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Privilege: A critical inquiry

Chaitanya Joshi²  and Sushruth Ravish^{1*} 

¹Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Kanpur, India

²Jyoti Dalal School of Liberal Arts, Narsee Monji Institute of Management Studies, Mumbai, India

*Correspondence: sravish@iitk.ac.in

The word “privilege” has become a part of our everyday conversations. However, it is not evident whether the various interlocutors in discussions on privilege are using it in the same sense. While different instances of privilege like white, male, or caste privilege have been discussed in contemporary academic discourses, we believe there is a lack of clarity regarding the notion of privilege. We critically analyse existing accounts of privilege to show that they leave some room for improvement. We offer an alternative account of privilege as “entitlements that fail to track deserts” that circumvents prevalent definitional ambiguities and emphasises the inherent *undeserving* nature of privilege. The hitherto underexplored links between privileges, deserts, entitlements, and rights can help us formulate a more accurate grasp of privilege.

Introduction

The word ‘privilege’ has become a part of our everyday conversations. While the colloquial usage of privilege in the sense of an honour or special perk has long been in use, in recent years, particular use of privilege and its manifestations such as white, male and caste privilege has attracted wide attention and controversy.¹ However, it is not at all obvious whether in discussions (on social media platforms and news portals) the concept of privilege is being used in the same sense. There appears to be a lack of clarity on a host of questions about privilege. A philosophical investigation that asks “What is privilege?” is invaluable when it brings to the fore the common patterns found in cases where privilege is being sustained or enhanced. In academic discourses, the concept of privilege was primarily elaborated on the basis of metaphors like “invisible knapsack” (McIntosh 1989), “bank account” (McIntosh 2009) and “virus scan programs” (Bailey 2021).² We believe that while such metaphors are illuminative, a more accurate understanding of the notion of privilege is desirable. Perhaps in acknowledgement of this gap, contemporary scholars have offered a range of alternatives to capture the varying usages of privilege. Most scholars pivot on the distinction between “earned” and “unearned” advantages, and identify unearned advantages with privileges (McIntosh 1989; Johnson 2006; Pease 2010; Zack 2015; Kimmel and Ferber 2017). Others have harped on group identities that tend to generate advantages for their members (Hobgood 2000; Dunham and Lawford-Smith 2017; Lowe 2020). Some others have focused on the systemic nature of advantages that are bestowed on some and denied to others (Bailey 1998; 2021).³

1 For instance, in 2019 #mywhiteprivilege started trending and went viral when a Twitter user asked readers to share instances of “outrageous” things they got away with as a white person. <https://twitter.com/Freeyourmindkid/status/1112021132364996610>.

2 These metaphors were coined originally to refer to white privilege, but can be generalised without much difficulty. “Invisible knapsack” refers to how (white) privilege can act as a weightless knapsack that offers special benefits (passports, maps, clothes, etc.) to its owners who can remain oblivious to its existence. “Bank account” refers to the ability of (white) privilege to act as a powerful bank account opened on one’s behalf, but from which one could endlessly spend. “Virus scan programs” work invisibly in the background making us take the security of things for granted.

3 The works cited here are only indicative and not meant to show that the respective commitments of authors are mutually exclusive.

In the first section of this article, we undertake a definitional analysis of privilege to show that each of the considered definitions leaves much to be desired. Learning from the limitations of extant discourse, we formulate adequacy conditions for the definition of privilege such that its varying commitments are captured. We offer an alternative understanding of privilege as “entitlements that fail to track deserts” that satisfy these adequacy conditions.⁴ By circumventing prevalent ambiguities in the discourse, our definition emphasises the inherent *undeserving* nature of privilege. The hitherto underexplored links between deserts, entitlements, rights and privileges help us highlight the inherent undeserving nature of privilege and formulate a more accurate grasp of it.

