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Racism: A Moral or Explanatory Concept?

Abstract

This paper argues that racism should not only be conceived as a moral concept whose main aim is to condemn severe wrongs in the domain of race. The paper advances a complementary interpretation of racism as an explanatory concept--one that plays a key role in explaining race-based social problems afflicting members of subordinate racialized groups. As an explanatory concept, the term 'racism' is used to diagnose and highlight the causes of race-related social problems. The project of diagnosing race-based social problems contributes to the pragmatic anti-racist end of developing better political and policy strategies for solving these social problems. The paper defends this interpretation of racism as an explanatory concept through a critical engagement with Urquidez's moral-philosophical account of racism.

In *Re-Defining Racism: A Philosophical Analysis,* Alberto Urquidez (2020) offers much-needed methodological clarification of what is at stake when we ask the question "what is racism?". The meaning of the term "racism" is hotly contested not only in philosophical circles, but also in society at large. This book develops a helpful framework for clarifying and negotiating this seemingly endless disagreement over the meaning of "racism". It does so by making explicit and challenging guiding assumptions shared by many contemporary philosophical accounts of racism. Urquidez also introduces a theory of racism in terms of racial oppression. While I am sympathetic with Urquidez's account of racism, I take issue with the moralist commitments of his position. In particular, I argue that racism should not be conceived only as a term of moral condemnation, but also as a term that plays a key role in explaining social problems that systematically harm non-whites. In Part I, I highlight some of the book's key contributions to the philosophy of racism, both at the level of methodology (i.e. clarifying the terms of the debate) and substantive theory (i.e. his own definition of racism). In Part II, I introduce an explanatory approach to the question "what is racism?" that

escapes the purview of Urquidez's moral-philosophical account of racism. In Part III, I discuss some implications of this explanatory project for the philosophy of racism in general, and for Urquidez's moralist project in particular.

Part I: Methodological and Substantive Contributions of *(Re-) Defining Racism*

One of the book's main contributions to the philosophy of racism is to unveil many previously unstated assumptions that guide current philosophical theorizing on the meaning of racism. First, the book identifies and questions the metaphysical commitments of philosophical definitions of racism. On the *metaphysical approach*, the answer to the question "what is racism?" is settled by the nature of racism itself. In other words, the metaphysical view contends that the term "racism" describes a real metaphysical entity or kind (i.e. racism itself) that does not depend on linguistic representation for its existence. Metaphysical analysis is often accompanied by the related assumption of *semantic externalism*, which affirms that the metaphysical entity that the term "racism" purportedly tracks is best construed as a kind whose internal nature can be revealed by the natural and social sciences. As Urquidez shows, once we adopt these methodological commitments to the semantics of racism, it is easy to be convinced that what justifies the truth or correctness of a definition of racism is whether it conforms to a fact about the real nature of racism itself. In other words, it becomes intuitive that definitions of racism should be judged based on *epistemic justifications*. (*Re-)Defining Racism* makes explicit these (and many other) methodological commitments in current philosophical theories of racism. In doing so, it opens up discursive space for a debate over whether we should keep or revise these commitments.

Having opened theoretical space for this methodological debate, Urquidez takes a position against metaphysical analysis, semantic externalism, epistemic justification, and other widespread commitments in the philosophy of racism. He does so by introducing *conventionalism*—a Wittgenstein-inspired semantic theory that stands opposed to the aforementioned commitments. Against metaphysical analysis, conventionalism states that to give a definition of racism is to lay down a rule for the correct use of the term "racism". Definitions of racism are not descriptions of the underlying reality of racism. Rather, to provide a definition of racism is to

make a prescription about how the term "racism" ought to be used. Against semantic externalism, conventionalism denies that defining racism depends on the natural and social sciences disclosing the essence of racism. Since definitions are prescriptions for the correct use of a term, the meaning of racism lies firmly within our linguistic practices. Thus, empirical facts about racism do not ground justifications for adopting a definition of racism. Rather, the meaning of racism rests on pragmatic justification. That is to say, definitions of racism are justified based on whether they satisfy a certain kind of representational need conditioned by the values, interests and goals of members of the linguistic practice in question.

