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Gaslighting-Up: When Gaslighting Is Good

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Abstract

Gaslighters make their targets feel defective for possessing mental states to which they are entitled. This kind of deceptive manipulation is universally condemned as wrongful and destructive by philosophers and psychologists, as it destroys its target’s epistemic agency and psychological well-being and can be epistemically unjust. But these issues apply to gaslighting that is downward-facing—where the powerful gaslight the vulnerable—and gaslighting is not always like this. When the traditional power dynamic is reversed and a vulnerable agent gaslights her powerful oppressor to defend herself from being wronged, I call it *gaslighting-up* and argue that such behavior is morally permissible and epistemically valuable. It enables abuse victims to avoid harm and to resist the very epistemic domination that is caused by abusive gaslighting, enables marginalized agents to safely protest bigotry and avoid the kind of testimonial injustice that they would face from traditional epistemic gaslighting, and even epistemically benefits its dogmatic targets by giving them a healthy dose of epistemic humility. So, rather than condemning gaslighting as intrinsically, universally bad, we should take a nuanced view and consider it in the context of real-world power dynamics and the role it plays in reinforcing and destabilizing these.

Keywords: social epistemology, epistemic injustice, abuse, oppression, protest, epistemic humility, gaslighting

1. Introduction¹

*You’re crazy. I would never do anything to hurt you—I love you!
Don’t get so worked up over nothing. He didn’t mean it.
I’m sure you just forgot again. You can be careless with these things.*

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Gaslighting has a bad reputation, and for good reason. Successful gaslighting imposes such significant self-doubt in its target that it undermines her status as a knower²—a grave epistemic wrong. It is also used as an emotionally abusive tool to reinforce misogyny and other forms of oppression and domination; so naturally it is universally condemned by feminist philosophers and psychologists who write on it. In a radical departure from this literature, I argue that at least one kind of gaslighting can be good. When oppressed agents gaslight their oppressors, the gaslighting functions as a strategic defense against being wronged. I call this phenomenon *gaslighting-up* and here defend its moral and epistemic value.

After some brief background on gaslighting, I explain the basics of how gaslighting-up works in section 3. In section 4, I argue that gaslighting-up can help abuse victims defend themselves against physical harm *and* against the very psychological and epistemic harms that gaslighting tends to cause. Further, because gaslighting-up is a way to resist being undermined as a knower, it is in accordance with a duty of self-respect, and it can even exhibit virtues of care when it is done in defense of others.

In section 5, I suggest that gaslighting-up can also be good in cases of social oppression, for two particularly surprising reasons. First, instead of undermining its target as a knower, as gaslighting usually does, I argue that gaslighting-up in these cases actually treats its targets as knowers who are capable of epistemic virtue. Second, although gaslighting is often rightly condemned as a testimonial injustice, gaslighting-up can be a strategy that members of marginalized groups use to preserve their credibility and avoid testimonial injustice. Finally, in section 6, I address the worry that even if gaslighting-up confers all the benefits that I discuss, the costs of gaslighting-up for the gaslighter are still too high for the behavior to be valuable.

If my arguments are correct, the larger point is that not all gaslighting is bad, and rather than condemning all gaslighting, we should take a more nuanced view and consider it in the context of real-world power dynamics and the role it can play in reinforcing and destabilizing these dynamics.

2. Gaslighting

Gaslighting is a particular way of deceiving someone by manipulating her into doubting herself. On Kate Manne's (2023, 137) definition, it occurs when the target is "made to feel *defective* in certain fundamental ways—either morally or rationally—for harboring mental states to which they are entitled. These include warranted

² When speaking generally, I follow the convention of using gendered language to refer to victims and perpetrators of gaslighting and abuse, which reflects the. But gaslighting and abuse are perpetrated and experienced by people of all genders, as I will emphasize.

beliefs and perceptions, valid desires and intentions, fitting feelings and attitudes, and so on.” I adopt Manne’s position and define successful gaslighting with reference to these two features, where gaslighters (1) reference flaws in their targets (either real or imagined) in ways that make their targets feel radically defective (2) for having mental states to which they are entitled. Notably, all that is required in this context for one to be entitled to certain beliefs is that they are “capable of being supported by the evidence,” as Cynthia Stark (2019, 233n19) says.

One of the advantages of Manne’s account is that it is broad enough to accommodate a wide range of commonsense cases and to explain what unifies the disparate kinds of gaslighting that other theorists discuss *as* gaslighting, rather than leaving them as unconnected manipulative tactics.³ For instance, some gaslighting is rightly condemned as a pattern of sustained abuse, and theorists who focus on this sort tend to characterize it by its having certain destructive aims (Abramson 2014) or manipulative intentions (Stark 2019; Pohlhaus 2020; Sodoma 2022), which can either be conscious or unconscious. Other gaslighting is rightly condemned as a pernicious form of testimonial injustice, to use Miranda Fricker’s (2007) term,⁴ and theorists tend to characterize it not by particular aims or intentions but by its mechanisms (Ivy 2017; Berenstain 2020; Podosky 2021; Engelhardt 2023). Despite their differences, many, if not all, of these accounts of gaslighting do meet Manne’s two basic conditions, and many philosophers working in both traditions also state outright that they do not take themselves to be characterizing gaslighting generally, just a particular kind of it (e.g., Ivy 2017, 168; Stark 2019, 222; Pohlhaus 2020, 674–75; Engelhardt 2023, 2–3). As a result, we may think of Manne’s account as explaining the broader nature of gaslighting, and as a base on which various rich accounts about particular kinds of gaslighting can be fit. The particular kind of gaslighting that I am introducing — gaslighting-up—also fits Manne’s broad model, so although gaslighting-up can be very

³ This breadth is not an accident: part of Manne’s aim in her paper is to give an account of gaslighting broad enough to capture what she calls epistemic gaslighting and moral gaslighting—i.e., to capture both gaslighting that locates rational defects and gaslighting that locates character defects. The examples listed at the start of this paper are classic examples of epistemic gaslighting, and moral gaslighting occurs, for example, when someone is made to feel ashamed or like a “bitch” for being unforgiving, even though she is entitled to withhold forgiveness (see Manne 2023, 124n2, 142–43).

