

## What Accounts of “Racism” Do

Abstract: In “Racism as Disrespect,” Joshua Glasgow articulates his disagreement with Lawrence Blum about whether a particular case is an instance of racism. This paper appraises this dispute in order to shed light on the distinction between descriptive and prescriptive approaches to racism. My main contention is that Glasgow’s approach to conceptual analysis is not descriptive as he claims, but prescriptive, and that this misunderstanding has substantial ramifications for his critique of Blum. I conclude the paper by developing a taxonomy of approaches to conceptual analysis, which I defend on heuristic grounds.

Keywords: racism, Joshua Glasgow, Lawrence Blum, ordinary language, descriptive analysis, prescriptive analysis, pure description, conservatism, methodology, Charles Mills

### §1 Introduction

The title of my paper takes its inspiration from the following passage in

Lawrence Blum’s “What Do Accounts of ‘Racism’ Do?”:

I have become a good deal less confident than Garcia that one can set a hopeful condition on an account of “racism” that it ‘conforms to everyday discourse about racism, insofar as this is free of confusion,’ or that his criterion of ‘accommodating clear cases from history and imagination and exclude cases where racism is clearly absent’ (1997a; 6) can be applied without at least some presupposing of an already existing account of racism.<sup>1</sup>

Blum’s suspicion that the ordinary language condition presupposes an *a priori*

conception of racism is very close to the mark. I argue, among other things, that Joshua

Glasgow’s approach to racism in “Racism as Disrespect” presupposes an unjustified

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<sup>1</sup> Blum 2004, 76.

value commitment that drives his account. This value commitment is unwarranted, because it is biased against revisionist accounts.

Glasgow's "Racism as Disrespect" develops a theory of "racism" that is said to resolve a challenge facing all descriptive theories—a problem he terms "the location problem." The challenge is to provide a definition of "racism" that cuts across conceptual categories.<sup>2</sup> After proposing and defending his considered definition of "racism," Glasgow proceeds to take issue with Blum's alternative definition. Further, he considers but ultimately rejects Blum's criticisms of ordinary usage, arguing that they are irrelevant to descriptive accounts of racism.

My critique of Glasgow's arguments will proceed from clarifications of distinct uses of *description*, *prescription*, and *correct use*. These elucidations will be used to expose conceptual confusion in Glasgow's arguments. In addition, I will offer a taxonomy of approaches to conceptual analysis and defend it on heuristic grounds. I will ultimately conclude that Glasgow is wrong to think that he does not need to defend his conservative approach. For he fails to realize that his disagreement with Blum can only be resolved by taking a moral stance on ordinary usage.

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<sup>2</sup> Glasgow bases his discussion of the location problem on Blum's discussion of the categorial plurality of racism (2004, 72-73).

## §2 On Correct Use

In his *"I'm Not a Racist, But..."*, Lawrence Blum objects to what he calls the inflated use of the terms "racism" and "racist" (henceforth, "racism"). Overusage, he claims, has problematized<sup>3</sup> the meaning of "racism": "the moral reproach carried by the term is threatened by a current tendency to overuse it. Some feel that the word is thrown around so much that anything involving 'race' that someone does not like is liable to castigation as 'racist.'"<sup>4</sup> Calling something "racist" ought to imply something about why it is racist, but this explanatory element seems lost in current practice. Blum explains this fact by arguing that the term has evolved into a mere slur, a mere expression of disapproval in the racial domain. Thus, the practical effects of inflation include the gradual damaging of its moral force and the weakening of charges of racism. He further argues that the use of a single term to describe the multiplicity of possible racial ills discourages the use of more nuanced moral vocabulary.

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<sup>3</sup> It is not altogether clear what Blum's position is regarding the semantics of current usage. In *"I'm Not a Racist, But..."* Blum's project is to *suggest* a core meaning, which suggests that he intends to recommend a norm (2002, 7-8). That he takes himself to be offering a stipulative definition in *"I'm Not a Racist, But..."* is confirmed in "What Do Accounts of 'Racism' Do?" (2004, 76). From this it is clear that he takes contemporary usage of "racism" to be problematic. But in what way is it problematic? Glasgow documents Blum's various attempts to pinpoint the problem: "It should be noted that in *'I'm Not a Racist, But . . .'*, 7-8, Blum does hedge his bets, holding that, while his account is meant to capture the 'core meaning,' usage of "racism" is so varied that we cannot get to 'the "true meaning" of "racism,"' and in 'Systemic and Individual Racism, Racialization, and Antiracist Education: A Reply to Garcia, Silliman, and Levinson,' *Theory and Research in Education* 2 (2004): 49-74, he holds that the search for the 'core meaning' of racism may be fruitless. He sometimes also indicates that his analysis attempts to balance ordinary usage of the term "racism" with the goal of providing the most useful way of construing racism, and to the extent that this aim is not so much to descriptively analyze the concept racism as to provide a prescription for better usage, our views are not inconsistent..." (Glasgow 2009, 70, fn 9).

<sup>4</sup> Blum 2002, 1.

Blum's solution to the problem of inflation is to stipulate a new definition that sets a limit on the proper use of this term. He proposes restricting the term to the most egregious racial ills, which he identifies with racial antipathy and racial inferiorization. For the purposes of this paper, I will assume that the problem of inflation is a legitimate problem, for I would like to explore whether, and to what extent, it undermines descriptive accounts of racism. Specifically, I want to focus on Joshua Glasgow's descriptive theory of "racism" in his "Racism as Disrespect." Near the end of his paper, Glasgow considers a controversial case and uses his analysis of "racism" to raise an objection to Blum's analysis. I argue that this objection fails.

