Dislocation and Self-Certainty: Remarks on Disorientation and Moral Life

Cressida J. Heyes
University of Alberta, cheyes@ualberta.ca

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Abstract

This article summarizes Ami Harbin's 2016 monograph, *Disorientation and Moral Life*, which argues that disorientations are an invaluable ethical resource. Harbin offers what she calls a "non-resolvist account of moral agency," in which non-deliberative and non-decisive action has the potential to be just as morally significant as fully thought-through and conclusive decision-making. It then suggests that Harbin's moral method provides a useful way of thinking through political inequities in the discipline of philosophy, and illustrates this with some examples. It highlights three lacunae or possible extensions to the argument: the value but also the complexity of understanding "doubling back" strategies; the ambivalence between psychological and philosophical claims about the value of irresoluteness and the paradoxical nature of being certain of the value of moral uncertainty; and the spatial, temporal, and embodied nature of disorientation.

Keywords: ethics; moral theory; disorientation; virtue; feminist philosophy

The message of Ami Harbin's wonderful book can perhaps be most pithily captured by a quote she herself provides. "Paradoxically," writes Rosi Braidotti, "it is those who have already cracked up a bit, those who have suffered pain and injury, who are better placed to take the lead in the process of ethical transformation" (Harbin 2016, 125). Well said. Harbin's intervention is into certain ethical conventions that tacitly structure the way philosophers think about moral agency and action. Ethics, she points out, tends to treat moral action as decisive, conscious, deliberate, and intentional (126), when in fact "disorientations" (the central concept of the book) can provoke useful ethical insight. Becoming disoriented is, for Harbin, "to lose one's bearings in relation to others, environments, and life projects" (xi);

"*disorientations are experiences that make it difficult to know how to go on*" (13). The kinds of commonplace unmoorings caused by having a child, getting sick, ending a relationship, coming out (or becoming queerer), bereavement, and so on, are not just wobbles on an otherwise straight course toward moral certainty; the very dislocations they provoke have moral value. Disorientations are an invaluable ethical resource: they can make us vulnerable or tender, more aware of structures of injustice. Harbin thus offers what she calls a "non-resolvist account of moral agency," in which non-deliberative and non-decisive action has the potential to be just as morally significant as fully thought-through and conclusive decision-making.

In this context, I understand Harbin's intervention as being part of a larger political project, taking place across radical philosophy but perhaps more convincingly within interdisciplinary social theory coming from literature, cultural studies, or anthropology, in which aspects of our dominant models of the self are deflated. By "our," I mean Western, settler-colonial, white European-descended, bourgeois mostly men, and the stories about the self that are the corresponding cultural background. In these stories—and perhaps especially in their US variants—individuals take control of their lives, using cognitive skill and ethical fortitude to map a path through moral challenge, along the way developing and demonstrating their virtue. Virtuous character traits, as Harbin points out, are "typically understood to be *static* . . . , *enduring* . . . , and *global*," as well as being qualities that individuals deliberately cultivate (31). Being able to successfully develop such traits is clearly facilitated by a normative environment that validates its subject and thereby supports the illusion of integrity. What Harbin calls moral resoluteness is not always a desirable trait, or a marker of virtue, despite its pervasive representation as such. Instead it may reflect a tendency to inflate moral agency and individualize moral responsibility, all the while minimizing the real-world conditions that make particular moral attitudes possible. As she puts it, "The social world is currently such that it does not make real interdependence and a life beyond productivity seem livable. Especially in conditions of austerity, individuals are often inclined to think we are responsible for our own security, to blame for acquired insecurity . . . and in need of privacy above all else" (166–167). Against the impetus to over-value moral certainty, the book defends a politically sensitive ethics that carefully maps out our existing moral habits—"of not responding to vulnerabilities, of assuming preparedness, of practiced individualism, and of the irresistibility of oppressive norms"—while articulating the "importance of sensing vulnerabilities, living unprepared, in-this-togetherness, or living against the grain of norms" (119).

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        This is a hard book to respond to because so much of the work it does consists in shifting the pictures of ethics that have held us captive, rather than in

antagonistic argument against particular positions. Indeed, what makes it so insightful is how often it shows rather than tells, and how it creates novel ethical grammars instead of just countering existing ones. I want to focus my comments around a theme—the politics of philosophy—because I think Harbin's book has a number of insights that could be very useful as we think critically about our own discipline.

First, Harbin has a wonderful description of what she calls "doubling back ethical strategies," which she describes as particularly useful in overcoming implicit bias:

> "Doubling back" action against injustice is not resolute movement toward a goal, but a constant questioning and challenging of unjust tendencies, and cultivating capacities to hear challenges from others. It is irresolute, precisely because it starts from having destabilized the expectation that one's own judgment is likely to be the best. (142)

