

## ONE CANNOT BE COLORBLIND AND EMPATHETIC

**Austin Belanger-Iott**

Eastern Michigan University,  
USA

Abelang5@emich.edu

**Abstract.** This paper borrows Jose Medina’s discussion on colorblindness and argues colorblind ideologies are inconsistent with empathy. Empathy is a game changer when dealing with highly diverse situations. It allows one to understand, adapt, and integrate more effectively. Colorblindness is when someone claims not to see color despite prejudice and racialization still playing a significant role in the lives of marginalized people in America. Colorblindness is a form of structural white ignorance. Structural white ignorance is a systemic ignorance permeating through societies and deeply entrenching itself into traditions and thought. This form of ignorance is used to push away responsibility for past injustices and responsibility for addressing and correcting those injustices. Colorblindness opens up people to continued violence, racism, prejudice, and testimonial injustice. If one is colorblind, he is unable to fully integrate marginalized peoples' testimony of injustice and, therefore, ends up harming subjects by allowing these injustices to perpetuate. If one is to be empathetic, one must acknowledge someone’s racialized identity as a way to understand their lived experience.

**Keywords:** colorblindness, empathy, white ignorance, structural ignorance, racial injustice

### INTRODUCTION

Someone cannot be “colorblind” and empathic at the same time. In this paper, I argue that colorblind ideologies are logically in conflict with the practice of empathy, so someone is not able to “not see color” and be empathetic towards racialized people. To be colorblind is to claim not to see their racial identity, which means they are not to be seen in totality. This dramatically decreases one's understanding of that person. If someone cannot see that race plays a role in people's lives, such as African Americans, they are lacking

in empathy. This sight requires seeing color and all it entails. Seeing color does not mean someone has to engage in prejudice; it only allows people to see things like oppression, injustice, poverty, and other features that relate to one's racialized identity. Colorblindness is when a person claims not to see someone's racial identity; privileged groups primarily take up this stance. When one engages in colorblindness, they dismiss aspects of their subject relevant to their lived experience. Dismissing one's racial identity within the context of the United States opens up subjects to both epistemic and social injustices, such as testimonial injustice and the perpetuation of structural ignorance. If a person cannot acknowledge one's social identity, they do not truly understand the subject; therefore, one opposes empathy.

#### EMPATHY

Empathy is understanding or perceiving another person's view, emotions, and attitudes from their perspective (point of view). (Barker 2003, 141) Empathy is a game changer when engaging with people beyond our perspective. Empathy is crucial because it allows us to understand beyond our perceptions, which is highly important in our diverse society. There are many different perspectives and backgrounds in American society, and if we lack empathy, then distortions and misunderstandings can be derived more easily from subjects. These misunderstandings and distortions take the form of stereotypes, prejudice, micro-aggressions, racism, and other assumptions of group behavior and dynamics. Empathy can also help bridge gaps between systems of thought, such as the sciences, philosophy, or religion. The empathetic listener can engage with conflicting systems in a way that reduces bias, making their interactions more authentic and less distorted. This can aid in finding objectivity since objectivity requires us to examine many different angles of the same subject to be sure we have the correct interpretation. If I look at a table, for example, from one angle, I

could miss things like dents, legs, how it exists in three-dimensional space, and many other features of that table. If someone goes shopping for a table, they rarely look at it once or accept one picture of the table; they either walk around it or ask for multiple photos to gain the best understanding of the object from multiple points of view. Requiring multiple views to form understanding is true of the sciences, people, places, and things. The best tool to engage with differing points of view is empathy. Empathy does not require us to adopt foreign beliefs or attitudes; it only requires that we engage with as little bias as possible by assuming the subject's position before assessing perspective. A similar analogy would be walking a mile in someone else's shoes. By walking the mile, we gain a more prosperous and deeper understanding of the subject that goes beyond the superficial and provides us with more objective truth. Objective truth would say that race, whether biologically real or not, affects people in real ways that pertain to their identity and everyday living, making it socially real, and to view that person without race is to view them out of context and, therefore, in a distorted sense. This distortion does not match the reality of many racialized Americans. People's willful ignorance of injustice perpetrated based on race does not erase these systems of race that we use, and simply forgetting them does not correct the harm they have done to many Americans, past and present.

