Survey Article: On the Nature of the Political Concept of Privilege*

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The political notion of privilege is a concept that is much discussed, generates a great deal of controversy, but is rarely analyzed. We aim to provide an analysis of privilege, including a novel taxonomy of types of privilege. Moreover, we think that getting clear on the nature of privilege can help make sense of some of the controversies and attending discussions of the concept. We also characterize and explain the resistance people described as having privilege often feel in these discussions. The upshot of our analysis is that we offer more effective strategies in how to think about efficacious political and discursive responses to privilege.

Section I of the article will offer a novel taxonomy of kinds of privileges. Section II offers formal schemas of the taxonomy from section I. We distinguish between advantage, entitlement, and benefit privilege in addition to distinguishing positive and negative privilege. In section III we consider politically and dialectically efficacious responses to claims of privilege. In section IV, we raise one further distinction between overall and specific privilege and use the resources we’ve offered to analyze some real world cases of complaints about claims of privilege. Section V contains our concluding thoughts.

I. SOME PRELIMINARIES

A few preliminaries about the nature of privilege are in order. First, privilege in the political sense is properly attributed to groups primarily and to individuals derivatively. For example, white privilege is typically thought of as something that white people have as a group, and it confers privileges that members of the

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group have in virtue of being members of that group. White people have the privilege of not being harassed (as often) by the police in a range of cases that African Americans do suffer police harassment. But it may well be true that an individual white person gets harassed by police all the time because she is romantically involved with a police officer’s ex. In one sense she lacks the privilege, but she lacks it for reasons external to how she is racialized.

Second, and related to the first, individuals may and typically do belong to both privileged and underprivileged groups. Sometimes membership in a group will confer privileges to the individual in question while membership in another group will be such as to negate that privilege. Being white may lend someone privilege qua white person, while simultaneously lacking that privilege in virtue of belonging to a different group. For example, white people have the privilege of being less liable to police harassment, but a white person who is parent to an inter-racial child may well suffer higher degrees of police harassment.¹ In other words, privilege is had qua membership in a group, not absolutely.

Third, having privilege need not confer any particular benefit, material or otherwise. Not being harassed by the police in virtue of one’s race is a privilege but one might not benefit from this privilege. Conceivably, one may suffer loss on account of their privilege. We will discuss this more below but we think any account of privilege has to distinguish privilege clearly from benefit.

One final preliminary. On our view, a privilege need not be unjust qua being a privilege. Providing the elderly with designated seats on a bus is reasonably thought of as a privilege, but we don’t think it is unjust to designate certain seats on the bus for the elderly. Some privileges, however, are unjust and problematic.

With preliminaries out of the way, let’s discuss privilege qua group phenomenon. The concept of privilege is frequently explained by appeal to example. Here are three examples that are often brought forth to illustrate male privilege.² First, men are not typically harassed while walking down the street on account of their gender.³ It’s unlikely for a man to walk down the street, minding his own business, wearing regular jeans and a t-shirt, to hear “Hey honey. Hey! Hey, look over here a minute.” Or, “How are you doin’ today, beautiful? [No response.] I guess not very good, huh?”⁴ Moreover, this is not merely unlikely for

¹If a white parent has a black child, they may well be stopped and questioned as to whether the child is really theirs. We take this to be a case of lacking privilege qua parent of an inter-racial child.

²As Rachel notes in McKinnon (2013), our use of male/female and man/woman are meant to be gender inclusive. We do not subscribe to a gender binary. However, for simplicity’s sake, we will tend only to use these terms. We also don’t subscribe to an obvious division between sex and gender, so we will use male/female and man/woman interchangeably.

³As always, there are many caveats. Men may be harassed for their perceived race such that, for example, a black man will be harassed for walking in what’s perceived as a “white neighborhood.” Men may also be harassed for their perceived femininity or sexual orientation. The latter may be understood as harassment on the basis of their gender expression, but not so much as harassment based on their maleness as such.

⁴There was a recent viral video—with a number of problems, particularly in how race intersects how white men’s actions were largely edited out—documenting some of the street harassment a woman received walking in New York City. See Rob Bliss Creative 2014.
incidental reasons: it is in virtue of being male and the current societal norms that men are unlikely to experience this. Second, men with identical qualifications to women are hired more often than women, and with a higher average salary. Men thus tend to enjoy employment advantages over women. Third, at nearly all ages, men can see representations of members of their gender in a variety of roles that are powerful, positive, and active in a wide variety of media.

These examples illustrate, in our view, three very different forms of privilege. Following McIntosh, we will begin with a binary division of privilege into entitlement and advantage privileges. The first example above illustrates an entitlement privilege. An entitlement privilege is a property a group has that every group ought to have but, at present, only particular groups enjoy. For example, assume for now that marriage is a contract that societies ought to provide to their citizens. In contemporary US society, until very recently, only consenting unmarried and non-directly related straight people had the right to marry one another. In the United States queer people did not have the right to enter into non-heterosexual marriages. This is a case in which one group enjoys what they are entitled to while another group is denied.

An advantage privilege is constituted by a group’s differential or exclusive access to actions or activities that confer an advantage, but is not such that every group is entitled to such access. Advantage privileges are, in a sense, zero-sum: a group can only enjoy an advantage privilege if other groups do not enjoy the same level of access. Our second case above is a case of advantage privilege. On similar lines, current research into implicit bias suggests that resumes with stereotypically white sounding names are taken more seriously and garner a better chance of employment by prospective employers than resumes with stereotypically African American sounding names. It may not be altogether clear what bias this is tracking (racial, socio-economic, preference for “normal” sounding names), but it is clear that having a characteristically white name gives one an advantage privilege over others. This privilege survives only insofar as it is an advantage over others and embodies the features of a zero-sum game.

