Statement Regarding My 2004 Paper on Racial Profiling

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I co-authored a paper in 2004 (M. Risse, R. Zeckhauser, “Racial Profiling,” Philosophy & Public Affairs, 32, 131-170), which grew out of a teaching exercise at the Harvard Kennedy School I was asked to join as a beginning assistant professor. Although the paper condemned police abuse and exclusive or excessive use of racial information in police tactics and was neither meant for nor received broader policy utilization, I failed at the time to fully understand the historical legacy of slavery and lynching, and current realities of institutional discrimination and brutality against African Americans and other people of color. As a recent immigrant from Germany from a working-class background, what was not clear to me back then is the true extent to which the shameful history of unfair policing has caused great harm to communities of color and is an ongoing challenge to making our society more just. And since I lacked that understanding, it was wrong of me even to join into that teaching exercise back then (which altogether failed to provide the required historical understanding to all involved) and to weigh in on this debate. I wish I had not done so. I am sorry for any anguish caused to students, particularly students of color.

Change starts with me. When I have written and spoken on race-related topics in the last many years and now, I have done so with a better understanding of the larger trends at work, and a profounder appreciation of the depth and rawness of the wounds from racism.
I hope my own journey can illustrate that people in positions of authority must and can acknowledge our institutional roles in miseducating ourselves, our students, and the public. It is imperative that white academics recognize the dividends of whiteness and our own recalcitrance in dismantling racism, and that academic institutions respond to experiences and perspectives of African Americans and other people of color more generally. I hope and believe my current work as a political philosopher, and as the director of the Carr Center, reflects a more inclusive approach to both political philosophy and public policy problem solving.