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Toxic Positivity and Epistemic Injustice

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Abstract
In this paper, I begin a philosophical theorisation of the phenomenon of toxic positivity (TP) within the framework of social epistemology. TP is the phenomenon of people being positive and optimistic to a degree that is unreasonable in a given situation, and as such makes others feel as if their own (less than positive) feelings are invalid or in some way wrong. I begin by providing an example of TP. I then identify four features of TP: appropriate emotion, unreasonableness, dismissal, and potential harm. Following this, I discuss the possible epistemic effects of TP and argue that it can affect knowledge in three ways: doubting belief, losing belief, and undermining self-trust. Finally, I argue that TP can in some cases be a form of gaslighting and can undermine epistemic agency, both of which are epistemic injustices.

1. Introduction

Toxic positivity (TP) is a term which has recently been gaining popularity, even though the concept itself is not entirely new. The term 'toxic positivity' was first used by Jack Halberstam (2011, 8) in *The Queer Art of Failure* to describe contemporary life. However, other concepts have previously been in use that have some resemblance to the phenomenon of TP. One example is Neil Weinstein's (1980) notion of unrealistic optimism, in which people make erroneous judgements about the likelihood of positive events occurring in their futures compared to others. This is an idea that has been developed at some length and has given rise to several other concepts that are similar (although not exactly the same), such as optimism bias, comparative optimism, and the illusion of invulnerability (Shepperd, Klein, Waters and Weinstein 2013, 395). All this literature tends to highlight the adaptive advantages of such positivity. Recently, however, concerns have been expressed that perhaps the blind commitment to positive thinking that is so pervasive in contemporary Western society is not as useful as has been made out and can even be problematic (Ehrenreich 2009, Halberstam 2011, Goodman 2022). This kind of observation has led to interest in the idea of TP.

In my understanding, TP is the phenomenon of people being positive and optimistic to a degree that is unreasonable in a given situation, and as such makes others feel as if their own (less than positive) feelings are invalid or in some way wrong, thus having the potential to cause harm to the victim (Goodman 2022, 6; Corp 2021, 18–19; Al Bawaba 2022, n. p.; Mecking 2022, n. p.; Cherry 2022, n. p.; Lecompte-Van Poucke 2022, 1). This phenomenon seems to me to be particularly dangerous because instances of TP are often interpreted as something good or helpful and because of this, the harms that it inflicts can be obscured. This may mean that significant damage is done before it is recognised and stopped. In this paper, I aim to develop the beginnings of the first philosophical account of TP and to argue that TP can be thought of as a form of epistemic injustice with especially strong ties to gaslighting and epistemic agency.

While TP has been investigated (albeit not in much theoretical detail) in psychology (Goodman 2022; Bosveld 2021; Cross 2022; Lecompte-Van Poucke 2022; Upadhyay, Srivatsa and Mamidi 2022), to my knowledge, no philosophical work on this topic exists. In this way, I hope to bring TP into the philosophical discourse. However, I cannot hope to offer a full theorisation of TP in a single paper. Hence, this account is only intended as a starting point, which I hope can be developed at greater length in the future. Given this, the specific features of TP which I pick up will be of particular relevance to conceiving of TP as a form of epistemic injustice. Other features could be drawn out more strongly if considering TP in a different context.

Here is the plan. In Section 2, I start with a theorisation of TP, in which I offer an example of TP and identify four features of TP. In Section 3, I engage the epistemological dimension of TP to describe how TP might undermine knowledge. In Section 4, I argue that TP can be considered a form of epistemic injustice because it can be used as a tool for gaslighting and it can undermine epistemic agency, both of which harm the victim of TP in their capacity as a knower (Fricker 2007, 20).

2. Conceptualising toxic positivity

In this section, I offer the beginnings of an account of TP. In Section 2.1., I provide an example of TP to illustrate the kind of behaviour I have in mind. In Section 2.2., I describe four features of TP, namely appropriate emotion, unreasonableness, dismissal/ not being taken seriously and possible harm.

2.1. Example of toxic positivity

The paradigm case of TP that I will put forward involves TP being perpetrated by a source external to the victim.[1] Consider the following case:

Grief

Joe has just lost his grandmother to whom he was very close. Understandably, he is feeling profound grief at her passing. When Joe is talking with his friend, Christina, and expressing this grief to her, in an attempt to comfort him, she responds by saying "But your grandmother is in a better place now, she is no longer suffering." Joe does not find this helpful or comforting, and he does not feel supported.

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[1]I also think that TP could be perpetrated towards the self, but this case would be somewhat more complex than the external case presented here because of human beings' propensity for self-deception. As such, I could not possibly do justice to an account of self-directed TP here and so leave it as an avenue for future work.

Instead, he feels that he is being dismissed, rather than being allowed to process his grief properly. However, Joe trusts Christina and believes that she has his best interests at heart. This causes Joe to question whether he has judged the situation correctly. Furthermore, Joe encounters similar responses from most other people that he encounters soon after his grandmother's death, reinforcing the idea that he has judged the situation incorrectly. This prevents Joe from properly processing his grief and he ends up facing mental health problems later in his life.

2.2. Features of toxic positivity

Four features of TP emerge from the above (somewhat dramatic) example. TP may have other features, but the four features discussed below are what I take to be the most salient in identifying a case of TP.

2.2.1. Appropriate emotion

The first feature of TP is that it involves an emotion on the part of the TP victim, and more specifically that the emotion is appropriate. Many different accounts of emotion have been put forward.[2] I do not have the space to go through each of them; nor is this necessary. The point I wish to make is that there is a difference between an appropriate and an inappropriate emotion, and most existing accounts allow for this through a minimal belief[3] condition.

