

no incompatibility with transitivity here since the counterpart relation that makes it true that Andrew will be each post-fission entity is not identity. See Sider (1996, pp. 438-439).

¹⁴ Perhaps infinitely many. See note 5.

¹⁵ As a four-dimensional object whose has both bent and straight-shaped stages, I am both bent and straight with qualification. But this is no contradiction since I am bent in virtue of one set of bent-shaped stages and straight in virtue of a non-overlapping set of straight-shaped stages.

¹⁶ Thanks to Martin Montminy for his many helpful discussions on this topic.

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Seeing Oneself as a Source of Reasons: Gaslighting, Oppression, and Autonomy

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Introduction

In this paper, I provide a novel account of gaslighting according to which gaslighting involves mistakenly failing to see oneself as a source of reasons with respect to some domain. I argue that this account does a nice job of explaining what's gone wrong in various popular examples of gaslighting, and that it captures what different instances of gaslighting have in common even when they are quite different in other respects. I also show how this account of gaslighting explains a common intuition according to which gaslighting is autonomy-undermining—something other accounts, I argue, have failed to do. And finally, I show that this explanation of why gaslighting is autonomy-undermining also shows that certain forms of oppressive socialization are autonomy-undermining as well, thus providing us with an argument in favor of more substantive theories of autonomy according to which a certain kind of self-respect is necessary for autonomy.

Part I: What is Gaslighting?

To get an idea of what I mean by "gaslighting," consider the following two cases:

Case 1:

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... 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... [etc.] (Abramson, 2014, p. 1, describing the movie "Gaslight")

Case 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." (Abramson, 2014, p. 4)

But while examples are helpful here, it can be difficult to formulate a definition-or something close to a definition-that gets at the heart of what various cases of gaslighting have in common. Kate Abramson, for example, provides us with a rough definition according to which gaslighting is "a form of emotional manipulation in which the gaslighter tries (consciously or not) to induce in someone the sense that her reactions, perceptions, memories and/or beliefs are not just mistaken, but utterly without grounds--paradigmatically, so unfounded as to qualify as crazy" (2014, p. 2). But this definition leaves out various cases that do seem to be cases of gaslighting. For example, we can imagine a version of Case 2 in which the protagonist somehow remains committed to her initial sense that she was deeply wronged until she brings up the incident with a trusted friend who suggests that this kind of thing happens frequently, and that women would be best off just getting used to it. Her friend in this case does not seem to be engaged in manipulation of any kind, and the friend does not seem to be trying--consciously or unconsciously--to undermine the protagonist's sense of what happened or how she should feel about it; instead, the friend is giving her honest take in a (misguided) attempt to be helpful. Still, given the broader context here, the friend does seem to be playing an important role in the gaslighting of the protagonist.

Another definition comes from Veronica Ivy who provides us with an account according to which gaslighting is a form of epistemic injustice. On an account like this one, gaslighting will involve discrediting an individual's testimony on the basis of that person's identity. The idea is that, because of the individual's identity, others take them to be unreliable and disbelieve or doubt their testimony. While this is, no doubt, one important way in which gaslighting often functions, it does not seem as though gaslighting requires that one's identity is relevant, nor does it necessarily involve discrediting testimony. In Case 1, for example, the protagonist's husband does not doubt her at all; he knows she is reliable, but he is causing her to see herself as unreliable as a way to manipulate her. And in Case 2, no one doubts that the protagonist's colleague did indeed slap her butt; instead, they simply do not view the event as morally

significant in the way the protagonist does.

In addition, as Kate Manne has pointed out, gaslighting often involves not just an *epistemic* component but also a *moral* component. To see this distinction more clearly, return to the examples above. In both cases the protagonist comes to doubt herself in some respect, but it is noteworthy that the ways in which they doubt themselves are radically different. In Case 1, the protagonist doubts her rational capacities, her ability to perceive reality, and her ability to think clearly. But in Case 2, there's no doubt that the protagonist really did get her butt slapped by her colleague. Instead, the question is whether this counts as a *wrongdoing*, or as something for which the colleague can legitimately be blamed or penalized. And I would argue, following Manne, that part of how these doubts are raised in Case 2 is by causing the protagonist to doubt her own self-worth. She is encouraged to see her colleague in the best possible light, as a person who is worthy of consideration and sympathy, but she is encouraged *not* to see *herself* as a source of reasons, or as someone her colleague ought to treat as worthy of consideration. So whereas in Case 1 the protagonist fails to see herself as a source of *epistemic* reasons, in Case 2 the protagonist fails to see herself as a source of *moral* reasons. These are profoundly different kinds of failures, but still importantly similar. In addition, as Manne has pointed out, they often work together in instances of gaslighting to cause an individual to doubt their epistemic abilities *and* their moral worth at the same time.

