

Ami Harbin
Disorientation and Moral Life
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The closing lines of Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* are famous: "You must go on. I can't go on. I'll go on." But how does one go on, when one doesn't know how? That is the focus of Ami Harbin's admirable *Disorientation and Moral Life*. The book demands that we attend to a feature of ordinary human lives curiously neglected by moral theory. Most of us will eventually find ourselves in a situation that staggers our normal expectations: a serious illness, the end of a career, the realization that we are the target of oppression. Harbin asks us to think carefully about these situations, and especially to see how they might be harnessed to contribute positively to our moral choices.

Disorientations are "temporally extended, major life experiences that make it difficult for individuals to know how to go on" (2). They can arise suddenly and acutely, as from the death of one's partner. Or they can be pervasive features of the lives of people taken not to fit in with oppressive social norms, as for many queer people and people of color. Disorientation is obviously not an intrinsically positive experience: disoriented people feel "out of place, uncomfortable, uneasy, and unsettled" (xi). Often, "it seems impossible that life will go on" (3). But in some cases, Harbin argues, we can salvage a type of value from this unavoidable pain. Perhaps disorientation can make us better able to recognize and respond appropriately to social injustice.

The book is sensibly structured. Each chapter introduces a central thesis or distinction, then illustrates with examples drawn from the lives of real people. The first chapter gives an overview of the concept of disorientation, linking it to related projects in historical and contemporary philosophy. Harbin stresses that specific cases of disorientation are linked by a Wittgensteinian family resemblance, rather than by easily expressed logical conditions.

The project of the second chapter is negative: Harbin identifies and challenges an implicit commitment of existing moral psychology, which she calls "resolvism." This is the view that an agent is properly morally motivated only when she possesses moral resolve, "a combination of knowing what to do, feeling able to do it, and successfully carrying out the required action" (37). If resolvism is right, then disoriented people cannot be properly morally motivated, since they do

not know what to do and will not feel confident about their choices. Showing the value of disorientation (in later chapters) will be part of Harbin's argument for denying resolvism. First she softens the ground by pointing out that resolvism has difficulty explaining our sense that we *can* be properly morally motivated even in circumstances that are bewildering, such as when struggling to best help a friend recently diagnosed with a terminal illness.

Chapter 3 begins to sketch the valuable aspects of disorientation, focusing on its epistemic dimension. According to Harbin, being disoriented can help us "gain *new awareness* in politically and morally important ways, even when they still do not prompt moral resolve" (66). For example, people are often disoriented when they recognize their place in systems of racial oppression. Harbin considers Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness" (the awareness of oneself as both a fully valuable person, but also through the denigrating eyes of a racist society), as well as the shocking realization by whites of their own benefit from privilege ("white ambush," in George Yancy's phrase). She is aware, of course, that these are not equally painful experiences, but they both involve a destabilization in one's sense of self, brought about by suddenly encountering realities of oppression. Because these discoveries implicate one's entire social environment, their consequences are not easily contained or even described. Harbin writes:

Unlike experiences that uproot one particular belief and transplant another in its place, the disorientation of consciousness-raising . . . reverberate[s] beyond whatever specific facts were being challenged. The effects of such disorientations are open-ended. They do not delimit how much of one's understanding may be shaken, or how much awareness will be gained. (83)

Disorientation, then, can be valuable when it enables us to newly understand social structures in ways that are not easily captured in discrete propositions. Further, disorientation may facilitate appreciation of the complexity of the task of social justice, and an accurate view of one's power to affect it: "Having an awareness of myself as more epistemically frail or flexible than I might have thought can be an important part of awareness about my position in complex social relations" (91).

Chapter 4 shifts from an epistemic focus to what Harbin calls "tenderizing effects." Experiencing disorientation can enable us to develop "capacities for *sensing vulnerability*--both one's own and that of others" (102). It helps us learn how to live without being prepared for every eventuality; a person who has experienced disorientation may later be "less emotionally attached to an assumption that they could or should be able to control or plan for any eventuality" (105). When disorientation results from confronting oppression, it may develop "capacities for in-this-togetherness" with other victims (112).

