

# **(You Drive Me) Crazy**

## **How Gaslighting Undermines Autonomy**

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## Abstract

The term gaslighting, signifying a type of manipulation whereby one person has another doubt their own perception, judgment, and sense of reality has been a household term in psychology since the 1960s. However, it has so far barely been studied by philosophers. In this thesis I investigate how gaslighting undermines autonomy. I argue that it does so through the impairment of a victim's trust in three crucial epistemic capacities: the capacity for perception and memory, the capacity to participate in trustful conversation, and the capacity for self-discovery. By limiting a victim's opportunities to exercise these capacities and participate in valuable epistemic practices, but most of all by instilling self-doubt, the gaslighter alienates the victim from reality, others, and herself. In doing so, gaslighting corrupts the three axes of engagement, marked by attitudes of confidence, trust, and open-mindedness that constitute autonomous agency.

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# 1. Introduction

More and more often, we hear our society being diagnosed as “post-truth”. World leaders tell lies so blatant they hit the “Pants on Fire!” mark on *PolitiFact*’s “Truth-O-Meter” almost weekly, and their voters seem to either have forgotten after a matter of days, or to have stopped caring altogether. Entertainment and shock value appear to dictate the public debate more strongly than the search for truth, let alone the search for consensus. The journalists and scientists whose authority came into question as a consequence of the diminished importance of facts have responded with fact-checkers and various analyses of the problem, ranging from Frankfurtian “bullshit” to the possible end of democracy.<sup>1</sup> Some critics have even gone so far as to accuse powerful actors like the Trump administration and the Kremlin of political “gaslighting”, a type of manipulation whereby one person has another doubt their own judgment, perception, and sense of reality.<sup>2</sup>

While the term gaslighting is as old as the eponymous 1938 play and has been well documented in psychological literature since the 1960s, it has only recently re-entered popular and philosophical vocabulary. Whereas the increased attention is likely due to the copious amount of opinion pieces written during the last US presidential elections, it certainly has not been limited to the political domain. Many blogs and self-help books make mention of gaslighting, warning their readers against the dangers of psychological manipulation in relationships, and helping them identify the signs of such tendencies in their social environment. Though primarily a psychological phenomenon, as a technique undermining a person’s sense of reality and trust in their own judgment, gaslighting has far-reaching ethical and epistemic ramifications. It is therefore striking that there has barely been any systematic philosophical study into the topic. The only exceptions are a 2014 paper by Kate Abramson, who identifies the various moral wrongs of gaslighting, and a book chapter by Rachel McKinnon equating it to a form of epistemic injustice.<sup>3</sup> But neither author has asked the question what the effects of gaslighting are on the agency of its victim, or even mentioned the severe violation of autonomy that is centrally involved. Arguably this is the case because it is so obvious that, as a species of manipulation, gaslighting is detrimental to autonomy. However, there is hardly agreement regarding the question how exactly manipulation undermines autonomy. Moreover, gaslighting’s corruption of the agent’s confidence in her own capacities seems to go over and beyond the wrongs of regular manipulation.

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<sup>1</sup> Lars Kristiansen and Bernd Kaussler, “The Bullshit Doctrine: Fabrications, Lies, and Nonsense in the Age of Trump,” *Informal Logic* 38 (2018): 13–52; Chugrov, Sergei, “Post-Truth: Transformation of Political Reality or Self-Destruction of Liberal Democracy?” *Polis Political Studies* 2 (2017): 42–59.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Frida Ghitis, “Donald Trump Is ‘Gaslighting’ All of Us,” CNN, January 16, 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/01/10/opinions/donald-trump-is-gaslighting-america-ghitis/index.html>; and Adam Caldwell, “How Russia Successfully Gaslighted the West,” *Huffington Post*, December 16, 2016, [https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/adam-caldwell/the-gaslighting-of-the-west\\_b\\_13657466.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/adam-caldwell/the-gaslighting-of-the-west_b_13657466.html).

<sup>3</sup> Kate Abramson, “Turning up the Lights on Gaslighting,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 28 (2014): 1–30; Rachel McKinnon, “Allies Behaving Badly: Gaslighting as Epistemic Injustice,” in *Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, ed. José Medina, Ian James Kidd, and Gaile Pohlhaus (New York: Routledge, 2017), 167–74.

The following is an attempt to fill this lacuna by analyzing gaslighting in terms of the systematic undermining of personal autonomy through the impairment of self-trust. I will take my example cases from fiction as well as empirical psychological studies – cases which range from grand-scale political to pathological and seemingly more innocent, every-day instances of this very pernicious type of manipulation. From these examples I will develop an interpretation of gaslighting as isolating the victim from central resources of agency. I aim to show that it does so by hindering the development and exercise of crucial epistemic capacities as well as the participation in important epistemic practices. Specifically, this concerns the capacities for perception and memory, the participation in trustful conversation, and the capacity for self-discovery.<sup>4</sup> Although these capacities and practices can be distinguished, they should not be viewed as wholly separate, for the resources they draw from are largely the same. If one capacity is impaired, or the access to one practice is limited, the other two will normally suffer, as well. Where they are stimulated and allowed to flourish, I argue, these capacities foster the type of healthy, positive relations to reality, others, and the self that are vital for personal autonomy. Where they are consistently stunted, those relations are corrupted, and agents find themselves isolated from reality, from other people, and even from themselves. This is what happens to victims of gaslighting. They suffer a loss of self-trust, resulting in the less than optimal exercise of epistemic capacities, which in turn further diminishes their self-trust. This continuing exhaustion of crucial agential resources is a central characteristic of gaslighting, distinguishing it from most other species of manipulation. Until the process is stopped, and sometimes for long after, the inevitable result is the impairment of the victim’s autonomy. The practical consequences thereof may range from increased dependency and need for recognition to clinical depression.

Before I discuss the three types of capacities and practices and the way they are affected by gaslighting, I will begin in chapter 2 by providing some background to the concept: the way it was first portrayed in the movie that made it famous, and the terms in which it has subsequently been discussed in psychological literature. This brief history of the term serves to discern the basic features of gaslighting including its aim of instilling self-doubt, and the way it does so by systematically undercutting the key epistemic capacities identified above. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 are each devoted to a further study of one of the three capacities. For all three, I first describe what abilities, attitudes and opportunities are requisite for full exercise of the capacity. Next, I highlight the various ways in which that capacity contributes to the autonomy of the agent who exercises it. These can include epistemic benefits which help the agent better navigate a complete reality, as well as social resources conducive to a positive relation-to-self. Every third section of the chapters 3 to 5 is dedicated to a specific study of how gaslighting threatens the development and exercise of the respective epistemic capacity. Each chapter is closed off with an example to illustrate the practical impact of gaslighting on the life of the victimized agents. These case studies demonstrate how under certain circumstances, the impairment of the epistemic capacities for perception and memory,

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<sup>4</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I will sometimes refer to these as three capacities. Since I consider “full participation in the practice of knowledge exchange” equivalent to “full exercise of the capacity to participate in knowledge exchange”, I believe such simplification is warranted. However, since the latter formulation is both elaborate and somewhat artificial, I will avoid it as much as possible in discussions of that particular practice.

participation in knowledge exchange, and self-discovery can completely alienate victims from reality, others, and themselves.

The question how gaslighting undermines autonomy thus firstly inquires about the distorting effects of a specific type of manipulation on agency. As such, it provides a philosophical perspective on a phenomenon that has until now been mostly confined to psychological study. Considering the renewed popularity of the term, and, unfortunately, apparently the employment of the technique itself, it seems a worthwhile endeavor as such to seek to learn more about the workings of gaslighting and the difficulties of providing resistance to it. But through the discussion of how autonomy is undermined, and how this can be done by impairing capacities that may appear to be primarily epistemic, a certain view of autonomy emerges, as well. I will start my investigations using only a very simple working definition of autonomy: to be autonomous is to live one's life according to reasons, values and desires that are one's own. For, despite the widespread disagreement among philosophers about virtually all features of autonomy, this basic definition seems to constitute a modest consensus. Yet as we are learning more about what types of influences frustrate autonomy, we also learn more of what is needed for autonomy to flourish. Throughout the following chapters, I will unveil a conception of autonomy as situated along three axes of engagement: the axis of engagement with reality, that of engagement with others, and that of engagement with oneself. Along all three axes, autonomy requires a variety of skills, attitudes and opportunities that enable a positive interaction. These considerations finally demonstrate that autonomy is an ongoing accomplishment, one that it is vulnerable, precisely because it is never definitive. As will become apparent in what follows, if we want to fully understand what is so pernicious about gaslighting, we must conceive of autonomy as presupposing not only agential, but also epistemic capacities, not just maximally critical self-evaluation, but also self-acceptance and self-trust, and not as a purely individual affair, but as something that we cannot do alone.

## 2. What is Gaslighting?

Gaslighting has in recent years become part of popular vocabulary. Google Trends shows a great increase in searches for the term over the last two years in comparison to the years before, with an absolute peak in January 2017.<sup>5</sup> Referring to the phenomenon where one person manipulates another into questioning their own soundness of judgment, the term is mentioned often in self-help books and online discussions, as well as on news websites and in everyday conversation. But the name, as well as the underlying concept, are far from new: gaslighting has been discussed in psychological literature since the 1960's and was appropriated into American idiomatic usage as early as 1953, while the play and movies which originally inspired the term were already released in the late 1930s and 1940s.<sup>6</sup> In this chapter I will critically discuss these various uses of the term, starting with providing a plot summary of the 1944 movie, from which a first outline of the gaslighting phenomenon should become apparent. The second section will consist of an overview of the most influential psychological work on gaslighting. I will then proceed by studying some concrete instances of gaslighting, including some supposed cases of day-to-day and political gaslighting, in order to finally evaluate what, if any, are the common characteristics of all the phenomena referred to as “gaslighting”.

### 2.1 *Gaslight*, the movie

At the origin of the term gaslighting is the 1944 movie *Gaslight*, the most famous adaptation of Patrick Hamilton's eponymous 1938 play.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the film, we see the protagonist questioning her own sanity as she seems to grow increasingly paranoid and forgetful.

The story starts with a murder: Alice Alquist, a famous opera singer, dies under mysterious circumstances in her own home; her killer is never caught. The film's protagonist is the victim's niece Paula (played by Ingrid Bergman), who was raised by her aunt and never knew her parents. After her aunt's death, Paula moves to Italy to pursue a singing career of her own, but instead she falls in love with the pianist Gregory Anton (Charles Boyer). They get married after only a few weeks, and move back into Alice's old London mansion. Apart from the bad memories the house evokes in Paula and her occasional forgetfulness, things seem to go well with the recently married couple at first. However, her forgetfulness gets worse. A picture is suddenly missing from the wall and she does not remember having moved it, yet everyone else denies having done so; she finds Gregory's watch in her purse but cannot recall taking it; she loses an expensive brooch he had given her as a gift; and she hears noises and footsteps coming from the boarded-up attic; she even believes she can see the gaslights dim even though no one has touched

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<sup>5</sup> Google Trends, “Gaslighting,” 2018, <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=gaslighting>.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Lighter, *Historical Dictionary of American Slang*, vol. 1 (New York: Random House, 1994), 868.

<sup>7</sup> A British film adaptation of the same name, known as *Angel Street* in the United States, appeared earlier (in 1938) but does not seem to have had as much impact on popular vocabulary as the American production. See *ibid.*

them. Due to her condition, Paula starts living a more and more isolated existence in her mansion, and after bursting into tears at a piano concert, she stops going out completely. Her husband, their cook and their maid, who obviously dislikes her, are the only people she speaks to anymore. They do not receive visitors on account of Paula's illness. Her condition further worsens when she finally learns about her mother's fate from Gregory: "It began with her imagining things, that she heard noises, footsteps, voices, and then the voices began to speak to her. And in the end, she died in an asylum with no brain at all."<sup>8</sup> The familiar-sounding story scares Paula into further mistrusting her own capacity of judgment. When one day she sees a strange man in her house who introduces himself as an admirer of her aunt's, she initially sends him away, since she is ill and cannot see anyone. When the stranger insists and starts asking her questions, Paula fears her husband will have her be taken away. But then the gaslights dim – and the stranger sees it. There are footsteps overhead – and he hears them. A great sense of relief visibly comes over Paula as she exclaims: "Then it really happened! I thought I imagined it," and "At last I can tell this to someone!"

This someone turns out to be Scotland Yard detective Brian Cameron, who has taken an interest in the Alquist murder case and has observed the Antons for some time. He has seen Gregory go into the alley behind their house at night, and inferred that Paula's husband uses the empty house to enter his own attic unseen via the roof where he searches for Alice Alquist's famous jewels. Paula herself, confronted with the facts, refuses to believe in her husband's betrayal: that he is the origin of the footsteps, the dimming lights and, in fact of her supposed insanity. Confused, she recounts how her husband told her she was going out of her mind, when Cameron interjects: "No. You're slowly and systematically being *driven* out of your mind." The moved painting, the lost brooch; they were all deliberately taken by Gregory in an effort to make Paula believe she was really going crazy. He did not forbid her from seeing people to protect *her*, but to ensure she would never find out about his deceit. He even turned the housemaid against her so she'd have no one to confide in. Paula struggles to accept that not only her forgetfulness, but her whole romance with Gregory now turns out to be a lie fabricated to allow him to gain control over her property and most especially, her aunt's jewels. When the gas lights up, the sign that Gregory will return soon, Cameron leaves, determined to catch the thief in the act. But suddenly Gregory, who has taken a different route this time, stands in front of Paula. She confronts him, but his influence over her has not worn off. Even as she tells him of the detective, he manages to convince her that her encounter was but a dream and she must have imagined everything. Desperate, she sinks into his arms, stammering: "my mind is going," and begging him: "take me away. I can't fight it anymore."

Luckily for Paula, at that moment Cameron returns. A struggle between the two men ensues. Finally, Cameron manages to overpower Gregory, leaving the latter tied up in a chair in the attic. Paula asks to see her husband. As he begs her to set her free, she decides to have a little fun of her own and play along until the police come. She pretends she cannot find the knife to cut him loose as she holds it in her

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<sup>8</sup> George Cukor, *Gaslight* (MGM, 1944).



hand, explaining she must be mad as her mother was, as she is always losing things. As Gregory finally admits that it was all a lie, Paula at last regains her voice, and with passionate indignation tells him:

If I were not mad, I could have helped you. Whatever you had done, I could have pitied and protected you. But because I am mad, I hate you. Because I am mad, I have betrayed you, and because I am mad... I am rejoicing in my heart without a shred of pity... without a shred of regret, watching you go with glory in my heart! Mr. Cameron, come.... Take this man away!

The actual gaslighting in *Gaslighting* thus consists in the various deceitful tricks Gregory employs (hiding the brooch, his pocket watch and the picture, as well as lying and plainly denying certain past events) in an effort to make Paula doubt her own senses and finally her own sanity. While the original gaslighting is rather extreme in its measures and specific in its aim, i.e. the embezzlement of the Alquist family jewels, similar real-life cases of long-term manipulation have been noted by mental health specialists. The next section will be concerned with the notion of gaslighting inspired by the movie, as it has subsequently come to be developed further in psychology.

## 2.2 Gaslighting in psychological literature

The first known mention of gaslighting in psychology is in a 1969 article titled “The Gas-Light Phenomenon.”<sup>9</sup> There, the actual phenomenon referred to is the intentional effort of relatives or other acquaintances to get an unwanted person admitted to a mental hospital. The two authors, both psychiatrists, describe three factual cases which, beside their shared aim, also have in common that they all involve medical professionals falsely diagnosing mental or behavioral disorders. In contrast, in only one of three cases the admission to the institution was deemed appropriate by the patient himself. The two other supposed victims of gaslighting were being mistreated, sometimes verbally abused and conspired against, but not necessarily manipulated. Contrary to the film’s protagonist, these patients did not themselves believe they were “going mad”. In another work from 1969, gaslighting is understood rather differently:

It is also popularly believed to be possible to “gaslight” a perfectly healthy person into psychosis by interpreting his own behavior to him as symptomatic of serious mental illness. While “gaslighting” itself may be a mythical crime, there is no question that any social attitude which interprets a given behavior or experience as symptomatic of a generalized incompetence is a powerful creator of shame.<sup>10</sup>

These two descriptions of gaslighting do overlap to some extent: both emphasize the victim’s health before the gaslighting started, and how detrimental a wrong diagnosis, whether it is made by a professional or by a relative, can be – even if it does not result in complete psychosis. The crucial difference between the two

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<sup>9</sup> Russell Barton and John Whitehead, “The Gas-Light Phenomenon,” *The Lancet* 293 (1969): 1258–60.

<sup>10</sup> Stanley Plog and Robert Edgerton, *Changing Perspectives in Mental Illness* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 83.

is the importance they attach to the victim's own perception of their mental state. For Barton and Whitehead, the psychiatrists who authored the first piece, it is the unwarranted admission to a mental health facility which constitutes successful gaslighting. As their case studies and those from two later articles show, that specific phenomenon is far from a "mythical crime", even though the subtler cases may often go unnoticed.<sup>11</sup> But the second, more popular notion of gaslighting seems to have caught on in the scientific literature since then. Most later psychologists have taken the victim's own assessment of their mental health as the main focus of the manipulative effort, with the added emphasis that the process need not have a distinctly defined aim, or in fact even be intentional.

Adopting a version of this broader definition, according to which gaslighting is a (usually unconscious) attempt to influence someone by causing them "to doubt the validity of their own judgments"<sup>12</sup>, psychiatrists Calef and Weinshel contend that gaslighting phenomena are "both ubiquitous and inevitable" and "play a significant role in human relationships."<sup>13</sup> Like later authors, the typical case of gaslighting they envision is very far removed from Gregory's evil schemes. As psychoanalysts, Calef and Weinshel believe all gaslighting behaviors have a defensive impulse at their origin. According to them, gaslighters are projecting their own mental conflicts unto their victims. When gaslighting attempts of projection are successful, victims will identify with them, leaving them "unsure of their own perceptions and motivations."<sup>14</sup> The possible unconscious motivations behind the phenomenon need not concern us here, since the focus of my investigation is on its effects. What should concern us is that Calef and Weinshel discern two loci that are particularly susceptible to such manipulations and in which (inter)dependency plays an important part: the therapeutic relation, in which patients may identify with false diagnoses – and marriage.<sup>15</sup>

In the 1988 article "Gaslighting: A Marital Syndrome", two therapists discuss gaslighting between married partners after or during the course of extramarital affairs. When confronted with the cheating by their partner, the gaslighter will not just deny the affair but actually accuse their partner of confabulation or paranoia, in dialogues typically taking a similar form to the following exchange:

"The worst part, Harry, is the lying."

"I'm not lying, you're just imagining things."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Barton and Whitehead, "The Gas-Light Phenomenon"; Charles Smith and Kenneth Sinanan, "The Gaslight Phenomenon Reappears," *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 120 (1972): 685–6; Charles Lund and Quentin Gardiner, "The Gaslight Phenomenon: An Institutional Variant," *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 131 (1977): 533–34.

