

The Connections We Make:
Friendship as the Path from Moral Disorientation

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ABSTRACT

Moral disorientation is a temporally extended life experience that causes an agent to feel as if they can no longer rely on their own moral judgment. Examples of morally disorienting experiences might be a loss of a belief system, grieving the death of a loved one, or surviving a traumatic experience. In paradigm cases of moral disorientation, the feeling of having unreliable moral judgment is due to a loss of moral beliefs. How should the morally disoriented person who wants to be good reorient themselves? I will argue that morally disoriented agents should defer to friends about morality, including questions about one's own moral character.

“It is a good thing that there are people whose moral beauty attracts us.”¹

¹ Zagzebski, Linda Trinkaus. *Exemplarist Moral Theory*. Oxford University Press, 2017. (p.60).

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² Brison, Susan J. *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*. Princeton University Press, 2002 (p.25)

Chapter 1: Moral Disorientation

1. What is Moral Disorientation?

You will come to a place where the streets are not marked.
 Some windows are lighted, But mostly they're darked.
 A place you could sprain both your elbow and chin!
 Do you dare to stay out? Do you dare to go in?
 How much can you lose? How much can you win?
 And IF you go in, should you turn left or right...
 or right-and-three quarters? Or, maybe, not quite?
 Or go around back and sneak in from behind?
 Simple it's not, I'm afraid you will find,
 for a mind-maker-upper to make up his mind
 You can get so confused
 that you'll start to race
 down long wiggled roads at a break-necking pace
 and grind on for miles across weirdish wild space...³

Most of us will come to a metaphorical place where “the streets are not marked,” if we have not already.⁴ For many people, disorientation is a somewhat familiar concept and an inevitable part of life. Disorientation is even portrayed in childhood stories, read by children who are just becoming oriented for the first time. Common descriptions of disorientation are: “*being in a rough patch, being shaken up, having lost our way, needing guidance*” or “*taking things one step at a time.*”⁵

The definitive study of disorientation and its philosophical implications is Ami Harbin’s *Disorientation and Moral Life*. Harbin describes disorientation as being “adrift in deep, unpredictable waters” where it seems that life can’t continue to go on, but it does, and you are carried along by

³ Seuss. *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* HarperCollins, 2010.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Harbin, Ami. *Disorientation and Moral Life*. Oxford University Press, 2016. (p.20). (Emphasis in original).

these waves anyway.⁶ Harbin's interest, as well as my own, lies in what happens to these agents in these "periods of being carried along."⁷

Grief is one experience which can lead to disorientation. In C.S Lewis' book, *A Grief Observed*, Lewis gives an account of his disorienting experience of grief after his wife's death:

Feelings, and feelings, and feelings. Let me try thinking instead. From the rational point of view, what new factor has H's death introduced into the problem of the universe? What grounds has it given me for doubting all that I believe? I knew already that these things, and worse, happened daily. I would have said that I had taken them into account. I had been warned— I had warned myself— not to reckon on worldly happiness. We were even promised sufferings. They were part of the programme. We were even told, 'Blessed are they that mourn,' and I accepted it. I've got nothing that I hadn't bargained for. Of course it is different when the thing happens to oneself, not to others, and in reality, not in imagination. Yes; but should it, for a sane man, make quite such a difference as this? No. And it wouldn't for a man whose faith had been real faith and whose concern for other people's sorrows had been real concern. The case is too plain. If my house has collapsed at one blow, that is because it was a house of cards. The faith which 'took these things into account' was not faith but imagination. The taking them into account was not real sympathy. If I had really cared, as I thought I did, about the sorrows of the world, I should not have been so overwhelmed when my own sorrow came. It has been an imaginary faith playing with innocuous counters labelled 'Illness,' 'Pain,' 'Death,' and 'Loneliness.' I thought I trusted the rope until it mattered to me whether or not it would bear me. Now it matters, and I find I didn't.⁸

Lewis' experience shows how the death of a loved one can leave a person completely disoriented with regard to their previously held values and beliefs. Elise Springer describes disorientation as "having the *moral wind* knocked out of you."⁹ However, the indefinite article in the title of Lewis' *A Grief Observed* reminds the reader that this is just one man's response to his own unique experience of grief. It is completely possible that a person can experience grief without being disoriented. After all, people often have different responses to different life events. According to Harbin, "we need to *feel* disoriented in order to *be* disoriented."¹⁰

⁶ Harbin, Ami. *Disorientation and Moral Life*. Oxford University Press, 2016.(p.3). (emphasis in original).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Lewis, C.S. *A Grief Observed*. HarperCollins, 1994. (pp.36-37).

⁹ Springer, Elise. "Disorientation and Moral Life." *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, 29 Nov. 2018, ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/disorientation-and-moral-life. (emphasis in original).

¹⁰ Harbin, Ami. *Disorientation and Moral Life*. Oxford University Press, 2016. (p.14).

Since Harbin investigates disorientation under a wide range of contexts (queer sexualities, grief, education, trauma, illness, migration, and oppression), she explains that we should look at disorientation as a “family resemblance concept.”¹¹ This conceptualization is due to the fact that different contexts of disorientation can have overlapping similarities despite the significant variation.¹² The “threads of relation” that Harbin believes tie these experiences together is that they are “sustained, difficult experiences that make it hard to go on.”¹³ By “sustained” Harbin means that they are not fleeting moments of unease, and people do not quickly go back to feeling fine.¹⁴

According to Harbin, disorientation can “change us without us knowing how we will be changed.”¹⁵ Disorientation can embitter us, paralyze us, and “unhinge us from positive moral orientations we have experienced in the past.”¹⁶ This particular type of disorientation is what I will refer to as moral disorientation. *Moral disorientation* is an extended period of time where people feel that they are no longer able to rely on their own moral judgment. It is a loss of moral bearings. Examples of potential morally disorienting experiences are a loss of a belief system, grieving the death of a loved one, or surviving a traumatic experience.¹⁷ However, as I mentioned in the example of grief, some people will not respond to these events by *feeling* disoriented, so therefore they won’t be disoriented. No event in itself guarantees a resulting state of moral disorientation; it simply depends on one’s individual response to a particular context.

However, most individuals face a difficult experience at some point in their life that challenges what they thought they knew, leaving them without any bearings in a “weirdish wild space.”¹⁸ For example, I was raised a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints

¹¹ Harbin, Ami. *Disorientation and Moral Life*. Oxford University Press, 2016. (p.17).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid. (p.18).

¹⁵ Ibid. (p.174).

¹⁶ Ibid. (p.xx).

¹⁷ Ibid. (pp.13-22).

¹⁸ Dr. Suess. *Oh, the Places You’ll Go!*. Random House, New York, 1990.

with a clear set of moral beliefs. I believed that God was very much involved in the details of my life and that I could be good simply from pleasing God. I believed that my divinely mandated role as a woman was to marry a righteous man and have righteous children. I believed in the abstinence of alcohol, pre-marital sex, coffee, and swearing. I believed that heteronormative families were central to God's plan and in the importance of obedience to my "earthly parents," as well as to my future husband. However, while studying at Brigham Young University, I was sexually assaulted, which created a type of "unlearning"¹⁹ where I no longer had these beliefs to fall back on. I could not make sense of how a divine being that I once thought helped me find my car keys, or assisted me on passing a military obstacle course, could not have intervened to protect me when I truly needed help. I also gained a greater awareness of the patriarchal structure of my religion, especially in the aftermath of my assault, and I could no longer accept my role within it. All of the things I once thought made me a good person -- my modesty, sexual "purity," clean language, and abstinence from alcohol and coffee -- suddenly felt superficial. I was left with very little direction and a whirlwind of difficult questions in my moral life.