#### RACIALIZATION IN AMERICA

Color in America has many implications and realities that willful ignorance cannot erase. For example, my grandmother was alive during the end of Jim Crow and experienced segregation. These living conditions affected her and many other people of color. Colorblindness ignores these truths and ignores the harm done to these people. How these harms are ignored is because if we claim to see someone without their racial identity, we become blind to racial injustice. The store attendant following a black man is no longer

racist or racially motivated through a colorblind lens, so the injustice goes invisible. The colorblind individual thinks that not seeing color would correct this injustice. However, I argue that not seeing this person's racial identity would not protect the subject from the store attendants' prejudice and also make the colorblind individual someone incapable of being an ally. The correction for this is not to have people not see brown skin but to diminish the assumptions and prejudice that brown skin can elicit. Seeing color is not the issue; it assumes color is tied to behavior. The behaviors that we see within racial groups are a product of environment, prejudice, shared trauma, and other social factors. When someone claims not to see someone's color, then they are not seeing shared trauma, social environment, and acts of prejudice or racism perpetrated towards people in context. Context enhances and is pertinent in understanding the subject in reality, a crucial feature of empathy, which is understanding the subject within their own given context and view. There may be people of color who say they do not see color as an attempt to erase the idea of race because the thought is that if race did not exist, neither would racism. However, that is an ideal; racism does exist, and we cannot ignore it and hope it goes away. So, for me, even if I were to subscribe to being colorblind, it would not erase how others perceive me and how society is structured down to its legislation to oppress me. Empathy requires that we seek to understand a person through their perspective, and while some people may believe they do not see color, many still do and want people like me to know what color we are. As long as racism still exists, then colorblindness becomes ignorance, leading to harm instead of liberation; an individual may claim not to see color, but for the person of color, this individual proclamation does nothing to secure their dignity or safety in the face of the still existent prejudices in the deep south and the northerners "silent segregation" (red-lining). This argument is consistent with Jose Medina's assessment of the issues of colorblindness; colorblindness dismisses our reality, and racism as a system cannot be overridden simply by willful ignorance. Colorblindness means one does not see

injustice perpetrated towards racial groups but also dismisses the concept of privileged racial groups. (Medina 2013, 41) The dismissal of race altogether is negligence on the part of the listener/observer that leads to a distortion of reality that is non-reflective of the lived experience of racialized people.

#### ISSUES WITH COLORBLINDNESS

One facet of colorblindness that becomes problematic is that there is no accountability for privileged individuals to rectify or seek justice for minority groups. If someone claims not to see color, then they do not see the harm perpetrated towards minorities as a racial problem and also do not see the perpetrators as racially motivated to commit this harm. Colorblindness inherently puts minorities at greater risk of injustice while simultaneously attributing to white privilege and protecting people who occupy racial groups that hold social power and use it as a weapon toward the social groups they view as outsiders. Lack of empathy is still consistent even when we have a minority viewing a privileged person, however. For example, I may say to a white man that I do not see race, but then I am dismissing social realities that affect people based on the merit of their whiteness. For example, white men hold one of the higher rates of people affected by depression who wish to take their lives. If one empathetically evaluates this claim, we could come to find that one reason this is the case is that while white men hold social power, many white men feel as if they are powerless. This sense of powerlessness comes from the unrealistic pedestal our society has put white men on, so when a white man falls outside the bounds of power, prestige, wealth, health, or other stereotypes, they can feel feelings of failure and low self-worth. Empathy allows us to see that race in our society harms all that are part of it in some facet. This does not diminish the actors' roles in this society, meaning the ones who play either oppressor or oppressed are still responsible for their actions. However, it is crucial to see and understand even the social

realities of your oppressors for reasons that do not always directly pertain to liberation or justice. Some aspects of empathy and understanding are cultivating better skills to operate as a human in a wildly diverse environment. Now, I have written previously that empathy does not mean sympathy. One does not need to feel bad for their oppressors because they are under high amounts of social pressure to be in control per se. However, they should acknowledge this social reality so that their oppressors can understand them better, their motivations, and the relationship between the subject and the listener.