Imagine that a high school teacher calls on a black Haitian student to provide "the black perspective" on some race-related issue. Does the teacher act racist?<sup>5</sup> Blum likens the teacher's remark to a kind of racial ignorance and insensitivity. Although he takes this type of ill to be a kind of moral failing (for the remark is racially ignorant and insensitive), he thinks its wrongness does not rise to the level of racism (for the remark is not based on racial antipathy or inferiorization). Glasgow, by contrast, feels that the teacher disrespects both the black student and the black race by treating the student as the representative of a homogenized group, as if "the black perspective" denotes a point of view that all blacks subscribe to. The practice of homogenization is disrespectful,

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<sup>5</sup> This thought experiment is Blum's (2002, 53-57).

argues Glasgow, “because it fails to recognize us as independent and distinctive” individuals.<sup>6</sup> This failure is, for him, sufficient for racism.<sup>7</sup>

Blum’s and Glasgow’s contradictory judgments about the teacher’s action are partly motivated by different definitions of “racism”:

(1) Racism is racial disrespect (Glasgow)<sup>8</sup>

(2) Racism is either racial antipathy or racial inferiorization (Blum)<sup>9</sup>

Since both philosophers agree that the teacher’s racial insensitivity is disrespectful, whether it is racist or not depends on how “racism” is defined. It is racist if we accept Glasgow’s definition, but not if we accept Blum’s definition.

To resolve the conceptual dispute, Glasgow defends his definition by arguing that it captures the ordinary use of “racism.” In other words, definition (1) but not definition (2) satisfies the following desideratum for a theory of racism:

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<sup>6</sup> Glasgow 2009, 92.

<sup>7</sup> Glasgow 2009, 92-93. Glasgow’s critique of Blum is predicated on his earlier discussion of racial homogenization. He complains that “Blum is clear that he doesn’t think positive stereotypes can be racist (although they can still be, on his account, objectionable), as they are not instances of antipathy or inferiorization. This stance renders Blum’s account unable to accommodate those remarks that we often call ‘racist’, not because they put down the target racialized group, but because they homogenize that group” (2009, 70).

<sup>8</sup> Glasgow’s formal definition: “(DA)  $\varphi$  is racist if and only if  $\varphi$  is disrespectful toward members of racialized group  $R$  as  $R_s$ .” He clarifies the locution ‘racialized group’ thus: “Racialized groups are, roughly, groups of people who have been identified and treated as if they were members of the same race” (2009, 81).

<sup>9</sup> Blum writes: “I want to suggest that all forms of racism can be related to one of two general themes or “paradigms”: *inferiorization*, and *antipathy*” (2002, 8). In his more recent work, Blum (2004) expresses doubts about whether these two types of racial ill are the only ones that rise to the level of racism. For our purposes it does not matter whether there are two, three, or more paradigms of racism/severe racial ill. What matters is that all such paradigms entail a distinction between racism and racial disrespect such that the latter is not always sufficient for racism.

As an attempt to capture the content of our current, ordinary concept of racism, the adequacy criterion operative here is that an analysis should accommodate ordinary usage of relevant terms, terms like “racism”. ...[P]rivileging analyses that accommodate ordinary usage does not entail that we cannot make mistakes in how we deploy the relevant terms—a point that is especially salient when the term in question is often used in contested ways, as is the case with “racism”. Instead, the adequacy criterion merely states that, other things equal, the more that an analysis can accommodate ordinary usage, the better.<sup>10</sup>

One can see how Glasgow brings this desideratum—the ordinary language condition—to bear on the case of the high school teacher:

Blum holds that, although such a question [“Will you please provide the black perspective on race relations?”] is insensitive and ignorant, it should not be considered racist because it does not spring from inferiorization or antipathy. But perhaps what we should do here is keep what Blum acknowledges is the widespread recognition that such questions are racist and jettison the inferiorization-or-antipathy approach to racism. [My] DA [Disrespect Analysis], in fact, can step into the breach and account for the apparent racism in the teacher’s request: among other problems, it is racially disrespectful...<sup>11</sup>

Blum’s judgment is said to be misguided because it contradicts “ordinary usage,” which seems to be a technical term here, signifying something like *what most people of our*

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<sup>10</sup> Glasgow 2009, 64-65.

<sup>11</sup> Glasgow 2009, 92. It might appear that Glasgow is arguing that his intuition confirms his theory and disconfirms Blum’s. If that were the argument, his intuition would be canceled by Blum’s intuition running in the opposite direction. His argument is rather that his intuition corresponds to “the widespread recognition that such questions are racist.” This conclusion is based on his assessment of several examples of categorially distinct forms of racism. For instance: “Next, recall that Blum’s list of categories includes societies and people as capable of being racist, which surely makes sense: some people—not merely their attitudes or beliefs, but the people themselves—are racist, and some societies, such as the United States at times—plausibly including all times to date—are racist. Accordingly, the language of disrespect had better work in these cases too. And so it does. We can say to the racist, ‘You—not merely your beliefs or attitudes, but *you*—fail to respect the targets of your hatred.’” (2009, 84). Thus, his argument can be reconstructed as follows: “The correct definition of ‘racism’ is the one that, among other things, best accommodates ordinary usage better than rival accounts. Definition (1) satisfies this condition, definition (2) does not. Therefore, other things equal, (1) is superior to (2). By (1), the teacher acts racist. Therefore, the teacher acts racist.”

