Editorial 'the Value of Disorientation'

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Because of COVID-19, the experience of disorientation has become very familiar. Many actions, self-evident and seemingly banal before the pandemic, are now significant due to the uncertainty of how the virus spreads and how it impacts our own health and the health of those around us. For example going to the supermarket or to work and also small interactions such as greeting each other have become a challenge to navigate and have caused many of us to be at a loss for how to proceed in such situations. Moreover, political measures to confine the spread of the virus, such as social distancing guidelines and the more severe stay-at-home orders, have, for many of us, deeply disrupted our ordinary ways of life. Because bars, restaurants, and other recreational places were closed, it became impossible to meet up with friends and family in our habitual ways, just as that many hobbies and pastimes couldn't be pursued anymore. As all these possibilities were cut off at once, many may have had the disorienting experience of losing that which normally gives life meaning. Work is also a profound example. As our habitual patterns of going to work, interacting with colleagues, etc. were disrupted, many of us will have experienced disorientation in finding and organizing alternative ways to still be able to teach, do research, and have meetings in ways that felt meaningful. And certainly those who lost a friend or family member and who were deprived of the normal rituals that give meaning to mourning and that are meant to help us cope with death, will have felt lost in a strange, bewildering world. The pandemic has impacted our lives in these and many more ways, disorienting us by disrupting routines and projects that give meaning and purpose to our lives.

We call such experiences in which we do not know how to go on, experiences of disorientation. In doing so, we follow Ami Harbin who has devoted a monograph on the contribution of disorientation to moral life (2016), which led to the organization of a workshop on 'the value of disorientation' at the University of Antwerp in May 2018, and subsequently to this special issue. The examples given above show that the experience of disorientation is a pressing, potentially dramatic issue in the life of agents. Harbin's book, and by extension our workshop, was motivated by the thought that experiences such as these merit a closer look.

Whenever philosophers have thought about practical deliberation and moral judgement, they assume a unified and resolved agent (f.e. Christine Korsgaard, Harry Frankfurt, Charles

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Taylor), leaving in the dark agents who feel alienated, conflicted, or disoriented. Insofar as these authors mention the experience of disorientation at all, they set it aside as negative, as a condition to be overcome as soon as possible. Surprisingly, however, a more thorough consideration of what it means to have a disorienting experience, such as is initiated by Harbin, may reveal that disorientation is by no means necessarily a negative obstacle to be overcome, as it were, by resolve and unity. On the contrary, at least some disorienting experiences, depending on how we conceptualise them, can be understood as positive occasions for rethinking the conditions within which we have been, or are, agents in the first place. This special issue takes up and tries to develop that thought further.

1 Two Sets of Questions: Conceptual and Evaluative

Depending on how exactly we understand disorientation, we might see it as an important, worthwhile, or even virtuous feature of the life of moral agents. To ask after the value of disorientation, is therefore to ask two questions at once: first, how do we understand it? And second, given such an understanding, what significance do we assign to it from a moral or practical point of view?

As regards how to understand disorientation, it turns out to be a way in which our understanding of ourselves is disrupted. As Harbin puts it: “I mean the term ‘disorientation’ to capture a sense in which major life experiences can make it hard to know how to go on in the sense of becoming unsure of how we should identify ourselves, what we should believe, what projects we should pursue, and what actions we should prioritize” (2016, p. 6). Thus, Harbin’s point of departure shares an overlap with Jonathan Lear’s case for irony (2011), in which ironic disruptions bring on an experience of uncanniness that likewise makes it impossible to go on, by way of making it impossible to know oneself. Using the example of a teacher who is struck by the prosaicism of grading papers, Lear writes: “[...] in the ironic moment, my *practical knowledge* is disrupted: I can no longer say in any detail what the requirements of teaching consist in; nor do I have any idea what to do next” (2016, p. 18, emphasis in original). Given this affinity, one of our contributors (Declercq), departs from Lear, rather than Harbin, in order to mount an argument as regards the virtue of cultivating an openness to be disrupted.

