

ANNALS OF PSYCHOLOGY

SO YOU THINK YOU'VE BEEN GASLIT

*What happens when a niche clinical concept becomes a ubiquitous cultural
diagnosis.*

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The philosopher Kate Abramson argues that gaslighting is an act of grievous moral wrongdoing which inflicts “a kind of existential silencing.” Illustration by Josie Norton

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When Leah started dating her first serious boyfriend, as a nineteen-year-old sophomore at Ohio State, she had very little sense that sex was supposed to feel good. (Leah is not her real name.) In the small town in central Ohio where she grew up, sex ed was basically like the version she remembered from the movie “Mean Girls”: “Don’t have sex, because you will get pregnant and die.”

With her college boyfriend, the sex was rough from the beginning. There was lots of choking and hitting; he would toss her around the bed “like a rag doll,” she told me, and then assure her, “This is how everyone has sex.” Because Leah had absorbed an understanding of sex in which the woman was supposed to be largely passive, she told herself that her role was to be “strong enough” to endure everything that felt painful and scary. When she was with other people, she found herself explaining away bruises and other marks on her body as the results of accidents. Once, she said to her boyfriend, “I guess you like it rough,” and he said, “No, all women like it like this.” And she thought, “O.K., then I guess I don’t know shit about myself.”

Her boyfriend was popular on campus. “If you brought up his name,” she told me, “people would say, ‘Oh, my God, I *love* that guy.’” This unanimous social endorsement made it harder for her to doubt anything he said. But, in private, she saw glimpses of a darker side—stray comments barbed with cruelty, a certain cunning. He never drank, and, though in public he cited vague life-style reasons, in private he told her that he loved being fully in control around other people as they unravelled, grew messy, came undone. Girls, especially.

Sometimes, when they were having sex, Leah would get a strong gut feeling that what was happening wasn’t right. In these moments, she would feel overwhelmed by a self-protective impulse that drove her out of bed, naked and crying, to shut herself in the bathroom. What she remembers most clearly is not

the fleeing, however, but the return: walking back to bed, still naked, and embarrassed about having “made a scene.” When she got back, her boyfriend would tell her, “You have to get it together. Maybe you should see someone.”

A few months after they broke up—not because of the sex but for “stupid normal relationship reasons”—Leah found herself chatting with a girl who was sitting next to her in a science lecture. It emerged that this girl had gone to the same high school as her ex, and when Leah asked if she knew him the girl looked horrified. “That guy’s a psycho,” she said. Leah had never heard anyone speak about him like this. The girl said that, in high school, he’d had a reputation for sexual assault. Some of what she described sounded eerily familiar. “The idea that he would want to have power over a girl while she was asleep was as easy for me to believe as the idea that he needed air to breathe,” she said. “It reminded me of every sexual experience I had with him, where he had all of the power and I was only a vessel to accept it.”

Leah went back to her dorm room and lay in bed for almost two days straight. She kept revisiting memories from the relationship, understanding them in a new way. Evidently, what she’d understood as “normal” sex had been something more aggressive. And her ex’s attempts to convince her otherwise—implying that she was crazy for having any problem with it—were a kind of controlling behavior so fundamental that she did not have a name for it. Now, six years later, as a social worker at a university, she calls it “gaslighting.”

These days, it seems as if everyone’s talking about gaslighting. In 2022, it was Merriam-Webster’s Word of the Year, on the basis of a seventeen-hundred-and-forty-per-cent increase in searches for the term. In the past decade, the word and the concept have come to saturate the public sphere. In the run-up to the 2016 election, *Teen Vogue* ran a viral op-ed with the title “Donald Trump Is Gaslighting America.” Its author, Lauren Duca, wrote, “He lied to us over and over again, then took all accusations of his falsehoods and spun them into evidence of bias.” In 2020, the album “Gaslighter,” by the Chicks (formerly known as the Dixie Chicks), debuted at No. 1 on the *Billboard* country chart, offering an indignant anthem on behalf of the gaslit: “Gaslighter, denier . . . you

know exactly what you did on my boat.” (What happened on the boat is revealed a few songs later: “And you can tell the girl who left her tights on my boat / That she can have you now.”) The TV series “Gaslit” (2022) follows a socialite, played by Julia Roberts, who becomes a whistle-blower in the Watergate scandal, having previously been manipulated into thinking she had seen no wrongdoing. The *Harvard Business Review* has been publishing a steady stream of articles with titles like “What Should I Do if My Boss Is Gaslighting Me?”

