

# The Exalted Professor

## Epistemic Violence in the Academy and its Analogies with Spiritual Abuse

---

Maren Behrens

*For Dr. Rachele Dyanne Bascara (1983–2021), survivor, activist, and scholar.<sup>1</sup> This text is a small attempt to honor and continue her work.*

This is not a text about the prevalence of sexual violence, harassment, and bullying (SVHB)<sup>2</sup> in academia, although this topic deserves more empirical attention.<sup>3</sup> It is about the epistemic violence<sup>4</sup> that accompanies and follows these phenomena;

- 
- 1 At great personal cost, Rachele Dyanne Bascara fought against oppressive structures and abusive professors in philosophy, on behalf of the women, queer and racialized students and staff who are still made to feel as if they do not belong. She died suddenly in 2021, only one year after she had successfully defended her PhD thesis *Towards a Unified Theory of Oppression*, London 2020 <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/47619/9/9/2023>.
  - 2 I will be using SVHB as an umbrella term throughout the text. The conceptual borders between these terms are porous: sexual violence (e.g., rape) can emerge from previous sexual harassment (unwelcome sexual advances such as unbidden touching or lewd comments), and either can occur with or without bullying (physical or verbal intimidation over time). In turn, bullying can occur with or without sexual elements. While there are important differences between the terms, I am using them as a cluster here, since there are relevant parallels in terms of their the effects on victims (violence, harassment, and bullying undermine the victim's sense of their social environment), strategies used by perpetrators (rapists and harassers are often bullies), and institutional responses (complaints about sexual harassment and bullying are often subject to the exact same kind of epistemic violence detailed below); cf. Ahmed, Sara, *Complaint!*, Durham, N.C., 2021.
  - 3 In particular, it needs more methodologically diverse attention. Cf. Linder, Chris et al.: *What Do We Know about Campus Sexual Violence? A Content Analysis of 10 Years of Research*, in: *The Review of Higher Education* 43 (2020), 1017–1040.
  - 4 In my use of the term 'epistemic violence', I broadly follow Kristie Dotson's discussion of the problem in *Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing*, in: *Hypatia* 26 (2011), 236–257. Epistemic violence destroys relevant knowledge, discredits or disappears relevant testimony, and thereby undermines a speaker's sense of themselves as a knower. In Dotson's view (*ibid.*, 240) it requires neither intention nor capacity, but merely a "failed communicative exchange owing to pernicious ignorance." (I suspect that epistemic violence in the

about how this epistemic violence normalizes SVHB, and trivializes its impact on survivors.<sup>5</sup> It disempowers survivors, keeps them from speaking out, and might even prevent them from recognizing the violence inflicted on them *as violence*. I will discuss the *structural* features of academic institutions generally, and academic philosophy specifically that contribute to this epistemic violence; and I consider them in analogy with spiritual violence,<sup>6</sup> because I think that there are important parallels between academic institutions and churches in how they (mis)handle SVHB in their own ranks.

SVHB occur in all segments of society. However, there are specific features of academic philosophy that exacerbate the problem of epistemic violence in the aftermath of SVHB; and (some of) these features can be understood in analogy to how the Catholic Church (mis)handled revelations of widespread SVHB in its institutions.<sup>7</sup> Despite public commitments to transparency and the prevention of SVHB, survivors regularly experience epistemic violence when they voice complaints. These complaints are relativized or ignored, and perpetrators shielded from consequences.

When we consider how institutions inflict epistemic violence, there are factors that are generalizable beyond academia or the Catholic Church, and I will discuss those under the rubric *institutional inertia*. In the final section, I then focus on specific parallel between the church and philosophy, focusing on the gendered distribution

---

context I discuss here is typically intentional; but could be unintended.) Epistemic violence leads to testimonial quieting (an audience fails to regard a speaker as a knower) and testimonial smothering (a speaker censors their own testimony, because it is unsafe to speak; *ibid.*, 242–251). Both forms of epistemic violence are directly relevant to the testimony of survivors of SVHB.

- 5 In this text, I will alternate between the terms 'survivor' and 'victim', using the first when the focus is on their agency after the attack and the second when the focus is on the perpetrator's actions and their impact. I recognize that either term has problematic connotations.
- 6 Sources for my understanding of spiritual violence are: Benkert, Marianne/Doyle, Thomas P.: Clericalism, Religious Duress, and Its Psychological Impact on Victims of Sexual Abuse, in: *Pastoral Psychology* 58 (2009), 223–238; Tobin, Theresa: Religious Faith in the Unjust Meantime. The Spiritual Violence of Sexual Clergy Abuse, in: *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 5 (2019), Article 5, <https://doi.org/10.5206/fpq/2019.2.7290> (19/9/2023); Wagner, Doris: Spiritueller Missbrauch in der katholischen Kirche, Freiburg i. Br. 2019; Panchuk, Michelle: Distorting Concepts, Obscured Experiences. Hermeneutical Injustice in Religious Trauma and Spiritual Violence, in: *Hypatia* 35 (2020), 607–625.
- 7 I speak about this analogy as a philosopher who has worked in a department of Catholic Theology, and researched the specific question of how the Catholic Church has failed to respond adequately to these abuse scandals. I will leave it to the readers to consider whether and how what I have to say applies to other religious communities or other academic disciplines. Given recent examples of systemic abuse and violence in other religious communities, e.g. Protestant churches or Buddhist communities, other examples are available, but due to my own familiarity with the case, I will stick to the Catholic Church here.