One upshot of this defense of pragmatic justification is that all theories of racism must start from a set of values and a picture of the aims of racist representation, both of which are immanent to the practice. Insofar as definitions of racism are driven by these pragmatic aims, they are *prescriptive*—that is, they make recommendations about what the meaning of racism ought to be. This prescriptivist commitment of conventionalism distinguishes Urquidez's method from traditional Wittgensteinian approaches that take definitions to be normative descriptions (i.e. descriptions of rules of correct use of the term supplied by ordinary usage).

Urquidez's book is not only a welcome methodological contribution to the philosophy of racism. It also provides a substantive answer to the "what is racism?" question. Urquidez defines racism in terms of racial oppression. To be precise, he affirms that racial oppression is the core of racism, and that ascriptions of racism are justified insofar as they play a functional role in sustaining racial oppression. Given his pragmatist semantics, Urquidez argues that his definition of racism is grounded in a particular set of anti-racist values and interests that that are responsive to the needs of the historical victims of racial oppression. In other words, his definition of racism aims to advance the representational needs of non-whites. In particular, Urquidez claim that a theory of racism ought to accommodate their moral representational need to condemn racial ills that are seriously morally objectionable. Defining racism in terms of racial oppression fulfills this moral representational need insofar as racial oppression is always deserving of severe moral condemnation. In his view, we ought to use the term "racism" to refer to phenomena that play a particular role in sustaining

racial oppression, which is deserving of strong moral condemnation due to the systematic harms that racial oppression imposes on subordinate racial groups.

I agree with Urquidez's methodological claim that theories of racism have a pragmatic end—they stem and are responsive to a set of values, interests and needs that arise within a community that chooses to theorize racism. I also agree that the pragmatic end that ought to guide philosophical theorizing on racism is the anti-racist project of ending or mitigating racial oppression (p. 278). Urquidez's theory of racism as racial oppression satisfies this non-negotiable pragmatic commitment by clarifying that racism is not only (or even primarily) a matter of interpersonal harms. Rather, his account locates the core of racism in the social-structural patterns of racially differential treatment that relegate non-whites to a condition of vulnerability. In other words, his account defines racism in terms of the system of racial oppression otherwise known as white supremacy.

Urquidez's theory of racism also contributes to moral-philosophical theorizing on racism. The moral significance of racism—its role as a term of severe moral condemnation—should not only (or even primarily) focus on matters of *personal morality* that deal with ascriptions of individual responsibility and blame. Rather, moralist theories of racism should focus on questions of *political morality*, i.e. the injustice of societal arrangements under conditions of racial oppression. Urquidez's prioritization of political morality is responsive to the moral-representational needs of the victims of racial oppression. Non-whites have a need to morally condemn not only the harms they endure in their interpersonal exchanges, but also (and perhaps more importantly) the systematic harms that social institutions inflict on them—mass incarceration, police violence, race-based disparities in wealth, education, and health care, to name just a few. All in all, Urquidez's moral-philosophical account of racism as racial oppression is a highly compelling moralist definition of racism. It is a much welcome addition to the list of offerings in the philosophical debate on the meaning of racism.

Part II: An Alternative Philosophical Approach to the Question "What is Racism?"

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Urquidez's conventionalism sheds light on the philosophical debate of defining "racism". However, there is a different aspect of the philosophical question "what is racism?" that his book does not address. In some philosophical contexts, the question "what is racism?" is not a call for a definition of racism. Instead, it is a call for an explanation of the litany of race-based social problems afflicting non-white communities—mass incarceration, police violence, race-based disparities in wealth, education, and health care, to name just a few. In this context, the question "what is racism?" is equivalent to the question "what is the best diagnosis of the race-based social problems that harm members of subordinate racial groups?" Here, the question does not a call for a definition because the relevant linguistic community has already decided how to use the term "racism".[1] This linguistic community includes anti-racist activists and scholars whose ultimate pragmatic aim is to solve the aforementioned race-based social problems.[2] Given this pragmatic end, the historical victims of these social problems (and their allies) have an interest in developing an appropriate diagnosis of these problems in order to develop better strategies for solving them. Due to the practical urgency of solving race-based social problems, anti-racists have a representational need for a term to describe the phenomena that play a prominent role in the reproduction of mass incarceration, police violence, the racial unemployment gap, and so on. In many anti-racist contexts, "racism" is the preferred term to fulfill this representational need. Thus, when we ask the question "what is racism?" in this context, we are not looking for a definition of racism—we already have a definition. Instead, this question calls for the best possible diagnosis of the race-based social problems afflicting non-whites.