⁴ Testimonial injustice occurs when “a speaker receives an unfair deficit of credibility from a hearer owing to prejudice on the hearer’s part” (Fricker 2007, online abstract). Of course, one’s testimony can be denied credibility in many ways (like merely being ignored), but undermining testimony through gaslighting often involves a deep betrayal of trust (Ivy 2017; Spear 2023).

different from established forms of gaslighting, it is still fundamentally the same kind of phenomenon.

Whichever definition of gaslighting one adopts, it is clear that there are multiple ways for an agent to phrase his gaslighting. Many instances of gaslighting take the form of what I will call outright rejections. Outright rejections occur when the gaslighter denies that the target's warranted mental states have *any* basis in reality and instead attributes her testimony to some defect in her (see Stark 2019, 227). Examples include, "No, that didn't happen. You were too drunk to remember," and "He would never say that. You must have misheard him!" Gaslighting can also occur as what I will call interpretive rejections, where the gaslighter rejects the target's interpretation of events, rather than outright rejecting the existence of the events themselves—saying, for example, "I know he said that, but it was just a joke. Don't be so sensitive." Outright rejections and interpretive rejections often occur separately, but they are not mutually exclusive. They come together in assertions such as: "He never said that, but honestly, that would have been funny. Don't take yourself so seriously."

One of the reasons gaslighting is condemned by psychologists and philosophers alike is because of the particular harm that it causes (Stern 2007; Abramson 2014; Stark 2019). When it is fully successful, the target suffers considerable psychological and epistemic harm from internalizing the accusations of her gaslighter, as she comes to believe that she is fundamentally defective somehow—that she is "crazy," paranoid, humorless, and so on. Internalizing these accusations involves not just doubting things about the world but doubting one's abilities to accurately perceive the world—and often, doubting not just one's interpretive ability but the accuracy of one's concepts altogether (Podosky 2021).

Internalizing such radical kinds of self-doubt means doubting that one can be a genuine source of knowledge or engage in epistemic practices—such as disagreement and the sharing of testimony—as rational knowers do. Generally, though, we *are* rational knowers who can so engage, and having a sense of oneself as such is an important part of our self-esteem and well-being. Thus gaslighting epistemically wrongs its target, even when it is not a testimonial injustice, because it undermines its target's status as a knower (Abramson 2014; Podosky 2021; Engelhardt 2023; Manne 2023).

The way gaslighting functions to fundamentally undermine its target sets it apart as an especially harmful and disrespectful form of both deception and manipulation. When run-of-the-mill liars—as opposed to gaslighters—deceive and manipulate, they do this by appearing to reason with their targets in respectful, normal ways. This is, of course, not what gaslighters do. In cases of gaslighting, the targets are not treated like knowers to be (deceptively) reasoned with, but are instead deceived by being fundamentally undermined. Additionally, where manipulation

functions merely to impact its target's behavior, gaslighting functions to impact its target fundamentally by undermining her very thoughts and feelings (Stark 2019; Manne 2023, 143n24).

Undermining someone this way is a psychological and emotional form of abuse, partly because its basic function is to control its target's thoughts and feelings, and partly because there are some significant psychological harms associated with being undermined as a knower, including disorientation, depression, feelings of inadequacy, isolation, and self-hate (Stark 2019, 230; Stern 2007). Gaslighting is also a misogynistic form of abuse when it relies on sexist tropes—ones that connect irrationality, weakness, and hypersensitivity to femininity—and when it is used to punish and control women. This in turn further normalizes and perpetuates these misogynistic practices and sexist beliefs, particularly when the gaslighting is fully successful and the targets internalize the sexist beliefs, norms, and so on (Stark 2019; Manne 2023).

Overall, gaslighting as Manne and others describe it is *prima facie* distinct from (and worse than) other forms of manipulation and deception in at least three ways: (1) gaslighting wrongs and disrespects agents by treating them as fundamentally defective and irrational, which (2) tends to cause real harm to the target's well-being and sense of self, and (3) is a form of misogynistic emotional abuse. While I agree that (1), (2), and (3) are true most of the time, in the following limited defense I introduce a kind of gaslighting that can be viewed more positively: as a permissible, even praiseworthy, tool of defense and protest that vulnerable agents—the quintessential victims of gaslighting—can use against their abusers, gaslighters, and oppressors.

3. Gaslighting-Up

To defend gaslighting, the first step is to emphasize that there can be nuance in the gaslighting power dynamic. The gaslighter is not always powerful, and the target is not always powerless. Yes, successful gaslighting requires “a power differential between the gaslighter and his target. . . . A gaslighter, qua manipulator, cannot undermine one's confidence in one's judgments unless one is in some way invested in what the manipulator believes,” as Stark argues (2019, 223). But while it is true that gaslighters must be granted some minimal credibility and standing in order to successfully gaslight, calling the sway that gaslighters have with their targets a power differential can be misleading, especially when done alongside arguments that detail the misogynistic, abusive elements of gaslighting, or alongside arguments that detail the social power imbalance inherent in gaslighting that is testimonial injustice. The emphasis of these elements together can suggest that gaslighters generally have considerable power over their target, but in reality we often attribute credibility in some narrow domains while withholding it in others: I trust my doctor to do the doctoring, and my shoemaker to do the shoemaking, but not the other way around.