Defining privilege: Four adequacy conditions

In the existing literature, attempts to define privilege usually begin by noting that privileges are advantages that always seem to accrue benefits for their holder (Johnson 2006; Pease 2010; Monahan 2014; Bailey 2021). Easing the barriers for the holder, or ensuring a smooth passage where others might find the terrain tough can be the work of privilege.⁵ For instance, racial privilege might mean that an individual belonging to the purported dominant race faces much lesser scrutiny and gets accorded default credibility, while people not holding that privilege might be scrutinised more, and their competence trusted less. While privileges are undoubtedly advantages, it would be woefully inadequate if one were to stop at such a description, for all advantages cannot be called privileges. If a student prepares well for an exam, she has an advantage while answering the questions, but we would not want to call her privileged merely on that basis. In recognition of this point, most scholars (as mentioned earlier) refer to privilege as an unearned advantage. However, it is not clear in the existing literature how exactly we should interpret what it is to “earn” an advantage. To the best of our knowledge, none of the proponents of this definition of privilege has satisfactorily clarified what amounts to “earning an advantage”. For instance, Bailey (2021, 10) defines earned advantages as “benefits and strengths attached to any earned condition, skill, asset, or talent that helps a person to move forward”. However, defining earned advantages as emerging from the earned condition is painfully circular. The addition of a skill, asset, or talent does not help any further because if the access is unequal, then advantages that come as a result of one’s skills and talents may still count as privilege even if they are “earned” (Dunham and Lawford-Smith 2017).⁶ This definitional confusion leads to many rightful instantiations of privilege falling outside the ambit of privilege, and several cases that should be excluded are taken to be manifesting privilege.

Adequacy conditions (a) and (b): Explicating “unearned” and “systemic”

We propose that to overcome this confusion, any account of privilege should (a) *either clarify what earning an advantage amounts to, or use an alternate terminology that defines the phenomenon in question*. One might perhaps opine that there is no cause for concern with the definition of privilege because, quite plausibly, earned advantage could be taken to mean “benefits obtained through an expenditure of efforts”, and therefore privilege could be taken to mean benefits obtained *without* any expenditure of efforts. This seems reasonable because when people accuse an individual of privilege, there often is an allegation of lack of effort on the part of the beneficiary. Paradigmatic cases of privilege usually cited are those granted by birth, with no effort exercised by the beneficiary. However, we contend that taking unearned to mean the absence of efforts makes “expending

⁴ We are not the first to identify a possible relation between privilege and deserts. Dunham and Lawford-Smith (2017) also accept that privileges are morally undeserving, but their account is significantly different from ours. We provide a more comprehensive account of deserts in the later sections of this article. At this point, it might be sufficient to understand that “some person or thing deserves some occurrence or mode of treatment in virtue of some fact about him or it” (Sher 1987, 7).

⁵ Borrowing from McIntosh (1989), Bailey (2021) mentions these as positive and negative dimensions of privilege.

⁶ Bailey makes a distinction between perks, advantages and privileges. Perks are defined as earned advantages in the *weak* sense (frequent flier programmes) in contrast to some *strongly* earned advantages (working and putting oneself through college), while privileges are understood as completely ‘unearned’ (Bailey 2021, 10–11). Our argument is that in the absence of clarity on what it is to “earn” a benefit, the inclusion of “unearned” in the definition of privilege would be counter-productive. We further disagree with Bailey when she implies that “unearned advantages” that are trivial and limited in scope (called perks by Bailey) should not be referred to as privileges. The quantum of benefits cannot determine whether something gets designated as a privilege or not.

efforts” and “privileges” mutually exclusive categories with the result that a complete absence of effort would be necessary before one could designate the ensuing advantage as a privilege. Such a qualifying criterion sets too high a bar, and many obvious cases of privilege would therefore get excluded. For instance, in a classroom activity evaluated by a racist teacher, a white student might get more marks or praise for similar efforts compared to a person of colour. Here, the privilege enjoyed by the student is not occurring in the absence of efforts, but their racial identity can be said to have overdetermined their accomplishments. Even when the student was making an “effort”, it would be erroneous to deny the presence of privilege in that interaction. The disproportionate praise the student receives in comparison to their efforts can only be attributed to them being a beneficiary of social hierarchies. In other words, irrespective of the efforts expended and individuals’ abilities, structures like caste, race and gender created by society deliberately favour the privileged. Whether it is caste or racial privilege, the beneficiaries do not simply happen to chance by certain advantages or lack of barriers, but come to enjoy opportunities and favours due to the systems constructed by their societies.

