

TURNING UP THE LIGHTS ON GASLIGHTING

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*You're crazy.
Don't be so sensitive.
Don't be paranoid.
I was just joking!
That's all in you.
It doesn't mean anything
You're imagining things.
You're overreacting.
Don't get so worked up.
That never happened.
There's no pattern.
It wouldn't be any different anywhere else.
You're just acting out.
I'm worried; I think you're not well.*

The term “gaslighting” comes from the movie “Gaslight”, in which Gregory deliberately tries to make his spouse Paula lose her mind by manipulating her, her friends, and her physical environment. Gregory’s aim is to have Paula hospitalized for mental instability, so he can gain access to her jewels. We witness him engaging in one ‘crazy-making’ manipulative move after another, over a stretch of months. He takes a brooch he’s claimed to be a prized heirloom out of Paula’s purse to make her doubt her clear memory of having put it there. He places his own watch in her purse when she’s not looking, accuses her of stealing it, and then “discovers” the watch in her purse while she is in the company of friends who—unbeknownst to Paula—he’s warned that Paula is unstable. This last incident not only upsets and confuses Paula, but is constructed by Gregory to be public so as to provide her friends with apparent ‘evidence’ that she’s losing her mind. It also thereby contributes to Paula’s increasing sense of isolation. The title of the movie is drawn from the following manipulative move. Gregory regularly searches for Paula’s jewels in the attic, and when he does so, his turning on the lights there has the effect of dimming the gaslights elsewhere in the house. Every

time this happens, Paula queries him about the gaslights diming. And each time, Gregory insists Paula is imagining things, suggesting that this too is a sign of her growing mental illness. All the while, Gregory is full of expressions of purported concern—e.g. “why don’t you rest a while”, “do you really want to go out? You know you haven’t been well”, etc.

In the 1980s, “gaslighting” became a term of art in therapeutic practice, and it’s now entered colloquial usage as well.¹ In both contexts, “gaslighting” refers to behavior that typically differs from Gregory’s in two respects. First, those who engage in this form of emotional manipulation are often not *consciously* trying to drive their targets crazy. Second, they often seem not to have any clear end-in-view; they’re not, that is, trying to drive their targets ‘crazy’ for the sake of something so simply and straightforwardly understood as expensive jewels.

Yet “gaslighting” in the movie and in everyday life is nevertheless recognizably the same phenomenon. Very roughly, the phenomenon that’s come to be picked out with that term 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. Gaslighting is, even at this level, quite unlike merely dismissing someone, for dismissal simply fails to take another seriously as an interlocutor, whereas gaslighting is aimed at getting another not to take herself seriously as an interlocutor. It almost always involves multiple incidents that take place over long stretches of time; it frequently involves multiple parties playing the role of gaslighter, or cooperating with a gaslighter; it frequently involves isolating the target in various ways. And there are characteristic things gaslighters say: indeed it is remarkable how much overlap there is between phrases that Gregory uses in the movie, and the sorts of proclamations that are made by gaslighters to their targets in real life.

I want to propose an account of what’s wrong with this way of interacting with someone. To do so, we’ll need to begin with an account of the structure of interactions that fit the initial rough characterization just offered. Any such account of the structure of gaslighting interactions will involve some regimentation of the term—after all, what we have here is a colloquial and therapeutic term that is picking out a recognizable phenomenon in human interactions, and the more precision we give to what we’re talking about when we talk about the kind of ‘crazy making’ manipulation that’s at issue in gaslighting, the more we set parameters for what qualifies as central and peripheral cases thereof. My hope is to give an illuminating account of the structure of gaslighting interactions that nevertheless preserves as its core that which has made it possible for “gaslighting” to become a colloquial term identifying a recognizable phenomenon. On the other hand, given that my aim is ultimately to give an account of what’s *wrong* with gaslighting, only some aspects of gaslighting interactions will be pertinent here. Questions

about the psychology of gaslighters and their targets, for instance, will be relevant here only insofar as they illuminate aspects of the wrongs of gaslighting.

There's nothing *necessarily* sexist about gaslighting. As a matter of fact, however, gaslighting interactions are often sexist in various ways. To begin with (1) women are more frequently the targets of gaslighting than men, and (2) men more often engage in gaslighting.² More importantly, gaslighting is frequently, though again, not necessarily, sexist in the following ways: (3) it frequently takes place in the context of, and in response to, a woman's protestation against sexist (or otherwise discriminatory) conduct; (4) some of the forms of emotional manipulation that are employed in gaslighting frequently rely on the target's internalization of sexist norms, (5) when gaslighting is successful—when it actually undermines the target in the ways it is designed to do—it can reinforce the very sexist norms which the target was trying to resist and/or those on which the gaslighter relies in his/her manipulation of the target, and (6) sometimes it is some subset of those very sexist norms which the gaslighter seeks to preserve through his/her gaslighting conduct. Gaslighting *can* be sexist in all of these ways, or none of them. And it can be sexist in some, but not all of these ways.

Yet if we are to offer an apt account of the wrongs of gaslighting, we cannot ignore the fact that it is often sexist in these various ways. For this reason, among others, a concern with the ways in which gaslighting can be sexist is woven throughout the analysis which follows. I begin with a series of examples that illustrate the phenomena, and all of these examples involve sexism in some way(s). Some of these cases also involve other forms of prejudice. Much of my analysis throughout this essay would work for those cases even if sexism weren't also implicated in those incidents, and indeed, even if no prejudicial norms were implicated in those cases. Here, however, I'm especially interested in the roles sexism plays in gaslighting, particularly insofar as sexism can frame gaslighting, be employed as leverage by the gaslighter, and be reinforced when gaslighting is successful, and sexism thereby gets hidden or erased.

I think we'll need the full breadth of our philosophical resources if we're to adequately understand just what's so nefarious about gaslighting. No single moral theory can fully capture the wrongs of gaslighting. Kantian resources, for instance, may be especially helpful when it comes to understanding some of the dimensions along which the gaslighter's aims are particularly nasty, but even when it comes to the gaslighter's aims, we'll need to look beyond Kantian talk to *fully* capture the wrongs of gaslighting. And when it comes to understanding what's wrong with the particular *ways* in which gaslighters manipulate their targets, and the resources on which they rely in so doing, Kantian theorizing only scratches the surface.

Not everything we might have reason to regard as gaslighting will fit my account, but focusing on cases that do largely fit my analysis can illuminate a dark corner—both in the sense of not otherwise seen, and in the sense of morally dark—of everyday life.

Illustrative examples:

We need some examples to help us focus on the phenomenon at issue. Here are a few:

1. Simone de Beauvoir: “Day after day, and all day long, I measured myself against Sartre, and in our discussions I was simply not in his class. One morning in the Luxembourg Gardens, near the Medici fountain, I outlined for him the pluralist morality which I had fashioned to justify the people I liked but did not wish to resemble; he ripped it to shreds. I was attached to it, because it allowed me to take my heart as the arbiter of good and evil; I struggled with him for three hours. In the end I had to admit I was beaten; besides, I had realized, in the course of our discussion, that many of my opinions were based only on prejudice, bad faith or thoughtlessness, that my reasoning was shaky and my ideas confused. *‘I’m no longer sure what I think, or even if I think at all’*, I noted, completely thrown.”
2. A junior academic woman is standing at the department’s front desk. A senior male colleague passes by and slaps her on the butt. She reports the incident to another senior colleague. The second colleague responds, “Oh, he’s just an old guy. Have some sympathy! It’s not that big a deal.” A third colleague responds, “Don’t be so sensitive.”
3. “Liz is a top-level executive . . . in her late forties . . . Now she seems to be on the verge of reaching her goal, in line to take over the company’s New York office. Then, at the last minute, someone else is brought in to take the job. Liz swallows her pride and offers to give him all the help she can. At first, the new boss seems charming and appreciative. But soon Liz starts to notice that she’s being left out of important decisions and not invited to major meetings. She hears rumors that clients are being told she doesn’t want to work with them anymore and has recommended that they speak to her new boss instead. [. . .] Finally, Liz confronts her boss, who has a plausible explanation for every incident. “Look,” he says kindly at the end of the meeting. “I think you’re being way too sensitive about all this—maybe even a little paranoid. Would you like a few days off to destress?” Liz feels completely disabled. She knows she’s being sabotaged—but why is she the only one who thinks so?”
4. An undergraduate is on a panel discussion about the values of her collegiate institution. The discussion turns to racism. Student expresses the view that this is something the community needs to continue to work on. After the panel, audience members respond, “Don’t be crazy,” “You’re being a little sensitive” and “you made the panel really uncomfortable.”
5. A gay junior academic discovers a job candidate has publicly avowed anti-gay views. After discussions with her colleagues and Chair about her

concerns, she asks to meet with the candidate on a campus visit. The Chair arranges the visit the one weekend he knows the junior academic will be away. In frustration, she posts copies of the university's non-discrimination statement on department bulletin boards before leaving. They disappear. She reposts them. The Chair appears at her office, torn statements in hand, and threatens her. Later she discovers that the Chair has signed a public petition asserting that it should not be regarded as a violation of disciplinary standards to fire academics for being gay. She expresses grave concerns to her colleagues about her job. They respond: "You're just acting out"; "don't be paranoid"; "that's crazy".