In fact, even when a relationship is vastly unequal in its power dynamic, the more vulnerable party is often granted some limited standing and credibility in narrow domains. As a result, under the right circumstances, a child can gaslight an adult and a woman can gaslight a violently misogynistic, domineering man. In the latter case, this kind of man is likely to grant credibility—even a credibility excess, as Emmalon Davis (2016) argues—to women in the severely restricted, typecast sphere of “feminine domains,” which may include cooking, housekeeping, and so on. The wife of such a man can gaslight him in those matters, because of the (perhaps undue) standing afforded to her in a gender-based way. While technically the wife has some power or credibility in these domains, it is only granted to her insofar as it is a limited, precarious standing—she is expected to know only in accordance with sexist stereotypes. Not only is the credibility granted in narrow domains not indicative of the overall power dynamic in the relationship, this husband-wife case shows that granting credibility in severely limited and prejudicial ways can be indicative of a dynamic where the person granting the credibility is the one with the power, all things considered.

When the oppressed gaslight their oppressors, I call it *gaslighting-up*. Its characteristic function is to defend vulnerable agents from genuine wronging—to defend or promote their agency or dignity. Many instances of gaslighting-up can look exactly the same as instances of abusive gaslighting, on paper, isolated from broader features concerning the relevant power dynamics and context. For example, we can imagine both an abuser and an abuse victim using the quintessential gaslighting phrases listed at the start of this paper: “You’re crazy. I would never do anything to hurt you—I love you!”; “Don’t get so worked up over nothing. He didn’t mean it”; and “I’m sure you just forgot again. You can be careless with these things.” Despite the superficial similarities, these two kinds of gaslighting are very different, and they can be distinguished by looking at the power dynamic and the relational context under which the gaslighting occurs. Abusers often gaslight in a destructive pattern of consolidating power and control over their target (Abramson 2014, 19), but when victims gaslight-up abusers, they are using their limited credibility to disrupt this control. As punching-up is a tool to subvert and thus resist unjust power dynamics through humor (Schwartz 2016), gaslighting-up is a tool to subvert and resist unjust dynamics through deception.

4. Defense

Two guiding literary cases, both concerning abusive parents and their children, will help showcase how gaslighting-up can be morally good. The first case, from Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, is an example of how gaslighting-up acts as a defense against physical violence. The other, from Roald Dahl’s *Matilda*, illustrates

two surprising benefits of gaslighting-up: it can improve the behavior of abusers and it can epistemically empower abuse victims.

4.A. Defending against Physical Violence

Here is the relevant incident from *Huck Finn*:

“Git up! What you ‘bout?”

I opened my eyes and looked around, trying to make out where I was. It was after sun-up, and I had been sound asleep. Pap was standing over me looking sour and sick, too. He says:

“What you doin’ with this gun?”

I judged he didn’t know nothing about what he had been doing, so I says:

“Somebody tried to get in, so I was laying for him.”

“Why didn’t you roust me out?”

“Well, I tried to, but I couldn’t; I couldn’t budge you.”

“Well, all right. Don’t stand there palavering all day, but out with you and see if there’s a fish on the lines for breakfast. I’ll be along in a minute.” (Twain 1885, ch. 7)

In this passage, Huck is using deception to strategically protect himself from being violently attacked—to defend and maintain his physical agency. He does this by taking advantage of the fact that his abusive, alcoholic father, Pap, does not remember what occurred the night before: namely, Pap threatening to kill Huck in a deeply frightening way, such that Huck grabbed a gun to protect himself after Pap eventually passed out drunk. Huck did aim the gun at Pap, and intended to shoot if attacked again, so if Pap is suspicious and angry that he was just in danger, those mental states are justified. To undermine these justified mental states, Huck tells a story about a stranger and indicates that Pap’s heavy sleeping—and by implication, his heavy drinking—is the defect at the root of Pap’s current confusion.

Even if Huck is undermining Pap’s justified mental states, one might worry that it is still just a common lie that does not pick out a significant rational or moral defect. But referencing intoxication, even indirectly, is a way to deny credibility. Gaslighters may insist their targets cannot really remember their experiences or insist that they are not in their right minds and cannot understand what is currently happening to them. Britney Spears, Frances Farmer, and Judy Garland are just a few famous targets of this behavior.⁵ We can also see that Huck’s deception is gaslighting because it is

⁵ Such gaslighting also occurs in literature, including *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (Kesey 1962) and *The Girl on The Train* (Hawkins 2015).

done via the classic gaslighting structure of an interpretive rejection. Huck does not deny that he took the gun, but he insists on a false interpretation of the situation by locating a relevant defect. These features together make this behavior an attempt at gaslighting, and in Huck's case the gaslighting is successful, for it instills enough doubt in Pap that he decides not to assault Huck.

In Huck's case, we see how gaslighting-up can defend against an immediate threat of physical abuse, and this is often how gaslighting is used by real abuse victims. In fact, gaslighting-up is an overlooked but crucial form of what researchers on abuse call safety planning. Any element of an abuse victim's practical, personal plan to prepare for and protect against abuse counts as her safety planning, and it can occur while she is living with her abuser, or after she has escaped (Wood, Glass, and Decker 2021; McFarlane et al. 2004; Sabri et al. 2021). Safety-planning behaviors include removing weapons from the home and gathering money, clothing, extra keys, and important documents (McFarlane et al. 2004, 41–42). Generally, safety planning includes all sorts of “strategies that increase women's safety by increasing situational awareness of IPV [intimate partner violence]-related risks and empowering women with necessary skills to enhance safety” (Sabri et al. 2021, 1730), and this means that “both overt and covert resistance strategies can be used . . . to minimize harm and gain control over the situation” (Wood, Glass, and Decker 2021, 69). Gaslighting-up is a covert resistance strategy that victims of abuse use to avoid harm and gain some control in a dangerous situation, as evidenced in *Huck Finn*, so gaslighting-up should be considered a legitimate form of safety planning.

