

GASLIGHTING

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MORAL GASLIGHTING

Philosophers have turned their attention to gaslighting only recently, and have made considerable progress in analysing its characteristic aims and harms. I am less convinced, however, that we have fully understood its nature. I will argue in this paper that philosophers and others interested in the phenomenon have largely overlooked a phenomenon I call *moral* gaslighting, in which someone is made to feel morally defective—for example, cruelly unforgiving or overly suspicious—for harbouring some mental state to which she is entitled. If I am right about this possibility, and that it deserves to be called gaslighting, then gaslighting is a far more prevalent and everyday phenomenon than has previously been credited. And it can also be a purely structural phenomenon, as well as an interpersonal one, which remains a controversial possibility in the current literature.

Victims' testimony about what was done to them—and by whom—is a powerful weapon in the fight against injustice. Women testifying to the reality of sexual assault and harassment galvanized the world in 2017, following the popularization of Tarana Burke's #MeToo movement. The testimony of people of colour has similarly played a crucial role in greater (if still highly imperfect) social awareness of the realities of racism. But sometimes a person who has been subject to one injustice is then subject to another: the deprivation of her ability to tell her tale, and even her own sense of its validity.

Gaslighting is one of the ways this happens, and this is one of the reasons I am interested in it. There are other reasons too. I am interested in gaslighting not only as a *mask* for misogyny (among other forms of injustice) but also because, as we will see, misogyny can serve as a tool or technique of gaslighting. Thus, for someone trying to make sense of the logic of misogyny, gaslighting demands and rewards close examination.

And gaslighting is also an inherently puzzling phenomenon, which deserves study in itself. Somehow, some agents manage to induce

others not to believe the evidence of their senses—along with testimonial evidence, the evidence provided by their memories, and other generally reliable belief-forming methods. How does this work? How could it? And could it operate purely structurally, as well as interpersonally, in some cases?

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I

Various definitions of gaslighting have been proposed in the literature, typically in passing. Neal A. Kline defines gaslighting as ‘the effort of one person to undermine another person’s confidence and stability by causing the victim to doubt [their] own senses and beliefs’ (2006, p. 1148). Veronica Ivy writes that gaslighting occurs ‘when a hearer tells a speaker that the speaker’s claim isn’t that serious, or they’re overreacting, or they’re being too sensitive, or they’re not interpreting events properly’ (2017, abstract). Paige L. Sweet characterizes gaslighting as ‘a type of psychological abuse aimed at making victims seem or feel “crazy”, creating a “surreal” interpersonal environment’ (2019, p. 851) which, as a substantive matter of fact, often ‘[relies] on the association of femininity with irrationality’ (2019, p. 855). And Kate Abramson writes:

Very roughly, the phenomenon that’s come to be picked out with [the term ‘gaslighting’] is a form of emotional manipulation in which the gaslighter tries (consciously or not) to induce in someone the sense that her reactions, perceptions, memories and/or beliefs are not just mistaken, but utterly without grounds—paradigmatically, so unfounded as to qualify as crazy. (Abramson 2014, p. 2)

These definitions are similar to one another inasmuch as they focus on the ways gaslighters try to depict their victims as, or actually

make them feel, ‘crazy’,¹ insane, mentally unstable, irrational, hysterical, paranoid, and so on—broadly rational defects. The Oxford English Dictionary’s current definition of gaslighting is similar too: it holds that gaslighting is ‘the action or process of manipulating a person by psychological means into questioning his or her own sanity’ (OED 2016).

Although these definitions doubtless capture something important, I believe they leave out a lot as well.² In my view, gaslighting can weaponize morality as well as rationality against its targets and victims. And once we have recognized this, we can make better sense of the possibility of purely *structural* cases of gaslighting, which the above authors find little room for (with both Sweet and Abramson rejecting it). I think such gaslighting is a real phenomenon, and the moral form of gaslighting explains how it is possible, and indeed not uncommon.

II

It will help to begin with the original case of gaslighting, which is responsible for the introduction of the term to the English language. In the 1938 play *Gas Light*, performed on Broadway as *Angel Street* (Hamilton 1942), Mr Manningham is a cruel and abusive husband, who torments his wife Bella in a variety of ways. He hides household objects around their home, and accuses her of stealing them; he implies that she is sick, feeble, and mentally unstable; and he accuses her, most painfully of all, of deliberately hurting their pet dog, whom Bella loves dearly.

Why does Mr Manningham do all this? As emerges late in the play’s first act, he is actually the diabolical Sydney Power, who murdered the previous resident of the home, Alice Barlow, in order to

¹ I use this term, which is certainly ableist, with circumspection. But it would be too difficult to do justice to the extant views on gaslighting in the literature without employing it on occasion, at least in scare quotes. I touch on the ways gaslighting often relies on ableist tropes in Manne (2020, ch. 8) (where I also discuss the two main cases that follow). Thanks to Barbara Cohn for useful discussion on this point and others here.

² To be clear, this is not necessarily harmful to these authors’ main projects, which include Abramson’s project of identifying the moral wrong of gaslighting, Ivy’s project of depicting gaslighting as a type of testimonial injustice, and Sweet’s project of theorizing the sociology of gaslighting in general, and its gendered dimensions in particular. I think each of these authors has done much to illuminate their respective topics, as will be clear from what follows.

steal her rubies. Power then slit Barlow's throat to silence her, we learn from the play's resident detective, Detective Rough, who comes to visit Bella to tell her this sordid tale. Some fifteen years on, Mr Manningham has married Bella (under this false name) to persuade her to use her inheritance to buy the Barlow residence, where he can look for the rubies he never located all those years ago. He searches for the rubies every night up in the attic, having told Bella he is going out for the evening.

