

Are you gaslighting me? The role of affective habits in epistemic friction

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Abstract

One of the most insidious consequences of continuous exposure to gaslighting is that agents develop an expectation of further emotional manipulation. Repeated exposure to demeaning and humiliating behavior can make agents prone to interpret any epistemic challenge as a potential instance of gaslighting. Embedded in physiological and affective habits, this expectation become an integral way of interpreting social interactions and other people's intentions. The concept of gaslighting was originally coined to alleviate a form of hermeneutic injustice, but some applications of the concept paradoxically come to perpetuate exactly this kind of injustice. When agents perceive gaslighting in epistemically ambiguous situations, they foreclose the possibility of benefiting from productive forms of epistemic frictions.

0. Intro¹

In recent decades feminist philosophers have defined gaslighting as a form of emotional manipulation that aims to shatter someone's sense of epistemic authority and moral standing (Abramson 2014).² One popular idea in this tradition is that certain concepts may help us to overcome what Miranda Fricker has called hermeneutic injustice. Marginalized groups experience hermeneutic injustice "when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences" (Fricker 2007, 1).³ If individuals are conceptually equipped to identify an epistemic practice as gaslighting, they may not be completely immune to its harmful effects, but they will at least be able to name the practice as unjust.

However, as I explore in this chapter, one of the most insidious consequences of continuous exposure to gaslighting is that agents can develop a habit of expecting gaslighting in other situations where their testimony is disputed. Being repeatedly exposed to demeaning and humiliating behavior can make agents prone to interpret any form of epistemic challenge as a potential instance of gaslighting. This expectation becomes an intuitive way of interpreting social interactions and other people's intentional states and emotions. Paradoxically then, when agents come to overapply, or misapply the concept of gaslighting, this interpretive mistake may exacerbate their own hermeneutic marginalization and isolation, and prevent them from benefiting from productive

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² Since Kate Abramson's influential article "Turning up the Lights on Gaslighting", came out in 2014, several philosophical papers on gaslighting have appeared. See for example Spear 2019; Stark 2019; Berenstain 2020; Sodoma 2022. We will evaluate this broad definition and its potential drawbacks in the course of the discussion.

³ For Fricker's full account of hermeneutic injustice, see Fricker 2007, chap. 7.

epistemic challenges and critiques. This habit can, in short, revert and aggravate hermeneutic injustice because it hinders an agent's possibilities of making sense of their social experience.

Before I explore this paradox, and how it unfolds in specific cases, I sketch out the brief, but influential, conceptual history of gaslighting and identify two salient forms. Originally gaslighting was used to refer to a form of *deception*, but in recent years the concept has morphed into including any kind of *deflation* or dismissal of an agent's testimony, especially testimonies of racism and sexism. I then explain in more detail how our environments come to shape our physiological and affective responses to specific situations and people (section 3) and the hermeneutic equipment that we have available to understand interactions with other people, and our own emotional responses to them (section 4). Through this analysis, we come to understand how some agents develop a habit of expecting gaslighting in situations where they are being epistemically challenged. In section 5, we consider reasons to refrain from applying the concept of gaslighting to epistemically ambiguous situations.

1. What is gaslighting?

The term gaslighting originates from a 1938 British theater play by Patrick Hamilton. It was later adapted to a British film and then into a Hollywood production featuring Ingrid Bergman (1944). The main plot in the play and its adaptations revolves around a husband who manipulates his wife Paula, driving her to madness as part of a broader criminal scheme. While attending a public performance, he places his watch in her purse to insinuate that she has stolen it. Similar ploys are repeated to establish his wife's doubts about her own sanity. In one such scheme, Paula is led to believe that her husband is out in the city, but he is directly above her bedroom, looking for jewels in the attic of the house. When he turns on the lights in the attic, the gaslights in his wife's bedroom

dim and she hears (his) scrambling upstairs. Paula informs the maid and her husband about these strange happenings, but they dismiss her experiences and express worry for her mental health. Paula concludes that she must be hearing voices—another episode following previous mental breakdowns that caused her to be hospitalized. The threat of sending Paula back to the asylum is repeatedly invoked to keep her confined to the bedroom.