*linguistic community believe*. For the sake of argument, let us assume that Glasgow is right that most members of our linguistic community follow norm (1).

Implicit in his argument is that the relevant use of “racism” is the ordinary/folk use. The idea here seems to be that descriptive analysis of “racism” is analogous to descriptive analysis of “race.” In both cases, the analyst is interested in describing the folk conception rather than the expert conception. For “[t]he point, recall, is to determine whether racial concepts should be conserved in or eliminated from contemporary public, mainstream discourse and practice.” This quote is from Glasgow’s “On the Methodology of the Race Debate,” which discusses what he calls “the mismatch problem” for theories of “race.” The mismatch problem is “the possibility that if we look at what the experts and/or history has thought about race, the resultant racial semantics might not match *our* racial semantics. (Where ‘we’ here is shorthand for those who employ contemporary commonsense, rather than a uniquely historical and/or expert ‘sense.’)” One ramification is that:

[I]f the mismatch phenomenon occurs, we’d be changing the subject. Words can have all sorts of meanings—folk, expert, stipulative, etc.—but the race debate is about certain specific terms. In that context, the concepts that are the subject of philosophical debate are, again, the public ones. So if in our arguments we purport to draw conclusions about the public conception of race based on premises about a mismatched deferent conception of race, we’ll have changed the subject midstream.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Glasgow 2008, 339.

Hence, given that the folk conception of racism is the appropriate target-concept, the correct definition of “racism” is the one that captures it. So, since most people use “racism” to signify racial disrespect, racial disrespect captures the term’s relevant sense.

Given this argument, if some expert conception of racism (such as Blum’s conception) is not isomorphic to the folk conception of racism, then it is not the conception that he purports to analyze in “Racism as Disrespect.” Glasgow might then argue that the conception of racism that philosophers *should* analyze is the folk conception, for this is the one that is of interest to disputes about what racism is. Blum’s analysis of “racism,” however, articulates a conception that fails to match the folk conception, for it is concerned with what “racism” *should* mean (as opposed to what it *does* mean). In this way, Blum’s approach and definition of “racism” might be thought to “change the subject” and thus miss the point. Alternatively, Glasgow might argue that, since Blum is engaged in a different kind of philosophical project, objections stemming from Blum’s pragmatic analysis do not touch his own disrespect analysis.

Blum could reply that Glasgow’s account of the ordinary use of “racism” — however grammatically correct it may be — is nevertheless morally incorrect. That is, even though most people use “racism” to signify racial disrespect, they ought not to. For ordinary usage contributes to the problem of inflation. The folk are normatively misguided to use “racism” to designate every racial ill imaginable. Given Blum’s analytical project, this strikes me as a legitimate reply to Glasgow’s objection. For, since

Blum's project is not descriptive (his aim is not to accommodate current usage, as much as possible), it completely dispenses with the ordinary language condition. Quite the opposite, Blum is engaged in a revisionist project which presupposes the problematic state of contemporary usage of "racism." He seeks to revise ordinary usage of "racism" on normative and pragmatic grounds and thereby rehabilitate its practical employment. He proposes to preserve the distinction between racial ill and severe racial harm by restricting usage of "racism" to the severest racial ills. Given this goal, it is no objection to his project that his theory fails to accommodate ordinary usage (i.e., fails to capture what "racism" *currently* refers to), for the aim is precisely to revise it. In other words, it is not Blum who "misses the point" of Glasgow's analysis (for he is not interested in describing what "racism" refers to); rather, it is Glasgow who misses the point of Blum's criticism of ordinary usage.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> I have supposed for the sake of argument that Glasgow's methodology is well suited to capture the folk conception of racism, and that his definition of "racism" is grammatically correct. On these suppositions, I have argued that: (a) Glasgow's approach is not well suited to tell us whether the folk conception is morally correct *and* that (b) his account must do so if it is to resolve his normative disagreement with Blum over the moral status of the high school teacher's action. To resolve his disagreement with Blum, it is necessary for him to affirm a prescriptive judgment (that his disrespect analysis provides the morally correct definition). Glasgow of course concedes that his analysis *only* succeeds in telling us what "racism" refers to and is inadequate to tell us what it should refer to. However, he fails to appreciate that an account which merely describes what "racism" refers to is in no position to resolve substantive disagreement about what it should refer to. So, in short: *Glasgow's methodology might determine what racism (currently) is, but his disagreement with Blum is not about what it is, but about what it ought to be.* Or again, his attempt to articulate the folk conception of racism *with an eye toward resolving contemporary disputes about racism* is misguided. Further, it is not Blum who has raised an objection to Glasgow, but Glasgow who is keen to reject Blum's definition of "racism." So it is *he* who is barking up the wrong tree by treating his and Blum's definitions as if they were competing accounts of the *ordinary use* of "racism."

We have seen that Glasgow's argument ignores the point and purpose of Blum's definition. Consequently, his objection to Blum's definition begs the question against Blum.<sup>14</sup> The question I would now like to address is: *Why does Glasgow fail to see that his objection to Blum is question-begging?* I propose that Glasgow fails to see this because he is conceptually confused. Specifically, he conflates two uses of the term "correct use of language." When Glasgow accuses Blum of misusing the term "racism" for refusing to apply it to the teacher's action, he assumes that a word is used "correctly" when it conforms to current linguistic practice. By contrast, when Blum insists that his own use of the term is correct, he assumes that a word is used "correctly" when it conforms to the morally correct linguistic practice. Therefore, they subscribe to different standards:

- A definition of "racism" D is *grammatically correct*<sup>15</sup> in linguistic community C if and only if it expresses a linguistic norm in C (i.e., individuals in C use "racism" in accordance with D).
- A definition of "racism" D is *morally correct* in linguistic community C if and only if D describes what "racism" *ought* to mean in C (i.e., independently of the linguistic norm in C).