Another reason we should acknowledge people's racial identity is to avoid epistemic harm. If I (A black man) were talking about my experiences of racism or prejudice in our society and someone replied, "It is okay, I do not see color," is there no harm being perpetrated to the knower? The listener has dismissed the reality of this harm and, in some sense, justified these instances in an egocentric way; their ability to not see me as black somehow overrides systems of racism and prejudice that pressure me daily. All the spokesperson hears is someone who claims firstly not to see them as a whole but is also incapable of seeing the knower's hardship. Suppose one cannot see prejudice or racism using the lens of those negatively affected. In that case, they are, in turn, not utilizing empathy and, therefore, are further from understanding.

#### STRUCTURAL & SYSTEMIC IGNORANCE

Colorblindness is a system of ignorance. A tool used to diminish accountability and dismiss injustices perpetrated based on race. James Baldwin and Spelman speak about this system of oppression in *The Fire Next Time* and *Managing Ignorance*. The heart of colorblindness ties to this quote by Baldwin powerfully, "White America remains unable to believe that Black America's grievances are real; they are unable to believe this because they cannot face what

this fact says about themselves and their country.” (Baldwin 1985, 536) People who claim not to see race typically hold positions of power.

A structuralist view of ignorance would account for why colorblindness is more common in white people. Structuralist ignorance is an account that takes into consideration the history and building of systematic ignorance in societies. (Martin 2021, 872) Historically, white people in America are taught that they are saviors towards people of color, rescuing them from their savagery. Now, initially, people in our society saw color, so how does colorblindness systemically aid white people? It aids them by diminishing responsibility and avoiding negative consequences for their actions. The idea is that the people alive today were not the ones who enslaved Africans. Therefore, the responsibility is not theirs, and the ones who are responsible for it are dead, so instead of helping to lift these people out of poverty, it is easier to say that color does not matter, and now things are equal. Races are, however, not being treated equally with respect to law, education, and housing. Black Americans still make \$56 for every \$100 a white family makes. (Martin 2021, 864) Another feature is that 17% of black Americans are in poverty, whereas 9% of white people are in poverty. Poverty and income inequality are a direct result of generational trauma and oppression for blacks and generational wealth and ownership of economic means of production for whites. Colorblindness allows white Americans to dismiss these statistics and avoid rectifying these injustices. Part of this may be that people today have no clue how to rectify such a gross injustice that slavery and Jim Crow were; this, however, is the heinous legacy passed down to whites.

As we see, ignorance is relationally relevant when discussing colorblind ideologies. For example, a colorblind person commits testimonial injustice. For example, a black man may be speaking about how they were racially profiled in a store and followed by a store attendant the whole time they were there; the colorblind person may respond, “Well, hey, it's okay. I don't see color at least”. The marginalized persons' experiences go unseen and, therefore, invalidated and uncorrected. For example, a colorblind person has

no motivation to confront the store attendant with their response and attempt to correct the injustice; they simply wave it off as a past experience and think their blindness makes up for others' prejudice. Their inability to access the knowledge of people of color creates an environment where marginalized people have a more challenging time escaping the social sanctions impacted by their race.

When the colorblind person addresses a person of color, however, another aspect of this person's ignorance is their need for more awareness of the social landscape. (Silva et al. 2023, 226-228). For example, one can claim they do not see race, but their statement is either egocentric or lacks social awareness; egocentric in the sense that they may believe their view supersedes society's view of race or lacks awareness that race plays a significant role in marginalized people's experience. The colorblind persons' lack of sight does not save our black man from being racially profiled in a store, and his claims then feel dismissed; they are unseen as well. This leads to inner harm and outer harm; inner harm to the mind and spirit, and our harm such as prejudice, profiling, and violence. We can see more clearly that colorblind ideologies lack empathy because empathy would fulfill this missing social awareness. Empathy would also entail seeing color because the black man sees himself as colored due to the way society treats them. They do not view themselves as colorless because that can be unsafe in highly prejudiced areas.