My feelings of having unreliable judgment were constitutive of being morally disoriented; in paradigm cases of moral disorientation, the lack of confidence in one's moral compass is due to a loss of a necessary stock of moral beliefs.²⁰ In Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel, *Persepolis*, Satrapi describes an instance of moral disorientation when she loses her belief in God after her uncle is executed in Tehran during the Islamic Revolution. In Satrapi's illustration, God is depicted as being an imaginary friend whom Satrapi had formerly turned to for safety and guidance.²¹ However, the violent death of her uncle created a disruption in her previously held beliefs:

¹⁹ Harbin, Ami. *Disorientation and Moral Life*. Oxford University Press, 2016. (p.120).

²⁰ Ibid. (p.2).

²¹ Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis*. L'Association, 2017. (p.53).





Satrapi illustrates this experience as being one in which, similar to Lewis's account of disorientation, the brutal facts of her own reality are no longer accommodated by the beliefs that she had. Beliefs are supposed to correspond with reality, but there seems to be an inability to maintain former beliefs off of these types of experiences. It is a type of "unlearning."²³ Satrapi appears to reject her previously held moral beliefs, for example, the moral implications attached to her belief in God. However, we also see through her graphic representation just how difficult and overwhelming experiences of moral disorientation can be. Satrapi even questions what could be worse. It is no surprise, then, that those who have experienced moral disorientation might want to search for a way out of it. The question, then, is: *How should the morally disoriented person who wants to be good try to reorient themselves?*

²² Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis*. L'Association, 2017. (pp.70-71).

²³ Brison, Susan J. *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*. Princeton University Press, 2002. (p.58).

2. *Why the Morally Disoriented Should Try to Reorient Themselves*

The question at hand makes the assumption that escaping moral disorientation is both desirable and within the agent's control. However, there are at least two possible objections to that assumption.

One objection is that it is not in the agent's control whether or not they can reorient themselves. Harbin's account provides support for this objection by stating that reorientations "are not always possible" and "we may need to live with disorientations more often and for longer than we would like."²⁴ Harbin also claims that "part of what it means to respond to ourselves as disorientable is to relinquish a certain kind of control."²⁵ This letting go of control is what Harbin refers to as "grace."²⁶

However, while it may not be in one's *complete* control to reorient themselves (the same way finding one's way out of a frightening forest may not completely be in one's control), one is still more likely to reorient themselves if they try. This desire to continue trying is called hope. As for what hope we have in attempting to reorient ourselves, I will be arguing for a potential solution in chapter two.

Another objection is that it may not be *desirable* for the morally disoriented to try to reorient themselves. Harbin's account also gives some support for the second objection by arguing that, surprisingly, disorientation has "potential benefits."²⁷ These benefits include, increased awareness, positive shifts in one's character,²⁸ as well as capacities to function without resoluteness.²⁹ I will be

²⁴ Harbin, Ami. *Disorientation and Moral Life*. Oxford University Press, 2016. (p.173).

²⁵ Ibid. (p.172).

²⁶ Ibid. (p.172).

²⁷ Ibid. (p.xx).

²⁸ Ibid. (p.99).

²⁹ Ibid. (p.151).

categorizing these benefits as epistemic benefits, moral benefits, and practical benefits of disorientation.

Harbin describes the *epistemic benefits* that can come from disorienting experiences as a greater awareness.³⁰ However, she does not mean a type of “productive awareness” that makes it clear how to act as a result.³¹ Instead, Harbin maintains that the individual continues to remain disoriented, while developing an increased awareness of:

1. How a person views herself and others as knowers.³² For example, in reflecting on one’s mistaken previous beliefs, one might become more aware of their own “epistemic fallibility.”³³
2. “Who one is” within the landscape of “oppressive norms and political complexity.”³⁴ For example, students who are initially disoriented by critical education may come to “gain awareness of who they are within sexist, racist, and heterosexist social worlds.”³⁵
3. The powerlessness one may feel to create change as an individual.³⁶ Harbin explains that this is beneficial insofar as it “can keep individuals from bold or hasty action” and it can help people realize that they need to work with others in order to effectively create change.³⁷

Harbin discusses the potential *moral benefits* of disorientation as positive shifts in one’s moral character. Harbin calls these the “tenderizing effects” of disorientation because the habits and expectations that an agent has learned and solidified over time are made malleable.³⁸ The “tenderizing effects” Harbin discusses are an increased capacity for:

³⁰ Harbin, Ami. *Disorientation and Moral Life*. Oxford University Press, 2016. (p.89).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid. (p.91).

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid. (p.94).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid. (p.95).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid. (p.99).

1. “Sensitivity to vulnerability”: In the process of facing one’s own vulnerability, one can develop a greater sense of empathy or sympathy toward others who face the same or other difficult experiences.³⁹
2. “Living unprepared”: One is better able “to cope with one’s inability to control or guard against future unpredictability” and “to accept one’s insecurity.”⁴⁰
3. “In-this-togetherness”: The ability to act in a way that reflects that one’s well-being is dependent on others, and others’ well-being is dependent on them.⁴¹
4. And “living against the grain of norms”: “Embodying non-normative relationships, practices, and ways of being in ways that do not easily or immediately succumb to the force of social norms.”⁴² In other words, “disorientations can make it possible to *live with* oppressive norms as though they could be otherwise,”⁴³ for example being gay and proud despite deviating from social norms.

Harbin states that “when expectations are unsettled,” agents can change and become “more responsive” to the “non-ideal realities” of the world we live in.⁴⁴ This is morally beneficial because, according to Harbin, “tenderized expectations more accurately reflect the actual conditions of oppressive society and prepare individuals to function well within conditions of unpredictability, vulnerability, and interdependence in their work going forward.”⁴⁵

Harbin also maintains that it is a mistake to take on the view that “people can either be good agents, or disoriented, but not both.”⁴⁶ She provides support for this assertion with potential *practical benefits* of disorientation. Harbin argues that there are some contexts of injustice where irresolute

³⁹ Harbin, Ami. *Disorientation and Moral Life*. Oxford University Press, 2016. (p.103).

⁴⁰ Ibid. (p.108).

⁴¹ Ibid. (p.112).

⁴² Ibid. (p.116-117).

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid. (p. 120).

⁴⁵ Ibid. (p. 121).

⁴⁶ Ibid. (p.164).

actions can be useful.⁴⁷ The main difference between resolute and irresolute actions is whether or not the agent performs them with “sureness of self.”⁴⁸ In cases that call for irresolute actions, it may be useful to have an agent with “less sure-footed ways of being.”⁴⁹ In other words, disorientations may “generate capacities for function without resoluteness.”⁵⁰ Harbin describes these practical benefits that can come from disorientations as the increased ability to perform the following irresolute actions:

1. “Both/and actions”: An agent can “tentatively pursue multiple goals that are in tension with one another.”⁵¹ There are some instances in which prioritizing one goal risks giving less attention to another worthy goal, and the irresolute action of pursuing both is helpful.⁵² For example, in the case of mass incarceration, one might pursue “*both* harm reduction in prisons *and* prison abolition.”⁵³
2. “Doubling back actions”: Rather than acting conclusively, in the case of persistent injustices, one can check and recheck with “a constant questioning” and cultivate “capacities to hear challenges from others.”⁵⁴
3. “Building without blueprints”: The ability to work on things without knowing exactly what the end state will be.⁵⁵ These actions can be beneficial in cases where it is not yet clear how to create something that meets everyone’s needs or addresses multiple problems. Yet, despite the uncertainty, building something new is still necessary.⁵⁶ For example, in ending

⁴⁷ Harbin, Ami. *Disorientation and Moral Life*. Oxford University Press, 2016 (p.150).

⁴⁸ Ibid. (p.149). (Emphasis in original).

⁴⁹ Ibid. (p.63).

⁵⁰ Ibid. (p.151). (Emphasis in original).

⁵¹ Ibid. (p.137).

⁵² Ibid. (p.134).

⁵³ Ibid. (p.135).