Bailey (1998, 108) accounts for this condition when she attempts to define privilege as benefits “unearned and conferred systematically to members of dominant social groups”.⁷ While Bailey’s usage of dominant social groups and the systematic nature of benefits is a nod in the right direction, it is not particularly helpful as far as the project of defining privilege goes. Firstly, it could be pointed out that members of socially dominant groups could also be marginalised with respect to specific aspects of their life experiences (Jenkins 2017). This possibility of incidental oppression, which is not the consequence of the dominance by social groups, undermines a definition of privilege that relies on social dominance.⁸ Bailey’s definition seems to incorrectly eliminate the possibility of discrimination against members of the dominant social groups. Further, it is equally likely that members of the non-dominant groups might also enjoy privileges. Therefore, any reference to socially dominant groups appears redundant as far as defining privilege is concerned. There is the additional issue of identifying these dominant groups. The usual tools to identify domination rely on how existing privileges are perpetuated. For instance, socially dominant groups are considered to achieve and maintain their dominance through legitimising myths that perpetuate existing privileges for specific group members (Pratto and Stewart 2011), but when we are interested in understanding what privileges are, such an explanation seems impermissible because of its circularity. Further, there is also a lack of clarity on how membership in any social group is understood. For instance, consider Lowe’s (2020, 457) definition of privilege: “a person’s advantage due to their membership in a social group, in contexts where that membership shouldn’t normally matter”. It is not clear what he means by membership in a social group. Social groups can vary from the very formal, institutionalised kind to the loosely formed ones. Clearly, all advantages arising from these memberships cannot be considered privileges. Further ambiguity is introduced when Lowe suggests that privilege arises in some circumstances where social membership is given undue importance. It is not easy to ascertain in which contexts social membership should matter and when it should not. Without these details, it is impossible to make a convincing case for defining privilege the way Lowe does. Thus, in addition to being understood as “unearned advantages”, or in terms of any alternate definition, any account of privilege should (b) *cogently bring out the systemic nature of the benefits conferred to the privileged*.

Owing to such ambiguities in defining privilege, we argue that the scope of privilege at times is cast too wide. McIntosh (1989, 30), for example, argues that privilege includes advantages that are desirable for everyone and those that seem to provide a “licence to be ignorant, oblivious, arrogant and destructive”. The first kind she believes needs to be encouraged and fought for, while the second category is considered harmful to society and the individual for its dehumanising effects. Similarly,

7 Hobgood (2000, 3) also offers a description of privilege on similar lines by claiming that privilege is “largely due to our membership in elite class, race, and sex/gender groups that enjoy unshared power in our society...privilege comes as a result of our dominant positions in interlocking class, race, and sex/gender systems”. Our critique of Bailey’s definition could therefore also apply to Hobgood’s analysis without much variance.

8 The concept of localised or incidental oppression is raised by Fricker (2007). Women with white privilege can still be victims of patriarchy and upper-caste men with caste privilege can become victims of racism, for instance.

Blum (2008), who builds on McIntosh's definition of privilege, distinguishes between two kinds of privileges – those that involve spared injustice, and those that involve unjust enrichment.⁹ Blum defines spared injustice as an absence of “unjust treatment of some kind” that a person lacking privilege otherwise faces. A typical example could be people of colour being stopped for additional inspection by airport security when white people are not. It is unclear what prevents us from simply designating desirable advantages in McIntosh's works and those privileges that involve “spared injustice” in Blum's works as “rights that everyone concerned should enjoy”.

Adequacy conditions (c) and (d): Explicating “rights” and “invisibility”

We believe Blum's and McIntosh's accounts are paradigmatic of efforts that fail to demarcate privileges from rights because the adoption of the “unearned advantages” definition of privilege means that certain rights too can descriptively fit the definition, leading to a troubling conflation of rights and privileges. Gordon (2004) raises a similar worry against traditional definitions of privilege by highlighting how the absence of certain goods, often erroneously categorised as an instance of privilege, should more appropriately be treated as a violation of rights.

These goods are, in other words, human rights, and as such, the term ‘privilege’ runs counter to their normative import since such rights are by definition imperatives that apply to and for all human beings (Gordon 2004, 175).

This argument is also echoed by Monahan (2014), who argues that certain privileges (like those mentioned by McIntosh) should best be understood as rights denied to the non-privileged. When only a handful of people enjoy an advantage that should ideally be available to everyone, it might appear acceptable to designate it as a privilege, but this runs the risk of gross miscategorisation. Designating certain rights as privileges makes the former appear as “supererogatory advantages and perks that the privileged enjoy unjustly, rather than recognising that they are rights of which the non-privileged are being deprived” (Monahan 2014, 76). When institutions are obligated to provide specific benefits to all members of a particular group, but offer them only to a few, it is more appropriate to refer to it as a denial of “equal justice under law”, or a more general form of violation of a principle of equal concern (Scanlon 2018, 7). For example, there was a time in many Western countries when women were not allowed to vote. There might be a temptation to call voting (at that time and place) a privilege granted to men. However, it is better categorised as a comparative wrong that violates women's rights. In any less-than-an-ideal world, there are bound to be individuals who are being denied their due rights. This by itself should not license us to call such benefits privileges, for, in that case, all rights risk being categorised as privileges. Subsuming rights under privileges might lead individuals

to think of themselves as having no special claim to kindness or consideration from others, so that whenever even minimally decent treatment is forthcoming, they would think themselves lucky... The harm to individual self-esteem and character development would be incalculable (Feinberg 1973, 58).

