) requires from all actors to recognize the importance of their physical presence in the public sphere; actors who attempt to shift social attitudes, inspiring love and mutual respect, must participate in public debates and events; they must speak to the society, creating a “crisis”, that is, a “creative tension”, to use King’s (1986) words, dramatizing injustices inasmuch as they “can no longer be ignored” (p. 291).

King’s approach of self-purification echoes Niebuhr’s personalist theology, which he was taught by Edgar S. Brightman and L. Harold DeWolf at Boston University (Lasch 1991, p. 389; Burrow 2015, p. 19). His “thoroughgoing personalist” nuances (Burrow 1992, p. 73; Burrow 2015, p. 21) and claims are often downplayed by authors of the caliber of (Garrow 1989a, vol. 1, p. xiv; vol. 2, p. 451; Miller 1992, pp. 7, 17), who suggested that personalism played a minor role in King’s theological approaches. In addition, King’s personalism has much to do with his influences from family and the black church (Burrow 1992, pp. 69–70, 77–83), as well as with his intellectual encounter with Plato, Kant, Hegel, Descartes, and Thomas Aquinas (pp. 75, 84). Personalism considers “each person regardless of gender or race ... inherently precious to God” (Burrow 1992, p. 70),<sup>3</sup> and harps on the “dignity and worth of all human personality” (p. 73). The *hubris* of racial segregation (King believed) was justified by the idea that American blacks were not worthy as human beings; instead, they were “objects or things to be used for creating lives of leisure, easy, comfort, and wealth for white people” (p. 127). King’s emphasis on individual dignity and worth is echoed in the liberal lexicon of the *Declaration of Independence*, in the principles of individual rights and liberty by creation. In his speech, *The American Dream* (delivered in 1961, at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania), he argued that “each individual has certain basic rights that are neither conferred by nor derived from the state. To discover where they came from it is necessary to move back behind them the dim mist of eternity, for they are God-given” (King 1986, p. 208). To respect the right to life and liberty is to respect the worth and dignity of each individual, which “lies in relatedness to God” (p. 122), “whose infinite love embraces all mankind” (p. 515). Worth and respect are rooted in the idea that every individual is “made in God’s image” and is “a person of sacred worth” (Raboteau 2017). Slavery was predicated on the premise that black Americans were not children of God; they did not deserve liberty and respect. In another speech, *Before the National Pres Club* (19 July 1962), he explained that during the civil rights movement “thousands of Negro students who have challenged the principalities of segregation” had taken “the whole nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the Founding Fathers in the formulation of the Constitution and Declaration of Independence” (King 1986, p. 103).

Weil fiercely opposed the liberal language of “human rights. In the liberal architecture of thought, justice is related to the sovereignty of the individual, whose right to life, property, and liberty are inalienable. For Weil, what prevents us from committing *hubris* is not respect for the “other” as a “person”, as an individual with a sovereign will. Rather, the “other” is a “sacred being”. This sacredness is never attributed to personality; instead, it is attributed to something impersonal that exists in every man and woman (Weil 2005a, p. 70), that is, to “a small portion” that exists in the human soul, “upon which nothing of the collective can get a hold” (p. 77). This “small portion” is a gateway to a higher

good, which (in Weil's thought) "is prior to the right" (Amesbury 2020). Thus, "there is no guarantee for democracy, or for the protection of the person against the collectivity, without a disposition of public life relating it to [this] higher good which is impersonal and unrelated to any political form" (Weil 2005a, p. 97). However, in the American context, to speak the language of "human rights", the language of the *Declaration*, so deeply engraved in the culture, history, and temperament of the Americans, was (perhaps) a necessary move for King to gain public traction from white liberals and black Americans, who despised the *hubris* of racial segregation. More to the point, this language was very familiar in the mainstream world of American politics. Hence, it was (for King) a necessary weapon in his attempts to communicate the message of equality and justice, dramatizing the suffering and oppression of black Americans before the court of public opinion. Nonetheless, beneath the surface of King's political liberalism one identifies an idea of justice related not exclusively to the notion of individual sovereignty: there is a higher law than human law; there is (in different terms) a will far superior to the individual will of a man or woman. This higher law is no other but the law of the universe; it is the will of God. This high law "is on the side of justice" and those who struggle but follow it have "cosmic companionship" (Burrow 2015, p. 22). However, those who violate it are "at great risk" (*ibid.*); they go against the grain of God's will, which advocates mutual love and respect. Such a move can have "nothing but grave consequences" (p. 23). The violation of this law is similar to the violation of a physical law (e.g., the law of gravity) (*ibid.*). Therefore, justice springs from a supernatural force, that is, from God's divine law, from a "higher good", which proposes love (or *agape*) (King 1986, pp. 119, 225). Certainly, it does not spring from an impersonal dimension, with which every individual who disconnects him/herself from society can establish a connection, as Weil believed. "To say that God is personal is not to make him an object among other objects or attribute to him the finiteness and limitations of human personality: it is to take what is finest and noblest in our consciousness and affirm its perfect existence in him" (King 1986, p. 40); it is to ascribe to our consciousness moral objectivity and purity (the finest and noblest elements of God). More to the point, God responds "to the deepest yearnings of the human heart" (p. 40); God responds to individual prayers (*ibid.*), to pleas for justice and recognition of our worth and dignity, by allowing us to discover means through which these deep longings could become a reality. These means abide with God's moral objectivity and purity, that is, with the principles of universal love and cosmic justice. Therefore, God's warmth melts bitterness, anguish, desperation, resentment, and all vengeful passions from individual minds, installing love and calmness in our souls. Thus, God prompts us to adopt a new "self", an ethical "self" (in other words), which embodies the spirit of *agape*, advocating unconditional respect for every man and woman (including those who pretend to be our enemies). Moreover, King's individual *catharsis* does not propose isolation. His emphasis on the "sacred worth" of every man and woman is rooted in his concept of "beloved community", which has "a central place in personalistic ethics" (Burrow 1992, p. 79); that is, to recognize the individual worth of every man and woman there must be social intercourse; equality and respect are demonstrable only when persons interact, only when they can publicly express their views, feelings, and sentiments toward others.