6. A female graduate student deals with sexual harassment. Confronts her harasser. He responds by first denying any problem, then, "see, there wouldn't be this problem if there weren't any women in the department", and finally, "you're just prude." She talks to another student. The second graduate student retorts, "he was just joking."
7. "I moved out of one field of philosophy in grad school due to an overwhelming accumulation of small incidents... When I tried to describe to fellow grad students why I felt ostracized or ignored because of my gender, they would ask for examples. I would provide examples, and they would proceed through each example to 'demonstrate' why I had actually misinterpreted or overreacted to what was actually going on."
8. "In my first year of grad school (this decade) I found out that some male students had discussed a ranking of female grad students' attractiveness. I believe there was also a ranking based on "cup size". When I expressed to one of the offenders that the behavior was inappropriate, I was badgered for being oversensitive and philosophically interrogated for what he thought were groundless restrictions on mere conversation between male friends. It was all suggested that my concern about the list was really just a matter of my insecurity about my place on it!"³

As we think about these cases, it's important to consider the variety of ways these women are dismissed—e.g. "too sensitive", "paranoid", "crazy" "prude" or the peculiarly existentialist dismissal of "bad faith". But it's also extremely important to remember that these are mere snippets from lives of women in which this sort of interaction has become pervasive. Illustrations of gaslighting interactions are, by necessity, illustrations of particular incidents. Yet its pervasiveness, over a long time, often from multiple voices, are also all important to understanding how and why gaslighting works, and what kinds of interactions qualify as gaslighting.

Even with all this said, this is one of those experiences it can be difficult to grasp. If you find that's true for you, try this. Think about one of your worst experiences, an experience which either itself, or in its effects, went on months. Now imagine that while you were going through that, all or most of the voices around you either flatly denied that anything worth being upset about was going on, or radically minimized it, or reconceptualized the experience so that it was

not so uncomfortable (for them) to live with. You protested. The protestations were greeted with “that’s crazy”, “it’s not a big deal”, “you’re overreacting”. Somehow you endured. But the very fact of your survival then became woven in to the rewriting of history, to confirm the minimizing and denials and later repression. (E.g. “Well, you survived, didn’t you?”, “It all worked out in the end” or “That was just a minor blip”.) So, at no point during it did someone (or perhaps someone, but not enough, or perhaps just not the people most dear to you) look at you and confirm the reality of horror with which you were dealing. To the contrary, they said you’re crazy for being upset, oversensitive, and any difficulty you might have is “all in you”. That’s what gaslighting is like.

Suffering on account of it is not a sign of fragility, weakness, or an exceptionally damaged psyche; it’s a sign of being human. We all need interpersonal confirmation, especially in difficult situations. And when the interpersonal confirmation is refused, or deliberately thwarted, precisely in order to radically undermine someone’s sense of standing to protest bad conduct, it’s gaslighting.

The Aims of Gaslighting

When gaslighting first became a technical term in psychoanalysis, it was understood as a process of projective identification.⁴ Here’s the general idea. The gaslighter feels something with which he is uncomfortable, and unable to acknowledge. So he attributes it to someone else. So far, all we have is projection, as when someone with unacknowledged anger starts fearfully wondering if others are angry with him. Or consider the familiar case of the person who has a crush he cannot acknowledge, and so believes that the object of his crush has a crush on him. It becomes projective identification when the projector needs the other person to play along, and she obliges—in psychological terms, she introjects. One common example goes: He feels anxious about his abilities, cannot tolerate the anxiety, and so does his best to expel that anxiety by producing it in someone else. If it works, what he gets is roughly “I’m not anxious, you are”. Of course, *he’s* made that the case by acting so as to produce anxiety in the other person.

There is, I’ll contend, something right about this kind of analysis of gaslighting, namely, the thought that successful gaslighting involves the gaslighter’s creating conditions such that his/her own deep anxieties are relieved by the successful gaslighting. But ‘projective identification’ doesn’t seem quite the right terms in which to understand gaslighting. Canonical cases of projective identification involve one person projecting onto another something *about themselves* that they cannot accept, and the second person then ‘introjecting’—taking on, or adopting, even if only temporarily—that which has been projected onto them. Many even relatively ordinary cases of gaslighting don’t quite fit that picture.

Consider, for instance, the following scenes from the movie *Pat and Mike*. Pat is an expert golfer engaged to a man, Collier, who would rather she abandon

her serious full-time career aspirations, marry him, and devote herself to wifely endeavors. That *she* doesn't want this for her own life threatens his personal sense of manhood. So he defensively forms 'worries' about her golfing abilities, and frequently expresses these 'worries' to Pat. Pat perseveres, reaches the championship. She's winning. Until the final round. Then, Collier shows up, and makes faces of 'concern'. Confidence shaken, it all comes down to the last hole. Right before taking what should have been her final, easy shot, Pat looks up to see Collier's 'worried' face. She loses.

Afterwards, the two have the following exchange on the train:

Collier: How about looking on the bright side of this for instance? Take this—As long as your job's out of the way, move the date up, tie the old knot? I think you've done enough, worked long enough, don't you?

Pat (distressed): oh, too much (*looks down*)

Collier (interrupting Pat): After all, what you trying to prove, who you trying to lick?

Pat (determinedly, upset): Myself. (*pounds fist in air*)

Collier: Just the kid who'll do it (*Puts his leg up and looks at her dubiously and patronizingly*)

Pat: Collier, do you sort of, I don't think you mean to, but do you think of me as just the little woman?

Collier: That's right, and myself as a little man. (*Squeezes her shoulders like a small child*).

Pat (quite distressed): Right now, now I feel like a sort of flop that you're rescuing. I'm flummoxed, that's what I am. Maybe we ought to wait until I don't feel so carved up, so nobody.

Collier: Why don't you just let me take charge!

Pat (fatigued): I have to be in charge of myself.

Collier: Oh what's the good of that, I mean after all?

Pat: I have to have time to think it over.

Collier: Well, just make sure you don't think it under. It's a nice long ride, just take your time. (*Opens newspaper to end conversation*).

Now we've got a case that's pretty clearly in the territory of gaslighting. Yet it's difficult to read as an instance of 'projective identification': it's not obvious that there is anything about himself of which Collier is trying to rid himself by 'relocating' it in Pat. There's *some* kind of defensive maneuver in play—Collier's 'worries' that Pat cannot succeed as a golfer are a defensive cover for his own desire that she want something for her own life that he does not. But it's not the fact that there is such a defensive maneuver in play, much less anything about the particular kind of defensive maneuver in play that makes this recognizable as an instance of gaslighting. It's recognizable as gaslighting because Collier is so clearly trying to radically undermine Pat, and doing so through a combination of dismissing (e.g. 'oh what's the good of that, I mean after all') and manipulating her (esp via her trust and love).

Notably, moreover, the sense in which Pat ends up undermined isn't just about her golfing abilities—she says she feels “carved up”, “nobody”. This kind of language is common among targets of successful gaslighting. It's in the same category, for instance, as De Beauvoir's “I am no longer sure . . . *even if I think at all*”. It's language that speaks to a sense of having lost one's independent standing as deliberator and moral agent. And, significantly, it's language that mirrors the canonical language of gaslighters. That is, gaslighters charge their targets with being crazy, oversensitive, paranoid. What these terms have in common in the context of gaslighting is that they are ways of charging someone not simply with being *wrong* or *mistaken*, but being in no condition to judge whether she is wrong or mistaken. The accusations are about the target's basic rational competence—her ability to get facts right, to deliberate, her basic evaluative competencies and ability to react appropriately: her independent standing as deliberator and moral agent. When gaslighting succeeds, it drives its targets crazy in the sense of deeply undermining just these aspects of a person's independent standing.

So is that what gaslighters want—to undermine their target's independent standing as deliberators and moral agents? Is that their aim? This is tricky territory. To begin with, we're talking about motives that are typically obscure to the gaslighter himself/herself, so when we talk about the gaslighter's “aims” or “desires”, we're often not in the territory of explicit features of conscious deliberation, but rather speaking of what will in some sense satisfy the gaslighter.⁵ Second, in this sense of having an “aim”, every individual gaslighter typically has multiple aims. This is true not only in the jejune sense that all people have multiple aims, but also in a sense that is directly relevant to their gaslighting—gaslighting activities nearly always serve multiple aims for the gaslighter.

It's helpful in this light to think about some rough categories into which we might sort the various aims or desires commonly implicated in gaslighting. In one category, closest to the psychological surface (though commonly not conscious) are what we might call the gaslighter's specific aims or desires—the aims the gaslighter has with regard to that particular interaction (or series of interactions) with that particular target. For instance, in this category we could place Collier's desire that Pat abandon her career for the sake of pursuing exclusively wifely projects. In the same category belongs Sartre's desire to have De Beauvoir sit admiringly and in awe at his feet, and Liz's boss's desire to see himself as judicious and kind.

