

## The Value of Privileged Access

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A standard view in the literature on self-knowledge is that we stand in a unique epistemic relationship to some facts about our own minds. The common name for this relationship is *privileged access*. Recently, a growing number of epistemologists have begun to question this view. These skeptics maintain that privileged access to facts about our minds is either much more limited than we might have thought, or, more radically still, that we lack such access entirely.<sup>2</sup> Current debates about privileged access have in turn focused exclusively on the question of whether we possess such access, and if so, how extensive it is. One question that has not been discussed, though, is what of value we lack if these skeptics are right.

In this paper, I address this value question. I do so by first motivating an account of privileged access. Defending an account of privileged access is important to my project given that what one's account of privileged access is can impact whether privileged access has value, and if so, what the nature of that value is.<sup>3</sup> The account I develop construes such access as being a matter of an agent *S* possessing highly

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<sup>2</sup> See Medina (2006), Schwitzgebel (2008; *passim*) and Carruthers (2005; 2010) for defenses of skepticism about privileged access. See Cassam (2014) for skepticism about the intrinsic value of self-knowledge as opposed to the value of privileged access.

<sup>3</sup> Compare: if knowledge is, as Crispin Sartwell (1991) has maintained, simply true belief, this will impact what value knowledge has. If one embraces Sartwell's view, then whatever value knowledge has for us is not going to involve value that might come from having a justified belief.

Note that the above point is not to say that a flawed account of privileged access will fail to yield similar results with respect to value issues as the correct account. It is to say that different accounts of privileged access can and will yield different value results, and this is why I think it is important to get clear on what the correct account of this epistemic standing is before discussing value-related issues.

epistemically secure knowledge of some fact F—where no other agent stands in as strong an epistemic position vis-à-vis F as S—and such knowledge is arrived at via a means no one else can, in principle, use to possess such knowledge. I defend this account, in part, by arguing that it comports best with how the term has been used in the literature.

Having explained what privileged access is, I proceed to argue that privileged access is extrinsically valuable, or valuable due to its relation to something else that has value. More precisely, I argue that privileged access is instrumentally valuable to us because it is required for possessing a type of robust epistemic control over the contents of our minds.<sup>4</sup> The control in question is a matter of being able to determine what others know or don't know concerning facts about our minds. And it is such control, I argue, that makes it much easier for us to successfully accomplish both our practical and epistemic goals.

I proceed to examine whether privileged access is intrinsically valuable; i.e., whether privileged access has value that supervenes on its non-relational properties. If privileged access is intrinsically valuable, then it is reasonable to think that privileged access has final value; i.e., it is reasonable to think that it is valuable for its own sake.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> More carefully still, I argue that *were* we to possess privileged access, it would typically be of significant extrinsic/instrumental value to us. My discussion, then, can proceed without assuming we have privileged access. Consider: the discussion of whether free will is valuable were we to possess it can proceed regardless of whether hard determinists are correct.

It should also be mentioned here that I take the fact that x is instrumentally valuable or valuable as a means to (or contribution to) something else that has value to entail that x is extrinsically valuable. This is because if one thing x is valuable as a means to (or contribution to) y, then x is valuable because of its relation to y.

<sup>5</sup> Korsgaard (1983), Kagan (1992), O'Neill (1992), and Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (1999, 2003) have not only made explicit the distinction between intrinsic and final value, understanding the two types of value as I do above, but they have also argued that some phenomena can be finally valuable without being intrinsically valuable. A dress owned by Princess Diana is (arguably) one such example. Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2003) argue that this dress is valuable for its own sake, but also valuable in part

Whether privileged access is intrinsically valuable is difficult to answer in part because it is controversial what means we should employ to determine whether any given thing, *x*, is intrinsically valuable. I argue, though, that given two influential tests for intrinsic value, it is reasonable to think that privileged access is intrinsically valuable.

Before proceeding further, I want to clarify a point about the nature of my project: in attempting to answer the epistemic value question I am interested in, I am not going to assume that knowledge *simpliciter* is either extrinsically or intrinsically valuable. A number of epistemologists think knowledge, in general, has both extrinsic and intrinsic value.<sup>6</sup> If privileged access is a type of knowledge, as I argue it is, then these philosophers will think that at least some instances of privileged access are valuable as well in virtue of being a type of knowledge. But to assume from the outset that these philosophers are right, I think, problematizes the goal of trying to figure out what, if anything, is valuable about privileged access. This is because what makes privileged access valuable (if it is) might be distinct from what makes knowledge *simpliciter*

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because it is owned by Princess Diana. I won't take a stand on whether final value reduces to intrinsic value. What I do maintain, and what I think is uncontroversial, is that if something *x* is intrinsically valuable, it is finally valuable as well.

It might be wondered why I don't just focus on final value as opposed to intrinsic value. There are two reasons I have decided not to do so. First, my focus in part 2 of this paper is on the extrinsic value of privileged access, and the natural counterpart to extrinsic value is, I think, intrinsic value. Second, there does seem to be a legitimate distinction to be made between intrinsic value and final value, and I think that if one successfully argues that *x* is the former, then it is also reasonable to hold that *x* is the latter.

<sup>6</sup> Moore (1903), Lemos (1994), Jones (1997), Zagzebski (2007), and Greco (2009) are just a few philosophers who think that knowledge is both extrinsically valuable and intrinsically valuable. Kvanvig (2003) denies that knowledge is intrinsically valuable. It bears pointing out that while the above philosophers couch their discussion of the value of knowledge in terms of intrinsic value, it seems relatively clear that what some of them have in mind is final value.

Relatedly, many philosophers hold that knowledge is more valuable than any epistemic standing that falls below it, although this view has been criticized by Kaplan (1985), Kvanvig (*ibid*) and others. There is currently a heated debate concerning whether knowledge is more valuable than any epistemic standing that falls below it. See Pritchard, Turri, and Carter (2018) for a summary of this debate.

valuable (if it is). For this reason, I will not assume that knowledge *simpliciter* is valuable. I will, however, have more to say concerning whether the value I believe privileged access possesses is also a value other epistemic standings possess.