of authority, language, and power. Before I turn to these points, I discuss how institutional (mis)handling of complaints about SVHB constitutes epistemic violence, and how this epistemic violence feeds back into “cultures of harassment.”<sup>8</sup>

There is a considerable amount of empirical research and advisory reports on how to tackle “campus sexual violence” (CSV). It is important to note that much of this work does not seem to take academic hierarchies into account, and largely focuses on peer-to-peer violence.<sup>9</sup> As Linder and colleagues note in their analysis of research trends on CSV, many researchers do not consider power in their empirical research; and a significant share of the existing research focuses on individual “risk factors” for victimization (instead of structural factors, or the agency and responsibility of perpetrators).<sup>10</sup>

My focus here is different in that I am primarily interested in how hierarchy, prestige, and power are used to maintain cultures of harassment, and how they allow perpetrators and their allies to harness epistemic privilege in order to discourage and silence their victims. This neither covers all of CSV, nor all of SVHB within institutions; but this subset is particularly instructive for the analogy I intend to draw.

## 1. Patterns of Violence

To set the stage, I will identify patterns of epistemic violence that commonly accompany SVHB. This account builds publicly available accounts of high-profile cases of (alleged) SVHB in philosophy and adjacent fields in the humanities, and testimonies that were shared with me personally.<sup>11</sup>

---

8 Cf. Johnson, Carrie Ann: The Purpose of Whisper Networks. A New Lens for Studying Informal Communication Channels in Organizations, in *Frontiers in Communication* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2023.1089335> (16/09/2023).

9 The very notion of ‘campus rape culture’ invokes fraternities, sports teams, student parties, but not the relationship between teachers and students, or between senior and junior staff.

10 Linder et al., What Do We Know about Campus Sexual Violence?, 1024–1026, 1031.

11 Kingkade, Tyler: University of Miami Sued over Handling of Colin McGinn Harassment Claims, in: *The Huffington Post* (16/10/2015), [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/university-of-miami-lawsuit-mcginn\\_n\\_561fbc37e4b050c6c4a47ec1](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/university-of-miami-lawsuit-mcginn_n_561fbc37e4b050c6c4a47ec1) (19/9/2023); Flaherty, Colleen: Another Harasser Resigns [Peter Ludlow], in: *Inside Higher Ed* (3/11/2015), <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/11/04/northwestern-philosophy-professor-resigns-during-termination-hearing-over-sexual> (19/9/2023); Baker, Katie J. M.: The Famous Ethics Professor and the Women Who Accused Him [Thomas Pogge], in: *BuzzFeedNews* (20/5/2016), <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/katiejmbaker/yale-ethics-professor> (19/9/2023); Baker, Katie J. M.: UC Berkeley Was Warned about Its Star Professor [John Searle] Years Before Sexual Harassment Lawsuit (7/4/2017), *BuzzFeed News*, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/katiejmbaker/john-searle-complaints-uc-berkeley> (19/9/2023); Flaherty, Colleen: Harassment and Power [Avital Ronnell], in: *Inside Higher Ed* (19/8/2018), <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/08/19/harassment-and-power> (19/9/2023).

It is important to note that these patterns can occur (almost), everywhere, precisely because they are rarely recognized as systemic.

Common features of epistemic violence in SVHB are *gaslighting*<sup>12</sup> (often in the form of victim-blaming) and *epistemic isolation*.<sup>13</sup> Perpetrators present their behavior as ordinary, dismissing any discomfort or harm inflicted on their victim; or they label their victim as “crazy” in order to claim that their behavior was “provoked”; and they seek to isolate victims from potential sources of support (e.g., family and friends). As a result, victims will doubt their own judgment, and refrain from sharing their experiences.

These features are also evident in publicized cases in academia. Perpetrators gaslight their victims by presenting their behavior as ordinary romantic interest or a special form of mentorship; even after they have come under scrutiny. On this point, they can often take advantage of institutional rules that may allow (some) sexual relationships between students and staff (or employees and supervisors) on the condition that these relationships do not lead to obvious conflicts of interest.<sup>14</sup> They can

