

Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository

---

12-14-2022 2:00 PM

## Essays on Privilege and its Implications for Relational Autonomy and Vaccine Hesitancy

Nicole Fice, *The University of Western Ontario*

Supervisor: Skelton, Anthony, *The University of Western Ontario*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Philosophy

© Nicole Fice 2022

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd>



Part of the [Applied Ethics Commons](#), [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Feminist Philosophy Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Fice, Nicole, "Essays on Privilege and its Implications for Relational Autonomy and Vaccine Hesitancy" (2022). *Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository*. 9061.  
<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/9061>

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact [wlsadmin@uwo.ca](mailto:wlsadmin@uwo.ca).

## Abstract

One goal of feminist philosophy is to challenge unjust systems of power like patriarchy, which privilege some social groups while oppressing others. In this three-chapter dissertation, I argue that to achieve this goal, we need a better understanding of privilege and its implications.

In chapter one, I raise objections to some existing philosophical accounts of privilege. These accounts are either too broad in defining privilege as always advantageous or they are vague regarding what privilege comprises. I provide an account of privilege which clarifies that privilege is generally advantageous and that privilege includes tangible resources and options to do certain things or be a certain way.

In chapter two, I utilize my account of privilege in the context of feminist debates on relational autonomy. Recently, strong substantive and constitutive accounts of relational autonomy have come under criticism. Critics argue these accounts generate perverse conclusions about oppressed agents. I show these accounts generate the same perverse conclusions about privileged agents. Critics also argue these accounts are poorly suited to achieve feminist goals, which are to combat systems of power and to offer an account for how autonomy is influenced by oppression and privilege. I defend an alternative account of relational autonomy given by Andrea Westlund and explain how it avoids the perverse conclusions while still achieving the second goal, as it can explain how oppression and privilege can influence autonomy. However, I argue that autonomy alone is not enough to achieve the first goal of combatting systems of power.

In chapter three, I investigate the issue of vaccine hesitancy, where parents delay or refuse routine vaccinations for their children. Some empirical literature suggests a proportion of these parents are privileged. However, this literature lacks a clear definition of privilege. I supplement and strengthen this research with my account of privilege. I demonstrate how my account of privilege captures additional elements of parents' privilege. Using my account of privilege, I show how privilege can potentially influence some of the reasons parents have for delaying or refusing vaccines. I also clarify how my discussion impacts public health policies aimed at addressing vaccine hesitancy.

## Keywords

Privilege, Feminist Philosophy, Relational Autonomy, Vaccine Hesitancy, Public Health Ethics, Feminist Bioethics

## Summary for Lay Audience

One goal of feminist philosophy is to combat unjust systems of power which work to benefit some (e.g., men) while harming others (e.g., women). The benefits one group receives are privileges, while the harm faced by other groups is oppression. Feminist philosophers have done much to clarify oppression. There are, by comparison, few attempts to clarify privilege. This three-chapter dissertation seeks to remedy this situation.

Chapter one clarifies the notion of privilege and its benefits. I argue privilege confers both 1) resources and 2) options to behave in unique ways. Chapter two examines feminist debates concerning autonomy, which refers to living the kind of life a person chooses and doing so in accordance with their own preferences and values. Feminist philosophers have argued we need to conceive of autonomy in a way that accounts for how oppression influences a person's preferences. Relying on my account of privilege, I argue feminist accounts of autonomy have failed to consider how privilege influences a person's preferences. When we plug privilege into these views, they generate some conclusions feminists should avoid. I defend a rival account of autonomy that avoids these worries.

Chapter three applies my account of privilege to the issue of vaccine hesitancy, a phenomenon where some parents delay or refuse routine vaccinations for their children. There is some research suggesting that a proportion of parents who delay or refuse vaccines are privileged. I argue this research lacks a clear definition of privilege. To properly account for how these parents are privileged, I supplement the research with my account of privilege from chapter one. I argue that vaccine hesitant parents are privileged because they have both resources and options to behave wrongly in this case. I demonstrate the

advantages of my account of privilege in the context of this issue and discuss how it impacts policies aimed at addressing vaccine hesitancy.

## Dedication

*To my parents, John and Karen.*

## Acknowledgments

I have many people to thank for helping me through my PhD. I am incredibly grateful for Anthony Skelton's supervision. This dissertation would not have been possible without him. Anthony took great care to provide me with rigorous and thoughtful feedback which helped me strengthen this dissertation. I am very appreciative of his support, which helped me become a better philosopher.

I extend my thanks and gratitude to members of my supervisory committee, Tracy Isaacs and Maxwell Smith, who provided me with excellent feedback on the chapters of this dissertation. I also extend my deepest thanks to members of my examination committee, which included Kate Choi, Tracy Isaacs, Dennis Klimchuk, and Amy Mullin. Many other faculty members at Western also assisted me throughout my degree. I thank Carolyn McLeod for her supervision in the early parts of this project and the many opportunities she provided me. I also thank Jennifer Epp for her support and mentorship. It was a joy to work with Jenn as a teaching assistant and I am grateful for her advice as I entered the job market.

This degree was supported by funding from The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies and the Ontario Graduate Scholarship Program. I was also lucky to work at the Centre for Teaching and Learning at Western for several summers and I am grateful to my colleagues from the Centre for their support in the development of my career as a teacher. I am also grateful for my professors (and, now, colleagues) at Trent University for their encouragement and support. The faculty members in the Philosophy Department at Trent instilled a great love of philosophy in me, which I am grateful for, as it is what sparked this journey.

Thank you to my parents, Karen and John, for their love and never-ending support. I like to think that I inherited certain character traits from them that made it possible for me to complete this degree, including my mom's creativity and my dad's perseverance (which might also be called stubbornness). I also thank my siblings, Melissa and Ryan, for their support and companionship.

Completing this dissertation would not have been possible without the love and support of Nathan Prendergast. I am grateful to have such an empathetic, patient, caring, and encouraging partner. His boundless compassion, support, and understanding acted as the foundation that allowed me to complete this degree.

I also acknowledge the significant support I received from many of my friends. I extend my deepest thanks to Cecilia Li. This was not an easy path, and I am so grateful to have completed it alongside Cecilia. I treasure the days we spent working together with Maité Cruz Tleugabulova. The sisterhood I have with Cecilia and Maité is invaluable, and I truly could not have done this without them.

I thank Veromi Arsiradam for her wisdom, guidance, and support throughout this journey, and for her helpful feedback on some of the chapters in this dissertation. I also thank Cory Goldstein, Magdalena Mirkowski, Aishwarya Sahai, Jane Parnell, Fernando Mercado Malabet, Chang Liu, Emily Cichocki, and many others for their friendship, which was an incredible source of support throughout this degree.

# Table of Contents

Abstract .....	ii
Keywords .....	iii
Summary for Lay Audience.....	iv
Acknowledgments.....	vii
Introduction.....	1
Section 1: Feminist Philosophy.....	1
Section 2: Why Care About Privilege? .....	6
Section 3: Overview of Chapters .....	9
Works Cited.....	14
Chapter One: On Philosophical Accounts of Privilege.....	16
Section One: Overview of Philosophical Accounts of Privilege .....	17
Section Two: Objection to Bailey .....	26
Section Three: Objections to Bailey and Ivy and Sennet.....	33
Section Four: An Amended Account of Privilege .....	45
Conclusion.....	46
Works Cited.....	48
Chapter Two: Relational Autonomy and Privilege.....	54
Section 1: What is Relational Autonomy? .....	57
Section 2: Feminist Criticisms of Relational Autonomy .....	67
Section 3: Privilege and Relational Autonomy .....	72
Section 4: Problematizing the Criticisms and Reassessing the Goals of Relational Autonomy.....	80
Section 5: Where To Go From Here .....	87
Conclusion.....	98
Works Cited.....	101
Chapter Three: Privilege and Vaccine Hesitancy .....	105
Section 1: Background .....	106
Section 2: Overcoming Gaps .....	115
Section 3: Privilege and Parents’ Reasons for Resisting Vaccinations.....	127
Conclusion.....	140
Works Cited.....	142
Conclusion .....	148
Works Cited.....	155

Curriculum Vitae ..... 157

## Introduction

This dissertation comprises a philosophical investigation of privilege and its role in select debates on theoretical and applied issues. While this notion is common in popular discourse on social injustices (Kimmel 2017), it has received less theoretical attention from feminist philosophers, especially in comparison with other notions such as oppression (Ivy and Sennet 2017). In this introduction, I provide an argument for why feminists ought to have a clear understanding of privilege. To make this argument, this introduction is structured as follows. First, I explicate the feminist orientation of this dissertation. Second, I explain why feminist philosophers ought to have a clear understanding of privilege. Finally, I provide an overview of the three chapters of this dissertation.

### Section 1: Feminist Philosophy

This dissertation is feminist in orientation. Feminism is a diverse area of theory and practice including a wide range of possible commitments and methodologies (hooks 2015, 18). It is important, then, for me to clarify how exactly I understand feminism. For my purposes, I adopt bell hooks' definition of feminism. She suggests we define feminism as "a struggle to end sexist oppression" (2015, 26; see also Ahmed 2017). There are a few features of this definition that are worth emphasizing.

This definition of feminism holds that oppression is a structural phenomenon (Frye 1983; Young 1990; hooks 2015; Cudd 2006). This understanding of oppression is perhaps most famously articulated by Marilyn Frye (1983). Frye describes oppression as "an enclosing structure of forces and barriers which tends to the immobilization and reduction

of a group or category of people” (1983, 10-11). From this definition, we can extract three features of oppression. First, it is a structural phenomenon. This holds that various forms of oppression are systemic, meaning that they are generated by overarching and unjust systems of power including, it is reasonable to presume, patriarchy, white supremacy, cis-gendered heteronormativity, ableism, and classism.<sup>1</sup> Second, oppression tends to cause harm, for example, by erecting barriers that may reduce the resources or options available to a person. Third, oppression targets groups or categories of people. When an individual is oppressed, they are oppressed because of their often unchosen membership in a certain social group.<sup>2</sup> Social groups are targeted by systems of power because these systems unjustifiably deem some social groups dominant and others as subordinate. As a result, these systems tend to lend privilege to dominant social groups and oppress others which are subordinate, a point I discuss in more detail below. What makes oppression unjust is that a person experiences the harms of oppression merely on the basis of one’s social group membership, which, in many cases, one has no control over.<sup>3</sup>

Consider the example of white supremacy, which Charles Mills defines as a “political system, a particular power structure of formal or informal rule, socioeconomic privilege, and norms for the differential distribution of material wealth and opportunities,

---

<sup>1</sup> For sake of clarify, I refer to these systems as ‘systems of power’ throughout this dissertation. Other feminist philosophers use the term ‘systems of oppression’ or ‘systems of domination’ instead. But I take these phrases to be referring to the same thing, namely, the overarching systems like patriarchy or white supremacy that work to oppress some social groups while privileging another of the same social kind. I think using the term ‘systems of power’ more clearly encapsulates the fact that these systems generate not just oppression but also privilege, whereas the term ‘systems of oppression’ may emphasize that these systems cause oppression but leave out privilege.

<sup>2</sup> Social groups, according to Iris Marion Young, are specific kinds of collectives differentiated from at least one other group by cultural forms, practices, or ways of life (1990, 43). Further, when one belongs to a certain social group, their membership is connected to relevant aspects of their identity (Ibid).

<sup>3</sup> We can also recognize that individuals have membership in various social groups which are each subject to systematic oppression or privilege, and that their relative oppression or privilege is shaped by how various systems work together to generate unique instances of oppression or privilege. I return to this point below.

benefits and burdens, rights and duties” (1997, 3). To relate this to Frye’s analysis of oppression, we can say that white supremacy, as a political system, benefits one social group and oppresses others because of their membership in a particular social group. The relevant social groups here are people of colour and those who are white. White supremacy systematically immobilizes or reduces people of colour through instances of racist oppression. But every instance of oppression in this case is systematically related and governed by an overarching system of power, namely, white supremacy.

Having explained what, exactly, oppression is, let us explain some other features of hooks’ definition of feminism that will be important to keep in mind throughout this dissertation. First, this account of feminism explicitly connects oppression to overarching unjust systems of powers. This is important because it provides an explanation for how oppression comes about, namely, as a product of unjust systems of power. This is important to keep in mind for the purposes of my arguments below.

A second key feature of this definition of feminism is that it expresses a commitment to end oppression. Feminists hold that we ought to end oppression because it is morally wrong (Jaggar 1991). Oppression is wrong because it causes unjustifiable harms to people merely on the basis of their membership in a social group. For these reasons, we ought to eradicate oppression.

To properly end oppression, however, we must also address the source of oppression. I have suggested that oppression is caused by unjust systems of power, which wrongly deem some groups as dominant and others as subordinate. Recall these systems work to allocate burdens and benefits on the basis of group membership, and those burdens are faced by social groups deemed subordinate. Given that unjust systems of power work

to generate and maintain oppression, I argue we can extend the definition of feminism given by hooks to include a commitment to end unjust systems of power. This will be important for my argument in the following section as well.

Third, this definition of feminism recognizes the unique ways in which various forms of oppression are interconnected. As hooks herself argues, on this definition of feminism, “race and class oppression would be recognized as feminist issues with as much relevance as sexism” (2015, 27). The point that various forms of oppression are interconnected is a central contribution of the concept of intersectionality to feminist thought. Intersectionality holds that “race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities” (Collins 2015, 2; see also the Combahee River Collective 1977; Crenshaw 1989; 1991; Davis 1983; Lorde 1984; Collins 2012; 2009; Young 1990, 171). Intersectionality aims to “disrupt the tendencies to see race and gender as exclusive or separable” by examining how the multiple intersections of one’s identities work together to generate new and unique forms of oppression (Crenshaw 1991, 1244).<sup>4</sup> These multiple aspects of a person’s identity together shape the unique forms of oppression they face. Thus, given their membership in multiple social groups, a person’s relative oppression or privilege may vary, and the forms of the oppression or privilege they face can be uniquely bound to their social position. For

---

<sup>4</sup> Intersectionality is unlike mere additive approaches to accounting for different forms of oppression. Elizabeth Spelman (1988) contends that additive accounts take the relevant form of oppression to be experienced in the same way for all those members of the same group. For example, an additive account would hold that Black women experience two forms of oppression: the racism experienced by Black people as a whole and the sexism experienced by women. But, as intersectionality suggests, the oppression faced by Black women, for instance, cannot be reduced to the racism experienced by Black men and the sexism experienced by white women. Rather, Black women face unique forms of oppression given their unique position at the intersection of being Black and being a woman in a white supremacist, patriarchal society.

example, in chapter one, I discuss some unique privileges white women have *because* they are white women in a white supremacist world. Other examples include the unique forms of oppression faced by Black women *because* they are Black women in a white supremacist and patriarchal world.<sup>5</sup>

Intersectionality suggests that the multiple identities of individuals—that is, their memberships in various dominant or subordinate social groups—generates unique forms of oppression and privilege. Intersectionality also recognizes various systems of power are interconnected and shape one another. What is beneficial about hooks’ definition of feminism is that it recognizes that various systems of power are interconnected and mutually constructing. Because these systems are interconnected, hooks’ holds that “one system cannot be eradicated while the others remain intact” (2015, 37). Since her account of feminism holds that various systems of power are interconnected, it thus holds that feminism needs to address all such systems if we want to address oppression. Feminism, then, is a commitment to eradicate various forms of oppression and the systems of power that generate them.

In this dissertation, I recognize that the multiple identities of a person work together to shape the forms of oppression they face or the privileges they have. A person’s membership in multiple social groups can alter their experience and generate unique forms of oppression or privilege. I also recognize that articulating the relationship between a person’s multiple identities and their relative oppression or privilege can be a difficult and

---

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that it is not my goal to determine which social group is the most oppressed or the most privileged. That is, I want to avoid what some feminists have called the “Oppression Olympics”, which are attempts to determine which social groups are the “most oppressed” or otherwise attempt to create a hierarchy of oppression (Martinez 1998). Nor am I interested in determining which form of oppression is “more fundamental” (Spelman 1988, 11-12; 116).

complex task. Given my focus on privilege, my discussion of case studies and examples tends to focus on people who we might reasonably say are relatively privileged due to various aspects of their identity. In the chapters, I highlight how intersectional identities of the people in the cases I analyze are important when it is relevant to my discussion.

## Section 2: Why Care About Privilege?

In this section, I explain why it is important for feminists to think about, and ultimately seek to end, privilege. Above I defined feminism as a struggle to end sexist oppression. I described the ways in which this definition of feminism is also committed to addressing various forms of oppression, including oppression based on race, sexuality, disability, and so on, because these forms of oppression are interconnected. I also argued that a commitment to address and end oppression in all its forms entails a commitment to eradicate unjust systems of power because these systems are what generate and perpetuate oppression.

Let us now turn to the issue of privilege. Above, I described that systems of power wrongly deem some social groups as superior and others as subordinate. Allow me to explain the significance of this in more detail. Subordinate groups, as argued by Frye and others, are the targets of oppression. But feminists have noted that, “for every oppressed group there is a group that is privileged” (Young 1990, 42; see also Cudd 2006, 25). What this suggests is that under systems of power, the social groups that are deemed superior are privileged, rather than oppressed. Recall, for example, Mills’ description of white supremacy as involving norms for differential distribution of material wealth and opportunities, benefits and burdens, rights and duties (1997, 3). As a system of power,

white supremacy distributes burdens to those it (wrongly) deems as subordinate. The relevant oppressed social group in this case is people of colour. But white supremacy further distributes benefits to members of the dominant social group, which in this case is those who are white. This provides us with a general understanding of privilege. For now, we can roughly understand privilege as something that provides members of dominant social groups with various benefits simply because they happen to be members of said group. Of course, I have more to say on this in chapter one, as I explain in the next section.

Feminists have argued that oppression, understood as various kinds of harms faced by individuals simply because of their membership in subordinated social groups, is wrong and unjust. Having provided a preliminary understanding of privilege, we can say that privilege is also wrong and unjust because it provides some individuals with various benefits merely on the basis of their membership in a dominant social group. I think most would agree that it is wrong for some people to receive greater benefits than others simply because they are a member of a social group that has been deemed dominant under systems of power.

A further reason to think oppression and privilege are wrong is related to how they work to perpetuate overarching systems of power. Oppression can immobilize a given social group by erecting barriers that prevent them from making progress and from exercising certain rights, among other things. The oppressive burdens and barriers faced by subordinate social groups work to keep members of said group “in their place” (see Manne 2017). Oppression, overall, ensures that the group remains subordinate. Privilege works in a similar way. By providing a dominant social group with various benefits, privilege operates to ensure that that social group remains dominant and powerful.

Oppression and privilege work together to ensure that systems of power and unequal relationships between relevant social groups remain in place.

Based on my suggestion in the previous section—that feminists have good reasons to eradicate systems of power, given that they cause oppression—I think we can suggest an argument for why feminists ought to understand and address privilege as well. Privilege, like oppression, is generated by unjust systems of power. I have explained how systems of power tend to provide benefits to dominant social groups, and explained privilege is wrong both because one should not receive benefits based on unchosen group memberships and because it perpetuates unjust systems of power. If feminists want to eradicate unjust systems of power, a part of this aim should be to understand and eradicate privilege as well, since privilege is also a form of injustice generated by these systems. It is for this reason that I think Alison Bailey is correct in saying that “any understanding of oppression is incomplete without recognition of the role privilege plays in maintaining systems of domination” (1998, 104). If feminists want to end oppression, and ultimately systems of power, they will have to understand privilege as well, since it also works to maintain the systems that cause oppression.

A more thorough description of feminism, based on the foregoing discussion, would be that it is a struggle to eradicate unjust systems of power, which generate oppression and privilege.<sup>6</sup> If the goal of feminism is to eradicate systems of power, then we must have a clear understanding of what, exactly, oppression and privilege are, given that these are unjust and help to perpetuate systems of power. While feminist philosophers have done some significant and important work to provide clear understandings of

---

<sup>6</sup> I do not think hooks would take issue with this reformulation of her definition of feminism, especially given that she recognizes various systems of power are interconnected and are related to oppression.

oppression, there is less work done that tries to clarify what privilege is (Ivy and Sennet 2017). This dissertation aims to fill this gap. I do this because providing a clear understanding of privilege is an important aim for feminism as a struggle to eradicate unjust systems of power, as I have suggested here. Further, because I am committed to the feminist goal of eradicating unjust systems of power, I am interested in investigating how some theoretical tools of feminist philosophy might be helpful in achieving this goal. Additionally, my feminist commitments lead me to examine how privilege appears in and is relevant to our ethical analysis of some real-world issues, which is important so that feminists can make suggestions for how we might address privilege in the context of these issues.

### Section 3: Overview of Chapters

This dissertation focuses on the topic of privilege and its implications for select issues in feminist philosophy and biomedical ethics. My thinking about privilege began with my earlier research on vaccine hesitancy. For example, I was interested in empirical research by Jennifer Reich (2014; 2016a; 2016b; 2020), which suggested that some parents who were hesitant to vaccinate their children were relatively privileged. But I found that this empirical research failed to provide an adequate account of privilege, despite its discussion of parent's privilege. What was needed was a clear theoretical account of privilege. I turned to the work of feminist philosophers to try to fill this gap. But I found myself dissatisfied with some work by feminist philosophers who aimed to define privilege. I was also surprised by how relatively little work there was on privilege by feminist philosophers compared to work on oppression. This was the impetus for writing the first chapter of this

dissertation: I wanted to expand on previous work by feminist philosophers to give a more robust account of privilege.

While investigating the topic of privilege, I started to think about how the theoretical tools of feminist philosophy might be used to help address privilege. Relational accounts of autonomy are one such theoretical tool used by feminists. I have been interested in relational autonomy for some time, and one of the reasons why I am interested in these accounts of autonomy is that they were explicitly designed to help achieve feminist goals, including goals of combatting systems of unjust power and understanding their effects on agents. Given my previous interest in relational autonomy, I was curious about how privilege might be conceptualized under these views, and whether relational autonomy could be a useful concept for thinking about privilege. But I was dissatisfied by the lack of explicit discussion on privilege in the literature on relational autonomy.

My writing on relational autonomy was also influenced by recent feminist criticisms of strong substantive and constitutive accounts of relational autonomy (see Wenner 2020; Khader 2020). Some of the central criticisms raised against these accounts, namely, that they generate preserve conclusions about oppressed agents, motivated me to think more about how strong substantive accounts would regard agents who are relatively privileged. I thought that discussions on how privilege might influence autonomy were lacking from both strong substantive accounts and criticisms of them. I wanted to explore whether strong substantive accounts of relational autonomy could be used to help address privilege. Ultimately, in chapter two, I argue they are not helpful in this way, and that their conclusions about the autonomy of privileged agents are too strong.

Having explained how I came to write this dissertation, allow me to briefly summarize the chapters in this dissertation in more detail. The first chapter analyzes the philosophical literature on privilege. I consider some philosophical accounts of privilege, namely, those given by Alison Bailey (1998) and Veronica Ivy and Adam Sennet (2017) and argue these accounts have some significant issues. I object to Bailey's description of privilege as something that is always advantageous. My main argument is that these views are vague regarding what privilege includes. My goal is to clarify what, exactly, privilege includes. Clarifying what privilege is and having a robust understanding of it will be important for feminists if we accept the argument I have presented in this introduction. If we ought to address privilege because it is an element of unjust systems of power, we need to have a clear understanding of what privilege is. Ultimately, I develop my own account of privilege which amends previous accounts and overcomes the gaps I have identified in order to provide feminists with a clear understanding of privilege so that we can address it. The following two chapters utilize my account of privilege in theoretical and applied topics respectively.

My second chapter centres on feminist relational accounts of autonomy. The literature on relational autonomy is vast, so I narrow my focus to strong substantive and socially constitutive accounts of relational autonomy. I focus on these accounts because they have recently come under criticism by other feminists, who suggest these views generate perverse conclusions feminists ought to reject. I suggest that both defenders and critics of relational autonomy have not adequately considered what these views imply about the autonomy of relatively privileged agents. Feminists should have a clear understanding of how our theoretical tools will be helpful (or not) in understanding and

addressing privilege, which, I have argued in this introduction, is an important goal for feminists. In chapter two, I argue that strong substantive and constitutive accounts of relational autonomy fail in this goal, for when we examine how these accounts treat privileged agents, we arrive at some perverse conclusions that feminists ought to avoid. I argue that a better account of relational autonomy should account for the nuanced ways in which oppression and privilege can influence an agent's autonomy. I ultimately argue that feminists should abandon strong substantive accounts of relational autonomy. What is needed in place of such accounts is a view of relational autonomy that avoids the perverse conclusions I and other authors have identified. I suggest that Andrea Westlund's (2003; 2009) dialogical account of relational autonomy avoids such conclusions and is thus an attractive alternative account of autonomy for feminists, as it can explain how privilege can influence autonomy.

The final chapter turns to apply my conception of privilege to the phenomenon of vaccine hesitancy and refusal. I mentioned above that this project was motivated by my earlier research on vaccine hesitancy, and so, having developed a clearer understanding of what privilege is in chapter one, I return to the empirical research that motivated me to contribute a richer theoretical understanding of privilege. I apply my account of privilege to empirical research by Reich, which argues that some vaccine hesitant parents are privileged. I show how my account of privilege can supplement and strengthen Reich's research. Specifically, I argue that my view of privilege allows us to categorize some further aspects of parents' reasons for refusing vaccines and their resulting behaviours as being related to their relative privilege. I explain how privilege, in the context of the relevant research, might mediate the reasons parents have for choosing to delay or refuse

vaccines. I end the third chapter by briefly discussing the impact of my discussion on proposed solutions aimed at addressing vaccine hesitancy, suggesting that vaccine mandates combined with the elimination of non-medical vaccine exemptions may be helpful in addressing the privilege that some vaccine hesitant parents use to opt out of vaccinating. By providing a justification for these policies, this chapter takes steps to achieve the feminist goal of addressing privilege as it appears in the context of vaccine hesitancy.

## Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sara. 2017. *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bailey, Alison. 1998. "Privilege: Expanding on Marilyn Frye's "Oppression"." *Journal of Social Philosophy*. 29 (3): 104-119.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 2009. *Black Feminist Thought*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. New York: Routledge.
- . 2012. "Social Inequality, Power, and Politics: Intersectionality and American Pragmatism in Dialogue." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26 (2): 442-457.
- . 2015. "Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas." *Annual Review of Sociology* 41: 1-20.
- Combahee River Collective. 1977. "The Combahee River Collective Statement"  
Retrieved from  
[https://americanstudies.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Keyword%20Coalition\\_Readings.pdf](https://americanstudies.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Keyword%20Coalition_Readings.pdf) (Accessed April 15, 2022).
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" *University of Chicago Legal Forum*. Issue 1.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43 (6): 1241-1299.
- Cudd, Ann E. 2006. *Analyzing Oppression*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Davis, Angela Y. 1983. *Women, Race, and Class*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Frye, Marilyn. 1983. "Oppression." In *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. California: The Crossing Press.
- hooks, bell. 2015. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. New York: Routledge.
- Ivy, Veronica [Rachel McKinnon] and Adam Sennet. 2017. "On the Nature of the Political Concept of Privilege." *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 25 (4): 487-507.
- Jaggar, A. 1991. "Feminist Ethics: Project, Problems, Prospects." In *Feminist Ethics* edited by Claudia Card. USA: University Press of Kansas.
- Khader, Serene J. 2020. "The Feminist Case Against Relational Autonomy." *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 17 (5): 499-526.

- Kimmel, Michael S. 2017. "Introduction: Toward a Sociology of the Superordinate." In *Privilege: A Reader* edited by Michael S. Kimmel and Abby L. Ferber. 4<sup>th</sup> Edition. New York: Routledge.
- Lorde, Audre. 1984. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley: Crossing Press.
- Manne, Kate. 2017. *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Martínez, Elizabeth Sutherland. 1998. *De Colores Means All of Us: Latina Views for a Multi-Colored Century*. 1st edition. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.
- Mills, Charles W. 1997. *The Racial Contract*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Reich, Jennifer A. 2014. "Neoliberal Mothering and Vaccine Refusal: Imagined Gated Communities and the Privilege of Choice." *Gender and Society* 28(5): 679-704.
- . 2016a. "Of natural bodies and antibodies: Parents' vaccine refusal and the dichotomies of natural and artificial." *Social Science & Medicine* 157: 103-110.
- . 2016b. *Calling the Shots: Why Parents Reject Vaccines*. New York: New York University Press.
- . 2020. "'We are fierce, independent thinkers and intelligent': Social capital and stigma management among mothers who refuse vaccines." *Social Science & Medicine* 257: 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2018.10.027>
- Spelman, Elizabeth V. 1988. *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Wenner, Danielle M. 2020. "Nondomination and the Limits of Relational Autonomy." *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics* 13 (2): 28–48. <https://doi.org/10.3138/ijfab.13.2.2020-01-08>.
- Westlund, Andrea S. 2003. "Selflessness and Responsibility for Self: Is Deference Compatible with Autonomy?" *The Philosophical Review* 112 (4): 483-523.
- . 2009. "Rethinking Relational Autonomy." *Hypatia* 24 (4): 26-49.
- Young, Iris Marion. 1990. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. USA: Princeton University Press.

## Chapter One: On Philosophical Accounts of Privilege

Feminists are interested in challenging systems of power, including white supremacy and patriarchy. One way in which feminist philosophy aids in challenging these systems is by clarifying our understanding of relevant concepts and objects of our critique. For example, several feminist philosophers have provided definitions of the concept of oppression so that it can be challenged effectively (Frye 1983, Young 1990, Cudd 2006). By contrast, privilege has been undertheorized, even though, like oppression, it is an important element of systems of power. Because privilege is an important element of these systems, I think Alison Bailey is correct when she writes “any understanding of oppression is incomplete without recognition of the role privilege plays in maintaining systems of domination” (1998, 104). We must, therefore, have a clear understanding of privilege in order to challenge it effectively.

In this chapter, I build on previous philosophical work on privilege to specify how we should understand privilege and what, exactly, it includes. The chapter is structured as follows. In section one, I provide an overview of general accounts of privilege with which I engage. I focus primarily on the work of Alison Bailey (1998) and Veronica Ivy and Adam Sennet (2017). In section two, I raise an objection to Bailey’s account of privilege that defines it as always advantageous. In section three, I explain how accounts of Bailey and Ivy and Sennet are vague regarding what privilege includes. In the final section, I propose a revised account of privilege to overcome these worries.

To begin, some preliminary remarks are necessary. I focus on privilege as conferred to social groups primarily and individuals derivatively (like Ivy & Sennet 2017, 487). I recognize individuals belong to many distinct social groups and, while they may have

privilege in virtue of their membership in one group, their membership in others may be a source of oppression (Ivy and Sennet 2017). For example, a gay cis-gendered man may be privileged in virtue of being a cis-gendered man but oppressed in virtue of his sexuality in a heteronormative society. There are many possible cases like this which show that sometimes a person's membership in oppressed groups may influence privilege they receive in virtue of being a member of a dominant social group. In this way, I recognize that privilege is not always absolute or guaranteed.

## Section One: Overview of Philosophical Accounts of Privilege

To date, philosophical work on privilege primarily focuses on particular kinds of privilege, e.g., white privilege and male privilege. These are helpful investigations. They illuminate how privilege operates within particular systems of power, e.g., white supremacy or patriarchy, and how particular social groups are granted privilege. However, there is less philosophical work clarifying the nature of privilege.

One general account of privilege is given by Alison Bailey. She defines privilege as “unearned assets conferred systematically” (1998, 107). Bailey's work on privilege aims to expand Marilyn Frye's (1983) work on the structural phenomenon of oppression to provide an account of privilege (1998, 104). Because Bailey builds on Frye's work, I will begin by providing a brief summary of Frye.

For Frye, oppression is a system of barriers confining and limiting the movement, options, and opportunities of people belonging to oppressed groups. Oppression is “the experience of being caged in” (Frye 1983, 4). In her famous birdcage analogy, Frye says we can think of instances of oppression as individual wires of a birdcage. An example of

an individual wire may be sexual harassment experienced by women. If we narrowly focus our attention on examining sexual harassment without thinking about how it is related to other instances of oppression, we will fail to see how it is systematically created and maintained by overarching systems of power. In the same way, if we focus narrowly on individual wires of a birdcage, we fail to see how there are many wires welded together to form a structure that traps the bird inside. Frye says that rather than microscopically focusing on the individual instances of oppression, we should examine it macroscopically. When we do this, we see that oppression is a structure like the birdcage: it is a system of interrelated barriers that work to immobilize, restrict, or keep people in their place. And for Frye, oppression is experienced by individuals “*because* they are members of particular social groups” (Bailey 1998, 106; emphasis in original). For Frye, the bird trapped in the birdcage does not represent an individual person, but a social group (1983, 8).