Regardless of what theory of emotion one operates under, it seems that having an appropriate emotion requires that one has a reasonable belief about the object of the emotion or at least that one does not have an unreasonable one. In cognitive accounts of emotion, reasonable belief (depending on which account we have) would be drawn from the correct perception and appraisal of some experience or state of affairs. In Joe's case, he believes that the loss of his (relationship with his) grandmother merits grief. This belief partly or wholly (again, depending on our account of emotion) constitutes his grief. In this case, his perception and appraisal of the situation are correct, meaning that the emotion he feels is appropriate (assuming that it is also proportionate).

On social constructionist accounts, to somewhat oversimplify, a reasonable belief, and hence an appropriate emotion, would be one that is in line with what is agreed upon in the social setting. In Joe's case, it is generally accepted by the social group of which he is a part that when one loses a close family member or friend, one should grieve. So, in this case, it is appropriate for Joe to grieve.[4] Thus, I think, that one could conceive of an appropriate emotion as one that is based on a reasonable belief (plus perhaps other conditions such as proportionality, but I leave those to the side for simplicity). In this

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[2]The accounts which I expect will be most useful for understanding TP would be cognitive accounts including but not limited to those of Robert C. Roberts (1988), Martha C. Nussbaum (2001) and Robert C. Solomon (2002), as well as constructionist accounts such as the account provided by Lisa Feldman Barrett (2009, 2012, 2017). There are also other accounts of emotion, including theories that are more physiologically rooted, such as William James's (1884). These kinds of theories might prove to be as useful in the context of TP, but they are also by all accounts less plausible.

[3]I use the term 'belief' here in the standard sense to mean a mental state in which an individual takes a proposition to be true (Schwitzgebel 2024).

[4]Although there may be variations on how it is socially appropriate to grieve in different societies and cultures. In *Grief*, we see that Christina thinks that Joe should no longer be grieving for the reasons that she cites. This leads Joe to doubt that he is grieving 'right', which makes him wonder if there is something wrong with his judgement of the situation.

way, we could sensibly talk about appropriate emotion regardless of particular theories of emotion.

If this is the case, then I can think of two ways in which an emotion could be inappropriate. The first way is that an emotion may be based on a false or unjustified belief. This would be the case when one incorrectly appraises a situation, and as a result, forms a false belief. If this happens, it seems likely that the emotion that would arise from this appraisal would be problematic. The second way in which an emotion might be inappropriate is if the object of the emotion is weighed incorrectly. If the object of the emotion is not correctly evaluated, this could mean that the emotion about this object would be inappropriate.

One important way in which appropriate emotion is undermined is through invalidation.[5] I will discuss this in more detail in Section 2.2.3. in connection with dismissal which I think is the way that invalidation is most likely to occur in the context of TP.

2.2.2. Unreasonableness

A second feature of TP is an element of unreasonableness on the part of the TP perpetrator. This is the obverse of the appropriateness of the victim's emotion. In *Grief*, the victim experiences an appropriate emotional response (grief) given their circumstances. However, the perpetrator's response to the victim is not reasonable because the TP perpetrator is trying to convince the victim that they should not be feeling the way that they are. Christina, while not denying that Joe is feeling grief, tries to make Joe change how he feels despite his grief being appropriate. It is important to note that the perpetrator does not question that the victim is having a negative emotional experience, nor that they are experiencing the emotion in the way that they are describing. Rather, the perpetrator is (at the very least) suggesting that what the victim is feeling is in some way wrong or inappropriate, and possibly even trying to make them alter that emotion. This is significant when considering reasonableness in TP because if the victim is experiencing appropriate emotions, it is unreasonable to suggest that the victim is wrong for having them or to try and alter them.

This kind of unreasonableness, in a successful instance of TP, manifests in two directions. Initially, unreasonableness manifests on the part of the perpetrator as they try to convince the victim that what they are feeling is inappropriate. This then causes the victim to doubt that they are being reasonable even though the emotion that they are experiencing is appropriate. This results in a kind of irrationality 'double-whammy', which distorts the more reasonable picture of reality that was formed by the initial appropriate negative emotion of the TP victim. Thus, in this context, a toxically positive response on the part of the perpetrator is unreasonable in so far as it has potential to undermine an initially appropriate response of the victim under the given circumstances.

Unreasonableness makes TP toxic because it distorts one's perceptions of reality (as well as having other negative epistemic effects – see Section 3 below). This is problematic when trying to form accurate beliefs about the world. The accuracy of beliefs is very important at a minimum because it allows one to more easily and efficiently navigate the world. This hindering of the formation of accurate beliefs is one of the things that I contend makes TP problematic.

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[5]I mention invalidation in this section is because invalidation can be linked with appropriateness. That is to say that for an emotion to be invalidated, it must first be appropriate. Simply feeling unsupported in inappropriate (or unreasonable) emotions, does not mean that you are in fact invalidated.

2.2.3. Dismissal/not being taken seriously

A third feature of TP is that the perpetrator's reaction (almost always) involves dismissal, or at least not engaging the victim seriously. Interestingly, in the typical case, the TP perpetrator does not doubt that the victim is having a negative emotional experience, nor that the victim is accurately articulating their experience. Nonetheless, even though the perpetrator does not deny the victim's emotions, in cases of TP, the perpetrator does not take the expression seriously. Rather than simply allowing for the expression of the emotion without judgement or supporting the expression of the emotion through sympathy or empathy, the perpetrator responds by, at the very least, making less of the victim's emotion than what ought to be made. In TP, dismissal may not be limited to just ignoring the victim's emotions and/or giving some kind of empty platitude but can be more or less subtle. The perpetrator may go further than this and begin to explain away the victim's emotion or prescribe how the victim ought to feel or react.[6] For example, in *Grief*, Christina does not deny that Joe is feeling the way that he says he is feeling, but nor does she properly acknowledge that what Joe is feeling is appropriate. She does not offer support, but immediately gives Joe reasons why he should not be sad and that he should be moving on.

