Feminist Philosophy Quarterly

Volume 4 | Issue 2 Article 6

2018

Response to commentaries on Disorientation and Moral Life

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Abstract

In this response, I address the commentaries of Liat Ben-Moshe, Cressida Heyes, and Ted Rutland. I argue for attention to the disorienting aspects of prison abolition, the use of disorientations in improving the context of academic philosophy, and the importance of moments of disorientation in white anti-racist work and social justice organizing.

Keywords: disorientation, moral psychology, ambivalence, feminist ethics, activism

It is an honor to read and respond to these commentaries, written by theorists who have deeply influenced my thinking. I have found in them a number of important insights, which both elucidate existing aspects of the book and point toward new and distinct directions of thinking. Following a brief overview of the book, I will take up a number of their main points here.

Philosophers have a tendency to understand experiences like disorientations as threats to moral agency. In *Disorientation and Moral Life*, I challenge a history of moral philosophy that I claim has been preoccupied by a focus on the best moral agents as those who are most decisive, wholehearted, and clear about how they ought to act. I give this preoccupation a name, *resolvism*, and argue that because resolvism has informed so much of philosophical ethics and moral psychology, the moral and political promise of disorientations has been difficult to see.

I focus on particular kinds of disorientations, and draw on philosophical, testimonial, and empirical sources to show that in some cases, those disorientations have effects that are morally or politically beneficial. For instance, I show how disorientations of experiencing racism, white privilege, consciousness raising, and critical education in some cases generate awareness of contingent oppressive norms and awareness of political complexity. I argue that even when these kinds of awareness don't help us resolve how to act, they generate epistemic humility, resistant reidentification, and collaborative action, which I argue are morally beneficial given the terrain of moral action within which such capacities are sometimes required. Further, I show how disorientations of illness, trauma, queerness, and migration in some cases generate capacities for living unprepared, sensing vulnerabilities, 'in this togetherness' and for living against the grain of norms. I argue that even when these kinds of capacities not only fail to help agents resolve how to act but also actively compromise

moral resolve, they are morally and politically beneficial because they generate shifted habits and expectations that more accurately reflect and better respond to conditions of unpredictability, vulnerability, and interdependence.

Later in the book, I claim that while many contexts of injustice demand resolute action—action that is purposeful, decisive, confident, and unwavering—not all do. *Irresolute* actions can be called for. I describe three kinds of irresolute actions: both/and actions (giving examples of their usefulness in unjust contexts of heterosexism and mass incarceration); doubling back actions (giving examples of their usefulness in contexts of implicit bias and colonialism); and building without blueprints (giving examples of their usefulness in contexts of postindustrial poverty).

I conclude with a reflection on the responsibilities we have to respond to disorientations. Since disorientations are experienced and expressed by individuals in the midst of relations with others, and since both others' and one's own reactions to one's disorientations can make a difference to how disorientations affect one's life, these reactions to disorientations are morally significant.

Writing a book on disorientations was perhaps most enriching for the ways it brought me into contact with others' complex experiences. I discovered in the process of writing that it was rare to find people who could not identify periods of disorientation in their own lives; discussions of disorientation are often disarming. The commentaries included here highlight, among other things, each author's take on the kinds of disorientations that stand out in their own experience, work, and activism. Some are similar to disorientations I address in the book, others are completely new.

Liat Ben-Moshe's commentary raises a number of interesting and instructive points about disorientations' promise in political contexts. In particular, her comments focus on how disorientations might be useful in the context of prison abolition, which is addressed extensively in her own work elsewhere.

Ben-Moshe considers the importance of epistemic humility as a crucial aspect of radical political action. As she suggests, not knowing what to do can be a powerful basis for coalition-building and sustaining social movements. She applies this in the context of prison abolition, claiming that in fact prison abolition is *a particular epistemic position*. On her view, abolition is both a counter-knowing (countering the idea that people must be segregated in the name of safety), and something that produces specific *forms* of knowledge (a new way of letting go of attachment to the idea that anyone has a certain formula for how to rid ourselves of carceral social relations). Ben-Moshe suggests that abolition invites us to "abandon our attachment to definitive types of knowing and especially to knowing all" (2018, 5), as I have also claimed is integral to many processes of disorientation. This is a very interesting and fruitful analysis of prison abolition, and one which I think opens up exciting new paths for abolitionist theory.