Frye’s account of oppression also aims to distinguish it from everyday kinds of harms or instances of suffering, like breaking a limb. Frye holds that while oppression is harmful, not all instances of harm constitute oppression (1983; Bailey 1998, 107-108). Distinguishing oppression from harm is important so we do not stretch it to include so many things the term ‘oppression’ becomes meaningless (Frye 1983, 1; Bailey 1998). Frye accounts for the difference between oppression and harm by looking to the context in which the harm takes place: if a harm is a part of an “enclosing structure of forces and barriers which tends to the immobilization and reduction of a group or category of people” (1983, 10-11), then we can understand it as oppression. If a harm cannot be traced back to a system of power that works to benefit one group and restrict others, then it will not count as oppression.

Like the difference between oppression and harm, privilege as Bailey defines it can be distinguished from what she calls “earned advantages”, which are generally permissible and fair advantages some people have. Examples Bailey gives of earned advantages include being awarded frequent air-flyer miles so a person can redeem a discount when booking flights. Another example is a student who practices volleyball daily to earn a volleyball scholarship. She notes that while all privileges are advantageous, not all mere advantages, like the examples above, count as privilege (108). Her task, then, is to distinguish privilege from earned advantages. Like Frye’s work on oppression, it is important to make this distinction so that we do not stretch the term ‘privilege’ to include so many advantages that it becomes meaningless.

To be precise, Bailey articulates four ways privilege is distinct from earned advantages (1998, 108). First, privileges are *conferred systematically* to members of dominant social groups (108), while earned advantages are generally not allocated to people based on their membership(s) in dominant social groups.<sup>1</sup> As in the case of oppression, privilege is systematic insofar as it is generated by systems of power. Here, Bailey draws on Frye in two ways to explain how privilege is systematic. First, individuals are privileged because they are members of dominant social groups (1998, 107).<sup>2</sup> Frye, we

---

<sup>1</sup> Importantly, Bailey notes that “because individuals are rarely members of one community, oppression is not a unified phenomenon. Group differences in race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, or class cut across individual lives to the point that privilege and oppression are often experienced simultaneously” (1998, 106). This insight, that individuals belonging members of multiple social groups that can provide them with more or less privilege, is rooted in intersectionality. Intersectionality also holds that “race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities” (Collins 2015, 2; see also the Combahee River Collective 1977; Davis 1981; Lorde 1984; Crenshaw 1989; 1991; Collins 2012; Collins 2009). Ivy and Sennet clarify how intersectionality related to the idea of privilege: “it [intersectionality] is an orthogonal concept that helps us understand how axes of identity variously combine and intersect to create forms of privilege or oppression” (2017, 503).

<sup>2</sup> Bailey adds two caveats to Frye’s observations about group membership (106). First, she recognizes that people have intersectional identities when she says that individuals can be members of multiple social groups, as mentioned above. Second, she recognizes that social groups do not have fixed boundaries.

saw, is also interested in oppression as something experienced by particular social groups. Examples of dominant social groups include men, white people, cis-gendered heterosexual people, and non-disabled people. People are often born into dominant social groups, rather than earning or achieving membership in them somehow.<sup>3</sup> Privilege is granted automatically in virtue of one's real or perceived membership in a dominant social group and, in this way, privilege is also *unearned* (110). Second, Bailey, like Frye, recognizes these social groups are deemed dominant by systems of power existing in the world, such as patriarchy, white supremacy, cis-heteronormativity, ableism, and so on. These systems of power make both oppression and privilege structural phenomena. Bailey argues we should examine privileges macroscopically in order to see how these systems of power work to ensure some groups are dominant and others are oppressed (108).

Having described Bailey's view of how privilege is systematic, we can compare privilege to earned advantages to highlight the first difference between them. Generally, earned advantages are not systematically conferred to dominant social groups and withheld from oppressed groups given systems of power. However, Bailey recognizes that privilege and earned advantages might not always be easy to distinguish, as privilege can make it easier for some people to earn regular advantages (109-110). For example, it would be difficult for a person living in poverty to participate in frequent flyer programs, as this earned advantage requires that a person be able to afford flights. Nonetheless, she argues

---

<sup>3</sup> Class may operate differently, as there is greater possible mobility between socioeconomic classes which may be, in some sense, earned. However, we are still born into families that have a certain socioeconomic class, and the class status of our families can allot us relative advantages or disadvantages which can influence our futures. For example, people born into or living in poverty may find it difficult to escape their circumstance given systemic barriers that maintain a cycle of poverty (Employment and Social Development Canada; Barrett et al 2019; see also Sandel 2020). Being born into a middle- or upper-class family, on the other hand, confers what Bailey calls negative privilege (a concept I explain below), insofar as they are free *from* the burdens and barriers faced by people of lower socioeconomic class or those living in poverty. It should be noted that class is intricately tied to other forms of oppression.

that we should maintain the distinction between earned advantages and privileges because failing to do so “allows privileged groups to interpret *all* privilege on the same footing as earned advantages” (110; emphasis in original). Bailey contends that reducing privilege to earned advantages is dangerous as it ignores the ways in which some social groups are automatically advantaged given systems of power which benefit them and oppress other groups. Like Frye, Bailey holds that to determine whether a given advantage counts as a privilege, we must be attentive to the context and whether the advantage can be traced back to systems of power. The first difference between earned advantages and privilege, then, is that privileges are systematically conferred to members of dominant social groups in virtue of said membership, which is not entirely the case for earned advantages.

The second difference between privilege and earned advantages is privilege is almost never justifiable (108). This claim, I think, is straightforward if we accept Bailey’s description of privilege as something that is conferred systematically simply given one’s group membership. Bailey writes “by most standards of fairness it is not justifiable to grant immunities to persons simply because they are perceived to be white, heterosexual, or male” (1998, 111). Privilege is unfair because it is advantage granted simply on the basis of someone’s membership in a dominant social group. Because privilege is granted based on group membership, it is also generally not deserved.<sup>4</sup> Earned advantages, however, might generally be permissible and deserved given they are earned in some way. Consider the example of the student who won a volleyball scholarship: they reasonably deserve that

---

<sup>4</sup> McIntosh distinguishes between privileges that should be available to anyone, like the expectation that your neighbours will treat you decently, and privileges that no one ought to have, like the ability to ignore those who are less powerful (1989, 36). On the issue of privilege and desert, we might say that oppressed groups do not deserve to have the first kind advantages withheld from them merely because of their group membership. And for the second kind of privileges, it is not the case that any social group deserves these, and the fact that some dominant social groups do have access to them is, perhaps, especially unfair and harmful (see the example of Brock Turner and Amy Cooper below).

scholarship given their practice. Privileges, because they are conferred simply because of a person's group membership, are not deserved in the same way, as the privileged person has done nothing to warrant those advantages.

The third difference between privilege and earned advantages is privilege tends to be invisible to those who have it. Because earned advantages are often intentionally cultivated, the person who has them would usually be aware of the benefits they receive: the collector of frequent air-flyer miles or the student with a scholarship are conscious of these resources they have available to them. This is not always the case for privilege. To illustrate, allow me to briefly explain Peggy McIntosh's (1989) famous invisible knapsack analogy.

For McIntosh, privilege is like a weightless, invisible knapsack someone carries with them, containing a variety of resources and tools that they can utilize to benefit or advance themselves. Because the invisible knapsack is conferred systematically via systems of power, those who have it may be unaware of the benefits it provides them. They may also be unaware others lack the same benefits. The invisibility of McIntosh's knapsack can allow a person to remain oblivious to the benefits it provides to them. For McIntosh and Bailey<sup>5</sup>, the invisibility of privilege is significant because it allows privilege to go unexamined by those possessing it (Bailey 1998, 112). Here we can think of a quote Bailey uses to illustrate this point, that "George Bush was born on third base, and to this day he believes he hit a triple" (1998, 110). Because his privilege is invisible, George Bush mistakenly believes his privileges are earned. He thinks that he got to the metaphorical

---

<sup>5</sup> The invisibility of privilege is an aspect of privilege which many philosophers have explored; see for example Charles Mills (1997), George Yancy (2004), Shannon Sullivan (2006); Linda Martín Alcoff (2006; 2015), Elizabeth V. Spelman (1988), among others.

third base due to his own hard work, but in reality, he was born with privileges that afforded him significant advantages over others.<sup>6</sup>

The final distinction Bailey makes between privilege and earned advantage is related to additional goods, benefits, or immunities that come from privilege. Privilege, Bailey argues, “facilitates one’s movement through the world in a way that earned advantages do not” (1998, 114). She argues that the systemic nature of privilege gives it a “wild card” quality, meaning that the benefits of privilege can be utilized in a wide variety of circumstances, whereas earned advantages are generally useful in certain situations or under limited conditions. For example, earning frequent flyer miles are only useful if you want to use them to travel with a specific airline. Likewise, earning a volleyball scholarship is only useful if you want to go to university and join the volleyball team. Privileges, however, can be used in many circumstances. For example, McIntosh (1989) provides a long list of how being white can benefit a person in their daily lives, illustrating the wide-ranging benefits of white privilege. Examples from her list of white privileges range from being able to easily find Band-Aids that match the colour of one’s skin to reliably knowing that one will be represented by members of their own race in movies, music, education curriculums, and politics. Belonging to a socially privileged group confers benefits and advantages that can generally be used in a great variety of circumstances. Earned advantages, on the other hand, are only useful in limited circumstances: as we have seen, the frequent flyer can only use their miles at particular airlines and the volleyball scholarship is only useful if the student wants to attend the granting university and play on their volleyball team.

---

<sup>6</sup> This said, we can recognize that privilege may not always be invisible: sometimes privileged people are conscious of their privilege. Indeed, as we see below, some people may wield it as a weapon.

Building from what she's called the wild card element of privilege, Bailey also distinguishes between what she calls "negative privilege" and "positive privilege". Bailey describes negative privileges as referring to being free *from* oppression. Recall the birdcage analogy from Frye. We have seen that oppression, for Frye, is characterized as a system of barriers hindering the abilities, resources, and opportunities of members of oppressed groups because of their group membership. Bailey argues Frye's birdcage metaphor as a system of barriers does not capture all kinds of privilege. The only kind of privilege the analogy can capture is negative privilege. But Bailey argues that there is another kind of privilege, positive privilege, which "can be understood as the presence of additional perks that cannot be described in terms of immunities alone" (1998, 115). Positive privileges 'go beyond' the mere absence of oppression and can provide additional kinds of benefits to privileged groups.

The example Bailey gives to illustrate negative and positive privileges is of a male student volunteering to "protect women" at a Take Back the Night March. The student recognizes he does not face the same barriers as women, namely, the risks of sexual harassment or assault women may face while walking alone at night. This is a negative privilege. The positive privilege in this example is the role of being a "protector". This role is an additional benefit that the student has in virtue of being a man. The role "reinscribes the function of hetero-patriarchal protector/predator gender role[s] assigned to men" (1998, 116) and thus reinforces patriarchal norms. Bailey argues that the student's male privilege provides him other additional benefits, such as being viewed as a natural protector or leader (116). Another example of positive privilege is the default credibility given to men or other privileged groups when speaking (Ivy and Sennet 2017). Negative privilege cannot explain

these forms of privilege. Being a protector or having excess credibility does not come about simply because men or other privileged groups are free from oppression. Rather, these are additional goods that further benefit members of dominant groups.

Let us now turn to Ivy and Sennet (2017), who build on work by Bailey and McIntosh. Their goal is to further clarify the nature of privilege. They helpfully add to the literature by describing a general schema of privilege:

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. (2017, 496)

This general schema summarizes much of what Bailey articulated. Allow me to explain. For both authors, privilege involves an asset or property being allocated to dominant social groups. Importantly, Ivy and Sennet note that these properties need not always be desirable. To understand the second criterion, we might compare the dominant social group of men to other groups in the category of gender, like women. The types of groups Ivy and Sennet are interested in are social kinds. The third criterion captures Bailey's description of privilege as conferred systematically to dominant social groups given systems of power. This criterion emphasizes the fact that a group,  $G$ , has some privilege,  $P$ , depending how overarching social or political institutions treat certain groups. The final criterion holds that the given social group does not deserve to have the relevant privilege simply because they are members of that social group.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Another important contribution to the literature made by Ivy and Sennet is their taxonomy of three different kinds of privilege: entitlement, advantage, and benefit privileges. I do not discuss these in detail here, as I think we can accept this taxonomy without facing the problems I raise below. Further, I think the taxonomy can be maintained given the revised account of privilege I provide in the final section.

The accounts of Bailey and Ivy and Sennet move us toward a greater understanding of privilege in general. For instance, they helpfully explain how privilege is conferred systematically according to one's membership in dominant social groups. In the next two sections, however, I raise some worries about these accounts.

## Section Two: Objection to Bailey

My first objection focuses on Bailey and her view of privilege as being advantageous.<sup>8</sup> The central point of her article is to show that “[p]rivilege, in the sense that I will be using the word, is by definition advantageous” (109). Similarly, she says in the beginning of her article that “I want to suggest that *all* privilege is advantageous, but that not all advantages count as privilege” (108; emphasis added). I argue the claim that privilege is always advantageous seems too strong in the sense it does not allow us to recognize how privilege can also harm those who have it.<sup>9</sup> Privilege, I argue, is not always or exclusively advantageous to those who have it.

Perhaps Bailey could respond that her view is not as strong as it initially appears. Indeed, she seems to temper her claim that privilege is always advantageous later in her paper, where she agrees with McIntosh on “the misleading ordinary language connotations of privilege as something positive” (110).<sup>10</sup> Here, Bailey draws directly on McIntosh who says privileges can give “some people the freedom to be thoughtless at best, and murderous

---

<sup>8</sup> Much like Bailey, Dan Lowe (2020, 457; emphasis added) defines privilege as “a person’s *advantage* due to their membership in a social group, in contexts where that membership shouldn’t normally matter”.

<sup>9</sup> I follow Carina Fourie (2022) in recognizing that, while privilege can harm those who have it, this is not to suggest that the harms of privilege are the same as the harms of oppression—the latter are much more severe.

<sup>10</sup> McIntosh’s worry is that the positive connotation of privilege suggests that it is something everyone must want (35). She rightly worries that privilege should not be viewed as something desirable because it harms not only those who are oppressed, but also individuals who are privileged.

at worst” (McIntosh 1989, 36), which, for McIntosh, should not be thought of as desirable. Despite drawing on McIntosh, who does recognize the potential harms of privilege, Bailey does not discuss how privilege can be harmful. Rather, for the remainder of the paragraph, she tries to deflect McIntosh’s worry about the positive connotations of the term ‘privilege’ by referring to the etymology of the word. She notes that the etymology of privilege corroborates her account of privilege as being advantageous by definition. She says, “[h]istorically, to have a privilege meant to have a right or immunity granting a peculiar benefit, advantage, or favour” (111). Bailey’s view of privilege remains, by definition, advantageous to those who have it.

However, other philosophers have explicitly recognized the harms of privilege. As Carina Fourie writes, “the idea that being privileged can impair the privileged is not unusual” (2022, 169). She cites Marilyn Frye, Charles Mills, and Paolo Freire as examples of philosophers who articulate the harms of privilege.<sup>11</sup> Fourie herself provides a helpful categorization of the kinds of harms privilege can inflict on those who have it. These include epistemic, evaluative, emotional, health-related, affiliative, and moral harms.<sup>12</sup> I do not have the space to summarize each harm in detail, so I choose to focus on moral harms here. On the moral harms of privilege, Fourie argues being privileged “risks an increase in moral failings. For example, the privileged will be less motivated to fight injustice and create just institutions” (2022, 177). Moral failings, given Fourie’s examples, may be understood as failures to do the right thing. To expand on the idea that privilege

---

<sup>11</sup> Here we might also include W.E.B. Du Bois, especially in his essay “The Souls of White Folk” (1920). See also Georgy Yancy on Du Bois (2017, 76-85). Another example would be Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (1963), which Meena Krishnamurthy argues invites white moderates “to recognize their moral failings and do better” (2021, 307).

<sup>12</sup> Fourie uses the “harms” of privilege and “impairments” of privilege interchangeably in her work.

can cause moral harm to those who have it, allow me to briefly consider work by Lisa Tessman (2005).

Tessman's plausible account for why privilege interferes with the flourishing of people who have it takes a virtue ethics approach. She thinks that systems of power cause moral damage to those who are oppressed *and* those who are privileged (2005, 33).<sup>13</sup> Tessman explains moral damage is caused when a person or group is unable to develop or exercise virtues necessary for human flourishing and living a good life (2005, 4). Tessman argues that the beneficiaries of systems of power sometimes possess what she calls 'ordinary vices of domination' (2005, 54). She says these groups may *seem* to lead a good life, but their passive (or active) acceptance of their unjust privileges often leads them to take up ordinary vices of domination, which brings into question whether they are actually leading a good life. These vices are ones 'of domination' because they are traits often learned through one's socialization as a member of a dominant social group. Tessman lists things like callousness, greed, self-centeredness, dishonesty, cowardice, and injustice to be among the kinds of vices that those with privilege may have (55). Other, less obvious vices and moral deficiencies brought about by privilege include a lack of respect for those who are oppressed, ignorance of their privileges and the oppressive social structures that confer them, and a refusal to resist the role of oppressor (55). These ordinary vices of domination cause moral damage to those with privilege because they prevent people from living a good, virtuous life.

---

<sup>13</sup> As Fourie notes, Paulo Freire also posits that systems of power are harmful to oppressors: "Once a situation of violence and oppression has been established, it engenders an entire way of life and behavior for those caught up in it—oppressors and oppressed alike. Both are submerged in this situation, and both bear the marks of oppression" (Freire 2018, 58).

To return to Bailey on privileges as advantages, I think ordinary vices of domination can sometimes be advantageous, but in a limited sense: these only seem to help maintain one's privilege. For example, ignorance helps to maintain one's status within social systems while ignoring the needs of others and/or the injustices of oppression. This may be beneficial for the individual because, if they are ignorant of their privilege, they can maintain that they do not have any responsibility to interrogate and challenge systems of power which confer those privileges. But the vices of domination nonetheless remain harmful for Tessman, as they inhibit one's ability to develop virtue, consequently preventing one from leading a good life (2005, 57). If this is correct (or at least plausible), it is difficult to see how privileges, which lead to certain vices, can be advantageous all things considered if they ultimately prevent human flourishing. A virtue ethicist may recognize, then, that privilege may not always be beneficial on the whole, given the moral damages privilege can inflict on those who have it.

While Tessman uses a virtue ethics approach in her work, other normative moral theories can also account for the moral harms of privilege. Kantians could apply Carol Hay's (2011; 2013) work on the obligations of the oppressed to resist their oppression to those with privilege. They could argue privilege, like oppression, can harm one's rational nature, violating duties of self-respect.<sup>14, 15</sup> Utilitarians may follow J.S. Mill (1969) in suggesting that privilege and power can corrupt those who have it.<sup>16</sup> Capability theorists

---

<sup>14</sup> While Kantian arguments like this could draw on Charles Mills' convincing work on white ignorance to explain how (white) privilege harms a person's rational nature, although they may also have to respond to Mills' analysis of Kant's racism (2017).

<sup>15</sup> Fourie uses Mills' account of white ignorance to describe the epistemic harms of privilege (2022, 172), and later suggests that epistemic harms like ignorance can give rise to moral harms. On this, she says, privileged ignorance can lead to "arrogance, exaggerated self-confidence and feelings of moral superiority" (2022, 177).

<sup>16</sup> Regarding how the unjust power men have over women can distort their own humanity, Mill writes: "Even the commonest men reserve the violent, the sulky, the undisguisedly selfish side of their character for those

could admit, as Martha Nussbaum does, that some capabilities are “positively bad” for anyone to have (2013, 44).<sup>17</sup> I raise these possible arguments to suggest one may not rely on a virtue ethics approach like Tessman’s to analyze how privilege might harm those who have it.

An example of privilege most would agree is morally damaging to those who have it is given by McIntosh, who, recall, suggests that (white) privilege can license some to be thoughtless at best and murderous at worst (1989, 36). The latter claim, that privilege can license members of dominant groups to be violent or even murderous, is not an exaggeration. Examples of this kind of privileged violence include the murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till. Roy Bryant and his brother-in-law J.W. Milam kidnapped and brutally murdered Till, after he, allegedly, whistled at Bryant’s wife, Carolyn (Library of Congress).<sup>18</sup> Cases of lynching, like that of Till, were committed with near impunity by white men against Black men, many of whom were accused of committing sexual violence against white women (Davis 1983; Wells 2002).<sup>19</sup> The impunity with which white men may commit extrajudicial murder of Black men in these and other cases, I think, is evidence of the kind of privilege McIntosh describes as being murderous.<sup>20</sup>

---

who have no power to withstand it. The relation of superiors to dependents is the nursery of these vices of character...” (1969; 66).

<sup>17</sup> However, capabilities that are bad are not required for basic human functioning, and so are not important on capability approaches that theorize about social justice (Nussbaum 2003; 2011, 26-28).

<sup>18</sup> Although the men were found not guilty for charges of murder, they later confessed to killing Till in a paid interview (Thompson 2021).

<sup>19</sup> On the justification of lynching, Angela Davis writes, “for the rape charge turned out to be the most powerful of several attempts to justify the lynching of Black people” (1983, 99). And on the impunity of white men who committed lynching, Ida B. Wells writes, “[n]ot all nor nearly all of the murders done by white men, during the past thirty years in the South, have come to light, but the statistics as gathered and preserved by white men...show that during these years more than ten thousand Negroes have been killed in cold blood, without the formality of trial and legal execution. And yet, as evidence of the absolute impunity with which the white man dares to kill a Negro, the same record shows that during all these years, and for all these murders only three white men have been tried, convicted, and executed” (2002, 39).

<sup>20</sup> Here we might also consider the example of George Zimmerman, who killed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in 2012; see George Yancy on Zimmerman (2017, 10-14) and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2016, 147-151).

Privilege that licenses people to commit violence and even murder clearly constitutes a moral failing of the kind Fourie mentions. In the case above, Bryant and Milam, by brutally lynching Till, transgressed some of the most basic expectations of various normative moral theories as well as common sense morality, including that one ought not commit murder. On the wrongness of these acts, Tessman, for instance, argues that “racist whites who form hate groups and terrorize people of color on the street clearly take advantage of their positions of dominance and exhibit vices such as cruelty” (2005, 54).<sup>21</sup> Bryant and Milam certainly acted with great cruelty in murdering Emmett Till, and in doing so, acted viciously. Because they acted viciously, we might say that they committed a moral failure, and thus, on Fourie’s account, are subject to moral impairments of privilege (2022, 177).<sup>22</sup>

But again, one need not rely on a virtue ethics approach to see how these acts constitute moral failures. Kantians could argue that Bryant and Milam, in killing Till, fail to act in accordance to perfect duties not to commit murder. Donald Wilson makes such an argument while providing a Kantian understanding of the wrongness of murder, suggesting that such acts (like those of suicide) are wrong because they fail to “respect the integrity and proper functioning of our bodies that [are] necessary conditions of our rational agency” (2018, 5). Utilitarians like Mill (1863) could argue that murderers like Bryant and Milam acted wrongly because they caused a great amount of pain to Till and also to the wider

---

See also Onwuachi-Willig (2017) for a detailed discussion on whiteness and the cases of Till and Martin. We might further include cases of police brutality against Black people as cases where privilege permits one to be murderous (Yancy 2017, 7-8; 10-11).

<sup>21</sup> Tessman, in her chapter, is interested in focusing on privileged people who we might normally think of as leading flourishing lives. This example, she says, is of privileged people who we would not think lead flourishing lives. While Tessman doesn’t focus on the latter cases in her chapter, she still holds they act viciously, which may cause moral damage on her view.

<sup>22</sup> Again, I stress that these harms are not on par with those experienced by the oppressed.

community: over 100,000 people attended Till's open-casket funeral to mourn him (Alexander 2021). Their act of murder also caused themselves suffering, as they were ostracized from the white community in Mississippi after they confessed to the murder (Onwuachi-Willig 2017). Additionally, the fact that Bryant and Milam had the ability to murder Till with impunity might count as a kind of "positively bad" capability (Nussbaum 2013), one that McIntosh rightly points out no one ought to have (1989, 36). My point here is that one need not be a virtue ethicist to see how the acts of Bryant and Milam constitute moral failures of the kind Fourie is interested in. Such moral failures, for her, amount to moral impairments or harms. This example, that some have the privilege to be murderous, demonstrates a clear case of how privilege can cause (moral) harm to those who have it. For another example of how privilege can cause harm to those who have it, see chapter three, where I discuss privilege in the context of vaccine hesitancy. As I discuss in that chapter, by enabling some parents' ability to delay or refuse vaccinations on behalf of their children, the privilege some parents have can potentially cause harm to their own children as well as wider communities and especially the most vulnerable, e.g., children who remain unvaccinated for medical reasons.

To summarize my objection to Bailey, it is not always the case that privilege is entirely advantageous. Even if we do not take Bailey to literally mean privileges are *always* advantageous, she still has failed to explicitly discuss how privilege can harm those who have it. Given that other philosophers have or could account for various kinds of harms privilege can inflict on those who have it, it may be a feature we ought to explicitly account for in our understanding of privilege.<sup>23</sup> Overall, while privilege may most often benefit the

---

<sup>23</sup> For further discussion on the harms of privilege, see Fourie (2022).

people who have it, there are some contexts where privilege may result in harm. The amended account of privilege I offer below aims to capture the harms of privilege to overcome this worry.

### Section Three: Objections to Bailey and Ivy and Sennet

In this section, I argue that aspects of the accounts given by Bailey and Ivy and Sennet are in need of further clarification. Specifically, the accounts are vague about what is included in the assets or properties conferred by privilege. I first demonstrate how these accounts of privilege are unclear in this regard. My task, then, is to sharpen our understanding of what privilege includes by proposing a categorization of the kinds of things privilege can include. Ultimately, I argue that privilege includes both tangible resources as well as sets of options to do or be certain things. I focus the majority of this section on clarifying how the category of options is a plausible kind of asset conferred by privilege, and I show why it is important to explicitly include options among these assets.

To begin, let us turn to Bailey's account. Bailey provides examples of some potential assets in a parenthetical remark, those being "control of resources, skills, a quality education, the attention of the mayor, a good reputation, a prestigious well-paying job, political power, or a safe place to live" (1998, 110).<sup>24</sup> She describes the assets conferred systematically by privilege as advantages. However, her description of these assets as being advantageous does not get us very far in understanding what forms these assets can take. It remains unclear, then, what kinds of assets might be conferred by privilege.

---

<sup>24</sup> For Bailey, these specific examples may be earned advantages or privileges. Her point is that these assets are advantageous to the person who has them, whether they are privileges or earned advantages. What would make them privileges (and not advantages) is whether they were conferred merely based on a person's group membership.

To show how her account under-describes the kinds of assets privilege can confer, recall the example of Bailey's student. The student was conferred the role of protector in virtue of being a man. Bailey says the role "suggests that men, by virtue of their "natural" role, are automatically the rightful heads of households, the proper leaders, the best organizers, administrators, and educators" (116). This is a patriarchal belief that men are naturally better suited to *be* protectors, the heads of households, and so on. In this case, I think what Bailey is describing is the option the student has to take up these patriarchal roles. The student can and does, in this case, choose to be a protector, which is an option conferred to him in virtue of his male privilege. We can compare this example to other kinds of assets conferred systematically to members of dominant social groups. Consider the gender wage gap, where, in general, men are paid more on average than women in similar positions.<sup>25</sup> What privilege confers in this case is higher wages to men. While in both cases privilege works to allocate assets to members of dominant social groups, I think there are some differences between the kinds of assets conferred. My hope is to offer friendly amendments to the previous accounts, to help sharpen how we can understand the assets privilege can confer.

To emphasize the different kinds of assets privilege may confer, consider what someone is highlighting when they accuse a group or person of "being privileged". In one sense, the accuser might be gesturing towards certain tangible resources that group has. In the case of the gender pay gap, the accuser may be pointing out that men receive greater

---

<sup>25</sup> Statistics Canada reports that in 2018, women earn \$0.87 for every dollar that men earn (Pelletier et al 2019). It should also be noted that wage gaps are not the same for all women. Disparities tend to be worse for Indigenous, racialized, disabled women and women of newcomer status (Canadian Women's Foundation 2018; McIntyre 2019). Furthermore, transwomen also see further pay inequity compared to cis-gendered women (Nath 2018).

resources, namely, higher wages, in virtue of their membership in a dominant social group. But the accuser may not be referring exclusively to some resource the privileged group has conferred to them. They may also be highlighting ways in which systems of power make it possible and permissible for some groups to do certain things or be a certain way. This is how privilege seems to operate in the case of Bailey's student: the student has the option of being a protector, which is allocated to him because he is a man in a patriarchal society. Bailey's account as is does not neatly explain the difference between the kinds of assets in these two examples. Based on these differences, I suggest a clearer categorization of what the assets of privilege might include below.

But first, let us turn to Ivy and Sennet's account of privilege. Recall the first point in their schema describes privilege as a "generally desirable property" to have in a given social setting (2017, 496). The descriptors 'generally' and 'desirable' seem clear. The first point refers to the authors' view that while privileges are often or typically desirable, they may not be desirable in every case. Ivy and Sennet describe the 'desirable' aspect of privilege as "grounded in more primitive notions of autonomy, flourishing, and the likelihood that possession of a given property enhances either of those" (2017, 496).<sup>26</sup> Privilege is desirable as a means to achieve other goods or to advance oneself in some way. Importantly, Ivy and Sennet qualify this by suggesting (unlike Bailey, as I explained above) that these need not always benefit a group or person. These aspects of their account seem straightforward.

What is unclear in Ivy and Sennet's account is their claim that "it's far more productive to understand privilege as the capacity for agents to engage in various forms of

---

<sup>26</sup> Chapter Two discusses some aspects of the relationship between privilege and autonomy in more detail.

behavior” (496). While I think Ivy and Sennet make progress here to address a common mistake of conflating privilege with material benefit by suggesting privilege also influences behaviour (496), they are not clear in explaining what they mean by a capacity. Further, it is unclear how this remark relates to their schema of privilege, and whether this capacity is meant to be included in the properties of privilege. More detail is still needed to flesh out this claim and to clarify how we should understand privilege as relating to behaviour.

To help clarify these accounts, I propose there are at least two ways we can categorize the assets or properties of privilege. On the one hand, privilege confers tangible resources like wealth to members of dominant social groups. This seems straightforward, as thinking about privilege as including resources is, generally, a common way to understand what privilege confers.<sup>27</sup> But resources are not the only form the assets of privilege can take. A second category understands privilege as conferring certain options to an individual in virtue of their membership in dominant social groups. These are options which other groups are denied. For the remainder of this section, I focus on explaining the options privilege can confer.

To clarify the notion of options, it may be helpful to briefly compare the options privilege can confer to the notion of capabilities. The capability approach to questions on inequality was developed by Amartya Sen, and, later, Martha Nussbaum.<sup>28</sup> In his work developing the approach, Sen suggests what is missing from previous discussions on inequality is “some notion of ‘basic capabilities’: a person being able to do certain basic things” (1979, 218; see also Chiappero-Martinetti et al 2020). Capabilities are understood

---

<sup>27</sup> Most dictionary definitions of privilege, for instance, define it as special rights or benefits enjoyed by some people and not others.

<sup>28</sup> I do not have space to summarize the entirety of the capability approach here. I focus on the idea of capabilities itself to help explain options as a plausible asset conferred by one’s privilege.

as the “effective opportunities that people have to do and be certain things, to achieve certain ‘functionings’” (Oosterlaken 2020, 127), where a functioning refers to the state of a person and what they have actually managed to be or do (Sen 1993). Capabilities refer to the opportunities and abilities a person has to achieve certain functionings. Nussbaum gives the example of health to draw out the distinction: having the capability to be healthy is distinct from the state of being healthy (2000, 14). But capabilities are valuable not just because they allow people to achieve certain functionings, but they are also valuable in and of themselves: as Nussbaum notes, they are “spheres of freedom and choice” (2011, 25). Capabilities, like sets of options, provide people opportunities to decide what they will do and be in their lives.

