

Reservations About White Privilege Analysis

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The turn toward “whiteness” in various disciplines, including philosophy of education, has proven a fruitful direction and framework. From a moral point of view, a focus on whiteness can be a powerful force for encouraging white students to recognize their complicity in racial injustice. Yet here I want to express some reservations about a key component of whiteness: “white privilege.” White privilege analysis (WPA) rests on a presumption that white privilege is a structural feature of the Western sociopolitical order, particularly in the United States, and that there is something morally and politically wrong with its being so. Without challenging this core insight, with which I completely agree, I think that the way that WPA has proceeded involves some important limitations.

THE MORAL BASIS OF WHITE PRIVILEGE ANALYSIS

The moral basis for the idea of white privilege as wrong or unjust has been insufficiently explored in WPA. Those of us who teach U.S. white students think it morally and politically important for them to learn to acknowledge their white privilege and do something morally constructive with that acknowledgment. But to do so requires a clear understanding of what exactly is wrong with white privilege.

Peggy McIntosh took an important step in exploring this moral basis in her still influential 1988 article, “White Privilege and Male Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.”¹ She distinguished between privileges that are morally not worth having — like being able to ignore the perspectives of less powerful groups — and privileges that are worth having but that everyone should have, such as having one’s voice heard, or being able to buy a house without having one’s race count against one. This distinction has both practical and theoretical significance. Practically, it facilitates getting white people engaged in challenging white privileges that are morally not worth having. Theoretically, one wants to preserve the ideal of democratic equality from which all, including whites, will benefit even if they have to give up something to get there.²

However, Lewis Gordon has pointed out a problem in referring to benefits worth having and that everyone should have as “privileges.” Privileges are generally counterposed to “rights.” They are not things persons should expect to have, but rather count themselves fortunate if they do have them. But many of the things that are called “privileges” have the character of either rights or things appropriate for someone to expect to have, such as those just mentioned. WPA refers to these as “privileges” because of the comparison to nonwhites who do not have them. But Gordon suggests that we revise our vocabulary for expressing this point, as we do not want to imply that white people who have these things should not have them or not expect to have them.³

“SPARED INJUSTICE” AND “UNJUST ENRICHMENT” PRIVILEGES

In this essay, I register Gordon’s legitimate linguistic complaint but continue to use the word “privilege” because of its pervasiveness and familiarity within the literature. Still, there are some important distinctions to be made within McIntosh’s category of “privileges worth having.” First is one between “spared injustice” privileges and “unjust enrichment” privileges. The former involves white people being spared unjust treatments suffered by persons of color, such as discrimination; blacks, for example, being stopped by the police without due cause while whites typically are not. In these cases, the privilege is simply being spared an injustice suffered by persons of color, without further benefiting from that injustice.

“Unjust enrichment” privileges, by contrast, are privileges in which whites *benefit from* the injustice to persons of color, over and above merely *being spared* the injustice. For example, police too focused on looking for black lawbreakers might be less vigilant toward white ones, conferring an unjust enrichment benefit on whites who break laws but escape detection.

On the face of it, unjust enrichment is morally more problematic than spared injustice, even if neither involves an intentional action by the beneficiary. It is not wrong merely to be spared an injustice, but it might be wrong to avail oneself of an unjust benefit, even if one did not seek it. A person is complicit in injustice if s/he benefits from it (even if s/he did not seek that benefit), but is not if s/he is merely spared it.

Because of the deeply entrenched system of white privilege in U.S. life and institutions, it is difficult for whites to escape unjust enrichment. When blacks are denied access to desirable homes, for example, this is not just an injustice to blacks but a positive benefit to whites who now have a wider range of domicile options than they otherwise would have. When schools do a poor job of educating their Latin@ and black students, this benefits whites in the sense that it unjustly advantages them in the competition for higher levels of education and jobs. However, though whites cannot escape unjust enrichment in a general way, not every particular instance of spared discrimination necessarily involves unjust enrichment.