The next section will reflect on King's love of *agape*, which (as has already been made clear) shares much in common with Weil's unselfish "love of neighbor", a type of love that "responds to an urgent need in the center of the human heart for an absolute good" (Doering 2010, p. 191). King's influence from Gandhi's principles of *satyagraha*, which advocate "self-purification" (p. 706), self-sacrifice (Gandhi 2018, p. 426), self-restraint (p. 511), reconciliation (p. 717), nonviolent civil disobedience (pp. 586, 717), and faith in "the infinite possibilities of universal love" (p. 275), will also be discussed. This analysis will allow me to move to the next step, where I will explain how individual *catharsis* prompts action toward radical social change (inciting collective *catharsis*).

### 3. Individual *catharsis*; the Case of *agape*

King's personalist theology differs in many aspects from the highly influential strand of George Washington Davis, which—as Christopher Lasch (1991) argued—exhibits an overt optimism concerning “[m]an's capacity for goodness”, advocating endless and uninterrupted progress toward a world where “all men will live together as brothers” (p. 391).<sup>4</sup> King (much like Weil) was aware of the sinful aspects of human nature (Burrow 1992, p. 71; Burrow 2014, p. 124). Right after his university graduation (in the middle of 1950s), he began to question the “superficial optimism” of liberalism, which (in his view) overlooks the human inclination toward error and sin (King 1986, p. 36). This optimism had “pervaded not only Rauschenbusch's social gospel but indeed all of the evangelical liberalism that George [Washington] Davis had suffused him with” (Garrow 1986, p. 42). It was a “characteristic of a great segment of Protestant liberalism” (Lasch 1991, p. 389). In addition, Lasch (1991) brings to our attention King's personal experiences; the suffering and humiliation “inflicted by membership in a persecuted racial minority”, he explained, prevented him from embracing “the dogma of progress”, the dogma of optimism (p. 391), which bestows unlimited faith to the human ability for good (pp. 13–14). King's encounter with Niebuhr's ideas made him aware “of the complexity of human motives and the reality of sin on every level of man's existence” (King 1986, p. 36). Thus, he came to the conclusion that evil is an essential characteristic of the human condition. He partially shared Niebuhr's view that selfishness, passion for domination, and exploitation are inherent in all men and women; they are among the greatest barriers to social justice (Garrow 1986, p. 42; Branch 1988, p. 81). In this spirit, “[t]he attitude of a group of Southern whites”, for example, “who lynch a negro on the report that he has raped a white woman before they investigate the truth of the assertion is a bestial exaggeration of [this] very natural human tendency” (Mumford 1959, p. 255). However, for King (1986), “the person who does the evil deed” is an object of God's love like every sinner, *id est*, like every man and woman (p. 13). He/she needs love and forgiveness in order to overcome his/her proclivity toward error and sin (*ibid.*). In King's thought, resentment and vengefulness had to be transcended “in a surge of joy whose object is the nation of the future”, summarizes Nussbaum (2013, p. 239), a nation in unity and brotherhood. In other words, bitterness, humiliation, and anger had to be transformed into sentiments that seek not the destruction of the sinner but his/her repentance.

While King was growing up under the intolerably oppressive system of segregation, he found himself “determined to hate every white person,” and this feeling continued to grow” (Lasch 1991, p. 393). The only way to overcome this hatred was religion, in short, his exposure to the tradition of the black church, which “insisted on the redemptive meaning of suffering” (p. 391), on seeing despair and trial as opportunities for self-transformation (King 1986, p. 41). This experience of the full impact of racism, the “frustration and agonizing moments which I have had to undergo occasionally as a result of my involvement in a difficult struggle” (p. 40), points to what Weil (2005a) termed as *affliction* (*malheur*). In short, *affliction* is a type of suffering that produces an effect of intense despair: “My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” (p. 100). This extreme and hellish suffering, “makes God appear to be absent for a time, more absent than a dead man, more absent than light in the utter darkness of a cell” (Weil 1951, p. 120). More importantly, *affliction* is incited in cases of extreme “social degradation” (p. 119). For example, “[s]lavery as practiced by ancient Rome is only an extreme form of affliction” (p. 117); racism (as occurred in America) could lead to similar types of *affliction*. In this condition of abandonment, neglect, and utter hopelessness, “God's absence becomes final. The soul has to go on loving in the emptiness, or at least to go on wanting to love, though it may only be with an infinitesimal part of itself. Then, one day, God will come to show himself to this soul and to reveal the beauty of the world to it, as in the case of Job” (p. 121). Then, one day, God will seize the souls of the afflicted and will “take possession of them as their sovereign lord” (pp. 119–20). “Only by the supernatural working of grace can a soul . . . get the sort of attention” to escape *affliction* (Weil 2005a, p. 91). “The name of this intense, pure, disinterested, gratuitous, generous attention is

love" (p. 92). In the midst of such a great suffering, "[i]n the midst of outer dangers", writes King (1986), "I have felt an inner calm" that only "known resources of [a personal] God could give" (p. 40). As he continues, "God has been profoundly clear to me" (ibid.); God "responded" to his pleas; God's power *transformed* "the fatigue of despair into the buoyancy of hope" (ibid.). Through this "redemptive suffering", frantic passions, including vengefulness, anguish, resentment, and bitterness, are wiped out from the "I"; despair and resentment give space to *agape*, to a generous incentive to "heal the people involved in the tragic situation" of segregation, seeking nothing in return (King 1986, p. 41).<sup>5</sup>

Transformation begins when a silent inner dialogue between the imagined "new self", shaped by the "high moral power", by the personal God, and the "I" (or the "self"), which has absorbed elements of the collective (that potentially incorporate *hubris*) or experiences that prompt resentment and vengefulness, takes place. The personal "self" projected by the "high moral power" is a new "I", emancipated from these passions. It is juxtaposed to itself, that is, to the same "I" that carries all these negative influences. The "high moral power", which "is under the control of a loving purpose" (King 1986, p. 40), orders the "purified self" to defeat the "corrupt 'I'"; the purified "self" asks the "corrupt 'I'" questions the latter finds impossible to answer. So long as the latter cannot defend itself against the attacks of the "new self", it capitulates to its ultimate demands. In Weil's (2005a) thought, "[p]ure love of creatures is not love in God, but love which has passed through God as through fire" (p. 292). The love of *agape* (in King's case), the "love of neighbor", is not a sentiment expressed toward an abstract supernatural force but a creative "good will for all men" (King 1986, p. 13) that has passed through the impersonal (divine) realm and has no influence from the collective. The love of *agape* is a product of a process of individual *catharsis*, of a long process of self-transformation.