<sup>12</sup> Victor Calef and Edward Weinshel, "Some Clinical Consequences of Introjection: Gaslighting," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 50 (1981): 52. The authors make clear that the phenomenon they describe has been observed before, but their application of the term "gaslighting" is new.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>16</sup> Gertrude Gass and William Nichols, "Gaslighting: A Marital Syndrome," *Contemporary Family Therapy* 10 (1988): 6.

Now, discovering gaslighting in this context is hardly a revelation. In fact, six out of nine case studies in Calef and Weinshel, Barton and Whitehead, and Smith and Sinanan concern gaslighting between married partners, and of these six, five involve extramarital affairs.<sup>17</sup> But Gass and Nichols do touch upon three dimensions relevant to gaslighting: that of trust; that of a third party; and that of gender stereotypes. Regarding trust they merely emphasize the partly irreversible damage that affairs paired with gaslighting can do. It is, however, important to add that only by virtue of the trust there was in the first place was it possible for gaslighter to succeed. The gaslighted party needed to rely on their partner's professed better judgment to agree with the disqualification of their own. Gass and Nichols further point to the large part a therapist can play in helping victims of gaslighting to restore faith in their own judgment. One can observe a parallel here with the crucial role of detective Cameron has for Paula's fate and the plot of the film. Understandably, the recognition of a third party is decisive for the victim's recovery. But the authors also warn therapists about the risks involved in treating victims of gaslighting, cautioning that "therapists may contribute to the woman's distress through the enunciation of stereotypical attitudes that reflect negatively on the wife and through the mislabeling of the woman's reactions."<sup>18</sup> The risk of misdiagnose was already indicated by Calef and Weinshel, but the emphasis on gender stereotype is then new to the psychological analysis of gaslighting. Gass and Nichols purposefully focus on cases of husbands gaslighting their wives; not because the reverse phenomenon is inconceivable, but because statistically, women are more likely to be victimized by inequity in marriage and mislabeled by therapists.<sup>19</sup> A concept like "female hysteria" underlines that historically, misdiagnoses of mental illness may have certainly had sexist underpinnings. And it is still true that femininity is strongly associated with emotionality, and emotionality with irrationality. All this can serve to illustrate how gaslighting can both exploit and reinforce gender stereotypes. But gaslighters might also use stereotypes of toxic masculinity to silence male victims of abuse.<sup>20</sup> Overall, it is important to note that victims and perpetrators can be of either gender, and that stereotypes *can* play a role in gaslighting, but that they are no essential part of it.

Since the 1980's, gaslighting has become more of a household term in psychology, whereby the broad definition – i.e. the conscious or unconscious attempt to influence someone such that they start doubting their own judgment and perceptions – has been generally adopted. Among victims of gaslighting are usually counted more than only those who have actually "gone mad". Contemporary psychology there echoes some of the intuitions already present in the above citation from 1969: that the dynamic behind gaslighting, while it may not often lead to psychosis and is only rarely intentional, is still highly damaging. Although most authors agree regarding its definition, their accounts of gaslighting still differ in the specific

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<sup>17</sup> Calef and Weinshel, "Some Clinical Consequences of Introjection: Gaslighting," 48-52; Barton and Whitehead, "The Gas-Light Phenomenon," 1258-59; Smith and Sinanan, "The Gaslight Phenomenon Reappears," 685-86.

<sup>18</sup> Gass and Nichols, "Gaslighting: A Marital Syndrome," 4.

<sup>19</sup> The authors suggest this is due to women's greater dependency on relationships and differences in socialization. See *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Bates, "Hidden Victims: Men and Their Experience of Domestic Violence" (Integrating Research and Practice to Combat Violence and Interpersonal Aggression, Coventry University, UK, June 8, 2017), <http://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/3058/>.

forms and techniques they discern, the motives they ascribe to gaslighter, and the conditions they consider conducive to gaslighting. The remainder of this section will be devoted to a brief overview of the way these aspects have been treated in contemporary psychology.

Different species of gaslighting interactions and techniques have been described in the literature. Taking a clue from Gass and Nichols' description of a typical gaslighter's response to allegations of cheating ("I'm not lying; you're just imagining things"), Theo Dorpat identifies a type of gaslighting he dubs "the double whammy".<sup>21</sup> The double whammy is defined as a two-phase verbal attack in which, after the victim has protested to the first assault, the victimizer attacks again by discrediting the judgments made by the victim in his protest. Another telling example of this verbal equivalent of the one-two punch is the following exchange between an adult daughter and her mother:

*Mother:* Everything you do turns to s—t!

*Daughter:* Ouch! That's mean! I wish you wouldn't say that.

*Mother:* You have no sense of humor. I was only kidding.<sup>22</sup>

Dorpat convincingly reveals the gaslighting nature of the mother's second remark, which, in addition to being offensive, actually serves to undermine the daughter's confidence in her perception. The example shows that gaslighting can be much more subtle and sophisticated than a direct accusation of madness or overactive imagination. Instead, the mother claims her daughter didn't pick up on non-verbal signs that should have made it clear she was joking. In most cases, such denials of malicious intent coupled with blaming the victim may be more effective in raising self-doubt than obvious lies about past events. But the concept of the double whammy also illustrates that gaslighting often occurs together with other forms of (emotional) abuse. The gaslighting itself can be, but must not necessarily be the "main event"; often it serves to conceal other aggressions.<sup>23</sup>

In her 2007 book *The Gaslight Effect*, therapist Robin Stern distinguishes various other gaslighting techniques.<sup>24</sup> According to Stern, gaslighters may use all types of techniques, ranging from covering up manipulations with romantic gestures and idealizations of the relationship and maintaining a reasonable appearance, to use of aggression, guilt-trips and yelling. Stern also identifies three progressive stages of the gaslighting process. In stage 1, disbelief, victims will feel confusion over the gaslighter's behavior, thinking they may have misunderstood. Stage 2, defense, is characterized by the victim engaging in the argument, attempting to disprove the gaslighter's allegations. During the final stage 3, depression, the victim accepts the gaslighter's accusations and may even try to actively verify them in order to regain their approval and

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<sup>21</sup> Theo Dorpat, "On the Double Whammy and Gaslighting," *Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy* 11 (1994): 91–96.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>23</sup> The concurrence of abuse and gaslighting has been noted by George Simon, "Gaslighting as a Manipulation Tactic: What It Is, Who Does It, and Why," Counselling Resource, *Psychology, Philosophy and Real Life* (blog), November 8, 2011, <https://counsellingresource.com/features/2011/11/08/gaslighting/>; and John Gottman and Neil Jacobsen, *When Men Batter Women: New Insights into Ending Abusive Relationships* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 122–34.

<sup>24</sup> Robin Stern, *The Gaslight Effect: How to Spot and Survive the Hidden Manipulations Other People Use to Control Your Life* (New York: Morgan Road Books, 2007).

harmony in the relationship. Depending on the stage they are in, victims may feel frustrated, anxious, disoriented, obsessive, desperate, scared, exhausted, and finally: defeated, empty, ashamed and out of touch with themselves.<sup>25</sup> Most of these symptoms have also been acknowledged by other authors, with the addition of guilt, cognitive dyscontrol, lowered self-esteem and in extreme cases, psychosis and suicidal tendencies.<sup>26</sup>

The possible motives for gaslighting are manifold. I have already touched upon Calef and Weinshel's controversial psychoanalytic theory of projection. Dorpat regards gaslighting primarily as an instrument to silence and control others by undermining their belief system, motivated by a need to control one's own feeling states.<sup>27</sup> Stern points to the victimizer's compulsive need to be right so as to preserve his or her own sense of power and sense of self.<sup>28</sup> The fictive example of the jewel-obsessed Gregory shows that motivations can also pragmatic, and that some people resort to gaslighting as a way of denying, concealing, or diverting attention from other crimes or abuses they have committed. The problem with attempting to generalize about the reasons people gaslight is that the motivations may be very diverse, and often unconscious. In any case, they are only rarely so specific and intentional as Gregory's. The only general claim we can justifiably make regarding the grounds for gaslighting is that its direct aim is always to have the victim doubt him- or herself. If we want to come to a better understanding of what gaslighting does to people, perhaps the right question to ask is not what motivates people to manipulate others, but what brings those others to defer to the judgment of their manipulators. In other words: what are the conditions under which victims are most vulnerable to gaslighting?

First of all, insecurity and self-doubt may be results of the gaslighting process, but they are also prerequisites to its success. Calef and Weinshel acknowledge that different individuals will respond differently to a given gaslighting attempt. According to them, if the gaslighting impinges on a sphere of internal conflict for the victim (notably involving guilt or shame), this enhances the chance of success of that attempt.<sup>29</sup> This still seems somewhat too specific, as most of their theory does, to apply to all victims of gaslighting. Stern speaks more generally of victim's antecedent insecurity giving rise to an increased need for approval and agreement, thus contributing to a stronger dependency on the manipulator.<sup>30</sup> Such need could also stem from a victim's personal attachment to (the relationship with) their gaslighter, for which in turn there could be many reasons. Gaslighters can be relatives: parents, siblings, children; romantic partners; friends; therapists; or bosses – people whom we love, trust, respect, and sometimes even idealize. If victims want to maintain harmony and avoid conflict – be it out of fear, insecurity, love, or otherwise – their only option is to conform to the gaslighter's view of things. Effectively, this boils down to their participation in their own oppression. Yet victims cannot be blamed for being vulnerable,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 19–21.

<sup>26</sup> Dorpat, "On the Double Whammy and Gaslighting," 91; Simon, "Gaslighting as a Manipulation Tactic."

<sup>27</sup> Dorpat, "On the Double Whammy and Gaslighting," 91–92.

<sup>28</sup> Stern, *The Gaslight Effect*, 12.

<sup>29</sup> Calef and Weinshel, "Some Clinical Consequences of Introjection: Gaslighting," 53, 64.

<sup>30</sup> Stern, *The Gaslight Effect*, 29–33.

especially considering that some vulnerability is unavoidable where trust is concerned. And such vulnerability is not a bad thing, either. Whereas personal relationships that are based on mutual respect can contribute greatly to the happiness and self-confidence of both parties, the reverse is true for relationships as asymmetrical as those between gaslighters and their victims. Victims who love their gaslighter, or who put him or her on a pedestal, inadvertently render themselves extremely vulnerable. In turn, gaslighters will only abuse the trust they receive.

Some conditions are thus less favorable to gaslighting than others. In order for the gaslighter's manipulations to be effective, the victim needs to "participate" in the process – that is to say, he/she cannot have the resources to both be aware of the manipulations and resist them. Apart from the sophistication of the employed tactics, insecure victims or people who are in another sense dependent on their gaslighter are much more prone to be manipulated into self-doubt. People who are prevented from finding recognition with third parties will also be more vulnerable, as I will show in more detail later. Still, psychologists seem to agree that beside these general conditions, gaslighting can and does take many forms. By way of illustration, and in order to give a complete and representative image of gaslighting, I will use the following section to critically discuss some supposed instances of gaslighting.

## 2.3 Instances of gaslighting

I have so far presented three concrete examples of gaslighting: first, Gregory from *Gaslight's* demonic systematic manipulations in order to drive Paula into an asylum; second, "Cheating Harry's" plain denial of his affair and resort to offense as defense; and third, the mother who accuses her daughter of not being able to take a joke. There is a vast difference in severity between the first and the last example, not only regarding the duration of the manipulations, but also regarding the perpetrator's intent and the harshness of their chosen means. Still, while Gregory's actions may be both the origin of the term gaslighting and the phenomenon's evil extreme, Dorpat's dialogue between the mother and the daughter is much more representative of many everyday instances of gaslighting. It even seems that the difference between these cases may be more than just gradual. This raises the question what the salient features of gaslighting really are. I will return to that question in the next section. But before properly determining what gaslighting is, and what it is not, I will now consider five supposed instances of gaslighting from psychological, philosophical and popular literature.

In *When Men Batter Women*, Gottman and Jacobsen describe the case of Cheryl, whose husband Randy often behaved violently towards her. One day their neighbor Sam told them about the affairs his wife was having. When Cheryl suggested his wife should use a vibrator instead if she's frustrated, Randy slapped her in the face. Cheryl turned to Sam, asking him "Did you see that?" But Sam denied. Confused, Cheryl walked back into the house. Her husband told her she made everything up, that he wasn't that kind of person, and her "disturbed mind" had imagined it, that she was projecting her own bad childhood onto their relationship. The authors note "he was so persuasive that Cheryl wasn't ever sure

what had really happened.”<sup>31</sup> The case is striking not only because of Randy’s blatant denial of his violence, but also because of Sam’s response, which essentially establishes his complicity in Cheryl’s gaslighting. In seeing Randy hit her, Sam likely feared retaliation from the batterer if he would have spoken out against him. His concern for self-preservation likely motivated him to play along. However, he thereby did not only expose Cheryl to the risk of more abuse; he also left her alone in her epistemic struggle. Such isolation is a key factor determining the success of gaslighting: it is why Gregory will not let Paula leave the house, does not let her receive visitors and manipulates the housemaid into treating Paula with contempt. But accomplices – whether they are so voluntarily and consciously or not – also play a large role in real-life gaslighting.

Philosopher Kate Abramson tells of a female graduate student, who, after being sexually harassed confronts the culprit. He first denies, then claims there wouldn’t be a problem if there weren’t any women in the department, and then accuses the victim of being prude. A fellow student, after having heard her story, retorts the man was just joking.<sup>32</sup> In a recent article, Rachel McKinnon gives a related example of a transgender woman, Victoria, being mispronounced (referred to as “he”) several times by James, her colleague. She recounts the story to another co-worker, Susan, who responds in disbelief: “I’m sure you just misheard him: you’re on edge and expect to hear mispronouncing,” defending James as he has won a university award for supporting queer issues. Victoria explains he has done it multiple times before and Susan concludes that she may say so, “but *I’ve* never heard him do it before.”<sup>33</sup> These last two cases are somewhat similar to the example of Cheryl, though perhaps not as obviously instances of gaslighting as the former. Sam denied something he had seen with his own eyes; Susan and the fellow student refused to believe testimonies of harassment, claiming or at least implying that the victims must have misinterpreted the situation. It could be argued that Susan and the student are doing nothing wrong, even displaying epistemic prudence, by withholding their belief in testimonies which contradict their experiential knowledge of the accused party. They could be going by the credo “innocent until proven guilty.” In all likelihood, they had the best interest of all parties at heart.<sup>34</sup> These indeed are border cases, that are difficult to judge without further context. Did Susan and the student have good reasons to assume the testimonies they were hearing were false or exaggerated? Or was it perhaps simply more comforting for them to believe that the esteemed colleague and the revered professor “would never do such a thing”? On both accounts, the person giving the testimony may come to doubt their own judgement, but only on the latter can we really speak of gaslighting, and even then it is mostly unintentional.<sup>35</sup> As it stands, neither Abramson nor

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<sup>31</sup> Gottman and Jacobsen, *When Men Batter Women*, 130.

<sup>32</sup> Abramson, “Turning up the Lights on Gaslighting,” 5.

<sup>33</sup> McKinnon, “Allies Behaving Badly,” 3.

<sup>34</sup> It would be more accurate to say they *thought* they had everyone’s best interest at heart. Assuming these are cases of gaslighting, everyone’s actual best interest would have been better served had they believed the testimonies.

<sup>35</sup> What is especially tricky about these boundary cases is that, for a correct assessment, they require an answer to the question whether the victim has a legitimate complaint or was really just being oversensitive. In making that judgment, we should take care not to commit gaslighting ourselves. On the one hand, someone’s experience of self-doubt certainly is not proof that gaslighting took place. On the other, careless insensitive remarks, if made repeatedly, can

McKinnon gives us the information to decide which case we are dealing with. What we do know is that cases of abuse and harassment merit special attention for the victim's account of the events. There are so many reasons for victims not to speak up – they may feel confused, ashamed, and fragile, they are vulnerable, and often find themselves in subordinate positions – that when they do, one should be extra careful in dismissing their testimony. Situations like the two above are certainly very susceptible to everyday instances of gaslighting. When assessing them, it can be helpful to remember that one instance on its own will not usually constitute effective gaslighting, but multiple instances over time, especially where multiple voices are questioning someone's capacity of judgment, almost invariably will.

Another example of the effectivity of the majority's voice is given by Paul Benson, who invites us to imagine a remake of *Gaslight*

. . . in which, as in the original, the female protagonist falls into a state of helplessness and disorientation as a result of a profound change in her view of herself. In this version, however, the husband starts off as a good soul who seems to have his wife's interests in mind. The trouble is that he is a physician, and although he has kept up with the best medical science of his day (the latter decades of the nineteenth century), that science does not understand women's health very well. He regards women who are excitable, who have active imaginations and strong passions, and who are prone to emotional outbursts in public as suffering from a serious psychological illness, an illness that has just those symptoms which Bergman displayed in the original film. The protagonist has the suspect traits, her husband makes the standard diagnosis, and the "hysterical wife" ends up isolated, feeling rather crazy.<sup>36</sup>

The most important difference between this plot and the original is not so much that the husband has good intentions, but mostly that science agrees with his diagnosis from the start. Putting it even more strongly: it is not even primarily the husband who is trying to maintain control over his wife or who is the primary perpetrator of gaslighting; it is society at large. Sadly, Benson's example is far from fictional and only highlights the ways in which negative stereotypes can be instrumentalized to further suppress disadvantaged sections of the population.<sup>37</sup> We may wonder how rare such cases of collective gaslighting are, or how great the majority of accomplices must be in order for them to be effective. Presumably, some outrageous racist prejudice justifying slavery has been used to gaslight people into subjection. Certain forms of propaganda, in the classical sense of "manipulation of the rational will to close off debate" can undoubtedly be employed to make large groups of people question their reality and shares many characteristics with gaslighting.<sup>38</sup> Stern even goes so far as to claim we currently live in what she calls a "gaslight culture," in which we are bombarded by media and politics with falsehoods which, for the sake

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constitute gaslighting even if the perpetrator does not know precisely what he or she is doing. I will return to the issue of the possibility of unintentional gaslighting below, in 2.4.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Benson, "Free Agency and Self-Worth," *Journal of Philosophy* 91 (1994): 656.

<sup>37</sup> It should be emphasized here that this does not apply exclusively to stereotypes against women. The same problems apply equally, if not more so, to trans people, ethnic minorities, and disabled people. For more discussion see Nora Berenstain, "Epistemic Exploitation," *Ergo* 3 (2016): 569–90.

<sup>38</sup> Jason Stanley, *How Propaganda Works* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 48. The aspects of intolerance to challenge, silencing opposition, and creating agreement through manipulation all seem to be common features of propaganda and gaslighting. One important difference is that propaganda is almost invariably intentionally designed to have this result, whereas gaslighting will in practice often be unintentional.



of marketing, we should give preference over our own responses.<sup>39</sup> Clinical psychologist Bryant Welch has controversially argued that political manipulation in the form of gaslighting has become widespread in the United States.<sup>40</sup> Sweeping claims like these are difficult to either prove or disprove, and I lack the space to evaluate them critically here. What I can do is discuss one particular example of alleged political gaslighting – the one which was in all likelihood the cause of the surge in Google searches for “gaslighting” in January 2017.

