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Michael J. Monahan^a

^a Department of Philosophy, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, USA

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The concept of privilege: a critical appraisal¹

Michael J. Monahan

Department of Philosophy, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, USA
michael.monahan@marquette.edu

In this essay, I examine the use of the concept of privilege within the critical theoretical discourse on oppression and liberation (with a particular focus on white privilege and anti-racism in the USA). In order to fulfill the rhetorical aims of liberation, concepts for privilege must meet what I term the ‘boundary condition’, which demarcates the boundary between a privileged elite and the rest of society, and the ‘ignorance condition’, which establishes that the elite status and the advantages it confers are not publicly recognised or affirmed. I argue that the dominant use of the concept of privilege cannot fulfill these conditions. As a result, while I do not advocate for the complete abandonment of the rhetoric of privilege, I conclude that it obscures as much as it illuminates, and that the critical theoretical discourse on liberation and oppression should be suspicious of its use.

The critical-theoretical literatures on various forms of oppression (race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, etc.) make common appeal to the notion of *privilege*. There is male privilege, white privilege, class privilege, heterosexual privilege and ability privilege, all of which are understood in relation to some corresponding form of oppression in the form of sexism, racism, heterosexism, ableism, ageism and so forth. In the broadest terms, the concept of privilege is meant to capture the unearned benefits and advantages that accrue to members of dominant groups as a result of the ongoing exploitation and oppression of members of dominated groups. The development of the concept of privilege has been lauded as a crucial advance in our understanding of oppression, in that it has focused attention upon the systematic aspects of oppression that condition our material and moral development in ways that are often drowned out by the more common focus upon explicitly held beliefs and attitudes. While there have been some important critiques of certain applications or side-effects of the concept of privilege, and the argument I will advance in this essay will build upon that work, even that critical literature has not subjected the concept *as such* to thoroughgoing scrutiny.² Concentrating, for the sake of brevity and focus, on the example of *white privilege* specifically, this essay will draw together some of the existing critiques of the concept of privilege, and argue ultimately that it obscures our understanding of oppression more than it illuminates.³

Before undertaking the critical analysis of the current use of the concept of privilege in the context of oppression, I will very briefly explore the development and use of the term generally. The Latin etymology of the term *privilege* points toward the concept of a ‘private law’ that situates one outside of the laws that bind others (Bailey 1998: p. 111; Gordon 2004: p. 174; Kruks 2005: p. 180). In this original sense, a privilege is a benefit or advantage that accrues to an exclusive (usually hereditary) elite, such that the benefits and advantages are part and parcel of their status *as elites*. To a Roman patrician, for example, privilege meant to be unfettered from certain restrictions and limitations that bound the plebians, such that these liberties were

1 Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Minnesota State University in Mankato, at the California Roundtable on Philosophy and Race, and at the Cave Hill Philosophy Symposium. I am grateful to the organisers of these fora for providing me with the opportunity to receive valuable feedback: Craig Matarrese, Falguni Sheth, Mickaella Perina, Darrell Moore, Frederick Ochieng’-Odhiambo, Ed Brandon and Roxanne Burton. I also received crucial commentary and feedback from Alison Bailey, Theresa Tobin, Anthony Peressini, Sally Matthews and Ward Jones.

2 Excellent examples of critiques of some of the literature on privilege include Ahmed (2004), Gordon (2004), Kruks (2005, 2012) and Applebaum (2010, especially Ch. 2).

3 It is crucial to note that significant discussions of the *phenomenon* that the term ‘privilege’ means to capture go back at least to the nineteenth century among African and African-American thinkers. Frederick Douglass, Anna Julia Cooper, W.E.B. DuBois, Ralph Ellison and Frantz Fanon all devote significant attention to the moral, political and psychological impact oppression has on its beneficiaries. These thinkers did not employ the term ‘privilege’, however, and since the use of that specific terminology is the focus of this paper, I will not be taking up their texts.

partly constitutive of what it meant to be patrician. Importantly, this relationship of advantage and exclusivity was explicitly recognised (even if not always affirmed) by elites, by non-elites and by the formal institutions that bound them together (primarily government and religion). In this ‘classical’ sense of privilege we see that it was understood as a legitimate entitlement of the upper caste by virtue of birth (noble blood). Privileges place one outside of the boundaries of the restrictions and limitations on behaviour that bind the majority of the population, but they are *legitimate* insofar as one’s membership in the appropriate caste (i.e. one’s birth) entitles one to them.

With the advent of the European enlightenment, and the articulation and gradual public affirmation of modern political liberalism, it was precisely this hereditary account of the legitimacy of privilege that came under the most intense critique.⁴ The problem with classical privilege from the point of view of liberalism was neither its exceptionalism nor its inegalitarianism. Inequality and exclusive or limited rights were perfectly acceptable in principle. Rather, the problem with privilege was that it attached to birth status, rather than to individual merit. Alison Bailey’s treatment of privilege appeals to this point in her reference to privileges as ‘*unearned* advantages’ (Bailey 1998: p. 104, emphasis mine). If, through hard work (economic virtue) and social acumen (political/moral virtue) one *earned* the privileges associated with wealth and political power, that was not merely legitimate, but praiseworthy. Bailey refers to these specifically as ‘*earned* advantages’ (Bailey 1998: p. 109), and they are the kinds of advantages gestured toward when we refer to the ‘privileges of wealth’, for example.⁵ This notion of privilege that results from merit is still very much with us today. When we say, to offer relatively innocent examples, that it is a privilege to be able to address the members of the Racine Moose Lodge, or that it is a privilege to be able to teach at Harvard, we mean to say that it is not a right or a legitimate expectation for any and all, but rather that it is an *exceptional* opportunity earned (one hopes) through one’s individual merit.

