

# MANNE, MORAL GASLIGHTING, AND THE POLITICS OF METHODOLOGY

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ABSTRACT: Kate Manne claims that her account of gaslighting rectifies regrettable deficiencies in existing theories. However, Manne hasn't done enough to demonstrate the novelty of her view given that she fails to seriously engage with a significant portion of the gaslighting literature. This is an issue in the politics of methodology. Many theorists working on gaslighting exist within the margins, attempting to centre their perspectives over dominant points of view. We must listen to marginalised folk when aiming to understand a phenomenon that disproportionately affects them. If Manne had listened, she would have come to see difficulties with some of her suggestions, such as the possibility of unintentional gaslighting.

KEYWORDS: gaslighting, social epistemology, philosophical methodology

It's a wonderful thing where upon seeing an esteemed theorist release a new publication one is struck by excitement. Kate Manne is surely one of those theorists for many of us, including myself. In her recent article, Manne (2023) urges us to think of gaslighting beyond the typical confines of epistemology. She argues that gaslighting has, or can have, a distinctly moral edge. It regularly functions to impugn its target's moral character, hitting at the level of one's self-understanding as good or bad rather than rational or 'crazy.'

Manne makes a point that bears repeating. *Sanity is a low bar*. Getting another to doubt their sense of reality clears this bar by some margin. However, we should recognise that doubt can be induced much more easily by making someone believe, or even just feel, that they have failed to live up to what's morally expected of them. And the success of this tactic tends to track social identity: when one is constantly judged to be morally suspicious, then one constantly wonders whether one is *in fact* morally suspicious. Gaslighters can exploit this.

I raise three critical points about Manne's analysis. The general theme is that Manne has not done enough to engage with, and separate her work from, existing literature on gaslighting. This is a great shame, and a serious political shortcoming in methodology. The work on gaslighting is rich, insightful, and important, and usually expressed by marginalised voices with experiences of gaslighting who are attempting to centre their perspective. Importantly, by engaging with this work, Manne could have come to recognise difficulties with some of her suggestions, such

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as the possibility of unintentional gaslighting and her far too consequentialist outlook on its nature.

## I.

Manne's argument is initially framed as filling a lacuna in the literature. She says that if gaslighting is mentioned by philosophers at all, it is only done so "in passing" (2023, 123). But this is certainly not true. While it is right to say that philosophy has been slow to give gaslighting the 'treatment', it is false to say that the literature is sparse. In fact, there have been many wonderful and notable contributions by philosophers over the past five or so years, mostly discussing the relationship between gaslighting and epistemic injustice. Yet, such literature is curiously absent from Manne's analysis. In Section I, where Manne explores extant theorists of gaslighting, she references only 5 theorists, and not all of them philosophers (e.g. psychiatrist Neal A. Kline; sociologist Paige Sweet). But a quick PhilPapers search returns many more theorists, including a collection on gaslighting published in *Hypatia*.

I am not suggesting that Manne has done something wrong merely by not referencing the rich literature on gaslighting. I am pushing back on the way that Manne has set up her paper: *that she is making a contribution to the philosophical debate on gaslighting by rectifying deficiencies in the literature*. If such deficiencies exist, this hasn't been shown. And the political nature of declaring the boundaries of an area of enquiry, especially as a prominent theorist, calls for serious judiciousness.

## II.

My next point is related. Manne, to reiterate, tells us that existing philosophical literature does a bad job of getting at the 'nature' of gaslighting because it misses out on explaining its moral dimension (2023, 124). That is, gaslighting is a form of psychological manipulation not just in the sense that it makes one question whether one is in touch with the facts, but that it makes one doubt the content of one's moral character.

It's not quite right to say that there is a gap in the philosophical literature, or if there is, it's not as big as Manne makes out. Moreover, even if extant accounts of gaslighting fail to explain its moral dimensions, I am not so sure that such accounts cannot accommodate them. While many theorists interested in gaslighting focus on epistemic dispositions, it doesn't entail that their accounts of gaslighting fail to make room for morality as a source of self-doubt. Again, this must be shown.

It would be good to make explicit all of the literature that Manne fails to mention and demonstrate how it relates to her ideas, for better or worse. However, given limitations, I will restrict my discussion to just three works.

The first is Cynthia Stark (2019), who distinguishes between *epistemic* and *manipulative* gaslighting. Where the former concerns the methods of manipulation that strike at one's capacity as an epistemic subject, the latter is concerned with a subject of gaslighting as both "a knower and as a moral equal" (2019, 222). This moral dimension is close to Manne's suggestion, and Stark even uses an example of someone subject to gaslighting who comes to question their moral standing—e.g., someone who questions whether it's appropriate for them to complain about another. So, it's not quite right to say that the philosophical literature has failed to explain how morality can be weaponised in gaslighting.

Manne also explores structural, cultural, or political gaslighting, a form of gaslighting that has its hold at a non-interpersonal level. Importantly, Manne says that it is at this level where moral gaslighting 'comes into its own.'

Though not referenced, Nora Berenstain (2020) appears to explore moral gaslighting at the structural level. Berenstain introduces the idea of 'white feminist gaslighting,' a kind of structural gaslighting that places white women's experiences of gendered oppression front and centre, which masks the nature of this oppression as essentially intersectional, and subsequently hides the legacy of woman of colour in combatting this oppression—such as the role of racism in sexual harassment.