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5See Steinpreis et al. 1999 concerning decision inequity. While that study did not find a difference in salary, subsequent studies—and real world cases, such as revealed pay inequity at McMaster University—have found gender bias in salary offerings.

6Again, there are very important intersectional issues here. White women, for example, may be hired more frequently than black men in cases where both applicants have identical qualifications.

7McIntosh 1988, 1989.

8It’s worth distinguishing claims that something is a zero-sum game from claims about the diminishing quality of making something more available. For example, some conservatives have argued against same-sex marriage as a threat to the meaningfulness of marriage for everyone. While these arguments strike us as absurd, they are irrelevant to the question of whether or not marriage is a zero-sum game. The arguments don’t attempt to show that one person’s getting married would prevent another from doing so as well. They are relevant to whether or not making something non-exclusive is related to the preservation of its value.

9See Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004, for example.

10Being free of discrimination on the basis of what one’s name suggests about its bearer is also an entitlement, of course. But the advantage one gains in chances of employment is in the vast majority of cases not an entitlement.
So far so good. However, sometimes a group has differential access to an entitlement privilege, and that differential access creates an advantage. We call this *entitlement-advantage*. Consider once again our first example of male privilege. Everyone is entitled not to be harassed while walking down the street. Consequently, given that members of one gender are not typically harassed while doing so, they have an advantage over groups that are more typically harassed. Moreover, the divide between entitlement and advantage privilege is useful, in part, because there is a cohesive prima facie link between types of privilege and appropriate political remedies when the privilege is unjustified. It’s pretty clear that the advantage shouldn’t be nullified by making everyone subject to harassment when passing construction zones.\(^{11}\) This seems like a general feature of entitlement privilege—we should (ceteris paribus) not achieve equality by denying people who have entitlement privilege their entitlements. We should be extending these entitlements to all so that they no longer constitute an entitlement privilege or entitlement-advantage.

One might think that not all will agree with this claim about “leveling up,” especially when the ceteris paribus clause is violated, or where it turns out to be impossible to give everyone all that they are entitled to. There are delicate questions about entitlement here as it is not that everyone is entitled to things that not everyone can have. It’s plausible to think that everyone is entitled to a long peaceful life but a society at war may not be able to offer this to everyone in the society. As such, an entitlement privilege may well become an advantage privilege if conditions change.\(^{12}\)

Unlike entitlement privilege, if the privilege involves an unjust advantage, it seems fairly clear that the political remedy (ceteris paribus) involves taking away the property from the privileged group. Consider the example of men having relative hiring advantages over women, despite identical CVs. Qua advantage, this privilege is one that cannot be given to everyone on pain of no longer being advantageous. The proper remedy for this, then, seems to be a nullification of the advantage. How to implement this is unclear (anonymous applications? Training people in methods of fighting implicit bias?), but any reasonable remedy seems to take away a (non-relational) property that the advantaged group had.

You may be wondering about the ceteris paribus clauses. They are there because extreme cases may well require otherwise unacceptable remedies and solutions. On the one hand, we can certainly imagine cases in which the only way to nullify an entitlement-advantage is to rob everyone of the entitlement. On the other hand, everyone is entitled to food and shelter but we can imagine scenarios of shortage where we draw lots for food and shelter, and people who draw a bad lot may well

\(^{11}\)Of course, this doesn’t mean that one can’t make a forceful point by subjecting men to such harassment. Perhaps it would be better if men did have a chance to get a partial glimpse first hand of what this sort of harassment feels like. But as a social remedy, it seems ridiculous that the overall outcome we should aim for is universal street harassment. We should be aiming for universal non-harassment!

\(^{12}\)We thank Tina Rulli for this suggestion.
lose out. And the usual counterexamples involving outlandish alternatives of course still serve as useful reminders—if aliens were to kill us all if we hired people named “Heather,” all non-Heathers would receive an unfair but possibly justified advantage privilege in employment opportunities. But, as rules of thumb, the convergence of privilege type and remedy seem prima facie reasonable.

Unfortunately, this nice convergence is disrupted by a form of privilege that lies “halfway” between advantage and entitlement. Dividing forms of privilege only in terms of advantage and entitlement doesn’t yet capture all of the cases that need to be captured. The distinction between advantage and entitlement privilege isn’t merely that one is zero-sum and the other is not. Another class of privilege is not zero-sum, but doesn’t fit neatly into entitlement privilege, so we need a new category, which we call benefit privilege. These are forms of privilege that aid in promoting human flourishing, and aren’t inherently problematic (as advantage privileges tend to be), but are problematic only if one group has it but another doesn’t. Moreover, what distinguishes benefit from entitlement privilege is that not everyone can have benefit privileges, while it’s at least conceivable that everyone could enjoy entitlement privileges.

Our third example of male privilege is an example of benefit privilege. Being part of a group that is represented in a positive manner in a variety of media arguably confers an advantage if other groups aren’t so represented. But it’s pretty clear to us that people aren’t entitled to be represented in positive manners. A society that refused to have any artistic representations of people at all probably wouldn’t be a very enjoyable one to live in, but it also wouldn’t be one in which all groups were deprived of an obvious entitlement. We might think that it’s better if everyone were to have access to a benefit privilege, but one isn’t entitled to everything that would benefit them. Here’s another putative example from McIntosh: “I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.”

Not being subject to racially based explanations of your behavior seems like an obvious advantage. It shares with entitlement privilege being a non-zero-sum game—everyone, in principle, could be free of racially based explanations of their behavior. But in the relevant sense, it’s not an entitlement—white people don’t have the entitlement that people won’t attribute things to them because of their race. If it is an entitlement, it’s an entitlement of an apparently very different order than freedom from street harassment. In this sense, it is much more like an advantage privilege as it confers a clear, unearned advantage. Clearly, moreover, the social political remedy would not be to start judging white people as an illiterate race if Peggy McIntosh stopped answering letters!