The contemporary literature on oppression makes use of this sense of illegitimate or ill-gotten benefits and advantages. In the context of critical-theoretical discourse on oppression, the concept of privilege is meant to pick out precisely the benefits and advantages that accrue to individuals solely by virtue of their membership *by birth* into an elite caste (such as, *inter alia*, a race or gender). Unlike the original historical definition of privilege, however, the membership in (or even existence of) the elite caste is not necessarily explicitly and publicly recognised and affirmed as legitimating the corresponding benefits and advantages.⁶ To use post-civil rights era white privilege in the USA as an example, it is supposed to be by virtue of one’s being born white that one receives the benefits and advantages of white privilege, even though there is (allegedly) no formal and explicit public affirmation of whites’ privileged status, nor even necessarily the first-person awareness of that status on the part of individual white people.⁷ The understanding of privilege that is the focus of this essay is thus like the classical definition in that it posits privileges as tied to birth, but appeals to the modern/liberal notion in claiming that such unearned privileges are illegitimate.

Within analyses of oppression, the concept of privilege presents itself as a complement or even contrast to overt, deliberate and conscious manifestations of oppression. That is, there is the conscious and explicit racism of the Klan member or the Neo-Nazi on the one hand, and white privilege on the other. Central to this use of the concept of privilege, therefore, is the irrelevance of conscious or explicit hatred, bias or general ill-will toward the oppressed on the part of privileged individuals. According to this view, one may not have a racist or sexist bone in one’s body, but as a white male, for example, one will benefit from both white privilege and male privilege (and likely many other sorts of privilege) in most every possible context regardless of that lack of ill-will. Indeed, Paula Rothenberg refers to white privilege as ‘the other side of racism’ (Rothenberg 2002: p. 1), while Shannon Sullivan makes the same distinction between unconscious,

4 I recognise that I am clearly painting here with a very coarse brush. There was no clear and obvious point at which the old notion of privilege was abandoned for the new. The gradual rise of the *bourgeoisie* in Europe for a very long time seemed to exhibit both notions of privilege.

5 Of course, the distinction between ‘*earned*’ and ‘*unearned*’ can often be difficult to discern, and I do not wish to imply that Bailey herself is oversimplifying this distinction.

6 To be sure, in most cases there was a time when elite race, sex or class status (to name just a few examples) was publicly and explicitly recognised in this way and, in most cases, that time was not too far in the past. And, there can certainly be *implicit* and informal recognition of the elite caste and their privileges even after the end of the formal and explicit acknowledgement (and indeed, pointing this out is the aim of much of the literature on privilege).

7 I will maintain a position of neutrality in this essay as regards the metaphysics of race – the ontology of whiteness has little bearing on the analysis of white privilege being offered here.

habitual white privilege, and more explicit and overt ‘white supremacy’ (Sullivan 2006: p. 5). Privilege, in this context, is just part and parcel of occupying the dominant position within an oppressive social hierarchy, and is indifferent to individual volition or belief.

Iris Young appealed directly to this distinction between the active and explicit versus the passive and implicit in her claim that oppression does not have corresponding oppressed/oppressor groups, but rather oppressed/privileged groups (Young 1990: p. 42). Likewise, Sonia Kruks defines privilege as ‘a benefit that redounds to the members of one group through the oppression of those of another’ (Kruks 2012: p. 94). Privilege, as opposed to oppression or one of what Stephanie Wildman and Adrienne Davis refer to as ‘isms’ (Wildman & Davis 1996: pp. 11–12), points toward the non-voluntary, systematic and unconscious aspects of domination. You don’t have to actively *do* anything, good or bad, deliberately or accidentally, in order to be privileged, you need only occupy the privileged category within a *system* of oppression. Likewise, a given privileged agent need not affirm, intend or even recognise his or her advantages in order to be privileged (indeed, a given white person may actively and openly support antiracist projects, yet remain privileged). Privileged status within the discourse on oppression, like the classical privilege associated with caste, is thus independent from both action and intent.

If privilege is meant to mark out a distinction between the privileged as a group and everyone else, it will need a clear way to draw the boundary between those who are privileged and the *norm*. I shall refer to this as the ‘boundary condition’, and one way to approach it is by thinking about the distinction often rhetorically drawn between privileges understood as non-necessary social goods (on the model of luxuries) on the one hand, and rights understood as necessary or essential social goods on the other hand. Much of the rhetorical force of the concept of white privilege comes from the fact that the possession of such privilege is supposed to be morally odious. Yet take the common example of whether one receives unwarranted attention from department store security. Is the *lack* of such undue attention a morally odious privilege that whites enjoy, or is it a morally benign right of which nonwhites are routinely deprived?

Interestingly, Peggy McIntosh, in her seminal essay ‘White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack’, recognised this problem with the language of privilege. Toward the end of her essay she states: ‘I now think that we need a more finely differentiated taxonomy of privilege, for some of these varieties are only what one would want for everyone in a just society, and others give license to be ignorant, oblivious, arrogant and destructive’ (McIntosh 2002: p. 100). She points out that in her list of ‘tools’ in the invisible knapsack, ‘[s]ome, like the expectation that neighbors will be decent to you, or that your race will not count against you in court, should be the norm in a just society,’ while ‘[o]thers, like the privilege to ignore less powerful people, distort the humanity of the holders as well as the ignored groups’ (McIntosh 2002: p. 100). This distinction between privileges, which belong unjustly to an exclusive subset of a given population, and rights, which belong properly to all, is crucial, and raises the critical question of how one should understand the *normal* restrictions, rules and burdens above which the privileged are placed.

