Disoriented Life: A Review of Ami Harbin, Disorientation and Moral Life

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Abstract

      This article reviews Ami Harbin's recent book, *Disorientation and Moral Life* (Oxford University Press, 2016). It summarizes and affirms the book's attention to the moral and political significance of moments of disorientation, moments in which people lack certainty regarding what to do, how to do it, or both. It also suggests two ways in which the book's analysis could be extended, including an exploration of more extensive and systemically produced disorientations.

Keywords: moral philosophy

      Disorientation and Moral Life is an engaging and provocative exploration of the personal and systemic relationships that bind us to each other. Its core aim, as Harbin explains, is to illuminate, theorize, and appreciate a moral terrain that lies beyond the boundaries of actions characterized by "moral resolve." Moral resolve is Harbin's term for the dominant characteristic of the kinds of actions that have most often interested moral philosophy. These are actions in which people "know what to do" and "how to do it" (41). They are also actions in which people "have confidence" (41) about the action they are taking and/or about oneself as a moral agent. The central premise of *Disorientation* is that something morally and politically valuable can emerge before, after, and outside these moments of moral resolve. To make sense of these other moments, Harbin introduces the concept of disorientation to refer to "temporally extended, major life experiences that make it difficult for individuals to know how to go on" (2), and she reflects deeply, imaginatively, and always precisely on the moral processes that can occur in these particular experiences of disorientation.

      Harbin's project is precisely defined, and it is important to register what she is, and is not, trying to theorize. Disorientation, for Harbin, does not refer to spectacular moments of losing one's direction or losing oneself, moments like visiting a foreign country or experiencing a spectacular shift in consciousness (e.g., by taking drugs). Disorientations, Harbin insists, are ubiquitous in life, they are often mundane, they are seldom brief, and they are mostly unchosen. The moral importance

of disorientations, meanwhile, is not restricted to the possibilities they can create for new ways of thinking and acting. Disorientations may create new possibilities by clearing away old assumptions and goals and making way for new ones, but that's not their only value. Significant moral processes, Harbin explains, can happen before, or in the absence of, some new moral orientation.

The import of *Disorientations* lies, in part, in its naming of disorientation as a potentially valuable experience, rather than an interval between potentially valuable experiences. It also lies, however, in the many examples of morally beneficial, disoriented processes that the author brings up and thinks through. One such example involves a white person recognizing a particular way that racial norms structure their life and, as a result, coming to know these norms better—coming to know the norms, that is, without the certainty of knowing them completely and without necessarily knowing how to act in relation to them. Another example involves a person experiencing the debilitation of illness, trauma, or migration. This experience might help the person to develop a richer sensitivity to the vulnerabilities that shape all of our lives and that shape some lives, due to structures of oppression, much more than others.

For me, the book's most important effect is to make it more possible to dwell in moments of disorientation, moments when one does not fully know how to act. The book does this, in part, by encouraging attention to what else is happening in these moments besides a kind of moral stasis, a kind of value-less interval between resolute and decisive actions that may feel like it needs to be overcome as quickly as possible. Reading the book brought to mind a whole series of disorientations in my own life that I found perplexing at the time, and that I continue to find perplexing because I continue to not know what the right action would have been.

One of these incidents occurred in a reading group that I co-facilitate, which focuses on Black critical scholarship. Nearly all of the group's members are Black students (usually graduate students); I'm often the only white person and the only professor present. In a recent meeting, the discussion of a particular text verged into a quite wide-ranging, insightful, and (I think) important criticism of white people. I didn't participate in this part of the discussion and, probably for this reason, a student turned to me at one point and said, "Sorry, Ted."

This kind of thing has occurred in my life before, but the repetition of the experience hasn't taught me how to respond with moral certainty. The possible responses that have come to my mind over the years are wide-ranging, from signaling my agreement with what people are saying ("That's okay; everything you're saying is true") to signaling my social or emotion distance from what people are saying ("It's okay; I'm not taking this personally"). What makes responding to this difficult, for me, is that any response that I have thus far imagined either (a) makes the discussion more difficult for others (by showing that this criticism does implicate me and

does make me feel uncomfortable, even as I think it's valid and necessary) or (b) positions me as the "good white person" (by suggesting that the criticism applies to white people in general, but not to me, or that it does apply to me, but that I can endure it).