Such specific desires or aims often differ from what we might call a gaslighter's basic or underlying desires. For instance, we might not implausibly suppose that Collier's most basic desire is to be the exclusive object of someone else's attention and affection. Sartre might equally plausibly be seen as driven by a need to have others prop up his fragile ego. Liz's boss (insofar as we encounter him) seems driven simply by a desire to dominate and/or maintain existing power structures. These are morally dark underlying aims. But that needn't be the case: some such underlying motives may not be, when considered in isolation, the least bit morally unsavory. Someone who insists that sexual harassment be

treated as merely a minor annoyance might at root be driven by a need to see the world they inhabit as basically agreeable and kind. Similarly, someone might want to see what is in fact discriminatory conduct as excusable because they have a deep need to look up to authority figures. Or they might be driven by a need to maintain harmony (or its appearance), or avoid conflict. Furthermore, there's no reason to suppose that any individual gaslighter has only one basic or underlying motive. His or her underlying motives might, for instance, be some psychologically undistinguished combination of a desire for harmony, a desire to look up to authority figures, and a desire to preserve existing power structures.

And yet, these very points allow us to see something else that's crucial about gaslighting. None of the specific or underlying desires I've just mentioned need depend for its satisfaction on gaslighting someone. If, for instance, Liz's boss ultimately wants to maintain existing power structures and see himself as judicious and kind, why doesn't he just ignore Liz? Or, short of that, simply end his meeting with her with what we are told are his plausible explanations for his misconduct towards her, rather than go on to suggest that she's being oversensitive and should take a few days off to de-stress? Similarly, if what's motivating the fellows in conversation with the junior colleague who was slapped on the butt is that they want to minimize the harm of sexual harassment (the specific aim) because they are driven by a desire to want to look up to authority figures (the underlying aim), why not just dismiss the incident with something as simple as the phrase "I don't see it that way"? Why, instead, call upon *her* to have sympathy for her harasser; why insist she's being "oversensitive"? If Collier wants to be the exclusive object of someone's attention and affection, why radically undermine Pat's career ambitions, rather than finding someone who doesn't have any such independent ambitions? Or consider, finally, the person deeply motivated by a desire for harmony. While successfully gaslighting someone who objects to injustice produces some sort of harmony, there's hardly a necessary or even obvious connection between having a desire for harmony and being motivated to gaslight dissenters. Why, to begin with, see she who objects to injustice as the person who has disrupted harmony, rather than they who have perpetrated the injustice in the first place? Even insofar as one focuses on the objector, why configure 'harmony' as something requires her total silencing (in the manner of gaslighting) rather than simply ignoring, or even appeasing her (either in addition to, or as opposed to the perpetrators of injustice)?

Something more has to be going on in the psychology of gaslighters to explain their behavior.⁶ What makes the difference between the fellow who ignores or dismisses evidence that his desires cannot be satisfied, and the one who gaslights is the inability to tolerate even the possibility of challenge. One clinical psychiatrist who works and writes on the subject puts it this way, "A gaslighter . . . can't tolerate the slightest challenge to the way he sees things. However he decides to explain the world to himself, that's how you must see it, too—or leave him prey to unbearable anxiety."⁷ Here too there are variations on this basic theme. First, there can be variations in the scope of the intolerance for

disagreement. Any given gaslighter, that is, might be able to tolerate challenges to some aspects of his views (say, literature or restaurant quality) but not others (say, what qualifies as sexual harassment or discrimination). And he might be able to tolerate disagreement from some people (say, male authority figures or strangers) but not others (say, women or junior colleagues).⁸ But it is this intolerance and intense anxiety about the very possibility of disagreement that explains why gaslighters behave as they do: they seek to eliminate *that* very possibility.

Furthermore, this characteristic aim of gaslighting is *interpersonal* in the sense that it is a need gaslighters have *of* and directed towards particular persons. Again: these are not the guys who roll their eyes and walk away when a woman points out that something is sexist. These are the guys who turn to that woman, insist that she's crazy, and insist that *she* assent in some way to the proposition that she's crazy. They don't just need the world to appear to themselves to be a certain way—they need *you*, the target, to see it that way.⁹ But you don't. He needs this to be 'just some poor old guy' he can admire, rather than a sexual harasser. You point out the sexual harassment. And precisely because what the gaslighter cannot tolerate the "slightest challenge to the way he sees things" he needs the challenge you've just presented to completely disappear *as* a challenge. The only way for that to actually happen is for you not to have the standing to issue challenges, and to not see yourself as having that standing.

The central desire or aim of the gaslighter, to put it sharply, is to destroy even the possibility of disagreement—to have his sense of the world not merely confirmed, but placed beyond dispute. And the only sure way to accomplish this is for there to be no source of possible disagreement—no independent, separate, deliberative perspective from which disagreement might arise. So he gaslights: he aims to destroy the possibility of disagreement by so radically undermining another person that she has nowhere left to stand from which to disagree, no standpoint from which her words might constitute genuine disagreement.

If we set this as the paradigm case of a gaslighting aim, gaslighting aims will then, and to that extent, belong to a particular family of dismissive interactions characterized as a family insofar as the parties to them fail to treat disagreements as seriously as they ought to be treated, for reasons having to do with psychologically difficulties the parties have in dealing with disagreements.¹⁰ And some close cousins in this family may be difficult to distinguish in situ from gaslighters. There are those, for instance, who need their vision of the world socially confirmed by most, but not all. For this person, it will be enough if *everyone else* thinks the woman who is pointing to sexism is crazy. She won't then have social standing to dispute his views, in the ordinary sense that no one will take her challenges seriously. Notice, however, that for a person so motivated, there doesn't seem to be any motive for engaging with the person who objects to sexism. Indeed, if the aim is that everyone else think she is 'crazy', it may be tactically better not to speak *to* she who objects, but only *about* her.¹¹

The gaslighter is different because he wants and needs more than that—he wants it to actually *be the case* that she cannot issue genuine challenges *to him*.

The only way to accomplish that is to gaslight her—to try and make it the case that she's left with no independent standpoint from which to issue a challenge. What he gets, and his cousin doesn't, is that he gets to be *right*. This, in my view, is the core insight of early psychoanalytic attempts to understand gaslighting in terms of projective identification, for what projective identification creates at the most general level is a situation in which one person's anxieties and needs are relieved by making external reality fit the contours of those anxieties/needs. Merely creating a situation in which everyone *regards* a woman as unhinged, without actually unhinging her, doesn't accomplish that.

One might well worry that this characterization of the gaslighter is too strong. One respect in which my characterization may seem too sharp by half has to do with how we think about the relationship between the examples with which I began, and the destructive aims I've claimed are characteristic of gaslighting. If we think of the *paradigm* case of gaslighting as one in which the gaslighter *wholeheartedly, constantly* and *consistently* aims at the destruction his or her target's standing to issue challenges, it may be less than entirely clear that all of the examples with which I began are examples of gaslighting. This appearance is partly mitigated by remembering that these are vignettes in the lives of women for whom, as a rule of thumb, this sort of interaction has become pervasive. A single instance of one person saying to another, "that's crazy" may not appear—may not *be*—an instance of someone trying to destroy another's standing to make claims. But when that form of interaction is iterated over and over again, when counterevidence to "that's crazy" is dismissed, when nothing is treated as salient evidence for the possibility of disrupting the initial accusation, appearances shift.

Equally importantly, we also need to bear in mind that gaslighters—like the rest of us—commonly have conflicting aims/desires. We've already seen that this can be true even internal to the aims/desires that motivate gaslighters. I've characterized Sartre's specific aim, for example, as wanting De Beauvoir to sit in awe of him at his feet. 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. A similar tension seems to hold between the general and the specific aims of the gaslighters involved in some of the other cases—e.g. the case of Pat and Collier.¹²

One might, in this light, try and amend my descriptions of the aims of gaslighting so we can make a consistent whole out of the gaslighter's desires. Perhaps, one might suggest, 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—a woman devoted exclusively to wifely endeavors, a female philosopher sitting in awe at his feet, a colleague willing to treat discriminatory conduct as though it were an exercise of justified authority.

But the conflicted picture of the gaslighter strikes me as closer to the truth, at least in most cases, than the proposed ‘reconciled’ picture of the gaslighter’s aims. For one thing, attempting to reconcile at a philosopher’s distance the otherwise apparently conflicting aims of the typical gaslighter problematically glosses over their destructive impulse and “unbearable anxiety” at the possibility of challenge that underwrites that impulse. By the same token, however, there is *more* than simply such a destructive impulse at work in most of these cases. Most gaslighters are not great evil-doing caricatures of the sort is Gregory (he is, after all, a movie character). To the contrary, people who engage in gaslighting often also want to maintain a relationship, sometimes even a close relationship, with their targets. Indeed, the gaslighter’s demands for assent are often simultaneously expressions of the destructive desire [‘be crazy so I don’t have to view this as an arena in which I might be challenged’] and, *at the same time*, expressions of a desire to maintain relations with their targets [‘just agree with me about this, so we can get on with our relationship’]. Think, for instance, of the urgency with which—immediately after her loss in the golf tournament—Collier tries to get Pat to agree marry him. He wants her undermined so that she will “just let him take charge!” but he also desperately wants her to assent—even want—to marry him (and so to have stable enough desires and will to do so). An apt description of the case, it seems to me, will simply let the tension in his motives stand as it is.

