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From Doubt to Despair – A Wittgensteinian Perspective on Gaslighting

I am the one standing in front, and behind whose back the world is constantly rearranging itself, changing as it pleases, where everyone is striving to get ahead, fast, fast, fast ahead, and whenever I dare to turn around, to take a look at the world, which is so alien to me anyway, everything looks different again and never, never, never do I know where I am or who. (*Anonymous* 2016)

Abstract

'Gaslighting' describes a form of manipulation that induces doubt in someone's perceptions, experiences, understanding of events or conception of reality in general. But what kind of doubt is it? How do 'ordinary' epistemic doubts differ from those doubts that can lead to despair and the feeling of losing one's mind?

The phenomenon of 'gaslighting' has been attracting public attention for some time and has recently found its way into philosophical reflections that address moral, sexist and epistemic aspects of gaslighting. Little has been said, however, about the nature of gaslighting-induced doubts themselves, how they differ from ordinary, even 'reasonable' epistemic (self-) doubts and how it can come to someone doubting their own perception and conception of reality in the first place. The aim of this paper is to shed some light on these aspects by drawing on some of Wittgenstein's remarks on doubt, published mainly in *On Certainty*. To this end, I will first outline the phenomenon of gaslighting as an epistemic injustice before presenting Wittgenstein's reflections on doubt(ing). These will then be applied to the phenomenon of gaslighting, with a more specific focus on the evocation of such fundamental self-doubt in successful gaslighting, again drawing on some of Wittgenstein's remarks.

Doubting can take different forms: There are epistemic, methodological, sceptical and practical-moral doubts. Some concern, for example, the year of a historical event or the colour of an object, some the reliability or trustworthiness of other people, and some concern ourselves, e.g., our memory of long-ago events, our perception under certain circumstances, our assessment and our judgement of situations. Very rarely do doubts take more fundamental forms that challenge our conception of reality as a whole or shake our very *capacity* for judgement and cognition, such as the appropriate assessment of situations, our perception and memory, in a fundamental way. Certainly, in sceptical or methodological doubt in philosophy, we sometimes doubt the reliability of sense perception, the reality of the external world and the mindedness of other people, but when we do so, we do not (usually) despair, or simply put, sceptical doubt does not usually affect us in everyday life, and certainly not such fundamental and impairing kinds as caused by gaslighting: "Gaslighting" can be roughly understood as a form of manipulation in the course of which doubts are induced in someone's perceptions, experiences or understanding of events or conception of reality in general and can lead to a profound uncertainty and despair of the gaslit person. While ordinary kinds of doubt and self-doubt can even be useful and necessary for gaining knowledge and for interactions with other people, these fundamental self-doubts get, as it were, under the skin and are thus obviously different from those – but how? How can these doubts be characterised in more detail? And how is it possible at all for someone to be driven to such fundamental self-doubt?

The aim of this paper is to answer these questions by drawing on some of Wittgenstein's remarks on doubt, published mainly in *On Certainty*: That is, on the one hand, I will determine the doubts evoked during and as a result of successful gaslighting in more detail and, on the other hand, I want to show how anyone at all can be driven to such fundamental self-doubt, and indeed to despair. To this end, I will first discuss the philosophical debate surrounding the phenomenon of gaslighting in more general terms and outline it as a form of epistemic injustice before presenting Wittgenstein's reflections on the conditions and limits of doubt as well as on

different kinds of doubt. These more general considerations will then be applied to the phenomenon of gaslighting, with a more specific focus on the evocation of the fundamental self-doubt generated by successful gaslighting, again drawing on some of Wittgenstein's remarks.

1. What is Gaslighting?

The term 'gaslighting' comes from Patrick Hamilton's play *Gas Light* (1938), made famous in particular by George Cukor's film adaptation *Gaslight* (1944), about a man who manipulates his wife and her social and physical environment to make her appear 'crazy' so that he can search undisturbed for jewels that are supposed to be in the attic of the house they share. Among other things, he causes the gaslight in their house to flicker, and then convinces her that her accurate perception of this is merely a function of her imagination, so that she gradually doubts her perception and her memory and finally believes she is losing her mind.

In the 1980s, the term 'gaslighting' found its way into therapeutic practice as well as colloquial language, and has since been used more generally to refer to when someone "manipulate[s] another person into doubting his or her perceptions, experiences, or understanding of events", which – unlike in the play or film – does not necessarily have to be done consciously, nor with malicious intent or a specific goal, such as stealing jewels in the play (*APA Dictionary of Psychology*, "gaslight"; cf. Abramson 2014, 2). Despite such differences of awareness and intention on the part of the gaslighter and differences of degree and severity on the part of the person being gaslit[1], it is recognisably the same pattern of interaction (cf. Abramson 2014, 2):

> Gaslighting is [...] quite unlike merely dismissing someone, for dismissal simply fails to take another seriously as an interlocutor, whereas gaslighting is aimed at getting another not to take herself seriously as an interlocutor. It almost always involves multiple incidents that take place over long stretches of time; it frequently involves multiple parties playing the role of gaslighter, or cooperating with a gaslighter; it frequently involves isolating the target in

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[1] Gaslighting does not necessarily affect only individuals but can also affect entire groups. Donald Trump, for example, has been accused of gaslighting entire nations through his handling of facts (cf. Ghitis 2017; Pitzke 2017). This paper, however, will focus on the more characteristic form of gaslighting of individuals.

> various ways. And there are characteristic things gaslighters say [...]. (Abramson 2014, 2)

The formulation "gaslighting is aimed at getting another not to take herself seriously as an interlocutor" is not entirely clear, insofar as Abramson does not believe that gaslighters are always aware of (this aim of) gaslighting: "[...] when we talk about the gaslighter's 'aims' or 'desires', we're not in the territory of explicit features of conscious deliberation, but rather speaking of what will in some sense satisfy the gaslighter" and "in this sense of having an 'aim', every individual gaslighter typically has multiple aims" (2014, 8). It would therefore be more accurate to say that there are various motives, both conscious and unconscious, on the part of the gaslighter which, in the case of successful gaslighting, lead to someone no longer taking themselves seriously as an interlocutor. The characteristic things that gaslighters say usually amount to denying their counterpart's correct perception, memory or assessment of a situation, often by explicitly or implicitly portraying the counterpart as 'crazy' or by relativising or denying the situation itself:

> You're imagining things. I wasn't on the telephone with any girlfriend. You must have been dreaming it. (from: Zemon Gass & Nichols 1988, 6)
>
> You didn't talk with a woman at the condo. That never happened. That's your imagination. (from: ibid.)
>
> [You're] hearing things. (from: ibid., 7)
>
> I think you're being way too sensitive about all this – maybe even a little paranoid. Would you like a few days off to destress? (from: Abramson 2014, 4)
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> [A female student deals with sexual harassment and gets the following responses by the harasser and another student:] You're just prude. [...] He was just joking. (from: ibid., 5)[2]