The chapter also makes a helpful distinction between two types of disorientation. First is "disorientation of interruption," which comes from a sudden change or disruption in life circumstances, as from the death of a partner or devastating house fire. Then there is "disorientation of ill fit," which comes from the recognition of one's place in social oppression, especially one's derogation by oppressive norms. Put somewhat simply, the former sort of disorientation is related to a discrete event and is about what happens to you; the latter sort is

related to a pervasive social context and is about who you are. Harbin argues that both types of disorientation can be valuable in weakening an ideology of self-reliance opposed to solidarity:

[H]abits of ignoring, assuming, practicing, and going-along-with correspond to the expectation that I and others will take care of ourselves, that I should act as though I am in control, that I am alone in facing harms, and that it is okay to go-with-the-flow of norms. Such habits and expectations are morally and politically devastating. (119)

The fifth chapter explores "irresolute action" in the pursuit of social justice. Harbin argues that the distinctive characteristics of disorientation--not knowing what to do and not feeling confident in one's choices--make it well suited to complex social change. Sometimes "working for justice . . . requires responding to conflicting calls to action" (135), or weakening "the expectation that one's own judgment is likely to be the best" (142), or recognizing that "there is no formula to follow for meeting everyone's needs, and perhaps not even a clear sense of all the needs to begin with" (147). If this is right, then we may have an obligation to create "hospitable" conditions for those experiencing disorientation (161), "interpreting" rather than "dismissing" their experiences (156). This leads to Harbin's strongest prescriptive claims:

The extent to which disorientations can benefit agency depends in part on the ways disoriented people are responded to in communities. As such, we may have a moral obligation to respond to the presence of disorientation in our own and others' lives in ways that facilitate their beneficial effects and a further responsibility to create social conditions that support rather than alienate or harm individuals who are disoriented. (154)

Finally, chapter 6 focuses on responsibilities to ourselves "to identify as disorientable" (171). According to Harbin, we should cultivate habits of mind that make us open to disorientation when it finds us, because of the above morally salutary effects. Important to note is that she does not suggest that we should actively seek out disorientation, since it so often accompanies seriously harmful events. The claim is "just about a responsibility to position oneself in a particular way toward the disorientations that one does not choose" (173).

One of the strengths of this book is its consistent use of real-world examples. Harbin avoids the philosopher's tic of conjuring fantastic set-pieces to pump intuitions. Her examples draw on first-personal writing, from the memoir of a woman who lost her family in the 2004 Asian tsunami, to narratives of LGBT people responding to homophobia, to accounts of community efforts to rebuild the institutions of post-industrial Detroit. These are well-chosen and presented in a thoughtful and engaging interplay with theoretical argument. Most important, they underscore the book's central message: there remain forms of vast injustice in our actual world, not merely in philosophical stories, and attention to that actual world draws us to realize the insufficiency of moral resolve for capturing all that a good person will aim to do.

Parts of the book could be better developed. The most important is Harbin's distinction between "disorientations of interruption" (for example, a partner's sudden death) and "disorientations of ill fit" (for example, life as a queer person or person of color amid oppressive social norms). This is a crucial distinction, which I began wondering about early and was frustrated not to see

acknowledged until more than halfway through the book. I understand why Harbin downplayed the distinction, as she wishes to focus on the common "tenderizing" effects of both types. But I think it would have been helpful to spend more time exploring the differences between the two. I'll use some of my space here to do that.