In this original use of the term “gaslighting”, the gaslighter’s intention is explicit and clear. Especially in the first televised version of the British play, the husband is a flat character with transparently malicious intentions. There is no opaqueness, no doubt about his motives. He represents a clear case of *deception gaslighting*. In the 1970s and 80s, psychologists took up this understanding of gaslighting in therapeutic practices, especially as a tool for understanding social control and psychic violence. More recently, however, gaslighting has been expanded to include examples where the intentions of the gaslighter are not as clear. The concept gained such prominence that, in 2022, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary announced “gaslighting” as word of the year.⁴ Importantly for our purposes, gaslighting has also come to describe situations where women, people of color, and other marginalized groups are met with disbelief while calling attention to instances of sexism, racism, discrimination, etc. Here is a paradigmatic example of what I will refer to as *deflation gaslighting*:

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” (Abramson 2014, 4).

⁴ The word “gaslighting” had been looked up 1,740% more in 2022 than 2021 (Press 2022). A quick search on Google Trends reveals a similar trend. Searches for the word have more than tripled in the last three years, reaching the highest point in March 2022.

In cases such as this, the act of gaslighting is no longer restricted to malignant scheming such as we found in the theater play that gave birth to the term. Deflation gaslighting does not necessarily deny the occurrence of some event. Rather, it seeks to devalue its significance and an agent's interpretation of it. This kind of gaslighting primarily serves to undermine a person's *testimony* ("That's all in you"; "It doesn't mean anything"; "It wouldn't be any different anywhere else")⁵ and their emotional response ("You're just acting out"; "You're overreacting"; "Don't get so worked up"). Certain instances may also combine both forms of gaslighting—deflation and deception—with direct reference to a person's mental health ("You're crazy"; "Don't be paranoid"; "You're imagining things") and include outright denial of the person's experience ("That never happened"; "There's no pattern"; "I was just joking!").

Central to both forms of gaslighting is that an interlocutor is behaving dismissively and exposing the target to a toxic form of doubt that does not aim to further dialogue, inquiry, or exploration of the issue at hand.⁶ The result of repeated exposure to both deception and deflation gaslighting can be self-doubt. Agents stop thinking of themselves as reliable epistemic authorities. In philosopher Kate Abramson's words, the "the moral horror of gaslighting is that it makes one complicit in one's own destruction" (Abramson 2014, 17). Targets of continued, pervasive gaslighting stop taking themselves (and their own emotional reactions) seriously and lose their sense of moral standing and status as full members of an epistemic community.

In this chapter, I follow in Abramson's footsteps to further detail the destructive consequences of gaslighting, and how these may include a new habit of expecting gaslighting in other situations where the agent is challenged epistemically. But I part ways with Abramson in one important

⁵ This paragraph quotes from Kate Abramson's list of illustrative examples which she collected herself, and through the blog "What is it like to be a woman in philosophy?" and other sources (Abramson 2014, 24).

⁶ See also Berenstain on structural gaslighting (Berenstain 2020).

regard which I will spend some time detailing. In her now classic paper, “Turning up the Lights on Gaslighting”, Abramson interprets an encounter between Simone de Beauvoir and Jean Paul Sartre as an instance of gaslighting. At this time, the two are young students at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris:

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 (Beauvoir 2005, 559, emphasis added).

In her list of illustrative examples of gaslighting, Abramson places this example first. The following six examples, including that of the junior academic woman harassed by senior colleagues that appears above, serve as clear instances of deflation gaslighting, where testimonies of sexual harassment are being disbelieved, disputed, undermined, or ridiculed. By placing Beauvoir’s experience first, Abramson seems to suggest that this encounter, too, serves as a paradigmatic example of gaslighting. Abramson is not alone to make such an interpretation. Miranda Fricker interprets the same episode as an example of what she calls testimonial injustice, “a wrongful

epistemic humiliation of considerable personal and professional consequence” (Fricker 2007, 50–51). There are, however, several reasons why we should hesitate to draw such conclusions.

My errand here is not to exculpate Sartre of sexism or degrading treatment of Beauvoir,⁷ nor to cast doubt on Beauvoir’s own impression of her arguments “being ripped to shreds” and her feeling of being intellectually beaten. There is, however, an important difference between being engaged in a heated exchange of ideas, no matter how unproductive it may be, and being manipulated or belittled when trying to muster support for one’s experience of harassment or discrimination.