On the face of it, one could fairly raise objections against such a proposition, considering absurd (if not morally repugnant) any expression of sympathy toward individuals who consciously engage with acts exhibiting *hubris*. In response, King (1986) brought a distinction between *agape* and *philia* (from the Greek "*φιλία*"), which derives from the verb *philo* (*φιλοῦ*), signifying "to love" and implies "friendship". The Greek philosophers were so enthusiastic about this "reciprocal" type of love that refers to "intimate affection between personal friends", King claimed (p. 46). One, for example, could invoke Aristotle (2004)'s definition of *philia* as a condition that presupposes "mutual affection" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1156a, p. 145); to consider a person as a friend would imply that the affection and love the former expresses toward the latter is reciprocated (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1156b, p. 147). For Aristotle, perfect friendship exists only when "those who love each other wish good things to each other" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1156b, p. 146). However, as King (1986) explained, *agape* is "the highest form of love, and . . . the source of all other types" (Burrow 2014, p. 199). Thus, *agape* is "more than friendship . . . It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return" (King 1986, p. 46). The persons who "love" at the level of *agape* do not love others because they like them (ibid.); Jesus said "'love your enemies' . . . he did not say like your enemies . . . Like is sentimental and it is pretty difficult to like someone bombing your home; it is pretty difficult to like somebody threatening your children; it is difficult to like congressmen who spend all of their time trying to defeat civil rights" (p. 47). To "love your enemies" does not mean that "you" should "like your enemies," that you should develop feelings of deep affection for them (ibid.). When we rise to love at this level, we do not do so because we seek to create emotional ties with our "enemies"; not "because their attitudes and ways appeal to us, but because God loves them. Here we rise to the position of loving the person who does the evil deed while hating and despising the deed he does" (pp. 8–9). Instead of "ston[ing] one of our brothers because he has made a mistake . . . we in the spirit of Christ, follow the example of the loving and forgiving father" (p. 454), seeking to persuade the evil doer with words or deeds (pp. 103, 149). Like Weil's Christian "love of neighbor", which springs from a supernatural source and encourages compassion, becoming "a vehicle for spreading and increasing the amount of pure good in society" (Doering 2010, p. 238), King's (1986) *agape*, the love of God that descends from the divine

order to “something deep down within”, to something that dwells deep inside the human soul (p. 260), appeals to the sacredness of human personality (Burrow 1992, p. 73) and to a restorative form of justice, which seek no vengeful retribution but repentance; that is, active recognition and rejection on behalf of the evil doer of the *hubris* that has possessed his/her own mind. For King, the person who loves at the level of *agape* recognizes that his/her enemy belongs to God, to whom every man and woman is connected (and subjected). Therefore, to advocate physical harm and destruction against the same person out of anger and/or vengefulness is to sin in the eyes of God. Repentance is the only response to evil doing. Therefore, King did not aim at the humiliation of the white community (King 1986, pp. 12, 87). The aim of *agape*, he argued, is to “redeem” (p. 18) and persuade those “who had perpetrated this system [of racial inequality] in the past” (p. 12). Every person needs *agape*, “the love of God operating in the human heart” (p. 9), the love that carries out “the demands of justice”, he argued (p. 247). In Weil’s thought, God is “secretly present in all acts” that arise “from unselfish love of neighbor” (summarized by Doering 2010, p. 186). “God created through love and for love. God did not create anything except love itself, and the means to love. He created love in all its forms” (Weil 1951, p. 123). This type of love (or *agape*, in King’s terms) is not “a sentimental” sort of thing (King 1986, p. 13). It requires genuine devotion to humanity and conscious understanding that “[t]he aftermath of violence is bitterness [while] [t]he aftermath of nonviolence is reconciliation and the creation of a beloved community” (p. 12).

Thus, when during the Montgomery bus boycott King’s house was bombed, he counselled angry black activists not to give in to resentment and vengefulness but to “love their enemies”; to a degree, he was enacting Gandhi’s principles of nonviolence, reverberated in his Christian *agape* (Branch 1988, pp. 166–67; Burrow 1992, pp. 73–74). Gandhi himself believed that “perfect love . . . is enough to neutralize the hatred of millions” (Garrow 1986, p. 68); he took “the ethic of love to the level of social strategy” (p. 638). Gandhi made love and nonviolence the animating spirit of his campaign of civil disobedience and “civil resistance” against the Police Superintendent (a rank in British police services operating in many former British colonies). Through such moves, Gandhi achieved persuading officials to relinquish power and the common Indian people to lose “all fear of punishment”, yielding “obedience to the power of love” (Gandhi 2018, p. 635). King (1986), during his trip to India (in Delhi, Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay), looked at the way nonviolent (Gandhian) cooperative movements for land reform (in India) succeeded in persuading large landowners to give up “millions of acres of land to cooperative management by small farmers” (p. 29). He noticed Gandhi’s spirit of peaceful resistance being “very much alive” in “almost every aspect of life” (p. 25). In India, writes King, “[t]he aftermath of hatred and bitterness that usually follows a violent campaign” was replaced by “a mutual friendship based on complete equality . . . between the Indian and British people within the Commonwealth” (ibid.). As he explained, the Gandhian method of nonviolent resistance “became the guiding light of our movement. Christ furnished the spirit and motivation while Gandhi furnished the method” (p. 38). Moreover, “[p]rior to reading Gandhi, I had about concluded that the ethics of Jesus were only effective in individual relationship. . . . But after reading Gandhi, I saw how utterly mistaken I was” (Burrow 2014, p. 205).

