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Introduction to Our Topic

That's crazy.

Don't be so sensitive.

That's all in you.

It doesn't mean anything

That never happened.

It didn't happen like that.

There's no pattern.

Don't you dare suggest that!

You're so suspicious.

You're imagining things.

Don't be paranoid.

I was just joking!

I didn't say that!

I didn't mean that!

You're overreacting.

Don't get so worked up.

If you're going to be like this, I can't talk to you.

It wouldn't be any different anywhere else.

You're just acting out.

I'm worried; I think you're not well.¹

1. A version of this list first appeared in my 2014 article. I make use of portions of this article throughout.

Things gaslighters say. More or less subtle, more or less direct, all recognizable even if only after the fact. The term “gaslighting” comes from the movie *Gaslight* (1944), in which Gregory tries to make his spouse Paula lose her mind by manipulating her, her friends, and her physical environment.² Gregory seeks 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. At one point, for instance, he takes a brooch he’s claimed to be a prized heirloom out of Paula’s purse to make her question her memory of having put it there and nurse the seeds of her self-doubt. He places his own watch in her purse when she’s not looking, accuses her of stealing it, and then “discovers” it while she is in the company of friends whom—unbeknownst to Paula—he has warned that Paula is unstable. This last incident not only upsets Paula but is constructed by Gregory to be public and so provide her friends with apparent “evidence” that she is losing her mind. It also thereby contributes to Paula’s increasing 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 asks him why the gaslights have dimmed. And every time Gregory denies that any such thing has happened, insists

2. There’s a reason I refer to this character as Gregory rather than his true name, Sergis: to understand what happened to Paula, we have to imaginatively enter into the perspective from which she was vulnerable to his manipulations. From that perspective, he was Gregory, her beloved husband.

Paula is imagining things, and suggests that this too is a sign of her growing mental illness. All the while Gregory is full of expressions of purported concern, including “Why don’t you rest a while?,” “Do you really want to go out?,” and “You know you haven’t been well.”

In the 1980s “gaslighting” became a term of art in therapeutic practice and thereafter gradually made its way into selective colloquial usage.³ From 2012 to 2014, as I presented the material that would become my first article on the subject, only a small minority of academic audiences were already familiar with the term. That’s not surprising—it was used only occasionally in the popular press, there was virtually no academic discussion of gaslighting, and the philosophical literature contained only a couple of glancing mentions of the concept. Still, every audience member immediately recognized the phenomenon when I described it.

Since then the term “gaslighting” has entered the colloquial lexicon. It appears regularly in the pages of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, as a topic of discussion on CNN, on countless blogs, and across social media. There are so many memes about gaslighting that entire subgenres have developed. The Chicks (formerly Dixie Chicks) have an album titled *Gaslighter*. Its usage crosses virtually every political line. And there’s been a commensurate surge in academic theorizing about gaslighting.

When a term gains popular traction on this scale, the scope of phenomena referred to under its rubric inevitably shifts.

3. Gaslighting was first mentioned in the psychological literature in Barton and Whitehead (1969) and first discussed in Calef and Weinshel (1981).

“Gaslighting,” accordingly, refers sometimes to a quite wide array of ways in which one person might relate to another, while at other times to a fairly narrow band of interpersonal interactions. One might treat these differences as merely verbal disputes. But we shouldn’t. For one, expanding the term to cover all the varied phenomena sometimes now referred to as “gaslighting” runs the real risk of what’s come to be called “semantic bleaching” or “concept creep,” where a once powerful concept becomes little more than a tag of disapproval attached to otherwise disparate phenomena. In philosophical terms, it’s making a thin ethical concept out of what used to be a thick one.

But there’s an even more important reason to resist dramatic expansion of the class of phenomena referred to as “gaslighting.” There is a real, immediately recognizable interpersonal phenomenon picked out by the term “gaslighting,” and if we expand the territory covered by the term too much, we will lose sight of and lose our ability to name *that* phenomenon. Gaslighting in this sense—the sense so aptly captured by the movie—is different from lying, dismissing or ignoring someone. It’s very different from familiar forms of manipulation like guilt-tripping and from familiar ways of making someone feel badly about themselves like shaming. It’s different from not treating them as a credible source of information, and different from not taking them seriously in some other way. It is even different from “brainwashing” someone in the manner of a cult leader manipulating his followers into believing some outrageous falsehood. No such description of other forms of familiar ways of acting badly aptly characterizes what Gregory was up to in his interactions

with Paula. When we want a quick one-line summary, we say that Gregory was trying to drive Paula crazy. A substantial portion of this monograph is devoted to spelling out, in detail, exactly what we are trying to capture about the phenomenon when we say that.