The notion of capabilities is often contrasted with resources, which may include income and material goods as well as a person’s physical or mental skills (Oosterlaken 2020, 128).<sup>29</sup> According to capability theorists like Sen and Nussbaum, the issue with focusing narrowly on resources is that it does not explain why these goods are important to people or what they allow people to achieve (see Sen 1979; Nussbaum 2011, 56-58).<sup>30</sup>

<sup>31</sup> For example, Sen writes, on Rawls’ conception of primary goods, “even though the list of goods is specified in a broad and inclusive way, encompassing rights, liberties, opportunities, income, wealth, and the social basis of self-respect, it still is concerned with good things rather than with what these good things *do* to human beings” (Sen 1979, 218;

---

<sup>29</sup> Rawls’ view of primary goods is one example of a resource-focused view, and include things like basic rights and liberties, freedom of movement and choice in one’s occupation, access to powers of office, income and wealth, and self-respect (Oosterlaken 2020, 132).

<sup>30</sup> The simplest version of a resource-based approach is one that focuses on level of income or wealth in making evaluations of how well-off a person is (White 2021).

<sup>31</sup> For a summary of some central aspects of the debate between resource approaches and capability approaches, see Oosterlaken (2020).

emphasis in original).<sup>32</sup> Thus, the difference between a focus on tangible resources versus capabilities relates to the former's emphasis on what resources a person may have access to and the latter's focus on what a person is capable of doing or being in their life.<sup>33</sup>

In his work, Sen notes that while thinking about inequality in terms of capabilities has clear benefits, he does not mean to suggest that other kinds of equality, including that of resources, are irrelevant (1979, 220).<sup>34</sup> Likewise, in proposing that the assets of privilege can be categorized as resources or options, I do not mean to suggest that one is of more importance than the other.<sup>35</sup> It is important that both categories are recognized as assets conferred by privilege. Recognizing these categories allows us to develop a richer account of what, exactly, privilege includes, which overcomes the vagueness of previous accounts. I think including options among the assets conferred by privilege is important as it allows us to recognize how privilege permits people to do certain things or be a certain way.

To show it is plausible to include options among the assets conferred by privilege, let us consider some work by other philosophers writing on particular kinds of privilege. These accounts help show that privilege confers more than just resources, and I think they nicely highlight how privilege also confers unique options. First, consider Shannon

---

<sup>32</sup> One of the criticisms of resource-focused accounts like that of Rawls that attributes like one's disability, or race, gender, sexuality, and so on, are purely personal limitations, and because they are personal limitations, they do not fall within the scope of justice of social institutions (Oosterlaken 2020, 134-136).

<sup>33</sup> This difference has implications for how the respective views conceive of justice. As Oosterlaken (2020) explains, the resource focused approach is an ideal theory that focuses on redistribution of resources to achieve greater equality, while the capability approach is interested in real-world issues of inequality and aims to promote public policies that promote capacities in individuals sufficient for achieving basic functionings (Oosterlaken 2020; Nussbaum 2000; Sen 1979).

<sup>34</sup> As I argue above, these privileges need not be strictly advantageous. This is still consistent with the analogy to capabilities: for instance, Nussbaum is careful to explain that some substantive freedoms (which, on Sen's view, are capabilities) may be "positively bad" (2003, 44; 2011, 72), and thus are rightfully subjected to constraints (45). These capabilities, however, are not those Nussbaum includes in her list of basic capabilities (2000; 2003).

<sup>35</sup> For my purposes here, I use the language of options for the remainder of my discussion to keep my discussion on privilege separate from debates on inequality, although I recognize these are not unrelated.

Sullivan’s work on the unconscious habits of white privilege.<sup>36</sup> Habits, for Sullivan, are ways of being and acting that can make up a person’s character (2006, 23). The unconscious quality of these habits means that they are “not objects of conscious awareness; human beings enact them “without thinking,”” (2006, 23). Her account provides a possible way of thinking about how oppressive social contexts shape individual members of dominant social groups, giving them habits they can enact, sometimes in ways that uphold white supremacy (4). This account demonstrates how privilege roots itself in lives of individuals. Sullivan’s description of habits as ways of being goes beyond thinking of privilege in terms of allocating resources. Because Sullivan defines habits as ways of being, which are conferred by one’s privilege, and given that the category of options includes the ways in which privilege permits people to be a certain way, I think we can understand these habits as being among the options conferred to members of dominant social groups.

Kate Manne’s (2017; 2020) work on male privilege also aligns with my categorization of the assets of privilege. Part of her work focuses on a *sense* of entitlement which is most often expressed by privileged men.<sup>37</sup> She defines this male entitlement as “the widespread perception that a privileged man is owed something” (2020, 4). Manne’s use of the phrase ‘sense of entitlement’ resembles something like an attitude—in this case, a belief that a person is owed something. These senses of entitlement include patriarchal beliefs that men are owed various things from women, including, for example, their care

---

<sup>36</sup> Also see Sara Ahmed (2007) on habits and bodily forms of privilege.

<sup>37</sup> I think Manne’s discussion of a *sense* of entitlement can be distinguished from *entitlement privilege*, which is a specific category of privilege outlined by Ivy and Sennet (2017). Entitlement privilege refers to the fact that people are entitled to some kind of good or property, but only some specific group has access to it. A sense of entitlement, for Manne, is at least in part a feeling of being owed something due to one’s privileged position (2020, 4).

or sex. Manne is also interested in how these attitudes of entitlement lead to certain kinds of behaviour—in her case, she analyzes how male entitlement leads to certain kinds of misogynistic behaviours (2020, 11). I think Manne’s discussion of a sense of entitlement and its influence on behaviour is neatly explained by the options privilege can confer. Under patriarchy, men are generally taught that they are owed certain things from women—such as sex or care. Their male privilege confers to them options to voice and act on these attitudes, potentially leading to misogynistic behaviour.

My point is that these accounts of white privilege and male privilege show that it is plausible to describe privilege as including more than resources. Privilege also confers a suite of options to think or act in certain ways. The accounts of Sullivan and Manne suggest systems of power confer options to have certain attitudes or behave in unique ways.

Let us now consider some examples to demonstrate how privilege operates in the real-world to confer options systematically to members of dominant social groups. First, consider the example of Brock Turner, a Stanford swimmer who was found guilty of three counts of felony sexual assault. Despite being found guilty, Turner received significant special treatment during his trial: for example, he was sentenced to a lenient six-month jail sentence and served only three of those months in prison (Gollom 2016). In this case, Turner had some significant resources available to him, including the wealth of his family. Another aspect of Turner’s privilege includes the options given to him via systems of power like patriarchy and white supremacy. Here we can use Manne’s work to identify several such options, such as the option to view women’s bodies as objects to be used to satisfy the sexual desires of men, and the corresponding sense of entitlement (some) men have towards women’s bodies (Manne 2017). Another option allocated to people like

Turner includes the possibility of being able to commit sexual assault and get away with it, and perhaps even further, an option to cast himself as a victim when he commits acts of sexual assault (see Manne 2017, 196 on ‘himpathy’; Srinivasan 2021).<sup>38</sup>

We might compare this case back to Bailey’s student. While her student chose to take up the role of protector, she notes that he cannot be a protector without potential predators (1998, 115-116). While the student had the option to be a protector, Manne’s work highlights how patriarchy also provides men with the option to be predators. Systems of power like patriarchy operate to give affluent white men like Turner options to act in certain ways and, potentially, face fewer consequences or get away with crimes altogether.<sup>39</sup>

A second example I want to explore to show how privilege confers options is a confrontation between a Black man, Christian Cooper, and a white woman, Amy Cooper (no relation), that occurred in New York’s Central Park in May 2020 (Aggeler 2020). While Christian Cooper was bird-watching in the park, he noticed a dog was off-leash in an area that required dogs to be leashed. He asked the dog owner, Amy, to leash the dog. In the confrontation, which Christian recorded on his phone, Amy approached Christian, demanding that he stop recording her. After Christian asks her not to approach, Amy

---

<sup>38</sup> Amia Srinivasan similarly notes that white, affluent men often believe they will not be held accountable for acts of violence: “Well-off white men instinctively and correctly trust that the legal justice system will take care of them... in the case of rape, well-off white men worry that the growing demand that women be believed will cut against their right to be shielded from the prejudices of the law” (2021, 6).

<sup>39</sup> Notably, individuals belonging to marginalized groups accused of similar crimes do not have the same options, nor do they receive the special treatment people like Turner are afforded. Consider a similar case for example, of Corey Batey, a Black university football star, who was convicted of three felony counts of sexual assault but was ordered to serve a minimum sentence of 15 to 25 years in prison (O’Neil 2016). Both cases, Turner’s and Batey’s, involve horrific acts of sexual violence. My point is that another aspect of Turner’s privilege, namely his white privilege, also operates to give him the option to get away with his crime, an option not afforded to Batey. One may also turn to Amia Srinivasan’s recent work, where she asks a counterfactual question regarding Brett Kavanaugh and whether he would have received the same treatment and defense if he had not been an affluent, white man (2021, 9).

threatened to call the police. Christian responds, “Please call the cops”. Before calling the police, Amy threatens Christian with the following statement: “I am going to tell them there’s an African American man threatening my life”. This was a false accusation, as Christian was not threatening Amy’s life. But it was significant, as I explain below. On the phone with the police, she tells the operator multiple times that Christian is recording her and threatening herself and her dog. The video Christian recorded ends when Amy clips the leash to her dog.<sup>40</sup>

What does this case show us about the assets conferred by privilege? First, we can say Amy Cooper has significant resources afforded to her in virtue of being a white woman. As Christian Cooper himself remarked, “There are certain dark societal impulses that she, as a white woman, facing in a conflict with a Black man, that she thought she could marshal to her advantage...” (Nir 2020). One of the resources of privilege that may be at play in this case is excess credibility afforded to Amy in virtue of her whiteness. In most cases, this credibility would benefit her. Police and others might (if there had not been video evidence to the contrary) believe her account of the situation over Christian’s.

A second resource Amy had was the police force itself. Police forces, as Todd May and George Yancy argue, are oriented towards keeping middle- and upper-class white people safe and keep “people of colour in their place so they don’t challenge the social order that privileges middle- and upper-class white people” (2020). Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2016) has similarly argued police forces are racist institutions that aim to serve the

---

<sup>40</sup> There are other cases of white women calling police on Black people for mundane reasons, such as using a grill in a public park or for selling bottled water ‘without a permit’ (Farzan 2018). This provides further grounds for suggesting actions like these are patterns, rather than isolated incidents. While it is individual white women making these calls, it is not purely explained in terms of individual behaviour: I think it is a symptom of how systems of power provide members of dominant social groups with options to act in particular ways, for example, to police the behaviour of others belonging to marginalized social groups.

interests of affluent, white populations. If this is the case, then the police are a resource for Amy in virtue of her position as an affluent white woman.

While police are a resource for Amy, they may not have been a resource to Christian. Police could have responded to Christian violently, given that Black people, and Black men specifically, face higher rates of police brutality (Edwards et al 2019). While in this case there was (thankfully) no police violence against Christian, police and police violence were nonetheless potential resources for Amy to leverage in her threat against Christian. Examples of resources such as Amy's excess credibility and her access to police are at least part of the "dark societal impulses" that Amy may have been using to her advantage in the situation.

Resources are not the extent of Amy's privilege. I wish to also examine the options Amy had to act in the way she did, those being, to make threats and false accusations against Christian Cooper. Recall that her threat to call the police involved emphasizing Christian's race: she said she was going to "tell them an African American man is threatening my life". To explain how this relates to the options Amy had available to her to behave in this manner, I turn to work by George Yancy and others. The Central Park confrontation takes place within a white supremacist social context where, historically, Black men were lynched and brutally murdered "because someone said they looked at, spoke to, or thought about a white woman" (Ann DuCille, quoted by Yancy, 27; also see Srinivasan 2021). As Angela Davis (1981) notes as well, fraudulent charges of rape of white women against Black men were a pretext for lynching following the American Civil War, seen also in the case of Emmett Till.

While Amy was not falsely accusing Christian of rape, she nonetheless had the option of falsely accusing him of “threatening her life”, which may similarly invoke racist myths about Black men committing violence against white women (Davis 1981). The structure of power relevant to this case—white supremacy—granted Amy with the option to make false accusations of violence against an innocent Black man who was simply asking her to leash her dog. And it was an option that may not exist for other social groups, as other groups do not share a similar legacy of false accusations resulting in violence against the innocent person. Consider again the possibility of someone accusing Amy of “being privileged”: what they may be referring includes both the resources she has available to her and the ways in which she behaved. Amy had the option to behave in this way in virtue of being a white woman in a white supremacist society.

My discussion here helps us overcome the vagueness of previous accounts. Adopting this categorization of the assets or properties privilege confers is, in this way, a friendly amendment to previous accounts. For Bailey, it provides a clear way to understand what, exactly, privilege includes: namely, resources and options. Understanding privilege as conferring options also helps clarify what Ivy and Sennet meant as privilege relating to a capacity to behave. As we have seen, this aspect from Ivy and Sennet’s account is unclear: the authors leave capacity undefined. Describing privilege as conferring options to members of dominant social groups to do or be certain things helps clarify this claim. As we have seen in the case of Brock Turner and Amy Cooper, both individuals had options to do certain things and behave in certain ways in virtue of their privilege. I say more on how my revised account helps clarify Ivy and Sennet’s claim below.

## Section Four: An Amended Account of Privilege

As mentioned above, my account of privilege is a friendly amendment to the work of Bailey and others. This revised account of privilege emerges from the discussions above. My revised account of privilege is as follows:

Privilege is generally desirable, but unearned, assets or properties which are conferred systematically to members of dominant social groups, where these assets or properties include both tangible resources and options to do certain things or be a certain way.

Allow me to explain this revision. First, this account of privilege adopts Ivy and Sennet's language of privilege as generally desirable to overcome the first worry raised above. It avoids claiming that privilege is by definition advantageous. Their schema of privilege accounts for privilege as a *generally* desirable property to have in some social setting (2017, 496). So, while the properties privilege confers may be desirable or helpful in most cases, this need not be the case. Their view allows room to analyze the ways in which privilege can sometimes be harmful to those who have it, which is captured by my revised account as well.

Second, my revised account still includes important elements of Bailey's notion of privilege: that the assets of privilege are unearned and conferred systematically. I think Bailey is right to point out these as unique characteristics of privilege. My account of privilege, however, adds important clarity by explicitly including both resources and options within the assets or properties of privilege. Thus, it avoids the ambiguity of Bailey's account relating to what is included in the assets or properties of privilege.

Finally, my revised account helps to clarify what Ivy and Sennet may have meant by privilege as a "capacity to behave" in some way. Specifying that the assets conferred by privilege include options to do or be certain things explains this idea. For example, systems

of patriarchy give options to men to behave in unique ways, as we have seen. Consider Manne's (2017) description of misogyny as the "law enforcement" branch of patriarchy. Manne's account of misogyny as dependent on systems of patriarchy shows how such systems give people the option to act in misogynistic ways in order to reinforce patriarchal social norms. These options include acts that Manne describes as misogynistic forms of hostility, which can range from acts which objectify, mock, or shame women or girls, to acts of violence (Manne 2017, 68). These are actions aiming to keep women 'in their place', which help maintain patriarchal social structures. The fact that privilege confers options to members of dominant groups highlights that, sometimes, individuals will actively take up these options. By understanding privilege as including options conferred to dominant social groups, we can locate the behavioural elements of privilege Ivy and Sennet are interested in at instances where individuals decide to take up these options.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I attempted to clarify our understanding of privilege. I identified some concerns regarding some existing accounts of privilege, namely, that they did not recognize how privilege harms those who have it or that they were vague regarding what the assets of privilege include. In response to these worries, I provided friendly amendments to these views suggesting a revised definition of privilege. My revised account adopts Ivy and Sennet's view that while privilege may often be advantageous, it may not be beneficial all things considered. I also suggested a way we might categorize the assets of privilege in order to clarify what, exactly, privilege includes. My account contends that privilege

confers both tangible resources and options to be or do certain things to members of dominant social groups.

## Works Cited

- Aggeler, Madeleine. 2020. "A Black Man Asked a White Woman to Leash Her Dog. She Called the Cops." *The Cut*. <https://www.thecut.com/2020/05/amy-cooper-central-park-dog-video.html> (Accessed September 24, 2021).
- Ahmed, Sara. 2007. "A Phenomenology of Whiteness." *Feminist Theory* 8 (2): 149-168.
- Alcoff, Linda Martín. 2006. *Visible Identities: Race, Gender and the Self*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2015. *The Future of Whiteness*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Alexander, Elizabeth. 2021. "Emmett Till Would Have Been 80 Today. His Story Still Defines the Ongoing Fight for Justice." *Time Magazine*. <https://time.com/6083394/emmett-till-would-have-been-80-today-his-story-still-defines-the-ongoing-fight-for-justice/> (Accessed May 31, 2022).
- Bailey, Alison. 1998. "Privilege: Expanding on Marilyn Frye's "Oppression"." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 29 (3): 104-119.
- Barrett, Christopher B., Michael R. Carter, and Jean-Paul Chavas. 2019. "Introduction." In *The Economics of Poverty Traps*. Edited by Christopher B. Barrett, Michael R. Carter, and Jean-Paul Chavas. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/9780226574448>.
- Canadian Women's Foundation. 2018. "Fact Sheet: The Gender Wage Gap in Canada." [https://www.canadianwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Gender-Wage-Gap-Fact-Sheet\\_AUGUST-2018\\_FINAL1.pdf](https://www.canadianwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Gender-Wage-Gap-Fact-Sheet_AUGUST-2018_FINAL1.pdf) (Accessed November 25, 2020).
- Chiappero-Martinetti, Enrica, Siddiqur Osmani, and Mozaffar Qizilbash. 2020. "General Introduction." In *Cambridge Handbook of the Capability Approach*. Edited by Enrica Chiappero-Martinetti, Siddiqur Osmani, and Mozaffar Qizilbash. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Library of Congress. "The Murder of Emmett Till." *Civil Rights History Project*. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/civil-rights-history-project/articles-and-essays/murder-of-emmett-till/> (Accessed May 30, 2022).
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 2009. *Black Feminist Thought*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. New York: Routledge.
- . 2012. "Social Inequality, Power, and Politics: Intersectionality and American Pragmatism in Dialogue." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26 (2): 442-457.
- . 2015. "Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas." *Annual Review of Sociology*. 41: 1-20.

- Combahee River Collective. 1977. "The Combahee River Collective Statement."  
Retrieved from  
[https://americanstudies.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Keyword%20Coalition\\_Readings.pdf](https://americanstudies.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Keyword%20Coalition_Readings.pdf) (Accessed April 15, 2022).
- Crenshaw, Kimberle. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum*. Issue 1.
- . 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43 (6): 1241-1299.
- Cudd, Ann E. 2006. *Analyzing Oppression*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Davis, Angela Y. 1981. *Women, Race, and Class*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. 1920. "The Souls of White Folk." In *Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe.
- Edwards, Frank, Hedwig Lee, and Michael Esposito. 2019. "Risk of being killed by police use of force in the United States by age, race–ethnicity, and sex." *PNAS* 116 (34): 16793-16798.
- Employment and Social Development Canada. 2022. *Tackling Poverty Together*.  
<https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/poverty-reduction/reports/tackling-poverty-together.html> (Accessed April 22, 2022).
- Farzan, Antonia Noori. 2018. "BBQ Becky, Permit Patty and Cornerstore Caroline: Too 'cutesy' for those white women calling police on black people?" The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2018/10/19/bbq-becky-permit-patty-and-cornerstore-caroline-too-cutesy-for-those-white-women-calling-cops-on-blacks/> (Accessed September 21, 2021).
- Fourie, Carina. 2022. "How Being Better Off is Bad for You: Implications for Distribution, Relational Equality, and an Egalitarian Ethos." In *Autonomy and Equality: Relational Approaches*. Edited by Natalie Stoljar and Kristin Voigt. New York: Routledge.
- Freire, Paulo. 2017. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Frye, Marilyn. 1983. "Oppression." *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. California: The Crossing Press.

- Gollom, Mark. 2016. "Stanford University sexual assault case sentencing seen as too lenient by legal experts" CBC News. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/stanford-sexual-assault-case-brock-turner-sentence-judge-1.3620631> (Accessed November 2, 2021).
- Hay, Carol. 2011. "The Obligation to Resist Oppression." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 42 (1): 21-45.
- . 2013. *Kantianism, Liberalism, and Feminism: Resisting Oppression*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Hill, Jess. 2020. "Patriarchy and power: how socialization underpins abusive behaviour" The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/mar/08/patriarchy-and-power-how-gender-inequality-underpins-abusive-behaviour> (Accessed February 3, 2021).
- Ivy, Veronica [Rachel McKinnon] and Adam Sennet. 2017. "On the Nature of the Political Concept of Privilege." *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 25 (4): 487-507.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1997. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated and edited by Mary Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- King, Martin Luther. 1983. *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/02/letter-from-a-birmingham-jail/552461/> (Accessed May 31, 2022).
- Krishnamurthy, Meena. 2021. "Martin Luther King Jr. on Democratic Propaganda, Shame, and Moral Transformation." *Political Theory* 50 (2): 305–36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00905917211021796>.
- Lorde, Audre. 1984. "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining the Difference" In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. California: Crossing Press.
- Lowe, Dan. 2020. "Privilege: What it Is, Who Has It, And What Should We Do About It?" *Ethics, Left and Right: the Moral Issues That Divide US*. Edited by Bob Fischer. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Manne, Kate. 2017. *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2020. *Entitled: How Male Privilege Hurts Women*. First Edition. New York: Crown.
- Maslin Nir, Sarah. 2020. "Amy Cooper is Fired after Calling Police on Black Man in Central Park" The New York Times.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/26/nyregion/amy-cooper-dog-central-park.html>. (Accessed January 25, 2021).

May, Todd and George Yancy. 2020. "Policing is Doing What It Was Meant to Do. That's the Problem" *The New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/21/opinion/police-violence-racism-reform.html> (Accessed November 10, 2021).

McIntosh, Peggy. 1989. "White Privilege and Male Privilege." In *Privilege: A Reader*. Edited by Michael. S. Kimmel and Abby L. Ferber. 2017. 4<sup>th</sup> Edition. Boulder: Westview Press.

McIntyre, Catherine. 2018. "Why do men make more money than women?" *Macleans Magazine*. <https://www.macleans.ca/society/why-do-men-make-more-money-than-women/> (Accessed January 25, 2021).

Mill, John Stuart. 1869. *The Subjection of Women*. Project Gutenberg.

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/27083/27083-h/27083-h.htm> (Accessed January 29, 2021).

———. 1983. *Utilitarianism*. Kitchener: Batoche Books.

Mills, Charles W. 1997. *The Racial Contract*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Moyser, Melissa. 2019. "Measuring and Analyzing the Gender Pay Gap: A Conceptual and Methodological Overview" Statistics Canada.

<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-20-0002/452000022019001-eng.htm> (Accessed January 25, 2021).

Nath, Ishani. 2018. "For transgender women, the pay equity gap is even wider" *Macleans*. <https://www.macleans.ca/society/for-transgender-women-the-pay-equity-gap-is-even-wider/> (Accessed November 25, 2020).

Nussbaum, Martha C. 2000. *Women and Human Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

———. 2003. "Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice." *Feminist Economics* 9 (2-3): 33-59.

O'Neil, Lauren. 2016. "Status and race in the Stanford rape case: Why Brock Turner's mugshot matters" *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/trending/brock-turner-mugshot-stanford-rape-case-images-sex-assault-1.3629147> (Accessed November 2, 2021).

- Onwuachi-Willig, Angela. 2017. "Policing the Boundaries of Whiteness: The Tragedy of Being "Out of Place" from Emmett Till to Trayvon Martin." *Iowa Law Review* 102 (1113).
- Oosterlaken, Ilse. 2020. "Resources or Capabilities? An Introduction to the Debate" In *Cambridge Handbook of the Capability Approach*. Edited by Enrica Chiappero-Martinetti, Siddiqur Osmani, and Mozaffar Qizilbash. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pelletier, Rachele; Martha Patterson and Melissa Moyser. 2019. "The Gender Wage Gap in Canada: 1998 to 2018" Statistics Canada. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-004-m/75-004-m2019004-eng.htm>. Accessed November 25, 2020.
- Sandel, Michael J. 2020. *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Sen, Amartya. 1979. "Equality of What?" In *The Tanner Lecture on Human Values*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Spector, Nicole. 2016. "Why That One Person Always Gets Out of Traffic Tickets" NBC News. <https://www.nbcnews.com/business/consumer/why-one-person-always-gets-out-traffic-tickets-n699491> (Accessed September 20, 2021).
- Spelman, Elizabeth V. 1988. *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Srinivasan, Amia. 2021. *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century*. First American edition. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Sullivan, Shannon. 2006. *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta. 2016. *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- Tessman, Lisa. 2005. *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Thompson, Wright. 2021. "His Name was Emmett Till" *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/09/barn-emmett-till-murder/619493/> (Accessed May 30, 2022).
- Wells, Ida B. 2002. *On Lynchings*. New York, NY: Humanity Books. [https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic\\_entity%7Cdocument%7C4402396](https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cdocument%7C4402396).

- White, Stuart. 2021. "Social Minimum" In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Ed. Edward N. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=social-minimum> (Accessed May 13, 2022).
- Wilson, Donald. 2018. "Murder and Violence in Kantian Ethics" *Natur Und Freiheit: Akten des XII. Internationalen Kant-Kongresses*. Edited by Violetta L. Waibel, Margit Ruffing, and David Wagner. Accessed via PhilArchive, Copy v1: <https://philarchive.org/archive/WILMAV-3v1>.
- Yancy, George. 2004. "Introduction: Fragments of a Social Ontology of Whiteness". *What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question*. Eds. George Yancy. London: Taylor and Francis.
- . 2008. "Elevators, Social Spaces and Racism: A Philosophical Analysis." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 34 (8): 843-876.
- . 2017. *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America*. Second Edition. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Young, Iris Marion. 1990. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. USA: Princeton University Press.

## Chapter Two: Relational Autonomy and Privilege

Over the past forty years, there has been much debate on the topic of personal autonomy amongst feminist philosophers. Some have argued traditional conceptions of autonomy, such as that of Immanuel Kant (1785), are inherently androcentric (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000). Feminists claim dominant views of autonomy are bound up with masculine character ideals and “assumptions about selfhood and agency that are metaphysically, epistemologically, and ethically problematic from a feminist perspective” (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000, 3; see also Sherwin 1992; Meyers 1997). Such assumptions include, for example, views of agents as individuals who are disconnected from social contexts and relationships (Sherwin 2012). Feminists argue traditional accounts of autonomy and the androcentric assumptions that underlie them are unhelpful in understanding and challenging oppression. For example, if traditional accounts take autonomous agents to be uninfluenced by their social contexts, such accounts will overlook how oppressive social circumstances may impact an agent’s autonomy. For autonomy to be a useful theoretical tool for feminists to understand and combat oppression, it needed to be reconceived.

Most feminist accounts of autonomy are referred to as “relational” accounts, or simply “relational autonomy”. Importantly, relational autonomy does not refer to a single, unified account of autonomy. Rather, relational autonomy is “an umbrella term, designating a range of related perspectives” (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000, 4). However, all accounts of relational autonomy share the view that people are socially embedded (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000). This means that relational accounts recognize “not only that we live in relationships with others but also that relationship and connection with others is

essential to the existence of the self. The human self is constituted *in and through* relationship with others” (Llewellyn and Downie 2012, 4; emphasis in original). This is a rejection of the assumption in traditional accounts that autonomous agents are isolated from and uninfluenced by others and their wider social contexts. It is important that relational accounts begin with this view of persons as it “make[s] visible the ways in which specific details of agents’ embodied identity, and the social practices that shape their experiences, may affect the degree of autonomy available to them” (Sherwin 2012, 13). By recognizing the ways in which selves are socially embedded, feminists are better able to consider how oppression impacts the development and exercise of autonomy.

Recently, some relational accounts of autonomy, namely, ones that are strongly substantive and socially constitutive in character, have come under criticism. The crux of these criticisms is that these accounts of autonomy are poorly suited to fulfill anti-oppressive feminist aims, including the aims implied above, that relational autonomy should 1) help us combat oppression and 2) provide us with a view of how oppression can influence the development and exercise of autonomy while recognizing autonomy is a relational capacity. In addition to failing to achieve these goals, critics have also argued these accounts lead to some perverse conclusions feminists ought to reject.

I strengthen the criticisms that strong substantive and constitutive accounts of relational autonomy generate perverse conclusions. I argue that neither relational theorists nor critics of relational autonomy have considered what these accounts imply about agents who are relatively privileged. It is important to think about privilege in the context of these views given the feminist goal of addressing overarching systems of power which cause privilege and oppression. To achieve this goal, feminists should aim, then, to understand

how both oppression and privilege might impact autonomy. My contribution is an analysis of how strong substantive accounts lead, again, to the perverse conclusions when we consider privilege. Further, I suggest that, in order to fulfill some of the feminist goals of an account of autonomy, we will have to adopt alternative views of relational autonomy that make greater room for nuance while avoiding the perverse conclusions identified. I argue an alternative account of relational autonomy that succeeds in this is given by Andrea Westlund. I show how her account avoids the worries raised against relational autonomy, while still enabling us to fulfill some of the goals feminists have for accounts of autonomy.

This chapter is structured as follows. In section one, I provide an overview of strong substantive and socially constitutive accounts of relational autonomy. In section two, I summarize some criticisms of these accounts by Danielle Wenner (2020) and Serene Khader (2020). In section three, I strengthen their conclusions by giving a parallel argument using the account of privilege developed in chapter one. I show how strong substantive accounts generate perverse conclusions about privileged agents, not just oppressed agents. In section four, I return to the two feminist goals of relational autonomy and investigate whether and how these might be achieved, given the foregoing discussion. There, I problematize some of the arguments given by Wenner and suggest greater nuance is needed in a relational account of autonomy. I argue that we can salvage the constitutive element of relational autonomy. In section five, I consider an account of relational autonomy given by Andrea Westlund (2003; 2009). I argue that her account avoids the perverse conclusions of strong substantive accounts while also permitting greater nuance in our understanding of autonomy. I argue it is thus an attractive alternative for feminists interested in maintaining a relational account of autonomy.

## Section 1: What is Relational Autonomy?

In this chapter, I am focused on personal autonomy, which can be contrasted with political autonomy and moral autonomy.<sup>1</sup> Personal autonomy generally refers to an agent's self-government and self-direction over their lives. As Joseph Raz explains, "[t]he ruling idea behind the ideal of personal autonomy is that people should make their own lives" (1986, 369). Being autonomous includes having self-direction over the preferences, desires, beliefs, and values that guide an agent's idea for how they want to live their lives, and the actions they take to live in that way.<sup>2</sup> Autonomy as self-government is also the sense in which feminist philosophers use the term. In general, both feminist and non-feminist conceptions of autonomy "converge around the idea of self-determination, of choosing, acting, and living according to what is, in some important sense, one's self" (Friedman 1997, 41). There is, however, much disagreement on what conception of autonomy is best.

Given this disagreement, relational accounts of autonomy are thus divided along several lines. First, Mackenzie and Stoljar (2000) distinguish between procedural and substantive relational accounts of autonomy. Procedural theories of autonomy focus on the

---

<sup>1</sup> Political, moral, and personal autonomy "address self-determination with respect to different phenomena" (Oshana 2006, 10). Political autonomy relates to an agent's membership in a state, particularly a democratic state, where an agent has various political and civil rights (Friedman 1997; Oshana 2006). Moral autonomy relates the ways in which an agent acts in accordance with moral principles, values, and rules that they adopted (Friedman 1997, 41). Personal autonomy, by contrast, relates to self-determination over aspects of our lives that are not necessarily related to moral or political phenomena (Friedman 1997; Oshana 2006). Personal autonomy relates to having authority over oneself and the power to act on that authority (Oshana 2006).

