" . . . But I'm Not Racist":
Toward a Pragmatic Conception of "Racism"

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FROM MY FIRST COURSES as an undergraduate in African American studies, I have been concerned about the dynamics by which white and Black[1] people discuss race. For one, I was troubled in my undergraduate African American studies courses by the ease with which white students would insert themselves into conversations where, it seemed to me, they simply did not belong, for example, conversations concerning visions for the future of the Black community and strategies for achieving such visions. Shannon Sullivan speaks of this phenomenon, accurately I believe, as "ontological expansiveness": one central feature of privilege is a sense of entitlement to enter every room without first considering whether or not one is welcome or belongs. Because of my concerns about entering where I might not be welcomed, I was long hesitant to write or speak about race at all, believing that those who suffer from racism should be the ones who talk, and that those of us who benefit from it should first listen long and carefully before speaking. In this regard, I am very grateful for my years of conversations with Tommy Curry, while he studied and taught with me and wrote his dissertation under my direction: those conversations did much to help me sort out what I, as a white person, might and might not rightfully say about race, and I expressed some of my thoughts in this regard in the paper I presented at the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, on what I termed "methodological Afrocentrism," an outline of what I proposed white scholars, such as myself, might do in order to listen better to Africana voices before speaking, and what we then might say about race and racism without being guilty of ontological expansionism.

A second major concern of mine in the discussion of race has been the enormous gap that separates white and Black Americans over matters of race generally, and over what counts as "racist," in particular. For example, at the

height of the AIDS epidemic, a large percentage of African Americans believed that the spread of HIV was part of a genocidal plot against them. I was one of the vast majority of white people who thought that such a belief was just plain crazy—that is, until I learned more about the Tuskegee experiments and the pharmaceutical industry's routine use of African people to test new drugs. As a result, I no longer think that beliefs in such plots are unreasonable.

A second example was the O. J. Simpson trial: a substantial majority of African Americans believed that Simpson was the victim of an elaborate plot on the part of the Los Angeles Police to frame him, while an overwhelming majority of white Americans believed Simpson to be guilty and that such a conspiracy theory expressed undue paranoia on the part of Black people. The enormous gap in perceptions between white and Black Americans regarding Simpson suggested to me that America has a much bigger problem than determining whether or not he was guilty.

More recently, 54% of whites believe the not-guilty verdict for George Zimmerman, in the death of Trayvon Martin, to be "right," while only 7% of Blacks think so, and while 68% of Blacks think that "the American justice system is biased against black people," only 25% of whites think so (Newport).

A further example of the gap between Black Americans' and white Americans' perceptions of race and racism is the huge divide over the extent to which there has been significant racial progress, especially since the start of the Civil Rights Era: Is America today significantly less racist than it was in, say, 1960? Many white Americans believe that America has entered a "post-racial" age, especially with the election of a Black president, and that race and racism are no longer significant factors in American life. Virtually no people of color agree with that judgment. Fifty-four percent of white Americans believe that "[c]ivil rights for blacks have 'greatly improved' in [their] own lifetime," while only 25% of Blacks think so, and 9% of Blacks believe that matters have gotten worse. Sixty-one percent of Blacks believe new civil rights legislation is needed, but only 17% of whites agree (Saad). Indeed, to raise issues of race in a credible manner before a white audience requires that one first flatter that audience by commending its members for how far they have come—such is evident in President Obama's speeches that have touched on race, and I have observed such ritualistic behavior in our profession. Persons of color tend not to be so convinced of such progress, even if they pander in order to get heard.

At the heart of this racial divide over the issue of racial progress seems to lie a similar divide over the meaning of "racism" and what counts as "racist." White people and persons of color mean different things by those terms, caus-

ing them to speak at cross-purposes, often with much aggravation. So, in my talk today, I wish to address that divide over the meaning of "racism" from a pragmatic point of view. Such a divide is evident, for example, in the hostility that often arises when white people, and organizations, are accused of being "racist." I think, for example, of the hostility expressed within our profession when SAAP member Leonard Harris famously and publicly accused the American Philosophical Association of acute racism. Although certainly not as severely as what Harris experienced, I, too, have met with hostility—and not mere scholarly and professional disagreement—when I have suggested, in my paper on methodological Afro-centrism and elsewhere, that our profession is considerably more racist than its white members tend to imagine.