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<sup>14</sup> It begs the question as follows. Glasgow and Blum's disagreement about whether the high school teacher's action is racist turns on a more basic methodological disagreement. Glasgow accepts the ordinary language condition as the morally correct approach for determining both what "racism" is and what it should be, whereas Blum rejects this standard in the latter case. So their methodological disagreement proves to be normative. However, Glasgow rejects Blum's definition as morally awry since it does not correspond to ordinary/folk usage. That is, he assumes the truth of the contentious normative judgment that needs to be proved: the ordinary/folk definition is the morally correct definition.

<sup>15</sup> Grammar, for Wittgenstein, consists of the set of rules governing the correct use of words (see Baker and Hacker's "Rules and Grammar," 2009, 41-67). Thus, by "grammatical correctness" I simply mean a (current) standard for the correct use of a word; that is, the linguistic norm that (actually) governs.

Glasgow's analysis is concerned with the grammatically correct use of "racism." Blum's analysis is concerned with the morally correct use of "racism." Since Glasgow is the antagonist in this scenario—the philosopher charging the other with impropriety of usage—he mistakenly runs grammatical and moral correctness together. For he is not merely observing that Blum's use of "racism" is ungrammatical given current usage. He is making the further normative claim that "what we *should* do here is keep what Blum acknowledges is the widespread recognition that such questions are racist and jettison the inferiorization-or-antipathy approach to racism" (my emphasis). His argument thus presupposes that both philosophers are engaged in the same kind of project and pursuing the same goal. Since this assumption is false, Glasgow's question-begging objection rests on conceptual confusion.

### **§3 The Conservative Bias**

I have now defended two substantive claims: (1) that Glasgow offers a question-begging objection to Blum; and that (2) his objection rests on conflating two uses of "correct use." In this section, I will deepen my critique by arguing that Glasgow misconceives the nature of his own analytical project in "Racism as Disrespect." Contrary to what he says, his account is not descriptive but prescriptive. I will further show that this basic misunderstanding (his failure to see the prescriptive nature of his project) explains his confused objection to Blum.

As we have seen, Blum argues that contemporary usage of “racism” is inflated and that this fact has caused the infelicitous consequence that *every racial ill imaginable can be castigated as racist*.<sup>16</sup> Glasgow’s definition of “racism” aims at preserving ordinary usage. Hence, if it is successful in doing so, it effectively preserves the inflatedness of “racism.” By advancing a definition that encompasses every racial imaginable, his definition inherits all the practical problems associated with current usage.

Glasgow is aware of this objection facing his analysis:

Alternatively, some might think that DA expansively implies that too many things are racist: not every ‘racial ill,’ as Blum puts it, should be considered racist, especially given the deep moral significance that attaches to attributions of racism. Since anything that is disrespectful toward members of *R* as *Rs* is racist according to DA, this unpacking of ‘racist’ might seem to fall victim to what Blum, following Robert Miles [(1989, 41-68)], calls the ‘conceptual inflation’ of racism” (2009, 90).

If “overinclusiveness” is a problem for Blum, Glasgow thinks he can deflect these practical concerns by underscoring the descriptive nature of his project:

So the short answer to the overinclusiveness objection is this. Some things we call “racist”, other things we don’t. The goal here has been to identify an account of racism that best captures ordinary everyday discourse and thought. It seems to me that DA [Disrespect Analysis] is no more expansive than ordinary discourse allows it to be, and, given the goal, its limits and expansiveness appear to be virtuous.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> “We have looked at two ways that “racism” and “racist” have been conceptually inflated and morally overloaded, diminishing their usefulness and force as concepts expressing moral reproach: the tendency to apply them to every malfeasance in the racial area, and to use them as general concepts for all forms of group discrimination, oppression, or denial of dignity.” (Blum 2002, 13)

<sup>17</sup> Glasgow 2009, 92.

He adds: “Perhaps we’d be better off if we reserved the term ‘racism’ for a different set of social ills than what it currently covers; perhaps not. In either case, though, a focus on what it currently covers is the constraint by which any descriptive analysis must abide.”<sup>18</sup> This last point implies that the descriptive nature of his analytical project logically *requires* a neutral stance on the normative issue of whether “racism” *should* be used to designate every racial ill imaginable. That is, logic prohibits him from criticizing ordinary usage, lest he abandon his descriptive project.

These passages suggest that Glasgow is committed to the following descriptive-prescriptive distinction:

- Descriptive analysis “investigates what our terms refer to,” e.g., what “racism” “currently covers.”
- Prescriptive analysis “deviates” from ordinary usage in its aim to achieve certain pragmatic or liberating ends, and explores what our terms “could and should refer to.”<sup>19</sup>

If the descriptive analyst is someone who merely describes what “racism” refers to, Glasgow (who is engaged in descriptive analysis) is engaged in *pure description*. That is, his analytical project consists in *merely reporting and describing* current usage for the purpose of understanding/uncovering linguistic practice. Like a reporter who is

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<sup>18</sup> Glasgow 2009, 93.