One of the main insights of recent anti-racist theory has been to diagnose these race-based social problems in structuralist terms. In particular, there is a growing consensus among anti-racists that a correct diagnosis of race-based social problems must make reference to systemic racial oppression—they often use the term "white supremacy" to refer to this system. In other words, many anti-racists believe that white

[1] I am not claiming that this decision on how to use the term "racism" applies to all anti-racist linguistic communities. I am only asserting that within the practice of diagnosing and solving race-based social problems, many anti-racists have embraced this particular meaning of the term.
[2] I take it that Urquidez would agree with this formulation of the pragmatic end of anti-racism.

supremacy (understood as a system of racial oppression, not as a set of individual beliefs and attitudes) plays a key causal role in the reproduction of race-based social problems. Accordingly, diagnoses of race-based social problems must take seriously the connection between the immediate causes of the problem and the broader system of white supremacy. For instance, a correct diagnosis of the problem of police violence would include an explanation of how police officers' use of excessive force against black citizens is linked to the functional role that policing plays in the system of white supremacy.

In this context, the question "what is racism?" calls for an explanation of race-related social problems in terms of causal processes that bear a functional relation to the system of white supremacy. Here, "racism" functions primarily as an explanatory concept—or to use Urquidez's terminology, it fulfills an explanatory-representational need. The *racist practice* of racial profiling (partially) explains the racially disproportionate use of force against blacks in the context of policing. *Environmental racism* (partially) explains the higher prevalence of asthma in the black community. As the second example attests, uses of "racism" in this context are sometimes shorthand explanations of race-based problems whose full articulation requires situating the relevant explanatory factors within the causal nexus of white supremacy. The representational aim of the term "racism" here is to provide a (sometimes implicit) diagnosis of race-based social problems.

The ever-changing meaning of racism in ordinary usage can be traced to advancements in this explanatory project of diagnosing the causes of race-related social problems. In the first half of the twentieth century, explanations of the social problems afflicting non-white communities focused on the beliefs, attitudes and behavior of racially prejudiced individuals (Allport 1954/1979; Myrdal 1944/1996). As a result, definitions of racism at the time referred to individuals, their actions, beliefs, intentions, and the like. The anti-racist movements of the 1960s pushed for a more complex understanding of the causes of race-based social problems—one that incorporated both individual-level and social-structural factors. As a result, current definitions of racism also make reference to institutions, social systems, and society at large. Neologisms, such as environmental racism, cultural racism, and colorblind racism, can be explained in a similar manner. For

example, "environmental racism" is a conceptual expansion of the term "racism" driven by the pragmatic need to explain the role that environmental factors play in the reproduction of race-based health disparities.

Ture and Hamilton's *Black Power: The Politics of Black Liberation* (1967) offers a good example of racism as an explanatory concept. This book provides the first articulation of the concept of "institutional racism" and calls for a sharp break from individualist explanations of race-based social problems. The first page of *Black Powe*r states that "in order to get the right answers, one must pose the right questions. In order to find effective solutions, one must formulate the problem correctly" (Ture and Hamilton 1967, xv). The authors of *Black Power* are explicit that one of their main goals is to offer a better diagnosis of the social problems afflicting the black community. The point of this project is not purely theoretical. It is informed by an anti-racist pragmatic interest in finding an effective solution to these problems. To fulfill this interest, their theory of racism must be responsive to the best possible articulation of the problem. Cognizant of the explanatory limitations of individualist diagnoses of the problem, Ture and Hamilton propose an explanation that incorporates institutional causes of race-related social problems. In so doing, they coined the term "institutional racism" as an explanatory concept.

So far I have described an anti-racist context in which the term "racism" is used to refer to the contributing factors to the race-related social problems that afflict subordinate racial groups. In this context, the question "what is racism?" is not a request for a definition of the term "racism". Instead, it is a request for the best possible diagnosis of race-based social problems such as mass incarceration, police violence, and racial disparities in access to health care. Here racism is an explanatory concept that furthers our understanding of race-based social problems. How are we to understand this linguistic practice from the perspective of Urquidez's methodological framework?