Not only is gaslighting-up its own kind of safety planning, but if *any* long-term safety planning is to succeed, it will likely be because the abuse victim deceives her abuser, often through gaslighting. Ideally, safety planning will proceed unnoticed by the abuser, but if any safety-planning behaviors—gathering clothing, keys, documents, and so on—make an abuser suspicious, the victim should, for her own safety, try to convince him that his (correct) suspicion is wrong, that she has not made plans to leave him even though she *has* begun that process. She may say: “I donated those clothes last spring. You're busy with more important things though, so I can understand why you don't remember”; “I don't know why the passports aren't in that cabinet. Are you sure you put them there?”⁶ I love you but you do have a habit of leaving things about”; or “Please don't be so paranoid. I just made an extra key for the babysitter.”

I imagine that this kind of gaslighting-up is incredibly common in contexts of domestic abuse, and I hope that instead of vilifying victims' behavior because it

⁶ This example also illustrates how gaslighting-up can co-occur with other kinds of deceptive resistance to oppression—in this case, Alison Bailey's (2007) strategic ignorance. I discuss some of these strategies' similarities in section 6.

appears to be problematic gaslighting, we understand it as a form of safety planning—as a desperate attempt by victims to keep themselves safe while in abusive relationships and while they are trying to exit them.⁷

4.B. Defending against Gaslighting

When gaslighting-up is used for defense and safety planning, it also comes with another, subtler benefit: gaslighting-up helps abuse victims maintain their epistemic agency and thus psychologically defend against abusive gaslighting. I will use Dahl’s character Matilda to show this, as she engages in gaslighting-up that explicitly serves this function:

“Oh my gawd!” yelled the father, staring into the little mirror. “What’s happened to me! . . . How did it happen?” He stared round the room, first at the mother, then at the son, then at Matilda. “How *could* it have happened?” he yelled.

“I imagine, Daddy,” Matilda said quietly, “that you weren’t looking very hard and you simply took Mummy’s bottle of hair stuff off the shelf instead of your own.”

“*Of course* that’s what happened!” the mother cried. “Well really, Harry, how stupid can you get? Why didn’t you read the label before you started splashing the stuff all over you!” (Dahl 1988, 75–76)

In this passage, Matilda’s abusive father, Harry Wormwood, realizes that his naturally dark hair is now blonde, and his (correct) instinct is that he could never have done this to himself. Matilda then gaslights her father by making him and others believe that this *is* the result of his own carelessness—a rational defect—instead of revealing what really occurred: Matilda herself poured peroxide into her father’s hair tonic bottle. In fact, Matilda systematically gaslights both her abusive parents throughout the book, and we are told why by Dahl:

She resented being told constantly that she was ignorant and stupid when she knew she wasn’t. The anger inside her went on boiling and boiling, and as she lay in bed that night she made a decision. She decided that every time her father or her mother was beastly to her, she would get her own back in some way or another. A small victory or two would help her tolerate their idiocies and *would stop her from*

⁷ For instance, I take gaslighting-up to have been vilified and used against an abuse victim in the way that the public responded to the *Depp v. Heard* trials, where reactive violence, generally, was viewed as abusive violence.

going crazy. You must remember that she was still hardly five years old and it is not easy for somebody as small as that to score points against an all-powerful grown-up. Even so, she was determined to have a go. (Dahl 1988, 25; my emphasis)

In this passage, we see that Matilda's deception "stop[s] her from going crazy" from her parents' abusive gaslighting toward *her*—such as them constantly telling Matilda that she's ignorant and stupid. While the Wormwoods' manipulative gaslighting is unsuccessful insofar as they have not manipulated Matilda into believing that she is unintelligent, it is successful insofar as they have already caused Matilda to experience some of the associated psychological and emotional harms of being gaslit, including feeling helpless, frustrated, isolated, and at least in some sense, like she is "going crazy."⁸ That Matilda is psychologically harmed by gaslighting, even if it has not yet radically undermined her sense of being a knower, reflects how abusive, manipulative gaslighting is often a pattern of behavior over time that slowly breaks down its victim's sense of self (Stark 2019, 231).

In response to the abusive gaslighting, Matilda herself begins to engage in a pattern of behavior similar to Jack Manningham's in Patrick Hamilton's (1939) play *Gas Light*. In Hamilton's play, Jack consistently tries to undermine his wife Bella's sense of being a knower. One way that he does this, in the case that originated the term *gaslight*, is by denying that the gas-run lamps in their home dim in the evenings, despite Bella witnessing them dim. Alongside this outright rejection, Jack systematically changes things around their home and pins these changes on Bella, even going so far as to hurt their dog and say that she did it. He gaslights Bella about these changes by means of an interpretive rejection, as Jack does not reject the fact that items are moved or broken but does reject Bella's (correct) view regarding that fact, that she really had nothing to do with these changes. This, and the imposition of Jack's own (false) interpretation of events, is what makes Bella feel confused in these cases and like she cannot trust herself and her memory (Hamilton 1939, 33–34). Jack has a convoluted reason for his behavior, but as Manne says, "the cruelty is partly the point for him" (2023, 126; citing Serwer 2018). All this is similar to what we see from Matilda: she systematically changes the environment around her family's home in confusing, startling ways, then gaslights her parents about these changes, usually through interpretive rejections. After all, she does not deny that her father's hair has changed, but she does reject his instinct that he would never make such a mistake. By attributing defects to her parents and suggesting (false) interpretations of their

⁸ There is also much to say on the ableist dimension of gaslighting and the ableism of the term "crazy," and I am developing an account of this ableism in a separate project (also see Manne 2020, ch. 8; 2023, 124n1; Bailey 2020).

experiences, Matilda repeatedly convinces her parents that their (warranted) confusion is unwarranted, and she undoubtedly takes great pleasure in the epistemic unmooring that her gaslighting causes.