A strictly quantitative account of such a norm fails, because privilege in the context of the discourse on oppression need not pick out a minority population. For instance, the white population in the USA, though its majority standing is waning, remains the largest racial/ethnic group in the USA and is still not a minority even in comparison with all other US groups combined. In strictly quantitative terms in the USA, what we refer to as ‘white privilege’ is the (purely quantitative) norm. Surely, therefore, the meaning of ‘normal’ at work here must be qualitative (*normative*) rather than purely quantitative. Following Bailey, we may say that privileges may be ‘negative’, in that they point toward the absence of normal barriers, or they may be ‘positive’, in the sense that they point toward the ‘presence of additional perks’ above and beyond the normal distribution of social goods (Bailey 1998: p. 115), but either way, they can be understood as social goods *in qualitative excess* of some generally acknowledged norm that holds for the remainder of the population. In order to describe a theoretically coherent and rhetorically sound account of privilege, therefore, some effort must be made to map out what are normal barriers, restrictions, goods and perks.

The question that arises at this point, in other words, is whether, as McIntosh worried, those social goods typically understood as white privileges are in fact truly above and beyond the normal expectations secured by such concepts as human or civil *rights*. Lewis Gordon has advanced a critique of the discourse of privilege along these lines that points to some of the consequences of ignoring this distinction between rights and privileges, or what I am calling the boundary condition. According to Gordon, the features of human life often referred to as white privilege:

are features the absence of which can lead to claims of human rights violations by whoever limits them. These goods are, in other words, *human rights*, and as such, the term ‘privilege’ runs counter to their *normative* [emphasis mine] import since such rights are by definition imperatives that apply to and for *all human beings*. (Gordon 2004: p. 175)

Privilege, therefore, might be best understood in part as the limitation of what should be universal human rights to an exclusive elite that all the while publicly denies its status as elite. This does not mean that all the various exemplars of privilege work like this but it seems plausible that a great many do. Such privileges do not place the elites above and beyond the norm, but rather are straightforward manifestations of that norm. The moral problem is thus not one of the possession of privilege, but rather the illegitimate exclusion of those who *lack* these so-called privileges. Such alleged privileges are best understood as human rights that are denied to the bulk of humanity in practice, even if they are guaranteed in principle. Nonwhites, for example, *should* have the privileges of whiteness, but of course, if they did, then they wouldn’t be *privileges* anymore, because they would no longer be exclusive to whites. Referring to such rights as privileges in the first place, therefore, is misleading precisely because it rhetorically positions them 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.

What we have, in other words, is not the systematic placing of an elite *above* societal norms, but rather the systematic exclusion of groups from those norms. The so-called privileged group surely remains advantaged relative to those who are not ‘privileged’, but the problem or injustice lies not in the *possession* of those positive and negative goods that constitute those advantages, but in the ongoing and systematic *deprivation* of the non-privileged. What we have are not ‘unearned advantages’ that constitute privilege, but rather unwarranted deprivation that constitutes (or at least contributes to) oppression. In such a case, the phenomenon referred to as ‘white privilege’ is not the passive and unknowing occupation of some advantaged social position that benefits those understood as ‘white’, but is rather the ongoing deprivation and disadvantaging of nonwhites, preventing them from enjoying those social goods that are ostensibly their due.

Again, insofar as it draws attention to the systemic aspects of racism, and fosters a kind of critical race-consciousness for whites, the language of privilege is doing some heuristic good. And it may well be the case that some of the social goods captured by the notion of white privilege might indeed be those sorts of unnecessary luxuries that, as McIntosh suggests, distort the humanity of those who possess them as well as those who suffer as a result of their possession. But surely many (and perhaps most) others are better understood as human rights, and by conflating them with these sorts of supererogatory goods, by being imprecise in our articulation of the boundary condition, there is a tendency toward, as Gordon phrases the point, ‘condemning whites for possessing, in the concrete, features of contemporary life that should be available to all’ (Gordon 2004: p. 176).

One possible way to preserve the concept of white privilege in the face of these problems raised by my analysis of the boundary condition so far would be to claim that the mere possession of the social goods entailed in the concept of white privilege necessitates or entails the exclusion of (at least some) nonwhites, such that the appeal to *norms* are irrelevant, insofar as all possession *eo ipso* excludes some others. If it should be the case, in other words, that the social goods in question are such that any one person’s possession of them *necessarily* means that some other must have proportionately less of them, then many of the problems of the boundary condition can be set aside. If this is so, then part of what makes the concept of white privilege coherent in its standard usage might be an implicit appeal to *scarcity*. Sonia Kruks makes this explicit in her own discussion of privilege, referring to privilege as ‘*intrinsically* a scarce resource’, such that, in order for ‘some to enjoy a privilege entails a structural relationship in which the benefits one group enjoys are denied to another’ (Kruks 2005: p. 179). If Kruks is right here, then one need not spell out clearly the normative distribution of social goods and burdens in order to define the boundary between a privilege and a right, since such a distribution is rendered impossible by an ongoing competition for social goods under conditions of scarcity. In this way, even if a certain social good is a right for a particular elite group, that right must of necessity be exclusive, and secured only at the expense of other groups, and so places that elite group above the (quantitative) norm of deprivation. The exclusion just happens (via the invisible hand of the market) as a result of an economy of scarcity, and thus may pass unnoticed by the privileged. The appeal to scarcity thus has *prima facie* plausibility as a way to satisfy the boundary condition.