⁵⁴ Ibid. (pp.142-143).

⁵⁵ Ibid. (p.146).

⁵⁶ Ibid. (p.149).

police brutality, agents may need to build a completely new system that is unfamiliar to what they have formerly depended on.

In short, Harbin suggests that disorientations can better situate individuals to approach problems with “constant questioning, tentativeness, and openness to correction.”⁵⁷ These practical benefits, as well as the moral and epistemic benefits of disorientations may give us reason to question whether escaping disorientation is desirable. However, I will argue that finding the path out of disorientation is the more desirable option to the morally disoriented agent.

While I agree that these benefits are real, the benefits of disorientation do not outweigh the costs. Harbin concedes that “in many cases the agent who acts wholeheartedly will be better off than one who faces perpetual turmoil of will.”⁵⁸ Harbin also makes it clear that she does not argue in favor of disorientation itself; she states that “disorientations are not so much good in themselves as they are a reality.”⁵⁹ Harbin also implores her reader not to forget the potential negative effects of disorienting experiences:

We cannot know in advance which disorientations have the potential to benefit moral agents, and which do not. Disorientations do not always enable moral agency, and it is important not to glorify or over-aestheticize such difficult experiences. They can and do interfere with wholehearted, decisive action. They can paralyze, overwhelm, embitter, and misdirect moral agents. They can unhinge us from positive moral orientations we have lived out in the past. The kinds of disorientation we have experienced in the past can affect our threshold for tolerating them (i.e., how much disorientation we can handle and experience as help rather than harm).⁶⁰

As Harbin remarks, there is only a certain threshold of disorientation that we can handle before it becomes harmful. Accordingly, the longer a person remains in a morally disoriented state, the more likely they are to experience harm. Moreover, ongoing moral disorientation poses a risk of wrongdoing. In saying this, I do not mean that a morally disoriented agent cannot be a good agent,

⁵⁷ Harbin, Ami. *Disorientation and Moral Life*. Oxford University Press, 2016 (p.149).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* (p.63).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* (p.xix)

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

but it seems that an increased risk for acting wrongly when one's sense of morality feels unreliable and ungrounded. Hence, it is in the best interest of disoriented individuals to find a way to reorient themselves.

Chapter 2: Moral Deference

How, then, should morally disoriented individuals who want to be good try to reorient themselves? It seems that the morally disoriented person has two options: they can try to regain their moral orientation alone or by deferring to others on issues of morality. In this chapter I will be arguing that the morally disoriented cannot and should not go it alone.

1. What is Moral Deference?

In order to understand moral deference, we will first need to understand the more fundamental concept of moral testimony. Moral testimony is a proposition with “explicit moral content.” For example, “you are a good person” or “it is wrong to kick babies.” However, I will not be attempting to define moral and nonmoral matters, under the assumption that we can roughly distinguish them.⁶¹ Moral testimony can be both solicited and unsolicited. It can be something you hear in lecture from one of your philosophy professors, or something a close friend tells you in response to a personal question you ask. Moral testimony can also include moral advice. According to Paulina Sliwa, moral advice is simply “testimony about practical questions” or “questions about what we should do” which encompasses many moral questions that we face.⁶²

Agents can act in various ways in response to the moral testimony of another. One response, moral deference, is traditionally defined as forming a moral judgment “*merely* based on the view of

⁶¹ Hills, A. (2009). Moral Testimony and Moral Epistemology. *Ethics*, 120(1). (p. 94).

⁶² Sliwa, Paulina. “In Defense of Moral Testimony.” *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 158, no. 2, 2012. (p. 184).

another,”⁶³ or “*purely* by someone else’s moral judgment”⁶⁴ or “*just* based on their say-so.”⁶⁵

However, to say that moral deference exclusively involves cases where the agent is acting *solely* on someone else’s moral testimony seems unrealistic. It seems rare that an agent would completely ignore all other available evidence. For example, if someone were to tell an agent that it is morally wrong to eat factory farmed meat, they might accept that based on someone’s say-so. However, that does not mean that they wouldn’t ask why, or that they wouldn’t still consider their own moral intuitions or think of all the information about factory farmed meat they already have from their own lived experience or exclude other potential sources of evidence.

As Paulina Sliwa points out in her advocacy of moral deference, “reliable testimony is in general just one piece of evidence that I have.”⁶⁶ Moral agents, even disoriented ones, have the ability to critically reflect on all the available evidence around them. While their critical reflection and deliberation may not always yield the right answer, the morally disoriented are still rational agents who bring their own thoughts and feelings to the table. In short, it does not seem plausible that any person could completely carve out all other sources of knowledge or their own moral intuitions, regardless of whether or not they feel their ability to interpret that evidence is reliable.

Sliwa also argues that even in the rare instances in which a speaker’s testimony appears to be *the only* evidence one has about a moral question, rationality may still require the agent to think about the plausibility of what they have been told.⁶⁷ For example, I once asked my usually reliable mentor what he believed in and he responded by sending me a link to 28-foot tall lizard god named “Zorp the Surveyor,”⁶⁸ and I felt that I could safely assume that he was joking.

⁶³ Enoch, David. “A Defense of Moral Deference.” *The Journal of Philosophy*, May 2014, Vol. 111, No. 5. (p. 229). (emphasis added).

⁶⁴ Hills, A. “Moral Testimony.” *Philosophy Compass*. 2013. (p.552). (emphasis added).

⁶⁵ McShane, Paddy J. “The non-remedial value of dependence on moral testimony.” *Philos Stud*, 2018. (p. 639). (emphasis added).

⁶⁶ Sliwa, Paulina. “In Defense of Moral Testimony.” *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 158, no. 2, 2012. (p. 183).

⁶⁷ *Ibid*.

⁶⁸ “Zorp the Surveyor.” *Parks and Recreation Wiki*, parksandrecreation.fandom.com/wiki/Zorp_the_Surveyor.

The traditional definition of deferring “*purely*” on the basis of someone else’s moral testimony would make any scenario of moral deference intuitively problematic because it feels wrong to unquestioningly or unthinkingly do what we are told.⁶⁹ Especially, it seems, in the case of moral matters, since our moral judgments reflect our personal character.⁷⁰ There is something unsettling about someone having absolutely no personal input in a moral judgment they adopt for themselves. It would seem robotic or radically subservient to accept moral testimony in a way that completely bypasses one’s own thoughts and feelings. While blind obedience may be an extreme form of moral deference, it is not the only form of deference.

Instead, a less idealized definition of moral deference is needed to better reflect lived experiences. I will define moral deference as when an agent relies on another’s moral testimony as the *strongest* evidence for forming a moral judgment. This definition captures a wider range of experiences where critical reflection is involved to varying degrees in accepting moral testimony, but, rarely, if ever, completely eradicated.

2. *The Myth of Going It Alone*

Deference, however, is only one path the disoriented might take; they might also attempt to reorient themselves alone, obtaining new moral beliefs on their own. An individualist approach to belief formation like this is at least partly due to the influence of René Descartes. In the *Meditations*, Descartes cultivates his own somewhat disorienting experience when he uses the method of doubt in order to find what he believed to be a sure foundation for knowledge. Descartes describes his

⁶⁹ Sliwa, Paulina. “In Defense of Moral Testimony.” *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 158, no. 2, 2012. (p. 183).