Conflating rights and privileges also raises worries over ameliorative efforts being misdirected. Remedial action for the violation of rights should focus on those being denied their due, while the requisite response to instances of privilege is to focus on those who are getting more than their due. Rectification for the comparative wrong of women being denied voting rights came about by focusing on how women were not treated fairly, and not that men were getting an advantage they should not be getting. Rights are “indispensably valuable possessions”, the loss of which could lead to “moral impoverishment”, and therefore deserve to be treated with utmost seriousness (Feinberg 1973, 58). Any attempt to conflate rights with privileges would, in our opinion, only undermine the gravity of the struggle to give people their due. We claim that existing accounts run a two-fold risk by not making the rights/privilege distinction central to their project. Firstly, it risks diluting the concept of privilege to meaninglessness to the extent that any benefit, even what we would

⁹ We believe that these are the only two instances of scholars engaging with the taxonomy of privilege.

typically understand as a benign natural right, can be designated a privilege. Secondly, it does a disservice to the struggles of those fighting for their rights by turning our ear away from them, and instead making it another issue about how the privileged can rescue, control and fix, such that it can restore their own goodness rather than understanding systematic wrongdoing (Bailey 2011). Thus, we assert that an account of privilege must (c) *demarcate privileges from rights*.

Existing accounts of privilege also construe privilege as being invisible to the beneficiary of the privilege. It is argued that the normalisation of privilege renders the privileged myopic to the unearned benefits they receive. As Kimmel and Ferber (2017, 3) put it,

[t]o be straight, or male, or middle class is to be simultaneously ubiquitous and invisible. You're everywhere you look. You are the standard against which everyone else is measured.¹⁰

The invisibility of privilege has primarily been referred to in the literature through different metaphors such as the “invisible knapsack” (MacIntosh 1989), “running with the wind at your back” (Kimmel and Ferber 2017, 1), and “word processing programs” that are structurally concealed from the users (Bailey 2012). Along with these metaphors that highlight invisibility, conceptual accounts of privilege also seem to imply that invisibility is a significant characteristic of privilege (Pease 2010; Kimmel and Ferber 2017; Lowe 2020). Such an emphasis could lead one to believe that invisibility is a necessary condition for privilege to exist. However, traditional discussions appear to excessively focus on the unconscious nature of privileges. In many instances of white, male privilege, individuals might hold on to their privilege even after being made to realise they are privileged.¹¹ If privilege is only incidentally visible, then a further account of why this is so (visible in some cases and invisible in others) is owed to us. Suppose one were to understand privilege as unearned advantages. In that case, it is incumbent on proponents of such a definition to claim that either the unearned nature and/or advantages are invisible to the beneficiaries of privilege. Therefore, we ask that the proponents of existing accounts of privilege should (d) *explain how and why privilege tends to be invisible*.¹²

So far, we have attempted to bring out four conditions that any account of privilege has to satisfy. While existing accounts might fulfil a few of these conditions in isolation, we believe that a more accurate understanding of privilege is possible and desirable.¹³ In the next section, we offer an account of privilege that satisfies the four conditions laid out above.

A deserts-based account of privilege

Two characteristics of privilege seem to stand out to us in any instantiation of privilege. Firstly, we find that privileges occur necessarily in the absence of deserts claims. We were led to this observation by the following reasoning – Consider any individual S with a privilege *x*. Whenever S has *x*, it appears intuitively true that it is morally permissible for S not to be granted *x*. If it is morally permissible for S not to be granted *x*, then it entails that it is not necessary for S to be granted *x* (on moral grounds). If it is not necessary for S to be granted *x*, then it is equivalent to saying that it is not the case that S *should* be granted *x* (on moral grounds). The requirement that S should be granted *x* (on moral grounds) is essentially a normative claim whose substantiation comes from deserts claims in many everyday conversations (Kinghorn 2021). The permissibility of *x* not being granted to S (on moral grounds) establishes that *x* is not deserts for S. Therefore, privileges appear to us as inherently

10 Kimmel and Ferber (2017, 4) observe that the invisibility of privilege can be interpreted in a double sense: “in describing both the power relations that are kept in place by the very dynamics of invisibility, and in the sense of privilege as a luxury”. According to them, an individual enjoys certain privilege on account of their owning up an identity belonging to a superordinate category, and hence in one of the senses, privilege remains invisible to the individual as she has the luxury of not seeing it, while in the other sense, it is invisible as the power structure ensures privilege.