Shortly after Donald Trump was elected president in November 2016, multiple journalists started connecting some of his behavior during and after his campaign as instances of gaslighting. They all pointed to Trump’s team repeatedly denying plain facts, including some statements he had himself made earlier, and perhaps most notoriously, concerning the turn-out at his inauguration on January 20.<sup>41</sup> Trump claimed there were at least a million people present at the National Mall during his inaugural speech, a larger crowd than at his predecessor Barack Obama’s inauguration. White House spokesman Sean Spicer later said it was “the largest audience ever to witness an inauguration, period, both in person and around the globe.” When several sources disproved their claims, the administration denied having spread falsehoods, defending themselves as instead merely having presented “alternative facts.”<sup>42</sup>

Is this an instance of gaslighting? If we want to avoid complete inflation of meaning, we have to be careful not to apply it too readily to every deceptive action or remark. Lying alone is not the same as gaslighting. Neither is this particular case, the Trump team’s lies and subsequent denial of lying, taken by itself. But contextual factors are of crucial importance. Although perhaps no one was so isolated from media outlets that they actually questioned their own perception of what happened outside the Capitol that January 20, some of the conditions were certainly favorable to gaslighting. First of all, as their president, Trump clearly stands in a relationship of power to the American people. Secondly, just as successful cases of gaslighting, this was no isolated incident: Trump had lied blatantly multiple times before, had accused politicians and journalists who confronted him about this of spreading “fake news” and being biased, and disqualified some as “neurotic”.<sup>43</sup> Thirdly and crucially, on his first day in office, the same day he very generously rounded up the number of attendants at his inauguration, Trump avowed he had “a running

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<sup>39</sup> Stern, *The Gaslight Effect*, 25.

<sup>40</sup> Bryant Welch, *State of Confusion: Political Manipulation and the Assault on the American Mind* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2008).

<sup>41</sup> Susan Dominus, “The Reverse-Gaslighting of Donald Trump,” *New York Times Magazine*, September 27, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/27/magazine/the-reverse-gaslighting-of-donald-trump.html>; Lauren Duca, “Donald Trump Is Gaslighting America,” *Teen Vogue*, December 10, 2016, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/donald-trump-is-gaslighting-america>; Ghitis, “Donald Trump Is ‘Gaslighting’ All of Us”; Caitlin Gibson, “What We Talk about When We Talk about Donald Trump and ‘Gaslighting,’” *The Washington Post*, January 27, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/what-we-talk-about-when-we-talk-about-donald-trump-and-gaslighting/2017/01/27/b02e6de4-e330-11e6-ba11-63c4b4fb5a63\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.acc6481e08e3](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/what-we-talk-about-when-we-talk-about-donald-trump-and-gaslighting/2017/01/27/b02e6de4-e330-11e6-ba11-63c4b4fb5a63_story.html?utm_term=.acc6481e08e3).

<sup>42</sup> Maggie Fox, “Some Experts Say Trump Team’s Falsehoods Are Classic ‘Gaslighting,’” NBC News, January 24, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/mental-health/some-experts-say-trump-team-s-falsehoods-are-classic-gaslighting-n711021>.

<sup>43</sup> Dominus, “The Reverse-Gaslighting of Donald Trump.”

war with the media,” who he claimed are “among the most dishonest human beings on earth.”<sup>44</sup> This was but one of his various deliberate efforts to undermine the trustworthiness of mainstream media in the eye of the public, and thereby to rob it not only of crucial information sources, but also, effectively, of dissenting voices. So, whereas his lies about the inauguration in themselves were not classic instances of gaslighting, within the context of Trump’s many dismissals of critics as oversensitive, biased, and dishonest, a larger tendency to gaslighting certainly is discernible. Just like in Stern’s description of the pathological gaslighter, Trump has displayed “an interpersonal need for assent, intolerance for challenge or even the possibility of being challenged” and has seem to have resorted to “the manipulative destruction of the gaslightee’s standing to issue challenge.”<sup>45</sup> As morally reprehensible as it may be, as an instrument of power and control, gaslighting can certainly be effective.

Now that I have presented multiple examples of gaslighting in its many guises – pathological, everyday, collective, and political – it is time to come to a working definition of what gaslighting is, and what it is not.

## 2.4 Problems and salient features

In the previous sections, I have provided a history of the term gaslighting, as well as an overview of its current use in (popular) psychology, and various examples of manifestations of the phenomenon. On the basis of a critical review of the existing literature, and abstracting from some idiosyncratic facets of the presented theories and examples, it is now possible to give a broad definition of gaslighting and describe its most salient features.

Gaslighting is a type of manipulation aimed at causing a victim to doubt their own beliefs and perception of reality, to such an extent that they might start questioning their sanity. In other words: gaslighting aims to undermine a victim’s self-trust. It can take a great variety of shapes, which can make it difficult to detect. Not every instance of lying, deception, or propaganda is an instance of gaslighting, and we must be wary not to apply the label too quickly. But gaslighting *can* take all those forms; it can be subtle, sophisticated, and inconspicuous, and even in the mild cases, it is obvious that gaslighting is harmful to the victim. However, gaslighting is not always done consciously and with a clear aim. Perpetrators can have many motives for behaving the way they do: they might be concealing other abuse, defending themselves by blaming and silencing the victim, or most commonly, they cannot cope with disagreement and challenge and attempt to resolve conflicts the most effective way: by getting the opposition to absolutely agree with them. In this regard, the fictional case that gave the psychological phenomenon its name is far from paradigmatic. But in another respect, Gregory’s actions in the film are not that different from everyday gaslighting. Gaslighting rarely consists of one or two isolated instances – rather, it is a matter of many events and interactions spread out over time which, all taken together, make an individual feel she is losing her

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<sup>44</sup> Fox, “Some Experts Say Trump Team’s Falsehoods Are Classic ‘Gaslighting.’”

<sup>45</sup> Abramson, “Turning up the Lights on Gaslighting,” 12.

grip on reality. Before I go into the question how gaslighting accomplishes this diminishing of self-trust, I want to address two concerns regarding this understanding of self-trust: first, can gaslighting ever be truly unintentional? And second, is there such a thing as positive gaslighting?

As for the first question, which I have already addressed briefly above, there seems to be a consensus in psychological literature that gaslighting really can be unintentional, since it can occur unconsciously. The problem is that on such a view, it is not possible to distinguish between interactions that cause a person to lose self-trust due to some problem within that person, and interactions that are aimed at unjustifiably making her lose self-trust. The other problem is that the real problem is in the practice. Many gaslighters who are manipulating others in order to force agreement are also deceiving themselves about how right they are. They do not know that they are manipulating, even though at some level they do know they want the other person to shut up. Perhaps it is best to say that if the diminishing of someone's self-trust is a truly unintended side effect, one that the agent either could not know about or could not have avoided without resorting to a worse action, the action does not count as gaslighting. If, however, an agent intends to diminish someone's self-trust through manipulation, or this is a reasonably foreseeable and preventable side effect of his action, then it is gaslighting. Unfortunately, of course, these neat conceptualizations do not aid in the assessment of non-hypothetical cases where we cannot look into people's minds, and even if we could, we could not filter out the self-deception. A final issue is that there appears to be a more than gradual difference between malicious and careless gaslighting. That is at least partly true: the gaslighting of an evil manipulator with a clear aim will look different from the gaslighting of a chauvinist employer dismissing an "overemotional" female employee. The conscious manipulator will use a wide variety of deceitful tactics that the careless gaslighter would not. But that does not warrant ignoring the milder but much more common variant of gaslighting. Despite their differences, they *are* both cases of gaslighting, aimed at diminishing someone's self-trust. And since this investigation focuses on the *effects* of gaslighting on the victim, rather than the psychology of the perpetrator, the latter variant definitely deserves consideration. So whenever in the following chapters I refer to gaslighting as "manipulation", or to its means as "techniques", let it be clear despite its connotations, manipulative techniques are not always part of an evil genius' carefully orchestrated master plan. People are often manipulative without knowing they are.<sup>46</sup>

The other question is whether my definition allows for something like positive gaslighting, i.e. the gaslighting of someone with an excess of self-trust to bring them to a lower, more justified level of confidence. First of all, I am certain the phenomenon exists: a beautiful example can be found in the movie *Amélie*. Its title character decides to exact revenge on her greengrocer, who keeps belittling his disabled employee. She breaks into the man's apartment, exchanging his slippers for a smaller size, switching his toothpaste with his foot cream, reversing the door knobs, adding salt to his liquor, and setting his clock back hours.<sup>47</sup> I would argue that this does constitute a case of gaslighting, even though Amélie's intentions

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. the discussion on the difference between testimonial injustice and gaslighting in 3.3.

<sup>47</sup> Jean-Pierre Jeunet, *Amélie* (UGC, 2001).

are good. She could have attempted to reason with the greengrocer or have an open discussion with him in order to restore his level of self-confidence to the appropriate level, but instead chose a more eccentric route of small, deceitful interferences. The question whether such “positive” gaslighting is ever justified must be left aside here, but I do think it can rightfully be called “gaslighting”.

Now that it is clear what gaslighting is and what it is not, let’s review the conditions and manifestations which have been discussed so far. A gaslighting attempt can only be successful if the victim does not detect it or cannot resist it sufficiently. The problem is there are good reasons for the victim not to, reasons inherent in the personal relationship that is almost invariably the locus of gaslighting. Victims might not want to disagree with their gaslighter out of fear of conflict or violence, as well as out of need for approval and wanting to maintain a harmonious relationship. But the most obvious reason for agreement is that they loves and/or respects him/her. It is simply inconceivable that a person you trust so much would betray you so horribly. So when that person lets you believe your judgment is off, it is more reasonable to believe they are right than to suspect they are deceiving you. But of course, that is precisely what gaslighters do. They abuse the vulnerability and dependency that to a large extent is unavoidable in personal relationships. They can further exacerbate such dependency by isolating the victim and by recruiting or manipulating third parties to play along. A central feature of gaslighting is that the victim’s situation grows from bad to worse. Robin Stern describes this development with her three-stage system. But I want to propose another framework for understanding the effects of gaslighting on the victim’s agency, one which reflects the specific nature of gaslighting in comparison to other forms of manipulation.

Every act of manipulation is an attempt to control and influence someone by other means than coercion or rational persuasion, and as such constitutes a violation of autonomy. Gaslighting, by contrast, does not just violate autonomy but slowly yet steadily erodes it. As my proposed definition suggests, the distinguishing feature of gaslighting is that it instills self-doubt and undermines self-trust, particularly trust in one’s own judgement and sense of reality. Where manipulation generally aims to influence a person’s values, beliefs, or actions, gaslighting specifically aims to influence a person’s beliefs about herself, especially beliefs regarding her own epistemic capacities. At the most basic level, this concerns the capacities of perception and memory. Think of how Gregory had Paula believe she was only imagining the footsteps and voices overhead, or how she supposedly forgot events that never really took place. But gaslighting also corrupts the development and exercise of, as well as the trust in, the capacities that are needed to take part in knowledge exchanges. Not only did Gregory not allow Paula to talk to anyone, he also let her think she was being unreasonable and oversensitive in conversations. Finally, the capacity for self-discovery is completely disabled. At the end of the movie, Paula let Gregory more or less run her life for her, for she believed that he alone knew what was good for her. By telling her lies about herself and her family, and most of all by having her think she was going mad, he managed to alienate her even from herself. As he accused her of stealing, she had no idea what to believe anymore; not just about reality, but about who she was. Of course, these epistemic capacities and practices are largely interrelated, as they draw on many of the same resources. If we do not trust our memory, that will also severely limit our

contribution in knowledge exchanges, and our knowledge about ourselves. But our self-trust in our capacities is vital for their full exercise, and their full exercise in turn contributes to our self-trust and, crucially, our autonomy. By undermining it, gaslighting damages some of the most basic resources of agency. The effects on the lives of its victims can be devastating.

There are many reasons why gaslighting is morally reprehensible. It is a manifestation of intolerance towards dissent; it often, though not necessarily, both relies on and perpetuates sexist stereotypes; it is done by means of lies and deceit which, even taken by themselves would be regarded bad; and it leaves its victim feeling confused, anxious, empty and depressed. But central to the gaslighting effort is its perhaps morally worst feature: its systematic undermining of autonomy through the impairment of self-trust. Before I complete my analysis of how exactly gaslighting accomplishes this, I will investigate one by one the three central epistemic capacities, starting in chapter 3 with the capacity for perception and memory.

### 3. Gaslighting and the Relation to Reality

Perhaps the primary way in which gaslighting affects its victim is through the impairment of her trust in her own capacity for perception and memory. Whenever a person accuses another of paranoia, hallucinations, or overimaginativeness, and does so in bad faith, this constitutes an obvious case of gaslighting. But, as the overview from the previous chapter demonstrated, gaslighting can also take more inconspicuous forms. Whether it concerns the open questionings of a person's sanity or repeated subtle side remarks about someone's inaccurate recall of past events, both such instances can severely undermine that person's epistemic self-trust. As a first step in the investigation of gaslighting's damaging effects on personal autonomy, I will in this chapter demonstrate how it does so at the most basic level through its attack on the capacities of perception and memory. I will start by exploring what the development and full exercise of these capacities demand of the agent and her environment. Here, I will distinguish the various abilities, attitudes, and opportunities such full use presupposes. Once I have established what the capacities entail, I will highlight the various ways in which they contribute to epistemic and personal autonomy. I will then show that gaslighting hinders their exercise and development, and, finally, what this means in practice for the agent and her relation to reality.

#### 3.1 The capacities of perception and memory

Perception and memory are two of the central, traditional sources of knowledge, beside testimony and introspection, to which I will return in later chapters, and reason. They are often thought of as cognitive faculties, or mental powers which help us gain and maintain awareness of the world around us, the objects it contains, and the events that take place within it. Supposing that it is their main function to provide us with knowledge about our environment, and to make sure that the relevant knowledge stays with us for a sufficiently long time, we may now ask under what conditions this function can be fulfilled properly. In what follows, I will understand those conditions as pertaining to either of the three following groups: the abilities and skills of the agent, the specific attitudes she has, and the opportunities the environment provides for exercising her abilities.

To begin with, when we talk about perception what we are referring to is sense perception. The capacity as a whole is thus dependent on the various senses and their decent functioning. Purely physically speaking, this means that organs through which we see, hear, feel, taste, and smell should be largely intact, and that the signals they receive should be transmitted more or less unaltered to the brain, so that we actually become aware of the registered input. The ability to memorize past events rests on the mostly accurate retaining of sense impressions from the past. All of these physical and mental abilities can be

damaged in various ways, some more serious than others.<sup>48</sup> But many deficiencies can be partly compensated through the enhanced working of other senses, through the use of external aids like guide dogs, hearing aids, notebooks, or the reliance on others.<sup>49</sup> No matter how important these abilities are for the capacities at hand, they are not the targets of the gaslighting efforts, so I will not go into them any further here.

While the physical and mental ability to perceive and to remember are at the basis of the full exercise of these capacities, they are certainly not the whole story. If the capacities are to really help someone learn and know about the world around them, this also requires a certain attitude on the behalf of the knower, and the availability of opportunities to actually get to know about the world. The main attitude required for accurate perception is open-mindedness. When I observe a situation with prejudice, chances are that I miss the signals contradicting my view. Such confirmation biases are hard to avoid altogether, but should be attenuated if the goal is to optimize perception. The attitude that is key to preserving memories is sincerity, since the biggest threat to accurate remembering beside forgetfulness is our tendency to repress what we dislike and enhance what pleases us. This attitude is put to the test especially where remembering is a collective and social endeavor, and other's memories may not match ours. That brings us to an attitude that underlies the development and exercise of both capacities, and indeed of all epistemic capacities, including the ones to be discussed in later chapters: self-trust.

Philosophers are fond of stressing the importance of a critical attitude, and epistemologists are no exception. Ever since Plato's time, critique, doubt, and questioning have been the mark of philosophical wisdom, that which separates it from mere *doxa*. In such a framework, overconfidence is easily associated with arrogance, with an unwillingness to challenge one's opinion, in short, with prejudice. On the other hand, the skeptical doctrine may serve to illustrate that if one has too little trust in the possibility of knowing the world, one is left without any knowledge at all. Someone who does not trust her own senses does not *know* whether she is perceiving or hallucinating. Someone who does not trust her memory does not *know* whether some event X has really happened or whether she has imagined it. So, someone who fundamentally distrusts her own faculties will not only be unable to critically reflect in any honest way upon her beliefs, but she will be unable to form any beliefs to reflect upon at all. In the words of epistemologist Linda Zagzebski: "It is in virtue of self-trust that I believe everything I believe ... That is why it is rational to have self-trust. Self-trust is the foundation of what we take rationality to be."<sup>50</sup> Underconfidence and distrust regarding one's epistemic capacities are thus just as harmful to the acquisition of knowledge as overconfidence.

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<sup>48</sup> Obvious serious conditions include blindness, deafness, Alzheimer's disease, but also rarer afflictions like the visual agnosia suffered by the man after whom Oliver Sack's famous book was named. See Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 8.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example: John Sutton et al., "The Psychology of Memory, Extended Cognition, and Socially Distributed Remembering," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 9 (2010): 521–60.

<sup>50</sup> Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 50–51. Bernard Williams puts it slightly differently, in his marked statement that "reflection can destroy knowledge." See: Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana and Collins, 1985), 148.

Finally, full exercise of the capacities of perception and memory requires opportunities to actually put them to use in such a way that they lead to knowledge about reality. Such opportunities are normally quite widely available, so to see why they are important it may be useful to think of counterexamples where opportunities are scarce. While it may theoretically be possible to deprive someone of virtually every input for sense perception or memory, it is a lot more easy and only slightly less unethical to limit their opportunity to acquire knowledge by deceiving them. Stuff in the world can be rearranged to seem different than it is, senses can be cheated, false memories can be suggested and even, somewhat more rigorously, brainwashed into someone's mind. Some of these tactics, it will become apparent, can also be employed by gaslighters. Only the relative absence of such distorting influences can ensure that the epistemic capacities of perception and memory flourish. But, or so I will argue next, their flourishing is not only valuable from an epistemic perspective.

### 3.2 How perception and memory contribute to autonomy

People who have a sufficient ability to perceive and remember, the right attitudes of open-mindedness, sincerity and trust in their abilities, as well as the opportunity, possess the most crucial instruments to learn about the world and get a grasp on reality. Clearly, then, these capacities are vital for the acquisition of knowledge. However, in this section I want to explore how unimpaired exercise of the capacities and the relationship to reality it generates contributes to autonomous agency. For the sake of this investigation I will initially adopt a simple working definition of personal autonomy, which most theorists could subscribe to. This definition states that to be autonomous is to live one's life according to reasons, values and desires that are in an important sense one's own. By critically discussing the various suggestions that have been done regarding the specific conceptualizations of the conditions for autonomy, I hope to distill a plausible view on the role the epistemic capacities of perception and memory play in the life of an autonomous agent.