Two central features of a pragmatic understanding of "racism" are, I suggest, that, first, it is socially and historically contextual in its analyses and considerations and, second, it is concerned primarily with consequences rather than with origins in defining what terms mean.

Regarding the first point: pragmatists ought to reject the idea that there is any sort of ahistorical essence of "race" or "racism" and always consider claims of "racism" within their proper social and historical contexts. What immediately follows from this pragmatic suggestion is the rejection of any notion that there is racial symmetry with respect to charges of "racism," and hence that talk of "reverse racism" or "anti-white racism" is largely just plain silly. Pragmatists should see immediately that animosity developed against some group by those seeking to steal its labor and property in order to make their theft seem justified, at least in their own minds, is not symmetrical with animosity that arises from being the brutal victims of such theft. Similarly, talk of "reverse discrimination" is equally silly, from a pragmatic perspective, because discrimination that aims to counter prejudice against one group is not symmetrically a prejudice against the group that has benefited from such prejudice and has come to take such benefit for granted. To claim in such instances symmetry of meaning in the terms "racism" and "racist" is to assume some ahistorical notions that can be applied without consideration of context. One might talk about racism between non-white groups in certain contexts, for example, between Blacks and Hispanics in the border regions of the Southwest, but that is not my concern here. I take what I have just said in this regard, that a pragmatic understanding of "racism" must be contextual and not ahistorical, as abundantly self-evident to any pragmatist and hence needing no further elaboration.

My concern here, then, is mainly with the second aspect of a pragmatic understanding of "racism," namely, looking primarily to consequences rather

than to origins in defining the meaning of terms. I offer two contrary notions of "racism" and consider the consequences of each in promoting racial progress in judging which is the preferable—and I will define what I mean by "racial progress" later. I refer to these two notions as the "high bar" and the "low bar" for what counts as "racist."

The "High Bar" for "Racism"

Unsettlingly striking in the history of race in America is how few white Americans have thought themselves to be racist. Indeed, many of those whom we commonly view as the epitome of white racism claimed not to be racist, including Madison Grant, D. W. Griffith, and George Wallace (even in his earlier years), and various Klan leaders, such as David Duke, just to name a few. Griffith, for instance, was shocked to learn that some people thought his film *The Birth of a Nation* to be racist, and he devoted much of the remainder of his life to demonstrating that he was not racist (Ebert). Grant, Duke, and their defenders have insisted that they are not racists but "white nationalists" who merely "want to preserve their own culture." Harm to non-whites as the result of such preservation is thus merely a sort of unintended collateral damage. Similarly, sociologists of race Leslie Houts Picca and Joe R. Feagin, who addressed SAAP only a few years ago, document case after case of white people, especially college students, beginning appallingly and blatantly racist rants with "I'm not racist, but," or concluding such rants with "but I'm not racist," as if such disclaimers somehow nullify the clearly racist content of their rants. One sees similar sorts of things all over the Internet, in discussions about race. By what possible definition of "racism" might such individuals imagine themselves not to be racist? Indeed, the bar that they set for themselves as to what counts as "racist" seems to be so absurdly high that scantly any white person clears it.

In the instances cited above, white people deny being racist by virtue of their claim that they intend no harm to people of color, and their insistence that they have nothing against non-whites. Indeed, most white Americans conceive "racism" similarly, as the intent to harm non-white people. Nancy DiTomaso reports, in her extensive empirical study of racial attitudes: "Most whites conceive of racism as people who harbor ill will toward nonwhites doing bad things to them" (7)—harm motivated by ill will. Some scholars, including some within our profession, have argued that the public display of symbols of the Confederacy, such as monuments honoring its leaders and even the Confederate flag, are not inherently racist because the intent behind

such displays is not necessarily to offend or to intimidate African Americans but merely to celebrate Southern culture (e.g., Schedler 45), as though that culture could be separated from its racist history. One such writer, and a member of our discipline, has suggested that if African Americans are offended and intimidated by such symbols, they simply need to become more thick-skinned (Schedler 69–70).

The problems with such a conception of "racism," as the *intent* to harm non-whites, are several and severe. First, it sets the bar for "racism" so high that only the most militantly racist persons would clear it, for, as we just saw, virtually no white person thinks of him- or herself as intending to harm anyone, including a person of color.