Recall, however, that the boundary condition requires that privileges exist above and beyond the normal status that obtains for the remainder of a population. The context of scarcity makes this boundary between those who are privileged and those who are not automatic – for any given individual, the accumulation of scarce social goods means that others must be deprived of them, either by directly taking such goods out of the hands of others, or at least preventing others from acquiring them. But in the case of privilege as it relates to oppression, we are supposed to be speaking of *groups*, not individuals. As Bailey puts it, the focus is not just on unearned advantages in themselves, but on ‘unearned advantages conferred *systematically*’ (Bailey 1998: p. 107, emphasis mine), and that systematic conferral targets individuals *qua* members of groups. If the boundary between the privileged elite and all others is the relevant boundary for privilege as it is employed by theorists of oppression, then while scarcity may help to explain the boundary on an individual basis, it cannot explain on its own why *groups* should have more social goods at the expense of other groups. In order for the boundary of exclusivity to fall along specifically group lines, in other words, we need an account not only of the scarcity of social goods, but also of the mechanisms whereby *group* memberships such as race or gender become salient categories of analysis (and distribution) in the first place. If it were *just* a matter of competition for scarce resources, there would be no apparent advantaging or disadvantaging of racial *groups*, only individuals.⁸

In the meantime, even if one assumes that it may be possible, through an appeal to an implicit context of scarcity, to provide an account of white privilege that fulfills the boundary condition, it is not at all clear that such an appeal makes sense of the social goods and burdens in question. That is, it is not obvious that the social goods typically described as white privilege operate under a logic of scarcity. It might be the case that while there is relative scarcity of social goods, there is still enough to provide a minimum threshold for all (this may indeed be the case with health care or education, for instance), or it might be the case that some social ‘goods’ simply do not, as Young argues, fit within the logic of distribution, and thus scarcity (Young 1990: p. 25). Self-respect, or cultural legitimacy, or political voice might all be examples of this latter kind of ‘social good’. And if many, or even most, of the social goods currently thought of as white privileges are in either of these ways *not* governed by scarcity, if it is the case that nonwhites can have increased access to these social goods without proportionately reducing the access of whites, then the boundary condition here requires not merely that agents act to secure their own goods within a context of scarcity, and thereby necessarily deprive others of those goods, but rather it requires that agents (or again, groups) actively deprive others of social goods (or at least prevent their acquisition) *unnecessarily*.

In the end, the concept of privilege fails to meet the boundary condition. The phenomenon it attempts to capture is not so much about a boundary between a societal norm and those who are placed above it, but rather more often a boundary between a societal norm and those who are kept *beneath* it. Conceiving of the relevant social goods as operating under conditions of scarcity does not help matters. On the one hand, many of the relevant goods and burdens do not seem to be *scarce* in the appropriate ways, and on the other hand, even if they were, it would not account for maldistribution based upon group membership.

There is a second important challenge facing the concept of privilege, however. Part of the rhetorical force of the concept of white privilege is that it is a privilege by birth that does not recognise itself as such. Any viable account of privilege will thus need to explain how advantages can systematically accrue to a given group without the mechanisms of that distribution being recognised and affirmed by the privileged.⁹ The coherence of the concept does not require that *all* beneficiaries of privilege be ignorant of those benefits and that status, but the rhetorical force of the concept, as well as its appeal to many of those theorists and activists working on race and racism rests on its ability to bring to light and reveal what is, for the most part, and from most privileged people, hidden. This use of the concept of privilege thus requires that the privileged are, by and large, though not universally, unaware of their status as privileged, and I will refer to this requirement as the *ignorance condition*.

The terminology should not be taken too far, however. The claim is not that all privileged persons are also unaware of their privilege, nor does one’s status as privileged disappear the moment one become cognisant of it. Nevertheless, the principal distinction between overt racism and privilege rests upon a general ignorance of

8 Of course the inequalities of distribution of such goods could be taken on its own to constitute the groups (as when an economist analyses distributions by ‘quintiles’), but this hardly helps as a response to this critique, unless one holds it to be pure coincidence that the group who has the most of the scarce resources just happens to also be white.

9 The oppressed, however, are typically acutely aware of them. Sara Ahmed makes this point with particular force (Ahmed 2004).

present oppression (and the legacy of historical oppression) occasioned by the fact that one can be privileged without recognising that fact, and thus groups can benefit from the exploitation and oppression of other groups without having to undertake an explicitly recognised and affirmed project of oppression. The rhetorical and pedagogical aim of white privilege discourse is thus to *reveal* these unearned advantages to white people in a way that enables them to recognise their complicity in ongoing oppression (by way of recognising their *status* as privileged), without needing to tell them that they are actively and consciously oppressors (Relax! You may be privileged, but that doesn't mean you are *racist*). They can in this way be assured that they are decent, well-meaning people, while simultaneously being unjustly advantaged by an oppressive system in which they are deeply implicated simply by virtue of being white. The rhetorical emphasis, therefore, is twofold. First, privilege focuses on systematic oppression and a given agent's *relation* to those systems (in Young's view, one stands as oppressed or as privileged), rather than on an agent's individual beliefs and attitudes. Second, because of this emphasis on relations to systems, privilege discourse focuses on elite status as a position passively occupied and beyond one's control, rather than on a deliberate action or set of actions. In relation to the ignorance condition, therefore, it is necessary to raise questions about the extent to which privilege can remain generally hidden in a way that both maintains the systems of oppression that delineate and maintain the boundary between the privileged and the oppressed, yet does not require the deliberate or conscious action or affirmation of the privileged in the maintenance of that boundary (clearly, the boundary and ignorance conditions cannot be very neatly or clearly separated from each other).