With that clarification in mind, I turn to addressing what privileged access is.

### **Part I: Understanding Privileged Access**

As previously noted, in attempting to determine whether privileged access is valuable, and if so, what its value consists in, it is important to first get clear on what privileged access is. In doing the latter, it should be kept in mind, I think, that *privileged access* is at least in part a philosophical term of art. Given this, the most natural place to start in arriving at an acceptable account of privileged access is with how the term has been used in the literature. And when one examines the literature one finds two features that are commonly associated with it. One feature involves standing in an epistemically secure relationship to some fact F.<sup>7</sup>

How secure must S's knowledge be in order to have privileged access? Although some philosophers have required epistemic certainty or perfect reliability in order to have privileged access, I think we should follow the majority of contemporary epistemologists in holding that possessing privileged access does not require that level of epistemic security.<sup>8</sup> Instead, it seems reasonable to understand the epistemic security required to

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<sup>7</sup> See Ewing (1951), Shoemaker (1963, *passim*), Chisholm (1966), Alston (1977), Byrne (2005), Gertler (2011), and Neta (2011) for the view that possessing privileged access involves standing in an epistemically privileged position to that which we have privileged access to. See Alston (1971) for various ways in which the epistemic security condition can be understood.

<sup>8</sup> See Byrne (2005), Gertler (2011) and Neta (2011) for the view that possessing privileged access does not require having certain or perfectly reliable knowledge.

have privileged access to be that approaching epistemic certainty with respect to internalist accounts of knowledge and that approaching perfect reliability with respect to externalist accounts of knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, a number of philosophers are sympathetic with Alex Byrne's (2005) suggestion that when one has privileged access to some fact F, one (typically) stands in a stronger epistemic position with respect to F than any other agent. More precisely, let's say that S is an *epistemic authority* with respect to some fact F iff. (i) S has highly epistemically secure knowledge that F, and (ii) no other agent R stands in a stronger epistemic position with respect to F than S. Call this the *epistemic authority condition*.

The second feature commonly associated with privileged access is *first-personal uniqueness*. The thought here is that when one has privileged access to some fact F one has a way of knowing F that is not, in principle, available to other agents.<sup>10</sup> So, for example, I might be able to come to know a particular fact F about my mind via introspection whereas you would have to rely on behavioral cues or the testimony of others to know F. In such a case, it seems, I would be employing a means of knowing F—viz. introspection—that no other agent could, in principle, use to know this fact. You, on the other hand, must rely on means available to other agents for knowing F. Given

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As implied above, I am not going to take a stand on the internalist/externalist debate over knowledge/justification in this paper. But I don't think I need to in order to motivate my views about the value of privileged access that I advance below.

<sup>9</sup> The epistemic security required in order to have privileged access has also sometimes been understood in terms of infallibility and/or omniscience. To say that an agent S is infallible with respect to a set of propositions P is to say that insofar as S forms a belief about a member of this set, S's belief cannot be mistaken. To say that S is omniscient with respect to a mental state M is to say that insofar as M is tokened, S knows (or at least believes) that M is tokened. Most contemporary epistemologists shy away from claiming that we are infallible or omniscient with respect to even a small set of facts about our own minds. See Gertler (2011; p. 61-65) for a discussion of infallibility and omniscience.

<sup>10</sup> See McKinsey (1991) and Gertler (2000; 2011) among others for contemporary philosophers who hold that privileged access involves uniquely first-personal knowledge.

this, I would have, but you would lack, uniquely first-personal knowledge of F. Let's call this the *uniqueness condition*.<sup>11</sup>

Privileged access, I think, should be understood as involving *both* epistemic authoritativeness and first-personal uniqueness. More precisely, I embrace the following account of privileged access:

PA: S has privileged access to some fact F iff. S is an epistemic authority with respect to F, and S possesses such authority with respect to F via a uniquely first-personal means.

PA construes the relationship between epistemic authoritativeness and first-personal uniqueness in a plausible way. According to this account, it is not just that one is an epistemic authority with respect to F *and* one has a unique way of arriving at knowledge that F; it is rather that first-personal uniqueness is what explains such authoritativeness.

One cogent reason to embrace PA is that if one were to deny either epistemic authority or uniqueness as a necessary condition for privileged access, such an account would be unable to make sense of certain substantive debates in the literature as debates about privileged access. If, for example, one were to abandon the uniqueness condition, one would have trouble making sense of the ongoing debate concerning whether content

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<sup>11</sup> A related notion to the uniqueness condition is the *directness* or *immediacy* condition. The thought is that possessing privileged access involves knowing the contents of one's mind in a non-inferential way. It is important to note that the uniqueness condition is distinct from the immediacy condition. This is because it is possible for there to be a uniquely first-personal, inferential process (e.g. certain transparency means of self-knowledge, perhaps), and it is also possible for there to be non-uniquely first-personal, non-inferential processes (e.g. certain perceptual processes, perhaps). In what follows, I will refrain from characterizing privileged access in terms of directness in part because some view visual perception as a highly reliable, non-inferential process and I take it we do not want to say that visual perception affords us with privileged access. That being said, I do think that satisfying the directness condition makes it more likely that one will be an epistemic authority.

externalism is compatible with privileged access.<sup>12</sup> This debate, as the voluminous body of literature indicates, is largely a debate over whether content externalists can explain the uniquely first-personal relationship we bear to our minds.<sup>13</sup> If, on the other hand, one construes privileged access *solely* in terms of epistemic security or epistemic authoritativeness, one would be committed to the view that the above debate is not a debate about privileged access.