The absence of a fully appropriate response in this context brings to mind the advice of African American activist Maurice Mitchell to the many white anti-racists who sought to support the Ferguson uprising when it began in 2014. "Your anxiety about getting it right," he said, "has nothing to do with Black liberation" (cited in Crass 2015). When "getting it right" is either impossible or unnecessary, Harbin's book has much to offer. Thinking about my experience in the reading group, for example, I notice something more about the pushes and pulls of white self-identification, including the tricky ways that white people's necessary criticism of whiteness, white actions, or white supremacy can unwittingly perform a kind of dis-identification with whiteness—an implicit suggestion that the problem lies elsewhere, among other white people. Noticing this problem does not produce a sure framework for future action, but it does seem essential to the ongoing practice of what Harbin, following Sue Campbell, calls "resistant identification" with privileged group membership, which is to say, being accountable for one's membership in a social group that exists only as part of a structure of domination that one is struggling against (see Nopper 2003).

The moments that I found most compelling in the book were ones like this: moments where none of the conceivable actions can be taken with certainty, incontrovertibly. It was the same kind of moments that I found most interesting when the book touches on political actions. One example of this kind is political action in which various incommensurable kinds of actions are possible, but it is hard to choose just one. One may face a choice, for instance, between political actions that seek to improve conditions in prisons versus actions that seek to abolish the prison system entirely. These two kinds of actions are incommensurable, but it hard to rule out either one. Another example is political action where the ultimate goal is not yet articulable. Community organizing in postindustrial cities like Detroit, Harbin argues, can take this form. Harbin labels this kind of work, following Scott Kurashige, "building without blueprints." This kind of work entails a productive, sustained disorientation. It requires one to act, without a precise sense of where one is headed or the exact steps that would carry one there. The absence of a clear blueprint, in this context, is not a limitation, but the condition of real social transformation.

This is another part of the book that I found helpful and, in fact, I think it's possibly more helpful than Harbin claims. Reading the book caused me to search my memory for political actions that didn't fall into the disorienting framework that Harbin theorizes. The one action that came to mind was my involvement in the 2012 Quebec student movement. This involvement, for me, entailed no great quandary,

no disorientation. What I needed to do, and what I knew I needed to do, was simply to support the students in any way I could. The entire student movement could potentially be seen in similar terms. In contrast to a political project like prison abolition, which can scarcely imagine the world that it is trying to create, the student movement was directed toward a fairly straightforward and easily imaginable outcome: the cancellation of a major tuition increase that the Quebec Liberal government had planned to institute. And yet, for those intimately involved in the movement, there were countless moments of disorientation, moments where decisions needed to be made about tactics, strategy, alliances, actions, messaging, deliberation, consensus making, and so on. In these moments, no clear decision-making framework existed, and the advice of the institutionalized Left in Quebec (far too complacent and conservative) could not be fully trusted. These moments, though they are reminiscent of those discussed in Harbin's book, may suggest the need for a modest expansion or revision of her conception of disorientation.

Two specific questions seem to require attention. First, is it possible that disorientation in politics is a matter not just of the *kind* of struggle, but of the kind of *position* one occupies within the struggle (mine versus the students)? Second, are there cases in which one can commit resolutely toward a goal (and, thus, know where one is trying to go) but still experience all kinds of disorientations in the pursuit of that goal? To the extent that the answer to either of these questions is yes, then there is some work to do in exploring what's politically valuable in these other moments. These could be moments that, while lying outside of Harbin's present definition of disorientation, could be brought productively within the latter. In any case, *Disorientations* makes it possible to frame and explore these additional political issues and, thus, invites further work on the politics of disorientations.