<sup>2</sup> This idea can be phrased in terms of authenticity. Some authors writing on autonomy hold the preferences, desires, values an agent holds must be authentic to count as being properly autonomous. These views may hold that preferences, desires, and values of an agent must be 'truly their own'. What authenticity means can vary. Some authors, like Stoljar (2011) and Oshana (2005; 2007), challenge the idea that authenticity is a requirement for autonomy. One difficulty faced by authenticity accounts relates to whether it is possible to properly assess whether a preference is truly authentic (see Noggle 2008; Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000). I do not wish to address these issues here, so I have chosen to avoid the language of authenticity.

mental and deliberative capacities of an agent to subject “her motivations and actions to the appropriate kind of critical reflection” (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000, 14). What makes a preference, desire, or value count as autonomous on procedural views is whether an agent has subjected those preferences to an appropriate kind of critical reflection (Ibid).<sup>3</sup> An agent will be ascribed autonomy so long as they have completed the required reflective process. On procedural accounts, autonomy is thus “something a person accomplishes” (Meyers 1987, 626) through certain deliberative processes. One important feature of these accounts is that they are neutral regarding the specific content of agent’s preferences.

Unlike procedural accounts, substantive accounts of relational autonomy are non-neutral with regards to the content of an agent’s preferences. While substantive theories may include procedural elements, they further hold that the content of an agent’s preferences or values must be of a certain kind or that there are certain necessary conditions for autonomy that will limit what kinds of preferences count as autonomous (Stoljar 2000).<sup>4</sup> These theorists hold we should be non-neutral with regards to the substance of agents’ preferences, desires, and so on because they may be caused by oppressive socialization. Even if an agent adopts a preference or desire through a critical deliberative process, substantivists posit those preferences can still be non-autonomous if they are the result of oppressive socialization. For substantivists, oppressive socialization can be harmful to autonomy in at least two ways. First, it can impair an agent’s capacity for critical reflection (a point procedural theorists would agree with; see Meyers 1987). Second, oppressive

---

<sup>3</sup> Different procedural theories adopt different accounts of the kind of critical reflection necessary. Mackenzie and Stoljar (2000) distinguish between structural, historical, and autonomy competency models, all of which differ in their account of the deliberative processes required for autonomy (see Frankfurt 1988; Christman 2009; Meyers 1987 respectively).

<sup>4</sup> Contrasted to procedural accounts, which hold autonomy is something that a person accomplishes, we might say that substantive accounts hold that autonomy is something that happens to a person (Meyers 1987, 262).

socialization may press agents to accept what substantivists see as objectively false or harmful preferences (Stoljar 2000); or it may remove certain options from an agent or an agent's ability to control aspects of their lives (Oshana 2006).

Substantive accounts are further divided into strong or weak accounts. Strong substantive accounts place direct normative restrictions on the content of an agent's preferences, desires, and values (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000; Benson 2005). For example, strong substantive accounts hold agents "are prohibited from endorsing commitments with particular content, for example, values that endorse gender hierarchy" (Warriner 2015, 30). Strong substantive accounts, then, may uphold a certain conception of the good life (Oshana 2006, 73).<sup>5</sup> Doing so places substantive constraints on the kinds of preferences that can count as autonomous, as an agent's preferences must conform to the adopted conception of the good life. Preferences and values that are inconsistent or opposed to their conception of the good life are, for the strong substantivist, non-autonomous.

Weak substantive accounts, on the other hand, do not require an agent to endorse specific preferences. However, they remain substantive insofar as they suggest some necessary conditions for autonomy which may limit which preferences are regarded as rightfully autonomous (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000). For example, Benson's weak substantivist account holds that autonomous agents must "have a certain sense of their own worthiness to act" (1994, 650). A requirement of having self-worth is substantive because it "does constrain the content of free agents' attitudes toward themselves" (Benson 1994, 664). On his weak substantive account, the agent must have a sense of self-worth to be

---

<sup>5</sup> Some strong substantivists hold that the good life is one that is self-directed, and so they argue agents should adopt the value of autonomy itself or, at minimum, not act in ways that would violate the value of autonomy (Friedman 2003, 19; see also Oshana 2015; Benson 2005; Warriner 2015).

considered autonomous. But Benson's account is only weakly substantive because it does not place any direct restrictions on the contents of the agent's preferences or desires (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000, 20; Warriner 2015, 33).

A final distinction among relational accounts is that they can be categorized as either causal or constitutive. This distinction relates to the theoretical connection between autonomy and social relationships (Friedman 1997, 56). Causal conceptions of autonomy analyze the ways in which social embeddedness and social relationships may cause or impede the development of autonomy (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000, 22). Constitutive conceptions of autonomy, however, focus on "the social nature of the capacity of autonomy itself" (Ibid). On these accounts, relationships and social embeddedness are a part of what autonomy *is* (Friedman 1997; Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000).

The constitutive element of relational accounts is what some have argued makes these accounts distinct from other, non-feminist views of autonomy (Christman 2004, 147; Benson 2015, 128).<sup>6</sup> Relational accounts that are causal may still be "fundamentally individualistic about autonomy itself: the fact that a capacity has social conditions does not imply that it is itself a social capacity" (Westlund 2009, 41). Constitutive accounts, however, are stronger than merely causal views, because an agent's relationships and social embeddedness are not "merely accidental, contributory factors in their autonomy" (Benson 2015, 137; see also Westlund 2012, 63 Nedelsky 2011, 46), but are instead a necessary

---

<sup>6</sup> Christman, for instance, argues that constitutive accounts of relational autonomy are powerful because they can place strong emphasis on securing certain social conditions that are required for the development and exercise of autonomy (2004, 156). Ultimately, Christman goes on to criticize certain constitutive conceptions of autonomy as dangerous. See footnotes 21 and 22 below. For a response to Christman's worries, see Westlund (2009). The argument is that other non-feminist accounts, such as that of Dworkin, seem to be able to make sense of the causal influence of relationships and social embeddedness on our autonomy: for instance, he writes, "[o]ur dispositions, attitudes, values, wants are affected by the economic institutions, by the mass media, by the force of public opinion, by social class, and so forth" (1988, 25). What is needed to make a feminist account unique, then, is a constitutive account of relational autonomy.

component for autonomy. Feminists may be better off adopting a constitutive account of autonomy if they want to explain how our autonomy is influenced and facilitated by social features of selves, since lacking relevant relational features would make autonomy impossible. As I argue in later sections, the constitutive feature of relational autonomy will be worth maintaining to achieve feminist goals.

This chapter focuses primarily on strong substantive and constitutive relational accounts. In the remainder of this section, I focus on the work of Natalie Stoljar (2000) and Mariana Oshana (2006) as examples of such accounts.<sup>7</sup>

To begin, Stoljar criticizes procedural accounts of relational autonomy and ultimately argues feminists must adopt a strong substantive account of autonomy. Procedural theories, she argues, cannot account for what she calls the “feminist intuition”, which is the view that:

preferences influenced by oppressive norms of femininity cannot be autonomous (2000, 95).<sup>8</sup>

Stoljar is focused on the influence of oppression on an agent’s preferences, values, and desires. Such influence can lead agents to internalize harmful patriarchal views, which in turn shape agents’ preferences. Her view relates to internal conditions for autonomy, such as the content of an agent’s preference (see Wenner 2020, 7).<sup>9</sup> Stoljar holds that preferences formed due to the influence of oppressive contexts and the internalization of false and oppressive norms of femininity are incompatible with autonomy (Warriner 2015, 29; Benson 2005, 126). Examples of oppressive norms may include prevailing beauty

---

<sup>7</sup> Wenner and Khader also focus on Stoljar and Oshana as examples of strong substantive and constitutive accounts (see also Benson 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Some suggest that feminists may not universally share this intuition (Benson 2014; Khader 2020; Wenner 2020).

<sup>9</sup> In other places, though, Stoljar defends an externalist account (2017).

standards, patriarchal views of women as inferior or subservient to men, and gendered expectations about feminine behaviour, e.g., that women should be polite, docile, and nurturing.

Stoljar uses research by Kristin Luker (1975) on women who take “contraceptive risks” as a case study to explain the feminist intuition. Luker’s research aimed to investigate why women who had access to contraception nonetheless experienced unwanted pregnancies which resulted in elective abortions (Stoljar 2000, 96). Luker found that while the majority of these women were using, or had previously used, some method of birth control, 40% had used no contraceptive method in the month prior to becoming pregnant. Luker argues that these contraceptive decisions were not irrational, but rather, the subjects were engaging in a bargaining process over the costs and benefits of using contraception. This bargaining process includes, for example, weighing the social costs of using contraception against the perceived benefits of pregnancy, where such benefits may include demonstrating fertility or establishing one’s worth as a woman (Stoljar 2000, 99). These perceived benefits, however, are rooted in patriarchal views about the value and sexuality of women.

The example of Luker’s subjects triggers the feminist intuition because the “subjects are motivated by oppressive and misguided norms that are internalized as a result of feminine socialization” (Stoljar 2000, 98). The appropriate target for criticism is not the bargaining process the women engaged in, which, on proceduralist accounts, would generate the conclusion that the women are autonomous as they fulfilled requirements for critical reflection by bargaining (Stoljar 2000, 97-98).<sup>10</sup> Rather, it is the *content* of the

---

<sup>10</sup> Stoljar explains five forms of critical reflection that are necessary for autonomy ascription on various procedural accounts (2000, 100). She argues that Luker’s subjects either fulfil these conditions or that the

preferences the women internalized that should be criticized from a feminist perspective, according to Stoljar (2000, 109). Stoljar argues the subjects who act in accordance with these norms accept something *false*, namely, oppressive norms about femininity, sexuality, and motherhood (Stoljar 2000, 99-100; 109). And it is the false and harmful content of these norms that impair the autonomy of the subjects (Stoljar 2000, 109; Benson 2005, 127).

As we have seen above, strong substantive accounts place normative restrictions on preferences. The strong substantive element of Stoljar's account relates to the content of an agent's beliefs, desires, and preferences. Ultimately, Stoljar holds that if feminist theorists wish to vindicate the intuition that preferences influenced by oppressive norms of femininity cannot be autonomous, they will have to adopt strong substantive accounts that place normative restrictions on the content of agent's preferences.

Let us turn to Mariana Oshana's (2006) account of relational autonomy. Oshana is primarily concerned with what it means for an agent to be globally autonomous, which refers to "the property of a person having *de facto* power and authority over choices and actions significant to the direction of her life" (2006, 2). This can be contrasted to local autonomy, which is the ability of an agent to make specific choices in particular situations (2). Oshana considers several case studies that help to illustrate the differences between

---

conditions do not rule the subjects as non-autonomous. For example, the self-knowledge condition, for proceduralists like Christman, hold that an autonomous agent must not deceive themselves (Stoljar 2000, 102). Stoljar argues that Luker's subjects do not deceive themselves, as some of the women are aware of conflicts between their wish to engage in sex and their commitments to religious or feminine norms that restrict the sexual agency of women (103). Stoljar argues while they may seem weak-willed by failing to fully accept or reject one or the other of these commitments, they are nonetheless aware of these tensions and their desires, and so are not deceiving themselves. Because they are aware of these tensions, they can count as autonomous on procedural accounts that require self-knowledge as a condition of autonomy, which violates the feminist intuition.

global and local autonomy.<sup>11</sup> These cases are also the basis for Oshana's account of relational autonomy.

Let us consider Oshana's example of Harriet, a woman who prefers the role of a subservient housewife (58).<sup>12</sup> Harriet, who is subjected to patriarchal social roles as well as the wishes of her husband, has critically reflected on this and soberly accepted it as her preference. But her social relations are ones that afford her less financial flexibility, less social mobility, and few opportunities (59). Decisions that are important for Harriet's life are made by others. Further, there are no economic, social, or political institutions that help to empower women like her (Ibid).

Harriet may have local autonomy in the sense she may be able to decide what she cooks her family for dinner (6). This is a single and relatively isolated situation in contrast to her life overall.<sup>13</sup> But Oshana argues Harriet lacks autonomy in a global sense. This is because she does not, overall, manage her life according to "a framework of rules (or values, principles, beliefs, pro-attitudes) that she has set for herself" (2006, 17). Oshana argues she lacks the overarching quality of being self-governing not because of her psychology<sup>14</sup>, but because of "her personal relations with others and to the social

---

<sup>11</sup> In her book, Oshana considers five case studies. For the sake of space, I only consider the example of Harriet.

<sup>12</sup> See also Thomas Hill's example of the Deferential Wife (1991, 5).

<sup>13</sup> On Oshana's account, episodes of autonomy do not add up to global autonomy. One reason for this is that episodes of choice can be "highly localized and restrictive—they might concern only a very narrow range of matters—or they might concern matters of little consequence" (2006, 18). Harriet's ability to choose dinners is narrowly focused on the meals she prepares. And even if she is able to make these localized choices, this still does not mean she will gain the ability to make choices in other, broader contexts, as for Oshana, her circumstances remain oppressive and render her nonautonomous.

<sup>14</sup> I do not have the space to fully summarize Oshana's rejection of procedural accounts. Briefly, she notes that on procedural accounts, Harriet would turn out to be autonomous given that she has goes through the right kind of psychological processes to accept her preferences, which it seems she has. But Oshana claims "people are not just psychological states, and their autonomy is a more complicated matter than that of their psychological states" (2006, 46).

institutions of her society” (2006, 59). Harriet’s social situation makes it impossible for her to be globally autonomous.

Given that Oshana’s account holds that social circumstances can remove the possibility of global autonomy, we can consider her account to be externalist in nature.<sup>15</sup> Externalist accounts of autonomy hold “the state of being autonomous is primarily a function of the external situation a person finds himself in” (2006, 6). Oshana’s account is also constitutive. On this feature of her account, she says “[a]utonomy is not a phenomenon merely enhanced or lessened by the contingencies of a person’s social situation; social relations do not just causally facilitate or impair the exercise of autonomy. Rather, appropriate social relations form an inherent part of what it means to be self-directed” (2006, 49). Here she argues that social relations *constitute* in large part what it means to be autonomous. Oshana claims that Harriet, for example, fails to be autonomous “not because she *wants* to be subservient, but because she *is* subservient. Her lack of autonomy is due to her personal relations with others and to the social institutions of her society” (2006, 59; emphasis in original). Because proper external circumstances constitute part of what it means to be autonomous, and given Harriet’s situation was one that lacked these, Oshana says she is not autonomous simply because the proper kind of circumstances were absent.

Oshana’s account is also strongly substantive in the sense that it “mandates the presence of content-specific states of affairs” (Oshana 2015, 3; 2006, 70-71). The substantive element of her approach focuses on the external circumstances of an agent and their social relations.<sup>16</sup> For Oshana, agents’ social environment and relations must be of a

---

<sup>15</sup> Raz’s (1986) account is also an externalist account of autonomy. I do not explore his account here, as my focus is on feminist accounts.

<sup>16</sup> This can be contrasted with Stoljar’s account, which requires that an agent’s *preferences* have the right kind of substance. Oshana’s account goes beyond this to say that autonomy requires a certain kind of external

certain acceptable kind, namely, they must be non-oppressive.<sup>17</sup> Like other strong substantive accounts, the acceptability of these external factors is not determined by the agent themselves, but by objective criteria (Oshana 2006, 50). Oshana's account adopts various conditions that, together, are sufficient for autonomy ascription (2006, 76). These conditions are ones that mandate certain states of affairs for autonomy.

Of these conditions, Oshana explains that while not everyone must have these to the same degree, they “must be satisfied, each to some significant degree, if a person is to be globally autonomous” (76). The conditions of autonomy on her account include epistemic competence, rationality, procedural independence, self-respect, control, access to a range of relevant options, and substantive independence. Because I do not have the space to explain each of these in detail, I focus on the condition of having access to a range of relevant options.

On having access to relevant options, Oshana writes “[I] maintain that the self-governing individual must have access to an adequate assortment of options” (2006, 84). On the relevant kinds of options for autonomy, Oshana says that “[a]t a minimum, a person must have among her options the opportunity to develop her capabilities (to hone her autonomy skills, if you like) and she must be involved in doing so” (2006, 85). Recall that these kinds of options are ones that Harriet lacked, and because she did not have access to these kinds of options, her autonomy was limited. There are other requirements for autonomy on Oshana's account, but below, my discussion will focus primarily on the requirement an agent have an adequate range of options available to them. The substantive

---

situation. Indeed, Oshana argues in the case of Harriet, her lack of autonomy is not due to the substance of her preferences and desires, but her lack of autonomy is due to her oppressive circumstances (2006, 58).

<sup>17</sup> Stoljar notes that Oshana's position presupposes a commitment to a substantive egalitarian position (2017, 31).

element of her view, then, is that agents must have an adequate range of options available to them, among other things.

In this section, I provided an overview of feminist relational conceptions of autonomy. The literature in this area is expansive, so I narrowed the scope of my discussion to select strong substantive and constitutive accounts of relational autonomy. Hereafter, I use the term “relational autonomy” to primarily refer to the strong substantive and socially constitutive accounts described in this section.

## Section 2: Feminist Criticisms of Relational Autonomy

In this section, I summarize Danielle Wenner’s (2020) and Serene Khader’s (2020) recent objections to relational autonomy. Both argue that accounts fail to fulfill feminist goals and that they come with drawbacks that should make feminists wary of embracing such accounts.

Wenner’s article begins by describing the goals of feminist relational theories of autonomy. The first goal of such accounts is to describe how the development, maintenance and exercise of autonomy is socially embedded. The second aim of feminist relational theories of autonomy is to distinguish between social influences which “contribute to, are consistent with, or are constitutive of autonomy and those that detract from, are inconsistent with, or undermine its integrity” (Wenner 2020, 1-2). Wenner argues relational accounts face “insurmountable challenges to unpacking autonomy in a way that allows for clear delineation between preferences grounded in productive socialization and those grounded in oppression” (2). I focus on her arguments against strong substantive views, summarizing her criticisms of Oshana and Stoljar respectively.

Wenner offers several criticisms of Oshana's account. Recall conditions of autonomy on Oshana's account include external features, such as having an adequate range of options. As we have seen, the conditions of Oshana's account involve having healthy social relations which allow an agent to "pursue her conception of the good in a secure and unforced manner" (Wenner 2020, 7). Not meeting these conditions makes autonomy impossible on Oshana's account. Wenner argues that "[w]hile Oshana is right to look to external factors in order to account for the impacts of social embeddedness, her error is thinking those features ought to be folded into a conception of autonomy" (8). She argues it is a mistake to categorize the social circumstances limiting the options an agent has available to them as "autonomy-limiting, rather than limiting in some other respect" (8). Wenner's criticism against Oshana's account is it conflates autonomy with other concepts, such as freedom.<sup>18</sup> Wenner argues this is a category error within strong substantive theories like Oshana's.

Relational accounts like Oshana's generate some perverse conclusions, which can be extracted from Wenner's arguments. First, on relational accounts, oppressed agents will not be considered autonomous simply because of the fact they are oppressed (8). Allow me to explain using the example of Harriet. Because Harriet's circumstance is one that withholds from her relevant options, substantive independence, and so on, she fails to meet the conditions Oshana lays out for autonomy. This is because of the oppressive circumstances Harriet is subjected to. This is a conclusion feminists ought to be wary of. As John Christman (2004, 156-157) argues, this implies that those who are non-

---

<sup>18</sup> Khader makes a similar point when she says it is incumbent on defenders of relational autonomy "to explain what theoretical value is added by calling external social conditions "autonomy," when we already have the concept of opportunity and other adjacent concepts" (2020, 519).

autonomous simply because they are oppressed will be excluded from having their voices respected. Relatedly, categorizing oppressed agents as non-autonomous may justify paternalistic interventions against these agents (a point Khader makes as well, as I explain below). Second, Wenner argues that “appeal to the influence of oppressive norms on the preferences that agents come to have, if taken to its logical conclusion, would seem to undermine all preferences” (2020, 9). This is because everyone, not just oppressed agents, are socialized in oppressive worlds which can influence the development of our preferences. In the following section, I further develop Wenner’s second point by showing how exactly privilege can influence the development of an agent’s preferences.

Now, let us consider some of Khader’s arguments. Like Wenner, Khader’s goal is to investigate whether relational accounts of autonomy succeed in doing what feminist philosophers want conceptions of autonomy to do (2020, 500).<sup>19</sup> According to Khader, one of the primary goals of theories of autonomy is to serve as a concept that can limit paternalism (501; see also Dworkin 1988, 123). Autonomy can limit paternalism in the sense that appeals to an agent’s autonomy can be used to deny the legitimacy of interferences with them that would be paternalistic (503).<sup>20</sup> This goal arises from feminism’s non-ideal theoretical character, which, as Khader explains, aims to provide guidance on how to address and combat injustice (502). This, as I outlined at the outset of this paper, is a central goal for relational accounts of autonomy. However, Khader argues that to achieve the goals of combatting injustice and limiting paternalism, relational autonomy requires “the presence of idealized social conditions [as a] requirement for

---

<sup>19</sup> What Khader calls socially constitutive accounts of autonomy or “SCA” describes strong substantive and constitutive accounts of relational autonomy, including accounts given by Oshana and Stoljar.

<sup>20</sup> For instance, bioethicists often use the concept of autonomy to argue against undue paternalism (see Beauchamp and Childress 1979; Archard 2008).

autonomy” (2020, 523). Idealized social conditions include, for example, Oshana’s description of autonomy as requiring an adequate range of options, and Stoljar’s requirement that agents be uninfluenced by oppressive circumstances. Khader argues these idealized requirements of relational autonomy will generate a perverse conclusion when applied to the real, non-ideal world (502).<sup>21</sup> Namely, these accounts imply that the oppressed are less autonomous than those who are members of dominant social groups (514).

Khader criticizes relational autonomy for failing to operate as a concept that limits paternalism against the oppressed. These accounts could permit or even require kinds of paternalism that worsens the conditions of the oppressed (514).<sup>22</sup> Khader argues there are three reasons relational autonomy tolerates or permits excessive paternalism towards the oppressed (514). Here, I focus on explaining Khader’s first reason, as it is most relevant to the arguments below. Khader’s first argument holds that relational autonomy implies that the oppressed are less autonomous than dominant social groups (514). On this point, she argues:

If autonomy entitles one to having decision-making authority in one’s own life, and if autonomy consists partly in access to morally desirable social conditions, oppressed individuals will have a lesser entitlement to making decisions about their own lives than the dominant do over theirs (2020, 514-515).

---

<sup>21</sup> Christman makes similar arguments against Oshana’s account, saying that it is perfectionist, e.g. ideal (2004, 2009). Consider, for example, what he says of Oshana’s theory of substantive independence: “they describe clearly an *ideal of an independent life*, an ideal which is, despite its label, a thoroughly individualist one” (2009, 171; emphasis added).

<sup>22</sup> Christman makes a similar argument. He argues strong substantive and constitutive accounts “turns the concept of autonomy into an unacceptably perfectionist idea that carries with it the danger of exclusion and overarching paternalism that attention to autonomy should well protect against” (2004, 158; see also Westlund 2009).

The first premise here is straightforward. Qualifying as autonomous means a person will have authority over their life. The second premise captures essential elements of relational accounts, those being that autonomy itself is constituted by an agent's access to idealized external social conditions. As we have seen from Wenner's criticism, a consequence of this is that oppressed agents will be non-autonomous. Further, because oppressed agents are deemed non-autonomous, Khader argues that their preferences do not warrant special respect on relational accounts (516-517; see also Wenner 2020, 4-5).<sup>23</sup> Because these preferences are non-autonomous and thus not worthy of respect, these accounts hold paternalistic interventions may be justified in order to remedy those preferences (Khader 2020, 517; 2011, 98-99). Hijab bans are one example of paternalistic interventions that operate under this logic, as defenders of these bans hold that veiling practices are oppressive and bans will "liberate" Muslim women from a source of their oppression (Khader 2019).<sup>24</sup> Khader argues feminists should reject relational accounts of autonomy because they lead to this perverse conclusion that oppressed agents are less autonomous than dominant agents, which she has shown permits paternalism rather than limiting it.<sup>25</sup>

Wenner and Khader offer compelling arguments against relational autonomy. They respectively suggest that views like Oshana's and Stoljar's will fail to fulfill feminist goals, which are to act as a tool that can help us combat oppression and to help us account for how oppression impacts autonomy. They also argue two perverse conclusions follow from these accounts of relational autonomy, namely, that either the oppressed will be less

---

<sup>23</sup> Srinivasan makes a similar argument while discussing feminists in the late twentieth century who were anti-pornography, saying "a feminism that trades too freely in notions of self-deception is a feminism that risks dominating the subjects it presumes to liberate" (2021, 82).

<sup>24</sup> Khader says that some who advocate for these bans argue that "an individual agent's desire to follow tradition constitutes an internal barrier to her excavating her true will, and traditional practices are barriers to her executing it" (2019, 80).

<sup>25</sup> Oshana is explicit that her account can sometimes permit paternalism (2006, 115).

autonomous than the dominant, or, that no one would be autonomous. I see a way in which their arguments for the perverse conclusions can be further supported, while also contributing a new focus—that of privilege—to the debate on relational autonomy.

### Section 3: Privilege and Relational Autonomy

My arguments here expand on work by Wenner and Khader. While their arguments focus on demonstrating how relational accounts generate perverse conclusions about the autonomy status of oppressed agents, here I turn my attention to privilege. Oppression and privilege are both consequences of unjust systems of power where some social groups face undue burdens and harms while other groups of the same social kind receive undue benefits, advantages, and options. If we take privilege to be a corollary effect of systems of power, we will have good reasons for wanting relational autonomy to address it as well, as it, like oppression, might impact the autonomy of individual agents.

It will be helpful to clarify what privilege is. In chapter one, I offered the following account of privilege:

Privilege is generally desirable, but unearned, assets or properties which are conferred systematically to members of dominant social groups, where these assets or properties include both tangible resources and options to do certain things or be a certain way.

This account draws out several important elements of privilege. First, privilege involves the systematic allocation of assets or properties to dominant social groups. Privilege is a structural phenomenon, much like oppression. Given these assets are granted to people simply because they happen to be a member of a dominant social group, they are unearned. This account of privilege also holds while these assets may be generally desirable, they need not always or exclusively be beneficial to those who have them. Finally, my account

holds the assets conferred by privilege includes both tangible resources and options to do certain things or be a certain way. Below I want to focus on this final feature of privilege. I argue recognizing that privilege can confer members of dominant social groups additional resources and options represents a challenge to accounts of relational autonomy. Here, my contribution is an argument that parallels those given by Wenner and Khader. I argue that when we consider what relational autonomy suggests about the autonomy of relatively privileged agents, we again arrive at the perverse conclusions described above, lending further support to arguments against accounts like those of Stoljar and Oshana.

Another aspect of privilege that is worth describing for my purposes below is the difference between negative and positive privilege, which was first drawn out by Alison Bailey (1998). As mentioned in chapter one, a negative privilege is a person's freedom from oppression. For example, a man, in virtue of simply being a man, is not subject to the same oppression women and others face. But members of dominant social groups also receive assets that go beyond simply being free from oppression. Positive privileges, then, are additional assets or properties conferred to dominant social groups that cannot be defined in terms of freedom from oppression. I return to this idea below.

Proponents of relational autonomy and their critics have focused little on how the views regard privilege. However, as I argued in the introduction to this dissertation, feminists have good reasons for wanting to address privilege, since it is a part of unjust systems of power they want to address. I am interested in the following questions: what outcomes would be generated if privilege were plugged into relational autonomy? And how does relational autonomy help address privilege? I propose when we plug privilege

into relational autonomy, we arrive again at some perverse conclusions that feminists ought to reject.

One of the perverse conclusions of relational autonomy identified by Khader is that these accounts imply that “the oppressed are less autonomous than the dominant” (2020, 514). This is due to their oppressive circumstances which remove the idealized requirements for autonomy like an adequate range of options, control, and substantive independence, as we saw in Oshana’s account. Khader’s argument highlights the negative privilege that dominant groups have, namely, freedom from oppression (515). But a corollary point, that privileged agents are *even more* autonomous than the oppressed, is true if we consider how privileged agents are conferred additional resources and options beyond simply being free from oppression.

Given that on Oshana’s account options are constitutive of autonomy, and given that privilege confers additional resources and options to members of dominant social groups in the form of positive privileges, it follows that on Oshana’s account privileged agents will be more autonomous simply because of their privilege. Consider an agent who is relatively privileged. Kevin is a member of various dominant social groups: he is a cis-gendered, heterosexual, middle-class, white man. Some of the privileges he has are negative ones. For instance, Kevin is free from the oppression faced by those who do not share his various group memberships. But other privileges he has go beyond simply being free from oppression. As a member of various dominant social groups, Kevin has privileges like greater socioeconomic advantages, epistemic credibility and authority, and so on (see McIntosh 1989; Ivy and Sennet 2017).

Let us consider a specific example of how Kevin's privilege provides him greater options. In his life, Kevin has found it easy to obtain good employment. Of course, part of this might be merited (for critical discussions of merit, see Oluo 2021; Sandel 2020). But other aspects of his success are due his privilege. For instance, his resume may be more likely to be selected in part because he has a "white-sounding", masculine name (Kang et al 2016; Kline et al 2022). This is one example of how various forms of bias caused by overarching systems of power work in Kevin's favour and provide him with additional options he can use to pursue the kind of life he wants to live. He has a greater ability to make choices among a wider range of options made available to him, options that may be granted to him in greater proportion simply because he is a member of certain dominant social groups. Further, some of his positive privileges (e.g., epistemic credibility) help ensure his choices will be respected.<sup>26</sup>

Relatedly, consider an example given by Peggy McIntosh on how her white privilege allows her to "measure up to the cultural standards and take advantage of the many options I saw around me to make what the culture would call a success of my life. My skin color was an asset for any move I was educated to want to make" (1989, 35). This seems to describe the sense of autonomy Oshana has in mind, where the external features of one's life constitutes what autonomy is. The overarching system of power, in this case white supremacy, helps white people (as the dominant social group) to maneuver the world in ways that might make it easier for one to live the life they want to live. Systems of power do this in part by granting members of the dominant social group additional resources and options they can use to advance themselves. Those options enable privileged agents to

---

<sup>26</sup> For additional examples see chapter three, where I outline some of the positive privileges some vaccine hesitant parents have, including the ability to opt out of vaccinating their children without fear of sanctions.

make autonomous choices about one's life on Oshana's view, but those same options are not available to oppressed agents. By incorporating the need for certain external options into her account of what autonomy is, Oshana's view leads us to the conclusion that the privileged will be more autonomous simply because they have greater resources and options vis-à-vis their privilege. My point here has been that privileged agents will be more autonomous than oppressed agents not just because they are free from oppression, but also because they have additional options available to them in virtue of being privileged. By considering positive privileges, we can see how the perverse conclusion Khader identified may be even more severe than originally stated.

The second perverse conclusion that follows from relational accounts is that no one is autonomous. Wenner's description of this perverse conclusion is as follows: "[a]ppeal to the influence of oppressive norms on the preferences that agents come to have, if taken to its logical conclusion, would seem to undermine all preferences, since we are all clearly socialized within oppressive social structures" (2020, 9). Wenner argues that if relational theorists aim to distinguish between oppressive and non-oppressive preferences by appealing to social influence on said preferences, as we saw in the feminist intuition, nearly all preferences may be undermined as a result. This is because many of our preferences are influenced by our social contexts. Here Wenner implies but does not directly argue how privilege can influence preferences. So, some aspects of her argument here are missing. Namely, we need to explain how we can apply the feminist intuition not just to oppressive socialization, but also privileged socialization, to prove this perverse conclusion holds in the way Wenner thinks it does.

I suggest we can extend Stoljar's arguments to show that privilege, like oppression, can influence an agent's preferences. For example, consider work by Kate Manne (2017; 2020) and Amia Srinivasan (2021) on patriarchy, male privilege, and some men's sense of entitlement to sex with women. Their analysis shows that women are socialized in unique ways under patriarchy, where they are expected to have certain attitudes and act in certain ways towards men. For example, this includes providing men with feminine-coded goods, such as care, attention, domestic work, and sex (Manne 2017). Women are generally socialized to be congenial to the patriarchal order and are rewarded when they conform to patriarchal norms and expectations (Manne 2017, 47; 192).<sup>27</sup> Stoljar's feminist intuition, we have seen, holds these forms of socialization, when internalized, can render an agent's beliefs, desires, and preferences as non-autonomous if they are internalized patriarchal norms.