Second, such a conception establishes white people as the sole arbiters of what counts as "racist" because, after all, only they know their intentions. Hence, whether or not the display of the Confederate flag is "racist," is to be left solely to white people. However, any definition of "racism" that makes whites the sole judges of what counts as "racist" is itself patently racist. This conception, though, does help to explain white people's visceral responses to being called "racist": they feel offended and indignant that those other than themselves presume to know their intentions: "How dare someone else presume to know what I intend?"

Third, conceptions of "racism" in terms of intent are tied closely to the false assumption, held by a large majority of white people, that racism lies in the interior of white folks rather than in the conditions of life of non-whites, and that the key to racial progress, therefore, is the changing of white attitudes rather than the improvement of the concrete living conditions of disadvantaged minorities, which is how I propose we pragmatists define "racial progress" more properly, in accord with outcomes rather than with origins—beliefs, attitudes, or intentions. What follows from the assumption that the key to racial progress is a change in white attitudes is that racial progress will be glacial at best, since, after all, "it takes a long time to educate people and to change people's attitudes"—so one commonly hears. Hence, Black people simply need to be patient and wait. (Martin Luther King, Jr., addressed such a view in *Why We Can't Wait*.) Moreover, the white people needing to be educated are, almost invariably, "those racists" over there and seldom oneself, as we shall see more clearly later.

Black racial realists, beginning at least with David Walker's 1830 *Appeal*, through recent critical race theorists, such as Derrick Bell, and including Henry Garnet, Martin Delaney, Frederick Douglass at times, and the later Du Bois, long gave up on changing white attitudes as the basis for racial

progress: given America's four-hundred-year history of racism, it has seemed naïve to them to imagine that much now will suddenly change. So they have developed alternative strategies, often militant and confrontational, which assume the permanence of race and racism in American society, at least for all practical purposes (Bell 306),[2] and hence do not rely upon benevolent white attitudes or moral suasion to improve the living conditions of people of color. Moreover, we see historically that there has been no necessary connection between white attitudes and beliefs, on the one hand, and racial progress, on the other. Few, if any, white Americans have sacrificed and risked more to promote the socio-economic conditions of African Americans than William Lloyd Garrison. Yet he, like many other white abolitionists, firmly believed African peoples to be inferior to European peoples. Booker T. Washington worked successfully with some of the most blatantly racist elements in American society to create significant new educational and economic opportunities for Black Americans without ever imagining that he would somehow change their racist beliefs, attitudes, or intents. Throughout American history, Black leaders have complained that they often feared more those white people who expressed progressive, anti-racist views than they did overtly racist whites: Malcolm X, for example, claimed to prefer working with those whites who openly expressed their racists views, such as George Wallace (although, as we noted above, Wallace did not see himself as racist) rather than working with white liberals, such as Lyndon Johnson. With Wallace, X could at least always see where the knife was. I will have more to say in this regard later.

So, white people's belief that racial progress requires a change in the attitudes of whites—almost always other than themselves—does nothing to improve the socio-economic conditions of non-whites, but it does allow white people to imagine that racial progress can be achieved without their having to give up anything, without having to pay any real, material price: "those racists" merely have to be educated and change their attitudes, and equal opportunity and material change will automatically follow.

Fourth, a notion of "racism" as the intent to harm non-whites presumes a meaningful distinction between that intent and the intent to preserve white privilege, but such a distinction is meaningful only to white people. For persons of color, the consequences are the same: they care not a whit if their oppression is intentional or accidental, conscious or unconscious. The intent to preserve privilege is indistinguishable from the intent to do harm, and the distinction is irrelevant—it's a difference that makes no difference to non-whites or to the cause of racial progress.

This last point, however, sheds light on how whites and Blacks often speak at cross-purposes with respect to "racism." As indicated previously,

whites tend to assume, when they are called "racists," that the speakers have unjustifiably made judgments regarding their (white people's) intentions, but, as I have just suggested, intentions are largely irrelevant to the victims of racism. Hence, those making the accusation of racism might not necessarily be making such judgments: they might be noting instead simply that whites are participating in structures of racial inequality and hence enjoying benefits therefrom, regardless of the white persons' intentions.