The satisfaction that Matilda derives from her deception reflects how gaslighting can promote the deceiver's self confidence in her epistemic abilities. Like so many other strategies of manipulation or deception, gaslighting involves controlling epistemic goods and narratives, and this brings its own sense of power and satisfaction for the deceiver, sometimes called “duping delight” (see, for instance, Ekman 1985; Spidel et al. 2011; Gunderson et al. 2022). But unlike other manipulative and deceptive acts—such as strategic ignorance (Bailey 2007) and deception by omission—gaslighting itself occurs through insisting upon one’s epistemic abilities and maintaining one’s credibility or expertise—it is constituted by acting like a knower through interpretive rejections or outright rejections. When someone gaslights and labels some feature in her target as a defect and successfully pushes her perspective, she is practicing maintaining her independent epistemic standpoint and showing herself that she is capable of that, and this means gaslighting can boost the confidence of the gaslighter.

This confidence boost is usually bad, but not in cases of gaslighting-up. In traditional cases of gaslighting (gaslighting-down), the positive feelings that gaslighters receive from controlling epistemic goods and narratives are problematic because they further entrench the gaslighter’s unjust sense of entitlement and tendency to privilege their own perspectives (Ivy 2017, 169). But when abuse victims gaslight-up, the visceral reinforcement of their core abilities is a good thing, as it shows them that they are capable of acting independently and resisting epistemic domination from their abusers.

This is a crucial benefit: such empowerment and self-confidence are exactly what the clinical literature advises real victims of abuse and gaslighting to aim for in their recovery. For instance, psychologist Amanda Avera encourages victims of gaslighting to “trust yourself and think of your strengths and positive qualities often. This will help to remind you that you are strong and capable. No one can control your thoughts and behaviors unless you let them” (Avera 2023; see also Stern 2007; Fuchsman, 2019; Herman 1998). When an abuse victim gaslights her abuser, she is doing just what Avera recommends: trusting herself and proving to herself that she can think and act independently of her abuser—that she is epistemically strong and capable. This is true even for abuse victims like Huck, who are not consciously aiming to psychologically benefit when they gaslight-up. All successful instances of gaslighting-up one’s abusive gaslighter defend the abuse victim's epistemic agency and help them psychologically endure through their abuse.

Matilda’s gaslighting-up also impacts the behavior of its targets, subtly and temporarily improving her abusive family’s treatment of her:

[Matilda's] safety-valve, the thing that prevented her from going round the bend, was the fun of devising and dishing out these splendid punishments, and the lovely thing was that they seemed to work, at any rate for short periods. The father in particular became less cocky and unbearable for several days after receiving a dose of Matilda's magic medicine.

The parrot-in-the-chimney affair quite definitely cooled both parents down a lot and for over a week they were comparatively civil to their small daughter. (Dahl 1988, 45)

Matilda's deception makes her parents behave better because their abusive behavior, like all abuse, is partly the result of an entrenched sense of entitlement and self-importance within the abuser (Manne 2020). Gaslighting-up can help reduce abusive behavior because being troubled by self-doubt (i.e., being successfully gaslit) *necessarily* dampens one's confidence in one's worldview and self-conception. After all, it is difficult to act entitled, tyrannical, self-important, and, as Dahl says, "cocky and unbearable" when one is actually disoriented and brimming with self-doubt. In other words, abusers who are shaken from their entrenched sense of self-importance become less inclined to treat in bad faith, exploit, or run roughshod over those under their power, since those behaviors stem from self-importance and entitlement.⁹

This result of gaslighting-up is practically significant: even if the improvement is subtle, temporary, or limited to narrow domains, every slight reprieve from abuse matters for the health and safety of the victim. Empirical work supports this; for example, in a 2021 study, Shannon Wood and coauthors link intimate partner violence to a broad range of health issues in victims and suggest that "mitigating repeat injuries and minimizing the impact of chronic stress should be a top priority for prevention and response programs" (Wood, Glass, and Decker 2021, 68; see also Hulley et al. 2023). When Matilda gaslights-up, it helps her minimize her chronic stress and mitigate repeat offenses and injuries; so her gaslighting-up, like Huck's, is a useful form of safety planning.

It may seem that gaslighting-up would be a better defense, a more useful form of safety planning, if it characteristically caused lasting improvements in abusive situations. Practically this may be true, but one reason that gaslighting-up should be distinguished from other forms of gaslighting is that it does not tend to lead to prolonged or universal self-doubt in its targets. Gaslighting-up avoids this because

⁹ Of course, many abusers *do* have low levels of self-esteem—e.g., those with covert narcissism or borderline personality disorder. My point holds though, because low self-esteem often coexists with a high sense of self-importance (Kandola and Gepp 2023).

abusers qua abusers already have such deeply entrenched habits of dogmatically centering themselves and dominating others that the impacts of subtle gaslighting-up are not likely to last long enough or make a deep enough or broad enough impression that would stably or universally change abusers' characters and behavior.

This is what we see with Matilda's parents: her pattern of gaslighting-up boosts her self-confidence and affords her temporary respite from her parents' abuse and neglect, but it does not implant the kind of longstanding, pernicious psychological distress and self-doubt that systematic gaslighting is usually thought to implant in its target. While this means gaslighting-up may not be a realistic way to permanently or universally transform the character and behavior of an abuser, it also means gaslighting-up an abuser is typically minimally harmful to its target, with little, if any, lasting psychological damage.