Notably, this close examination is premised on the thought that gaslighting is best understood as a form of *interpersonal interaction* rather than as a feature of social structures. To put it a bit starkly, people gaslight, social structures don't. That doesn't mean that there are no important links between social structures and gaslighting. Certain pernicious social structures—such as those involved in systematic racism and sexism—can play specifiable and significant roles in gaslighting. In fact, once we see just what those roles are, we will also be able to understand why some have found it so tempting to (mistakenly) think that it's the social structures themselves that, as it were, “do the gaslighting.”

A crucial reason to get as clear as we can about all of this is that in being a distinctive interpersonal phenomenon, gaslighting is also a distinctive *moral* phenomenon. In fact, as we'll see, these two dimensions of gaslighting are inextricably linked. We can to some extent mark out what distinguishes gaslighting as an interpersonal phenomenon without making any specifically moral claims. But insofar as we wish to distinguish gaslighting from other nearby experiences—like conning someone or infantilizing her—we will inevitably in part be making a moral case, arguing that there are moral reasons to distinguish gaslighting from these other morally problematic ways of interacting with someone. Moreover, because gaslighting is a distinctive moral phenomenon, if we want to understand gaslighting, we

need to find as precise and illuminating ways as we can to talk about what's wrong—horribly wrong, immoral, unethical, vicious—in interacting with someone *this* way. We can thereby gain not only a more complete and appropriately complicated picture of gaslighting but also a better understanding of the relationship in which gaslighting stands to other nearby moral phenomenon, like treating someone dismissively, lying to her, and “brainwashing” her.

One final dimension of gaslighting—both as a distinctive interpersonal phenomenon and as a distinct moral phenomenon—deserves separate treatment, namely, the relationship between trust and gaslighting. Although matters of *trust* are frequently mentioned in discussions of gaslighting, there's a whole nexus of questions about trust and its relationship to gaslighting that the literature has not addressed. For instance, *of course* it's true that gaslighters exploit their targets' trust. But exploit in what way(s)? Is it just like (or mostly like) the way in which a successful liar exploits her target's trust? I argue that it is not. Is trust used against the targets of gaslighting in just the way that gaslighters make pernicious use of their target's empathetic abilities, or their own positions of authority, or some other common tool of gaslighters? I argue that it is not. Rather, gaslighters exploit their targets' trust in ways that specifically take aim at the normative structure of trust. Similarly, it's obvious that gaslighting violates the target's trust. I argue however that the way that trust is thereby violated is importantly different from the ways in which other aspects of the interpersonal relationship are violated in gaslighting. Moreover, by thinking closely and carefully about how exactly trust is manipulated and fractured

in gaslighting, we can also deepen our understanding of trust and its structure.

The organization of the monograph largely follows the narrative just outlined. In chapter 1 I propose an initial characterization of gaslighting and defend its key elements against the outlines of some alternatives that have recently emerged. This is followed, in chapter 2, by a general analysis of some of the typical contexts in which gaslighting occurs along with a series of examples. The purpose of this chapter is to provide material from everyday life on the basis of which we can pursue the more refined analysis of the phenomenon of gaslighting that follows in subsequent chapters. Chapter 3 takes a close look at the characteristic aims of the gaslighter, and chapter 4 examines the paradigmatic methods, means, and tools of gaslighting. In chapter 5 I argue against the recent expansion of the concept to include what's now called "structural gaslighting." Instead, I argue, if we reserve the term "gaslighting" for the kind of interpersonal cases identified in chapters 1 to 4, the *analogies and disanalogies* between gaslighting and other politically significant phenomena become mutually illuminating. In chapter 6 I turn my attention directly to examining gaslighting as a moral phenomenon. The central aims of this chapter are to explicate each of the many dimensions of the immorality of gaslighting, argue that none is reducible to any of the others, and make a case thereby that part of what makes gaslighting so awful is the multidimensional nature of its immorality. Finally, in chapter 7 I examine the various roles that trust plays in gaslighting. I argue that we can be much more specific than any existing account has been about the ways in which gaslighters use trust

as a weapon, violate their target's trust, and damage their target's ability to trust. This will also allow us to bring into view significant features of interpersonal trust that have been overlooked in the philosophical literature.

My central goal is to offer an account of gaslighting that fits with, and allows us to make sense of, the phenomenon as we find it in everyday life. Doing so can illuminate a dark corner—both in the sense of not otherwise seen and in the sense of morally dark—of everyday life.

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