II—Carla Bagnoli

Normative Isolation: The Dynamics of Power and Authority in Gaslighting

Gaslighting is a form of domination which builds upon multiple and mutually reinforcing strategies that induce rational acquiescence. Such abusive strategies progressively insulate the victims and inflict a loss in self-respect, with powerful alienating effects. In arguing for these claims, I reject the views that gaslighting is an epistemic or structural wrong, or a moral wrong of instrumentalization. In contrast, I refocus on personal addresses that use, affect, and distort the very practice of rational justification. Further, I argue that the social dimension of gaslighting cannot be fully explained by reference to bare social structures because this compound wrong succeeds via emotional person-to-person addresses. Rational justification becomes, then, the locus where the struggle for power takes place. This struggle involves and is operated by not only victims and wrongdoers but also third parties. They are crucial actors in wrongdoing as well as in rescuing the victims and restoring their normative status. Ultimately, this study shows that the deontic structure of wrong is multifocal, and its relationality points to modes of epistemic and moral rehabilitation that are also modes of social empowerment.

The constitutive aim of gaslighting is domination, and its condition for success is the victim's acquiescence to it, as a result of a loss of self-respect. The argument in support of these claims is based upon two examples of gaslighting: the first draws on George Cukor's *Gaslight*, and centres on the way the manipulation of evidence and emotional abuse progressively isolate and disempower the victim;[1] the second focuses on Stephen Frears's *Philomena*, and identifies

[1] This is a 1944 remake of a film directed by Thorold Dickinson in 1940; both are adaptations of *Gas Light* by Patrick Hamilton.

Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume XCVII
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blaming and shaming as bonding practices of confinement which play on the victim's sense of membership and fear of exclusion.[2]

This investigation puts forward and defends four claims about gaslighting. First, it is a complex normative relation, which results from cumulative and mutually reinforcing ways of wronging others as 'self-authenticating sources of [valid] claims' (Rawls 2001, p. 23).[3] Second, gaslighting generates a personal bond of dependence that is transformative of the persons involved and alters the contents of their respective reasons. Third, attention to these personal dynamics brings into sharp relief the role of third parties. Third parties have the agential power to intervene in the relationship between gaslighters and victims, and they may operate under different normative descriptions—for example, *qua* representatives of the relevant normative community or critical outsiders, self-interested, indifferent or sympathetic bystanders, helpers or accomplices. Thus third parties can be either destabilizing or empowering forces, and their mobilization should be recognized as a possible driver of social and normative change. Correspondingly, they can be recruited as a cardinal force in support of the victims' attempt to reclaim full normative standing and to have their place restored in the relevant normative community. This focus on bystanders underscores that normative isolation from the broader normative community is not only an effective gaslighting strategy; it also has deeply alienating effects. Finally, to vindicate the deep and broad relationality of wronging persons, its deontic structure should be reconceived as multifocal, rather than monadic or bipolar.

[2] This is a 2013 film directed by Stephen Frears, based on *The Lost Child of Philomena Lee* by Martin Sixsmith.

[3] I adapt Rawls's phrase coherently with a relational account of autonomy, to signal (a) the centrality of self-respect, and (b) that the achievement of self-respect is dependent upon reciprocal relationships of mutual respect (Rawls 1980, p. 543; 1993, p. 72; 2001, p. 23; and also Rawls 1971, pp. 440, 386). Rawls ambiguously refers to 'self-authenticating sources of *valid* claims', but making claims does not suffice for their validity in any standard (ethical, political or epistemic) sense. However, *making* claims demands attention independently of the subsequent issue of validity, and regardless of whether the claims are a matter of general agreement. Thus self-respecting agents should expect their making claims to be taken seriously. Furthermore, the qualification 'self-authenticating' is not opposed to 'social', because the source of authority coincides with a dialogical form of rational justification, based on a conception of persons as interdependent, vulnerable to one another, and capable of shared rational agency (Rawls 1993, p. 72; see also Rawls 1971, pp. 524–5, 460 n. 4).

Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume XCVII
https://doi.org/10.1093/arisup/akad002

I

Acquiescence by Reasoning. In contrast to other views, I consider the concept of power as evaluatively neutral and thus I distinguish between 'power' and 'domination'. 'Power' identifies the generic normative capacity to demand normative attention and normative response, and hence to influence others by way of reasons.[4] To this extent, power is intrinsically relational and is exercised by rational agents on agents susceptible to reasons and capable of acting on reasons. It is neither bad nor good, because it does not contain criteria of (moral, ethical and political) adequacy. However, power dynamics can be legitimate or illegitimate, depending on their rational justification. I use the term 'normative authority' as equivalent to 'rational authority' to highlight that there are power dynamics which have no normative authority because they are based on invalid reasoning or inconclusive reasons. Domination is an illegitimate variety of a power dynamic, which violates the premiss of equal normative standing of individual agents.

The peculiarity of gaslighting is that it enacts domination by undercutting the victim's self-respect and extorting her acquiescence. The victim's acquiescence is a necessary element in the gaslighting dynamic, but different ways of extorting the victim's acquiescence may prevail at different times. Second, the gaslighter may not be aware of the full extent of his dominating attitudes, or of the effects thereof, at all times throughout these complex dynamics. Third, the temporal structure of gaslighting may also vary: in some cases, gaslighters may in time become aware of their attempt to dominate others; in other cases, they intend to dominate their victims, and become convinced by their own lie that this is for the sake of the victims. These temporal schemas are not linear. Gaslighters may be ambivalent, or even self-deceptive: these are some of the moral losses that they incur for their will to dominate others. My argument does not rest on the claim that gaslighting is an intentional act, but uncovers some unexplored complexities that emerge from the bonding interactions of wrongdoers and wronged.

The Fabrication of Evidence. Paula notices that the gaslights in the attic dim and brighten, but Gregory insists that the attic is empty

[4] See also Lukes (2005, p. 12) and Forst (2017, p. 47); cf. the distinction between 'power to' and 'power over' in Dillon (2021, p. 213).

Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume XCVII
https://doi.org/10.1093/arisup/akad002

and sealed. Gregory gives Paula a precious brooch, his family heirloom, and Paula recalls having it safely stored in her handbag, but the brooch has disappeared and Gregory blames her. Gregory and Paula give different explanations of these episodes, and each claims to be telling the truth and expects to be believed.