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13 McIntosh 1989, p. 11. For an extensive discussion of white privilege, see Zack 2015.
14 Using Ann Richards’s baseball metaphor, some people are “born on third base” but think they “hit a triple.”
We don’t pretend that this division of privilege into types means that any given privilege will be easy to classify. A recent example that comes to mind involves studies that claim to show that student evaluations are guided by gender and race—in particular, that white male professors tend to receive an unearned bump on their evaluations.\textsuperscript{15} For example, MacNell et al. found that students would give higher average course evaluation scores when they thought that their online course was taught by a man (even though it was really taught by a woman).\textsuperscript{16} This data mirrors the findings about gender and CV evaluations in Steinpreis et al.\textsuperscript{17} This case is difficult to slot into our categories because it is not clear whether there is an evaluative level that a given professor is entitled to. On the one hand, if there’s a determinate objectively correct evaluation a professor should receive, (which is admittedly a large assumption), and white male professors are getting that rating while professors of other races and genders are not, this looks like an entitlement privilege, but one that creates a distinct advantage (that is, an entitlement-advantage). On the other hand, if the evaluations are higher than what the white male professor deserves, it looks a lot more like an advantage privilege rather than an entitlement. But, plausibly, there is no number that any given professor should get—the system depends crucially on how professors are being rated relative to one another. If this is right, it looks a fair bit like an advantage privilege as the system has the characteristic of a zero-sum game. We leave it to the reader to try to determine what sort of privilege this is—but it is a privilege nonetheless.

Privilege can also be divided along a second dimension. Following Bailey, negative privilege is the absence of barriers to engaging in particular actions or activities.\textsuperscript{18} Recall our first example of male privilege, men tend to have the ability to walk down the street without the likelihood of objectifying comments or cat calls. That is, they have the privilege of being free from this sort of behavior and, indeed, from the worry about possibly being subject to this behavior. That is not a privilege most women have.

Similarly, most people racialized-as-white can walk down the street without much fear of being randomly stopped by police because they vaguely “fit the description” of a suspect.\textsuperscript{19} The cases that support this are legion, but here are two recent examples. First, the widely criticized NYPD practice of “stop and

\textsuperscript{15}See also Lazos 2012.  
\textsuperscript{16}MacNell et al. 2015.  
\textsuperscript{17}Steinpreis et al. 1999.  
\textsuperscript{18}Bailey 1998.  
\textsuperscript{19}One might wonder about the usage of “racialized-as-white” or “racialized.” It’s important to note that race and racism operates not just at the level of what race one is, but what race people perceive one to be. Moreover, privilege often—but certainly not always—operates at the level of perception. For example, a light-skinned black person may not be thought of as black, but treated as white. While this person is black, she is racialized-as-white. She would thereby have some form of white privilege. Conversely, a mixed-race, half-white half-Japanese person might be variously racialized depending on where she is. In the Southeastern United States, she’ll likely be racialized-as-Mexican or Latina; in western Canada, she might be racialized-as-Asian.
frisk”—which grossly disproportionately resulted in black people being selected for random stops, questionings, and friskings. Second, a black Yale undergraduate student was stopped at gunpoint by a campus police officer, after he was exiting the library, because he “fit the description” of some suspect—where being black is often sufficient to count as fitting the description.\(^{20}\) The relative freedom from being subjected (or potentially subjected) to such police suspicions and behaviors is one manifestation of negative white privilege.

Positive privilege, on the other hand, is the presence of an ability to engage in behavior that is not best explained in terms of immunities from barriers alone. One example would be where people confer default credibility to a man’s testimony, even when he knows nothing about the relevant subject area. In Fricker’s terminology, the positive privilege is that he benefits from a credibility excess for his testimony.\(^{21}\) By contrast, women tend to suffer from a credibility deficit.\(^{22}\)

The negative/positive distinction is useful, but it’s worth noticing that we can present any positive privilege in terms that make it appear as a negative privilege. In the example just mentioned, one might claim that men are (generally) free from suffering a credibility deficit when engaging in assertoric practices in testimonial contexts. While it’s true that any positive privilege corresponds to a lack of barriers (such as discrimination or prejudice), we take it that not all descriptions of a privilege are equally illuminating as to the nature of the privilege. The fact that someone has the right to vote can be re-described as a freedom to avoid all barriers to voting, but we take it that the “positive” descriptions of this right are more illuminating.\(^{23}\)

II. A SCHEMA OF PRIVILEGE

Identifying the dimensions of privilege doesn’t yet tell us what a privilege is or what it means to have a privilege. The purpose of this section is to sketch a schema for having a privilege. One way to understand privilege is what we will call the **counterfactual view**. On this view, what it means to have a form of privilege \(\phi\) is that were one to have a different intersectional identity (where that identity doesn’t enjoy \(\phi\)), one would suffer the ill effects of not having \(\phi\) or not enjoy the benefits that \(\phi\) confers. For example, Lilly is a white femme lesbian woman. She has white privilege. This means that if she enters a retail shopping store, she’s not likely to be followed and suspected of being a shoplifter. However, if she were a black lesbian woman—with all other relevant identity

\(^{20}\)See Jaschik 2015.

\(^{21}\)Fricker 2007.

\(^{22}\)For an overview on the state of the literature on this topic, known as epistemic injustice, see McKinnon 2016.

\(^{23}\)There’s a similar issue in legal theory concerning negative and positive rights as well as positive and negative liberties. We do not have the space to pursue these analogies here. See Narveson (2001) for further discussion.
features held constant, such as her age, occupation, education level, economic status, and so on—it would be more likely that she would be followed in the store and suspected of shoplifting. On the counterfactual view, the truth of this counterfactual concerning white people in general constitutes a form of white privilege.