The arguments of Manne and Srinivasan show how men are socialized under patriarchy in ways that plausibly affect the formation and content of their beliefs, desires, and preferences. Srinivasan, for example, investigates the ideological shaping of sexual desires and preferences of both men and women, noting that these preferences are rarely just personal (2021, 88).<sup>28</sup> In the chapter "On Not Sleeping With Your Students", she considers the example of a male graduate student, who, to his surprise and shock, faced complaints that he stared at his female undergraduates' legs when they wore shorts or skirts (2021, 140). On this example, Srinivasan writes "[n]o one told him that, unless he stopped himself from doing what came 'naturally' to him, he would likely end up treating the

---

<sup>27</sup> See Manne's account of misogyny as the "law enforcement" branch of patriarchy (2017).

<sup>28</sup> In this context Srinivasan is concerned with sexual preferences, however, I think the example of sexual preferences counts as a kind of autonomous preference. I think Srinivasan is right to raise questions about how political ideology shapes sexual preferences and desires.

women in his class not fully as students, but also as bodies to be consumed” (2021, 140). But the ‘natural’ actions of the graduate student are not innate qualities of men, but rather, behaviours resulting from socialization under patriarchy. Some men, like this graduate student, are socialized in ways that reflect gendered expectations and social norms, where women are objects to be consumed and men are the consumers.

Where women are generally socialized to provide men with certain feminine-coded goods, men are socialized to feel entitled to those goods as the beneficiaries of patriarchy (Manne 2017; Srinivasan 2021, 139). Related to this sense of entitlement, both Manne and Srinivasan consider the case of involuntary celibates, or “incels”, who are most often men who desire but do not have sex with (certain kinds of) women.<sup>29</sup> When these men do not get what they want, they blame women for their lack of relationships, often by voicing their toxic grievances online or, in some cases, through acts of gender-based violence. Elliot Rodger, for instance, executed a plot to kill members of a sorority at the University of California, Santa Barbara (Manne 2017, 35). His justification for this, outlined in his manifesto, was that he was “forced to endure an existence of loneliness, rejection, and unfulfilled desires, all because girls have never been attracted to me” (Manne 2017, 34-35). Rodger, like other incels, sense that they are not given the things that they are owed as men because of their gendered socialization.

My point is that both men and women are socialized in unique ways under systems of power. While incels are an extreme example, they show how privileged socialization

---

<sup>29</sup> Not only is incel ideology incredibly misogynistic, but it is also deeply racist, and both features inform the (sexual) preferences and desires of incels. Elliot Rodger, for example, laid out a hierarchy of desirable women in his manifesto, and in choosing to attack the Alpha Phi sorority, he sought to target the women he perceived as most desirable (Srinivasan 2021, 94; Manne 2018, 50).

can potentially influence the beliefs, desires, and preferences of men under patriarchy.<sup>30</sup> These privileged forms of socialization and the affects they have on the preferences of men perpetuate systems of power like patriarchy through the maintenance of certain norms and expectations. For these reasons, feminists have good reason for criticizing these forms of socialization and the preferences they can generate.

What does the kinds of socialization experienced by privileged members of society suggest about their autonomy? Can their beliefs, desires, and preferences be properly ascribed to them, if they are the result of how they have been socialized under systems of power? Stoljar's feminist intuition seems to suggest the answer of whether these preferences are autonomous is no, since they are, much like that of oppressed agents, the result of harmful socialization under systems of power. This seems like a logical extension of the feminist intuition, especially if we take relational autonomy to task in helping achieve feminist goals of addressing privilege, which, we have seen, is a part of unjust systems of power. However, this extension of the feminist intuition leads us to the conclusion that Wenner identified. Since the feminist intuition holds that preferences influenced by either oppressed or privilege socialization cannot be autonomous, almost all preferences will be ruled out because, as Wenner says, we are all socialized within systems of power.

Relational autonomy seems caught between these two unpalatable conclusions when we consider privileged agents. On these accounts, either privileged agents will be more autonomous than oppressed agents, or, no one will be autonomous because we are

---

<sup>30</sup> As bell hooks points out as well, “[p]atriarchal masculinity teaches men that their sense of self and identity, their reason for being, resides in their capacity to dominate others” (2000; 70). This is to say patriarchy socializes men into taking up patriarchal versions of masculinity, which requires them to think and act in certain ways.

all, in some ways, influenced by systems of power. What this suggests is that an alternative account of relational autonomy is needed. But before I explore the possibilities of an alternative account in the final section, I want to investigate whether relational autonomy can still achieve the feminist goals outlined above, and also raise some issues with arguments made by Wenner.

#### Section 4: Problematizing the Criticisms and Reassessing the Goals of Relational Autonomy

In this section, I want to return to the central goals of relational autonomy. My question here is whether, given the perverse conclusions identified above, relational autonomy will still fail to fulfill the feminist goals of an account of autonomy. Recall these two goals are to 1) combat oppression and 2) provide a view of how oppression influences autonomy. I argue that we can salvage relational autonomy in such a way that allows us to achieve the second goal and do so while still recognizing that autonomy is a thoroughly relational capacity. This can be done, too, while avoiding the two perverse conclusions identified above.

In this section, I problematize some of the arguments given by Wenner against the feminist intuition. I argue both the feminist intuition and Wenner's criticisms of it are too strong. Contra Wenner, I argue that we can maintain relational autonomy in a way that allows us to achieve the second goal listed above. I argue that we can salvage the constitutive element of such accounts and that doing so will help us achieve the second goal. But ultimately, I think Wenner and Khader are right that feminists should abandon the strong substantive element of relational autonomy to avoid the perverse conclusions. What is needed to achieve the second goal, then, is a constitutive but procedural account

of relational autonomy. I introduce such an account in section five. But until then, my aim is to explain why we need such an account to achieve the second goal. I end this section by briefly considering whether it is possible to achieve the first goal of relational accounts of autonomy, that is, for such a concept to act as a tool to help us combat oppression.

One of the central goals of a feminist, relational account of autonomy is to understand how our relationships and social embeddedness influences our autonomy, which is itself a thoroughly relational capacity. Recall that Wenner's goal in her paper was to show this goal is not achievable for relational autonomy: she writes that, in part, "attempts to incorporate those [relational] observations into the conceptual apparatus of autonomy...fail to adequately distinguish between productive and oppressive socialization" (2020, 2). And the feminist intuition, she argues, cannot distinguish between true or false preferences without appeal to wider social contexts (2020, 9). If we accept the feminist intuition, it leads us to the perverse conclusion that no one would be autonomous under the feminist intuition, since we are all socialized under systems of power (Ibid).

I want to problematize the arguments Wenner makes against the feminist intuition. Recall the feminist intuition suggests that preferences influenced by oppressive norms cannot be autonomous. Further, recall that Wenner's objection to this held that this might undermine all preferences, since we are all socialized under systems of power. In the previous section, I strengthened Wenner's argument by showing exactly how privilege might inform an agent's preferences. Following this, I described what the feminist intuition would say about preferences informed by privilege and demonstrated how we arrive at the perverse conclusion described by Wenner, namely, that no one will be autonomous under the feminist intuition. While I am sympathetic to Wenner's objection, which tries to

anticipate the wider consequences of the feminist intuition, I think it ultimately makes the same mistakes made by Stoljar.

One of the central issues with the feminist intuition is that it is too strong. It is too strong in the sense that any influence of oppressive or privileged socialization on an agent's preferences automatically compromises the autonomy of an agent. Wenner's argument that the feminist intuition renders any preference influenced by systems of power as non-autonomous, including those influenced by privileged socialization, is likewise too strong a claim. Like the feminist intuition, her argument pre-emptively assumes the influence of privilege will automatically compromise an agent's autonomy.

Both the feminist intuition and the extension of it in Wenner's argument treat autonomy in an overly simplistic way. Both arguments seem to treat autonomy as something like a simple on-off switch: it is 'on', or an agent is autonomous, when an agent's preferences are free from oppressive or privileged socialization, and 'off' as soon as such socialization is detected in the content of the agent's preference. This is, I think, both too strong and too simplistic a view, even in cases where an agent's preferences and actions are genuinely said to be informed by harmful social norms. What is needed to account for differences between agents, even those who may be similarly socialized, is a more nuanced approach to relational autonomy. Such a view would avoid treating autonomy as an on-off switch. I think it is possible to have such a view, while avoiding the perverse conclusions, as I explain in more detail in the section below. The upshot is that, if a more nuanced view is possible, we will not have to abandon the second goal of relational autonomy: we can still provide an account for how social embeddedness and our social

relations influence autonomy while maintaining that autonomy itself is a relational capacity.

To achieve the second goal of relational autonomy, then, I think we need to salvage the constitutive element of accounts like Stoljar's and Oshana's. Recall that relational accounts of autonomy that are constitutive hold that relationships and social embeddedness are a part of what it is to be autonomous. Autonomy, in this way, *depends* on social relationships and embeddedness (Westlund 2012, 59). Merely causal accounts hold that one's social circumstances could facilitate or impair autonomy, but these do not see autonomy itself as a relational capacity, and thus, might lead us back to individualistic notions of autonomy feminists want to avoid. But preserving autonomy as a thoroughly relational capacity is important, I think, because it allows us to see how oppression and privilege act not just as accidental features of agents that happen to shape their autonomy, but as features of an agent's life that can sometimes generate barriers for an agent to exercise the relational elements that constitute what autonomy is. But we can explain how oppression and privilege can do this without making the same mistakes as the feminist intuition or criticisms of it—namely, mistakes that automatically mark those who are relatively oppressed or privileged as non-autonomous. Again, what is needed to overcome these issues is a more nuanced conception of agents and how their relative oppression or privilege can sometimes shape how they exercise autonomy and its relational elements.

I want to turn to briefly consider the first perverse conclusion and explain why an alternative account, one that allows us to achieve the second feminist goal of relational accounts of autonomy, might be procedural. Here I also want to address how the greater resources and options conferred by privilege, including positive privileges, may be related

to an agent's autonomy. In the first perverse conclusion we have seen that, on Oshana's account, these greater resources and options mean relatively privileged agents will have greater autonomy, while the oppressed will have less, because access to an adequate range of options constitute a part of what it means to be autonomous. The crux of Khader's argument against Oshana is that it opens the doors to paternalistic interventions against the oppressed. I think Khader is right that Oshana's account is one feminists ought to resist because it is too idealized to achieve in our non-ideal world and could, plausibly, lead to increased paternalism. But does this mean there is *no* relation between the greater resources and options conferred by privilege and the autonomy of privileged agents? I want to clarify the relationship between autonomy and an agent's relative privilege, which confers greater resources and options to them in virtue of their membership in dominant social group(s), while retaining Khader's conclusions.

As we saw above, predicating autonomy on the options an agent has available to them has significant theoretical drawbacks. One theoretical drawback of strong substantive views that do precisely this is that they automatically mark out those who are oppressed as less autonomous. In a parallel fashion, these views also automatically mark those with privilege as more autonomous. But this seems implausible, as there are cases where similarly privileged (or oppressed) agents might be different from one another in ways that reflect differences in their autonomy. In the following section, I contrast some examples of privileged agents who seem autonomous against other privileged agents who, in some important ways, seem non-autonomous despite their similar social status. As I argued above, one central issue with strong substantive accounts is that they fail to consider the

nuances of individual agents. Because of this, feminists ought to abandon the strong substantive element of relational autonomy.

I propose that, instead of adopting a strong substantivist approach that misconceives adequate options *as* autonomy, we should conceive of an agent's autonomy as an ability to choose among sets of options that may be bigger or smaller, given their status as relatively oppressed or privileged. This is a procedural approach, since an agent's autonomy is not dependent on what those options actually are, as is the case on Oshana's view. It will be better to think of autonomy as an agent's ability to choose among whatever set of options they happen to have, as it can recognize differences between similarly situated agents while also avoiding the perverse conclusion that those with more privilege are automatically more autonomous than those who are oppressed. Despite locating autonomy in the choice an agent might make, this approach still recognizes that the relative privilege or oppression of an agent will shape those sets of options but does not take these to constitute autonomy. This allows us to achieve the second goal of feminist accounts of autonomy—that is, to account for the influence of oppression and privilege on autonomy—while avoiding Khader's criticism that strong substantive accounts are too idealized.

What I have shown in this section is that more nuance is needed in a relational account of autonomy, especially if we are to suggest that relational autonomy can still achieve the second feminist goal for a concept of autonomy. Overall, I agree the main conclusions of Wenner and Khader. Where possible, any alternative account of relational autonomy should aim to avoid the perverse conclusions discussed above. I maintain feminists will have to abandon strong substantive approaches to relational autonomy for two reasons: 1) the idealized requirements of Oshana's account make autonomy

unachievable in non-ideal circumstances and 2) feminist intuition is too strong and too simplistic a view of autonomy. For these reasons, an alternative and more nuanced account of relational autonomy is needed, one that is procedural and constitutive. But feminists need not resort to ‘traditional’ accounts of autonomy they have rejected. I contend below that Andrea Westlund’s dialogical account of relational autonomy can overcome the issues above while being able to better account for nuances in how oppressive or privileged socialization can influence an agent’s autonomy.

While I have argued in this section that it might be plausible to salvage relational autonomy in a way that allows us to achieve the second feminist goal for views on autonomy, I have not yet said whether such an account will be useful for achieving the first feminist goal, which is to help us combat oppression. Ultimately, I think that any view of relational autonomy *alone* will be an ineffective tool to achieve such a goal. What is needed are other concepts, like those of freedom (see Wenner 2020) or, perhaps, opportunity or equality (Khader 2020).<sup>31</sup> But this does not mean relational autonomy is not itself an effective tool in other ways: as I have argued, it might still be useful to analyze how oppression or privilege might influence an agent's autonomy. This itself is important for feminists, as we should seek to understand the ways in which one’s social circumstances and relationships impacts one’s life in various ways, including one’s autonomy. It is worth trying to defend relational autonomy, then, because it can still help us understand the

---

<sup>31</sup> In this way, I think Khader and Wenner are right that strong substantivists mistakenly conflate autonomy with other concepts, such as opportunities or freedom. Feminists may argue that we ought to increase the options available to the oppressed, or narrow those available to the privileged. But to make an argument in favour of this, feminists need not rely on, nor should rely on, strong substantive accounts of autonomy, given their theoretical drawbacks.

effects of oppression and privilege on the lives of individual agents. However, the view of relational autonomy best suited for this is given by Westlund.

## Section 5: Where To Go From Here

Given the discussion in the foregoing sections, relational autonomy seems to be in jeopardy. The question that remains, then, is where to go from here. In this section, I begin to explore a path forward for feminists who want a relational account of autonomy. Moving forward, I think the account feminists should adopt is Westlund's dialogical account of relational autonomy, which is relationally constitutive in nature but procedural and thus content-neutral. My goal here is not to offer a complete defense of her view, but rather, to show how her account can avoid the unpalatable conclusions raised above. I also describe the ways in which Westlund's account permits greater nuance when examining the influence of oppression or privilege on agent's autonomy. This will allow us to better account for how oppression and privilege can shape and influence an agent's autonomy.

Westlund argues that autonomy is a disposition to hold oneself as answerable to external critical perspectives for one's action-guiding commitments, including one's beliefs, desires, and preferences. Her account is dialogical insofar as it sees dialogue with critical perspectives as an essential component of autonomy. Westlund's relational account of autonomy is constitutive and procedural in nature, rather than being substantive.

Like other critics of strong substantive accounts of relational autonomy, Westlund suggests that the egalitarian ideals required by these accounts for autonomy subscription are problematic because they hold an agent's oppressive condition may itself undermine

their autonomy (2009, 29).<sup>32</sup> We saw this in the case of Oshana's example of the subservient housewife, who desires to be subservient and prefers her deferential situation. Strong substantivists like Oshana argue that it is the very condition of being subservient that makes the housewife non-autonomous. Or, in the case of Stoljar's feminist intuition, the content of her preference renders her non-autonomous. But Westlund suggests that such accounts should take into consideration psychological differences between relatively oppressed agents (Ibid).

For example, we might compare, on the one hand, a deferential housewife who is completely unresponsive or indifferent to the critical perspectives of others to a second, equally deferential housewife who, on the other hand, is "prepared to take up and respond to the critical perspectives of others, even if she is unconvinced by their arguments" (Ibid; see also Westlund 2003, 512). Like the first housewife, the second housewife believes that she and other women ought to defer to their husbands (2003, 512). But the second housewife, unlike the first, can and does respond to others who are critical of her beliefs and preferences (Ibid). She may, for example, explain that she "place[s] herself within a religious community whose creed she shares and whose lifestyle she values, or she may gesture toward some other, secular account of women's proper role in the family" (2003, 512) as a justification for her beliefs and preferences. Other justifications are possible here, but the point is that she does not dismiss critical perspectives, but instead can take them up and respond to them. By being able to respond to the critical perspectives of others, the

---

<sup>32</sup> Westlund also develops her account based on criticisms she makes of procedural accounts of autonomy, especially hierarchal accounts like those given by Harry Frankfurt or Michael Bratman (2003; 2009). She argues that both of these accounts, which holds autonomous agency is exercised when one, upon reflection, is motivated by a desire in which they identify with, fail to account for how the deferential housewife has compromised autonomy (2003, 491). Since I am interested in addressing the shortcomings of strong substantive accounts, I will not summarize much of Westlund's criticisms of other procedural accounts.

second housewife can “enter into justificatory dialogue about her deference” (Ibid). In doing so, the second housewife seems strikingly different from the first, who fails to defend or answer for her beliefs or preferences, and merely continues to defer to her husband (2003, 487-488). This difference is relevant to whether and how we might ascribe autonomy to each of the respective housewives.

Strong substantive theories would suggest the second housewife remains non-autonomous given the content of her preferences. But this, Westlund argues, suggests the housewife lacks authority of her own voice, even when she can defend her choices (Ibid). This conclusion of the strong substantivist “flies in the face of the evidence she gives of such authority in engaging in just the kind of critical dialogue in which one might expect reflective, self-governing agents to engage” (2009, 31). That is, through responding to critical perspectives and giving reasons for her choice, the second housewife provides evidence of her authority over said choice. What makes it seem inappropriate to say this housewife is non-autonomous is that, although she is committed to her subservient role, she is disposed to answer for that commitment (2009, 33-34; 2003). The second housewife, Westlund argues, “comes across as a fellow inhabitant of that dialogical space in which we shape and reshape our lives in response to one another’s provocations and insights” (2003, 513). She is also able to anticipate critical perspectives in a way that gives her an overall disposition to respond a kind of readiness to take up the opinions of others and answer for her choices (2003; 2009). We might think that the beliefs of the second housewife are morally and politically problematic, and take her to be deeply mistaken about her beliefs. But even if her answers do not satisfy us, because she is able to engage with us at all without

simply deferring to her husband, she is quite different from the first housewife in the sense she demonstrates her command or self-authorization of her choices.

The first housewife does not engage in dialogue in the same way, if at all. Any attempt to engage in dialogue results in continued deference to her husband's commitments, not her own. For Westlund, the first housewife's lack of autonomy is not due to the mere fact that she defers to her husband. Rather, it is compromised because in doing so she abdicates her overall ability to answer for her commitments (2003, 511-512). When the first housewife is confronted with critical perspectives, she is unable to feel their "normative force" (2003, 502). The first housewife's deference is what Westlund calls "deep deference", which she defines as: "[s]elf-abnegating deference...expresses an attitude that is more intuitively self-undermining—to abnegate oneself is, in some sense, to *deny* or *efface* oneself" (2003, 486; emphasis in original). The deferential housewife further denies herself "as a distinct and separate evaluator of practical reasons" (Ibid). What makes the housewife's deference deep, then, is that although she endorses her own deference, that endorsement or reasons for her deference have no bases that are not, themselves, deferential (2003, 488; 2009, 32). In the case of the first housewife, her deference is such that it renders her unable to participate in dialogue with others about her action-guiding commitments, which ultimately compromises her autonomy (2003, 485).<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Westlund argues that another upshot of her view is that it explains what it means to be "in the grip of" one's commitments (2003, 502; 2009, 34). This expression describes the way in which an agent's desires, preferences, and so on *do not* seem to be their own yet are the basis for their actions. We might say the first housewife is gripped by her deference. This can be contrasted to an agent who is self-governing and autonomous: they are said to have *their own* commitments, not be in the passive sway of them. What makes the commitments their own, in the case of the autonomous agent, is their readiness to answer for them and engage in critical dialogue regarding them. An agent who is "gripped by" their commitments has the condition of being impervious to the normative force of external critical perspectives on those commitments (2003, 502).

On Westlund's account, then, autonomy relies at least in part on the disposition of agents to hold themselves answerable to external critical perspectives on their beliefs, preferences, and other action-guiding commitments (2009, 28).<sup>34</sup> She argues that while this disposition is not sufficient for autonomy, it is a necessary and key component of it (Ibid). Allow me to explain some additional features of answerability. First, Westlund holds that the critical perspectives the agent answers to may be the real opinions of other people in the agent's life, or, these perspectives could "inhabit her own moral imagination" (2009, 36). An imagined perspective should still be one that challenges the agent's action-guiding commitments. But in both cases, an autonomous agent can give answers to those real or imagined perspectives. Second, answerability requires that an agent not just have the ability to raise critical questions about their desires or preferences, but further, that they have the ability to resolve (or, at least, attempt to) resolve these questions through dialogue (2003, 493).<sup>35</sup> A third feature of her account is its content neutrality. Answerability for oneself as a disposition to respond to external criticisms need not require the agent to adopt any specific beliefs nor does it require the agent's preferences to have specific content (2009, 37).<sup>36</sup> And it does not require the agent to have the idealized social circumstances described in Oshana's account.

---

<sup>34</sup> Westlund also calls the disposition to answer for oneself "responsibility for self" or "self-responsibility" (2003, 485).

<sup>35</sup> By incorporating the ability to resolve (or attempt to resolve) these questions through dialogue, Westlund distinguishes her account from Gerald Dworkin's. His account also goes beyond requiring agents to identify with their desires, as seen in accounts given by Frankfurt and Bratman: "[i]t is not the identification or lack of identification that is crucial to being autonomous, but *the capacity to raise the question* of whether I will identify with or reject the reasons for which I now act" (1988, 15 emphasis added). Westlund's account requires both this capacity to raise the question and the ability to attempt to resolve them through dialogue, but further, holds that the overarching disposition of being answerable for one's commitments is what is important for autonomy (2003, 494).

<sup>36</sup> In this way, Westlund's account is distinguished from Benson's weakly substantive account, which requires that agents have a sense of self-worth (Westlund 2009, 36; Benson 1994).

Finally, allow me to describe the way in which Westlund's account remains relationally constitutive. Answerability is in one sense a relation to oneself. When we consider another agent to be autonomous, or to be their own representative or governor of their will, we presuppose that they hold *themselves* answerable for their commitments (2003, 498). This was alluded to in the example of the housewives. The second housewife, we saw, has the disposition to answer for herself and hold herself responsible for her commitments (2003, 499). Although this kind of answerability is a feature of an agent's psychology, and thus internal, Westlund's account also has externalist features.<sup>37</sup> While the disposition to be answerable for one's beliefs and preferences is internal to an agent, Westlund contends that this requirement for autonomy also "point[s] beyond itself, to the position the agent occupies as one reflective, responsible self among many" (2009, 35). Westlund's account holds that dialogical engagement *with others* is a necessary aspect of what it means to be autonomous, and so it holds that others we stand in relation to during dialogue, whether real or imagined, are a key component of answerability. Westlund's account holds that the disposition to respond to critical dialogue with others is a relationally constitutive element of her account (2009, 40). Recall that constitutive accounts of relational autonomy hold that interpersonal and social conditions are defining aspects of what autonomy is. Having a disposition to be answerable for one's commitments depends on the critical perspectives of others. What it means to be autonomous depends on this kind of dialogical engagement, and so autonomy itself is constituted by an agent's social relations.

---

<sup>37</sup> Westlund also suggests that the capacity for autonomy is developed and sustained in relations with others (2009, 42). In this sense, her account is also causally relational (2009, 42).

Having summarized Westlund's account, I now explain how it can avoid the unpalatable conclusions rendered by strong substantive accounts when applied to cases of privilege. First, it does not follow from Westlund's account that the privileged will be automatically more autonomous than those who are oppressed. This is due to her account's procedural element, which, unlike Oshana's account, does not require idealized social circumstances, like an adequate range of choices. On Westlund's account, the presence (or absence) of idealized social circumstances does not determine an agent's autonomy. An agent might meet all of the conditions of Oshana's account of autonomy, yet refuse to answer for their commitments or actions. But because answerability is a necessary condition for autonomy ascription, refusing to answer for one's commitments or actions will compromise an agent's autonomy. Below, I consider some examples to further illustrate the point that two similarly situated agents might have different levels of autonomy. Overall, both Oshana's and Stoljar's accounts are unable to capture such nuance because they both make automatic assumptions about the autonomy of agents based on either external circumstances or influence of harmful social norms.

Second, it does not follow from Westlund's account that no one will be autonomous, since being able to answer for one's commitments does not require that one's action-guiding commitments are free from oppressive or privileged forms of socialization. Because of this procedural feature of her account, a given preference cannot be ruled automatically as non-autonomous merely because of its content. This avoids the worries raised over both the feminist intuition and Wenner's criticism, both of which make automatic assumptions about the autonomy of agents merely based on how oppressive (or

privileged) socialization influences constitute the formation of beliefs, desires, and preferences.

The ways in which Westlund's account avoids the perverse conclusions of strong substantive accounts speaks to the underlying strength of her view, namely, that it permits a more nuanced understanding of agents' autonomy. This permits greater nuance in how we account for differences in autonomy even when agents are similarly situated. It can make room for the fact that beliefs, desires, and preferences can be influenced by oppressive or privileged social norms, and yet, it does not make automatic assertion that the mere influence of such norms render an agent non-autonomous, as we saw in the case of Stoljar's feminist intuition and the plausible extension of it.

To demonstrate the strength of Westlund's account, let us consider an example, focusing in particular on how privilege might influence an agent's action-guiding commitments. Consider again the case of some violent misogynists like Elliot Rodger. As Manne and Srinivasan explain, a relevant aspect of patriarchal influence that underscores his beliefs and actions is the socialization of men. Men, as the group benefited by systems of patriarchy, are socialized in unique ways, as we have seen. One aspect of patriarchal socialization holds that men are owed certain things from women, in virtue of their status as the beneficiaries of patriarchy. While, of course, not all men internalize these social norms to the degree Rodger and other incels have, I argued that the feminist intuition might be plausible extended to argue that Rodger's action-guiding commitments are the result of privileged socialization and harmful social norms, and thus, are non-autonomous. But is this the right conclusion in this case? I think the answer to this question is no. While Rodger's beliefs, desires, and preferences, together with his actions, were obviously and

deeply morally wrong, I think it would be a mistake to conclude that, merely because the commitments and the actions he took were influenced by patriarchal socialization and gendered norms, they are non-autonomous. It would be odd, I think, to conclude that Rodger's attack was somehow not his own or that he was not acting in a self-governing way when plotting and enacting it. Although his motivations were deeply wrong, they seem to be his own. What is needed is a view that can account for this.

On Westlund's account, we might say that Rodger is autonomous if he can provide some kind of answer for his (again, obviously wrong) action-guiding commitments. Did Rodger meet this requirement for autonomy ascription? I think it is plausible to suggest he did. Prior to his attack, Rodger uploaded a video to YouTube titled "Elliot Rodger's Retribution" and emailed a 107,000-word manifesto to several people, which later circulated online (Srinivasan 2021, 74). In these documents, he describes his motivations leading up to his act of misogynistic terrorism. While his justifications for his actions were clearly wrong, he was able to articulate them in a way that suggests he could have answered for his commitments that underscored his actions.

However, we might compare someone like Rodger to another kind of agent, whose beliefs, desires, and preferences are similarly influenced by patriarchal social norms and gendered socialization. Let's call this agent Jeff. Jeff is a man who has some deeply misogynistic action-guiding commitments. For example, he believes that women are subordinate to men, and likewise, he desires the women in his family obey him as the sole authority figure in his household. Let us assume these action-guiding commitments clearly reflect his socialization as a man in a patriarchal society: he believes that he is superior to women in virtue of being a man and expects the benefits that men may receive under

patriarchy. He believes that he is owed feminine-coded social goods, like care, from women. He also believes that he is owed sex from women and that, among other things, it is “his for the taking” (Manne 2017).

But unlike agents like the second housewife or Rodger, who answer for their (wrong) commitments, Jeff fails to defend his commitments when others are critical of them. He is much like Westlund’s example of the “Entrenched Eccentric”, or EE, who has a tendency to make scathing sarcastic remarks (2003, 511). Whenever someone attempts to engage with EE, or question his desire to make these remarks, he simply responds with additional sarcastic dismissal. Like EE, let us say Jeff is dismissive of arguments that are critical of his views and often refuses to engage with them. He might even respond angrily if someone were to question his commitments. If he does respond to opposing views or critical perspectives, his replies are always the same: he yells, “that’s just the way it is” and does not engage in dialogue any further.

In the case of EE, Westlund suggests his autonomy is compromised by his failure to answer for his action-guiding commitments (2003, 510). He fails to take full ownership of his choices and actions in a way that renders him non-self-governing (2003, 511). In similar ways, Jeff’s autonomy may be compromised, given his inability to engage with the critical perspectives of others. Both EE and Jeff resemble the first housewife in the sense that they are all “less than fully *self*-representing in interpersonal dialogue” (2003, 511; emphasis in original). All of these agents fail to represent themselves fully, or at all, when in dialogue with critical perspectives. They also lack an overarching disposition to be answerable for their commitments.

But while the first housewife defers to someone else, namely, her husband, and EE and Jeff do not. Even though Jeff may not defer to another person to justify their commitments, as the first housewife does, he could instead defer to dogmatic views, which is another kind of ‘pathology’ Westlund considers to be relevant to autonomy ascription. She says, “[b]lind’ devotion to an ideology or dogma can, for example, thwart engagement in justificatory dialogue every bit as effectively as blind servility to another person” (2003, 514). Devotion to a dogma and constitute a kind of deep deference which, on Westlund’s account, can undermine one’s ability to answer for their beliefs, desires, and preferences (Ibid). In Jeff’s case, his inability to answer for his action-guiding commitments may be the result of this kind of deep deference to a dogma.

The overall strength of Westlund’s account, then, is that it captures the complexities of autonomy in the face of oppressive *and* privileged socialization. In the case of the first and second housewives, we saw that, despite their preferences being informed by oppressive social norms and social circumstances, differences in their psychologies are relevant to whether or not we think they can be autonomous. Westlund’s account of answerability captures those differences. In a parallel manner, her view also accounts for differences between agents who are influenced by privileged socialization. In Jeff’s case, we might consider his devotion to patriarchal social norms amount to a kind of dogmatic deference that renders him unable to answer for himself. And we can contrast this to the case of Rodger, who, unlike Jeff, had given some attempt to answer for his action-guiding commitments. Of course, the content of Rodger’s commitments and his justifications for them were utterly wrong. But, on Westlund’s view, we can account for the subtle nuances between agents like Rodger and Jeff, despite the fact that they are similarly socialized.

Westlund's account allows us to identify when and how oppressive or privileged socialization becomes a threat to agents' autonomy. These forms of socialization compromise autonomy when they render an agent unable to answer for their choices and actions, as was the case with the first housewife's deep deference and in Jeff's blind devotion to a dogma. This overcomes Wenner's criticism that relational accounts of autonomy cannot distinguish between preferences that are autonomous or non-autonomous. On Westlund's account, an agent's preferences may be non-autonomous when that agent cannot answer for them in dialogue with others, and sometimes, inability to answer can be caused by barriers relating to one's oppression or privilege. We can, then, still achieve the second goal of a feminist account of autonomy. Namely, Westlund's account allows us to recognize how oppression or privilege can influence autonomy. And her account also maintains a constitutive element that makes autonomous thoroughly relational while not making these constitutive elements strongly substantive. Feminists do not, then, have to abandon relational autonomy altogether.

## Conclusion

Feminist relational conceptions of autonomy focus primarily on issues relating to oppression and oppressed agents. So too do critics of these accounts. While the focus on oppression is vital to help feminist aims, it is also important for feminists to address unjust privileges conveyed to members of dominant social groups. By focusing on privilege, I have aimed to strengthen some of the criticisms of relational autonomy. Specifically, I argued that considering privilege within the context of relational autonomy also supports the perverse conclusions Wenner and Khader have identified, giving additional reasons for

thinking feminists ought to be wary of strong substantive and constitutive accounts of relational autonomy.