One possibility would be to identify this practice with social scientific approaches to racism. Urquidez recognizes the existence of approaches that construe racism as a social-explanatory concept (p. 20, fn 14). In this context, the point of calling something racist is not to condemn it (i.e. moral evaluation) but to explain why it exists, persists, or recurs (i.e. social explanation). I completely agree with Urquidez on this

point. The practical context in which racism functions as an explanatory concept is driven by the anti-racist end of eliminating or at least mitigating race-related social problems. The pursuit of this pragmatic end takes the form of developing causal explanations of these problems in order to devise better intervention strategies. As a result, there is a representational need to explain the causes of race-related social problems, as well as the relation of these causal factors to the wider system of white supremacy. The term "racism" fulfills this explanatory-representational need.

Even though Urquidez acknowledges this approach to the question "what is racism?", he associates it with social scientific practice rather than philosophy. Social-explanatory theories of racism appear orthogonal to the moralist concerns of the philosopher, unless their empirical findings have direct implications for the philosopher's question of articulating racism as a term of severe moral condemnation. Thus, Urquidez endorses a disciplinary division of labor in which the social scientist deals with empirical description and explanation, while the philosopher focuses on moral evaluation. There may be collaboration between the two but only to the extent that the findings of social science are morally significant.

This disciplinary division of labor partially underlies the intuitive appeal of many tenets of conventionalism. For Urquidez, the philosophical question "what is racism?" is a request for a particular kind of normative proposition—one that lays down a rule for the correct use of the term "racism". By contrast, the social-scientific question "what is racism?" is a request for an empirical description of empirical matters of fact (e.g. racism's causal contribution to the resilience of racial inequality). According to Urquidez, metaphysical approaches to the theory of racism are misguided because they interpret the philosophical question by analogy with the social sciences—that is, as a question of describing the ultimate reality of racism itself (p. 55). In his view, the metaphysical paradigm is wrong because philosophers (unlike social scientists) are not in the business of giving empirical descriptions of racist phenomena, but rather of making normative prescriptions about how the term "racism" ought to be used. Similarly, Urquidez rejects semantic externalism on the grounds that it mistakenly locates the meaning of racism in the language-independent essence of racism, whose internal nature can be disclosed by the social sciences. For Urquidez, the philosophical

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question "what is racism?" is a matter of metalinguistic negotiation among competing normative prescriptions of how the term "racism" ought to be used. The practice of social science is orthogonal to this philosophical project, unless its findings have pragmatic implications for the debate over what definition to adopt. For the same reason, it is wrong for philosophers to justify their accounts of racism by reference to facts about the world. Empirical justification may be valid for social scientists who seek to verify empirical propositions, but the philosopher's project is to justify their preferred definitions of "racism", and for this task only pragmatic justification is appropriate.

Thus, Urquidez's conventionalism entails a division of labor between social-scientific and philosophical approaches to the question "what is racism?". To be clear, this is not an argument against conventionalism. To the contrary, by clearly demarcating the tasks of the social scientist and the philosopher, Urquidez helps us realize that the methodological principles of social-scientific practice are not always applicable to the philosophical task of defining racism. What I would like to challenge is the idea that the only (or even the main) task of philosophical accounts of racism is to define racism. Throughout the book, Urquidez seems to equate the philosophical question "what is racism?" with the definitional question of how the term "racism" ought to be used. Defining racism is certainly a very important philosophical task. However, I contend that the explanatory approach to the question "what is racism?" is also a philosophical project. In other words, the task of providing a description of the best possible explanation of race-related social problems pertains not only to the social scientist, but also to the philosopher. Urquidez is right to distinguish the prescriptive project of defining racism from the descriptive project of describing racism and explaining its causal contribution to race-related social problems. My issue with his division of labor is that it seems to imply that the domain of philosophy is restricted to the prescriptive project.

