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CHAPTER 14

Privilege

PRIVILEGE: WHAT IS IT, WHO HAS IT, AND WHAT SHOULD WE DO ABOUT IT?

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The popular podcast *Death, Sex & Money* featured an interview in 2017 with a woman who supported herself by regularly shoplifting.[1] While that alone would have made the episode notable, the controversy that followed focused on what "Alice" (as she asked to be called) said about what would happen if she were caught: "I'm a white female," she said, "so I feel like I would get off a lot easier than some other people would." The interviewer fell silent for a moment, and then asked her: "How does that feel to say out loud?" Alice replied: "It's . . . kind of disgusting to me, but, I mean, it's how the world is . . . "

What Alice is talking about here is *privilege*, a word that seems like it's everywhere these days. It's common to hear about "white privilege," "male privilege," or that you should "check your privilege." Yet there's little agreement on what "privilege" actually means, and as a result, such conversations tend to be heated and unproductive. This is also the case in academia, where scholars have often disagreed about the nature and definition of "privilege."[2] Here, I propose an account of privilege that aims to capture as much previous academic discussion as possible. I argue that once we have a clear understanding of what "privilege" means, many misunderstandings can be cleared up and common objections answered.

1. What Is Privilege?

Let us define *privilege* as a person's advantage due to their membership in a social group, in contexts where that membership shouldn't normally matter. If Alice's judgment is accurate, and she would be punished less harshly if she were caught shoplifting, then her example fits the definition of privilege. First, if she were caught she would have an advantage compared to others: Lenient treatment is an advantage. Second, the advantage is due to her membership in a social group: It is because she is a member of the social group *white women*. And third, in that

context, her membership in a social group shouldn't normally matter: The punishment should fit the crime and should not be based on the perpetrator's gender or race.

The point about context is important because sometimes a person's membership in a social group *should* matter. Members of a country club have certain perks—golfing on especially nice grass, I guess?—that non-members (like me, obviously) don't have. As long as that's the context we're talking about, those advantages aren't morally problematic. Yet if we were to find out that members of country clubs got an additional ten points automatically added to their SAT scores, that *would* be problematic, because in that context—taking the SAT—whether one is a member of the country club or not shouldn't matter. (In fact, it's natural to say that in this context and the context of shoplifting, the social group a person belongs to shouldn't *ever* matter—but as we will see later on, the qualification that membership in a given social group shouldn't *normally* matter is important.)

The definition of privilege I've proposed here is a philosophical use of the term that has been developed only recently. The original sense of the term was that a "privilege" was a special perk available to a lucky few. We still use the word in this way; if you get the chance to meet a brilliant artist, you might say, "It's a privilege to meet you." A lot of confusion about privilege comes from mixing up the new, philosophical use of the term with its original, ordinary use.

One such confusion is that if someone has privilege, they must have an easy life. In the ordinary sense of the term, a "life of privilege" would be an easy life, but in the philosophical sense of the term, one can have advantages without having an easy life. Even if Alice is correct about the advantages she would have over others, she has not had an easy life, as indicated by her stealing just to get by. Here, an analogy from the sociologist Michael Kimmel is helpful. Privilege, he says, is like walking with the breeze at your back, giving you a push in the direction you want to go.[3] While the wind at your back is helpful, it can't do your walking for you—you still have to expend energy to get where you're going. This doesn't mean that privileges are insignificant—when a number of privileges combine, the advantage can be quite significant. Nevertheless, while privilege may make some things *easier*, that's not the same as making life *easy*.

Another confusion is that privileges can never be rights. For instance, when using the ordinary sense of the term, we say, "Voting is a right, not a privilege," to draw a distinction between certain nice things in life and the basic goods to which everyone is entitled. This can make it seem like privileges are about rather trivial advantages, rather than fundamental rights.[4] But in the philosophical sense of the term, having a right could be a privilege. Consider the time in U.S. history when only men could vote. Because those men had an advantage over women, it makes sense to talk about them as privileged, even though the specific privilege we're talking about is *also* a right. Peggy McIntosh, the theorist who coined the newer use of the term "privilege," wanted to avoid this confusion; some privileges, she said, "should be the norm in a just society and should be considered as the entitlement of everyone."[5]

2. Who Has Privilege?

It's easy to talk about the existence of privilege in long-ago periods of history, where privilege was formally recognized in the law, but what about the here and now? Is Alice right when she implies that privilege exists today? It would be impractical to undertake a comprehensive account of every form of privilege that exists, but we can briefly survey a few examples of contemporary privilege:

- White privilege: Alice's story is reminiscent of a remark made by McIntosh, who notes that as a white woman, "I can go shopping alone most of the time, fairly well assured that I will not be followed or harassed by store detectives."[6]
- Male privilege: When walking home at night alone, men do not generally have to consider the risk of being sexually assaulted.
- Straight privilege: Straight people can hold the hand of their partner in public without worrying whether it is safe to do so.
- Able-bodied privilege: Able-bodied people can use the entrance of the building that is nearest to them without it being inaccessible and having to look for another entrance (if there even is one).