Similar remarks apply if we abandon the epistemic authority condition. A host of debates in the self-knowledge literature involve disagreement over whether we possess epistemically secure knowledge to facts about our own minds, knowledge that is more robust than other agents possess. These debates are viewed as being disagreements concerning whether we possess privileged access to such facts.<sup>14</sup> One who denies that having such authoritative knowledge is necessary for privileged access cannot make sense of these disagreements as disputes concerning privileged access.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Goldberg (2015) for a summary of this debate.

<sup>13</sup> McKinsey (1991) suggests this when he opens his seminal paper, "Anti-Individualism and Privileged Access" by noting: "It has been philosophical commonplace at least since Descartes, to hold that each of us can know the existence and content of his own mental states in a privileged way that is *available to no one else* (p. 9; emphasis added). McKinsey proceeds to argue that content externalists cannot make sense of this "philosophical commonplace."

<sup>14</sup> Gertler (2011; ch. 3), for example, discusses whether we have epistemic security to facts about our minds in light of recent skepticism about such a view, and she construes this debate as a debate about privileged access. See Schwitzgebel (2008) as well.

<sup>15</sup> It might be held that we can make sense of such debates if we embrace an *epistemic security* condition (i.e. a condition that requires that one have highly epistemically secure knowledge of the fact in question in order to have privileged access), as opposed to an *epistemic authority* condition. Insofar as this is the case, the above defense would not provide support for the view that we should embrace the latter condition as opposed to the former. In response to this objection, I *do* think that a number of these debates are debates about whether we have authoritative knowledge, not just epistemically secure knowledge. See, for example, Gertler (2000). Furthermore, I think there are reasons for thinking we should embrace an *epistemic authority condition* as opposed to merely an *epistemic security condition*. The main reason, as I implied above, is that a number of philosophers view privileged access as involving epistemic asymmetry. The other reason for opting for an authority condition over a security condition is that we want our account of

One might object to the above defense of PA by noting that there is an alternative account of privileged access that can make equally good sense of the above debates as debates about privileged access. That account is the following disjunctive view:

PAD: S has privileged access to some fact F iff. S is: (i) an epistemic authority with respect to F and/or (ii) S has uniquely first-personal knowledge that F.

PAD, I acknowledge, does make sense of the above debates as privileged access debates. However, this account leads to some very awkward consequences. For instance, it entails that we can have privileged access to certain commonplace facts about the external world. For example, I could be an epistemic authority, it seems, with respect to the fact that there is a spider crawling across my apartment wall. I might, after all, have epistemically secure knowledge of this fact, knowledge no one else possesses. According to PAD, I would possess privileged access to this fact. More broadly, any facts that one is an epistemic authority with respect to, including *a priori* facts, will be facts that one has privileged access to. Such an account of privileged access is, I think, too liberal. It would entail that we have privileged access to truths that are commonly thought to be outside the realm of privileged access. This problem alone suffices, I think, to rule out PAD as a viable alternative account of privileged access.<sup>16</sup>

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privileged access to make sense of what is privileged about privileged access. And an account that not only requires epistemic security but also security that is stronger than anyone else's helps us see what is robustly and distinctively privileged about this type of knowledge.

<sup>16</sup> PAD is also hobbled by scenarios where one possesses uniquely first-personal knowledge of facts but lacks the type of epistemic security privileged access is typically thought to consist in. One might, for instance, have a uniquely-first personal way of knowing the contents of her mind that puts her in a less



There are good reasons, then, to accept PA as our account of privileged access. Insofar as PA is the account of privileged access we should embrace, we can now state the value question we are interested in more precisely:

**The Privileged Access Value Question:** What, if anything, is valuable about being an epistemic authority with respect to some fact F *because* one possesses a uniquely first-personal way of knowing F?<sup>17</sup>

Let us turn to an investigation of this question next.

## **Part II: The Extrinsic Value of Privileged Access**

In the previous section I argued that the most plausible account of privileged access involves being an epistemic authority with respect to a fact *because* one has a uniquely first personal way of knowing that fact. One significant consequence of embracing this account is that privileged access is required if we are to possess a type of robust epistemic control over facts about our minds. The epistemic control in question is a matter of being

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epistemically secure position than an alternative third-personal means would. Given such a scenario, calling this type of access “privileged” seems strained at best.

It bears mentioning here as well that there are accounts of privileged access that build into the analysis a more *precise* explanation of how one arrives at the epistemically secure knowledge in question (e.g., an account that builds into the analysis that the first-personal process needs to be an introspective process). Such *thicker* accounts, though, have the drawback of ruling out certain accounts of self-knowledge (e.g., extrospectional accounts of self-knowledge) as being able to make sense of how we have privileged access to some of the contents of our *minds*. (Note that Byrne (2005; 2018) and Fernandez (2013) think we possess privileged access to facts about our minds via such extrospective means.) The above drawback alone, suffices, I think, to rule out such explanatorily richer accounts of privileged access as tenable accounts.

<sup>17</sup> This question concerns extrinsic value. Below I will also address the following question about intrinsic value: why, if at all, should we think that privileged access is intrinsically valuable?

able to keep private or disclose particular facts about one's mind to others. If, for example, a defense lawyer has privileged access to the fact that she believes her client is guilty, this is a fact that, in the typical case, she will be able to refrain from disclosing to her client, a client that will lack the type of epistemic security she has to it. Her client will lack this type of epistemic security because he is not an epistemic authority with respect to the fact in question.

Furthermore, the client will likely have to rely on his lawyer in order to know this fact. This is because he lacks the first-personal means the lawyer has available to her to know what she believes. He will in turn have to rely on third-personal means to know this fact, and these third-personal means will likely involve the cooperation of his lawyer, cooperation that will either come in the form of behavioral cues or testimony.