PRIVILEGES NOT RELATED TO INJUSTICE

There is a distinct third category of privileges worth having, in which one benefits from one’s position in a manner that one does not deserve from a moral point of view. In contrast to the previous categories, this benefit is unrelated to an injustice suffered by the disadvantaged group. A useful, though not race related, example is a type of “linguistic privilege.” In any social order, certain languages are privileged. Native speakers of the official language(s) have an advantage over those raised in another language, whether due to being immigrants or being brought up in a linguistic minority community. This is an undeserved advantage. However, it does not seem unjust for there to be a national language, and native speakers of it will always be privileged over nonnative speakers. Nonetheless, there are certainly language-related injustices, such as discrimination against persons with “accents” or the violation of rights that should be independent of native language, such as voting rights or receiving public services.⁴

This type of privilege is a “non-injustice-related” privilege. In theory at least, there can be racial instances of these privileges, such as those related to majority/minority dynamics. Consider the informal cultures of workplaces and professions. These tend to have a partly ethno-cultural character, so that particular ethnic or racial group members are more comfortable in them than are others. Here, the bias is usually toward whites and it has been historically shaped by exclusion; in that respect, it is unjust. Let us imagine, however, a utopian future in which the historical injustices have been rectified, and equal occupational opportunity for all ethnic and racial groups prevails. One can imagine some degree of ethnic bias in workplace culture still remaining, simply because of majority/minority dynamics. If every racial group were proportionally represented in a given workplace, there might yet be a comfort factor that favored white people if they were the majority group in the wider population. One could, and should, still attempt to accommodate racial minorities. Nevertheless, even then, there might be some remaining “cultural tilt” that is not unjust but that favors some groups over others. This analysis suggests that it is plausible that some instances of white privilege could be of a majority/minority character distinct from any actual injustice.

As we can see, WPA would profit from a closer scrutiny of privileges to clarify their particular relation to injustice and other moral wrongs; as things stand, there seems to often be an implication that *all* forms of white privilege fall into the most morally heinous of the three categories, that of unjust enrichment. Students should learn that these distinctions pose challenges similar to the moral asymmetries related to racial victimization — that it is morally worse to victimize members of a vulnerable racial group than a dominant one — because in both cases there is a danger that the difference in degree gets used inappropriately to deny the wrongness of the lesser wrong simply because it is *less* wrong than the other. But morally informed pedagogy cannot shrink from this challenge, which arises in many contexts.

Nevertheless, it should not be thought that someone who benefits from a non-injustice-related privilege is entirely “morally in the clear” with respect to it. Just because the arrangement is not unjust does not mean the beneficiary of the privilege is without moral responsibility toward the disadvantaged person or group. The privilege accruing to the majority person is still undeserved. The native speaker should be empathetic, sensitive, and accommodating to the situation of the nonnative speaker in recognition of the undeserved disadvantage from which the latter suffers.⁵ The privileged person should not be complacent about such privileging arrangements even when they are not unjust, but should recognize that s/he benefits and press for structural changes to redress the situation.

ABSENCE OF STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

Much writing on white privilege within philosophy makes very little contact with explorations and explanations of the historical, social, economic, and political forces that determine the structures of racial hierarchy. Why is the average income of blacks \$33,500 and of whites \$52,000? Why do black households have only 10 to 13 percent of the wealth of whites? Why do Latinos and blacks receive inferior health care? The vast literature in the social sciences on these matters barely registers

in philosophy, including philosophical examinations of white privilege. Concomitantly, Margaret Andersen has noted that whiteness studies are concentrated in cultural and literary studies, psychology, and history — and I would add philosophy of education — but with scant presence in the social sciences.⁶ Citing “white privilege” does not explain the disparities just mentioned; it simply names them and implies their systematicity without providing an account of any actual systems and structures.

Yet, without such particular explanations, we do not understand the structures and processes of white privilege, so we cannot know the best way to try to change them. One example that has attracted attention among social scientists is the wealth gap between black and white Americans. In their influential book, *Black Wealth/White Wealth*, Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro give a plausible historical account of why the racial wealth gap between U.S. blacks and whites is so much greater than the income gap.⁷ The explanation starts with the failure of the government to provide resources to the newly free slaves after emancipation in 1865, and proceeds through racial discrimination (both explicit and indirect) in the federal home mortgage program in the 1930/40s, the largest subsidized home ownership program, which benefited whites disproportionately. Since home ownership is a central component of wealth, this contributed substantially to the racial wealth gap. As Oliver and Shapiro show, the wealth gap gets exacerbated by the familiar housing market dynamics that depress the value of black-owned homes in black neighborhoods. In a follow-up study, *The Hidden Cost of Being African American*, Shapiro shows that wealth more than income determines advancement in the society, including choices to pursue higher education or not.⁸ Both books suggest policies that could mitigate the racial wealth gap, such as supporting poor people’s accumulation of assets.⁹

