

GASLIGHTING AND PEER DISAGREEMENT

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ACCORDING to the Dilemmatic Theory proposed by Kirk-Giannini: a subject, S_1 , gaslights another subject, S_2 , with respect to a proposition, p , iff (1) S_1 intentionally communicates p to S_2 ; (2) S_2 knows (and S_1 is in a position to know) that if p is true, then S_2 has good reason to believe she lacks basic epistemic competence in some domain, D ; (3) S_1 does not correctly and with knowledge-level doxastic justification believe p , and S_1 does not correctly and with knowledge-level doxastic justification believe that S_2 lacks basic epistemic competence in D ; and (4) S_2 assigns significant weight to S_1 's testimony.¹

Part of what sets this theory apart is that it is not supposed to include any appeal to social hierarchies or testimonial injustice or the intentions of the gaslighter (other than the intention to communicate p). At the same time, it articulates and makes explicit a feature of gaslighting that, in retrospect, is clearly central but, until now, has gone largely unrecognized.² In particular, the theory illuminates the distinctive dilemmatic structure of gaslighting. This kind of insight, something that in retrospect seems like it should have been obvious and central all along, is the mark of an important contribution.

The theory also delivers the judgment that gaslighting occurs in the following cases:

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

1 Kirk-Giannini, "Dilemmatic Gaslighting," 757.

2 Kirk-Giannini gives credit where credit is due, however. He points out that Spear ("Gaslighting, Confabulation, and Epistemic Innocence") briefly touches on a similar idea. And he explicitly identifies elements of his theory influenced by Ivy ("Gaslighting as Epistemic Violence") and Podosky ("Gaslighting First- and Second-Order"). He also notes that he draws on and builds his theory in part out of examples first introduced by Abramson ("Turning Up the Lights on Gaslighting").

Skeptical Peers: I moved out of one field of philosophy in grad school due to an overwhelming accumulation of small incidents. . . . When I tried to describe to fellow grad students why I felt ostracized or ignored because of my gender, they would ask for examples. I would provide examples, and they would proceed through each example to “demonstrate” why I had actually misinterpreted or overreacted to what was actually going on.³

Kirk-Giannini shows that the Dilemmatic Theory accommodates intuitions about a wide variety of cases, including variants of the above. And he shows that more traditional theories have trouble accommodating these cases.

Nevertheless, I think there are variants of *Skeptical Peers* that may be cause to modify the Dilemmatic Theory. Consider:

Skeptical Peers II: Paula tells her peers that she feels ostracized and ignored in her subfield of philosophy because she is a woman. Paula provides examples to illustrate. When Paula considers the examples, they seem to her to clearly be cases that illustrate discrimination. When her peers consider the cases, they seem to them to clearly not be such cases. Paula forms her belief on the basis of her personal experiences. Paula’s peers form their belief on the basis of statistical reasoning about her descriptions of the case. Paula and her peers assign significant weight to each other’s testimony.

If we stipulate that Paula’s peers do not correctly believe that she is mistaken, then the theory has the result that Paula’s peers gaslight her. That is not the basis of an objection. The question of whether gaslighting can occur in the absence of intention is a matter of dispute in the literature.

I want to focus on a different seeming result of the theory. At first glance, it might seem that the Dilemmatic Theory has the additional result that gaslighting can go in either direction in this case. If Paula is right or if her peers are not justified in believing that she is wrong, then Paula’s peers gaslight her. And, if Paula is wrong or if she is not justified in believing that her peers are wrong, then Paula gaslights her peers. In the latter case, condition 1 is satisfied because Paula testifies to her peers that she is ostracized and ignored because she is a woman. Condition 2 is satisfied because if Paula is right, then her peers lack basic epistemic competence in assessing examples of discrimination. Condition 4 is satisfied because Paula’s peers assign significant weight to Paula’s testimony.

3 Jender, “But the Women Never Say Anything Interesting,” as cited in Abramson, “Turning Up the Lights on Gaslighting,” 5.