This is where the flickering of the gaslights comes in. Their telltale ebbing has allowed Bella to infer where her husband is going every night (though not why he is going, or what he is doing, up there). For, every night, ten minutes after her husband ostensibly leaves the house, the gaslight would ebb; and then, ten minutes before he returns, it would revert to its former, full flame. This meant that a light must have been switched on, then off again, somewhere else in the house, since the gas pressure from one light being turned on would siphon off gas pressure from another. And the only plausible candidate location is the attic, which is shut up, and off-limits to anyone in the house (bar, it turns out, its master).

The following exchange between Detective Rough and Bella brings out that Bella knew all along, at least deep down, that her husband was creeping about in the attic each night:

Mrs Manningham: It all sounds so incredible [but] ... when I'm alone at night[,] I get the idea that—somebody's walking about up there—[*Looking up.*] Up there—At night, when my husband's out—I hear noises, from my bedroom, but I'm too afraid to go up—

Rough: Have you told your husband about this?

Mrs Manningham: No. I'm afraid to. He gets angry. He says I imagine things which don't exist—

Rough: It never struck you, did it, that it might be your own husband walking about up there?

Mrs Manningham: Yes—that is what I thought—but I thought I must be mad. Tell me how you know.

Rough: Why not tell me first how you knew, Mrs Manningham.

Mrs Manningham: It's true, then! It's true. I knew it. I knew it! (Hamilton 1938, Act One)

Though Bella is triumphant in her extant knowledge in that moment, she has suffered terrible epistemic losses: her husband has made her so doubtful of herself that she didn't dare to question his movements, let alone his motives.³ And this, presumably, is partly why he is doing it—to discredit her in advance of her potentially discovering and acting upon the truth about his misdeeds. There is also the undoubted pleasure he takes in his cruelty. (The cruelty is partly the point for him, to borrow a phrase from Adam Serwer 2018.)

Notice that, even in this example, where Mr Manningham *does* depict his wife as mentally unstable—and arguably tries to *make* her so—there are also moral elements to his gaslighting behaviour. His accusations toward her of stealing objects and hurting their pet dog are straightforwardly moral complaints, and seem designed to impugn her moral character, rather than her rationality, sanity, or similar. In order to establish the role this plays in destabilizing her, and many other victims of such gaslighting, let us turn to another case which sheds further light on the matter.

III

The possibility that gaslighting can proceed by weaponizing moral norms comes out even more clearly in a case drawn from the recent hit podcast *Dirty John*—which also has the benefit of showing that there are real-life cases of gaslighting scarcely less extreme than the foregoing, fictional one.

In this case, Debra Newell, a woman in her late fifties, falls in love with and marries a con artist named John Meehan. He pretended to be an anaesthesiologist (dressing up in scrubs on their dates), while in reality he was a nurse anaesthetist who had been fired for stealing drugs intended for patients (some of whom were on the operating table at the time, and thus would have been left in agony). He had a long history of addiction to prescription pain medication, and had stalked many women. He boasted of raping at least one of them. He had been repeatedly arrested, served with restraining orders, and

³ The set-up is thus subtler in the play than in the film, where Paula questions her husband Gregory about the gaslights dimming and he denies this is happening—a denial that is arguably too implausible to be credited. Here she doesn't dare to raise the issue in the first place, and doesn't doubt these perceptions so much as their significance. (Though Bella does say, above, that her husband dismisses *other* of her perceptions as delusions or fabrications, and in an angry manner.)

when he met Debra, unbeknownst to her, he had just come out of prison a day or two earlier for felony drug theft. ‘Just the most devious, deceptive person’ was how one hardened career cop described John Meehan—hence his eponymous moniker. Some people also called him ‘filthy’.

Debra’s children had strong suspicions about John, and worried about their mother. Eventually, she found incontrovertible evidence of his myriad deceptions—arrest warrants, prison records—and moved out of their shared home in Newport Beach, California. Meanwhile, John was in hospital, following back surgery and ensuing complications. When Debra withdrew from him, he began to threaten her, and depicted *her* as the wrongdoer: accusing her of stealing from him, hitting him, and other supposed misdeeds she had never committed. This was a go-to move for John: painting himself as the victim, on no basis whatsoever. Debra hid from John in hotels, on the advice of a police detective whose help she had appealed to.

Nonetheless, somehow, despite all this, Debra not only forgave John but was persuaded by him that it was all a big misunderstanding—she bought his demonstrable, dangerous lies all over again. It’s not altogether clear from the podcast whether John gaslit, or merely lied to Debra, originally. But it is clear that, whatever the case, Debra was subsequently (re)gaslit. Here’s *LA Times* journalist Christopher Goffard interviewing Debra, in a dialogue that will provide important insights into how John managed to achieve this:

Debra: So twenty-three days go by [while he’s in hospital] and I just want to look him straight in the face and ask him why he did this. So I went in there and he said that those stories are wrong, that he was set up. He was trying to tell me so many times that he was set up and had to go to jail. Please forgive him. He just knew that I wouldn’t understand until he had all the evidence in front of him.

Christopher: All a big misunderstanding?

Debra: All a big misunderstanding and he had an answer for everything; and it was so convincing that I thought, Okay. He, literally, had convinced me, at this point, that he is not this person.

Christopher: Despite all of the paperwork?

Debra: Yes. All the facts were right there in front of me and he is that convincing that I would say that ... I was also in love with him. It’s so

hard, when you're in love, to listen. You're listening to your heart, not your head.

Christopher: Did you ask about his nickname, Dirty John?

Debra: He said it wasn't true. He said, 'I don't know where you got that from'. It was as if everything ... He was able to convince me. He was so good at it, it could be a cold day out and he could convince me that it's 95 degrees, that's how good he was. To where you questioned yourself.

Christopher: It's almost like he convinced you that all the facts about his life were some kind of hallucination on your part?

Debra: Yes, he made me out to be the one ... That he was this great guy and that everyone else had done him wrong, is what he had said ... [H]e always, again, he always had a story. He told me that he had lied because he thought he'd lose me, that he feels so lucky that I'm such a forgiving person who, hell, I'm the love of his life, that I've made him a better person. Just all this kind of stuff ... I felt guilty, to some degree, that I'd married him and that he's in the hospital, but at the same time, I feared ...