Defining "racism" in terms of white intentions does nothing to improve conditions for non-whites. Rather, the chief consequence of conceiving "racism" in terms of the intent to do harm to non-whites is to allow white people to continue to enjoy the benefits of racism without feeling that they themselves are racists or are even doing anything that is racist: "racists" are always "those other white people" and seldom oneself. Such a conception of "racism" is thus a central example of what Charles Mills has well termed (oxymoronically) "epistemologies of ignorance," that is, beliefs that function to shield whites' racism from themselves—"a systematically supported, socially induced pattern of (mis)understanding the world that is connected to and works to sustain systemic oppression and privilege. . . . Most significant, these white delusions about racism . . . function to protect white people from having to recognize their own racism" (Applebaum 37) and are a part of what Mills terms "the racial contract" (Mills, *Racial Contract* 18–19, 96–98).

Gunner Myrdal, in his classic 1944 study, *An American Dilemma*, already observed this phenomenon, to which Mills has since given a name—there he writes: "When talking about the Negro problem, everybody—not only intellectual liberals—is thus anxious to locate race prejudice outside of himself. . . . One can go around for weeks talking to white people in all walks of life and constantly hear about [racism] . . . yet seldom meeting a person who actually identifies himself with it" (Myrdal 37). Later in that work, Myrdal continues: "The social paradox in the North is exactly this, that almost everyone is against discrimination in general, but at the same time, almost everyone practices discrimination in his own personal affairs" (1010).

DiTomaso's research indicates how Myrdal's observations are as true today as they were in 1944. She writes: "To whites, 'those racists' means others, not themselves. Using a framework of discrimination, most whites can examine their day-to-day experiences and feel confident that they have done nothing specifically harmful to blacks (or other nonwhites)" (7–8). As she explains, white people actively seek out opportunities for getting ahead, and because they have greater opportunities than non-whites for doing so—for example, access to social capital and to financial and other resources—the aggregate effect of their efforts is the perpetuation of racialized inequalities without

white people sensing that there is anything racist about the situation. The result is racism without racists; that is, scarcely anyone feels that he or she is racist. "I'm merely trying to gain a leg up for myself and my family," one imagines. "I'm not trying to keep anyone down. What's racist about that?" So much racism; so few racists!

I am reminded here of an incident involving the late mayor of Chicago, Richard J. Daley, father of the more recent mayor, Richard M. Daley. When reporters discovered that Daley had arranged for one of his other sons, John P. Daley, then an insurance agent, to receive millions of dollars in city insurance business, Daley did nothing to deny the charges but instead shot back to reporters: "If a man can't put his arms around his son, then what kind of world are we living in? If I can't help my sons, they [his critics] should just kiss my ass" (qtd. in Kelly 114). Daley's remarks were met with wildly enthusiastic approval: few Chicagoans saw anything wrong, let alone racist, in what the Mayor had done. On the contrary, he had only shown himself to be loyal, a strong advocate for family values, and a good father. Clearly, though, since whites are much more likely to enjoy privileged positions, such as Daley's, from which they might extend such help to family, friends, and acquaintances, actions such as his are clearly racist by virtue of their consequences: they perpetuate racialized patterns of privilege.

From white people's tendency to distinguish their intent to preserve advantages from any intent to harm non-whites—a distinction that is meaningless to non-whites—we similarly then are able to explain another major racial divide in the perception of who is "racist," namely: white liberals and progressives imagine themselves to be much less racist than they imagine white conservatives to be, but non-whites see a much smaller difference between white liberals and conservatives, often to the dismay of white liberals and progressives. As DiTomaso's studies show, conservative whites are more likely than white liberals and progressives to see poverty as a result of personal moral failings (e.g., laziness, lack of self-discipline), to deny significance to racism, and to see present-day America as post-racial, while white liberals and progressives are more likely to attribute poverty to racism and failures in the social structure. Furthermore, white liberals and progressives are more likely to acknowledge that they enjoy racial advantages than are white conservatives, but they are no more likely to acknowledge a contributing or causal connection between their advantages and successes and the disadvantages of others: they, like conservative whites, persist in asserting that, whatever opportunities they enjoy, they have taken advantage of those opportunities through their own hard work, and thus resist the suggestion that their advantages have cost anyone else anything. DiTomaso writes:

