

## GASLIGHTING AND EPISTEMIC COMPETENCE

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ONE ATTRACTIVE IDEA about gaslighting is that it can be individuated by the distinctive kind of *dilemma* with which the gaslighter confronts his victim: she must choose between trusting him, in which case she has good reason to doubt her epistemic competence, and rejecting his testimony, in which case she must negotiate the interpersonal consequences of concluding that he is unreliable, manipulative, or perhaps even malicious.

A dilemmatic account of gaslighting along these lines is *anti-intentionalist* in the sense that it holds that a gaslighter need not have any particular intention beyond the intention to communicate *p* to his victim. Anti-intentionalist accounts of gaslighting have a number of appealing features. For example, they can easily account for the intuition that gaslighting occurs in certain paradigm cases. Consider the following case, which the literature has regarded as a clear example of 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.<sup>1</sup>

*Skeptical Peers* contains no information about the intentions of the victim’s peers, and the strength of the intuition that they gaslight her is not diminished by stipulating that they lack the intention to manipulate or undermine her: they are not excused from the charge of gaslighting if they disregard her testimony simply out of perverse contrarianism, for example. Anti-intentionalist accounts of gaslighting may also be easier to apply in practice, since they do not require us to reach firm conclusions about the internal motivations, intentions, or prejudices of speakers before deciding whether they have engaged in gaslighting.

However, anti-intentionalist accounts of gaslighting that center its dilemmatic structure risk overgenerating. Whenever a speaker communicates some

1 This case is from Abramson, “Turning Up the Lights on Gaslighting,” 5.

proposition that is inconsistent with the beliefs of one of her interlocutors, that interlocutor must choose whether to accept the testimony and revise his beliefs or reject the testimony and conclude that the speaker has spoken falsely. So more must be said to explain why everyday cases of disagreement do not constitute gaslighting.

I have explored one approach to this problem in my 2023 article “Dilemmatic Gaslighting,” where I defend a dilemmatic account of gaslighting:

*Dilemmatic Gaslighting:* For all persons  $A$ ,  $B$ , and propositions  $p$ :  $A$  gaslights  $B$  with respect to  $p$  iff (i)  $A$  intentionally communicates  $p$  to  $B$ , (ii)  $B$  knows (and  $A$  is in a position to know) that if  $p$  is true, then  $B$  has good reason to believe that she lacks basic epistemic competence in some domain  $D$ , (iii)  $A$  does not correctly and with knowledge-level doxastic justification believe  $p$ , and  $A$  does not correctly and with knowledge-level doxastic justification believe that  $B$  lacks basic epistemic competence in  $D$ , and (iv)  $B$  assigns significant weight to  $A$ 's testimony.<sup>2</sup>

My earlier account contains several conditions designed to address worries about overgeneration. In what follows, I focus on the condition that a gaslighter must give his victim reason to doubt her *basic* epistemic competence in some domain.<sup>3</sup> I argued that incorporating this condition into Dilemmatic Gaslighting helps it deal with a range of cases that would otherwise be problematic. For example,

It seems to me that it is not possible . . . for one paleontologist to gaslight another by suggesting that her considered view about what caused the extinction of the dinosaurs is implausible.<sup>4</sup>

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, and so forth. If you demonstrate that I have made some mistake in a complex calculation involving the physics of lasers, I do not thereby gain a reason to doubt any basic epistemic competence of mine. The same can be said about most areas of philosophy.<sup>5</sup>

2 This case appears in Kirk-Giannini, “Dilemmatic Gaslighting,” 757.

3 The idea that a gaslighter targets the basic competence of his victim is also suggested by Abramson: “The accusations are about the target’s basic rational competence—her ability to get facts right, to deliberate, her basic evaluative competencies and ability to react appropriately” (“Turning up the Lights on Gaslighting,” 8).

4 Kirk-Giannini, “Dilemmatic Gaslighting,” 756.

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

Suppose our colleague Professor Plum gives us a cryptic smirk at the department colloquium. You think he means to indicate that he has a devastating objection to the speaker's theory; I think he means to indicate that he has once again succeeded in pilfering one of the bottles of wine meant for the reception. Even if your belief is correct, my insisting on my wine hypothesis does not call into question any basic epistemic competence of yours—Plum's smirk was, after all, cryptic.<sup>6</sup>

In each of these cases, we have something like the dilemmatic structure present in gaslighting, but the intuitive verdict is that gaslighting does not occur. I explained this datum by (i) requiring gaslighting to target a basic epistemic competence and (ii) maintaining that the disagreements in question do not call into question any basic epistemic competence of the parties involved.

