

*On Idealistic Ethics, Nihilism, and the Analyticity of
'Black Maleness': A reply to Tommy Curry*

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Curry's chapter "In the Fiat of Dreams" makes two strong claims about the definition of "black male" and the value of idealistic ethics for black men. Depending on what he means by the analyticity of "black male", he either understates his desired conclusion for the severity of the black male's condition, overstates his conclusion in rejecting idealistic ethics, or ends up in contradiction within the "world" or "society" he is talking about. Given the most charitable reading of his argument, I show that he requires further explication, or merely a different argument, in order to make the claims that he intends to offer.

Curry's first strong claim is that society sees the sentence "Black men are rapists and murderers" as analytic. His overall characterization of such a claim starts from the following question: "How many times do we have to observe the phenomenon of Black men and boys be[ing] (sic.) falsely accused of transgressions or crimes before it becomes part of our analytic sensibilities?" (Curry 2017, 167). Curry answers his question by asserting that "Black males are known to the world as savages, affixed within the American schema as the negation of all that is good, ordered, and civilized" and that the "relationship between Black and male" is of "a very real operating ontology" (*idem.*). His second claim characterizes the Black male as always being driven in the direction of *reactionary suicide*, which is defined, borrowing from Newton (2009), as "the reaction of a man who takes his own life in response to social conditions that overwhelm him and condemn him to helplessness" (Curry 2017, 181). That directionality stems from false hope that things will improve for the black male via ethics. Such hope of the oppressor letting up their oppressive nature is problematic because "such hope paralyzes the oppressed through an *a priori* duty to the oppressor" (*idem.* 182). That is to say racism is permanent, because society, by definition, positions the white person as the oppressor and the black male as the oppressed *simpliciter*.

It is unclear what Curry means by “analytic”, but it is clear that the nihilistic situation of the black man is dependent on what he means. One instance of this dependence is Curry invoking the following from Newton to describe the situation of black men: “to pursue a goal which is by definition unattainable is to condemn oneself to a state of perpetual unhappiness” (*idem.*). The definition Curry has in mind when referring to Newton’s work is that “[t]he problem...–which results in black male death–is one of definition, in which the nature of black men is thought to be synonymous with the negativity imposed on them...there is no resistance to the negation of the Black male’s humanity” (*idem.* 169). This is to say, directly built into the concept of “black male” is the “negation of all that is good, ordered, and civilized” (*idem.* 167). He goes on to reject ethical theories as being useless for the black male in the last two sections of the chapter (i.e., anti-idealistic ethics). If black men are permanently and intrinsically defined as being the negation of the good, it follows that idealistic-ethics is useless to the black man in their nihilistic situation. Given the antecedent, I assert he should not make this claim.

Curry’s argument proceeds as follows. If race is socially constructed, then a society prescribes the meaning of a group identity, word, or action. U.S society attributes the meaning of “black male” as the “negation of all that is good, ordered, and civilized”. It is analytic to say “black males are the negation of all that is good, ordered, and civilized”. If black males are analytically the negation of all that is good, ordered, and civilized, then futuristic ethical theories that discuss worlds where that is not the definition are useless. Therefore, futuristic ethical theories that discuss worlds where that is not the definition are useless.

In regard to “analytic”, there can be a strong metaphysical reading and a weaker epistemological reading. Traditionally, metaphysical analyticity concerns those sentences that are true in virtue of the meanings of words. In a weaker epistemological sense, analytic truths can be *known* via the *comprehension* of the meanings of the constituent words of a sentence, rather than having to know anything of the world as it is; truth is ‘trapped’ within contextualized semantics. If Curry believes in some form of constructivism, he appears to be claiming words and identities have meaning if and only if some definition is socially constructed within a given cultural context. In such a case, he must be invoking the stronger metaphysical analyticity. On standard views of social constructivism, ‘race is real’ is merely to say race is a socialized phenomenon–society is determining the truth value of the power dynamics, identities, *etc.* For Curry, the very concepts describing the phenomena are getting directly at the ontological facts of those entities–we are not constrained to truth-valued sentences without being concerned with reality or experience. If Curry was using epistemological analyticity, the sentence “black males are rapists” might be true given one’s specific understanding of the words being intentionally used, but that would say nothing about the experience of black males in society. We would only discuss what a speaker takes the words to mean in language

with no facts of the matter beyond language. This would not allow Curry to reject idealistic ethics as useless, because all it would take to achieve “social change” would be to alter how people understand words without any actual shift in prevailing racism in society.

This is a view Curry is trying to avoid, so he either must be using analyticity in the metaphysical sense or must not be using “analytic” in a common sense; let us investigate the first case. Consider metaphysical analyticity: “black males are rapists”, ‘X’, might be a true sentence in virtue of some socially constructed truth. Further, ‘X’ is subjected to truth or falsity depending on ‘X’'s use within a given society—that is to say ‘X’ might be analytically true in America but might be false in another society. Even if he claims that ‘X’ is a truth across all people on earth, it must still be true in virtue of those societies existing and having some ‘roughly defined’ boundaries. As such, one could say for all people currently alive in a modern society, ‘X’ is true, relative to the truth-value of ‘X’ for all people not alive in a society—both future and past. While this claim seems strange, the point collapses into a very practical form: it is unclear how uncontacted tribes (i.e., “hidden peoples”), with a homogenous race, could possibly be subject to that universal claim that “black men are rapists”. Otherwise, he would be implying some essential characteristic to just black men or black people, which he ought to avoid.

I take his provided argument as needing to be unpacked to avoid trouble, given that he allows for analyticity to be contingent on a specific society. Suppose (the above) ‘X’ is false in society B and ‘X’ is true in society A and both speak English. On Curry’s view, if you translate meaning between culture A and B you will be understood to have two different truth values for the same sentence in an instance where we would not expect there to be such variation. For instance, if I grew up half my life in society A and half in B, when would I be using English A or B? While there are ways out, he has not given much reason to take these assumptions as comfortably true.

The most charitable reading is to not use analytic in any sort of proper philosophical use, but merely to say something like “‘X’ is true the majority of the time” or “‘X’ is prototypical”. This is a weaker interpretation, but it can be supported textually when Curry says for the only time that “the world fundamentally believes black men, *more often than not*, are rapists” (*idem*. 168, emphasis added). Curry adding such wiggle room logically requires him to constrain his claims.

It might be true that most people take black men to be the negation of all that is good, ordered, and civilized and that, given society right now, ethical theory might not be particularly useful to black men, but if so Curry’s argument doesn’t follow. Let R be “black men are rapists” and T be “black men are the negation of all that is good, ordered, and civilized”. If only some people see R as true and R is merely a logical instance of T, then the very fact

that there can be a logical instance that is false means that his claim of black men being T, by definition, cannot be universal. Thus, he has to give up both the claim that ethical theory is always not useful for black men in the present *and* that hope for black men is a problematic attempt to avoid a nihilistic truth—it seems hope is still reasonable.

The motivation for this critique is not to negate the valuable points Curry offers throughout his text *The Man-Not* (2017), but rather that idealistic ethics, while not necessarily realizable, could be used in a utopic sense to point out ideological falsehoods in a given social milieu via the Ideology-Utopia dialectic proposed by Paul Ricoeur (1986). Even if we never escape ideology to neutral ground, utopias allow for one to imagine a world beyond present social structures and materially improve the present. Nihilism is unacceptable.

References

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