Towards the end of her paper, just before Abramson describes “severe, major clinical depression” as the final stage of gaslighting, Abramson returns to Beauvoir’s recollection of the episode and her feelings of intellectual defeat in the moments after: “I’m no longer sure... even if I think at all”. In Abramson’s analysis, Beauvoir “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” (Abramson 2014, 24). There are without doubt episodes of gaslighting that lead to severe depression, but this is not one of them. Abramson’s analysis of this quote leaves out a key perspective, namely Beauvoir’s own understanding.

In Beauvoir’s recounting of the episode as an adult, this was the moment she decided to become a writer and not to pursue a career in philosophy. She explicitly writes that the incident did not make her feel slighted or hurt.

I preferred learning to showing-off. But all the same, after so many years of arrogant solitude, it was something serious to discover that I wasn’t the One and Only, but one among many, by no means first, and suddenly uncertain of my true capacity (Beauvoir 2005, 560).

⁷ See Michele Le Doueff’s discussion of this (Le Dœuff 2006, 134ff).

With Sartre, she later notes, she felt that she had for the first time in her academic life met a discussion partner who she could count as her intellectual “doppelgänger”—someone who understood her ideas and with whom she would “always be able to share everything” (Beauvoir 2005, 561). Nevertheless, Beauvoir shows disdain for the aggressive format of Sartre’s discussion style (“I preferred learning to showing-off”), and she emerges from the conversation with a new form of epistemic humility that she prefers to her previous “arrogant solitude.” The encounter with Sartre, far from an intellectual collapse, becomes a defining moment:

...the future suddenly seemed as if it would be much more difficult than I had reckoned but it had also become more real and more certain; instead of undefined possibilities I saw opening out before me a clearly-marked field of activity, with all its problems, its hard work, its materials, its instruments, and its inflexibility (Beauvoir 2005, 560–61).

Beauvoir was able to make productive use of the epistemic dislocation the conversation left her in.⁸ Abramson, however, interpret the Sartre episode is a paradigmatic example of gaslighting and proceeds to link her condition with severe depression. In her analysis, Fricker allows that Beauvoir herself would probably disagree but insists that we can “read between the lines” to see a clear case of testimonial injustice (Fricker 2007, 50). The tone in these interpretations is almost patronizing—there is something Abramson and Fricker know about Beauvoir’s situation that she does not want to acknowledge or cannot recognize.

⁸ See also Kate Kirkpatrick’s reading of this episode (Kirkpatrick 2019, chap. 4) and similar intellectual exchanges Beauvoir had with other *normaliens* at the time: “She got home feeling crushed. It was so interesting! She wrote—but it was also revelation: ‘I’m no longer sure what I think’” (Kirkpatrick 2019, 95).

Would it have benefited Beauvoir to interpret Sartre as engaged in gaslighting? And does such a charge further the pursuit of hermeneutic justice? I do not think this is the case. To begin with, we should take Beauvoir's own understanding of the episode seriously. If she had merely rejected Sartre's epistemic challenges as gaslighting, Beauvoir would not have been able to benefit from the epistemic disorientation that the conversation caused in her.⁹ In this sense, (mis)applying the concept of gaslighting to the situation would have done her a disservice, blocking access to epistemic insights and exacerbating her hermeneutical marginalization.

My primary interest here is not to provide a rebuttal of Abramson and Fricker's analysis. Rather, I wish to further detail what Abramson calls the "moral horror of gaslighting", namely that exposure to gaslighting makes agents complicit in their own destruction (Abramson 2014, 17). Why do Abramson, Fricker and others, myself included, come to overuse the interpretative lens of gaslighting?

2. Physiological and affective habits

Until now I have contended that continued exposure to gaslighting may result in the formation of a habit to expect gaslighting in future interactions, and that such a habit may aggravate an agent's hermeneutic marginalization. But how can we establish that the formation of such a habit is not just mere coincidence, or the product of individual variation, but the result of exposure to systematic group prejudice? To address this question, I first focus on the physiological and affective aspects of this question and explain how past experiences and our social environment come to shape our emotional responses.

⁹ Another possibility is that Beauvoir benefits epistemically from the situation though it is a form of gaslighting. In other words, Beauvoir's productive interpretation of the episode does not hinge on the question of whether or not gaslighting took place (which remains an open question). Nonetheless, the example still illustrates the larger issue I am concerned with in this chapter. Thanks to Alex Madva and Jacob Smith for the discussion on this point.