Yet for all of these complexities, it remains the destructive impulse that distinguishes the gaslighter’s aim as the aims of a gaslighter: it’s the intense anxiety and fear about challenge, the need to destroy that possibility that drives him to gaslighting. And I think the basic structure at issue in my characterization of these core destructive aims of gaslighting—an interpersonal need for assent, intolerance for challenge or even the possibility of being challenged, and the manipulative destruction of the gaslightee’s standing to issue challenge—can all be read fairly straightforwardly off the typical form or pattern of gaslighters’ interactions with their targets. To see this clearly, however, we also need to begin to think about what’s wrong with gaslighting.

The moral darkness of Gaslighting, with special focus on its aims

It’s so obvious that aiming at the obliteration of another person’s independent perspective and moral standing constitutes one of the deepest kinds of moral wrongs, that one might well wonder what else could possibly need be said about the moral wrongs of gaslighting. But there are in fact several reasons to say a good deal more. First, characterized in the way I just have, the aim of gaslighting might be satisfied by various means. 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 to try and 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. Second, and relatedly, even for all that's been said thus far, one might *still* wonder whether the proposed characterization of the central aim of gaslighting is too strong. Gaslighting, one might object, is dreadful, but it is not so rare as one might expect to be the desire to obliterate another person's perspective and independent moral standing.¹³ I will address both of these issues in this section through a discussion that centers around the question of what gaslighting does, and does not, have in common with other kinds of wrongs the aims of which implicate another person's independent moral standing.

We might begin by noticing that the opening moves of gaslighting interactions, those that are characterized by the kinds of quips with which I began this essay, take place in a kind of netherworld between what Steve Darwall calls the second-person and third-person standpoints. As Darwall emphasizes, in being angry with someone, I take myself to have *standing* to make a demand of her—say, for an apology—whether or not I express my anger. In contrast, there's nothing about regarding someone as crazy that presupposes my authority to demand something of her. To the contrary, it would seem that insofar as I regard someone as 'crazy', I should regard her—in Strawsonian terms—as the object of treatment and management, rather than a member of the moral community of whom demands may be made.¹⁴

Seen in this light, the fact that gaslighters frame their targets as “crazy”, “paranoid”, and “completely overreacting” is already telling, for these are ways of framing the target of gaslighting such that she cannot be a source of challenge to the gaslighter. Someone who is crazy isn't, insofar as they are crazy, in a condition such that they can issue proper *challenges* to my views, and in that respect presents no threat to me even if I were unable to tolerate being challenged. But gaslighters don't merely *think* someone is crazy, paranoid or oversensitive—they say these things *to the person so regarded*. That's very odd. Ask yourself: what's the point of saying such things *to the person so regarded*? If I really think someone is paranoid, for instance, it would seem as a matter of both prudence and concern for that person that the last thing I should do is tell her I think she's paranoid. People who are genuinely paranoid will only take that as further evidence in favor of their ill-founded fears.

One might suggest that such expressions can be ways of trying to get a person to rethink her reactions, or to see another perspective. But in at least three respects, that's clearly not what's going on in gaslighting. First, the gaslighter's insulting, dismissive phrases are not issued in the form of invitations to reconsider or conversation, but as directives or proclamations. “Don't be paranoid” is a command, not an invitation to discussion; “that's crazy” is a proclamation, not a query about the foundation of someone's views, and equally, Liz's boss's “I think you're being way too sensitive . . . maybe even a little paranoid” has the form of a declaration, not a query.

Second, if one does engage with a gaslighter *as though* it were a conversation, they won't engage, they'll re-entrench. If one responds, for instance, to a gaslighter's "that's crazy" with "well, I'm not the only one who thinks this, so does this other person", the gaslighter may simply retort, "well then, that person is crazy too." Or notice how the exchanges with the two cases of the sexually harassed grad students (#6 & 8) progress. In #8 we get a progression of re-entrenching dismissals, from accusations of being oversensitive to the accusation of being insecure. In #6, the harasser first denies there's a problem, then tries to make it the woman's problem by grotesquely joking about how it would be better if there were no women in philosophy, and when neither of those work, resorts to calling her "prude". And the last of these is not only a dismissal, but also a manipulative move—it's an attempt to move the sexually harassed student by appealing to her own internalized sexism.

This brings us to a third prototypical feature of gaslighting—it works by manipulation. When insisting and re-entrenching doesn't produce assent, the gaslighter will pull out the manipulative leverage. In the next section, I discuss in some detail the various kinds of manipulative leverage gaslighters employ. At the moment, I want to highlight simply the fact that manipulation often enters in at this stage of the gaslighting exchange—i.e. when there isn't immediate uptake on the dismissive accusation. For instance, one common form manipulation takes in gaslighting is that of calling the exchange to an end in such a fashion as amounts to a threat or emotional goading. Consider the exchange between Pat and Collier, and Liz's exchange with her boss. There's Pat, utterly distressed, having just told her fiancé that she feels "carved up" and "nobody", but nevertheless has to be in charge of herself, and his response is to shut down conversation and open the newspaper. He's trying to manipulate her by withdrawing emotional support at a crucial moment. When Liz's boss calls the exchange to an end by recommending that she "take a few days off too distress" the manipulative threat is different, but equally clear—her job is on the line.

So, here's what we can now say about the basic structure of a typical gaslighting interaction. First, the target is framed in the mind of the gaslighter as crazy, paranoid, overreacting or oversensitive—framed in such a way, that is, that she cannot be the source of genuine disagreement. Then the gaslighter tells her this is how he sees her, in the form of a proclamation—e.g. "that's crazy"—or a command—e.g. "don't be paranoid". Then s/he insists on the dismissive framing in their interactions; re-entrenching or using other terms of dismissal if she resists. And finally (though often this is going on throughout), the gaslighter manipulates his target—perhaps, like Liz's boss by making it clear that her job is on the line, or perhaps like Collier by attempting to manipulate his loved one's desire for comfort at a difficult time by withdrawing.

Once these features of gaslighting interactions are laid bare, it no longer strikes me as too sharp to say 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.

Thus understood, gaslighting does share certain key features with other forms of manipulation and other kinds of wrongs. But even insofar as we can aptly characterize it under the rubric of one of those other, more widely discussed, categories, it is a peculiar moral violation.

Consider, for instance, what we might say about gaslighting as a species of manipulation. Stephen Darwall characterizes some forms of manipulation as:

... purport[ing] to create reasons in something like the way that legitimate claims or demands do, that is, second-personally, but without the appropriate normative backing for the threatened “sanctions”, which consequently provide only the superficial appearance of an accountability relation. [...] Indeed, it is not unusual for threats or other forms of coercion or manipulation to be accompanied by self-indulging rationalizing fantasies of justified authority. Tyrants and batterers frequently comfort themselves by imagining the righteousness of their cause. (*The Second Person Standpoint*, 51)

Likewise, when the gaslighter says “that’s crazy”, he isn’t in the first instance claiming for himself an epistemic authority (I see this rightly, you don’t). Rather, what he’s doing is issuing a demand that one see things his way. It’s a demand because it works that that way—this isn’t a case of, for instance, testimonial credence (i.e. the gaslighter isn’t asking his/her target to take it on testimony that it’s true that “that’s crazy”). If that were the scenario, there’d be no explanation for the gaslighter’s use of manipulative threats (implicit or explicit). It’s the explicit or implicit manipulative threats behind “that’s crazy” that give the target anything like motive for assent. And just as with the kinds of manipulation Darwall mentions, there are rationalizing fantasies of *justified* authority at play in gaslighting. Indeed, here we can see another role that calling someone “crazy” or “paranoid” plays in gaslighting—such claims enable a rationalizing fantasy that the target is not in a condition to make judgments for herself—she’s paranoid, crazy, oversensitive; her basic rational capacities have escaped her, so she really *needs* to substitute his judgment for hers.¹⁵ But the rationalizing fantasies are exactly that. What is being expressed is a deep interpersonal need for assent, an intolerance for being challenged, and the desire to destroy the very possibility of disagreement, all of which are taking the form of a manipulative demand.

On the other hand, the *content* of the gaslighter’s aim makes this much worse than most forms of manipulation. Suppose, for the moment, we follow the usual Kantian account of what’s wrong with manipulative conduct. Then we might say this: while it’s a violation of recognition respect to guilt-trip me into going somewhere with you (because, e.g. you are thereby causing me to act for reasons which I cannot rationally endorse), there’s nothing wrong with asking me to do so—the aim of having me go somewhere with you is permissible.¹⁶ In Kantian terms, there are permissible maxims of action with that aim. Even supposing that ordinary manipulation is wrong, and for this reason, there’s an important

difference between that kind of failure of recognition respect, and the kind of failure that's at issue in gaslighting. We might put the difference this way: the gaslighter's aim is impermissible no matter under what maxim of action it is pursued: it is to aim at producing a situation in which, one way or another, that person does not occupy a standpoint from which challenges might be issued. That aim, in and of itself, involves a profound violation of recognition respect.¹⁷ It aims to work not only in a way to which a person could not rationally consent (like ordinary manipulation), but to make it the case that consent is no longer an issue because the individual is no longer in a position to either offer or withhold consent.

