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Humes 103

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Critical Analyzation of Ideal Theory

“‘Ideal Theory’ as Ideology’ by Charles W. Mills highlights two main theories: ideal theory and non-ideal theory. The ideal theory does not take into account the intersectionality of race, gender, sexuality, and class in creating philosophical moral frameworks and political thought for United States moral systems. The non-ideal theory however, does take into consideration intersectionality and existing systems of oppression for moral systems. When white, male, and wealthy philosophers applied the ideal theory, they excluded the marginalized people of American society, specifically, people of color, women, and the working class. Therefore, the ideal theory is unrealistic and grounded in the maker's own reality, creating rigid moral frameworks that are exclusionary.

After introducing these two concepts in the small passage, Mills goes on to critique the application of ideal theory when theorizing morals. He does not believe the ideal theory when applied to moral systems is the correct conscious, moral choice without realistic restrictions of the real world, as it lacks any. He breaks down his critique by demonstrating ideal theory applied to objects, demonstrating the need for facts. Then, when applied to humans, it needs to take into account a new moral restriction as American society has different lived experiences. This in turn, refutes the counterargument that ideal theory without realistic parameters is the ultimate way to theorize. Ideal theory, as the initial and only process to theorize, is not the correct

way to begin thinking about ideas; instead, nonideal theory, with its realistic parameters, better represents the human condition.

At the beginning of Mills' small passage selection, he inquires, "In trying to understand the workings of an actual P, how useful will it be to start from an [ideal] model of P?" (167).

By utilizing the example of the "very smooth, Teflon-coated plane suspended in a vacuum", Mills explores the most positive, "ideal" outcome of the ideal theory in a material object (167).

The reason for exploring the ideal theory in an object as opposed to human morals in his initial example creates the base for his argument that ideal theory needs realistic parameters. To start with something objective, non-living, and has no human moral sense of right or wrong, leaves little to no room for subjective interpretation (167). If the plane is conceptualized from a factual, realistic idea of materials needed, then the ideal theory is working within the dimensions of reality (167). Though this is the best positive outcome, Mills emphasizes that the ideal theory does not always work within dimensions of reality. By substituting the "Teflon" material with "Velcro", Mills demonstrates how the plane itself then becomes a destabilized and unrealistic idea that would not work with the "plane's actual properties" (167). The Teflon as a material is realistic and based on facts as opposed to an idea of what might be a good material; the velcro. Once the idea switched from Teflon to Velcro, it no longer became a viable idea and instead came across as unreasonable (167). The larger theme of the passage is that individuals tend to theorize within the dimensions of their own perspectives and reality. Mills' example of the plane refutes the notion that theorizing with solely the "ideal" version of anything, without realistic parameters, is an accurate and helpful way to theorize.

Later on, Mills expands upon the limitations of the ideal theory to speak about why there are new limitations when theorizing morals. By building on his earlier breakdown of the plane

example, Mills introduces the additional “crucial moral dimension along with the factual one” of human morals (167). He breaks down why the ideal theory excludes the marginalized when applied to morals. The word “moral” emphasizes how it's no longer just a concern about getting the facts right, but a concern about how humans should decide what is right or wrong socially (168). There is now “[a concern] with how “people should be like (character), how they should treat each other (right and good actions), and how society should be structured in its basic institutions (justice)” (167). Additionally, the usage of “factually” in the passage highlights an objective fact that ideal theory “deviates” from how actual American society behaves when applied to morals (167). It “deviates” from how American society actually behaves because it excludes lived experiences and prioritizes white, male, wealthy perspectives (170). By expanding on how the ideal theory is objectively exclusionary in nature, he introduces why ideal theory needs crucial realistic dimensions that don't just include facts, but also lived experiences that are realistic and align with the American society. Mills' build up from the application of the ideal theory in objects to human morals adds to his argument that the ideal theory excludes the crucial aspects of the history of oppression in the United States that need to be taken into account when introducing moral frameworks.

Lastly, Mills restates the crucial difference between nonideal theory and ideal theory to ultimately argue that nonideal theory is a crucial, realistic method to theorize morals. Mills' perspective of the difference between the two is that the ideal theory “marginalizes the actual” whereas the nonideal theory does not (168). He addresses that both nonideal and ideal theory use ideals when theorizing morals. The choice to single out the ideal theory's workings emphasizes that the ideal theory solely relies on idealization and disregards reality as “not worth theorizing in its own right” (168). The American people have a wide variety of lived experiences that vary

according to their gender, sex, and class (172). White, male, wealthy philosophers represent a “small minority of the nation’s population” and when they apply ideal theory to create moral frameworks, they are not representative of the general American society (172). They create an unrealistic, rigid moral framework when utilizing concepts like the idealized social ontology, capacities, social institutions, and silence on oppression, which do not work within the dimensions of reality (168). In reality, as he explains, there is “imperialism, slavery, Jim Crow, Segregation, [and more] that have shaped the United States and the modern world” that aren’t taken into account when theorizing morals under the ideal theory (179). However, the nonideal theory does “appeal to moral ideals” as it is “dubious about invoking idealized human capacities” and therefore is a better framework to theorize morals (178). It’s the final debunk in the breakdown of thinking of ideal theory within unrealistic moral theorization, as Mills critiques the ideal theory for its lack of working with the reality of the United States.

Overall, in the small passage, Mills’ main assertion is that the ideal theory can be useful in theorization when working with realistic properties and dimensions, but is not useful when considering morality (179). He emphasizes that to create an accurate version of an idea, the limitations of the factual and moral scheme need to be known. He highlights this small passage to break down the vices of ideal theory in the limitations within the ideal theory in objects, morals, then lastly how the theorization of morals excludes the actual reality of United States society. Finally, he writes about how philosophers and creators of systems don’t address white supremacy, oppression, and imperialism when theorizing. Then, when applied to society, it inevitably causes even more oppression and marginalization (179). Hence, why the nonideal theory as opposed to ideal theory, better represents the human condition.

Works Cited

Mills, Charles W. ““Ideal Theory” as Ideology.” *Hypatia*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2005, pp. 165–184, www.jstor.org/stable/3811121.

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