An important effect of dismissal might be invalidation of an appropriate emotion. The need for validation arises from the social nature of human beings leading us to seek some kind of confirmation about the appropriateness of our beliefs from those around us, even beliefs and emotions that are connected to our personal experiences. A study conducted by Hillman, Fowlie and MacDonald (2023, 309–311) shows that not receiving social verification, a form of validation, can be highly distressing for people. Invalidation occurs when, at a minimum, the expression of emotion (most often negative emotion), is ignored or minimised, and in extreme cases even punished (Elzy and Karver 2018, 59; Lombardo, Waters and Elzy 2023, 14405), or one's inner experience is 'communicated to be incorrect by another' (Hillman, Fowlie and MacDonald 2023, 312). This can occur in TP when a victim is dismissed. For example, emotions like those in *Grief* may be invalidated if they are not properly acknowledged or are communicated to be inappropriate even though they are appropriate. Furthermore, the feeling of wrongness incurred through invalidation in TP could have further reaching consequences than any one instance of TP. Invalidation undermines the self-confidence that victims of TP may have because they are made to doubt that they are in fact being reasonable.[7] In extreme forms, this kind of doubt instigation can become gaslighting.[8] Additionally, I think it is plausible that the invalidation that occurs in TP could extend beyond the isolated instance of TP (and so beyond the content of the specific belief that is targeted in that instance) to affect the victim's sense of their general ability to rightly read the world. In this way, invalidation can erode a victim's self-trust.[9]

Dismissal acts as a doubt-instigator which has consequences for epistemic agency, epistemic self-trust and epistemic authority. I will engage with this more deeply in Section 4, but very briefly, in terms of epistemic agency, dismissal can prevent a victim

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[6]An example of this kind of dismissal is how when children expressed that hand dryers of the kind that are found in public bathrooms hurt their ears, and adults told them that that was not true or attributed this belief to some other reason like children not wanting to wash their hands. As it turns out though, given children's more sensitive ears and hand dryers operating at louder frequencies than advertised, hand dryers really do hurt children's ears (Keegan 2020). In cases like this, the dismissal of children's testimony had potential to cause harm.

[7]I discuss the feature of reasonableness in Section 2.2.2.

[8]I discuss gaslighting again briefly in Section 2.2.4 and in more detail in Section 4 where I consider gaslighting as an epistemic injustice.

[9]I give a more extended discussion of self-trust in Section 3.3. and Section 4.1.

from meaningfully using the knowledge that they might have formed based on their emotional experiences, and in some cases may prevent the knowledge from even being acquired at all. In terms of epistemic self-trust, dismissal can make a victim lose confidence in their ability to form accurate beliefs. And, in terms of epistemic authority, the perpetrator's dismissal indicates that they think they know better than the victim, even though the victim is articulating feelings based on their personal experience. This then introduces a power dynamic into the exchange in which the victim is at a disadvantage even though they should not be.

2.2.4. Potential harm

The fourth feature of TP is that it has the potential to cause harm. I will conceive of harm as something which compromises well-being. The reason that it is important to include potential harm as a feature of TP is that it highlights why, in addition to wronging the victim,[10] there are potential practical effects of TP that give us an additional reason, apart from the wrong, to avoid being a perpetrator of TP. Harm in the case of TP can be a degreed concept with some harms amounting to small things, like a person feeling invalidated on one or two occasions, to much bigger things, such as mental health problems.

One notable feature of harm in the context of TP is that the same instance of TP can be more or less harmful depending on the victim. This means that someone who is more thick-skinned may have a higher tolerance for (or not be affected at all by) an instance of TP. In such cases, even though harm has not occurred, the potential for harm-causing still exists. Hence, my insistence that only *potential* harm is a feature of TP. So, even if victims are not affected by TP, or not affected in the same way, the potential for harm still exists.

In *Grief*, Joe suffers from mental health problems. However, it is possible that less harm may have been suffered. In Joe's case, it seems unlikely that severe mental health issues would have arisen from only a single instance of TP, in such a case, the harm suffered would probably be more akin to disappointment or irritation at Christina's lack of support. However, the compounded effect of similar toxically positive responses from multiple sources and over an extended period causes the serious harm that Joe has suffered. Additionally, I think that TP that comes from sources close to the victim (and especially those who they trust) could also be more harmful than TP perpetrated by peripheral sources or TP that is not targeted at the victim.[11]

Sections 3 and 4, I take a deeper look into the varieties of epistemic and psychological harms that TP can perpetrate. For now, let me just mention two examples of harms – gaslighting and emotional suppression – to clarify what I mean by potential harm being a core feature of TP. These two are by no means the only harms that could arise out of TP, in fact, there are additional indirect harms (often relating to mental health) that could be suffered as a result of these direct harms. But I will limit my discussion to these two harms because they are direct harms and also because I think that they can be most strongly tied to TP.

Firstly, I think that TP can gaslight a victim (in severe cases) because repeatedly being told that one's negative emotions are not appropriate could cause a victim to doubt their grip on reality. When a victim doubts their grip on reality, they are then successfully

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[10]More on this is Section 4 where I discuss TP and epistemic injustice.

