UNDERSTANDING WHAT IT’S LIKE TO BE (DIS)PRIVILEGED

BY

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Abstract: Can a person privileged in some respect understand what it is like to be disprivileged in that respect? Some say yes; some say no. I argue that both positions are correct, because ‘understand what it is like to be disprivileged’ is ambiguous. Sometimes, it means grasp of the character of particular experiences of disprivileged people. Privileged people can achieve this. Sometimes, it means grasp of the general character shared by experiences of disprivileged people. Privileged people cannot achieve this. However, there is a general kind of understanding that they can achieve: understanding of why individual experiences have their character, in relation to privilege and disprivilege. This understanding is a skill, not knowledge. It is difficult and discomforting for the privileged to acquire and is easily conflated with knowledge of general experiential character. Distinguishing and characterizing these kinds of understanding clarifies whether, and how, the privileged might understand what it is like to be disprivileged.

1. Introduction

Can a person privileged in some respect understand what it is like to be disprivileged in that respect? Various voices suggest that they can. To take one example, the Alabama tourist department suggests that people exploring the state’s history of civil rights struggles visit the Rosa Parks Museum in Montgomery, in order to ‘feel what it was like to be arrested for not moving to the back of the bus.’

To take another, Barack Obama (2007) repeatedly emphasizes the importance of such understanding:
We need somebody who’s got the heart – the empathy – to recognize what it’s like to be a young teenage mom. The empathy to understand what it’s like to be poor or African American or gay or disabled or old – and that’s the criteria by which I’ll be selecting my judges.

To take a third, María Lugones (1987) argues that we can imaginatively travel to the ‘worlds’ of others, that doing so ‘is a way of identifying with them’, and that this is so ‘because by travelling to their “world” we can understand what it is to be them’ (p. 17).³ And to take a fourth, George Yancy (2018, p. 93) urges his ‘white reader’ to ‘enter my world, our world, and try to see yourself as I/we see you’.

Yet, elsewhere, Yancy (2016)⁴ is dubious about whether White people’s imaginations can take them into Black worlds:⁵

[Y]ou do not need to be a bat to fail to understand what it is like to be Black or a person of color. Being white in America will do the trick. … I do not think that I’m underestimating the extent to which white people cannot or do not empathize with Black people.

Similarly, Ijeoma Oluo (2018, pp. 35–38) recounts an excruciating conversation in which she explains to her White mother, who raised two Black children, that she has not thereby acquired the ability to understand ‘being an actual black person who experiences the full force of a white supremacist society firsthand’. And L. A. Paul (2014) claims that ‘even small differences … in experiences between people can prevent us from knowing what it is like to be a different kind of person’ (p. 7). The idea that the privileged cannot or do not understand what it’s like to be disprivileged is expressed as frequently as the idea that they can.⁶

There is a tension here, if not outright contradiction. White people should try to understand what it is like to be Black; White people cannot understand what it is like to be Black. Privileged people should try to understand; privileged people cannot do so.

Perhaps one claim or the other is simply wrong. But I think both are right. By elaborating distinct ways in which the privileged might understand what it is like to be disprivileged, we can explain how it is that they both can and cannot understand.

I suggest that there are two things aptly called ‘understanding what it is like’ that the privileged can successfully pursue. The first is comprehension of what it is like to have a particular experience. In this sense, understanding is an outcome: one understands what an experience is like when one grasps its distinctive feel or ‘phenomenal character’.⁷ The second is an understanding of why the feel of some particular experience is caused and justified by a person’s privilege or disprivilege. In this sense, understanding is a skill: one understands when one is able to use, manipulate and apply knowledge of experiences’ characters and causes. That both kinds of understanding are achievable explains why the privileged are encouraged to pursue
understanding in both particular and general terms: to understand what it is like to have particular experiences and also to understand what it is like to be disprivileged generally. And it explains why Obama and Lugones are right: the privileged can understand.

I also suggest that there is a third kind of understanding that the privileged cannot successfully pursue. One might interpret ‘understanding what it’s like to be Black’ (for example) as meaning a grasp of a generalized phenomenal character, shared by and abstracted from particular experiences of Black people. This sense of understanding is similar to the first: it is a putative outcome of an epistemic process. One might then think that, by repeatedly grasping particular experiences, one will thereby achieve a grasp of this generalized feel. By imagining exemplar experiences, such as being arrested for sitting in the wrong place on a bus, one will come to understand what it is like to be Black. This is a mistake, because there is no route from imagining particular experiences to grasp of a generalized phenomenal character. This explains why Yancy and Paul are also right: the privileged cannot understand.

I further suggest that the privileged systematically, if not consciously, confuse this third kind of understanding with the second kind. They do so because achieving the second kind of understanding is difficult and disconcerting. It is difficult because it involves comprehensive mastery of the relations between experience and privilege. It is disconcerting because it makes salient unwelcome truths about the relations between their own experiences and their privilege. By contrast, the third kind of understanding appears less difficult to achieve and brings little discomfort. Moreover, the slippery language of understanding, imagination and empathy allows the privileged to sincerely perpetuate the confusion. This explains why the privileged often sincerely believe they have achieved generalized understanding when they have not.

My argument for these suggestions is something like an inference to the best explanation, premised on the belief that all of the quotations earlier tend to the truth, despite the tensions among them. The explanation is an elaboration of the thoughts expressed in the quotations; in particular, fuller, more precise characterizations of the notions of understanding invoked in them. The plausibility of the explanation – the evidence for it – depends on whether the characterizations of the various kinds of understanding are plausible, whether so characterized they are plausibly the kinds of understanding at issue and whether so characterized they plausibly explain the tensions.

I begin with examination of imaginative identification with particular experiences, which I argue is both possible and valuable (Section 2). I then argue that there is no route from such imaginings to a generalized understanding of what it is like to be disprivileged (Section 3). The discussion could stop there, with the conclusion that people talking of a generalized understanding are simply wrong to do so. However, ideas manifest in several
congruent literatures suggest a profile of what genuine generalized understanding might be (Section 4). I then offer a characterization of a cognitive skill typified by mastery of relations between experience and (dis)privilege, based on Alison Hills’ account of understanding why (Section 5), and argue that the skill so characterized matches the profile of genuine generalized understanding (Section 6). Finally, I discuss briefly the value of pursuing such understanding (Section 7).

It will be helpful to immediately stipulate some terminology. A thematic point is that ambiguity in the phrase ‘understanding what it’s like’ encourages confusion among various epistemic achievements. Referring to any or all such achievements as ‘understanding’ perpetuates confusion. Accordingly, I will call grasping the first-personal feel of experiences imaginative identification, grasping a generalized experiential feel generalized identification and grasping the relations between experience and privilege experiential mastery. The terminology is unlovely but also unambiguous.

Preliminary remarks are also required concerning ‘the privileged’. ‘Privilege’ refers to the many and various ways in which societies are structured in favour of members of one group. Race, gender, class, sexual orientation and disability are examples. This list is not exhaustive, and privilege works differently in each case. For example, disability leads to discrimination in ways that are complex, multiple and unlike the ways in which homosexuality does so. My focus is on race, with occasional mentions of gender. I hope that much of what I say is at least partially applicable to other types of privilege, but I cannot be more comprehensive. The privileged are those favoured in some respect in a certain society; the disprivileged are those disfavoured. One may be disprivileged in some respects and privileged in others, but the archetypal privileged person is a straight, able-bodied, Western, White, cis-gendered, middle-class man.

I am only concerned with privileged people who are apparently well disposed to engagement with the experiences of disprivileged people and to the pursuit of ameliorative actions: those who might aspire to being ‘allies’. There are, no doubt, many unwilling privileged people, with little wish to sincerely engage with the disprivileged, still less to examine their own privilege. There are also, no doubt, numerous privileged people who actively wish to preserve their privilege. Nothing much that I say addresses the problems of how to deal with such people.

2. Imaginative identification

The phrase ‘understand what it’s like to be …’ evokes the first-personal feel of experience – how things seem, phenomenally, from a certain person’s point of view. All experiences, from the simple and mundane to the complex and extraordinary, have such phenomenal character. The complete
character of a complex experience might encompass various phenomenal elements: perceptual, affective, emotional and cognitive. The ability to grasp what other people’s experiences are like is important, perhaps fundamental, to social existence. As Janine Jones (2004) puts it, while discussing White Americans who fail to understand the experiences of African Americans, one puzzle of their failure is that it calls on ‘a type of understanding … that most ‘normally’ constituted human beings possess … [and is] necessary for navigating a world that includes more members than one’s self’ (pp. 65–66). We use this understanding for parsing others’ behaviour, comprehending their perspective, moral motivation and education, perhaps aesthetic appreciation.

This understanding is predicated on imagination. To understand what it is like to be somebody, you imagine what their experiences are like. To understand properly, you imagine being them: not just what their experiences are like, but what it is like for them to have those experiences. This is imaginative identification: putting yourself in the position of another person and feeling what their experiences are like from their point of view.

Imaginative identification is related to empathy, but what the relation is depends on what one takes empathy to be, and definitions of empathy are hotly contested. Some, as Karsten Stueber (2019) notes, conceptualize empathy broadly, as subsuming several capacities related to knowledge of others’ thought and feelings. Some conceptualize it more narrowly, often as effectively equivalent to imaginative identification. Amy Coplan (2011b), for example, characterizes empathy as ‘a complex, imaginative process through which an observer simulates another person’s situated psychological states while maintaining clear self-other differentiation’ and ‘pseudo-empathy’ as the less taxing project of imagining oneself in another’s situation (p. 40). When Obama and others invoke empathy, they are plausibly referring to this imaginative process in which one grasps the feel of another’s experience from their own perspective. I will call this ‘imaginative identification’ to avoid confusion with anything else ‘empathy’ might mean.

