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'White privilege': A mild critique^I

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ABSTRACT

White privilege analysis has been influential in philosophy of education. I offer some mild criticisms of this largely salutary direction – its inadequate exploration of its own normative foundations, and failure to distinguish between 'spared injustice', 'unjust enrichment' and 'non-injustice-related' privileges; its inadequate exploration of the actual structures of racial disparity in different domains (health, education, wealth); its tendency to deny or downplay differences in the historical and current experiences of the major racial groups; its failure to recognize important ethnic differences within 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.

KEYWORDS *structural analysis, white privilege, whiteness*

THE TURN TOWARD 'WHITENESS' in various disciplines, including philosophy of education, has proven a fruitful direction and framework in many ways. I will not be discussing the merits of this scholarly direction, except to note that, 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 I want to express some reservations about a key component of Whiteness, and that is 'White privilege'. 'White privilege analysis' (WPA) rests on a presumption that White privilege is a structural feature of the socio-political order in the United States and perhaps the 'West' more generally, and that there is something morally and politically wrong with its being so. Without challenging this core insight, with which I am in complete agreement, I think that the way that White privilege analysis has proceeded involves some important limitations.

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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 US American White students think it morally and politically important for them to learn to acknowledge their White privilege, and to 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 article on White privilege from 1988, 'Unpacking the invisible knapsack: White privilege and male privilege' (McIntosh, 1988). 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 on board to challenge White privilege if they see that some of their privileges are 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 the latter benefits all should have but which Whites disproportionately do have currently as 'privileges'. Privileges are generally counterposed to 'rights'. They are not things people should expect to have, but rather things that people count themselves fortunate if they do have them. However, many of the things that are called 'privileges' in WPA do have the character of either rights or things it is appropriate for someone to expect to have, such as those just mentioned: being able to buy a home of one's choice, having one's voice heard in various settings, and the like. These are referred to as 'privileges', of course, because of the comparison to non-Whites 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 nor expect to have them (Gordon, 2004).

'SPARED INJUSTICE' AND 'UNJUST ENRICHMENT'
PRIVILEGES

For the purposes of this article, I will register Gordon's legitimate linguistic complaint, but will continue to use the word 'privilege' because of its pervasiveness and familiarity within the literature. Within McIntosh's category of 'privileges worth having', there still seem some important distinctions to be

made. The first is between 'spared injustice' privileges and 'unjust enrichment' privileges. The former involves a person of color suffering an unjust treatment of some kind while a White person does not. (The White person is spared the injustice of discrimination.) For example, a Black person is stopped by the police without due cause but a White person is not. In this case the privilege is simply in being spared an injustice suffered by the person of color, but without further benefiting from that injustice.

'Unjust enrichment' privileges, by contrast, are privileges in which the White person *benefits from* the injustice to the persons of color, over and above merely *being spared* the injustice. For example, if police are too focused on looking for Black lawbreakers, they might be less vigilant toward White ones, conferring an unjust enrichment benefit on Whites who do break the laws but escape detection for this reason.

On the face of it, unjust enrichment is morally more problematic than spared injustice, even if neither involves an intentional action on the benefitee's part. 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 she benefits from it (even if she did not seek that benefit) but not if she is merely spared it.

Because the system of White privilege is so deeply entrenched in American life, institutions and history, 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 would have if Blacks had equal access to housing. When urban schools do a poor job of educating their Latino/a and Black students, this benefits Whites in the sense that it unjustly advantages them in the competition for higher levels of education and jobs. Whites in general cannot avoid benefiting from the historical legacy of racial discrimination and oppression. So unjust enrichment is almost never absent from the life situation of Whites. Nevertheless, not every particular and localized instance of spared discrimination necessarily involves unjust enrichment; so a particular White person's overall situation may well be a combination of unjust enrichment and spared benefit privileges.

PRIVILEGES NOT RELATED TO INJUSTICE

There is yet a third category of privileges worth having distinct from these two. That is when one benefits from one's position, in a manner that one does not deserve from a moral point of view, but, in contrast to the previous two categories, the benefit is not related to an injustice suffered by the disadvantaged group. A particularly clear example, though not related to race, is a type

of 'linguistic privilege'. In any polity, some languages are privileged over others by being the official language(s). Native speakers of the official language(s) have an advantage over those who are brought up in another language (because they are immigrants, or have been brought up in a linguistic minority community). This advantage is undeserved by those who have it. However, it does not seem unjust for there to be national languages and, if there are, native speakers will always be privileged over non-native speakers. There can certainly be injustices related to language, such as discrimination against persons with 'accents' of various kinds, or violation of rights that should be independent of native language, such as voting rights or receiving of public services.³ But some advantages of being a native speaker do not involve discrimination.