[11]I imagine untargeted TP to be the kind of generally overly optimistic sentiments that are commonly found on social media in the form of inspirational or motivational quotes (many of which also have religious overtones). But I do not have the space to address this kind of TP here.

gaslit (Abramson 2014, 2).[12] If TP can gaslight, then I think that it must be considered a potential harm to TP because gaslighting is widely accepted as a form of abuse (Hakim 2021). If this is the case, it seems obvious that a victim of gaslighting would suffer serious harm (regardless of what kind of behaviour causes the gaslighting), especially if the exposure to gaslighting is prolonged. Of note here is the detrimental effect that gaslighting could have on mental health (Sodoma 2022, 322). But it is also worth noting that poor mental health is also associated with physical health problems (Castellani, Griffiths, Rajaram and Gunn 2018; Yang and Zikos 2022), meaning that the harmful effects of gaslighting can be quite far-reaching.

A further harm to TP is emotional suppression. Goodman (2022, 13) explicitly cites emotional suppression as a dangerous consequence of TP, which has negative effects on both mental and physical health. Suppression is the emotional regulating behaviour of greatly reducing, or not at all showing, behavioural signs of experienced emotion (English and John 2013, 314) although it does not dampen the experience of emotion (English and John 2013, 316; Gross 1998, 232; Gross 2002, 285). It seems clear that TP encourages suppression because when a victim of TP attempts to express a negative emotion it is often the case that they are dismissed by the perpetrator. Over time, this could mean that the victim no longer even attempts to express their emotion because they know that they will not be properly acknowledged and, as such, do not see the point in expressing emotion. This is significant to conceiving emotional suppression as harmful because it has been found to have more negative effects than other emotional regulation techniques (Gross 2002, 285; Goodman 2022, 13) making its (over)use in any context potentially problematic. By not expressing an emotion that one is feeling, one creates an incongruence between experience and expression. This incongruence can foster a sense of inauthenticity, which can have detrimental effects on social adjustment (English and John 2013, 315, 317), cognition (Gross 2002, 287), and physiological effects (increased activation of the sympathetic nervous system and increased blood pressure) (Gross 1998, 233; Gross 2002, 287). Therefore, when a victim of TP suppresses negative emotions, they risk harm to themselves in several ways.[13]

3. Potential epistemic effects of toxic positivity

So far, I have argued that the key features of TP are 1) appropriate emotion, 2) unreasonableness, 3) dismissal and 4) potential harm. Identifying these features of TP will help us to identify an instance of TP, but I think that there is more to TP that can benefit from a closer theoretical examination of aspects of the phenomenon. As such, I now move to examine some epistemic effects of TP,[14] which will allow us to better

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[12]I realise that at this stage I have not yet made an argument for why I think that TP can gaslight, I will make this argument in Section 4 below as my more extended discussion of gaslighting will rely on points that I make in Section 3.

[13]Another possible feature of TP could be insincerity. However, while many instances of TP are insincere, I also think that toxically positive behaviour can (and often does) arise from a genuine place of care and efforts that are intended to help the victim. As such, I will not discuss insincerity here, but it might make for interesting future work.

[14]In addition to the epistemic effects of TP, I think that there are also moral and social considerations. The moral considerations arise out of the potential harms (discussed in Section 2.2.4.) and the wrongs (which will be discussed in relation to epistemic injustice in Section 4) of TP. Moral considerations around TP give us reason to avoid TP. The social considerations would be helpful in understanding the role that social values and pressures can play in TP, specifically the ingrained value of optimism being upheld at all costs and of any negative emotions being viewed as shameful (Goodman 2022, 7). While I think that these considerations are important, I will not say anything more about them in this paper, because they are not directly relevant to the epistemology of TP that is the focus here.

theorise the phenomenon.[15] I think that TP has epistemic effects because it has potential to undermine knowledge by causing self-doubt that can have detrimental effects on beliefs. Before one becomes a victim of TP, one enters an exchange around a particular belief either about one's emotions or a belief that constitutes them. In *Grief*, Joe has the first-order belief that the situation that he faces (his grandmother dying) is a sad situation, which is constitutive of the grief that Joe feels. To put it more generally, the belief that is called into question through TP is the belief that situation X (the situation you are in) is Y (emotional appraisal), which is constitutive of the emotion one experiences. In this section, I contend that it is this first-order belief that has its claim to knowledge undermined through TP.[16]

The primary way that TP undermines beliefs is through doubt instigation, which usually comes about through dismissal or not being taken seriously. This happens because when the victim is dismissed it is communicated to them that what they are saying is, at a minimum, beneath the serious consideration of the interlocutor, and in some cases may even directly communicate to the victim that what they are feeling is wrong or inappropriate. This can undermine the first-order belief about situation X being Y. In *Grief*, this is Joe's belief that his grandmother dying is sad. This could happen in at least three possible ways. First, one might doubt the belief. Second, one might lose the belief. Third, doubt can undermine self-trust, the basis for forming knowledge.

3.1. Doubting belief

The first way that self-doubt brought about by TP undermines knowledge is when the doubt acts as a psychological defeater. A psychological defeater is a 'belief that is had by S, yet indicates that S's belief that p is either false or unreliably formed or sustained' (Lackey 2006, 87). TP can act as a psychological defeater when it makes a victim doubt whether they have correctly appraised situation X as Y.[17] If this happens, the victim may come to doubt whether their belief that X is Y is appropriate causing them to lose justification for that belief. When this happens, the belief can no longer count as

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[15]I discuss epistemic concerns of TP separately from features of TP because I wish to separate, for the purposes of this paper, practical considerations (for example, using the feature that I have picked out in identifying an instance of TP) from theoretical ones (for example, rigorous analysis of the phenomenon to understand the phenomenon itself better). I do this because practical vs. theoretical considerations may be more or less interesting and relevant to different groups of people or in different contexts. For example, to be able to identify an instance of TP with the aim of mitigating the effects thereof, might not require a thorough understanding of the epistemological underpinnings of the phenomenon to be effective. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to clarify this point.