However, I argued that the arguments of feminist critics of relational autonomy are not without their own issues. In particular, I argued that Wenner's argument is subject to the same worries as Stoljar's feminist intuition. Both accounts are, I think, too strong. In response to these issues, I defended an alternative account of relational autonomy, given by Andrea Westlund, which is procedural but still constitutively relational. By adopting Westlund's account, I argued that feminists need not surrender relational autonomy, and that it can still be used for certain feminist goals, like that of accounting for how both oppression and privilege can impact autonomy all while maintaining autonomy is a thoroughly relational capacity. I demonstrated how Westlund's account allows for a more nuanced understanding of how these features of agents impacts their autonomy, in a way that both 1) avoids the over-generalizations committed by the feminist intuition and Wenner's argument and 2) avoids the perverse conclusions generated by strong substantive accounts.

Feminists, then, are still able to salvage relational autonomy and achieve some feminist goals while avoiding the perverse conclusions of strong substantive accounts. However, I think we, as feminists, may have to be more realistic when it comes to describing the goals of a relational account of autonomy. As I have showed, accounts like Westlund's are able to describe how our social embeddedness, including both oppression and privilege, can influence autonomy. While this allows us to understand some of the effects of oppression and privilege, thus achieving the second goal for relational accounts of autonomy, autonomy alone may not be a concept that can help us *combat* oppression

and privilege (although, it might give reasons for thinking why we ought to do this if oppression or privilege diminishes autonomy). Feminists might have to utilize additional concepts as tools to combat oppression, rather than trying to use autonomy alone as a conceptual tool for this end.

## Works Cited

- Archard, David. 2008. "Informed Consent: Autonomy and Self-Ownership." *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 25 (1).
- Bailey, Alison. 1998. "Privilege: Expanding on Marilyn Frye's "Oppression"." *Journal of Social Philosophy*. 29 (3): 104-119.
- Beauchamp, Tom L., and James F. Childress. 1979. *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Benson, Paul H. 1991. "Autonomy and Oppressive Socialization." *Social Theory and Practice* 17 (3): 385-408.
- . 1994. "Free agency and Self-Worth." *Journal of Philosophy* 91 (12): 650-58.
- . 2005. "Feminist Intuitions and the Normative Substance of Autonomy." In *Personal Autonomy: New Essays on Personal Autonomy and Its Role in Contemporary Moral Philosophy*. Edited by James Stacey Taylor. Cambridge University Press.
- . 2014. "Feminist Commitments and Relational Autonomy." In *Autonomy, Oppression and Gender*. Edited by Andrea Veltman and Mark Piper. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2015. "Stereotype Threat, Social Belonging, and Relational Autonomy." In *Personal Autonomy and Social Oppression: Philosophical Perspectives*. Edited by Mariana A.L. Oshana. New York: Routledge.
- Canadian Civil Liberties Association. 2022. "Bill 21: Our Fight to Protect Religious Freedom in Quebec" <https://ccla.org/major-cases-and-reports/bill-21/> (Accessed Feb 17, 2022).
- Christman, John. 2004. "Relational autonomy, liberal individualism, and the social constitution of selves." *Philosophical Studies* 117 (1-2): 143-164.
- . 2009. *The Politics of Persons: Individual Autonomy and Socio-Historical Selves*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dworkin, Gerald. 1988. *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Elster, Jon. 2016. "Sour Grapes." In *Sour Grapes: Studies in the Subversion of Rationality*. 110–41. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9781316494172.005.

- Frankfurt, Harry G. 1988. *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Friedman, Marilyn. 1997. "Autonomy and Social Relationships: Rethinking the Feminist Critique" In *Feminists Rethink the Self*. Edited by Diana T. Meyers. 40-61. Westview Press.
- Friedman, Marilyn. 2003. *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hill, Thomas E. 1991. *Autonomy and Self-Respect*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- hooks, bell. 2000. *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. Cambridge MA: South End Press.
- Kang, Sonia K., Katerine A. DeCelles, Andras Tilcik, and Sora Jun. 2016. "Whitened Résumés: Race and Self-Presentation in the Labor Market." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 61 (3): 469–502. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001839216639577>
- Kant, Immanuel. 1785. *The Moral Law: Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Edited by H. J. Paton, 1948. New York: Barnes & Noble.
- Khader, Serene J. 2011. *Adaptive Preferences and Women's Empowerment*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2019. *Decolonizing Universalism: A Transnational Feminist Ethic*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2020. "The Feminist Case Against Relational Autonomy" *Journal of Moral Philosophy*. 17 (5): 499-526.
- Kline, Patrick, Evan K. Rose and Christopher R. Walters. 2022. "Systemic Discrimination Among Large U.S. Employers." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 137 (4): 1963-2036 <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjac024>.
- Llewellyn, Jennifer J. and Jocelyn Downie. 2012. "Introduction." In *Being Relational: Reflections on Relational Theory and Health Law*. Edited by Jocelyn Downie and Jennifer J. Llewellyn. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Luker, Kristin. 1975. *Taking Chances: Abortion and the Decision Not to Contracept*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Mackenzie, Catriona and Natalie Stoljar. 2000. "Introduction: Autonomy Refigured." In *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*. Edited by Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Manne, Kate. 2017. *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2020. *Entitled: How Male Privilege Hurts Women*. First Edition. New York: Crown.
- Meyers, Diana Tietjens. 1987. "Personal Autonomy and the Paradox of Feminine Socialization." *Journal of Philosophy* 84 (11): 619-628.
- . 1997. "Introduction" *Feminists Rethink the Self*. Edited by Diana Tietjens Meyers. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Nedelsky, Jennifer. 2011. *Law's Relations: A Relational Theory of Self, Autonomy, and Law*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Noggle, Robert. 2008. "Autonomy and the Paradox of Self-Creation: Infinite Regresses, Finite Selves, and the Limits of Authenticity." *Personal Autonomy: New Essays on Personal Autonomy and its Role in Contemporary Moral Philosophy*. Edited by James Stacey Taylor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Oluo, Ijeoma. 2021. *Mediocre: The Dangerous Legacy of White Male America*. New York: Seal Press.
- Oshana, Marina A.L. 2005. "Autonomy and Self-Identity." In *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism: New Essays*. Edited by John Christman and Joel Anderson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2006. *Personal Autonomy in Society*. New York: Routledge.
- . 2007. "Autonomy and the Question of Authenticity." *Social Theory and Practice* 33 (3).
- . 2015. "Is Social-Relational Autonomy a Plausible Ideal?" In *Personal Autonomy and Social Oppression: Philosophical Perspectives*. Edited by Mariana A.L. Oshana. New York: Routledge.
- Raz, Joseph. 1986. *The Morality of Freedom*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Sandel, Michael J. 2020. *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Sherwin, Susan. 1992. *No Longer Patient: Feminist Ethics and Health Care*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

- . 2012. “Relational Autonomy and Global Threats.” In *Being Relational: Reflections on Relational Theory and Health Law*. Edited by Jocelyn Downie and Jennifer J. Llewellyn. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Srinivasan, Amia. 2021. *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century*. First American edition. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Stoljar, Natalie. 2000. “Autonomy and the Feminist Intuition.” In *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*. Edited by Catriona Mackenzie & Natalie Stoljar. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2011. “Autonomy or Authenticity? Commentary on Andrea Westlund’s ‘Rethinking Relational Autonomy’ and Catriona Mackenzie and Jacqui Poltera’s ‘Narrative Integration, Fragmented Selves and Autonomy’.” *Symposia on Gender, Race and Philosophy*. 7 (1). <http://web.mit.edu/sgrp/2011/no1/Stoljar0511.pdf> (Accessed March 3, 2022).
- . 2014. “Autonomy and Adaptive Preference Formation.” In *Autonomy, Oppression, and Gender*. Edited by Andrea Veltman and Mark Piper. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2017. “Relational Autonomy and Perfectionism.” *Moral Philosophy and Politics* 4 (1): 27-41.
- Warriner, Jennifer. 2015. “Gender Oppression and Weak Substantive Theories of Autonomy” In *Personal Autonomy and Social Oppression: Philosophical Perspectives*. Edited by Mariana A.L. Oshana. New York: Routledge.
- Wenner, Danielle M. 2020. “Nondomination and the Limits of Relational Autonomy.” *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics* 13 (2): 28–48. <https://doi.org/10.3138/ijfab.13.2.2020-01-08>.
- Westlund, Andrea S. 2003. “Selflessness and Responsibility for Self: Is Deference Compatible with Autonomy?” *The Philosophical Review* 112 (4): 483-523.
- . 2009. “Rethinking Relational Autonomy.” *Hypatia* 24 (4): 26-49.
- . 2012. “Autonomy in Relation” In *Out from the Shadows: Analytical Feminist Contributions to Traditional Philosophy*. Edited by Sharon L. Crasnow and Anita M. Superson. New York: Oxford University Press.

## Chapter Three: Privilege and Vaccine Hesitancy

Resistance to vaccination is as old as vaccines themselves (Dubé et al 2015; Goldenberg 2021, 6; Reich 2016b). While there are a variety of causes for vaccine hesitancy across the globe, this chapter focuses on resistance to vaccination in Western countries and cases where such resistance is driven primarily by non-medical personal beliefs. Contemporary vaccine hesitancy in Western countries is most often traced back to a 1998 study by Andrew Wakefield and colleagues which reported an association between the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine and the onset of autism in children (Goldenberg 2021, 23). However, the initial evidence for this connection was weak, and later, the study was found to have fabricated data. The study was ultimately retracted from the *Lancet* (Ibid). Despite the retraction of the study and significant scientific evidence disproving its findings, the study was influential in shaping some parents' choices around the MMR vaccine and resulted in a decline of vaccination rates (Goldenberg 2021, 39; Navin 2016, 73).

In this chapter, I examine some empirical research that suggests resistance to early childhood vaccines might be disproportionately high among parents who are relatively privileged. Given this, it will be important to understand how privilege may be relevant to parents' choices whether to vaccinate their children. I argue that recent attempts to understand privilege in this context are incomplete. I draw on research by Jennifer Reich (2014; 2016a; 2016b; 2020), who analyzes the privilege of some vaccine hesitant parents. I argue that, while the analysis presented by Reich is informative, there are theoretical gaps in her understanding of privilege. I aim to bridge these gaps by introducing my own account of privilege. In so doing, I argue my account of privilege is a useful lens through which to analyze the behaviour of vaccine hesitant parents and some of the reasons they may have

for choosing to delay or resist vaccines. Based on my discussion, I briefly suggest some future directions for research and policy aimed at addressing vaccine hesitancy and resistance.

This chapter is structured as follows. The first section provides background on vaccine hesitancy and summarizes research by Reich and others. The second section addresses the theoretical gap in Reich's research. In this section, I introduce and explain my account of privilege. I explain how my account builds upon Reich's discussion of privilege. In the third section, I discuss in greater detail some of the reasons parents have for resisting vaccines. I argue that privilege can, potentially, influence some of the reasons for vaccine delay and refusal. I end by briefly discussing some practical implications of my chapter in the context of vaccine policy.

It should be noted that throughout this paper, I limit my discussion to focus on early childhood immunizations, including MMR; varicella, diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, and *haemophilus influenzae* type b (DTaP-IPV-Hib); rotavirus; and other routine early childhood vaccinations.<sup>1</sup> Given my focus on early childhood vaccines, my discussion also focuses primarily on parents, as they are proxy decision-makers for infants and children.

## Section 1: Background

In the past decade, the term 'vaccine hesitancy' has gained popularity in academic literature and public discourse over terms such as 'vaccine refusal' and 'anti-vaccination'. The older terms construct binaries that suggest parents are either accepting of vaccines or they are

---

<sup>1</sup> I exclude some specific vaccines from my considerations in this paper, including the annual influenza vaccine, the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine, and vaccines against COVID-19. These vaccines each raise unique issues given their nature. For example, the HPV vaccine raises concerns about the regulation of girls' sexuality and sexual activity (see Cayen, Polzer & Knabe 2016; Thompson 2013).

not (Dubé et al 2016). The term vaccine hesitancy is more nuanced and makes visible the grey area between the extremes of total acceptance and total refusal of all vaccines. Vaccine hesitancy is defined as a continuum of diverse vaccine attitudes and actions, which are often underscored by a reluctance to accept routinely recommended vaccines (Dubé et al 2020; Dubé et al 2016).

Some examples of attitudes or actions that fall within the spectrum of vaccine hesitancy include delay of vaccination or use of an alternative vaccine schedule; refusal of some vaccines but not others; feeling regret for having vaccinated their children; or complying with vaccine programs with reluctance or hesitation (Dubé et al 2013). Vaccine hesitancy is an incredibly complex phenomenon given the range of attitudes and behaviours between total acceptance and total rejection of all vaccines. For my purposes, I focus on parents who choose to delay or refuse some or all vaccines. I refer to these choices as vaccine resistance.

Vaccine hesitancy is a public health issue in several respects. In cases where parents delay some or all vaccinations, or when vaccines are refused, serious individual- and community-level effects are possible. At the individual-level, children who are not but could be vaccinated are more likely to contract vaccine-preventable diseases (Siddiqui, Salmon & Omer 2013). Additionally, those who are particularly vulnerable to vaccine-preventable illnesses, including those who cannot be vaccinated for medical reasons, are put at greater risk of infection. At the community-level, it is possible that vaccine coverage rates may fall below coverage targets for herd immunity for some vaccine-preventable diseases (see Omer et al 2009; Siddiqui, Salmon & Omer 2013; Schellenberg and Crizzle 2020). Herd immunity refers to a threshold of immunity, where a large portion of a

population is immune to disease infection, which in turn provides indirect protection from disease to those who are most vulnerable to infection. One way herd immunity is achieved is through high rates of immunization (Dube et al 2013). The potential for vaccine resistance to cause a decline herd immunity is significant, especially since research suggests that vaccine hesitant attitudes and behaviours occur in geographically clustered communities, where rates of vaccination can be lower than the thresholds needed to reach herd immunity (Omer et al 2009; Phadke et al 2016; Estep and Greenberg 2020). The decline in herd immunity can lead to outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases. For this reason, the World Health Organization listed vaccine hesitancy within a list of top ten threats to global health in 2019 (WHO 2019).

Vaccine hesitancy has become a public health issue in Western countries where most (but not all) of the population has access to and can afford vaccines (WHO 2014). In cases where vaccine hesitancy occurs and vaccines are widely available and accessible, the focus of the empirical research shifts to analyzing the source(s) driving lack of uptake. The focus of empirical literature may seek to determine the reasons parents may have for delaying or refusing vaccines that they can otherwise easily access. I discuss research that examines parents' reasons for delay or refusal in section three. Empirical research also seeks to investigate the demographics of parents who delay or refuse vaccination.

Some empirical literature shows that a proportion of the people who are vaccine hesitant in developed countries are relatively privileged. It is not my intention to suggest that *all* parents who are vaccine hesitant are privileged or to homogenize the issue of vaccine hesitancy in a way that suggests it *always* involves privilege. I recognize that vaccine hesitancy is a complex global issue (de Figueiredo et al 2020). And in Western

countries, it can appear within various populations, including, for example, Orthodox Jewish communities in New York City (Belluz 2019) and Somali-American communities in the Midwest (Bahta and Ashkir 2015). But for my purposes in this section, I summarize research demonstrating some vaccine hesitant parents are privileged so as to draw out in later sections some of the unique ways privilege may influence vaccine hesitancy, including the reasons some parents have for delaying or refusing vaccines.

It is also important to keep in mind that the research below focuses on children who are *intentionally un-vaccinated*, including those whose parents have delayed or refused vaccination on non-medical grounds. This can be contrasted to children who are *under-vaccinated* for other reasons, including lack of access to vaccines (Smith et al 2004; Berezin and Eads 2016). The contrast between intentional delay or refusal of vaccination and unintentional under-vaccination creates “two worlds of childhood vaccination” according to Berezin and Eads, where privileged parents exercise choice and control over the health of their children at the expense of families who face difficulties in accessing health care (2016; see also Reich 2016b, 14).

One area of empirical research examines the demographics of parents who seek out non-medical vaccine exemptions in jurisdictions that mandate vaccinations for school attendance.<sup>2</sup> Parents who wish not to vaccinate their children for religious, conscientious, or philosophical reasons can, in some jurisdictions, obtain non-medical exemptions to mandates whereby their unvaccinated children can still be permitted to attend school.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> I refer to exemptions grounded in religious, conscientious, or philosophical personal beliefs as non-medical exemptions. I discuss some of these reasons in more detail below. This is contrasted to children who receive exemptions to vaccination for medical reasons.

<sup>3</sup> In response to rising public health concerns over the prevalence of non-medical vaccine exemptions, some US states have moved to eliminate these exemptions (Goldstein and Suder 2022).

Seeking non-medical vaccine exemptions are one way in which parents may exercise their choice to delay or refuse vaccination.

Several quantitative studies have found that wealth is a significant predictor for non-medical exemptions to vaccination. A study by Yang et al (2016) analyzed public data on non-medical exemptions between 2007 and 2013 for kindergartens in California and used information from national surveys to obtain data on household income and race/ethnicity. They found that exemptions were more common in areas with higher levels of income, which they conclude is consistent with previous studies (Yang et al 2016). Several other studies also find that children whose parents' refused vaccines were significantly more likely to live in a household with higher-than-average family income (Smith et al 2011; see also Smith et al 2004; Sobo 2016; Berezin and Eads 2016; Bryden et al 2019; Swaney and Burns 2019).

Other research suggests that rates of non-medical exemptions are higher in private schools than public schools (Petrelli 2018; Shaw et al 2014; Sobo 2015; Yang et al 2016). One study analyzed private schools in California and found a strong association between kindergarten tuition and levels of exemptions, where “kindergartens with tuition of \$10,000 or more were over twice as likely to have 20% or more children with PBEs [personal-belief exemptions] than kindergartens with lower tuition” (McNutt et al 2016, 1736; see also Sobo 2015; Estep and Greenberg 2020). The ability of parents to afford high tuition costs of private schools, while also seeking out non-medical exemptions for vaccine requirements, again suggests a correlation between wealth and vaccine hesitancy in some cases.

These studies identify other characteristics of some parents who seek out non-medical exemptions. Some studies found non-medical exemptions were more common in families with non-Hispanic white racial identities (Yang et al 2016; Smith et al 2011; Smith et al 2004). Other studies also found that parents of children with exemptions or who were otherwise vaccine hesitant had higher than average levels of education (Salmon et al 2005; Berezin and Eads 2016). The picture emerging from these studies is that some parents who resist vaccines by pursuing non-medical exemptions are middle- to upper-class, white, and educated. This suggests, too, that vaccine hesitancy and resistance may be higher among in such groups.

This description of some vaccine hesitant parents is corroborated by social scientists working on vaccine hesitancy. I focus on research by sociologist Jennifer Reich because she explicitly discusses how this picture is one that illustrates the privilege of some vaccine hesitant parents (2014; 2016a; 2016b; 2020). Throughout her work on vaccine hesitancy, and especially in her book *Calling the Shots: Why Parents Reject Vaccines* (2016b), she argues that:

[a]s a technology that provides individual benefits and risks, enforced by the state, and administered on young children's bodies, vaccines allow us to explore these complex and contradictory meanings and to examine challenges to expertise, choice of consumption, and the ways these dynamics are structured by privilege (2016b, 19-20).

Privilege, she argues, shapes how some parents make decisions about vaccination and how they exercise those choices. Allow me to briefly summarize some of her research methodologies and central conclusions related to privilege.

*Calling the Shots* draws on over a decade of research and includes data Reich collected during interviews with parents, healthcare providers, researchers, attorneys,

policymakers, and advocates (2016b, 3; 258). In addition to data generated from interviews, her book also draws on data generated through ethnographic observation and content analysis of both in-person meetings and online discussions relating to vaccine choice (2016b, 263). Her ethnographic observations took place at various settings, including annual meetings of organizations opposing vaccine mandates and educational community events held by pediatricians about vaccines (Ibid).

Relating to her interviews with parents, most of whom opted out of vaccines or used alternative vaccine schedules for their children, most were mothers and all but one participant was white (2016b, 259-260).<sup>4</sup> Reich notes that parents she interviewed resemble those who other researchers have found to be most likely to challenge vaccine recommendations: they are white, college-educated mothers with a family income of over US \$75,000 (2016b, 4; Smith et al 2004). The proportion of parents Reich is focused on thus tend to be white, relatively wealthy women.

One of Reich's central arguments is that the privilege of these parents shapes how they exercise their choices around vaccination. Reich argues that intentional delay or forgoing of vaccination is a choice "almost exclusively made by families with the most resources and represents a fairly privileged parenting practice" (2016b, 14). While some parents who decide to opt out of vaccines are privileged, parents of children who are unintentionally under-vaccinated are not (Ibid).<sup>5</sup> The privilege of some parents, Reich says, creates an uneven landscape of parental choice, where those with more privilege can

---

<sup>4</sup> Reich (2014, 2016b) had originally aimed to interview mothers and fathers, but she found that women were primarily making vaccine decisions. She, like others (see Navin 2016), notes that managing the health of children is a responsibility often unfairly relegated to women under patriarchy (2016b, 260).

<sup>5</sup> Mark Navin makes a similar point, arguing further that free riding is more available to members of privileged social groups (2016, 145).

choose to opt out. The decision to opt out is a luxury that can be accessed by those with additional resources (2016b, 237; 2014, 688; see also Berezin and Eads 2016; Giubilini 2019).

Another argument central to Reich's work is that many parents who are vaccine hesitant or resistant are invested in what she calls individualist parenting (2016b).<sup>6</sup> These, she explains, are parenting practices that involve expending significant time and energy researching how to best keep their children healthy, closely managing the lifestyles (e.g. nutrition) and risks their children are exposed to, advocating for personalized forms of healthcare, and seeing oneself as an expert on and advocate for their children (2016b, 11-12; 71). Reich notes these intense practices are expected of all mothers given gendered expectations regarding childrearing, but are most often taken up by middle- and upper-class women who have the resources to invest significant time and energy into their children (2016b, 18).<sup>7</sup> These parenting practices prioritize parents' individual choice about what is best for their own children over possible obligations one might have towards the larger community (2016b, 12). This prioritization allows privileged parents to ignore how those with less privilege lack the same options and may be at a greater risk of illness (Ibid).

Under individualist parenting, Reich argues vaccines become another object that some parents seek to control to best promote their children's health (2016b, 90). Parents assess the risks of vaccines for their individual children, often devoting significant time to researching separate vaccines and the (real or scientifically unsupported) risks associated with them (2016b, 76-77). Parents may decide to pursue alternative vaccination schedules

---

<sup>6</sup> In her earlier work, Reich calls these "intensive parenting practices" (2014).

<sup>7</sup> In the context of the HPV vaccine, Alison Thompson similarly argues that we exist in an era where choice becomes an expression of individualism (2013, 17; see also Rail et al 2018).

for their children or refuse some or all vaccines if they judge this best given their child's history and particular vulnerabilities.

They may also seek out non-medical vaccine exemptions, despite the fact that accessing these can be a long and laborious process (2016b, 228). Pursuing these requires parents to advocate on behalf of their children, arguing these choices are in their child's best interests. But, as Reich argues, "the most privileged parents remain the most empowered to advocate for their own children, often furthering inequality" (2016b, 16; 183).<sup>8</sup> Vaccine choices, influenced by individualist parenting, are ones Reich argues are enabled by the privilege some parents have. Overall, Reich's research explicitly explores how the privilege some vaccine hesitant parents have is relevant to their vaccine choices.<sup>9</sup>

Despite Reich's explicit analysis of the privilege of some vaccine hesitant parents, questions remain. Some might question what, exactly, is meant by 'privilege'. I turn to discuss this point in the following section. Clarifying what privilege is, I argue, will further help us get clearer on several points, including: 1) what privilege is, how it operates, and what, exactly, may be included in the privilege some vaccine hesitant parents have, 2) why the focus on privilege is important in the context of vaccine hesitancy and the reasons some

---

<sup>8</sup> The inequalities relevant here can include differences between how relative privileged parents and their children experience health care compared to families who are less privileged. For instance, Reich argues here that privileged parents are more likely to demand additional health care services and receive respect for their choices, while also being less likely to be reported to state agencies like child protective services (2016b, 16).

<sup>9</sup> Reich is not alone in explicitly discuss privilege in the context of vaccine choice. Throughout her non-fiction book *On Immunity: An Inoculation*, Eula Biss (2014) explicitly discusses vaccine hesitancy and anxieties as related to privilege. One of her arguments, for example, suggests that privileged parents may free ride on herd immunity generated by others to ensure the safety and health of their own children, while avoiding vaccines they perceive to be risky or unnecessary. Philosopher Mark Navin (2016) makes a similar argument relating to the (un)fairness of free riding. He writes, "In particular, vaccine refusers are often socially privileged people, and they make unfair use of the contributions to herd immunity that are made by members of disadvantaged social groups" (2016, 145). Like Reich (2014; 2016b) and Biss (2014), Navin argues that free riding can compound "existing injustices rooted in social inequalities" (2016, 145).

parents have for resisting vaccines, and 3) how it may be relevant to practical responses to the issue.

## Section 2: Overcoming Gaps

Here I introduce my account of privilege to supplement and strengthen Reich's work. While Reich does not give a definition of privilege, we might try to extract her understanding of privilege from her discussions. Consider, for example, that throughout *Calling the Shots*, Reich references how greater resources available to more privileged parents enables them to exercise their vaccine choices (2016b). In later research, Reich analyzes how some privileged mothers have access to greater social capital, which she defines as resources embedded in certain social structures that can be used for individual benefit (2020, 1). From these examples, Reich seems to understand privilege as something that provides people with greater tangible resources that they can then use to their advantage.

I do not reject understanding privilege as something that confers greater resources. However, I think this view of privilege is incomplete. As I argued in chapter one, while privilege does work to confer greater tangible resources to members of dominant social groups, privilege also confers unique options to members of these groups. My account of privilege captures this distinction. I define privilege as:

generally desirable, but unearned, assets or properties which are conferred systematically to members of dominant social groups, where these assets or properties include both tangible resources and options to do certain things or be a certain way.

There are two important contributions my account makes to Reich's research. It clarifies what, exactly, privilege is, and explains how some parents with privilege may have greater

resources which they can use to benefit themselves. Additionally, my account of privilege can expand on Reich's arguments to explain how other parts of her analysis may also count as aspects of parents' privilege.

The first benefit my account provides to Reich's research is a clearer understanding of privilege which can provide an explanation for how some parents may come to have additional resources in virtue of their privilege. My account of privilege holds that the assets of privilege are allocated to individuals based on their membership in dominant social groups.<sup>10</sup> Under systems of power like patriarchy, white supremacy, ableism, classism, and so on, certain social groups are (wrongly) deemed superior and others inferior. As I have argued in chapter one, these systems work to allocate resources to certain groups, which members can use to benefit themselves. For example, in her discussion on privilege, McIntosh describes white privilege as an 'invisible knapsack', one that confers various resources and tools one can use to one's advantage (1989, 29). They are resources conferred to one in virtue of one's membership in a dominant social group. She argues the resources in one's invisible knapsack allow one to navigate the world and exercise choice (1989, 35).

Given that dominant social groups receive privilege vis-à-vis systems of power, I hold that privilege is a structural phenomenon. This is an important contribution to Reich's research, as she does not explain how exactly some of the parents in her research acquire privilege, nor does her work explicitly connect privilege to systems of power.<sup>11</sup> If Reich

---

<sup>10</sup> Given that my account understands privilege as a structural issue, where some members of dominant social groups are provided with additional assets simply because they are members of those groups, we can also understand the resources (and options) conferred by privilege as unearned (see also Bailey 1998, 110).

<sup>11</sup> Her description of social capital gets us close, as it understands capital as resources embedded in certain social structures (2018), but it remains unclear what those structures are. My account clarifies these structures are systems of power and provides further clarification on how these systems treat certain social groups.

wants to suggest a proportion of the vaccine hesitant population is privileged, she will have to show how these parents are members of dominant social groups, since privilege is allocated based on group membership under systems of power. As we saw from Reich's research and that of some others, a proportion of the parents who resist vaccines are wealthy white mothers. These parents seem to have membership in some dominant social group(s). White women, for example, are members of a dominant social group under systems of white supremacy in virtue of their whiteness.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, Reich suggests that the parents in her studies are wealthy. Above I surveyed other research that suggests wealth is correlated to higher rates of vaccine hesitancy and resistance, seen for example in who accesses non-medical exemptions to vaccines. Wealth can certainly provide greater resources, but Reich must be clearer about whether the resources she refers to are ones related simply to wealth or whether they refer to resources conveyed by other aspects of their privilege. My own account of privilege recognizes that one's socioeconomic class may operate slightly differently than membership in other dominant social groups, since wealth might be earned more easily.<sup>13</sup> But I nonetheless recognize that socioeconomic class still allots people relative advantages or disadvantages.<sup>14</sup> More work is needed to clarify how some parents' wealth may be

---

<sup>12</sup> Some may argue that, in virtue of their gender, these parents are members of oppressed groups. Indeed, Navin (2016) discusses how gendered oppression may be relevant to vaccine hesitancy, especially given that women may experience epistemic injustices in medical contexts. I do not intend to refute Navin's argument here, as I think he is right to raise issues of gender-based epistemic injustices in the context of vaccine hesitancy. However, the other dominant social groups these particular women are members of lend them other significant privileges. See, for example, my discussion of Amy Cooper in chapter one on the relative privilege of white women.

<sup>13</sup> Education might operate similarly to wealth in the sense it may be earned in some ways. However, I think that the memberships individuals have in dominant social groups plays a significant role in how and whether education and wealth can be obtained. Peggy McIntosh argues, there exists a myth of meritocracy in Western countries, which suggests that one's life is always 'what one makes of it' (1989, 34; 39). But this is not always the case: many people have doors opened for them in virtue of their membership in dominant groups, including pathways to greater wealth and education (McIntosh 1989, 34; see also Sandel 2020).

<sup>14</sup> See p. 20n3.

relevant to Reich's analysis of resources. What this discussion also suggests is that Reich's work on privilege might benefit from greater intersectional analysis of the privilege some parents have.<sup>15</sup> While I do not have the space to offer such analysis here, I do want to suggest that her study participants seem to have overlapping memberships in several dominant social groups that, together, make them uniquely privileged as wealthy white women.

The first advantage my account of privilege brings to Reich's work is, then, a theoretical explanation of privilege and how privilege works to provide some people with additional resources. More empirical research may be needed to strengthen the connections between privilege and vaccine hesitancy. But my account remains beneficial for this future research, as it provides a clearer theoretical understanding of how people come to have privilege and what, exactly, privilege includes.

A second advantage of my account of privilege is that it moves us beyond thinking of privilege as conferring only resources. As I argued in chapter one, privilege also confers unique options to members of dominant social groups to do certain things or be a certain way. In chapter one, I argued, for example, that Alison Bailey's (1998) student, who wanted to use his male privilege to act as a 'protector' for a feminist demonstration, is given the option to take up this role and to be a protector by overarching systems of power

---

<sup>15</sup> Intersectionality holds that different aspects of a person's social identities, such as one's race, class, gender, and so on, are not mutually exclusive entities, but are phenomena that co-construct one another (Collins 2015). As Ivy and Sennet write, in their work on privilege, "it [intersectionality] is an orthogonal concept that helps us understand how axes of identity variously combine and intersect to create forms of privilege or oppression" (2017, 503). In this context, then, we might think that the different axes of these parents' identities work together to create unique forms of privilege. Intersectionality allows us to think about how, for example, wealthy white women have a unique kind of privilege, based on their various social identities. See also p. 19n1.

like patriarchy. I also used Kate Manne's (2017; 2020) work to explain how men have the option to be predators and, potentially, to get away with it.

Recognizing that privilege confers certain options to members of dominant social groups will prove helpful in strengthening Reich's discussion of privilege, as it will aid in the understanding of other elements of her analysis as additional aspects of some parents' privilege. To begin, I want to say more here about the options certain privileged groups have to get away with things or think of themselves as exempt from punishment. In chapter one, I considered Manne's discussion of Brock Turner, a Stanford student convicted of three counts of felony sexual assault. Manne argues that Turner's case was an example of 'himpathy', which is what she calls excessive sympathy towards (white, affluent, and non-disabled) male perpetrators of sexual violence (2017, 197). Manne argues this systematic phenomenon allows privileged 'golden boys' to be exonerated from crimes they commit (2017, 192).