Like Weil’s love, which has no need of force or violence (Weil 2005a, p. 291), since force itself “destroy[s] positive relationships” perpetuating “the spiral of violence” itself (Doering 2010, p. 131), King’s *agape*, which operates “through the Gandhian method of nonviolence”, through the method of *satyagraha*, makes nonviolence seem high. King (1986) condemned the vengefulness of “armchair revolutionaries who insist on the political and psychological need for violence” and “elaborately scorn the process of dialogue in favor of “tactics of confrontation””, glorifying “guerrilla movement[s]” while equating “revolutionary consciousness with the readiness to shed blood” (pp. 642–43). *Agape* and nonviolence constituted “one of the most potent weapons available to the Negro in his struggle for freedom” (p. 16). *Agape* (in King’s mind) activates the corrective and “redemptive good will” (p. 19), securing unity and brotherhood. King (2000) opposed the actions of many

Southern blacks who had slipped into a mentality of revenge and found “solace and security” in “self-destructive” black nationalist ideologies (p. 101). Their anger, notes [Lasch \(1991\)](#), due to their suffering inflicted by membership of a persecuted minority, their “sense of political powerlessness”, due to the extreme police repression, drove them to the “politics of resentment” (p. 387). On the other hand, he believed that resentment and vengefulness, instead of creating “friendly ties” between black and white Americans, would escalate “a frightening racial nightmare” ([King 1986](#), p. 297). He feared the consequences of the loss of faith in reconciliation; racial vengefulness and revolutionary violence could escalate into full-blown conflict, perpetuating racial enmity and division. Resentment would lead to “utter destruction,” that is, to a right-wing revenge and, consequently, to “a kind of right-wing takeover in the cities and a Fascist development, which will be terribly injurious to the whole nation” (p. 69). In [King’s \(1986\)](#) account, violence adds “deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars” and “[d]arkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that” (p. 594). “True nonresistance”, that is, nonviolent resistance, according to the love *agape*, “is the only real resistance to evil” so long as it “extirpates the evil feeling” (*ibid.*). This spirit of nonviolence and interracial cooperation King attempted to implant in the heart of the movement in order to avoid the destruction “of the soul of the nation” ([King 1986](#), p. 69).

So much for individual *catharsis* and love (or *agape*). It is time to move ahead, shedding light on the process of collective *catharsis* (through civil disobedience and *dramatization*). [Aristotle’s \(1995\)](#) analysis in *Poetics*, in conjunction with Weil’s approach on Homer’s *Iliad*, coupled with [Vetř’s \(1994\)](#) analysis on Weil, provide important insights concerning the mechanisms that poetry and drama set in motion in order to inspire collective *catharsis*. More precisely, when art or drama is used as a means of political critique, the dissident poet or dramatist, who has already elevated him/herself above the personal and the collective, establishing a connection with impersonal dimensions in order to de-create his/her “I” from biases and negative prejudices, thereupon enters the public sphere and leads through his art a specific campaign, identifies in a populace the particular reasons that have permitted *hubris* to possess its own (collective) mind. He/she “dramatizes” human suffering (the consequences of this *hubris*), prompting the populace to abort perception and attitudes (sometimes unconsciously reproduced) that contribute to its perpetuation. The civil disobedient (King, in our case) uses similar methods of social dramatization.

#### 4. Collective *catharsis*; the Case of “Social Dramatization”

According to Aristotle, “dramas are so called because they represent people in action” (*Poetics*, 1448a3, p. 35). The noun drama derives from the word *δρῶντας* “dran”, implying “doing” or “acting” (*Poetics*, 1448b39, p. 37). For the same author, “tragedy . . . is imitation [*μίμῃσθαι* or *mimēsis*] of an action which is elevated, completed, and of magnitude” (*Poetics*, 1449b24, p. 47). *Mimēsis* “employs the mode of enactment, not narrative” (*Poetics*, 1449b24, p. 47); its ultimate concern is to incite “pity and fear” (*Poetics*, 1449b24, p. 47) through “recognition” (*Poetics*, 1451a8, p. 67), that is, through the “change from ignorance to knowledge” (*Poetics*, 1452a29, p. 65). Put in stark terms, imitation (*mimēsis*) portrays the intensity of the suffering certain individuals or groups experience in front of a spectator that he/she has never been aware not only of its existence but, more importantly, of its real causes. *Mimēsis* emboldens portions of a populace to recognize their own share in the suffering of such individuals and/or groups. For Aristotle, first comes the ruling impression of fear, the violent disruption of spectators’ feelings concerning the consequences of its own *hubris*, followed by pity, and salvation through *catharsis* (*Poetics*, 1455b15, p. 91), through the recognition and rejection of—sometimes passively reproduced—norms that have contributed to the perpetuation of social injustices.

Homer’s *Iliad* offers a good example of individual and collective *catharsis* through dramatization. According to Weil’s interpretation, Homer’s first objective is to “accede to perfection”, that is, to raise himself to impersonal dimensions where he can “de-create” his “I” and to understand the “human condition revealed in the tortured existence of those

whose lives and acts he portrayed" (Vetö 1994, p. 103). In the *Iliad*, Homer manages to translate "the tragic truth of the human condition into the matchless songs of his great poem" (ibid.). In order to recognize the terrors of the Trojan War, Homer creates a "plot", that is, a story consisting of different events, a story with "a beginning, middle and end" (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1450b26, p. 55). In this story, the poet depicts the *hubris* of war, "the greatest of griefs that can come among men; the destruction of a city" (Weil 1987, p. 49). Thereupon, he detaches himself, his own "I" (ibid.); he pays *attention* to the *affliction* of the defenseless victim and *dramatizes* human suffering in a way that it could not be ignored. He brings the reader "at the center of a truth . . . in all its nakedness" (p. 65).