[16]My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for a useful comment that aided clarification of the types of beliefs that are at issue in TP. I also thank Veli Mitova for assisting me in further clarifying the thoughts articulated in this section.

[17]The specific doubt that is cast may depend on the content of the toxically positive remarks. In *Grief* as I have laid it out in this paper, Christina's comments that Joe's grandmother is no longer suffering calls into question Joe's belief that his grandmother's passing is sad. However, had Christina's toxically positive remarks cast doubt on the appropriateness of Joe's emotion itself, for example, had she said something like 'Your grandmother would not want you to be sad.', then the doubt would not be cast directly on the first order belief as it does when the appraisal is questioned directly. Rather the doubt about the appropriateness of the emotion would then cause the doubt about the appraisal of the situation, which would then undermine the first order belief that situation X is Y. Thus, doubting the appropriateness of the emotion itself would still undermine the belief, although more indirectly. In such cases the gaslighting involved would be what Sodoma (2022) calls emotional gaslighting. I leave the discussion of this variety of TP for another occasion. (See also footnotes 18 and 25).

knowledge. Consider *Grief*. In this case, Christina's TP casts doubt on whether Joe has correctly appraised the situation of his grandmother dying as sad when she claims that his grandmother is in a better place and is no longer suffering (presumably not suffering is a happy outcome). This casts doubt on whether it is appropriate to believe that this situation is in fact sad. This doubt acts as a psychological defeater because it suggests that Joe's belief is false, making Joe lose justification for the belief that it is sad that his grandmother has died. When Joe genuinely doubts that his belief is appropriate, even if he still holds the belief, it will no longer count as knowledge because it cannot be justified.

It is worth noting that, in a case like this, Joe need not give up his belief that the situation is sad, but genuinely doubting this belief means that the belief can no longer be considered knowledge. In this way, the doubt engendered by TP can place knowledge that a victim would otherwise have had on shaky ground.

3.2. Losing belief

The second way that the self-doubt caused by TP could undermine knowledge is by making the victim of TP give up their first-order belief that situation X is Y, even if it is. Here again, TP casts doubt on the victim's belief that they have appraised the situation correctly.[18] However, it is possible that rather than merely doubting their first-order belief, the victim might give up the belief altogether because they realise that they have lost justification for the belief.[19] For example, in *Grief*, Christina's TP makes Joe doubt whether he has correctly appraised his grandmother's passing as sad. This makes Joe wonder if he is justified in believing that the situation of his grandmother's passing is sad. Based on this, Joe might give up the belief that it is appropriate to feel sad because he no longer thinks it is justified. In this way, TP can cause a victim to give up beliefs that should constitute knowledge, thus depriving the victim of that knowledge.

3.3. Losing self-trust

The third way that doubt caused by TP interferes with the victim's knowledge is by undermining a victim's self-trust, an important precondition for acquiring knowledge (Zagzebski 2012, 50–51; Dormandy 2020, 1). Karen Jones (2012) makes a compelling argument that not being taken seriously (as happens when one is dismissed at any level) undermines self-trust.[20] Dismissal is a feature of TP and so, this makes the victim vulnerable to loss of self-trust. As already noted, TP causes the victim to doubt their belief that situation X is Y. This sort of doubt can undermine self-trust because when the victim appraises situation X as Y, they do so with the tacit background assumption that they have the general capacity to form beliefs that would count as knowledge, in other words, they trust themselves to acquire knowledge. So, when the victim is made to doubt (or even lose) a belief that should count as knowledge, they may come to doubt their general ability to acquire knowledge because they lack self-trust. For example, in *Grief*,

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[18]Again, as explained in footnote 17, another route to this doubt would be to cast doubt on the appropriateness of the emotion itself, although this will be less direct.

[19]Giving up a belief that one genuinely doubts seems like the best course of action, especially if one's reasons for doubting a belief are thought to be good. However, as I noted in Section 3.1., it is possible to retain a belief without justification, it will just not count as knowledge.

[20]Jones (2012, 245) notes, "self-trust is created interactively". So, without having our judgements affirmed by people that we trust, we will either never build trust in ourselves, or not be able to maintain such trust. One way in which disaffirmation of beliefs might occur is through invalidation, meaning that invalidation can compromise self-trust.

Christina suggests that Joe has misjudged his grandmother's passing as sad causing Joe to doubt whether it is appropriate to believe this situation is sad and so, whether he can really trust himself to form beliefs. In this way, the doubt that TP engenders can cause a victim to lose self-trust because not only is one's trust in their belief undermined but one also has their general confidence in themselves and their ability to perceive events accurately undermined. (This has been identified by Veronica Ivy - formerly Rachel McKinnon - as gaslighting, which I will discuss in more detail in Section 4.)

Loss of self-trust through doubting or complete loss of belief can also erode the emotion that a victim experiences. This is because the belief that situation X is Y is constitutive of the emotion that the victim feels. So, when the belief loses its status as knowledge or the belief is lost, the emotion itself is eroded. This is significant because it can cause the reality of the experienced emotion to be either distorted (if the belief remains intact but is still genuinely doubted) or completely erased (if the belief is lost). If the victim loses a core belief around an event, and so doubts the emotion that hinges on that belief, any knowledge that might be formed around this belief and emotion will be lost, because the first-order belief that should be able to form the foundation of other knowledge, is not knowledge (through loss of either justification or the belief itself). So, loss of trust will prevent the acquisition of knowledge not only pertaining directly to the belief that one doubts or loses but any other knowledge that might be formed with this belief as a foundation.