> [T]hey [white liberals and progressives] tended [in my surveys] to frame
> the source of the problem [of poverty and inequality] as prejudice or
> racism. They did not [however] generally see their own advantages as
> having contributed to the disadvantages of the poor or racial minori-
> ties. That is, they recognized their own good fortune (and generally
> attributed it to their hard work and . . . to making good use of the op-
> portunities with which they were provided). They expressed a concern
> about those who are less fortunate. They also talked about what govern-
> ment ought to do and what "those racists" need to do, but their analyses
> were not turned toward themselves. . . . Their concerns, instead, were
> turned outward. (132)

Indeed, white liberals and progressives are especially prone to seeing "rac-
ists" as "those other people." For example, "those racist" are often older whites
or whites of another class—"redneck," poor, working-class, or less educated
whites. For white women liberals and progressives, "those racists" tend to be
males, who are also seen as sexist: white women liberals tend to imagine that,
because they are victims of sexism, they are less racist than white males[3]—a
belief not supported by empirical evidence, as indicated by Angela Davis's
historical study, *Women, Race, and Class.*

In failing to see any contributing or causal link between their own advan-
tages and the disadvantages of others, white liberals and progressives imagine
that opportunities might be extended to racial minorities without their enjoy-
ing any fewer opportunities, that racial equality might be achieved without
their having to pay any price. Thus, they are able to see themselves as much
less racist than they picture white conservatives to be, while non-whites see
far less of a difference. White liberals and progressives thus, more often than
conservatives, acknowledge the presence of racism generally and abstractly
but deny it in their own particular cases, and they are more likely to support
affirmative action programs in principle, but only until their own privileges
are threatened.

"Disparate Impact"

A major challenge to white people's tendency to define "racism" in terms of
intent to do harm came from the landmark Supreme Court case *Griggs v.
Duke Power Co.* in 1971, based upon Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.
In that case, the Court coined the term "disparate impact" and articulated the
concept. Lower courts found no discriminatory liability on the part of Duke
Power because the plaintiff had failed to prove discriminatory motive in its
hiring and promotion policies. The High Court, however, claimed that Title

VII "proscribes not only overt discrimination but also practices that are fair in form, but discriminatory in operation;" that is, practices can be racist on the basis of their consequences, even if not linked to racist intentions. The Court further famously declared that the "absence of discriminatory intent does not redeem employment procedures or testing mechanisms that operate as 'built in headwinds' for minority groups and are unrelated to measuring job capacity." Once a plaintiff demonstrates disparate impact, the burden of proof shifts to the defendant to offer a plausible, non-racist explanation for the disparity.

Following this important ruling, civil rights attorneys achieved significant successes in several cases, arguing that patterns of "disparate impact" were sufficient to prove racism, and critical legal studies scholars, such as Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Charles R. Lawrence III, have been especially aggressive in this regard. So if an employer in a neighborhood that is, say, 50% minority, employed only 10% minority workers, and only 5% of its managers were minority, that disparity would be sufficient to win a suit against that business for racial discrimination: one did not need to prove that the management or owners intended to discriminate against minorities. More recently, though, courts at various levels have rolled back these gains. Attorney General Eric Holder, however, recently invoked the notion of "disparate impact" in announcing that the U.S. Justice Department would be monitoring closely public schools where minority students are disciplined more frequently and severely than white students, that is, schools where disciplinary practices are having disparate impact on non-white students.

Especially striking has been the backlash against Holder's announcement. Critics, such as Mona Charen in the *National Review*, pervasively assume that Black students will now be allowed to misbehave with impunity, rather than that white students might not be allowed to get away with the bad behavior to which they have come to believe their white privilege entitles them. That is, Holder's critics assume that the rules for defining bad behavior and disciplining students for it are color-blind. Furthermore, they fail to consider the possibility that white students typically get away with more bad behavior than non-whites, because, for example, they are more likely to have connections and influence with school officials, through their parents, and to be thought of simply as "good kids" who just made uncharacteristically bad decisions. Holder's critics, such as Charen, racistly assume that the disparity regarding disciplinary actions is a result of white students behaving better than minority students and hence that such disparity is irrelevant in judgments about racism. The example again illustrates how whites tend to assume that racism is only about intended harm toward non-whites and not about whites' assumed

privileges: they assume in this case that because school officials did not intend to discriminate against Black students, but only to discipline bad behavior, according to presumably color-blind standards, that the consequential disparity regarding the disciplining of white and non-white students is not racist, but the result of color-blind judgments, based upon race-neutral school rules.