Doubling back, she argues, is useful in contexts of injustice that share three features: psychological habits one ought not to trust, epistemic uncertainty about the right thing to do, and meta-ethical awareness that a moral situation makes iterative demands rather than inviting moral closure. Doubling back, in other words, entails a refusal to see equity as something to be achieved, once-and-for-all, and insists on the impossibility of ethical closure in the face of continued epistemic humility. I suggest that failures to recognize equity challenges in philosophy share these features, and that doubling back should be an important strategy in the context of a moral community where practices of justification are unusually highly prized. As I have argued myself (Heyes, forthcoming), philosophy exhibits a culture of judgment, in which the ability to articulate and justify a performative certainty about one's own evaluative stance is seen as a marker of ability. Judgments such as that a particular piece of work is "not real philosophy," Kristie Dotson (2012) points out, are primarily concerned with showing how a current exemplar is *unlike* the worthy tradition that precedes it:

> By relying upon a presumably commonly held set of normative, historical precedents, the question of how a given paper is philosophy betrays a value placed on performances and/or narratives of legitimation. Legitimation, here, refers to practices and processes aimed at judging whether some belief, practice, and/or process conforms to accepted standards and patterns, i.e. justifying norms. (5)

Such exercises of legitimation involve lining up philosophical projects (especially projects by scholars whose intellectual approach—or, indeed, their minority status itself—invites *a priori* scepticism) in order to evaluate whether they "fall within the purview of a certain set of commonly held, univocally relevant justifying norms" (Dotson 2012, 8). This is exactly the kind of moral environment in which disorientation could be most provocative, and where an insistence on doubling back could undermine entrenched moral habits that are enabled by privilege. Doubling back here will entail a committed (resolute?) belief in the epistemic value of diversity—the claim familiar from Sandra Harding's work, for example, that knowledge is advanced by the most diverse community of inquiry—and an openness to revising past claims. I remember in the 1990s the incredulity that greeted suggestions that "there should be more women in philosophy." "What could be more sexist?!," men in philosophy departments exclaimed. A good philosopher is a good philosopher regardless of what they have "between their legs" (as a colleague once put it). Many of us white women argued hard against this kind of reductionism, but without a differentiated sense of the forms of femininity and masculinity we were advancing or of the intersectional nature of gender. "Doubling back" has historically meant for many of us returning to those political moments to understand their racial exclusions and to think about how we could have, and can do, better.

Second, relatedly, there is also an interesting problematic threaded through the book about privilege and oppression in the context of disorientation. Embedded in Harbin's argument is the feminist political claim that many cases of disorientation involve people marginal to structures of power: the queer person is disoriented precisely because of the force of heteronormativity, for example (112). Even in cases of disorientation that can happen to anyone at any time—like being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness—the experience of being thrown off track is exacerbated by these structures. Harbin (2016) cites, for example, Audre Lorde's famous account of the sexism and racism she encounters after her breast cancer diagnosis (103–104). Yet she also alludes to examples where those with normative identities are disoriented, referencing George Yancy's concept of "white ambush"—when white people see our previously tacit racism reflected back to us in disconcerting ways (75). Chapter 3 includes a long discussion of the complexity of disorienting experiences in situations where privilege and oppression intersect, including directly in the lives of individuals. Harbin rejects any equivalence between (for example) the disorientation of experiencing racism and that of having one's own racism revealed (76–77). That is, she pulls back from making any kind of claim about whether being unwillingly disturbed out of a normative position is more ethically provocative than being disoriented because of one's own inadvertent failure of normativity, saying

that "awareness" both of "oppressive norms and their contingency" and of "political complexity" (88) can be disorienting and ethically valuable.

I found it hard to sort out the ethical and the epistemic in this nexus of issues. I think Harbin concurs that persistent disorientation due to oppressive norms can be ethically undermining, and, conversely, the ways that refusals of disorientation are enabled by structures of power form a central part of the psychic structure of privilege. She fully recognizes and cites examples of both of these phenomena: the experience of gaslighting of women of colour in professional philosophy (80–81), and the "individual [who] can refuse to think of himself as disorientable" (170). In the first case, disorientation is involuntary and deeply disconcerting. When one is being gaslighted in a philosophy department, one craves moral certainty. We long for our moral perception to be triangulated by others who can confirm our experience. It really is true that feminist graduate students are being overlooked for choice teaching assignments! It really is true that women's contributions to the shared department workload are taken for granted while their research is disparaged! The department chair who calmly insists that his decisions are fair and that he treats colleagues equally, needs to be disoriented. He will likely refuse any voluntary disorientation in favour of moral resoluteness and belief in his own virtue. So here is an ethical asymmetry where (dis)orientation looks differently valuable from each side of the relation. For me this raises the question of how disorientation might be forced upon those who refuse it—an interesting ethical issue that I would like to see Harbin address.