Not all examples of privilege are as clear-cut as these, because it is not always obvious whether certain advantages are due to one's membership in a social group, or to other factors, like one's character, upbringing, or just luck. However, even if we only focus on the clear cases, there are some patterns that help us understand how privilege works in the real world.

First, *privilege tends to be invisible to the person who has it.*[7] In each of the examples above, the privileged group does not have to deal with obstacles that the disadvantaged group must reckon with. Yet it is human nature to notice obstacles—not their absence. (And for good reason—to notice everything that is absent would be to notice an infinite number of things!) Because I am able-bodied, I couldn't tell you where the wheelchair-accessible entrance to my office building is. I'm pretty sure there is one, and I've probably even used it. But because a stairs-only entrance poses no obstacle to me, I don't notice which entrances have stairs and which do not. Yet a person in a wheelchair can't help but notice which entrances are accessible and which are not. To return to Michael Kimmel's analogy, we tend not to notice when the wind is at our backs; all we feel is our forward momentum. But if we turn around and try to walk against the wind, we notice it right away.

Second, *privilege is contextual.* Our definition already says that privilege is contextual in one way, because privilege concerns contexts where the social group one belongs to shouldn't normally matter. But privilege turns out to be contextual in yet another way: Whether membership in a social group provides one with an advantage at all depends upon the context. The examples above are taken from the context of the United States, but being white or a woman is surely different in Saudi Arabia or Zimbabwe or China.

Yet even within the United States, there are different contexts that affect who has privilege and how it functions. A few years ago, the professional basketball

player Nik Stauskas said that in the NBA he was treated as if he needed to prove himself because he was white.[8] I'm not in the NBA—not *yet*, I like to tell myself—so I don't know for sure whether Stauskas is correct. But the majority of NBA players are black, and stereotypes paint whites as less athletic than blacks, so what Stauskas is saying seems plausible enough: Within the NBA, there may be a kind of black privilege. Of course, that doesn't mean that the same is true within society in general; however, it does illustrate how membership in a social group may give a person an advantage in some contexts but not in others.

Third, *privilege is intersectional.* Intersectionality acknowledges that a person is a member of multiple social groups at the same time—an individual not only has a race but also a gender, not only a sexual orientation but also a class. Accordingly, intersectionality says that a person's experiences are affected by the intersection of these identities, and thus can't be reduced to any one of them.[9] Consider, for instance, the way that lesbians are often accused of being "man-haters."[10] This is not reducible to their identity as women; heterosexual women do not in general face a stereotype of being man-haters. Nor is it reducible to their identity as homosexuals; gay men do not generally face a stereotype of being woman-haters. In other words, how lesbians are treated is due not to one aspect of their identity or another, but to the intersection of their identities as homosexual women.

Intersectionality reminds us not to reduce a whole host of privileges to one fundamental kind of privilege. It is tempting to do this with class, since it is natural to wonder whether poverty neutralizes all the advantages one might have from other aspects of one's identity. Can it really be the case that poor white people, who are sometimes callously referred to as "white trash," nevertheless have white *privilege*? The example of Alice indicates that poor whites can have privilege. The reason she steals, after all, is that she is poor, yet despite that poverty, she still has white privilege with respect to how she would be treated if caught. Of course, that doesn't mean that Alice's white privilege is the exact same as that of a rich white man—rich whites may receive advantages from their whiteness that poor whites don't get.[11] This itself is an insight of intersectionality, which reveals how privilege will change depending on the other aspects of a person's identity, including whether they are rich, poor, or somewhere in between.

Objections to the Account of Who Has Privilege

The examples considered so far seem to paint a picture of straight, white, able-bodied men as the group in America with the greatest privilege. Yet many people do not see things this way; a poll in 2017 showed that the majority of white Americans believe that whites face discrimination based on their race.[12] Indeed, it is more and more common to believe that straight white men are in fact one of the *less* privileged groups in America.

The sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild has studied the evolution of these beliefs about contemporary American society, and what she calls "the deep story" underlying them.[13] The deep story relies on a metaphor that goes like this. Imagine that you and many others are patiently trudging up a very long hill in single file. At the top of the hill is the American Dream. You hope to reach the top, or at least, to keep moving forward, and end up further ahead than where you started. But as time goes on, you wonder whether you are actually moving forward at all, and at times you seem to be moving backwards. That is when you see people cutting in line ahead of you. And what's worse, they are doing so with the help of the very people who are supposed to be monitoring the line—the American government. If you are a white person standing in line, you see black and brown people given spots ahead of you by affirmative action. If you are a man standing in line, you see women gaining ground as their cultural achievements are celebrated in the name of diversity. If you are a straight person standing in line, you see gay people moving forward and being lauded just for coming out. Whether in terms of material benefits or cultural recognition, all these people seem to be cutting in front—and as they slide into their new place in line, they yell over their shoulder that no one is more privileged than the straight white man behind them.

According to the deep story, it is the allegedly disadvantaged groups that have more privilege than straight white men do. As I said earlier, it would be impractical to attempt a comprehensive survey of every form of privilege that exists and survey them all to see who is the most privileged. However, there are still reasons to be skeptical of what the deep story says. The deep story neglects the reason why programs like affirmative action exist in the first place—to compensate groups for some previous disadvantage. Likewise, cultural recognition of women's achievements is partly done to compensate for the fact that women's contributions were undervalued for so long. So the deep story seems to assume that these are in fact *overcompensations*, where the advantages gained by these groups are more significant than the disadvantages they faced.

We have one major reason to doubt that this is accurate: *Attempts to compensate for a group's disadvantage are almost always going to be more visible to privileged groups than the disadvantage itself.* As I noted earlier, one feature of privilege is that it tends to be invisible to those who have it. Thus, they will see little that is in need of compensation. Yet measures to compensate for a group's disadvantage are highly visible—they must be undertaken explicitly, as when companies or universities practice affirmative action as an official policy. The result is that the advantages of being a white person interviewing for a job tend to be invisible; the advantages gained by affirmative action tend to be highly visible. Or to use another example, I may not notice which entrances are wheelchair-accessible, but I see very clearly the handicapped parking spots near the front of the store that I cannot use. So although there is a great deal more to be said about this objection and the deep story than I have space for here, we can already see why the deep story lacks perspective if privilege is generally less visible than our attempts to correct it.

3. What Should We Do About Privilege?

There are a number of misunderstandings about how we should respond to privilege. Some argue that all this talk of privilege paints straight white men as the ultimate villains in contemporary America,[14] implying that one should feel guilty about privilege or be condemned for it. However, when we carefully consider the definition of privilege we've been discussing, we can see that this is irrational.

Recall that privilege is a person's advantage due to their membership in a social group (in contexts where that membership shouldn't normally matter). Yet the social groups one belongs to aren't generally the result of one's own choices, and the advantages one gets from being a member of those groups are conferred not by oneself but by society at large. These are things over which no individual has control. Accordingly, condemnation is unfair and guilt is irrational—one should not be criticized or feel ashamed for what one has no control over. And for the same reason we cannot simply choose *not* to have privilege; if it is not an individual's choice to have privilege, one cannot just choose to jettison it.

But even if the existence of our privilege isn't up to us, *how we respond to our privilege* is. You can, as a first step, try to be conscious of your own privilege. The point is not to wallow in the knowledge of your socially-conferred advantage—that self-indulgently puts the focus on yourself. Rather, the point is to empathize better with members of other social groups, to understand that they may not have the same advantages or face the same obstacles that you do. This is what it means to "check your privilege"—not to feel ashamed for having it or use it as an excuse for inaction, but to acknowledge that your experiences and perceptions of the world may be quite different from those of members of other social groups.

And most importantly, we should consider what we might use our privilege *for*. Think again about Alice. In addition to the fact that she probably shouldn't have been shoplifting, she shouldn't have been willing to benefit from using privilege in the way she did. After all, stores she shoplifted from will probably become more suspicious about shoplifters, and given the stereotypes about black criminality that linger in the background of our society, that suspicion will fall more heavily on black customers. Trevor, a listener to the podcast about Alice, called in to a subsequent episode to express his frustration about how Alice's actions contribute to the way he (as a black man) is treated when he is in a store. In Trevor's words, "I've never stolen from a store, but I'm followed around a store constantly, and it's very frustrating, because you're just like, 'I make good money, why would I be stealing from you?'"[15] All things being equal, people who have privilege should use it to change the social norms that create privilege, and not reinforce those norms.