Of course, a more systematic enquiry would disentangle the notions of disorientation and disruption in a more thorough manner than is undertaken in this special issue. It points the way to future research, in which potential points of contact with yet other philosophers might be further explored as well. One might look into, for instance, the notion of transformative experiences in which the inability to plan a course of action is central according to L.A. Paul (2014; see Van Gils-Schmidt 2020, 59–60 where this link is made explicit), but also the importance of a particular kind of ‘negativity’ for self-becoming in the work of Christoph Menke (see in particular 2016, regarding the productive-negative function of disruptive experiences; and ed. by Khurana et al. 2018 regarding the theme of negativity in Menke’s work more generally). For now, the special issue contents itself with an initial exploration of the topic in which we have let authors themselves decide on the terminology that comes most natural to them. In other words, we have proceeded on the assumption that there is at least enough of a family resemblance for the reader to see that grouping them around the theme of ‘not knowing how to go on’ is not unwarranted. If we want to take seriously that this is an important theme meriting future academic research, it will likely not do to propose a strict

delineation of the experience in advance. We will have to, in any case, be able to show *why* this is an important theme. And this is what each of the various articles in this special issue seek to do in their own way.

Indeed besides the conceptual questions surrounding the experience of disorientation, there is the second question of what moral or practical significance to assign to it. Unlike the standard interpretation of disorientation in philosophy (which is negative, without value for us as moral agents, and a state to be overcome as quickly as possible) the contributions in this special issue want to re-evaluate such experiences, which they consider to draw out interesting features of our existence as self-reflective, moral agents.

While all our authors give a positive evaluation of disorientation, since they differ in their conceptualisation of the concept, they also diverge in the kind of evaluation given. There is first the possibility that the structure of a disorienting experience bestows practical value upon it inherently. This is Ami Harbin's take, especially in her book. Secondly, one can remain agnostic (at least in principle) about the inherent value of disorientation, while emphasizing merely the consequential benefits of the experience, e.g. as a way of reaching more robust decisions, of gaining self-knowledge, of making one more empathic to the suffering of others or more aware of one's own vulnerability. This approach is most clearly present in the contributions by Lopez-Cantero & Archer, and Cowley. It must be noted, however, that this approach does not exclude the previous one, and instrumental considerations also play a role (though not uncritically) in Harbin's approach. Thirdly, and finally, disorientation may have a positive value which is yet different in kind from practical value (whether this is inherent or instrumental value), i.e. an aesthetic value that lies in the awareness of being disrupted. One can see Declercq as arguing that such aesthetic value may nevertheless still bear a connection to practical value, as he examines the practice of drawing and appreciating satire cartoons as one that performs the function of balancing the stringency of moral demands against the practical impossibility of living up to these demands.

2 Summary of the Contributions

In her contribution 'Inducing Fear', Ami Harbin provides a moral evaluation of the cultivation of fear as a tool to orient or disorient others towards/away from a specific course of action. Fear can be used as such a tool, as empirical research shows how fear and other intense emotions can alter, among other things, both an individual's capacity for decision-making as well as the way they relate to the world. Fear can be used as a persuasion tool in small, interpersonal ways (trying to get your child away from the hot stove by inducing fear) but also in larger, politically-laden contexts (an authoritarian ruler who induces fear in their people to serve their political aims). In this paper, Harbin focuses on the moral evaluation of interpersonal cases, concluding that actions inducing fear are morally complex and cannot be heaped together as either good or bad. However, insofar inducing fear means to induce suffering and to cause epistemic damage, they are morally blameworthy insofar as no counterbalancing considerations are present.

