

This, the 4th in an unbroken Thinksheet series on privilege, is some yes/no notes on privilege as good/bad news depending on how one uses one's privilege(s). The idea overarching all four is the need to nuance the concept if we're to use it more humanly and less screechingly. To get at this goal, I'm deliberately saying some things that may make some screechers screech louder--but I hope also think deeper broader.

1. VICARIOUS PRIVILEGING: I'm capable of behaving so as to privilege someone in my stead--ie, advantaging the other person instead of myself. Is.53, Jesus, prophets-martyrs-saints. Sometimes I've even done it, always to an inner satisfaction elsehow impossible for me. The satisfaction proportionate to the self-sacrifice. Parent to child. Pastor to parishioner. Teacher to student. Common human experience, without which the world would be a far worse place than it is....Yes, leave room for the neurotic excess: Some can't enjoy their advantages, have to renounce them, give them to others. But the narcissistic neurosis, the reverse compulsive condition, is far more prevalent in our species.

2. HONORING THE ANCESTORS BY ENJOYING YOUR PRIVILEGES: Parents sacrifice so their chn. and chn.'s chn. "can have it better." Certainly I have more privileges than did my parents or their parents, and it was their intentions that I so have--so I'm enjoying them not only for myself but also for them, and they are transgenerationally vicariously enjoying these privileges they "sweat for" in me. ^{187/s} PROBLEM: This understanding requires that one escape from the current Am. individualistic skin-bag ("the individual" as focus and locus of all value) into the "long body" of genetic flow: I am "Elliott-Volk" as truly as I am "Willis Elliott" (and "Willis Elliott" as well as "Willis Elliott II"). Let's call this diachronic privilege; it teaches me my duty not to let other human beings interfere with my enjoyment of my privileges in fulfilment of my ancestors' labors (eg, S.African whites should not let S.African blacks interfere with their enjoyment of their white privileges--see, I told you you'd be screeching!). The obscene overextension of this is in the statement of France's last king, "God has (dynastically) given us the kingdom, let us enjoy it."....This value must be in tension with the dynamic-continuous adjustment of one's privileges synchronically, ie in relation to the needs/privileges of others. My friends have kind words for the synchronic and dirty words ("elitist," "racist," eg) for the diachronic. Afrikaans theologians have developed the diachronic (and it's an implication of Robt. Bellah et al, HABITS OF THE HEART), but I've seen no Afrikaans theology in the American press, secular or religious: verboten, as "undemocratic" and "unChristian.".... Justice is multigenerational (a child justly treating the ancestors by fulfilling their dreams) as well as societal (that same child facing, with all chn., the issues of justice for all)....Pardon (!) a personal reference: My building & enjoying a massive-hardwood-frame house is a form of gratitude to and communion with my father, who was an executive in a hardwood lumber firm before he became a judge. He taught me to pet and thank God for great wood, and I pet and enjoy it for him, knowing how he'd revel to be in our house. Yep, mystical. And spiritual. And a privilege that, instead of oppressing-depriving others, fostered their prosperity: 100s of workers benefited.

3. "PRIVILEGED INFORMATION" is often violated in both private and public life. The privilege of access to such information, eg the religious confessional, is abused. "Leakers" in government seek to advantage themselves by violating pledged secrecy. As honor declines, so does trust, and proper communication is hampered by fear and suspicion. A "Watergate" is only an inflated instance, dramatic because combining

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multiple violations both of privilege of office and of privilege of information.

4. INHERITED/REFLECTED/ACQUIRED PRESTIGE is a privilege powerful to use & easy to abuse. You're born (say, a Rockefeller) to fame and/or fortune; or you associate yourself with a prestigious person (as Boswell with Johnson, or Roy Cohn with the infamous Sen. McCarthy) or movement or cause or institution (eg, a prestigious college), and bask in reflected light; or you take advantage of your opportunities to become "self-made," prominent enough in your field so the public remarks "how far you've come." Commonly, all three of these worldly glories halo one public person, tripling the temptation to abuse the prestige-privilege. Martin Luther King, Jr., had some of all three glories; many have only the second; Lincoln & Billy Graham, only the third. Add to all this a privilege overlay variously called "the breaks," "luck," "being the right person at the right time at the right place," and "God opened the door." Currently, one hears this retort to the egalitarian complaint against all this: "Whoever told you life was fair?" Some are given and get more, and need Jesus' caution "To whom much is given, much will be required." I'm for "equal-opportunity legislation" but against the false equation of democracy with levelerism, which teaches that privilege is inherently evil. New social starts will, as Toqueville noted, use leveler rhetoric (and so there's a lot of it in the Bible, in early French socialism, and in Marxist literature); but social reality, even at the early stages of even a leveler movement, is not leveleristic--again, pace Toqueville. Some are beginning to study this dual phenomenon in the lengthening history of C.&S.American "base communities.".... Incalling for the need to nuance "privilege," I must condemn a form of catharism that simplistically, unrealistically, unfairly elevates "equality" and denigrates "privilege." Some of this mispreaching--as Robertson points out in THE DISPOSSESSED--is by the highly privileged who are highly enjoying their high privileges and hypocritically compensate their bad conscience by preaching (self-flagellation?) against privilege and trying to make me feel guilty so as to confirm their game. Bad faith, bad grace, bad sociology, bay psychology, even bad politics. Here the Lord's Prayer may lead to balance, realism, honesty, even unity.

5. OBSESSION WITH individual/collective SELF--America's most prevalent disease--inclines to the abuse of privileges by (Luther) "incurvature." This mentality is vulnerable to every idolatry-addiction-compulsion-fad-fashion-movement-"spirituality"-"therapy." Little wonder that "the infinite value of the individual" has become an article of belief in and out of the churches (I read the phrase just today, 16Aug86, in a fundamentalist attack against abortion). The worship of the human being is a logical projection from self-obsession. To preach against either end of this "logic" is felt as an attack against the other end, a rejection of compassion, and a blasphemous attack on "Christianity"! I think drugs serious enough to call for capital punishment of pushers, and my friends practically read me out of the church! Emotionally there's no response difference between a primitive and a sophisticated taboo; morally there's a difference: the latter is more arrogant.

6. It's a God-given privilege to live in the BIOSPHERE, and we humans are multifariously abusing the privilege. The sense of privilege, with attendant gratitude, is one motivation for environmental action.... "PRIVILEGED ACCESS" might come to be called Deaverism; then there's the PACs....The argument from IMAGINED FUTURE PRIVILEGE. Since the majority eventually rules (so goes this belief), why not now (eg, Arabs in the Mideast and blacks in S.Africa)? You might call it arithmetic racism. Countering is another claim, viz we-got--here-first (Jews in "Palestine," whites in S.Africa): ANCESTRAL-LAND PRIVILEGE.