Objections to the Account of What to Do About Privilege

An objection one might have is that we should not always try to dismantle systems of privilege, because privilege is sometimes justified. For instance, the philosopher Michael Levin has argued that it is rational to more strongly suspect black men like Trevor of being likely to commit crimes than whites, given statistics about the percentages of crimes committed by black men.[16] Accordingly, Levin argues, the police should engage in racial profiling. Since this would create a comparative advantage for whites based on their race, it would create a kind of privilege—but one that Levin thinks would ultimately be justified.

I will not weigh in on the legitimacy of racial profiling, but it's worth mentioning Levin's argument for two reasons. First, it indicates where some may disagree with the account of privilege given so far. And second, it highlights an important feature of the definition of privilege. I noted that privilege involves cases where a person's membership in a social group shouldn't *normally* matter. Accordingly, the definition allows the possibility that people's race or gender could legitimately be taken into account even in contexts like law enforcement. In other words, the definition of privilege itself doesn't settle the debate about whether practices that create privilege, like racial profiling, are legitimate. Nevertheless, whenever there is a privilege, in that context group membership shouldn't normally matter, and so people like Levin face an uphill battle in arguing that an exception should be made. In other words, according to the account here, the burden of proof is on the person who wishes to defend the creation or continuation of privilege.

Another objection one might have is that even if privilege is real, the fact that some have advantages and others have disadvantages doesn't amount to an injustice. And this is because ultimately everyone in a society like ours has the ability to overcome their disadvantages and succeed. Accordingly, we shouldn't accord privilege the attention that should normally be reserved for genuine injustices.

The problem with this objection is that it assumes that as long as it is possible to succeed despite the obstacles one faces, the obstacles themselves don't constitute injustices. This is a mistake. Suppose that a teacher, when giving a test to her students, gave all of the women fifteen minutes more to complete the exam than the men. Imagine that the men protested this unfairness, and the teacher responded: "It's still possible for you to get good grades on the exam. Yes, you may have to study more and take the test faster. But everyone in this class has the ability to succeed on this exam." This would be an unreasonable response, confusing the issue of whether the test was administered fairly with the issue of whether it is possible to succeed on the test. If we live in a society where individuals face disadvantages because of the social groups they belong to, then it's very likely that those disadvantages are unfair. Having to work twice as hard as another person for the very same thing merely because of the social group one belongs to *is itself an injustice*. If those disadvantages can be overcome, then that's good news, but that's not the point—the point is that people shouldn't have to overcome those disadvantages in the first place.

4. What's the Point of Talking About Privilege?

We are all familiar with the idea that in our society, individuals are disadvantaged because of the social groups they belong to. Talk of privilege helps us see the flip side of this pattern—that there are those whose membership in a social group is beneficial. But why think about this at all?

We have already considered some answers to this question: thinking about privilege helps us understand the nature of our society better; it can make us more empathetic people, aware of what members of other social groups go through. But I'd like to suggest a further reason that is worth contemplating: Thinking about privilege may help us understand why the disadvantages that exist in society are likely to persist over time.

If we only think about disadvantages and the ways in which society fails certain groups, it becomes somewhat puzzling why these disadvantages haven't yet been remedied. Yet when we focus on the advantages gained by dominant groups, we recognize that some groups have a vested interest in society staying the way it is. As

we have seen in Hochschild's account of the deep story, groups who have a certain position in society can be profoundly defensive of their "place in line." Privileged groups will tend to resist changes to a status quo that gives them advantages. Thus, thinking about privilege not only helps us understand how the status quo is structured, but why a society with injustice may nevertheless be slow to change.[17]

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Lowe define privilege? In his example, what features give Alice privilege?
2. What confusion comes from using the word "privilege" in a way that deviates from its original and ordinary use?
3. Why is context important when understanding privilege?
4. What is the "deep story," and what is the status quo?
5. Why is a reflection on the nature of privilege important to the present?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Lowe defines privilege as "a person's advantage due to their membership in a social group, in contexts where that membership shouldn't normally matter." How can we know if a person's advantage is due to their own character, hard work, lucky breaks, or their membership in a social group?
2. Some people say that when you're accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression. How well does this explain why many people embrace Hochschild's "deep story" about privilege in America today?