Systems of power like patriarchy and related phenomena like himpathy may lead to beliefs that members of dominant social groups will be exempt from punishment or sanction altogether. Relevant to this point is Manne's discussion of Turner's father, Dan Turner, who lamented during his son's trial that Brock was no longer his "happy-go-lucky self" (Manne 2017, 196). Dan suggested the consequences faced by his son leading up to and during his trial were "too steep a price to pay for 20 minutes of action" (Hunt 2016). He suggested that his son should not be incarcerated at all—but simply put on probation and allowed to teach others on college campuses the dangers of binge drinking (Hunt 2016; Manne 2017). In addition to failing to consider the impact of the assault on the victim, what Dan Turner was suggesting is that his son, like other privileged 'golden boys', should be

exempt from (full) punishment. This is indicative of a wider cultural expectation that these privileged men will not have to face punishment, even for violent criminal behaviour. Himpathy is one example of how systems of power operate to give privileged men, as a group, the option to get away with bad behaviour and think of themselves as exempt from punishment.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, the case of parents who choose to delay or refuse vaccines is different from that of Brock Turner. Turner acted despicably. Parents who decide to delay or refuse vaccines may not have acted in the same egregious way as Turner, but nonetheless, they are acting wrongly in resisting or refusing vaccines on behalf of their children.<sup>17</sup> This is because their choice has the potential to cause harm to their own children who are unvaccinated for non-medical reasons and may cause harm to other children, including those who are vulnerable to infection because they are unvaccinated for medical reasons (Skelton and Forsberg 2020). Additionally, their choice is one that breaches a social expectation they comply with routine vaccination policies and contribute to the public good of herd immunity. This choice comes with sanctions for refusing to comply. What I argue is that, despite the differences in the cases, both are examples of the options members of dominant social groups have to do certain (immoral) things and think of themselves as exempt from corresponding sanctions.

The expectation that one is exempt from sanctions is something Reich alludes to in her research, although she does not argue that this itself is an aspect of parents' privilege.

---

<sup>16</sup> Others who have written on privilege have also recognized that systems of power work to give members of dominant social groups options to get away with not only bad behaviour but crimes. For example, McIntosh argues privilege licenses members of dominant groups to be “at best, thoughtless, and at worst, murderous” (1989, 36).

<sup>17</sup> Others have also argued the decision to delay or refuse vaccines is an immoral one. For instance, philosophers have argued it violates a moral obligation to be vaccinated (see Giubilini et al 2018; Giubilini 2019; Pierik 2016; Navin 2016, 115).

I want to suggest it is. She says, “[a]s families exercise their choice to opt out of vaccines, signing a form that entitles their unvaccinated child to attend school, they do so as educated parents with privilege—and *without fear of public sanctions*” (2016b, 15; emphasis added). In the context of vaccine decision making, sanctions might include an unvaccinated child being ineligible for public school attendance. Reich rightly points out that some privileged parents who delay or refuse vaccinations have the resources to exercise their choice to opt out. Such resources include having more money to afford alternative forms of childcare, ability to research exemptions, and additional time and energy to obtain non-medical exemptions. Other parents from less privileged backgrounds lack these resources (Navin 2016, 145-147). Further, less privileged parents might depend on public education for their children. They may also lack the time to go through the laborious process of seeking non-medical exemptions.

Beyond simply having the resources to evade sanctions, Reich’s argument that some privileged parents think of themselves as exempt from punishment is an example of how some privileged parents have the option to ignore or avoid sanctions.<sup>18</sup> In addition to her suggestion above that some parents do not fear sanctions, she also writes some parents in her studies were surprised by punitive responses to their decisions (2016b, 233). What I am suggesting is that thinking of oneself as exempt from punishment is itself an aspect of the privilege these parents have. Reich does not explain this as an element of some parents’ privilege. Thus, my account of privilege expands on and strengthens Reich’s discussion by explaining how this option—to see oneself as exempt—can count as another facet of parents’ privilege.

---

<sup>18</sup> Biss also discusses the problem of seeing oneself as exempt and how it ignores our inter-dependence (2014, 123).

Building again on Reich's work, I suggest a second unique option some privileged parents have is a sense of entitlement to the choice to delay or refuse vaccinations. My account of privilege allows us to better conceptualize how this sense of entitlement can count as an aspect of parents' privilege. In chapter one, I explained how privilege can confer on dominant social groups certain senses of entitlement. There I focused the sense of entitlement some men have towards sex with or care from women (Manne 2020; 2017; Srinivasan 2021, 93-94). In these and other cases, members of dominant social groups may feel as though they are owed something from someone else, or from society at large, simply because they are members of dominant social groups.

Reich suggests the choice to customize a child's vaccine schedule, or the choice to refuse vaccination altogether, is a choice some parents feel entitled to make. On this point, Reich argues "[p]rivileged parents committed to individualistic values more commonly perceive their parental work as actively cultivating their children into successful adults. They are more likely to demand individualization of vaccines—and *feel entitled to get it*" (Reich 2016b, 115; emphasis added).<sup>19</sup> Reich further suggests that these parents feel entitled to certain healthcare resources in order to execute their choices around vaccination (Reich 2016b, 237). Reich argues parents who are members of dominant social groups may feel entitled to make these individualized decisions for their children because they have the resources to take up individualist parenting, as Reich argues (2014, 682; 2016b, 18). But this, again, assumes a narrow understanding of privilege.

---

<sup>19</sup> Also see Atwell et al (2018, 112), who suggest that the behaviours of vaccine hesitant parents are indicative of 'healthism', where people are encouraged to be self-empowered individuals who exercise control over their behaviours to make informed choices. Both intensive parenting styles and healthism frame health as individual responsibilities, where people must make good choices for themselves (or their children). See also Estep and Greenberg (2020, 29), Navin (2016, 109; 152) on these kinds of individualistic modes of parenting.

I suggest we can extend Reich's discussion of privilege here beyond focusing on the resources conferred by privilege. This sense of entitlement some privileged parents have to make decisions for their children, and have those choices respected, is better categorized as an option available to these parents in virtue of their privilege. It is also an option unavailable to those who are relatively oppressed. For instance, the sense of entitlement some privileged parents have to make choices free from state interference can be compared to the systematic over-policing and excessive surveillance of Black and Indigenous parents and low-income families (Roberts 1993, 14; McKenzie et al 2016). The policing and surveillance of Black, Indigenous, and low-income families can, in some jurisdictions, result in an over-reporting of families to child welfare authorities and even disproportionate child apprehensions (Ontario Human Rights Commission 2018; Fallon et al 2021).

While these are systematic forms of injustice faced by certain oppressed groups, dominant social groups are, generally, less likely to be subject to this kind of state surveillance. Indeed, Reich makes this point when she notes that the more privileged parents in her studies are not regularly subjected to state surveillance (2016b, 233).<sup>20</sup> And this freedom from surveillance can result in a sense of entitlement to have their choices respected. The options available to privileged parents, including ones to decide whether or not to vaccinate their children, are generally unavailable to members of oppressed groups, who, instead, may face more scrutiny and state surveillance of their parenting. Thus, the sense of entitlement to make these choices and have them respected represents not the

---

<sup>20</sup> As one mother in her study wrote, “[m]y child’s vaccination status is no one’s business other than mine and his father’s...By state law, I do not have to vaccinate him. And that should not preclude me from ANYTHING. School, medical treatment, or other wise. And I certainly do not believe that is grounds for CPS [child protective services] knocking at my door” (2016b, 233-234).

resources that parents have available, but instead speaks to the systematic way in which these parents are given options others are lack.

In addition to having the options of expecting oneself to be exempt from sanctions and that of feeling entitled to have vaccine choices respected, I think we can identify a related third option available to some parents who resist vaccines in virtue of their privilege. It is the option not to contribute to social goods like herd immunity. Herd immunity, as I have explained, is when a large proportion of the population becomes immune to contagious diseases, most often through mass immunization.

Achieving herd immunity is often the goal of vaccination policies, given that it provides protection to those who are most vulnerable to infection, e.g., those who cannot be vaccinated for medical reasons (Navin 2016, Giubilini 2019).<sup>21</sup> Herd immunity also protects those who are vaccinated, since vaccines are not 100% effective (Giubilini 2019). Additionally, it provides wider social benefits. For example, because it helps to prevent the spread of contagious diseases, herd immunity reduces costs associated with treating those who might otherwise fall ill (Ibid). Herd immunity is an important *public* good because it is non-excludable and non-rivalrous (Giubilini 2019, 20). That a good is non-excludable means that people cannot be easily prevented from benefitting from it (Ibid). Further, for a good to be non-rivalrous means that any individual benefitting from it does not diminish the benefit others receive (Ibid).

A common moral criticism of those who do not vaccinate is that they free ride on herd immunity, as they get the benefits of herd immunity without contributing to it when they are otherwise able to (Giubilini 2019). I think it is uncontroversial to say that most

---

<sup>21</sup> We can also recognize that vaccination is also an individual good, since it provides individuals with immunity to contagious diseases (Navin 2016, Giubilini 2019).

would agree it is wrong to free ride on the collective efforts of others to contribute to public goods (for additional arguments on the wrongness of free riding see Navin 2016; Giubilini 2019). My goal is to explain how privilege can, potentially, enable free riding. One aspect of parents' privilege that allows them to free ride is, as Reich points out, greater access to resources (2016b). For example, some parents, we have seen, can use resources to send their children to private schools or obtain non-medical exemptions. However, I want to analyze how other aspects of her discussion also relate to the option to free ride, which is more available to some privileged parents.

As Reich notes, some of her participants ignore "the reality that some children are unvaccinated because they lack access, are medically fragile, or are too young" (2016b, 236). This is a common theme in Reich's analysis of some vaccine hesitant parents. She notes that, while these parents seek to do what they think is best for their children, they overlook or explicitly deny how their choices impact others (2016b, 17; 2014).<sup>22</sup> That is, they overlook the impacts of their free riding. Like Reich, Navin also suggests that the failure of some vaccine hesitant parents to consider the consequences of their decisions might be explained by a kind of "social ignorance". He suggests this kind of ignorance "is often an important contributor to vaccine refusal" (2016, 152). What both Reich and Navin miss, however, is how this ignorance is, potentially, another aspect of the privilege some vaccine hesitant parents have. An upshot of my account of privilege, when applied to these discussions, is that it explains how privilege is related to unique kinds of ignorance. Indeed, this facet of privilege is commonly discussed in literature on privilege: McIntosh, for

---

<sup>22</sup> This is also seen in the case of Dan Turner and his ignorance of the harms experienced by the victim, Chanel Miller.

example, explains that white privilege allows a person to be oblivious and ignorant to systems of power and the experiences of those who are oppressed (1989).<sup>23</sup>

I suggest that privilege allows one to remain ignorant of the impacts one's decisions have on others. Indeed, as I argued briefly in chapter one, maintaining ignorance can shield one from a sense of responsibility. The privilege of some vaccine hesitant parents, given that it can generate certain forms of ignorance, might also shield one from considering how one's choices impact others. This may, in some cases, help to enable the possibility of resisting vaccines for one's child, since privileged parents can remain ignorant of how their choices might impact and even harm others. This represents another aspect of parents' privilege, drawing on work by Reich and Navin.

The goal of this section has been to provide a clearer definition of privilege to supplement Reich's work on the privilege of some vaccine hesitant parents. I have argued my account of privilege has two benefits. First, my account of privilege provides a clearer theoretical understanding of what privilege is, how it operates, and what it can include. I have articulated how my account of privilege can be a theoretical tool for future research. Second, I have suggested, in line with my definition of privilege from chapter one, that privilege also works to allocate options to members of dominant groups. This is a helpful addition to Reich's work because it allows us to identify and account for three additional aspects of some parents' privilege in the context of vaccine hesitancy. These are some parents' expectations that they will be exempt from sanction, a sense of entitlement to delay or refuse vaccines, and how privilege may facilitate the ability to free ride and overlook the effects of one's free riding.

---

<sup>23</sup> See also Mills (1997); Bailey (1998); Sullivan and Tuana (2007); Fourie (2022), among others.

### Section 3: Privilege and Parents' Reasons for Resisting Vaccinations

In this section, I want to briefly turn to summarize some of the central reasons parents may have for refusing or delaying vaccines for their children. The reasons I focus on here include claims regarding parents' rights to make decisions on behalf of their children, beliefs about purity, and a lack of trust in medical professionals and institutions. Importantly, these reasons are expressed by many vaccine hesitant parents—not just those who are privileged. But, as I argue below, privilege can nonetheless be a useful tool to analyze how some parents may experience these reasons for vaccine hesitancy.

One reason some vaccine hesitant parents provide in their decision to delay or refuse vaccination relates to parental rights. This reasoning appears, for instance, in Reich's research, where participants in her interviews insisted "that as parents they have the right to make individual choices for their children" (2016b, 12). Vaccine hesitant parents believe their choice is grounded in their parental rights. Of course, this is in part true—as parents do have the right to make choices they think are best for their children, but this must be consistent with respect for the rights of others. As we will see, parents do not have a right to delay or refuse vaccination on behalf of their children. But the choices parents see as available to them, including the choice to opt out, may be experienced differently depending on one's relative privilege.

A second reason some parents have for delaying or refusing early childhood vaccines relates to the 'purity' of their child (Navin 2016, 97; Dube et al 2016). We can understand purity here as a kind of metaphysical status, where 'pure' bodies are clean, natural, or even good (Shotwell 2016; Navin 2016, 97). An ethic or politic of purity holds

that we ought to protect or maintain purity given its normative association with goodness (Shotwell 2016; Navin 2016). Hence purist beliefs suggest that we ought to pursue naturalness or purity, or defend purity from contamination (Shotwell 2016, 3; see also Navin 2016, 97).

Drawing on Eula Biss, Alexis Shotwell notes vaccination is a common issue that invokes notions of purity (2016, 10-11). Indeed, concerns about the impurity of vaccines arise in some empirical research on why parents choose to delay or forgo vaccinating their young children. Some parents who are concerned about vaccines may hold a “belief that vaccinations introduce toxins that would make a child no longer pure” (Shotwell 2016, 11). This kind of reasoning is seen, for example, in parents choosing not to vaccinate based on concerns about vaccine ingredients, such as thimerosal, being ‘toxic’ (Navin 2016, 105).<sup>24</sup> This is grounded in the purist belief that infant bodies are “natural, complete, and pure” (Reich 2016a, 106), and the view that that external interventions like vaccination are artificial and unnatural, and thus should be avoided (Reich 2016a, 107; see also Reich 2016b; Dubé et al 2016). Beliefs about purity are also seen in some parents’ preference for natural immunity, which is immunity gained post-infection (Reich 2016a; Navin 2016, 120).

Finally, some parents’ lack of trust in medical professionals and institutions, including pharmaceutical industries and governments that enact public health policies, can play a central role in parents’ decisions to delay or refuse vaccines. Empirical researchers have argued that parents’ decisions to vaccinate or not are made in relation to one’s trust

---

<sup>24</sup> Parents concerned about thimerosal suggest that the mercury-based preservative is toxic. However, at a low dose, it generally does not cause harm (CDC 2020). It should also be noted that most vaccines no longer contain thimerosal (Ibid).

in healthcare professionals and institutions (Atwell et al 2017; Leask et al 2012; Siddiqui, Salmon & Omer 2013). In one study of twenty-seven vaccine hesitant parents, researchers reported that almost all participants voiced distrust of pharmaceutical industries that produced vaccines (Atwell et al 2017). Participants expressed concern that pharmaceutical industries corrupt medical research, individual doctors, and government policymaking on vaccination, making these institutions and experts untrustworthy (Ibid; see also Dubé et al 2013; Smith et al 2022).

Despite the empirical evidence supporting the idea that vaccine hesitant parents have a lack of trust, there are some issues in this literature. As Goldenberg (2021, 112) argues, the empirical literature does not clearly define trust. Goldenberg fills this theoretical gap by describing trust as follows: “[t]o trust is to hold the optimistic attitude, or confidence, that the trustee will competently perform the task with which they are entrusted; even more, we expect the trustee to be favorably motivated to do the task well because they know we are counting on them” (2021, 114-115). This definition captures several elements of trust: that the person trusting another (the trustor) has a certain attitude towards the person they trust (the trustee). The trustor judges the trustee to be trustworthy, that is, dependable and worthy of having confidence placed in them (Goldenberg 2021, 114). It also highlights the dependence the trustor has on the trustee, e.g., to perform the task they are entrusted to do. This dependence also entails vulnerability of the trustor, as there is no guarantee that the trustor will complete this task and do it competently. Thus, trust can be risky, since one’s trust can be betrayed (Goldenberg 2021, 116).

Given this more robust understanding of trust, Goldenberg argues we should understand vaccine hesitancy as a ‘crisis of trust’<sup>25</sup>, where the public, including individual vaccine hesitant parents, may not find medical professionals and institutions trustworthy (2021, 124-125). Goldenberg identifies several possible sources of the public’s mistrust in medical experts and institutions. Below, I focus on medical racism as a potential source of mistrust.

These are three common sources of vaccine hesitancy. I remain open to the possibility that there are other reasons parents may have for delaying or refusing vaccines. In the remainder of this section, I show how privilege can be a useful lens through which we can examine the reasons parents may have for choosing to delay or refuse vaccines. I draw on Bailey’s (1998) distinction between negative and positive privileges in order to explain how privilege can mediate these reasons for vaccine resistance. To briefly explain, negative privilege is defined as freedom from oppression (Bailey 1998, 115). Positive privilege is defined as additional assets that cannot be described solely in terms of freedom from oppression (Ibid). I argue some parents, due to their relative privilege, can experience unique negative or positive privileges that may shape how they take up the reasons for vaccine resistance described above.

Decisions to delay or refuse vaccines are often defended by an appeal to individual parental rights and freedom (Navin 2016, 136; Giubilini 2019, 63). As I have mentioned, parents generally have the right to make choices they think are in the best interest of their children. But in the case of choice about vaccines, some have argued that parental rights may be insufficient to morally justify vaccine refusal (see Navin 2016; Giubilini 2019;

---

<sup>25</sup> She contrasts this to understanding vaccine hesitancy as a ‘war on science’, which the first half of her book describes and refutes (Goldenberg 2021).

Skelton and Forsberg 2020). I agree that parental rights cannot justify vaccine delay or refusal. While some privileged parents might believe they have such a right, they, in fact, do not. But, as Reich argues, some parents may be able to utilize their relative privilege to prevail in their choice to refuse vaccines despite the lack of a parental right to do so. What they are doing, then, is exercising their parental choice, and simply in virtue of their privilege, they tend to have their choices respected more than others who are not privileged, despite having no legitimate claim based on their parental rights to resist vaccines. Privileged parents' exercise of their (harmful and wrong) choices, even in cases like this where we might think parental rights do not justify the delay or refusal of vaccines, is possible given certain negative and positive privileges they have available to them.

The choices parents make, and whether those choices are respected, are experienced differently depending on a parent's social location (Navin 2016, 145-147). Allow me to explain how parents' relative privilege might help them exercise their choice to opt out. First, the ability of privileged parents to exercise their choice might be explained in part by their negative privilege. Privileged parents, unlike parents who may be relatively oppressed, do not face the same barriers to exercising their choice in the context of resisting vaccines. For example, as I argued above, relatively privileged parents do not face the same levels of state surveillance over their parenting.

This represents one kind of negative privilege these parents have: they are free from the levels of surveillance other parents may face. And because they are free from this, they may find it easier to exercise their choice. Further still, they can make certain choices, including to delay or refuse vaccines, without fear of interference or sanction, as I described above. This is connected to the negative privilege I have described here, as they are free

from facing consequences that other, less privileged parents might face if they were to make the same choice.

Second, the positive privileges some parents have might also help them exercise their choice and have them respected. As Reich notes, privileged parents tend to have more resources at their disposal that enable them to exercise their choice to opt out (2016b, 225). These resources are positive privileges, as they are not gained merely by being free from oppression. These resources might include, as argued above, more money and time to research exemptions from vaccine mandates. Armed with the knowledge that one can gain exemptions, and the resources to pursue them, privileged parents are empowered to advocate for their views about what is best for their children in clinical encounters (Reich 2016b, 16). Privileged parents are empowered to exercise their choice with physicians, and they also “receive more respect from providers” (Ibid). Exercising the choice to opt out is thus a luxury for those who are privileged, a luxury enabled by their negative and positive privileges.

In the context of vaccine hesitancy, privilege may thus play a role in how parents are able to make choices to delay or refuse vaccines. Importantly, the forms of privilege that enable vaccine hesitant parents to choose to delay or refuse vaccines further enables them to do something wrong: namely, to put their children at risk of harm and to potentially threaten herd immunity, which is an important public good that protects vulnerable members of society. I argue in more detail below that we might justify limiting choices available to parents through mandatory vaccination policies with no option for non-medical exemptions, as doing this will prevent privileged parents from causing potential harms.

Purity, as another reason to resist vaccination, can also be understood through my account of privilege. Relevant to beliefs about purity are parents' adoption of individualist parenting. As Reich argues, parents who may use beliefs about purity to justify vaccine delay or refusal may be invested in these parenting styles. This connection appears in some of the literature on parents who resist vaccines. For example, research by Dubé et al (2016, 415) also suggests mothers who refused vaccines, or were otherwise vaccine hesitant, believed that 'natural immunity' was superior to immunity conferred by vaccination and that vaccines injected 'artificial products' into the 'pure bodies' of children. But seeking to achieve natural immunity is a practice that involves significant resources: it can involve parents extensively researching and comparing vaccines, closely managing diets and nutrition to promote a child's immune system, accessing expensive alternative medical practices, and so on (Reich 2014, Navin 2016, Atwell et al 2018). Protecting and maintaining a child's natural immunity and purity can, then, place significant burdens on parents.

I think some parents' ability to take up individualist parenting practices can be categorized as both a negative and positive privilege. Parents' negative privilege, namely, their freedom from oppression faced by others, might make it easier for them to practice individualist parenting. But the additional resources and options conferred to them by their privilege can also facilitate their ability to take up these practices. Indeed, Reich argues, worrying about purity, researching the 'toxic' ingredients of vaccines, and the steps some parents take to practice 'natural' living, are most often available to middle- or upper-class parents (2016b). Some of these practices are luxuries, given that they require immense amounts of resources. Individualist parenting styles that emphasize purity are, generally,

an option available to privileged parents, in part because they are more likely to have the resources to take up these demanding strategies, which involve carefully managing various aspects of their child's life. Because the option to be this kind of parent is most often available to members of dominant social group(s), it constitutes a unique kind of positive privilege, which may also be seen in how parents act on their beliefs about purity.

Finally, I want to consider distrust in medical institutions. By examining relative oppression and privilege experienced by certain groups in medical contexts, we can distinguish between cases of distrust that are, given legacies of oppression experienced by some groups, more justifiable. Allow me to explain. One of the sources of distrust Goldenberg identifies is medical racism, which refers to historical and ongoing discrimination faced by people of colour in medical contexts.<sup>26</sup> Examples of historical instances of medical racism includes the Tuskegee syphilis study, where Black men infected with syphilis were observed by researchers to study the progression of the disease while being denied treatment (Goldenberg 2021, 132; 188). Public health interventions, too, have had racist origins. These include eugenic policies such as forced sterilization of Black and Indigenous women (Goldenberg 2021; Lombardo 2019). Given these histories, members of marginalized racial groups may have higher levels of distrust towards medical institutions and governments that oversee public health initiatives, including vaccination recommendations.<sup>27</sup> Goldenberg notes that in these cases, distrust may be warranted.

---

<sup>26</sup> Goldenberg also examines social media and the commercialization of medicine as other sources of distrust (2021). For my purposes, and due to lack of space, I set these aside to focus on medical racism. More research is needed to explore these sources of distrust and how they may be influenced by relative privilege (or oppression).

<sup>27</sup> Researchers have found racial disparities between uptake of adult flu vaccination between Black and white Americans, where Black Americans in the study were shown to have lower trust in the vaccine and the vaccination process (Quinn et al 2017). Researchers explained these lower levels of trust may be due to histories and experiences of medical racism (Quinn et al 2017; Goldenberg 2021).

However, Yolonda Wilson (2022) argues there is a problem with implying Black people as ‘distrustful’ rather than focusing on how medical institutions are not only untrustworthy but also operate within unjust social contexts.<sup>28</sup> This line of thinking is, as Wilson notes, present in research on vaccine hesitancy. Focusing on the question “why don’t Black people trust *x*?”, she says, pathologizes Black people rather than questioning and seeking to address underlying unjust circumstances (2022, S12). The question, she argues, is a normative one that implies “Black people *should be* doing something differently, *should be* making different life choices” (Ibid; emphasis in original). She argues that this kind of questioning also invokes “(intentionally or not) racist stereotypes about Black people’s general intelligence, capacity to reason, and ability or willingness to make the best decisions by which to govern Black lives” (2022, S13). Black peoples’ hesitancy to trust medical institutions and information, including vaccine recommendations, is framed as deviant or irrational, instead of doing one’s due diligence while living within an oppressive system (2022, S16).

I think there are two ways in which some privileged parents, who tend to be white, may have negative privileges that influence how they experience distrust. First, they may be free from racist forms of oppression experienced by other groups in medical contexts. Second, building from Wilson’s discussion, privileged parents’ resistance to vaccination is generally not explained in terms of negative stereotypes about their race. We might compare this to some of the examples McIntosh gives of white privilege, where the behaviour and choices of white people are not explained in terms of stereotypes. But, McIntosh argues, if a person of colour were to behave in the same way or make the same

---

<sup>28</sup> This argument may also apply to other racial or ethnic groups who have experienced historical and contemporary systematic injustices in healthcare contexts. It could include, for example, Indigenous peoples.

choices, these may be attributed to racist stereotypes (1989, 31-33). So, the privileged parents who resist vaccination, if they are affluent and white, may be seen as hesitant, but this hesitancy is not explained in terms of racist stereotypes. They are free from experiencing this form of oppression.

More research may be needed to further analyze how privilege may influence other sources of distrust. But given the different experiences various social groups have with medical professionals and institutions, it may be worth examining the sources of distrust among various racial and ethnic groups. Goldenberg's discussion of medical racism, for instance, illustrates the importance of analyzing how oppression may influence the distrust members of oppressed groups may have towards various medical institutions. Wilson's argument, however, cautions researchers in focusing exclusively on distrust, especially when exploring disparities in vaccination rates among racial and ethnic groups. My point here is that relatively privileged parents who resist vaccines have some negative privileges relevant to how they may experience distrust.

Given that some of the reasons parents have for choosing to delay or refuse vaccinations can be exacerbated by their negative or positive privilege(s), I want to suggest that privilege may be a useful lens through which we can examine why and how some parents resist vaccines. These are aspects of the uneven landscape of parental choice in relation to vaccine delay and refusal: while some children who are under-vaccinated come from less privileged families, those who are intentionally unvaccinated are more often from fairly privileged families. Given how privilege can mediate some of the reasons for vaccine resistance, it may be important for healthcare professionals, social scientists, and policymakers interested in mitigating vaccine hesitancy to be mindful of privilege.

Researchers I have engaged with in this section have provided nuanced suggestions for addressing vaccine hesitancy and resistance, ones which recognize the complexity of the phenomenon and the multiple sources of resistance. I want to suggest that, given that vaccine resistance may sometimes be influenced by privilege, and given that privilege is a structural phenomenon, one thing that is needed to address vaccine resistance is larger-scale social changes. This is a point Wilson raises in her argument. She says, “[a]bsent concerted effort to bring about a reasonably just society, efforts at building trust would not change the condition of many who are most profoundly affected by injustice” (2022, S16). She is suggesting that, unless overarching systems of power that oppress marginalized groups and privilege others are addressed, then it may continue to be the case that institutions embedded in those systems, including various healthcare institutions, will continue to be untrustworthy in the eyes of marginalized groups. Although Wilson is focused on distrust as a source of hesitancy and the experiences of oppressed groups, the argument that we need to address systems of power may apply to policies aimed at addressing the other sources of vaccine resistance, for addressing these systems may also address the privilege some vaccine hesitant parents have. This follows from my analysis above, which illustrated the ways in which privilege might influence some other reasons parents have for delaying or refusing vaccines.

Given my analysis in this section, which shows how privilege can shape the sources of vaccine hesitancy, I want to suggest that some larger-scale action to address unjust systems of power and the privilege they afford to certain social groups may be helpful in addressing vaccine hesitancy. I have argued that parents’ reasons for choosing to delay or refuse vaccines, including beliefs in their parental rights to make those decisions, beliefs

about purity, and distrust of medical institutions, may be mediated by negative and positive privileges. For instance, privileged parents may find it easier to exercise their rights or act on beliefs about purity because they are free from various forms of oppression that may make it more difficult for other, less privileged parents to do those same things. Further, parents may have additional resources and options conferred by privilege to be able to resist vaccination. Addressing the ways in which parents' privilege can help them delay and refuse vaccines may be an important aspect of policies aimed at reducing vaccine resistance in some cases.

Such large-scale changes may be difficult to envision, let alone enact, even in the context of addressing this one issue. So, I sympathize with Navin who points out that “making things better is likely to be difficult” (2016, 221). But Navin also notes there is reason to be hopeful in terms of addressing vaccine hesitancy and resistance. I want to add there is reason to be hopeful about larger-scale changes addressing the relative privilege of some parents who resist vaccinations. While these changes may be difficult, they are not impossible.

Consider, for example, that in recent years, some US states have moved to eliminate non-medical exemptions (Goldstein and Suder 2022). This policy change can be justifiable given the research I have engaged with that showed non-medical exemptions were more likely to be accessed by relatively privileged parents.<sup>29</sup> If we want to address privilege in the context of vaccine resistance, and given that non-medical exemptions are often accessed by those with greater privilege, then removing these exemptions as an option most

---

<sup>29</sup> Notably, Navin has elsewhere argued against eliminating non-medical exemptions (Navin and Largent 2017; see also Giubilini et al 2017; Giubilini 2019). I do not have the space to fully engage with that argument, but I think my analysis here provides some further reasons for adopting non-medical exemption eliminationism, as doing so might help addressing privilege.

often available to and accessed by privileged parents may be one route to address the unequal landscape of parental choice, a landscape Reich argues is marked by privilege.

As I have mentioned, non-medical exemptions are required in some jurisdictions that mandate vaccines, including for school attendance. Vaccine mandates are another larger-scale solution that might also address the inequalities generated by privilege, especially when coupled with the elimination of non-medical exemptions. Consider that Navin, for instance, argues that “[c]oercive vaccination may be permitted if it is the only available means to ensure that people make fair contributions to herd immunity” (2016, 181).<sup>30</sup> If privilege can, as I have argued, shape vaccine resistance, it may generate unfairness given that some privileged parents have greater resources and options to opt out of contributing to herd immunity. Recognizing that privilege can help some people avoid contributing to social goods like herd immunity when they are otherwise able to can strengthen arguments that mandates can be justified. This is because mandates, especially when coupled with the elimination of non-medical exemptions, may prevent privileged parents from unfairly using their additional resources and options to opt out of contributing to the public good of herd immunity when they otherwise ought to do so.<sup>31</sup>

While I suggest large-scale policies may be helpful in addressing overarching some of the inequalities generated by some parents’ privilege, which they can utilize in exercising their choices about vaccination, it will have to be evaluated whether these will

---

<sup>30</sup> Coercion here refers to the influence a certain proposal (e.g., a vaccination policy) has on a person’s will (Giubilini 2019, 68). Influence over another’s will can take many forms, and so coercive policies may include policies that aim to persuade or incentivize compliance, or ones that impose sanctions for non-compliance, which include mandatory vaccination policies (Giubilini 2019).

<sup>31</sup> I think addressing the issue of under-vaccination issue will require more equitable policy-making, given that under-vaccination is more often experienced by vulnerable populations. Solutions to this issue may have to include greater resource allocation to vulnerable groups in order to ensure they can access early childhood vaccines in safe and timely manners.

be effective strategies. I leave that task to empirical researchers. But the upshot of my arguments above remains, as researchers are now better equipped with a more robust account of privilege which they can use to examine the issue of vaccine hesitancy and resistance.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I argued Reich's view of privilege, which seemed to understand it as conferring only resources, was incomplete. And this is a significant gap, given that her research aims to discuss how parents' privilege is relevant to their vaccine choices. I argued my account of privilege supplements Reich's arguments by clarifying what privilege is and how it operates. My account of privilege holds that while tangible resources are a part of what privilege confers, privilege also works to confer members of dominant social groups unique options to do certain things or be a certain way.