In recent years, the phenomenon of gaslighting has also been addressed philosophically in various ways: Probably the most thorough analysis of gaslighting to date was presented by Abramson in her paper "Turning Up the Lights on Gaslighting" (2014), in

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[2] According to the authors Zemon Gass and Nichols and Abramson, the examples cited here are authentic (cf. Zemon Gass & Nichols 1988, 1; Abramson 2014, note 1).

which she deals primarily with the moral wrongs that occur in gaslighting and is critical of a characterisation of gaslighting as a testimonial injustice in the sense of Fricker (cf. Fricker 2007, 28; cf. Abramson 2014, 17 f.). In contrast, McKinnon (2017), Spear (2018) and Catapany Podosky (2020) have highlighted different types of epistemic or testimonial injustice in gaslighting. Also in this paper, I will characterise gaslighting as an epistemic injustice, but not (necessarily) a *testimonial* injustice in the Frickerian sense, which I will explain in the following[3].

In her book *Epistemic Injustice – Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (2007), Fricker characterises distinctive *epistemic injustice* as "consisting, most fundamentally, in a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower" (ibid., 1). In particular, she highlights the form of *testimonial injustice* that a speaker suffers "if and only if she receives a credibility deficit owing to identity prejudice in the hearer; so the central case of testimonial injustice is *identity-prejudicial credibility deficit*" (ibid., 28). In such general terms, it may at first seem plausible to understand gaslighting as an extreme form of testimonial injustice, insofar as a person's testimony, i.e., their statements about what they have perceived, experienced or how they assess an issue, is doubted, undermined or portrayed as 'crazy'. However, it is questionable whether gaslighting – if this may nevertheless often be the case in practice – is *necessarily* based on identity bias as defined here by Fricker in relation to testimonial injustice. More importantly, however, Fricker elsewhere clearly distinguishes testimonial injustice from an intentional denial of credibility, as occurs in at least some characteristic cases of gaslighting:

> In testimonial injustice the absence of deliberate, conscious manipulation is definitive, at least in my conception. I was trying to bring out a phenomenon that is easy to miss, and in need of a name. In this kind of epistemic injustice, the hearer makes a special kind of misjudgement of the speaker's credibility – one actually clouded by prejudice. And this is importantly different from any deliberate misrepresentation of someone's true or reasonable beliefs as false

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[3] For a philosophical film analysis of *Gas Light* in light of its conjunction with madness, scepticism, and the *cogito* as well as the issue of the finding on one's voice, cf. Cavell (1996, ch. 1).

or rationally unfounded, for when that happens the perpetrator herself need not misjudge the other's epistemic status at all. Precisely not – rather she sees that he knows, or has reasons, but she intends to cause *others* to doubt these things and to downgrade his epistemic status in their eyes. Testimonial injustice by contrast happens by way of a discriminatory but ingenuous misjudgement, and it will, I believe, be useful to continue keeping this separate from the closely related kind of injustice that involves the deliberate manipulation of others' judgements of credibility. (Fricker 2017, 54)

Of course, there can also be non-intentional forms of gaslighting based on identity prejudice, to which the concept of testimonial injustice would be applicable, as Fricker also admits (cf. ibid., note 7), but this is a specific form of gaslighting and not sufficient to grasp the phenomenon of gaslighting in its entirety or even in its characteristic form. Nevertheless, this specific form of gaslighting seems to be particularly interesting for philosophical considerations (cf. McKinnon 2017, Catapany Podosky 2020 and Stark 2019): McKinnon distinguishes this testimonial, "often unintentional" form of gaslighting from an intentional "psychological abuse form" and further restricts the former to cases in which the speaker's personal experience of suffering or injustice is at stake. That is, McKinnon's testimonial form of gaslighting "involves expressing doubts that the harm or injustice that the speaker is testifying to really happened as the speaker claims" (2017, 168). First, the division into a 'psychological abuse form' and a testimonial-epistemic form of gaslighting seems to me misleading, or at least unfortunate, insofar as they do not necessarily occur separately in practice, especially when different people take on the role of the gaslighter in a gaslighting case. Moreover, limiting the testimonial form to cases where the testimony concerns personally experienced suffering and injustice seems too narrow to me, since one could also think of cases of gaslighting in which someone's testimony is challenged but does not relate to personally experienced suffering and injustice, but more generally to the perception and assessment of a situation.

This may suffice as an example of why the concept of gaslighting cannot be sufficiently defined as testimonial injustice in Fricker's sense since it is at most a specific class of cases of gaslighting that are cases of testimonial injustice, and why further subdivisions and

limitations do not do justice to the complexity of the gaslighting phenomenon. The term 'gaslighting' is a colloquial one and denotes a plethora of individual phenomena and dynamics that are constituted by complex situational, social and structural contexts, but also individual outer and inner factors (gender, job, ethnicity, class, character, mental state, etc.) and therefore defy a neat theoretical classification. It may thus be best understood as a family resemblance concept, which is useful just because it denotes a multitude of cases that exhibit certain recurring *and* varying characteristics without being limited to fixed definitional features. This being said, gaslighting can be seen as *characteristically* involving a form of epistemic injustice, namely insofar as in gaslighting, a person is manipulated into doubting their own understanding of reality and is thereby harmed "specifically in their capacity as a knower" (Fricker 2007, 1)[4]. Gaslighting in this respect as a form of epistemic injustice emphasises, on the one hand, that it is the *epistemic* qualities of a person, their capacity for *knowledge* and judgement, or the person as knower, which the gaslighter questions and, on the other hand, that gaslighting is an injustice since these epistemic qualities are not legitimately questioned for good epistemic reasons, but – whether intentionally or not – in order to unsettle the person themselves. Insofar as gaslighting represents a wrong, an injustice, it has an ethical-political dimension, which is expressed here in particular in the tension of social power relations in epistemic interactions (cf. Fricker 2007, 1 f.), i.e., successful gaslighting as a wrong is based on and enforces an inequality of social power relations between gaslighter and gaslightee[5].

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[4] Abramson also believes that gaslighting can at least partly be understood as epistemic injustice (cf. 2014, 18), but also rejects, albeit for different reasons, a characterisation as a testimonial injustice: "To suppose that in gaslighting, the primary issue is about credibility assessments is, I think, to focus in the wrong place. It's to lose sight of the fact that an important part of what's going on is that the gaslighter is trying to turn a situation that might involve credibility assessments into a situation in which credibility assessments are not at issue, because there is no credibility to be assessed, no other perspective in the offing, and so no possibility of disagreement" (ibid., 17).