4.C. Defending Others

Gaslighting-up can also be done in defense of others. This can happen when a victimized parent protects her child from the abusive parent, or when older siblings protect younger siblings. For instance, if a child honestly tells his abusive father that he hates him, the mother might attempt to diffuse the abuser's anger and protect her son from harm by making the abuser doubt his justified belief that the child meant what he said. To do this, she may say, "Don't take it seriously; that's just how angry kids are! Of course Junior loves you. We're so grateful for everything you do for us." When gaslighting-up is done in defense of others like this, it is particularly valuable. It is still an accessible tool for vulnerable agents to defend or reclaim justified agency and dignity, and it is still minimally harmful to its target; but additionally it exhibits selflessness and care, as it is done in an attempt to shield others who are vulnerable to harm when they cannot shield themselves, even though that attempt increases one's own risk of serious harm. When gaslighting-up in defense of others reflects these virtues, it is not just permissible but admirable and praiseworthy.

It takes a minimal commitment to care for oneself in order to stand in one's *own* rightful defense, too. Specifically, gaslighting-up in self-defense exhibits virtuous self-respect because it enables a victim of abusive gaslighting to maintain a proper sense of herself as a rational agent, and, as Rae Langton puts it, "respect her own person . . . abjuring the vice of servility" (2012, 385; on self-regarding virtue, see also Taylor and Wolfram 1968; Massey 1983; Bloomfield 2011). This again highlights that while successful gaslighting generally functions to make its targets servile, successful gaslighting-up functions to help gaslit and oppressed agents resist and shed servility. Given this, even neo-Kantians may agree that gaslighting-up in self-defense is good (Hill 1973; Langton 2012; Terlazzo 2020).

So far, I have argued that it is morally good and practically valuable for abuse victims to gaslight their abusers. It is an effective form of safety planning against

potentially grave physical harm *and* against cumulative epistemic and psychological harm, where it rebuilds abuse victims' confidence in their epistemic abilities. What's more, gaslighting-up can even exhibit virtues of self-respect and care.

5. Protest

I suggest in this section that gaslighting-up can also be valuable and good when it is used to protest social prejudice and injustice. In this kind of gaslighting-up, like the kind used to combat abuse, the gaslighter is a victim of oppression, and the target is a perpetrator. In these cases, though, the gaslighter is a vulnerable, marginalized agent—a victim of systemic oppression because of her identity—and the oppressive agent or dominant group that she is gaslighting has power over her insofar as they facilitate or perpetuate her oppressed status.

Additionally, the agent who gaslights-up *in protest* is protesting not just because she is looking for a way to reject the true assertions, justified beliefs, accurate perceptions, or other mental states to which her target is entitled, but also because she sees that her target is making his assertions and forming his perceptual judgments in bad faith or with bad intentions. As a result, the gaslighter refuses to engage in a good faith, honest conversation. She already knows it would go nowhere. The following “gaydar” case serves as a guiding example of this kind of gaslighting-up.

A homophobe attends a Pride parade in bad faith, with the intent to harass the parade-goers and stoke her own bigotry; while there, she sees a man dressed in revealing clothing and infers from this perception that he is queer. Her inference is correct in this case: the man is queer. Further, he had dressed in a visibly queer style with the intention of telegraphing that he is queer to others in the community, hoping to make positive connections, express pride in his identity, and so on. This means that when the bigot forms her belief that the man is queer, she has a justified and true belief—arguably even knowledge. The man she is observing *is* queer, and his intentionally telegraphed indications of that are not being misread by the bigot in this instance.

Next, the bigot acts on her belief. She shouts at the man, “You queers should have the decency to dress decently in public at least.”

The target then responds by denying the truth of the bigot's (true) assertion that he is queer, and treating the bigot's inferential abilities in this domain with contemptuous skepticism and derision by saying, “You're insane. You think you can read my sexuality off how I'm dressed? At a Pride event, no less? Please. For your information, I'm actually a straight father of three. And there's nothing indecent about what I'm wearing. Get a grip.”

We can tell this case is an instance of gaslighting, as the agent attempts to undermine the bigot’s justified belief (that he is queer)¹⁰ by locating a rational defect in her (calling her insane), and combining an outright rejection (the denial that he is queer) with an interpretive rejection (the denial that his clothing should be interpreted as inappropriate).

5.A. Educational Benefit

Notably, while the defensive gaslighting-up discussed in section 3 does not require a radically destructive aim where the gaslighter genuinely aims for the target to take themselves to be crazy,¹¹ the gaslighting-up at issue here *does* involve this destructive aim, at least to an extent. The point of the queer agent in the “gaydar” example engaging in a gaslighting response is not merely to make the bigot think that her gaydar is unreliable, but to make her feel ridiculous for thinking she could rely on it. Put another way, this gaslighting-up makes the bigot doubt both her interpretive abilities and the accuracy of her concepts (Podosky 2021).

Undermining bigots like this is actually a good thing for them. Concerning phenomena such as someone else’s sexuality or gender, people are benefited epistemically and morally when they are discouraged from thinking of themselves as competent knowers. Despite the stereotypes, these statuses are often invisible, private, and knowable only through the first-person perspective or testimony. Someone who puts her faith in stereotypes will thus tend to have undue confidence in her beliefs about how to read others. When bad actors are overly confident concerning the private statuses and first-person perspectives of others—even when they are correct in a particular instance—what they need is a healthy dose of epistemic humility, which is “both a disposition to embrace others as partners in cognitive activity and an awareness of our own ignorance and limitations,” as scholar Nicolas Bommarito (2018, sec. 4.3) says. Possessing epistemic humility about private statuses is particularly good for us, in a Socratic sense, as it paves the way for a richer understanding of these statuses (see De Brasi and Boeri 2023) and reduces one’s reliance on stereotypes. In turn, this reduces the quantity of one’s bad, prejudiced inferences and reduces one’s unwarranted confidence in those kinds of inferences.