Pragmatists, I suggest, ought to follow critical legal studies scholars, critical race theorists, and Holder, in accord with the notion of "disparate impact," and look mainly at empirical outcomes in the determination of what counts as "racist." Indeed, Bell notes how the Racial Realists who founded critical legal studies and critical race theory "took their cue from Oliver Wendell Holmes" and his legal pragmatism: they, like Holmes, "stressed the *function* of law . . . rather than the *abstract conceptualization* of it" (Bell 303).

A few examples might illustrate my suggestion, beginning with some from education. I do not imagine that some bigoted education bureaucrat in Springfield, Illinois, is consciously and intentionally sending white students to the better-funded schools and Black students to the most poorly funded ones, but the demographics make it look as though that is the case. Jonathan Kozol identified my state, Illinois, as containing the most "savage inequalities" in public school funding of any state. The high schools in some wealthy, disproportionately white suburbs send over 95% of their students to college, while in other, all-Black high schools only an occasional student every few years might attend college. Parents in the wealthy districts see themselves as merely trying to preserve the best for their own children—who can fault them for that?—and not as depriving anyone of anything. Hence, they tend not to see the system of funding public schools through real estate taxes, which perpetuates gross racial inequalities in education, as racist in any way.

When my own daughter was applying to colleges, I, as a "good parent," looked to do all that I could to assist her gain admission to and financial support for the colleges she chose. I did not hesitate to exploit any and all personal and professional connections that I had to those institutions. Unlike Mayor Daley, I never sought any special favors but simply that her record be considered "carefully and fairly" and, in one case, that it be re-examined after she had been denied a prestigious scholarship. Following a review, my daughter received the scholarship, and at the time, I saw nothing wrong or racist in what I was doing: after all, wasn't it what any good father would do for his son or daughter? And surely I wasn't harming anyone. What could possibly be wrong or racist in that? Only later did I realize, with considerable embarrassment and guilt, that the aggregate consequences of privileged parents, such as myself, exploiting their social capital for the sake of their children perpetuate racial inequalities in education, but none of us feels like

a racist—at least not at the time. Everyone, Black or white, might use their social capital for their own and their children's benefit, but such capital is not equitably distributed, and such inequality is strongly along racial lines. I knew the latter abstractly, but, typical of what DiTomaso describes of white liberals and progressive, I was oblivious to how it applied to my own and my daughter's case: such a blind spot was part of my own epistemology of ignorance.

Regarding employment, approximately 70% of all hiring involves some sort of help, through family, friends, and social networks (DiTomaso 73–77). Some businesses, such as the Circle K gas stations, hire only through the rec-ommendations of current employees, and I got my first job in high school through my brother-in-law, and my second one through my best friend. When I ask students if they got their first job through a family member or friend, a significant majority of hands goes up. Here again, no one intends harm to anyone: who wouldn't help a family-member or friend get a job if he or she could? White Americans, however, are far more likely to be in positions to help their family and friends, and so racist patterns in employment are perpetuated without anyone intending harm against anyone or imagining him- or herself to be racist. Indeed, DiTomaso's interviews indicate a consistent pattern:

> The extra help they [whites] may have received when looking for a job or trying to help their own relatives get jobs was considered appropri-ate and expected, but when nonwhites or women were given access to jobs from which they had previously been excluded, that was considered unfair and unbalanced. (94)

The flip side of this pattern in hiring is what sociologists term "the Uncle Billy effect." Recall Uncle Billy in the film *It's a Wonderful Life*. A response that non-whites commonly have to the film, but which white people seldom have, is: *How is it that someone as inept as Uncle Billy gets to keep his job?* The answer is quite obvious: it is because Uncle Billy is a beloved member of a social network that is willing to carry him and to find for him a place where he feels useful and needed, despite his incompetence. White Americans are much more likely to command the resources that enable them to carry their Uncle Billys than are non-whites, but again, they seldom see such practices as perpetuating racialized inequalities or as "racist."