[5] In using the term 'gaslightee', I follow Sweet's terminology (2019). Catapang Podosky (2020) has pointed out the difficulties with terms such as 'target' and 'victim' and has himself, although not fully satisfied, used the term 'subject of gaslighting' (cf. ibid., note 11), which I consider ambiguous, however, since 'subject' in the sense of some philosophical traditions could just as well denote the gaslighting person here.

Related to this is another important aspect of gaslighting, namely the relationship between gaslighting and sexism. Gaslighting is not or need not be sexist *per se*. However, sexist, as well as classist, racist, heterosexist and other discriminating norms are an important component of many occurrences of gaslighting, insofar as it is a phenomenon of social interaction facilitated by the presence of such norms and their consequences for affected individuals. This, in my opinion, has been most clearly pointed out by Abramson[6]:

> There's nothing *necessarily* sexist about gaslighting. As a matter of fact, however, gaslighting interactions are often sexist in various ways. To begin with (1) women are more frequently the targets of gaslighting than men, and (2) men more often engage in gaslighting[7]. More importantly, gaslighting is frequently, though again, not necessarily, sexist in the following ways: (3) it frequently takes place in the context of, and in response to, a woman's protest against sexist (or otherwise discriminatory) conduct; (4) some of the forms of emotional manipulation that are employed in gaslighting frequently rely on the target's internalization of sexist norms, (5) when gaslighting is successful [....] it can reinforce the very sexist norms which the target was trying to resist and/or those on which the gaslighter relies in his/her manipulation of the target, and (6) sometimes it is some subset of those very sexist norms which the gaslighter seeks to preserve through his/her gaslighting conduct. Gaslighting *can be* sexist in all of these ways, or none of them. And it can be sexist in some, but not all of these ways. (Abramson 2014, 3)

It seems important to me to emphasise that gaslighting is not per se or *necessarily* sexist, but only insofar as generally existing unequal social power relationships facilitate phenomena like gaslighting and successful gaslighting creates a power imbalance. However, it is also conceivable that within a particular framework in which gaslighting takes place, there are other inequalities than in the rest of society, so that, for example, a woman can also gaslight her male partner if she has a more dominant role within the partnership. However, even if

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[6] Although not originating in philosophy, Sweet (2019) also points to sexist attitudes in gaslighting in her sociological study of gaslighting, as do Zemon Gass & Nichols (1988), the latter problematising these not only on the part of the gaslighter but also on the part of (couple) therapists dealing with gaslighting cases.

[7] Abramson refers here to: Morgan (2007) and Calef & Weinshel (2017).

gaslighting is sexist, it does not necessarily have to take the form outlined by Abramson in (3), i.e., as a reaction to *women's* protest against sexist conduct: Although less common, gaslighting can also occur when men and other genders are, e.g., sexually harassed. In the case of sexual harassment of men, it is the flipside of the same sexist norms that are at work in the sexual harassment of women, due to which the victim's statements about the incidents are not believed or taken seriously, because "the male vulnerability disappears behind ascribed role clichés according to which a man is not allowed to be vulnerable" – and this applies in particular to sexualised violence (Lenz 2001, 370; my transl.; cf. Jungnitz et.al. 2007, 15 f.)

Sexist, but also other factors of social inequality thus play a decisive role in successful gaslighting, which will be discussed again in more detail in the last section in relation to the evocation of doubt. In the following, I will explain Wittgenstein's more general reflections on doubt, especially in *On Certainty*.

2. Wittgenstein on Doubting

Wittgenstein's writings published as *On Certainty,* written shortly before his death, contain primarily conceptual investigations into epistemological issues, that is, he is concerned here with how we use terms such as 'knowing', 'doubting', 'erring' and the like in our everyday language games. In particular, Wittgenstein here engages with Moore's truisms of the kind "I know there is a hand here" (cf. 1962, 144) or "I know that I am a human being" (cf. 1925, 106), as well as with sceptical doubts, and in this way describes the circumstances and conditions under which it is meaningful to speak of 'knowledge' and 'error', and under which certain doubts and assumptions are considered 'reasonable' and justified. When discussing the topic of doubts, Wittgenstein distinguishes in *On Certainty*, but also in the writings on the philosophy of psychology[8] rather *en passant*, between sceptical-philosophical and 'practical', i.e.,

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[8] As is well known, the writings published as *On Certainty* and *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology II* (as well as *Remarks on Colours*) are partly based on the same manuscripts (namely Mss 172-176), which were divided thematically by the editors. This editorial decision has been criticised on various occasions (cf. Rhees 2003, 1–5; Schulte 2016b, 66, 70).

genuine, doubts. In the following, I will first explain Wittgenstein's reflections on the conditions and limits of doubt in *On Certainty* before moving onto his distinction between philosophical and practical doubt.

2.1 Conditions and Limits of Doubt

To Moore's truisms, Wittgenstein famously objects that one cannot meaningfully speak of 'knowing' them, since under ordinary circumstances there can be no doubt either that "here is a hand", that "I am a human being", or that "my body has never moved far from the surface of the earth" (cf. Moore 1925, 107). Doubting, for example, whether "I have ever been in the stratosphere" (cf. OC, 218) would, according to Wittgenstein, be *unreasonable* under ordinary circumstances – "[t]he reasonable human", he writes simply, "*does not have certain doubts*" (OC, 220; mod. transl.)[9]. That is,

> […] contrary to the usual emphasis on *questioning* in connection with the concept of reason or the use of reason, especially in philosophy, [Wittgenstein] points out here that the *exclusion of certain doubts* constitutes an equally relevant facet of the meaning of 'reasonableness' or 'use of reason'. (Weiberg 2017, 438; my transl.)

In fact, for Wittgenstein, the exclusion of certain doubts is not only a requirement of reasonableness, but a condition of doubting in the first place; that is, the very possibility of doubting presupposes the acceptance of certain principles: "If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty" (OC, 115). The fact that the game of doubting itself presupposes certainty can be understood in two ways: First, the remark can be understood in a principal sense, according to which *something* must be certain *in order to be able to doubt at all*: "Doubting and non-doubting behaviour. There is the first only if there is the second" (OC, 354). Understood in this way, it is a condition for doubting in general that *something* must be certain (cf. OC, 234 f.). For, a "doubt that doubted everything would be self-defeating in that it would equally annihilate both the reasons for

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[9] Cf. also: OC, 19, 219f., 252, 254, 261, 323-327, 334, 336, 452-454, 556 f..

doubt […] and the possibility of meaning" (Coliva 2021, 920)[10]. Descartes, for instance, can only carry out his methodological doubt because he does not doubt the meaning of his words and (thus) the doubting Ego. On account of that, all-encompassing (sceptical) doubts are logically impossible. Moreover, the remark quoted above can also be understood in a more specific sense, according to which particular certainties are logically presupposed by particular questions and doubts corresponding to or correlating with them:

> That is to say, the questions that we raise, and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, as it were the hinges on which those turn. (OC, 341)[11]

In an experiment, for instance, "I do not doubt the existence of the apparatus before my eyes. I have plenty of doubts, but not *that*" (OC, 337). Although some things must be exempt from doubt, it seems impossible to list *all* the things that are beyond doubt in any individual case (cf. OC, 519). For, that which is fixed for us, those hinges on which our doubts first turn, are, among other things, such fundamental assumptions as Moore lists in his *Defence of the Common Sense:* Although we do not explicitly learn such propositions as "I am a human being", they form a "nest" of interwoven, fundamental beliefs, they are concluding points of doubt and justification and describe our *world picture* (cf. Schulte 2016a, 255):

> But I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false. (OC, 94)

With his critique of Moore's propositions, Wittgenstein thus does not want to deny their unquestionable certainty; rather, his critique refers to the epistemological status Moore ascribes to 'his' propositions: Moore considers them to be empirical propositions, whereas Wittgenstein emphasises their grammatical-logical status

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[10] As Coliva points out in her paper, the impossibility of a global doubt as Wittgenstein states in *On Certainty*, has been anticipated by Stebbing (cf. Stebbing 1932, 93; Coliva 2021, 920).

[11] Wittgenstein *always* uses the word *Satz* (sentence) and not 'proposition', so in German it has less of a philosophical-technical ring to it, however, since 'proposition' seems more natural in English I kept it here and in the subsequent instances.

within language practice. Although Moore's propositions, as well as many others, take the *form of empirical propositions,* they are *used in a similar way* to logical propositions as "expressions of a norm" (ROC, 32), that is, in a sense, as generally accepted principles. Our world picture is thus composed of various beliefs that include certain logical or mathematical propositions ("2+2=4") and basic empirical propositions à la Moore ("I am a human being", "My name is…"), but also concern certain (often implicit) presuppositions, such as our perception and memory: If someone calls something "red" under good viewing conditions, we do not usually doubt their eyesight (cf. OC, 524) and just as little do we doubt someone's memory when they claim "I have never been to China" (cf. OC, 333). Such basic assumptions and propositions describe our world picture and thus cannot be doubted or verified insofar as they form the framework of our epistemic practices, i.e., the framework "in which our arguments take hold and in which our justifications can prove themselves" (Schulte 2016a, 225; my transl.). This framework, however, can of course change through new scientific discoveries or also political revolutions – and thus, also "what humans consider reasonable or unreasonable alters" (OC, 336, mod. transl.).

If someone nevertheless wanted to question the hinges of our world picture, we would no longer speak of a "doubt", as Wittgenstein remarks, but of "madness", "craziness" (cf. OC, 217, 281) or consider the person to be a "half-wit":

> If someone said to me that he doubted whether he had a body, I should take him to be a half-wit. But I shouldn't know what it would mean to try to convince him that he had one. And if I had said something and that had removed his doubt, I should not know how or why. (OC, 257)

We could not convince a person who actually doubted whether they had a body that they have a body, or if we could, we would not know how and why because such a 'doubt' is outside the framework of our epistemic practices constituted by the hinge propositions of our world picture, within which certain reasons and arguments (such as "But I *see* that you have a body!") can take effect in the first place. *What* counts in each case as a reason and argument, or as sufficient check, in relation to a belief or a state of affairs, is admittedly justified

insofar as the propositions of our world picture do not constitute "single axioms" but form "a system in which consequences and premises give one another *mutual* support" (OC, 142). But since, as Wittgenstein says, we do not have our world picture because we have convinced ourselves of its correctness, the framework of our epistemic practices is to a certain extent arbitrary or also determined by a certain practicability, as the following example makes clear:

> Perhaps I shall do a multiplication twice to make sure, or perhaps get someone else to work it over. But shall I work it over again twenty times, or get twenty people to go over it? And is that some sort of negligence? Would the certainty really be greater for being checked twenty times? (OC, 77)

> And can I give a *reason* why it isn't? (OC, 78)

To make sure is to check it, perhaps twice, or with the help of others, but even though it would be 'theoretically' possible to make a mistake in this and any further checking, the certainty would not increase from a certain point onwards – and this concerns not only doubts about multiplications but also other doubts, such as whether one has actually turned off the stove before leaving the house or the date of an important historical event. Successful checking, the removal of doubt, is rather based on relying on certain things, so that checking twenty times does not make things any more certain than checking two or three times – which is to a certain degree arbitrary, since it cannot be further justified, but part of what is commonly considered 'reasonable' in such contexts. If what is generally considered sufficient checking of a matter of fact is no longer sufficient to dispel doubt about that matter of fact, we would *no longer be* inclined to speak of an actual 'doubt' in such cases, *but* of a pathological case (such as an obsessive-compulsive disorder), insofar as our concepts (epistemic and otherwise) and the limits of their use are constitutive of what we usually *call* a 'pathological case'[12].

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[12] Conversely, Moyal-Sharrock (2007) considers pathological cases to be constitutive for certain concepts precisely because they stand outside the boundaries of ordinary uses of the concepts: In order to speak meaningfully of, e.g., 'certainty' when it comes to hinge sentences, even though these cannot be meaningfully doubted according to Wittgenstein, it requires – so the argument goes – a different 'outside perspective' than that of doubt. According to Moyal-Sharrock, this 'outside perspective' is provided by pathological cases,

But it is not only pathological cases, 'crazy' people and 'half-wits' who are not satisfied with what is *commonly* considered 'sufficient checking' or sometimes doubt whether they have a body and whether the external world exists, but also philosophers! – So, what is the status of sceptical doubts? Are they crazy? At least, they do not seem to be *reasonable* in Wittgenstein's sense, since they question those hinges of our world picture just as 'crazy doubts' do, and here, too, it is not readily clear how such doubts could be remedied:

> "Doubting the existence of the external world" does not mean, for example, doubting the existence of a planet which is later proved to exist. [...] Otherwise it would be possible to point out the discovery of the planet Saturn to the doubters and say that its existence has been proved, and hence the existence of the external world as well. (OC, 20)

Moore famously presents a very similar argument in his *Proof of an External World* (1962), where he cites the holding up of his two hands as evidence for external objects and ergo for an external world. Such a proof cannot work because it relies on the very thing that is questioned in doubts about the existence of the external world: namely, the reality of the empirically observable world[13]. In fact, in

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i.e., what Wittgenstein would call 'crazy doubts': "[...] pathological cases constitute a foil to the default objective certainty [...]" (Moyal-Sharrock 2007, 212). However, when Wittgenstein writes that one cannot speak meaningfully of 'knowledge' in relation to Moorean sentences such as "I know that I have two hands", since there is no possibility of doubt here, he means not philosophical or pathological, but *meaningful* doubts. For there may well be pathological cases in which someone might seriously doubt whether there is a hand here, but this would still not be a sufficient reason to speak of a 'knowledge' of 'the hand here' in non-pathological cases. However, this is what Moyal-Sharrock would have to admit when she cites pathological cases as the conceptually necessary alternative to 'certainty', and other concepts. The fundamental problem with this view is that pathological cases would be presupposed *as such* for any use of concepts like 'certainty', 'trust', 'doubt', 'error', etc., so that a (linguistic) behaviour would be classified as pathologically conspicuous regardless of the norms of a society that are determined by the scope of our concepts. I have discussed this problem in more detail in Trächtler (2022a, ch. 5.1.3 and 2022b).