In many activist communities, this is a common way to speak about what it means to have a particular form of privilege, especially when attempting to explain privilege to people who aren’t yet familiar with the concept. For example, suppose that one wants to explain what it means to have white privilege to a poor, white man. The term “privilege” connotes advantage, and someone who is severely economically disadvantaged is going to have a hard time understanding how he is “privileged” when he can point to countless instances of black men having easier lives than him. So one discursive strategy is to say to him, “Take everything about your life, and now suppose that you woke up tomorrow as a black man. Many things about your life would be instantly harder. Other white people would be less likely to trust you; you would likely have a harder time finding work; you’d likely face racist insults at the job you do have; and so on.” This is often an effective discursive strategy. However, we think that the counterfactual view is a mistaken schema for privilege.

To be clear, we don’t reject the truth of many of the counterfactuals. Nor do we deny that it is useful to explain the workings of privilege in these terms. But we think that it is wrong to analyze the concept of privilege in conditional terms. We have four reasons for thinking this. First, it isn’t very clear which counterfactuals we should be evaluating, as it isn’t clear what the manifestations of privilege are. Say that tomorrow the government granted all and only white people free parking. This would ground the truth of a new counterfactual as applied to white people:

(i) If you were black, you wouldn’t have free parking.

The truth of this counterfactual doesn’t reveal the nature of privilege, it would be indicative of a new privilege.

Second, even if we tried to rectify the problem by generalizing about how hard life would or wouldn’t be, it isn’t clear that we don’t already need to smuggle in the notion of privilege in question. Consider this counterfactual about Lilly:

(ii) If Lilly were to wake up as a black femme lesbian woman (and all else were held fixed), her life would be more difficult.

(ii) is definitely true, but at least partly for reasons unrelated to privilege. If anyone who is white were to wake up having dramatically changed the color of their skin, they would find life more difficult. People wouldn’t recognize them and they would no longer be able to use their photo ID cards. They would have a hard time understanding what had happened and would assume that they had a medical condition (which doctors would likely want to study). These are all ways
in which one’s life would be more difficult but they don’t seem to be best explained by appeal to privilege.

Of course, we know that those aren’t the sorts of ways life would be difficult that “count” when we’re interested in the ways that the presence of privilege may make some people’s lives easier, and the absence of privilege may make some people’s lives more difficult. Those nearby worlds, on a vaguely Lewisian semantics of counterfactuals, aren’t relevant.24 But the irrelevance of these worlds seems to be guided by the fact that they don’t reflect a political notion of privilege. We take this to suggest that a useful notion of privilege should help explain which counterfactuals are relevant, rather than vice versa. More importantly, the counterfactual seems to identify privilege on the basis of things going better or worse for the agent. But this threatens to confuse the concept of privilege with the concept of general benefit. There is no conceptual necessity for someone with privilege having more overall well-being and benefit than people without the privilege.

Third, the counterfactual account is not set up to exhibit the differences this article is trying to uncover. While counterfactuals might be good ways to detect and justify general claims of privilege, they don’t seem especially useful for carving up the concept using the distinctions we’ve identified. The truth of a counterfactual such as (ii), even if we restrict the counterfactual’s evaluation successfully to relevant worlds, leaves us no natural way to express the differences between entitlement, advantage, and benefit privileges. In fact, it leaves no obvious way for identifying particular privileges such as the aforementioned three examples of male privilege. The reason for this is that the truth of the counterfactual lumps all the privileges—race, sexual orientation, gender, and so on—one enjoys into one factor: the relative easiness of one’s life, absence of potential hindrances and sources of oppression, and so on. But this fails to divide between the various specific ways in which one’s life would be easier or harder if one changed some relevant feature of one’s appearance, orientation (or, perhaps religion, political beliefs, and so on). We could try to approach this by making the counterfactuals more sensitive. For example:

(iii) If Aaron were a woman (and all else were held the same), he would be more likely to be harassed on the street.

This seems like a more promising route to identifying individual privileges. But it still doesn’t seem to tell us whether or not freedom from street harassment is a privilege (or a disadvantage). Of course, we know that being harassed on the street constitutes a real general disadvantage, but not thanks to the counterfactual.

Fourth, and we acknowledge that this may be more of a quibble than a substantive issue, counterfactual accounts are notorious for giving the wrong

24Lewis 1986.
predictions where special circumstances apply. Say that Lilly in our example is a notorious criminal and is about to be caught by the police, but also suppose that the police force will be thrown off if she suddenly were to change skin color dramatically. In that case, (ii) would come out false—her life would actually become much easier! But the falsity of (ii) doesn’t seem to reflect anything about the relevant concept of privilege so much as the peculiarities of Lilly’s situation. This is a quibble but a worthwhile one—what it shows is that restricting the understanding of the counterfactuals to relevance seems to be guided by a prior notion of privilege, which should predict the truth of the counterfactuals, not be constituted by them.

The main problem with the counterfactual view, at root, is that it conflates privilege and material benefit. As we argued above, privilege need not be beneficial—though obviously it typically is beneficial. Counterfactuals regarding how well someone’s life would or wouldn’t go disregard the derivative nature of individual attributions of privilege. We thus submit that the concept of privilege is not to be analyzed using counterfactuals. Instead, it’s far more productive to understand privilege as the capacity for agents to engage in various forms of behavior. Our general schema for analyzing having privilege is:

Members of a group $G$ have a $G$-privilege $P$ in a social setting $S$ if and only if:

1. $P$ is a generally desirable property to have in $S$.
2. (Most) other groups of the same type don’t enjoy $P$.
3. $G$ has $P$ because of how the social and/or political institutions of $S$ treat membership in $G$.
4. $G$ does not deserve to have $P$ merely in virtue of comprising a group of $Gs$.