---

com/news/2018/08/20/some-say-particulars-ronell-harassment-case-are-moot-it-all-com-es-down-power (19/9/2023); Bronkhorst, Xander: Professor is Forced To Resign; University Criticized for How It Handled Complaints, in: DUB (14/12/2020), <https://dub.uu.nl/en/news/professor-forced-resign-university-criticised-how-it-handled-complaints> (19/9/2023). The last case concerns a former ethics professor at Utrecht University, whose name I will not use here, since he is known to retaliate against those who speak out against him. See also: Dutch Network of Women Professors (LNVH): Harassment in Dutch Academia: Exploring Manifestations, Facilitating Factors, Effects and Solutions, authored by Marijke Naezer, Marieke van den Brink, Yvonne Benschop in 2019, [https://www.lnvh.nl/uploads/moxiemanager/LNVH\\_rapport\\_!squo\\_Harassment\\_in\\_Dutch\\_academia\\_Exploring\\_manifestations\\_facilitating\\_factors\\_effects\\_and\\_solutions\\_rsquo\\_.pdf](https://www.lnvh.nl/uploads/moxiemanager/LNVH_rapport_!squo_Harassment_in_Dutch_academia_Exploring_manifestations_facilitating_factors_effects_and_solutions_rsquo_.pdf) (19/9/2023); Youth Academy Groningen (YAG): Harassment at the University of Groningen, 2021, <https://www.rug.nl/ab-out-ug/latest-news/news/archief2021/bijlagen/1007-yag-report-harassment-at-the-ug.pdf> (19/9/2023); Besley, Tina/Jackson, Liz/Peters, Michael A.: Named or Nameless. University Ethics, Confidentiality, and Sexual Harassment, in: Educational Philosophy and Theory (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2021.1952865> (19/9/2023).

12 Abramson, Kate: Turning Up the Lights on Gaslighting, in: *Philosophical Perspectives* 28 (2014), 1–30; Sweet, Paige L.: The Sociology of Gaslighting, in: *American Sociological Review* 84 (2019), 851–875; Field-Springer, Kimberly et al.: (Re)claiming Stories in the #MeToo Movement. Righting Epistemic Wrongs of Physical, Mental, and Emotional Harms of Sexual Violence, in: *Health Communication* 37 (2022), 982–991, esp. 985–986.

13 Cf. Sweet, The Sociology of Gaslighting.

14 In the case at Utrecht University (Bronkhorst, Professor Is Forced to Resign), the perpetrator was fired on account of “creating a hostile work environment”, but the fact that he had a sexual relationship with a PhD student at his own institute was not held against him: He was able to claim that he had merely failed to report this relationship, and that there was no conflict of interest because he was not directly involved in the supervision of these students. In the case of Colin McGill, the University of Miami treated the complainants report, which she believed to be an account of sexual harassment, as an account of a consensual relationship.

also take direct advantage of their reputation and institutional power. When professors harass their students, they can count on the students' reluctance to speak up, because the costs of doing so are typically much higher for the accuser than they are for the accused (and perpetrators also tend to remind their victims of this fact). Those subjected to SVHB in an academic context (at least initially) tend to be isolated from one another, unaware that other victims of the same perpetrator might be sitting in the same classroom or the office next door. If the accused has sufficient prestige, this will likely mobilize equally prestigious defenders who act as character witnesses for the accused, may attempt to smear the character of the accuser, and help to paint the complaint as a "conspiracy" against the accused.<sup>15</sup> Complaint procedures may be available, but unlikely to lead to meaningful change.<sup>16</sup> If perpetrators are sanctioned at all, the effects are rarely career-ending.<sup>17</sup> When complaints become public, they might be framed as arising from a "consensual relationship" between a professor and their student, mentee, or employee; such that the transgression itself can be transformed from SVHB into a mere "failure to report a relationship."

Descriptions of "grooming" in academic contexts are also remarkably similar across different cases: the perpetrator shows (supposedly) intellectual interest in a student or junior staff member, then academic opportunities are offered or hinted at, and after this "professional" basis has been established, sexual interest is expressed, effectively demanding sexual favors for continued support. At this point, SVHB can be transformed into a mere "conflict of interest" between "romantic affection" and academic meritocracy; and there is no longer any acknowledgement of the fact that institutional power was what allowed the perpetrator to establish these "relationships" in the first place.

A compounding factor is how within the discipline, SVHB is rarely regarded as a topic worthy of philosophical attention. In *Aftermath*, Susan Brison gives a philosophical account of surviving a brutal rape, and coming to terms with trauma in a

---

15 This happened in the cases of Colin McGinn and Avital Ronnell, where both accused initially receive widespread public support from colleagues in their own and other fields.

16 Ahmed, *Complaint!*, Part I discusses numerous examples of how university bureaucracies and those that run them use complaint procedures against complainants, and keep things as they are.

17 As far as I can see, none of the complaints referenced above, in Fn. 12, was fully career-ending for the alleged perpetrator (Colin McGinn may be an exception here, in that he does not seem to have held an academic post since his resignation, and has published very little since then). In some cases, complaints affected the memory and legacy of the accused more than their active careers. In other cases, the accused kept their positions and the associated prestige, with minimal sanctions, and some impact on their reputation. Even in cases where the alleged perpetrators were dismissed, or threatened with dismissal, they were still able to continue their professional academic activities in other places, albeit in less prestigious and less secure positions.

society that is deeply hostile to survivors.<sup>18</sup> The book is the culmination of her sustained efforts to write a philosophy of sexual violence and trauma. In “We Must Find Words Or Burn,” Brison describes how these efforts were diminished and silenced in the discipline.<sup>19</sup> In 1991, she was cautioned by her only female colleague not to write about rape until she would have tenure. At the same time, she encouraged students to speak out about their experiences, telling them:

I was sexually harassed by my senior thesis advisor, and I kept quiet since I thought it was probably my fault, and, besides, I was headed to graduate school and did not want to have a “reputation”. Then, during my first year of grad school, I was sexually harassed by one of my professors. I figured I would say something about it eventually, but first I needed to get my PhD.<sup>20</sup>