An emerging consensus across a broad range of disciplines highlights two core features of emotions and affective states: they must be understood as contextually situated and embedded in our physiology. From this perspective, feelings and affect are more than individual, private experiences; they are to a large degree shaped by the social, political, and moral values of our environment.¹⁰ Moreover, the way we experience, perceive, and interact with other people and the world around us is filtered through our feelings and affective states (Sullivan 2015; Colombetti 2017; Barrett 2017; Goldie 2009). In the words of philosopher Shannon Sullivan:

The knowledge that an organism has—about the world, about itself, about others—has a bodily basis. Human beings ... come to know things through our physiological, affective transactions with the world (Sullivan 2015, 14).

There is no experience of the world that is not rooted in an individual body. Our heart starts pounding when we are about to enter an important meeting, our stomach rumbles when we are hungry, we feel a flush of nausea from a virus. Many, if not most, of the body's most basic functions lie beneath the radar of our consciousness. The circulation of blood, the pounding of the heart, the rhythms of respiration—these and many other bodily functions never turn off, though we are rarely aware of them (Barrett 2017, 56; Posner, Russell, and Peterson 2005).¹¹ They are nonetheless present so throughout our lives, working in the background and shaping our perceptions. Before we consider the epistemic dimensions of how we come to interpret our bodily responses (section 3), we first need to understand (i) how a specific physiological pattern may be formed (i.e. the acquisition process); (ii) why such affective dispositions are often impossible to

¹⁰ For a review of these recent developments in philosophy and experimental psychology, see Munch-Juriscic 2021a; 2020; von Maur 2021; Eickers 2022; Eickers and Prinz 2020.

¹¹ For more on these physiological and affective states that scientists call interoception, see Berntson, Gianaros, and Tsakiris 2018.

control in a given moment; and (iii) why it is hard to change such affective habits once they have been established.

We typically think of bodily reflexes as different from habits.¹² Whereas habits are malleable and acquired, the knee-jerk reflex, for example, is innate. But throughout our social lives, some of these innate capacities, biological reflexes, and functions are shaped by our environment into what Sullivan calls *unconscious physiological habits* (Sullivan 2015, 13). As a result, our emotional experiences are rooted in our physiology. Feelings of fear rely on the startle reflex; feelings of disgust rely on the gag reflex and the distaste response; feelings of empathic concern rely on the innate capacity to feel vicarious distress.¹³ For all of these innate capacities, the specific content of *who* we come to fear, *what* we feel disgust for, and the extent of our empathic concern varies greatly. The rudimentary reflexes we are born with are shaped and formed by the specific social, moral, and cultural codes of our society, as well as our personal experiences (Munch-Juriscic 2022, chap. 4). Similarly, and central to the discussion in this chapter, the anxiety, anticipation, or fear of humiliation relies on a range of basic biological and physiological functions—not only the startle reflex, but also the capacity for an increased heart rate, to clench our teeth and tense our muscles, the capacity to flush, to breathe rapidly.

We do not acquire these affective habits passively; we develop them through everyday engagement with the world. Just as we learn how to bicycle through daily practice until it requires no conscious effort, so our bodies develop unconscious physiological habits that are so fully entrenched that they come to feel natural (Sullivan 2015, 12–13). Learning how to bike requires both (i) an innate bodily capacity for balancing and (ii) the learning of a skill. Without the latter, our

¹² See the chapters 1, 2, and 3 in this book.

¹³ For literature review of this experimental evidence, see Munch-Juriscic 2022, chaps. 1 and 2.

bodily capacity for balancing could not be expressed as bike-riding. More basically, the same can be said if bicycles did not exist or were useless to us in a mountainous setting without paved roads.

