

Abstract for the General Public - OPUS Project

“From Wrongs to Privileges: Moral, Economic, Epistemic Perspectives”

We often hear, especially in progressive circles, that privilege is everywhere. There is such as thing as a “white” privilege but also the privilege of being a man, an able-bodied person, being in a heteronormative relationship, being good-looking etc. We also tend to think – progressives and conservatives alike – that there is something wrong with privilege. Indeed, conservatives too are keen to attack the “privileged elites” and claim to stand up for the unprivileged middle or lower classes.

But, what exactly is privilege? And, if there is something wrong with it, what are we supposed to do about it? What obligations, specifically, fall on those who have privilege just for the fact of being privileged?

In this project, I elaborate a philosophical answer to these questions. Philosophy is helpful both in clarifying the concepts that we use when we make claims about privilege and in determining the extent and ground of our moral obligations. So, it seems a philosophical account of privilege is required if not overdue.

More specifically, I aim to do three things. Firstly, I want to arrive at a *unitary definition* of privilege. Presumably, when we talk about privilege, we talk about a phenomenon with different facets (see next paragraph). But there must be something all types of privilege have in common, some significant *core* or paradigm of privilege. And the first stage of the investigation will attempt to describe that unitary core.

Secondly, I want to explain how privilege plays out differently in different contexts. Even though privilege has a unitary core, not all types of privilege work in the same way. I want to focus, precisely, on two kinds of privilege that have particularly attracted attention. The first is *economic* privilege, which we can define, generally, as the excessive possession of resources that can be turned into money. I will be interested in understanding not only how best to define economic privilege but also how economic privilege affects the relationship between citizens in a democratic society and whether, as many suspect, it creates an obstacle towards the achievement of a more just society.

The second type of privilege I want to investigate at this stage is *epistemic*. The idea that some groups of people hold epistemic advantages has now been popularized. A lot has been published in both academic and public writing, for instance, about the excessive credibility that men tend to have in comparison to women, with notorious pernicious effects. Similarly, a lot has been written about the difficulty of people not belonging to the majority (think about indigenous people in former colonized states, for instance) in expressing a worldview that is publicly accepted or at least expressing complaints that may be given a fair hearing in the public arena. Here, I will be interested in understanding, again, how best to define epistemic privilege and what are our main reasons for objecting to it.

Finally, in the third stage of the project I discuss normative *responses* to privilege specifically. I investigate, that is, the moral obligations that privilege engenders and, more generally, the moral reasons we have to object to privilege. Some of the discussion of privilege in public culture seems to elicit the impression that privilege is a source of *guilt* for the privileged. Maybe, then, privileged people engage in a form of interpersonal *wrong* which they ought to repair (and atone for?). In ethics, duties to make up for one’s wronging another person are usually called *corrective duties*. If privileges are ultimately wrongs, we would expect corrective duties to emerge whenever there is a privilege. However, the interpretation of privileges as wrongs is not so easy to support. After all, most privileged people have acquired their privilege involuntarily and some privileges cannot even be easily rejected. Hence, the avenue I want to explore is that privilege is instead a type of *distributive* injustice. But that still leaves open the question about which duties fall on which agents in society.