Knowledge itself, which is the main product of the full exercise of these capacities, is not usually cited as a prerequisite for personal autonomy. Sarah Buss for example argues that the extent to which we consider an agent autonomous should depend only "on whether *she* determines her response to the considerations that figure in her reasoning – not on how the considerations to which she responds relate to reality, nor on how she came to be aware of these considerations."<sup>51</sup> To be sure, we cannot expect any and all autonomous agents to have perfect and complete knowledge of the world. And to say that someone completely lacks autonomy when they do not understand physics or politics is obviously going too far. But it seems that even value-neutral theories can perfectly accommodate the insight that agents with basic knowledge about the world will overall be better at self-government than agents without. This is also where the distinction between local and global autonomy becomes relevant: at the level of one single decision,

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<sup>51</sup> Sarah Buss, "Valuing Autonomy and Respecting Persons: Manipulation, Seduction, and the Basis of Moral Constraints," *Ethics* 115 (2005): 195–235.



knowledge is not decisive for autonomy. But a person who consistently does not know what she is “getting herself into” can hardly be regarded as fully in charge of her life. The importance of informed decision-making for self-determination is perhaps most prominent in the field of bioethics, where the concept of informed consent is considered synonymous with autonomy.<sup>52</sup> If a person does not really understand what the options she has entail, or perhaps does not even know there are various alternatives to choose from, her deliberation will reflect less self-determination than if she were well aware of all options. Instead of deliberating themselves, many people therefore prefer to defer medical decisions they do not understand to experts. The relevance of knowledge for autonomy is further illustrated by the emphasis various theorists put on the availability of a range of significant options. Joseph Raz convincingly argues that people who can only choose among worthless or repulsive options are less autonomous than those who also have valuable options available.<sup>53</sup> This implies that those who theoretically have significant options, but are not and could not easily become aware of them, suffer a similar diminishing of autonomy. These various considerations all suggest that knowledge about the world stemming from perception and memory can significantly contribute to the extent of agent’s self-governance.

A well-functioning memory is usually regarded as conducive to autonomy in other sense, i.e. through constitutive role in the shaping of personal identity. Locke was the first to famously argue that memories are the constant factor connecting my past self with my current self, and thereby the prime candidate for proving that despite all the changes I have gone through, I am still in a relevant sense the same person I was before. Since Locke, various philosophers have expanded this idea to the notion that autobiographical memories, weaved together in a narrative, are actually what makes me *me*.<sup>54</sup> My personal identity is then considered relevant to autonomy in that it constitutes the “self” of self-governance. Without a sense of who I am, which I base partly on what has happened to me and how I have acted in the past, it will be difficult to give a meaningful direction to my life. I will return to the relation between memory, identity, and autonomy in the chapter on self-knowledge. For now let me just note that the narrative theory of identity is common but not uncontested. Critics have questioned whether the weaving of a narrative is actually the way in which identity is constructed, and whether, if it is the case, that is actually a good thing.<sup>55</sup> But one need not subscribe to a theory of narrativity to acknowledge that, in order to be self-directing with regard not to a single action but to one’s whole life, long-term decisions and plans that are only possible in virtue of the capacity to remember are indispensable.

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<sup>52</sup> Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, “Introduction: Autonomy Refigured,” in *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*, ed. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5.

<sup>53</sup> Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986); Mackenzie and Stoljar, “Introduction: Autonomy Refigured,” 22; Susan Brison, “Relational Autonomy and Freedom of Expression,” in *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*, ed. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 285.

<sup>54</sup> Narrative views have been defended by many, but perhaps most influentially by Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

<sup>55</sup> Galen Strawson, “Against Narrativity,” *Ratio* 17 (2004): 428–52.

Beside these more specific resources generated by perception and memory, knowledge about the world that is relevant to their actions, and memories of facts and experiences, these capacities also establish a firm connection between the epistemic agent and reality. Agents who possess the skills to find out about the world, and the right attitudes of open-mindedness and trust in their own abilities, thereby have access to a valuable means of engaging with the world. Agents lacking such means have no way of orienting themselves, and will be dependent on other's aid to navigate life. They suffer a shortage of epistemic autonomy that is reflected in a deficiency of personal autonomy. Another way of describing the threat faced by agents with a reduced capacity for perception and memory is that they do not have sufficient objectivity. In his book *Liberation from Self*, Bernard Berofsky outlines a conception of autonomy for which the manner in which an agent is immersed and engages with her surroundings is decisive. He contrasts objectivity, a willingness to adjust one's beliefs, values, desires and responses to the factual state of the world, to rigidity, the dogmatic unwillingness or pathological inability to do exhibit such flexibility. The autonomous person is capable of engaging the world "robustly, confidently, vitally, and independently"<sup>56</sup>, and has the ability to "see the world ... for what it is and to respond to it appropriately."<sup>57</sup> On his view, autonomy leans heavily on the full exercise of epistemic capacities like perception, including the open-minded attitudes it presupposes. An autonomous agent is competent, reasonable, and free from pathology. And since physiological and psychological conditions can limit a person's ability to openly interact with the world, autonomy must be understood as a matter of degree. Berofsky himself points out that his view is supported by the core idea of cognitive therapy, i.e. that it is possible to regain control over one's actions and emotional responses by combatting cognitive failures, or misinterpretations of the world.<sup>58</sup>

The capacities of perception and memory help agents gain context for their deliberations, input for and grip on their long-term plans for shaping their lives, and, if they are exercised with a confident and open attitude, crucial anchors for getting a grip on reality. In these various ways, they contribute greatly to an agent's competency of orientating herself and navigating the world, and thus, to her autonomy. That is why I identify the axis of engagement with reality as the first of three which are constitutive of autonomy.<sup>59</sup> In the following two sections I will discuss the gaslighter's techniques for undermining these capacities, and illustrate what the practical consequences for the victim's agency of such a breakdown might entail.

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<sup>56</sup> Bernard Berofsky, *Liberation from Self* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 182.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 202. Elsewhere, Berofsky adds to "seeing the world as it is" the qualification: "or at least as a normal, competent, impartial spectator would." See *ibid.*, 182.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>59</sup> The axis terminology is respectfully borrowed from Catriona Mackenzie, who also identifies three, but only in the realm of relations-to-self. As I argue here and in the next chapter, I regard the engagement with reality and others as vital, as well. Cf. Catriona Mackenzie, "Three Dimensions of Autonomy: A Relational Analysis," in *Autonomy, Oppression, and Gender*, ed. Andrea Veltman and Mark Piper (Oxford University Press, 2014).

### 3.3 How gaslighting undermines the capacities

If full exercise of the capacities for memory and perception requires various abilities, attitudes, and opportunities, and if their full exercise is conducive to autonomy, then it can reasonably be expected that a person's autonomy can be diminished by eliminating or at least impairing those prerequisites. As I will argue, this is precisely what gaslighters do, even if they are not always fully conscious of it. The distinctive feature of gaslighting is that it always undermines a victim's self-trust in her epistemic capacities, and so it always constitutes an assault on the positive attitudes that support them. This section is therefore primarily devoted to a study of how gaslighting accomplishes the above. But before discussing the techniques used to damage self-trust, I want to discuss if and how gaslighting might additionally target the abilities or opportunities needed for perceiving and remembering.

As for the actual physical and mental abilities that exercise of the capacities presuppose: we can be brief about the effects gaslighting has on them, for it has virtually none. As long as people's sensory organs and brain are not damaged by trauma or disease, their ability to perceive and remember is more or less unscathed. Rare exceptions include the removal or sabotage of external aids people use for perceiving and remembering, like their glasses or their calendar. Still, such behavior is rather extreme and unlikely to be displayed by "careless" gaslighters. A more malicious gaslighter could perhaps attempt to take away a victim's opportunity of acquiring some specific piece of knowledge by deceiving him or her. By confining their victim, or manipulating their physical environment to give off a false appearance, they could technically limit the opportunity for perception or memory. Or, more commonly, they could simply suggest a victim had done or experiences something forgotten about it. All these techniques aim at removing or at least obscuring the victim's opportunities for learning about reality. But none of these deceptive means necessarily accompany gaslighting. The only form of deception that is fundamentally connected to the gaslighting effort, and the form which most efficiently makes victims lose touch with reality, is their deception into distrusting their own faculties.

Gaslighting's instruments for undermining a person's trust in their capacities for perception and memory are diverse and plentiful. All the types of deception enumerated above can feature not only as ways to remove opportunities to acquire knowledge, but also and usually more primarily as ways to instill epistemic self-doubt. Suggesting to someone they have committed an act they didn't actually commit does not just serve to deceive some about reality, but more crucially, it also deceives them about themselves, specifically about their capacity to remember. Of course people are most intimately acquainted with their own capacities themselves, and so it not easy to wrongly convince them about their inadequacy. That is why gaslighting is rarely a matter of one isolated instance, or one single lie. Most cases of gaslighting take place over a large stretch of time. Very often, also, more than one person is involved in the process. This I will go into in the following chapter. And small deceptions are often used as pieces of evidence for the suggestion that a person's capacity for perception or memory is deteriorating. But the central instrument

for diminishing someone's trust in those capacities is through denial of her competence and the withholding of recognition.

"You're just imagining things," "Have you forgotten again?" "You're being oversensitive," "I think you're just jealous," and "You're seeing this all wrong!" Every one of these more or less subtle accusations could have been uttered by a gaslighter. They each question the addressed person's capacity for accurate and objective perception or memory, with the objective of having them doubt their own judgment. As demonstrated in the previous chapter when discussing "the double whammy" and the use of gaslighting as an instrument to conceal other abuse, many instances of gaslighting do indeed take a form similar to the above statements. In doing so they show a striking resemblance with the phenomenon Miranda Fricker refers to as *testimonial injustice*. Testimonial injustice is a type of specifically epistemic injustice which "... occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word."<sup>60</sup> The overlap between gaslighting and testimonial injustice consists in the fact that both crucially involve a misrecognition of what the victim is attempting to voice, on the basis of the wrong reasons. Fricker points out that it is possible to misjudge someone's credibility in a certain domain by honest mistake, but that this by itself cannot constitute a case of epistemic injustice. So, if I do not grant a physics professor appropriate credibility for her assessment of quantum mechanics because I mistake her for her twin sister, a pastry chef, I have not committed an injustice. To really be unjust, the credibility deficit must necessarily be a consequence of not just a false belief, but one for which the hearer is ethically and epistemically culpable – say, if I discredit the professor's opinion because she is a woman.<sup>61</sup> As can be inferred from her definition of testimonial injustice, the sort of "wrong reasons" for credibility deficits that Fricker has in mind are negative prejudices.

Some cases of gaslighting, especially the ones that are less advertent than Gregory's evil manipulations are certainly connected to prejudice. The trans woman who "probably misheard" herself being mispronounced, the sexual harassment victim's alleged prudishness over a supposed joke, and Paul Benson's well-meaning but misdiagnosing doctor could all arguably be cases of someone's testimony not being given due credibility on the basis of some negative prejudice against them. The harassed graduate student must have been oversensitive – a negative prejudice against her which is probably an indirect result of a positive prejudice towards her harasser, but a prejudice nonetheless. McKinnon, who tells us of the mispronouncing case, argues explicitly that gaslighting is to be regarded as a species of testimonial injustice. The prejudice in her example would be an identity prejudice: that (trans) women are overly emotional and irrational, resulting in unreliable testimony.<sup>62</sup> Such "identity-prejudicial credibility deficits", which follow an agent around in various spheres of life and are strongly linked to other types of injustice, are considered

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<sup>60</sup> Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1. The word "testimony" is to be taken in a very broad sense, including all cases of telling, in spoken and written form, as well as the expression of an opinion or value judgment. In all these cases a credibility deficit can occur.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>62</sup> About trans women she notes that the prejudice is found to apply "perhaps particularly if they're on estrogen-based hormone replacement therapy," McKinnon, "Allies Behaving Badly," 169.

by Fricker to make up the central cases of testimonial injustice.<sup>63</sup> McKinnon's example illustrates that identity prejudice can play a role in gaslighting; Benson's rather realistic film script should remind us that it very often has. As I noted in chapter 2, sexist stereotypes portraying women as irrational can be used as leverage by gaslighters, while the gaslighting itself can further reinforce them. Moreover, many gaslighting efforts to get a victim acknowledged as insane are advanced by prejudices against mental illness.<sup>64</sup>

Yet many other cases of gaslighting, especially intentional ones, are much harder to construe on Fricker's model.<sup>65</sup> Most intentional gaslighters do not have a prejudice against their victims; a credibility deficit need not even strictly be involved. Abusive gaslighters, like Cheryl's husband Randy, as well as his neighbor and accomplice Sam, do not actually think their victim's testimony is untrue – in fact, they very well *know* it is not. They only want *her* to think it is. By withholding assent and actively contradicting her testimony, they are of course in practice not giving her the credibility she is due. However, there is no prejudice involved, and the issue of credibility only comes into view as a way of purposefully silencing the victim. The same goes for all Gregory's manipulative actions, even though he uses prejudice instrumentally to set up others against his victim. In a recent article, Fricker herself appears to agree that this alone does not suffice to interpret intentional gaslighting as testimonial injustice. She argues for strictly upholding the condition that the credibility deficit must be prejudice-based. This means, as she makes clear, that testimonial injustice is of necessity unintentional. Whenever testimonies are deliberately misrepresented as rationally unfounded, even when prejudice is exploited to do so, something else is going on: there is no actual misjudgment on the part of the perpetrator, and thus no testimonial injustice, but rather “a third-personal intentional gaslighting.”<sup>66</sup>

The differences between gaslighting and testimonial injustice are not to be underestimated. Gaslighting certainly is an injustice of a distinct epistemic nature, but it is not epistemic justice on Fricker's definition, because the role of prejudice is at best secondary. So the relationship between the two phenomena is one of partial overlap at best, such as in those border cases of gaslighting that are not fully intentional. There are good reasons for considering prejudice-based epistemic injustices a separate category from the epistemically-orientated type of manipulation that is gaslighting. The former is obviously an issue of social justice, an inadvertent contribution to the persistence of oppression. The latter, by contrast, is a pathology, often much more individual, with a more explicit oppressive aim.<sup>67</sup> Still, when it comes to the effects both these phenomena have on their victims, gaslighting and testimonial injustice again have a very important feature in common: they both *in practice* result in credibility deficits, even

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<sup>63</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 27.

<sup>64</sup> Abdi Sanati and Michalis Kyratsous, “Epistemic Injustice in Assessment of Delusions,” *Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice* 21 (2015): 479–85.

<sup>65</sup> McKinnon herself admits that “at first look, many cases of gaslighting don't seem clearly to arise from a speaker identity prejudice or stereotype.” However, after arguing that it does in her specific example, she doesn't return to this issue but focuses exclusively on the subtler form of gaslighting she has in mind, which she refers to as “a sub-species of testimonial injustice.” See McKinnon, “Allies Behaving Badly,” 168, 171.

<sup>66</sup> Miranda Fricker, “Evolving Concepts of Epistemic Injustice,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, ed. Ian James Kidd, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus (New York: Routledge, 2017), 53–54.

<sup>67</sup> See *ibid.*

though gaslighters may privately attribute proper credibility to speakers' testimonies. And despite the fact that their reasons for doing so will not necessarily be related to prejudices or stereotypes, they *will* invariably be the wrong reasons: if not epistemically unsound, then at least morally objectionable. Gaslighting and testimonial injustice thereby share one central characteristic: they both wrong a subject in her capacity as a knower.<sup>68</sup> They both, intentionally or not, lead to the victim's questioning her own capacities, thus effectively robbing them of the self-trust required for the full exercise of those capacities. They deprive a person of epistemic authority in her own eyes.

Even though gaslighting does not actually damage someone's ability to see and remember, it does something much more sly and sophisticated, yet equally devastating. It lets a person believe that her abilities are impaired, even when they really aren't. And despite the fact that no physical harm is done, gaslighting still accomplishes its aim of isolating its victim from reality. It can do so through additional deceptions, but it always does so by instilling unwarranted self-distrust in its victim. In the next chapter, I will explore the social aspects of the testimony-related injustice done by gaslighting. But before doing so, I want to illustrate the detrimental impact that gaslighting's undermining of trust in perception and memory can have.

### 3.4 Implications for agency and the relation to reality

As an example of what gaslighting can do to a victim's relation to reality, let us once more consider what gradually happens to Paula through the course of the film. Her first reactions to Gregory's suggestion that she is forgetful is far from indignant. She is just a bit surprised, since she doesn't recognize herself in his description, but figures he must be right. He later hides her brooch and his watch, and moves the painting, all to provide her with false evidence of her feeble memory. He even lets her believe that she wholly imagined a certain past event, as well as, of course, the footsteps overhead and the dimming of the gaslight. Seeing as there is no one else to point out what is happening, or to acknowledge Paula's perceptions and memories for fact, she starts believing she really is slowly going mad. Gregory even succeeds briefly in having her think she confabulated the whole meeting with detective Cameron, rendering her so desperate that she actually requests Gregory let her be taken away. Gregory and Paula's example is fictional, and extreme both in its malevolence, its measures, and its results, but it does illustrate how bad gaslighting *can* get once the erosion of self-trust has set in. Due to Gregory's consistent manipulations, Paula no longer trusts her own senses or memory. She feels she can no longer distinguish perceptions from hallucinations. We can only assume this leaves her feeling very disoriented, desperate, and unstable.

Her feelings of disorientation are very understandable considering the fact that her confidence in herself is so low she can no longer properly exercise the capacities that would normally ground her in reality. Her further alienation from reality will only make her more unstable and more unsure, establishing

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<sup>68</sup> According to Fricker, this is testimonial injustice's "primary harm". See Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 46. I will also return to this harm as well as the overlap and differences between testimonial injustice and gaslighting in 4.3.

a vicious cycle that is typical of gaslighting, and that makes it incredibly difficult to discontinue. In distrusting her own faculties, Paula has disqualified her prime instruments for engaging with and learning about reality. In Berofskian terms, she is not objective. She cannot adjust her beliefs to the facts, since she (thinks she) cannot discern fact from fiction. She cannot display the type of flexibility and confidence required for autonomy, because Gregory has ruined the positive self-regarding attitudes those virtues presuppose. Another way to phrase what she and many other victims of gaslighting experience is epistemic isolation, a state in which virtually all the subject's ties to the outside world through the traditional sources of knowledge are severed and an individual will have lost most of her grip on reality. Paula is epistemically locked up inside of herself with no means left to reach out.