This last point may seem obvious and trivial, but it makes clear that even the most simple and straightforward examples of unconscious physiological habits are not purely biological, but also reflect contingent facts of our environment. For more normatively loaded examples of affective dispositions, specific environments and their political and social codes are especially important. Consider, for example, Iris Marion Young's original analysis of how gendered expectations of girls' throwing skills end up shaping and scaffolding how girls make use of their innate, physiological capacities (Young 1980). Since Young made this point in 1980, her insight has been reproduced and restated many times throughout the psychological sciences. How we walk, talk, and conduct ourselves in the world is shaped by the expectations that other people hold for us—expectations that we end up internalizing and making our own (Bolis and Schilbach 2020).¹⁴

To sum up, learned habits intermingle with innate physiological capacities to the point where it is not practically possible to distinguish one from the other. And though these physiological habits are situated within a specific human being, we cannot think of them as purely individual. They are truly *shared* affective dispositions, shaped by expectations of a person as a member of a specific social group (Munch-Juriscic 2020; Puddifoot 2021; von Maur 2022).

Once we have acquired and internalized specific affective and physiological habits, they can be difficult to alter and unlearn. Some ways of behaving or responding come to feel right or wrong. Sufficiently internalized, such feelings appear second nature to us. As Jordan Theriault and his colleagues have argued, it is important to understand the biological underpinnings of the developments of such a “sense of should” without assuming a nativist understanding of morality.

¹⁴ Critical phenomenologists draw similar conclusions. See for example George Yancy's analysis of these processes when it comes to racialization (Yancy 2008).

Moreover, we must not assume that all such feelings of “should” are necessarily in line with our explicit and principled beliefs. Even when we have deliberately and consciously changed our mind about certain behaviors, the embodied feeling that is based on outdated beliefs may remain (Theriault, Young, and Barrett 2020).¹⁵ Such physiological and affective reactions may grant us an unpleasant insight into sides of ourselves that we are ashamed of, or which we would prefer to be without—what Michael Brady calls *emotional failings* (Brady 2013, 152).

For the purposes of our discussion on gaslighting, these recent studies are valuable reminders that the biological underpinnings of affective habits must be taken seriously. One of the most rudimentary motivations of human beings (and any living life form) is to maintain stability in one’s immediate environment, keeping allostatic costs low. In our relations with other people, this motivation is reflected by a general preference for social interactions that are easy to predict and understand. We may not be able to control how other agents will behave, but we can make their behavior more predictable if we conform to their expectations. In short, the social process of conforming to other people’s expectations of us is rooted in a simple, biological motivation to keep our metabolic costs low (Theriault, forthcoming).¹⁶ By extension, the social environment that we encounter—which may be highly demeaning, as in the case of repeated gaslighting—and the expectations that it cultivates are not just a matter of cognition or mental states; these expectations become woven into and intricately enmeshed into our bodily and affective responses

The range of physiological and affective responses associated with the expectation that one is about to be gaslit (increased heartbeat, sweaty hands, reddened neck, chest and face) can be seen as the body’s attempt to fortify a defense system that will prepare the subject for humiliating

¹⁵ Consider, for example, the cases of severe nausea among anti-segregationist white women in the 1950s American South who were unable to share a meal with their Black co-organizers (Yancy 2017, 245; Smith 1978, 148) or the rapidly increasing evidence of implicit biases (Puddifoot and Holroyd 2018; Brownstein, Madva, and Gawronski 2019).

¹⁶ Obviously, the particularity of this process (and what kinds of “shoulds” it motivates) will depend greatly on the specific context, environment, and type of life form.

treatment. In some cases, merely the thought of entering a room or a specific building can trigger such a response. As Ji Young Lee has recently argued, the expectation that one will be submitted to epistemic injustice may generate avoidance behavior, which can be characterized as anticipatory epistemic injustice (Lee 2021). To Luna Dolezal, such patterns of feelings can also be conceptualized as *shame anxiety*, the chronic anticipation of shame or shameful exposure (Dolezal 2022). Such anticipations develop diachronically from a myriad of social encounters that were experienced as gaslighting, but the synchronious upshot is a simple physiological response. Like the thought of biting into a slice of lemon can make our mouth water, so can the mere expectation of being gaslit activate a defense system originating in both bodily and epistemic habits.

3. Epistemic habits

How does this bodily anticipation influence and interact with our epistemic understanding of a situation? Before I lay out the epistemic dimensions of how we come to expect gaslighting, a few meta-reflections are required. Only an analytic distinction exists between (i) ontological questions of what an affective habit is, i.e. the physiological foundation of an emotion experience that we have just considered, and (ii) epistemic questions of how we come to grasp our own and others' emotions. Every emotional experience is necessarily mediated through a set of interpretive tools, though we may not always apply them consciously (Munch-Juriscic 2021a; 2022). As several accounts in both the cognitive and affective sciences have laid out, this kind of epistemic grasping, as a form of orientation, can be both fast and slow.¹⁷ But even slow, deliberate processes of reflection should not be thought of as entirely cognitive or mental phenomena (Buttingsrud 2021).