Coplan (2011a) argues that imaginative identification is ‘a form of experiential understanding’: it provides ‘knowledge of another person’s thoughts, feelings, and behavior’, and knowledge of what those experiences feel like for the other person (p. 17). If you successfully identify imaginatively with another person, you accurately grasp what their experience feels like and ipso facto come to know, to understand, what it is like to have that experience. You thereby acquire a partial grasp of what it is like to be them. Given this, and given that the capacity for imaginative identification is widely possessed and used, the privileged person asked to ‘understand what it’s like to be disprivilegged’ might reasonably take it that they are being asked to grasp the first-personal feel of experiences belonging to particular disprivileged people. To understand in this sense is to successfully reach
the end of an epistemic process: an understanding of what it is like is the outcome of the process, a piece of phenomenal knowledge.

Now, however confident one is that people can generally imaginatively identify with others, one might worry that identification of the privileged with the disprivileged is impossible, owing to doubts about whether they can manage the necessary shift of perspective. As Jones (2004) suggests, White people’s ‘empathy’ for African Americans is often deficient because they feel the right things for the wrong reasons: for example, they feel anger about the acquittal of Rodney King’s attackers because of the randomness of the justice system, rather than because of its structural racism (pp. 72–75). Similarly, a White person imagining themselves being scared of the police gains no insight into disprivileged experience; they need to imagine being scared of the police in virtue of being Black, and this requires the adoption of a different perspective to at least some degree. The imagining also needs to involve a relevant, realistic imagined experience.15 You can imagine being Napoleon, walking on the moon (Walton, 1990, p. 33), but such fantastical imaginings are of no help here. The imaginings of the privileged need grounding in the realities of the disprivileged.

Theoretical and practical doubts might thus be raised. Peter Goldie (2011) raises a theoretical doubt by arguing that entirely adopting the perspective of another is impossible; owing to the structural relation between thoughts and their origins in character and experience, one cannot adopt the ‘full-blooded … first-personal agency’ that another person has with respect to their thoughts (p. 303).16 A similar thought motivates Paul’s (2014, ch. 2) claim that small differences in experience undermine projects of understanding and more generally her central thesis that one cannot know what one’s preference structures will be like after an experience that transforms them. But a ‘full-blooded’ shift of perspective is not required for imaginative identification. As Paul (2017) herself says, for successful empathetic identification, ‘you don’t have to have had all the same experiences, but you have to somehow be able to “try on” the beliefs and attitudes … [of the other] by attempting, in some properly attenuated sense, to grasp [their] belief or emotional structure’ (p. 199).17 A privileged person trying to imagine what it’s like to have a particular experience in virtue of being a disprivileged person need not imagine being a disprivileged person in a full first-personal sense; imaginatively adopting the relevant aspects of their perspective suffices. Similarly, the experiences imagined need not be replete and accurate in every detail; a degree of verisimilitude in relevant respects is enough to get a grasp of what an experience is like.

So, theoretically, a partial grasp of disprivileged experience can allow the privileged insight into what it’s like to be disprivileged. But one might have doubts, premised on practicalities, that even a partial grasp is attainable. A privileged person needs to know something about what the experiences of disprivileged people are like in order to imagine them; in a society structured
by privilege, such knowledge might be hard for them to come by. As Charles Mills (2007) argues, part of the way in which privilege functions is by obscuring the lives of the disprivileged, such that the privileged are systematically deprived of contact with and knowledge about those lives. Without such contact and knowledge, it will be hard to achieve imaginative identification. As Yancy (2016)\textsuperscript{18} says:

\[O\text{ur culture (visual or not) requires Black people and people of color to empathize with white people. This is because it is necessary for Black people, for example, to have a kind of dual cognitive skill where we are forced to understand what goes on within the white world and what goes on within our own worlds. White people, can, for the most part, avoid our world, avoid Black children’s literature (the very few books out there dealing with Black children and their lives), avoid serious Black characters playing serious roles in movies.}

Yancy’s thought echoes W. E. B. Du Bois’ (1903) concepts of double consciousness and ‘second sight’, the ability afforded to African Americans to understand both the White and Black worlds of the USA and so to see themselves as they are seen in both worlds. The point is well taken, but this practical limitation on the ability of the privileged to imagine experiences of disprivilege is surely surmountable. White people can avoid Black worlds, but they can also choose not to; they can, with sufficient effort, engage with accounts of Black lives, products of Black cultures and so forth. Likewise, a man can imaginatively engage with women’s experiences, given sufficient effort to find out about them. Mills and Yancy are right that such knowledge of experience is not open to the view of the privileged, but they can uncover it all the same.

So, difficult though it may be, it is theoretically and practically possible for the privileged to imaginatively identify with experiences of the disprivileged. Furthermore, it is something they are often appropriately asked to do. If someone asks you to ‘try to understand what it’s like to be me’, a straightforward way to comply is to try to imaginatively identify with them. Similarly, when the privileged are asked to understand what it’s like to be disprivileged, they are sometimes being asked to imaginatively identify with particular experiences of disprivileged people. Jones (2004), for example, argues that White Americans could and should empathize properly with African Americans. One reason why imaginative identification is important is that it frequently motivates action. The privileged are more likely to act in solidarity with the disprivileged if they grasp what their experiences are like.\textsuperscript{19} Another reason is that identification requires closely attending to the person whose experiences you are trying to identify with; because the privileged frequently fail to attend, it is appropriate and important to encourage them to do so.

So it is sometimes legitimate for the privileged to respond to the request that they ‘understand what it’s like to be disprivileged’ by trying to
imaginatively identify with particular experiences of particular disprivileged people, such as being arrested for sitting in the wrong place on a bus. They try, thereby, to grasp the phenomenal characters of those experiences: successful grasp is successful understanding of what an experience feels like. But, sometimes, the request to ‘understand what it’s like’ invokes something more general than identification with individual experiences. When Obama talks about empathy, he talks of understanding what it is like to be ‘poor or African American or gay or disabled or old’: what it is like to be in some general category. I will later suggest a positive characterization of this generalized understanding, but I first wish to establish the negative conclusion that it does not derive from repeated imaginative identification.

3. Against generalized identification

‘Generalized identification’ is a grasp of the phenomenal character shared by (relevant) experiences of people belonging to some group. It is similar to imaginative identification in that it is an outcome of a process: one understands if one grasps this common phenomenal character. If generalized identification with people outside one’s own group(s) was attainable, it would likely be attained via repeated instances of imaginative identification. I do not have an apodictic argument to show that the privileged cannot attain generalized identification by this process, in part because it is unclear what exactly the target outcome is. But I will follow Simon Evnine (2008) by considering two ways to derive an account of ‘what it is like to be a K’ from individual experiences of K-type beings, where ‘K’ ranges over types of being that have phenomenal consciousness. Evnine is concerned with whether there is a way to derive such an account when Ks are kinds of creature, such as bats or humans. I am concerned with whether there is a way to derive an account when the Ks are kinds of people—Black people, women, disabled people and so on. But Evnine’s arguments are easily adapted to my ends. I will consider two methods of derivation he discusses: extrapolation and aggregation.

The method of extrapolation involves saying what, phenomenally, the various capacities or types of experience enjoyed by humans have in common (Evnine concentrates on perceptual capacities, while allowing that other capacities make phenomenal contributions to experience, p. 189). One would then extrapolate some general pattern of phenomenal character common to all, much as one can abstract from instances of red a general idea of redness. Besides the obscurity of the mechanism of extrapolation, there are two problems with this method. First, it is dubious that anything phenomenal that is really shared by all the human perceptual (and other) capacities is going to be something on which a rich, interesting conception of what it is like to be human might be founded. The candidate abstracta are too vague
and insubstantial. Second, while it is fairly plausible that one could extrapolate from ‘what it is likes’ of all the sensory modalities a description of things that they have in common – say, that they are directed towards objects – such a description will not be an account of ‘what it is like’ in the relevant sense; it will not be a phenomenally rich thing that one must experience in order to grasp (Evnine, 2008, pp. 191–194).

Parallel reasoning applies to kinds of disprivileged people. We might think that, in order to understand what it’s like to be Black (e.g.), White people should imaginatively identify with various particular experiences of individual Black people, extrapolate from those the relevant common factor(s) that they share and thus derive an understanding of what it is like in general to be Black. Set aside the worry that the mechanism of abstraction is obscure and also the worry that it might be difficult to identify the relevant common factor(s). Analogues of Evnine’s doubts remain. First, such experiences are complex and diverse, and so the few phenomenal factors that might be common to all of them will be too vague and abstract to constitute a satisfactory account of what it is like to be Black. Second, any substantial common factors that might be identified are likely to give a descriptive account of what it is like to be Black, not a phenomenally rich experiential kind. So it seems dubious that it is possible for the privileged to extrapolate a generalized understanding of what it is like to be disprivileged from repeated imaginings of disprivileged people’s experiences.

Evnine’s second candidate method of saying what it is like to be human is aggregation. Suppose we could say what each individual capacity is like: what it is like to see, hear, smell and so forth. Then ‘what it is like to be human’ would just be the aggregate of what all of those things are like. As Evnine (2008) points out, this apparently has the disagreeable consequence that (say) someone blind all their life would not know what it was like to be human (p. 195). The most anyone could know would be what it is like to be a creature with the sensory capacities they happen to have. The parallel of the strategy in the cases of kinds of people would be for the privileged to, say, imagine many individual experiences of various individual Black people and aggregate them. But this would not result in a general understanding of what it is like to be Black. Rather, if it resulted in anything, it would be a grasp of the accumulated experiences of some imaginary, disprivileged alter ego. Setting aside the metaphysical and moral qualms one might have about this idea, it is dubious that totally grasping what it is like to be one particular person, imaginary or not, furnishes a general understanding of what it is like to occupy a position of disprivilege. So it does not seem like the sort of understanding that might, possibly, be acquired via aggregation would be germane to the task at hand.