Cukor's *Gaslight* begins with Paula and Gregory being on an equal footing, and is the story of how this relation between equals is altered.[5] The dramatic arc of the film follows the progression of this alteration. It all starts with deception: Gregory deceives Paula by manipulating the lights in the attic, and contradicts her reports about what she observes, challenging her credibility. Gregory's fabrication of evidence is aimed at confusing Paula and making her doubt her capacity of judgement. Subsequently, Gregory systematically discounts and second-guesses Paula's best judgement, undermining her self-confidence and self-esteem.

At first, Paula protests and disputes Gregory's accusations, but then, faced with an increasing amount of (seeming) evidence that contradicts her judgement, her confidence begins to crumble. Next, Gregory publicly exposes Paula as self-deceptive and delusional in front of friends, which results in a loss of public recognition of full normative standing, and a consequent diminished credibility. As the evidence piles up and is endorsed by others, Paula becomes more and more uncertain about her normative standing, and is correspondingly overcome by feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness. She eventually surrenders to Gregory as a superior authority, the sole genuine source of valid claims. This is the result of a progressive corrosion of the victim's normative authority and self-respect.[6] I take self-respect primarily to convey consciousness of oneself as entitled

[5] For the sake of a focused analysis, in this section I only consider the epistemic strategies of gaslighting. It may be objected that the relation between Gregory and Paula does not start as one between equals because of Paula's history of emotional vulnerability (as an orphan, and as a witness to her aunt's murder), or because there are discriminating social categories in place. I come back to the role of emotional vulnerability and social structures in §§III–VI.

[6] One might suggest that gaslighting undermines respect for oneself as an epistemic agent but leaves other aspects of self-respect unaffected. However, the gaslighter's aim of domination is to undermine the victim's normative status as a rational agent, not only as an epistemic agent. Gregory's attempts at disqualifying Paula as delusional are aimed at subjugating her in all dimensions of life.

Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume XCVII
https://doi.org/10.1093/arisup/akad002

to make claims on others based on equal standing.[7] The concept of self-respect involves recognition, and the achievement of self-respect is dependent upon reciprocal relationships of mutual respect. To treat someone with a lack of respect is to fail to acknowledge their status as a self-authenticating source of claims.[8] The recognition of equal standing in making claims does not license the view that all individuals have the same knowledge, but establishes that they have the same normative authority to present their claims to others and thus legitimately demand attention from them. Self-respect is importantly related to self-esteem and confidence in one's skills and abilities, but these concepts should be kept separate. Lack of self-esteem concerns the value of the agent's actions and achievements; and self-esteem is the judgement that one's life includes valuable achievements that are worthy of esteem by others. Both self-respect and self-esteem are important attitudes, which have a role in gaslighting, but it is the loss of self-respect that explains the victim's rational acquiescence to the gaslighter.[9]

A Distorted Practice of Justification. Gregory's fabrication of evidence shows that he addresses Paula as being susceptible to the burden of proof, sensitive to reasons, and responsive to evidence. A specific feature of gaslighting is that perpetrators implicate their victims in a practice of rational justification quite like ordinary justification, except that evidence is not provided to establish the truth or in order to prove that Paula's claims are misplaced, but in order to undermine her self-respect and her self-representation as having

[7] Rawls's definition of self-respect includes a person's sense of one's own value, but also a confidence in one's ability to fulfil one's intentions, which is a form of self-esteem; see Rawls (1971, p. 440; cf. p. 444). My emphasis is on respect as including recognition of others as capable of making claims. One cannot respect oneself unless one recognizes others as having equal standing. This is a conceptual claim, although it can be reinforced by empirical remarks: absence of recognition or mutual respect can and often does cause lapses in self-respect. A further claim is that self-respect depends on social recognition. I have argued elsewhere that this further claim is importantly related to the Kantian notion of self-respect.

[8] Rawls's original phrase articulates the presumption of moral equality and thus the notion of 'claim' is to be understood in relation to it, and addressed to institutions; see Rawls (2001, p. 23). My rewording emphasizes *making* claims and, as the argument unfolds, extends to epistemic and evaluative claims. Whether specific claims are valid depends on subsequent rational assessment, and there might be different ways of justification. On the Kantian view, self-authentication is understood to be authentication by reason, and addressed to others as having equal standing.

[9] As Rawls remarks, without self-respect 'nothing seems worth doing, or if some things have value for us, we lack the will to strive for them' (1971, p. 440; see also p. 386).

Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume XCVII
https://doi.org/10.1093/arisup/akad002

equal normative standing. I use the term 'claim' in a broad sense here, to emphasize that the discussion of evidence originates from within normative practices which are grounded on expectations of mutual respect and recognition of rational agency. From this perspective, the question of the burden of proof is forensic rather than epistemic, and it should be addressed as the normative problem of what rational agents owe to one another, rather than the problem of correctly representing the facts of the matter.[10]

The public presentation and discussion of evidence are modes of articulating the disagreement (for example, about whether there is somebody in the attic), which may contribute either to its resolution—by revealing faults or mistakes or delusions—or, in other cases, may allow all parties to acknowledge that their disagreement cannot be resolved through reasoning, though nobody is at fault (when incommensurable values are at stake, for instance). In the normative discussion that articulates disagreements, doubts about one's self-trust and self-confidence regarding some issues are not indicative of any lack of self-respect.[11] On the contrary, these epistemic attitudes are congruent with the agents' responsiveness to reasons, essential to a proper rational discussion, and may often be conducive to reaching a rational agreement. Rational agents are expected and required to revise their judgement according to decisive contrary evidence (for example, that there is nobody in the attic), or may suspend the judgement if there is no decisive evidence. In contexts marked by radical value pluralism, self-doubt can be a perfectly reasonable attitude, coherent with, if not commanded by, mutual respect and recognition of equal standing. It is to be contrasted with arrogance and

[10] 'The burdens of judgment set limits to what can be reasonably justified to others' (Rawls 1993, p. 61); see also Scanlon (1998). I favour a social conception of normative discussion, in contrast to views that centre on imaginative rehearsal or reflective endorsement, and articulate the agential standpoint (cf. Gibbard 1990, p. 75).