In short, then, having privileged access to some fact F is required for being able to put others in a highly epistemically secure position with respect to our minds, or withhold information about our minds to others. The latter is what I am calling *epistemic control*.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The notion of epistemic control I am invoking here is related to a popular notion of privacy that has been defended by a number of philosophers of law. One such account is Fried's (1970), who understands *privacy* as "the control we have over information about ourselves" (140). Fried proceeds to claim that the person who enjoys privacy is able to grant or deny access to this information to others (140). Fried's account of privacy is broader than my understanding of epistemic control given that Fried's account includes control over non-mental facts about ourselves in addition to facts about our minds. But insofar as the type of control that Fried points to in explaining privacy involves the ability to determine what others know about us—and it seems reasonable to think that it does—such control is similar in nature to the type of control I am arguing we have to a robust degree when we have privileged access (and certain other conditions are met). Cf. Westin's (1967) and Miller's (1971) accounts of privacy as well.

The above discussion, though, should not be taken to imply that I embrace so-called *control accounts of privacy* like Fried's account. Perhaps qua analyses of *privacy* such accounts fail. In fact, I have refrained from calling epistemic control, privacy, in part because I don't want my view of epistemic control to be conflated with such views of privacy. What I do want to maintain is that there is an intimate connection between the latter and what I mean by *epistemic control*, a relationship that helps illuminate the notion I am underscoring. See DeCew (2018) for an overview of competing accounts of privacy. I thank Uriah Kriegel for a helpful discussion concerning epistemic control and these accounts of privacy.

What other conditions must be met in order for one to have the type of robust epistemic control privileged access helps to afford? At least one other condition that needs to be met would be appropriately unconstrained agency. To see why, consider the case of an agent who cannot help but blurt out whatever facts she has privileged access to. Such an agent would have privileged access to facts about her mind, but would lack any type of control over these facts. This agent, who suffers from what we might call *Epistemic Tourette Syndrome*, lacks the type of appropriately unconstrained agency most of us typically possess with respect to facts about our minds. Such an agent has privileged access but lacks the epistemic control we typically have when we possess privileged access. Having appropriately unconstrained agency, then, with respect to what we reveal or don't reveal about our minds also seems to be a necessary condition for possessing the type of epistemic control I have been focusing on.<sup>19</sup>

The following analogy will, I think, help to clarify the relationship between privileged access and epistemic control. Naomi might have the ability to easily defeat her opponent Serena in a particular tennis match, but only if Naomi knows (or has warranted belief) that Serena has a weak backhand and cannot handle the chip and charge. This knowledge, then, is necessary in order for Naomi to have the ability in question. There are other conditions Naomi also needs to meet in order to be able to soundly beat her opponent—she needs, for example, to have certain athletic skills (e.g., the ability to force her opponent to use her backhand.). The knowledge, then, that Naomi possesses, while very important, is not going to suffice on its own to allow her to defeat Serena.

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<sup>19</sup> It should be clear that the agency that is required for epistemic control is only a *necessary* condition for having such control. I should also register that I think this agency is extrinsically valuable to us, but I don't need to defend that claim here.

Analogously, I am contending that having authoritative, uniquely first-personal knowledge is a type of knowledge that is required in order to have a specific ability—viz. what I am calling *epistemic control*, or the ability to “put” people in a highly epistemically secure position with respect to the facts in question, or refrain from revealing such facts; that is to say, privileged access is necessary for maintaining a type of robust control over facts concerning the contents of our minds.

I now want to argue that the type of control I have been discussing is, in most cases, of great instrumental value to the person who possesses it (and that consequently, privileged access because it is required for such control, is of great instrumental value to its possessor.)<sup>20</sup> This is most obviously the case with respect to goal-oriented action. Our ability to accomplish what we set out to accomplish would be markedly limited if we didn’t have this type of epistemic control over our minds. Certainly, a poker player would have no chance of bluffing her opponent if the latter possessed the type of epistemic access to her mind the bluffer possesses. Less trivially, perhaps, a middle school math teacher would have a very hard time accomplishing the goal of motivating a struggling student if the latter had epistemically secure knowledge of the fact that her teacher believed she wasn’t a strong student. Mundane examples like this are not hard to come by.

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<sup>20</sup> More precisely still, the type of value that I think both epistemic control and privileged access possess is not just extrinsic/instrumental value, it is also *prudential value*. The latter is value that concerns what is good for a person (in this case, the person who possesses epistemic control). The type of value I will be discussing, then, is not moral value, although it is the case that in some circumstances, epistemic control will be of moral value to the person who has it as well. See Tiberius (2015) for an overview of prudential value.

The upshot is that we would typically have a more difficult time accomplishing many of our objectives if we lacked such epistemic control.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the latter enables us to choose to keep private certain beliefs, desires, intentions, etc. that if uncovered, would potentially cause harm to other agents and/or ourselves.

Given the above discussion, one might think that the instrumental value of the type of epistemic control in question lies solely in the fact that it enables us to keep some facts private. But this is mistaken. It is clear that sometimes it is beneficial to us to put other agents in a very strong epistemic position vis-à-vis some fact we have privileged access to. An estranged lover might want a former partner to know in a highly epistemically secure manner that she still loves him. Disclosing this fact would be of paramount importance in such a case. The instrumental value of privileged access, then, is not just a matter of affording us with a type of control that allows us to keep hidden what we don't want disclosed.<sup>22</sup> It is rather that it is necessary for a type of control that enables us to keep hidden *or* reveal facts about our minds.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> It might be objected that we would still be able to effectively accomplish our goals if (a) we lacked privileged access, but (b) others *lacked* knowledge of what we were going to do as well. In such an event, while we might lack robust epistemic control, this would not prevent us from successfully accomplishing our goals since third-personal parties would lack such knowledge as well. But note that insofar as we lack privileged access to such facts, the control we possess over our minds is going to be diminished. Agents will have a more difficult time controlling who has access to such facts if they themselves aren't in a strong epistemic position with respect to the facts in question.

<sup>22</sup> This is in part why I have decided not to refer to the type of epistemic control in question as *privacy*. Privacy connotes keeping hidden that which we don't want to disclose. But this is too restrictive a notion, I think, for what I mean by *epistemic control*.