What does it mean then, to lose one's grip on reality? To be locked off from the world like that? Besides the terrible feelings of isolation loneliness such a condition must engender, it means a loss of epistemic autonomy. The victim is deprived of the authority to make reliable judgments about reality. Disoriented and unable to rely on one's own epistemic faculties, the natural reaction to disorientation is to look for an anchor, for something to provide direction. Uncoincidentally, the one thing which will seem able to do so in the progressed stages of gaslighting, the one thing we might still trust when we do not trust ourselves and which still holds authority over us is the gaslighter himself. This is another way in which gaslighting goes from bad to worse: the self-doubt fostered by the gaslighter renders the victim increasingly dependent, which again makes it easier to further diminish her self-trust, etc. Now, complete epistemic self-reliance is an unrealistic and misguided ideal, for we are always to some extent dependent on the knowledge of others, as I will explain in 4.1. But while epistemic autonomy certainly does not require dismissing all epistemic authorities, it does entail identifying and acknowledging the proper authorities to the best of one's abilities. And, problematically, this is extremely difficult for advance-stage gaslightees because of their self-doubt. As Zagzebski puts it: "A being without self-trust is not autonomous because the basic norm of self-management is conscientious reflection, and a being without self-trust cannot trust conscientious reflection."<sup>69</sup> So, the epistemic autonomy needed to stop the further erosion of self-trust is itself dependent on that very same self-trust which is lacking.

Of course, it is not just a person's epistemic autonomy that is dismantled by gaslighting. Epistemic autonomy itself is often considered conducive or even essential to personal autonomy.<sup>70</sup> And as gaslighting deprives its victim of the main epistemic resources, it also deprives her of some of the most crucial resources of agency. Through deception, manipulation, and deliberate misrecognition, gaslighting undermines the attitudes of open-mindedness and especially self-trust that are vital for the full exercise of the epistemic capacities of perception and memory. In some cases, it additionally even corrupts or

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<sup>69</sup> Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority*, 237.

<sup>70</sup> Thus Elizabeth Fricker believes epistemic autonomy makes us more "practically independent" and Zagzebski notes that "autonomy of the will presupposes autonomy of the intellect" and that it is "unlikely that we can autonomously make a choice unless the beliefs upon which the choice is based are autonomous." See Elizabeth Fricker, "Testimony and Epistemic Autonomy," in *The Epistemology of Testimony*, ed. Jennifer Lackey and Ernest Sosa (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 234; Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority*, 24.

removes the aids and opportunities that the proper use of these capacities requires. By severely impairing the exercise of perception and memory, gaslighters isolate their victims from forms of knowledge and relating to the world that are absolutely integral to their personal autonomy. As such, gaslighting has devastating effects on a person's agency, alienating and isolating her from reality. It thus subverts the first axis of engagement constitutive of autonomy. In the next two chapters I will show how a victim's diminished self-trust and increased dependency will tend to also alienate her from other people, thus tragically only further exacerbating the disintegration of her autonomy.



## 4. Gaslighting and the Relation to Others

The consequences of gaslighting for someone's relation to reality, and her confidence in her own senses and memory can be far-reaching. But perception and memory are not the only sources of knowledge, and the relation to reality is not the only axis of engagement relevant to autonomy. For gaslighting to be effective, it will need to also corrupt its victim's relation to reality. In this chapter, I will argue that it does so by frustrating her participation in knowledge exchange. Being able to share knowledge and exchange testimonies in trustful conversations provides a person with important epistemic and agential resources. In other words, it is vital to autonomy. However, proper participation in this epistemic practice is itself dependent on having the right competencies, attitudes, and getting the opportunity to participate at all. Gaslighting often targets each one of these preconditions, sophisticatedly excluding its subject from trustful conversation and isolating her from others. This chapter aims to explore exactly how gaslighting accomplishes the victim's alienation from other people, and how it thereby contributes to the undermining of her autonomy. It will follow the same structure as the previous chapter: First, the epistemic practice itself will be analyzed in terms of the norms and skills it presupposes. Then, I will evaluate how free and full participation in the practice contributes to autonomy, and how gaslighting prevents it. Finally, I will review what the practical implications of this impairing effect amount to for the victim.

### 4.1 The practice of knowledge exchange

Early modern philosophers unanimously held that acquiring beliefs purely through the use of one's own faculties was the superior, or even the only way to gain knowledge. Since then, numerous theorists have pointed out how few of our beliefs are actually arrived at in such a primary, individual manner, and how many are, by contrast, acquired through the testimony of others. From the most rudimentary facts, like our own date of birth, to the most sophisticated scientific theories: most of what we know, we know through hearsay rather than personal experience.<sup>71</sup> Leaving questions of justification of this type of knowledge aside, I will dedicate this section to a further study of the *practice* of knowledge exchange. What exactly does the practice entail, and what does it presuppose, both in terms of the demands it places on its participants, and the norms that govern the practice itself?

Central to the exchange of knowledge is the giving of testimony. In the narrow sense, to provide a testimony is to recount an experience, and in colloquial usage the term has the rather formal connotation of the personal accounts given in judicial courts. But the phenomenon I have in mind when speaking of testimonial exchange is much broader in range, including not only the provision of official statements, but also the expression of one's opinions and views, the voicing of one's beliefs, and the simple act of telling

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<sup>71</sup> John Hardwig, "The Role of Trust in Knowledge," *The Journal of Philosophy* 88 (1991): 693–708; Mark Owen Webb, "Why I Know About As Much As You: A Reply to Hardwig," *Journal of Philosophy* 90 (1993): 260–70.

someone something. Such interactions need not be limited to the spoken word, either, but could equally well be captured in writing, or even in symbols, icons, or images, as long as their meaning is more or less clear to the intended audience. What *is* important is that the exchange is dialogical, rather than monological: for the exchange to really be an interaction rather than a sham, it must consist of more than preaching in the void, or a one-way transfer of knowledge. There must be an opportunity for the hearer to react to what is said. He may affirm or contradict the given statement, provide critical comments, request proof or further explanation. In exchange, he must listen. As soon as the hearer decides to stop listening, be it out of sheer boredom or to prove a point, the conversation is thereby effectively terminated.<sup>72</sup> Full participation in the exchange of knowledge then involves giving your testimony, listening to the testimonies of others, as well as giving and receiving feedback. At a minimum, this encompasses receiving recognition for your opinions and your stance as a participant in the conversation, and being corrected when you are wrong (or rather, when others think you are wrong). But these relatively simple constraints turn out to presuppose a lot about the norms of conversation and the relation between participants in a testimonial exchange.

Philosophers of language such as Donald Davidson and Paul Grice have formulated various principles governing dialogues, including the principle of charity, which prescribes an interpreting each other's words in a way which maximizes agreement and the cooperative principle, which states that contributions must be made clearly, truthfully, and only if relevant and informative.<sup>73</sup> Such principles mainly specify how our utterances should be made in the context of a conversation. But that context itself would not be possible without certain constraints on how we perceive and treat others. The mere fact that you and I engage in conversation implies a basic mutual respect for each other as conversational partners. This shows in the requirement of actually listening to what the other has to say, not because they are necessarily right, but because we believe they might have something meaningful to contribute. Whether they offer valuable information, an original perspective, or a critical comment, we listen because we take them seriously as speakers, and as epistemic agents. Consider, for instance, the difference between the typical way one would listen to a teacher's explanation of some complex matter, a good friend's personal advice, and a local doom merchant's apocalyptic prophecies. Only in the first two cases do we ascribe our interlocutors full epistemic agency. We listen because we want to learn: the teacher is an authority. We listen because we value our friend's opinion: we trust her. Unless we are planning to fully engage with the doomsayer's arguments, we listen to him instead merely for our amusement, or perhaps out of sheer anthropological fascination.

The suggestion that conversation implies not only clarity and truthfulness but also a principle of mutuality and basic equality has been expressed by multiple theorists. Habermas famously argues that

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<sup>72</sup> The same of course applies in exchanges between multiple people as soon as all hearers stop listening.

<sup>73</sup> Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 183–98; H. Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

communicative action requires power neutrality.<sup>74</sup> Anthony Simon Laden distinguishes as conversational norms those of intelligibility, good faith, and reciprocity.<sup>75</sup> David Cockburn studies the role played by the relationship between speaker and hearer when the latter believes the former's testimony, emphasizing the importance of trust and holding one another accountable.<sup>76</sup> The trust at stake is twofold: on the one hand, we trust someone ethically, as being honest with us; on the other, we trust someone epistemically, as someone who knows what they are talking about. A few exceptions aside, we expect ourselves and others to abide by these norms when entering a dialogical exchange. Part of making a dialogue an exchange at all is that we can and often do call each other out on deceitfulness and inaccuracy. On the part of the speaker, this requires a minimal amount of openness to criticism in return.

But conversation demands more from its participants than the mere adoption of the right attitude towards one's interlocutor. Trustful dialogue is not a given if we put any one speaker and hearer together. After all, there are reasons underlying our trust in our friends, and our dismissal of the doomsayer's testimony. If we do not ascribe someone the ability or authority to properly relay their experience, the conversation stops, if it has ever begun at all. Full participation in trustful dialogue thus also presupposes that a speaker is epistemically and verbally competent. For his or her testimony to be reliable, a speaker needs to have the ability to learn about a fact, memorize it, and communicate it. That means a speaker must possess, and be considered to possess, the epistemic capacities of perception and memory considered in the previous chapter, as well as communicative skills. Their statement must be made in a clear enough way to be understood. And beside the other-regarding attitudes of trust and openness that were already discussed, full participation requires a basic amount of confidence in oneself. At its best, insufficient self-trust will lead a speaker to communicate less effectively. Mumbling and stuttering are hardly conducive to the clarity of a message. As people who suffer from fear of public speaking can attest, anxiety and insecurity can almost "choke" someone. At its worst, people who do not believe in the value of their own contribution or in their capacity to voice it will refrain from participating altogether. On the other side of the dialogical arena, hearers can also choose to exclude a speaker who is deemed incompetent or untrustworthy from participating in knowledge exchange. As we have seen in the discussion on testimonial injustice, this can sometimes take systematic forms. Norms like clarity, truthfulness and mutual trust sound like wonderful principles on paper, but they can also be employed as an exclusionary instrument. This is especially true where the principles are relatively open to personal interpretation. The doomsayer's words are meaningless, for he is "crazy". A "notorious liar" is quickly dismissed. And it could easily be thought that someone who stammers must for some reason be unsure about their own message, and therefore less reliable.

Participating in the exchange of knowledge thus involves many implicit norms, no matter how simple and ordinary the practice may sometimes seem. Be it through the practice of peer review or

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<sup>74</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981).

<sup>75</sup> Anthony Simon Laden, *Reasoning: A Social Picture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>76</sup> David Cockburn, "Trust in Conversation," *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* 3 (2014): 47–68.

neighborhood gossip, knowledge exchange presupposes a complex of competencies and attitudes. It requires that a speaker is informed, sincere, to-the-point, confident, and at least minimally articulate. To fully participate, a speaker must, finally, get the opportunity to speak at all. But where the dialogue is opened, it is also inherently reciprocal, requires speaking as well as listening, giving as well as receiving criticism, respect, ethical and epistemic trust, and recognition of each other as partners in the exchange. From this it should be clear that the exchange of knowledge is not just an epistemic practice, but also a social practice.<sup>77</sup> Participation is about much more than gathering information; it is about being acknowledged as a being endowed with reason, as a knower, and as an agent.<sup>78</sup>

## 4.2 How participation in knowledge exchange contributes to autonomy

From the determination of knowledge exchange as a normative practice in which not only epistemic, but also important social goods are exchanged, the outlines of the practice as one conducive to autonomy become discernible. This section consists of a brief investigation of the various ways in which trustful dialogue contributes to the personal autonomy of the participating agent. Building upon an extensive body of literature on autonomy, I will analyze how many of the resources that are explicitly generated in such exchanges, as well as the implicit attitudes identified above, support both the development and exercise of autonomous agency.

The goods that are most obviously transferred in the exchanges we are concerned with are information and knowledge. First and foremost we acquire many beliefs through the testimony of others. It has even been suggested that the fact we have somewhat steady beliefs at all is in virtue of trustful conversation. Bernard Williams argues that this context prompts us to “steady the mind”, that is, to commit ourselves to believe only those propositions which merit it, and which we expect to believe in the future as well. The fact that another person relies on me to tell the truth creates a pressure for me to avoid all too impulsive assertions, lies, and wishful thinking. So, in Williams’ words: “It is the presence and needs of others that help us construct even our factual beliefs.”<sup>79</sup> As for the relation between knowledge and autonomy, the previous chapter established that knowledge can steady the relation between the agent and reality, helping her navigate a complex world. Moreover, knowledge enables informed deliberation and decision-making.<sup>80</sup> Finally, many epistemologists have in recent years come to support a mild version of the postmodernist intuition that knowledge is an instrument of power, acknowledging that the decision to engage in or refrain from the transfer of information may serve to exclude people from or include them

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<sup>77</sup> This statement is rather trivial from the perspective of social epistemology, which takes the social dimension of knowledge and knowledge practices as its starting point. But the recognition of that dimension is relatively new. For further discussion see the introduction in Adrian Haddock, Alan Millar, and Duncan Pritchard, eds., *Social Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>78</sup> A similar point is made in Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 44.

<sup>79</sup> Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 194.

<sup>80</sup> See 3.2. This very brief summary a reconstruction of the views of Joseph Raz and Bernard Berofsky discussed in more detail there. See also Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*; Berofsky, *Liberation from Self*.

in one's circle. Examples of such social demarcation vary from intellectual elitism among the university educated population and the phenomenon of dog-whistle politics to the decision whom to share intimate one's secrets with. Being accepted as a member of a community will often involve certain privileges, such as the access to even more "inside information", the possession of a network, and thus the further acquisition of the types of social goods associated with knowledge exchange. While the value of the epistemic benefits of participation in trustful dialogue is not to be underestimated, their implications for autonomy largely follow from the discussion of firsthand knowledge in the previous chapter. What distinguishes knowledge acquired through testimony is the social interaction as the process by which it is obtained and the community membership that enables it. On the most basic level, this means that conversation with others can help build intellectual confidence, at least when others agree. But the type of recognition that only social interaction can offer is broader and more fundamental than merely receiving confirmation for individual beliefs, no matter how valuable that alone may already be for someone's self-trust. It is this social dimension that is at the focus of this chapter, as it forms a context in which many agential resources are generated and distributed.

The second resource offered by knowledge exchange is then the membership of a community as such, which may in itself be considered a social good. It can further provide that member with a sense of belonging and a feeling of safety, strengthening the agent's self-trust even in contexts external to that of their own particular community. Even communities with obvious internal inequalities and injustices do often display loyalty to lower-rank group members when under external threat, like an older brother defending at school the younger sibling he torments at home. As long as this loyalty is not completely overshadowed by the internal oppression, a member of a community presumably feels more confident knowing she can depend on her fellow members for back-up when needed. Just the belonging to a loyal community can be of significance to a person's self-trust. Perhaps even more important is the context of trust and recognition that such a community can and often does provide. A speaker and a hearer acknowledge each other as epistemic agents, as knowers or potential knowers. The former trusts the latter to listen, to correct him where needed, and to treat the conveyed information with appropriate care; a hearer in turn trusts a speaker to be reliable and competent; both participants trust each other to be respectful and to adhere to the norms of conversation. Such mutual trust is crucial for autonomy in at least two ways: first, it provides a fruitful environment for self-expression and self-definition; second, to be trusted by others is an important precondition for learning to trust ourselves. In the remainder of this chapter I will elaborate on these two statements, which I consider to be related.

To begin with, it seems intuitive enough that a trusted hearer is the preferred audience for acts of self-expression. In displaying what I consider to be my true self, am making myself quite vulnerable. If I suspect an audience will scorn me or laugh at me for who I really am, I might choose to be less sincere in my self-presentation. For acts of self-definition I similarly trust others to appropriately recognize my identity, and to criticize me if and only if they suspect I have been disingenuous. But how important are self-expression and self-definition for autonomous agency? On the level of "local" autonomy, that is

autonomy regarding a single act, trait, or desire, the decision to refrain from expressing who one really is in a statement or action may not seem crucial. If I sincerely consider all options and possible outcomes and decide it is best for me to do something I would not normally do, because it is dangerous for me to do so in these circumstances, that decision can well be regarded an autonomous one. But if such situations occur very often during my existence, my “global autonomy”, i.e. my being in charge of my whole life, will obviously suffer. If I am consistently prevented from doing what I otherwise would have, simply out of fear, I never actually get to translate into action what I really believe and value. Diana Meyers, in her influential 1989 book, argues that what we call autonomy is in fact a cluster of competencies enabling self-discovery, self-definition, and self-direction.<sup>81</sup> To be self-governing, a person needs to find out who that self really is: what they really believe and value, and then either translate their answer into action or, if they are unsatisfied with the answer, adapt until they are. The point is that for Meyers, who defends a relational conception of autonomy, these competencies are rarely exercised in isolation.<sup>82</sup> As Meyers puts it: “Often... people need the additional stimulation of other’s interpretations of their situation in order to notice self-referential responses or in order to find plausible explanations of these responses. When this is so, conversation becomes central to the self-reading process.”<sup>83</sup> Her suggestion is that even for gaining self-knowledge about who we really are, over and above introspection, we usually need feedback from other people to avoid self-deception and wishful thinking. I will get back to this point in the next chapter.

Some relational theorists hold that dialogue is essential to autonomy in another aspect. Andrea Westlund and Paul Benson both offer slightly different versions of the thesis that to be autonomous at all is to hold oneself answerable to others. For Benson, this comes down to agents taking ownership of their actions, by claiming authority to speak for themselves.<sup>84</sup> For Westlund, what is crucial is that an agent is willing to defend herself, her conduct and her decisions against external criticism. As she puts it: “Autonomous agents will, in one way or another, manifest responsiveness to justificatory challenges and their disposition to do so is partly constitutive of their status as self-governing.”<sup>85</sup> In other words, for both these thinkers, to be autonomous is to be open to a dialogical situation in which one contributes one’s own perspective on oneself and can expect to receive feedback. Though Westlund seems to suggest this process can sometimes take place without the help of others in a merely hypothetical dialogue, the traditional, non-hypothetical dialogue with another person still is the archetypical context both thinkers envision for self-authorization. That makes her theory only mildly relational, but still more accommodating

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<sup>81</sup> Diana Tietjens Meyers, *Self, Society and Personal Choice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989). See esp. pp. 76-97.

<sup>82</sup> The insight relational theorists share is that autonomy is not a private endeavor, but that it is actually (partly) constituted by the positive relationships we have with other people. See Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, eds., *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>83</sup> Meyers, *Self, Society and Personal Choice*, 79.

<sup>84</sup> Paul Benson, “Taking Ownership: Authority and Voice in Autonomous Agency,” in *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism*, ed. John Christman and Joel Anderson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 101-26.