Why should we believe that the philosopher has anything to contribute to the descriptive project of explaining the resilience of racial inequality, mass incarceration, police violence, and many other social problems afflicting non-whites? Aren't these empirical questions to be settled by social science? Part of the answer is that the descriptive project encompasses both empirical and normative descriptions of racism. As

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Urquidez explains, empirical descriptions describe matters of empirical fact, whereas normative descriptions describe and clarify the norms that govern human practices (p. 55). Thus, in addition to empirical descriptions of the causal mechanisms that underlie systemic racial oppression, a descriptive project also requires normative descriptions of the rules that govern racist social practices. It is this second kind of descriptive project that philosophers are well-equipped to perform. For example, rules such as "feel fear when crossing a black person on an empty street", "think of Latinos as prone to shoplifting", "employ excessive force against black citizens" are constitutive of racist social practices. These rules are action-guiding for agents that participate in the racist practices of racial stigmatization and racial profiling. Describing these constitutive rules of racist practices furthers our understanding of how they contribute to the reproduction of race-related social problems. In particular, it provides a normative explanation of agents' participation in racist practices. These norms are explanatory even if agents do not explicitly endorse the rules or are not aware that they follow them due to having internalized them. Describing the norms that govern racist practices not only helps explain the behavior of agents in the practice, but also clarifies the function of the practice within the wider system of white supremacy. For instance, identifying the rule "employ excessive force against black citizens" as constitutive of the practice of policing helps explain how this practice contributes to the social problems of mass incarceration and police violence.

Philosophers can also contribute to social scientific empirical descriptions of racism. Regarding the task of describing how racism causally explains the resilience of race-related social problems, philosophy of social science is well situated to clarify methodological issues such as the nature of social explanation, or the choice between methodological individualism and methodological holism. Social ontology develops descriptive theories of socially significant phenomena (e.g. social groups, institutions, social structures, implicit bias), as well as distinctly racial phenomena (e.g. race, white supremacy) that feature in social scientific explanations of racism. Moreover, philosophers of language and social epistemologists provide empirical descriptions of how phenomena, such as white ignorance, hate speech, and racial ideology, contribute to the reproduction of race-related social problems.

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There is a distinctive philosophical approach to the question "what is racism?" whose aim is to provide normative and empirical descriptions of racist phenomena as actually existing social entities that help explain the persistence of race-related social problems. This project is contiguous but not identical to social-scientific approaches to racism. Having established the philosophical credentials of this descriptive-explanatory project, I now turn to its implications for the prescriptive philosophical project of defining racism that is the focus of Urquidez's book.

Part III: Implications of the Explanatory Question for Urquidez's Definitional Question

The first upshot of the explanatory approach is that the philosophical question "what is racism?" is not exhausted by the problem of defining the word "racism" (p. 41). While Urquidez leaves open the possibility that the question "what is racism?" might be used to express other philosophical questions, he claims that the problem of definition provides a fairly comprehensive analysis of the question "what is racism?" for the purposes of philosophy (p. 45). When he considers approaches that interpret the question as a problem of describing and explaining social reality, he seems to place them in the domain of social science rather than philosophy (p. 44). Instead, Urquidez should recognize the explanatory project I outlined above as a complementary philosophical (not just social scientific) approach to the question "what is racism?"

At first sight it might seem that the explanatory approach is incompatible with Urquidez's conventionalism. The explanatory approach interprets the question "what is racism?" as a call for empirical and normative description of racist phenomena as actually existing entities. Given its emphasis on description, this project relies on epistemic justification by reference to facts about the world. Relatedly, since many (although certainly not all) matters of fact about racism are disclosed by social science, it may seem that the explanatory approach implicitly relies on semantic externalism. However, the explanatory approach cannot rely on semantic externalism because it is not engaged in the semantic project of settling the meaning of racism. The explanatory project does not undermine the conventionalist tenets of prescriptivism, semantic internalism, and pragmatic justification because it does not deal with the question of how to define the term "racism". This is because the explanatory project is already committed to a particular definition of "racism".

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Philosophers (and social scientists) engaged in this project use the term "racism" to represent the individual and supra-individual phenomena that causally explain race-related social problems. In this context, the question "what is racism?" is a call for an empirical and normative description of the phenomena that play this explanatory role. In fact, Urquidez's conventionalism sheds light on why the explanatory project defines racism in the way it does. Its preferred definition of racism stems from the anti-racist pragmatic end of ending or at least ameliorating race-related social problems. This anti-racist end creates a need to diagnose these problems in order to devise better strategies for solving them. Consequently, it creates a representational need to identify and describe the causal processes that explain the resilience of race-related social problems. The preferred (already agreed upon) term to fulfill this representational need is "racism".