One of the main critiques of abolition I note in philosophical discussions stems from an inability to know what a future without prisons would look like. Without a clear vision of how an abolitionist future could be designed and attained, even those who are friendly toward the idea of abolition seem to hesitate, and worry that it is not a viable option. Ben-Moshe shows that the uncertainty central to these worries is in fact *integral* to a promising abolitionist view. Abolitionism involves, on her view, letting go of the idea that we could know how to rid ourselves of carceral logics. This resonates with how I have responded to criticisms of disorientation in philosophical contexts. That is, one might criticize the disoriented agent for not knowing how to go on, or for not being able to resolve how to act. Such inabilities would seem to indicate moral weakness or incapacity. But I have argued that such an inability to resolve how to act is consistent with the potential beneficial effects of disorientations. Both forms of criticism—that is, the idea that abolitionist politics could only be promising if we knew exactly how to enact them, and the idea that disorientations could only be promising if we became reoriented by them—evince an underlying preference for control that is not merited in all ethical/political contexts. We do not yet know how to live beyond prisons, and we do not always know how to go on when disoriented. As the book suggests, feigning certainty in such contexts would be a waste of energy and opportunity.

Cressida Heyes's commentary offers further applications of the view, as well as expansions and correctives. As Heyes notes, the book joins a literature within and beyond philosophy that aims to challenge the idea of moral selves as self-controlled, virtuous, and resolute. As summarized above, part of the project is not only to consider the effects of disorientations on the lives of moral agents, but also to propose a view of the importance of irresolute moral action in some contexts. One of the examples of irresolute action considered is 'doubling back,' envisioned as a retreading of the ground over and over, in order to question and challenge unjust practices that might otherwise go unnoticed. I claim that 'doubling back' actions might be particularly useful in unjust contexts of implicit bias and colonialism. Heyes suggests that doubling back actions might be further useful in the unjust context of academic philosophy, where only some philosophical projects (and thereby, philosophers) are treated as legitimate (to the extent that they align with existing norms and precedents) while others are judged 'not real philosophy/philosophers.' I agree that doubling back might be usefully practiced in such cases, especially given that such judgments are often seemingly learned and practiced by philosophers to the point of becoming deeply seated habits, and are bound up with any given philosopher's own desire to be recognized as legitimate, thereby becoming difficult to even recognize as *judgments*. Unsurprisingly, a practical challenge in making use of doubling back actions in the context of professional philosophy will be the potential of philosophers to feel assured in our clarity of thought and reason (i.e., *if I*

judge some work to be not real philosophy, I can certainly give an argument for why it is so), and to feel critical, at a meta-level, of such an indefinite, unsatisfying approach to action (i.e., *why must we retread ground, instead of more straightforwardly perceiving, uprooting, and replacing any mistaken judgments?*). In other words, philosophers (and others) who pride themselves on a belief that their own cognitive lives are ones to which they always have direct and uncomplicated access might be suspicious of any moral strategy that suggests more ongoing, repeated self-investigation and correction might be needed. Thankfully, such a belief is not a necessary feature of philosophical life.

Heyes raises a related point in her discussion of differences in the disorientations faced by oppressed individuals (e.g., the disorientation of being gaslighted as a woman of color in philosophy), as compared to those faced by more privileged individuals (e.g., a department chair who refuses to be disoriented by a charge of biased treatment of colleagues and students). Heyes considers whether the department chair might be forced to experience disorientation, in order to raise awareness of their own harmful biases. This raises the question: can and should disorientations be forced on those who refuse them? Throughout the book, I focus only on disorientations that occur without being forced on individuals—as I say, disorientations occur often enough without individuals actively looking for them or deliberately bringing them about. But I also claim that, given that how we respond to our own and others' disorientations can affect whether and how disorientations affect us, individuals have a responsibility to respond to themselves as disorientable. So refusals of disorientations of the kind described become issues of irresponsibility. The imagined department chair's refusal to be shaken from their orientation (i.e., the refusal to be affected by the charge of bias, and to have their confidence shaken by it) means that the harms of the bias go unrecognized and unrepaired. In such cases of moral failure, there is the question of whether disorientation should be forced in some way. Two responses seem relevant here: first, I claim throughout the book that it is not always, or typically, up to an agent whether she will be disoriented or not. Agents are fundamentally disorientable—even if one is not disoriented by one thing (e.g., a charge of bias), one still might be disoriented by other things (e.g., being diagnosed with an illness, or facing grief), and disorientations can have morally beneficial effects beyond just the realm within which they occur—the tenderizing effects of disorientation in one's personal life may have beneficial effects in one's professional life. Second, even if we could agree upon contexts where they ought to be, I am not sure disorientations *can be* successfully forced in all cases, in order to bring about the desired results. In some cases, though the process of disorientation might yield better results, perhaps through generating the kind of humility and awareness that could prevent similar harms in the future, it might be that agents can successfully refuse forced

disorientations. The harms of their behavior must then be corrected in some other way (e.g., their judgments overridden, or their powers limited or revoked).