¹⁷ The experience of our own bodily feelings and our understanding of other people's affective states (facial expressions, bodily gestures, etc.) is always mediated through our hermeneutic equipment, for example in the form of scripts (Eickers 2022), biases, or heuristics (Evans and Stanovich 2013), or through the repertoire of words, concepts

The idea that every experience we have is mediated by our internal hermeneutic resources is foundational in the phenomenological tradition, most notably in Gadamer. From this perspective, the subject's interpretative horizon forms the background of any form of perception and how we make sense of the external world.¹⁸ The core insight is that these conceptual tools (or hermeneutic equipment) are not necessarily accessible to us in a given moment and frequently operate below our explicit awareness.

Past experiences—where we grew up, how we were talked to, how people interacted with us—inform our ability to predict and understand future interactions (Munch-Jurisc 2021b; Bolis and Schilbach 2020; von Maur 2022). But our interpretation of a specific event or situation is not just a matter of coincidence. Expectations become habitual. In specific situations, we come to expect certain forms of behavior. Even at a rudimentary level, then, perception is fundamentally normative because our modes of interpretation are structured in terms of what we believe is most likely to happen in a given environment.

I use the concept of normativity in a very minimalistic sense here. As Sophie Loidolt has pointed out, we should think of normativity in terms of degrees or stages (Loidolt 2018). There is the explicit, critical normativity that we use to argue for a specific point (a way something should be), but there are also implicit forms of normativity, such as the feeling of what we should be doing (normativity that binds us, in Loidolt's words) and more basic forms of *operative normativity*. The primary function of operative normativity is to help us orient ourselves in the world by preparing us for various scenarios that we are likely to encounter.

This rudimentary, operative form of normativity forms the background for our basic ability to understand each other. As advocates of the mind-shaping thesis have argued, the interpretative

and narratives we have available (von Maur 2021; Munch-Jurisc 2021a). This is also the key insight in constructionist views of emotion in the scientific studies of emotions (Barrett 2017; Lindquist et al. 2012).

¹⁸ For an introduction to the perspective of critical phenomenology, see for example Madva 2019.

frameworks and hermeneutic resources that we employ to understand the world have been shaped by our past experiences, encounters, and the concepts, words, and meanings they made available. As Tadeusz Zawidzki puts it, the way our minds bend and adhere to a specific environment begins from birth:

Human infants are born with a bias to interpret and acquire information from people in their immediate environment and this learning in turn shapes how they come to perceive and interact with their environment (Zawidzki 2013, 198ff).

From this perspective, human social cognition is a group accomplishment, “involving simultaneously interpretive and regulative frameworks that function to shape minds, which these frameworks can then be used to easily and usefully interpret” (Zawidzki 2013, xiii). The dynamics of mind-shaping make social coordination and an understanding of other people possible. By constantly adjusting, refining, and regulating our own interpretative frameworks to our environment, we are able to understand other people, and also to produce comprehensible patterns of behavior so others can understand us (McGeer 2007, 149; Haslanger 2020). At the same time, the normative expectations that are embedded in our interpretative frameworks can also lead us to overinterpretations of other people’s intentions and gestures.

4. Are you gaslighting me?

We are now better prepared to explain why individuals may come to overuse the interpretative lens of gaslighting. In hostile epistemic environments where gaslighting is common, agents come to internalize a reasonable expectation that they may be gaslit in situations where they are being

epistemically challenged.¹⁹ Once internalized, this expectation is difficult, if not impossible, to control in the moment. It functions both as a bodily and epistemic habit, which may operate below our conscious radar as a form of fast thinking (like a heuristic, script, or bias).