<sup>85</sup> Andrea Westlund, “Rethinking Relational Autonomy,” *Hypatia* 24 (2009): 40.

to the social dimensions of autonomy than traditional theories, which only emphasize critical self-evaluation. Without trustful dialogue, we would have nothing to base our inner critical reflections on, and again, nothing to keep us from wishful thinking.

The relevance of trustful dialogue with others to the development and exercise of skills and competencies that constitute self-governance is thus acknowledged by many philosophers. Opinions differ when it comes to the matter *how* indispensable other people actually are for acquiring and expressing an authentic self-image, but for the current purpose it suffices to state that conversation can and very often does enhance our opportunity for self-expression, self-definition and self-authorization.<sup>86</sup> That leaves the question how others' trust in us contributes to or even constitutes our trust in ourselves and our autonomy. Part of the answer can be found in recognition theory, part in applied ethics. Basing themselves on Hegelian metaphysics, recognition theorists claim that positive relations with others are essential for the development of self-regarding attitudes and, thereby, the autonomous subject. Axel Honneth specifically redefines personal autonomy in the context of the intersubjective constitution of the subject, analyzing self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem as arising from various forms of recognition, namely love, rights, and solidarity.<sup>87</sup> Trust is a complex concept and as a form of recognition it does not straightforwardly fall into one of Honneth's categories. In conferring trust, we may be expressing our love for the other person, especially if there is little evidence available to actually ground our trust. When we trust someone to be honest, we show respect for the other person's moral agency. When we trust someone to be epistemically competent, we are recognizing them as knowers, thus further grounding their self-respect, or sometimes even as experts; then we ground their self-esteem. All these forms of trust can have a place in the type of knowledge exchange that is trustful conversation, and all the types of positive self-regarding attitudes they support contribute to personal autonomy.

The importance of self-trust for autonomy is further underlined in various works of feminist (bio)ethics.<sup>88</sup> Carolyn McLeod's, in her book on reproductive autonomy, describes how women whose feelings regarding childbearing or miscarriage do not find uptake will often experience confusion regarding those feelings, and thus, diminished self-trust. She argues that self-trust is socially constituted by the feedback we receive from others, and that self-trust in turn is key to autonomy. The examples she discusses concern women who doubt the appropriateness of their own emotional responses to and views about pregnancy, and are therefore much more likely to defer important decisions to their partners or doctors.<sup>89</sup> McLeod's insight in this domain could easily be applied to oppressed people deferring virtually all

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<sup>86</sup> See chapter 5.

<sup>87</sup> Axel Honneth, "Decentered Autonomy: The Subject after the Fall," in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 181–93; Axel Honneth, *Kampf um Anerkennung: zur moralischen Grammatik sozialer Konflikte* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992).

<sup>88</sup> Trudy Govier, "Self-Trust, Autonomy, and Self-Esteem," *Hypatia* 8 (1993): 99–120; Onora O'Neill, *Autonomy and Trust in Bioethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Sara Goering, "Postnatal Reproductive Autonomy: Promoting Relational Autonomy and Self-Trust in New Parents," *Bioethics* 23 (2009): 9–19; Marina Oshana, "Trust and Autonomous Agency," *Res Philosophica* 91 (2014): 431–47.

<sup>89</sup> Carolyn McLeod, *Self-Trust and Reproductive Autonomy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002). McLeod's view is a strong endorsement of insights from relational theory.

decisions to their oppressors. But the relation between being trusted by others and autonomy can perhaps be construed even more straightforwardly. Quite obviously, when I receive no trust from others, I keep getting the message that I am somehow untrustworthy. When I hear it repeated often enough by the relevant people, it seems only reasonable to give credence to their verdict, to accept that I am undeserving of trust, and to give up my trust in myself as well.<sup>90</sup>

From a developmental perspective, if we have never been trusted to make our own decisions, we have never had the opportunity to become morally autonomous at all. By way of illustration, imagine a child who, as in the sci-fi horror series *Black Mirror* episode “Arkangel”, has always been monitored by her parents in all her actions, and is corrected whenever she does something wrong. When she is in the kitchen attempting to steal a cookie from the kitchen cupboard, her mother is in the living room observing her every move through a tablet, and upon seeing what her daughter is up to, tells her “no” before she can even get to the cookie jar. The girl is never trusted, never given the responsibility to decide for herself, and has thus effectively grown up without ever learning to take responsibility and be autonomous.<sup>91</sup> The same considerations have led Annette Baier to equate trust in the social world with “the starting point and very basis of morality”.<sup>92</sup>

To develop the capacities and attitudes that autonomy requires, and to fully exercise them, we need the relations of mutual trust and recognition that are presupposed in trustful conversation. We need to be able to trust others to express ourselves freely and to rely on their testimonies; others need to trust us so that we can learn to trust ourselves. The practice of knowledge exchange is the prime locus of such trustful conversation. It does not only provide us with additional knowledge, but also with a community acknowledging us as a moral and epistemic agent. However, it is precisely the emphasis on the cruciality of recognition and positive personal relationships for autonomy that also highlights our vulnerability to them.<sup>93</sup> Because as the previous section has shown, trustful conversation cannot be taken for granted. It presupposes skills and attitudes of openness, trust and confidence that are not a given for everyone. Although increased self-trust is a result of dialogical exchanges that go well, whether one can fully participate is itself dependent on a starting level of self-confidence. So if feedback, respect and trust are consistently absent or abused, we can expect it to have seriously damaging consequences for the agent who is attempting to self-define and her autonomy. In the following two sections I will argue that this is exactly what happens in gaslighting.

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<sup>90</sup> “The relevant people” are those who have a certain authority over me. Who they are will depend on the circumstances: they might be a relative majority, people with direct power, experts, or simply people who are close to me.

<sup>91</sup> Jodie Foster, “Arkangel,” *Black Mirror* (Los Gatos, CA: Netflix, 2017).

<sup>92</sup> Annette Baier, “Demoralization, Trust, and the Virtues,” in *Setting the Moral Compass: Essays by Women Philosophers*, ed. Cheshire Calhoun (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 180.

<sup>93</sup> Some very interesting elaborations of this idea can be found in Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds, eds., *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).



### 4.3 How gaslighting prevents full participation in knowledge exchange

I have so far argued that the background of trust against which knowledge exchange takes place is of crucial importance for the development and sustainment of autonomous agency. It may already be obvious at first glance that gaslighting is detrimental to the victim's proper participation in that practice and to the mutual trust it presupposes. The challenge now is to identify the various techniques gaslighters consciously or unconsciously employ to accomplish their victim's exclusion from trustful conversation. I will take up this challenge here by first going into the ways they ensure the isolation of the victim; then I will discuss how they tend to impair others' trust in the gaslightee; and finally, I will outline methods by which they further erode the victim's self-trust in the context of knowledge exchange.

One of Gregory's most strikingly inhumane endeavors is that he does not allow Paula to leave the house or others beside himself and the household staff to enter it. Although this is a gradual process, Paula herself is never really given the opportunity to protest, and when she is, her objections are quickly brushed aside as ramblings. Gregory's external justification for this grave measure is Paula's condition demands she rest, but in fact, he clearly only does it to control whom his wife gets to talk to. Such plain imprisonment of gaslightees may be rare in reality, but there are many more sophisticated ways to isolate people that do not require their actual confinement. Manipulating them to distrust others or getting others to avoid them will also achieve the desired result of preventing the victim from engaging in conversation with other people. Abusive gaslighters may even implicitly or explicitly threaten a third party not to get involved.<sup>94</sup> If victims never even have the opportunity to take part in knowledge exchanges, they are prevented from finding out the truth about reality, and most of all, the truth about themselves. Reducing the social contact of their victims is an important instrument for gaslighters to maintain power over their victims. In practice, it will be very difficult to inconspicuously deprive someone of all interaction with other human beings. But gaslighters have other tactics at their disposal for controlling their victims' social environment.

Getting people to avoid someone may be an effective way of preventing conversation; getting those same people to mistrust the victim can be just as effective for ensuring any conversation that *is* started lacks the mutual trust that renders it psychologically valuable. In the movie, this is what Gregory does with Nancy, the new housemaid, when he tells her he does not want her bothering "the mistress", who is "inclined to be rather highly strung", and that the previous maid was let off for breaking that rule. He keeps emphasizing to her how particular Paula is about "everything being correct", and of course, that she is not well.<sup>95</sup> All his priming leads Nancy to avoid Paula when she can, and to behave very distantly or even hostile when she cannot. It is unsurprising, then, that a mutual distrust develops between the women, precluding them ever speaking in confidence. Paula never confides in Nancy when she grows increasingly suspicious of the sounds in the house, and so Nancy can never confirm her experience or give her

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<sup>94</sup> See for example the case of Randy, Cheryl and Sam I discussed in chapter 2.

<sup>95</sup> Cukor, *Gaslight*.

perceptual and mental abilities any recognition.<sup>96</sup> As always, the movie *Gaslight* merely offers a stylized and dramatically enhanced depiction of what happens in many real-life instances of gaslighting. Rumors of mental instability are easily started, especially if the victim has a history with psychological problems.<sup>97</sup> And the consequences are dire. This type of “third-personal gaslighting”<sup>98</sup> does not only prevent the victim from getting the trust and recognition they need to regain self-trust, it also thereby renders them even more (and more exclusively) dependent on their manipulators. Finally, it can actually exacerbate their self-distrust in their capacity to participate in conversation and knowledge exchange when they come to feel the lack of uptake they receive is due to a fault on their own behalf.

Socially isolating someone and turning others against them are often part of the gaslighting process, but are they are not essential components. Primarily, as I have already indicated, gaslighting aims to reduce someone’s self-trust by having them doubt their epistemic capacities. In the most general sense, this is accomplished by a less than full acknowledgement of their standing as epistemic subjects. The two most direct ways this happens in practice with regard to the capacity of participation in knowledge exchange is again through credibility deficits and through withholding recognition for the victim’s ability to communicate. Someone whose self-trust in his or her capacities for perception and memory has been undermined might already refrain from contributing to knowledge exchanges. But gaslighters can also lead them to doubt their communicative capacities. In order to do so, they could abuse the norms of conversation I enumerated in section 4.1 by falsely accusing their victims of not abiding by those norms. People’s contributions are sometimes dismissed because of being related in an “overemotional” way.<sup>99</sup> The gaslighter can use a victim’s emotionality against him or her not only by refusing to give credibility to their assessment of a situation, but also by refusing to take them seriously in conversation at all as long as they are agitated. Understandably, such a dismissal will usually only lead to further agitation, thus having a self-fulfilling effect. In this manner, someone’s contribution to a conversation may be dismissed on the basis of the way they express themselves, even though the content of their expression may have been valid.<sup>100</sup> In certain conversational contexts, such a dismissal may be justified, especially when temporary, as for example a courtroom hearing may be adjourned when the witness is too emotional to finish a statement at that time. But when the content of the speaker’s utterance is relevant and actual knowledge exchange is aspired, their testimony will eventually have to be heard. Other reasons for dismissal include a speaker’s

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<sup>96</sup> Elizabeth, the cook, actually seems to like Paula. However, she interacts much less with her due to her function, and is equally unable to confirm the sounds coming from the attic, as she is hard of hearing. She does suspect Paula is not actually ill, but never tells her mistress, presumably out of fear of losing her job.

<sup>97</sup> Arguably this is due to negative stereotypes of the mentally ill, resulting in overgeneralization of their unreliability in certain domains. See Sanati and Kyratsous, “Epistemic Injustice in Assessment of Delusions.”

<sup>98</sup> This is the term Miranda Fricker uses to describe the inducing of prejudice in a third party so that they give diminished credibility to the victim’s statements. (Miranda Fricker, “Evolving Concepts of Epistemic Injustice,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, ed. Ian James Kidd, José Medina, and Gaile M. Pohlhaus (New York: Routledge, 2017), 53–54.

<sup>99</sup> Unjustified accusations of emotionality are easily associated with gender prejudice, but they could also be directed against children. Then again, they can also be unrelated to stereotypes altogether.

<sup>100</sup> This, again, is very closely related to prejudicial testimonial injustice, though in gaslighting the injustice is not usually based on prejudice. Cf. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*.

contribution being irrelevant, dishonest, unclear, or uninformed – in principle all these reasons can be valid, but the point is that gaslighters *falsely* accuse their victims of these transgressions with the purpose of instilling self-doubt.

It is worth pointing out here that through lying about the status of someone's arguments and their status as a knower and a speaker, or indeed through committing fallacies to make a speaker doubt the validity of their own words, the gaslighter him- or herself is really the one not abiding by the norms of conversation and, worse, betraying the trust of their interlocutor. As I have demonstrated, every form of knowledge exchange presupposes at least minimal amount of mutual trust between speaker and hearer. But gaslighters are not just random others to their victims; they are usually lovers, family members, close friends, or other people whom they love, deeply admire, and as such trust. It is bad enough to be lied to by a stranger, but to be lied to by someone we know and trust intimately is a particular kind of betrayal, and one we are much less likely to actually discover precisely because we tend to assess our friends' judgement of us less critically than that of strangers. As Harry Frankfurt notes:

We suppose that our friends are generally truthful with us; and we take this pretty much for granted. We tend to trust whatever they say; and we do so, mainly, not on the basis of a particular calculation that they are telling the truth, but because we feel comfortable with them. As we familiarly put it, "we just know they wouldn't lie to us."<sup>101</sup>

It is by virtue of the trust they betray that gaslighters are able to succeed in their efforts at all. It takes a very self-assured person to hold their own in the face of repeated accusations that one is an unreasonable or incompetent interlocutor, but it would likely take a sociopath to do so if the accuser was a close friend. Arguably only someone with excessive self-trust would be arrogant enough not to start doubting themselves when their environment kept telling them their judgment was off. This shows why it is so difficult to discover, let alone stop the gaslighting; if you ever surmised anything, the reasonable response would be to feel paranoid rather than to continue suspecting your friend. And even if you were to discover what had happened, the gaslighter would still have succeeded at least partly in undermining your self-trust, owing to Adrienne Rich's insight that "to discover that one has been lied to in a personal relationship leads one to feel a little crazy."<sup>102</sup> The betrayal itself is enough to have you doubt your judgment.

In the previous chapter we established how gaslighters make their victims doubt their own perceptions and memories. Such doubt by itself could suffice to prevent a person from contributing to knowledge exchange at all, especially as a speaker. The insecurity is only worsened when the gaslighter attacks a person's trust in their capacity for participating in trustful conversation by questioning their communicative abilities, their intentions, their honesty and their interpretation of social cues. And if all this still does not compel the victim to avoid trustful conversation with anyone but the gaslighter, the

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<sup>101</sup> Harry Frankfurt, "The Faintest Passion," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 66 (1992): 7.

<sup>102</sup> Adrienne Rich, "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying," in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* (New York: Norton, 1979), 191.

victimizer could still resort to deceiving and manipulating others such that they will avoid the victim. Their distant behavior will almost definitely only further diminish the victim's self-confidence, thus completing the vicious circle. The practical consequences of missing out on so many valuable resources for autonomy can, as I will illustrate now, be truly devastating.

#### 4.4 Implications for agency and the relation to others

Consider the following, non-fictional case, recounted by a psychologist:

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. When she complains to her colleagues, they look at her in bewilderment. "But he always praises you to the skies," they insist. "Why would he say such nice things if he was out to get you?" 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?<sup>103</sup>

How Liz's story continues will depend greatly on whether she has people she can trust to be on her side and support her through this absurd situation. In real life, she did: her husband and friends. Still, she remarked to her therapist that after a few months of her dealing with her boss's manipulations, everyone was getting pretty tired of hearing about her work problems.<sup>104</sup> Even though Liz's case ended as well as it possibly could have (with her finding a new job), she had gotten to a point where she was obsessing over her boss, to such an extent that, as Stern notes, she felt like he had become "the most important person in her life" – that is, more important than her friends and family.<sup>105</sup> This alone could have sufficed to alienate those around her so much that she would have lost the support she initially received. The fact that the gaslighting she was subjected to was restricted to her professional life was not even necessarily to her advantage: had she had less trusting friends, they could have quite easily doubted her story for its absurdity and thought that at the very least she must have been exaggerating. Things would have been much worse still if Liz had had no social contacts outside of the office, thus relying exclusively on her co-workers' judgment of the situation. Seeing as they had some evidence to side with her boss, this latter scenario

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<sup>103</sup> Stern, *The Gaslight Effect*, 10.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

would have left her extremely isolated and likely depressed. In all these possible continuations of the story, the victim's access to and participation in trustful conversation is, to a greater or lesser extent, diminished. Above, I have indicated how the capacity for such participation and a person's self-trust in her competence contributes to autonomous agency. Using Liz's example, I now want to look at how missing out on the development and exercise of that capacity would affect a victim in practice.

In chapter 3 I have outlined the main differences between gaslighting and testimonial injustice. But one central characteristic they have in common is that they both in some way exclude their object from trustful conversation.<sup>106</sup> Most obviously this will always mean the victim misses out epistemically, for important sources of knowledge are out of reach when testimonial exchange is minimized.<sup>107</sup> I will therefore build upon Fricker's analysis of what happens to a victim of epistemic injustice to see what the practical implications of gaslighting are. In the end, I think that despite all the differences, there is an overlap between both phenomena that invites further consideration of the unintentionality condition Fricker puts on epistemic injustices. Returning now to the example of Liz, by being kept out of meetings she loses her involvement in company decisions as well as access to confidential information about clients and policy. Less straightforwardly, we would miss out on feedback to help us, in Williams' terms, "steady the mind" and form beliefs at all. But, as Fricker points out, it is not just knowledge per se which becomes less accessible to persons when they stop participating in testimonial exchanges; they are thereby also losing a prime context in which intellectual virtues can be practiced and exercised.<sup>108</sup> This is due to their lessened participation as well as their diminished self-trust. Some situations call for intellectual courage, which will be difficult to muster when one's confidence has been systematically undermined. Even if Liz had been allowed to join all meetings, she would have eventually stopped actively contributing, having lost faith in her ideas ever finding any uptake after repeatedly being dismissed. These mostly epistemic harms – loss of knowledge, confidence in one's beliefs, one's ability to express them, one's epistemic virtues, and even one's own trustworthiness – have consequences of their own that reach far beyond the merely epistemic.

Beside the epistemic harms, Fricker distinguishes more practical harms.<sup>109</sup> For the sake of clarity I will further divide these up into purely practical, social, and psychological harms. The purely practical harms of exclusion from knowledge exchange will differ most per individual situation. In Liz's case, since she could not prove her boss was sabotaging her, the only way to prevent the gaslighting from going any further was by quitting the job she had worked so hard for all these days, which she admitted was a big sacrifice. A realistic fear she had was her boss would spread rumors about her so she would not be hired at a different company, either. In fact, this was one of the main reasons she kept working for him for as long as she did.<sup>110</sup> On the other hand, even if she had stayed on, chances were her boss would have fired her anyway. For someone who had invested so much in her career, these professional consequences had

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<sup>106</sup> For Fricker, this constitutes testimonial injustice's primary harm. See Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 162.