Christopher: Explain that to me. Guilty why?

Debra: Because I made a commitment. I made a commitment to marriage—for better, for worse.⁴

Intuitively, and given the language often used to describe this case in the media, I take this to be a clear case of gaslighting.⁵ But notice that, importantly, John never alleged that Debra was crazy, or impugned her rationality in any way—and though she questioned her own perceptions and beliefs (as in many though not all cases of gaslighting, as I'll eventually argue), she never questioned her very sanity. Rather, John made Debra out to be a *bad person* when she challenged or withdrew from him, and a good one for believing him. He operated with both a moral stick—the prospect of his condemning Debra—and a moral carrot—the prospect of him celebrating her as a wonderful wife, forgiving person, the love of his life, and so on.

⁴ I take this dialogue, and the foregoing details, from the podcast *Dirty John*, produced by Christopher Goffard, 1 October 2017, <https://www.latimes.com/projects/la-me-dirty-john/> (accessed 13 July 2021).

⁵ For a representative discussion of the latter kind, see Pilossoph (2019).

His bait for swallowing his story was primarily moral—and affective. It was the prospect of seeming bad or mean, not mad or insane, that made Debra afraid to continue to think ill of John. And that is what allowed him to gaslight her so effectively.

This possibility is not surprising, upon reflection. One of the basic lessons of Miranda Fricker's concept of testimonial injustice (Fricker 2007) and Kristie Dotson's related notion of testimonial quietening (Dotson 2011), is that there are plausibly *moral* as well as rational defects that wrongly make us disbelieve some people's stories. It is wrong, as well as unreasonable, to doubt a woman's testimony *because* she is a woman and one implicitly believes women to be incompetent or liars—these being sexist and misogynistic stereotypes. Imagine, then, if John had said to Debra that she was refusing to believe him because of her unjust stereotypes about convicted felons—stereotypes which undoubtedly exist, and which she may have even harboured (like many, if not most, Americans). One can imagine this giving a morally conscientious person grave pause: in failing to believe my partner, am I committing a testimonial injustice against him? Or (as was the case here) am I merely putting two and two together and ceasing to be (too) credulous?

Of course, John did not invoke these technical philosophical notions in gaslighting Debra. Rather, he used more common and ready-to-hand moral norms—such as being a loving and forgiving wife, as opposed to a cold and untrusting one—in order to manipulate her. But the point here is just that there are sometimes moral grounds, as well as rational ones, for second-guessing our initial disbelief in the testimony of certain people.⁶ Gaslighters may invoke

⁶ I put this point carefully, since a commitment to the reality of testimonial injustice—wherein, roughly, people wrongly *disbelieve* an agent due to broadly moral failures—clearly doesn't imply a commitment to moral reasons for belief per se. But it is nevertheless telling in this connection that the classic case of non-epistemic reasons for belief in the literature, due to John Heil, is that of a wife who decides to trust her husband and overlook the evidence that he is having an affair—a long blonde hair on his coat, a lipstick-stained handkerchief, and a matchbook from a romantic French restaurant where she has never been with him (Heil 1983, p. 752). This wife chooses to believe that her husband is faithful for 'practical' (presumably, moral and prudential) reasons. Whether or not one agrees with Heil that this may be the rational course of belief, all things considered, or that there can ever be cases like this, these *ostensible* non-epistemic reasons for belief can plausibly be weaponized and used to gaslight some people. Similarly, Fricker's point that broadly moral failures may lead us to make genuine mistakes about the credibility of certain people can be weaponized against us for the purposes of gaslighting us, according to my argument in the main text.

the spectre of these norms in order to illicitly convince people to buy their narrative—or sob story—even if it is not only false but radically implausible.

Moreover, there are reasons to think that this phenomenon, which I will dub ‘moral gaslighting’, may be easier and more effective than impugning a target’s rationality in order to gaslight her.⁷ To put it crudely, sanity is a relatively low bar: even speaking as an agent who lives with some history of mental illness (in the form of depression and anxiety), I don’t often doubt that I am basically in touch with reality, not prone to hallucination, delusions, and so on. It would be relatively difficult for an agent to convince me otherwise. Whereas I, like any morally conscientious agent, frequently worry that I am getting things wrong epistemically because of some moral failure of mine. Perhaps I am not forgiving enough, or am too cynical about some people’s purported moral transformations, or am harbouring unjust stereotypes, to give just a few examples. By exploiting these common-or-garden worries about the ways in which my imperfect adherence to moral norms may infect my epistemic state—for instance, by making me too sceptical of some people’s testimony—I could quite easily become a victim of what I’ve called moral gaslighting. Arguably these considerations apply more readily to women, which jibes with the observation that women are particularly vulnerable to gaslighting, as Abramson and Sweet both rightly argue (and of which more will follow).⁸ But I invite all but the most morally confident (overconfident?) readers to generalize to their own case, as applicable.

For morality is a high bar. We do, and should, have worries about our moral imperfections making us worse agents, epistemically (as well as, of course, morally). By amplifying and exploiting these

⁷ To avoid the risk of confusion here, note that what I call moral gaslighting need not have a moral (or otherwise normative) *proposition* as the content of the relevant belief state, when beliefs are in question. We’ll see an example in due course where someone is subject to moral gaslighting that targets their (straightforwardly empirical) belief that their partner is drinking. Conversely, it’s not controversial that what I distinguish here as *rational* gaslighting can target someone’s moral beliefs either. Under the pressure of gaslighting, Bella Manningham’s sense of herself as increasingly ‘mad’ leads her to second-guess her doubts about her husband’s character, for example. So moral gaslighting is about the content of the incipient criticisms (or praise) used to gaslight someone, not the content of the resulting beliefs or other mental states, as per the above discussion.