Condition 3 *seems* to be satisfied. There are two ways in which the case can be formulated so that condition 3 might appear to be satisfied. One way 3 might be satisfied is simple. If Paula is wrong and she was not discriminated against, then the condition is satisfied because she does not correctly believe her peers lack the relevant basic epistemic competence.

The other way 3 might be satisfied is a bit more complicated. Suppose Paula is right, and she was discriminated against, but she does not believe it. Stipulate that the disagreement with her peers causes her to be so shaken and distressed that she becomes agnostic and does not believe her peers lack the relevant basic epistemic competence, and she does not believe that she has been discriminated against. Nevertheless, she thinks it is worthwhile to present her case. This could be because she feels defensive. Or it could be because she believes in intellectual diversity, and so although she does not believe what seems to her to be true, she thinks it is important to get her different perspective on the table in discussion with her friends. We can imagine something similar happening in Central Case. Paula might be so shaken by Gregory's testimony that she no longer believes the gaslights flickered. But she may still feel compelled to assert that the lights have flickered. This could be because she is feeling defensive or because she thinks, even though she may well be wrong, her testimony and perspective should be heard as one voice in the conversation.

So the theory, either because Paula is wrong or because she is right but has been shaken by disagreement, seems to have the implication that Paula gaslights her peers.

Either way, the two main camps in the literature would be uneasy with this result. One camp would be uneasy because they take Paula to lack the intentions required for gaslighting. The other camp would be uneasy because they take gaslighting to occur only in the direction of more to less powerful people. Paula is less powerful than her peers. So she does not gaslight. So this result, if Kirk-Giannini were to accept it, would put him outside of the mainstream.

Being outside the mainstream may not be bad in itself. But if one's theory seems to depart from the mainstream, then it is important to either give a story about why it turns out to be acceptable to depart from the mainstream or give a story about why the theory does not really deliver the relevant out of the mainstream judgment.

In the present case, Kirk-Giannini may plausibly reject the claim that his theory has the relevant result. In particular, he may note that there is an asymmetry between Paula and her peers. In *Skeptical Peers II*, Paula is not calling into question a basic epistemic competence. She is instead calling into question an advanced epistemic competence. She calls into question the ability of her peers to evaluate complicated statistical claims. Paula's peers form their belief

based on advanced statistical reasoning. Paula forms her belief based on her experience that comes from her position of marginalization. Advanced statistical reasoning is not a basic epistemic competence. As Kirk-Giannini puts it:

There are some domains in which our beliefs are not plausibly regarded as formed on the basis of any basic epistemic competence. First, there are beliefs about theoretical domains like advanced mathematics, the natural and social sciences, philosophy... Second, there are beliefs which ... are formed on the basis of evidence which is subtle or otherwise difficult to interpret.⁴

Indeed, given that the report in the original *Skeptical Peers* is that the grad student peers “proceed through” the examples and “demonstrate” that she is mistaken, it sounds like they are employing an advanced rather than basic epistemic competence. On the other hand, experience that comes from one’s position of marginalization, one might maintain, is a basic epistemic competence. So condition 3 is unsatisfied. Paula’s peers gaslight her. But Paula does not, given the Dilemmatic Theory, gaslight her peers. And Kirk-Giannini has a plausible way of resisting the argument I gave above.

So far so good. But if one takes this line, then it seems to me the theory is subject to a different counterexample. Consider:

Skeptical Peers III: Paula tells her peers that she feels ostracized and ignored in her subfield of philosophy because she is a woman. Paula provides examples to illustrate. She evaluates those examples via her views about complicated statistical inferences, sociological background claims, and philosophical reflection about how women in philosophy are generally treated. Her peers know that she is right. But they dismiss her concerns as being based on a misunderstanding of complicated statistics. They tell her that because she is a woman, she is incapable of competently engaging in the kind of advanced statistical reasoning required to understand the examples. They maintain that while women have all basic epistemic competences, they do not have the advanced epistemic competences that are unique to men. Distressed, Paula begins to wonder whether they might be right. And she thinks she might be misunderstanding the complicated statistics and, therefore, whether she has been discriminated against.