As the name suggests, disorientations of interruption are temporally defined and involve a change in circumstances: today you are healthy but tomorrow, suddenly, you are quite ill, and the adjustment leaves you disoriented. This may be true even when your new situation is not itself intrinsically bad. Elizabeth Barnes points out that *becoming* disabled can be a harm because it involves "transition costs," even if *being* disabled is not in itself a bad thing (Barnes 2016). Years later, a person with an acquired disability may be fully satisfied with their life, such that they would not prefer reversion to their previous condition. Yet they may still look back on the event that created the disability as a troubling time of disorientation.

By contrast, disorientations of ill fit needn't be linked to a specific event or change. A person of color who lives her entire life in a racially oppressive society may be aware, from her earliest memories, of how she is perceived by members of the dominant group. Her realization that she is perceived not to fit to norms can be a pervasive feature of her life, not something that dawns upon her in a moment of clarity. Of course, some people *do* have such dawning moments (Harbin quotes from Du Bois's own) but this is not a necessary feature of disorientation of fit.

One way in which the distinction matters is in clarifying the relationship between disorientation and other types of personal change. Consider Laurie Paul's concept of "transformative experience" (Paul 2014), a type of experience that changes one's beliefs or values so thoroughly that one cannot reliably evaluate its personal significance beforehand. This is not the same as disorientation, since disorientation involves not knowing what to do, whereas a transformative experience may leave one with very firm, albeit new, convictions. But it's also clear that in many cases a person *undergoing* a transformative experience will suffer disorientation of interruption. Further, it might be that *after* a transformative experience, some people experience disorientation of ill fit. Harbin does not discuss Paul's work (understandably, since it was likely published after much of this book was written). But it would be easier to see how these connections work if we had a clearer limning of the distinction between the types of disorientation.

Perhaps more important, the distinction plays a key role in something Harbin mostly does not discuss: the conditions under which we *can* appropriately demand moral resolve from others, and indeed are right to blame them if it is lacking. For example, a person who evinces uncertainty about the criminal prosecution of homosexuality is a person appropriately targeted with moral disdain. I don't think Harbin would disagree, but my point is that the book could benefit from sustained consideration of the thought. Harbin rightly stresses the limitations of resolvism, but some very interesting and difficult questions remain about expecting resolute solidarity from others, especially in contexts of social oppression. When is disorientation an exculpatory condition for otherwise blameworthy failure of moral resolve? When is it not? I think that the interruption/ill fit distinction can play a role in starting to answer these questions.

As an example, consider those LGBT people in North America and Europe who have recently joined campaigns against Muslim migration on the grounds that Islam is hostile to queer life.

There is some room for irresolution here; there are real complexities about what social justice requires in balancing legal protections for minority communities. But I take it that we should *not* lack resolution about the basic matter of whether Muslims deserve to be permitted fundamental rights of citizenship. And yet some LGBT people espouse uncertainty on this point, citing their experiences of homophobia as their reason. I do not think we should let these people off the hook: they can be faulted for their irresolute motivation on this point, even though it results from a disorientation of ill fit.

Now imagine a similar case, instead involving disorientation of interruption: an individual has very recently suffered the death of his partner of many years, and in the immediate aftermath admits a weakening in many of his convictions, including the belief that Muslim migrants should be welcomed. It seems clear to me that this person's lack of resolution is excusable (though of course not admirable). We must make some allowances for a person who has just suffered destabilizing trauma; his failure to be resolute may have more to do with his circumstances than the quality of his will. By contrast, I do not think such excuses apply to LGBT people who, on the basis of long-standing disorientation of ill fit, fail to resolutely support Muslims facing oppression. If I'm right about this, then the comparison shows why the interruption/ill fit distinction deserves more discussion: it can help to guide our assessment of failures of moral resolve.

Of course, it should be obvious that my ability to frame this point depends upon having Harbin's conceptual tools. This alone shows the value of the book in drawing our attention to a real and important phenomenon. Disorientation is a part of many human lives, and in highlighting its capacity to foster moral improvement, Harbin has done a good thing for both ethical theory and the pursuit of social justice.

References

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