Ted Rutland's commentary helpfully highlights moments where disorientations come up in contexts of political organizing, and in particular in activism in response to racialized displacement and austerity. Rutland raises one case of not-knowing what would constitute right action, in the context of being a white participant in a reading group focused on Black critical scholarship. As the only white person present, Rutland describes how, in a conversation raising multiple criticisms of white people, another participant turned to him and apologized—as in, "Sorry for how these criticisms must feel, Ted," or "Sorry to single you out." In such a context, Rutland describes not knowing how to respond, whether to signal agreement with the criticism ("Everything you're saying is true about white people, including me") or to signal distance ("Don't worry, I'm not taking this personally"). He notes that, even as he still does not know how to respond, it is possible to identify potentially beneficial aspects of such a non-knowing: he is made not-in-control, as there is no way to regain power over the situation, or to ensure that he feels in charge of how others view and describe him. As a white participant, he is made not-in-control by a criticism of precisely his participation in a legacy of being most powerful. I see this as a subtle and important kind of disorientation—it would seem particularly important to not attempt to resolve the issue and regain control, but instead to allow for the discomfort and speechlessness that signals one's powerlessness within the situation.

The other case from Rutland's comments, of being a participant in political actions that are *not* experienced as disorienting, is equally compelling. Rutland describes his own involvement as a university faculty member in the 2012 Quebec student movement. As he says, his participation involved no disorientation. The goal of the movement was clear (cancel the planned tuition increase), as was his role in the movement (support the students in any way he could). And yet, he notes, for the student organizers, there were plenty of moments of disorientation. This raises three questions, according to Rutland. First, does one's position with respect to some context/action make one more or less likely to be disoriented by it? Second, is it possible to be resolute towards some goal while still disoriented within the process of working toward that goal? And third, are there political contexts where no action can be taken with sureness? To all three questions, the answer seems to be yes. To the first question, the student movement example does a great job of showing how closer proximity to the center of organizing/decision-making can make one more likely to feel disoriented by it. Note that this may unfortunately compound tendencies for some to want to distance themselves from the core of organizing: to the extent that activism is envisioned as chiefly an empowering, clarifying experience, individuals might be dissuaded from participating, or may

believe themselves to be doing it wrong, the more they are disoriented by the work. Preventing this dissonance is one good reason to work to reframe assumptions about, and accounts of, what activism feels like: even very worthwhile and vital efforts do not always feel clear or empowering. To the second question, while there do seem to be some contexts where the goal itself is not clear, there are others where the goal is more clear without thereby making all steps in the process of organizing clear. And finally, yes, it seems there are some contexts where no action can be taken with certainty. As Rutland describes, there are political contexts in which something like a both/and action or building without blueprints is not (yet) possible. He gives Fanon's example of how the Black subject can neither affirm his Blackness, nor transcend it, and points to Christina Sharpe's point about the impossibility of confronting the violence of racism from within 'so-called democracy.' This gestures toward what Rutland fruitfully calls "not disoriented moments, but disoriented lives" (2018, 6). Here perhaps returning to the example of prison abolition is instructive, which as Rutland describes it, is a political project that "can scarcely imagine the world that it is trying to create" (4). Contexts like that of prison abolition will be the most perplexing for any view of moral/political psychology that measures success by resoluteness, and yet also crucially important for philosophers to consider.

Once again, I am grateful to the commentators not only for their perceptive questions and considerations but also for their openness about where discussions of disorientation resonated with their own theorizing and experience. The threads of connection running through their pieces—the recognitions of the existence and significance of contexts where sure action is not possible, the shared challenges of responding to resistance to disorientation, among other points—are a reminder of the way disorientations are familiar, and parts of life we share in common. Hopefully, we will continue to create conditions that facilitate their promise.

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