[11] Public confrontation can be especially useful when the agent is confident that he is right, to avoid the risk of arrogance, which is as dangerous as servility. Furthermore, in practical deliberation, public confrontation can bring to light hidden motives: 'Indeed, even when the good that we are pursuing is a genuine good, we may be unable to recognize that we are pursuing it not so much because it is good as because its achievement will satisfy our desire for, say, power. This is when we most need the ruthless correction of our judgments by others who can see in us what we cannot see in ourselves, and that is why deliberation not conducted in the company of such others is deliberation on which we would be unwise to rely. We should always therefore treat solitary deliberation as peculiarly liable to error' (MacIntyre 2009, p. 16).

Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume XCVII
https://doi.org/10.1093/arisup/akad002

dogmatism, which denounce and expose one's unresponsiveness to reasons and manifest disregard for others.[12]

Gaslighters attack their victims, not to fault them as epistemic agents, but to undermine their moral standing as 'self-authenticating sources' of claims.[13] Notice that this characterization of persons does not commit one to the view that individuals are the source of the validity of (moral and epistemic) claims. Rather, it commits to the view that the recognition of equal normative standing is a presupposition of the correct exercise of (moral and epistemic) agency. While gaslighters apparently engage in an ordinary exchange of reasons; in fact they distort the very practice of rational justification, thereby undercutting its *raison d'être* (namely, the articulation and resolution of disagreements). In offering unwarranted grounds for deference and submission, the gaslighter does not openly act as an aggressor, but uses for manipulation the norms governing the ordinary practice of rational justification. By accusing the victim of recurring failures, the gaslighter offers *her* instrumental reasons for deferring to him, thus concealing domination as protection.[14] In response to such reasons, victims feel defective and vulnerable, and accept the gaslighter's offer of protection.[15] The process leading to this effect not only undermines the victim's self-trust and self-confidence (in her skills and competences as an epistemic agent), but also inflicts a loss of self-respect, that is, a failure to value herself as having equal normative standing. This damage to the victim's self-representation constitutes a major obstacle to regaining full normative standing in the normative community.

Public Exposure and Normative Isolation. The public exposure of faked evidence by the gaslighter is not aimed solely at the victim,

[12] Feminists argue that under oppressive conditions a 'self-respecting' variety of arrogance is empowering and can be used strategically; see Dillon (2021, pp. 223, 224). By contrast, on the Kantian view which I defend, arrogance is not a corrective action but—like servility—a failure to respect oneself and others as having equal normative standing.

[13] See notes 3 and 8 above.

[14] In some cases, this concealment may involve self-deception, and these two phenomena can be mutually reinforcing. The gaslighter may represent his action as protective of the victim's interests, especially if he has a narcissistic personality that inclines him to forge and retain a positive self-representation.

[15] The gaslighter gains the victim's trust by entrapment. The victim is led to believe that she is out of place in the world unless she relies on her oppressor's protection. On the victim's loss of confidence in the world, see Corbí (2017, p. 164).

Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume XCVII
https://doi.org/10.1093/arisup/akad002

but is also intended to win over his audience. Isolation neutralizes any sympathetic bystanders. In Cukor's drama, the dyadic gaslighting relationship between Gregory and Paula expands to include the housemaid, Nancy. She becomes Gregory's lover, believes in his discrediting narrative about Paula's madness, and treats her with hostility. Perhaps Nancy is herself another victim of deception and manipulation, not fully aware of Gregory's abusive behaviour, and if so, she does not straightforwardly qualify as an accomplice. However, she is a supporting partner for Gregory because her hostile attitude corroborates his narrative and is regarded by Paula as an additional proof of her inadequacy and unworthiness. Bystanders act as an emotional and normative sounding board for the gaslighter/victim duo: their disengagement or unsympathetic attitudes resonate with and strengthen the gaslighter's narrative, indirectly legitimize his position of power, and thus assist him in disabling and disempowering the victim. Importantly, the contributive effect of indifference or lack of sympathy is not only causal.[16] Rather, these attitudes also play a normative role in orienting the gaslighter/victim dynamics, and thus bystanders bear a moral responsibility for the way gaslighting succeeds in establishing a relation of dominance.

There is another way in which third parties qualifying as bystanders are in fact recruited or neutralized by the gaslighter, that is, by seclusion. Isolation has multiple normative effects: its intended effect is to align the victim with the dominant narrative by impeding her exposure to alternative standards of judgement, preventing any possible benefit provided by critical outsiders, and thus blocking the possibility of self-correction via dialogical interaction with others. As argued in §III, the victim's confrontation of critical outsiders favours comparison and exchange with the relevant normative community at large, and thus may play a positive role in counteracting the narrative that enables domination. The main damage of normative isolation consists in its alienating effects, in that it estranges the victim from her own agency and from the community to which she belongs. To this extent, normative isolation is not only an effective

[16] This alteration is never merely causal. Normative isolation is key to gaslighting precisely because the gaslighter needs to make the (social) world inhospitable for his victim, and to this effect it is simpler to insulate the victim than to actively co-opt bystanders, and less risky than counting on their indifference.

Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume XCVII
https://doi.org/10.1093/arisup/akad002

technique of gaslighting but also a constitutive element of it, which is functional to the exercise and maintenance of dominance.[17]

II

Gaslighting as a Compound Wrong. Gregory undermines Paula's credibility in order to rob her of the jewels she has inherited; his misconduct may therefore be characterized as a case of epistemic wrong or else a failure to treat others as ends in themselves.[18] The analysis provided in §1 supports the conclusion that these characterizations are partial and misleading. Gaslighting is best understood as a compound relational wrong aimed at securing domination. While it builds upon different kinds of moral wrongs—including, for example, deception, manipulation, emotional abuse, public exposure, and normative isolation—it is not reducible to any of them individually.

First, although the victim suffers damage to her credibility and ultimately begins to credit the gaslighter with superior authority on unwarranted grounds, this is not a result of an attack on the normative status of the victim only 'as a knower'. Gaslighting does not aim to redirect trust, but to establish dominance by rational acquiescence.[19] Loss of credibility is the effect of being wronged as an agent with equal normative standing through practices of rational justification in which she actively partakes. Thus it is not only partial, but also misleading to characterize gaslighting as an epistemic wrong.