The conclusion Evnine draws from his arguments is ontological: we ought to be sceptical that there is anything that it is like to be a human, a bat or any type of creature – at least, anything that is the sort of generalized
phenomenal type that we might think talk of ‘what it is like to be a bat’ expresses. I am not sure that I want to draw the parallel ontological conclusion about kinds of people. Given that there are commonalities of experience among Black people, women and other groups of disprivileged people, it could be that there is something substantial that it is like to be a woman, or to be Black, in a suitably local sense. Plausibly, someone belonging to such a group thereby has a grasp of what it is like, in a general sense, to be a person in that group. But if they do have such a grasp, it is a product of extensive and ongoing lived experience. What the outsider needs is a way to achieve knowledge without experience: an epistemic shortcut. Extrapolation and aggregation are two prima facie plausible shortcuts, but it seems dubious that either works. They are shortcuts to the wrong destinations, or no destination at all. So I can demur from the ontological conclusion while accepting the epistemic one: whether or not there is an appropriate target of knowledge available, one that might be called ‘understanding’ of what it is like to be disprivileged, there is no obvious epistemic process that reliably or easily allows the privileged to hit that target.

4. What might generalized understanding be?

Given that generalized identification is, if not metaphysically impossible, an epistemically distant destination for the privileged, the tensions among the opening quotations could be explained simply: one side is just wrong. It is true, one might say, that the privileged cannot understand what it is like to be disprivileged in any general sense. The sceptics are correct; Obama and Lugones are wrong, or at best misleading. Though they talk about understanding in general terms, in terms of grasping ‘worlds’, they really ought to be talking about understanding in the limited, specific sense of identifying with individual experiences, for this is all that the privileged can achieve.

This simple explanation is too simple. A quick reason to think so is that those who say that the privileged can attain generalized understanding are not sloppy thinkers; it is unlikely that they are simply mistaken. A slow reason to think so is that considerations manifest in several contiguous literatures together suggest that there is a kind of generalized understanding that the privileged can and should work towards, and furthermore suggest some characteristics of that understanding. In the present section, I outline these suggestions and thereby sketch a profile of generalized understanding. In the next section, I explain experiential mastery. In Section 6, I claim that experiential mastery matches this profile and thus is plausibly what is meant when generalized understanding is invoked.

For the sake of dialectical tidiness, it would be pleasing if each characteristic were distinctly mooted in a self-contained body of literature. This is not
so. Rather, multiple characteristics are suggested in multiple overlapping literatures. So I will discuss in turn the suggestions apparent in literature on White fragility, on White ignorance and on White learning and the development of allies.

4.1. WHITE FRAGILITY

‘White fragility’, as described by Robin DiAngelo (2011), refers to White people’s defensiveness and disengagement when confronted with Whiteness and racism in ways that make them uncomfortable; when, for example, they are shown evidence that their perspective is as racialized as that of Black people, or challenged about the degree of their anti-racist commitment, or questioned about the depth of their understanding of race and racism (p. 57). Reactions might include emotional responses such as anger, behavioural responses such as arguing back, or physical responses such as literally walking away. Fragility is not the preserve of outright racists: rather, as Yancy (2017, ch. 7) argues, it is often displayed by people who think of themselves as ‘good whites’.

Fragility is a complex phenomenon and so does not have one cause or one solution. But I want to draw attention to three aspects of it. First: fragility often manifests when White people are challenged about the universality of their experience. As Reni Eddo-Lodge (2017, p. ix) says, discussing the ‘emotional disconnect’ that led her to stop talking to the ‘vast majority’ of White people about race:

They truly believe that the experiences of their life as a result of their skin colour can and should be universal. I just cannot engage with the bewilderment and the defensiveness as they try to grapple with the fact that not everyone experiences the world in the way that they do.

These White people take their experiences to be universal and normal and overlook the ways in which privilege grounds them. They do so owing at least in part to an ‘emotional disconnect’.

Second: one common White reaction to questions about privilege is to stress empathetic achievements. For example, David S. Owen (2015, p. 154) says:

Asking white people ‘How does it feel to be a problem?’ will result in a wide range of reactions from earnest expressions of empathy, to befuddlement, to failures to understand the coherence of the question, to expressions of guilt, and to outright hostility. Similarly, ventriloquizing a White reaction to the same question, Alison Bailey (2015, p. 38) says:

You can trust me! I’m on your side! I’m open-minded, fair, supportive, and empathetic. My heart is in the right place. I mean well. I’m innocent. I’m good! I’m a good white person! It’s all good! There is no problem here.
Third: DiAngelo (2011) suggests that fragility occurs in part because White people ‘have not had to build the cognitive or affective skills … that would allow for constructive engagement across racial divides’ (p. 57).

In relation to generalized understanding, the points are these. First, White people ought to develop a kind of generalized critical understanding of race and racism that includes both grasp of ‘the social and existential dynamics of what it means to be Black’ (Yancy, 2018, p. 82) and grasp of the fact that their own social position constitutes a racial perspective. Second, one way in which White people react to discomforting challenges regarding their lack of such understanding is to insist on their empathy. Third, such understanding has something to do with emotional connection and involves a skill that is both cognitive and affective. This all suggests that generalized understanding is connected to the feel of experiences, as imaginative identification is, but is distinct from imaginative identification insofar as it is general, insofar as it is reflexive or self-critical, and insofar as it is a skill, not an outcome of learning. Given that White people often do not have this understanding, it seems to be difficult to achieve. And given that they often talk about their empathy when challenged about this, it seems that generalized understanding is liable to be confused with something like generalized empathy or identification.

4.2. WHITE IGNORANCE

‘White ignorance’ does not just refer to lack(s) of knowledge on the part of White people. Rather, it refers to ways in which their ignorance about their own privilege and others’ disprivilege is sustained. Privileged ignorance is the result both of misuse of otherwise sound epistemic mechanisms or procedures and of ‘substantive epistemic practice’, as Linda Martin Alcoff (2007) puts it (p. 39). The very ways in which the privileged form beliefs sustain their ignorance.

Alcoff (2007, sect. I–III) distinguishes three ways in which the privileged might sustain ignorance. First, people make judgements about plausibility and credibility on the basis of their prior experiences; privileged people and disprivileged people will often make different judgements and so will form different beliefs, and in some cases, those of the privileged will be less likely to be true. For example, men might be less inclined than women to find credible a woman’s characterization of an interaction as sexual harassment. Second, privileged positions constitute perspectives that are epistemically disadvantaged with respect to the workings of privilege; those occupying a disprivileged position are better able to develop standpoints from which they can see how privilege and disprivilege function. For example, being a woman in a patriarchal society gives one better access to a standpoint from which one can see how state policies concerning childcare are structurally discriminatory. Third, one of the ways in which societies are
structured to the advantage of the privileged is the endorsement of mechanisms and norms of knowledge generation that act as cognitive dysfunctions, obscuring the workings of privilege, generating false beliefs about it and protecting the privileged from painful realizations concerning their place in society.

The characterization of this third way in which ignorance is generated and sustained owes primarily to Charles Mills (1997, 2007). It concerns systematic ways in which the privileged come to have false and damaging beliefs, rather than simply lacking true ones. Mills (1997) contends that various connected cognitive mechanisms leave White people ‘unable to understand the [racist] world they themselves have made’ (p. 18). For example, selective inattention to and distortion of the history of the USA leaves White Americans ignorant of the atrocities of slavery and the extensive waging of brutal wars against Native Americans; this ‘editing of white memory enables a self-representation in which differential white privilege, and the need to correct for it, does not exist’ (Mills, 2007, p. 31). Somewhat similarly, Miranda Fricker (2007, ch. 7) argues that disprivileged groups suffer ‘hermeneutic injustice’: because the privileged control the development of descriptive resources, disprivileged people are denied ways to articulate their experiences and viewpoints and so cannot make the privileged see privilege.27 Du Bois (1903), again, prefigures this thought, arguing that racism leaves White people systematically ignorant of their own privilege, of the fact that Whiteness is not ‘normal’, while allowing Black people the dubious advantage of being able to see Whiteness, Blackness, privilege and disprivilege.

Against this background, one might see imaginative identification as both virtuous and vicious. By imagining what experiences belonging to disprivileged people are like, the privileged do learn something, and moreover something valuable. Imaginative identification exploits a functional, virtuous epistemic mechanism. But, viciously, its functionality and the ambiguity of the language of ‘understanding what it’s like’ together facilitate the propagation of a bogus norm of knowledge generation. That norm is the assumption that repeated exercises of imaginative identification will lead to generalized identification. As I argued earlier, it cannot do so. But once this norm of knowledge generation has become established, it becomes perniciously hard to dislodge, because it is ‘psychologically and socially functional’ for the privileged, even though it is epistemically dysfunctional (Mills, 1997, p. 18). It is convenient and reassuring for the privileged to think that repetitive imagining of experiences brings generalized understanding. That there are three reasons why this is so. First, it means that generalized understanding comes free with imaginative identification. So there is no need to do extra, harder work.28 Second, related, it allows the privileged to claim sincerely, without cognitive dissonance, that they have achieved generalized understanding, so long as they do not ask too acutely what that actually
is. Third, if generalized understanding is conceptualized as iteration of imaginative identification, it is still entirely outwardly directed and involves no reflection on one’s own privileged situation.