11 Monahan (2014) and Wildman and Davis (1996) have also questioned whether instances of privilege always remain invisible to the beneficiaries of privilege.

12 We realise that the literature on epistemology of ignorance (Alcoff 2007) have offered different accounts of how and why one could be ignorant of one’s own privilege. However, our charge is that those who offer a definition of privilege have not fully accounted for the causes and manifestations of the contingent nature of invisibility.

13 For instance, McIntosh (1989) and Bailey (2021) account for the systemic nature of privileges in their definitions.

antithetical to deserts.¹⁴ This fits well with widely accepted formal account of deserts, according to which there is a three-place relation between an individual, the benefit concerned and the grounds for accordance of that benefit.¹⁵ For instance, X (any benefit/mode of treatment) would be the deserts for M (individual/ group of individuals) if having V (any virtue/skill/effort) has changed the normative status of M's having X (Sher 1987).

Secondly, privileges occur necessarily in the form of entitlements. Entitlements can be said to be claims by an agent to a benefit on some basis (Feldman and Skow 2020). While agents can claim a host of benefits, only those sanctioned by society concern us. While advantages can be provided purely from one individual to another as a favour or as part of a transaction, entitlements “concern procedural claims grounded in public practices: in legal, or quasi-legal rules, real or hypothetical” (Kristjánsson 2006, 45). There is always a system needed to formulate and implement entitlements, and to that extent, entitlements are impersonal compared to advantages. Thus, we believe that privileges are concomitant with entitlements. The centrality of these two observations leads us to conceive of privileges as entitlements that fail to track deserts.¹⁶

Satisfying adequacy conditions (a) and (b)

Defining privilege as a species of “entitlement” emphasises the social conferment of benefits referred to in privilege. Consider a person who has a rags-to-riches story. Although they would enjoy certain privileges that come with being wealthy, what benefits and advantages they get to enjoy on account of their wealth are not decided by them alone. While some choices and effort are involved in aspiring for and achieving social entitlements, what these entitlements entail is pre-decided by society. We do not mean here that people cannot negotiate particularities of their social entitlements, but simply that they are operating under larger social structures not of their own making. Consequently, we believe that the systemic conferment of privilege required by condition (b) gets satisfied in our definition. As far as the fulfilling requirement stipulated by condition (a) goes, we have circumvented the ambiguities that plagued traditional definitions by replacing the term “unearned” with “failure to track deserts”. While some privileges might be “unearned” (in whichever sense one might use the term *earn*), like male and white privileges, others are not. Social entitlements arising out of wealth or position in an organisational structure might be “earned”, but when deemed not proportional to what they deserve, it can be termed a privilege. This move helps us to capture the essence of what privileges are by integrally connecting them with deserts. When people object to instantiations of privilege, it is not because of a lack of effort on the part of the privileged, but because of the perceived lack of “deservingness” of the privileged.

We can foresee two possible criticisms against our definition. Firstly, critics might contend that we have not in any substantive sense shifted the discourse because unearned can be interpreted as “undeserved”. It is unclear to us whether such an interpretation (namely unearned as undeserved) is feasible since, intuitively, earning and deserving appear as distinct concepts and the meanings of “earned” and “deserved” rarely converge (Dunham and Lawford-Smith 2017). For instance, a CEO of a company earning 100 times that of an ordinary worker in the firm could claim that the benefits are all *earned* by their talent and efforts. While one cannot deny that the CEO has made efforts to obtain such benefits, it gets called privilege because of the assumption that all the perks

14 Here is an example to make the same point. Consider the privilege that the eldest son (S) of a family has of “inheriting the estate of his father” (x). It would be morally permissible if the eldest son were not to inherit the estate. That is to say that it is not necessary for the eldest son to inherit the estate. This is equivalent to saying that it is not the case that the eldest son should inherit the estate. To say that the eldest son should inherit the estate would have been a normative statement, often justified by deserts claims. Since it is permissible for the eldest son not to be granted the estate, it can be established that “inheriting the estate” is not a desert for the eldest son.