My proposal, then, is that gaslighting involves a person being made to falsely believe that they are not a source of reasons with respect to a particular domain--where this domain can be epistemic, moral, or both. Those who cause them to lose their sense of themselves as reason-giving need not be doing so intentionally or in response to the person's identity (as a woman, say). This means that individuals who are members of a dominant group in a society may be victims of gaslighting, though it may be easier to gaslight oppressed individuals, and they may, in practice, end up being the victims of gaslighting most often. This is because others may tend to distrust members of oppressed groups more, and in addition, oppressed individuals often already have a weaker sense of themselves as reason-giving, so undermining that sense will be easier.

In Case 1 above, the protagonist loses her sense of herself as reason-giving with respect to the domain of memory and perception, as she takes herself to be forgetting past events and to be prone to hallucinations. She does not seem to lose her sense of herself as a source of moral reasons though; the whole motivation for her husband to engage in this particular form of manipulation is that she presumably would not allow him to have

her jewels. She would see him as taking advantage of her, and she would see herself as entitled to what she owns. Thus, he has to find an alternative route to getting what he wants from her. In Case 2, the protagonist loses her sense of herself as a source of moral reasons for others not to treat her in certain ways. She initially believed that her preferences, boundaries, rights, etc. had significant moral status that others had reason to respect, but those around her convinced her that the freedom of her colleague to do as he pleases without penalty or even discomfort morally outweighed these things. As a result, she came to feel as though she morally ought to repress or ignore these things about herself, and that (certain) others had no obligation to appreciate them either. Thus, she no longer saw herself as a source of moral reasons in the relevant context for herself or for others.

Part II: Why is Gaslighting Autonomy-Undermining?

This explanation of what gaslighting essentially is also provides us with a plausible explanation of why victims of gaslighting lack autonomy to some degree. But before getting into my proposed explanation, it's worth looking at an alternative explanation from Paul Benson (1994, 2000). According to Benson, the protagonist in Case 1 lacks autonomy 'because she does not see herself as worthy to act, or as answerable for herself. He argues that in cases of gaslighting, the individual lacks autonomy because they lack "the sense of worthiness to act which is necessary for free agency." This sense of worthiness "involves regarding oneself as being competent to answer for one's conduct in light of normative demands that, from one's point of view, others might appropriately apply to one's actions." (1994, p. 660) If we are made to feel as though we are incapable of effectively identifying and acting in accordance with the norms that govern a particular domain, then we lose our trust in ourselves to make choices; we may become paralyzed or disassociated from our decision-making.

While I think there is much that is right in Benson's account, there is an important oversight—namely, Benson has not accounted for the fact that many victims of gaslighting *do* take themselves to be answerable for their conduct. While they may see themselves as lacking competency with respect to certain domains, they will still often believe that they *ought to be* competent with respect to that domain and that they are blameworthy for their failure. Return again to the cases above. In Case 1, the protagonist sees herself as responsible for apparently stealing her husband's watch. She accepts the blame he places on her, and it is her belief in her moral

failure that contributes to the efficacy of her husband's attempt to gaslight her. Similarly, in Case 2, the protagonist does take herself to be accountable and to be responsible for making the right decision. Her sense of responsibility for herself is part of what makes the gaslighting effective, as she decides not to report her colleague in response to her sense that she has a moral obligation not to. She is made to feel as though she owes her colleague sympathy, instead. Gaslighting often functions by placing unreasonable moral expectations on the victim of gaslighting who comes to believe that they do, indeed, have these obligations and had better ignore their own sense of what they deserve for the sake of fulfilling the supposed obligations.