Additionally, this erosion of self-trust will likely have broader consequences for epistemic agency in general because the victim of TP is limited in their ability to produce, communicate and use knowledge that they may have had if it were not for the TP. These consequences are significant because they speak directly to epistemic injustice, to which I am arguing TP has strong ties.

4. Toxic positivity and epistemic injustice

In Section 3, I argued that TP has the potential to interfere with a victim's epistemic life in negative ways that would have not otherwise come about.[21] If this is the case, then it would be plausible to say that the perpetrator has wronged the victim epistemically. In other words, they have committed an epistemic injustice against the victim. I will make use of Gaile Pohlhaus Jr.'s (2017, 13) understanding of epistemic injustice.[22] Epistemic injustices are 'epistemic practices and institutions … that are simultaneously infelicitous toward certain epistemic values (such as truth, aptness, and understanding) and unjust with regard to particular knowers' (Pohlhaus 2017, 13). This is a broad definition of epistemic injustice, but several more specific varieties of epistemic injustice have been identified. Below, I will consider how TP can be a source of two distinct kinds of epistemic injustice.

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[21]Again, potential not actual. Only some or even none of these effects may occur depending on the victim.

[22]The original definition of epistemic injustice was put forward by Miranda Fricker in her 2007 book *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Naturally, this definition has since been critiqued, refined and expanded upon. I have chosen to use Pohlhaus here because their definition is more refined than Fricker's, but still broad enough to encompass a wide range of phenomena that ought to be considered epistemic injustices. I should also note that much work on epistemic injustice following Fricker's has been devoted to identifying and better defining individual types of epistemic injustices, for example, 'willful hermeneutical ignorance' (Pohlhaus 2012) among many others.

4.1. Gaslighting

In Section 2, I identified gaslighting as one of the direct harms of TP. In what follows, I discuss why I think that TP, in many cases, gaslights the victim. A standard example of gaslighting occurs in the context of abusive relationships where one partner behaves in such a way that it makes the other partner feel as if the gaslightee is in some way responsible for the gaslighter's bad behaviour. This occurs when the gaslighter persistently undermines the gaslightee's perceptions by telling them that they are mistaken in their perceptions/beliefs. This makes the gaslightee doubt their grip on reality.[23]

Various accounts of gaslighting have been put forward,[24] each highlighting different aspects of the phenomenon and drawing conclusions based on that. However, given that this paper engages epistemic aspects of TP, I will engage (briefly) with the accounts that focus on epistemic gaslighting. Specifically, I will consider Veronica Ivy (formerly Rachel McKinnon) (2017) and Andrew D. Spear's (2023) accounts of gaslighting which both look at gaslighting from a specifically epistemic perspective.[25]

Ivy (2017, 168) distinguishes between 'normal' and epistemic gaslighting, which she thinks is more subtle than 'normal' forms of gaslighting. 'Normal' gaslighting, she argues in a similar manner to Abramson (2014), involves making a victim doubt their memory and perceptions. Epistemic gaslighting, on the other hand, involves making a victim doubt their very 'reliability at perceiving events accurately' (Ivy 2017, 168). It seems to me that TP works in a similar way to how Ivy describes epistemic gaslighting. In Section 3, I argued that the belief that is undermined is the victim's belief that they have judged their situation correctly (such as by saying that the situation of my grandmother dying is a sad situation), but such a belief is formed on the basis of perceptions around the experience. So, the victim of TP starts out holding the belief that situation X is Y because they have perceived the situation accurately. This belief is then undermined, as I argued in Section 3, by casting doubt on the accuracy of the appraisal of a situation. So, when the victim experiences TP, and the belief that they have correctly appraised their situation is undermined, they may begin to question whether they have in fact perceived events accurately. Thus, TP makes the victim doubt whether their perceptions of some experience were sufficiently reliable to produce an accurate belief. Given this, it then seems that, in Ivy's (2017) view, TP could count as a kind of gaslighting. I would further note that if this kind of gaslighting were prolonged, the victim may no longer only doubt the reliability of their perception of only a particular event, but this doubt may begin to spill over into other areas of the victim's life and begin to undermine the victim's confidence in the general ability to perceive events accurately, which would also undermine a victim's self-trust.[26]

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[23]Kate Abramson (2014, 2) notes that gaslighting occurs when someone tries to make another person think that their perceptions and related actions, beliefs and memories are groundless. In this way, a victim of gaslighting is made to call into question everything that they think they know about a given event. While I do not disagree with Abramson, and this definition is most widely cited in the literature, for my purposes, Rachel McKinnon (2017) and Andrew D. Spear's (2023) work on gaslighting are more relevant because they highlight the epistemic dimensions of gaslighting.

[24]See, for example, Abramson (2014), Cynthia A. Stark (2019), Andrew D. Spear (2023), and Katharina Anna Sodoma (2022).

[25]Sodoma's (2022) work on emotional gaslighting would also be relevant if the doubt that is being cast by the TP is on the appropriateness of the emotion (as described in footnote 17), since emotional gaslighting targets the victim's confidence in their emotional reactions. However, this is not how I have set up the case of TP in this paper and so will leave proper consideration of emotional gaslighting for a later time.

[26]And, of course, the victim may then experience the secondary harms that would be associated with gaslighting such as poor mental health.