As I suggested in my discussion of scarcity in relation to the boundary condition, the coherence of privileges *qua* privileges seemed strongest only from the perspective of an individual agent making choices within that context of scarcity. That is, individual agents in a context of scarcity may make choices that are not designed to harm or disadvantage others, but because of that context, an individual's pursuit of her own utility will necessarily disadvantage others, and so she will be privileged relative to them. As I argued, however, this is inadequate to the concept of privilege relevant to oppression, because the agents in question are not individuals, but groups.¹⁰ White privilege benefits individual whites because of their whiteness, not because of their individual actions to secure their own well-being in a context of scarcity. This raised the central question of how such groups are organised in the first place, and how the mechanisms that ensure the privilege of one group (or groups) at the expense of another group (or groups) function. Since one of the aims of the language of privilege is supposed to be an emphasis on the social and systemic over the individual and volitional, this question is crucial indeed.

However, once we shift to a systematic analysis that emphasises groups, it becomes clear that the establishment and maintenance of *group* privileges are not an automatic result of scarcity, but rather require no small amount of social engineering. That is, even if, for example, securing decent health care for a given individual requires that other individuals have lower-quality health care, some further explanation is required to account for how whites come to have better health care on average than nonwhites. This is enmeshed in questions about the very ontology of race in the first place (that is, the fact that we can even raise the issue of the privilege afforded *white* people requires that there be some mechanism that organised the population in this way at all), as well as questions of the mechanisms that condition individual actions such that resources are allocated from nonwhites to whites. With this in mind, one may still think of white privilege as passive and unintentional only insofar as it remains unconscious to those *individuals* who enjoy it. The rhetoric of privilege paints a portrait of individual whites who do not set out deliberately to deprive nonwhites of social goods for their own unjust benefit, yet just happen nevertheless to benefit unjustly. This is meant to be the rhetorical difference between being privileged and being racist: if I don't realise how my life has benefited from the advantages I enjoy either at the outright cost of nonwhites, or as a result of ongoing denial of those benefits to nonwhites, then I may be thought of as passively enjoying white privilege, rather than actively engaging in racism. This would, however, demand a rather robust ignorance on my part. There may be children, or even pristinely ignorant adults, who are literally unaware or unconscious of the mechanisms that establish the boundaries that constitute privilege, but far more common are those who are operating in what Charles Mills has called an 'epistemology of ignorance' (Mills 1997: p. 18).¹¹

10 I am setting aside any ontological worries about group agents here. If they cause discomfort, substituting 'unit of analysis' for 'agent' will serve the same function in the argument. As the sentence following this one points out, one need not have an ontologically robust account of 'whites', let alone believe that whites constitute a group agent, in order to recognise the force of the argument.

11 For a particularly insightful discussion of the central role that the 'epistemology of ignorance' plays in understanding white privilege, see Bailey (2011).

Mills describes the ways in which institutional racism creates mechanisms and incentives that cultivate and reward ignorance of the historical and ongoing functions of racism.¹² Those bound up in the epistemology of ignorance confront evidence of oppression and their implication in it quite often, but oppressive institutions provide resources, especially to those it advantages, that facilitate the dismissal of such evidence. At stake, therefore, is our understanding of *ignorance* itself in such a context. The ignorance of the ‘epistemology of ignorance’ is not simply a state bereft of knowledge, but rather points toward the more active mode of ‘ignoring’ evidence that fails to conform with our pre-existing beliefs and desires.¹³ The rhetoric of privilege is aimed not at those I referred to above as the ‘pristinely ignorant’, who are literally and completely unaware of their systematic advantage within a context of oppression, but rather at those who have long practice at ignoring not only the evidence of oppression all around them, but especially the evidence of their own implication in that oppression. There are thus two crucial features of the epistemology of ignorance that bear on the present analysis of the ignorance condition. First, the ignorance is not a complete lack of knowledge, but rather more a kind of self-deception; and second, the ignorant therefore bear some responsibility for their ignorance.

The more mundane sort of ignorance typically refers to a simple absence of propositional knowledge. I am ignorant of the position of the cat relative to the mat, or my exact latitude and longitude as I write this sentence, or whether there is life on other planets. The ignorance relevant to systems of oppression, however, is a different sort of animal, because it refers not simply to a collection of facts (say, about the distribution of resources), but rather to a pervasive and complicated system with which all agents are intimately engaged. Because these systems play such a huge role in our development as individuals, there is both a great deal of evidence around us, and a great deal at stake in how we understand that evidence. For those who benefit from systems of oppression, there is every incentive to ignore those systems. Of course, ironically, in order to ignore something, you have to be aware, to a certain extent, of its existence – you have to know what to avoid. Anyone who has engaged in antiracist practices (including education) can attest to the extraordinary lengths and intellectual contortions people advantaged by racism will go to in order to maintain their alleged ignorance. As soon as any initial state of genuinely naive ignorance is challenged, any pretension to passive ignorance must be recognised as exactly that – pretense. The epistemology of ignorance, as a kind of *ignoring* of evidence all around us, is more a manifestation of ongoing self-deception, therefore, than it is a passively occupied state or condition. In a systematically oppressive context, furthermore, such self-deception is facilitated and rendered *normal* by the larger social world that affirms *misunderstanding*, and provides myriad nuggets of ‘common sense’ that explain away evidence and, in being publicly affirmed, help shore up that self-deceptive ignorance against any incursions by the truth.¹⁴