⁷⁰ Jones, Karen. “Second-Hand Moral Knowledge.” *The Journal of Philosophy*. Feb., 1999, Vol. 96, No. 2. (p. 57).

experience almost identically to Harbin's description of feeling "like one loses one's footing and is adrift in deep, unpredictable waters,"⁷¹ when he writes:

The meditation of yesterday filled my mind with so many doubts that it is no longer in my power to forget them. And yet I do not see in what manner I can resolve them; and just as if I had all of a sudden fallen into very deep water, I am so disconcerted that I can neither make certain of setting my feet on the bottom, nor can I swim and so support myself on the surface.⁷²

In his process of escaping this generally disorienting experience, Descartes reorients himself by "going it alone" over the course of a few days of meditation. By going it alone, I mean using private reasoning and reflection *exclusively*. However, as Harbin points out, in the case of Descartes, this is a case of a transitory experience of disorientation rather than a temporally extended experience of disorientation.⁷³ In fleeting moments of disorientation, it may be possible to reconstruct one's beliefs with critical thinking alone, but it seems that extended periods of disorientations would be much more challenging and require a different method. I will argue that this is especially true in cases of moral disorientation.

While my definition of moral deference gives a role to the critical reflection demonstrated by Descartes, it certainly does not promote *only* using private reasoning and reflection. I will argue that going it alone through the exclusive use of critical reflection is not a feasible way of reorienting oneself in the case of moral disorientation. Just as rationality may require that an agent does not defer *purely* based on another's moral testimony, it may also demand that an agent does not rely *purely* on their own personal deliberation.

For, example, in her book *Aftermath*, Susan Brison gives a devastating account of moral disorientation as a survivor of rape and attempted murder, where she utilizes both self-reliance and interdependence. Brison explains that "trauma shatters one's most fundamental assumptions about

⁷¹ Harbin, Ami. *Disorientation and Moral Life*. Oxford University Press, 2016 (p.3).

⁷² Ariew, Roger, and Eric Watkins. *Modern Philosophy: an Anthology of Primary Sources*. Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2019. (p. 64).

⁷³ Harbin, Ami. *Disorientation and Moral Life*. Oxford University Press, 2016 (p.4).

the world,”⁷⁴ which can make one feel as if they have landed “beyond the moral universe” and do not know how to get back.⁷⁵ She then goes on to say that in attempting to rebuild her beliefs and reorient, she found herself “like Descartes, ‘quite alone,’ with ‘a clear stretch of time’ in which to rebuild [her] shattered system of beliefs.”⁷⁶ Brison also recounts another sexual assault survivor’s experience of personal reflection, who explains that “when your life is shattered, you’re forced to pick up the pieces, and you have a chance to stop and examine them. You can say ‘I don’t want this one anymore’ or I think I’ll work on that one.”⁷⁷ However, while critical reflection is a necessary component to rebuilding one’s moral beliefs, Brison does not *solely* self-reflect but also relies on those around her. In fact, she clearly emphasizes the need for “empathetic listeners”⁷⁸ to listen *and respond* in the process of rebuilding.

Brison states that “the trauma survivor must find empathetic listeners in order to carry on.”⁷⁹ However, it seems that as an empathetic listener one is called to do more than just listen; one is also called to *respond*. Brison seems to illustrate this point further through her own personal experience.

But it’s essential to talk about it, again and again. It’s a way of remastering the trauma, although it can be retraumatizing when people refuse to listen. In my case, each time someone failed to respond I felt as though I were alone again in the ravine, dying, screaming. And still no one could hear me. Or, worse, they heard me, but refused to help.⁸⁰

Brison’s salient account gives us reason to think that morally disoriented agents need to be responded to in a way that necessitates some form of moral testimony -- even if that testimony is as simple as “what you experienced was truly awful” or “you are still a good person despite what you’ve gone through.”

⁷⁴ Brison, Susan J. *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*. Princeton University Press, 2002 (xii).

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* (ix-x).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* (p. 26).

⁷⁷ Brison, Susan J. *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*. Princeton University Press, 2002. (p. 20).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* (p. 38).

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* (p. x).

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* (p. 16).

Harbin also expresses the need for “sympathetic interpreters” who “listen *and* support.”⁸¹ She explains that “without an interpreter of my expression of disorientations, I may be more likely to doubt, question, or dismiss my own experience.”⁸² It seems that in being an interpreter, one is not just called upon to accept moral testimony, but to offer moral testimony as well in order to provide support.

Another particular type of moral testimony that I take to be key in allowing morally disoriented agents to reorient themselves is testimony about who they are. While dependence on others for self-definition may seem self-contradictory, it is less so when we consider how “fundamentally relational” one’s character is.⁸³ As Harbin states, “one’s identifications are not up to oneself alone” and one of the benefits of being disoriented is that you become more aware of this salient fact.⁸⁴ Brison also supports this idea by presenting research which shows that survivors of trauma often depend on others’ attitudes or beliefs toward them in the aftermath of traumatic experiences:⁸⁵

Survivors of trauma recover to a greater or lesser extent depending on others’ responses to them after the trauma. These aspects of trauma and recovery reveal the deeply social nature of one’s sense of self and underscore the limits of the individual’s capacity to control her own self-definition.⁸⁶

Especially important is testimony about one’s own character. In paradigm cases of moral disorientation, agents are insecure about their most foundational beliefs (including their beliefs about themselves) and likely feel an altered sense of self-worth. It seems that in order for an agent to be good, they would need some reason to think that there is some goodness in them already. Dylan Scholinski illustrates this point in his memoir, *The Last Time I Wore A Dress*, when in the aftermath of

⁸¹ Harbin, Ami. *Disorientation and Moral Life*. Oxford University Press, 2016 (p.155). (emphasis added).

⁸² Ibid. (p.156).

⁸³ Brison, Susan J. *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*. Princeton University Press, 2002. (p.63).

⁸⁴ Harbin, Ami. *Disorientation and Moral Life*. Oxford University Press, 2016 (p.94). (emphasis added).

⁸⁵ Brison, Susan J. *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*. Princeton University Press, 2002. (p.63).

⁸⁶ Ibid. (p.64).

abuse and neglect, he punched a kid at school and felt that he was no longer a good role model for his sister, Jean:

The next day in the hall on the way to recess I punched Earl in the stomach and knocked him down. Nothing happened to me for punching him and I wouldn't have cared if anything did. My mother was gone, and layers were piling on top of me, layers and layers. I knew I wasn't being good and polite and a role model for Jean but my teachers and my father and my mother didn't believe I ever could be anyway, so why should I try? I couldn't see out from the layers on top of me and no one could see in.⁸⁷

Here, what robs Scholinski of the desire to be good is the lack of confidence others have in his goodness. It seems that the morally disoriented person, even if they were to act on their own moral judgments unaided, would at some point at least need to rely on the moral testimony of others that they have some goodness in them. My argument is as follows:

P1. To try to be good requires knowing that you're already a little good.

P2. The disoriented person cannot know on their own that they're good.

C1. Therefore, the disoriented person cannot try to be good on their own.

Another example that makes the dependence on others painfully clear, is a scene from the television series *Bojack Horseman*. Here, the main character, Bojack, solicits moral testimony from his close friend Diane, during his experience of moral disorientation:

...I guess my question is do you think it's too late for me?... I mean am I just doomed to be the person that I am?... I mean it's not too late for me, is it? It's not too late? Diane, I need you to tell me it's not too late...I need you to tell me that I'm a good person. I know that I can be selfish and narcissistic and self-destructive, but underneath all that, deep down, I'm a good person and I need you to tell me that I'm good, Diane... Tell me, please, Diane, tell me that I'm good...⁸⁸

Bojack appears to be worried that his life experience shows that wanting to be good is not enough to actually be good. Without having moral testimony that can spark enough hope for an agent to keep trying, it seems that reorientation is futile. So, it appears that moral deference is necessary, at the very least in giving the morally disoriented hope to continue on.

⁸⁷ Scholinski, Daphne, and Jane Meredith Adams. *Last Time I Wore a Dress*. Riverhead, 1998. (p. 50-51).

⁸⁸ Bob-Waksberg, R. (n.d.). *Bojack Horseman: Season 1, Episode 11 "Downer Ending"* [Cartoon].