<sup>19</sup> The distinction is taken from the following passage: “I don’t mean to deny that we also might want to use and unpack the term “racism” in a way that deviates from ordinary usage but that serves various pragmatic or liberating ends. But investigating what our terms refer to and exploring what they could and should refer to are attempts to paint two different pictures. DA [Disrespect Analysis] is an analysis of the former variety.” (Glasgow 2009, 93)

saddled with merely reporting how things are, whether good or bad, Glasgow is saddled with describing current linguistic practice, whether good or bad. He cannot permit his analysis to become tainted with prescriptive recommendations.

Glasgow's defense against the inflatedness (or overinclusiveness) objection implies that he cannot revise or criticize ordinary usage without abandoning his project. Yet, a further goal of his project requires him to do precisely that. For Glasgow is not merely interested in discovering the current definition of "racism" for its own sake—*for the sake of understanding*—but for the sake of *resolving disagreement about racism*. To resolve disagreement about the proper use of "racism" *it is necessary to take a normative stance on what the definition of "racism" ought to be*. To appeal to a definition in resolving disagreement is to *lay down* a standard of correct use. In other words, in using and relying on the folk conception of racism as the standard of correct use Glasgow effectively accepts it as the morally correct standard.

This conclusion crystallizes when we consider the general structure of his argument in "Racism as Disrespect." First, (I) he articulates a definition of "racism" that accommodates ordinary usage, as much as possible; second, (II) he uses this definition as a standard to resolve disagreement about particular cases. Step (II) presupposes the moral correctness of the definition provided in step (I). So Glasgow's is committed to the following propositions:

- a) The current definition is the one that preserves ordinary usage, as much as possible
- b) "Racism is racial disrespect" is the current definition (for it preserves ordinary usage, as much as possible)
- c) The current definition ("Racism is racial disrespect") is the morally correct definition

Judgment (a) is presupposed by Glasgow's analysis and is expressed in his *a priori* stipulation of the ordinary language condition. Judgment (b) is the result of his analysis of folk usage. Judgment (c) is presupposed by Glasgow's use of his definition as a standard of correct use. That Glasgow "affirms" its moral correctness is evident from the fact that he *uses* it as a standard to mitigate his disagreement with Blum, for he relies on it when he objects to Blum's judgment that the teacher does not act racist. In doing so he goes *beyond* mere description of ordinary usage. If Glasgow were to deny the truth of (c) (i.e., the moral correctness of his own definition), or if he were to remain neutral about its moral correctness, he could not use it as a standard of correct use.

Consequently, he could not use it to resolve disagreement in step (II) and his analytical project would be rendered incoherent. So affirming the truth of (c) is essential to his analytical project.

Glasgow assumes without argument that (c) is true. That is, he assumes that the morally correct definition of "racism" is the one that satisfies the ordinary language

condition. However, (c) does not follow from the conjunction of (a) and (b). On the contrary, it needs normative argumentation. Further, Blum's inflation argument for revising current usage suggests that (c) is false. We can now see that Glasgow's objection to Blum, as well as his reply to the overinclusiveness objection, betrays his normative bias in favor of *actual* linguistic practice. Blum and Glasgow disagree on the following point:

- Ordinary usage should be preserved; it is in good moral standing (Glasgow)
- Ordinary usage should not be preserved; it is not in good moral standing (Blum)

*Both* competing recommendations need defending. Therefore, Blum and Glasgow's disagreement cannot be resolved by appealing to current usage. Therefore, Glasgow is confused in thinking that his approach merely describes what "racism" refers to. He is as engaged in legislating ordinary usage as is Blum. The fact that Glasgow's proposal recommends conserving usage rather than revising it is no reason to think that his endorsement is not a positive normative stance. It follows from this argument that Glasgow's theory of racism is not a *purely* descriptive project, as he thinks. The argument can be stated thus:

1. Glasgow contrasts descriptive theorizing, which merely describes "what our terms refer to," with prescriptive theorizing, which *prescribes* what our terms ought to refer to.

2. The salient difference between these two approaches is that descriptive theorizing is normatively neutral whereas prescriptive theorizing is not. (By “normatively neutral” I mean an analysis of ordinary usage that does not take a stance on the moral status of ordinary usage.)
3. Hence, Glasgow’s analysis of “racism” is descriptive (and normatively neutral) because it merely describes how the term is applied in everyday use without stating that it ought to be so applied. (This is what allows him to evade the overinclusiveness objection.<sup>20</sup>)
4. However, Glasgow’s theory is not normatively neutral, for he supposes that the grammatically correct definition of “racism” (which he takes to be his own) is the morally correct one.
5. Therefore, his analysis of “racism” is not descriptive, but prescriptive.

Glasgow conflates two uses of “descriptive analysis.” On one use of the term descriptive analysis consists in what I call *pure description*. A purely descriptive approach (i) aims at conceptual clarity that is free from conceptual confusion; (ii) its clarifications neither approve nor disapprove of current usage. This analytical practice is *normatively neutral* in the sense specified by (ii).<sup>21</sup> This conception was famously

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<sup>20</sup> “So the short answer to the overinclusiveness objection is this. Some things we call ‘racist’, other things we don’t. The goal here has been to identify an account of racism that best captures ordinary everyday discourse and thought.”