More to the point, Weil mentions Hector's death whose "head lay in dust, /That head but latterly so beloved. Now Zeus permitted /His enemies to defile it upon its native soil" (p. 25). The "real subject, the core of the *Iliad*", writes Weil, is oppressive force, which constitutes a dehumanizing force; under its dominance, men and women are *things* (p. 24). For example, a captured, disarmed, or weak soldier, under the command of a warrior, is under the sway of (an oppressive) force. The soldier is a *thing*, a "living corpse", unable to defend himself, attack the warrior, or escape captivity. For Doering (2010), "Homer depicted the warriors as blind, uncontrollable scourges of disaster: blasting fire, flood, whirlwinds, and man-eating lions" (p. 52). They are too subjugated to their own passions, excited by war and they are unable to think; "[w]here there is no room for thought, there is no room either for justice or prudence" (Weil 1987, p. 34). "[O]nly an instant of impatience" on the part of the warrior suffices to deprive the life of the soldier (p. 27). Weil mentions Achilles in the state of perfect distress, who wishes in his heart "[t]o escape evil death, and black destiny . . . /With one arm he encircled those knees to implore him /With the other he kept hold of his bright lance" (p. 26). This is the empire of (oppressive) force and it "extends as far as the empire of nature", which wipes out "all inferior life" (p. 30). Thus, the empire of force and the empire of justice (in Weil's mind) are rivals; when there is force, there is no justice; in the empire of force, freedom, life, respect, and dignity are at the mercy of chance. In the empire of force there are no hindrances to the sudden and abrupt explosion of frantic passions that could lead to *hubris*.

To dramatize this barbarity, the poet adopts "a universal perspective" from which he senses the *affliction* of the victim "as his own" (Vetö 1994, p. 103). He "suffers, feels an irreducible bitterness" (ibid.). Thereupon, he implants his *affliction* in the minds of his readers. Thus, his readers imitate (*mimēsis*) the suffering of the victim; they feel his/her hopelessness, anguish, and misery as their own. In return, they seek pity but not in order to comfort their (implanted) *affliction*. The poet offers "no misleading consolation" but represents "horror as it is and in this way makes acceptance of universal necessity possible for the reader" (ibid.). The aim of the pity (for the suffering soldier) incited by this implanted *affliction* (in the mind of the reader) is to whip up abhorrence and disgust for the real consequences of *hubris*. In other words, the reader understands that *hubris* and justice are opposite. Therefore, one could assume that justice is a matter of civil law, which prevents, even through the use of an *ad minimum* force, the prevalence of conditions where certain groups could resort to the use of oppressive force against certain others, submitting the latter to the mercy of the abrupt explosion of their *hubris*. However, Weil was not an ardent supporter of this idea; civil institutions, democracy, majority rule, and freedom of speech alone do not safeguard justice (Weil 2013, p. 5), which (in Weil's mind) is "a vehicle for spreading and increasing the amount of good in society" when it is inspired "by love of neighbor" (Doering 2010, p. 238). In other words, "[g]oodness alone is an end" (Weil 2013, p. 12); civil laws are only the means through which this end is met. More importantly, civil laws require the exercise of an (*ad minimum*) force (or state violence) to prevent the prevalence of conditions within which human *hubris* could hold sway. Nonetheless, an *ad minimum* force can become oppressive in the event that one bestows absolute faith on mechanisms that promote its use. One way to break the monopoly of the state is to allow popular attitudes, predicated on compassion and "love of neighbor", to be developed.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, love and compassion (as mentioned earlier) require the abandonment of

elements—asccribed (by collective environments) in the “I” —that justify *hubris*. Following this approach, one could arrive at the following conclusion: Homer prompts his reader to imitate (*mimēsis*) the *affliction* of the defenseless victim in order to raise awareness concerning the importance of paying attention to the “inherent” (according to Weil) evil in human nature (Doering 2010, p. 43; Rozelle-Stone and Stone 2013, p. 77; McCullough 2014, p. 173), to the innate passion for domination and exploitation that (quite often) society exalts and glorifies. Homer’s readers are encouraged to elevate themselves above the personal and the collective in order to *de-create* their own “I”, aborting evils men and women (quite often) passively accept; he prompts them to adopt a new “self”, filled with generosity and respect. Moreover, in this way, the empire of (oppressive) force is defeated within ourselves.

Euripides’ *The Trojan Women* may serve as a helpful illustration of this process of collective *catharsis*. From a contextualist point of view, *The Trojan Women* was written almost one year after the slaughter of the citizens of the island of Milos by the Athenian army ([Castoriadis] Καστοριάδης 2008, p. 211), an event that has been (of course) brought to Weil’s (1951, p. 141) attention. Euripides’ references to the atrocities of the Greeks in the Trojan War are allusions of the *hubris* of the Athenians against the Melians. As Thucydides (2009) recounts, during the Peloponnesian War, the Melians (who were allies of Sparta), fearing their enslavement and ruthless exploitation, refused to capitulate to the ultimatums of the Athenians to join their alliance. In response, the Athenian generals razed the city of the island to the ground, killed all men, and sold their women and children as slaves (*Peloponnesian War*, Book 5–116, p. 307). To their plea for justice and moral decency, the Athenians responded with the following words: “You know as well as we do that when we are talking on the human plane questions of justice only arise when there is equal power to compel: in terms of practicality the dominant exact what they can and the weak concede what they must” (*Peloponnesian War*, Book 5–89, p. 302). Although there were some Athenians who had doubts concerning the expansion of the influence of their city through force and violence, through means domination and subjection”, the besiege of Milos was supported by the vast majority of the Athenian *demos* (Walzer 1977, p. 8); it was voted by the democratic assembly of Athens and several Athenian generals considered the destruction of the island a “*necessity*” for expansion of the Athenian empire (ibid). Thus, Euripides invited the Athenian audience to question the rightness of its decisions. He described the Greeks as “dreadful monsters carried away by their *hubris*” (Castoriadis 2007, p. 123); he highlighted the vulgarity of the Athenians against the Melians. Like Achilles in Homer’s *Iliad*, the defenseless Melians in Thucydides’ *Peloponnesian War* were under the total sway of the empire of (oppressive) force. The Athenians committed a *hubris* not only because there was no civil law, that is, an *ad minimum* (counter) force to prevent the besiege of the island. For Castoriadis (2007), the Athenians had lost their capacity for self-limitation (p. 123). In Weil’s mind, this translates as an inability of men and women to restrain from their inherent selfishness, from their pathos for earthly domination, an innate tendency in human nature (as mentioned earlier) that social environments exalt and glorify.