Some comments about the schema are in order. First, we are generously helping ourselves to the notion of a generally desirable property. There are all sorts of well-known, interesting questions regarding what makes a property generally desirable, whether or not there is a reasonable notion of a generally desirable property that is workable over large social settings, whether or not we can reduce general desirableness to individual desirableness, and so on. We hope that there is a workable notion as any theory of privilege will at some point have to explain why privileges are things that people have and tend to enjoy having, and why people without those privileges tend to be worse off for lacking the privilege. It seems plausible that the desirability will be grounded in more primitive notions of autonomy, flourishing, and the likelihood that possession of a given property enhances either of those. In any case, we will give ourselves license to talk about a property being desirable. We expect that where it is controversial whether or not a property is desirable (but the other conditions are satisfied), it will be controversial in those cases whether or not having that property is a privilege.

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25See the discussion of primary social goods in Rawls 1971. If there is no workable notion of “desirable property,” it is difficult to see how to make sense of why privilege can be problematic.
Second, there is some vagueness inherent in the analysis. For example, it’s somewhat vague as to what counts as a “social setting.” Western Europe is a social setting composed of smaller social settings and it’s not clear just how large or small a social setting is that can still be taken to have sufficient cohesion to count. But the restriction to social settings (or something playing a similar role) seems crucial to us. The privilege of having your race broadly represented in media is one that white people enjoy in Canada but not South Korea.26

It’s also not clear what counts as a group in the relevant sense. The “cool kids” at a high school form a group that has advantages that other students don’t have, but is this really a group that we should be focusing on in political discussions of privilege? Probably not. But we think that this partly reflects a political choice about what groups we focus on in discussion of socio-political privilege. Part of the reason for thinking that the “cool kids” should be excluded from our analysis is that groups should have a stability through time, recognized relatively widely by the social setting in which they inhere.

In light of this, we could restrict our analysis to “social kinds” like gender, race, able-bodiedness, and so on. On the other hand, someone studying the dynamics of high school life may well treat the group of cool kids as a relevant kind and discuss their privileges in a perfectly coherent manner. If the progeny of wealthy donors were given differential access to school resources and enjoyed grade inflation on behalf of being related to wealthy donors, we may well take that to be a case of undeserved privilege. We take this flexibility to be a feature rather than a bug. An analysis of privilege need not provide a full explanation of the pragmatics and socio-political deployment of the concept. If we choose to ignore certain privileges from consideration because they are too minor, or because the group in question is too gerrymandered or temporary in membership, that is our choice of levels of theorizing, not necessarily a feature of the nature of privilege.

Importantly, the analysis above, however, doesn’t distinguish between entitlement, benefit, and advantage privilege. This is on purpose. With small precisifications to the analysis, we can use it to capture the various forms of privilege we have articulated above. Advantage, entitlement, and benefit privileges, respectively, can be characterized as follows:

Members of a group \( G \) have an advantage \( G \)-privilege \( P \) in a social setting \( S \) if and only if:

1. \( P \) is a generally desirable property to have in \( S \) that other groups can’t have consistent with members of \( G \) having \( P \).
2. (Most) other groups of the same type don’t enjoy \( P \).
3. \( G \) has \( P \) because of how the social and/or political institutions of \( S \) treat membership in \( G \).
4. \( G \) does not deserve to have \( P \) merely in virtue of comprising a group of \( G \)s.

26Still, even while in South Korea, white people enjoy the privilege of being represented broadly in America.
Members of a group $G$ have an *entitlement* $G$-privilege $P$ in a social setting $S$ if and only if:

1. $P$ is a generally desirable property to have in $S$ that *members of $S$ are (generally) entitled to have.*
2. (Most) other groups of the same type don’t enjoy $P$.
3. $G$ has $P$ because of how the social and/or political institutions of $S$ treat membership in $G$.
4. $G$ does not deserve to have $P$ merely in virtue of comprising a group of $G$s.

Members of a group $G$ have a *benefit* $G$-privilege $P$ in a social setting $S$ if and only if:

1. $P$ is a generally desirable property to have in $S$ that *members of $S$ are not generally entitled to but that everyone in $S$ could have.*
2. (Most) other groups of the same type don’t enjoy $P$.
3. $G$ has $P$ because of how the social and/or political institutions of $S$ treat membership in $G$.
4. $G$ does not deserve to have $P$ merely in virtue of comprising a group of $G$s.

We can now more precisely characterize privilege:

Members of a group $G$ have a $G$-privilege in a social setting $S$ if and only if

1. Members of $G$ have an advantage, entitlement, or benefit $G$-privilege.

The set of advantage, entitlement, and benefit privileges that a group has constitutes that group’s $G$-privilege. So white privilege (relative to North America, to pick a social setting) is the set of advantage, entitlement, and benefit privileges white people have in North America. That’s what it means to have white privilege.

The distinction between positive and negative privilege is a little less easy to encode. But it is not hard to give an analysis:

A $G$-privilege $P$ is a negative privilege (relative to $S$) iff:

1. $P$ is (partly) constituted by a lack of barriers to some desirable activity or state.

Any privilege that is not negative is a positive privilege.