<sup>23</sup> An analogy might help bolster this claim: think of each fact about your mind as being locked in its own separate safe box. When you have privileged access to a certain fact, in the typical case you not only have a key that enables you to open the safe box in question; you will also be the only one with such a key as long as you choose to be. You can certainly choose to reveal the contents of what is locked in the safe box to others, but prior to such a revelation (and perhaps even after) other agents will lack a key to the safe box. Most of us, I imagine, think that it would be valuable to possess such a key. And furthermore, most of us

I want to further motivate the above defense of the instrumental, and consequently extrinsic, value of privileged access via the following *gedankenexperiment*.

**Super Siri:**

Imagine that, implanted in your brain, there is a chip connected to a larger operating system. This chip enables one's brain to be *read* via an app that functions like an extraordinarily highly-capable version of Apple's Siri. Ask Super Siri a question about your mental states, and Super Siri delivers an answer. The device is highly reliable, and you have strong evidence that it is. You are thus able to learn facts about your mind via Super Siri. However, with a bit of effort, others are able to learn facts about your mind in the same highly reliable way as you because the operating system makes its reports publicly available.

The first thing to note is that someone who comes to know facts about her mind via Super Siri would have highly epistemically secure knowledge of such facts but would lack privileged access to them. She would fail to have such access because she would not arrive at such knowledge in a uniquely first personal way. In part because her knowledge isn't arrived at via uniquely first-personal means, she possesses much less epistemic control over her mind than she typically would possess if she had privileged access to such facts.

I take it that most of us would not want to have such a chip implanted in our brains. We wouldn't opt to have this done because doing so would allow others access to, e.g., our beliefs, desires, hopes, fears, etc. In allowing others this type of access to the

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would think that, *in general*, the more keys we possessed the better. The view that possessing these keys is valuable is what underlies the above defense of the instrumental/extrinsic value of privileged access.

content of our minds, we would be ceding a large amount of the control we possess over the contents of our minds. Our desire not to lose this control indicates that such control is valuable to us. And it is valuable to us, I think, because of the reasons adumbrated above. If this is correct, this provides further support for the view that privileged access is instrumentally valuable in the way outlined above.

An objection that might be raised to this epistemic-control-based defense of the extrinsic value of privileged access is that we can possess the type of epistemic control I have been arguing is valuable in cases in which we lack privileged access (or at least possess control that is as valuable as the type of control I think we possess when we have privileged access). In particular, one might think we can possess such control in cases in which we have epistemically authoritative knowledge but lack privileged access.<sup>24</sup> In defense of this objection, consider a mathematician who is an epistemic authority with respect to a proof she recently discovers. Such a mathematician, however, lacks privileged access to the mathematical fact in question because she does not arrive at knowledge of it in a uniquely first-personal way. It could be claimed that this mathematician possesses authoritative knowledge and would, in the typical case, possess epistemic control over this fact, control that is as extrinsically valuable to her as the epistemic control she would possess if she had privileged access to this fact.

In response to this objection, first note that even if this objection is to the mark, it would merely indicate that there is nothing unique about what is extrinsically valuable

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<sup>24</sup> Cases in which we have uniquely first-personal knowledge of our minds but lack privileged access because we lack authoritative knowledge do not, I believe, pose a problem for my defense. The reason is that one's epistemic control over the fact in question in these cases has already been compromised; in such cases, there is at least one other person who stands in as strong an epistemic position vis-à-vis the relevant fact as the agent with the relevant self-knowledge.

about possessing privileged. It would not entail that privileged access fails to have the type of extrinsic value I think it does.

The above being said, there is a less concessive response we can offer to the above objection—viz., that while we might possess epistemic control in cases in which we have authoritative knowledge but lack privileged access, (a) such control is going to be more limited and tenuous than the type of control privileged access is a necessary condition for, and (b) the fact that (a) is the case makes a significant value difference.

In defense of (a), recall again the mathematician. Insofar as this mathematician lacks a uniquely first-personal means by which she arrives at this knowledge, she will lack a certain amount of control over whether others also arrive at knowledge of this fact. This is because her peers have available to them the same means that could, in time, enable them to arrive at this fact as well. So while the mathematician has some epistemic control over this fact, her control is limited in a way that it wouldn't be if she possessed privileged access to this fact.

The above point applies as well if we focus on facts about the contents of our minds. In support of this contention, note first that if an agent S possesses authoritative knowledge to some fact F about her mind but lacks privileged access, then the reason S lacks privileged access is because the agent lacks a uniquely-first personal means of knowing the fact about her mind. Insofar as this is the case, it warrants considering what third-personal means are going to afford one with highly epistemically secure, authoritative knowledge about facts about her mind. The two most obvious third-personal means by which we know facts about our minds are the testimony of others and observations of behavior. If the means is the former, then it seems like the recipient of the



testimony would not possess authoritative knowledge given that the testifier would have the same highly epistemically secure (if not more secure) knowledge as the recipient of such testimony. Furthermore, even if the above is not the case, in circumstances in which one learns a fact about their own mind via the testimony of someone else, the epistemic control over the fact in question S possesses has already been compromised; this is in part because the testifier would have the same highly epistemically secure knowledge as the recipient (if not more secure knowledge).