⁸ For the relevant insightful discussions, see Abramson (2014, p. 3) and Sweet (2019, pp. 854–6).

worries, moral gaslighters may target us, and will sometimes be effective.⁹

IV

It will help to pause at this juncture to say something about the characteristic aim of agents who gaslight, with the aid of Kate Abramson's illuminating account of the matter. This will allow me to begin to locate my views with respect to hers, and also to say where I think she goes wrong, in characterizing gaslighting more strongly and narrowly than is warranted. After that, in the following section, I'll be in a position to show how the view I defend about what gaslighting *is* can accommodate a phenomenon she implicitly denies: structural gaslighting.

⁹ Further evidence of the reality of moral gaslighting comes from Sweet's empirical work, where she interviewed 43 domestic violence victims who were also the victims of gaslighting. (Sweet had originally hoped to contrast domestic violence victims who had been gaslit with those who had not but, strikingly, found that *all* of her interview subjects, recruited through a shelter, had in fact been gaslit.) Although Sweet's definition of gaslighting (see §1) meant that she likely wasn't looking for specific evidence of what I call moral gaslighting, she seemingly found it anyway—for, many of the women she interviewed had been morally condemned and written off in the course of their (in all but one case male) abuser's gaslighting behaviour. What Sweet was looking for here were ways in which women's sexuality is weaponized against them during gaslighting, which explains the particular cast of these examples; but they all still count as moral gaslighting for my purposes:

- Simone was accused of adultery and not being a good enough mother.
- Nevaeh was also accused of being a bad mother.
- Carla was accused of being a 'prostitute' and that she too would make a bad mother (while pregnant).
- Rosa, Mariposa, and Adriana were accused of cheating on their partners.
- Jaylene was called a 'ho' and a 'slut' by her boyfriend.
- Fabiola was called 'nasty' and 'sick' by her partner after sex, leading to her sense she was 'bad'.
- Margaret was accused of deliberately attracting too much sexual attention.
- Maria S. was told she was too sexually forward by her husband (after *he* propositioned *her*).
- Rubi was said to be a 'witch', trapping her husband in the marriage.
- Rosalyn and Luisa were portrayed by their abusers as the 'real' abuser, leading to Rosalyn being arrested.

Sweet thus writes that 'crazy bitch' is the classic refrain—the 'literal discourse'—of the gaslighter. Here, I am in effect arguing that the second epithet is just as important as the first one (Sweet 2019, pp. 861–5).

According to Abramson, gaslighters are characteristically motivated by a desire to avoid being challenged, or disagreed with, by their victim. ‘What makes the difference between the fellow who ignores or dismisses evidence ... and the one who gaslights, is the inability to tolerate even the possibility of challenge’, she writes (Abramson 2014, p. 9). Before going on to give an account of the moral wrong of gaslighting, Abramson writes that ‘the gaslighter’s characteristic desire is to destroy the possibility of disagreement, where the only sure path to that is destroying the *source* of possible disagreement—the independent, separate, deliberative perspective from which disagreement might arise’ (2014, p. 10). The ‘successfully’ gaslit person is thus so radically undermined that ‘she has nowhere left to stand from which to disagree, no standpoint from which her words might constitute genuine disagreement’. Not only has she been made to *feel* that she has lost her mind; she actually has done. And, on Abramson’s view, gaslighters both believe their victims to be, and aim to drive them, crazy.

It’s not clear, however, that gaslighters need to take a *sure* path to achieving their aim, *pace* Abramson. And, given their other aims, it may be better that they do not. For, as Abramson acknowledges, gaslighters don’t *solely* want to destroy the possibility of disagreement with their interlocutor—if that was all they wanted, then they could pursue many alternative strategies which would be an equally, if not more, certain means to that end. They could, for example, avoid conflict, and behave in a submissive fashion themselves; they could avoid their victim entirely; and, as Abramson herself points out, they could even kill their victims, if they had no compunction about murder (as at least some gaslighters do not, including the two men in the foregoing case studies).^{10, 11}

What some of the most dastardly gaslighters want, I think, is to preserve the *appearance* of disagreement, or potential disagreement, but

¹⁰ For a fuller discussion of the ‘Dirty John’ case, including John Meehan’s homicidal tendencies, see Manne (2020, ch. 8), which I draw on in describing the cases in the two previous sections.

¹¹ Abramson writes, pithily, ‘If, for instance, someone kills me, I no longer have an independent perspective from which disagreement with that person might arise. That’s not what gaslighters do. Rather, they behave in distinctive ways, ways crudely characterized as forms of emotional manipulation, as the means by which they try to destroy another’s independent perspective and moral standing. To that extent, the question of precisely what’s wrong with the aims of gaslighting is inseparable from the question of how gaslighters try to satisfy those aims’ (2014, p. 13).

to avoid the concomitant risk of actually losing ensuing arguments. He can ‘win’ by stacking the decks heavily in favour of his prevailing, having made her a much more tentative and deferential interlocutor than she would be otherwise. Or he can avoid the ignominy of losing by forestalling conflict in the first place, having heavily incentivized her perpetual, predictable acquiescence to his viewpoint. He may thus dominate her by means of his gaslighting tactics (rather than by dint of physical coercion, emotional blackmail, financial control, or similar—though these tactics may also be used against her concurrently). In view of this, it seems to me that such a gaslighter need not aim to destroy the victim’s rational perspective *tout court*. Indeed, given his aim of preserving an *apparent* potential disputant, while enjoying the (admittedly hollow) victory of having his perspective at least typically prevail over hers, it seems better not to destroy her perspective whole cloth.¹² Rather, he can proceed by making her afraid to disagree with him, as with Mrs Manningham, or feel obligated to buy his story, as with Debra Newell, among other possibilities.