She recalls that in 1993,

just after I published my first scholarly article on sexual violence, when, still an assistant professor, I had my annual evaluation meeting with my senior colleagues. They informed me that this article did not count as philosophy and that, if I wanted to get tenure, I should stop writing about rape. The nice one said, “I’m sure writing it was very therapeutic, but now you can put that behind you and go back to doing philosophy”.<sup>21</sup>

She also notes how one of these colleagues harassed her when she was tenured over his protestations, and how she waited to apply for a well-deserved promotion until these two colleagues had either left or died, just to avoid their scrutiny.<sup>22</sup> Brison reads these reactions as a disciplinary attempt to control the agenda, and retain epistemic power. This epistemic “aftermath” of violence did not concern her credibility as a survivor. No one doubted that Brison had survived a horrific attack on her life, but her capacity to speak about sexual violence *as a philosopher* was still put in question.

There are lessons here for those who experience SVHB in academic settings. Even when there is *no* doubt about what occurred, there can still be disagreement about what it means. “This is why,” as Sara Ahmed notes, “making a complaint about

---

18 Brison, Susan: *Aftermath. Violence and the Remaking of a Self*, Princeton, N.J. 2002. The book just saw its second edition, a testament to its continued relevance.

19 Brison, Susan: *We Must Find Words or Burn. Speaking Out against Disciplinary Silencing*, in: *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 3 (2017) 2, Article 3, [https://doi.org/10.5206/fpq/2017.2.3\(11/9/2023\)](https://doi.org/10.5206/fpq/2017.2.3(11/9/2023)). The text was initially presented as a talk in honor of Catharine MacKinnon.

20 Brison, *We Must Find Words or Burn*, 4.

21 *Ibid.*

22 *Ibid.*, 7.

harassment can often feel like being harassed all over again.”<sup>23</sup> Maybe the perpetrator was just “socially inept” (but they are a socially inept *genius*, so we can excuse their behavior).<sup>24</sup> Maybe the student or junior staff member should have ended the “relationship,” if they felt it was abusive; maybe it was all consensual. Maybe it will be enough to give the perpetrator a warning (and otherwise hope that whisper networks will keep potential victims away from them).<sup>25</sup> If something happened (even if we let it happen for years or decades) maybe we can still treat it as an outlier that does not reflect on our institutional cultures.

## 2. The Catholic Church: Spiritual Violence

Such patterns of epistemic violence in the aftermath of sexual violence are also evident in the institutional responses of the Catholic Church to revelations of systemic sexual violence in their parishes, convents, and schools. When public allegations were few and far between, the church would speak about “isolated cases” (as in the case of Gilbert Gauthe, the first Catholic priest to be tried and convicted for his crimes in a secular court in the United States in 1985).<sup>26</sup> When it became clear that the issue was widespread and systemic, the church promised “accountability”; but its version of “accountability” is built on more denial.<sup>27</sup>

The church no longer denies that its clergy bullied, harassed, raped, and even killed children in church institutions. It no longer denies that its hierarchs protected

---

23 Ahmed, *Complaint!*, 44 f.

24 Cf. Babich, *Babette: On the Status of Women in Philosophy, or Great Men, Little Black Dresses, and The Virtues of Keeping One’s Feet on the Ground*, Working Papers at Fordham University, New York 2009. Babich’ main point is that men get away with ‘messy’ attire and ‘messy’ behavior, if they have a reputation as a distracted genius. Ironically, she notes Kripke as an example, while only mentioning his messy hair, but not his alleged behavior; *ibid.*, 17. Sarah-Jane Leslie and colleagues’ research on how attributions of brilliance and genius (raw, innate intellectual ability) affects gender distributions across the natural and social sciences provides instructive context for these observations; Leslie, Sarah-Jane; Cimpian, Andrei; Meyer, Meredith; Freeland, Edward: *Expectation of Brilliance Underlie Gender Distributions Across Academic Disciplines*, in: *Science* 347: 6219 (2015), 262–265.

25 Cf. Johnson, Carrie Ann: *The Purpose of Whisper Networks*.

26 Chatelain, Kim: *Catholic Church Ignored 1985 Report Warning of Sex Child Abuse Crisis*, in: *The Times-Picayune* (21/2/2019), [https://www.nola.com/news/article\\_91ac5ee5-ed47-55b9-a6e9-ef72496a8900.html](https://www.nola.com/news/article_91ac5ee5-ed47-55b9-a6e9-ef72496a8900.html) (16/09/2023).

27 I analyzed this failed accountability as a form of epistemic injustice in Behrensen, Maren: *Die ‘Aufarbeitung’ der Missbrauchsskandale in der katholischen Kirche als hermeneutisches Unrecht*, in: Wirth, Mathias/Noth, Isabelle/Schroer, Silvia (eds.): *Sexualisierte Gewalt in kirchlichen Kontexten. Neue interdisziplinäre Perspektiven*, Berlin/Boston, Mass. 2022, 159–188.

many of the bullies, harassers, and rapists. It does deny, however, that the institutional structure of the church contributed to these crimes; and it has set up complaint procedures that project accountability to the public, but retraumatize complainants, and fail to offer meaningful resolutions.<sup>28</sup>

In the face of “scandal,” the Catholic Church has repeatedly prioritized the protection of its own reputation over real institutional change. Both Pope Francis and Pope Benedict XVI (whose papacies saw the most significant revelations) have pushed the narrative of a *societas perfecta* tainted and corrupted by external evils.<sup>29</sup> The church’s “accountability” comes with a serious epistemic cost: the expectation that the crimes committed under its roof are not discussed in terms of its institutional failure.