15 While there could be different grounds for deserts, such as virtue-based (Hurka 2001), actions-based (Feldman 1995), and effort-based (Barry 1965; Sadurski 1985), as Olsaretti (2003) points out, there is a consensus that the grounds for deserts must be pertinent to features or actions of that individual themselves. Our choice of this particular definition of deserts does not force us to commit to any specific way of understanding the grounds of deserts.

16 Our definition is committed to the idea of deserts being pre-institutional in contrast to entitlement which is invariably institutional (Feinberg 1970). Not distinguishing between entitlements and deserts comes at the cost of denying the distinction between “what one deserves” and “what one is entitled to” (Kleinig 1971). While one might choose not to grant us this assumption and argue for deserts as being essentially institutional, such a position, we believe, would have to end up denying the existence of privilege as well.

and benefits the CEO has are not *morally deserved*. In many everyday examples too, what appears to substantiate charges of privilege are not references to efforts or their lack, but an appeal to the undeserving nature of the entitlement being received by the said individual. Further, the scope of the term “deserved” seems to be broader than that of the term “earned”. It appears to us that “earned” is solely defined based on effort, leading to the exclusion of skill in overall competence. While individuals can be deserving of a particular advantage merely on account of their skills alone, they cannot claim to have earned that advantage in the absence of effort. Consequently, according to the “unearned advantage” definition, even the skill-based, unearned (with no relevant effort) advantages will have to be categorised as a privilege. For example, consider how in the Oscar-nominated movie *Lagaan*, a differently abled character – Kachra – is drafted into a cricket team purely because of how he could *naturally* spin the ball (owing to his disability).¹⁷ His inclusion, while deserving (by virtue of his skill), does not indeed appear to have been earned in the absence of relevant effort. Kachra did not put any intentional and relevant effort in acquiring the skill of spinning the ball, which was purely accidental. Therefore, while Kachra’s inclusion might count as deserving according to us, it will be mistakenly categorised as an unearned advantage and, by extension, a privilege according to the traditional definition. Lastly, we would like to highlight again that the meaning of “earned” has not been clarified in the existing literature, and thus there is no textual support for such an interpretation. The divergence of meanings in the two cases is clear enough to claim that “unearned” and “undeserved” have different references.

A second possible objection from the critics could be to point out that privilege is not integrally linked with deserts by citing everyday usages of privilege, where it might be used to mean honour or a special perk provided to a lucky few. For instance, when a speaker claims that she is *privileged* to be addressing a gathering, there is no sense of her acknowledging that she has some entitlements in excess of her deserts. Traditional discourses on privilege tend to ignore everyday usages of privilege as non-philosophical and disparate (Lowe 2020). We are not inclined to toe this line as the distinction between philosophical and non-philosophical usages appears ad-hoc. On closer examination, what might appear as an honour or special perk can reveal itself as an undeserved entitlement. We see no merit in distinguishing between the colloquial and philosophical usages of the terms as far as their relation to the absence of deserts is concerned. Our definition has the virtue of offering a unified account of privilege that can account for varying uses of the term, irrespective of whether it is being used in academic discourse or elsewhere.

Our approach also marks a breakthrough by foregrounding the concept of deserts in the conceptual analysis of privilege. While there is considerable disagreement on the nature and the grounds of deserts (Feinberg 1970; Rawls 1971; Sher 1987; Kagan 2012), there is consensus that, at the very least, deserts indicate a thought that some individuals might be more deserving than others. In general, it is a desirable state of affairs, all things considered, that treatment of individuals tracks their deserts (Kagan 2012).¹⁸ As Olsaretti (2003, 4) puts it, “to say that someone deserves something is to claim that she ought, other things being equal, to get that thing, or that it would be morally better that she get it”. Thus, any deserts claim brings with it a normative force. Firstly, the normative force of a deserts claim could be based on the obligations it creates for people. X is obligated to provide Y with what they deserve, as in cases where a worker could be said to deserve a safe environment to work and, therefore, there is an obligation on the management to provide safety gear and equipment to the worker. Secondly, the normative force could be based on how it would be a good thing if Y has what they deserve for reasons connected with their deserts.¹⁹ In the case of the worker considered before, if they exceed their production targets and contribute to the company’s

17 <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0169102/>

18 In the literature on deserts, it is possible to distinguish between comparative and non-comparative deserts. Non-comparative deserts are a matter of fairness and has to do with the well-being of a person, given the virtues that a person has (Kagan 2012). Comparative deserts, on the other hand, are claims that an individual can make given that other similarly placed individuals are either getting more or less than what they deserve, and vice versa. However, as Kristjánsson (2006) and Kinghorn (2021) have shown, non-comparative deserts can also have minimal elements of comparison. For our purposes in this article, mentions of deserts should be taken to refer to non-comparative deserts broadly understood.