The habit of expecting gaslighting functions as a survival mechanism in toxic epistemic environments where deception and deflation gaslighting are prevalent. In such environments, the habit can surely be beneficial. We can think of it as a form of *burdened virtue* (Tessman 2005)—a habit that marginalized people develop as a defense strategy to counter and endure malicious attempts at undermining their epistemic and moral standing. In hostile environments, it can be too costly *not* to interpret situations as gaslighting, simply because such an interpretation would be correct most of the time.²⁰

To understand why Simone de Beauvoir reacts so forcefully following her conversation with Sartre (“I’m no longer sure if I can think at all”), it is not enough to analyze the unfolding of this specific event. We need to consider the broader social and political environments that have come to shape Beauvoir’s affective and epistemic habits—the way she has been seen (and not seen), and how such factors affect her interactions. In 1920s France—when women were only beginning to enter elite academic institutions—it is safe to assume that, long before her conversation with Sartre, Beauvoir had been exposed to significant hostility and epistemic humiliations. Insulting stereotypes attached to women’s intellectual abilities persisted long after the doors to the educational institutions formally opened, though Beauvoir would not have conceived of such episodes as “gaslighting”.²¹

¹⁹ I adopt Adam Hosein’s use of the term “reasonable”. Whether or not an expectation of gaslighting is reasonable will depend on the evidence available to the specific agent, i.e. the specific experiences of gaslighting they have had in the past (Hosein 2018, e8).

²⁰ Yancy makes a similar point with regards to over-interpretations of race in the US, and adds that, for people of color, ambiguous situations can prove fatal as a product of white racism (Yancy 2008, 854).

²¹ Consider the arguments made against women in Danish academia from 1850-1900 (Possing 2020, chaps. 2 and 4).

When a young woman like Beauvoir engages in intellectual debate with a male peer in 1920s France, she has good reasons to anticipate what we today call gaslighting. However, a further, normative question is whether such labeling is epistemically beneficial and helpful to her *tout court*, as Abramson and Fricker seem to suggest. As I have argued, I do not believe the charge of gaslighting is merited in this particular encounter between Beauvoir and Sartre. Instead, it serves as an example of how such mislabeling can be counter-productive to the individual and the cause of hermeneutic justice. To clarify my argument, let us consider another example of a similar situation, where we have a bit more access to the mindset of the characters involved.

In 1950s Italy, Eleni, the protagonist in Elena Ferrante's novel, *My Brilliant Friend*, is sitting for her entry-exam to the University of Pisa:

The professor of Italian treated me as if even the sound of my voice irritated him: *You, miss, do not make a logical argument when you write but flit from one thing to another; I see, miss, that you launch recklessly into subjects in which you are completely ignorant of the issues of critical method.* I was depressed, I quickly lost confidence in what I was saying. The professor realized it and, looking at me ironically, asked me to talk about something I had read recently. I suppose he meant something by an Italian writer, but I didn't understand and clung to the first support that seemed to me secure, that is to say the conversation we had had the summer before, on Ischia, on the beach of Citara, about Beckett and about Dan Rooney, who, although he was blind, wanted to become deaf and mute as well. The professor's ironic expression changed slowly to bewilderment. He cut me off me quickly and delivered me to the history professor. He was just as bad. He subjected me to an endless and exhausting list of questions formulated with the utmost precision. I had never felt so ignorant as I did at that moment, not even in the worst years of school, when I had done so badly. I was able to

answer everything, dates, events, but only in an approximate way. As soon as he pressed me with even more exacting questions I gave up. Finally he asked me, disgusted, “Have you ever read something that is not simply the school textbook?”

I said, “I’ve studied the idea of nationhood.”

“Do you remember the name of the author of the book?”

“Federico Chabod.”

“Let’s hear what you understood.”

He listened to me attentively for several minutes, then abruptly dismissed me, leaving me with the certainty that I had said a lot of nonsense.

I cried and cried, as if I had carelessly lost somewhere the most promising part of myself. Then I said that despair was stupid, I had always known that I wasn’t really smart. Lila, yes, she was smart, Nino, yes, he was smart. I was only presumptuous and had been justly punished (Ferrante 2015, 1263–66).

Eleni’s immediate response resembles the damaging consequences of gaslighting: her epistemic agency is shaken, she feels devalued and loses hope for an academic future. She feels that she has “carelessly lost somewhere the most promising part of [herself]”, and even mocks her own despair. She takes the episode as proof that she “wasn’t really smart”, but “only presumptuous”, and the treatment she experienced was a form of “just punishment”. However, to Eleni’s disbelief, she later finds out that she has passed the exam: “I, Elena Greco, the daughter of the porter, at nineteen years old was about to pull myself out of the neighborhood, I was about to leave Naples” (Ferrante 2015, 1266).