So even if we accept Abramson’s view that gaslighters characteristically want to avoid disagreement or challenge, as I am inclined to, there is no need to accept her view that gaslighters typically aim to destroy the independent rational perspectives of their victims. Although achieving this would indeed guarantee that this aim would be satisfied, it would conflict with other of the gaslighter’s aims, since domination requires preserving a rational agent to subjugate, control and disempower.¹³ Moreover, there are easier ways to satisfy the

¹² Abramson says something similar about a particular case of hers: ‘Satisfaction of his gaslighting desire to destroy de Beauvoir’s independent standing, both would and would not support this more specific aim. On the one hand, the more de Beauvoir’s own sense of her philosophical abilities is undermined, the more likely she is to sit in awe of Sartre at his feet. On the other hand, if she really came to consistently doubt whether she can “think at all,” De Beauvoir would be so undermined that she wouldn’t have enough sense of her own acumen left to be in awe of Sartre’s abilities’ (2014, p. 11).

¹³ Abramson holds that gaslighters *are* conflicted in something like this way, in discussing the case in the previous footnote. She acknowledges that it may be suggested that ‘the gaslighter typically wants to undermine his target not to the point where she loses the ability to challenge altogether, but just to the point where he gets other things he wants’, before rejecting this proposal in favour of what she calls ‘the conflicted picture’ of the gaslighter (2014, pp. 11–12). In effect, I am arguing that the gaslighter wants to undermine his target to the point where she appears to be, but is not, capable of posing an effective challenge to his arguments, so that he gets the satisfaction of ostensibly winning without the associated risk of losing. Although this is a tricky tightrope to walk, it is possible, at least in theory: and it contrasts with Abramson’s aforementioned conflicted picture of the gaslighter.

aim of achieving such domination: making a victim feel fearful or ashamed to mentally ‘go there’, that is, to disagree with or challenge the gaslighter, will often achieve the same end, without destroying her mind in the process. This has the further advantage of preserving for the gaslighter the apparent interlocutor he often wants (and wants to preserve, to dominate).

Abramson is sensitive to the criticism that her account may be judged ‘too sharp by half’, and as problematically ruling out less extreme, more everyday cases, of gaslighting (2014, p. 11). But to my mind, her response to this objection—essentially, that a look at long-term iterations of the everyday cases will reveal them to indeed have the above structure—is not fully satisfactory. In my view, gaslighting can aim to *skew* someone’s deliberative perspective without completely destroying it. And gaslighters may pull this off by making a victim feel various negative first-personal moral emotions—guilt and shame, for example—rather than by impugning her rational capacities. It may also make the victim anticipate some positive moral status which incentivizes her to accede to the gaslighter’s preferred narrative.

One of my informants was gaslit in this way. Once upon a time, she was romantically involved with an alcoholic. He decided to give up drinking, and managed to do so for a time. Then, like many people who live with this disease, he relapsed. When she aired her suspicions that he was regularly inebriated, and offered to try to get him help, he vigorously denied that he was drinking again. And he attributed the sure signs—slurred speech, an eerie spaciness, oddly inconsiderate behaviour, and mean-spirited comments markedly contrary to his usual character—to a history of trauma and subsequent dissociation. He insinuated, furthermore, that she was undermining his recovery by not being more trusting. ‘If you don’t believe me, I really *will* relapse’, he said to her on more than one occasion. ‘I *need* you to trust me’, he further insisted, implying that her mistrust emanated from a morally defective trait of hers—roughly, of being too suspicious. This is a real vice, notably, and one she believes that she is prone to. But not on this occasion, as he eventually admitted, after months of making her doubt herself, her judgements, and her moral character. This was, I think, gaslighting, and will be widely agreed to be so.

The case illustrates several points. First, it reiterates the point that the victims of gaslighting need not be made to doubt the rationality,

as opposed to the morality, of their belief-forming mechanisms. Second, unlike the previous two cases, gaslighting need not be performed by Machiavellian characters, intent on undermining or even destroying their victims. Third, and relatedly, it need not even be malicious. Here, it emanated from a place of shame (though it was not necessarily any less wrong or harmful to its target and victim for that reason).¹⁴ Finally, it targeted a very specific set of beliefs of hers, and not her whole mental life, certainly not aiming to destroy her independent perspective, *pace* Abramson. But it did, as she holds, try to make disagreement in this specific domain difficult, since morally *verboten*.¹⁵

We can also now see how misogyny—and the associated ideals of femininity—can be weaponized against the targets and victims of gaslighting. Misogyny can be a tool or technique of gaslighting, in other words, as well as gaslighting being used to conceal and obscure misogyny. For trust is something particularly expected of women with respect to our male partners. We are meant to be loving, supportive, and ‘cool’ wives and girlfriends. We are meant to believe in him, and hence to buy his story. If we fail to do this, we may be criticized and punished. If we somehow manage to, there may be rewards and benefits. Misogyny’s carrots and sticks operate epistemically too; and this is a social fact which gaslighters may utilize.

¹⁴ I say ‘target and/or victim’ here and at various other junctures throughout to reflect the fact that I don’t take ‘gaslighting’ to be a ‘success term’ (to use a somewhat unfortunate philosophical term of art here for terms that imply that some process has been carried through to completion). Someone can be *targeted* by gaslighting, then, without becoming a victim of it (in which case they would have been gaslit successfully—or, perhaps better, ‘successfully’, given its wrongful nature).

¹⁵ One possibility is that Abramson and I disagree over the phenomena, and that she would deny that the examples of moral gaslighting I moot here and elsewhere count as gaslighting at all. I doubt this is the issue though, since some of her own examples also invoke this possibility. Take, for instance, her case of a junior female academic who rightly complains about being slapped on the butt by a senior male colleague. Another senior colleague responds, ‘Oh, he’s just an old guy. Have some sympathy! It’s not that big a deal’ (Abramson 2014, p. 4). This colleague is effectively hinting at punishment if she presses on with the complaint, and rewards (in the form of approval) if she withdraws it and adopts a more sympathetic attitude toward him. Despite this and a few other examples with moral elements though, Abramson emphasizes rational techniques of gaslighting much more than moral ones in theorizing the phenomenon. And although she does write, at times, about a gaslit agent lacking ‘independent perspective *and* moral standing’ (my italics) it’s clear from her discussion that she envisages the latter as occurring because the person has ‘gone crazy’, ‘lost their minds’, or similar, due to a long, steady process of rational undermining. The distinctively moral means to gaslighting someone is not a possibility which she theorizes explicitly; nor, to the best of my knowledge, do other authors in the literature.