Spear ([2023](#), 75) specifically picks up on the issue of self-trust and argues that all gaslighting involves epistemic trust. He thinks that gaslighting undermines self-trust and can even cause a victim to doubt the reliability of their cognitive faculties[27] in general (Spear [2023](#), 77). This means that the effects of gaslighting can move beyond the 'contained' sphere in which the gaslighting occurs and influence a person's beliefs and perceptions more generally. In Section [3.3.](#), I discussed how TP can undermine self-trust and how this affects the victim of TP's ability to form knowledge based on their perceptions (one needs to have accurate perceptions before one can appraise a situation correctly). This seems consistent with what Spear ([2023](#)) is arguing for regarding the role of self-trust in forming knowledge. So, if Spear ([2023](#)) is right about the role of self-trust in gaslighting (and I think he is), then it seems plausible to say that TP could be capable of gaslighting a victim into believing that their cognitive faculties, including perceptions of which appraisals of situations are based, are not reliable. This also tallies nicely with Ivy's ([2017](#)) account of epistemic gaslighting as something which makes the victim doubt their perceptions.[28]

In this section, I have discussed two accounts of gaslighting and showed how some instances of TP could count as gaslighting on these accounts. Of significance in considering these accounts, and something that Sodoma ([2022](#), 325) explicitly notes, is that one kind of gaslighting will rarely occur on its own and the effect of various kinds of gaslighting will not be contained to only the targeted area of the gaslighting. However, the end result of all gaslighting is similar – the victim comes to doubt themselves in such a way that they lose their grip on reality.[29] Given this, I think that TP can[30] gaslight the victim because it could make them call into question, at the very least, their interpretation (if not their entire perception) of a situation. For example, in *Grief*, Joe is hearing from one trusted source, and from multiple other sources, that he is viewing his situation and experience wrongly. Instead of being grief-stricken, he ought to be grateful that his grandmother is no longer suffering, and that he should move on with his life. After hearing this (or similar sentiments) over and over, Joe begins to doubt the accuracy of his appraisal (and the perceptions on which this appraisal is based) of his grandmother's passing as an event worthy of grief (Ivy [2017](#); Spear [2023](#)). In any case like this, and especially in cases where this happens repeatedly over time, the victim will begin to doubt the reliability of their cognitive faculties in all spheres of their life and severely undermine the victim's self-trust (Spear [2023](#), 77). The fact that a victim of gaslighting is made to question their very ability to be able to produce knowledge, and to doubt knowledge that they have previously generated (memories), gives good reason to think that gaslighting is epistemic (Spear [2023](#); Ivy [2017](#)). This kind of doubt clearly harms and wrongs the victim as a knower because they are prevented from fully participating in normal epistemic life.

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[27]Under the heading of cognitive faculties, I include perceptions as does Sodoma ([2022](#), 321) since perceptions affect judgement. This seems to make sense given that perception is a crucial element in forming almost any knowledge.

[28]This is somewhat more specific than Spear's more general term of 'cognitive faculties'.

[29]This happens in at least two ways. The first is that the victim loses self-trust and so their capacity for acquiring knowledge is compromised. The second is that through the loss of the belief that is constitutive of the emotion, the emotional experience is distorted. These are points that came up in Section [3](#).

[30]I use 'can' instead of 'does' here because I wish to acknowledge that I do not, by any stretch of the imagination, think that all instances of TP gaslight. In fact, I think that TP on its own would only successfully gaslight in the most severe cases. However, in many cases, I think that TP could be employed in conjunction with other techniques to gaslight. Nonetheless, I think that its role can be significant and as such merits consideration.

An anonymous reviewer suggests that what I am describing in this section might be better described by what Alexander Edlich and Alfred Archer (2023) call 'tightlacing'. Edlich and Archer (2023, 395) identify tightlacing as 'a distinctive form of psychological abuse'. Edlich and Archer (2023, 396) conceive of tightlacing as follows:

> Tightlacing consists in inducing a mistaken self-conception in others that licenses overburdening demands on them, typically by means of direct moral address, and makes them apply these demands to themselves. Centrally, the wrong of Tightlacing consists in making its victim complicit in a denial of their rights and an erasure of who they are. It shares some aims and tactics with Gaslighting, but targets not a person's epistemic capacities but their sense of who they are and their sense of entitlement to conduct themselves as who they really are.

They argue that the target in gaslighting is epistemic, while tightlacing is not. I grant that tightlacing may induce a quicker change in behaviour than gaslighting because its target is behaviour, but I think that it is a mistake to disregard the epistemic dimensions of tightlacing. In their definition, Edlich and Archer (2023, 396) note that tightlacing involves a shift in self-conception, which presumably requires holding some beliefs about oneself and who one is. This means that for a shift in self-conception to occur (even one that is induced by another), there would need to be some change of belief about oneself. I think that this provides good reason to think that tightlacing is an epistemic phenomenon as well.[31]

However, I do think that TP could be conceived of as a method of tightlacing (as well as a tool for gaslighting). One way in which tightlacing works is by making a person believe that they are someone they are not, making them believe that they ought to behave in a way that is more in line with the person they are made to think that they are, rather than in line with who they really are. TP, as I have described it, seems to do just this. Just by virtue of living in a society in which optimism is so prized can make one believe that they ought to feel positive and optimistic all the time and that anything less is a failure of character. This, as Edlich and Archer's definition suggests, induces in a person a false self-conception of who they are (or at least who they ought to be). When a person expresses their appropriate negative emotions and is offered a toxically positive response, as occurs in *Grief*, this may cause a person to think that they are falling short of who they ought to be for experiencing negative emotions at all. So, a false self-conception has been introduced in the victim and so, licences the demand that the victim not feel negative emotions, or at the very least not express them. In this case, the victim will change their behaviour (perhaps by not expressing negative emotions, or maybe even suppressing them, which as I argued in Section 2.2.4. can have devastating effects) to suit this false self-conception that is pressed on them by the perpetrator. Thus, the behavioural change that is wrought in the victim of TP shows them to have been successfully tightlaced. Thus, while I think that TP can be considered tightlacing (and this could make an interesting and fruitful avenue for future work), I also think it can be used as a tool for gaslighting since it interferes directly with beliefs and perceptions that can cause a victim to lose self-trust and doubt their grip on reality (which is the aim of gaslighting).