Importantly, our view can capture most of what was right about the counterfactual view. Consider freedom from street harassment. Males are generally free of this and our view deems it a negative entitlement privilege. Now consider a male walking down the street and adjust things so that he is perceived as a female, he knows that he is perceived as a woman, and that the adjustment wasn’t sudden or noticed as a switch from male to female appearance. Well, in those scenarios, that male is much more likely to be harassed. Build those conditions into the antecedent and you get the truth of the counterfactual: if $X$ had been perceived as a female without any sudden switches, $X$ would be more likely to face harassment. Of course, this won’t apply to every value of $X$ and perhaps there are things that depend on $X$’s being male that will render the counterfactual false. But for all the things we care about, the counterfactual is highly plausible and rendered so by our analysis.
There is one question that is worth addressing in this context that can complicate the analysis. The analysis as stated renders properties groups have as privileges that are not obviously privileges. A good example (thanks to Tina Rulli) is the “model minority” status often attributed to Asian Americans. One feature of this status is being viewed as being good at math (in virtue of being Asian). Another is a complaint frequently made by men’s rights groups—that women are privileged in virtue of being granted custody over children more frequently in family court. On our analysis, these turn out to be privileges—given the general desirability of being perceived as good at math or having advantages in custody battles. And this may strike some as absurd given the racist and sexist assumptions that generate these group level properties.

The issues are extremely complicated. Here are a few relevant points. First, we can build more constraints into the analysis. There are two ways one might do this, depending on what one thinks the problematic feature of these putative privileges are. One might think that the problem is that the putative privileges stem from a noxious source and that they thus aren’t actually privileges. This seems wrong—white privilege stems from a noxious source, but white privilege is still privilege. A second more reasonable approach locates privilege within a certain hierarchy. The idea would be to locate a hierarchy of dominance, so that only dominant groups relative to that hierarchy could enjoy properties that are properly thought of as privilege.27

For example, one could modify the initial analysis as follows:

Members of a group $G$ have a $G$-privilege $P$ in a social setting $S$ if and only if:

1. $P$ is a generally desirable property to have in $S$.
2. (Most) other groups of the same type don’t enjoy $P$.
3. $G$ has $P$ because of how the social and/or political institutions of $S$ treat membership in $G$.
4. $G$ does not deserve to have $P$ merely in virtue of comprising a group of $G$s.
5. $G$, relative to the relevant type hierarchy, is dominant within that hierarchy.

(5) provides the relevant leverage. It ensures that “model minority” status is not properly thought of as a privilege even if it constitutes an advantage or general benefit. Further, given that women (as a group) are subordinated to men (as a group), the property enjoyed by the group of having a better chance at attaining custody over children is not a privilege because women, qua women, simply can’t have gender-based privileges. This suggests a possible second notion of privilege that is relational in nature. If there were three groups $x$, $y$, and $z$ who fit into a hierarchy of dominance in that order, then one could potentially posit properties that $y$ has as a group that is a privilege relative to $z$ but not a privilege relative to $x$.28

27See Bartky 1990 for an account of gender as a hierarchy of dominance.
28Thanks to Tina Rulli for this suggestion. We think that the notion of relative privilege could be a very theoretically and practically useful one.
Second, however, we want to suggest that it is not obvious that non-dominant groups fail to have properties that constitute privileges, even if sometimes they aren’t experienced as such. At the very least, it doesn’t seem to be conceptually impossible that a group that was not dominant overall should still possess properties that the dominant group lacked as a result of the institutions of their social setting. A group may rightfully resent being seen as a “model minority” and it might cause a fair bit of harm to members to have this status. Perhaps, for example, being seen as good at math will really hamper Asian Americans who turn out to be terrible at math (where others in similar circumstances will be judged less harshly relative to an expected standard of math competence). Or the very thought that there’s a stereotype that Asians are good at math can affect one’s performance on a math test. On our view, privileges themselves aren’t just or unjust, but particular privileges are politically problematic and should be rectified. One reason that a privilege may be unjust is because it confers an unfair advantage, but another way in which it might be problematic is because it supports bad or pernicious stereotypes regarding a group.

It’s worth noting, moreover, that one may coherently be upset about or resent a privilege that one has. Well-meaning white people may resent the social configuration that privileges them and prefer to give up a range of these privileges. In this particular instance, this is often part of what is referred to as “white guilt.” But seeing your privilege as something you prefer not to have doesn’t mean that it isn’t a privilege, just as not benefiting materially from a privilege doesn’t mean that it isn’t a privilege either.

The view that non-dominant groups have privileges might strike some as flatly false—surely the use of such phrases is simply a way to keep people down or trivialize the notion of privilege by claiming that there is Asian privilege on account of Asian Americans being seen as good at math, or African Americans being seen as good at certain athletic sports. We agree. The use of such phrases typically is used to trivialize the impact of claims that certain dominant groups have unjustified privileges. So people shouldn’t use them for such purposes or in contexts in which this will be the result. But there’s no straightforward route from

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29 This would be an instance of the underperformance effect manifestation of stereotype threat. The proposed mechanism is that being aware of the stereotype, and that one’s concern that one’s performance may be judged in light of—such as embodying—the stereotype takes up working memory resources, which impedes cognitive performance on the test. See, for example, Shih et al. (1999). For information on the working memory mechanism hypothesis, see Schmader and Johns (2003) and Beilock et al. (2007).

30 Of course, it becomes an interesting question how this line of thought interacts with the idea that privileges are “generally desirable.” If every male knew about and resented any and all hiring privileges and everyone else preferred not to have this advantage, would this make the property of “having a generally higher probability of being hired” a non-generally desirable property?

One line of thought is that the property of “having a generally higher probability of being hired” is generally desirable. It’s the property of “having a generally higher probability of being hired because of your gender” that is undesirable. Similarly, if it is generally desirable to be seen as good at math, it may not be generally desirable to be seen as good at math because people hold racist views towards you.
the problematic use of terms to their non-applicability. Moreover, with or without the term “Asian privilege,” the set that we take it to denote has members that can be used to trivialize debate and downplay the effects of privilege. Thus, the following conversation might well function as a way to trivialize the pernicious effects of male privilege:

A: “[Group X] has certain privileges.”