<sup>21</sup> Of course, in another sense, *no* philosophical approach is normatively neutral, for *every* philosophical approach is governed by certain values. After all, every approach has a valued end or goal. This distinction is elaborated in section §5.

championed by Wittgenstein when he wrote that “philosophy leaves everything as it is.”<sup>22</sup> By this he did not mean that philosophy is impotent, i.e., achieves no meaningful goal or purpose. Rather, he meant that philosophy does not achieve its purpose by revising or proposing recommendations to ordinary usage. Its critical purposes are achieved by offering “grammatical reminders,” which are *mere clarifications* of ordinary usage. Clarifications are offered for the sake of achieving conceptual clarity and perspicuous understanding. Conceptual clarity, moreover, consists in freedom from conceptual confusion.

On the second use of “descriptive analysis” description consists in accommodating ordinary usage, where accommodation is understood in terms of preserving ordinary usage, as much as possible. Descriptive analysis thusly understood entails a conservative commitment and the ordinary language condition amounts to a theoretical norm that drives Glasgow’s theory toward preservation. This approach to descriptive analysis can be called *conservativism* and the ordinary language condition can be redescribed as *the preservation condition*. Hence, there is an important misunderstanding in Glasgow’s conception of his approach. When the expression “description of ordinary usage” is used within an analytical project that seeks to resolve disagreement, “description” is no longer synonymous with “pure description.” When descriptions are used to achieve normative ends—e.g., to *defend* current usage against

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<sup>22</sup> Wittgenstein 2009, §124.

criticism—they are no longer “mere” (normatively neutral) reports, but political ammo or arsenal for political ends. Glasgow’s theory is a form of political advocacy, advocacy on behalf of conserving current usage.

Stated differently, we have seen that Glasgow analyzes the description-prescription distinction in terms of the is-ought distinction, and he identifies his own approach with the descriptive side of this coin. However, this is-ought analysis does not properly characterize his conservative practice which corresponds to a different description-prescription distinction:

- Descriptive analysis aims at *preserving* ordinary usage, as much as possible.
- Prescriptive analysis aims at substantially *revising* ordinary usage (rather than preserving ordinary usage, as much as possible).

That is, to describe ordinary usage of “racism” is not merely to “describe what racism refer to,” but to preserve said usage. Preservation thus retains a crucial normative component that is lacking in pure description.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> It is worth noting that the preservation-revisionist analysis of the description-prescription distinction corresponds to Charles Mills’ account of the latter (2003, 32). He states that descriptive analysis is committed to “*affirming* the correctness of how the word is used, but seeking to refine it,” i.e., to preserving current usage as much as possible. Prescriptive analysis, by contrast, “seek[s] to *revise* existing linguistic practice,” not in the sense of offering minor emendations and reforms, but in the sense of offering fundamental changes. Mills calls the descriptive theorist a “non-revisionist” because the theorist is antecedently committed to preserving ordinary usage. The non-revisionist’s goal is to discover the operative linguistic norm, and refine it for the sake of correcting slipshod usage, and resolving substantive disagreement. The non-revisionist *affirms* the correctness of actual linguistic practice. My paper is largely indebted to this distinction and passage in Mills’ “Heart Attack,” which crystalized it within my own thought.

If Glasgow were truly engaged in pure description, there would be no need for him to criticize Blum; ipso facto, he would not appeal to current usage *as a moral standard* in criticizing Blum. Instead he would *observe* that Blum's definition of "racism" is grammatically erroneous, that is, incompatible with current usage. (This is a point that Blum antecedently concedes; indeed, his analysis presupposes the problematic state of current usage.) Glasgow would then leave Blum's disagreement with ordinary folk "where it is" — for the purpose of his descriptive analysis. Clearly, Glasgow is not content with pointing out the grammatical incorrectness of Blum's position. For that would not resolve the normative disagreement between Blum and the folk.

I have now argued that Glasgow's "descriptive theory" is *not* normatively neutral and is therefore not descriptive in one important sense. Namely, it does *not* merely describe what "racism" refers to. By *endorsing* the preservation condition (which goes beyond *merely describing* ordinary usage), Glasgow lays down a rule for what is *to be* called "racism." This rule drives his account toward preservation. What is more, I have argued that Glasgow conflates two uses or kinds of "descriptive analysis." This conflation of theoretical practices helps to explain why Glasgow fails to see that his objection to Blum's definition is question-begging. He wrongly takes himself to be describing ordinary usage in the purely descriptive sense, whereas, as a matter of fact, he is engaged in the normative-political project of conserving ordinary usage, that is, in preserving the *status quo* (as much as possible).

Since Glasgow fails to defend his conservative approach (i.e., the preservation condition), his account is biased against non-conservative approaches. The term “bias” is helpful here, for we apply it to cases where a certain option is “ruled out” or when a certain option is “privileged” over and against the alternatives, *without due consideration for the alternatives*. Glasgow’s approach commences with the stipulation of the preservation condition. As such, it expresses an *a priori* commitment that effectively privileges conservative definitions of “racism” *without due consideration* for rival revisionist alternatives. Revisionism is disadvantaged prior to the start of one’s investigation. The charge of bias is a reminder that Glasgow must own up to defending his normative commitment.

#### **§4 Some Ramifications**

In this section I would like to discuss some of the ramifications of my argument for conceptual analysis; specifically, for the conceptual analysis of “racism.”