Second, gaslighting constitutes a moral violation of respect for persons, of a distinct kind.[20] Gregory does act instrumentally toward Paula because he uses her to steal her jewels, but the drama is clearly not the story of a robbery. Unlike cases of treating others as mere

[17] Normative isolation does not play only a functional (causal) role in the effects of gaslighting. Rather, it is constitutive of the alienating effects of gaslighting, in that those effects could not obtain without normative isolation.

[18] The former characterization is current in feminist and social epistemology; see McKinnon (2017); cf. Fricker (2007, pp. 147, 155) and Spear (2019); the latter is associated with the Kantian view, cf. Abramson (2014, pp. 3, 16, 22).

[19] The moral complexity of gaslighting eludes those accounts of epistemic wrongs that focus on distributive gaps in accessing, transmitting, and disseminating knowledge. See McKinnon (2017); cf. Fricker (2007, pp. 147, 155).

[20] Abramson (2014, pp. 22–3) is correct that it is restrictive to consider gaslighting as a vice of instrumentalization, but the Kantian conception of violation of respect is broader than she assumes in her critique.

Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume XCVII
https://doi.org/10.1093/arisup/akad002

means, the success condition of gaslighting is the victim's acquiescence: she submits based on reasons of justification which she accepts. To understand the importance of the victim's acquiescence, it is useful to compare gaslighting to coercion by conditional threat. Unlike coercion by force, the conditional threat gives the victim reasons to submit in order to avoid any undesirable consequences that will materialize if she does not accept the coercer's deal. That is, the victim is engaged as capable of acting on reasons, and whether such reasons justify submission is a matter that the agent under threat assesses through deliberation. Unless the coercer miscalculates, and overestimates the normative impact of the threat, submission can be instrumentally justified. However, the agent under threat can refuse the coercive deal, and for this reason her decision to act in one way rather than another may elicit criticism and resentment, even when the circumstances are considered to be mitigating.[21] Like the coercer, the gaslighter produces reasons that apparently justify submission, and can also make use of threats in disguise,[22] but gaslighting is only partially similar to paradigmatic coercion by conditional threat, in that the gaslighter manipulates rational justification to sabotage the victim's self-respect. Unlike the coerced, in acquiescing to the gaslighter, the victim accepts being disqualified as a self-authenticating source of claims.[23] Thus gaslighting does not simply alter the victim's reasons, but changes the way she values herself. Unlike the case of coercion by conditional threat, the victim of gaslighting does not suffer a loss of negotiating power in her dealings with the gaslighter, although one effect is the victim's unconditional surrender. More dramatically, she suffers a loss in her capacity to make claims on

[21] There is an ongoing debate about whether submission under coercive threat exculpates, excuses, or justifies the victim, and if it suspends moral responsibility and blameworthiness; see Bagnoli (forthcoming).

[22] Threats can take place in disguise, as doubts, second-guesses, and advices. When Gregory second-guesses, 'Do you really want to leave the house?', he means 'If you go, you will make me very angry'. When Nancy advises Paula not to leave the house, she means 'If you go out, Gregory will be mad at you'.

[23] Coercion negatively affects the conditions of rational choice, and can be humiliating, but does not necessarily have an impact on self-respect. In some cases, coercive threats are designed to undermine the agent's moral integrity by forcing her to make morally dilemmatic choices in which all options are morally forbidden, but even in this case it is arguable that coercion does not destroy the agent's respect for herself as a moral agent, in so far as she retains, for example, the capacity to engage in moral repair. See Bagnoli (forthcoming); cf. Bazargan (2014) and Khader (2021, pp. 234–5).

Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume XCVII
https://doi.org/10.1093/arisup/akad002

her own behalf, and more radically, the capacity to relate to herself as entitled to expect and demand respect from others. This may be characterized as a loss of moral agency.

III

The Deep Relationality of Gaslighting. If the victim's moral agency is not only inhibited but also damaged by normative isolation, is there any hope for her to recover her status and reclaim her place in the normative community? I argue that the resources to respond to these questions reside in the relationality of wrongs, which can be better illustrated by the story of *Philomena*. The protagonist of Stephen Frears's film is a Catholic girl, indoctrinated to believe that sex is sinful unless it is intended for procreation. Seduced by an occasional partner, she becomes pregnant, and is secluded in a Catholic convent for troubled girls, where she is subjected to various forms of abuse, including gaslighting. During her time at the convent, Philomena is treated as a shameful sinner whose lack of good judgement needs punishment. Her bad behaviour is evidence that her moral capacities are defective, and, based on this alleged evidence, young Philomena forms beliefs about her own defectiveness, badness, and worthlessness—analogously to Paula's belief in her deficiencies and vulnerability. While Paula comes to accept that she needs her husband's supervision and normative guidance, Philomena comes to believe that she is unfit to be a good mother. Penniless, ruined by guilt, and mortified by shame, Philomena is eventually induced to give up her son for adoption, a decision she then deeply regrets. Despite her regret, it is arguable that young Philomena is at least ambivalent about giving up the child for adoption, and that her ambivalence is exploited by the nuns who emphasize how the child would benefit from being taken away from her. As an old woman, she embarks on a search for her child, not only to remedy a wrong, but to reappropriate part of a missed life.

The film spans Philomena's life, and is instructive for two reasons: first, Philomena is subjected to systematic forms of gaslighting, and her story is not a private matter—as Paula's might be taken to be; and second, throughout her life, she partakes in a heterogeneous social and normative network. Her case brings into sharp focus that the practice of rational justification is the primeval locus of the power struggle, in ways that raise crucial methodological issues on

Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume XCVII
https://doi.org/10.1093/arisup/akad002

the interpretation of this case as a social phenomenon. I argue that gaslighting enacts discriminating social structures, which depend on complex personal dynamics binding gaslighters, victims, and third parties.[24] Compared to Paula's case, there is a richer social web at work in the convent, but its analysis underscores close analogies between the two cases of gaslighting. Both are social in the sense that they succeed because of the distorted relational dynamics that thrive on normative isolation. In my view, such distorted dynamics should be investigated in terms of personal and emotional practices, rather than in terms of bare structures (see Forst 2017, p. 45; cf. M. J. Thompson 2021 and Haslanger 2012). While in Paula's case spousal attachment comes with distinctive normative expectations that partly explain her submission, in Philomena's case the relevant emotional practices are communal and more thoroughly social.