Berenstain does not use the term 'moral gaslighting.' Yet, it's reasonably clear that she is picking it out in her description of the kind of gaslighting to which Black women have been subjected—a kind of gaslighting that relies on ideological hermeneutical resources. In particular, "[t]he images of masculinization and deviant hypersexuality that have characterized representations of Black womanhood under white supremacist capitalist patriarchy..." (2020, 744). These images invoke ideas of Black women as being impure and primitive, and thus morally compromised or incomplete, which are then used as a mechanism of control and justification for oppression at the intersection of race, gender, and class. Similar images have been used to oppress Indigenous women, especially in Australia.

A final theorist is Andrew Spear (2023), who argues that gaslighting has an essential epistemic dimension: gaslighters create situations of epistemic peer disagreement that call into question the target's epistemic standing. I bring up Spear as a potential foil for Manne. If Spear is right, then gaslighting is essentially epistemic. Yet Manne can't accept this, since one can be gaslit simply by having one's *moral* standing impugned.

There are two ways we can go. Agree with Manne that gaslighting can target one's moral character, or agree with Spear that gaslighting is essentially epistemic. Either option is not particularly friendly to Manne. If the latter, then what Manne has identified is not gaslighting, but rather something else—though still very important (perhaps something more akin to 'negging'). If the former, then we are owed a story about why targeting another's moral character counts as gaslighting, which we haven't been given.

### III.

Manne tells us that gaslighting, moral or otherwise, can be unintentional (2023, 139). However, she doesn't explain how and it's not obvious what she means by 'unintentional.' It could mean that one intentionally gaslights but without the intention to harm. Or it could mean that one gaslights but does not realise it. I suspect it must be the latter, since the former would make gaslighting far too uncommon.

The most we get from Manne about the nature of unintentional gaslighting is the case of Rob: "a successful (and otherwise privileged) actor, who was gaslit by his family to doubt his extant belief that he had broken his arm as a child" (2023, 139).

In passing, I want to stress the political significance of Manne's choice of example. Rather than reflect on a case of unintentional gaslighting that affects a marginalised person, Manne has chosen someone who is 'otherwise privileged'—Rob Corddry, a famous white man. But drawing lessons from someone situated as privileged about a phenomenon that disproportionately affects marginalised agents risks obscuring our understanding of the nature of gaslighting (i.e., severing its link to structural injustice).

Manne does not explain why this case counts as unintentional gaslighting, but merely states that it does. As she recites the story, it seems that the family unintentionally gaslights Rob simply in virtue of two things: (1) there is disagreement about the facts of the matter and (2) this disagreement caused Rob to feel defective for having a belief to which he is entitled. These are the bare details of the situation. To reiterate, Rob is 'otherwise privileged.' So it can't be a condition that his marginalised social identity must have been *causally related to* his self-doubt. Should we accept that this counts as gaslighting?

If we do, the consequences are not clearly palatable. For example, mere disagreement with someone in the grips of generalised anxiety might cause self-doubt, making that person feel defective in some fundamental way. As someone with anxiety, I certainly don't want others who disagree with me about, say, philosophy,

to think of themselves as gaslighting me when I come to doubt my worth as a philosopher—even if I am entitled to a better self-understanding.

So, Manne's way of thinking presents us with a dilemma. We are entitled to certain beliefs, but this entitlement bumps up against one's right to disagree. What should we do? I think that this dilemma shows us that something has gone wrong in Manne's analysis. The reason is that her account is almost entirely *consequentialist*. Gaslighting, for Manne, is just making another feel defective for having a mental state to which they are entitled. However, gaslighting cannot be too consequence-focused, for it makes too much of our lives morally suspicious.

What Manne is missing is a story about how these consequences are produced from a questionable and unjust source. Unintentional gaslighting is not just about getting someone to doubt themselves in a fundamental way. It is about self-doubt being a product of something related to one's marginalised social identity. This is why Rob does not count as being gaslit, and should not be explained as unintentional gaslighting.

Paul-Mikhail Catapang Podosky (2020) offers an explanation of unintentional gaslighting as being relevantly connected to structural injustice. For Podosky, unintentional gaslighting is possible only in virtue of the fact that certain people doubt themselves *owing* to their social identities, which are typically associated with negative epistemic stereotypes (e.g. over-sensitive). Thus, according to Podosky, and contra Manne, one cannot be subject to unintentional gaslighting simply because one is made to feel defective in some fundamental way. Rather, it must be because this feeling has as its source identity-prejudicial stereotypes that link up with structures of unjust inequality.

A final point. Manne's consequentialist analysis de-politicises the notion of gaslighting, which is unwelcome. If the case of Rob counts as gaslighting, where there is no concern about whether he occupies a lower position in social hierarchy, then gaslighting is not necessarily a politically rich concept. We would need to distinguish between cases of *mere* gaslighting, which might be evaluatively-neutral, and *pernicious* gaslighting, which tracks social inequality. If this distinction holds, then it seems the latter is what the philosophy of gaslighting should really be all about.

## References

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