This theoretical story explains why the privileged might be motivated to conceive of generalized understanding as generalized identification. It also explains why they might react to challenges to their understanding by emphasizing empathy: they might sincerely believe that the bogus norm of knowledge generation underlying generalized understanding is epistemically functional. The theoretical story also suggests some characteristics of real generalized understanding. First, if the story is to work, genuine generalized understanding must be similar enough to generalized identification that the two can be plausibly and sincerely confused. Second, the emphasis on functional and dysfunctional norms and mechanisms of knowledge generation encourages consideration of ways in which ‘understanding’ might be conceptualized that shift the focus from knowledge outcomes to knowledge mechanisms: from understanding as a thing one might learn to understanding as a skill one might employ over one’s learning.

4.3. WHITE LEARNING AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF ALLIES

The literature on Whiteness, anti-racism and allies is rich with ideas about how White people (more generally, privileged people) might become better allies. An ally is someone actively committed to dismantling a structure of privilege from which they themselves benefit. I want to highlight two ideas from this literature.29

The first is that the privileged should listen to and learn from disprivileged people on the subject of what their experiences are like. As Kurt M. Blankschaen (2016) says in discussing allies of ‘the LGBT community’, it is vital ‘that allies listen and engage in conversation with the specific people to whom they are allied’ (p. 20). Oluo (2018), similarly, says that it is important for the privileged to ‘start seeking out work … by people who don’t have your same privilege, and listen when those people are speaking’ (p. 58). Listening is important for several reasons: for example, because it requires compensatory silence on the listener’s part and because it reveals that White experience is not universal experience. Another reason is just that the privileged should learn what disprivileged experience feels like. This is suggested by Adam W. Fingerhut (2011), for example: he argues that listening and communication are important for developing allies’ empathy.

The second is that the privileged ought to develop a critical stance on their own privilege. White people, for example, need to appreciate how their own perspective is constituted and constricted by their racial position and how that position is part of a structure of racial supremacy. Bailey (1998) argues that allies (those with ‘traitorous identities’) ought to be ‘privilege-cognizant’, which involves making ‘the choice to develop a critically
reflective consciousness’ (p. 38). Lisa Droogendyk et al. (2016) conclude a psychological study of the potential pitfalls of allied action by saying that, to mitigate them, allies ‘should seek to better understand their own privilege’ (p. 330). And Shannon Sullivan (2014, p. 20) says that ‘learning about other cultures’ is not enough for ‘eliminating white domination’:

Rather than setting aside one’s whiteness in an attempt to learn about other races, white people can begin to do effective racial justice work by cleaning up their own house.

One might think that these are separate tasks for the privileged. Maybe it is one good thing for White people to learn what Black people’s experiences are like, and another good thing for them to develop a critical stance on their own race, but the two are unconnected. Alternatively, one might think that the two are linked: that part of the point of learning what disprivileged experience is like is to use that knowledge to develop a more critical stance on one’s own experiences qua racialized subject. One listens and learns not just to empathize but to do something with what one learns by empathizing.

This second idea is intimated by Yancy’s (2018, p. 93) exhortation to his ‘white reader’ to ‘enter my world, our world, and try to see yourself as I/we see you’, and it is substantiated by psychological studies of the development of allies. These suggest that becoming an ally is a process with identifiable stages. One important stage is the development of empathy for people who do not share one’s privilege. A further, more advanced stage is the development of a critical perspective on one’s privilege. It could be that these stages are strictly distinct. But it is much more plausible that each stage builds on the one that comes before. Reason et al. (2005), for example, explicitly say that White college students move from exposure to and understanding of ‘minority’ experiences to having a ‘sense of whiteness’. Similarly, Thomann and Suyemoto (2018) say that ‘White youth’ who become allies develop ‘perspective taking skills and empathy’ and then use those skills for ‘engaging and struggling with [their] identity as a White person’ (p. 745). The development of a critical stance on one’s own race is at least partially facilitated by the development of empathy. To develop critical perspective, one uses what one has learnt through imaginative identification.

In relation to generalized understanding, all this suggests that there is a connection between empathetic identification with individuals and a generalized, critical stance on race – one’s own and others’. Some kind of skill or ability is required to bridge that gap. The skill needs to connect imaginative identification with knowledge about structural racism, and it needs to allow the privileged person to critically reflect on the roots of their own experiences: to go beyond grasping the experiences of the disprivileged towards grasping their own privilege. So the skill involves and is similar to imaginative identification but also distinct from it. It is also, plausibly, difficult to acquire: it is a more sophisticated stage in ally development. And, because it
must involve reflection on privilege, it is discomforting: ‘negative emotions, such as feelings of guilt and failure … and fear and anxiety … are a part of the ally developmental process’ (Thomann & Suyemoto, 2018, p. 748).

4.4. SUMMARY

The various literatures surveyed here do not, between them, explicitly say what generalized understanding is. But the threads and themes I have highlighted together suggest the profile of a kind of general understanding of what it is like to be (dis)privileged that the privileged can work towards attaining. The understanding is linked to or based on imaginative identification and so involves the feel of experiences. But, unlike imaginative identification, it is generalized; it involves self-reflection or self-awareness; and it is a skill exercised over things one has learned, not an outcome of learning. Acquisition of this skill is difficult and discomforting, not least because of the self-reflection it involves. Because of this, the privileged might be motivated to avoid acquiring the skill. All the same, they might sincerely claim they have acquired it, because it is plausibly conflated with generalized identification. I will now give an account of a skill that matches this profile.

5. Experiential mastery

My suggestion is that, when the privileged are asked to understand what it is like to be disprivileged in a generalized sense, they are being asked to acquire a cognitive skill: an ability to manipulate the relations between experience and privilege, which I will call experiential mastery. In the present section, I will characterize and explicate this skill. In the next section, I will argue that experiential mastery matches the profile of generalized understanding just sketched.

5.1. THE BASIC IDEA

In moral epistemology, a distinction is often drawn between knowing what is the right thing to do and understanding why it is the right thing to do.\(^{30}\) In epistemology generally, a similar distinction is often drawn between knowing why something in the case and understanding why it is the case.\(^{31}\) Different people draw the distinction differently. I will adopt Alison Hills’ (2016) account of understanding why. Anyone who accepts that there is a distinction could agree with my application of it, modulo the details germane to their preferred way of drawing it.

According to Hills, you understand why something, P, is the case if you have ‘cognitive control’ over the explanatory relationship between P and its explanation, Q. ‘Cognitive control’ names the notion that to understand
is to ‘grasp’ a subject matter. Physically, to have a grasp of an object is to have it under your control and to be able to exercise a set of practical abilities over it. Similarly, to grasp a subject matter is to have cognitive control over it and to be able to exercise intellectual know-how or skill with respect to the explanatory relationships between Ps and Qs. Hills (2016, p. 663) argues that, if you understand why P, you can:

- Follow some explanation of why P given by someone else.
- Explain why P in your own words.
- Draw the conclusion that P (or that probably P) from the information that Q.
- Draw the conclusion that P′ (or that probably P′) from the information that Q′ (where P′ and Q′ are similar to but not identical to P and Q).
- Given the information that P, give the right explanation, Q.
- Given the information that P′, give the right explanation, Q′.

This list of abilities may not be exhaustive (p. 667), and Hills leaves open the question of whether cognitive control is constituted by or grounds them (p. 663). But the set provides a clear idea of how cognitive control might be demonstrated. Hills goes on to distinguish understanding why P from knowing why P and explain the unique value of understanding why. Knowledge why does not suffice for understanding why; you can know why, say, giving to charity is right, but ‘you won’t necessarily have the abilities to make accurate judgements about other, similar cases’, demonstrating that you lack cognitive control over the subject matter (p. 669). Understanding why is also instrumentally valuable in ways that knowledge is not, for example, because it guarantees that you will be able to tackle new questions, new P′s and Q′s (p. 678).32

Hills’ account of understanding why can be adapted to give an account of the generalized understanding that the privileged should obtain. To imaginatively identify with someone is to know what their experience is like. But it is a different and further achievement to understand why their experience is like that. It is also something that one can achieve with respect to one’s own experience. One knows for free, as it were, what one’s experience is like: but one does not necessarily understand why it is like that. To understand this is to achieve cognitive control over the relations between the characters of experiences and the explanatory grounds of those characters. This is experiential mastery. To have experiential mastery of (dis)privilege is to have control of the relationship between the character of relevant experiences and its explanatory grounding in (dis)privilege. Someone who has experiential mastery of (dis)privilege demonstrates abilities similar to those Hills lists, where R is an experience whose character is explained in large part by (dis)privilege. They can do such things as:

- Follow an explanation of why R’s character is explained by (dis)privilege.
- Explain why R’s character is explained by (dis)privilege in their own words.
• Draw the conclusion that the character of particular experience R is (probably) explained by (dis)privilege, given the information that R-type experiences are often explained by (dis)privilege.
• Draw the conclusion that the character of experience S is (probably) explained by (dis)privilege, given the information that S is similar in relevant respects to R.
• Given an account of R, give the right explanation, (dis)privilege.
• Given an account of S, give the right explanation, (dis)privilege.

Like Hills, I do not claim that this list is exhaustive, and I leave open the question of whether experiential mastery is constituted by or grounds some such set of abilities. But the list gives a good sense of what mastery of the relation between experience and disprivilege amounts to. Some of the abilities are self-explanatory, but some deserve comment.