<sup>107</sup> And, if we follow, Williams, we would also lose knowledge for lack of source to "steady the mind".

<sup>108</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 47–50.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>110</sup> Stern, *The Gaslight Effect*, 30.

great existential impact. In a more “private” gaslighting situation, someone might be forced to give up certain hobbies, places they like to go, or even relationships, out of self-distrust or fear of further conflict. That immediately brings us to the social consequences. As this chapter has shown, many gaslighters use social isolation as an instrument for gaining more control. If a gaslighter feels threatened by one of the victim’s acquaintances in any way, for example because they are contributing to the victim’s self-trust, they can use various measures to try and limit the victim’s contact with that person.<sup>111</sup> Often, by questioning the victim’s capacities for communication, gaslighting makes the victim lose confidence in her interpersonal skills, up to a point where she may avoid social contact altogether. At its worst, when the gaslighting is never found out, a victim can become so isolated that the only person they still communicate with and trust is the gaslighter himself. Since the gaslighter is deceiving the victim, this boils down to the victim having no actual trusting relationships. However, if the victim does discover the betrayal, this may result in serious trust issues, as well. If Liz had not quit her job and had further alienated herself from her friends and family, she may have ended up without any people to trust. These social harms are obviously closely connected to the psychological harms gaslighting does. In the previous chapter I discussed the disorientation, frustration and confusion experienced by victims. These feelings are only enhanced by the exclusion from trustful conversation, which further adds isolation, trust issues, and loneliness to the list. But something even more fundamental may be at stake.

Throughout this chapter I have analyzed the practice of trustful conversation for exchanging knowledge as one contributing to autonomy through its dialogical character and the reciprocal trust and recognition this presupposes. I have also indicated that dialogue offers the prime context for agents to form beliefs, self-express, and self-authorize, and that thus, by excluding people from this practice, gaslighting undermines yet another axis of the victim’s autonomy. The victim is alienated from others, partly through and on top of his or her isolation from reality. But the claim I finally want to and will defend is that dialogue is crucial for autonomy in the most central way possible, namely, for the formation of identity and personhood as such. We may privately entertain all sorts of beliefs about ourselves, but in isolation, we can never know whether we are actually just self-deceiving. In the next chapter I will elaborate on this claim, exploring the ways in which self-knowledge is undermined by gaslighting, and how the damage caused may just be the final blow to the victim’s autonomy. For now I want to end this chapter with Fricker’s pertinent summary of the value of knowledge exchange for agency: “It is obviously an essential attribute of personhood to be able to participate in the spread of knowledge by testimony and to enjoy the respect enshrined in the proper relations of trust that are its prerequisite.”<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> For some good, non-fictional examples, see Stern, *The Gaslight Effect*.

<sup>112</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 58.

## 5. Gaslighting and the Relation to the Self

A person who has been subjected to gaslighting has diminished trust in herself, in her capacity for perception and memory, and in various crucial epistemic resources, including trustful conversation with others. This means she is not only made to doubt her own judgment, but also isolated from any source that might restore her self-trust, her insight into her own situation, and her connection to reality. In this final chapter I will investigate what all this implies for the gaslighted agent's ability to acquire self-knowledge – a capacity I will henceforth refer to as “self-discovery”. Self-knowledge, it is widely agreed, is crucial for self-governance. I will argue here that it is so because it enables the positive relation-to-self that constitutes the third axis of autonomy. Before demonstrating this point, I will again start by outlining what the capacity for self-discovery entails in terms of epistemic and agential skills, attitudes, and opportunities. In the third and fourth section I will subsequently show how this capacity, too, is undermined by gaslighting, and what such impairment involves in practice for the gaslightee's relation-to-self.

### 5.1 The capacity for self-discovery

When I speak of self-discovery as the process by which we come to know ourselves, the self-knowledge I am referring to is not the abstract kind Descartes displays when he determines himself as *res cogitans*,<sup>113</sup> even though the process by which he acquires this insight is not wholly unlike the one I have in mind. I am also not claiming this discovery can only take place on spiritual journeys to Tibet or through weekly meditation sessions, while I will not deny such measures can help some learn more about themselves. Least of all I am thinking of a mystic insight into some metaphysic entity called “the true self” which is passively waiting to be uncovered. Rather, the type of self-knowledge I want to discuss here is a person's understanding of what they really want, believe, and value. The most obvious way of acquiring such knowledge about oneself is, quite simply, through introspection. Arguably, introspecting is not just the most direct, but also the primary way to discover what one's thoughts and deepest wishes are. After all, there is a sense in which I have “privileged access” to this information: only I can know for sure what goes on inside my head, whereas others can merely guess. Of course, those other people are not completely empty-handed. Not only do I intentionally say and do things that might provide insight into my motives; unconscious signs I send through the tone of my voice, my facial expressions, and body language can also serve as evidence. Still, deducing inner states from such external symptoms is generally considered a secondary, derivative method of finding out something about other people which I can instantly know about myself.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> René Descartes, *Meditations*, trans. Desmond Clarke (London: Penguin, 2010), Second Meditation, 20.

<sup>114</sup> The view that introspection is the preeminent way to acquire self-knowledge is explored in many works, including John Heil, “Privileged Access,” *Mind* 97 (1988): 238–51; Brie Gertler, ed., *Privileged Access: Philosophical Accounts of Self-Knowledge* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2003); Alvin Goldman, “Epistemology and the Evidential Status of Introspective Reports,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 11, no. 7–8 (2004): 1–16.

However, in some instances, it might not actually be as easy to acquire self-knowledge as the above picture suggests. The mere ability to introspect does not always suffice. For what we find on the surface when we peer inside does not necessarily coincide with our deepest motivations and convictions. Sigmund Freud was famously one of the first to argue that unconscious urges are one of the driving forces behind many human actions, but that people tend to rationalize their own behavior, preferring to think they had more socially acceptable motives instead.<sup>115</sup> More recently, psychologists have introduced the concept of implicit cognitive bias to describe the phenomenon of unconscious failures of reasoning, like stereotyping.<sup>116</sup> While neither theory is considered uncontroversial, the more general idea that some of our desires and beliefs remain largely hidden from our own view, largely is. This is not to say that there is no possible way to ever reveal any of those unconscious sentiments. Tests have been developed to detect implicit bias, and the practice of psychoanalysis claims to uncover repressed desires. These two methods are quite formal, and both require the assistance of experts. But the presupposition they share, which I would like to mark as a condition for sincere self-discovery, is that it often takes serious effort, and the right type of attitude. A superficial inward gaze does not suffice, simply because that would make it too easy to glance over those facts about ourselves we would rather not acknowledge. So the practice of self-discovery, if its aim is truth-finding, presupposes *critical* self-reflection rather than simple introspection. Similar to the capacity for perception, self-discovery also requires an attitude open-mindedness about facts that could possibly contradict the view I have of myself. When I insist I am a hard worker, but keep finding myself procrastinating, it may be time to face the fact that I am lazier than I'd like to think. Or conversely, when I keep telling others and myself I am a bad student, while in fact I consistently receive excellent grades, I should start acknowledging I am not as dense as I say I am. However, there are two main threats to critical self-reflection: self-deception and manipulation. These threats suggest that proposing critical evaluation as a solution to the challenges of self-discovery may be too simplistic.

Critical self-reflection does not guarantee self-discovery to the extent that, as a formal condition, it cannot completely prevent self-deception. People can quite successfully avoid confrontation with some of their less agreeable features if they set their mind to it. Out of shame and under societal pressure, I may consciously or unconsciously suppress my unacceptable desires and politically incorrect beliefs such that I myself cannot detect them anymore even when reflecting critically. Some of my feelings may be so unconscious that I simply cannot find out about them, or at least not all by myself. Some I may, intentionally or not, be hiding not only from others but also from myself. Such self-deception is heavily criticized by existentialists, who consider it a form of conformism, inauthenticity, insincerity, or *mauvaise foi*.<sup>117</sup> All the same, it is difficult to maintain that self-deception is irrational per se, especially when it serves

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<sup>115</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Das Ich und das Es* (Vienna: Internationaler Psycho-analytischer Verlag, 1923).

<sup>116</sup> Anthony Greenwald and Mahzarin Banaji, "Implicit Social Cognition: Attitudes, Self-Esteem, and Stereotypes," *Psychological Review* 102 (1995): 4–27.

<sup>117</sup> See Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983); Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel Barnes (London: Routledge, 2003).



as a coping mechanism. It has been suggested that the majority of humans are persistently deceiving themselves about their own influence on situations, the exception being people suffering from clinical depression.<sup>118</sup> If there is indeed a relation between depression and realistic self-image, then demanding complete absence of self-deception may be too much to ask. On the other hand, self-deception, whether prudent or not, still almost invariably constitutes an impediment to self-discovery.<sup>119</sup> And unfortunately, I am not the only one who can deceive me about myself.

The second obstacle to critical self-reflection is manipulation and oppression. In previous chapters I have already discussed various ways in which manipulation thwarts autonomy and in the third section of the underlying chapter I aim to show how gaslighting specifically sabotages the practice of self-discovery. But here I only want to illustrate how manipulators can prevent their victims from gaining insight into their actual beliefs and motives. Perhaps the most obvious technique available to this end is deceit. Manipulators deceive their victims about reality, their place in that reality, and about themselves. They can brainwash and threaten, contradict any claim a victim makes about herself, punish her for statements they dislike, and possibly even deny her the authority to make claims at all. The most skilled manipulators will have their victim believe anything about reality and herself they want her to, including the fact that they did not manipulate her into thinking so, or that their manipulation was justified since it allowed her to learn the truth. Striking examples of such identification with such imposed self-images can be found among cult members and victims of extreme abuse.<sup>120</sup> But more everyday examples of oppressed people who have self-identified with possibly negative stereotypes are unfortunately abundant. Marilyn Friedman gives the example of a 1950s married woman who has a higher-order desire to be a dutiful housewife, but nevertheless finds herself feeling depressed and frustrated in that role. Friedman's suggestion is that lower-order feelings should also be taken into account when assessing whether someone's feelings are authentic.<sup>121</sup> But in the context of our investigation, it could equally well be interpreted as an argument for regarding openness to and self-trust in one's own intuitions as significant conditions for successful self-discovery. To get access to who we authentically are, we need to not just take a step back and reflect rationally from a distance. We also need to take cues from our emotional responses. Often, that involves accepting what cannot be changed. I will return to this issue in the next section. All the same, it is clearly very difficult to find out for ourselves what we really want when we are always told what we want or ought to want by others – let alone when they plainly tell us it is not up to us to decide.

The existence of the first obstacle, that of self-deception, suggest that a reliable practice of self-discovery consists of more than private, silent critical self-reflection. To find out who we really are, getting

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<sup>118</sup> Shelley Taylor and Jonathon Brown, "Illusion and Well-Being: A Social Psychological Perspective on Mental Health," *Psychological Bulletin* 103 (1988): 193–210; Shelley Taylor, *Positive Illusions: Creative Self-Deception and the Healthy Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).

<sup>119</sup> A perhaps farfetched exception could be a case of an initially misguided but eventually self-fulfilling confidence in my own abilities. Such self-deception still inherently undercuts self-knowledge, but it instrumentally supports it. See also Taylor, *Positive Illusions*.

<sup>120</sup> See e.g. Michele Cascardi and K. Daniel O'Leary, "Depressive Symptomatology, Self-Esteem, and Self-Blame in Battered Women," *Journal of Family Violence* 7 (December 1, 1992): 249–59.

<sup>121</sup> Marilyn Friedman, "Autonomy and the Split-Level Self," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 24 (1986): 19–35.

the opportunity to experiment, put our wishes into action, and communicate with others seem necessary, too. That is to say, there is not a static, core true self which we need only reveal. There is also an active component of self-exploration and self-definition involved in the practice of self-discovery. In chapter 4 I explained how Bernard Williams claims beliefs are formed only in virtue of trustful conversation. If others did not rely on us, there would be no need for us to commit lastingly to certain convictions.<sup>122</sup> But Williams subsequently extends this concept from the formation of beliefs to the realm of desires, values, and finally, beliefs about ourselves:

Drawn to bind myself to the others' shared values, to make my own beliefs and feelings steadier (to make them, at the limit, for the first time into beliefs), I become what with increasing steadiness I can sincerely profess; I become what I have sincerely declared to them... The sense that I am contributing to this, that it is a project, fills out the idea that acknowledgement is more than mere factual discovery, while at the same time the sense that there that there is discovery involved is related to the need to resist fantasy in making sense of my beliefs and allegiances this way.<sup>123</sup>

Williams, through a slightly different route, thus arrives at the same conclusion as Meyers, who, as I discussed, considers conversation “central to the self-reading process.”<sup>124</sup> The same intuition underlies Charles Taylor’s analysis of authenticity as consisting of two elements, neither of which can be privileged over the other: that of originality, non-conformism, and self-creation, and that of self-definition in dialogue.<sup>125</sup> And it is again that thought which is expressed by narrative theorists, who hold personal identity to be not a readily available object, partly discovered, partly constructed story, which takes shape by virtue of an audience willing to listen.<sup>126</sup> The view all these authors share is that we do not discover who we really are in isolation, but through expressing ourselves, trying out certain things, and working with the feedback we receive. We need to put ourselves “out there” before receiving confirmation of identity claims. It is this dialogical process which can prevent most cases of self-deception.

Still, as I have indicated before, the fact that agents largely depend on others for their acquisition of self-knowledge, that is, on others’ recognition of their identity, also renders them highly vulnerable. If others are unwilling to confirm my claims about myself, this could mean I have been self-deceiving and need to revise my self-image, but it could equally well mean my claim was truthful and the fault was theirs. The problem here is that, while our unavoidable dialogical dependency decreases the likelihood of self-deception, it only enhances the risk of oppression and manipulation. The next sections will be devoted to an exploration of what this risk means for the gaslightee’s autonomy.

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<sup>122</sup> Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, 191–205. For a further discussion of Williams’ view and the relation between trustful conversation and identity formation, see Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 51–53.

<sup>123</sup> Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, 204.

<sup>124</sup> Meyers, *Self, Society and Personal Choice*, 79.

<sup>125</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 66–67.

<sup>126</sup> See 3.2.

## 5.2 How self-discovery contributes to autonomy

To understand why self-discovery and the self-knowledge it generates are so important to autonomy, one need only look at the basic definition I proposed in the introduction: to be self-governing is to live and act according to desires and values that are not externally imposed on you but in an important sense your own. There are, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, at least three senses in which self-discovery is indispensable for even this rather minimal sense of personal autonomy. First of all, in order to be able to act on your desires, you need to have an understanding of what these desires are. Blindly following any urge which presents itself does not suffice to transcend heteronomy; you need to actually *know* what you want and that it is *you* who wants it. Autonomy also requires that you are able to self-explore and self-define, that is, to give shape to who you are yourself. That presupposes knowing the material you have to work with, as well as knowing and accepting your own limits. Finally and perhaps most crucially, the procedure of self-discovery, in the form of critical reflection, is widely considered *the* mark of autonomous agency.

As self-explanatory as it could seem that knowing what you want is decisive for living an autonomous life, I will first briefly illustrate how this claim can be interpreted. Self-discovery is one of the three categories of autonomy competencies distinguished by Meyers, besides self-definition and self-direction. She envisions the process of self-discovery as involving the construction of a self-portrait.<sup>127</sup> This may sound like an overly artificial and complex endeavor which can hardly be expected of the average agent. But the actual skills required to acquire the self-knowledge Meyers refers to are ones we exercise on a daily basis without giving it much thought. I have previously highlighted how memory and trustful conversation contribute to agents' identity formation, and obviously they can do so without our explicit knowledge of the exact mechanisms by which they affect us. But imagination, reason, and volition also play their part in how we come to perceive ourselves, and prior to this, we simply take cues from our emotional responses. In Meyers' own words: "For example, a person who is feeling frustrated must determine whether this trouble stems from a particular condition which could be avoided without major alterations in the individual's life plans or whether it is symptomatic of a need for radical change in life directions. Reading feelings of this kind enables people gradually to identify integral sentiments, propensities, values, and goals."<sup>128</sup> On the basis of the identified responses, agents can formulate and test hypotheses about their probable future responses and then finally, develop a portrait of themselves. Often, this whole process takes place rather implicitly. But especially in dialogue, where people are confronted with the images and interpretations of others, these reflections can become explicit, for example when someone feels compelled to defend their response in a particular situation. Crucially, this self-portrait gives

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<sup>127</sup> Meyers, *Self, Society and Personal Choice*, 79–84.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

us an understanding of what it is we want and need in life. But, as Meyers rightfully points out: “an accurate self-portrait is not yet autonomy.”<sup>129</sup>

Knowing who we are, how we affectively respond to particular situations, and what we desire, by itself is not enough to count as self-governing. We may discover that we have many conflicting desires and beliefs, or we may find we do not particularly like what we have unveiled. At this stage, the competencies of self-definition and self-direction come into play. On Meyers’ view, this boils down to envisaging a life plan and sticking to it – at least within reasonable limits.<sup>130</sup> At this stage, too, the self-image of the agent is fundamental, for it constitutes the main source of input for the life plan. Life plans can be ambitious, so in making them, an agent shouldn’t simply take the self-portrait she constructed at a certain point in time as the be-all and end-all of her identity. All the same, a life plan should take into account the qualities, traits, and limitations of the agent in question. I can intend to practice and work hard to better myself, but I cannot simply wish myself to become a categorically different being from what I currently am. So finding out who I am and what I want is the foundation not only for doing what I want but also for figuring out what I want to want.

All the above considerations are formulated within the conceptual framework of Meyers’ competency theory of autonomy. But the conclusions are not substantially different if we substitute her account with identification theories of autonomy like Frankfurt’s and Dworkin’s. In maintaining that autonomy consists in decisive identification with certain desires, they, too must acknowledge the significance of first clarifying what these desires are. And indeed, Frankfurt says it is “only in virtue of his rational capacities that a person is capable of becoming critically aware of his own will.”<sup>131</sup> In fact, there is something we might call a “strong” sense of self-knowledge – distinct from the “weaker” sense meant above – which, on identification accounts, is more or less equivalent to the concept of autonomy as such. By “weak self-discovery” I mean the more or less neutral mapping of all the emotions, beliefs and values I observe within myself.<sup>132</sup> “Strong self-discovery” is then the much less neutral inquisition who I *really* am, the discriminatory search for those traits which really define me among the bulk of my responses. It is strong in the sense that it has a more active component, that it involves decision-making rather than mere observation. In Meyers’ framework, this is already the stage of self-definition, but she takes care to emphasize that “the enterprises of self-discovery and self-definition are intertwined.”<sup>133</sup> Regardless of the label we decide to use, the practice of figuring out what is truly important to me and what is not is obviously a major part of what it means to be autonomous – on some accounts, it might even be all there is to it.

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>130</sup> To give a sense of what those reasonable limits entail, I just want to emphasize that sticking with a life plan unconditionally is usually a sign of stubbornness and rigidity rather than autonomy. An autonomous agent will update and revise a life plan when circumstances, or her own, developed identity demand it.