The popularity of the term testifies to a widespread hunger to name a certain kind of harm. But what are the implications of diagnosing it everywhere? When I put out a call on X (formerly known as Twitter) for experiences of gaslighting, I immediately received a flood of responses, Leah’s among them. The stories offered proof of the term’s broad resonance, but they also suggested the ways in which it has effectively become an umbrella that shelters a wide variety of experiences under the same name. Webster’s dictionary defines the term as “psychological manipulation of a person usually over an extended period of time that causes the victim to question the validity of their own thoughts, perception of reality, or memories and typically leads to confusion, loss of confidence and self-esteem, uncertainty of one’s emotional or mental stability, and a dependency on the perpetrator.” Leah’s own experience of gaslighting offers a quintessential example—coercive, long-term, and carried out by an intimate partner—but as a clinician she has witnessed the rise of the phrase with both relief and skepticism. Her current job gives her the chance to offer college students the language and the knowledge that she didn’t have at their age. “I love consent education,” she told me. “I wish someone had told me it was O.K. to say no.” But she also sees the word “gaslighting” as being used so broadly that it has begun to lose its meaning. “It’s not just disagreement,” she said. It’s something much more invasive: the gaslighter “scoops out what you know to be true and replaces it with something else.”

The term “gaslighting” comes from the title of George Cukor’s film “Gaslight,” from 1944, a noirish drama that tracks the psychological trickery of a man, Gregory, who spends every night searching for a set of lost

jewels in the attic of a town house he shares with his wife, Paula, played by Ingrid Bergman. (The jewels are her inheritance, and we come to understand that he has married her in order to steal them.) Based on Patrick Hamilton's 1938 play of the same name, the film is set in London in the eighteen-eighties, which gives rise to its crucial dramatic trick: during his nighttime rummaging, Gregory turns on the gas lamps in the attic, causing all the other lamps in the house to flicker. But, when Paula wonders why they are flickering, he convinces her that she must have imagined it. Filmed in black-and-white, with interior shots full of shadows and exterior shots full of swirling London fog, the film offers a clever inversion of the primal trope of light as a symbol of knowledge. Here, light becomes an agent of confusion and deception, an emblem of Gregory's manipulation.

Gregory gradually makes Paula doubt herself in every way imaginable. He convinces her that she has stolen his watch and hidden one of their paintings, and that she is too fragile and unwell to appear in public. When Paula reads a novel by the fire, she can't even focus on the words; all she can hear is Gregory's voice inside her head. The house in which she is now confined becomes a physical manifestation of the claustrophobia of gaslighting and the ways in which it can feel like being trapped inside another person's narrative—dimly aware of a world outside but lacking any idea of how to reach it.

The first recorded use of "gaslight" as a verb is from 1961, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, and its first mention in clinical literature came in the British medical journal *The Lancet*, in a 1969 article titled "The Gas-Light Phenomenon." Written by two British doctors, the article summarizes the plot of the original play and then examines three real-life cases in which something similar occurred. Two of the cases feature devious wives, flipping the gender dynamic usually assumed today; in one, a woman tried to convince her husband that he was insane, so that he would be committed to a mental hospital and she could divorce him without penalty. The article is ultimately less concerned with gaslighting itself than with safeguards around admitting patients to mental hospitals. The actual psychology of gaslighting emerged as an object of study a decade later. The authors of a 1981 article in *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*

interpreted it as a version of a phenomenon known as “projective identification,” in which a person projects onto someone else some part of himself that he finds intolerable. Gaslighting involves a “special kind of ‘transfer,’ ” they write, in which the victimizer, “disavowing his or her own mental disturbance, tries to make the victim feel he or she is going crazy, and the victim more or less complies.”