V

As we have now seen, gaslighting comes in such a wide variety of forms as to initially seem bewildering. It may be intentional or not; Machiavellian or not; malicious or not; more or less domain-specific; and it may proceed via weaponizing moral as well as rational norms against a target or victim.

To make matters still worse from a theoretical perspective, this last raises further questions about whether gaslighting must be restricted just to eroding or undermining a person's *beliefs*, perceptions, and other such cognitive states, or whether it can also work to dislodge her desires, feelings, emotions and reactive attitudes, among other broadly affective mental states.

I believe it can. Take the following example, from the hit TV show *Succession*. The father, Logan Roy, has committed numerous shady and downright wrongful acts—both ethically and legally—in the course of building his media empire. And he has behaved unforgivably, in myriad ways, toward his four variously feckless and unsatisfactory children. Rather than trying to gaslight them out of the belief that he has indeed acted in these ways, he tries to gaslight them out of feeling negative reactive attitudes toward him—contempt, resentment and moral disgust, for starters—on this basis. He does so partly by saying, at a family therapy session, ‘Everything I’ve done, I’ve done for my children’.¹⁶ This is deeply, and obviously, false. But he thereby tries to manipulate—and, I would say, gaslight—his children into feeling gratitude and love, rather than anything negative, toward him. Given his power, wealth and gravitas, and his position as the head of the family, this even goes some way toward working (though it is not fully successful). And it is as powerful a portrait of

¹⁶ *Succession*, Season 1, Episode 7, ‘Austerlitz’ (HBO, 2018). Later in the series (Season 2, Episode 6, ‘Argestes’), Logan slaps his son Roman viciously, sending him flying, and knocking his tooth out. But Logan gaslights Roman into giving up his knowledge that the assault was quite deliberate, making it out to have been an accident—which indeed never even happened, as the dialogue continues. ‘That thing up in Argestes: I didn’t even know you were there. I mean, if I did, I wouldn’t, you know ... That’s not something I *do*, you know’, he intones: a superficially descriptive statement intended to prescribe to Roman that he must buy, and echo, this false narrative. Roman accedes quickly—mumbling, avoiding eye contact—‘I know, sure ... I know that; I know, I know’. ‘Did I even make contact?’ Logan asks him, ensuring an answer in the negative. ‘Umm ... I don’t think ... I’m not quite sure what we’re talking about, to be honest’, Roman adds, obediently, as if the incident was nothing. And so it becomes nothing in family history.

a patriarch weaponizing moral norms of loyalty and fealty against his children as we have seen since *King Lear*.

What is the common thread, if any, running through this example and all of the above ones? I suggest it lies, roughly, in the fact that gaslit people are made to feel *defective* in certain fundamental ways—either morally or rationally—for harbouring mental states to which they are entitled. These include warranted beliefs and perceptions, valid desires and intentions, fitting feelings and attitudes, and so on.¹⁷ The target or victim is thus gaslit *out* of occupying cognitive and affective territory which ought to be hers but is ceded to the gaslighter—rendering her not merely dominated but colonized, effectively. He does not, and perhaps cannot, tell her what to want, think and feel; rather, he harnesses her own internal mechanisms—and indeed, often the best parts of herself—to control her mental states in line with his objectives. She becomes mentally unfree, and often less in touch with reality, by dint of her own capacities for morality and reason. She second-guesses herself out of beliefs which might have been knowledge, desires to which she has every right, and feelings which are in fact appropriate to her social and moral situation.

As well as this autonomy-compromising form of mind control, which is obviously damaging and insidious, gaslighting may also damage a person's self-conception. A gaslit person is often caught between a rock and a hard place: either bring your mental states into line with those the gaslighter would have you have or face the prospect of being written off as crazy, irrational, hysterical, disloyal, callous, or otherwise defective by a person you are in thrall to. Bella Manningham was thus gaslit out of her incipient belief that her

¹⁷ Notice that, when beliefs are in question, this definition implies that you can't gaslight someone out of a belief to which they are *not* entitled (with the full implications of the definition being quite properly tied to the correct theory of our cognitive and affective entitlements, which is of course controversial). One cannot gaslight someone out of believing in a conspiracy theory, for example. I believe this consequence of my definition is as it should be, though we might still allow that someone employs techniques *adjacent* to gaslighting to improperly coerce someone out of beliefs she should not have held in the first place (or insincere avowals of belief, for that matter). It's also worth highlighting the intended consequence that, in cases of interpersonal gaslighting with respect to belief, my definition does not imply anything about whether or not the gaslighter *himself* believes the proposition he is pushing on the target. It thus allows for cases like that of Mr Manningham, who gaslights his wife into believing that he's not creeping about in the attic upstairs at night, even though he knows full well that this is false; and it allows for cases like that of Dirty John, who gaslights Debra into believing that he is a good person, deep down, which he seems to believe himself (or at least we can imagine this).

husband was creeping about in the attic by the prospect of being written off as delusional and crazy; Debra Newell was gaslit out of her previous belief that her husband was a con man by the prospect of being written off as cold, hard and unforgiving; my informant was gaslit out of her belief that her partner was drinking by the prospect of being written off as mistrustful and unsupportive. The idea of ‘Don’t even go there (mentally)!’ captures something of the feeling of being caught between one’s incipient, rightful mental state and the threat of being punished for fully inhabiting it or acting on this basis.