Oliver and Shapiro connect (1) an analysis of a particular racial inequality (the black/white wealth gap), (2) an account of why this particular gap is of moral and political concern (because it is so strongly connected with equality of opportunity), (3) an explanation of the class and racial factors that led to this inequality, and (4) a set of policy proposals intended to address the persisting injustices. One can find analogous accounts that analyze the class and racial character of the causes of arguably unjust racial disparities in health and health care, and that suggest policies to address these (ranging from proposals about broadening health insurance coverage to running educational programs for health care providers on unconscious bias and stereotypes).

Such accounts do not ignore the interconnection between racial inequities in differing domains (housing, wealth, education, and health), but they provide a specificity of analysis of their causes that tends to be absent in WPA. These analyses increase our understanding of how racial privilege actually operates. One important explanatory axis that they highlight is class. Although the role of class is often at least nominally acknowledged in WPA, it is seldom given both the explanatory and the normative importance it deserves. The plight of racial groups is deeply influenced

by class-based factors. For example, in regard to the preceding discussion of wealth, persons with the same level of wealth, no matter what their race, are subject to the same advantages and disadvantages, although of course the fact that blacks have disproportionately less wealth than whites is largely, though not entirely, due to race-based reasons. While no one would assert this as a defensible position, WPA often implies that all disadvantages suffered by racial groups are caused by the group's race — by how they are treated *as a racial group*. But many forces bear on the disadvantages, and they are not all related to race. Moreover, class provides an axis of privilege that is distinct from, but deeply intertwined with, race. Professional blacks and Latinos have class advantages over working class and poor whites, and the normative dynamics of these advantages require more attention than they have been given. For these and other reasons, I think that philosophers should always include issues of class privilege in their discussions of race privilege, recognizing the distinction between them but also their empirical interconnection. In my view, it is profoundly misleading, both empirically and normatively, to discuss race privileges without also talking about class.

The lack of engagement with the actual structures and processes of racial inequality and privilege in WPA literature might seem surprising, since whiteness theorists generally note the systemic and structural character of white privilege. They know it is not simply a matter of individuals' attitudes. But this insight is seldom built upon. There is an important educational lesson here. One of the capacities we wish to foster in our students is that of social analysis tied to a moral vision or principle. We want them to look critically at their society and analyze problems, such as those of racial injustice. This involves a certain orientation toward the specificity of social analysis and research. In addition, when we do not provide this sort of analysis as part of our teaching about white privilege, we fail to provide white students who are awakened to their white privilege with one constructive place to go with that realization.

CONFLATING THE SITUATIONS AND HISTORIES OF PEOPLE OF COLOR

The focus on white privilege is often taken to imply that the situations of all people who are not white are essentially similar. If the key divide is between whites and people of color, differences within the latter category can seem insignificant. One frequently sees references to “blacks and other minorities,” or “blacks and Latinos and other minorities,” as if the “other minorities” situations were not significantly different from those of the mentioned groups. At the very least, the focus on white privilege points us away from examining these differences. In the United States, there are morally and politically significant vast differences in the racially defined experiences of all the major groups of color. For example, no other group is remotely comparable to African Americans, whose history of slavery and of government failure to provide resources after slavery has led to both material and social/psychological disadvantages not faced by any others. The history of Native Americans is also entirely distinctive; no other group has suffered similar devastation. As Angelo Corlett has argued in *Race, Racism, and Reparations*, and Walter Feinberg in *Common Schools/Uncommon Identities*, it is plausible to see Native

Americans and African Americans as having suffered forms of oppression distinctively worse than those experienced by Latinos and Asian Americans.¹⁰

Many people are uncomfortable with comparative judgments regarding suffering and oppression. Such judgments can be used to undermine common sympathies and political alliances and to drive groups into a counterproductive and narrow so-called “identity politics.” Nevertheless, such cautionary concerns must not prompt us to act as if the situations of all the groups were and are essentially similar from a moral and political point of view.