On its way from niche clinical concept to ubiquitous cultural diagnosis, gaslighting has, of course, passed through the realm of pop psychology. In the 2007 book “The Gaslight Effect,” the psychotherapist Robin Stern mines the metaphor to the fullest, advising her readers to “Turn Up Your Gaslight Radar,” “Develop Your Own ‘Gaslight Barometer,’ ” and “Gasproof Your Life.” Stern anchors the phenomenon in a relationship pattern that she noticed during her twenty years of therapeutic work: “Confident, high-achieving women were being caught in demoralizing, destructive, and bewildering relationships” that in each case caused the woman “to question her own sense of reality.” Stern offers a series of taxonomies for the stages (Disbelief, Defense, Depression) and the perpetrators (Glamour Gaslighters, Good-Guy Gaslighters, and Intimidators). She understands gaslighting as a dynamic that “plays on our worst fears, our most anxious thoughts, our deepest wishes to be understood, appreciated, and loved.”

In the past decade, philosophy has turned its gaze to the phenomenon, too. In 2014, Kate Abramson, a philosophy professor at the University of Indiana, published an essay called “Turning Up the Lights on Gaslighting,” which she has now expanded into a rigorous and passionately argued book-length study, “On Gaslighting.” Early in the book, she describes giving talks and having conversations about gaslighting in the decade since publishing her original article: “I still remember the sense of revelation I had when first introduced to the notion of gaslighting. I’ve now seen that look of stunned discovery on a great many faces.”

The core of Abramson’s argument is that gaslighting is an act of grievous moral wrongdoing which inflicts “a kind of existential silencing.” “Agreement isn’t the

endpoint of successful gaslighting,” she writes. “Gaslighters aim to fundamentally undermine their targets as deliberators and moral agents.” Abramson catalogues the ways in which gaslighters leverage their authority, cultivating isolation in the victim and leaning on social tropes (for example, the “hysterical woman”) to achieve their aims. Outlining the various forms of suffering that gaslighting causes, Abramson stresses the tautological bind in which it places the victim—“charging someone not simply with being wrong or mistaken, but being in no condition to judge whether she is wrong or mistaken.” Gaslighting essentially turns its targets against themselves, she writes, by harnessing “the very same capacities through which we create lives that have meaning to us as individuals,” such as the capacities to love, to trust, to empathize with others, and to recognize the fallibility of our perceptions and beliefs. This last point has always struck me as one of gaslighting’s keenest betrayals: it takes what is essentially an ethically productive form of humility, the awareness that one might be wrong, and turns it into a liability. Any argument in which two people remember the same thing in different ways can feel like a terrible game of chicken: the “winner” of the argument is the one less willing to doubt their own memories—arguably the more flawed moral position—whereas the one who swerves first looks weaker but is often driven by a more conscientious commitment to self-doubt.

Being a philosopher, Abramson spends a good deal of time defining the phenomenon by specifying what it isn’t. Gaslighting is not the same as brainwashing, for example, because it involves not simply convincing someone of something that isn’t true but, rather, convincing that person to distrust their own capacity to distinguish truth from falsehood. It is also not the same as guilt-tripping, because someone can be aware of being guilt-tripped while still effectively being guilt-tripped. At the same time—and although Abramson recognizes that “concept creep” threatens to dilute the meaning and the utility of the term—her own examples of gaslighting sometimes grow uncomfortably expansive. (And her decision to use male pronouns for gaslighters and female pronouns for the gaslit also reinforces a reductive notion of its gender patterns.) Both the book and her original essay open with a list of more than a dozen “things gaslighters say,” ranging from “Don’t be so sensitive” to “If you’re going

to be like this, I can't talk to you" to "I'm worried; I think you're not well." It's hard to imagine a person who hasn't heard at least one of these. The quotations function as a kind of net, drawing readers into the force field of the book's argument with an implicit suggestion: Perhaps this has happened to you.

Growing up in Bangladesh as the daughter of two literature professors, a woman I'll call Adaya often had difficulty understanding what other people were saying. She felt stupid because it seemed so much harder for her to comprehend things others understood easily, but over time she began to suspect that her hearing was physically impaired. Her parents told her that she was just seeking attention, and when they finally took her to the family doctor he confirmed that her hearing was fine. She was just exaggerating, he said, as teenage girls are prone to do.