3. *Suspensions of Moral Deference*

But despite its potential usefulness to the disoriented, moral deference seems to be controversial. Indeed, if one were to peruse the philosophical journals, it might seem like there's a debate about whether moral deference is acceptable. But in fact, the debate is really over *when* moral deference is morally acceptable. No one argues that moral deference is never acceptable. For example, most people would agree that moral deference is acceptable in the case of children forming their beliefs based on their parent's moral testimony.⁸⁹ People also generally agree that moral deference is acceptable in cases where there are significant epistemic or moral limitations. For instance, Allison Hills, although against moral deference in general, specifically argues for its acceptability in the case of any moral agent whose "starting points are too far off the mark"⁹⁰ or "anyone who does not have the requisite stock of true moral beliefs."⁹¹ This, of course, would include paradigm cases of moral disorientation.

Nevertheless, resistance to moral deference is a longstanding part of the philosophical tradition. In "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment," Immanuel Kant famously critiques accepting guidance from others as "immaturity" and instead calls on agents to rely on their own reasoning.⁹² Kant argues that it is "laziness and cowardness" that tempts agents to "gladly remain immature for life."⁹³ He goes on: "It is so convenient to be immature! If I have a book to have understanding in place of me, a spiritual adviser to have conscience for me, a doctor to judge

⁸⁹ Hills, A. (2009). Moral Testimony and Moral Epistemology. *Ethics*, 120(1). (p.120).

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Kant, Immanuel. *An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?*
web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/What_is_Enlightenment.pdf.

⁹³ Ibid.

my diet for me, and so on, I need not make any efforts at all.”⁹⁴ Kant believes that moral deference entails a compromised autonomy that can stem from laziness and cowardice.

If the morally disoriented are in special need of moral deference, then Kant’s suspicions mean that they will be especially susceptible to laziness and cowardice. This is reflected in the television series *Fleabag*, the name given to the main character, implying her to be a person of bad character. She feels that she is “a greedy, perverted, selfish, apathetic, cynical, depraved, morally bankrupt woman who can’t even call herself a feminist.”⁹⁵ Throughout her morally disorienting experience of grief, she has sex with her best friend’s boyfriend, she steals, and she lies to the people closest to her. Her moral disorientation leads her to crave deference in a confession to a priest:

I want someone to tell me what to wear in the morning. I want someone to tell me what to wear *every* morning. I want someone to tell me what to eat. What to like, what to hate, what to rage about, what to listen to, what band to like, what to buy tickets for, what to joke about, what not to joke about. I want someone to tell me what to believe in, who to vote for, who to love and how to tell them.

I just think I want someone to tell me how to live my life, Father, because so far, I think I’ve been getting it wrong — and I know that’s why people want people like you in their lives, because you just tell them how to do it. You just tell them what to do and what they’ll get out at the end of it, and even though I don’t believe your bullshit, and I know that scientifically nothing I do makes any difference in the end anyway, I’m still scared. Why am I still scared? So just tell me what to do. Just fucking tell me what to do, Father.⁹⁶

Here, *Fleabag* attempts to defer in both moral and non-moral matters, even when it is clear that she would have come to another conclusion if she were left unaided. However, intuitively her behavior is morally and epistemically problematic. In particular, that she appears to have compromised her autonomy, which is exactly what Kant is concerned about.

However, Sliwa argues that what is problematic about a case like this is not the moral deference, but the ulterior motives underlying it.⁹⁷ In cases like this the agent is not relying on others

⁹⁴ Kant, Immanuel. *An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?* web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/What_is_Enlightenment.pdf.

⁹⁵Waller-Bridge, Phoebe. *Fleabag*: Season 1, Episode 1.

⁹⁶Waller-Bridge, Phoebe. *Fleabag*: Season 2, Episode 4.

⁹⁷Sliwa, Paulina. “In Defense of Moral Testimony.” *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 158, no. 2, 2012. (p.188-189).

because she wants to do the right thing, but because she appears to lack self-worth.⁹⁸ She is not relying on the priest to resolve moral uncertainty but is instead asking the priest to make the moral judgments *for* her. Other ulterior motives can be attributed to laziness or cowardice in attempting to avoid responsibility, but in this particular case, it seems that it is more due to the fact that she lacks self-worth.⁹⁹ In other words, Sliwa states, unlike in cases of moral deference where one is earnestly seeking moral knowledge, agents like Fleabag are “using other people to make their decisions for them rather than relying on them for belief, so they can decide on their own.”¹⁰⁰ She appears to be relying on moral deference as the *only* evidence, rather than the *strongest* evidence to make her moral judgments. Fleabag’s autonomy is thus compromised because she has basically “given up as an agent.”¹⁰¹

4. *A Defense of Moral Deference*

Despite issues of ulterior motives, moral deference is in fact compatible with autonomy. In her critique of Kant, Linda Zagzebski argues that the process of responsibly and conscientiously governing oneself with reason actually *requires* dependence on others.¹⁰² There are those “whom one is required by reason to trust,” which “includes the acceptance of epistemic and practical authority.”¹⁰³ In other words, by using one’s own reason to choose who to trust, one is still acting autonomously, and is in fact in some cases acting more responsibly than when solely relying on oneself:

If we rely solely upon our own individual reason in governing ourselves, we are less likely to become a conscientiously governed self than if we take some of our beliefs, attitudes, intentions and goals from others. This is because there are other people whose conscious

⁹⁸ Sliwa, Paulina. “In Defense of Moral Testimony.” *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 158, no. 2, 2012. (p.188-189).

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Zagzebski, Linda Trinkaus. *Exemplarist Moral Theory*. Oxford University Press, 2017. (p.150).

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

states are more likely to survive our own conscientious reflection than the states we acquire independently.¹⁰⁴

In other words, there will always be people in a better epistemic position to provide more moral knowledge than we could otherwise obtain from our own private reflection. Sliwa argues similarly that moral deference can be “epistemically good because it allows us to take advantage of our peers who may be epistemically better placed to make certain moral distinctions and to come to the right conclusion.”¹⁰⁵

Zagzebski also argues that critical reflection and deliberation can still be very much involved in deferring to others in the process of choosing who to defer to, and thus autonomy is not compromised:

The subject takes direction... from an exemplar or an admirable person because of something in herself that she reflectively endorses... It is a dictate of self-direction. Similarly, if the subject judges that another person is more likely to have true beliefs in the relevant domain than she has herself, and she has the desire for truth, she has a reason to believe what the other person believes. Her reflection on her own end leads her to adopt the strategy of taking certain beliefs from the other person... She is autonomous when she does so because she is acting on her own reasons for her own ends.¹⁰⁶

As we can see individual thinking and effort is still present in the process of moral deference especially in judging who to defer to.

Both Sliwa and Zagzebski’s arguments are supported by the assumption that there are disparities in moral knowledge and agents differ in their reliability on a given moral question. And in the case of the morally disoriented agent, it seems even more plausible that they are morally permitted and perhaps even morally obligated to rely on others in order to be morally conscientious. It turns out that, contrary to Kant’s assertions, sometimes the most mature and autonomous decision one can make is to defer to other people.

¹⁰⁴ Zagzebski, Linda Trinkaus. *Exemplarist Moral Theory*. Oxford University Press, 2017. (p.151).

¹⁰⁵ Sliwa, Paulina. “In Defense of Moral Testimony.” *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 158, no. 2, 2012. (p.181).

¹⁰⁶ Zagzebski, Linda Trinkaus. *Exemplarist Moral Theory*. Oxford University Press, 2017. (p.151-152).

However, with so much critical reflection involved in endorsing a reliable testifier, one might begin to doubt that the morally disoriented agent is *truly* deferring, since the decision of who to defer to arises from their own self-reflection. In other words, it could be argued that the fact that you've judged a person to be a reliable testifier means that whatever testimony they give you is merely a reflection of your values all along. As Jean-Paul Sartre says, "if you seek counsel--from a priest, for example--you have selected the priest; at bottom you already knew, more or less, what he would advise"¹⁰⁷ In other words, Sartre's point is that one wouldn't choose to go to a priest unless the agent agreed with what they thought the priest would advise. So, this is not a true case of deference because the priest's beliefs ultimately reflect your values.