This expectation is in direct contradiction to independent reports<sup>30</sup> and first-person accounts<sup>31</sup> that highlight such institutional, epistemic factors: misplaced reverence for authority figures, the aristocratic hierarchy of the church, enforced celibacy, an extremely conservative and rigid ethics of sexuality, and the refusal to discuss sexuality and relationships openly in the education of priests. Perpetrators could rely on a network of “brothers” who made sure that complaints would be handled internally rather than turned over to the police and secular courts.

Perpetrators also frequently used their victims’ faith to gaslight them. Physical violence becomes divine punishment, sexual violence becomes innocent “cuddling,” while survivors are framed as having “tempted struggling priests,” blaming victims

---

28 I explore this point in more detail in Behrens: Die ‘Aufarbeitung’ der Missbrauchsskandale, 177–180. My own account of this problem was heavily influenced by Born, *Luna: Missbrauch mit den Missbrauchten. Mehr Träume als die katholische Kirche zerstören kann*, Baden-Baden 2019.

29 Bergoglio, Jorge Mario (Pope Francis): Rede in der Eucharistiefeier zum Abschluss der Kinderschutz-Konferenz im Vatikan vom 21.-24. Februar 2019, published by the German Bishops’ Council (DBK), [https://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse\\_downloads/dossiers\\_2019/2019-02-24\\_Reede-Papst-Franziskus-Kinderschutz-Konferenz.pdf](https://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse_downloads/dossiers_2019/2019-02-24_Reede-Papst-Franziskus-Kinderschutz-Konferenz.pdf) (19/9/2023); Ratzinger, Joseph (Pope Benedict XVI): Die Kirche und der Skandal des sexuellen Mißbrauchs, in: *Vatican News* (11/4/2019), <https://www.vaticannews.va/de/papst/news/2019-04/papst-benedikt-xvi-wortlaut-aufsatz-missbrauch-theologie.html> (19/9/2023).

30 See, for instance, Dreßing, Harald et al.: Sexueller Missbrauch an Minderjährigen durch katholische Priester, Diakone und männliche Ordensangehörige im Bereich der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz, Mannheim, Heidelberg and Gießen 2018, [https://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse\\_downloads/dossiers\\_2018/MHG-Studie-gesamt.pdf](https://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse_downloads/dossiers_2018/MHG-Studie-gesamt.pdf) (19/9/2023).

31 See, for instance, Haslbeck, Barbara et al. (eds.), *Erzählen als Widerstand. Berichte über spirituellen und sexuellen Missbrauch an erwachsenen Frauen in der katholischen Kirche*, Münster 2020.

for their own victimization.<sup>32</sup> Faith and dogma amplify the shame felt by survivors, further increase the threshold for speaking up, and erode their own agency and moral compass. Benkert and Doyle note:

The youthful Catholic often believed the priest can do no wrong, therefore the sinfulness of any sexual action must be attributed to the victims. It has not been unusual for victims to blame themselves for the abuse and feel guilty at having led a priest into sin.<sup>33</sup>

Catholic priests are literally holy men, and as such, they are triply epistemically privileged: as divinely inspired authorities over lay Catholics, as men over women, and as adults over children.<sup>34</sup> When they abuse their institutional power to groom victims, gaslight them, or to protect other perpetrators, they commit *spiritual violence*. Spiritual violence uses a person's faith (religious texts, symbols, and rituals) against that person, undermining their sense of belonging in a religious community.<sup>35</sup> Not all spiritual violence is sexual violence, but all sexual violence in a church context is spiritual violence.<sup>36</sup> Spiritual violence is also epistemic violence: it shatters a person's knowledge of their social environment.

The fear and shame felt by survivors of sexual violence in church contexts are directly connected to their faith, and they have a direct impact on how they understand themselves and their religious communities (they turn the shameful behaviors of their attackers into their own shame). Spiritual violence as epistemic violence is a weapon:<sup>37</sup> it silences victims, protects perpetrators, normalizes violence, and prevents institutional change.

### 3. Institutional Inertia

Many human institutions, academia included, mirror many of the problems described above for the Catholic church. Institutions are inert, they tend towards preserving their established structures, and those who hold power within them tend toward preserving their power. Institutions do not need to be religious in order to inflict the kind of epistemic violence sketched above. As Paige L. Sweet notes:

---

32 Tobin, Religious Faith in the Unjust Meantime, 8–10. Born, Missbrauch mit den Missbrauchten, frequently highlights this strategy in 'accountability' processes as well, calling it *Schuldumkehr*, reversal of guilt.