[13] In a very similar way, Stebbing has already pointed out that there can be no proof of commonsensical beliefs (such pivotal propositions as that the external world exists), since such a proof would necessarily be based on premises whose truth is contestable, whereas the truth of commonsensical beliefs would not be contestable (cf. Stebbing 1932, 70). This has been pointed out by Coliva (2021, 917). I wish to thank Simon Wimmer for bringing this to my attention.

the case of sceptical doubt, it is no longer clear what counts as evidence and what does not:

> If a blind man were to ask me "Have you got two hands?" I should not make sure by looking. If I were to have any doubt of it, then I don't know why I should trust my eyes. For why shouldn't I test my *eyes* by looking to find out whether I see my two hands? *What* is to be tested by *what*?! (Who decides *what* stands fast?)

> And what does it mean to say that such and such stands fast? (OC, 125)

When, as in the case of sceptical doubt, our hinges and thus the framework of our epistemic practices are radically questioned, the whole structure in which consequences and premises mutually support each other begins to crumble. As a result, it is fundamentally no longer clear what counts as evidence and what does not, *what* is to be tested by *what*, and consequently, it is also unclear, how the sceptical doubts could be remedied – this is what Wittgenstein means when he says that *something* must be certain in order to be able to doubt at all (cf. OC, 115). However, if a doubt is such that it cannot be remedied in principle, then it is actually no longer possible to speak meaningfully of a 'doubt' here. In this way, Wittgenstein demonstrates the nonsensicality of radical sceptical doubts and relegates them to the grammatical limits of our epistemic practices, within which there are rules that govern what it is regulated what is to be tested by what, how a doubt can be remedied and what counts as (sufficient) checking of a knowledge assertion. Although the doubts both of a 'half-wit' and of Descartes can concern the same objects, such as the existence of one's own body, the latter does not seem *crazy,* insofar as Descartes merely used these doubts methodically and also does not deny in his *Meditationes* that the facts "that there is in truth a world, that men possess bodies, and other such things […] never have been doubted by anyone of sense" (cf. MPP, *synopsis*)[14]. There is thus a difference between such

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[14] This is partly disputed within Descartes research. While the methodological-instrumental purpose of doubt seems generally acknowledged, Sanchez Curry argues that this does not mean that the doubts arising from this method are themselves 'artificial', i.e., not 'genuine'

philosophical doubts and those 'serious', 'genuine' doubts to which Wittgenstein repeatedly refers in *On Certainty,* but also in the other 'last' writings, i.e., writings produced between 1947 and 1951 (cf., e.g., Ms 137, 43b; LWPP I, 329; OC, 19) and which I will point out in the following.

2.2 Kinds of Doubt

By a philosophical or theoretical[15] doubt, Wittgenstein means a more or less systematic questioning, as often happens in the course of philosophical or other scientific investigations, in order to question the possibility of certain knowledge, the recognisability of truth or the truth of certain assertions and theories. Such doubting differs significantly from that which sometimes comes over us in everyday life: when we do not know how to act or whether we have miscounted or turned off the stove, or whether we can trust someone, this is *real* doubt, which can sometimes even grow into *despair.* Wittgenstein calls such doubts *practical* doubts, by which he seems to mean that the doubt is in some way linked to our life practice and expresses itself, e.g., in an uncertainty or a hesitancy in acting. Theoretical or philosophical doubt on the other hand exists above all in theory and, as a systematic questioning, mainly characterises the *form of* our scientific or philosophical investigations.

But what exactly is the difference between a theoretical and a practical doubt?

As already indicated, theoretical and practical doubts, even in their 'reasonable' forms, are not necessarily distinguished by the

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or 'real' (cf. Sanchez Curry 2016). Even if that is true – and I do not deny the possibility of starting from a sceptical, artificial doubt to end up in a genuine doubt (see 2.2) – Descartes' doubts are still very different from the (pathological) cases in which someone actually doubts the existence of their body. I would like to thank Mahdi Ranaee for pointing me to this discussion within Descartes research. A good 'compromise' may be Cavell's description of Descartes' 'hyperbolic doubt' in contrast to "natural doubt" in comparison to Derrida (cf. 1996, 64).

[15] Wittgenstein actually only distinguishes between 'philosophical' and 'practical doubts', since it is primarily sceptical doubts about the existence of the external world and about a knowledge of other minds that particularly preoccupied him in his last writings. In principle, however, systematic questioning, for instance in the form of checking or examining, is also possible in other areas, which will be generally understood here as 'theoretical doubts'.

object doubted in each case, but theoretical doubts are often of a more general nature than practical doubts:

> We all know the doctor's question "Is he in pain?"; and the uncertainty as to whether a person under anaesthesia feels pain when he groans; but the philosophical question whether someone else is in pain is completely different; it is not doubt about each individual in a particular case. [...] (LWPP I, 239)

Practical doubts arise in very specific, concrete situations; they represent uncertainties caused by the respective circumstances, such as whether someone under anaesthesia feels pain because they moan, or whether 'that is a tree' because it is foggy (cf. OC, 349). On the other hand, theoretical doubt is not about the correctness of this or that sense perception or about whether this or that person is in pain, but about the fundamental reliability of sense perceptions or about the principal question of the existence of other minds. Although it is not excluded that concrete situations, individuals or individual statements also become the subject of systematic questioning, theoretical doubt as a form of scientific and philosophical enquiry usually concerns the truth of assertions, the validity of theories and moral values, and thus sets out more generally to question the respective presuppositions, contents or implications.

Another difference between theoretical and practical doubts can be seen in their respective relations to (language) actions: Unlike theoretical doubts, practical doubts also consist in the fact "that I not only say something – without any connection to my life – but that this doubt also manifests itself in my linguistic action" (Weiberg 2017, 442; my transl.). If someone doubted in an idealistic manner whether "the table's still being there when no one sees it" (OC, 119), it is questionable how "his doubt come out in practice", since doubting here "makes no difference at all" (OC, 120; cf. RPP II, 338 f.).

