

EPISODE 22: GASLIGHTING, PTSD AND TESTIMONIAL INJUSTICE WITH RACHEL MCKINNON

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Christiane Wisheart: We're going to be talking about gaslighting and post traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD on the show today. Listeners who have experienced gaslighting or PTSD could be triggered by parts of this episode.

Andy Cullison: Hi I'm Andy Cullison.

Christiane Wisheart: And I'm Christiane Wisheart.

Andy Cullison: And this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

[begin music]

Christiane Wisheart: Trans people are vulnerable to many types of harms. And unfortunately, some of these harms can come from their "allies"—people who claim to want to help them. On today's episode, Andy and I talk to the philosopher Rachel McKinnon, who writes about allies and their relationship to the trans community.

Andy Cullison: She tells us that one of the bad behaviors that allies can be guilty of is something called gaslighting. Rachel describes for us two of the major problems with gaslighting: it's a particularly harmful form of epistemic injustice and it can lead to a type of post traumatic stress disorder.

Christiane Wisheart: We wrap up our interview by discussing the importance of thinking about how we act in an oppressive or unjust situation. Stick with us to understand all of this and more on today's episode of Examining Ethics!

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Andy Cullison: Today we're talking with the philosopher Rachel McKinnon.

Rachel McKinnon: My name is Rachel McKinnon. I'm an assistant professor of philosophy at

The *Examining Ethics* podcast is hosted by Andy Cullison, the Director of the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University and is produced by Christiane Wisheart and Eleanor Price.

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the College of Charleston.

Andy Cullison: We spoke with her about her article “Allies Behaving Badly: Gaslighting as Epistemic Injustice.” In it, she discusses some of the harms that allies can inflict on transgender people.

Christiane Wischart: The word “transgender” is an umbrella term that refers to any person whose gender identity is different than what they were called at birth. So for example, you could use the term “transgender” to describe a person whose parents called them a boy, but who later in life identified as a woman. Or transgender might describe someone who doesn’t identify with any gender at all, or whose gender identity is fluid.

Andy Cullison: And “cisgender” refers to people whose assigned gender (the gender they were given at birth) matches the gender they identify with.

Christiane Wischart: Transgender people are often marginalized — or put on the sidelines of American culture. In order to try and correct some of the injustices that arise from this, some cisgender people will call themselves “allies” to the trans community. Rachel told us that the traditional way to define “ally” is to think of them as someone who has a more dominant position in society than the person they seek to help.

Rachel McKinnon: So we all have a race, a gender, we have ability statuses, we have education level, citizenship status, so on and so forth. And some of those identities are marginalized and some we refer to as being more dominantly situated. In contemporary America for example white people are more dominantly situated than people of color, men are more dominantly situated than women, cisgender people are dominantly situated with respect to transgender people, so on and so forth. So a white person can be an ally to a person of color, a man an ally to a woman, a cis person an ally to a trans person.

Andy Cullison: Rachel believes that the way allies see themselves can be problematic.

Rachel McKinnon: One of the worst things that allies do I think is they conceive of themselves as a good person and then they conceive of themselves with the identity of being an ally as the type of thing that they are, a type of person that they are. In the history of queer cultures, the status of Ally was something you had to earn over a long period of time. Whereas now with Ally culture people are conceiving and labeling themselves an ally without having done any work, not even signing up for the newsletter. No work at all. I'm an ally. And one thing that happens is if you criticize an ally for having done something wrong towards a marginalized person they will refer to their ally status as a sort of get out of jail free card defense. So they say something transphobic and you're saying, "Hey, that was really transphobic, what — what the hell," they'll say "Oh but I'm really an ally to you. I'm really a supporter like you shouldn't make me feel bad. You shouldn't call me out because then I'm just not going to want to be an ally to you anymore" and that's compounding the harm of the original offense.

Christiane Wischart: Rachel explained that one of the reasons allies respond so poorly to

criticism is because being an ally is considered a part of their identity. In her article “Allies Behaving Badly,” she writes, “When our identities, and ones we strongly identify with, are under attack, it’s predictable that we’ll respond by counter-attacking.” She told us that when an ally is “called-out” or criticized for their bad behavior, their defensive response can often exacerbate the harm.