Adaya believed what her parents had said, though she kept encountering situations where she couldn't hear things. It wasn't until her mid-thirties, in 2011, that she finally went to see another specialist. This was in Iowa, where she'd moved for a graduate program in writing after her first marriage, in Bangladesh, fell apart. The clinician told her that her middle-ear bone was calcifying; it was a congenital problem that had almost certainly affected her hearing for at least twenty-five years. Waiting for a bus home from the hospital—in the middle of winter, with a foot of snow all around her—Adaya called her mother to tell her. She responded without apology ("You're old enough to take care of yourself, so take care of yourself"), and let another six years pass before casually disclosing that the family doctor *had* found something wrong with Adaya's hearing, all those years before. When Adaya asked why they had kept this from her, her mother replied, "I didn't want to tell you because I didn't want you to be weak about it."

Of all the people who approached me on X with testimonies of gaslighting, I found Adaya and her story particularly compelling because her diagnosis eventually offered her a kind of irrefutable confirmation—something the gaslit crave, but often never receive—that allowed her to confront the dynamic directly. For Adaya, the damage of her parents' deception went beyond the

hardships of her medical condition. “It made me feel that what I was experiencing in my body was not real,” she told me. “All my life I was told I was lying and exaggerating. . . . In those years when my sense of self was being formed, I was being given a deficient version of myself.” It was part of a broader pattern. From an early age, Adaya told me, she felt that she didn’t fit in with her family without quite knowing why. Eventually, she realized that this sense of falling short had arisen from things her mother said. She thought of herself as ugly because her mother said so, disparaging her dark skin; when she got a skin infection, she was made to believe it was because she didn’t keep herself clean enough. “If your mother cannot see the grace and beauty in you, who can?” Adaya said. That sense of shame and worthlessness propelled her toward an abusive marriage (“The first boy who told me I was worth loving, I moved toward him”) and kept her in it for years.

The idea of gaslighting first began to resonate with Adaya when she finally went to therapy, in her forties. She had gone in order to understand the dynamics of her failed marriage, but came to see that the problems went deeper. As she wrote in one of her first messages to me, she found it easier to talk about surviving domestic violence than about the emotional violence she experienced in her childhood. The things her mother had said about her “dislodged and disoriented and to some extent destroyed my sense of self.” Adaya has come to divide her life into three parts: her youth, when she believed in the version of herself shaped by her mother’s narrative; the period of adulthood when the hearing diagnosis caused her to wrestle with that narrative; and the current era, in which she has a stronger self-conception and is in a stable romantic relationship. She was able to arrive at this point in part because her therapist helped her identify her relationship with her parents as one of gaslighting. Looking back on herself when she was young, she says, “I almost feel like it’s a different person—like she is my child, and I want to take care of her.”

The psychoanalyst and historian Ben Kafka, who is working on a book about how other people drive us crazy, told me that he thinks our most familiar tropes about gaslighting are slightly misleading. He believes that, although romantic relationships dominate our cultural narratives of gaslighting, the

parent-child dynamic is a far more useful frame. When I visited Kafka in the cozy Greenwich Village office where he sees his patients, he pointed out that, for one thing, the power imbalance between parents and their children is intrinsically conducive to this form of manipulation. Indeed, it often happens unwittingly: if a child receives her version of reality from her parents, then she may feel that she has to consent to it as a way to insure that she continues to be loved and cared for. (And what other sense of reality do we have at first, besides what our parents tell us to be true?) Additionally, gaslighting later in life almost always involves some degree of infantilization and regression, insofar as it creates an enforced dependence. Lastly, and crucially, Kafka's orientation toward parent-child bonds stems from an essentially Freudian belief that the dynamics at play in our adult relationships can usually be traced back to those we grew familiar with in childhood.

There are many memoirs that recount experiences one might call gaslighting—indeed, the very act of writing personal narrative often involves an attempt to “reclaim” a story that’s already been told another way—but few trace the lasting residue of parental gaslighting as deftly as Lily Dunn’s “Sins of My Father.” When Dunn was six, her father left the family to join a cult who called themselves the sannyasins and preached a doctrine of radical emotional autonomy. At thirteen, Dunn went to spend the summer at her father’s villa, in Tuscany, where he lived with a much younger wife (they’d got together when he was thirty-seven and she was eighteen) and a rotating crew of fellow cult members. In the entrancing but unsettling paradise of the villa—with its marble floors and grand staircases, shoddy electricity, and plentiful vats of wine—one of her father’s middle-aged friends began trying to seduce her. After kissing her in the kitchen, his skin leathery and his breath stale from cigarette smoke, he whispered, “I want to have sex with you,” and invited her back to his camper van to listen to his poems.