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[31]I do not have the space to fully defend this claim here. The point I want to make is that to ignore or exclude engagement with what seems to me to be a very plausible connection with one's beliefs about oneself, at best offers an incomplete theorisation of tightlacing.

4.2. Undermining epistemic agency

Before I begin to explain why I think that TP undermines epistemic agency, I will explain why the undermining of epistemic agency is an injustice. As epistemic agents, we are part of epistemic communities in which we are able to both give and receive knowledge and within these epistemic communities, because we are able to give and receive knowledge from other members of the community, we have a kind of epistemic personhood conferred upon us (Lackey 2022, 70). So, when a person's ability to give or receive knowledge in an epistemic community is undermined, their epistemic personhood is undermined and so an injustice is committed against them. This means that anything that unfairly undermines the epistemic agency of a person can be considered an epistemic injustice because the victim is prevented from participating in their epistemic communities, which harms them as a knower. In the remainder of this subsection, I will briefly discuss what I take epistemic agency to be and why I think that TP undermines epistemic agency.

In the context of TP, I will think of epistemic agency in very broad terms. One such conception is put forward by Amandine Catala (2025, 23), where she thinks of epistemic agency as anything that affects an agent's 'ability to produce, convey, or use knowledge'. This definition hangs well with Lackey's (2022, 70) notion of epistemic agency. I think that TP does undermine an epistemic agent in regard to producing and conveying knowledge, and possibly most of all in the agent's ability to use knowledge. Alison Jaggar (1989, 169) argues that appropriate emotions have great epistemic value because they can help us to form reliable knowledge, and I have argued that belief that is constitutive emotion is undermined. If we put these two claims together, we might come to conclude that in undermining the belief that is constitutive of the emotion in cases where the emotion is in fact appropriate, one undermines the epistemic value that the appropriate emotion may have in forming and using knowledge that may be based off this emotion. So, in this way, by undermining the belief that an emotion is appropriate, TP can undermine the victim's epistemic agency preventing the victim from holding knowledge to which they should also have a claim. Furthermore, in Catala and Lackey's views, TP can directly undermine knowledge by preventing the victim from even expressing their appropriate emotions, effectively preventing them from being the givers/conveyors of knowledge in their communities. This is clearly the case when a victim of TP is dismissed. At this point, when the victim realises that their interlocutor is either not paying attention to them or they have been directly cut off, the victim will likely cease their expression of emotion resulting in the perpetrator of TP being unable to receive the knowledge about the victim's experience that they are trying to give. Being prevented from being a giver of knowledge, especially when transmitting knowledge about true beliefs, one is wronged as a knower because one is not able to participate in the epistemic community and is thus denied a part of one's epistemic personhood.

Another definition of epistemic agency that is narrower, but still relevant, is put forward by Dustin Olson (2015) which specifically pertains to one's belief-forming practices. For him, epistemic agency is 'the agency one has over one's belief-forming practices, which will directly affect the way in which one forms belief and indirectly affects the beliefs one forms' (Olson 2015, 451). This definition, while not as broad as Catala's or Lackey's, also seems to be relevant in the context of TP. I argued in Section 3, that TP can affect how we form beliefs by making us think that our beliefs (especially those in regard to appraisal of a situation) are inappropriate and thus need revision. This could plausibly cause us to doubt whether our beliefs were properly formed, thus calling into question our belief-forming practices. In this way, it seems to me that TP, by calling into doubt our belief-forming practices, undermines one's epistemic agency understood

in Olson's sense. Loss of epistemic agency in this sense then would seem to prevent the production and exercise of knowledge that the victim ought to have, thus wronging them as a knower. Therefore, I think that TP can undermine epistemic agency, wronging the victim and so committing an epistemic injustice against them.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that TP is a source of epistemic injustice. In Section 2, I offered a conceptualisation of TP. I provided an example, one of TP (*Grief*). Using this as a base, I identified four characteristics of TP: 1) appropriate emotion, 2) unreasonableness, 3) dismissal, and 4) potential harm. In Section 3, I considered how TP might affect knowledge. I identified the belief that TP targets as being the belief that situation X is Y. I then explained three ways that TP could undermine this belief, specifically that one might doubt the belief causing it to lose its status as knowledge, one might lose the belief entirely and one might lose self-trust affecting one's ability to form any knowledge at all. In Section 4, I argued that TP could be considered a source of epistemic injustice, especially when considered in the context of gaslighting and epistemic agency. I considered TP in the context of epistemic gaslighting in particular. I also briefly engaged with Edlich and Archer's (2023) notion of tightlacing to show that there may be more of an epistemic dimension to tightlacing than they suggest, and to show that, on their account, TP could be used to tightlace a victim. Finally, I argued that TP undermines epistemic agency because it prevents the formation, sharing and exercise of knowledge.

The issue of TP is, at present, very underexplored philosophically speaking. As such, I anticipate that there could be much fruitful work that could stem from thinking about it. Beyond conceptualising the phenomenon of TP at a deeper level, one could explore the other dimensions of TP, including the moral and the social. One might also consider how TP could be self-directed, untargeted, or perpetrated by groups. It is my sincerest hope that there be more work done on this topic, not only for the sake of academic interest but also for practical reasons relating to raising awareness around and combatting TP.

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