To the extent that one’s ignorance is a result of an ongoing and self-deceptive project of avoiding possible confrontation with evidence, or actively ignoring evidence that cannot be avoided, then one bears a certain responsibility for that ignorance. Neither the ignorance itself, nor one’s responsibility for it admit of straightforward, all-or-nothing analysis. That is, it is an oversimplification to think that one is either ignorant or not, or that one is either responsible or not. Relative to the context of oppression, agents are neither completely and pristinely ignorant, nor simply pretending to be ignorant of what they in fact know. They are neither completely innocent in relation to their (itself ambiguous) ignorance, nor have they set out and executed a deliberate and explicit plan to avoid knowing about oppression. Rather, we have sophisticated agents bound up in a complex system that facilitates an ambiguous relation to their own ignorance, which ignorance in turn is itself ambiguous – not a complete lack of knowledge, but rather a vaguely understood suggestion that promises to wreak moral havoc if pursued. Given all this, what are we to make of the ignorance condition?

To be sure, the question of ignorance under such conditions and one’s responsibility for it is a very complicated one, but my concern here is only to suggest that the ignorance condition cannot be fulfilled simply by appeal to the straightforward ignorance of the privileged. What ignorance remains beyond an original pristinely naïve state is always in some significant ways a result of an ongoing *commitment* to ignorance – either by disavowing, ignoring or explaining away evidence, or simply by avoiding situations and contexts that might threaten that ignorance (something that most oppressive systems make quite easy for those it privileges). The ignorance condition, therefore (the necessary extent to which the boundaries of privilege are maintained in ways ostensibly invisible to the privileged), is placed in serious doubt. The rhetoric of privilege

12 This concept is further developed and explored in Sullivan and Tuana (2007).

13 José Medina describes this phenomenon as ‘active ignorance’ in his excellent study of epistemology and oppression (Medina 2013: pp. 105–107).

14 Drawing on a different philosophical tradition, Lewis Gordon refers to this phenomenon as ‘weak bad faith’ (Gordon 1995: pp. 45–48).

portrays it as a passive condition that privileged people happen to passively inhabit, yet the alleged invisibility of privilege, and thus its status *as privilege* (over and against overt and active *oppression*), requires complex and subtle, yet always active, *participation* on the part of the privileged. It thus cannot be properly understood as the ‘other side’ of active and overt oppression.

This is not, however, to say that it is obviously and unambiguously overt, conscious and active, either. The point here is that these do not function as all-or-nothing dichotomies, and the idea of privilege as the ‘other side’ of racism can obscure that fact. Let me stress that while I think it is important to critique the *oversimplification* of the differences between the phenomena of racism or white supremacy on the one hand, and white privilege on the other, I am not arguing that the difference is completely nonexistent. Shannon Sullivan’s account of white privilege as *habitual* is an excellent case in point. Habits can often operate under the surface of consciousness, so to speak, and inform our bodily comportment, our understanding of our identity, and our sense of how the world works in powerful ways that are not always readily apparent to the subjects who possess those habits. But at the same time, as Sullivan herself stresses, habits are neither completely inaccessible to us as agents, nor are they immutable and fixed. There are ways in which we can confront and become aware of our habits, and there are ways and strategies for avoiding such confrontation, and we bear responsibility for the extent to which we conduct our lives in a manner more or less conducive to that critical encounter with our habits. Part of my concern with the rhetoric of privilege, therefore, is that it can foster a disavowal of that underlying responsibility. If privilege is just this thing that you either have or lack, and not something that one acts out, affirms, reinforces and evades, or something that one resists, critiques, undermines and roots-out, then we run the risk of missing the important ways in which what we call privilege is always also another way of actively manifesting, legitimising and maintaining *oppression*.

It is the ignorance condition that makes it possible for privilege to be understood as a status or condition that the beneficiaries of oppression simply occupy or possess, regardless of their actions or intentions. Yet, given the challenges posed both by the requirements of the boundary condition to demarcate distinctions based on *group* membership, and by a more nuanced understanding of epistemology and responsibility in relation to oppression, it seems unlikely that an account of privilege can be offered that will satisfy the ignorance condition. So-called privilege is not really or entirely invisible, even to the so-called privileged, and so the distinction between more active and overt oppression, and more passive and implicit privilege, becomes blurry at best. The concept of privilege, as deployed within much of the contemporary literature on oppression, thus fails to satisfy both the boundary and the ignorance conditions.