The strength of my account of privilege is that it allowed me to build from Reich's research to categorize some other elements of her analysis as counting as aspects of parents' privilege. Drawing from Reich's work, I argued additional elements of parents' privilege might include 1) the expectation that they will be exempt from sanctions for non-compliance with vaccine policies, 2) a sense of entitlement to choose to delay or refuse vaccines, and 3) an ability to free ride and overlook the effects of one's free riding. My account of privilege strengthens Reich's research by lending a richer account of what privilege is and what it includes, which, I have argued, allows us to capture additional elements of parents' privilege in the context of vaccine hesitancy.

I ended this chapter by considering how privilege might mediate some of the reasons parents have for choosing to delay or refuse vaccines. I described three central reasons that drive resistance to routine early childhood vaccines, which include the belief that individual parental rights can justify choices to delay or refuse vaccines, beliefs about purity, and lack of trust in medical institutions. I argued that it is possible for parents' relative privilege to influence each of these reasons. I identified some positive and negative privileges relevant to each of these reasons to show how parents' privilege might influence their reasons for vaccine hesitancy and resistance. Given these possible influences, and the disproportionate uptake of vaccine resistance by those who are relatively privileged, it will be important for future research and policies aimed at addressing vaccine hesitancy to pay attention to the relative privilege some hesitant parents have. The overall advantage of my chapter is that researchers and policymakers will have a richer account of privilege to use in such future research.

## Works Cited

- Attwell, Katie; Julie Leask, Samantha B. Meyer, Philippa Rokkas, and Paul Ward. 2017. "Vaccine Rejecting Parents' Engagement With Expert Systems That Inform Vaccination Programs." *Bioethical Inquiry* 14: 65–76. <https://doi-org.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/10.1007/s11673-016-9756-7>
- Bailey, Alison. 1998. "Privilege: Expanding on Marilyn Frye's "Oppression"." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 29 (3): 104-119.
- Bahta, Lynn, and Asli Ashkir. 2015. "Addressing MMR Vaccine Resistance in Minnesota's Somali Community." *Minnesota Medicine* 98 (10): 33–36.
- Belluz, Julia. "New York's Orthodox Jewish community is battling measles outbreaks. Vaccine deniers are to blame". Vox. <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2018/11/9/18068036/measles-new-york-orthodox-jewish-community-vaccines> (Accessed February 17, 2021).
- Berezin, Mabel and Alicia Eads. 2016. "Risk is for the rich? Childhood vaccination resistance and a Culture of Health." *Social Science & Medicine* 165: 233-245.
- Biss, Eula. 2014. *On Immunity: An Inoculation*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press.
- CDC. 2020. "Thimerosal and Vaccines" <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccinesafety/concerns/thimerosal/index.html> (Accessed July 3, 2022).
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 2015. "Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas." *Annual Review of Sociology*. 41: 1-20.
- de Figueiredo, Alexandre, Clarissa Simas, Emilie Karafillakis, Pauline Paterson, and Heidi J. Larson. 2020. "Mapping global trends in vaccine confidence and investigating barriers to vaccine uptake: a large-scale retrospective temporal modelling study." *The Lancet*. 396 (10255): 898 – 908.
- Dubé, Eve, Caroline Laberge, Maryse Guay, Paul Bramadat, Réal Roy and Julie Bettinger. 2013. "Vaccine Hesitancy: An Overview." *Human Vaccines & Immunotherapeutics* 9 (8): 1763-1773. doi: 10.4161/hv.24657.
- Dubé, Eve, Maryline Vivion, and Noni E. MacDonald. 2015. "Vaccine hesitancy, vaccine refusal and the anti-vaccine movement: influence, impact and implications." *Expert Rev. Vaccines* 14 (1): 99-117.
- Dubé, Eve, Maryline Vivion, Chantal Sauvageau, Arnaud Gagneur, Raymonde Gagnon, and Maryse Guay. 2016. "Nature Does Things Well, Why Should We

Interfere?": Vaccine Hesitancy Among Mothers." *Qualitative Health Research* 26 (3): 411-426.

- Dubé, Eve, Anne Farrands, Thomas Lemaitre, Nicole Boulianne, Chantal Sauvageau, François D. Boucher, Bruce Tapiero, Caroline Quach, Manale Ouakki, Virginie Gosselin, Dominique Gagnon, Philippe De Wals, Geneviève Petit, Marie-Claude Jacques and Arnaud Gagneur. 2019. "Overview of knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, vaccine hesitancy and vaccine acceptance among mothers of infants in Quebec, Canada." *Human Vaccines & Immunotherapeutics* 15 (1): 113-120. doi: 10.1080/21645515.2018.1509647.
- Dubé Eve, Dominique Gagnon, and Maryline Vivion. 2020. "Optimizing communication material to address vaccine hesitancy." *Can Commun Dis Rep* 46 (2-3): 48-52. doi:10.14745/ccdr.v46i23a05
- Estep, Kevin and Pierce Greenberg. 2020. "Opting Out: Individualism and Vaccine Refusal in Pockets of Socioeconomic Homogeneity." *American Sociological Review*. 10.1177/0003122420960691journals.sagepub.com/home/asr
- Fallon, Barbara, Rachel Lefebvre, Nico Trocmé, Kenn Richard, Sonia Hélie, H. Monty Montgomery, Marlyn Bennett...Shannon Soop. 2021. *Denouncing the continued overrepresentation of First Nations children in Canadian child welfare: Findings from the First Nations/Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect-2019*. Ontario: Assembly of First Nations.
- Giubilini, Alberto. 2019. *The Ethics of Vaccination*. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan Pivot. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-02068-2>
- Giubilini, Alberto, Thomas Douglas and Julian Savulescu. 2017. "Liberty, Fairness, and the 'Contribution Model' for Non-medical Vaccine Exemption Policies: A Reply to Navin and Largent." *Public Health Ethics* 10 (3): 235-240. doi:10.1093/phe/phx014
- Giubilini, Alberto, Thomas Douglas and Julian Savulescu. 2018. "The Moral Obligation to be Vaccinated: Utilitarianism, Contractualism, and Collective Easy Rescue." *Medicine, health care, and philosophy* 21 (4): 547-560. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11019-018-9829-y>
- Goldenberg, Maya J. 2021. *Vaccine Hesitancy: Public Trust, Expertise, and the War on Science*. USA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Goldstein, Neal D., and Joanna S. Suder. 2022. "Towards Eliminating Nonmedical Vaccination Exemptions Among School-Age Children." *Delaware Journal of Public Health* 8 (1): 84-88. <https://doi.org/10.32481/djph.2022.03.014>

- Hunt, Elle. 2016. "‘20 minutes of action’: father defends Stanford student son convicted of sexual assault" *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jun/06/father-stanford-university-student-brock-turner-sexual-assault-statement> (Accessed July 12, 2022).
- Ivy, Veronica [Rachel McKinnon] and Adam Sennet. 2017. "On the Nature of the Political Concept of Privilege." *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 25 (4): 487-507.
- Kaufman, Sharon R. 2010. "Regarding the Rise in Autism: Vaccine Safety, Doubt, Conditions of Inquiry, and the Shape of Freedom." *ETHOS* 38(1): 8-32. DOI: 10.1111/j.1548-1352.2009.01079.x.
- Leask, Julie, Paul Kinnersly, Cath Jackson, Francine Cheater, Helen Bedford and Greg Rowles. 2012. "Communicating with Parents about Vaccination: A Framework for Health Professionals." *BMC Pediatrics* 12(154).
- Lombardo, Paul. 2019. "Eugenics and Public Health: Historical Connections and Ethical Implications." *The Oxford Handbook of Public Health Ethics* edited by Anna C. Mastroianni, Jeffrey P. Kahn, and Nancy E. Kass. DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190245191.013.56
- Manne, Kate. 2017. *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2020. *Entitled: How Male Privilege Hurts Women*. First Edition. New York: Crown.
- Mark, Navin C. 2016. *Values and Vaccine Refusal: Hard Questions in Ethics, Epistemology and Health Care*. New York: Routledge.
- Mark, Navin C. and Mark A. Largent. 2017. "Improving Nonmedical Vaccine Exemption Policies: Three Case Studies." *Public Health Ethics* 10 (3): 225–234. <https://doi.org/10.1093/phe/phw047>
- May, Thomas, and Ross D Silverman. 2003. "'Clustering of exemptions' as a collective action threat to herd immunity." *Vaccine* 21 (11–12): 1048–1051. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0264-410X\(02\)00627-8](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0264-410X(02)00627-8)
- McIntosh, Peggy. 1989. "White Privilege and Male Privilege." In *Privilege: A Reader*. Edited by Michael. S. Kimmel and Abby L. Ferber. 2017. 4th Edition. Boulder: Westview Press.
- McKenzie, Holly A., Colleen Varcoe, Annette J. Browne, and Linda Day. 2016. "Disrupting the continuities among residential schools, the sixties scoop, and

child welfare: An analysis of colonial and neocolonial discourses.” *International Indigenous Policy Journal* 7(2).

- McNutt, Louise Anne, Cristina Desemone, Erica DeNicola, Hassan El Chebib, Jessica A. Nadeau, Robert A. Bednarczyk, and Jana Shaw. 2016. “Affluence as a Predictor of Vaccine Refusal and Underimmunization in California Private Kindergartens.” *Vaccine* 34 (14): 1733–38. doi:10.1016/j.vaccine.2015.11.063.
- Mills, Charles W. 1997. *The Racial Contract*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Mohanty, Salini, Caroline M. Joyce, Paul L. Delamater, Nicola P. Klein, Daniel Salmon, Saad B. Omer, Saad B. & Alison M. Buttenheim. 2020. “Homeschooling parents in California: Attitudes, beliefs and behaviors associated with child’s vaccination status” *Vaccine* 38 (8): 1899-1905. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vaccine.2020.01.026>.
- Omer, Saad B., Daniel A. Salmon, Walter A. Orenstein, and Neal Halsey. 2009. “Vaccine Refusal, Mandatory Immunization, and the Risks of Vaccine-Preventable Diseases.” *The New England Journal of Medicine* 360: 1981-1988.
- Ontario Human Rights Commission. 2018. *Interrupted Childhoods: Over-Representation of Indigenous and Black children in Ontario Child Welfare*. Report. <https://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/interrupted-childhoods#4.3.%20Factors%20that%20may%20lead%20to%20discrimination> (Accessed July 20, 2022).
- Petrelli, F., C. M. Contratti, Elisabetta Tanzi, & Iolanda Grappasonni. 2018. "Vaccine hesitancy, a public health problem." *Ann Ig* 30 (2): 86-103. doi:10.7416/ai.2018.2200
- Phadke, Varun K, Robert A. Bednarczyk, Daniel A. Salmon, and Omer, Saad B. 2016. “Association Between Vaccine Refusal and Vaccine-Preventable Diseases in the United States: A Review of Measles and Pertussis.” *JAMA* 315 (11): 1149-1158. doi:10.1001/jama.2016.1353.
- Quinn, Sandra Crouse, Amelia Jamison, Vicki Freimuth, Ji An, Gregory R. Hancock and Don Musa. 2017. “Exploring racial influences on flu vaccine attitudes and behavior: Results of a national survey of White and African American adults.” *Vaccine* 35 (8): 1167-1174. doi:10.1016/j.vaccine.2016.12.046
- Rail, Geneviève; Luisa Molino, Caroline Fusco, Moss Edward Norman, LeAnne Petherick, Jessica Polzer, Fiona Moola, and Mary Bryson. 2018. “HPV vaccination discourses and the construction of "at-risk" girls.” *Canadian Journal of Public Health* 109 (5-6): 622–632. <https://doi.org/10.17269/s41997-018-0108-8>

- Reich, Jennifer A. 2014. "Neoliberal Mothering and Vaccine Refusal: Imagined Gated Communities and the Privilege of Choice." *Gender and Society* 28 (5): 679-704.
- . 2016a. "Of natural bodies and antibodies: Parents' vaccine refusal and the dichotomies of natural and artificial." *Social Science & Medicine* 157: 103-110.
- . 2016b. *Calling the Shots: Why Parents Reject Vaccines*. New York: New York University Press.
- . 2020. "'We are fierce, independent thinkers and intelligent': Social capital and stigma management among mothers who refuse vaccines." *Social Science & Medicine* 257: 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2018.10.027>
- Roberts, Dorothy E. 1993. "Racism and Patriarchy in the Meaning of Motherhood" *Penn Law Legal Scholarship Repository*. Paper 595.
- Sandel, Michael J. 2020. *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Schellenberg, Naomi and Alexander M. Crizzle. 2020. "Vaccine hesitancy among parents of preschoolers in Canada: a systematic literature review." *Canadian Journal of Public Health* 111: 562–584. <https://doi.org/10.17269/s41997-020-00390-7>
- Siddiqui, Mariam, Daniel A Salmon, and Saad B Omer. 2013. "Epidemiology of vaccine hesitancy in the United States." *Human Vaccines & Immunotherapeutics* 9 (12): 2643-2648. <https://doi.org/10.4161/hv.27243>
- Shotwell, Alexis. 2016. *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times*. USA: University of Minnesota Press.
- Skelton, Anthony and Lisa Forsberg. 2020. "Mandating Vaccination." In *The Ethics of Pandemics* edited by Meredith Celene Schwartz. 131-134.
- Smith, Philip J., Susan Y. Chu, and Lawrence E. Barker. 2004. "Children who have received no vaccines: who are they and where do they live?" *Pediatrics* 114(1): 187-95. 10.1542/peds.114.1.187. PMID: 15231927.
- Smith, Philip J., Sharon G. Humiston, Edgar K. Marcuse, Zhen Zhao, Christina G. Dorell, Cynthia Howes, and Beth Hibbs. 2011. "Parental Delay or Refusal of Vaccine Doses, Childhood Vaccination Coverage at 24 Months of Age, and the Health Belief Model." *Public Health Reports* 126: 135-146.
- Smith, Susan, Nina Sivertsen, Laruen Lines and Anita De Bellis. 2022. "Decision making in vaccine hesitant parents and pregnant women – An integrative

- review” *International Journal of Nursing Studies Advances*. 4.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnsa.2022.100062>
- Sobo, Elisa J. 2015. “Social Cultivation of Vaccine Refusal and Delay among Waldorf (Steiner) School Parents.” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 29: 381-399.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/maq.12214>
- . 2016. “What is herd immunity, and how does it relate to pediatric vaccination update? US parent perspectives.” *Social Science & Medicine* 165: 187-195.
- Srinivasan, Amia. 2021. *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century*. First American edition. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Sullivan, Shannon and Nancy Tuana. 2007. *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*. Edited by Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Swaney, Sharon Elizabeth, and Sharyn Burns. 2019. “Exploring Reasons for Vaccine-Hesitancy Among Higher-SES Parents in Perth, Western Australia.” *Health Promotion Journal of Australia* 30 (2): 143–52.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/hpja.190>.
- Thompson, Alison. 2013. “Human Papilloma Virus, Vaccination and Social Justice: An Analysis of a Canadian School-Based Vaccine Program.” *Public Health Ethics* 6(1): 11-20.
- WHO. 2014. “Report of the SAGE Working Group on Vaccine Hesitancy”  
[http://www.who.int/immunization/sage/meetings/2014/october/1\\_Report\\_WORKING\\_GROUP\\_vaccine\\_hesitancy\\_final.pdf](http://www.who.int/immunization/sage/meetings/2014/october/1_Report_WORKING_GROUP_vaccine_hesitancy_final.pdf)
- WHO. 2019. “Ten threats to global health in 2019” <https://www.who.int/news-room/spotlight/ten-threats-to-global-health-in-2019> (Accessed September 27, 2022).
- Wilson, Yolonda. 2022. “Is Trust Enough? Anti-Black Racism and the Perception of Black Vaccine ‘Hesitancy’.” *Hastings Center Report* 52 (2): S12– S17. DOI: 10.1002/hast.1361
- Yang, Tony Y., Paul L. Delamater, Timothy F. Leslie, and Michelle. M Mello. 2016. “Sociodemographic Predictors of Vaccination Exemptions on the Basis of Personal Belief in California.” *American Journal of Public Health* 106 (1): 172–177. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2015.302926>

## Conclusion

In the introduction to this dissertation, I promised to develop an account of privilege and apply it to theoretical and practical issues in the areas of feminist philosophy and biomedical ethics. I have accomplished these tasks in the three chapters of this dissertation.

In chapter one, I explored some philosophical literature on privilege and identified some issues with existing accounts of privilege (Bailey 1998; Ivy and Sennet 2017). First, I argued that Alison Bailey's account of privilege as being always advantageous was too strong. In response to Bailey, I gave evidence that privilege can, in some instances, harm the people who have it. A second issue with the philosophical accounts of privilege I investigated related to the vague descriptions of what privilege includes. To overcome this issue, I argued that privilege includes not only the possession of tangible resources but also the possession of options to do certain things or be a certain way. I articulated my account of privilege as follows:

Privilege is generally desirable, but unearned, assets or properties which are conferred systematically to members of dominant social groups, where these assets or properties include both tangible resources and options to do certain things or be a certain way.

This account, I explained, offers friendly amendments to the previous accounts of privilege given in the philosophical literature. Importantly, I showed that my account allows us to overcome the issues existing in previous accounts, while strengthening our understanding of what, exactly, privilege involves.

In chapter two, I investigated how strong substantive and constitutive accounts of relational autonomy regard agents who are relatively privileged. There, I built on recent criticisms of strong substantive accounts of relational autonomy (Wenner 2020; Khader

2020). The main point of these criticisms is that strong substantive accounts generate perverse conclusions: that either the oppressed will be non-autonomous simply because they are oppressed or that no one at all would count as autonomous. Additionally, critics argue that relational autonomy might be poorly suited to fulfill feminist goals, which include combatting oppression and explaining how oppression or privilege might influence an agent's autonomy.

I employed my account of privilege from chapter one to strengthen some of the criticisms against strong substantive accounts of relational autonomy. I argued defenders of strong substantive accounts and their critics have little to say about how these views of autonomy regard relatively privileged agents. I showed how, when we consider how these accounts conceive of the autonomy of relatively privileged agents, we arrive again at the perverse conclusions of strong substantive accounts previously identified by critics. This strengthens the arguments against strong substantive accounts, as I showed they will generate perverse conclusions about a variety of agents.

To overcome the issues with strong substantive accounts of relational autonomy, I ultimately argued an alternative account was needed. I agreed with critics that feminists should abandon the strong substantive element of relational autonomy. I argued that what is needed in an alternative account is greater room for nuance in terms of understanding how oppression and privilege can influence an agent's autonomy, as well as an explanation for how such an account can avoid the perverse conclusions. I suggested that feminists interested in maintaining an explicitly relational account of autonomy will be better served by Andrea Westlund's (2003; 2009) dialogical account of relational autonomy, which is constitutive but procedural in nature. I showed how Westlund's account can avoid the

perverse conclusions generated by strong substantive accounts. I also explained how her account provides a more nuanced understanding of autonomy. I showed that her view can explain the influences of oppression or privilege on autonomy. This allows her account to achieve the second goal of relational autonomy. However, I ended by suggesting that feminists might not be able to use autonomy alone as a concept to combat oppression. Feminists will need to employ other concepts to achieve the first goal.

In chapter three, I applied my conception of privilege to the case of vaccine hesitancy. There, I provided an overview of research by Jennifer Reich (2014; 2016a; 2016b; 2020), who suggests that a proportion of the parents who choose to delay or refuse vaccines on behalf of their children are privileged. I identified some issues with her research, namely, that it does not provide an adequate understanding of what privilege is. She seems to define it as something that confers tangible resources to parents. I argued this account of privilege is incomplete. I supplemented her work with my account of privilege from chapter one. I argued my account has two benefits when applied to Reich's work. First, it connects privilege to systems of power, which Reich's analysis did not do. Second, my account of privilege moves us beyond thinking about privilege as conferring only resources. I argued my account, which holds members of dominant social groups can also be conferred with unique options to do certain things or be a certain way, captures additional aspects of the privilege some vaccine hesitant parents have. The additional forms of parents' privilege that emerge, include: 1) the expectation that they will be exempt from sanctions for non-compliance with vaccine policies, 2) a sense of entitlement to choose to delay or refuse vaccines, and 3) an ability to free ride and overlook the effects of one's free riding.

In addition to supplementing Reich's work with my account of privilege, I argued that privilege can be a useful lens through which we can view some parents' reasons for delaying or refusing vaccines. Three common reasons for parents' delay or refusal of vaccines include appeals to individual parental rights, beliefs about purity, and lack of trust in medical institutions. I argued that it is possible for parents' relative privilege to influence each of these reasons, sometimes in ways that make it easier for parents to adopt these ways of thinking. I ended my discussion in chapter one by considering the implications of my analysis on policies that aim to address vaccine hesitancy. I suggested that my arguments will support vaccine mandates and the elimination of non-medical vaccine exemptions. Overall, I showed that the application of my account of privilege from chapter one strengthened existing research on privilege in the context of vaccine hesitancy and that my account will be a useful theoretical tool for future research on this issue.

Having summarized the chapters of this dissertation, I want to focus on future questions that I am interested in investigating, ones that are related to aspects of my dissertation research.

In relation to my first chapter, I hope to explore more examples of options conferred by privilege to members of dominant social groups. Although there are, potentially, an endless number of options conferred by privilege, I think it will be helpful to explore some further examples. I think exploring some further examples of options conferred by privilege might potentially allow us to categorize these options into certain types.

Another area of investigation I am interested in pursuing, related to the first chapter, is how the ignorance that is sometimes generated by privilege impacts moral responsibility. In particular, I am interested in clarifying what the moral responsibilities of relatively

privileged agents are, especially in terms of addressing their own privilege. If we say that those with privilege are sometimes ignorant in unique ways, how does this ignorance affect whether we think agents have certain kinds of moral responsibility to address their privilege? Can be responsible for addressing their privilege if they are ignorant of it? My intuition is that the privileged might still have certain kinds of responsibility for addressing their privilege, and that ignorance of privilege might not be a sufficient excuse to remove such a responsibility. But this will require further research and investigation.

There are further areas of investigation I am interested in pursuing which draw on my work in the second chapter. Building on my interest in moral responsibility and privilege, I hope to investigate the relationship between agency, autonomy, and moral responsibility, especially in the context of feminist literature on relational autonomy. Autonomy has potential implications for how we think about moral responsibility (including, potentially, whether we can be ascribed moral responsibility at all). The relationship between autonomy and moral responsibility is a complex and sprawling one in the literature, so I did not have the time or space to explore it in much detail in this dissertation. But I hope to explore this relationship in the future while focusing on the responsibility of relatively privileged agents.

I am also interested in continuing to explore, and defend, Westlund's dialogical account of relational autonomy. I am interested in whether it might better account for how agents might change their preferences, which may be especially relevant in cases where those preferences may be problematic from a feminist perspective. This takes up an interesting point made by Amia Srinivasan on sexual desires and preferences on "whether there is a duty to transfigure, as best we can, our desires" (2021, 90), especially in cases

where our desires are problematic or even harmful. I am interested in investigating how, exactly, people might challenge and change their own desires. I think that Westlund's account of dialogical answerability might be relevant here, given its requirement that agents be answerable to critical perspectives of others. A question for future investigation, then, is if autonomous agents are ones who have a disposition to answer for their action-guiding commitments (including their preferences and desires), could this be a disposition that could help agents transfigure their desires?

Building on some of the themes explored in chapter three, I am interested in investigating the effects privilege may have on solidarity. Solidarity, some have argued, is a moral sensibility integral to bioethics and public health ethics (Jennings and Dawson 2015; see also Dawson and Verweij 2012; Krishnamurthy 2013). Feminist bioethicists, too, have argued that a framework of public health ethics should build on notions of relational solidarity (Baylis et al 2008; Sherwin and Stockdale 2017). My future work will engage in debates in the literature on how we ought to understand solidarity in the context of bioethics. I am interested in exploring how privilege may present challenges to achieving or acting in solidarity, especially in the context of public health policies.

Overall, I think feminist philosophy and its sub-divisions, including that of feminist bioethics, will benefit from greater discussion of privilege. This is especially important if we take feminist philosophy to task in achieving the goal of eradicating unjust systems of power and the various forms of oppression generate. But, as I argued in the introduction to this dissertation, privilege is also generated by unjust systems of power. So, if feminists want to eradicate these unjust systems, they should seek to understand and address not only oppression, but also privilege.

Further investigations into the effects of privilege will be helpful for understanding privilege on a deeper level. Additionally, feminists should, I think, examine whether our theoretical tools will be helpful for understanding and addressing privilege. This was the kind of investigation I pursued in chapter two, where I analyzed how relational accounts of autonomy treat privileged agents. There, I suggested, we might need alternative conceptions of that theoretical tool if we want to achieve feminist goals. It is possible that we might have to revise other feminist concepts if we want them to address privilege. In addition to re-examining whether and how our concepts might be helpful in addressing privilege, feminists should pay close attention to how privilege appears in the world and how it might be relevant to practical issues feminists are interested in addressing.

## Works Cited

- Bailey, Alison. 1998. "Privilege: Expanding on Marilyn Frye's "Oppression"." *Journal of Social Philosophy*. 29 (3): 104-119.
- Baylis, Francoise; Nuala P. Kenny and Susan Sherwin. 2008. "A Relational Account of Public Health Ethics." *Public Health Ethics* 1 (3): 196-209.
- Dawson, Angus and Marcel Verweij. 2012. "Solidarity: A Moral Concept in Need of Clarification." *Public Health Ethics* 5 (1): 1-5.
- Ivy, Veronica [Rachel McKinnon] and Adam Sennet. 2017. "On the Nature of the Political Concept of Privilege." *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 25 (4): 487-507.
- Jennings, Bruce and Angus Dawson. 2015. "Solidarity In the Moral Imagination of Bioethics." *Hastings Centre Report* 45 (5): 31-38. DOI: 10.1002/hast.490.
- Khader, Serene J. 2020. "The Feminist Case Against Relational Autonomy." *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 17 (5): 499-526.
- Krishnamurthy, Meena. 2013. "Political Solidarity, Justice and Public Health." *Public Health Ethics* 6 (2): 129-141.
- Reich, Jennifer A. 2014. "Neoliberal Mothering and Vaccine Refusal: Imagined Gated Communities and the Privilege of Choice." *Gender and Society* 28(5): 679-704.
- . 2016a. "Of natural bodies and antibodies: Parents' vaccine refusal and the dichotomies of natural and artificial." *Social Science & Medicine* 157: 103-110.
- . 2016b. *Calling the Shots: Why Parents Reject Vaccines*. New York: New York University Press.
- . 2020. "'We are fierce, independent thinkers and intelligent': Social capital and stigma management among mothers who refuse vaccines." *Social Science & Medicine* 257: 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2018.10.027>
- Sherwin, Susan and Katie Stockdale. 2017. "Whither Bioethics Now?: The Promise of Relational Theory." *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics*. 10(1): 7-29.
- Srinivasan, Amia. 2021. *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century*. First American edition. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

- Wenner, Danielle M. 2020. "Nondomination and the Limits of Relational Autonomy." *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics* 13 (2): 28–48.  
<https://doi.org/10.3138/ijfab.13.2.2020-01-08>.
- Westlund, Andrea S. 2003. "Selflessness and Responsibility for Self: Is Deference Compatible with Autonomy?" *The Philosophical Review* 112 (4): 483-523.
- . 2009. "Rethinking Relational Autonomy." *Hypatia* 24 (4): 26-49.

## Curriculum Vitae

**Nicole Fice**

- Education**      **Ph.D. Candidate, Philosophy**, Western University, 2016-Present  
Supervisor: Dr. Anthony Skelton
- M.A., Philosophy**, Western University, 2015-2016  
Research Project Title: Harm and Vaccine Hesitancy  
Supervisor: Dr. Carolyn McLeod
- B.A. Honours, Philosophy**, Trent University, 2011-2015  
Emphasis in Applied Ethics, Minor in Politics  
President's Honour Roll
- AOS**                      Feminist philosophy, biomedical ethics, normative ethics
- AOC**                      Social and political philosophy, philosophy of sex and gender, philosophy of love and friendship
- Academic Appointments**      Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Trent University (2022-Present)
- Lecturer, Department of Philosophy, Huron University College, Western University (2020-2021)
- Publications**      **Book Chapters:**  
Fice, Nicole. Forthcoming November 2022. "I will never, ever turn my back on people who need me": Repairing the World through Care" *Avatar: The Last Airbender and Philosophy*. Edited by Helen De Cruz and Johan De Smedt. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Reports:**  
McLeod, Carolyn; Lorraine Davies; **Nicole Fice**; Leona Bruijns; Emily Cichocki; Hale Doguoglu; Heather Stewart; Austin Horn; Jaclyn Rekis; Tara Filipovich. 2019. "Time to Attach: An Argument in Favour of EI Attachment Benefits." Produced for Adopt4Life: Ontario's Adoptive Parents Association and the Adoption Council of Canada. <https://www.adopt4life.com/tta/final-report/>
- Blog Posts:**  
Leona Bruijns & **Nicole Fice**. 2019. "Time to Attach: New Study Supports Attachment Leave" in *Focus on Adoption*, Magazine of BC Adoption Association. <https://www.bcadoption.com/resources/articles/time-attach-new-study-supports-attachment-leave>

**Nicole Fice;** Cory E. Goldstein, & Austin R. Horn. 2017. “Forgotten role of reproductive justice in Zika crisis” in *Western News*. 53(3).

**Nicole Fice;** Cory E. Goldstein, & Austin R. Horn. 2016. “Zika: An Epidemic or an Issue of Reproductive Justice?” for *Rotman Institute of Philosophy Blog*. <https://www.rotman.uwo.ca/zika-an-epidemic-or-an-issue-of-reproductive-justice/>

**Scholarships & Awards**

Donchin and Holmes Emerging Scholar Prize, Feminist Approaches to Bioethics Network, 2020, Value: \$250.00 USD

Ontario Graduate Scholarship (OGS), 2019 – 2020, Value: \$15,000.00  
Western University

Ontario Graduate Scholarship (OGS), 2018 – 2019, Value: \$15,000.00  
Western University

Lynn Lionel Scott Fellowship, 2018, Value: \$750.00  
Western University

Ontario Graduate Scholarship (OGS), 2017 – 2018, Value: \$15,000.00  
Western University

Lynn Lionel Scott Fellowship, 2017, Value: \$915.00  
Western University

Dean’s Entrance Scholarship, 2016, Value: \$2,000.00  
Western University

Chair’s Entrance Scholarship, 2015, Value: \$1,000.00  
Western University

Sophia Prize in Philosophy, 2015, Value: \$100.00  
Trent University

**Additional Academic Employment**

**Graduate Student Program Instructor**, Centre for Teaching and Learning  
Western University, June 2018-May 2021

**Summer Student Teaching Intern**, Department of Philosophy  
Western University, June 2020-September 2020

**Research Assistant**, Department of Philosophy  
Western University, January 2018-September 2019

- Project: “Time to Attach”, Principal Investigator: Dr. Carolyn McLeod.

**Graduate Student Assistant**, Department of Women's Studies and Feminist Research

Western University, February 2017-September 2017

- Project: "Seen but not 'Herd': A Critical Discourse Analysis of Vaccine Hesitancy", Principal Investigator: Dr. Jessica Polzer

**Academic Presentations**

"Privilege as a Relational Concept in Public Health Ethics", Feminist Approaches to Bioethics (FAB) Congress, June 2020, Online

"Relational Perspectives on Vaccine Hesitancy", Shaping A More Just Bioethics: A Celebration of the Work of Susan Sherwin, May 2018, Halifax, NS

"Relational Perspectives on Vaccine Hesitancy", York's Philosophy Graduate Student Association, Bioethics and Applied Philosophy Conference, April 2018, York University, Toronto, ON

"Relational Perspectives on Vaccine Hesitancy", Philosophy Graduate Student Association Colloquium Series, April 2018  
Western University, London, ON

"Health Care Inequalities Faced by Indigenous Peoples in Canada", Feminist Approaches to Bioethics (FAB) International Congress, May 2016, Edinburgh, UK

"Kant's Good Will: Goodness, Rationality, and Happiness", Trent University Philosophy Society Student Symposium, March 2014,  
Trent University, Peterborough, ON