If the Dilemmatic Theory is combined with the view that advanced statistical reasoning is not a basic competence, then the theory delivers the result that

4 Kirk-Giannini, “Dilemmatic Gaslighting,” 765.

Paula's peers do not gaslight her. In order to satisfy condition 3, Paula's peers must call into question a basic epistemic competence. But in this case, they do not. They instead cast doubt on whether she is competent in advanced statistics because, they claim, women are incapable of doing advanced statistics. And yet, this seems like a paradigm example of gaslighting.

Let me say more to defend my judgment that Paula's peers gaslight her in *Skeptical Peers III*. Note that this variant is merely a way of filling in the details of *Skeptical Peers*. As Kirk-Giannini notes, *Skeptical Peers* first appeared on the blog *What Is It Like to Be a Woman in Philosophy?* and then was adopted by Abramson in her list of eight central cases of gaslighting out of which she builds her theory. Kirk-Giannini observes that the case is underspecified in various ways. And yet, even without very many details being filled in, it is nevertheless a paradigm example of gaslighting. Our reaction is that it is a case of gaslighting. Our reaction is not that we need to hear more from the woman reporting her experience before we can tell whether it is really gaslighting. And Kirk-Giannini points out that one of the details missing from the case is whether the woman's peers are acting with the intention Abramson thinks is required for gaslighting (the intention to subvert or control). Kirk-Giannini reasons that this suggests that whether intention occurs in the case is irrelevant to whether gaslighting occurs. Kirk-Giannini puts it this way:

The case as Abramson presents it is underspecified: it does not tell us anything about the intentions of the fellow graduate students. . . . We can imagine that the perpetrators of the gaslighting in *Skeptical Peers* do indeed have the kinds of subterranean motivations Abramson regards as individuating of gaslighting. But we can also imagine that they do not. . . . The fact that we can identify *Skeptical Peers* as a case of gaslighting without knowing about the intentions of the gaslighters suggests that our judgment about the case is not sensitive to facts about those intentions. This conclusion is further suggested by the observation that our intuitive sense that the victim's fellow graduate students are gaslighting her persists when we fill out the case so that they lack an intention to subvert or control her. If this line of argument is sound, it must be possible for there to be gaslighting in the absence of the psychological features Abramson and other intentionalists identify, common or salient though those features may be.⁵

I think we can say the same thing about the lack of details in *Skeptical Peers* concerning exactly what kind of competence is being called into question.

5 Kirk-Giannini, "Dilemmatic Gaslighting," 750–51.

There are no details in the original Skeptical Peers about whether what is called into question is the graduate student's knowledge from a position of marginalization or her ability to do complicated statistics or anything else. If we follow Kirk-Giannini's reasoning, this suggests that exactly which epistemic competence is called into question is not relevant to our intuitions about whether she is gaslighted. Think about it this way: suppose the woman who wrote the blog post on *What Is It Like to Be a Woman in Philosophy?* comes back to fill in the details and reveals that she was dismissed by her peers for her alleged lack of competence in advanced statistics on the basis of being a woman.⁶ We would not then conclude that she is mistaken and that her peers did not gaslight her.

Furthermore, Skeptical Peers is an especially central example for testing theories of gaslighting. As Kirk-Giannini puts it:

There is thus an important dialectical difference between cases like Bird and Bill and cases like Skeptical Peers. Whereas existing accounts' difficulties with capturing the intuition that certain versions of Skeptical Peers involve gaslighting give us reason to hope for an account which does better, the fact that (Dilemmatic Gaslighting) classifies certain versions of Bird and Bill as gaslighting does not indicate that it struggles to capture our intuitions in the same way.⁷

So Kirk-Giannini takes it to be especially important to match intuition in Skeptical Peers. And there are ways of filling in the details of Skeptical Peers in which our intuitions do not change but in which the Dilemmatic Theory seems to give a counterintuitive result. If we follow Kirk-Giannini's reasoning here, then it seems that the point he makes about others' theories also applies to his theory. It is a serious problem if the theory diverges from intuitions about Skeptical Peers III.⁸

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6 Jender, "But the Women Never Say Anything Interesting."

7 Kirk-Giannini, "Dilemmatic Gaslighting," 768.

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