The decisive difference between the two kinds of doubt, however, is that a theoretical doubt in the sense of a (more or less) systematic questioning is *arbitrary,* that is, volitional, whereas a practical doubt is nonarbitrary, that is involuntary, and can virtually afflict us and even overwhelm us in despair. Thus, Wittgenstein writes:

> How does it come about that doubt is not subject to arbitrary choice [*Willkür*]? – And that being so – might not a child doubt everything because it was so remarkably talented?
>
> A person can doubt only if he has learnt certain things, as he can miscalculate only if he has learnt to calculate. In this case it is indeed nonarbitrary [*unwillkürlich*]. (RPP II, 343; mod. transl.)

That theoretical doubt is subject to will does not mean that it is completely random: In its meaningful or reasonable form, theoretical doubt is indeed limited by grammar, by the rules of our epistemic practice, but *within* these limits it happens arbitrarily. Just as, for example, the movements of our arms are limited by joints and tendons, but within these limits we can move them when and how we want, so too with theoretical doubt one can, to a certain extent, decide for oneself when and what one *wants* to doubt (cf. OC, 221; Weiberg 2017, 442 f.). This is not the case with practical doubt: here, it is the external circumstances or certain events on the basis of which one begins to doubt or is overcome by doubt. Practical doubt can therefore neither be systematised nor methodically instrumentalised. So, it can be investigated and reflected upon in philosophy or also in other sciences as an object, for example as a psychological phenomenon; but it cannot be used and practised as a *form* of investigation itself.
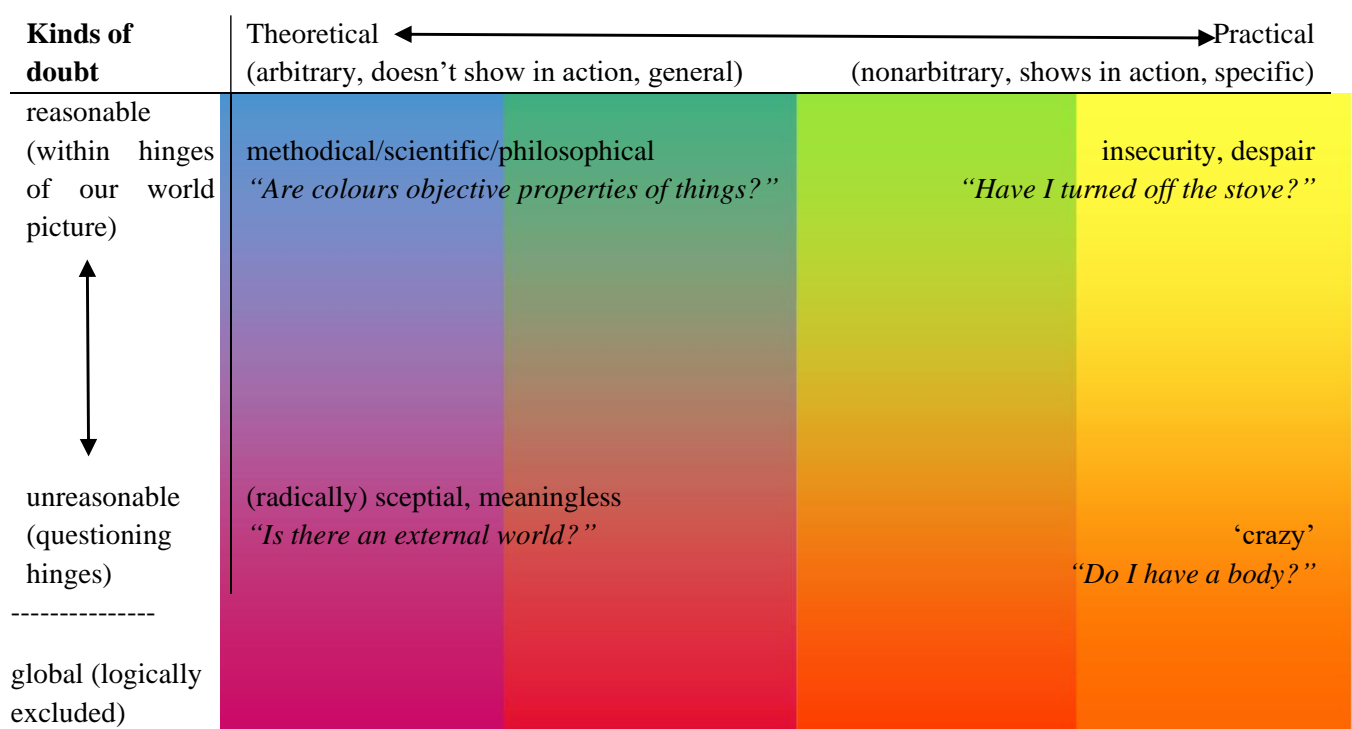
Although there are important differences between theoretical and practical doubt, this distinction itself is a theoretical one. In practice, that is, in the reality of people's lives, mixed forms and transitions between practical, nonarbitrary doubt and theoretical, arbitrary doubt are found: Thus, scientific or philosophical investigations can also be driven by practical doubt and sometimes even accompanied by despair. Likewise, it is possible that doubt about the sincerity of a beloved one arises through a systematic questioning of certain behaviours or the like – one knows, as Wittgenstein writes, in a sense via theoretical doubting the 'way' on which a practical doubt could be achieved:

> "But I can't *know* that he is happy." – That is, to evoke a doubt in oneself. I say to myself, "How would it be if he were pretending, and were unhappy inside!" I think of cases in which appearances have deceived me. And must I now succeed in seriously doubting

his mood? No. But I know, so to speak, the way in which such a doubt could be achieved. (Ms 137, 43a; my transl.)

This interweaving of practical and theoretical doubt is related to the fact, as Wittgenstein reminds us, that "even our more refined, more philosophical, scruples have a foundation in instinct", for example the sceptic's argumentative move "One can never know…" means, in a sense, "remaining receptive to further arguments" (CV, 83). Even if certain basic assumptions are exempt from doubt, remaining accessible to further arguments is not only an essential presupposition for epistemic discourse and our 'reasonableness', but for our life and survival as a whole, for indeed appearances are sometimes deceptive and indeed we sometimes judge wrongly. But remaining accessible to further arguments can also be exploited when theoretical doubts are used (knowingly or unknowingly) to manipulate and unsettle people. This is what happens in gaslighting, as will be explained below.