#### RACIAL POWER DYNAMICS IN CONTEXT

White people tend to adopt colorblind attitudes because race does not affect them to the same degree, so not seeing it is an easier task. What if a white suburban woman tells a black man they do not see his color; they see him as an equal? Are the power dynamics of the social environment still at play? The power dynamics are still at play because the white woman does not just become a woman and not white, as in the only role at play is her woman; intersectionally, her whiteness affects that dynamic. For example, back in 2014, I knew

a man who was close friends with someone who had wanted to go to a school dance with a white girl; this resulted in the teen's body being found in wrestling mats. The official news report never mentioned race as a factor in this boy's death, but the person I knew said that it was still an unspoken rule in many southern areas; he was from Georgia, and down there, a black man was not to mingle with a white woman still as a type of social more; a *more* is a sociology term that refers to essential functions of a community that are quite like unspoken rules. Now, a suburban soccer mom would likely say she is a victim of oppression, and because of this, she can relate to race, but they are different. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is the prime example of the power white women hold over black men; that story is simply a retelling of similar stories like the one mentioned earlier, which is more recent, or cases like Emmett Till, where a white woman's testimony let a child murderer go free. The suburban mom is still oppressed concerning their identity as a woman. Black men are not seen as full men since they are not white; therefore, white women in the suburbs do not need to answer to them in the same way they would white men because they hold racial power.

#### COLORBLIND & MARGINALIZED

Now, there are instances of minorities also taking this stance; however, their social positioning means that those who do engage with this stance would be considered oppressed and colonized. Colonization has an assimilatory effect on people, which pressures them to adopt specific beliefs that help to reinforce and uphold that society's oppression. So, those who are minorities and adopt this stance are, for the most part, indoctrinated, and their testimony becomes non-representative for those trying to resist oppression. The privileged individuals who take this stance are also actors hammered into their roles as oppressors. However, they have more motivation to support colorblindness because the point of view aids in the oppression of people of color; it hides oppression and denies colonization, meaning there is nothing to repair or fix. When there

is nothing to repair or fix, then those in power need not do anything but treat people justly; moving forward, they do not need to answer for injustices perpetrated prior to the erasure of color. If we were not to see color as a society, there would be no need for reparations because, in this idealized world, people would be treated justly despite looking different. There would be no need for social justice regarding race because race would no longer exist. Some expect we can just move past race, but let us consider the black person who has been racialized their whole life; racialization has shaped their identity and experiences both negatively and positively.

#### ERASURE

Colorblind individuals may think that they are liberating people of color by not acknowledging or seeing their race, or they may be trying to justify their reality; I argue that they are simply adding to the trauma and erasure of these people's identities as a way to defer responsibility and introspection. African-Americans, for example, have worked hard to build culture and identity here despite being stripped of their heritage and past, and it was recently that African-American culture was crafted and supported in mainstream media. From someone who comes from the community, the colorblind mentality feels like an erasure of identity but not on the terms of my people; the colorblind perspective would say my people are neither white nor black; they are simply human. This is nice in theory, but it does not represent me. Being biracial, both white and black, one may think that being colorblind would be okay since social group membership is for both groups. In American society, however, my social group membership is more contingent on my outward appearance. What this means is that I have never been able to claim I am white and reap those benefits; the world sees me as black and treats me as such.