Let us call this type of privilege a 'non-injustice-related' privilege. In theory at least, there can be *racial* instances of non-injustice-related privilege, for example, related to a majority/minority dynamic. Consider the informal cultures of workplaces and professions. These cultures tend to have a partly ethno-cultural character, so that members of some ethnic or racial groups find them more comfortable than do others. In the USA, this tilt is usually toward Whites. These biases have historically been shaped by exclusion, and in that respect are unjust. Let us imagine, however, a perhaps utopian future in which the historical injustices have been rectified, and there is equal opportunity for all ethnic and racial groups in the occupational world. One can imagine that some degree of ethnic bias in workplace culture would still remain, simply because of a majority/minority dynamic. If every racial group were represented in a given workplace in proportion to its numbers in the wider population, there might still be a comfort factor that favored White people, simply because of being the majority group. This would be a kind of unearned privilege not founded on injustice.

The existence of such a demographically based advantage does not license a failure to attempt to accommodate racial minorities, in the workplace and elsewhere. Aiming for equal comfort for all persons and groups is still an appropriate endeavor. Nevertheless, even after accommodation, there might be some remaining 'cultural tilt' that is not unjust but which nevertheless favors some groups over others. If this is correct, it seems plausible that some White privilege is of a majority/minority character distinct from actual injustice.

It should not be thought that someone who benefits from the non-injustice type of privilege is entirely 'morally in the clear' with respect to it. That is, 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 unrelated to his or her desert. The native speaker should be empathetic and sensitive to the

situation of the non-native speaker, and be as personally accommodating as possible (and supportive of institutional accommodation), in recognition of the undeserved disadvantage from which the non-native speaker suffers.⁴ The privileged person should not be complacent about the arrangement that privileges her, simply because it is not unjust, but should recognize that she benefits from an undeserved majority position and that she should try to accommodate the member of the minority group, and should press for structural changes that would facilitate that accommodation.

White privilege analysis would profit from a closer scrutiny of types of privilege to make clear their particular relation to injustice and other moral wrong; as things currently stand, there seems to me often 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 these distinctions. Teaching them poses 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. Making that distinction can lead some students to think there is nothing whatever wrong with a race-based victimizing of a member of a dominant group, when there is, on the grounds that it is less wrong than a comparable act victimizing a member of a vulnerable group.⁵ Similarly, there might be a concern that distinguishing the lesser moral concern of non-injustice-related privilege from unjust enrichment privilege might lead students to deny that the former is of any concern at all. However, this challenge is not a reason to deny a genuine moral distinction but only to find a way to enable students to appreciate moral differences of degree, a challenge that arises in many contexts.

ABSENCE OF STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

Much writing on White privilege within philosophy makes very little contact with literature that explores and attempts to explain the historical, social, economic and political forces that determine the actual structures of racial hierarchy. Why is average Black household income \$33,500 and White \$52,000 (US Census Bureau, 2006: 7)? Why do Black households have between 7% and 10% the wealth of Whites? (Oliver and Shapiro, 2006: 204). Why do Latinos and Blacks receive health care that is inferior to Whites? There is a vast literature in the social sciences on each of these matters, but philosophy, including philosophical explorations of White privilege, generally makes very little contact with it. Margaret Andersen has pointed out that Whiteness studies has been concentrated in the areas of cultural and literary studies, psychology and history – and I would add philosophy of education – and has had little presence in the social sciences (Andersen, 2003).⁶ Citing 'White privilege' does not

explain the disparities just mentioned; it simply names them and implies their systematicity, but without providing an account of the actual systems and structures in question, such as the social sciences can provide.