What is striking about the foregoing analysis of the ignorance condition in relation to white privilege in particular is that white privilege can *appear* to be passive and unconscious from the point of view of a particular white individual, but that appearance is itself an active manifestation of racism as a kind of enactment of the epistemology of ignorance (self-deception). That is, privilege only appears *as privilege* from the point of view of individuals deeply implicated in epistemologies of ignorance. In order to articulate the concept of white privilege as describing boundaries between *racial groups*, we need to move beyond the individual level of analysis to incorporate the systemic and institutional. Insofar as part of the very aim of the discourse of privilege was to make visible the systematic and institutional aspects of oppression, as opposed to the individualistic language of prejudice and ‘isms’, the fact that privilege, as it is described by the theoretical work on it, is really only experienced as such by relatively self-deluded individuals, renders it less effective as an explanatory/analytic device. The discourse of privilege, despite its avowed intention of emphasising the systematic and institutional aspects of oppression, has in fact preserved a basic ontological individualism that is necessary in order for its purported significance to be intelligible. Once that perspective is abandoned, then what we see are active participants in and beneficiaries of oppression who have insulated themselves (admittedly, with a great deal of institutional support) against any direct confrontation with their implication in that oppression. There seems little rhetorical or analytic sense in calling *that* ‘privilege’.

Of course, the rhetorical distinction between racism and privilege is itself predicated upon the assumption that the concept of racism necessarily points to explicit and overt attitudes, beliefs and actions on the part of specific individuals. Privilege can be the ‘other side’ of racism only if the latter concept is understood in this narrow and individualistic way. But as I have been arguing, the passive and unconscious aspects of privilege appear *as such* only to particular individual subjects, and even then, most often only through a robust project of self-deception directed toward disavowing one’s ongoing participation in and contribution to systems of exploitation and domination. Privilege, therefore, is only intelligible *as privilege* if we assume the very

individualism with which it was intended to contrast, and grant those individuals an utter lack of responsibility for their ignorance of their complicity in systematic oppression.

My ultimate argument here is this. The idea behind saying ‘white privilege’ and ‘male privilege’, as opposed to ‘systematic racism’ and ‘patriarchy’, or just plain ‘racism’ and ‘sexism’, was allegedly to provide a way of drawing attention to the unintentional, unconscious and passive ways that ‘privileged’ people are complicit with oppression. But as I have been arguing, if we scratch the surface of the discourse of privilege, its pretensions toward unconsciousness and passivity begin to ring hollow. In order to satisfy the boundary condition, we need to posit a very contentious context of scarcity that still only explains individual, but not *group*, privilege. To satisfy the ignorance condition, we must assume an oversimplified and psychologically implausible account of naïve and passive participants in a system that just happens to thrust unearned advantages on them. That is, in order to avoid being a simple manifestation of the historical understanding of privilege as publicly recognised and hereditary elite status, the complex structures (formal and informal institutions, cultural mores, ritual practices, etc.) that police the exclusionary boundaries between the races and allocate resources among them must be actively explained away (as meritorious privilege), disavowed, obscured or otherwise ignored. The ignorance condition, in other words, can only be maintained to the extent that we actively ignore the systematic nature of the boundary condition, and assume discrete individual agents living their normal lives in blithe ignorance of the oppression that is the air they breathe.

The language of privilege, consequently, has the (surely unintended) result of directing the attention of the privileged to where it is most comfortable – inwardly upon themselves. That is, the concept of privilege makes sense *to me* as it is described from *my* perspective – I am not consciously and explicitly racist, yet I seem to just receive these benefits and advantages without even *trying*, so I am either simply a better and more deserving person, or I am, in effect, a moral *victim* of privilege.¹⁵ The discourse of privilege that aims to serve the rhetorical function I have been describing here thus allows the privileged to say that while they may have, for example, male privilege, which is surely lamentable, at least they aren’t *sexist*! In other words, to the extent that the rhetoric of privilege works at all, it engenders among the privileged a tendency to struggle (or at least pretend to struggle) to recognise one’s privilege, to feel guilty (or pretend to feel guilty) about said privilege, and then to pat oneself on the back for being so self-aware and morally sensitive (that part is usually genuine). The discourse of white privilege in this way continues to place whites squarely in the normative centre of an ongoing racial morality play, where the end result is not so much racial justice, but white moral redemption.¹⁶

The foregoing is not meant to deny the reality of systems of oppression that structure the world such that our economic, political and aesthetic interactions tend inexorably to benefit certain groups at the expense of everyone else. Those systems are all-too real, and all-too effective. Nor would I deny that very often these processes and advantages are not *entirely* visible to those who are advantaged by them (though neither are they *entirely* invisible), and an important task of social justice praxis must be to illuminate those systems of oppression more fully. Nor most certainly do I mean to question the motives of those critical theorists, educators and activists who have articulated and employed the language of privilege (indeed, I have been among them) – even if it has the negative effects I describe, I do not mean to suggest that they were explicitly intended.

Ultimately, the critique I am offering is that the concept of privilege, at least as it is currently understood, fails to follow through on its promise to emphasise the systematic and social aspects of racial oppression. Privileges as unearned advantages that are ‘invisible’ to those so advantaged, I have argued, are intelligible *as such* only by assuming individuals under a logic of distribution within a context of scarcity and under conditions of oversimplified and naïve ignorance. If we truly begin with the idea that racial oppression, for example, is a social phenomenon, enacted by and upon deeply socially-constituted subjects (i.e. if we reject an atomistic social ontology), then white privilege cannot be understood as the *other side* of racism. Indeed, I would argue that taking seriously the social and systematic nature of oppression means first and foremost that we abandon the individualistic account of racism as well. White privilege is thus not a passive and unconscious status held or position occupied by those who happen to be white. Rather, the phenomenon in question is the active, if diffuse and subtle, expression of racism. It is the way in which racial oppression has shaped white subjectivity (the way they understand themselves, others and their relative places in the world), and by positing itself as this unconscious status that they happen to occupy, it provides a ready means

15 There is something particularly ironic about seeing privilege as something from which one morally *suffers*.

16 Ahmed (2004, especially ‘declarations’ 2–5), Applebaum (2010: p. 19) and Kruks (2005: p. 181) all make similar points.

whereby they may *continue* to enact racial oppression individually and collectively, and thus go on to shape the subjectivity of future generations.