All the abilities are phrased in terms of (dis)privilege. They can be exercised over any experience whose character owes (partially) to structural privilege. This includes experiences that are as they are owing to a person’s disprivilege and those that are as they are owing to a person’s privilege. If one only has cognitive control with respect to one or the other kind of experience, one does not have complete experiential mastery over privilege. The list could be doubled in length to make this explicit, with six abilities pertinent to privilege and six to disprivilege. I will henceforth avoid using the awkward ‘(dis)privilege’, but the point that both privilege and disprivilege are at issue should be borne in mind.

Ability (iii*) describes something that privileged people often do not do. A privileged person might know that experiences of a certain kind are generally manifestations of disprivilege: for example, that Black people are often rightly aggrieved when they have a harder time finding employment than White people. But faced with a particular instance of a Black person feeling aggrieved at not getting a job, a privileged person will often prevaricate or make exceptions; they will prescind from the conclusions that this particular experience is caused by disprivilege and that the anger it involves is justified. This is an instance of White fragility; Eddo-Lodge (2017) recounts an experience very much like it (p. 63). Drawing those conclusions correctly indicates that one has some grasp of the relation between experiences and disprivilege.

Ability (iv*) allows both narrow and broad readings. On a narrow reading, the particular experience S is explained by the same kind of privilege as R. For example, one might know that a certain Black person was aggrieved at not getting a job owing to disprivilege, and then be told that another Black person was angry to be overlooked for an award, and draw the conclusion that the second experience probably had the same cause and justification as the first. On a broad reading, the ability is applied across
kinds of privilege. For example, one might know that a Black man was aggrieved at being overlooked for promotion in a company dominated by White men, and be told that a White woman was similarly aggrieved, and draw the conclusion that her experience was also caused by disprivilege. Similar comments apply to ability (vi*). Deployment of abilities (iv*) and (vi*) in the narrow sense demonstrates a grasp of some particular kind of disprivilege; deployment of them in the wide sense demonstrates a grasp of disprivilege of various kinds, and similarities and relations among them.

Abilities (iv*) and (vi*) are similar but not parallel to (iv) and (vi) in Hills’ list. There, Q and Q’ are distinct explanantia related to distinct explananda, P and P’. In the characterization of mastery, the explananda (R and S) are distinct, but the explanans (disprivilege) is the same. The difference is because Hills’ list is a characterization of understanding why in general, whereas my list is a characterization of mastery specifically over privilege. The characters of experiences have many grounds, and one could develop mastery over the relations between experiential character and any of those grounds. Some such relations might be relatively straightforward to master, say the relation between painful experience and painful stimuli. Some might be very complicated. For example, if psychoanalytic theory were tenable, there would be a complex, deep, difficult relation between the characters of various experiences (guilt, disgust, desire and love) and their grounds in childhood events. It is possible in principle to gain complete experiential mastery over all the grounds of experience, though almost certainly practically impossible. But my subject is specifically experiential mastery over one kind of ground: privilege and disprivilege.

With the nature of the abilities clear enough, I will now make six remarks about experiential mastery. The point is not to provide an analysis of mastery but to characterize the skill sufficiently to show that it is plausibly what is meant when generalized understanding is invoked.

5.2. FURTHER CHARACTERIZATION

The first remark is the most important and bears reiteration: experiential mastery of the relation between experience and disprivilege encompasses mastery of the relation between experience and privilege. As Eddo-Lodge suggests, the privileged often take their experiences to be universal and normal and overlook the ways in which privilege grounds those experiences. But categories of disprivilege and privilege are constructed and defined relative to each other. If one only understands what it is like to be Black in terms of Blackness, with no reference to the opposed construct and experiential category of Whiteness, one has not truly understood what it is like to be Black; one does not have experiential mastery of disprivilege. A privileged person can demonstrate this aspect of mastery by, for example, being able to explain how the character of their own experiences is grounded in their
privilege and how dissimilarities between their experiences and those of disprivileged people are explained by differences in privilege.

Second: both the disprivileged and the privileged can lack experiential mastery. A disprivileged person can lack understanding of how the characters of their own experiences are grounded in disprivilege.\(^\text{34}\) If, for example, one grows up always feeling scared of the police, in a community scared of the police, it might not be apparent that some people aren’t scared of them. However, it is likely that the privileged lack experiential mastery far more often than the disprivileged do. Again, White people can easily ignore Black worlds, but Black people cannot easily ignore White worlds; the workings of privilege are often more obvious to Black people. The same applies for women, the disabled and others. Experiential mastery is an unwelcome gift to the disprivileged but something the privileged must earn.

Third: mastering complicated subject matters often requires mastery of a range of subsidiary skills. For example, one might truly master some tennis skills – the forehand and the volley – but fall short of mastery of tennis, owing to a failure to master some essential skill (perhaps one simply cannot serve).\(^\text{35}\) Likewise, experiential mastery involves control over a number of privilege–experience relations. This is so with respect to individual types of privilege and also to privilege \textit{tout court}. To have experiential mastery of one type of privilege, one needs to have control over a range of experiences and explanations. To have experiential mastery of privilege \textit{tout court}, one needs to master many more. Given intersectionality, it is clearly possible for someone to have an expert grasp of one type of privilege while having no grasp at all of some other type.

Fourth: all the same, mastery of privilege, of one type or \textit{tout court}, does not require consideration of every single instance and experience and manifestation of privilege. Rather, the point of having mastery is to be able to apply one’s skills to new and unfamiliar situations. When one truly masters tennis, one has a set of skills, but one has not played every shot possible. Instead, one has an ability to apply learned skills to new scenarios. Further, one’s skills are not separate; they interact fluently. Much the same is true of experiential mastery; a grasp of one kind of privilege facilitates grasp of others, and control over multiple kinds is mutually reinforcing.

Fifth: I have explicated experiential mastery as pertaining to relations between the characters of experiences and their roots in disprivilege. One might think, rather, that the important relation is between the \textit{occurrence} of experiences and their causal relation to privilege. But neither is \textit{the} important relation for the privileged to grasp. Both are important. My reason for concentrating on the character of experience is that there is clearly an idea abroad that the privileged should try to understand something important about \textit{what it is like} to be disprivileged, and this strongly suggests that experiential character is at issue. This is not to deny the importance of grasping the causal relations between experiences’ occurrence and privilege; it is to
deny that grasp of those relations is what is at issue when ‘understanding what it’s like’ is invoked.

An example might illuminate these distinctions. Consider this vignette: two White police officers enter a diner in the South of the USA, following up vague reports of trouble. Looking around the patrons, they see groups of White people paying them scant attention and one table of young Black men casting them wary glances. They approach the table, ask some questions; the young men respond defensively, taciturn. The officers ask to see some ID. The men refuse, saying something about knowing their rights. They make to leave. The officers ask, then command, that they stay. They refuse to comply. There is a scuffle. Arrests are made.

Now, one could offer a causal explanation of why all this happened as it did, adducing structural racism, implicit bias, racial profiling and their effects on the conduct of police officers and of Black people interacting with them. Such objective explanation of the causes of such situations, rooted in knowledge of disprivilege, is an achievement, for sure. But it is not an achievement that displays understanding of what it is like to be Black. Another achievement would be to imaginatively identify with the young Black men: to see the situation through their eyes and feel about it as they do. This would also be an achievement, and one to do with understanding what something is like, but it falls short of experiential mastery. Mastery requires connecting the subjective feel of particular experiences with objective, general, causal and justificatory explanations concerning privilege. It is not just understanding what experience feels like or why things happen as they do. It is understanding why experiences are like that and why relevant aspects of them are appropriate: why, for example, a young Black man in the USA might feel wary of the police and why their wariness is justified.

Sixth, and finally: often, a significant part of the character of experiences rooted in disprivilege is affective: feelings of fear, despair, resignation, anger and so forth. Disprivilege does not only cause such feelings, it also justifies them. A Black person might feel scared of the police because of their race, and they might well be right to be scared; a woman might be furious at an apparently trivial sexist comment, and her anger might well be justified. The cognitive control asked of the privileged encompasses such justificatory relations as well as causal ones; for example, they might be able to explain why Black fear of police happens and why Black fear of police is appropriate. Likewise, they might be able to explain why White trust of the police is often appropriate: not because the police are generally trustworthy, but because they are trustworthy if (and because) one is White.

Experiential mastery, in sum, is a matter of achieving cognitive control over the justificatory and causal relations holding between the characters of experiences and privilege and disprivilege: having a set of abilities that allow one to grasp and manipulate those relations. One has such experiential
mastery when one is able to fluently and appropriately apply those abilities to new instances of experiences whose characters are grounded in privilege.

It would be nice to now reveal a magic trick or shortcut that allows the privileged to attain mastery. But there is not one—there is only slow, difficult improvement as one tries, over and again, to develop mastery. But a little more can be said about how one might try to do so.

5.3. ACQUIRING EXPERIENTIAL MASTERY

The process of acquiring a cognitive skill is analogous to that of acquiring a practical skill. Hills (2016) points out three ways in which this is so with respect to cognitive control. First, cognitive control is gradable and comes in degrees (pp. 665–667). You can be better or worse at it and can have partial control. Second, you gain cognitive control through repeated exercise: as with practical skills, ‘reflection and practice’ are necessary if you are going to acquire it (p. 670). Third, cognitive control cannot be acquired through testimony or at least is rarely so acquired. It’s very difficult to learn a skill just by reading about it; you need to actually practice doing it (p. 670).

Similar considerations apply to experiential mastery. One can be better or worse at it; one improves gradually. To do so, one needs to exercise the abilities that it involves. One needs to make repeated efforts to grasp relations between experiences and privilege. Furthermore, one has to do it for oneself; it is not enough to be told repeatedly that there are such relations. In so doing, one will, by degrees, come to have mastery over privilege.