Yet, unless we know these particular explanations, we do not understand the structures and processes of White privilege. And unless we understand these explanations, we cannot know the best way to try to change them. Let me give one example that has attracted a good deal of attention among social scientists concerned with racial justice. That 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 Blacks and Whites is so much greater than the racial income gap (Oliver and Shapiro, 2006: 204). That explanation starts with the failure of the US government to provide any resources to the newly freed slaves after Emancipation in 1865, and proceeds through racial discrimination (both explicit and indirect) in the federal home mortgage program in the 1930s and 1940s that provided the largest government subsidized program in supporting home ownership, a program from which Whites benefited disproportionately. Since home ownership is a central asset or component of wealth in the USA, this favoring of Whites in home ownership contributed to the racial wealth gap. Oliver and Shapiro continue with the familiar but depressing account of dynamics in the housing market that depress the value of Black-owned homes in Black neighborhoods, further exacerbating the wealth gap. In his follow-up volume, *The Hidden Cost of Being African American*, Shapiro shows how wealth rather than income is the primary determinant of advancement in the society, of choices to reach for higher education, and so on (Shapiro, 2006). Both books end with suggestions of policies that could mitigate the racial wealth gap, such as shifting social policy toward a policy supportive of poor people's accumulation of assets.⁷

The point of mentioning Oliver and Shapiro's account is that it connects (1) an analysis of a particular racial disparity (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 involving both class and racial factors that has led to this disparity, and (4) a set of policy proposals intended to address the particular gap in question. One finds analogous accounts in the area of health care disparities – ones that analyze the causes (of both class and racial character) of arguably unjust health and health care racial disparities, and that suggest policies to address them (ranging from proposals about broadening health insurance coverage to running educational programs for health care providers on unconscious bias and stereotypes). This degree of analytic specificity is largely absent in discussions of White privilege within philosophy of education.

Such accounts do not ignore the interconnection between racial disparities in differing domains (housing, wealth, education, health). But they provide a specificity of analysis of the causes of racial disparities that provides an understanding of how racial privilege actually operates. One important explanatory axis that will be highlighted by such explanations is that of class. Although the role of class is often at least nominally acknowledged in White privilege analysis, 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; in the discussion of wealth just mentioned, persons with the same degree of wealth, no matter what their race, are subject to the same advantages and disadvantages of that level of wealth, although of course the fact that Blacks as a group have disproportionately less wealth than Whites is largely, though not entirely, due to race-based reasons. White privilege analysis 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* – although no one would assert this as a theoretically defensible position. But many forces bear on the plight of a racial group, and they are not all related to race.

Moreover, and related to this, class provides an axis of privilege that is distinct from race, but is deeply intertwined with it. Professional-class Blacks and Latinos have class advantages over working-class and poor Whites, and the normative underpinnings of these advantages require more attention than they have been given. Although I cannot defend the point here, 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 deep empirical and normative interconnection. I think it is basically 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 almost uniformly note the systematic or structural character of White privilege. They know it is not simply a matter of individuals' attitudes. But this insight is seldom actually built upon in the direction of offering or seeking structural analyses of particular racial disparities. There is an important educational lesson here. One of the capacities we wish to build in our students is that of social analysis, tied to a moral vision or principle. We want them to be able to look at their society and be able to analyze problems, such as those of racial injustice, that they are able to see. This involves a certain orientation toward the specificity of social analysis and research. In addition, without providing 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 implies, or 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 the mentioned groups, and as if the situations of Blacks and Latinos were essentially the same. At the very least, the focus on White privilege points us away from examining these differences. In the United States, there are vast and morally and politically significant differences in the experiences of all the major groups of color, racially defined. No other group's history, for example, is remotely comparable to that of African Americans. The history of slavery and Jim Crow segregation has led to both material and social/psychological disadvantages not faced by any other group. The history of Native Americans is also entirely distinctive. No other group has suffered the devastation of Native Americans. As Angelo Corlett has argued in *Race, Racism, and Reparations* and Walter Feinberg in *Common Schools/Uncommon Identities*, it is plausible to see Native American and African Americans as having suffered forms of oppression distinctively worse than that of Latinos and Asian Americans (Corlett, 2003: ch. 5; Feinberg, 1998: 161–6).