I would agree with Sartre that sometimes agents which appear to be deferring are in fact not. It may be the case that an agent really does know, deep down, what a particular priest or testifier would advise for a given moral question. And in the case of Fleabag, ulterior motives aside, it seems that she could plausibly predict what a Catholic priest might have to say. However, she also seems so defeated that she no longer really cares what is advised so long as she can give up on making decisions for herself. In this case, she doesn't seem to be looking for a particular answer; she just predicted that a priest would be one to give *an answer*. Thus, it seems that the same can be the case for those who are genuinely concerned for what is right or wrong. An agent can approach a testifier simply hoping to find an answer rather than the answer they hope to receive.

What about Kant's accusations of the cowardice of those who defer? Contrary to his assertion, by relying on moral deference to do the right thing, the morally disoriented agent is still exercising courage. Trusting another person and choosing to rely on them can in fact *require* bravery, perhaps even more so than if one was to rely on one's own judgment. For instance, accepting

¹⁰⁷ Sartre, Jean-Paul. "Existentialism and Humanism." *Basic Writings*. Ed. Priest, Stephen. London, Routledge. 2001. (p.34).

someone else's moral testimony can require courage if in doing so one is admitting their own epistemic or moral fallibility. For example, it might take courage to accept someone else's moral testimony that they made a racist comment.

As for Kant's criticism of laziness, Karen Jones states that the evidential standards for justified trusting of a testifier are high, and the "morally indolent can take no particular comfort" from a defense of moral deference.¹⁰⁸ Indeed, as we shall see in the next chapter, judging someone to be a reliable testifier will take a lot of hard work. So, we see that choosing to rely on others is not necessarily an effortless or fearless task.

¹⁰⁸ Jones, Karen. "Second-Hand Moral Knowledge." *The Journal of Philosophy*. Feb., 1999, Vol. 96, No. 2. (p.78).

Chapter 3: Deferring to Friends

1. Identifying Moral Exemplars

Now that I have argued for moral deference, one might wonder how a morally disoriented agent might be able to identify a trustworthy testifier. In the literature regarding moral deference, the guides one should hope to identify are moral experts.¹⁰⁹ A moral expert is a person who is “trustworthy, experienced, and knowledgeable” when it comes to what is morally right or wrong.¹¹⁰ Some define a moral expert in a strong sense which would require them to be an expert in *all* moral matters. However, I will be focusing on moral experts in a weak sense, which would only require someone to be reliable in answering questions within a particular moral topic.¹¹¹ In other words, the person to whom a morally disoriented agent defers does not need to be a moral expert in all matters, but just particular moral topics.

Of course, the morally disoriented person may not be able to easily identify a moral expert, since the criteria to decide who has moral expertise might require moral starting points that the morally disoriented person does not have. In other words, it would be difficult for a morally disoriented person to make a judgment about who has the moral knowledge that they lack.

However, there is a certain type of moral expert that is more easily identifiable for a morally disoriented agent: a moral exemplar. Moral exemplars are defined by Zagzebski to be “those persons whom we see, on close observation and with reflection, to be admirable in all or most of their acquired traits.”¹¹² For example, Jesus Christ, Guatama Buddha, Martin Luther King, Socrates, and

¹⁰⁹ Hills, A. (2009). Moral Testimony and Moral Epistemology. *Ethics*, 120(1). (p.95).

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Sliwa, Paulina. “In Defense of Moral Testimony.” *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 158, no. 2, 2012. (p. 190).

¹¹² Zagzebski, Linda Trinkaus. *Exemplarist Moral Theory*. Oxford University Press, 2017. (p.65).

many others. However, I will also be focusing on moral exemplars in a weak sense, meaning that they only need to be admirable in the relevant traits to a given moral topic, rather than exemplary in all or most moral matters. In short, a moral exemplar is a moral expert with evident good character in at least some relevant moral areas.

Zagzebski argues that the way we can identify moral exemplars is through feelings of admiration.¹¹³ By admiration, I mean the emotion that comes from “witnessing acts of virtue or moral beauty.”¹¹⁴ Jonathan Haidt terms my conception of admiration as the “other-praising emotion” of “elevation.”¹¹⁵ This terminology was inspired by Thomas Jefferson who describes how moral exemplars in fictional books can “elevate” a reader’s sentiments and “dilate [the reader’s] breast.”¹¹⁶ Jefferson describes this phenomenon as follows:¹¹⁷

When any act of charity or of gratitude, for instance, is presented either to our sight or imagination, we are deeply impressed with its beauty and feel a strong desire in ourselves of doing charitable and grateful acts also. On the contrary when we see or read of any atrocious deed, we are disgusted with its deformity and conceive an abhorrence of vice.¹¹⁸

Haidt claims that this feeling of admiration, or in his words, “elevation,” is what one feels toward moral exemplars.¹¹⁹ Zagzebski summarizes the main components of Haidt’s research on the feeling of admiration as follows:

- a. It is elicited by acts of charity, gratitude, fidelity, generosity, or any other strong display of virtue.
- b. It leads to distinctive physical feelings, including the feeling of dilation or opening in the chest, combined with the feeling that one had been uplifted or “elevated.”
- c. It gives rise to a specific motivation of action tendency: emulation, or the desire to perform the same kind of acts oneself.¹²⁰

¹¹³ Zagzebski, Linda Trinkaus. *Exemplarist Moral Theory*. Oxford University Press, 2017. (p.10).

¹¹⁴ Algoe SB, Haidt J. Witnessing excellence in action: the 'other-praising' emotions of elevation, gratitude, and admiration. *J Posit Psychol*. 2009;4(2). (pp.105-127). A portion also quoted in Zagzebski (2017).

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Jefferson T. Letter to Robert Skipwith. In: Peterson MD, editor. *The portable Thomas Jefferson*. New York: Penguin; 1975. (p. 349). (Original work published 1771).

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Algoe SB, Haidt J. Witnessing excellence in action: the 'other-praising' emotions of elevation, gratitude, and admiration. *J Posit Psychol*. 2009;4(2). (pp.105-127). A portion also quoted in Zagzebski (2017).

¹²⁰ Zagzebski, Linda Trinkaus. *Exemplarist Moral Theory*. Oxford University Press, 2017. (p.41).

This research supports Zagzebski's assertion that agents can identify moral exemplars through *feelings* of admiration.¹²¹

However, Zagzebski maintains that the feeling of admiration does not entail a judgment that the object of admiration is *in fact* admirable.¹²² The distinction I am making between feeling and judgment is that a judgment is something like a feeling or intuition in which one has confidence. With admiration one is able to "withhold judgment" until they are able to "reflect or investigate the admired object further."¹²³ Zagzebski continues:

Admiration need not include the judgment that the object of our admiration is admirable, but if we trust our emotion, we will be prepared to make that judgment. We tend not to make the judgment if we are skeptical of our emotional state, or if we wish to withhold judgment until we have been able to reflect or investigate the admired object further.¹²⁴

In other words, initially, the morally disoriented agent feels that the moral exemplar is admirable, and then over time the agent can become more confident about that intuition. This process is helpful in the case of the morally disoriented agent who does not feel as though they can rely on their own moral judgment. Instead, they can rely on their intuitions in order to find an exemplar, and then wait to see if the emotion of admiration "survives reflection over time."¹²⁵ Then, eventually, the morally disoriented agent can come to trust their own intuition and make the judgment that the person is a worthy moral exemplar.¹²⁶

One might wonder: Why not use this same process for making other moral judgments, besides judgments of moral exemplars? However, it is far more plausible that a morally disoriented person could identify a moral exemplar using feelings of admiration rather than a correct moral belief or belief system. According to Zagzebski,

¹²¹ Zagzebski, Linda Trinkaus. *Exemplarist Moral Theory*. Oxford University Press, 2017. (p.10).

