

Gaslighting and Epistemic Agency

Phyllis Pearson, December 16th, 2024

1. What is gaslighting?

Central Case: “Gregory seeks to rob Paula of her aunt’s jewels, which are hidden in her attic. He routinely searches the attic, at which times the sound of his footsteps and the dimming of the house’s gaslights are clearly perceptible to Paula. But when Paula discusses her observations with Gregory, he insists that she is merely imagining the footsteps and dimmings. Distressed, Paula begins to fear that she is losing her sanity.”¹

Diversity Panel: “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.’”²

Philosophy Grad School: “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.”³

Junior Academic: “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 nondiscrimination 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.”⁴

2. Three Families of Theories:

Intentionalist accounts hold that gaslighting necessarily involves particular intentions.

Kate Abramson (2014):

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

¹ *Gaslight 1944*, described in: Kirk-Giannini, C. (2023). Dilemmatic Gaslighting. *Philosophical Studies*, 180, p.746

² Abramson, K. (2014). Turning up the Lights on Gaslighting. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 28, p. 4

³ *Ibid.*, p.5

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.4

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.⁵

Social Identity Accounts hold that gaslighting is constitutively connected to identity-based oppression.

Veronica Ivy (2017):

Gaslighting constitutes a failure to afford the first person (epistemic) authority of disadvantaged speakers [its] appropriate epistemic weight.⁶

Bare Epistemic Accounts hold that gaslighting has a distinctive epistemic structure.

Cameron Kirk-Giannini's *Dilemmatic Gaslighting*:

A gaslights B iff:

1. A intentionally communicates p to B,
2. B knows (and A is in a position to know) that if p is true, then B has good reason to believe that she lacks basic epistemic competence in some domain D
3. A does not correctly and with knowledge-level doxastic justification believe p, and A does not correctly and with knowledge-level doxastic justification believe that B lacks basic epistemic competence in D, and
4. B assigns significant weight to A's testimony⁷

Critical points:

- Both Intentionalist accounts and Social Identity Accounts are too restrictive.
- Bare Epistemic Accounts are promising, but *Dilemmatic Gaslighting* isolates the wrong epistemic structure as undergirding the phenomenon of gaslighting.

3. My view

A gaslights B iff A unjustly compromises B's ability to set epistemic contexts.

Details:

- The ability to set epistemic contexts is key to our epistemic agency
- When an interlocutor introduces difficult-to-rule-out possibilities, they compromise this ability
- When this is done unjustly, it amounts to gaslighting

4. Upshots

- Gaslighting is a weaponization of skepticism, rather than a weaponization of trust
- Gaslighting fundamentally compromises an ability that is central to our epistemic agency
- Seeing this enables us to get correctly characterize the distinctive harm of gaslighting
- Seeing this also enables us to see the political dimensions of skepticism, and the way in which gaslighting can take place through argument and debate

⁵ Ibid., p.10

⁶ Ivy, V. [McKinnon, R.] (2017). Allies behaving badly: Gaslighting as epistemic injustice. p. 170

⁷ Kirk-Giannini, C. (2023). Dilemmatic Gaslighting. *Philosophical Studies*, 180, p. 757.

Mr. Manningham This fire's in ashes. Ring the bell, will you, Bella dear, please?

Mrs. Manningham Yes ... *(She moves towards the bell, but stops)* Is it merely to put coal on, my dear? I can do that.

Mr. Manningham Now then, Bella. We've had this out before. Be so good as to ring the bell.

Mrs. Manningham But, dear — Lizzie's out in the street. Let me do it. I can do it so easily. *(She moves over to the fireplace)*

Mr. Manningham *(stopping her with an outstretched hand)* No, no, no, no, no ... Where's the girl? Let the girl come up if Lizzie's out.

Mrs. Manningham But, my dear

Mr. Manningham Go and ring the bell, please, Bella — there's a good child.

Mrs. Manningham gives in, and rings the bell

What do you suppose the servants are for, Bella?

Mrs. Manningham does not answer. There is a pause

Go on. Answer me. What do you suppose servants are for?

Mrs. Manningham *(shamefacedly, and scarcely audibly, merely dutifully feeding him)* To serve us, I suppose, Jack

...
Mr. Manningham Precisely. Then why --- --- ?

Mrs. Manningham But I think we should consider them a little, that's all.

Mr. Manningham Consider them? There's your extraordinary confusion of the mind again. You speak as though they work for no consideration. I happen to consider Elizabeth to the tune of sixteen pounds per annum. And the girl ten. Twenty-six pounds a year all told. And if that is not consideration of the most acute and lively kind, I should like to know what is.

Mrs. Manningham Yes, Jack. I expect you are right.

Mr. Manningham I have no doubt of it, my dear. It's sheer weakmindedness to think otherwise.

(...)

There is a knock at the door. Mrs. Manningham hesitates. There is another knock

Come in.

Nancy, the maid, enters. She is a self-conscious, pretty, cheeky girl of nineteen. Mrs. Manningham hesitates to tell Nancy why she rang the bell. Nancy looks at the Mannings.

Nancy Oh, I beg your pardon. I thought the bell rang ...

Mr. Manningham Yes, we rang the bell, Nancy... {Pause} Go on, my dear, tell her why we rang the bell.

Mrs. Manningham Oh ... Yes... We want some coal on the fire, Nancy, please.

Nancy looks impudently at Mrs. Manningham, and then, with a little smile and toss of the head, goes over and puts coal on the fire.⁸

⁸ Hamilton, P. (1939/1942, pp. 5-7)