The idea that gaslighting must target a basic epistemic competence is thus *prima facie* attractive from the perspective of an anti-intentionalist, dilemmatic theory of gaslighting. Unfortunately, however, Scott Hill shows that enforcing a connection between gaslighting and basic epistemic competence leads to problems of undergeneration. In particular, there are intuitive examples of gaslighting in which the target is not a basic epistemic competence. For example, Hill presents the following version of Skeptical Peers:

*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.<sup>7</sup>

6 Kirk-Giannini, "Dilemmatic Gaslighting," 765.

7 This case is from Hill, "Gaslighting and Peer Disagreement," 644. Hill also presents another case:

*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

An account of gaslighting that ties it constitutively to basic epistemic competence predicts that Paula's peers in *Skeptical Peers III* do not gaslight her since they do not give her reason to doubt any basic epistemic competence. But, Hill argues, *Skeptical Peers III* is intuitively a case of gaslighting. And if we hold that it is important to accommodate our intuitions about versions of *Skeptical Peers* where the peers lack any intention to manipulate or undermine, it must also be important to accommodate our intuitions about a version of *Skeptical Peers* where the epistemic competence targeted is not basic. As Hill puts it:

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. . . . This suggests that exactly which epistemic competence is called into question is not relevant to our intuitions about whether she is gaslighted.<sup>8</sup>

Cases like *Skeptical Peers III* thus appear to pose a problem for anti-intentionalist accounts of gaslighting that center its dilemmatic structure. To avoid overgeneration, they face pressure to hold that gaslighting must target a basic epistemic competence. But to avoid undergeneration, they face pressure *not* to hold this.

What might a friend of Dilemmatic Gaslighting and related views say in response to cases like *Skeptical Peers III*? My sense is that the intuition that *Skeptical Peers III* is a case of gaslighting is not profitably denied. One option is to fall back on the methodology of conceptual engineering, arguing that the theoretical utility of Dilemmatic Gaslighting renders it resistant to refutation by clever counterexamples like those suggested by Hill: while it is important to accommodate our intuitions about cases, it is not *all*-important. But to respond in this way would be unsatisfying insofar as it would do nothing to explain why

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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. (642)

At first, Hill suggests that Dilemmatic Gaslighting might counterintuitively predict that Paula could be gaslighting her peers in *Skeptical Peers II*. However, he goes on to note that there is a compelling reply to this worry: Paula's peers do not form their belief using any basic epistemic competence, so Paula's challenging that belief cannot call into question any basic epistemic competence of theirs. For this reason, he does not offer *Skeptical Peers II* as an objection to Dilemmatic Gaslighting.

8 Hill, "Gaslighting and Peer Disagreement," 646.

we intuit that gaslighting occurs in cases like Skeptical Peers III. Instead, I suggest that there is a different response that can accommodate cases like Skeptical Peers III without giving up the core commitments of the dilemmatic approach.

The response I recommend is to revise Dilemmatic Gaslighting by removing both occurrences of the word ‘basic’. The resulting view, which we might call Dilemmatic Gaslighting\*, retains the other important features of my original proposal without restricting gaslighting to basic epistemic competences. In this way, it generates intuitive verdicts about both Skeptical Peers III and Skeptical Peers.

As we have seen, however, the condition that gaslighting must target a basic epistemic competence is designed to do explanatory work in avoiding over-generation problems. So it is incumbent on me to explain how such problems can be avoided without restricting gaslighting to basic epistemic competences.

According to Dilemmatic Gaslighting\*, *A* gaslights *B* with respect to *p* only if: if *p* is true, *B* has good reason to believe that she lacks epistemic competence in some domain *D*. Whether this condition is satisfied in any given case depends on the strength of the evidence *p* provides that *B* lacks epistemic competence in *D*, which in turn depends on the identities of *p* and *D*. My suggestion is that reflection on cases involving various communicated propositions and epistemic domains significantly diminishes the force of over-generation worries. In other words, the problem that the basic epistemic competence condition was meant to solve never existed in the first place.

Say that a communicated proposition *p* is a *strong challenge* to hearer *B*’s epistemic competence in domain *D* just in case (if it is true) *p* is good evidence that *B* lacks epistemic competence in *D*. Then the crucial question for Dilemmatic Gaslighting\* is whether our intuitions about whether gaslighting has occurred in a case line up in the right way with the facts about whether the communicated proposition is a strong challenge to the hearer’s epistemic competence in that case. I believe our intuitions do line up in this way.