With respect to observations of our own behavior, I am skeptical that we regularly possess highly epistemically secure, authoritative knowledge of the contents of our minds via observations of our behavior. But even setting this issue aside, in a world in which observations of our own behavior is the normal way we come to possess highly epistemically secure knowledge of the contents of our own minds, our epistemic control over the facts in question would also be more limited than if we possessed privileged access. This is because, in such a world, some people would, it seems, be just as reliable (or nearly as reliable) as we are at employing such means to know the contents of our minds. Such people could in turn compromise our control over such facts by coming to possess knowledge of them via the same means we use to possess such knowledge.<sup>25</sup> The

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<sup>25</sup> One might think that in such a world we are going to be more of an expert about ourselves than others and this would enable us to maintain a significant amount of control over our own minds. Perhaps, it might be contended, we would be more of an expert about ourselves because we have more observations of ourselves to base our inferences on. In response to this claim, first note that there is literature from contemporary social psychology that suggests that others are often more reliable than us at arriving at conclusions about our minds on the basis of observations than we are. (See Wilson (2004) and Schwitzgebel (2008) for defenses of this claim). But even if this is not the case, though, we might find ourselves around others who simply are better than we are at gauging the contents of our own minds on the basis of observations of our behavior (even if, *in general*, we are more reliable than third-personal parties at doing so.) We would, it seems, have to be lucky enough to not be around those types of persons in order for our control to not be compromised. Given this, I think our control would be more tenuous and limited if we

epistemic control we have when we possess mere authoritative knowledge as opposed to privileged access, then, is going to be more limited than the control we possess when we possess privileged access.<sup>26</sup> And this type of limitation on our epistemic control matters, I think, with respect to whether the epistemic control we have when we possess privileged access is as valuable as the control we have when we have mere authoritative knowledge.

The above is the case, I believe, because the epistemic control we have when we possess privileged access makes it more likely that we will accomplish our objectives than if we had mere authoritative knowledge. In defense of this claim, consider again the middle school teacher of mathematics who knows she believes her student is not strong in math. Recall that this teacher wants to keep this fact private given that she has the objective of motivating her student to learn the course material. If such a teacher were to possess mere authoritative knowledge with respect to such a fact but not privileged access, then this teacher would most likely have arrived at this knowledge via the testimony of someone else (in which case she would seemingly not have authoritative knowledge, and her epistemic control over the fact would already be compromised) or via observations of her own behavior. But concerning the latter, others could, in principle, observe her relevant behavior, just as she did, to discover this fact.<sup>27</sup> And if they did, then

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had mere authoritative knowledge via observations of our own behavior as opposed to having a uniquely first-personal means of knowing these facts.

<sup>26</sup> A proponent of the initial objection might think there is some other non-uniquely third-personal means that can be invoked in defense of their objection. But the burden is on such a proponent to explain what that third-personal means would be and why such a means would pose a serious threat to my defense of the extrinsic value of privileged access. After all, whatever the third-personal means would be, it would have to be a means that others could in principle use to know the contents of our minds.

<sup>27</sup> Perhaps they would not be able to do so as easily as the teacher does, but they could, it seems, do so. If no other persons could acquire this knowledge via such a means, then the means would not be third-personal.

the teacher's ability to accomplish her objective of motivating the student would be jeopardized.

If the teacher possessed privileged access to the fact in question, however, then others are, it seems, going to have to rely on some third-personal means to know this fact, third-personal means that the teacher herself does not have to rely on. The fact that this teacher relies on first-personal means to know the fact in question, something that makes her a true expert concerning this fact about her mind, leaves third-personal parties more dependent on her to acquire knowledge *simpliciter*, let alone, highly epistemically secure knowledge of the fact in question.<sup>28</sup>

Given the above, it is thus less probable that such a fact would be uncovered if the teacher has privileged access to the fact than if she had mere authoritative knowledge. And insofar as this is the case, it is more likely that the teacher will be able to accomplish her objective of motivating her student if she has privileged access to the relevant fact as opposed to having authoritative knowledge. The broader point is that, in the typical case, the additional amount of epistemic control privileged access helps contribute to is going to be more effective at helping us accomplish our personal objectives than if we

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Now it might be pointed out that we might be fortunate enough to be around others who are simply poor at drawing inferences about our minds on the basis of observations of our behavior. I agree—we might be lucky in this respect. But the fact that we would have to rely on such luck to maintain robust epistemic control over facts about our mind motivates my point about the epistemic control we possess over the contents of our minds being more tenuous than it otherwise would be if we had privileged access to such facts. Removing the need for such luck would seem to be a valuable thing with respect to facts about our minds. After all, some of us might not be so lucky.

<sup>28</sup> Such a teacher might be concerned that the student or someone else might learn the fact via observations of her behavior, but given that she possesses authoritative, highly epistemically secure knowledge of such a fact, something she would not have to acquire via observations of her behavior, the teacher could be more circumspect with respect to preventing others from learning this fact via such third-personal means. Some cooperation, then, on the part of the teacher, it seems, would most likely be needed for others to learn this fact.

possessed mere authoritative knowledge. Given this, the former is going to be more extrinsically valuable to us than the latter.

Up to this point, I have focused on the contribution that privileged access makes to helping each agent accomplish her individual goals. But it bears pointing out that the type of epistemic control in question also enables important collective goals to be met.<sup>29</sup> This type of control, I submit, allows societies to function in a much more productive, organized, and amicable way. When we accomplish group objectives in an efficient and peaceful manner we do so in large part by keeping private that which would be counterproductive to the group's efforts, and/or revealing our thoughts, beliefs, desires, etc. that are valuable for other members of a group to know.

Consider the following examples: if certain group members believe that one of their own is not carrying his weight, and if that group member were to become even less productive if he found this out, then keeping such information concealed might very well be helpful overall to the group. In some circumstances, though, it is beneficial to the group to put group members in a strong epistemic position with respect to facts about one's mind. If, for example, a member of a group discovered that other members believed she was exceptional at a certain task, such a disclosure might very well lead the agent to have more confidence in her abilities, which in turn could improve the performance of this agent.

Thomas Nagel (2002) makes a similar point to the one above in a slightly different context, writing:

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<sup>29</sup> I thank Eli Alshanetsky for encouraging me to think about the collective value privileged access affords.

The boundary between what we reveal and what we do not, and some control over that boundary, is among the most important attributes of our humanity... There is much more going on inside us all the time than we are willing to express, and civilization would be impossible if we could all read each other's minds (191).