19 Sher calls them value claims (1987).

cost-cutting exercises, one might say they deserve an increment in the next appraisal. If, however, by some twist of fate (say the company shows a drop in sales and profits), they fail to get an increment, then there appears to be no lapse on the part of the management. The deserts claim stands not on the basis of any obligations being imposed, but because, given their excellent performance so far, it would be good if they were to secure an increment. Unlike this deservingness of increment, the deservingness of the worker's safety could be termed as the worker's right. In our framework, rights could be understood as deserved entitlements since their deservingness creates obligations on others to extend those rights to the deserved.

Satisfying adequacy conditions (c) and (d)

We believe that rights and privileges are species of social entitlements. For instance, workers are *entitled* to salaries based on the work they have done as per their contract; on the other hand, in a racist society, members of the allegedly dominant race might claim that they are *entitled* to preferential treatment on account of their superior social status. While both the above cases are of social entitlements, what helps us call the second set of examples instances of privilege is the fact that the benefits being claimed (because of their race) are morally undeserved. The social entitlements in the second set are privileges because they describe claims made by individuals purely on account of the social positions they find themselves occupying. Paying attention to why we object to entitlements arising out of race or gender, but not those emerging from being workers, helps us see the implicit link between privileges and deserts. We believe that workers morally deserve a salary for their work, but that people belonging to the dominant race do not deserve to be merely obeyed because they belong to that particular race. On our account, all deserved entitlements could be taken as rights and all undeserved entitlements as privileges. Such a distinction between rights and privileges, we believe, also allows the possibility of understanding certain rights as absolute in nature because, as discussed in the previous section, the conflation of rights with privileges not only devoids rights of their sanctity, but also takes the sting out of the accusation of privilege. Thus, the notion of deserts we employ also provides a clear distinction between rights and privileges, thereby satisfying condition (c). This move reinforces the relevance of the discourse on privilege, distinct from any discourse on rights.²⁰

Including deserts as part of the definition of privilege offers insights that are missing from other accounts that understand privilege as broadly "unearned" benefits. Having morally undeserved entitlements does not make someone privileged in their entirety, but only in a qualified manner. That is to say that one is privileged as an owner of a specific identity. There can never be an absolute privilege; there is always a male privilege, white privilege, class privilege, etc. An individual is an aggregation of identities (some of which might have been adopted by choice, while others might have been conferred by default). Some of these identities confer advantages on their holders, while others might bring disadvantages depending on the existing social structures. In any given society, an individual might be privileged by their membership in a particular group (often referred to as a superordinate category) and simultaneously marginalised because of their membership in some other group (often referred to as a subordinate category) (Kimmel and Ferber 2017). In a patriarchal society, an individual's male identity is rooted in a superordinate category that confers certain morally undeserving entitlements on him. In contrast, other identities of female and a third gender are consequently rooted in subordinate categories. In addition, a man might be the recipient of certain morally undeserving entitlements as a result of belonging to the superordinate category of being male. Still, because of his belonging to other subordinate categories, if there are any (as in the case of belonging to a lower caste), he might be a recipient of certain disadvantages.²¹ Thus, it can be argued that the social ontology of personhood is constituted of superordinate and subordinate

20 We are not necessarily committed to the existence of absolute rights, but we consider it a virtue of our account that it allows the possibility of there being such.

21 This framework to understand the social constitution of personhood as constituted of identities rooted in superordinate and subordinate categories parallels the framework of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991). The framework construes personhood as a collection of diverse identities that are interwoven in terms of how they constitute the self.

categories. Our discussion on the relation of identity with privilege explains why individuals are often oblivious to their privileged status. This is especially true when individuals who have not asserted a particular identity claim that by their non-assertion, they cannot be beneficiaries of any privilege that accrues from their unasserted identity. Individuals might claim they cannot be beneficiaries of white privilege since they have never asserted their white identity. However, as our discussion suggests, the subjective assertion of any identity is independent of the objective conferment of privilege. It can also be said that the more emphatically an individual asserts (their own) identity vested in a superordinate category, perhaps the more their privilege becomes invisible to them.²² Confronting privilege thus becomes a greater challenge owing to this subjective “invisibility” of privileges in cases of both over-assertion and lack of assertion of identities.