To be clear: I am not suggesting necessarily that we ought to stop trying to help our family and friends—although perhaps we should—but only that we be mindful of the social effects that those favors have in the aggregate, and that if we engage in such practices, then we need also to work much harder to offset their racist consequences.

Ironically accompanying the racist patterns that I have described above is the belief among the great majority of white people that their successes are entirely the results of their own efforts and hard work. DiTomaso summarizes the results of her massive study, involving thousands of interviews:

> Across most of the interviews there was a strong sense that all outcomes in their lives had been the result of their own efforts or were justifiable because of the choices with which they had been faced. . . . But what most of the interviewees did not see or acknowledge was that it had been possible for them to make their efforts in the first place only because family or friends provided them with help that gave them an extra edge or advantage that moved them to the head of the line when hiring was done. Even those who acknowledged that they might have received some help to "get in the door" stressed that they had proved themselves or worked to earn their place. And most did not mention or seemingly did not recall the help they had received when asked how they ended up in the life situations they had achieved. Instead, what was salient to them was the effort they themselves had expended, the hard work they had undertaken, and the uncertainty that had faced them at various times in their career. The efforts undertaken on their behalf by family, friends, and acquaintances were not especially salient to them and, in most cases, were not mentioned unless I specifically asked about them. (DiTomaso 91–92)

Illustrating DiTomaso's conclusions, Congressman Paul Ryan presented himself, as Mitt Romney's vice presidential running mate, as a self-made man, and he can be rightfully proud of his hard work. However, after Ryan's father, a prominent attorney, died when Ryan was 16, his family received government assistance while it struggled to get back on its feet, and his mother took advantage of government student aid while she returned to college at the University of Wisconsin, a public university. Ryan, too, was able to attend a public university, Miami University of Ohio, only through Social Security Survivor Benefits from his father's death. While a student, though, Ryan, without any apparent sense of irony or shame, distributed copies of Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* and gave speeches and wrote articles against Social Security and other forms of government assistance! Through friends of his father, he secured his first jobs in government. (Incidentally, Ryan now claims that his political philosophy is based much more upon Thomas Aquinas than upon Rand.) Brian Miller and Mike Lapham similarly show, in their *The Self-Made Myth*, how wealthy individuals, including Donald Trump, H. Ross Perot, Sr., and the Koch brothers, routinely deceive themselves by imagining their successes to be due almost entirely to their own hard work.

Exaggerated claims regarding one's own efforts thus seem to be part of the epistemology of ignorance that helps to keep white people in denial regarding their racial and other privileges. Whites tend, first, to minimize the significance of the social capital at their disposal, that is, the help that they receive from family, friends, community, and networks of acquaintances. Second, they see their advantages only in the singular, and hence only as the exception, and thus they fail to see that the privileges that they take for granted and consider right and proper in their own particular cases, in the aggregate perpetuate racialized patterns of inequality.

So far, then, I have suggested why a notion of "racism" based upon the intent to do harm to non-whites should be rejected, especially by pragmatists. I have called such a notion a "high bar" for "racism" because it sets the criteria for what counts as "racist" so high that virtually no white person clears it, and I have shown how such a notion fails to advance racial progress but, on the contrary, serves only racist ends: focusing upon intentions in the understanding of racism enables whites to enjoy the benefits of white racism without thinking of themselves as racist and is part of a larger epistemological frame that conceals various forms of privilege, not just racial ones.

So, what is an alternative to the "high bar" for what counts as "racist"? I have hinted at what that alternative might be. Now allow me to be more explicit.

The "Low Bar" for "Racism": Conclusion

In accord with pragmatist principles and practices, I seek a conception of "racism" that follows the analyses and suggestions of critical legal studies scholars and critical race theorists who, in turn, have been influenced by legal pragmatists in looking to consequences and outcomes with respect to persons of color. Such a notion locates "racism" not foremost in white attitudes, beliefs, and intentions, whether conscious or unconscious, but in the concrete conditions of life as experienced by non-whites. What notion of "racism" might best promote racial progress, defined, not in terms of improvements in white attitudes, but in terms of the improvement of the social and economic conditions of racial minorities? I propose that we pragmatists define "racism" as participating in and hence benefiting from racialized patterns of inequality. Such a definition helps to make clear that the problem of racism is not foremost with white attitudes, beliefs, and intentions: it is about the suffering of non-white peoples.