Granted, the mere fact that we lack privileged access would not in and of itself entail that others had epistemic access to our minds. So others wouldn't *necessarily* be able to read our minds insofar as we lacked such access. But we would, as I have argued, have less control over facts about our minds than we would if we had privileged access. And this, I have argued, would adversely effect our ability to accomplish collective objectives.

The upshot of the above discussion is that in most cases, possessing privileged access would be of great instrumental, and therefore extrinsic value to those who possess it. It is instrumentally valuable because it is required in order for us to possess a robust form of epistemic control that is advantageous for us to possess.<sup>30</sup>

I would like to conclude this section by acknowledging that there will be cases in which (i) one possesses privileged access, (ii) such access enables, in part, one to have robust epistemic control over the fact in question, and yet (iii) privileged access and/or

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<sup>30</sup> One might object that privileged access is not *instrumentally valuable* on my view because, strictly speaking, privileged access does not *lead to* epistemic control. One who offers this objection, though, is working with a problematically narrow conception of instrumental goodness. On one reasonable way of understanding instrumental goodness, x is instrumentally good if x *contributes* to something y that is also good. Good health, it is not unreasonable to suppose, is instrumentally good because it contributes to living a good life. It doesn't (at least in and of itself) lead to a good life. Good health's instrumental goodness lies in its being necessary for living a good life. In a similar vein, I have been contending that privileged access makes a necessary contribution to a type of epistemic control that is quite valuable to us. Some might prefer to call this type of value "contributive value." (Cf. Korsgaard (1983)). I am fine with this as I think the distinction between "contributive value" and "instrumental value" is, at the end of the day, a relatively unimportant terminological preference. Either way, if I am correct, privileged access would at the very least be extrinsically valuable to the agent who possesses it.

such control is (instrumentally) disvaluable. Such cases might include scenarios in which possessing authoritative knowledge harms the knower in some way. So, for example, we can imagine a relief pitcher coming to acquire highly epistemically secure knowledge of the fact that he believes he will lack control of his pitches in high-leverage situations. This in turn causes him to walk a number of batters in these types of pressure-filled circumstances. Or, more tragically, there could be a case in which a patient suffering from a disease comes to possess privileged access to the fact that she believes she won't recover, which in turn makes it more likely that she won't. In such cases, perhaps, the disvalue of possessing such access outweighs the overall goodness that possessing epistemic control over the fact in question affords.

But conceding the above point does not mean that we should accept the view that, *in the typical case*, the instrumental value of privileged access is going to be trumped by other factors. After all, it seems that the above scenarios are aberrant cases, and, more specifically, that in most cases possessing privileged access to a fact is not going to harm the agent who possesses it, but is rather going to be to their benefit. The suggestion that possessing privileged access is, in the typical case, going to be disvaluable, has as much plausibility, it seems, as the suggestion that possessing knowledge *simpliciter* typically involves greater overall instrumental disvalue than instrumental value for one who possesses it.

### **Part III: The Intrinsic Value of Privileged Access**

We might wonder, though, whether privileged access is merely extrinsically valuable, or whether it typically has intrinsic value as well. As mentioned above, x has intrinsic value

iff. x has value that supervenes on its non-relational properties.<sup>31</sup> Does privileged access have this type of value?

Answering this question is difficult, in part, because it is not entirely obvious what means we should use to determine whether any given thing x, is intrinsically valuable. That being said, there are several influential tests for determining whether something x has value that is the result of x's non-relational properties, and such tests can also help us determine whether x is finally valuable, or valuable for its own sake. Why? The answer is it is widely agreed that if x has value that is the solely the result of its non-relational properties—i.e., if x is has intrinsic value—then it also has final value.<sup>32</sup>

One popular test for whether a given thing x has value that is determined solely by its non-relational properties is Moore's Isolation Test.<sup>33</sup> One performs this test by considering a world in which only one thing, x, exists.<sup>34</sup> One next proceeds to determine whether in such a world, x would be valuable. If one judges that x is valuable, this provides (at least) *prima facie* justification for thinking that x is intrinsically valuable. The thought here is that insofar as x exists in the absence of anything else, and is judged

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<sup>31</sup> Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (1999) embrace a broader notion of intrinsic value where x has intrinsic value iff. x has value that supervenes on its internal properties. By "internal properties" they mean not just the non-relational properties x possesses, but also the internally relational properties that it possesses in virtue of the relations it has to its own parts. Because I believe that not much hangs on whether we embrace this broader notion of intrinsic value concerning my project, I will adopt the narrower, more common way of understanding intrinsic value.

<sup>32</sup> Consider: if something's value is the result of its non-relational properties, then it is going to be valuable not because it contributes to something else that is valuable, but rather it is going to be valuable for its own sake.

<sup>33</sup> Moore (1903) was the first to defend the use of such a test. See Lemos (1994) and Zimmerman (2001) for ways of developing it.

<sup>34</sup> More carefully, one imagines a world in which only x *and* that which is necessary for x to exist, obtain. So, insofar as a conscious agent is needed in order for there to be privileged access, in our isolation world a conscious agent must exist. However, since one can possess privileged access without other agents existing (because in such a world, the epistemic authority condition would be trivially satisfied—see f.n. 34 below), in our isolation world, no other agent would exist.

to be valuable, x cannot be deemed valuable because of extrinsic phenomena that x is related to. *Ex hypothesis*, there are no extrinsic phenomena in this world that x could be related to.

Applying the isolation test to privileged access would involve considering whether such access is valuable in the absence of everything else.<sup>35</sup> It strikes me as reasonable to think it is. Such access seems valuable regardless of the fact that no other agents exist in this world. In defense of this claim, I think reflective people would prefer that an agent in this world would have such access to her mind as opposed to lack it. They would, that is, prefer the agent to possess privileged access even if there is nothing beneficial about having such access. This preference, I think, provides defeasible evidence for the claim that privileged access has intrinsic value, and therefore final value as well.