Such efforts will often involve imagination. This is because, fundamentally, experiential mastery is an ability to manipulate the causal and justificatory relations between experience and privilege. Practising this ability means practising manipulating this relation, and such manipulation can be practised by using counterfactual imaginings. For example, a privileged person might usefully try to imagine having their actual experiences but being disprivileged. It is quite likely that this is impossible: a privileged person may well be unable to successfully, coherently imagine having their actual experiences while lacking their present privilege. But this failure is really a success. By showing how the relations between privilege and experience cannot be manipulated, the exercise provides insight into the relation between privilege and experience and develops one’s skills of manipulation. So, whereas a condition of success for imaginative identification is managing to imagine the target experience, it will often be the case that imagining succeeds in improving one’s experiential mastery precisely when one fails to imagine the target experience.

That imaginative exercise is relatively simple, based as it is on one’s own experiences. Imaginative exercises might also be relatively complicated. For example, a privileged person might try to imagine themselves living in a society in which the positions of privilege in their own society are reversed:
a society where White people suffer under structural racism or men are subjected to matriarchal oppression. This imaginative exercise is complicated, because it involves constructing an imaginative alternative to the world and imagining experience within it: How would one’s experiences be in that society? What iniquities would one face? Could one, really, be the same person as one is under current conditions? Here, the relatum being varied is the nature and structure of privilege itself. In trying to imagine how that structure might be different, one can practice manipulating the relation between privilege and experience.38

This does not mean that experiential mastery is a skill of imagination. In cases such as tennis, what you practice is the skill you acquire. But experiential mastery is not to be exercised in imaginary scenarios. The point is to acquire a skill applicable to real life: imaginative manipulation of counterfactuals is a way of practising manipulation of facts. Once one has acquired the skill, one can apply it unreflectively; one can make the right links between experience and privilege without imagination intervening, just as one does not have to think about riding a bike once one knows how to do it.

5.4. SUMMARY

I have characterized experiential mastery as a skill that one can acquire with respect to privilege and disprivilege. One has mastery when one can exercise a set of abilities over the relation between the characters of experiences and their causal and justificatory grounds in privilege and disprivilege. I have emphasized that true mastery of this relation requires that one has control over both privilege and disprivilege. And I have suggested that the best way to acquire this skill is to repetitively try to exercise the abilities it involves; such exercise will often involve imaginative manipulation of character of experiences and their relations to their grounds in privilege. I will now argue that experiential mastery is credibly the skill at issue when a generalized understanding of ‘what it is like to be disprivileged’ is invoked.

6. Is experiential mastery generalized understanding?

In Section 3, I adumbrated a profile of generalized understanding. The principal reason to think that experiential mastery is generalized understanding is that it matches that profile. But before establishing that, I should first establish that mastery is credibly referred to as ‘understanding what it is like to be disprivileged’. If it is not, it cannot be the generalized understanding invoked by that phrase.

Experiential mastery is a form of understanding why. A thematic point of Hills’ (2016, sect. 3) account of understanding why is that languages (English and many others) both mark and obscure distinctions between knowing,
understanding, knowing why and understanding why. Sentences such as ‘she has an understanding of Russian history’ might be used ambiguously to mean that she knows a great deal about Russian history or to mean that she has cognitive control over Russian history. In the former case, she can recall numerous dates, names and events. In the latter case, she is able (e.g.) to apply her knowledge to provide explanations of aspects of Russian history with which she is unfamiliar, and she is able (e.g.) to use her grasp of Russian history to offer explanations of French history. The two cases are distinct, but both could be meant by ‘understanding’.

Similarly, ‘understanding (of) what it is like to be disprivileged’ is ambiguous between a kind of phenomenal knowledge and a kind of skill exercised over that knowledge. Sometimes, to understand does (just) mean grasping the character of certain experiences. Sometimes, to understand involves exercising a skill. And the ways in which Obama, Lugones and others invoke generalized understanding suggest that in fact they mean the skill, not the knowledge. They talk about generalized understanding as something that can be exercised over various different types of privilege or worlds: one can attempt to understand what it is like ‘to be poor or African American or gay or disabled or old’; one can try to travel to many worlds. So experiential mastery can credibly, if ambiguously, be called ‘understanding what it is like to be disprivileged’.

With its basic candidacy established, the question is whether experiential mastery matches the profile of generalized understanding. The profile illustrated something related to and based on imaginative identification; distinct from identification in being reflexive, general and a skill; difficult and uncomfortable to achieve; and plausibly confused with generalized identification.

Experiential mastery is related to imaginative identification; it is an ability often exercised over the deliverances of such identification. Mastery is an ability to manipulate the relations between experiential character and privilege. To exercise such ability, it is necessary that one has a stock of experiences over which to exercise it and with which to practice it. So being able to imaginatively identify with experiences of disprivilege – grasping what they are like – is a necessary precursor to the acquisition of experiential mastery. This relation between the two explains why, in the literature on development of allies cited earlier, empathetic identification with others’ experience comes before development of a critical stance on one’s own privilege.

This relates to one of the ways in which experiential mastery is distinct from imaginative identification. Identification is always directed towards another person. But experiential mastery crucially involves a grasp of the relations between one’s own privilege and the character of one’s own experiences. This is because one does not fully grasp privilege unless and until one grasps all its manifestations. I suggested earlier that generalized understanding must involve critical self-reflection and self-understanding.

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experiential mastery does so. The difference might be thought of as a
difference between passive and active engagement with privilege and
disprivilege. Being willing and able to imaginatively identify with
disprivileged experiences requires nothing much more of the privileged than
listening, repeatedly, and engaging their empathetic imaginations. It
involves being told that an experience is grounded in disprivilege, while
grasping that experience’s feel. Experiential mastery, by contrast, involves
moving from the feel of an experience to actively, independently grasping
its grounds in disprivilege, rather than waiting to be told that it has such
grounds. Similarly, there is a difference between accepting that one’s partic-
ular experience is grounded in privilege once one is told that it is and actively
grasping the grounds of one’s own experiences. 39

Experiential mastery is also different from imaginative identification in
that it is general. If one has mastery, one can exercise the abilities it involves
over a range of experiences, and one does so by relating experiences to a
wider grasp of the nature and workings of privilege. So experiential mastery
does involve generalizing from, and over, a range of experiences: it is a
general form of understanding.

The two also differ in that experiential mastery is a skill, not an outcome
of learning. To understand what an experience is like is to grasp its
character, and this is a thing one learns, an outcome. To understand why
the experience is so is to exercise a skill over it, namely, experiential mastery.
It is clear from the literature discussed earlier that generalized understanding
is a skill, and it is definitional of experiential mastery that it is a skill;
moreover, one exercised over just the subject matter required by the profile
of generalized understanding.

A further aspect of that profile is that generalized understanding should be
difficult to achieve. As I have explained it, complete and consummate
experiential mastery is indeed difficult for the privileged to achieve. Because
mastery is gradable, one might have the skill to some degree but may well
fall far short of complete mastery. This is due to the complexity of the skill
and its subject matter. The subject matter is a relation between two relata
that are themselves hard to grasp. Privilege is a complex and insidious
phenomenon, and we have discussed already the difficulties faced by the
privileged in acquiring adequate access to the character of individual experi-
ences of disprivileged people. To acquire experiential mastery, the privileged
need first to have a sufficient grounding in both these relata. They then need
to do the further work of relating them. As I have explained, this is not a
trivial matter of drawing obvious connections: it is a matter of laboriously
doing the practice and exercise necessary to develop abilities to manipulate
the relation.

This brings us to the requirement that generalized understanding must be
discomforting for the privileged. This is indeed the case with experiential
mastery. If a privileged person grasps properly the relations between
experiences and privilege, they will have grasped properly the fact that, as Eddo-Lodge says, their experiences are not universal. Moreover, they will have grasped the fact that their experiences are, in some basic sense, *nicer*, for reasons that have nothing to do with attainment, skill, merit, and everything to do with luck, happenstance and situation. They will have realized that they do not deserve their privilege, any more than the disprivileged deserve their status. And they will have gained some insight into their complicity in maintaining structures of privilege. This is a deeply disconcerting set of insights. Experiential mastery is uncomfortable.

The final requirement on generalized understanding is that it can be plausibly conflated with generalized identification. This explains how the privileged avoid discomfort: they substitute a bogus form of generalized understanding for the real thing. Experiential mastery is a plausible candidate for such conflation. Generalized identification, remember, is supposed to be the automatic by-product of repeated exercises of imaginative identification: a knowledge of general phenomenal character derived from knowledge of individual characters. Now, practising the abilities involved in experiential mastery does indeed involve repeated exercises of imaginative identification. To practice the abilities, one has to practice relating the character of experiences to their roots in privilege; to do that, one has to imagine relevant experiences. So the ways in which one should try to practice experiential mastery are similar to the ways in which one would go about achieving generalized understanding. This substantiates the claim that the two can be confused and explains why the privileged often invoke empathy when challenged about their lack of understanding.

I have argued that experiential mastery matches the profile that was earlier established of generalized understanding. My argument is now complete. I have distinguished three things that might be meant by ‘understanding what it is like to be privileged’: imaginative identification, generalized identification and experiential mastery. I have argued that, sometimes, the privileged are asked to attempt imaginative identification and that this is something they can do. I have argued that the privileged cannot achieve generalized identification, even though they might think that this is what they are being asked to do when a generalized form of understanding is invoked. This explains why some people say that the privileged cannot understand what it is like to be disprivileged. However, I have argued that the privileged can (with great difficulty) achieve experiential mastery and that such mastery is plausibly what is meant when generalized understanding is invoked: this explains why some people say that the privileged can understand what it is like to be disprivileged. I have used the difficulty and discomfort associated with mastery to explain why the privileged might shirk the task of achieving it, and I have used the ambiguity of the phrase ‘understanding what it’s like’ and the relation between mastery and identification to explain how the privileged might conflate mastery with generalized
identification. The only thing missing from this account is any idea of why the privileged ought to achieve experiential mastery. I will now briefly address this.