#### HOW DO WE GAUGE EMPATHY?

Empathy cannot be seen or touched, so how do we know whether

someone engages with empathy? Let us examine kindness as a parallel. Some may say empathy has no measure or way of examining what it is because it is relational. We have defined empathy as when someone is engaging with a subject from their emotional and attitudinal perspective; how do we measure this component of the definition? Like acts of kindness, actions, and language can help us determine whether someone engages with empathy. For example, if someone were to hold open the door for anyone they saw and make efforts to make people feel happy, these are kind acts. Now, this does not mean that every action they do is kind, but it does highlight that that person in those moments is being kind. The measure depends on examining the practitioner of kindness and the recipient of kindness; by examining the act, we look for the intent: Was this person aiming to help, aid, or enhance a person's experience? If so, it is kind. Was the act meant to deter, harm, or have no thought for others? If so, this person is not engaging with kindness. Now, can an act be kind without engaging in kindness? Let us say a person holds the door open only because they need to stop and say something before leaving. As they do, someone walks through the door. Was this an act of kindness? The act is kind, but this person is not engaged in kindness. Empathy is similar to this laid-out logic. We can measure whether someone is engaged with empathy by looking at the interpersonal relationship in which someone uses empathy. Like our kindness example, empathy requires two players: someone to use and receive empathy.

Let us say a black man is speaking to a white man and talking about an incident in which police racially profiled them. The black man talks about how scared he was about the demeanor of the cops, saying they seemed standoffish and that because of this, he has lost respect for the police. The non-empathetic listener hears this and responds, "Well, if you follow their instructions, there is nothing to worry about. I have never had an issue with the police, so I am sorry that happened. The police were just doing their job, though you should not disrespect law enforcement; the job is hard." This response does nothing to validate the speaker; it dismisses the

speaker entirely and makes their worries and attitudes seem unfounded. The person responding is speaking in such a way that the speaker may feel as if they misinterpreted that whole experience, challenging their view. This is the key to why it is non-empathetic. The listener is responding to the speaker using their experiences and understanding; they do little to engage with the speakers' experiences and understanding. So, the empathetic response would attempt to understand what the speaker is saying using their emotions and attitudes. This does not mean you must agree, but an empathetic response may look like this; "That is very scary. Were you feeling any other emotions outside of fear? Was this the first time you have been stopped like this? If you do not mind me asking, I am genuinely curious about what indicators cops give off during their profiling so I can be more aware. I am sorry, and they should have been more receptive to you. I have never had that happen to me, but I figure that is likely because I am white." As we see, the two responses are starkly different.

One seems to downplay and dismiss the speaker's claims, and one validates and asks further to seek a richer understanding of that speaker's emotions and perspective on the incident. Through this, we can see a measure of empathy, which requires us to examine the exchange between the speaker and the listener. If one is to ask questions and not first dismiss someone's claim before trying to understand the attitude and emotions of the speaker, then they are engaging in empathy. Engaging in this empathy, though, brings about a deeper and richer understanding, which can enhance one's knowledge. In our example, the non-empathetic response shuts down the conversation, leaving little room for the speaker to add more and flesh out that experience of prejudice. Non-empathetic responses, in turn, mean the listener now has no better understanding of racial prejudice and has committed testimonial injustice, which is an epistemic injustice towards the speaker by not acknowledging this racial prejudice. The empathetic response firstly does not contribute to epistemic injustice, and it makes it possible for this listener to understand prejudice from a minority perspective,

which in turn can illuminate their social positioning better and increase their knowledge of the social landscape in America. When someone asks those types of questions and attempts to respond using someone's perspective, they are engaged in empathetic dialogue and fostering empathy interpersonally.