Rachel McKinnon: We have this distinction: to call out someone for their bad behavior is fairly public and it usually just sort of stops at the pointing to the bad behavior, whereas a call-in can be public or private and it's an invitation for further conversation to talk about the harm and talk about the behavior. People, especially the ones who conceive of themselves as allies, treat being called in or called out as an attack and they not only don't respond the way we think friends should, right this sort of profusely apologizing, "I'm so sorry, you're right, I did something bad. They go on the attack and they say things like — like "you're making me feel bad, you're embarrassing me publicly, you are attacking me, and if this is how you treat your allies well then maybe I just won't even bother." Right, so they double down on the harm rather than acknowledging that they did something bad and apologizing.

I think this leads to maybe like a pro tip on what to do if you've been called in or called out. I think the first thing people should do is take a breath. So being called in or called out is never fun. And even someone like me who researches on this topic, I'm in various marginalized communities as a member and as an activist, I still make mistakes too. So even when I'm called out I have to remember to take a breath first. Trust the person calling you in or calling you out. Typically we only call out people that we care about. So if I really just don't care about you at all and you say something sexist I'm just going to walk away. So trust the person that they're doing it because they care and believe them. If they said that you did something harmful, they're probably right. And then acknowledge that you did the harmful thing, "you're right," and apologize. "I'm sorry." And then finally commit to not doing it again. And that's it.

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Christiane Wischart: Rachel McKinnon has just explained that when allies see their ally status as a part of their identity, they can become defensive and respond poorly to criticism from marginalized groups.

When Andy and I spoke with her, she also told us about a type of harm that lots of people, including allies, can inflict on transgender people or other marginalized groups. It’s a troubling behavior known as “gaslighting.” Gaslighting occurs when one person manipulates another into doubting their own sanity.

Rachel McKinnon: Well, there are two different ways to think of gaslighting. There is a 1938 Patrick Hamilton play and a subsequent 1944 movie named *Gaslight*. The play and the movie refer to a kind of psychological warfare. It's very intentional. You are trying to convince a person that they shouldn't trust their own perceptions and that when they say that they are experiencing a thing or especially a sort of harm that they're just imagining it, that they're overreacting, that they're making it up, that they are hysterical and that they're crazy. That's less common I think

now so the other sense that we use gaslight is that it's a kind of discounting a person's claim that they've experienced the harm. So 'oh you're overreacting. John wouldn't say something like that' or 'you're just hypersensitive,' that you're on edge and just expecting to hear people say things even when they're not really saying it. So you just shouldn't be trusted in your claims that you're experiencing a harm.

Andy Cullison: In her article, Rachel paints a vivid picture of a transgender person experiencing this “discounting of harm” type of gaslighting.

Christiane Wischart: She describes a trans woman named Victoria, who uses the feminine pronouns she/her/hers. Victoria is at her annual department holiday party. Everyone is sitting around and talking when her colleague James begins telling a story about Victoria. In his story, James uses “he” and “his” to describe Victoria. James mispronouns Victoria multiple times over the course of telling the story. This hurts Victoria, and she complains about it to another colleague named Susan. And instead of sympathising with Victoria, Susan says, “I’m sure you misheard him. I don’t think James would ever do anything like that.” According to Rachel, Susan’s response is an instance of gaslighting. By doubting Victoria’s claim, Susan makes her feel unheard, but most disturbingly, makes Victoria doubt her *own* experience of harm.

Rachel McKinnon: The gaslighter, intentionally or not, is trying to claim that the person's own perceptual abilities are unreliable. And one of the consequences of this is that the person who's being gaslit will experience a lack of confidence in their own perceptual abilities like "oh gosh maybe.. Am I overreacting? Did I really hear that? Did this person really do this?" And that's itself a kind of harm right to doubt our own perceptual abilities when we are being reliable.