Consider first Skeptical Peers III. In this case, the proposition that constitutes the gaslighting—that women are “incapable of competently engaging in ... advanced statistical reasoning”—entails in the context that the victim lacks epistemic competence in the relevant domain (advanced statistics).<sup>9</sup> This is the strongest possible evidential connection between *p* and the proposition that *B* lacks epistemic competence in *D*, so it is no surprise that we have the intuition that gaslighting has occurred.

9 I remain neutral on the question of whether one’s lacking epistemic competence in advanced statistics entails that one also lacks competence in statistics simpliciter.

This situation contrasts with ordinary cases of peer disagreement implicating a nonbasic epistemic competence. Consider my earlier examples: first, beliefs in theoretical domains like physics, philosophy, and paleontology; second, “beliefs which, while they do not belong to theoretical domains, are formed on the basis of evidence which is subtle or otherwise difficult to interpret” like our beliefs about Professor Plum’s cryptic smile.<sup>10</sup>

Take the paleontology example. It still seems to me that learning the proposition that one’s considered view about what caused the extinction of the dinosaurs is implausible would not call into question one’s basic epistemic competence in any domain. But now I think a stronger claim is also plausible: this proposition is not a strong challenge to *any* of one’s epistemic competences, basic or otherwise. By their nature, the kinds of advanced epistemic competences on which paleontologists rely in forming their views about what caused the extinction of the dinosaurs can misfire. Even if one is perfectly epistemically competent, one might arrive at the wrong view about the extinction of the dinosaurs by failing to detect some subtle methodological flaw in a research paper or by relying slightly too heavily on one source of evidence—or in any number of other ways. Just as we would not interpret a single error in computing a difficult arithmetic problem using pen and paper as good evidence of arithmetic incompetence (or even incompetence at advanced arithmetic), we would not interpret these kinds of mistakes as good evidence of paleontological incompetence (or even incompetence at advanced paleontology). And the same point applies also to other theoretical domains, including physics and philosophy.<sup>11</sup>

Similar remarks apply to the cryptic smirk case. Here, however, the explanation for why my insisting on my wine hypothesis does not constitute a strong challenge to your epistemic competence is not that interpreting smirks in general requires difficult cognitive work. The explanation is rather that that *in this particular case*, the evidence is objectively ambiguous or difficult to interpret.

If this line of reasoning is sound, we should expect that a version of Skeptical Peers III in which Paula’s peers fail to provide a strong challenge to Paula’s epistemic competence will generate less of an intuition that gaslighting has occurred. This does seem to be the case: if we modify the case so that the peers’ testimony to Paula is simply that her statistical reasoning must have gone wrong somewhere on this occasion (without further explanation), for example, the

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

11 As well as statistics—which, it is worth noting, provides the present proposal with a way of responding to Hill’s worry that Paula might be gaslighting her peers in Skeptical Peers II: she cannot be gaslighting them because the proposition she communicates does not constitute a strong challenge to their statistical competence.

situation seems better described as one in which they are bullshitting (in the sense that Harry Frankfurt describes) than as one in which they are gaslighting her.<sup>12</sup>

So only in certain special cases does Dilemmatic Gaslighting\* predict that disagreements implicating an advanced epistemic competence involve gaslighting: cases in which the communicated proposition constitutes a strong challenge to the hearer's epistemic competence. These are generally cases in which what is communicated goes beyond merely the claim that the addressee has gotten things wrong on a particular occasion.

Interestingly, the same does not seem to be true of basic epistemic competences. If you are looking at a large yellow vase under ideal conditions, and I try to convince you that the vase is in fact blue, then I am gaslighting you. This is plausibly because basic epistemic competences, unlike advanced epistemic competences, do not normally misfire. While even the most competent arithmetician makes errors in complicated calculations from time to time, mistaking a blue vase for a yellow one under ideal conditions even once is good evidence that an individual's perceptual apparatus is not functioning properly. So saying that one has gotten things wrong on some occasion with respect to a basic epistemic competence often constitutes a strong challenge to that competence. Given this difference between basic and nonbasic epistemic competences, Dilemmatic Gaslighting\* can explain why the most intuitively forceful cases of gaslighting often involve calling into question an individual's basic epistemic competence in some domain.

The preceding discussion raises an important issue for philosophers interested in gaslighting, whether or not they are attracted to an anti-intentionalist view like Dilemmatic Gaslighting: What necessary and sufficient conditions must be satisfied for a communicated proposition to constitute a strong challenge to a hearer's epistemic competence in a given domain? While I have offered a few generalizations above, I leave a more substantive answer to this question for future research.

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<sup>12</sup> See Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*.

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