So too, in Kantian terms, gaslighting is even worse than contempt. The problem with contempt, according to Kantians, is that it involves regarding a person *as though* she were outside the moral community.¹⁸ Gaslighting attempts *to make it the case* that a person is in fact no longer properly regarded as a full member of the moral community, because *she doesn't in fact have that independent standing*.

Moreover, because of the ways in which gaslighting works through manipulation, the destruction of the target's independent perspective is brought about, after a fashion, through her own complicity. If I'm manipulated into going along with something by a simple act of deception, I may feel embarrassed for having believed that person, but I won't typically feel I've been complicit in having been so duped. Gaslighting, in contrast, is accomplished through manipulative means that leave its target sensing (rightly so) that she has been turned against herself. In this way, gaslighting has several important elements in common with what David Sussman argues is paradigmatic of torture. Torture, like gaslighting, aims at the destruction of another's sense of self.¹⁹ But what's specially awful about torture, on Sussman's account, is that in torture, a victim's will is turned against itself; she is made to believe that at every moment there is something *she* could do to stop it, to escape, and that becomes itself part of the torture. Similarly, gaslighted women have not only their wills, but their affective dispositions and even sometimes their character turned against them for their own destruction. Liz's devotion to her career, for instance, has been turned into a threat used to destabilize her own sense of being unjustly treated at work; Collier is trying to use Pat's love for him to get her to turn against her own independent interests; the guys who are urging the junior colleague who'd been slapped on the butt to "have some sympathy" are trying to get her to turn her sympathetic capacities against her own proper sense of dignity.²⁰ Consider too the ways in which the phrase "that's crazy" (as opposed, to "you're crazy") can be deployed in gaslighting efforts. The phrase, "that's crazy" gives the *appearance* of an escape, an out, for the target: if only she agrees that it is 'crazy' to think x, it seems, then she can escape the charge that she herself is crazy. But this is merely an appearance: to the extent what is going on is gaslighting, acceding to the claim "that's crazy" will instead only confirm the gaslighter's view that the *person* is crazy.²¹ Part

of the moral horror of gaslighting is that it makes one complicit in one's own destruction in these ways.

Similarly, the wrongs of gaslighting also go far beyond what Miranda Fricker calls "testimonial injustice". Testimonial injustice, on Fricker's account, occurs when a "speaker receives a credibility deficit owing to an identity prejudice in the speaker".²² Yes, the gaslighter gives his target's testimony *no* credibility—she's crazy. But it would be more accurate to say that gaslighting puts questions of credibility deficits and excesses off the table entirely. To suppose that in gaslighting, the primary issue is about credibility assessments is, I think, to focus in the wrong place. It's to lose sight of the fact that an important part of what's going on is that the gaslighter is trying turn a situation that might involve credibility assessments into a situation in which credibility assessments are not at issue, because there is no credibility to be assessed, no other perspective in the offing, and so no possibility of disagreement.

One final category of wrong deserves also deserves mention in this context: that of silencing. In Rae Langton's well-known work on the subject, she describes the central notion at issue here thus:

one speaks, one utters words, and fails not simply to achieve the effect one aims at, but fails to perform the very action one intends. Here speech misfires, and the act is unhappy in the way Austin described: although the appropriate words are uttered, with the appropriate intention, the speaker fails to perform the intended illocutionary act. Silencing of this . . . kind we can call *illocutionary disablement* . . . Example (1) *Warning* [drawn from Donald Davidson] Imagine this: the actor is acting in a scene in which there is supposed to be a fire . . . "Fire!" he screams . . . And now a real fire breaks out, and the actor tries in vein to warn the real audience. "Fire!" he screams.²³

"Something about the role he occupies", Langton says of the actor-warning case, "prevents his utterance from counting as a warning".²⁴ It's not hard to see in what way(s) gaslighting involves silencing in this sense. At the most rudimentary level, the target is unable to issue challenges to the gaslighter's desires/views, because none are taken by the gaslighter as such: that is the role she occupies for him. She says "this is discriminatory", and there is no way for that to count as a challenge to the view that *x* is not discriminatory, for its force (for the gaslighter) is merely that of a crazy, paranoid, or oversensitive rant. But it's not only at this level that gaslighting is 'silencing' in Langton's sense. Insofar as the target of gaslighting is regarded as crazy, it's not merely particular utterances that will fail to have what would otherwise be their illocutionary force, but anything she says. And insofar as gaslighting is actually successful, it undermines the target's ability to take her own words, thoughts, reactions or views as having the force they otherwise would. She may be angry, or if she can no longer muster that, hurt in response to a discriminatory act, but she will not be able to take her own reactions seriously herself—to treat those attitudes, herself, in any of the myriad of ways in which it is appropriate to treat *anyone's* reactive attitudes. Successful

gaslighting, in this way, involves what might be aptly thought of as a kind of existential silencing.²⁵

One might then say that the aims of gaslighting make it a form of manipulation, and a deep failure of recognition respect, and torture, and epistemic injustice and silencing. It is, indeed, each of these. Yet as we've seen, it involves a particular form of each of these other kinds of wrongs, and to fully capture the immorality of what it is at which gaslighters aim, it won't do to simply choose one of these categories. Each provides an important piece of the horrifying puzzle.²⁶

One might want to object that such strong characterizations of what's wrong with the characteristic aims of gaslighting don't seem to take into account my earlier point that the scope of a given gaslighter's intolerance for disagreement can be quite limited. For instance, in many of my examples, to the extent there's such a destructive intolerance for disagreement at issue, it's restricted in scope to intolerance for being challenged about 'whether there's discrimination going on' or even more specifically 'what qualifies as sexual harassment'. These gaslighters, one might suggest, are aiming to destroy the possibility of disagreement just about those matters. And, so the argument would go, even if they succeed in undermining their targets sense of having standing to judge or react on those questions, successful gaslighting that's limited in scope in this way isn't enough to drive anyone to lose their sense of standing as an independent deliberator and moral agent altogether.

On the one hand, there's something right about this: people can and do withstand a great deal of gaslighting before they reach the point that's been at work in the background of my remarks. But it's important not to minimize. First, even insofar as the scope of gaslighting efforts remains confined to something like "what qualifies as sexual harassment", we do ourselves a disservice if we don't retain a sense of the importance of what's at stake in these examples—a sense of one's integrity as a sexual being, one's identity as a co-worker among equals, one's identity as a philosopher. The scope of gaslighting efforts may be limited, but in these cases, they concern core aspects of individuals' self-conceptions. Second, even in ordinary, mundane cases of a loss of self-confidence, that loss can spread like an infection to other arenas of one's life; in gaslighting, where the loss of self-confidence can be extreme (commensurate with the destructive aims of gaslighting) and the target arena involves core aspects of an individual's self-conception, it is to be expected that this infection will often spread.²⁷ Third, as I said in the beginning, it's important not to forget that where gaslighting is going on, it's often pervasive. This is rarely one exchange about bra sizes; it's part of the warp and weft of too many women's everyday experiences.²⁸

The Gaslighter's leverage

Ordinary attempts at manipulation like 'guilt-tripping' sometimes work, sometimes don't, and sometimes work only partially. Many attempts to gaslight

similarly fail. What's surprising is that they ever succeed. Consider the vast difference between being manipulated into: (a) going to a movie one would rather not see, (b) losing one's sense of standing as an independent moral agent. How could such a thing as (b) ever happen? The movie *Gaslight* gives us two overlapping answers—a personal one that portrays our protagonist, Paula, as already damaged and vulnerable on account of early childhood trauma, and a second story that focuses on the various forms of leverage her husband, Gregory, uses to manipulate her. For the sake of illuminating what's wrong with gaslighting, it's that second kind of story on which I'll focus here.

There is a recognizably common set of manipulative tools used by gaslighters, and each comes with its own dimension of moral nefariousness. Getting someone to turn against themselves by open threat is, for instance, a different kind of wrong than getting them to turn against themselves by appealing to their love or kindness, and the immorality of the latter cannot be adequately understood in any of the proto-Kantian terms we have as yet on the table.