Christiane Wischart: Rachel told us that because gaslighting calls into question what a person is saying about their experience, it’s a form of “epistemic injustice.”

Rachel McKinnon: So one important thing about being a human in a social world is that we know things and we want to communicate our knowledge to other people. And epistemic injustice talks about ways that that can go wrong or ways that people can be occluded from coming to know things about themselves or how they're oppressed.

Andy Cullison: There are two types of epistemic injustice. There’s hermeneutical injustice and testimonial injustice. According to Rachel, gaslighting is a type of testimonial injustice.

Rachel McKinnon: Testimonial injustice is when we under-judge the credibility of a speaker due to an identity prejudice. Testimony doesn't just refer to courtroom cases, right, testimony is all around us we're always learning from other people. Testimonial injustice is when someone tells us something and we don't believe them for inappropriate reasons. Typically they are identity prejudices. So I don't believe you because you're a woman even if it's not intentional, right. If your identity is featuring into why I'm not believing you then that can be a form of testimonial injustice. So one of the most important things that we do as we go through the world is we come to know things and then we use our knowledge to improve our lives, improve other people's lives, to talk to each other. Coming to know things and then communicating our

knowledge is one of the most central things that humans do as social beings.

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So disrespecting another person insofar as they are a knower and they are trying to communicate your knowledge is to harm something central to being human.

[end music]

Christiane Wischart: This is exactly why gaslighting, or calling into question someone's story, is a form of testimonial injustice, and also why it's so harmful. Unfortunately though, there is often an added layer of harm in gaslighting. Gaslighting is bad enough when it's done by a stranger, or mere acquaintance. But Rachel explained that it often comes from people we trust.

Rachel McKinnon: The gaslighting is experienced very acutely as a kind of betrayal and the betrayal is often experienced as more harmful than the thing the victim was complaining about.

Andy Cullison: When gaslighting comes from trusted people, like allies, it can be detrimental to the person who experiences it.

Rachel McKinnon: When we complain to a person and then they gaslight us, that's often not just a one-off, it's often repeated over and over again or it's repeated by many different people. So the victim is re-experiencing this betrayal. Recently I've started appreciating that there's an important connection to post-traumatic stress disorder, specifically the complex PTSD form which is characterized by repeated betrayals by people that we trust. So gaslighting by people that we trust can cause PTSD.

Christiane Wischart: The effects of complex post traumatic stress disorder can be disturbing.

Rachel McKinnon: The outcomes are sometimes a loss of a sense of self, a loss of a sense of self-confidence knowing who one is and what one should believe. But especially a retreating of being willing to trust people again. And so when we're talking about PTSD caused by gaslighting and epistemic violence, then you're going to be less willing to confide in other people. Right, you're going to be less trusting your relationships, you're not going to open up about your own experiences to other people. The social effects are pretty extreme but more than that, the triggering events for episodes are really widespread because all it takes is another person to gaslight you and you re-experience the trauma all over again. Some of the conversations I've had with people is that things like social media become extremely fraught, because if we want to converse with people about our experiences, which is a typical thing people do on social media all the time, and people are like "oh you're just making stuff up." Right, the, the risk of gaslighting is so omnipresent that it becomes dangerous for these people to even engage on social media.

Christiane Wischart: And I wonder if there is even an unfortunate added layer to this kind of PTSD where it just... it's hard for people to believe that that is PTSD.

Rachel McKinnon: I think that's entirely right. We are pretty comfortable thinking of PTSD being caused by single traumatic events and we tend only to conceptualize them in terms of soldiers in war or witnessing a murder or things like a rape. But we are not so comfortable especially with Complex PTSD. When people want to talk about epistemic violence as a cause of complex PTSD, people who don't believe you will often infantilize the victim, saying that "well you just need to grow up and stop being a snowflake and suck it up buttercup" and things like that. "You're overreacting, you're over sensitive" and then that's gaslighting. So often the typical response to someone saying "I've PTSD from gaslighting" is to gaslight the person. And so there's this risk of even telling people that you have PTSD from gaslighting because the risk of being gaslit on that very claim is so high.