These examples suggest, fairly obviously, that gaslighting must invoke norms relevant to the mental state in question. The prospect of being judged ugly, say, will not typically work to dislodge certain beliefs in us, because beliefs do not—and are generally understood not to—go wrong because we are somehow aesthetically lacking. (Or at least, not directly.) Slightly less obviously, the criticism must also have real bite: it is hard to credit the possibility that someone might be gaslit by the prospect of being envisaged (it does not seem right to say ‘written off’) as a little bit silly, just slightly ungenerous, or a tad over-cautious. This is why I say that gaslighting invokes defects that are *fundamental* in some way.¹⁸

These examples also help to underscore the point, emphasized by several of the foregoing authors, that gaslighting typically works best (‘best’) in interpersonal contexts when we are in the grip of another agent’s overall domination. If the prospect of being written off by them represents no real threat to us, then it will at least be more difficult for them to gaslight us effectively. This is why gaslighting proliferates in intimate relationships, and also in families, where power may take the form of being able to dictate a family’s accepted narratives, scripts and schema. This power may be held not only by an individual who possesses more power than others in these arrangements, but also in the aggregate, via multiple people acting in concert.

¹⁸ Are all such defects either rational or moral? Or might some be prudential, for another salient possibility? I leave this question for another day, since I do believe that we can be gaslit out of certain broadly mental states, namely, appetite and hunger, by the prospect of not only seeming but *being* ‘unhealthy’. But given the difficulties of saying what this criticism amounts to, exactly—it seems partly prudential, partly moral, and also shares some linguistic features with pejoratives (perhaps surprisingly)—this topic would take me well beyond the scope of the present paper.

Take the case of Rob, a successful (and otherwise privileged) actor, who was gaslit by his family to doubt his extant belief that he had broken his arm as a child. His mother exclaimed: ‘You never broke your arm. I’m a nurse, I would remember!’ His father ridiculed him by presenting Rob with photos of himself *sans* cast from later on that summer: ‘Did your arm magically heal overnight?’, he ribbed him. Other family members also played a role, with Rob’s sister designating herself ‘the keeper of family memories’ and saying she didn’t recall it ever happening, with the insinuation being that if it *had* happened, she wouldn’t have forgotten. Rob’s brother added, ‘Oh boy, here we go, another “I broke my arm, I broke my arm” story. Look, *I’m* the broken arm guy, that’s my role.’ (Rob’s brother indeed broke his arm twice as a child.) Rob was thereby made to feel guilty—like an attention-seeking malingerer, who was stealing Rob’s brother’s thunder—as well as unreliable for insisting that it had happened.

But Rob *had* broken his arm, just as he remembered, as hospital records eventually revealed. His family members had all somehow forgotten this—their gaslighting was not intentional—and the incident had thus been written out of the official familial narrative. Notably, it took a lengthy investigation by a well-known podcaster and journalist to excavate a truth that would otherwise have been lost—ceded—to family lore, via gaslighting.¹⁹

VI

Suppose gaslighting can be defined, as I suggested in the above section, as the process of making someone feel defective in some of the most fundamental ways (for example, morally or rationally) for having (or for that matter lacking) mental states which she is in fact entitled to have (or lack). By the lights of this definition, there is obviously no *technical* need for it to be an agent (or small group of agents) performing the gaslighting within an intimate setting, as with all of the above examples and the vast majority in the literature. But

¹⁹ I take this case from episode 16 (‘Rob’) of the podcast *Heavyweight*, produced by Jonathan Goldstein, October 4, 2018, available at <https://gimletmedia.com/shows/heavy-weight/n8hoed> (accessed 13 July 2021).

are there realistic, compelling cases of gaslighting which do not fit this description, and operate on a broader scale?²⁰

I believe so. Donald Trump, for example, was accused of gaslighting America, both in the well-known podcast ‘Gaslit Nation’, hosted by Sarah Kendzior and Andrea Chalupa, and in Lauren Duca’s viral article, ‘Donald Trump is Gaslighting America’ (Duca 2016). For, as they pointed out, Trump employed a wide range of tactics—including brazen lying, decrying reliable news sources as ‘fake’, dismissing opponents with cheap epithets, raging at political enemies, drumming up rousing sentiments during his many rallies, and making false promises (‘There will be so much winning. You’ll get sick of winning’)—which worked to induce a false sense of reality among many of his supporters. The idea was also that Trump’s usage of these tactics was far more systematic and insidious than with any of his American precedents.

Another putative example of non-interpersonal gaslighting comes from the philosophical literature. In a recent article, Elena Ruíz mounts a compelling argument that white settler colonialism in North America does its oppressive work partly by gaslighting Black and Indigenous populations—particularly its female members. She defines ‘cultural gaslighting’ in general as ‘the social and historical infrastructural support mechanisms that disproportionately produce abusive mental ambients in settler colonial cultures in order to further the ends of cultural genocide and dispossession’—for example, the ‘systemic patterns of mental abuse against women of color and Indigenous women’ in North America, which ‘distribute, reproduce, and automate social inequalities’ in favour of white settler populations (Ruíz 2020, p. 687).

In a somewhat similar vein, the political scientists Angelique M. Davis and Rose Ernst define ‘racial gaslighting’ as follows:

The political, social, economic and cultural process that perpetuates and normalizes a white supremacist reality through pathologizing those who resist. (David and Ernst 2019, p. 761)

I think these phenomena are real and important. But the possibility of such gaslighting remains controversial. Some of the aforementioned

²⁰ Another question is whether an agent can gaslight *herself*, a possibility which my definition of gaslighting similarly leaves open. I believe the answer is ‘yes’, but space considerations prevent my arguing as much here. For an interesting recent discussion of this phenomenon, see Dandelet (2021).

authors believe that gaslighting is, predominantly or necessarily, an interpersonal phenomenon. Kate Abramson writes that the ‘characteristic aim of gaslighting is *interpersonal* in the sense that it is a need gaslighters have *of* and directed towards particular persons’ (2014, p. 10, her italics). And Paige L. Sweet argues that ‘analyses that suggest Trump is gaslighting America go too far’, since:

Gaslighting occurs in power-laden *intimate* relationships, precisely because trust and coercive interpersonal strategies bind the victim to the perpetrator. The public has too much collective power to experience gaslighting, such that we can fact-check and push counter-narratives into the public sphere. (Sweet 2019, p. 870, her italics)