This invisibility of privilege, however, is not found invariably with the state of privilege. It is not that the privileged *cannot see* their privilege, but often, they *do not see* it. We believe that there are different modes by which this invisibility of privilege can be manifested. Firstly, there might be invisibility of both – the existence of benefits and their underserved nature. In such cases, the individuals concerned might be so accustomed to the “benefits” they are receiving that they would see these advantages as just being part of a natural state of affairs. This assumption that *what they receive is just how it has to be* makes them myopic towards the “undeserving” nature of their advantages.²³ For instance, until recently, in many cultures, it was the norm for only the eldest son to inherit the family’s wealth and take over the business of the estate. Given the ubiquitous nature of the custom, it might be the case that the beneficiaries did not consider this an advantage as much as the natural order of things. Here again, we believe the traditional definition fails to account for why the subjects failed to perceive their privilege. While it is conceivable that individuals experiencing normalised privilege come to treat it as the natural order of things, it is difficult to see how anybody could have reasonably construed it as an earned advantage. In the example considered above, it is hardly conceivable that inheritance based on birth order could have been construed as having been “earned”. The second mode of invisibility concerns cases where the privileged acknowledge the benefits they have been bestowed but fail to perceive the “undeservingness” of the benefits. For example, first-generation billionaires might concede that their wealth fetches them advantages but might stress that they deserve them because they have earned these benefits by their acumen, talent and skills. Again, the mistake is to conflate the meaning of the terms “earned” and “deserved”. As we have argued before, expenditure of effort does not necessarily make one a deserving recipient. Lastly, there might be individuals to whom the advantages and their undeserved nature are clearly visible.²⁴ For example, a politician’s son might use his parent’s clout to evade arrest. It is evident that he knows he has an advantage, and the clandestine nature in which the influence is exerted might also indicate that the person knows the morally problematic nature of the interaction. While not being able to see privilege can render individuals more prone to be recipients of such benefits, the mere acknowledgement of privilege does not diminish it, and they can continue to collect benefits (Pease 2010). Thus, by highlighting the incidental nature of the invisibility of privilege and explaining how and why privilege tends to be invisible, our account satisfies condition (d). Our account of privilege is thus able to fulfil the four adequacy conditions and can provide us with expanded avenues for engaging with privilege.

22 We do not claim that the invisibility of privilege is an invariable consequence of one’s assertion of an identity emerging from a superordinate category, but there might be a correlation. Pratto and Stewart (2012) argue for a similar thesis where they present empirical justification to explain the phenomenon of invisibility of privilege. According to them, the invisibility of privilege to the superordinate group and its visibility to the subordinate group is explained through two different psychological models, namely norm theory and social dominance theory.

23 Pratto and Stewart (2012) talk of how the privileged lack social comparison information to recognise the discrimination they do not experience. Members of superordinate groups might have a block in their imagination that prevents them from realising their privilege.

24 Logically speaking, there could be another combination where individuals may find the advantages invisible but the undeserving nature of privilege was visible to them. This combination, however, is untenable because only with the cognisance of the advantages does the question of their deservingness arise.

Conclusion

The thrust of the discourse on privilege should be to address allies and ensure that they can question and challenge systems of privilege that perpetuate oppression. Such allies would also be interested in learning if they had become unwitting accomplices in creating social structures that facilitate oppression, and would be eager to amend them. For the discourse on privilege to fulfil its purpose then, it is imperative that individuals recognise privilege when they see its instantiations. To facilitate this recognition, we have attempted to develop four adequacy conditions that any account of privilege should satisfy. Our proposed definition of privileges as entitlements that fail to track deserts allows us to fulfil these conditions while circumventing the murky distinction between earned and unearned advantages. We believe that such an understanding of privilege can be expected to push the conscientious among us to work towards either relinquishing these entitlements where possible, or attempting to redeem themselves by addressing systemic inequalities.

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ORCID IDs

Chaitanya Joshi – <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2784-3588>

Sushruth Ravish – <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9944-0211>

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