A peculiarity of Philomena's story which should be investigated is that she shares the moral categories that her oppressors deploy and that are used to justify her exploitation and submission during her youth.[25] Thus gaslighters exercise both authority and power over Philomena. To unravel the entanglement between social power and normative authority, I will now focus on the composite category of third parties.

In addition to the nuns who are guilty of gaslighting, there are two categories of third parties who play a normative role in the gaslighting dynamics. First, there is a group of dejected women in a similar condition to Philomena who have adapted to the rule of the convent and consider resistance to be futile and rationally unadvisable. They confirm a pattern of submission,[26] and play a strong disempowering role, albeit as unwitting accomplices. Second, there is one character who counteracts the effects of social gaslighting and establishes

[24] Even in Paula's case, social categories such as gender may be invoked to explain her submission, as the extant literature on this case emphasizes; see Abramson (2014), Khader (2021), and Dillon (2021). *Philomena* portrays a more complex social dimension, and thus it gives a better illustration of the inadequacy of the explanations based on structural injustice.

[25] Likewise, Paula and Gregory apparently share a commitment to truth in relating their beliefs, although Gregory does not in fact honour his commitment. It is arguable that the nuns appear to be at least morally ambivalent regarding the guiding role of Catholic moral categories, if not committing to them only superficially and instrumentally.

[26] On self-subordination under oppression, see Cudd (2006, p. 81) and Khader (2021, p. 235). While I believe that rational agents have a moral obligation to resist, I leave open *what* counts as resistance and non-submissive compliance (cf. Khader 2021, pp. 236–7).

Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume XCVII
https://doi.org/10.1093/arisup/akad002

a dialectical relationship with Philomena. This is a journalist who initially takes an interest in Philomena's life as he plans to write a humanitarian story which will regain visibility for him within the profession. His interaction with Philomena reveals that he does not approve of her forgiving attitudes toward the nuns, and more generally, he is sceptical about her loyalty to Catholic values. It is arguable that his doubts arise because of Philomena's history as a gaslighting victim. He may be convinced that a person who is systematically sidestepped and whose judgement is routinely faulted or overruled is likely to become a poor judge. This is the corrosive long-term effect of the systematic violation of recognition respect. His worry is not that Philomena's forgiveness is misplaced given her circumstances, but that it does not really reflect the proper operation of her own judgement at all; rather, it is the judgement of her oppressors. These are all plausible conjectures, which disincline to take Philomena's words at face value. The journalist is reluctant to recognize that Philomena is entitled to first-person authority. This posture shows that gaslighting victims are at risk of being second-guessed even by well-intentioned helpers who intervene in their support, owing to a vice of implicit bias which aggravates their disfavoured condition, despite not constituting—in itself—a case of gaslighting.[27]

The interesting complication here is that the journalist expresses doubts about the moral categories adopted by Philomena to articulate her life experience, including, for example, sin, in the attempt to help Philomena in her quest for moral repair. Unlike Gregory's unwarranted doubts about Paula's judgement, the journalist stands in genuine normative disagreement with Philomena.[28] His doubts

[27] Gaslighting may involve self-deception and other forms of self-opacity, but it differs from the operation of implicit bias. Thus I reject the view that gaslighting is a case 'often unintentional, where the listener doesn't believe, or expresses doubt about, a speaker's testimony' (McKinnon 2017, p. 168). This characterization is unhelpful, as it blurs the boundaries between gaslighting and general cases of implicit bias and prejudice. The definition of gaslighting as a compound wrong accounts for cases in which the gaslighter uses the bystanders' implicit bias and prejudice to his advantage to enact domination. There might be cases in which the gaslighter's wouldn't be able to gaslight if it weren't for that support. The bystanders play a constitutive role with respect to this instance of gaslighting, and their activities would have a constitutively deleterious effect on the victim's self-respect, even though this is a case of gaslighting only because of the perpetrator's aim of domination. I would like to thank Guy Longworth for pressing this point.

[28] For this reason, the journalist's reaction is not simply 'a failure to afford to the first person (epistemic) authority to disadvantaged speakers their appropriate epistemic weight', nor is it a 'betrayal' of the victim's trust (cf. McKinnon 2017, pp. 170, 171).

Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume XCVII
https://doi.org/10.1093/arisup/akad002

can be used to voice two concerns that may arise in the stance of a critical outsider. First, these moral categories do not really 'represent' Philomena, because they are not in service of her own ends and cannot therefore be trusted in the hermeneutics of her life experience; they are also not transparently and authentically avowed as a result of rational deliberation. The journalist attributes to the victim a loss of self-understanding and self-knowledge but also, and more fundamentally, a self-impairing and self-destructive substantive mistake, conducive to a loss of self-respect. The radical mistake is to endorse the category of sin that is central in the justification of Philomena's exploitation as the just punishment for the imputed moral defect. Interestingly, to describe the victim as a sinner does not involve a formal violation of equal moral standing, because it does not target her as a member of a social group or gender but extends this defect to the entire human condition. Nonetheless, it is used manipulatively to extort Philomena's consent for adoption (cf. Khader 2021, p. 237).

A second concern that may be voiced by a critical outsider relates, not to the nature and content of the moral categories, but to the fact that they are coercively enforced. While coercive enforcement gives moral categories the power to exact compliance, it might also be used to undermine their normative authority. These concerns are based on the presumption that coercive power cannot produce valid reasons; reasons are legitimate if produced by the reasoning of free agents. Unlike cases of implicit bias, Philomena is openly suspected as being a disciple of a coercive moral system.

IV

Blaming and Shaming as Bonding Modes of Confinement. Within the convent, Philomena is treated as the appropriate target of blaming and shaming, like all other single mothers. Emotional practices like these enforce the moral categories of sin and atonement, which are used to justify her exploitation as penance for her sins. A pressing question is whether it matters for the legitimacy of moral values that they gain a foothold in one's character through coercive enforcement.