The point that the public can resist putative cases of gaslighting does not seem sufficient to discredit the possibility of political gaslighting, on the face of it, since some individual agents *also* successfully resist their abuser’s attempts to gaslight them. But it is indeed hard to see how whole groups of people could be made to experience a ‘surreal environment’, which functions to make them feel crazy for having certain beliefs (recalling, from §1, Sweet’s working definition of gaslighting), at least outside of the context of an intimate, cult-like setting.²¹ But the possibility of *moral* gaslighting comes into its own here, showing how political gaslighting can nevertheless be real, and indeed not uncommon. For, groups of agents can be made to feel guilty or ashamed for their beliefs with relative ease: if you inspire loyalty in a group, then a savvy political operator can weaponize that loyalty to make its members strongly inclined to stick to the party line, echo the claims of their leader, defend the leader, and so on. These people would then feel guilty and ashamed for not believing or at least accepting the lies of a Donald Trump, for instance.²² It is moral values, not rational ones, which are the primary means of such political-epistemic manipulation.

Similar observations apply to the categories of cultural and racial gaslighting. One way white supremacy in general, and white settler

²¹ This is especially so given shared hermeneutical resources which marginalized people may develop, as a collective, which allow them to hang onto a sense of their own reasonableness in interpreting and navigating the social world.

²² For a classic discussion of the distinction between belief and acceptance, see Cohen (1989). I here rely on the fact that ‘acceptance’ is an at least partly mental state, enabling it to count as the target of gaslighting on my account of it.

colonialism in particular, often works is by shaming an oppressed group of people for deviant—say, supposedly ungrateful or excessively angry—attitudes. And sometimes this shaming works. The incipient shame experienced by members of this group can be weaponized to make its members much more reluctant than they otherwise would be to challenge the prevailing narratives about, say, the beneficence of white people's motives, or the extent of the harms of racism. Patriarchy can work in a similar fashion: many women have long felt ashamed to come forward to testify to our experiences of sexual assault and harassment, or even to admit to ourselves their seriousness and prevalence. It is this collective sense of shame that Tarana Burke's #MeToo movement, popularized in 2017, helped to push back against. In this way, it addressed a silence which was plausibly the result of structural gaslighting, wrought by the patriarchy. Notably, such gaslighting has the potential to silence victims' testimony again, even after they have come forward. As I have argued elsewhere, victims eating their words is a common, pernicious effect of the gaslighting that often serves to mask and thereby perpetuates misogyny.²³

Gaslighting can thus make us witnesses against ourselves. It makes us buy the stories of our abusers, and feel good and reasonable for so doing. It makes us not just unreliable, but treacherous, as narrators. And it can operate on a large scale, even purely structurally, in some cases.

VII

On my proposed definition of gaslighting, it is a considerably broader phenomenon than previous authors have credited. I have suggested, in brief, that the unifying feature common to cases which intuitively count as gaslighting is that agents are made to feel fundamentally *defective*—bad, mad, or similar—for harbouring a mental state to which they are entitled. We can thus talk productively about what agents are gaslit *out* of: and on my account this includes not only beliefs, but also desires, intentions, feelings, emotions, reactive attitudes, and so on.

²³ See the introduction of [Manne \(2017\)](#) for discussion.

But while broader than is traditional by design, this account is not overly broad either. It does not allow mere denial or disagreement to count as gaslighting, in ways which help to push back against spurious claims that someone is being gaslit when they are merely being challenged. Indeed, the central insight adapted from Kate Abramson suggests that more or less the opposite is true, at a social level: a space in which robust, reasonable disagreement proliferates is an *antidote* to gaslighting. Perhaps, as its best, philosophy can be like this.

On the other hand, this is not to underestimate the ways in which denial and disagreement *may* play a role in gaslighting, in certain social contexts. In the context of broader power dynamics and moral-social structures, a less powerful agent will often be made to feel morally defective—and so guilty or ashamed—for harbouring some warranted yet unflattering belief about a more powerful agent.²⁴ Let's say, for example, that you believe, truly and fairly, that a more prominent philosopher is a transphobic bully who is using his expertise to obscure the fact that he is denying the entitlements, and very existence, of trans women. Others around you, and he himself, splutter in denial: 'He's just interested in the truth!', 'He's a free thinker!', 'He's doing feminist philosophy!', 'You're interpreting him so uncharitably!' And, of course, 'He's a good guy!' Together these denials conspire to make you feel ashamed of questioning the motives and moral character of someone who is indeed, let's imagine, unjustly targeting trans women and others who violate the bounds of gender. And as a result of these collective efforts, concerted or not, your warranted belief wavers and fizzles; it fails to be knowledge, at least of a sort that you can rely and then act upon.

Such gaslighting does not aim to make anyone feel 'crazy' or otherwise irrational. Rather, it weaponizes other important norms—moral

²⁴ Similarly, gaslighting is obviously more than mere lying, according to my account of it. However, repeated lies told to a particular end could be used to gaslight someone, given specific background power dynamics. If a powerful and authoritative agent repeats a lie with enough confidence and brazenness, then their interlocutor or audience may reasonably feel loath to question it, and even rationally or morally defective (confused, incompetent, or insolent) for doing so. This could then count as gaslighting; but many lies will not. Similarly, gaslighting is something more specific than manipulation, though it often involves it: for while manipulation may aim merely to change someone's behaviour, gaslighting is aimed at achieving *mental* conformity: it aims to control what someone thinks or feels, and not merely what she does or refrains from doing.

norms of charitable interpretation, in this case, among others—to rob us of incipient or extant knowledge and warranted reactive attitudes, among other things. In the aggregate, it can rob us of our *minds*, by enlisting the best, most conscientious parts of ourselves against ourselves. Rationality and morality become weapons to make us less ourselves, less in touch with reality, less rational, and less moral.

This is insidious. It is scary. And, if I am right, such gaslighting is endemic in social and moral life as we know it—including in philosophy.

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