Let us go back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, where we find out that *mimēsis* “employs the mode of enactment, not narrative,” and requires “plot”, that is, a story with “a beginning, middle and end” (*Poetics*, 1450b26, p. 55). The “plot” of *The Trojan Women* focuses on “[t]he shame of Greece” which “[b]rought devastation . . . to the shores of Simois.” (*Trojan Women*, 1316, p. 69). In *The Trojan Women*, Euripides (2009) describes scenes of destroyed cities vanishing like smoke in the sky (*Trojan Women*, 675, p. 51), and scenes of “sacred groves . . . deserted”, of blood oozing “from the temples of the gods” (*Trojan Women*, 15, p. 31), where corpses of dead men lie naked beneath the temple of Pallas (*Trojan Women*, 690, p. 52), and multitudes of children cry for help in front of the city gates (*Trojan Women*, 1274–5, p. 69), and young adults are flung to their cruel death from the city walls (*Trojan Women*, 1341, p. 70). The actors imitate (*mimēsis*) on stage the acts of the Athenian soldiers, and thus, the dramatist (like the poet) incites pity, terror, and disgust concerning the *hubris* committed by the Athenian *demos* itself. Like Homer, he invited the spectators to *imitate*

the *affliction* of the victims. He encourages *catharsis* (1) by encouraging his audience to recognize the *hubris* of the Athenian army as its own, and (2) by prompting the Athenian *demos* to abort attitudes that had led to such moral transgressions.

In many Greek tragedies and poems (such as [Homer's \(1966\) \*Odyssey\*](#)), collective *catharsis* occurs when dramatization encourages *katabasis*. This term (*katabasis*) derives from the Greek word *κάθοδος* (*kathodos*), from the (verb) *καταβαίνω* (*kataibaino*), translated as “descend” or “climb[ing] down” ([Watts 2008](#), p. 102). To make sense of the purifying action of *katabasis*, it is necessary to speak of the unconscious collective mind (or the *underworld*). Briefly, we can imagine the existence of a collective storehouse within which social attitudes, habits, and norms (which provoke *hubris*) are lodged. The *underworld* is, therefore, a symbolic space, a dark realm, a collective database, where these attitudes and habits are located; we call it “unconscious” so long as these absorbed attitudes manifest themselves in social life and critical portions of the same society do not realize the influence these attitudes have exerted on their individual behavior. Thus, the *underworld* contributes to the passive perpetuation of *hubris*. Dramatization prompts members of a society to access this *underworld*. The aim of this process is to encourage social re-evaluation; that is, to raise awareness to several members of the same society about their silent absorption of such attitudes and, consequently, of their participation in *hubris*. Consider also [Weil's \(1987\)](#) assertion that “[i]n several Greek tragedies we observe a curse born of a sin transmitted from generation to generation until it strikes a guileless person who suffers all the bitterness of it. Then the curse is ended” (p. 10). First, when passions that stimulate moral transgression dominate a social reality (the passion for domination, even through means of exploitation and humiliation), they effectively shape conditions that incite *hubris*. Second, once the same conditions that led to such transgressions are gradually normalized, they are lodged in the storehouse of the collective unconscious. These transgressions then become sublimated. Thereupon, they begin to propagate themselves; they become “curses”, transmitted “from generation to generation”, passively reproduced, without ever being challenged. When, however, works of drama depict the suffering of a “guiltless person” in a way to stimulate pity, a *katabasis* begins. Or let us consider Ulysses’ *katabasis* to Hades, a hard place “for those that live to behold these realms” according to Ulysses’ mother (*Odyssey*, 11–157, p. 397). In this lurid *underworld*, Ulysses seeks Tiresias, who advises him to resist temptation and deceit, in short to avoid eating the “goodly flocks of Helios” (*Odyssey*, 12–263, p. 393), which was the main cause of his death. Here, we can use Ulysses’ example symbolically: as Ulysses learns from Tiresias (who dwells in the underworld) the cause of the latter’s death, similarly (in drama), the *katabasis* of the spectator to the collective *underworld* allows him/her to identify the causes of suffering, namely, the attitudes “dwelling” in this dark space. These attitudes fuel oppression and intense suffering. In other words, when pity provokes *katabasis*, the spectators, the *demos*, or part of the populace imitate (*mimesis*) Ulysses; it comes into contact with dark aspects of its own collective “self” for which they were not aware. In short, the spectators come into contact with what has incited the *hubris* and suffering the “guiltless victim” had highlighted (through dramatization). It is, therefore, expected that through such a procedure, parts of the *demos* (a significant percentage of the spectators) will improve their self-awareness, identifying in their own temperament elements that contributed to *hubris* and *affliction*. These elements must be converted into forces that promote love (or *agape*). Hence, the aim of social dramatization is to prompt members of society to gradually realize the need to shape for themselves a new “collective self,” emancipated from *hubris*.

Let us explain, at this stage, how King’s methods of civil disobedience relied on similar procedures. King attempted to “dramatize” the ongoing racism in the lives of black Americans “before the court of world opinion” ([Colaiaco 1988](#), p. 2), in such a way that they “can no longer be ignored” ([King 1986](#), p. 291). According to [Phillips \(1998\)](#), King’s leadership was characterized by the “the art of listening”, and the “desire for lifelong learning” (43). Effective listeners “take in everything they hear” from the public, “analyze it within the context of the environment” (*ibid.*), and return it back to