¹²² Ibid. (p.34).

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid. (p.45).

¹²⁶ Ibid.

We are often more certain of the identities of exemplars than we are of any conceptual foundation. For instance, I think we are more certain about Confucius, Jesus, and Socrates are admirable than we are of claims about the good of pleasure, or what human flourishing is, or the good of doing one's duty, or any of the other claims that are used to ground a moral theory. In fact, I think that we are more certain that they are admirable than we are of *what* is admirable about them.¹²⁷

Zagzebski also states that while a belief system or moral theory might provide a “city map” for the morally disoriented agent, they would still need some kind of sign that can help orient them.¹²⁸ For example, a “You are here” sign or a landmark.¹²⁹ Zagzebski argues that moral exemplars can serve as those signs. She explains: “Just as a city map is useless unless we can identify something on the map by reference to something in our environment, a moral theory is useless unless we can find a place where the theory connects to a part of the moral domain we can identify independent of the theory.”¹³⁰ Therefore, while the process of relying on one's intuitions first and then forming a moral judgment over time works well for identifying moral exemplars, it is not as useful for coming to other moral judgments.

However, in order for the morally disoriented to feel confident in trusting a moral exemplar over time, moral exemplars will need to be observed closely. It is difficult to gather all of this evidence with people we know only casually or formally. Accordingly, I shall argue that the people we can most reliably identify as moral exemplars are those closest to us (if any of them are moral exemplars), since it is easier to observe potential markers of excellence in the people we know intimately.

2. Why the Morally Disoriented Should Defer to Friends

¹²⁷ Zagzebski, Linda Trinkaus. *Exemplarist Moral Theory*. Oxford University Press, 2017. (p.10).

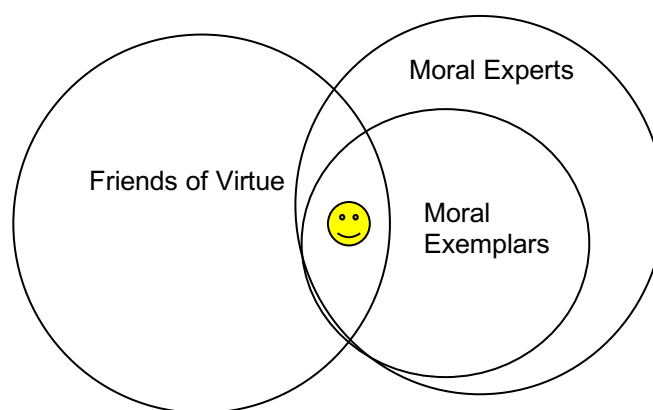
¹²⁸ *Ibid.* (p.7).

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

Aristotle writes that “in poverty and other misfortunes of life,” true friends are “the only refuge.”¹³¹ I argue that true friends are also a refuge in times of moral disorientation. Friends of virtue are defined by Aristotle to be those who are “anxious to do well by each other” and are concerned with promoting each other’s wellbeing.¹³² Such friends might include family, romantic partners, mentors or others, so long as they genuinely care about you. These are the friends who help and challenge you to become a better person. As Aristotle writes, “a certain training in virtue arises also from the company of the good...”¹³³ I will be arguing that the moral exemplars most easily identifiable for the morally disoriented are the ones who are also friends of virtue.

The diagram below illustrates the recommendation that I am offering to the morally disoriented agent. In short, the morally disorientated agent should defer to moral experts that they can more easily identify (moral exemplars) and can be in close trusting proximity with (friends).



Both Harbin and Brison provide direct support for the orienting capacity of friendships. In Harbin’s acknowledgements, she describes her partner as being her “closest and most truth-telling interlocutor” and states that together their life is “orienting.”¹³⁴ Though Harbin maintains that “the main function” of the people closest to us “is not to interact with us in ways that reorient us...,” it

¹³¹ Aristotle, Translated by David Ross. *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Oxford, 2009. (1155a11-12).

¹³² *Ibid.* (1162b6).

¹³³ *Ibid.* (1170a11-12).

¹³⁴ Harbin, Ami. *Disorientation and Moral Life*. Oxford University Press, 2016 (xxiv).

seems that she has experienced the orienting power of friendship in her own life.¹³⁵ As I argued previously, by deferring to others, an agent is able to obtain valuable moral testimony of who one is or who one can be, which is an essential moral starting point for the morally disoriented person who wants to be good. Brison supports this claim by noting that her disorienting experience inspired her view that the self is “fundamentally relational” and is capable of “being remade in connection with others.”¹³⁶ In short, friends have the ability to help reorient the morally disoriented.

Moreover, friendships also offer relevant evidence of trustworthiness. True friendship takes time. As Aristotle says, “a wish for friendship may arise quickly, but friendship does not,” and in fact “requires time and familiarity.”¹³⁷ Thus friendships provide relevant evidence for a testifier’s reliability because they offer a sustained period of intimate observation. And, returning to Zagzebski’s argument for identifying a moral exemplar, the only way a morally disoriented person can come to trust their emotion that someone is admirable, is if that emotion can withstand observation and critical reflection over time.¹³⁸ For example, Karen Jones’ offers some insight into potential markers for trustworthy moral exemplars:

We shall want to have good evidence about the person’s character, about possible hidden agendas, and about whether she has the sort of experiences that contribute to the kind of competence we are counting on her to have. We would also want to know that our witnesses have appropriate epistemic self-assessment and are not given to asserting with confidence claims that they are in a position to assert only tentatively if at all.¹³⁹

Besides the common intuition that one can trust the people closest to them, it seems that given any set of markers for a reliable testifier, an agent is more likely to be able to identify those markers if the testifier is someone they know personally.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁵ Harbin, Ami. *Disorientation and Moral Life*. Oxford University Press, 2016 (168).

¹³⁶ Brison, Susan J. *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*. Princeton University Press, 2002 (p. xi).

¹³⁷ Aristotle, Translated by David Ross. *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Oxford, 2009. (1156b31-32).

¹³⁸ Zagzebski, Linda Trinkaus. *Exemplarist Moral Theory*. Oxford University Press, 2017. (p.45).

¹³⁹ Jones, Karen. “Second-Hand Moral Knowledge.” *The Journal of Philosophy*. Feb., 1999, Vol. 96, No. 2, pp 55-78.

¹⁴⁰ McShane, Paddy J. “The non-remedial value of dependence on moral testimony.” *Philos Stud*, 2018. (p. 633).

This evidence of reliability is especially important to the morally disoriented agent, since they can be vulnerable to moral hustlers with hidden agendas. For example, those who are morally disoriented are sometimes preyed on by religious organizations. As a former proselytizing missionary, my mission president advised us to “look for people who have just experienced a death in the family or have just had a new child or who have experienced some other life changing event.” That is when I began to suspect that my mission was really about trying to find vulnerable people to baptize in order to fill a quota, rather than simply sharing “the Good News.” The problem with relying on people that an agent does not know personally and intimately is that it is going to be more difficult for the morally disoriented to observe defeaters such as hidden agendas. Therefore, friendship provides the time and proximity to gain confidence in one’s intuitions about admirability and moral excellence.

Furthermore, Paddy McShane points out that with the people closest to us we can come to “fine-tune” on which topics we depend on their moral testimony for. If we find them to be “locally unreliable in some way,” our dependence can exclude certain moral topics or circumstances of their unreliability.¹⁴¹ For example, if an agent knows that one of their friends can be petty, they may want to avoid asking that friend about how they should respond to their frustration with another person. Or if an agent knows their friend is particularly grumpy in the morning before they have had their coffee, the agent might avoid asking their friend what they think about people in that particular circumstance.