33 Benkert and Doyle: Clericalism, Religious Duress, and Its Psychological Impact, 233.

34 Cf. Behrens, Die 'Aufarbeitung' der Missbrauchsskandale, 178.

35 Ibid., 5.

36 Ibid., 8–9.

37 Cf. Tobin, Religious Faith in the Unjust Meantime, 20.

“When perpetrators mobilize [...] structural inequalities [...] and institutional vulnerabilities against victims [...], gaslighting becomes not only effective, but devastating.”<sup>38</sup>

Academia weaponizes *dedication* in much the same way that churches weaponize faith. Dedication means the (spoken or unspoken) expectation to always be available to work, including weekends and vacations. It means enduring a hypercompetitive environment with few and long-delayed rewards, and treating it as a *vocation* rather than a job.<sup>39</sup> It can also mean perseverance in the face of bullying, harassment, and sexual violence; and being reluctant to complain about any of it (because “I still get to do what I love”).

This institutional weaponization of dedication (partly) constitutes the meaning of what it is to be an academic.<sup>40</sup> It serves to keep us docile, while extracting additional resources from us. It is analogous to how churches as institutions weaponize faith to control their members and retain their social, political, and ethical relevance.<sup>41</sup> In either institution, perpetrators can utilize their victims’ loyalty to the institution to ensure their acquiescence and silence.

The hypercompetitiveness of academia makes “success” even more dependent on personal networks than in other professional fields. Academic “legacies” and “schools” are one of the *schemas* of academia; and they tend to coalesce into implicit cultural norms, internalized by members, which explain why things are done in a certain way, and also why there is resistance to changing these ways.<sup>42</sup> Students and postgraduates quickly come to understand that the “goodwill” of an eminent figure in the field can advance their careers, and their “ill will” can end it. When

38 Sweet, *The Sociology of Gaslighting*, 852.

39 Goguen, *Stacey: Working at Philosophy*, Part 2.5. *How We Talk about Philosophy and Leaving It*, in: *Philosopher’s Cocoon* (16/2/2016), <https://philosopherscocoon.typepad.com/blog/2016/02/working-at-philosophy-part-25-how-we-talk-about-philosophy-and-leaving-it.html> (19/9/2023); Behrensen, Maren/Kaliarnta, Sofia: Sick and Tired. *Depression in the Margins of Academic Philosophy*, in: *Topoi* 36 (2017), 355–364, 362.

40 Sociological institutionalism (as a theory of institutions) might thus identify dedication as one of the norms or schemas that can explain why academia as an institution is so slow to change in this respect; cf. Amenta, Edwin; Ramsey, Kelly L.: *Institutional Theory*, in: Leicht, Kevin T./Jenkins, J. Craig (eds.): *Handbook of Politics. State and Society in Global Perspective*, New York/Dordrecht 2010, 15–39; cf. also Haslanger, Sally: *What is a Social Practice?*, in: *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 82: *Metaphysics* (2018), 231–247.

41 When I left the Lutheran church, I received a standard letter from ‘my’ parish (one where I had never attended church services) that ‘reminded’ me that I would not be able to be married in a church, or buried in a church graveyard.

42 Haslanger, *What is a Social Practice?*; cf. Amenta/Ramsey, *Institutional Theory*, 21, where the authors note it as a weakness of sociological institutionalism, that the theory seems better at explaining (political) stability than (political) change. This makes the theory attractive, however, as an explanation for institutional stability.

such an eminent figure assaults, harasses, or bullies them, and then expects their acquiescence or silence, they think (quite plausibly) that their careers are at stake. And they remain quiet.<sup>43</sup>

Intransparent (and sometimes perverse) institutional rules and procedures further raise the threshold for speaking up and demanding change. When official procedures are “nonperformatives,” designed to stall complaints rather than advancing them,<sup>44</sup> those victimized by SVHB will conclude (again, quite plausibly) that the institution has no interest in protecting them. Academic institutions are rife with examples of implicit patterns clashing with explicit norms. They want to be seen as caring about certain causes, but if actually advancing those causes means change, they would rather not change. This is how commitments to “diversity and inclusion” can coexist with a near-complete lack of diversity among staff and students; and it explains why official policies against SVHB might do very little to protect students and vulnerable staff in practice.<sup>45</sup> And where there are no policies, but only whisper networks to protect the vulnerable, “there is a culture of harassment in [the] organization,” and “sexual harassment is built into the organizational structure.”<sup>46</sup>

This gap between implicit patterns and explicit norms serves to protect the institution’s reputation, and placate those who demand change. It inflicts further epistemic violence on those who have been assaulted, harassed, or bullied by members of that institution; and it is utilized in the Catholic Church as well as in academia.

#### 4. Gender, Language, and Power

So far, I have only discussed features that are common in academia, but not specific to philosophy; now, I turn to features of academic philosophy that make it particularly prone to inflicting epistemic violence on survivors. Again, the point is not to claim that other fields or institutions are “immune,” but to consider exacerbating factors in philosophy.