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Christiane Wischart: We've been discussing the effects of a particular form of testimonial injustice called gaslighting with the philosopher Rachel McKinnon. She writes about it in her article "Allies Behaving Badly: Gaslighting as Epistemic Injustice."

Andy Cullison: She concludes her article by offering an alternative to ally culture.

Rachel McKinnon: One option is what we call the active bystander model. And increasingly workplaces, universities, colleges, are offering active bystander training.

Christiane Wischart: The active bystander model is focused on action, specifically, how one acts in response to an injustice.

Rachel McKinnon: Whenever something bad happens that we witness, we can either do something to help or not. We are all bystanders when we see something happen and then the distinction is, did you do something to help? In which case you'd be an active bystander, or did you not, in which case you'd be a passive bystander. The active bystander model recognizes that no matter who you are, no matter how you are situated in society, you see something happen, you are a bystander. And then it's whether you're active or passive. One of the big advantages of the active bystander model is that one doesn't get to call oneself an active bystander unless one is active, unlike ally culture where people are adopting that label without ever having earned it, without ever having done something. So you can't claim to be an active bystander unless you have actually actively engaged in a situation of oppression.

Christiane Wischart: When we spoke with Rachel, the three of us discussed the active bystander model and how it could help change the ways people think about harm.

Andy Cullison: I find a lot of people have this rosy view of the world that people are basically good and there's a real reluctance to accept the idea that like people who we would call good can in an occasional one-off case if the circumstances are right do something really really horrible. And when we're very reluctant to believe that this person you know, "I just can't believe" John would do something like that. That's just so unlike him." Right. One recommendation might be

let's just try to disabuse ourselves of that kind of worldview like just acknowledge like look great people can do awful things if given the right circumstances and the right kind of priming and and then you know if we if we trained ourselves to stop thinking that way maybe bystanders will be less inclined to respond the way that they're doing in these kinds of cases.

Christiane Wischart: It often seems that like a harm coming from a nice person is less of a harm when to the victim, No! It's still a harm and maybe even more of a harm because it was a nice person that they trusted or they thought they could trust.

Rachel McKinnon: One analogy I often like to use is thinking about someone who broke your favorite plate. Sure. It's worse if you meant to break it. But even if you unintentionally broke it, it's still broken. So a harm has happened whether you intentionally did it or not, whether it's indicative of a character flaw or not. We still need to acknowledge that the harm was done and we shouldn't try to point to our perceptions of a person's character which as you say, Andy, are quite unreliable, as a reason to doubt the claim that they did something harmful.

Christiane Wischart: We wrapped up our discussion with Rachel McKinnon by asking her for some advice that everyone could take home with them if they wanted to be active bystanders. Because sometimes it's difficult to act, even if you want to.

Rachel McKinnon: One really useful thing that we have a lot of research on is something called an implementation intention. So these are things that you do, often you have to write them out for them to be effective. You take a statement like, "if I see someone say something racist I will..." And then you fill in the blank. So what you're doing is you are thinking ahead of time what your ready response will be. And so in the moment when something happens, if you don't have an implementation intention, you're running through all of the options and that can be quite paralyzing. But if ahead of time you've already decided what your go-to response will be, you are empirically more likely to do that thing.

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Christiane Wischart: Rachel McKinnon is a very prolific scholar, so if you want to know more about what she's thinking about and writing about, there are a couple of places to go. She makes all of her scholarly work available on Academia.edu. She also practices public philosophy via her YouTube channel, "Dr. Rachel McKinnon." Her YouTube channel is great, and it answered a lot of questions I had about trans issues.

Andy Cullison: And of course we'll have links to all of this on our show notes page.

Christiane Wischart: Before we go, I also want to point people to a show that Rachel was on called the UnMute podcast with Myisha Cherry. Myisha is an amazing philosopher and her show is awesome. Rachel was on episode 6, talking about a lot of the issues that we covered here. It's a fantastic episode and a great opportunity to hear more from Rachel.

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