<sup>131</sup> Harry Frankfurt, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971): 11–12.

<sup>132</sup> Or, indeed, through the use of my mnemonic or communicative faculties – i.e., not necessarily through introspection.

<sup>133</sup> Meyers, *Self, Society and Personal Choice*, 80.

I have stated above that self-discovery, in order not to be reduced to self-deception, needs to take the shape of critical self-reflection, preferably in an enacted and dialogical form. I have also added the qualification that the critical stance is mediated by self-trust in one's intuitions and emotional responses. After this brief discussion of procedural theories, it should come as no surprise that it is precisely critical self-reflection which is cited almost ubiquitously as the practice constitutive of autonomy.<sup>134</sup> Critical reflection and subsequent endorsement of the traits reflected upon is generally considered to fulfil the authenticity condition for autonomy. That is, it is supposed to guarantee that that which governs the self is really the self, and not some desires or beliefs the agent herself would feel alienated from upon reflection. The importance of critical self-reflection for autonomy has, however, been criticized on the grounds of it being both overdemanding in one sense, and not demanding enough in another. As for it being overdemanding, I hope to have made clear in the previous section that complete self-transparency is obviously impossible to ask of anyone. But there is also the question of social justice when theorists put the bar for autonomy so high that parts of the population cannot reach it, for this is prone to worsen that group's situation and indeed, their chances of steadily becoming more autonomous.<sup>135</sup> On the other hand, critical self-reflection does not in all cases seem to provide a satisfying solution to filtering out cases of manipulation. The critical stance is usually typified as a detached one, which enables a person to distance herself from desires she wishes to shed. However, what if that detached stance itself has been affected by oppressive ideas? And what if the criticism of the stance is so strict that in fact, it only alienates an agent from herself? In the next section I will illustrate this possibility through studying the effects of gaslighting on self-discovery.

### 5.3 How gaslighting undermines self-discovery

Self-discovery, as I have presented it, is not so much a singular capacity as a cluster of skills and competencies that, in various ways, allow a person to gain insight into what she believes and desires. So when I ask how gaslighting affects the practice of self-discovery, what I want to know is how gaslighting undermines the skills and resources that are at play in that practice. Two crucial capacities that have already been discussed are memory and the capacity to participate in trustful conversation. When a person's capacity to remember events accurately is questioned repeatedly, as it is in gaslighting, their willingness to rely on their autobiographical memories will decrease considerably. This in itself can already be inimical to their self-knowledge, since they will have a lot less first-hand material to work with in constructing their self-portraits. Especially on narrative accounts, people's trust in their first-personal memories is hugely important to the way they perceive themselves and to their personal identity.<sup>136</sup> But first-personal memories

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<sup>134</sup> John Christman, "Autonomy, Self-Knowledge, and Liberal Legitimacy," in *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism*, ed. John Christman and Joel Anderson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 330–58.

<sup>135</sup> See John Christman's critical discussion in *ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> John Christman, "Why Search for Lost Time? Memory, Autonomy, and Practical Reason," in *Practical Identity and Narrative Agency*, ed. Catriona Mackenzie and Kim Atkins (New York: Routledge, 2010), 146–66.

about what has happened to me in the past and how I have reacted are not the only way to find out who I am or who I have been: I can, and probably should, also ask people close to me how they perceive me. They can, for instance, help me remember, offer a new perspective on my personality traits, or provide critical feedback to prevent me from deceiving myself about what I am like.

Unfortunately, as I have shown, the practice by which we could learn about ourselves from others – i.e., exchanging knowledge in trustful conversation – is extensively obstructed by gaslighting, as well. Victims will mostly avoid such situations out of distrust of others or themselves, and if they do enter into trustful conversation, the interlocutors are unlikely to give them the credibility they is due. If those conversational partners are anyone other than the gaslighter, they have usually been primed by him to either avoid or disbelieve the victim. Their resulting prejudice against the victim as someone who is mentally unstable and delusional will leave the gaslightee extremely vulnerable to testimonial injustice. Third parties are thus unable or unwilling to give the victim the recognition they need for creating a reliable self-image. Their memories and self-perceptions won't be taken seriously, and might even be openly questioned. Any doubts the victim may have about the accuracy of her self-conception are only reinforced by the lack of uptake of her thoughts and feelings by others. And the situation is even worse when the interlocutor in question is the gaslighter him- or herself.

As a form of manipulation, gaslighting is a technique for getting another person to do and think what you want them to. The gaslighter will refuse to give recognition for most of the victim's acts and statements, unless they are an expression of the victim's own diminished self-trust in her judgment. But in contrast to any third parties involved, gaslighters have methods of instilling certain beliefs in their victims in addition to the mere withholding of confirmation. Just like other manipulators, a gaslighter can control his victim's environment, or brainwash or threaten her, in order to have her believe certain things about reality. And, also just like other manipulators, he can make her believe certain things about herself. Manipulation is, in many discussions, implicitly considered the prime threat to the critical self-reflection I just pronounced fundamental for acquiring reliable self-knowledge. Say I wanted to manipulate someone into thinking his life's destiny was to serve me. If I succeed, that person would, when asking himself what he really wanted, discover only desires somehow consistent with the overall wish to please me. Any residual beliefs or wishes contrary to the purpose of serving me he would deem alien. If my manipulating efforts were truly successful, he would, upon "critical" reflection, only identify with the desires I wanted him to identify with. If this hypothetical case seems too exotic to seem realistic, it may be useful to look beyond the, admittedly rare, cases of extreme brainwashing by cult leaders to the much more widespread phenomenon of oppressive socialization. For the longest time, many women believed that it was indeed their primary purpose to serve their husbands' needs. They believed it was good for them that first their fathers, and then their spouses had the authority to speak for them.

Cases like these make clear how manipulation can have severely distorting effects for people's self-image, and that the distortion itself is not picked up on in critical self-evaluation once the victims have identified with the manipulation. To avoid this problem, it has been suggested a clause should be added

to identification theories of autonomy, specifying that to count as autonomous, a person cannot feel alienated from the historical procedures by which she came to acquire her beliefs and desires, were she to reflect upon them critically.<sup>137</sup> This suggestion has been criticized for merely shifting the problem; after all, if someone is truly brainwashed, she will even identify with the harsh methods used to make her “see the light”.<sup>138</sup> A different suggestion that has been made is that theories of autonomy should not be procedural, but substantial in nature, specifying constraints on the content of people’s beliefs and desires for them to count as authentic. On such a view, autonomous people can never be excessively deferent or self-subjugating.<sup>139</sup> This suggestion raises an abundance of interesting questions about authenticity and first-personal authority that I unfortunately cannot go into now.<sup>140</sup> The point is that most manipulation impairs not only people’s judgment of reality, but also their capacity to judge themselves.

What sets apart gaslighting from most other forms of manipulation in this regard, is that gaslighting does not so much make people less critical of their own desires, values, and beliefs than they should be, but in effect makes them more critical, or rather, *too* critical of themselves. This is the type of self-doubt that is not conducive, but inimical to self-knowledge, for it runs so deep that victims of gaslighting let their self-image be determined completely by another person, instead of weighing his feedback, along with that of others, in a fair way. They are likely to vastly underestimate themselves in many regards, which means their own evaluation of their traits is much less reliable. Moreover, seeing as the main aim of gaslighting is to impair a person’s self-trust, their self-trust in the capacity to know themselves is also undermined. So it is possible that they themselves do not even attempt anymore to critically self-evaluate, because they have come to believe they are not fit to do so. If they reach this conclusion, it renders gaslightees even more dependent on their manipulators, and thus even more vulnerable to further impairment of their self-trust. In the advanced stages of gaslighting, it is not uncommon that a victim perceives herself as so confused that she herself is not capable of deciding whether she is crazy, and therefore leaves that decision up to the gaslighter, whom she trusts. What is particularly tragic about her situation is that it is not unreasonable for her to defer the decision about her mental health. It is notoriously difficult to judge one’s own sanity; many patients who have been diagnosed with delusion may not deem themselves mentally ill, either. So, when your self-trust has systematically been eroded by someone in a multitude of ways, it is not crazy to leave the judgement whether you are crazy up to someone else. In the following, final section, I will illustrate what this advanced stage of having lost faith in one’s own capacity to acquire self-knowledge can look like.

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<sup>137</sup> John Christman, “Autonomy and Personal History,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 20 (1991): 1–24.

<sup>138</sup> For a more extensive discussion of this critique, see Paul Benson, “Autonomy and Oppressive Socialization,” *Social Theory and Practice* 17 (1991): 385–408; Mackenzie and Stoljar, “Introduction: Autonomy Refigured,” 16.

<sup>139</sup> See for example Govier, “Self-Trust, Autonomy, and Self-Esteem”; Benson, “Free Agency and Self-Worth.”

<sup>140</sup> For insightful discussions on these matters, see Marina Oshana, “Personal Autonomy and Society,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 29 (1998): 81–102; Marina Oshana, “How Much Should We Value Autonomy?,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 20 (2003): 99–126; Andrea Westlund, “Selflessness and Responsibility for Self: Is Deference Compatible with Autonomy?,” *The Philosophical Review* 112 (2003): 483–523; Westlund, “Rethinking Relational Autonomy.”

## 5.4 Implications for agency and the relation to the self

What happens to someone who does not trust her own capability of self-discovery? Again, circumstantial differences are highly relevant to the fate of the gaslightee; still, the general prospects are, unfortunately very bleak. The story of my friend's mother (let's call her Ann) may serve as a sad illustration of the practical consequences. For years, decades even, she was married to an undiagnosed narcissist. They had two children together, teenagers by the time they divorced. The marriage wasn't unhappy, especially at first. Ann loved her family, including her husband – except she feared him, too. His needs would always come first. She thought she had learned to live with it, and to some extent she did, until their children got older. Her husband would often accuse her of being selfish, for example for going back to work, and he could get furious if she made plans without his consent, or throw fits if she decided something against his will. If, on the other hand, she ever dared to question *him*, he would always turn things around to make *her* feel oversensitive, guilty, or indeed, paranoid. As time progressed, Ann increasingly avoided seeking out these confrontations. But that didn't stop her husband from criticizing her whenever he felt like it. In the last years of their marriage, he would even manipulate her into behaving as he wanted her to by threatening to leave her. In the end, and probably for the best, he did leave her, for another woman. The divorce devastated her; she had tried so hard to keep the family together and still failed. What's worse is that she found herself feeling completely disoriented, unstable, and empty. For so many years she had adapted her choices, her whole life, to his wishes, effacing her own, that she did not actually know anymore what those wishes were in the first place. I am sorry to say that to this day, a decade later, she still suffers from clinical depression and debilitating self-doubt, which has completely impaired her decision-making capacity. Just recently, the task of choosing where to go on holiday simply paralyzed her. With the help of her children, Ann is steadily getting better, but progress is slow.

When gaslighting invades in such an intimate domain as that of self-knowledge, the consequences for people's agency and sense of identity can be utterly destructive. Where the impairment of self-trust in your perceptive abilities leaves you feeling alienated from reality, and that of self-trust in your capacity to participate in trustful conversation leaves you feeling alienated from others, not trusting yourself to know your own desires makes you feel alienated even from yourself. While all three forms of impairment are terrible, and they usually go hand in hand in cases of gaslighting, the undermining of self-knowledge is arguably the most harmful to agency. For what do you base your decisions, trivial or existential, on, when you are constantly second-guessing what it is you want and what is good for you? Anne's feeling of paralysis in that regard is not surprising, nor exceptional. This is how Robin Stern describes the impact of advanced-stage gaslighting:

Stage 3 gaslighting is truly soul-destroying. Some of my patients describe a listlessness that spreads through almost every area of their lives—food no longer tastes good, they no longer enjoy time with their friends, a lovely walk in the countryside leaves them unaffected—until finally, all of life has lost its savor. Other patients



talk about a growing inability to make even the smallest decisions: where they'd like to eat lunch, what movie they'd prefer, which clothes they want to wear that morning. Still others describe a lack of connectedness; they feel as though some other person were living their lives, going through the motions while they are hiding deep within themselves, trying not to be found.<sup>141</sup>

For Stern, "Stage 3: depression" is marked by a sense of resignation. At this point, the victim has stopped defending herself and is instead only trying to go along with her gaslighter's idiosyncrasies in order to win his approval.<sup>142</sup> Although it seems likely that a person's self-trust in what they know about themselves already starts to crumble in the preceding stages ("disbelief" and "defense"), the intense self-doubt experienced by Anne is a central characteristic of Stern's third stage, during which the victim loses touch with herself. According to Stern, if you find yourself in this final stage of gaslighting, "you're mired in full-scale depression, hopeless and joyless, unable even to remember the person you once were, with your own point of view and your own sense of self."<sup>143</sup> Needless to say, such self-alienation has harmful implications for your epistemic, practical, social and psychological functioning.

Epistemically, an impaired capacity of self-discovery primarily means diminished self-knowledge. At best, this comes down to a slightly distorted self-image constructed on the basis of other people's view. But in gaslighting, as we know by now, such cooperation is not readily available. So, in the worst case, where you can no longer depend on anyone to help you discover what you want, believe, and value, you may end up without a sense of self at all. Lack of self-knowledge in turn renders exercising the previously discussed epistemic capacities of perception and participation in knowledge exchange increasingly difficult, if not impossible.<sup>144</sup> It further inhibits practical and social functioning through the impairment of the capacity to make even minor decisions. The feeling that you do not know what you value or feel anymore undercuts the foundation of personal relationships. Having no idea what you want and are capable of is the end of any professional ambitions. In the end, even doing groceries becomes virtually impossible. As becomes clear from Ann's example and Stern's discussion, it is psychologically devastating when the last anchor, certainty about yourself, has been taken away, and you have already been deprived of all the resources you previously had to possibly fall back on. Gaslighting systematically takes away all possible foundations of self-knowledge. It isolates you from reality, from other people, and finally, from yourself. By undermining your self-trust in your ability to know yourself, it obliterates the final epistemic capacity fundamental for self-governance, and the final axis of autonomous agency.

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<sup>141</sup> Stern, *The Gaslight Effect*, 85.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>144</sup> This I consider to follow from the fact that lack of self-knowledge exacerbates lack of self-trust, which, as discussed, plays an important role in the exercise of these capacities.

## 6. Conclusion

In order to get an understanding of how gaslighting undermines autonomous agency, I have developed a broad definition of this form of manipulation which draws attention to its effects on the agent's epistemic capacities and her participation in epistemic practices. I have argued that the capacity for perception and memory, the participation in trustful conversation, and the capacity for self-discovery are the main competencies targeted by gaslighting. Since these capacities and practices rely on some of the same resources, they are to be regarded as distinct, but not separate. Each one of them relates to one of three axes of autonomy: a person's positive relation to reality, to others, and to herself. By generating valuable knowledge and allowing the agent to take part in meaningful epistemic and social practices, the full exercise of these capacities greatly contribute to the agent's autonomous engagement with herself and the world around her. However, through a combination of weakening a person's ability for, removing or sabotaging her opportunities for, and, crucially, impairing the attitudes that are vital for the development and exercise of the epistemic capacities, gaslighting injures such autonomous interaction. Gaslighting cases can be vastly different, ranging from the grand-scale, extreme and pathological to the everyday, and can show various degrees of intentionality and malice, as well as different ratios and combinations of the above techniques. Still, what gaslighting behavior has in common is its aim of directly or indirectly subverting a victim's self-trust. The attitude of self-trust is vital to perception and memory, participation in trustful dialogue, and self-discovery alike. Thus, by harming her self-trust, gaslighting corrupts its victim's positive relations with her surroundings, isolating and alienating her from reality, others, and herself. Systematically, it undermines her autonomy along all three axes.

*That* gaslighting is harmful to autonomous agency should not come as a surprise, since it is a species of manipulation, the phenomenon which is widely regarded as one of the prime threats to autonomy. Perhaps this explains why philosophers have so far largely disregarded the topic. But whereas manipulation generally violates autonomy by influencing someone's beliefs, decisions and actions in a way that bypasses rational deliberation, gaslighting aims at disabling the capacity for rational deliberation itself. It does not just change someone's beliefs via an underhanded procedure, instead it slowly erodes the epistemic capacities through which a person is able to acquire and reflect on beliefs at all. Its systematic nature explains why gaslighting is almost invariably a long-term process, as well as why it is such a particularly pernicious form of manipulation. Gaslighting is not a matter of a one-time bypassing of autonomy and its resources, it is their exhaustion, which results in the ever-increasing dependence of the victim on the perpetrator. This vicious cycle of autonomy-impairing effects is typical of gaslighting, and it is very difficult to break out of. The gaslighter exploits a relationship of trust to engender self-distrust, and abusing the victim's vulnerability and reliance to only render him or her more vulnerable and more dependent. As the process of manipulation progresses, it becomes increasingly hard to combat. To end on a positive note, all that does not imply there are absolutely no forms of resistance against gaslighting. Especially in its early stages and with outside help, gaslighting's devastating effects can be mitigated if

recognized in time. Under the right circumstances, if they have enough self-trust left to see the manipulation for what it is, people are sometimes able to stop the gaslighting dynamic.

My analysis of gaslighting as autonomy-impairing *through* its limiting effects on epistemic agency does not only add to the understanding of this particular phenomenon and manipulation generally; it also brings to light the inextricable connection between epistemic and agential competencies and the resources they draw from. By studying how gaslighting's attack on epistemic capacities affects an agent's interaction with the physical and social world around her, and her relation to herself, we get a clearer view of what autonomy entails and requires. Firstly, I have argued that autonomy should not be conceived as dichotomous but as a matter of degree. It is situated along three axes, each of which represents a different category of relation: the relation to reality, to others, and to the self. For a person to count as minimally autonomous, her third-personal, second-personal and first-personal relations should be fundamentally positive. That presupposes, first of all, a range of cognitive and communicative skills and opportunities which enable engagement in all three directions. For their self-knowledge, self-expression, and self-determination, people are to a large extent dependent on the interaction with and recognition of others. This observation reflects the relationality of my conception of autonomy: it is something that, barring rare exceptions, we cannot achieve and sustain all by ourselves. It also explains why we humans are so vulnerable to manipulative interactions like gaslighting: because our reliance on and trust in others is unavoidable. Autonomy, on the view I have developed, further requires that the agent have the right kind of attitudes of open-mindedness, sincerity, and of course, self-trust. Crucially, this means that the self-critical reflection demanded by traditional theories is not autonomy-conducive without qualification, but should have an upper limit. Where self-criticism and self-doubt are not balanced out by a healthy amount of justified self-trust, they threaten to destroy the ongoing accomplishment that is autonomous agency.

Finally, I want to express the hope that these reflections on gaslighting and autonomy may contribute not only to the scholarly debate on manipulation, but also to its societal understanding. Being able to identify gaslighting is the only way to effectively oppose it – a skill which could turn out to be especially valuable in times when truth often appears to be neglected.

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