Some, especially white people, will likely balk at such a definition for several reasons. First, since every white person, simply by virtue of living in a country such as America, participates in and hence benefits from racial-

ized patterns of inequality, every white person would, by that definition, be considered "racist." So, while extremely few white people clear the "high bar" definition of "racism," based upon intent to do harm, my alternative low bar definition sets the standard so low that every white American clears it, without even trying but simply by enjoying the privileges into which one has been born. Thus, some might object that since, by this definition, every white person is *a priori* "racist," it fails to function in sorting out the racists from the non-racists. I reject, however, the assumption in that objection that the primary purpose of a notion of "racism" is to do such sorting. Is the main point to separate "good guys" from "bad"? Or, should we not care more about improving the actual living conditions of those who have suffered from racism than about who gets called a "racist"? I would hope so.

Second, and relatedly, one might object, again, especially white persons, that by this definition, despite even heroic efforts to combat prejudice and racialized inequality, one might still be called a "racist." Why should one fight for racial justice if, in the end and despite possibly Herculean efforts, one will still be called "racist"? Indeed, I have often heard liberal and progressive whites complain that despite what they consider to be valiant anti-racist efforts, some non-whites still consider them to be racist. Hidden, however, in this objection, is a confession that we ought to find extremely disturbing: that is, in raising this objection does not one secretly admit that one's primary motive in fighting for racial justice is to avoid being called "racist"? As we saw, the sting of being labeled "racist" is such that even those taken to epitomize "racism" want to avoid it. If that is the case, then white people who buy the objection have been seduced by the Ring of Gyges (and I confess that I was initially so seduced): they see the crime of "racism" as one of appearing and hence being called "racist" and not as one of being implicated in an unjust system. Fighting racism is not about creating a legacy for white people or making them feel better about themselves for being "non-" or "anti-racist": it is about making life better for those who have suffered injustice.

So, the pragmatic reasons for accepting this "low bar" definition of "racism" are fundamentally three: that is, three positive consequences will follow, helping to promote racial progress, as I have defined it. First, the "low bar" definition locates "racism" where it belongs, not in white intentions but in the concrete conditions of life as experienced by racial minorities, and hence it gauges racial progress not by improvement in white attitudes, beliefs, and intentions, but by real improvement in the concrete lives of those who suffer from that racism.

Second, the "low bar" definition challenges white people to look more honestly within themselves so as to ask whether their professed anti-racism truly seeks to overcome racial injustice or merely to avoid the sting of being

called "racist." They are challenged to focus more squarely on what will actually promote racial justice rather than on what merely allows them to appear non-racist and thereby to evade the "racist" label. In this way, then, too, my proposed definition unsettles epistemologies of ignorance that enable one to detach his or her racialized privilege from others' disadvantages and thus better realize that racial progress will cost white America something—there are no free lunches when it comes to racial progress, and hence achieving racial equality requires that white America let go of the privileges it has come to take for granted.

Third, the "low bar" definition of "racism," in making clear that no white person escapes implication in the social web of white racism, makes equally clear that no white person fully deserves not to be called "racist" until all the deeply institutionalized patterns of racism in which he or she inescapably participates and from which he or she invariably benefits are eliminated—nothing less will do. Is not such radical eradication of racial injustice precisely what we pragmatists should set as our goal?

NOTES

This article is written in honor of John J. McDermott and is dedicated to the memory of Bruce Wilshire.

1. I follow the convention of capitalizing "Black" as a proper noun or adjective designating people of African descent and synonymous with "Africana," and hence pertaining to culture rather than skin pigmentation, but using lower case for "white," designating persons not-of-color.

2. Interestingly, 40% of all Americans agree with critical race theorists that race and racism are permanent features of American society. Sixty-nine percent thought so in 1995, following the Simpson trial (Jones).

3. For instance, it is common for white feminists writing on race to suggest that because they know the sting of sexism, they are therefore in a better situation to understand racism. For example, Sullivan writes: "[M]y being a woman and a feminist led me to focus on and hopefully better understand race and white privilege" (11). Or, they imply this by assuming symmetry between racism and sexism (e.g., Trout).

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