Nor is this recognition a denial that in important ways whites are privileged in comparison to each of these groups. But the forms of privilege are quite distinct. Asian Americans as a “racial” group were marginalized, denied naturalized citizenship, excluded from immigrating, and seen as suspicious outsiders throughout much of American history. Only since 1952 were the racial restrictions on naturalization lifted, restrictions that primarily affected Asians. However, the situation of the Asian population that immigrated post-1965 is quite different in character from the earlier Asian immigrant experience. This is especially true in education. Asian Indians, Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans have had remarkable success in schools, both in K–12 and higher education.¹¹ As certain scholars have argued, there is an important “nonblack” privilege that has operated throughout American history that advantages all “nonblack” immigrant groups, and indeed even privileges black immigrants over African Americans.¹² In some sense there is a “nonblack privilege” operating alongside “white privilege.” These distinct, if related, racial hierarchies — “white/people of color” and “nonblack/black” — need to be taken account of in our understanding of racial injustice.

NEGLECT OF THE IMPORTANCE OF ETHNICITY WITHIN RACIAL GROUPS

Perhaps one will reply that not all Asian groups are so successful academically. Cambodians and Hmong are much less successful than the South and East Asian groups just mentioned. But this important point just demonstrates that we must take into account *ethnicity* as well as race in our understanding of the structures of inequity. That is, “Asian,” understood as a racial category, might be of limited analytical value in understanding the fates of distinct Asian ethnic subgroups, notwithstanding the historical fact that Asians were all indeed seen as a distinct racial group in the United States in earlier periods. We need to recognize the differences in initial immigration status and social capital among different Asian immigrant groups. That some are more disadvantaged than others means that ethnic groups *within* the major racial or pan-ethnic groups need to be distinguished, that they have importantly distinct historical experiences that shape the character of whatever racial and ethnic stratification applies to them.

This point applies to blacks as well. Caribbean blacks (often called “West Indian”) have been a small though socially and politically significant part of the black American community since the 1920s, but since 1965 they have become a larger percentage of the American black population and have been joined by a much smaller group of African immigrants. This ethnic plurality within the black community complicates a purely racial analysis of the black/white divide and of disparities

that work to the benefit of whites. It does so in several distinct ways, one of which I will mention here. It might well be thought that the injustice involved in the slave and postslavery history of African Americans is crucial to how we are to understand the injustice involved in disparities between this group and the white population, but that the same injustice does not apply to the later immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean (even if the latter's ancestors were themselves slaves).

None of this complexity is meant to deny that some form of white privilege is operating here. The point is that if one wants to understand the actual dynamics that generate various forms of inequality, it is necessary to take ethnicity into account along with race. The purely racial dimension implied by "white privilege" is too crude an instrument to express the character of the various inequalities involved. WPA, and its affiliated educational practices aimed at revealing and countering white privilege, needs to more robustly integrate more fine-tuned tools of social analysis.

THE TOO-NARROW POLITICS OF WHITE PRIVILEGE ANALYSIS

Finally, let me briefly suggest a problem with what might be called the "politics" of WPA that flows from the reservations expressed so far. What is the point of noting or discerning white privilege? One frequent response in WPA is that it encourages individuals to divest themselves of their individual privilege — for example, by not getting into a cab that has passed up a black customer, or by calling a waiter's attention to a black customer who has been passed over for restaurant service.

Recognizing such privilege in one's day-to-day life is a very important step forward for white people, and can have a morally transformative effect on white students. However, suppose we shift from the question, "How can I divest myself of white privilege in my own life?" to the quite different question, "What can I do to make my society more racially just?" This question can lead down a very different path, toward quite different antiracist projects that have different kinds of meaning to those students who engage in them.

For example, the second question forces one to look at the concrete structures that produce disparities and ask what can be done about them. As suggested earlier, these structures are not the same in every social domain. Suppose a white student is interested in the area of medicine and wishes to engage with the issue of health care disparities. Then the activity that might both contribute in a meaningful way to improving the situation of Latinos and blacks in the United States would be to join a group that is researching and documenting health care disparities in one very specific area, say diabetes care; or it might involve trying to find a project or group that is attempting to educate health care providers about the ways that they, generally unknowingly and unintentionally, shortchange their black and Latino patients.¹³ These activities might both be personally meaningful for the student and also contribute meaningfully to reducing health care disparities.