Many people are uncomfortable with comparative judgments regarding suffering and oppression on the part of different groups. It is true that such judgments can be used to undermine common sympathies and political alliances, and drive groups into a counterproductive and narrow so-called 'identity politics'. Nevertheless, such cautionary concerns must not allow 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 a good deal of American history. Only since 1952 were racial restrictions on naturalization lifted, restrictions that primarily affected Asians. However, the situation of the post-1965 Asian immigration is quite different in character. This is especially true in the area of education. Asian Indians, Chinese, Japanese and Koreans have been remarkably successful in the area of schooling in the USA, both at the K-12 level and in higher education (Hacker, 2003: 161–6). As certain scholars have suggested, there is an important 'non-Black' privilege that has

operated throughout American history, to privilege all non-Black immigrant groups, White as well as non-White, and indeed to privilege Black immigrants over African Americans.⁸

It would be accurate to say that there is a 'non-Black privilege' operating alongside 'White privilege'. That is, there are two distinct, though related, racial hierarchies – 'White/people of color' and 'non-Black/Black' – and both need to be taken account of in our understanding of racial injustice. Asians and Latinos are disadvantaged in the former hierarchy but privileged in the latter.

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 for a significant period of US history. 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; 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 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 US Black community complexifies 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, and these cannot all be dealt with here. Let me mention that it might well be thought that the injustice involved in the slave and post-slavery history of African Americans is crucial to how we are to understand the injustice involved in disparities between them and the White population; but that the same injustice does not apply to the later immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean (even if the ancestors of these later immigrants were also slaves).

None of this complexity is meant to deny that some form of a general 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. Again, from an education point of view, more fine-tuned tools of social analysis must be more robustly built into the teaching of White privilege.

THE TOO-NARROW POLITICS OF WHITE PRIVILEGE
ANALYSIS

Finally, let me just briefly suggest a problem with what might be called the 'politics of White privilege analysis' that flows from the reservations expressed so far. What is the point of the noting or discerning of White privilege? One direction White privilege analysis often goes in answer to this is the attempt by individuals to divest of their own 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?' That question can lead down very different paths, and lead to quite different antiracist projects that have a different kind of meaning to students who engage in them.

For example, the second question forces one to look at the concrete structures that produce disparities and to ask what can be done about them. As suggested earlier, these structures are not the same in every domain of social existence. Suppose a White student is interested in the area of medicine and wishes to engage with the issue of health care disparities. Then an activity that might both contribute in a meaningful way to improving the situation of Latinos and Blacks in the USA and be personally meaningful to the student 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, short-change their Black and Latino patients.⁹

Notice, however, that the student in question could engage in such projects without ever coming to grips with, or even focusing on, her own White privilege; she could engage in research and activism concerning a particular disparity and be driven by a commitment to racial justice. Of course, as 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 'color-blind', or an overinvestment in one's own individual racial innocence (Applebaum, 2005a; Applebaum, 2005b). 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 to understand and mitigate 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 force 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, disproportionately White, 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 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 (not all) actual White privilege.

I have raised several distinct but related concerns about White privilege analysis – its inadequate exploration of its own normative foundations, its inadequate exploration 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.¹⁰

NOTES

1. This article originated as a presentation at the 2008 Philosophy of Education Society conference and will appear in that form in the Yearbook of the conference.
2. Cashin (2004) provides a powerful account of how all, including Whites, would 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. This democratic benefit tends to get lost in a centering of the privileges of Whites. Ultimately, antiracist analysis should encompass both the benefits (illusory, short-term and substantial) of Whiteness and the ultimate moral and personal damage to Whites of a system of White privilege and racial injustice.

3. Over time, the native speaker's advantage can disappear if the non-native speakers learn the official language(s), though there may remain a residue of accent discrimination against them.
4. I am not equating race and culture here, but only trading on the fact that racial groups or portions thereof have distinctive cultures.
5. For a discussion of asymmetries in racism, see Blum (2002), chapter 2: Can Blacks Be Racist?
6. Andersen says that the absence of social scientific contribution to Whiteness studies leaves it 'without much grounding in the material reality of racial stratification' (2003: 21).
7. See chapter 9, 'The emergence of asset-based policy', in Oliver and Shapiro (2006).
8. See Waters (1990), on White ethnics distancing themselves from Blacks without recognizing that they are doing so; Waters (1999), on Black immigrants', especially Anglophone Afro-Caribbeans', complex relationship with African Americans and with Blackness, but including availing themselves of a perceived privilege, within the USA, of *not* being African American; Yancey (2003).
9. See, for example, Institute of Medicine (2002).
10. In writing this article, 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' (Stein, 2001) and Peter Kolchin's 'Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America' (2002), although I have not drawn on their substantive arguments.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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