But while I think Benson has overlooked this very strong sense of accountability that victims of gaslighting often experience, I think he is right to point toward the importance of our sense of ourselves as sources of reasons. My own explanation of why gaslighting undermines autonomy is that we cannot be self-guiding if we do not see ourselves as a source of reasons. When we are not the sources of the reasons that motivate us, then we can only be moved by reasons that come from some external source (e.g. another person, social norms); and when we act for reasons that are not our own without even filtering them through reasons of our own, then we cannot be plausibly thought of as guiding ourselves. We seem to be prime examples of someone who is *heteronomous* rather than autonomous. As Suzy Killmister puts it, "To be self-governing, the agent must be able to acknowledge at least some of the motivational attitudes she experiences as her own and, more importantly, she must be able to accept at least some of them as reason giving" (2015, p. 171). But while the victim of gaslighting does not see herself as a source of reasons for herself or others, she may still see herself as bound by the reasons that others generate. Thus, the view I propose is consistent with the fact that many victims of gaslighting do see themselves as morally responsible for their actions, and it allows for the fact that gaslighting often involves guilt-tripping and an excessive sense of responsibility for others.

Part III: Why Oppressive Socialization is Autonomy-Undermining

Once we have established that gaslighting involves causing someone to mistakenly fail to see themselves as a source of (epistemic or moral) reasons, and once we also accept that this is precisely what makes gaslighting

autonomy-undermining, then we are left with very good reason for believing that oppressive socialization will undermine autonomy in just the same way gaslighting does. This is because oppressive socialization often functions by causing the oppressed to fail to see themselves as a source of reasons-especially moral reasons. This is arguably why gaslighting tends to be so effective with oppressed individuals in particular-namely, they often begin with a truncated sense of what they are worth and what they are entitled to.

Consider, for example, a version of Case 2 in which the protagonist never tells of the incident in the first place because she *already* believes-as a result of oppressive socialization-that her own sense of what she deserves cannot be trusted and that her priority should be to make sure those around her are as comfortable as possible. If she is socialized to tell *herself* all the things her colleagues told her in the original version of the case, then she will not be inclined to bring the case to her supervisor. But the explanation for her eventual acquiescence to her colleague's harassment is importantly similar in both versions of the case-she does not see herself as a source of reasons with respect to this incident, and so she ignores her discomfort and sense of having been wronged and she does not see seeking penalties for her colleague as a legitimate course of action. She is motivated not by her *own* feelings, desires, beliefs, etc., but instead-as a result of coming to believe that these things are either unreliable or irrelevant-she is motivated by the feelings, desires, and beliefs of the relevant parties around her. In crucial ways, it is not *she* who is guiding her actions, as she takes herself to be irrelevant to what she does.

Another example may be useful here in closing. Consider the true story of Jane Mickelson as described in an episode of the *Hidden Brain* podcast called "The Fake Bride" (Vedantam, 2021). Mickelson describes her childhood with her father and stepmother as one in which, due to their emotional fragility and violent reactivity, she was always walking on eggshells. She learned to prioritize their comfort over her own and to avoid confrontation by remaining hyper-vigilant in monitoring which of her behaviors kept the peace. She describes the implicit lesson they taught her as: "Other people's happiness and joy in life is far more important than your own. You're here to take care of them and make sure they're okay and do everything you can not to upset them and to give them happiness."

Years later, in college, she ended up going to visit an acquaintance, Philip, whom she hardly knew. He picked her up from the bus station and

drove her to what he said was a fraternity party. When they arrived, she realized it was a wedding reception, and after a few moments of being there, she realized that it was supposed to be *her* wedding reception. Philip had told his friends and family that they were just married, and the party was for them. Mickelson hardly knew Philip, but her childhood training kicked into gear and she found herself playing along for the sake of not making anyone else uncomfortable. This playing along continued for the weekend, as Philip introduced her to his siblings and even his parents, and had her accompany him to his college graduation as his wife.² Despite Mickelson's profound discomfort, she did not confront Philip. She told herself that it would all be over soon and that it wasn't worth the trouble. In describing the experience, Mickelson says "I became a stranger. I was like a hypnotized person, I wasn't me and yet I was."