7. Why achieve experiential mastery?

The question of why the privileged ought to achieve experiential mastery might be interpreted as a specific version of the question of why they ought to try to be allies. There are reasons to doubt the value of allies, but examining those is beyond my scope.\textsuperscript{40} I take it that allyship, whatever its problems and flaws, is a good thing to pursue.

The question, then, is really why developing experiential mastery makes one a better ally. And the basic reason is that it helps to put one in a position to take more and better allied actions. Partly this is a matter of motivation, just as with imaginative identification. Understanding the experiences of others, why their experiences are as they are, understanding that those reasons are contingent and unjust, and understanding why their anger and fears are justified: all this is powerfully motivational. People help out other people because they understand their experiences, and knowing why those experiences are as they are is useful for knowing how to help. Now, some people’s motivations might be entirely rational; they might not need to grasp anything to do with the character of others’ situations to motivate moral action; knowledge of others’ situations and their causes might suffice. But many people are not like that, and so the ability to truly understand what it’s like to be disprivileged, and why it is like that, really matters.\textsuperscript{41}

The point here is not just that experiential mastery is an additional source of motivation: it is a better source of motivation. Experiential mastery involves critical self-reflection on one’s own privilege, and studies of allies suggest that those who achieve such a critical stance are better allies. Reason \textit{et al.} (2005) say that those White people in their study who ‘reflected upon and committed to’ a reflective stance on their own privilege carried out ‘more racial justice actions’ and did so at greater ‘intensity levels’ than those who had only achieved a kind of empathy (p. 541). Furthermore, gaining experiential mastery is likely to make one’s allied actions better in the sense of being more considerate and considered. Droogendyk \textit{et al.} (2016), again, advance understanding of one’s own privilege as a way to mitigate potentially damaging ill-informed allied action.\textsuperscript{42}

A further related point is that good allies should be aware of how deficient their understanding is and should be humble about this. But, often, one only becomes aware of how far away one is from acquiring a skill once one has made a serious effort to acquire it; if you never try to play tennis, you can dream of winning Wimbledon. Similarly, with mastery, serious efforts to acquire it should make one aware of just how short one falls of genuinely
So developing a critical stance on one's own privilege is a way to become a better ally; insofar as experiential mastery helps one to develop that stance, developing experiential mastery is a way to become a better ally. I do not think that mastery is the only way to develop this stance and nor do I think it is a panacea for all the problems of privilege. But it is a useful, important tool for addressing them. There are many ways in which the privileged can learn about disprivilege and many skills they can acquire with respect to it. Alabama, for example, offers the White person many opportunities to learn about Black lives. They can visit the Legacy Museum in Montgomery and come to know bare, overwhelming facts: numbers and laws and examples about slavery, sharecropping, racial terror and mass incarceration. Or they can visit the related National Memorial for Peace and Justice, which is dedicated to victims of lynching, and acknowledge terrible truths of the USA's history of structural racial violence. Or they can visit Joe Minter's extraordinary 'African Village in America', outside Birmingham, and appreciate a deep expression of Blackness and pain and anger, contemporary and historic.43

There are significant differences between knowing, acknowledging and appreciating. Knowing is directed towards propositions and facts; one can, for example, know that at least 4400 Black people were lynched in documented atrocities in the USA between 1877 and 1950, besides countless others killed in unrecorded lynchings. Acknowledgement is also directed towards propositions. but consists in a grasp of them, a felt recognition of their truth; one can acknowledge the horrors of lynching in a way that goes beyond merely assenting to the truths that it was terrible, prevalent and systemic.44 And when one appreciates the Minter work, one learns something powerful, perhaps beyond words or propositions, about his experience as a Black person. These are different epistemic achievements concerning Black lives. White people, and more generally privileged people, should pursue all such achievements. Experiential mastery over privilege is yet another epistemic achievement: a skill that helps develop better allies.

8. Conclusion

I have argued that the privileged are able to imagine particular experiences of disprivileged people sufficiently well to know what those experiences are like, but that one cannot derive from such imaginings a generalized understanding of what it is like to be disprivileged in some respect. I have suggested that, when generalized understanding of what it is like to be disprivileged is invoked, what is at issue is experiential mastery of causal and justificatory relations between the characters of experiences, and
privilege or lack of it. I have explicated this experiential mastery and argued that it is what is meant when a generalized sense of ‘understanding what it is like’ is invoked.

It could be that experiential mastery is practically unobtainable. Perhaps it is too difficult for the privileged to fully grasp the relevant relations. But that does not mean that they should not try. Yancy (2018) argues that ‘as a white person, you never clearly come to a place of “arrival” … as a “nonracist white” ’ (p. 80). Sullivan (2014), similarly, says that ‘the figure of the white ally is more ideal than real. I’m not sure if many white allies yet exist, and perhaps they never will. The white ally nonetheless can serve as an ideal for which white people might strive even if they never achieve it’ (p. 10). Experiential mastery over the relations between the characters of experiences and their roots in privilege is a kind of generalized understanding that the ideal ally would have. It could be that a privileged person will never quite gain the skill and never quite meet the ideal; all the same, the difficult work of trying to do so is work that they should do.\(^{45}\)

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NOTES

1 Day 3 of their ‘civil rights trail itinerary’, https://perma.cc/ZKM3-G7QW (2018). Anyone might take up the suggestion, but it is especially significant for White people. The example owes to Thomas Laqueur’s (2018) exploration of memory and amnesia about racism in the USA. (N.B. to ensure persistence of reference, all hyperlinks are to permanently archived versions of sources at https://perma.cc/.)

2 Campaign speech to Planned Parenthood Action Fund, 17 July 2007; quoted widely, for example, by the Los Angeles Times, https://perma.cc/W7YY-53NQ (13 April 2010). Obama often invoked imaginative identification during his presidency, for example, encouraging Israelis to imagine being in Palestinians’ positions (White House Briefing, 21 March 2013, https://perma.cc/V3E3-7U5J), and has done so since, for example, marking World Refugee Day: ‘our ability to imagine ourselves in the shoes of others … is part of what makes us human’ (Facebook post, 20 June 2018, https://perma.cc/2NXV-FWVR).

3 Lugones (1987) is mostly concerned with ‘world travelling’ undertaken by ‘outsiders’ to the mainstream of, for example, White/Anglo organization of life in the USA, but clearly thinks that ‘insiders’ can and should travel to worlds of ‘outsiders’ (p. 3).


5 In almost all relevant literature, "Black" is routinely capitalized. It is a matter of debate whether "White" should also be capitalized. Yancy does not do so; several other authors cited here also choose not to. There are good arguments in favour of that practice, but there are also good arguments in favour of capitalizing. This article follows the style preferred by the journal, which is to capitalize "White". I myself do not have a settled view. For discussion and a case in
favour of capitalizing "White", see Kwame Anthony Appiah’s discussion at The Atlantic online, 18 June 2020, https://perma.cc/NE6M-NAZA.

Here are further examples:

- Trinity Browne’s reflections on being Māori in New Zealand: thatsus.co.nz, https://perma.cc/GM3R-43ZZ (2016);
- Hoodo Hersi discussing the alienation of Black Muslim women from feminist movements: vice.com, https://perma.cc/G7AH-J5AQ (2016);
- Bernie Sanders suggesting that White people do not (or cannot?) know what it’s like to live in a Black ghetto: CNN/YouTube, https://perma.cc/GSK8-HJMY (2016); and

Thanks to Mariana Bandarra, Bee Henaghan, Jennie O’Hara, Amy Kind, K. A. Nielsen, Jessica Robinson, Madeline Thomas and Sherri Tuttle Ross for suggesting examples, many more than I could use.

7 I will use ‘feel’ and ‘phenomenal character’ interchangeably to refer to how experiences seem.

8 It is widely accepted that cognitive experiences have phenomenal character. See, for example, Bayne and Montague (2011) and Smithies (2013).

9 On mind reading, see, for example, Currie and Ravenscroft (2002) and Goldman (2006). On moral matters, see, for example, Nussbaum (1990), Chappell (2014, p. 249), Johnson (2016) and Bommarito (2017). On aesthetic appreciation, see, for example, Walton (1990), Camp (2017) and Stock (2017).

10 Both are viable imaginative projects. The nature of the second is a matter of debate, concerning especially the extent to which one’s own self is effaced in such imagining. Williams (1966) argues that it disappears entirely; Walton (1990, ch. 1.4) argues that it is present but attenuated; Wirling (2014) argues that such imagining involves dialogic interaction between one’s own self and the target’s perspective. See also Wollheim (1974).

11 For overview of definitions and their relations to imagination, see, for example, Stueber (2016, 2019), Read (2019) and Schmetkamp and Vendrell Ferran (2019).

12 See also Coplan’s (2011a) distinction between other-oriented and self-oriented perspective taking. There are several other distinctions among types of empathy. One is between lower-level empathy (of which many animals may be capable) and higher-level empathy (which involves sophisticated cognitive capacities); see, for example, Goldman (2006). Another is between affective and cognitive empathy (grasping others’ affective states versus grasping their thoughts); see, for example, Shamay-Tsoory (2011), Maibom (2017) and Spaulding (2017). I am concerned with higher-level grasp of the affective and cognitive feel of others’ experiences and perspectives.

13 Thanks to Kristin Borgwald, Bradford Cokelet, Íngrid Vendrell Ferran and Julia Langkau for help with the passage on empathy.