##### *A New Taxonomy*

We have considered two pictures of descriptive analysis. On one hand, description can be conceived as *preserving* current usage, as much as possible. Such a practice presupposes that current linguistic practice ought to be preserved. On the other hand, description can be conceived as *reporting* or *clarifying* current usage. This practice implies no evaluative attitude to ordinary usage. To clarify or report usage is to *draw attention* to it as such (or to some of its features). Drawing attention to current usage is

consistent with doing so for any number of reasons, for example, to *better understand it*; to *dissolve conceptual confusion*; to *expose features of it that might otherwise go unnoticed*.<sup>24</sup> All of these goals are compatible with either endorsing or criticizing ordinary usage. For example, I have clarified two uses of “description” but my clarifications do not commit me to either rejecting or endorsing Glasgow’s preservation condition. My elucidatory remarks are critical insofar as they expose confusion in Glasgow’s arguments.

We have also clarified two pictures of prescriptive analysis. A theory of racism might be prescriptive in virtue of *recommending that ordinary usage be conserved*. On the other hand, it might be prescriptive in virtue of *recommending that ordinary usage be substantially revised*. Glasgow’s theory is normative in the first sense. Putting all of this together, I propose the following taxonomy for conceptual analysis:

#### *Descriptive Analysis*

- *Pure description*: This is the practice of describing an existing linguistic norm, the purpose of which is to state, report and/or clarify the norm (e.g., to dissolve conceptual confusion about the norm). The analysis terminates in a normative description (i.e., mere description of the current norm).

#### *Prescriptive/Normative Analysis*

- *Conservatism (reformist analysis)*: This is the two-part analytical project which has descriptive and prescriptive components. The first component is to describe current linguistic norm; the second component is to *affirm* the moral correctness of this norm, to *recommend* it as the morally correct norm, and to proceed to use it

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<sup>24</sup> Wisniewski (2007) argues that clarification of ordinary usage can serve critical ends simply by exposing our norms. He thus rejects Marcuse’s (1964) objection that pure description is committed to conservatism (i.e., the status quo).

to resolve disagreement about particular cases. The analysis terminates in a normative proposal (“Conserve the current definition.”).

- *Revisionism (revisionist analysis)*: This is the practice of criticizing ordinary usage and substantially revising it by way of introducing a new standard of correct use. The analysis terminates in a normative proposal (“Adopt this new definition.”).

Given that conservatism has descriptive *and* prescriptive components, one might wonder why we should characterize this practice as “prescriptive” rather than “descriptive”? This is a reasonable question; it rightly suggests that my taxonomy requires heuristic justification. My reply is that the above taxonomy is justified by the fact that it is helpful for averting conceptual confusion. The terms “description” and “prescription” are associated with distinct pictures. The former corresponds to the picture of the unbiased and normatively neutral observer, on the analogy of a cultural anthropologist or sociologist who develops non-evaluative descriptions of a culture.

While there is arguably a helpful analogue here in the case of pure description,<sup>25</sup> there

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<sup>25</sup> One might question the possibility of giving non-evaluative descriptions. Michael Root identifies three ways in which a theoretical inquiry can be non-evaluative: value-freedom, value-neutrality, and value-irrelevance (1993a). He argues that social scientific theories are evaluative in all three ways (see 1993a and 1993b). A description or theory is *value-free* if it contains no value judgments. A description or theory is *value-neutral* if it is neutral between competing conceptions of the good; both the language *and* grounds of a value-neutral description must be value-free. A description or theory is *value-irrelevant* if no judgment of value rationalizes an interest in a study. The approach that I call *pure description* is value-relevant (as opposed to irrelevant), for the practice has a point; the practice is directed at attaining conceptual clarity that is free from conceptual confusion. As such, it rests on the value that clarity is good and confusion is bad. Further, pure description is value-laden (as opposed to value-free), for it contains statements that express implicit and explicit evaluative judgements: for instance, critical remarks, such as charges of conceptual confusion. Finally, pure description is partisan (rather than value-neutral) if one takes the value of conceptual clarity to consist in a “conception of the good.” None of these observations undermine the non-evaluative nature of pure description in my sense of the term. A pure description of ordinary usage is non-evaluative, in my sense, if it clarifies ordinary usage without proposing revisions to it, criticizing it, or affirming its moral correctness. When pure description is pursued *for the sake of*

can be no such analogue in the conservative account of “descriptive analysis.” For the affirmation of value is a necessary condition for resolving substantive conceptual disagreement. If I am right that Glasgow confuses his own approach to “descriptive analysis” with “pure description,” adopting my proposed terminology can potentially avert this kind of confusion.

If conservatism is driven by the value of conservation/preservation, what is the value that drives the practice of pure description? Pure description leaves ordinary usage where it is. That is, it merely describes ordinary usage for the sake of conceptual clarity. But why is this practice deserving of the name “descriptive analysis”? The justification here is pragmatic. *Conceptual clarity is intrinsically valuable*. For, as we have seen, conceptual clarity about different approaches to conceptual analysis is connected with *freedom from conceptual confusion*. Freedom from conceptual confusion grounds the following stipulative definition: Approaches seeking to resolve definitional/conceptual disagreement are *to be* called “prescriptive” rather than “descriptive,” for doing so can avert substantive misunderstandings. So my proposal is that “descriptive analysis” should be reserved for *pure description* which is driven by the desire to understand what words signify instead of what they could or should signify. “Normative analysis” should be reserved for both conservative *and* revisionist approaches, for both are driven

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*dissolving confusion*, the critical-evaluative components of pure description apply to philosophical theories *about* ordinary usage rather than *to* ordinary usage as such.

by the normative desire to legislate usage—a problem that conceptual clarity alone, however insightful, can never resolve.