Notice, however, that the student could engage in such projects without ever coming to grips with, or even focusing on, her/his own white privilege. Of course,

as Barbara Applebaum and others have pointed out, there are pitfalls to antiracist work focused on individual white agency — such as a failure to appreciate the group basis of oppression, a misplaced concern to be “colorblind,” or an overinvestment in one’s own individual racial innocence.¹⁴ Nevertheless, none of these pitfalls *necessarily* accompanies a concern to mitigate racial injustice in the absence of a specific concern with one’s own white privilege. This is not to deny that it would be ideal if students were *both* concerned about white privilege *and also* concerned with understanding and mitigating the structures of racial injustice. These are both valid educational goals. But they are not the same, and they can lead to distinct forms of practice.

The power of this point can perhaps best be seen by picking up a thread from the earlier discussion of class-related forces affecting the well-being of people of color. Since blacks and Latinos benefit disproportionately from government-funded social provision, and since wealthy people are those whose taxes should fund those programs, joining a political organization aimed at reversing the Republicans’ stated project of “starving government” might be one of the best ways to aid the cause of racial justice, even though it is not directly focused on race. And yet joining this project in a personally meaningful and politically useful way might bear only a weak relationship to the (white) agent’s coming to terms with her/his white privilege. There are important ways that white students can engage in racial justice projects that have little to do with dealing with their own white privilege, though the projects may be aimed at dismantling the unjust structures that underlie much (if not all) of white privilege.

I have raised several distinct but related concerns about white privilege analysis: its inadequate exploration of its own normative foundations and of the actual structures of racial inequality, its tendency to deny or downplay differences in the historical and current experiences of the major racial groups, and its overly narrow implied political project that omits many ways that white people can contribute meaningfully to the cause of racial justice.¹⁵

1. Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege and Male Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” in *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*, eds. Margaret L.L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1991).

2. Sheryll Cashin, in *The Failures of Integration: How Race and Class Are Undermining the American Dream* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), effectively spells out how all will benefit from a more equal, integrated, and democratic society, though whites will also have to give up some things (some not worth having) to achieve it.

3. Lewis Gordon, “Critical Reflections on Three Popular Tropes in the Study of Whiteness,” in *What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question*, ed. George Yancy (New York: Routledge, 2004).

4. Over time, the native speaker’s advantage can disappear if the nonnative speakers learn the official language(s), though there may remain a residue of discrimination against them based on accent.

5. I am not equating race and culture here, but only trading on the fact that racial groups often tend to correlate roughly with ethno-cultural ones.

6. Margaret Andersen, “Whitewashing Race: A Critical Perspective on Whiteness,” in *White Out*, eds. Ashley W. Doane and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (New York: Routledge, 2003). Andersen says that the

absence of social scientific contribution to whiteness studies leaves it “without much grounding in the material reality of racial stratification” (21).

7. Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro, *Black Wealth/White Wealth* (New York: Routledge: 2006), 204.

8. Thomas Shapiro, *The Hidden Cost of Being African American: How Wealth Perpetuates Inequality* (New York: Oxford, 2006).

9. Oliver and Shapiro, “The Emergence of Asset-Based Policy,” in *Black Wealth/White Wealth*, chap. 9.

10. J. Angelo Corlett, *Race, Racism, and Reparations* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003); and Walter Feinberg, *Common Schools/Uncommon Identities: National Unity and Cultural Difference* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000).

11. Andrew Hacker, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 161–6.

12. See Mary Waters, *Ethnic Options* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), on white ethnics distancing themselves from blacks without recognizing that they are doing so; and Waters, *Black Identities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), on the complex relationship of black immigrants, especially Anglophone Afro-Caribbeans, with African Americans and blackness, including availing themselves of a perceived privilege within the United States of *not* being African American.

13. See, for example, the Institute of Medicine report, *Unequal Treatment: Confronting Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health Care* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2002).

14. Barbara Applebaum, “On ‘Glass Snakes,’ White Moral Responsibility, and Agency Under Complicity,” in *Philosophy of Education 2005*, ed. Kenneth R. Howe (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2005); and Barbara Applebaum, “In the Name of Morality: Moral Responsibility, Whiteness and Social Justice Education,” *Journal of Moral Education* 34, no. 3 (2005): 277–90.

15. In writing this essay, I have been encouraged by the critiques of the field of whiteness studies, and of the concept of “whiteness” within the discipline of history, in particular a set of articles on “Whiteness and United States History: An Assessment,” in *International Labor and Working Class History* 60 (2001): 1–92; and Peter Kolchin’s “Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America,” in the *Journal of American History* 89, no. 1 (2002): 154–73.