B: “Big deal. Women can use their sexuality to affect men. Asian Americans are seen as good at math, and ...”

B is trivializing the debate by simply listing advantages without using the phrase “privilege” at any point. One doesn’t gain new political advantages by calling these “privileges.” So the problem may be with the pragmatics of invoking “female privilege”—insofar as it constitutes an attempt to trivialize the pernicious effects of other forms of privilege. We leave this as a matter for further discussion.

III. PUTTING THE TOOLS TO WORK

We suggest that there are a number of political, discursive, and epistemic benefits to understanding privilege both in terms of the schemata. It should now be clear that not all privileges are of the same type and, moreover, our view allows us to be more precise in discussing particular forms of privilege than something as broad as “male privilege.” That is, some forms of male privilege will count as negative entitlement privileges while others will count as positive advantage privileges. Treating them under the same umbrella of “male privilege” elides important differences, both politically, discursively, and epistemically.

When confronted with the topic of privilege, many people in privileged groups are put off by being told that they have, for example, “white male privilege” if the many disparate examples of privilege aren’t carefully distinguished. Particularly, we suggest, those resistant to understanding themselves as having forms of privilege and, moreover, understanding how the forms of privilege they have are connected to other people’s oppression tend to think only of entitlement privileges and in terms of whether or not privilege is beneficial to them materially overall. On our view of entitlement privilege, being told to “check your privilege” will be met with strong resistance precisely because it would be wrong (in most circumstances) to think that someone should “give up” or resist the entitlement. And if this is the only type of privilege someone knows about, then they will take it to be clearly absurd that their privilege is a problem that should be rectified. After all, since it’s an entitlement that everyone should have, this isn’t a property (the ability to walk down the street free from harassment or assault) that men should give up. However, it is important for men to “give up” the idea that this isn’t a form of privilege that they disproportionately enjoy and women do not.
On the other hand, though, it’s often more politically and discursively efficacious to raise positive advantage privileges. There are advantage privileges that should be resisted. Having great advantages over women in the job market may be something that men wouldn’t want to give up, but will more generally be acknowledged to be in violation of principles of fairness and justice.\(^{31}\)

Understanding some forms of privilege as positive advantage privileges in terms of zero-sum also helps us understand why people in privileged groups resist giving up those privileges and, moreover, why they feel like they’re losing something in giving up that privilege. They are losing something! They’re losing an (unfair) advantage. It’s important to recognize and acknowledge this.

IV. OVERALL VS. SPECIFIC PRIVILEGE

The considerations above can also help us explain another source of resistance to the thought that members of some groups have privilege. Our diagnosis is that some of the resistance is rooted in confusion between two different but related notions: overall and specific privilege.

Specific privilege is the notion that we have been discussing in this article. The ability to walk down the street mostly free of harassment is a male entitlement privilege. General freedom from police harassment is a white entitlement privilege. But there is also a sense of privilege that tracks one’s intersectional, overall situation within a society. This latter notion can be thought of, roughly, as the privilege one has “on the whole.” The relationship between specific and overall privilege can be compared helpfully with the notion of being “well-liked.” Consider the following example.

Aaron is well-liked by corrupt politicians but Aaron is not well-liked by others. This is not a contradiction. Similarly, we take the following to be non-contradictory:

Brian has white privilege but Brian is not privileged (overall).\(^{32}\)

The idea is that Brian’s position in society might well be non-privileged overall despite having certain specific privileges. For example, Brian might be disabled, poor, and uneducated. He still has various white privileges qua being racialized-as-white, but we can compare, roughly, his overall privilege to another person, Sheila, who is a wealthy black lesbian woman. Sheila does not have white

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\(^{31}\)Men dominating conversations, or being given more default credibility as speakers (e.g., Fricker 2007), are not entitlements. For example, see: Swann 1989; Tannen 1996; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2013; and McKinnon 2015. In the case of having a credibility excess (and intersectionality certainly applies here), that is an advantage, but taking the view that everyone should be free from prejudicial credibility deficit (i.e., testimonial injustice), that is an entitlement.

\(^{32}\)Rachel has heard people say this, in fact. We would be surprised if you couldn’t find people who will admit to a person having what we are calling “specific privileges,” but being angry at their being called “privileged.” It’s a virtue of our account that we can make sense of this apparent pattern of agreement and disagreement.
privilege, nor does she have male and (at least some forms of) heterosexual privilege. However, having economic privilege is often so powerful in our society, that she has more overall privilege than Brian.33

Unfortunately, we find that when many people are confronted with claims that they enjoy various forms of privilege—and this is overwhelmingly white men, in our experience—one way they resist this claim is to point to someone who is not a white man who is wealthy, such as Oprah Winfrey, or a black man who is far better off than themselves, such as Barack Obama. We think that resistance to accepting specific privilege is sometimes based on two possible confusions. The first is a conflation of privilege with being well off. Someone may be very badly off and still enjoy the privileges we suggested above.

Second, and more subtly, there may well be a confusion between overall and specific privilege (in this case, white privilege). In an essay that is sympathetic to both the notion of privilege and to resistance to being called “privileged” if one is extremely poor, Gina Crosley-Corcoran claims:

I, maybe more than most people, can completely understand why broke white folks get pissed when the word “Privilege” is thrown around. As a child, I was constantly discriminated against because of my poverty and those wounds still run very deep. But luckily my college education introduced me to a more nuanced concept of Privilege; the term Intersectionality. The concept of Intersectionality recognizes that people can be privileged in some ways and definitely not privileged in others.34

While we agree with the overall message of Crosley-Corcoran’s piece, intersectionality isn’t clearly the right concept for what she means. Part of what intersectionality means is recognizing the multi-faceted identities we all have and how they can combine to create new forms of discrimination (or privilege).35 For example, some forms of discrimination that black women face aren’t simply a combination of discrimination for being black plus discrimination for being a woman. Part of this involves not treating intersectional forms of oppression as additive. Some forms are (relatively) unique to being a black woman. The term for this is “misogynoir.”36 So we don’t see intersectionality as a more nuanced version of the concept of privilege. Rather, it is an orthogonal concept that helps us understand how axes of identity variously combine and intersect to create forms of privilege or oppression.