#### EMPATHY, IGNORANCE, AND COLORBLINDNESS - THE LOGICAL RELATIONSHIP

Being empathetic does not guarantee that one is not ignorant; it does help in moving one away from ignorance, however. Ignorance is a lack of knowledge and awareness, and as we have seen, it is a self-preservation tactic for oppression; empathy is accessing someone's awareness and emotions to better process and understand their knowledge. The processing of knowledge is not guaranteed. One can be engaged with empathy and still arrive at false conclusions because processing the information requires first that a person views things through the subject's lens, a skill cultivated through social interaction. Think about children; when it comes to social interaction, they are most ignorant since they have so much to learn. We give them grace as they say rude things, cuss, and use inappropriate language because we acknowledge their ignorance. A child can walk up and say, "That hat looks bad on you," we are far more likely to laugh it off than when an adult does it because we assume the adult has been socially trained to know that those words can be hurtful. Much like a child, the listener is an infant who listens to the speaker's perspectives and norms. This means they should be offered grace as they learn, but similarly, the listener has been taught at some point and must be held accountable for integrating those teachings. The listener is bound to fail when they first attempt empathy, which is okay; through practice and discourse, the listener will increase their overall understanding and knowledge of the subject as long as they are aware and open to it. Knowledge attainment is, therefore, a product of awareness in empathy, making

awareness more towards the forefront of combatting colorblind ignorance.

(CB = Colorblind) (I = Ignorant) (E = Empathetic)

(A = Have Awareness) (K = Have Knowledge)

(P = Have Perspective)

(U = Understanding)

$(CB \supset I) \quad (CB) \quad (I) \quad (I \supset (\sim A \wedge \sim K)) \quad (E \supset (A \wedge P)) \quad ((A \wedge P) \supset U) \quad (K \supset A \wedge P \wedge U) \quad (E \supset \sim CB)$

This logical formula outlines the current discussion and how empathy is inconsistent with colorblindness. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of empathy as a knowledge producer through awareness and perspective, which are critical features of the definition and attainment of knowledge.

#### CONCLUSION

If we claim to be understanding and empathetic, then we cannot dismiss and unsee color and what it has done to many Americans and people across the globe. Empathy requires us to see those injustices and to attempt to feel and resonate with the harms perpetrated based on race. Colorblindness is a form of ignorance, meaning we lose knowledge and awareness; if we accept this ideology, injustices will go unnoticed and unaddressed, and harm will not be mitigated nor corrected. One can claim not to see race, but the harms of race are still prevalent in today's society, and turning a blind eye to this makes it impossible to solve these injustices. The empathetic person sees race but also understands the subject being racialized through their lens as a human and not lesser. The empathetic listener sees color, especially when the subject experiences color.

## REFERENCES

- Bailey, A. (2007). Strategic Ignorance. In *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (pp. 77–94). State University of New York Press.
- Code, L. (2007). The Power of Ignorance. In *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (pp. 213–229). State University of New York Press.
- Cormier, H. (2007). Ever Not Quite. In *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (pp. 59–76). State University New York Press.
- Medina, J. (2013). Color Blindness, Meta-Ignorance, and the Racial Imagination. *Critical Philosophy of Race*, 1(1), 38–67.
- Mills, C. W. (2007). White Ignorance. In *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (pp. 13–38). State University of New York Press.
- Spelman, E. V. (2007). Managing Ignorance. In *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*. State University of New York Press.
- Sullivan, S. (2007). White Ignorance and Colonial Oppression Or, Why I Know So Little about Puerto Rico. In *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*. State University of New York Press.
- Sullivan, S., & Tuana, N. (Eds.). (2007). *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*. State University of New York Press.
- Medina, J. (2016). On refusing to believe: Insensitivity and self-ignorance. *Rationality Reconsidered: Ortega y Gasset and Wittgenstein on Knowledge, Belief, and Practice*, pp. 187–200.
- Silva Jr, P., & Siscoe, R. W. (2024). Ignorance and Awareness. *Noûs*, 58(1), 225–243.
- Mackenzie, C., & Sorial, S. (2022). The empathy dilemma: Democratic deliberation, epistemic injustice and the problem of empathetic imagination. *Res Publica*, 28(2), 365–389.
- Piñero, J. (2022). Colorblindness, hermeneutical marginalization, and hermeneutical injustice. *Southwest Philosophy Review*, 38(1), 115–122.
- Annette Martín, (2021) What is White Ignorance?, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Volume 71, Issue 4, Pg. 864-885.