When Dunn told her father how anxious these sexual advances made her, he replied that she shouldn’t be worried. “You could learn something,” he told her. “He’s a good man. He’ll be gentle.” (He changed his mind once he learned that his friend had gonorrhoea.) For Dunn, her father’s failure to affirm her sense of

being preyed upon was far more damaging than the other man's predation. Years later, whenever she asked her father to acknowledge that his behaviors had affected her, he would gaslight her even more. Echoing the teachings of his sannyasin guru, he acted as if it were inappropriate for her to blame him for any emotional damage: " 'You can choose how you feel,' he said, again and again. 'It has nothing to do with me.' "

For years after that incident, Dunn told me, "I could never trust that what I was feeling was quite right," because she'd been consistently told by her father that she felt too much, and that she needed to deal with these feelings on her own rather than foisting them onto others. At fifteen, she began her first serious romantic relationship, with a much older man (he was thirty-two), and found it almost impossible to trust her suspicions about him. Looking back, it's clear to her that he was living with his female partner, but he said that the woman was just a roommate, and Dunn didn't have the confidence to disbelieve him. Instead, she told me, she got lost in obsessive thought patterns, trying to figure out whether this man was lying or if she was being paranoid; she couldn't concentrate properly because she was so consumed by this circular thinking. "I thought I had to work it out myself," she said. Looking back, she sees herself frantically trying to play two roles at once: she was the anxious child, who knew something was wrong but couldn't figure out what, *and* the adult who was attempting—but not yet able—to take care of things, to make them right.

Sitting in Kafka's office thinking of Dunn and Adaya, I found myself swelling with indignation on behalf of these gaslit children, taught to feel responsible for the pain their parents had caused them. But beneath that indignation lurked something else—a nagging anxiety coaxed into sharper visibility by the therapeutic aura of Kafka's sleek analytic couch. I eventually told him that, as I worked on this piece, I had started to wonder about the ways I might be unintentionally gaslighting my daughter—telling her that she is "just fine" when she clearly isn't, or giving her a hard time for making us late for school by demanding to wear a different pair of tights, when it is clearly my own fault for not starting our morning routine ten minutes earlier. In these interactions, I can see the distinct mechanisms of gaslighting at work, albeit in a much milder

form: taking a difficult feeling—my latent sense of culpability whenever she is unhappy, or my guilt for running behind schedule—and placing it onto her. Part of me hoped that Kafka would disagree with me, but instead he started nodding vehemently. “Yes!” he said. “Within a two-block range of any elementary school, just before the bell rings, you can find countless parents gaslighting their children, off-loading their anxiety.”

We both laughed. In the moment, this jolt of recognition seemed incidental, a brief diversion into daily life as we crawled through the darker trenches of human manipulation. But, after I’d left Kafka’s office, it started to feel like a crucial acknowledgment: that gaslighting is neither as exotic nor as categorically distinct as we’d like to believe.

Gila Ashtor, a psychoanalyst and a professor at Columbia University, told me she often sees patients experience a profound sense of relief when it occurs to them that they may have been gaslit. As she put it, “It’s like light at the end of the tunnel.” But Ashtor worries that such relief may be deceptive, in that it risks effacing the particular (often unconscious) reasons they may have been drawn to the dynamic. Ashtor defines gaslighting as “the voluntary relinquishing of one’s narrative to another person,” and the word “voluntary” is crucial—that’s what makes it a dynamic rather than just a unilateral act of violence. For Ashtor, it’s not a question of blaming the victim but of examining their susceptibility: what makes someone ready to accept another person’s narrative of their own experience? What might they have been seeking?

In addition to working as a psychoanalyst, Ashtor has studied and taught in Columbia’s M.F.A. program in creative nonfiction (where I also teach), and she thinks a lot about the connections between gaslighting and personal narrative. I asked her how patients tend to narrate their gaslighting experiences: how often they come to her with the idea already in their minds, and how often she is the one to bring it up. Ashtor said that, if she introduces the term, she tries to use it as a placeholder, a first step in figuring out what was at play in a relationship. When patients introduce it—and sometimes she can sense a patient *wanting* her to use it first—she may be skeptical, not because they are wrong but because

they usually haven't fully reckoned with their own role in the dynamic yet. It's as if they are trying to close something by invoking the word—to mark it as settled, figured out—whereas she wants to open it up. Ashtor says it frequently becomes clear that patients are very attached to the term “gaslighting,” and fear something will be taken away from them if she disputes it. The question of what would be taken away is an illuminating one, and it raises an even trickier question: what did the dynamic give them in the first place?