Ultimately, my critique of privilege is threefold. First, the use of the term ‘privilege’ connotes the inherent injustice of the social goods and advantages held by the privileged (hearkening back, as it does, to the classical understanding of the privileges of caste) – the possession of a privilege constitutes an injustice in itself. This conflates those goods that are the due of all with those goods that are in effect social luxuries – that is, it conflates rights with privileges. More often than not, the injustice lies not in the possession of so-called privileges by the beneficiaries of oppression, but in the deprivation of the rights of the oppressed. This is true, I have argued, even if we assume a context of scarcity of social goods, insofar as the advantage of one *group* over another requires more than simple rational choice in a context of scarcity. If the injustice described by the term ‘privilege’ is this ongoing and systematic *deprivation* of the oppressed, then it is difficult to see why this should be thought of as ‘privilege’ as distinct from ‘oppression’. Again, such a rhetorical move only seems intelligible if we assume the perspective of an individual and relatively ignorant beneficiary of oppression.

Second, those advantaged by oppression do not simply happen, unfortunately and through a misadventure of circumstance, to be privileged. They are, on the contrary, active participants in it. While the aim of the discourse of white privilege is to pick out the way in which white people benefit from racism without being necessarily overt racists, this distinction itself is predicated both upon a simplistic and individualistic understanding of racism (as individual beliefs/attitudes), and upon an oversimplified distinction between actively engaging in oppression on the one hand, and passively benefiting from it on the other. This distinction in turn is, like the account of racism with which it is meant to contrast, predicated upon an atomistic conception of the agent as clearly distinct from the institutions and systems in which she participates. If we take seriously the commitment to an analysis of racism as fundamentally social and systemic, and of agents as both constituted by and constitutive of those systems, then such distinctions become untenable.

Third, the rhetoric of privilege oversimplifies the epistemic position of the privileged in relation to their advantages and the systems that engender them. The lack of awareness of privilege on the part of the privileged, in other words, is as much a kind of deliberate self-deception as it is a lamentable condition. The ‘consciousness raising’ moment of the pedagogy of privilege, therefore, must be understood to be as much an effort to disabuse the privileged of their self-deception as it is a presentation of information. The idea that white privilege is hidden or invisible to whites, in other words, elides the way in which that alleged invisibility is always incomplete, and the ways in which whites are responsible (to some degree) for that so-called invisibility. By the same token, one can never fully come to know the ways and means of one’s participation in ongoing systems of oppression (at least in any practical sense, I will take an agnostic position as to the logical possibility), so the idea of complete knowledge or transparency is also an oversimplification. Certainly, the recognition or acknowledgement that one is a beneficiary of oppression on its own does little to challenge that oppression, nor does it seem, on its own, to absolve those who know from ongoing culpability.

Given all of this, what should be done with the idea of privilege? I have been arguing that most, if not all, of the benefits captured by the term ‘white privilege’ are not truly privileges, but rather relative advantages resulting from the systematic deprivation of nonwhites. What is more, the idea of privilege as a kind of passive position occupied by often (though certainly not exclusively) ignorant whites ultimately violates the very commitment to a systematic understanding of racism that is the avowed purpose of the discourse of privilege. The phenomenon that the discourse of white privilege attempts to capture is better understood, therefore, not as privilege, but as a step toward a more genuinely social and systemic understanding of racist oppression. The phenomenon described by the concept of white privilege is in this way not something that white people *possess*, but rather something they do or act out with the support and cooperation of numerous formal and informal institutions and systems, the collective function of which is the oppression of nonwhites. It only makes sense to refer to this as ‘white privilege’, as opposed to ‘racism’ if one assumes the individualistic and simplified account of racism as individual and explicit belief and action.¹⁷

17 One consequence of this view would be that the distinction between ‘privilege’, as a status that one occupies and that is beyond one’s control, and ‘oppression’, as an activity one engages in requiring deliberate and willful participation, must be called into question. One obvious question that emerges from this move is whether this means that all whites, by virtue of being white in a context of ongoing racist oppression, are thus *oppressors*, even if they know about and actively work against that oppression. Clearly a great deal is at stake in this question, but it is beyond the scope of this paper. The minimal point I wish to raise here is that privilege does not work the way it purports

Now, given that this understanding of racism is predominant, some proponents of the idea of privilege might agree, more or less, with the critique I just offered, yet hold that as a *rhetorical device* it is necessary to create a space where relatively well-meaning whites can see themselves as decent people on the one hand, yet as bearers of white privilege on the other. Once they create that conceptual space, then it becomes possible to complicate that understanding of racism and eventually arrive at a more genuinely systematic account of racist oppression. There is surely some merit to this claim, but I would argue that the misleading and morally dubious aspects of privilege I have described here ultimately do more harm to a genuine understanding of oppression than good. First and foremost, I have argued that the rhetoric of privilege surreptitiously assumes the very understanding of racism and of individual agents that it purports to critique. We would be better served by *beginning* with a more sophisticated understanding of racist oppression as systemic, and of individual agents as constitutively implicated in that system.

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