Now it might be thought that such a world would be a solipsistic nightmare, a world in which we alone existed and were “trapped” inside our minds. Given this, one might think that we wouldn’t (and/or shouldn’t) prefer to have privileged access to our minds in such a world, and hence, the Isolation Test actually provides evidence that privileged access is not intrinsically valuable.<sup>36</sup>

In response to this concern, I agree that most reflective agents would not want to live in such a Moorean universe. Most of us, after all, are social beings. But I also think that if we were unfortunate enough to have to exist in such a world, we would rather have

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<sup>35</sup> One might have noticed that in such a world, the agent with epistemically secure knowledge of her own mind would trivially be an epistemic authority with respect to her mind. This is because, *ex hypothesis*, there are no other agents in this world. But this fact, of course, would not prevent the agent in question from possessing epistemic control over her mind.

<sup>36</sup> I thank Eli Alshanetsky for first raising this objection.



it be the case that we were at least sure about one thing—viz. the contents of our minds. If the latter is the case, then we seem to have some reasonable evidence here that privileged access is intrinsically valuable, and consequently, of final value as well.

It might further be objected that we simply aren't able to carry out Moore's isolation test vis-à-vis our value question because we aren't able to conceive of a world in which only an agent with privileged access exists. For what it's worth, I find myself able to carry out such a test. But even if I am (somehow) mistaken about this, there is a similar test for intrinsic value that is arguably easier to carry out than Moore's test—viz. what we might call *the addition/subtraction test*. This test involves conceiving of an individual or society S who lacks a given thing x and adding x to S's life/lives; or, alternatively, conceiving of S as having x and then subtracting the latter.<sup>37</sup> In order for the addition/subtraction test to be useful, we also have to imagine that there is no extrinsic/instrumental gain or loss to be had when x is added or subtracted. If we are able to conceive of a scenario in which: (i) x is added to S's life, (ii) there is no extrinsic value acquired from adding x to S's life, and (iii) we think S's life is better with x than without it, this, it seems, gives us some reason to think that x is intrinsically valuable. After all, if we are carrying out the test properly, we aren't preferring that x be added to S's life because of its relation to other goods. We must, then, think that x is valuable but not because it is extrinsically valuable (if it is); we must, that is, think that x is intrinsically valuable.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> I thank Eric Schwitzgebel for helpful discussion concerning this test. Schwitzgebel (2015) employs the addition/subtraction test in arguing that knowledge *simpliciter* is intrinsically valuable.

<sup>38</sup> Similarly, if we are able to conceive of a scenario in which: (i) x is subtracted from S's life, (ii) there is nothing extrinsically disadvantageous about x being subtracted from S's life, and (iii) we think S's life is worse without x, then this gives us some reason to think that x is intrinsically valuable.

Let's run the addition/subtraction test with respect to privileged access. And let's do so by considering an individual who is a less radical version of Sydney Shoemaker's (1994) self-blind agent. Such an agent might not completely lack self-knowledge, but she does not possess privileged access to any of the contents of her mind. Would we prefer such an agent, in general, to have such access even if such access resulted in no extrinsic advantage to the agent? Admittedly, such a question is difficult to answer in part because it is hard to imagine that such access wouldn't be extrinsically advantageous to the person.<sup>39</sup> That being said, I think it's preferable that the agent have such access even if this type of knowledge didn't lead to a better life. I imagine others will as well.

Now more can and needs to be said concerning the alleged intrinsic value of privileged access than what I have offered here. But, at the very least, I think the above reasons serve as defeasible evidence that privileged access is typically not only extrinsically valuable but intrinsically valuable as well. And if it is the latter, then it is valuable for its own sake.

Additionally, it bears stressing that in addressing epistemic value questions concerning privileged access, I have refrained from assuming that knowledge *simpliciter* is intrinsically valuable. But if knowledge *simpliciter* is, in general, intrinsically valuable, as many philosophers think it is, then since privileged access is a type of knowledge, this would entail that privileged access is, in general, intrinsically valuable as well. In fact, one might hold that privileged access being a type of knowledge is what in part supports our intuitions with respect to the above two tests.

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<sup>39</sup> This provides further support, I think, for the claim that privileged access is at the very least extrinsically valuable to those who possess it in most cases.

## **Conclusion:**

It might be held that insofar as we lack privileged access, not much of value would be absent from our lives. I have argued that this is in fact not the case. If skeptics about privileged access are correct, then something of significant extrinsic and, plausibly, intrinsic value would be absent.<sup>40</sup> There might be lesser epistemic standings that are able to afford us with a similar type of extrinsic value, and arguably intrinsic value as well. But unless we possess a type of uniquely first-personal, epistemically authoritative knowledge, we are going to lack the type of robust epistemic control I have argued is typically of paramount importance to us.

I mentioned above that there are “thin” and “thick” ways of understanding privileged access. To understand privileged access in a “thick” way is to build into the analysis the precise means by which one is supposed to acquire authoritative knowledge. I argued that such thick accounts face problems as accounts of privileged access. However, I think it is reasonable to hold that the type of knowledge acquired by, e.g., transparency means, might afford us with a different kind of epistemic good that is unique to that particular view of self-knowledge. Such a suggestion is worthy of further investigation. What I have done here, though, is work to establish that on the most plausible view of privileged access, the latter indeed is something we wouldn’t want to be without.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> One might think that if privileged access to our mental states is much more diminished than we thought, then such access wouldn’t be valuable. But as noted above, my project involves answering the following question: if we do possess privileged access, what, if anything, would be valuable about having such access? Therefore, the conclusions drawn above, I think, are not effected by the claim that we have less privileged access than we think we do (or that we don’t have it at all).

<sup>41</sup> Special thanks to Baron Reed, Eric Schwitzgebel, Eli Alshanetsky, and Uriah Kriegel for their valuable comments on earlier version of this paper, as well as to Brie Gertler, Sanford Goldberg, Jennifer Lackey,

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