The issue of susceptibility gets thorny quickly; it can appear to veer dangerously close to victim-blaming. Ashtor doesn't believe in the old psychoanalytic idea that everything that happens to us is somehow desired, but she does think that it's worthwhile to investigate why people find themselves in certain toxic dynamics. Without discounting the genuine suffering involved, she finds it useful to ask what her patients were seeking. Ashtor wondered aloud to me whether there could be something “good” about gaslighting, and why it feels so transgressive even to suggest that this might be the case. “There's a real appeal in adopting someone else's view of the world and escaping our own,” she told me. “There are very few acceptable outlets in our lives for this hunger for difference.”

Ashtor thinks that therapeutic examination of a gaslighting dynamic can bring you closer to understanding something crucial about yourself: a complicated relationship to motherhood, say, or the effects of certain imbalances or conflicts in your parents' marriage. The work is to “understand what's getting enacted and why.” One doesn't necessarily emerge from this type of examination with a self that is entirely “cured” or integrated, but it can, as she says, allow one to “live in closer proximity to the questions and struggles that animate the self.” In working with patients to better understand their experiences of being gaslit, Ashtor is hoping to give them a different way to engage with the impulses that led them there.

Although most accounts of gaslighting focus on interpersonal dynamics, Pragya Agarwal, a behavioral scientist and a writer based between Ireland and the U.K., believes that it's more useful to consider the phenomenon from a sociological perspective. “People who have less power because of their status in society,

whether it be gender, race, class, and so on, are more susceptible to being gaslighted,” she told me. “Their inferior status is used as leverage to invalidate their experiences and testimonies.” She spoke of instances in medicine in which genuinely ill patients are repeatedly told that their symptoms are psychosomatic. Endometriosis, for example, is an underdiagnosed condition, she said, because women’s pain is often discounted. Similarly, in the workplace, minorities who report microaggressions may be told that they are being “too sensitive” or that the offending colleague “didn’t mean it like that.”

In this view of gaslighting, it becomes harder to see the utility of susceptibility as a framing concept. When I asked Agarwal about what role the gaslit party might play in the dynamic, she replied, “I don’t believe that it is the responsibility of the oppressed to create conditions where they wouldn’t be oppressed.”

What does the gaslighter want? In the 1944 film, the gaslighter’s motivation (to steal Paula’s jewels) is so cartoonishly superficial that it seems like a stand-in for something larger—a metaphor for the desire to undermine a woman’s self-confidence, perhaps, in order to keep her dependent. In real life, casting the gaslighter as a two-dimensional villain seems insufficient, another way of avoiding a reckoning with complicity and desire.

The question of the gaslighter’s motivation often becomes a chicken-or-egg dilemma: whether their impulse to destabilize another person’s sense of reality stems primarily from wanting to harm that person or from wanting to corroborate their own truth. Think of the college boyfriend who convinces his girlfriend that all sex involves violence—is his fundamental investment in controlling her or in somehow justifying his own desires? Abramson writes that both goals can be at play simultaneously, such that a gaslighter may be “trying to radically undermine his target” and also, “in a perfectly ordinary way, trying to tell himself a story about why there’s nothing that happened with which he needs to deal.” (Indeed, as she points out, gaslighters “are often not *consciously* trying to drive their targets crazy,” so they may not always be self-aware enough to distinguish between these reasons.) If the need to affirm one’s own version of

reality is pretty much universal, it makes sense that a desire to attack someone else's competing version is universal, too. Yet, in the popular discourse, it can seem as if everyone has been gaslit but no one will admit to doing the gaslighting.