In 'Lost without you: the Value of Falling out of Love', Pilar Lopez-Cantero and Alfred Archer examine the prudential and moral value of disorientation when falling out of love. Their conception of love relationships as processes of mutual shaping of identities readily explains why falling out of love is so disorienting: when love has ended, one is deprived of an important point of reference in one's self-understanding. At the same time, it necessitates an

evaluation of who one was in the relationship, and who one is now. This is what makes disorientation valuable according to the authors, since it may help one to avoid or escape the oppressive practices in what they call ‘subsuming relationships’. Because the process of falling out of love is disorienting, it invites self-examination and possibly leads to more accurate self-knowledge. That is its prudential value. But according to the authors it also has moral value insofar as it leads to awareness of norms that encourage (some) people to subordinate their autonomy in romantic relationships. As Harbin (2016) indicated, raised awareness of oppressive norms may be one of the moral advantages of disorienting experiences. Archer and Lopez-Cantero add the warning that reorientation after falling out of love should not be pursued too quickly, as that may deprive one of insights in social norms or interpersonal dynamics, and hence perpetuate subordination.

Christopher Cowley’s contribution ‘Divorce, Disorientation, and Remarriage’ also explores the connection between disorientation and the change in identity caused by dying love. He focuses on the specific break-up of divorce, and he raises the question whether a divorcee can make a second marital vow in all moral seriousness. His answer relies on the impact of the disorientation that comes with a divorce process. According to Cowley, divorce can be justified, not because the marital vow was not really unconditional after all, and not because happiness weighs more than a promise, but because a promisor may be transformed through the disillusion and disappointment of a failing marriage such that she or he becomes a sufficiently different person from the one that made the promise. On this interpretation of divorce, it is not irresponsible to make a second unconditional promise, even to the contrary. Using Harbin’s framework of disorientation and reorientation Cowley explains that a remarriage may be inspired by the self-discovery and epistemic humility which render a divorcee even more entitled to make an unconditional vow the second time round.

Dieter Declercq, in ‘Irony, Disruption, and Moral Imperfection’, critically analyses Jonathan Lear’s conception of disruptive irony and argues that a modification of the concept, in terms of an activity of pretence, can counteract the poor reputation it enjoys: contrary to signalling an unwillingness to commit oneself, Declercq shows that irony can actually perform the crucial function of balancing such commitment against the impossibility of ever fully living up to it. We see this exemplarily in satire cartoons: through what he calls ‘ironic characters’, Declercq shows how satirists cultivate an ironic virtue of being committed without letting the commitment overwhelm one and impair one’s ability to act at all.

This issue aims to put discussions on the practical and moral value of disorientation on the philosophical agenda. It does so by showing the diverse ways in which disorientation is both practically relevant and theoretically rich. The discussions of disorientation found in this issue should appeal to a wide variety of philosophers, insofar as reflection on disorientation sheds light on background suppositions concerning the nature of agency, the construction of personal identity, the authority of morality and other foundational concepts in philosophy. Moreover, a focus on disorientation allows academic philosophers to engage with current debates in ethics, aesthetics or epistemology while bringing philosophy very close to problems with which each of us is familiar from everyday life, especially in the past few months.

The pandemic has inaugurated a unique kind of news story, a kind that perhaps only global warming could approach previously (and this to a markedly less dramatic effect due to the vastly greater timescale on which global warming occurs). We refer to dolphins making their way inside the Amsterdam harbour, and off the coast of Venice, reclaiming what has become the territory of grotesque cruise ships; to dramatic ‘before and after’ photos of New Delhi, showing the disappearance in a manner of days of the thick layer of smog usually veiling the

India Gate war memorial; and to the phenomenon of an 'online reading club' acting as a surrogate, not only for offline reading clubs, but social outings, film nights, and sporting and fitness activities as well. Such stories make intelligible radically different ways of life that, to many of us, were unimaginable only a month or so before. And so they too, in their way, speak to the crucial, ineliminable, perhaps even immanent role that disorienting experiences play within, or in relation to our self-understanding. What remains up to us, then, is the practical and moral, or perhaps even political, decision to take such experiences seriously.

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