The following overview shows the different kinds of doubt according to Wittgenstein: This is a spectrum, which is here horizontally excepted between theoretical and practical doubts as well as vertically between their respective reasonable and unreasonable forms – that is, there are transitions (shown here by means of colour transitions) between theoretical and practical doubts (blue – yellow) on the one hand and their respective reasonable and unreasonable (reddish) forms on the other.

Kinds of doubt	Theoretical ⟷ Practical	
	(arbitrary, doesn't show in action, general)	(nonarbitrary, shows in action, specific)
reasonable (within hinges of our world picture) ↕	methodical/scientific/philosophical *"Are colours objective properties of things?"*	insecurity, despair *"Have I turned off the stove?"*
unreasonable (questioning hinges) -------------- global (logically excluded)	(radically) sceptial, meaningless *"Is there an external world?"*	'crazy' *"Do I have a body?"*

3. Planting Doubts: Gaslighting and the Way from Doubt to Despair

As mentioned earlier, gaslighting consists of manipulating a person into doubting their own perceptions, experiences or understanding of certain events (cf. APA Dictionary of Psychology, "gaslight"). Insofar as these doubts of the gaslightee are nonarbitrary and often manifest themselves in an uncertainty (of action), the doubts evoked in gaslighting can be characterised as practical doubts according to Wittgenstein's distinction explained earlier. Nevertheless, the practical doubts evoked by gaslighting differ from everyday practical doubts in that they are more general in nature and similar to those classified by Wittgenstein as 'unreasonable', i.e. gaslighting usually happens, as the examples given make clear, when the gaslighter questions the perceptions, experiences or judgement of the gaslightee: "you must have been dreaming it", "that's your imagination", "you're hearing things", "you're paranoid", "you're just prude" (see above). By questioning a person's cognitive faculties, gaslighting is not simply an ordinary disagreement or discussion: "what the gaslighter does is make the question of the reliability of his victim's cognitive faculties (her ability to grasp, interpret, and correctly judge the situation) *itself* the proposition about which they disagree" (Spear 2018, 12). Gaslighting involves a shift from the factual level of the conversation to the personal level by disqualifying the cognitive faculties of the other person and thus the basis of their utterances. This *strategy* of the gaslighter to question the cognitive faculties altogether, is similar to sceptical doubting, although the intentions or motives of gaslighting and scepticism are different and sceptical doubts do not (usually) question the cognitive faculties of a particular person, but of everyone more generally. Despite these differences, one might ask why the gaslighter's doubts are not simply dismissed, just as someone not in the mood for philosophising would dismiss sceptical doubts taken out of context because in such cases "[o]ne might simply say 'Oh nonsense!' […] That is, not reply to him but to rebuke him" (OC, 495, mod. transl.):

> If someone wanted to arouse doubts in me and spoke like this: here your memory is deceiving you, there you've been taken in, there

> again you have not been thorough enough in satisfying yourself, etc., and if I did not allow myself to be shaken but kept to my certainty – then my doing so cannot be wrong, even if only because this is just what defines a game. (OC, 497)

> The queer thing is that even though I find it quite right for someone to say "nonsense" and so brush aside the attempt to confuse him with doubts at bedrock, – nevertheless, I hold it to be incorrect if he seeks to defend himself (using, e.g., the words "I know"). (OC, 498; mod. transl.)

Similar to the case of sceptical doubt (which Wittgenstein is talking about here), it would be useless in the case of gaslighting to defend oneself in the Moorean manner with the words "I know". For if someone questions the fundamental reliability of his counterpart's sensory perceptions, memory and judgement, then the framework of our ordinary epistemic disputes is left behind, so that affirmations like "I know" can no longer be effective either. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, finds it 'quite right' to dismiss 'the attempt to confuse him with doubts at bedrock' as 'nonsense', because it 'just defines a game'. What is meant by this is that "a language game is only possible if one relies on something" (OC, 509; mod. transl.). A language game, such as the discussion of whether a certain event has taken place or how a certain fact is to be evaluated, is only possible if the speakers rely on fundamental certainties, such as the sensory perceptions, memories and other cognitive abilities of their counterpart. If this is challenged, as in gaslighting, the language game's rules of ordinary discussions, which are defined by the framework of our epistemic practices, are violated: in a sense, it is playing 'unfairly' – and this is why gaslighting is an injustice of an epistemic nature. This injustice could only be rebuffed by rebuking the gaslighter, i.e. by pointing out this rule-breaking directly or indirectly, as with the words "Nonsense!". But successful gaslighting shows that this is not always possible in practice or does not happen for other reasons.

So why do the doubts raised by the gaslighter become practical (self-) doubts on the part of the gaslightee, which can sometimes take on forms of despair?

As mentioned earlier, practical doubts cannot only arise in concrete situations where there is a reason for uncertainty but can also be evoked by systematic questioning (in the sense of theoretical doubts), for instance by thinking of cases "in which appearances have deceived me" (Ms 137, 43a, my transl.). Such questioning of appearances or of what seems certain means remaining accessible to further arguments and thus constitutes an important prerequisite for our scientific, but also for our more everyday epistemic confrontations with others and our environment. This remaining accessible is exploited in gaslighting: For such practical doubt induced by systematic questioning can concern one's own perception, memory and judgement in relation to certain facts and thus lead to *single* self-doubts even in more 'harmless' cases without gaslighting. But usually, i.e., as long as we move within the framework of our 'reasonable' epistemic practices, such self-doubts do not lead to questioning one's own cognitive faculties *altogether*, as they do in gaslighting. Successful gaslighting thus involves another factor that can also lead to 'doubts about what at present seems at the furthest remove from doubt':

> Even a proposition like this one, that I'm now living in England, has these two sides: it is not a *mistake* – but on the other hand, what do I know about England? Can't my judgment go all to pieces?

> Would it not be possible that people came into my room and all declared the opposite? – even gave me "proofs" of it, so that I suddenly stood there like a madman alone among people who were all normal, or a normal person alone among madmen? Might I not then suffer doubts about what at present seems at the furthest remove from doubt? (OC, 420)

The scenario outlined here is admittedly an unlikely extreme case, but it nevertheless illustrates how much our epistemic self-trust is also based on the fact that we judge *in agreement with others*. An important aspect of the possibility of successful gaslighting in principle is thus the social structure of epistemic practices, that is, that knowledge and its associated practices and institutions are in an essential way embedded in or the result of social interactions[16]. This

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[16] Indeed, Wittgenstein (especially *On Certainty*) is sometimes considered a pioneer of social epistemology (cf. Wilholt 2007).

means that what we (can) identify as 'knowledge' is ultimately based on recognition by others – because no matter how sure I am: if "all the others contradicted me, [...] and if all other testimonies spoke against me – what *good* would it do me to stick to my 'I know'" (OC, 503; mod. transl.)?