All of the gaslighting tools I discuss in what follows are especially efficient tools gaslighting insofar as they take place against a background of power inequities. These can be simple, structural power inequities like the relation of employee to employer, or more complicated and deeper structural inequities such as those implicated in our interactions on account of prejudicial social norms (like sexism). They can also involve more intimate, personal inequities of power—if, for instance, one person has what is colloquially called a 'fear of abandonment' (as does Paula in the title movie), her loved ones then have a tool for manipulation she does not hold over them; it's a relational power-inequity. And there can be situational power-inequities as well; when, for instance, one person is particularly emotionally vulnerable because of circumstances, the withdrawal of affection by her beloved would cause much greater harm to her than were it the other way around (think, for instance, of Collier's withdrawal from Pat just after she's lost the tournament).²⁹

I won't much tarry on this point about power inequities in the explorations that follow, but I do think it's worth highlighting here, for three reasons. First, as I've already suggested, doing so can help us understand how it could be possible for someone to lose her own sense of independent standing as deliberator and moral agent. Second, doing so helps to make sense of why gaslighting is so often, though certainly not necessarily, a sexist phenomenon. And third, insofar as gaslighting often—if not necessarily—occurs in the context of power inequities that too adds a dimension to its moral perversity: to not only manipulate someone, but to do so in a way aimed at radically undermining her independent standing, *by using manipulative leverage one has in virtue of a power inequity* is a special brand of immorality indeed.

A. Love

One tool gaslighters use to manipulate is love. Here are four ways they do so. Loving someone, *ceteris paribus*, plausibly gives us reason to give their views a little extra credence.³⁰ We needn't go very far in this direction to see how this can become a gaslighting tool. Suppose love simply gives one reason to consider matters further than one would otherwise. Then, when he says, "you're paranoid", there's the moment to wonder, to second-guess oneself. Loving someone also involves wanting to be with the beloved, and wanting the beloved to want to be with you. In this way, it's built into the structure of loving someone that their expressing a desire not to be around you is experienced (absent further explanation) as a fracture, however small, in love. And that too gives the gaslighter a tool. Think of the moment that Collier opens the newspaper. Or consider the way in which the phrase "I'll just give you some space" can function simultaneously as a dismissal ('you're so nuts I don't want to hear you'), and a threat ('continue this way and I will disappear'). Third, we want our beloveds to think well of us.³¹ To say to someone who loves you "you're crazy" is not only to condemn, but to thereby threaten one of the basic desires involved in loving.³² Finally, loving someone involves wanting them to fare well. The evident distress on a gaslighter's face as he says, for instance, "oh have some sympathy for the guy" isn't just about "the guy"—to the extent the gaslighter is distressed, and one wants people whom one loves not to be distressed, one will want to relieve his distress.³³

B. Empathy

Our empathetic abilities can also be drawn into the service of gaslighting. Consider the junior colleague who's told to have sympathy for the guy who slapped her on the butt. One can, of course, resist calls to empathy as outrageous. But we shouldn't underestimate the cumulative effect of social forces that heighten the possibility of empathy being leveraged in gaslighting. In many of these situations, the gaslighters are people with whom one interacts regularly and with whom one has some need to get along. Those two factors together facilitate empathy, and make its pull harder to resist—this may be an inappropriate situation in which to empathize with the gaslighter, but if one needs to get along with him, it's very difficult to simply cease empathizing with him altogether. Second, the familiar sexist trope that women are and should be more empathetic is alive and well in us all. As Cordelia Fine notes, while women and men do not generally score meaningfully differently on tests for empathetic abilities, if you remind women of this trope, our empathetic abilities suddenly increase.³⁴ And you get similar effects just by gender-priming, by for instance, having women tick a box that says "female" before taking an empathy test. The situations I've been highlighting are, I'd suggest, ones in which women are already gender-primed by the time gaslighting begins. They're gender-primed because the initial situation

about which they're being gaslighted involves sexism—in that regard, the fact that they are female is already well on the table.

C. Practical consequences as manipulative leverage

The practical consequences of trying to resist gaslighting can be momentous.³⁵ For instance, Liz's job is clearly at stake. And her boss has framed matters in a particular way—she's "too sensitive" and "a little paranoid" and should "take a few days off to destress." Anything short of agreeing to this will amount to disagreement with her boss's basic framework, a boss who has shown himself more than willing to act without justification against her professional interests.

Liz could try to act as though she assents to her boss's framework, while privately withholding assent. But that's not an easy feat to pull off, for reasons that have been familiar since at least Hochschild's exploration of the ways in which emotional management can be a job requirement in *The Managed Heart*.³⁶ One of Hochschild's early examples involves flight attendants. Their job requires *appearing* happy and agreeable. But flight attendants quickly learn that passengers are adept at picking up on "strained or forced smiles", and so learn to actually *be* happy in order to *appear* happy.³⁷ Liz's situation is not wholly dissimilar—her job depends on her appearing to assent to the view that she is "too sensitive" and "maybe a little paranoid", and her boss is at least as likely to pick up on false appearances as passengers on an airplane—presumably more so, given that he interacts with her every day. In terms of job security, Liz might well be better off if she did regard herself as too sensitive. But if she reaches that point, she's gaslighted.

D. Authority and purported authority

Authority and purported authority also often gives gaslighters manipulative leverage. First, people in actual positions of authority can use that as leverage to demand they be treated with unjustified degrees of credence. For instance, the authority of our employers gives us reason to give their views a little bit more credence over a subset of employee related matters. If a junior faculty member's department mentor says, "here's a good way to go about getting this done in the department", his authority as her department mentor gives her reason to give that more credence, and that's so even if the position of department mentor and authority thereof are derivative of presumptions of special competence with regard to, say, departmental matters. The line between cases of such justified exercises of authority and concomitant expectations of being given a little extra credence, and cases where employment related authority has overstepped its bounds is easily blurred. Gaslighters can exploit that fact. Second, there is the

purported authority of the crowd; what psychologists sometimes call the “normalizing” effect of multiple voices. That’s one reason why it’s significant that so many of these examples involve multiple gaslighters. The voice of many people is a great deal more difficult to ignore than one person.³⁸ And a reasonable woman, surrounded by what otherwise *seem* to be reasonable people, who are in one voice telling her that she’s overreacting, is not unreasonable for treating that aggregative voice with a little extra credence. Third: appeals to ungrounded authority play a role here because, in short, sexism is real. When, for instance, the gaslighter says “you’re just a prude”, or “you’re oversensitive”, he’s appealing to norms of sexism. And while the details of why, and to what extent, that will work on any particular woman vary, the basic explanation as to why they work is not mysterious—they work because this is a sexist society, and the sexist norms to which gaslighters appeal are, to some extent, in us all. Gaslighters are using internalized sexism as weapons against their targets.

E. Sexism and self-doubt

There’s one particular sexist norm that warrants special highlighting in this context. Call this the sexist norm of self-doubt. We encounter this under various guises every day. One form of it is the normative expectation that men will be forthright and confident, while women who are equally so get called foul names. Another variety shows up in our classrooms, when women hesitate to speak, and later say, “I didn’t think it was important”. Another form is gendered-deference, as when women in our classes defer to male voices, affording those men unjustified excesses of credence. And so on. It’s part of the structure of sexism that women are supposed to be less confident, to doubt our views, beliefs, reactions, and perceptions, more than men. And gaslighting is aimed at undermining someone’s views, beliefs, reactions, and perceptions. The sexist norm of self-doubt, in all its forms, prepares us for just that.

Thinking in this way about the gaslighter’s tools shows us aspects of the wrongs of gaslighting that go far beyond what can be captured by Kantian talk about using someone as a mere means or failures of recognition respect. Yes: using someone’s love, their empathetic capacities, their practical dependence on their job, or their own internalized sexism against them, to manipulate them into giving up their independent moral standing, are horrific failures of recognition respect.

But the fact that *these* are the gaslighter’s tools is itself morally significant. To use someone’s love as a tool for gaslighting her is to take a capacity that’s central in moral life and more generally and pervert it; it’s to take a capacity that is of incalculable value and turn it into a tool for the destruction of the person who loves. Likewise, we rely every day, and all the time, in our interactions on our empathetic capacities, and there is a special darkness in using that capacity to turn someone against herself, to undermine the very moral capacities of which

empathy is so important a part. And there is yet a different sort of wrong involved in using internalized sexist norms against a person, to gaslight her, and keep her trapped in those very sexist norms. This too is a wrong that cannot be adequately captured by talk of using a person, or failures of recognition respect. It is a distinctive kind of moral wrong, one that has political and social dimensions, in that it unjustly, and by means of discriminatory norms, limits the psychologically real possibilities for a woman going forward, and furthermore, in so doing, constitutes a moment of preserving and reinforcing larger structures of injustice.

Damages

When gaslighting works well, its target ends up feeling, “carved up”, “nobody”, or she may say she feels lost, that there’s nothing left of her, or with De Beauvoir “*I’m no longer sure . . . even if I think at all*”. She has lost her sense of independent moral standing, and for a time, even some of her ability to engage in the deliberations constitutive of that independent standing.

