

Reflections on the Appropriate Use of Unjustly Conferred Privilege

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Abstract: What ought beneficiaries of injustice to do with the privileges unjustly conferred upon them? This article examines how those who have been privileged as a consequence of injustice can best contribute to struggles for justice. In particular, I ask whether we ought to renounce privileges which have been unjustly conferred, or whether it may be better to use such privileges in ways that help bring about justice. The article engages—in particular with feminist literature on the topic of privilege, building on arguments provided in this literature to argue that in many cases the best contribution the privileged can make to struggles for justice, is to use unjustly conferred privileges in a way that ultimately undermines the unjust systems and structures that conferred them. I tentatively outline some ways in which the privileged can develop the sensibilities which will allow them to use their privilege in this way.

Keywords: beneficiaries of injustice, inequality, justice, oppression, privilege

I, like many academics working on issues related to poverty and injustice, have often experienced a discomforting sense of tension between my own privilege and my commitments to thinking, writing and teaching about justice. I attend conferences on poverty where conference delegates sit in air-conditioned rooms, sipping bottled water and struggling to concentrate on the topic at hand as our full stomachs digest the rich conference lunch we have just eaten. I employ a woman to help me take care of my children so that I may have time to write about justice, but I pay her far less than I get paid to write and teach about the inequalities which characterise our lives. I sip coffee while preparing a lecture on the injustices of the global trade regime which helped make that coffee cheap and easily available to me. The feelings of tension that such situations evoke in me have pushed me to wonder about the appropriateness of writing about injustice while benefiting from it and to ask whether I can reconcile my life of relative privilege with my commitments to justice.

These kinds of concerns have surfaced in different ways in much recent literature on justice, particularly in the reflections of some feminists who, in the words of Sonia Kruks, 'are concerned with privilege less as a matter of