In fact, the phenomenon of gaslighting shows that it does not even take contradiction from "*all* the others" to shake one's epistemic self-trust. Often, however, it is at least the authority of a group or the authority of certain social norms (such as sexist norms) that are decisive for the success of gaslighting:

> The voice of many people is a great deal more difficult to ignore than one person. And a reasonable woman, surrounded by what otherwise *seem to be* reasonable people, who are in one voice telling her that she's overreacting, is not unreasonable for treating that aggregative voice with a little extra credence. (Abramson 2014, 22)[17]

Sometimes, however, the authority of a group or social norms is not even needed for successful gaslighting if there is an emotional or practical relationship with the gaslighter, as is the case in friendships, love relationships or work relations (cf. Abramson 2014, 20 f.; Zemon Gass and Nichols 1988). In addition, characteristic cases of gaslighting involve multiple occurrences over a longer period of time, manipulation of the social environment of the gaslightee and (gradual) isolation of the gaslightee, which further attacks their epistemic self-trust (cf. Abramson 2014, 2).

Such unequal social structures at the bottom of our epistemic practices form the breeding ground for the doubts evoked in gaslighting: if one's own views are repeatedly and over a longer period of time exposed to contradiction by certain authorities, by persons close to one, by socially prevailing views and norms, or altogether by the social environment, in short: "If I were contradicted on all sides […], then in that case the foundation of all

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[17] This shows how fragile and relative that is which we call 'reasonableness' and/or (epistemic) rationality. A further question, but beyond the scope of this paper, would be how gaslighting affects the connection between 'hinges' – which are challenged by the gaslighter – and their role in relation to epistemic rationality. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this hint.

judging would be taken away from me" (OC, 614), so that in such cases self-doubt *involuntarily* arises. In other words, the theoretical doubts put forward by the gaslighter can grow into practical self-doubts on the part of the gaslightee, because the suggestions expressed in the gaslighter's doubt ("you're hearing things", "you're paranoid", "you're just prude", etc.) are directly or indirectly confirmed by the social environment (in the broadest sense), "so that I suddenly stood there like a madman alone among people who were all normal, or a normal person alone among madmen" (OC, 420)[18]. The process of successful gaslighting can, of course, be promoted by individual and structural factors. Although gaslighting is in principle gender-neutral, Abramson emphasises that women are more prone to self-doubts and thus to gaslighting:

> It's part of the structure of sexism that women are supposed to be less confident, to doubt our views, beliefs, reactions, and perceptions, more than men. And gaslighting is aimed at undermining someone's views, beliefs, reactions, and perceptions. (Abramson 2014, 22)

Once such profound self-doubts have been planted, the way to despair is not far: since fundamental certainties and judgements are called into question in gaslighting, it is no longer clear here – just as in the case of sceptical doubts – which judgements one can still rely on at all, insofar as fundamental doubts concerning one's own sense perception or memory would, as it were, topple all other judgements (cf. OC, 419). As mentioned earlier, the propositions of our world picture, which include the fundamental reliability of sense perceptions and of one's own memory with regard to certain things, form a coherent, mutually supporting system. In other words, "[w]hat I hold fast to is not *one* proposition but a nest of propositions" (OC, 225). This nest structure of fundamental beliefs and certainties means that one cannot depart from or doubt one of these without 'toppling' all the others interwoven with it: "'If my memory deceives me *here*, it can deceive me everywhere.' If I don't

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[18] Conversely, it can be the affirmation by others that frees the gaslightee from her (self-) doubts. In the play and film *Gas Light*, this is the detective who confirms the gaslit women's perceptions of the flickering gaslight and her suspicion that this is caused by her husband (cf. Cavell 1996, 56 ff.). I thank Sandra Laugier for bringing this to my attention.

know *that,* how do I know if my words mean what I believe they mean" (OC, 506)?

When it is no longer clear what can be known at all, what can be relied on at all, the point is reached where doubts (*Zweifel*) that presuppose something as certain and can be remedied turn into despair (*Ver-zweiflung*). People who experienced gaslighting often describe this as feeling like they are losing their mind, they are no longer knowing what is true and what is false, what they can rely on and what to think – in a sense, being successfully gaslit means to even lose the certainty of the *Cogito* (cf. Cavell 1996, Ch. 1; Zemon Gass & Nichols 1988, 7; Sweet 2019, 860-863)[19]. One person described her experience of gaslighting as follows:

> My life seems to me like a lie that someone else has invented for a purpose unknown to me or to torment me. I make every effort to shape this lie into a piece of truth, but no matter how much energy I expend, how hard I try, everything always turns into the opposite of what it should have been, every truth becomes a lie, every answer becomes a question.
>
> I get off the bus and recognise the houses, know that I've seen them before, but it's as if someone had rearranged them, jumbled them up, this neon sign from the locksmith's and the metre-high sign of the medical centre, the tram stop, the zebra crossing, the building site sign, as if all of this had taken on a life of its own, and then, when I got off the bus, froze in place, it's like when we were kids and we used to play "statues" [Ochs, Esel, hinterm Berg], that game where one kid stands with their back to the others and recites the chant and then turns around and the others have to try to get as far

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[19] It would be interesting to further explore the relationship between the self-doubt evoked by gaslighting and the grammatical 'first-person authority' in relation to one's feelings and mental states asserted by Wittgenstein. For if, as a consequence of gaslighting, someone no longer knows what they think, "want, wish, believe, hope, see" (cf. LW I, 839), then gaslighting seems to abolish an essential trait of our language games with psychological verbs. I think this is true in the sense that, as mentioned earlier, fundamental rules of language games are violated in gaslighting anyway, in that the gaslighter switches from the factual to the personal level in the conversation. However, it would not be correct to say that the gaslightee loses their 'first person authority' because of their practical self-doubts. For the authority of the first person is a grammatical one, i.e., it is granted to someone *qua* participation in language (games) and not through the individual psychological certainty of their utterances. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the tension between practical self-doubt in gaslighting and first-person authority.

> ahead as possible, but as soon as the one in front turns around, everyone has to stop or you get kicked off. I am the one standing in front, and behind whose back the world is constantly rearranging itself, changing as it pleases, where everyone is striving to get ahead, fast, fast, fast ahead, and whenever I dare to turn around, to take a look at the world, which is so alien to me anyway, everything looks different again and never, never, never do I know where I am or who. (*Anonymous* 2016; my transl.)

In philosophy, we don't despair about sceptical reflections on the reality of the external world or whether the table is still there when I turn away, because we can stop doubting if and when we want, like a game. Gaslighting is when such and other (self-) doubts become real and serious, and it shows that it doesn't even take the demons of scepticism to bewitch someone's mind – in fact, they live among us.

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