In the psychological literature, this final “stage”, as it’s sometimes called, of gaslighting has a name: severe, major, clinical depression.³⁹ That’s hardly surprising. Yet we talk often in everyday life of clinical states as ones that—insofar as they are clinical—are inappropriate responses. In this context, I don’t think that’s useful. Let’s distinguish two issues: first, is a person’s psychological state such that psychological help would be a good idea; and second, is her psychological state a fitting response to her situation? Someone who is suffering in ways that meet the criterion for major clinical depression does need psychological help. But we should treat it as an open question whether her needing psychological help shows that her response is not fitting. Imagine, for instance, someone grieving the death of a child. Surely being unable to function in the world, to remember, sleep, keep track of the details of everyday life are not just understandable, but fitting responses to so horrific a loss. That doesn’t mean it might not also be helpful to a person facing that loss to get psychological help working through it.⁴⁰ A gaslighted woman has lost, albeit partially and temporarily, *herself*. And in various ways, her depressive responses *are* fitting—she *is* grieving; she’s grieving the loss of her independent perspective, her ability to form and maintain her own reactions and perceptions, the loss of the friendships that became or turned out to be mere gaslighting relations, and her own largely blameless complicity in all of this. It may take her time, and work, to come to see her symptomatically depressive reactions in these terms; like many forms of significant grief, it can take work and self-understanding that’s not easily or immediately accessible to experience its manifestations as grief. But, devastating though it is, it is precisely that.⁴¹

There is another significant moral point to so reframing the final stage of gaslighting. Doing so shifts our perspective from one in which we see a gaslighted

woman as a mere object of treatment—qua clinically depressed—to one in which we see her as an ongoing member of the moral community, grieving losses of insuperable value. And it frames her depression itself, if in a peculiar way, as the last form of resistance to gaslighting—if she can grieve the loss of herself, then in fact, she is not *entirely* lost. Her depression is not then merely the outcome of the wrongs she has suffered and endured; it's a fitting evaluative response to what she has been subjected and the first signpost on the road back.⁴²

Notes

1. See e.g. Robin Morgan, *The Gaslight Effect* (New York: Random House, 2007) & Calef and Weinshel's "Some clinical consequences of introjection: Gaslighting" (*Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, January 1981 v.50.1: 44–66). In the more popular genre, "gaslighting" is a common topic on e.g. jezebel.com (an online third-wave feminist magazine).
2. See e.g. Robin Morgan, *The Gaslight Effect* (2007) & Calef and Weinshel's "Some clinical consequences of introjection: Gaslighting".
3. None of these examples are fictional. The first is from De Beauvoir's *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, as quoted by Miranda Fricker in *Epistemic Injustice* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2007, pp. 50–51) The third is a summary of a patient's report from Dr. Robin Morgan's, *The Gaslight Effect* (op cit, 2007). The last two examples are drawn from, "What is it like to be a woman in philosophy?" The remaining examples are reports offered to me of incidents by the targets of the gaslighting themselves.
4. The foundational article in the psychoanalytic literature here is Calef and Weinshel's 1981, "Some clinical consequences of introjection: Gaslighting". A slew of articles on the topic followed in its wake, but to my knowledge, all those in the psychoanalytic literature to date have adopted Calef and Weinshel's framing of gaslighting as an instance of (successful) projective identification.
5. Gaslighters, just as with any one else, often have conflicting motives, and for that reason, can be distressed (as well as, also satisfied with) the successful results of their gaslighting efforts.
6. I suspect that one reason this has been difficult to see is the tendency, perhaps particularly exaggerated among philosophers, to identify what is most important (morally or otherwise) about a person's motives in one of two ways, either of which would be misleading to the point of obscuring the phenomena centrally at issue in the case of gaslighting. On the one hand, there's some tendency to equate that which is 'most important' with that which is conscious—in which case, the closest thing we have in gaslighting will be what I've called the gaslighters 'specific motives', though even those are not often conscious. But those won't explain why someone would engage in gaslighting behavior. On the other hand, there's some tendency to identify that which is most important about a person's motives with that which is most basic of underlying (the kind of motives discussed above)—but, as we've seen, such basic or underlying motives as gaslighters often do have also don't explain why they behave as they do.

7. Robin Morgan, *The Gaslight Effect*.
8. The scope of a gaslighter's intolerance for being challenged can overlap (or not) in various ways with what I've described as his or her specific aims or desires. In Sartre's case, for instance, he cannot tolerate challenge from De Beauvoir, and it is also she whom he desires to look up to him in awe. But it can be much more complicated than this. For instance, the person who wants to feel deserving of their good reputation, might be able to tolerate challenge on that score from those he regards as his superiors, but not his colleagues. Or be unable to tolerate some kinds of challenges from superiors, and unable to tolerate other kinds of challenges from colleagues.
9. The interpersonal need involved in the gaslighting aim might also be directed at different persons from those who are implicated in that person's underlying desires or aims. For instance: X's underlying desire is to see herself as the only 'real relationship' in Y's life. For that reason, X cannot tolerate Y's relationship with Z. So X gaslights Z. If successful, Y's relationship with Z is may then be configured by both X and Y as, say, "charity for the unfortunate, 'crazy' Z", rather than a 'real relationship', thereby serving X's need to be the only 'real relationship' in Y's life. Indeed, insofar as the gaslighting efforts are successful, Z herself may come to see things in just these terms. (See e.g. *Heathers* or *Gossip Girl*).
10. My thanks to Cathay Liu and Steve Darwall for a helpful conversation that led to the addition of the next two paragraphs.
11. This configuration of motives and interactions is common in portrayals of teenage and young-adult women's interactions with one another—television shows like *Gossip Girl* and *Pretty Little Liars* rely centrally on it. Of course, in doing so, those shows are picking up on (with tv-esque caricatures) a phenomenon recognizable in everyday life.
12. My thanks to Steve Darwall for conversation on this point.
13. I confess, I know not on what basis—prior to actual examination of interactions between actual human beings—one would make such antecedent estimations of the frequency of deeply dark motives in the human psyche. Fortunately, it also doesn't strike me as necessary to enter into such a meta-discussion for present purposes, for laying bare the typical structure of a gaslighting interaction in such a way as will illuminate the first set of questions (those which involve seeing the ways in which the wrongs of gaslighting aims are inseparable from the means by which gaslighting is accomplished) will also provide confirmation of the proposed characterization of the aims of gaslighting.
14. Stephen Darwall, *The Second Person Standpoint* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006)
15. A second, related rationalizing fantasy often in play in gaslighting is that the target like a young child, who needs someone to take over for her. Think, for instance, of Collier's squeezing Pat's shoulders like a small child and saying, "Why don't you just let me take charge!" My thanks to Adam Leite for this point.
16. There are variations among Kantian accounts about precisely why ordinary manipulation involves a failure of recognition respect. See e.g.: Christine Korsgaard, "The Right to Lie: on Dealing with Evil", *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge, Cambridge University, 1996); Barbara Herman, "Leaving

Deontology Behind”, *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1993); Thomas Hill, “Autonomy and Benevolent Lies”, *Journal of Value Inquiry* 18 (1984): 251–267. The differences among these, and other, Kantian accounts of what’s wrong with ordinary manipulation do not matter for present purposes. For reasons noted above, on any of them, gaslighting still will be a much worse violation of recognition respect.

17. Here’s a different way to notice the difference between ordinary manipulation and gaslighting. Sarah Buss has argued that Kantians cannot ultimately make good on their claim that manipulation is (necessarily or usually) a failure of recognition respect because, as she puts it, “one person can manipulate and deceive another . . . without preventing the manipulated person from governing herself”. [“Valuing Autonomy and Respecting Persons” *Ethics*, v.115.2 (January, 2005): 195–235, p.197] Even if Buss’s argument works against the Kantian analysis of what I’ve called ‘ordinary manipulation’, the same cannot be said of the form of manipulation at issue in gaslighting, for in gaslighting, it is precisely the undermining of another person’s standing and ability to govern herself at which the manipulation aims.
18. To regard someone with contempt, Kant claims, is to treat her as though she has “no moral worth” not even a “predisposition to the good”. As such, it precludes us (we are told) from viewing another as an ongoing member of the moral community.
19. In torture, the destruction of another’s sense of self is typically a means to some clear end in view—prototypically, in a political context, the information the torturer imagines he/she will receive by so destroying another’s sense of self. Most cases of gaslighting do not have that in common with torture, except in the attenuated sense that gaslighters treat gaslighting another as a means to secure their own views/perceptions against the possibility of challenge or disagreement.
20. David Sussman, “What’s wrong with Torture?” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (2005, v.33.1): 1–33. Sussman writes, e.g., “I do not regard the wrong of torture as just disregarding, thwarting or undermining the victim’s capacities for rational self-governance. Instead, I argue that torture forces a victim into the position of colluding against himself through his own affects and emotions, so that he experiences himself as simultaneously powerless and yet actively complicit in his own violation.” (p. 4) Without taking away the force of Sussman’s point, it’s perhaps worth noting that some measure of this seems to go on in many cases of manipulation, particularly forms of emotional manipulation that do not work through deception. Consider, for instance, the ways in which one can be successfully “guilt-tripped” even as one is aware that that is going on.
21. Thanks again to Steve Darwall for noticing the ways in which “that’s crazy” can actually function so as to be *more* rather than less pernicious in the context of gaslighting than “you’re crazy”.
22. *Testimonial Injustice*, p. 28.
23. Langton, “Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts”, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, v.22.4 (Autumn 1993): 293–330, pp. 315–316.
24. *ibid*, p. 316.
25. Thanks to Susanne Bobzien for bringing to my attention the relevance of Langton’s work here, and for the suggestion that gaslighting might be aptly seen