Practices of blaming and shaming are canonical modes of moral enforcement, and are certainly not distinctive of the community to which Philomena belongs (Gibbard 1990, pp. 135–50; Rawls 1971, §§67, 70–5, pp. 445–84). In some respects, their effects are analogous

Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume XCVII
https://doi.org/10.1093/arisup/akad002

to sanctions and deterrents, in that they provide rational agents with reasons of compliance and play a crucial coordinating role within communities governed by norms.[29] However, unlike sanctions and deterrents, blaming and shaming are bonding practices that produce compliance and self-constraint by strengthening communal ties of identification. They operate primarily on the agent's sense of membership in and identification with the relevant normative community, and gain leverage through the description by which the agent gives herself value. This way, they convey social knowledge of one's place in the community, together with the normative expectations associated with this role (Williams 1993; Calhoun 2004). Importantly, these emotions are expressed with proper authority only by the active participants in the relevant normative community and are addressed appropriately only to agents capable of moral agency.

Both blaming and shaming are practices centred on 'reactive attitudes',[30] which are addressed to persons as having a will and being capable of moral agency. Reactive attitudes are also co-reactive, not only in the psychological sense that they are likely to provoke specific reactions, but also in the normative sense that they call for specific normative reactions. Blaming responds to the violation of normative expectations, demands and duties, and invites amends. Shaming, like shunning, invites a reaction of self-isolation, and thus deepens the condition of normative isolation that is key to the victim's disempowerment. The combination of blaming and shaming is particularly taxing. On the one hand, blaming demands from the blamed an effort to correct themselves, entailing that the wrong done is reparable by enduring punishment or offering amends, while shaming points to a radically defective character of the victims, which seems beyond repair.[31]

[29] This is a general concern in so far as (i) blame is the 'characteristic reaction of the morality system' to a failure to meet one of its obligations (Williams 1985, p. 177), and (ii) 'blame involves treating the person who is blamed like someone who had a reason to do the right thing but did not do it' (Williams [1989] 1995, p. 42). Williams disputes that this is the case when agents do not have 'internal reasons' to comply, but also suggests that internal reasons are the only action-guiding reasons in the deliberative stance.

[30] These attitudes hold a special place in the practices of moral responsibility and mutual accountability; see Strawson ([1962] 1974). The rational justification of reactive attitudes raises important questions about the boundaries of the normative community; see M. Thompson (2004) and Bagnoli (2021).

[31] Whether the defect is beyond repair ultimately depends on the dimension of sin, and its relation to grace and salvation; but I cannot enter this debate here.

Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume XCVII
https://doi.org/10.1093/arisup/akad002

These remarks allow us to address the concerns that arise in the stance of a critical outsider. First, the coercive force of blaming and shaming only partly explains young Philomena's submissive compliance. Her identification with Catholic morality is diachronically consistent, and disputing her hermeneutical categories may betray a paternalistic attitude and thus a failure to respect her as autonomous. Arguably, Philomena affords the nuns superior authority, not by virtue of their social status or individual traits and virtues, but as the representatives of the normative standards of her moral community. Thus her deference can be thought to be justified on moral grounds internal to her community. While she does suffer from their mistreatment, her experience of suffering, and the corresponding moral distress, does not track or express her perception of a moral wrong done to her.

Second, the logic of communal shaming matches the logic of shame as a self-directed attitude: these are co-reactive and mutually reinforcing attitudes. Arguably, shame responds to a failure to meet the normative standards that one (at least partially) adopts. It invests one's global self, rather than being directed at one's performative agency. In this context, shame is particularly damaging, as it is not originated by an occasional failure but identifies an intrinsic condition of fragility, that is, a radical weakness that explains an incorrigible propensity to evil.

The structure of shame is interpersonal and social, which explains why the social practice of shaming is so effective. Shame does not respond directly to personal failures but to the way in which these failures are exposed and judged by (concrete or ideal) authoritative others. The social mediation of other authorities is crucial to feeling ashamed, and indicates that failures are assessed on grounds found by the ashamed persons to be personally authoritative, at least partially. These may be social expectations embodied by concrete others, but they are also normative. Thus the key normative function of shame depends on the agent's self-representation as a member of the relevant normative community and her fear of exclusion, rather than her loyalty, her desire to conform, or the expectation of benefits and rewards (cf. Gibbard 1990, pp. 126–51).

The effects of shaming and of feeling ashamed are alienating in two mutually reinforcing ways. On one hand, shaming, like shunning, involves the threat of a withdrawal of recognition, and positions its target in a precarious and marginalized position, at the mercy of the

Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume XCVII
https://doi.org/10.1093/arisup/akad002

community. On the other hand, precisely because shame is a reaction to the public exposure of shortcomings, it prompts self-withdrawal and gives rise to self-marginalization aimed at avoiding the public eye. Blame and self-blame have similar alienating effects,[32] but they are confined to one's performative agency, and are open to correction and rehabilitation. Generally, the attribution of wrongful acts goes hand in hand with specific demands for repair; the wrongdoer therefore knows that by accepting punishment and serving the penalty, she can be rehabilitated.

Third, blame and shame are dynamic, relational, and co-reactive, rather than static and episodic. The expressive articulation of these reactive attitudes entails demands of normative attention, and thus seeks normative engagement with others. These attitudes are sensitive to judgement, and can be abusive, for instance, because they are biased, unfair, or disproportionate (see Hutchison, Mackenzie and Oshana 2018; Bagnoli 2021). Emotional abuse is an intentional and wrongful activity committed against specific persons; in this case, it is a social activity, which is perpetrated jointly. Failure to consider this as abuse counts as a further moral wrong of normative abandonment. In the specific community to which Philomena belongs, blaming her for violating a norm and shaming her for her failure to meet the standards constitutive of the normative community are reactive attitudes based on the recognition of membership, but neither of these circumstances entails the recognition of equal normative standing.

The manipulating role of blaming and shaming in Philomena's youth is apparent: these abusive emotional practices facilitate her acquiescence just as much as spousal attachment does in Paula's case. They provide the victim with reasons to submit, which seem instrumentally valid because they mask submission as protection of the victim from her own fragility and vulnerability. The representation of the victim as vulnerable, inadequate, fragile and dependent is mirrored, but also supported, by the expression of shame and sense of guilt through which the victim is further implicated in the wrong done to her. In Paula's case, these sentiments are not a truthful guide to the discovery of a fault, as they are elicited by the fabrication and manipulation of evidence, but in Philomena's case, they have a

[32] '[T]he pain of guilt involves, at base, a feeling of estrangement, of having violated the requirements of a valuable relation with others' (Scanlon 1998, p. 162).

Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume XCVII
https://doi.org/10.1093/arisup/akad002

different cognitive significance, as she reflectively endorses the same standards of judgement as those of her own community throughout her life. Thus, in her case, self-blame and shame are normative responses that testify to her bonds with the community.

The co-reactive shame and blame dynamics at work in gaslighting directly affect rational justification, and they are abusive because, and in so far as, they are used to justify the victim's submission. On the one hand, the gaslighter treats the victim as being sufficiently rational to understand, acquire and respond to evidence of her own inadequacy. On the other, he disqualifies her and exposes her as lacking full normative standing.[33] This ambiguity shows that the gaslighter uses reactive emotions offensively, to isolate and marginalize the victim within her normative community. To Philomena, the threat of being an outcast is made tangible by her economic dependence, but the risks associated with normative isolation are deeper than the loss of benefits and cooperative interactions, involving her capacity to give herself value, as argued in §1.

Philomena's case indicates that the normative dimension of authenticity does not always align with normative authority; normative authority is susceptible to pressures that originate in social power. Thus the psychological violence exercised by gaslighters is also and at the same time a source of normative pressure: the fact that Philomena acquired practical reasons through emotional abuse and normative isolation indicates that social power is not completely external to the practice in which reasons gain their normative authority. This case challenges theories that explain normativity via mechanisms of identification and endorsement, as they ignore social power dynamics and fail to investigate their normative effects.

In contrast to these oversimplifying and individualistic approaches, my proposal is to refocus on the second-personal dynamics that explain gaslighting as a moral and social phenomenon. Violence is a permanent background feature of Philomena's deliberation, and a structural element of how social power is gained and maintained. However, structures do not exercise power directly: they do so

[33] On this ambiguity, see Abramson (2014, p. 13). By contrast, my view is that both the objective and practical stance are agential options, which can be misappropriated and misused. The objective stance is intrinsically disempowering in a basic sense: it is either excusing and exempting or disqualifying and discrediting others as incapable of moral responsibility; see Bagnoli (2021, p. 648).

Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume XCVII
https://doi.org/10.1093/arisup/akad002

through and by way of personal and social relationships. The analysis of disempowerment focused on personal relationships explains how structures fail or support rational agency, and not vice versa. In particular, the wrongness of gaslighting cannot be explained with reference to social structures alone, as it works and succeeds via temporally extended emotional person-to-person relationships, which directly crush the victim's self-respect. By addressing the complex social articulation of such relationships and the bonding role of emotional practices, we gain the adequate resources to identify possible modes rehabilitation and re-empowerment.

V

Reclaiming Full Standing: The Empowering Role of Bystanders. The claustrophobic structure of gaslighting raises issues regarding the kind of empowerment that is necessary to escape from this self-damaging relationship. Unlike some other cases of wrongs, gaslighting does not leave the victim's self-respect intact; restoring this self-respect and the victim's prior normative standing after being abused is a lifetime process that requires the cooperation of many. There is no momentous, life-changing breakthrough by which the victim regains full standing once and for all. Regaining full normative standing is also not just a matter of successfully negotiating one's place in the relevant normative community, or rebuilding self-trust to a sufficient level to resist unwarranted reasons for deference.[34] Rather, it is a difficult and slow process of recognizing oneself as having the normative standing to reclaim normative attention and proper consideration. The recovery of full normative standing requires more than social recognition because of the damage inflicted upon self-respect. But how can one's self-respect be regained?

I have argued that third parties are a significant normative presence in the context of choice.[35] They can alter the normative force of

[34] It is arguable that the condition of oppression justifies special non-ideal norms of rational justification, for example, that it is ethically and epistemically prudent to ignore or discount higher-order reasons for deference, even when the agent does not know that such reasons are misleading or based on fabricated evidence; see Dillon (2021). The question is whether an agent who has lost self-respect can act on this norm.

[35] Bystanders can also find themselves in a (moral) dilemma about whether they have decisive reasons to intervene in action; see Hill (2010), cf. Bagnoli (forthcoming). In any case, the victim's rehabilitation needs social support at various stages of her emancipation.

Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume XCVII
https://doi.org/10.1093/arisup/akad002

the reasons at play in the normative relations of the agents involved. Furthermore, they play more than supporting roles because they are interlocutors in a public arena. Whether they decide to intervene and how they do so alter the normative dynamics. Thus they potentially affect the results of rational negotiation between the agents involved and influence the distribution of responsibilities within any given deliberative scenario. These effects are at least partly under deliberative control, and thus there is some significant deliberative activity involved in occupying the position of bystander.

In §I, I explained how the gaslighter recruits or neutralizes bystanders by providing them with reasons to withdraw recognition of full normative standing from the victim, and thus contribute to isolating or abandoning her. How, then, can victims compete in this campaign for rational support if they have lost their self-respect and have accepted their diminished status? This difficulty is raised by the logic of emotional attitudes analysed above; but this logic also provides part of the answer to the puzzle. Victims of gaslighting are voiceless, but they are not invisible. They suffer and manifest distress. Unlike the moral emotions discussed in §IV, moral distress is not aimed at anyone in particular, but conveys a generic claim of attention, and is thus directed to all possible moral providers. While distress does not generate any specific obligation, it cannot be neglected without infringing on the normative status of the claimant. This is the distinctive sense in which distress exerts a deontic power.[36] Thus the first way for the victim of gaslighting to recruit bystanders is via the expression and communication of distress. This does not necessarily arise from a distinct awareness of being wronged, since the victim aligns with the gaslighter's voiced assessment of her inadequacy. The bystanders recruited as moral providers may subsequently help the victim to realize that they have been wronged. Wrongful segregation is unlikely to go unnoticed. In Cukor's film, an old neighbour notices Paula walking out the door every day. Visibly distressed, she pauses as if conflicted and paralysed, and eventually returns inside. The old woman suspects that something is wrong, and comments aloud that Paula's condition is scandalous, alerting a policeman who then decides to investigate further. Her casual comment has a

[36] I consider distress as a reactive attitude, akin to 'hurt feelings' (Strawson [1962] 1974, p. 4). I argue for the deontic power of moral distress in Bagnoli (2022).

Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume XCVII
https://doi.org/10.1093/arisup/akad002

powerful effect: it creates a rupture in Gregory's isolation strategy, which proves to be decisive for Paula's liberation.

A second way in which bystanders can be recruited in support of the victim is exemplified by the dynamics among the women segregated in the convent. That is, bystanders may share the victim's position and thus develop forms of solidarity. Furthermore, this kind of solidarity heightens the victim's sense of belonging and raises the awareness of her condition of subordination. But awareness might not be the result of mutual recognition of membership. A third way of acquiring awareness of being wronged exploits exactly the opacity and estrangement generated by gaslighting. The condition of systemic gaslighting is marked by ambivalence and self-deception. One might be able to recognize the wrongful dimension of the suffering of others that one is reluctant to recognize in one's own suffering.

Finally, bystanders can be recruited by other third parties, just as Paula's neighbour does in blaming Nancy. In so far as the bystander's position is recognized as a morally charged deliberative stance, it is also and at the same time qualified as potentially susceptible to moral blame. However, who has the standing to blame them, given that victims are not always fully aware of being wronged? Bystanders can be blamed by other third parties. Blame expresses criticism, and exacts a response from bystanders as members of the relevant normative community, on behalf of the community, or on behalf of the normative standards of that community. Responsible bystanders are expected to act on their values and intervene in support of the victim.[37] In the contrary case, third parties can acknowledge the bystanders' moral failure to take responsibility for action and thus demand explanations and justifications. In these cases, the role of blaming and shaming (directed toward the bystanders) is subversive, aimed at overturning a patterned wrong rooted in a structural feature of the social network.

In so far as bystanders have rational agential power, they are bound by due deliberation and bear distinctive responsibilities. They may be alerted to such responsibilities in different ways: they may be recruited directly by the victim through expressions of moral distress or they may be mobilized by other interested or sympathetic

[37] The practice of blaming can be used as a means of effecting social change; see Calhoun (1989, p. 389). It can be applied appropriately to the case of bad allies (cf. McKinnon 2017).

Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume XCVII
https://doi.org/10.1093/arisup/akad002

third parties, by blaming as well as by implicating them in reasoned argumentation about the responsibility and opportunity to intervene directly. Expressing emotions is an effective way of breaking through the walls of isolation, as it provides bystanders with direct normative reasons for action. Bystanders may decide to act upon these reasons and stand by the victim, criticize, or intervene in the gaslighting relationship on behalf of the normative standards of the normative community, not acting in place of the victim, but together or in concert with them. When these reasons succeed, bystanders become disruptive empowering forces and generate new social powers.

VI

The Multifocal Structure of Moral Wrongs. Gaslighting is a relationship of dominance that works when the victim acquiesces to it, and is maintained by her normative isolation. The remarks above about the role of third parties in the negotiation of the rational dynamics, as well as in breaching the victim's isolation, invite us to reconsider the deontic structure of moral wrongs.

In the monadic representation of moral obligation, the victim belongs in the action description, that is, she is incorporated in the wrong action and represented as the mere occasion for wrongdoing. This characterization fails to represent the victim's stance as well as the personal nature of wronging someone. A good candidate for capturing these features is the bipolar model, which identifies two poles of the normative relation of wronging someone,[38] and thus acknowledges the victim as the addressee of wrongdoing, rather than the mere occasion of doing wrong.[39] The merit of the bipolar model is that it better captures the normative power of wronging others: the power to establishes a new relationship between persons.

[38] Bipolarity is introduced as an amelioration of the Kantian-Rawlsian conception of obligation/right (Rawls 1971, §51), which is said not to capture relationality; see Scanlon (1998) and M. Thompson (2004, p. 334).

[39] "The intellectual content of my feeling of shame is a deontological, not a dikaiological, judgement. 'I did wrong in that I lied to you' contains representations of a pair of agents, indeed, but the combination is not properly bipolar: the representation of you falls inside the scope of the action description that is fitted into this monadic normative form; it does not go to characterize the form of normativity itself. You are the occasion, not the victim, of my fall", M. Thompson 2004, p. 340, and see also pp. 348, 346 n. 20.

Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume XCVII
https://doi.org/10.1093/arisup/akad002

Furthermore, this model captures a feature of moral wrongs which structural interpretations of social wrongs fail to acknowledge, that is, its second-personal features. These features include reactive attitudes, which have been identified as cardinal disempowering or subversive and empowering forces that may be recruited to assist the victim in claiming recognition of full normative standing.

The exploration of the dynamics of gaslighting shows that the relational nature of wronging is more complex than the one expressed by bipolarity. First, there are more than two relevant foci of the deontic relation of wronging someone, which include third parties. Second, the poles of normative relationships are reciprocally affecting and transforming over time, not only because of the exchange of reasons, but also because of co-reactive attitudes. Finally, wronging others impairs the relationship between the victim and the wrongdoer, but also calls into question the normative community to which they belong. Such actions therefore appropriately elicit communal reactive attitudes, which can provide reasons for action in relation to anyone in the normative community.

VII

Conclusion. I have argued that gaslighting is a form of domination that distinctively builds upon multiple, mutually reinforcing strategies that induce rational acquiescence. Such abusive strategies have powerful alienating effects, which progressively isolate the victims and correspondingly corrode their capacity to defend themselves. This entails a loss of self-respect, which prevents victims from exercising their deontic power and reclaiming full standing in the normative community. The examination of these strategies highlights that those abusive dynamics use, affect, and distort the very practice of rational justification. Rational justification thus becomes the locus where the power struggle takes place. This struggle involves and is operated by not only the victims and the wrongdoers, but also third parties, who are crucial actors in wrongdoing, as well as in the rehabilitation and re-empowerment of victims. For victims to recover their place in the normative community, rectify the wrong done to them, and repair their loss of self-respect, third parties must take responsibility. Ultimately, this study shows that wrongs are multifocal, and their broad and deep relational

Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume XCVII
https://doi.org/10.1093/arisup/akad002

nature points to modes of moral rehabilitation that are also modes of social empowerment.[40]

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Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume XCVII
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