Kristin Dombek, in her 2014 book, "The Selfishness of Others: An Essay on the Fear of Narcissism," discusses how narcissism, once solely a clinical diagnosis, became an all-purpose buzzword. In her view, we hurl the accusation of pathological selfishness at others as a way of making sense of the feeling of being ignored or slighted. Gaslighting is not a clinical diagnosis, but, as with narcissism, less precise applications of the term can be a way to take an inevitable source of pain—the fact of disagreement, or the fact that we are not the center of other people's lives—and turn it into an act of wrongdoing. This is not to say that narcissism or gaslighting don't exist, but that, in seeing them everywhere, we risk not just diluting the concepts but also attributing natural human friction to the malevolence of others. Although "gaslighting" is a term that many members of Gen Z have grown up with, one teen-ager I know expresses its perils in this vein succinctly: "Every time someone gets criticized or called out, they just say, 'Oh, you're gaslighting me,' and it makes the other person the bad guy."

It doesn't help that the accusation is essentially unanswerable: "No, I'm not" is exactly what a gaslighter would say. Even a third party who disputes someone's account of being gaslit is threatening to inflict the same harm as the gaslighter. No wonder the issue of proof is crucial in many accounts of gaslighting: the tights on the boat, the charts that show decades of hearing loss, the other women who were assaulted. These are empirical life preservers that pull us out of the epistemic whirlpool. In proving that our past perceptions were correct after all, they also seem to guarantee that we are correct now in our feeling of having been hurt.

Such certainty is possible only in retrospect, however. Inside the experience of gaslighting, Abramson writes, "the gaslit find themselves tossed between trust and distrust, unstably occupying a world between the two." Which is to say, the

more adamant you are that you're being gaslit, the more probable it is that you're not. On Reddit, a man laments, "My last GF loved to tell me I was 'gaslighting' her every time I simply had a different opinion than hers. Infuriating." Has he been gaslit into thinking he's a gaslighter?

Part of the tremendously broad traction of the concept, I suspect, has to do with the fact that gaslighting is adjacent to so many common relationship dynamics: not only disagreeing on a shared version of reality but feeling that you are in a contest over which version prevails. It would be nearly impossible to find someone who hasn't experienced the pain and frustration—utterly ordinary, but often unbearable—that comes when your own sense of reality diverges from someone else's. Because this gap can feel so maddening and wounding, it can be a relief to attribute it to villainy.

At the climax of Cukor's film, Paula confronts her husband with the truth of his manipulations. (He has been tied to a chair by a helpful detective. She is brandishing a knife.) He doubles down on his old tricks, trying to convince her that she has misinterpreted the evidence and should cut him free. But Paula turns his own game against him: "Are you suggesting that this is a knife I hold in my hand? Have you gone mad, my husband?" In a further twist, she inhabits the role of madwoman as a repurposed costume:

How can a madwoman help her husband to escape? . . . If I were not mad, I could have helped you. . . . But because I am mad, I hate you. Because I am mad, I have betrayed you. And because I'm mad, I'm rejoicing in my heart, without a shred of pity, without a shred of regret, watching you go with glory in my heart!

On its surface, this final scene offers us a clear, happy ending. The gaslit party triumphs and objective truth prevails. But deeper down it gestures toward a more complex vision of gaslighting: as a reciprocal exchange in which both parties take turns as gaslit and gaslighter. This is a version of gaslighting that psychoanalysis is more congenial to. In the *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* article from 1981, the authors describe a "gaslighting partnership" whose participants may "oscillate" between roles: "Not infrequently, each of the participants is convinced

that he or she is the victim.”

In this sense, gaslighting is both more and less common than we think. Extreme cases undoubtedly occur, and deserve recognition as such, but to understand the phenomenon exclusively in light of these dire examples allows us to avoid the more uncomfortable notion that something similar takes place in many intimate relationships. One doesn't have to dilute the definition of gaslighting to recognize that it happens on many scales, from extremely toxic to undeniably commonplace.

Ben Kafka told me that he thinks one of the key insights of psychoanalysis is that people respond to anxiety by dividing the world into good and bad, a tendency known as “splitting.” It strikes me that some version of this splitting is at play not only in gaslighting itself—taking an undesirable “bad” emotion or quality and projecting it onto someone else, so that the self can remain “good”—but also in the widespread invocation of the term, the impulse to split the world into innocent and culpable parties. If the capacity to gaslight is more widely distributed than its most extreme iterations would lead us to believe, perhaps we've all done more of it than we care to admit. Each of us has been the one making our way back into bed, vulnerable and naked, and each of us has been the one saying, Come back into this bed I made for you. ♦

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