- as “existential silencing”. The details, and so any inaptness, in the account of why it might be apt to so see gaslighting are my own.
26. Questions about blame are partly an outgrowth of the gravity involved in so wronging another. But just as with any moral wrong, there are additional considerations that come to bear when we are making judgments about whether, and if so how to blame someone (what reactive attitudes to bear towards them, whether it would be appropriate to demand or expect an apology, and so on) for gaslighting. The fact that the destructive motives characteristic of gaslighting are not commonly fully conscious to the person engaged in it does not, by itself, strike me as an excusing condition. That will depend on a great many further considerations, including: whether they had opportunity to understand their not-fully conscious motives, to obtain evidence that ran counter to the view they are so anxious to maintain, the relationship between gaslighter and target, to what extent the gaslighter’s preferred view of the world is maintained by willful ignorance and concomitant failures to exercise opportunities to overcome the repression, denial and projection through which their destructive motives are kept outside of their conscious purview, and so on.
 27. I owe this point to Kirk Ludwig.
 28. My thanks to Adam Leite for a helpful discussion of the questions at issue in this paragraph
 29. My thanks to Adam Leite for a helpful discussion of the questions at issue in this paragraph
 30. The *ceteris paribus* clause is important. As Michelle Mason rightly pointed out, in coming to love someone, we often also come to know that there are certain arenas with regard to which they are particularly unreliable judges.
 31. Different philosophical accounts of love will, of course, explain this desire in different ways.
 32. Some of the things gaslighters characteristically say leverage love in this way, though more subtly. It’s been pointed out to me by a psychoanalyst, for instance, that the remark “it would be the same anywhere else” is very much like the sort of thing batterers say to those they abuse, viz. “no one else would treat you any differently”, or even more directly, “no one else will love you like I do”. In the context of gaslighting, “it would be the same anywhere else” communicates “you don’t deserve any better”, and thereby condemns in the same way that calling someone ‘crazy’ or ‘paranoid’ does.
 33. I have started with “love” partly because the early examples in the title movie, the psychoanalytic literature, as well as many in popular press/discussions, involve romantic partners or close friends. For that reason alone, it’s important to think about the ways in which love can be a tool of manipulative leverage for the gaslighter. But the reader will have undoubtedly noticed that my early examples nearly all involve colleagues, and/or professional contexts. One may well wonder what relevance has love in those kinds of contexts. [Thanks to Liz Harman for pressing me on this question] In this light, there are at least two points worth making. First, it seems to me no coincidence that one of the most frequently discussed contexts for gaslighting is academic life. One might suspect that this is simply the result of the fact that many of those discussing gaslighting, in colloquial and psychological contexts (e.g. blogs) are themselves academics. I

suspect there's more to it than that, and one piece of that puzzle is that unlike some professions or careers, academics are passionate about and devoted to our chosen fields in ways that sometimes strikes outsiders as bizarre. For that reason, among many others, it's a familiar feature of academic life that some of our colleagues are also our friends; sometimes dear friends. Second, then, familiar phenomena of transference come into play in academic settings to an extent that they don't in some other professional fields. Again, this is I take for a variety of reasons including the fact that academics are typically passionately involved in our careers, and have extended daily contact with professional others (whom we work for, with, or stand in professional relations of authority such as professor-to-student)—compare, for instance, the sheer amount of time we spend with our students to the amount of time a medical doctor spends with any given patient. So, students, e.g., fall 'in love' with their professors (in single quotes to indicate that its commonly actually positive-transference at issue) and while it is transference rather than real love, that transference nevertheless brings with it many of the same vulnerabilities that do genuinely loving reciprocal relationships.

34. Cordelia Fine, *Delusions of Gender* (New York: Norton, 2010)
35. It's important to note that resisting gaslighting in the first place requires identifying that that is what is going on (itself no easy task, particularly as the gaslighting voices will insist that's not the case), and that we're not talking about gaslighting as something the target voluntarily undertakes. One doesn't decide to go along with gaslighting; one finds oneself gaslighted. My thanks to Michelle Mason for highlighting this point, and noting the importance of clarifying it here.
36. In this context, 'managing' means something in the territory of what Strawson had in mind in when he spoke of the standpoint from which we regard another as an "object for treatment and management". That is women can come, as part of their job requirements, to need to regard themselves and their own emotions as an object of treatment and management.
37. A few telling quotes from *The Managed Heart*: "In the case of the flight attendant, . . . "[Passengers are] quick to detect strained or forced smiles, and they come aboard wanting to enjoy the flight." (Kindle Locations 154–156).; "For the flight attendant, the smiles are a part of her work, a part that requires her to coordinate self and feeling so that the work seems to be effortless. To show that the enjoyment takes effort is to do the job poorly. Similarly, part of the job is to disguise fatigue and irritation, for otherwise the labor would show in an unseemly way, and the product—passenger contentment—would be damaged. Because it is easier to disguise fatigue and irritation if they can be banished altogether, at least for brief periods, this feat calls for emotional labor." (Kindle Locations 179–182).; "But most of us have jobs that require some handling of other people's feelings and our own, and in this sense we are all partly flight attendants. The secretary who creates a cheerful office that announces her company as "friendly and dependable" and her boss as "up-and-coming" the waitress or waiter who creates an "atmosphere of pleasant dining" . . . —all of them must confront in some way or another the requirements of emotional labor." (Kindle Location 225).
38. A number of experiments in the territory of conformity effects support this hypothesis, perhaps most notably: Asch, S. E. (1956). Studies of independence

and conformity: A minority of one against a unanimous majority. *Psychological Monographs*, 70. My thanks to Kirk Ludwig for bringing this to my attention. He also pointed out to me, aptly, that follow up experiments indicate that even one dissenter has the effect of reducing the pleasure of conformity significantly [Morris, W., & Miller, R. (1975). The effects of consensus-breaking and consensus-pre-empting partners of reduction in conformity. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 11, 215–223] One lesson from this, the lesson Kirk Ludwig drew, is that as a matter of practical advice, if you see gaslighting: protest. Another, however, darker lesson might be drawn—given that the pleasure of conformity is significantly reduced by even so much as one dissenter, it is for that reason alone unsurprising that those particularly invested in one sort of conformity or another should try so hard (up to the point of gaslighting) to make sure the dissenting voice ‘goes away’—in the case of gaslighting, making sure it ‘goes away’ by trying to ensure it no longer qualifies as a genuine dissent, but merely a crazy, paranoid rant.

39. A person might, of course, find herself in the radically undermined position that the targets of successful gaslighting find themselves in, as a result of processes that are not gaslighting: e.g. people suffer from severe depression for all sorts of reasons. Similarly, it’s been pointed out to me that those who engage with Socrates’ often end up sounding awfully close to De Beauvoir’s “I am uncertain . . . whether I think at all”. And elenchus is not gaslighting. On the other hand, the difference between the ways Socrates engages with his interlocutors, and the ways gaslighters interact with their targets seems to me clear enough. Socrates doesn’t call his interlocutors crazy, or paranoid; when pressed for reasons, he gives them rather than re-entrench with further dismissive accusations, and one would really have to push against the text to make a case that Socrates is engaging in emotional manipulation. By the same token, all of these are also indications that Socrates—unlike the gaslighter—*can* tolerate disagreement. My thanks to Gary Ebbs for a very helpful discussion of these points.
40. I offer a parallel example about the moral salience of expressions of grief in my 2012 “Affective Conflict and Virtue: Hume’s answer to Aristotle” ed. Miller, *The Reception of Aristotle’s Ethics*, and discuss the possibility of depression as a term belonging to a mode of evaluation rather than (as it is often treated) as something on the order of a ‘natural kind’ in further detail in my “Character as a mode of evaluation” (to appear in the 2015–16 edition of *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*).
41. I’m aware of ways in which the line I am adopting here touches on the recent controversial changes in the DSM V. Those debates are too complex to permit full discussion of them in this context. Two points, however, strike me as worth making here. First, much of the movement against the inclusion of “bereavement” as a possible (form of) depression objects that this “pathologizes” grief. But notice that “pathologize”, as the objectors are using it, carries with it exactly the connotation to which I’m objecting above—namely, that a condition that it would be helpful getting therapeutic aid in working through is also (for that reason?) not a fitting response to one’s situation. Second, some who object to the inclusion of bereavement as a possible form of depression have done so on grounds that grief often doesn’t involve characteristics of major depression such

as profound feelings of guilt and worthlessness. Yet the latter feelings of guilt and worthlessness (or something close) are, we might expect, part of what a target of successful gaslighting will have to work through—and a natural expression of her *grief*—given what she has lost and her own largely blameless complicity in the process.

42. My thanks to Susanne Bobzien, Steve Darwall, Gary Ebbs, Michael Della-Rocca, Julie Jorati, Adam Leite, Cathay Liu, Kirk Ludwig, Michelle Mason, David Sussman, the Yale Philosophy Department and members of the MAP colloquium series, the graduate students in my “Philosophical Feminism” seminar, and the brave and herein anonymous women who generously told me their own stories for use in this philosophical exploration of gaslighting.

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