It seems to me that Mickelson was not acting autonomously that weekend, but she was not coerced,³ nor was she a victim of gaslighting. Her lack of autonomy is explained by her failure to see herself as a source of moral reasons for herself or others. She felt that her own comfort and sense of control over her self concept and life story were less important than the comfort of a man she hardly knew. She felt obligated to make him and those around him comfortable, and to avoid doing anything that might embarrass him. She felt sympathy for him, and the care she felt she owed to him prevented her from seeing the many things about *her* that should have been factoring into her decision-making. While this is a rather surprising case in many ways, the various components of it are present in many interactions between members of oppressed groups and members of dominant groups, as many oppressed individuals have been made to fail to see themselves as sources of reasons just as Mickelson did. Thus, the very same features that undermine autonomy in cases of gaslighting and in extreme cases like Mickelson's are present in more every-day cases as well-like some cases of wives deferring to their husbands, or some cases of women enduring painful and/or resource-intensive grooming practices-and those features will be autonomy-undermining⁴ wherever they are present.

Notes

¹ Benson's focus is on free agency and responsibility, not autonomy. But approaches to issues like freedom, agency, and responsibility often inform approaches to autonomy and vice versa (though what the relationship between these things is, exactly, is contentious).

² Mickelson did end up telling Philip's family that they were not, in fact, married, though it was very difficult for her to do.

³ This point is somewhat complicated given the ever-present risks women face when dependent on men for transportation, accommodations, etc. But at the very least Philip himself did not explicitly or implicitly threaten her.

⁴ My view is that autonomy comes in degrees, so to say that those features are autonomy-undermining when they are present is not necessarily to say that they eliminate autonomy entirely. A person may take some reason-giving features of themselves to, indeed, be reason-giving, while at the same time failing to appreciate other relevant reason-giving features of themselves.

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Moral Idiots and Blameless Brutes in Aristotle's Ethics

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Abstract: Aristotle maintains that vicious people are blameworthy despite their moral ignorance, since becoming vicious was up to them (*eph'hemin*) and whatever is up to us we are able to do or not do. However, one's upbringing shapes one's moral character. Together, these claims invite an objection I call *the horrible childhood challenge*. According to this objection, vicious adults who suffered horrible childhoods through which they were taught to adopt bad ends as though they were good should not be held accountable for their vice. Aristotle's likely answer to this challenge reveals that, for Aristotle, a minimal degree of rationality is necessary for moral responsibility. I argue that, for Aristotle, a vicious agent is responsible for her vice only if 1) she is rational, which implies 2) she grasps a specific basic principle, thus consenting to become a certain kind of person through action. The thoroughly bad who satisfy both claims are moral idiots; those who do not may be blameless brutes.

According to Aristotle, the vicious are morally responsible for their character.¹ Indeed, Aristotle proclaims, "we do not forgive vice, nor any other blameworthy quality" (*NE/EE2* 1146a2-4). A quality is only blameworthy when the possessor had a hand in bringing it about.³ That is to say, we only blame people for what is voluntary (*NE* 1109b30-34; *EE* 1223a8-16). Aristotle adds that all character states result from deliberative choice (*prohairesis*) (*NE* 1112a2-3 and 1113b3-14), which is often the clearest indication of voluntary behavior (*NE* 1169a1-2; *EE* 1223b26-27 and 1228a13-20; *MM* 1189b5-6).⁴ Regardless of which type of character we develop, our initial acquisition of character is, in a very important sense relevant to moral agency, "up to us" (*eph'hemin*), and whenever a result is up to us, says Aristotle, it was once in our power to realize that result or not (*NE* 1113b6-14; *EE* 1223a4-12 and 1228a9-11).

On the other hand, Aristotle also tells us that the vicious are unconscious of their vice (*NE/EE* 1150b36). Their characters make bad ends appear to be good ones (*NE/EE* 1151a15-19), and so they believe themselves to be justified whenever they act badly (*NE/EE* 1146b24 and 1151a13-14). In other words, they are ignorant of general moral truths (*NE* 1110b27-1111a1). Even if a vicious person were to recognize that what she perceives to be pleasurable, good, and therefore, worth pursuing