### *The Relevance of Practical Objections*

My argument implies that even the most minor or modest reforms of ordinary usage entail a moral commitment. The rationale for this is not that modest reforms are still reforms, but that modest reforms are indicative of a basic normative commitment in terms of which those reforms are to be made. To prescribe reforms to ordinary usage is to tacitly endorse a standard of correctness. If one's standard is conservative, this will render one's analytical project conservative.<sup>26</sup>

This brings me to the second ramification that I would like to discuss—an adequacy condition for prescriptive theories of racism. If we reserve the term “theory of racism” for analyses that aim at resolving disagreement about racism, a corollary of the preceding arguments is that pure description never terminates in a theory of racism (only in perspicuous clarifications of ordinary usage). If theories of racism that propose modest reforms and/or substantive revisions presuppose a standard in terms of which those changes are to be made, then: *Theories of “racism” (that aim at resolving substantive disagreement about racism) occupy a normative space and therefore require normative*

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<sup>26</sup> By “conservative” I do not mean *political conservatism*, but *preservationist conservatism*. The latter is the normative thesis that contemporary linguistic practice should be preserved. Or as Glasgow puts it, it is the proposal that descriptive analysis ought to accommodate ordinary usage, as much as possible.

*argumentation*. It follows that conservative theories of racism, and not just revisionist theories, are open to normative, practical and pragmatic objections.

Blum's definition of "racism" aspires to resolve substantive disagreement by limiting usage to the severest forms of racial ill, thereby accommodating the distinction between racism and less severe racial ills. Glasgow, however, hopes to resolve disagreement without accounting for the practical problems that give rise to contestation. He endorses a definition of "racism" while deliberately ignoring the practical problems that prompt disagreement. Therefore, his analysis is *detached* from the real-life problems surrounding ordinary usage. Detachment, however, implies that his analysis is *unhelpful* for resolving these concerns in a way that meets the corresponding needs. To be sure, Glasgow definition of "racism" sets a limit on its proper use and thereby resolves certain disagreements. For example, by rendering the term synonymous with "racial ill," we can conclusively settle the dispute over whether the high school teacher's action is racist. His resolution, however, leaves something to be desired, for the limit is determined on formalistic abstract-theoretical grounds. Consequently, it does not address the practical concerns that lead Blum, Miles, and others to worry that contemporary usage of "racism" is overinclusive, inflated and morally overloaded. These concerns are set aside as irrelevant to what "racism" should mean despite the fact that they partly explain the origin of the dispute.

The disconnectedness of Glasgow's theory from normative concerns and needs is a function of his failure to *see* the normative nature of his approach. Since he takes himself to be a "cool observer" he thinks that Blum's objections do not touch his analysis. But his detachment is not a cool one, for his analysis commences with, and results in, a conservative prescriptive proposal. Therefore, the kind of detachment he exemplifies is *not* moral neutrality, but lack of proper concern for the object of analysis. To properly resolve disagreement, a definition of "racism" must address the practical concerns that prompt disputes about racism. The philosopher's prescriptive proposal may be conservative or revisionist, but in either case she will have to address the prompting concerns from within some normative space.

### §5 Conclusion

Extrapolating from my argument: *all* adequacy conditions, and not just the ordinary language condition, are norms in need of defending. For they reflect the philosopher's philosophical aspirations. I have thus attempted to justify the adequacy condition implicit in pure description: the analyst should not meddle with current usage when seeking conceptual clarity for its own sake. Wittgenstein was surely right to distinguish *endorsements* of ordinary usage from *clarifications* of ordinary usage. Clarifying a thesis, position, definition, or practice minimally consists in rendering it perspicuous. But the practice of clarification is consistent with a wide variety of subjective attitudes toward the object of description. For instance, one might clarify a

practice that one personally rejects to attain a clearer view about its internal complexity or about why it is problematic (perhaps as Karl Marx aspired to do). I contend that a descriptive analysis that *truly* leaves everything where it is does not meddle with ordinary usage—it neither *approves* nor *disapproves* of current usage, for the aim is not to resolve disputes about current usage, but to better understand ordinary usage in all of its internal complexity, tension, and contestedness.

In conclusion, I have argued that Glasgow's interest in describing current usage for the sake of resolving disagreement implies that (i) he affirms the moral correctness of current linguistic practice. Further, by failing to defend his moral stance against Blum's criticisms of ordinary usage and by relying on this standard to criticize Blum's definition, (ii) he effectively begs the question against Blum and (iii) offers a confused reply to the overinclusiveness objection. Finally, by taking the preservation condition for granted, (iv) his approach is essentially biased against revisionist approaches.

Finally, I suggested that Glasgow is unaware of these ramifications and difficulties because he is conceptually confused. Blum argues that the difficulties resulting from overusage of "racism" prompt the need for a stipulative definition based on historical usage.<sup>27</sup> Glasgow, by contrast, is committed to the claim that ordinary usage is in good moral standing. For although he flirts with the idea that ordinary usage *may not* be in good moral standing, he ultimately relies on the current linguistic norm *as*

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<sup>27</sup> Blum 2002, 7-8.

*though it were* in good moral standing to appraise Blum's position. He therefore confuses the grammatical correctness of his definition with its moral correctness. He does not realize that pure description cannot terminate in a substantive recommendation. In short, he is wrong to think that because his theory is not revisionist, it cannot therefore be normative; that because he does not recommend revisions to ordinary usage, he does not assume a substantive normative position.

It follows that Glasgow's approach smuggles in an unacknowledged value commitment that drives his account, vindicating Blum's claim that the ordinary language condition is not morally neutral. The conservative analyst is not firmly planted in a cool and neutral place, but in a normatively entrenched space.

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