The book is organized around a paradox: lack of moral certainty is ethically valuable, and this claim is itself a moral certainty. Further, there are specific moral certainties that underlie the value of disorientation: that gender normalization constrains human possibility, including within the academy (as I would put it), and that work in philosophy toward "equity" should build on this fact. Harbin, however, doesn't offer a systematic account of which moral claims she accepts as foundational ("women of color in philosophy have been oppressed"?), and which need to be thrown into question ("our philosophy department is doing an excellent job on equity and diversity"?).[2] In a way, this is more an issue in moral psychology than in meta-ethics: more of us should more often recognize that our moral certainty is a product of our privilege, and should allow ourselves to be disoriented in the service of overcoming moral complacency. This seems correct to me, but it still begs the question of how certain we can be about the value of moral irresoluteness in particular contexts. Harbin suggests that "doubling back" (as a key strategy in situations of moral irresoluteness) is useful in three contexts of injustice:

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[2] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for phrasing this objection in a similar way and pushing me to elaborate it.

psychological (having habits that make one less likely to recognize injustice), epistemic (finding it difficult to know when injustice has occurred), and meta-ethical (no obvious state of affairs that would count as justice having been achieved), and it may be that Harbin's analysis is more useful in the first case than in the latter two. That is, we can read her as offering a valuable political-sociological account of how power comes to make people feel overconfident about their moral judgements when they should be more willing to double back, but it is a less convincing philosophical argument for the general value of moral uncertainty. That this is the value of the book is confirmed by my own sense that political change comes from material shifts in power rather than from "awareness." A symposium presenting feminist analysis of subtle practices of harassment and discrimination might have no effect at all on department dynamics. But if gaslighted faculty ask the union to file a grievance and the dean decides to intervene, that is more likely to provoke disorientation—albeit likely not in ways that inspire critical self-reflection. Often the reaction to a materially significant intervention is angry and inchoate—raising the question of whether one must know one is disoriented and/or see the moral value of disorientation for Harbin's account to have ethical purchase.

Thus at some points in the book it is hard to map the fairly commonsense (and tacitly certain) feminist account of privilege and oppression that Harbin mobilizes onto the arguments that she makes about disorientation in moral life. I also think there are outstanding questions about the relation of her work to feminist standpoint theory (which is surprisingly under-referenced). In that tradition (to speak in simplistic Hegelian terms), being the Master brings with it a certain kind of inadvertent ignorance, while being the Slave brings knowledge, including of the Master. That epistemic claim cross-cuts (it seems to me) the ethical intuition about asymmetry in the value of disorientation I just sketched. Subordination brings knowledge: it is the experience of manifest sexism on the academic job market that shows me the easy erasures in the claim made by male graduate student peers that "all departments just want to hire a woman." But the disorientation caused by that sexism need not itself be ethically productive—as Harbin describes. Its value, then, comes importantly in the way it generates "epistemic humility" (91–93). Yet there is something odd about gaining knowledge only to learn epistemic humility—hence the tension between standpoint and moral psychology here.

Finally, third, Harbin explains that her method, in the tradition of naturalized ethics, involves paying close attention to examples and connecting conceptual argument to empirical work in moral psychology. In certain respects, though, her analysis of disorientations is surprisingly separate from the experience of disorientation as temporal, spatial, and embodied. To be *oriented* (in its pre-twentieth century uses) in English implied at the same time an attitude, a direction, and a trajectory. That is, to be oriented is to be located relative to a field (spatial or

semiotic) and along a vector (an orientation suggests not only where I am now, but where I am going in the future). When I am *disoriented*, I have lost my sense of where my body is in space; I don't know in which direction I should go to get back onto my planned trajectory. Harbin (2016) cites the phenomenological tradition that culminates in Sara Ahmed's book *Queer Phenomenology* (8–9), but I think that there is more work to do connecting the deeply affective and somatic experiences of disorientation with the examples of moral uncertainty at the heart of this project. I won't say much about this here—in part because I think this would be an extension of the project rather than an integral part of the work the book achieves. It would be interesting, though, to think about how visceral affective experiences such as disgust, anxiety, or grief are formative of experiences of disorientation, or how disorientation provokes clumsiness, physical and cognitive error, and so on, in ways that can be treated as phenomena of spatiality and temporality—in other words, treated existentially and phenomenologically. Harbin surveys some of these issues in the introduction (6–12) before turning to more analytically inflected moral psychology. I think her analysis in *Disorientation and Moral Life* could usefully be brought back around to this introduction, to reconsider these levels of analysis in light of the work the book does.

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Ami Harbin has written a book that is both extraordinarily intellectually creative and clear-headed. Inspiring us to an account of moral agency more in keeping with the realities of our messy worlds, she has made a major contribution to moral psychology, feminist philosophy, and ethical theory. I have been asked to comment on three books recently in this kind of forum: in addition to *Disorientation and Moral Life*, Karen Houle's (2014) book on abortion, and Ellen Feder's (2014) book on intersex (see Heyes 2016). All three offer brilliantly oblique feminist perspectives on the self-certainties of mainstream ethics. They encourage us to situate ethical thinking in the complexities of everyday moral life and to see ethics as inseparable from contexts of power, and I sincerely hope that they are part of a revolution in philosophy we have yet to see fully unfold.

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CRESSIDA J. HEYES is Professor of Political Science and former Canada Research Chair in Philosophy of Gender and Sexuality at the University of Alberta, Canada. She is the author most recently of "Dead to the World: Rape, Unconsciousness, and Social Media" (*Signs* 2016), and (with J. R. Latham), "Trans Surgeries and Cosmetic Surgeries: The Politics of Analogy" (*Trans Studies Quarterly* 2018). She has authored and edited many other articles and books, most notably *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies* (2007), and copies of many of her publications can be found on cressidaheyes.com.