So, ideally the homophobe will come away from the conversation with the realization that she cannot infer someone’s sexuality from how they immediately present themselves. She will think, “Maybe it really *is* crazy to believe I have a gaydar. I guess I just can’t understand this new generation.” When the bigot loses confidence like this, she comes to understand sexuality better than before—at least, she

¹⁰ The homophobe’s belief is “justified” in that it is supported by the evidence (Stark 2019, 233n19).

¹¹ Matilda has a version of this aim, but Huck does not.

understands that she cannot perceive it and that it is foolish to think that she can. It is good for her to believe this even if her “gaydar” is mostly accurate and, in this particular instance, is reflecting reality and is rationally justified, because the bigot’s broad tendency to be confident in her prejudiced inferences stands in her way of a better, more fine-grained understanding of both sexuality and fashion. For instance, she won’t be led to the false judgment that all the skater boys with long hair and painted nails are queer.¹² Moreover, this person owes it to others not to make stereotypical and offensive assumptions about their sexuality, and she certainly owes it to them not to make morally inexcusable inferences and be grossly disrespectful on the basis of said traits (whether real or imaginary) (Basu 2019).

Still, there is a mean: the gaslighting-up in the gaydar example is not meant to be universal, where it would make the bigot doubt her epistemic abilities overall, such as her ability to perceive a joke or a slight, or infer appropriately in other domains. Instead, it aims to undermine radically but locally. We naturally grant credibility in some domains and not others, so this may seem like an uninteresting, mild aim.¹³ Recall from section 2, though, that this is also the aim in some cases of abuse, where perpetrators want their victims to be competent in some domains but want to undermine them fundamentally in others (Davis 2016). In contrast to both the insignificant and the problematic cases, this aim, of radically but narrowly undermining one’s target, is praiseworthy when applied to a case of gaslighting-up as protest, because the local self-doubt that is instilled in bigots is an instrumental epistemic harm, done in part so that those bigots can achieve the greater epistemic good of domain-specific epistemic humility.

Because gaslighting-up bigots fosters epistemic humility, it is ultimately a way of treating its target as a knower. Producing a better epistemic state in one’s target need not be a conscious aim in the mind of the gaslighter; it is a feature of gaslighting-up that it functions to radically humble and undermine its target in some narrow domain—or, put more positively, that it treats its targets as knowers capable of achieving epistemic virtue.

5.B. Testimonial Benefit

Perhaps the most important benefit of gaslighting-up as protest is that it preserves and promotes the standing of marginalized agents, as sometimes it is only possible for marginalized agents to be treated as knowers by those around them when they conceal their identity. Being honest would just result in being stripped of

¹² I’m grateful to Nicholas Silins for this example of fashion trends that may signal queerness in some social contexts (such as Pride events) but not in others (skate parks).

¹³ Recall the doctor and shoemaker example from section 3 that illustrates this.

their credibility. For example, we can imagine that the homophobe would write off the queer agent's testimony if she thought that he was queer when he was rebuking her. This is not just because confirming the homophobe's inference by being honest further entrenches the homophobe's confidence in that kind of inference, but because the queer agent's testimony will simply not be taken seriously once the homophobe learns that he is queer, in a classic case of testimonial injustice.

Because gaslighting-up in protest maintains the vulnerable agent's credibility in the eyes of the bigot, it is one way that vulnerable agents can safely plant epistemic flags, stand their ground as knowers, engage in the world as knowers do, and thus maintain their dignity and credibility in their *own* eyes as epistemic agents. Gaslighting-up is one of several strategies of epistemic flag-planting for marginalized agents to resist oppression,¹⁴ and when used this way, it helps marginalized agents to maintain their credibility and avoid the testimonial injustice that they would otherwise be subject to through behaviors like epistemic gaslighting (Ivy 2017; Berenstein 2020; Pohlhaus 2020; Podosky 2021; Engelhardt 2023).

All this is to say that gaslighting-up in protest functions simultaneously to defend against bigots, to open a space for them to doubt themselves and improve themselves as epistemic agents, and to preserve—perhaps even promote—the credibility of the oppressed gaslighter.¹⁵ What's more, gaslighting-up can be used by oppressed agents to benefit those who are in an even worse position, similar to how gaslighting-up can be used to defend third parties in situations of interpersonal abuse. But in the context of social prejudice, this kind of gaslighting-up exhibits solidarity in shared vulnerability and oppression, and it exhibits valuable allyship toward the most vulnerable, as it requires that the gaslighting agents recognize they have been granted something that not all oppressed agents have: limited credibility and standing in the eyes of their oppressors.¹⁶ So although “allies” do tend to behave badly when they gaslight (Ivy 2017), they behave well when they gaslight-up.

¹⁴ As I discuss in section 6, which strategy (if any) is appropriate in any given circumstance will depend on the details of those circumstances and agents.

¹⁵ Thanks to Reviewer 2 for the suggestion to emphasize this discussion.

¹⁶ For instance, this kind of gaslighting-up can happen when women at a bar say that they're friends with an extremely intoxicated young woman (who is in fact a stranger to them) so that she is not taken into a car by a creepy guy who was insisting that he would drive her home. For example, see this untitled mobile-phone video, posted October 21, 2024, by “delululittlepsycho,” to TikTok, (1 min., 55 sec.): <https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZT2fw3GcE/>.

6. Objections

Even if gaslighting-up can do all I have said, it may still come with costs to the gaslighters. The two I address here are the psychological costs associated with gaslighting-up as a strategy for protesting bigotry, and the vices associated with it as a kind of safety planning.