the public sphere in order to be further discussed. Effective listeners focus on popular demands in order to analyze them. Having exposed themselves to a high moral ideal, having purified themselves from biases and all sorts of resentments, they become able to distinguish right from wrong; they understand which among these expressed demands and, more importantly, which among the proposed means that have to be employed (in order these demands could be met) are acceptable. King's methods of "self-purification", writes Burrow (2014), involve *attention* (to use Weil's terms), that is, praying "on a regular basis in preparation for demonstrations" (p. 275). Self-purification leads to the discovery of "inner peace amid outer storms", the peace one finds through faith in Christ (King 1986, p. 508), the "inner law which etches on . . . hearts the conviction that all men are brothers and that love is mankind's most potent weapon for personal and social transformation" (p. 124).<sup>7</sup> Thus, during the Montgomery bus boycotts, King, by entrusting his "'inner voice" telling him what to do", encouraged his audience to resist the *hubris* of segregation through means that comply with the objectives of the moment (*agape* and racial brotherhood) (Branch 1988, p. 162). In short, King listened to the demands of black Americans for desegregation. As an effective listener, he rejected calls for violent resistance against racial exclusion. He assimilated popular (especially among black Americans) demands for desegregation to his notion of *agape*. Thus, during the bus boycotts, he instructed his followers to remain calm in extreme police brutality. King intended (1) to portray the suffering and mistreatment of African Americans in the hands of the American police forces, bringing the real face of racism "out in the open where it can be seen and dealt with" (p. 295), and (2) to implant the *affliction* of African Americans to diverse audiences, to people who were either ignoring or were silently approving the *hubris* of segregation. Through this method of dramatization, King created a "plot", that is, a story with "a beginning, middle and end" (Aristotle, Poetics, 1450b26, p. 55). Such a story begins by depicting groups of African Americans protesting peacefully, demonstrating the intention for cooperation and reconciliation. Subsequently, armed police forces attack protesting crowds using violent means of repression. Despite this ruthless suppression of the freedom to protest, the "innocent" crowd remains calm. The police and the establishment play the role of the aggressor; the crowd, on the other hand, of the oppressed "victim." The public, the spectator, witnesses a scene that stimulates pity toward the suffering of the "oppressed" and "guiltless victims" (to use Weil's terms again).

As King argued, "[w]hen the majority of white Americans saw on television the brutality of segregation in action", when they "recognized" the evils of segregation, changing "from ignorance to knowledge", to repeat Aristotle's (Poetics, 1452a29, p. 65) words, "they reacted . . . with revulsion and sympathy", that is, with pity "and with demands that somehow this . . . must stop" (quoted from Lasch 1991, p. 397).<sup>8</sup> However, when dramatization incites fear and pity, in our case the fear and pity toward the injustices and suffering of black Americans, portions of the same collective (of the American society) begin to sense, to "recognize" (in Aristotle's terms), the matrix of these injustices in the collective *underworld*. Thereupon, *katabasis* begins and the same individuals find themselves exposed to *hubris*; they "recognize" that racial injustice is a form of "normalized" *hubris*, which they (quite often) passively perpetuate. This *hubris* was incited by sinful endeavors, not entirely by their own endeavors but, more importantly, from the endeavors of preceding generations, which at some historical moment consciously caused great suffering. I am, obviously, referring to the moral transgression of slavery (especially in the American South), to the issue of racial injustice that has "been with us since our earliest beginnings as a nation" and has "bred fears, myths, and violence over centuries", wrote (Rustin 2020, p. 187). It is "deeper and sharper than the other points of contention" and a "source of dark and dangerous irrationality . . . running through our history and dimming our brighter achievements" (ibid.). As Tiresias in Homer's (1966) *Odyssey*, who deals in the underworld of Hades (the world of the dead), unveils to Ulysses the secret of his death, in the same way Agamemnon recounts how he "died by a most pitiful death" (*Odyssey*, 11–411, p. 415) by the "guileful Clytemnestra" (*Odyssey*, 11–422, p. 417), and round about him "the rest of . . .

[his] comrades were slain unceasingly" (*Odyssey*, 11–411, p. 415). Agamemnon is dead due to Clytemnestra's viciousness. Thus, to learn about the real causes of his death, one has to visit Tiresias in the underworld of Hades.

To recapitulate, dramatization eliminates petrified and unconsciously reproduced patterns and attitudes (products of *hubris*). It intends to eradicate "already made up . . . preconceived ideas", to use King's words (quoted by Garrow 1986, p. 30), which find expression (sometimes unconsciously) in public life. Therefore, the sin of injustices and the conditions of suffering are preserved since the same sin is transmitted "from generation to generation" (Weil 1987, p. 10), and is embraced unconsciously. The dramatization of ignored injustices provokes *katabasis* toward the *underworld*, prompting "recognition" of the causes of *hubris*. In turn, pity and fear concerning the consequences of *hubris* lead to collective *catharsis*.

## 5. Conclusions

A major complication in piecing together Weil and King involves disentangling their genuine ideas on individual self-purification. On a more fundamental level, Weil's pathway toward self-purification is related to the notion of impersonality; that is, on establishing a connection with an "anonymous" God, to which the "I" must be entirely surrendered. King, on the other hand, supported the idea of a "personal God", who responds to individual prayers and directs men and women toward the path of "love for neighbor" (or *agape*, in King's terms). Both authors considered the Christian love an antidote to the "innate" (in their mind) human selfishness, which encourages *hubris*. Both believed that individual *catharsis* should inspire civil disobedience. As the present study explained, the aim of civil disobedience is collective *catharsis* through dramatization. In turn, the aim of collective *catharsis* is to shift public attitudes; that is, to "de-create" the collective "self", urging members of the public to abort normalized attitudes that (potentially) incorporate elements of *hubris*. We have examined cases of collective *catharsis* by considering Weil's approach to Homer's *Iliad*, by reflecting on Euripides' *The Trojan Women* as well as on King's campaign against racial segregation. If King's leadership turned degraded people into self-respecting citizens, who discovered a new sense of dignity while protecting their constitutional rights, this could be attributed to his insistence on methods through which racial (as well as economic) injustices could be dramatized to the nation (King 2000, p. 30). As King wrote in 1961, "[w]ithout the presence of the press . . . there might have been untold massacres in the South" (quoted by Lasch 1991, p. 397). "A "dramatization to the nation of what segregation was like"" presupposed the presence of national news media, "to get across the nation the evils of racial discrimination" (ibid.). According to Colaiaco (1988), if King's leadership changed the attitude of a great percentage of (mainly white) Americans, awakening their conscience to the evils of racial segregation (p. 1), this could be attributed to his ability to "dramatize the persistence of segregation in the South" (p. 104), driving the public's attention to the suffering of black Americans, inciting pity and fear, prompting large sections of American society to rethink its stance on race relations.