Insofar as the explanatory approach to the question "what is racism?" is not concerned with the definition of the term "racism", it does not (and cannot) challenge Urquidez's conventionalism. However, the definition of "racism" that this approach operates with, as well as the pragmatic reasons for its adoption, casts doubt on Urquidez's own definition of racism. As I stated earlier, the explanatory approach applies the term "racism" to phenomena that feature in our best possible (often structuralist) explanations of race-related social problems. In other words, actions, beliefs, institutions, social processes, and so on, are racist if they partake in systemic racial oppression and explain the resilience of race-related social problems. Although this definition of racism is rarely stated by those engaged in the explanatory project, it is the definition that best explains how they use the term. More importantly, the reason they adopt this definition is because it serves the ultimate pragmatic end of anti-racism—to solve the race-related social problems that afflict subordinate racial groups. The pragmatic end of solving these race-related problems gives rise to a representational need to diagnose the problems correctly. Their use of the term "racism" stems from and reflects this explanatory-representational need.

Thus, another upshot of the explanatory project is that the moral-evaluative need to condemn seriously objectionable racial ills is not the only representational need of the historical victims of racial oppression. This has implications for Urquidez's adequacy criteria for a theory of racism. In his view, moral

objectionability is an essential feature of the concept of racism (p. 14). Accordingly, his first criterion of adequacy (i.e. the moral condition), requires definitions of "racism" to accommodate usage of "racism" that corresponds to the legitimate *moral* need we have for the convention. The need in question is the moral-representational need to condemn severe racial ills. However, in his introductory chapter, Urquidez gives a more general formulation of this criterion: definitions of racism must "accommodate usage of "racism" that corresponds to the legitimate need we have for the convention" (p. 35). This more general formulation does not restrict the legitimate needs to moral ones. Consequently, it would require definitions of racism to also accommodate the explanatory-representational needs of historical victims of racism. In other words, it would require definitions of racism to accommodate the explanatory function that the concept plays in anti-racist linguistic practice.

So why does Urquidez end up favoring moralist criteria of adequacy that restrict the legitimate anti-racist needs that a theory of racism ought to accommodate? One possible reason is that Urquidez is interested in articulating the requirements for a moralist (rather than an explanatory) theory of racism (p. 35). But since definitions are prescriptive—Urquidez would also need an argument for why we ought to prefer moralist over explanatory theories of racism. We have already established that the explanatory-representational need to explain the causes of race-related social problems, as well as their relation to the wider system of white supremacy, is a legitimate pragmatic need for the historical victims of racial oppression. Therefore, Urquidez owes us a pragmatic justification for his claim that the primary role of the concept of racism is moral evaluation (p. 20). Absent such a justification, the criteria of adequacy that inform metalinguistic negotiation on the meaning of racism should not prioritize moralist over explanatory concerns.

Moralism is another methodological commitment in philosophical definitions of racism that needs to be argued for rather than presupposed. Once we recognize that the point of representing things as racist is not only to condemn serious racial ills, but also to further our understanding of the workings of racial oppression, we can have a metalinguistic negotiation about which (if any) of these pragmatic values our definitions of racism should prioritize. Perhaps, we will realize that in addition to the categorial plurality of

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racism, we also face a problem of pragmatic pluralism. Representing things as racist serves at least two legitimate needs for the historical victims of racial oppression. If it turns out that a single definition of racism cannot fully accommodate both representational needs, we will be faced with a pragmatic dilemma. Should the term racism be (mainly) used for the purposes of moral condemnation or social explanation? I would argue, and I think Urquidez would agree, that the answer to this pragmatic question hinges on which of these representational uses best serves the ultimate anti-racist aim of ending or at least mitigating racial oppression. While there is a real need to express our moral condemnation of severe racial ills, we should not lose sight of our need for advancing our understanding of the mechanisms behind the reproduction of mass incarceration, police violence, race-based health disparities, and other race-related social problems that systematically harm non-whites. Developing a proper diagnosis of these social problems is necessary for finding effective solutions to them. If the ultimate aim of anti-racism is to eliminate racial oppression, this explanatory project is at least as important as the moralist project that underlies Urquidez's definition of racism. Racism is not only a moral, but also an explanatory concept.

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