14 Empathy is widely construed as a success term; see, for example, Epley and Caruso (2009, pp. 299–307).

15 ‘Imagined’ here means ‘not actually now happening’ and thus can include real experiences.

16 Goldie argues that imaginative identification is never possible, but one might deny that and still apply his argument to particular cases. The argument that complete perspective shifts are impossible was probably first made by Edith Stein (1917).

17 Wirling (2014, p. 220) makes a similar point against Goldie.


19 The thesis that imaginative identification or empathy is (morally) motivational is widely held. It is recognizable in the sentimentalism of Adam Smith and David Hume. Martin
Hoffman (2000) provides one among several philosophical examinations of the relations between empathy, moral development and motivation; see also Chappell (2014). Paul Bloom (2017) argues that empathy often motivates people to do the wrong thing, and moral action is better motivated otherwise. But he agrees that people are actually (if unfortunately) motivated by empathy.

Paul’s work is not discussed here because, despite its thematic relevance, it is concerned with different questions. Paul (2014) is sceptical about imagination’s powers to deliver knowledge of (a) the phenomenal character of experiences radically different from those you have previously had (‘epistemically transformative experiences’, p. 17) and (b) what your preferences would be like if you were to undergo some change that radically altered them (‘personally transformative experiences’, p. 17). Her central concern is the consequences of these limitations for rational decision making. Her focus is on whether you can imagine yourself, an individual, having very different preferences from those that you currently have. This is not the same question pursued here, which is whether repeated imagining can deliver a grasp of general phenomenal character shared by the experiences of many people. Paul (2014) does claim (more or less) that such a grasp is impossible (p. 7) but presents this as an intuitive, brute fact about the limits of imagination; she does not try to explain why it is impossible. Indeed, Cappelen and Dever (2017) argue that Paul’s central claims can be made without any reference to first-personal experience.

I assume there are such kinds, socially constructed but still substantive. See, for example, Mills (1998), Haslanger (2012), Barnes (2016) and Mallon (2016).

Evnine quickly discusses two more methods. The ‘minimalist’ says that ‘there is something it is like to be a human’ is a pleonastic transformation from ‘humans have conscious experiences’. This account yields no substantive notion of ‘what it is like’. ‘The primitivist’ says that ‘what it is like to be a human’ is a sort of ‘ontological hum that accompanies existence’, presumably analysable via introspection (Evnine, 2008, p. 191). This, Evnine asserts, is not a hum that he hears.

Intersectionality, as originally described by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1989), presents another problem for this strategy. Part of Crenshaw’s point is that the experience of being (say) a poor Black woman does not neatly decompose into experiences of poverty, Blackness and womanhood; the ways in which disprivilege is manifest in the life of such a person are not simply a sum of racial, sexual and class disprivilege. This might mean that it’s not possible to abstract from the experiences of various Black people (say) a generalized conception of the experience of being a Black person. For overview of the large intersectionality literature, see Carastathis (2014).

By which I mean: if there are any such substantial phenomenal kinds, they will likely be localized geographically (Black in the USA, in the UK, in Nigeria, etc.) and situated at intersections (poor Black American woman, rich Black American man, etc.).


A perspective is conferred almost automatically by virtue of occupying a certain position, whereas a standpoint is something that one must work to acquire; there is a difference between having a woman’s perspective and having a feminist standpoint (see, e.g. Harding, 1991, pt. II; Hartsock, 1998). A standpoint is a starting point for inquiry; for example, adopting a feminist standpoint allows one to propose projects of inquiry that could not be conceptualized from a masculine standpoint (which is often mistaken for a ‘neutral’ standpoint). Imaginative identification perhaps involves gaining a perspective. But acquiring experiential mastery is not about achieving a standpoint. Experiential mastery is a skill, not a starting point for inquiry. Furthermore, experiential mastery can be exercised without adopting the standpoint of disprivileged groups. Experiential mastery might nonetheless be useful for achieving standpoints, but there is dispute over whether standpoint theory is the best feminist approach to projects of inquiry; an alternative is ‘feminist empiricism’, espoused by (e.g.) Longino (1990) and Solomon (2001) (though Intemann, 2010, argues that standpoint theory and feminist empiricism have converged). Gaining experiential mastery is worthwhile whether or not standpoint theory should
be preferred to feminist empiricism. So the value of experiential mastery is not dependent on its usefulness for attaining standpoints.

27 Fricker also argues that disprivileged groups suffer ‘testimonial injustice’: dominant groups tend to ignore or disbelieve what they are being told. This is related to Alcoff’s first two epistemologies of ignorance.

28 I am not suggesting that imaginative identification is easy. Often, the privileged feel the right thing, but for the wrong reasons; they achieve only Coplan’s ‘pseudo-empathy’ (Jones, 2004, pp. 72–75; Coplan, 2011b, p. 40). And, as discussed, the privileged face difficulties in accessing worlds of experience that are not open to their view. It is a genuine, hard-won achievement for the privileged to achieve proper imaginative identification. Perversely, this is a contributory factor in sustaining ignorance. It is recognized that the demand for understanding is a demand to achieve something difficult and moreover something to do with phenomenal character; the privileged person who often achieves imaginative identification with others really does do something difficult and something to do with phenomenal character. But they have not done an even more difficult, uncomfortable thing.

29 I offer only representative quotations, but the ideas are thematic in work cited throughout, by, for example, Sullivan (2006, 2014) and Oluo (2018). See also papers in two volumes edited by Yancy (2004, 2015).

30 For example, Hills (2009). Some think there is no distinction, for example, Sliwa (2017).


32 Hills also suggests that understanding why is valuable for non-instrumental reasons (pp. 679–680). Pritchard (2009, p. 40) similarly argues that understanding is non-instrumentally valuable.

33 It is straightforward to grasp that painful experiences are caused by painful stimuli and to use that grasp to offer plausible explanations of why someone is in pain. It is not straightforward to say exactly what pain is and how it relates to stimuli.

34 See (e.g.) Ibram X. Kendi’s (2019) account of overcoming ‘internalized racism’, ‘the real Black on Black crime’, to become a genuine anti-racist (p. 10).

35 I’m not sure that any worthwhile practical skills are so simple that they lack this compositional structure – tying knots, perhaps.

36 For example, Russow (1980) and Williamson (2007) discuss what the latter calls ‘the pervasive role of the imagination in assessing counterfactual[s]’ (p. 89).

37 The insight is defeasible. There is probably a further skill required to read the right insights into failed and successful imaginings. Plausibly, the better one’s mastery, the better one will be at such interpretation. For overview of the question of conceivability’s relation to possibility, see Gendler and Hawthorne (2002a) and papers in the same volume (Gendler & Hawthorne, 2002b).

38 Imaginative construction of counterfactual worlds to bring into focus aspects of the real world is the business of speculative fictions (Cameron, 2015). Numerous authors use such fictions to explore issues of race, gender and (dis)ability. One example is N. K. Jemisen’s Broken Earth Trilogy, which she describes as a product of her experiences as a Black woman, intended to explore real-world issues of racial privilege. Note that, while dystopias are often employed in this context, there are also utopian works: Woman on the Edge of Time by Marge Piercy and The Female Man by Joanna Russ are examples of feminist utopian novels. Thanks to Sarah Lohmann for these examples.

39 Attending to this difference can mitigate what Nora Berenstain (2016) calls ‘epistemic exploitation’, where the disprivileged are repeatedly and exhaustingly forced to explain privilege and disadvantage to the privileged. Such exploitation arises in part because the privileged fail to actively engage with privilege and disprivilege in the way that experiential mastery encapsulates, which obviates the need for them to have the grounds of an experience explained to them.

40 For discussion, see, for example, Sullivan’s (2014) introduction to Good White People.
Sometimes, it’s suggested that, because the privileged lack understanding of experiences of disprivilege, they have no standing in discussion of relevant issues, for example, questions about whether certain behaviour ‘counts’ as sexual harassment. Understanding of what it’s like to be disprivileged is not sufficient for standing in such debates. So even a privileged person with experiential mastery might not have such standing.

Note again that I am only concerned with privileged people already disposed to allyship. Mastery does not automatically, necessarily motivate actions in favour of the disprivileged, any more than empathy does. To be so motivated requires additional dispositions. Some people may lack those dispositions; those people, I should think, would be more likely to avoid acquiring mastery, rather than to acquire it and then not act on it. Some may even have opposing dispositions. A committed White supremacist could acquire mastery and use it to sustain White supremacy. But people who are motivated by empathy or understanding to take actions against those whose experiences they have understood are, I think, seriously morally deviant and in any case are not my concern in this paper.

Laqueur (2018) also mentions some of these examples. He does not mention the Minter installation, some idea of which can be gained here (https://perma.cc/44DN-DKV3). The Legacy Museum and the National Memorial (https://perma.cc/V8VJ-KQ5N) are both projects of Montgomery’s Equal Justice Initiative (https://perma.cc/2XXR-4T9C). This list of examples is slanted in two important respects. First, it is mainly concerned with negative aspects of Black lives. White people should also learn about how Black people in Alabama have resisted, thrived and experienced joy: they might, for example, visit the Alabama music hall of fame in Tuscumbia, or the Tuskegee Airmen Museum (though neither suggestion is unambiguously positive). Second, it is mainly concerned with the past, but racial injustice persists in the present (the Legacy Museum does address this). Part of the value of discussing experiential mastery is identification of a way in which the privileged might understand aspects of contemporary, continuing injustices.

This distinction between knowing and acknowledging is drawn in aesthetics by Cavell (1976, p. 263) and Gibson (2003, pp. 230–234).

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