6.A. Psychological Costs

We should not be flippant about how psychologically harmful it can be to deny a personal status that one possesses. Deceptive strategies of survival and resistance will *all* involve such risks, though. Whether the particular strategy is code-switching (Haugen 1956; see also Young 2009), strategic ignorance (Bailey 2007), gaslighting-up, or some other kind of deception, there is a risk that it will foster a negative self-conception and double consciousness. Such deceptive strategies all require marginalized agents to present “themselves as they are not in order to protect other aspects of themselves that are important,” which inevitably comes with risks of self-alienation (Bailey 2007, 89). But until marginalized agents do not need to protect important aspects of themselves, they must continue to make this cost-benefit analysis and decide which parts of themselves to protect and prioritize. Gaslighting-up in protest involves a version of this trade off, where it helps marginalized agents preserve an important aspect of themselves—their standing and credibility as knowers—even though preserving this aspect is done by denying their marginalized identity.

Still, it is important that the deception in service of gaslighting-up bigots tends to be temporally limited and for a specific purpose. It does not characteristically require a prolonged suppression of one’s statuses or identities,¹⁷ so it is less likely to foster alienation and its associated psychological harms, such as shame or a sense of

¹⁷ However, one real-life case of extended gaslighting-up bigots may be the case of Ron Stallworth, a Black police officer in Colorado Springs who led a successful investigation into the Ku Klux Klan for several months in 1978 and “made a fool of David Duke” (Stallworth 2018) by gaining official membership to the Klan, and even “befriending” the Klan’s Grand Wizard at the time, the neo-Nazi David Duke, with whom Stallworth would have phone calls multiple times a week. Stallworth managed all this by posing as a racist and anti-Semitic white man on the phone with Duke, and having a white officer play his role at physical events. This situation is also an example of gaslighting-up being employed alongside other deceptive strategies to maintain one’s credibility and engage with bigots, as in this case, Stallworth sometimes gaslit-up in order to maintain his cover if his code-switching over the phone ever faltered. This behavior is depicted in Spike Lee’s (2018) film *BlacKkKlansman*, which is based on Stallworth’s experiences.

isolation, than deceptive strategies that persist over long periods of time, like a pattern of code-switching in one's school and place of work (Young 2009). Additionally, agents who gaslight-up can simultaneously maintain an active, positive inner dialogue about their identities that will reduce the psychological risks associated with gaslighting-up. For instance, the queer agent from may gaslight the homophobe while simultaneously stressing to himself that there is nothing shameful about being queer or dressing in a way that telegraphs this. The point here is that individuals who engage in active reflection when they gaslight-up are in a good position to defend against the potential psychological harms they could face from the gaslighting-up. If engaging in this sort of reflection seems too demanding, remember this is the demand for *all* action: good deliberation generally requires that we can accurately perceive situations and their salient features. This includes being aware of what actions, out of our options, can cause us significant harm, and how to avoid that harm (see Archer 2022).

6.B. Character Costs

One might worry that abuse victims cultivate vices by gaslighting-up—that they become manipulative and deceptive people. I take this worry to reflect a more general risk of abuse: that victims become abusive themselves, as in cases of intergenerational trauma cycles (Zuravin et al. 1996; Pears and Capaldi 2001). But resisting oppression can still be genuinely good and praiseworthy, even if it can morally limit and burden the resistant agent. Such behavior exhibits what Lisa Tessman calls burdened virtues, which are character traits that “make a contribution to human flourishing—if they succeed in doing so at all—*only* because they enable survival of or resistance to oppression (it is in this that their nobility lies), while in other ways they detract from their bearer's well-being” (Tessman 2005, 95). The “vices” habituated by gaslighting-up—dishonesty, Machiavellianism, hypervigilance, and so on—are burdensome in this way, because while they do detract from an agent's well-being, in contexts of oppression they also become tools to of resistance and survival.

Instead of thinking that the existence of these long-term risks influences whether gaslighting-up is good in instances when it is done well, we should remember that nearly *any* coping mechanism or defensive behavior inhibits flourishing when it is prolonged or used outside of its intended contexts.¹⁸ Even when children like Huck and Matilda must rely on gaslighting-up for years to deal with parental abuse, we hope that they are able to escape those toxic environments at some point and begin to heal and cultivate greater well-being, rather than just defend themselves against

¹⁸ Of course, whether some instances of gaslighting-up lead to more harm than good for the abuse victim is ultimately an empirical matter.

total destruction—either physical or psychological and epistemic. For all I have said, gaslighting-up may never be a good permanent coping strategy; however, that is still compatible with it being permissible and even laudable in the short and medium term, as I have argued.

7. Conclusion

My project here has been to explore an overlooked type of gaslighting, one we should view more positively than we might expect, given the universal censure of gaslighting in the philosophical and psychological literature. This is what I call *gaslighting-up*, where an oppressed, otherwise powerless agent gaslights her oppressor to defend herself against being wronged—and particularly to preserve her agency and dignity.

I first argued that gaslighting-up is a valuable defense for victims of abuse. It can help them avoid abuse while also helping them heal from the psychological harms of abuse—and of abusive gaslighting in particular. The *Huck Finn* and *Matilda* examples are cases in point: Huck gaslights his abusive father to avoid potentially grave physical harm, and Matilda gaslights her abusive parents to counteract the psychological harm that she experiences as the target of their gaslighting.

I then argued, using the gaydar case, that gaslighting-up can also be good when it is used as a tool for oppressed agents to protest social oppression and prejudice. One main reason for this is that it allows marginalized agents to maintain standing and credibility that they otherwise would have been denied. Used this way, gaslighting is not a testimonial injustice but a tool to help marginalized agents *avoid* testimonial injustice. What's more, such gaslighting-up can protest the behavior and inferences of its bigoted target without aiming to epistemically destroy them, as gaslighting is usually thought to do. Instead, gaslighting-up bigots ultimately treats that target as a rational agent, capable of reflection and epistemic virtue.

These conclusions may initially seem counterintuitive, but my arguments reveal how gaslighting can have a bright side. So if you are not convinced that gaslighting can be good by this point, you must be crazy.

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