In addition to moments like these, there are other moments that I think fit within Harbin's present definition of disorientation, but that could actually be more disorienting than the book suggests. Concretely, reading the book caused me to think about the political contexts discussed by certain Black scholars. Frantz Fanon (1986), for example, evokes a particularly vexed situation in his famous essay, "The Lived Experience of the Black." The essay moves dialectically toward the final paragraph, in which Fanon finally pinpoints the situation of the Black subject: a situation in which this subject can neither fully affirm its blackness (in an oppressive, anti-Black society) nor transcend this racial position (through organized struggle) to attain a universal class position. Fanon, locating himself in this situation, writes of himself "straddling infinity and nothingness," a vexed situation that, when contemplated, causes him "to weep" (140).

The context depicted by Fanon is certainly one of disorientation. However, it does not seem to be defined by the subject facing a pair of incommensurable actions that, in the end, must *both* be chosen (a situation that calls for what Harbin,

following Chris Dixon, terms "both/and" decisions). It seems to be a context, instead, in which the subject faces *no* action that can, with assuredness, be taken (a situation that, it could be said, calls for "neither/nor" decisions).

A similar predicament is sketched, more recently, in Christina Sharpe's 2016 book, *In the Wake*. Sharpe's book clearly aims to make sense of a kind of impossibility—the ongoing disaster opened up for Black people by transatlantic slavery. This impossibility, for Sharpe, lies in the paradoxical fact that "the ongoing state-sanctioned legal and extralegal murders of Black people are normative and, for this so-called democracy, necessary" (7). The major consequence of this situation is that all of the concepts that one might use to articulate political action lie within this "democracy" and therefore cement Black subjection and premature death rather than promising freedom. The list of these concepts is long; it includes justice, freedom, agency, progress, equality, and empowerment. As Sharpe explains, these concepts have been fully compatible with, and contingent upon, the ongoing production of their opposite condition for Black people. The concepts, she concludes, produce and require Black exclusion, subjection, and death as normative.

If one accepts Sharpe's claims, then political action for Black people—and simply *existing* as Black people—may call for a way of living amid the absence of tenable political action and the inconceivability of political change. This kind of living is what Sharpe calls "wake work," and she describes it in terms that align with Harbin's book. Sharpe's core question in the book is the following: "How . . . might [we] begin to live in relation to this requirement for our death[?] . . . What happens when we proceed *as if* we *know* this . . . to be the ground on which we stand, the ground from which we attempt to speak, for instance, of an 'I' or a 'we' who know[?]" (7). Implied in wake work, then, is a particular relation to knowledge. Knowledge, as it is usually conceived, is not possible in the wake. One must live "as if" one knows. Also implied is the belief that something useful happens here, in the wake, in this unending moment in which proper knowledge and resolute action are impossible. Sharpe's premise is that it might be better to develop concepts and ideas to describe this moment than to make recourse to established, surer ideas like freedom, progress, and justice.

Both Fanon and Sharpe, then, point toward a kind of disorientation that Harbin does not discuss, but that could be approached in the same manner as those that she does discuss. It could be useful, then, to consider whether there are political contexts or positions in which even something like a "both/and" action or "building without blueprints" isn't (yet) possible. What kind of subject experiences these contexts (for neither Fanon nor Sharpe is depicting this as a universal experience)? If this experience of disorientation is unique to Black people in the post-1492 world (as Fanon and Sharpe suggest), are there other experiences of disorientation that are specific to other groups? Might disorientation arise more frequently, or more endur-

ingly, for groups experiencing the gravest forms of oppression? To what extent, finally, are scholars like Fanon or Sharpe crafting tools and concepts for a more enduring and structural form of disorientation than the forms described by Harbin—not disoriented moments, but disoriented lives?

The questions above are, in all cases, questions about expansion. They are questions about applying Harbin's work more broadly. This, to me, is the mark of a significant, thought-provoking, and nourishing work. *Disorientation and Moral Life*, in shedding light and value upon usually disregarded moral processes, suggests new ways of thinking about life and new ways of living that life. To the extent that disorientations are ubiquitous (as Harbin claims), then the book is helpful in a great many moments. What comes to the person here is not an answer, and not even guidance really, but rather a kind of companionship that makes it possible to live better in the recurrent stretches of life where one does not know how to go on, but one cannot stay put either. I feel fortunate, in this case, to have Harbin's book at my side, and very grateful that she wrote it.

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