On our view, the more nuanced concept of privilege is “specific” privilege and the concept that worries many people is the notion of “overall” privilege. There’s no contradiction between realizing that you are massively disadvantaged overall and that you still have certain unearned advantages (that is, advantage privilege).

33We note below how fraught it is to do such a calculation, even very roughly.
34Crosley-Corcoran 2014.
35For some good discussions of intersectionality, see Crenshaw (1991) and Garry (2008, 2012).
36An accessible explanation of the concept can be found in Boom 2015.
A similar concern applies to the case of someone more hostile to notions of privilege. An article in the *Princeton Tory* criticizing privilege claimed:

Perhaps it was my privilege that my own father worked hard enough in City College to earn a spot at a top graduate school, got a good job, and for 25 years got up well before the crack of dawn, sacrificing precious time he wanted to spend with those he valued most—his wife and kids—to earn that living. I can say with certainty there was no legacy involved in any of his accomplishments. The wicker business just isn’t that influential. Now would you say that we’ve been really privileged? That our success has been gift-wrapped?37

In a similar vein, a comment in the thread authored by someone who goes by the pseudonym “SFC MAC” claims:

Where in the hell is all this privilege I’m supposed to have because I’m white? My environment was far from prosperous. I come from a working class family in a racially diverse neighborhood. My mother raised 7 kids, mostly by herself. We all worked. My two older step sisters worked two part time jobs, and my mother worked to make ends meet. It was a hell of a struggle. I joined the Army at the age of 18 and served a total of 30 years (20 Active, 10 reserve). My skin color didn’t exempt me from two combat tours in Iraq. My Associates Degree was earned at a community college because that’s all my GI Bill and pocket could afford. My pension is still not enough to cover all the bills, but I still have Social Security to look forward to. Whoopie. No one gave me a free meal ticket because I’m a hyphenated “Caucasian.”38

One ought to take these concerns seriously, in our view, rather than dismiss them. But we do think that there is a subtle misunderstanding at work here—having certain privileges, even positive advantage ones, does not mean that you don’t suffer from certain disadvantages as well, nor does it mean that having various forms of privilege (or even “overall” privilege) means that one has an easy life. It doesn’t even mean you’ll have an easier life than members of more disadvantaged groups. Having an advantage on the job market is no guarantee of a job. Being relatively free of sexually based street harassment does not guarantee that you will be safe walking down your streets. But it is worth, in our view, trying to see how this misunderstanding comes about. We claim that the misunderstanding is a conflation of particular specific privileges with overall privilege. To put it vulgarly, having privilege doesn’t mean your life won’t suck nor that you won’t suffer a great deal of disadvantage. If we are right, having a particular privilege might put you at an overall great disadvantage in various circumstances.

Thus, on our view, it is a mistake to see Tal Fortgang and SFC MAC as disagreeing that they have white, male privilege. What they are doing is equivocating on the notion of privilege. It is compatible with having white privilege that a given white person may well be worse off than the average non-

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37 Tal Fortgang ’17 2014.
38 SFC MAC 2014.
white woman and one can sympathize with such a person’s frustrations if they are interpreting claims that they are privileged as overall rather than specific. It may even be compatible with most white people being overall worse off than their non-white counterparts in extreme situations where privilege wasn’t turned into material benefit (if we were to stretch our imaginations).

It would be nice if we could reduce the notion of overall privilege to a sum of the various specific privileges one has, but this may well give a distorted picture. One major problem is that specific privileges are probably not all equally valuable and their value may well depend on features of the subject’s context. A second is that it is easy to see how, in theory at least, some specific privileges might contribute more than “the sum of their parts” if they together confer advantages that aren’t derivable from the individual privileges. It is thus very hard to tell if a rich black gay man has more or less overall privilege than a middle class white woman, and we don’t think there is much to be gained from trying to make these comparisons.

We want to note how deeply fraught it is to compare the various forms of specific privilege that two people enjoy (and those that they do not) in order to calculate, even roughly, who has more overall privilege. This is not a minor point. Our goal here was to characterize privilege, not to evaluate the importance or quality of any given privilege a group may have. But this shouldn’t spoil the point—not being able to give an algorithm that determines overall privilege shouldn’t lead us to conclude that there is no coherent notion nor that it can’t do any explanatory work. We hope we have shown here that it can and it does.

V. CONCLUSION

In this article we’ve put forward an analysis of the concept of privilege, resulting in a six-fold division along three axes. We divided forms of privilege in terms of positive or negative and of advantage, entitlement, or benefit. Part of the need for these divisions is that not all forms of, say, “white privilege” fit neatly into one category. Rather, white privilege has many manifestations, some of which are positive advantage privileges, while others are negative entitlement privileges, among others. One benefit of making these distinctions is that it makes it clearer that our political responses to unfair privilege depend on the kind of privilege it is. We don’t respond to entitlement privileges by removing the privileges from those who enjoy them (in most cases); instead, we aim to extend the privileges to those who don’t. Conversely, we don’t respond to positive advantage privileges by extending the privileges to those who don’t have them (since this is impossible); rather, we aim to remove the privileges from those who unfairly have them. We also argued that making these divisions will help prevent misunderstandings when attempting to engage in various anti-oppression projects, given the resistance that those with privileges tend to present when confronted with the concept of privilege.
REFERENCES