The first point I want to highlight is the gendered demographic of the discipline, and its relation to gendered perceptions of philosophical aptitude. Like the Catholic Church, philosophy was and in many ways still is a “boys’ club”: both in

43 LNVH, Harassment of Women in Dutch Academia, 14–16.

44 Ahmed, *Complaint!*, 29–68.

45 In their reaction to the report on harassment at the University of Groningen (which was published with the report), the board of the university notes: “A few years ago we installed a zero-tolerance policy and have instituted various mechanisms to support this policy. We deeply regret – as the report shows – that despite these efforts, the interviewed employees still experienced undesirable behaviour.” YAC, Harassment at the University of Groningen, Reaction by the Board.

46 Johnson, *The Purpose of Whisper Networks*, 04.

terms of the actual composition of its hierarchy, and in terms of who is regarded as a competent member of the discipline (and potential “thought leader”).<sup>47</sup> In 2008, Haslanger reflected on “surviving as a solo” (the only woman in her cohort) in a deeply hostile environment,<sup>48</sup> and noted that “feminist philosophers have been arguing for decades [that] the familiar dichotomies with which [...] philosophy defines itself map neatly onto gender dichotomies.”<sup>49</sup> Philosophy itself, with its “seminal” arguments, its “penetrating” critiques, and its “rigorous,” “rational,” and “objective” demeanor, is framed as a fundamentally masculine activity.<sup>50</sup> In 2015, Sarah-Jane Leslie and colleagues presented evidence that philosophy (much more so than other humanities and social sciences, and many natural sciences) reinforced a belief in innate aptitude: good philosophers are not regarded as diligent or curious learners, but as *geniuses*. They found that this belief in innate aptitude correlates with gendered distributions of power and influence in a discipline: disciplines with a strong “ideology of smartness”<sup>51</sup> tend to have a low proportion of women.

Evidence suggests that while the proportion of women in philosophy continues to increase, their number at the postgraduate and professor levels remains low; and philosophy loses many women as they try to move up the academic hierarchy.<sup>52</sup>

- 
- 47 Of course, the Catholic Church is far more extreme than academic philosophy in that it still regards women as categorically unqualified to lead, and treats anatomical criteria of ‘manhood’ as a necessary condition of spiritual authority.
- 48 Haslanger, Sally: *Changing the Culture and Ideology of Philosophy. (Not) by Reason Alone*, in: *Hypatia* 23 (2008), 210–223, 211.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 213. Haslanger restricts her claim to “Anglophone philosophy,” but I am confident that it can be generalized over other languages and traditions.
- 50 *Ibid.*, see also: Dotson, Kristie: *Concrete Flowers. Contemplating the Profession of Philosophy*, in: *Hypatia* 26 (2011), 403–409.
- 51 Cherry, Myisha/Schwitzgebel, Eric: *Like the Oscars, #PhilosophySoWhite*, in: *Los Angeles Times* (4/3/2016), <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-0306-schwitzgebel-cherry-philosophy-so-white-20160306-story.html> (19/9/2023).
- 52 Beebe, Helen/Saul, Jennifer: *Women in Philosophy in the UK*, on behalf of the British Philosophical Association and the Society for Women in Philosophy UK 2021, <https://bp.a.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/2021-BPA-SWIP-Report-Women-in-Philosophy-in-the-UK.pdf> (19/9/2023). Their findings show that while women make up nearly half of all philosophy undergraduates, and half of all research masters, their proportion drops to a third at the PhD intake level, less than a third for PhD completions, and a quarter for philosophy readers and professors. See also Klonschinski, Andrea; Bratu, Christine; Herzog, Lisa: *Förderquoten von Frauen in der Philosophie in Deutschland. Eine Erklärung der “Leaky Pipeline”?*, Society for Women in Philosophy Germany 2021, [https://swip-philosophinne.n.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/DFG\\_LeakyPipeline\\_final\\_12022021.pdf](https://swip-philosophinne.n.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/DFG_LeakyPipeline_final_12022021.pdf) (12/12/2023). The authors summarize the findings of Klonschink’s previous analysis of the proportion of women in academic philosophy in Germany, which largely mirrors the findings of Beebe and Saul (although the increase of women at the professor level seems much steeper in Germany). Their main question here is whether and how gender bias in the distribution

The continued underrepresentation of women and a masculine-coded ideology of smartness likely reinforce each other (even more so when women at the top level of academic philosophy also buy into this ideology). Together, they foster the continued existence of networks where (White) men support each other<sup>53</sup> and protect perpetrators; and they foster the notion that intellectual authority in philosophy is not a skill, but a special personal quality (what Cherry and Schwitzgebel call “being good at seeming smart”).<sup>54</sup> And the latter notion can, like the disciplinary culture as a whole, be weaponized by perpetrators: it allows “the messy genius” to invoke their special qualities against complaints.

Unwanted sexual attention becomes a special intellectual favor, initial acquiescence is reframed as an indicator that the victim was a willing participant. When victims attempt to maintain a professional relationship in spite of SVHB, perpetrators can use this to suggest that their sexual interest was reciprocated (this is victim-blaming of the same kind not unlike the “seduced priest” trope we encountered above).

Language plays a central role in this dynamic. Argumentation is central to philosophy, language is central to argumentation; and learning how to do philosophy is learning how to use language in a particular way.<sup>55</sup> I do not intend to address the question whether the “nature” of philosophy is fundamental critique, or whether philosophy is an inherently antagonistic activity.<sup>56</sup> It is sufficient to note that academic philosophy has a variety of linguistic, and hence argumentative styles; and that proponents of different styles might completely fail to understand one another (and then claim that their opponent’s style is not worthy of proper philosophical engagement).