Although *catharsis* removes biases that hinder one's capacity to judge impartially, this process does not promise absolute protection from all temptations in every moment of life. Put starkly, justice, truth, and beauty "are the image in our world of this impersonal and divine order of the universe", Weil claims (Weil 2005a, p. 98). A human being (a leader of civil disobedience, for example) can sense perfect justice by connecting him/herself with the impersonal realm, with the "high moral ideal." However, the leader or the "civil disobedient", writes Hannah Arendt (1972), "never exists as a single individual" and he/she "can function and survive only as a member of a group" (p. 55). In other words, the civil disobedient and the leader must be in contact with the world they aspire to influence. Irrespective of how deeply their minds in the state of impersonality are purified, their purified "self" remains vulnerable to corruption. Upon re-entering the public realm, they find themselves exposed to all types of egoistic inducements, incited by their social environment. The limits of individual *catharsis* and the influence of the secular world on

the human mind are subjects that we could discuss in another study. Notwithstanding a prudent leader is not entirely shielded from collective *hubris*, his/her persistence, resilience, and moral sobriety can cultivate the soil for love and mutual respect. For this reason, King's leadership, anchored in the Christian notion of *agape*, could be taken as an inspirational example for those who seek to engage with spiritual disciplines in order to exert positive influences on society.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> According to Czeslaw Milosz (2013), *hubris* implies "lack of measure" (p. 55). In more clear terms, *hubris* stands for the frantic impulse for exaggeration ([Castoriadis] Καστοριάδης 2007, p. 177) and for the violation of moral limits ([Castoriadis] Καστοριάδης 2008, p. 210). *Hubris* deprives the dignity and self-respect of those subjected to the arbitrary will of persons who rely on brute force with the intention to dominate, oppress, exploit, or even exterminate. A good example of *hubris* is the case of racial segregation (that I will discuss later on).
- <sup>2</sup> King's nonviolent activism for the desegregation of the American South rested on the following four steps: "(1) collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive, (2) negotiation, (3) self-purification, and (4) direct action" (King 1986, p. 290).
- <sup>3</sup> "These two convictions are traceable to the Bible, as well as to Afrikan traditional thought among Africans during and after American slavery" (Burrow 1992, p. 70).
- <sup>4</sup> Davis considered the decline of patriarchy, the abolition of child labor, the end of persecution of the mentally ill, the end of slavery as "signposts of true progress" (Lasch 1991, pp. 390–91). This idea, Lasch believed, rested on the extravagant optimism of the eighteenth century (so deeply inscribed in the American mind), which approaches the future with confidence, assuming that certain procedures or political moves will automatically generate prosperity and happiness (pp. 13–14). "When Davis spoke of the "nemesis of all dictatorships," he meant that dictators fell "by the wayside" because they ignored "the directional signs of history""", which point to a world of perfect respect, brotherhood, and peace (p. 391).
- <sup>5</sup> In Weil's thought, the annihilation of the "I" caused by *affliction* is followed by God's intervention. Human beings are surrendered to (an impersonal) God. Therefore, *affliction* points to a redemptive type of suffering (Weil 2005a, p. 100). King considered a suffering "redemptive" when bitterness and hopelessness become an opportunity for self-transformation, that is, for self-purification. "As my suffering mounted", he claimed, "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. I decided to follow the latter course. Recognizing the necessity for suffering I have tried to make of it a virtue . . . to transform myself and heal the people involved in the tragic situation which now obtains" (King 1986, p. 41). Bearing this in mind, we could assume that *affliction* does not completely annihilate the "I". Agony, bitterness, and humiliation deprive the sense of worth and dignity of the individual; this loss of self-esteem is followed by the "intervention" of a "personal God", who responds to this condition of intense suffering by bestowing love and courage. Gradually, the afflicted rediscover their self-esteem. The same persons re-examined and re-evaluated their goals and pursuits. In short, through this process, a new "self" emerges, which embodies the spirit of *agape*.
- <sup>6</sup> As Weil (2005b) explained in her book *The Need for Roots: Prelude Toward a Declaration of Duties Toward Mankind* (1952/2005b), to consider the state an institution of absolute value is to render it an object of idolatry (p. 124). In Weil's thought, idolatry reinforced the savagery of totalitarianism, by making the state a supreme institution and nationalist domination an end in itself. Idolatry converted secular institutions of power and domination into *ersatz* religions, for which everyone was willing to sacrifice everything, even their own lives.
- <sup>7</sup> Gandhi's methods of "the self-purification process meant long periods of fasting, prayer, meditation, and silence . . . We know, of course, that on a number of occasions, King fasted and prayed while in jail" (Burrow 2014, p. 275). His emphasis on self-purification (through *attention*, to use Weil's terms, that is, through prayer and fasting) does not derive from Gandhi alone. "What King knew of Gandhi during the early weeks of the bus boycott", writes Burrow (2014), "was based primarily on the lecture he heard Mordecai Johnson deliver during his senior year in seminary, what he gathered from conversations with Dean Walter Muelder at Boston University regarding Reinhold Niebuhr's critique of Gandhi's nonviolence, and discussions with his black peers in the Dialectical Society during his doctoral studies" (p. 204). Garrow (1989b) argued that King's belief in moral purity and goodness derived from "his childhood Bible instruction and his youthful and adolescent years observing his father as pastor of a large black Baptist church" (p. 6).

- <sup>8</sup> Thus, dramatization comes at the price of personal sacrifice (King 1986, p. 8). Through this “willingness to sacrifice [the African Americans] won the right to vote” (p. 91). “[T]hese qualities of courage, perseverance, unity, sacrifice, plus a nonviolence of spirit are the weapons we must depend upon if we are to vote with freedom” (pp. 91–92). In simple terms, dramatization is motivated by the willingness for self-sacrifice in the pursuit of justice.

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