Would it have been beneficial for Eleni to apply the concept of gaslighting to her situation? I think not. As evidenced by her admittance to the university (with a full scholarship), it is clear that

the examiners are impressed by her performance. She is being submitted to harsh questioning and critique, but this is after all the premise of an examination. The examiners are not seeking to undermine Eleni, but to explore her knowledge and intellectual capacity.

Like Beauvoir, Eleni is entering a situation where she can reasonably expect that her testimony may be deflated. There is no need to deny that a condescending mix of ageism and misogyny is also present for the questioning and, for Eleni, classism, too. Coming from a poor working-class family, Eleni has only recently come to know what a university is. When her teacher urges her to go on studying and not settle for a working life after her primary education, she expresses her surprise:

“What was there left to study? I didn’t know anything about the order of schools, I didn’t have a clear idea what there was after the middle school diploma. Words like high school, university were for me without substance, like many of the words I came across in novels” (Ferrante 2015, 219).

Entering the examination room, Eleni is therefore only vaguely aware of what to expect. It is the first time she has left her hometown of Naples, and although she has made the decision herself, she discovers that she is “afraid of everything: afraid of taking the wrong train, afraid of having to pee and not knowing where to do it, afraid that it would be night and I wouldn’t be able to orient myself in an unfamiliar city, afraid of being robbed” (Ferrante 2015, 1263). In the hour before the examination, she walks the streets of Pisa “in a state of wary anxiety that coexisted seamlessly with a growing sense of liberation” (Ferrante 2015, 1263).

When she finally sits down at the exam table, her entire nervous system and bodily apparatus is on edge, primarily because she has no idea what to expect. Importantly, her sense of agitation is

at this point a rudimentary affective state, a mood without a clear sense of direction. It fluctuates between excitement, nervousness, and trepidation. Once the examination begins, Eleni makes sense of her own emotions and the situation with the hermeneutic tools that her past experiences have made available. She interprets, for example, the tone and mannerisms of her examiners as hostile and demeaning. During her discussion of a Samuel Beckett play, Eleni understands a professor's (inherently ambivalent) facial expression as evidence that she is making a fool of herself. At the end of the examination, she is left with "the certainty that [she] had said a lot of nonsense" (Ferrante 2015, 1265).

Luckily for Eleni, her interpretations are later repudiated when she receives her exam results. Beauvoir, too, is able to regain her intellectual strength. But in many, perhaps most, cases when marginalized people face such epistemically ambiguous situations, their suspicions—*Were they gaslighting me?*—are never conclusively resolved. The presence of nagging but unconfirmed suspicions may lead the agent worse off, particularly if the primary heuristic to draw on is gaslighting. In such situations, applying the concept of gaslighting may not alleviate hermeneutic injustice but exacerbate it. Individuals may feel discouraged from entering such exam rooms, conversations, meetings or institutions again, and in this way be deprived of access to productive forms of epistemic frictions that would strengthen their academic standing or serve professional advancements (Medina 2013, chap. 1). Both examples in this chapter are set in academic environments, but the problem can be observed in many other domains. Epistemic challenges may occur in clinical encounters between doctors and patients (Houlders, Bortolotti, and Broome 2021) and other interactions where an agent's epistemic agency is challenged, including discussions in activist and feminist communities (Schulman 2016, chap. 1; ContraPoints 2019). In these domains, the habit marginalizes an individual additionally because it deprives them of access to institutions,

organizations, and communities where they would have been able to alleviate their hermeneutic injustice.

To the extent that individuals *are* being gaslit, the concept names an important phenomenon and may, as Fricker hopes, help contest hermeneutic injustice. The risk is that individuals come to rely on this heuristic in cases of epistemic friction where an alternate interpretation would serve them better. Unfortunately, as we have seen, we cannot always choose or control how our nervous system reacts to specific encounter, experiences, and environments, nor decide what hermeneutic tools we apply in a given moment. It should be clear that the responsibility for the development of this habit cannot be ascribed to individuals, but to the social and institutional environments that have prompted such a response in self-defense.

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