Learning about different philosophical styles and “schools” can then feel like one needs to “choose a team” and display loyalty to the team’s “leader” (whether that leader be a dead or a living philosopher). Perpetrators know how to exploit this apparent gap between philosophy’s apparent commitment to objectivity and

---

of research funding distributed by the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (DFG, the largest funding body in Germany) affects the career prospects of women in philosophy.

53 Täuber, Susanne: Undoing Gender in Academia. Personal Reflections on Equal Opportunity Schemes, in: *Journal of Management Studies* 57 (2020), 1718–1724. Täuber was one of the main forces behind the YAC report on harassment at the University of Groningen; in March 2023, a labor court ruled that the university could fire Täuber, based on the claim that “Undoing Gender” was an unacceptable attack on the university itself. The firing sparked protests and concerns about academic freedom in the Netherlands.

54 Cherry/Schwitzgebel, Like the Oscars.

55 This is, perhaps, a view of philosophy inspired largely by Wittgenstein’s later views.

56 Cf. Priest, Graham: What is Philosophy?, in: *Philosophy* 81 (2006), 189–207 and Dotson, Concrete Flowers.

rigor, and the fact that it is a language game that can be played in different ways.<sup>57</sup> Philosophers learn how to use the power of language to highlight certain aspects of reality. They can use this power to analyze, critique, and reconstruct *social* realities. But they can also use the same power to gaslight others and undermine their sense of social reality.

The communication scholars Graves and Spencer define gaslighting as “a discursive dynamic in which one social actor is empowered to dictate knowledge at the expense of another’s sense of reality.”<sup>58</sup> I quote their account of gaslighting here (rather than other, readily available philosophical accounts)<sup>59</sup> because their perspective does not make an attempt to engage in the philosophical debate and yet makes a philosophical point: they take (Aristotle’s) rhetoric seriously as an explanation of how we construct social realities (persuade and build consensus) over things where there can be reasonable disagreement. And they show how this “construction” engages reason (*logos*), status (*ethos*), and emotion (*pathos*).<sup>60</sup> This use of rhetoric can go well: when someone makes reasonable claims (*logos*), from a well-deserved position of credibility and authority (*ethos*), and engages their audience’s emotions without manipulating them (*pathos*). But it can also be dangerous: for instance, when it is used against victims of discrimination and violence, by discrediting or silencing their testimony with sophistry, from ill-founded positions of credibility and authority, while manipulating the audience’s emotions.

The people who populate the discipline of philosophy are engaged in a shared (for better or for worse) project of rhetoric. They shape the social reality of what it means to be a philosopher. They are also trained to be *good at rhetoric* in this sense of co-shaping social reality. When the discipline itself is shot through with unacknowledged, gendered hierarchies, this presents a risk for dangerous rhetoric: toxic, but influential individuals in the discipline and their allies distorting what it means to be a philosopher; and using this distorted meaning to discredit those who speak out against SVHB.<sup>61</sup> As “philosophers,” they claim to be on the side of reason, while complainants are presented as “emotional,” “hysterical,” or vengeful liars. The pattern is

---

57 Behrensen/Kaliarnta, Sick and Tired, 359–362.

58 Graves, Clint G./Spencer, Leland G.: Rethinking the Rhetorical Epistemics of Gaslighting, in: *Communication Theory* 32 (2022), 48–67; see also Sweet, *The Sociology of Gaslighting*.

59 See, for instance, Abramson, *Turning Up the Lights on Gaslighting*; Ivy, Veronica: 2017. *Allies Behaving Badly. Gaslighting as Epistemic Injustice*, in: Pohlhaus Jr., Gaile/Kidd, Ian James/Medina, José (eds.): *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, New York 2017; Pohlhaus Jr., Gaile: *Gaslighting and Echoing, or Why Collective Epistemic Resistance Is Not a ‘Witch Hunt’*, in: *Hypatia* 35 (2020), 674–686.

60 Graves and Spencer: *Rethinking the Rhetorical Epistemics of Gaslighting*, 56–57.

61 And they might be successful precisely because they are bullies, not in spite of it; Täuber, Susanne/Mahmoudi, Morteza: *How Bullying Becomes a Career Tool*, in: *Nature Human Behavior* 2022, Correspondence, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01311-z> (19/9/2023).

familiar from other fields, but in philosophy it is doubly toxic, because philosophy as a discipline claims to be devoted to truth and enlightenment. Precisely because of this outward commitment to non-violent interaction (and a presumption of non-violence extended to its practitioners), academic philosophy can become a “sphere of violence” that shields perpetrators and normalizes violence.<sup>62</sup>

Much like priests who promise salvation and offer only manipulation and spiritual violence, some philosophers promise enlightenment, but only offer bullshit and epistemic violence.

---

62 Cf. Schotte, Dietrich: Was ist Gewalt? Philosophische Untersuchung zu einem umstrittenen Begriff, Frankfurt a.M. 2020, 194–196.