Case 1

Consider this letter to a *New York Times* advice column:

> I'm riddled with shame. White shame. This isn't helpful to me or to anyone, especially people of color. I feel like there is no "me" outside of my white/upper middle class/cisgender identity. I feel like my literal existence hurts people, like I'm always taking up space that should belong to someone else.
>
> I consider myself an ally. I research proper etiquette, read writers of color, vote in a way that will not harm P.O.C. (and other vulnerable people). I engage in conversations about privilege with other white people. I take courses that will further educate me. I donated to Black Lives Matter. Yet I fear that nothing is enough. Part of my fear comes from the fact that privilege is invisible to itself. What if I'm doing or saying insensitive things without realizing it?
>
> Another part of it is that I'm currently immersed in the whitest environment I've ever been in. My family has lived in the same apartment in East Harlem for four generations. Every school I attended, elementary through high school, was minority white, but I'm now attending an elite private college that is 75 percent white. I know who I am, but I realize how people perceive me and this perception feels unfair.
>
> I don't talk about my feelings because it's hard to justify doing so while people of color are dying due to systemic racism and making this conversation

Case 1 (continued)

> about me would be again centering whiteness. Yet bottling it up makes me feel an existential anger that I have a hard time channeling since I don't know my place. Instead of harnessing my privilege for greater good, I'm curled up in a ball of shame. How can I be more than my heritage?
>
> Whitey*

What would Lowe say about this letter? What's good about it? What's bad about it?

*https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/14/style/white-guilt-privilege.html

NOTES

1. "Why I Steal," *Death, Sex, & Money*, September 26, 2017, https://www.wnycstudios.org/story/why-i-steal-death-sex-money
2. This is complicated by the fact that many scholars do not define "privilege" generally, but instead focus on defining particular kinds of privilege, most prominently white privilege. And even in those works, "white privilege" and "male privilege" are not always defined, but are instead elucidated through examples and metaphors. For some representative definitions, see Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies," in *Privilege: A Reader*, edited by Michael S. Kimmel and Abby L. Ferber (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 2016 [4th ed.]), 28–40; Alison Bailey, "Privilege: Expanding on Marilyn Frye's 'Oppression,'" *Journal of Social Philosophy* 29, no. 3 (1998), 104–119; Jeremy Dunham and Holly Lawford-Smith, "Offsetting Race Privilege," *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 11, no. 2 (2017), 1–22. Perhaps the most important precursor to contemporary scholarship on white privilege is the notion of a "psychological wage" gained by whites in America, put forward by W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1998).
3. Michael S. Kimmel and Abby L. Ferber, eds., *Privilege: A Reader* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2016 [4th ed.]), 1.
4. Naomi Zack, *White Privilege and Black Rights: The Injustice of U.S. Police Racial Profiling and Homicide* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 3–4.
5. McIntosh, "White Privilege and Male Privilege," 17.
6. McIntosh, "White Privilege and Male Privilege," 8.
7. McIntosh, "White Privilege and Male Privilege," 4.
8. Jason Jones, "Kings Guard Nik Stauskas Surprised by Reaction to Comments," *Sacramento Bee*, October 15, 2014, http://www.sacbee.com/sports/nba/sacramento-kings/article2667967.html.
9. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991), 1241–1299 Although Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality," there are important precursors of the idea, most notably "A Black Feminist Statement" (1977) by the Combahee River Collective, in Susan Archer Mann and Ashly Suzanne Patterson, eds., *Reading Feminist Theory: From Modernity to Postmodernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 247–252.
10. Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1983), 135.
11. Shannon Sullivan, "White Privilege," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Race*, edited by Naomi Zack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 336–337.
12. Don Gonyea, "Majority of White Americans Say They Believe Whites Face Discrimination," National Public Radio, October 24, 2017, https://www.npr.org/2017/10/24/559604836/majority-of-white-americans-think-theyre-discriminated-against.
13. Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: The New Press, 2016), 136–140.
14. Jonathan Haidt, "The Age of Outrage: What the Current Political Climate Is Doing to Our Countries and Universities," *National Review*, December 29, 2017, http://www.nationalreview.com/article/454964/age-outrage.
15. "Why She Steals: Your Reactions," *Death, Sex, & Money*, October 17, 2017, https://www.wnycstudios.org/story/why-she-steals-death-sex-money.

16. Michael Levin, "Responses to Race Differences In Crime," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 23, no. 1 (1992): 5–29.
17. I am grateful to Ami Cho, Barrett Emerick, Bob Fischer, Alison M. Jaggar, Katie Keller, Joseph Stenberg, and Benjamin Stine for their thoughtful comments on previous drafts of the paper. Special thanks are due to Ami Cho for her research help, Katie Keller for introducing me to the podcast episode with which I begin the article, and Spencer Case for his generosity in first suggesting I join this project.