In addition to having more opportunities for verifying trustworthiness, relationships provide *incentives* to be trustworthy. Unlike books or radio hosts or preachers, the intimate speaker is more likely to specifically address the hearer. For example, a friend might preface this invitation with

¹⁴¹ McShane, Paddy J. “The non-remedial value of dependence on moral testimony.” *Philos Stud*, 2018. (p.645).

something like, “trust me...” or “believe me...”¹⁴² McShane explains that for the testifier, “issuing such an invitation brings with it certain responsibilities; for example, a testifier should have grounds for thinking that he can live up to your trust, should you accept his invitation.”¹⁴³ In other words, the fact that testimony was personally invited by someone who wants you to depend on them provides a reason for the testifier to speak reliably.

Moreover, by accepting a friend’s testimony, we are conveying trust in them, which is “constitutive of the ideal of friendship.”¹⁴⁴ This is because in the case of moral testimony, by choosing to depend on a friend, the agent makes themselves vulnerable to them and therefore expresses trust.¹⁴⁵ Accordingly, in friendships, trusting the people closest to you is an ideal which can sometimes compete with the ideal of doing what’s right:

We often find ourselves in situations in which the value of trusting pulls against other moral considerations. Trust does not always win out in these situations, but it often does. Because trust is so important to our relationships, and our relationships are themselves so important, trust even wins out when the degree of risk is quite high, and the consequences of our trust being let down is morally weighty.¹⁴⁶

However, it seems that taking these morally weighty risks are unjustified outside of these types of relationships. For example, it seems that we would be more sympathetic toward an agent who commits wrongdoing because they relied on their close friends or family for moral testimony, rather than a person who commits wrongdoing after relying on the moral testimony of a radio host. In the case of deferring to moral exemplars whom the agent does not intimately know, trust should not be a strongly competing ideal since there is no personal relationship. As a result, even if the morally disoriented person’s initial intuition is wrong regarding whether or not their friend is a moral

¹⁴² McShane, Paddy J. “The non-remedial value of dependence on moral testimony.” *Philos Stud*, 2018. (p.640).

¹⁴³ *Ibid.* (p.646).

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.* (p.636).

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.* (pp.635- 636).

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.* (p.645).

exemplar, the risk of wrongdoing is more justified than in the case of deferring to non-intimate moral exemplars.

Given these reasons, I argue that the morally disoriented agent should first look for friends of virtue who provoke feelings of admiration. Next, they should see if upon close observation and critical reflection the friend continues to appear trustworthy. Then, the morally disoriented agent should begin relying on their friend's moral testimony, and act on the trust that is essential to the ideal of friendship. Lastly, time and experience may further strengthen or weaken the morally disoriented agent's estimation of the person as a moral exemplar. Accordingly, this process can lead the morally disorientated agent on the path to orientation.

3. Objections

Unfortunately, dependence within friendships tends to have a bad reputation.¹⁴⁷ For example, consider dysfunctional labeling such as “co-dependent” or “emotionally dependent.”¹⁴⁸ However, McShane argues that instances of “co-dependence” are mostly seen as bad because they “prop up unhealthy or immoral behaviors (e.g. addiction, abuse, etc.)” whereas in the case of moral deference, the friends are relying on each other for “good things.”¹⁴⁹ She then continues on to say, “to adopt the aim of becoming entirely independent of a friend's good will for good things seems at odds with being in a friendship, especially an ideal one.”¹⁵⁰ In this case, it would be strange for friends not to depend on each other for the “good of moral knowledge.”¹⁵¹ McShane explains that “we often see acts of dependence as important milestones in friendship.”¹⁵² For example, when a

¹⁴⁷ McShane, Paddy J. “The non-remedial value of dependence on moral testimony.” *Philos Stud*, 2018. (p.634).

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.* (pp.635-137).

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.* (p.635).

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.* (p.634).

¹⁵² *Ibid.* (p.635).

friend asks a person to watch their pet for them, or when a person is invited to move in with their romantic partner. Sometimes we depend on friends even when we don't have to because it seems to be an important part of the intimacy of the relationship.¹⁵³ Therefore, contrary to being dysfunctional, depending on one another's testimony is essential to the "flourishing of our intimate relationships."¹⁵⁴

However, perhaps the worry is that, given the morally disoriented agent's exacerbated state of uncertainty, they may come to depend *too heavily* on their friends. In other words, there can be a lack of reciprocity or an overdependence on others for moral testimony. McShane concedes that "one-sided dependence can signal a departure from the ideal friendship" and that "for dependence to play a role in constituting the ideal friendship, it must be *reciprocal*."¹⁵⁵ For example, returning to Fleabag, her overdependence is evident as she essentially pleads: "tell me how to live my life."¹⁵⁶ And while this high degree of dependence may be acceptable for short periods of time, moral disorientation is temporally extended.

Nevertheless, McShane argues:

To say that dependence on friends is valuable is not to say that it should be pursued to the extreme. It is also not to say that it is the only thing that is of value; indeed, the value of dependence should be situated and pursued alongside other, sometimes competing, values (e.g., the value of independence).¹⁵⁷

Luckily, according to Harbin, the morally disoriented are benefited with capacities to function without resoluteness, where "by acting *irresolutely*, one can tentatively pursue multiple goals that are in tension with one another."¹⁵⁸ Therefore, the morally disoriented should pursue the value of dependence in cases of moral topics they are disoriented in and pursue independence in others. This

¹⁵³ McShane, Paddy J. "The non-remedial value of dependence on moral testimony." *Philos Stud*, 2018. (p.635).

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.* (p.629).

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.* (p.637).

¹⁵⁶ Waller-Bridge, Phoebe. *Fleabag*: Season 2, Episode 4.

¹⁵⁷ McShane, Paddy J. "The non-remedial value of dependence on moral testimony." *Philos Stud*, 2018. (p.636).

¹⁵⁸ Harbin, Ami. *Disorientation and Moral Life*. Oxford University Press, 2016 (137). (emphasis in original).

seems possible, considering it is not likely that an agent would be disoriented on *every* given moral topic.

Moreover, it seems unlikely that there would be a significant lack of reciprocity in regard to valuable moral testimony on the part of the morally disoriented agent. Seeing as moral disorientation has potential epistemic benefits, the morally disoriented agent would have certain epistemic expertise from their experiences. For example, Julia Driver writes:

Someone who has actually experienced a tragedy is frequently taken to be a greater authority on that tragedy than someone who has not. The idea is that imagination, empathy, and sympathy take you only so far. One can't know what it is like to lose a loved one, it is claimed, unless one has lost a loved one.¹⁵⁹

While this may not be a propositional type of knowledge, Driver argues that “the intuition carries over” to moral testimony. For example, returning to Lewis’ account of grief, it seems that his assertion has greater authority than others who have not experienced the death of a loved one. In fact, he even describes his frustrations with those who try to assert something they don’t truly understand.

It is hard to have patience with people who say, ‘There is no death’ or ‘Death doesn’t matter.’ There is death. And whatever is matters. And whatever happens has consequences, and it and they are irrevocable and irreversible. You might as well say that birth doesn’t matter. I look up at the night sky. Is there anything more certain than in those vast times and spaces, if I were allowed to search them, I should nowhere find her face, her voice, her touch? She died. She is dead. Is the word so difficult to learn?¹⁶⁰

McShane states that the “reciprocity of dependence should not merely be understood quantitatively, but also qualitatively.”¹⁶¹ It seems that in cases of moral disorientation, the agent may have a better-quality moral testimony when it comes to topics within the realm of their experiences. Furthermore, the morally disoriented person may also invite their friend to learn how to attend to them in ways

¹⁵⁹ Driver, Julia. “Autonomy and the Asymmetry Problem for Moral Expertise.” *Philosophical Studies*, Apr. 2006, Vol. 128, No. 3. (p.628).

¹⁶⁰ Lewis, C.S. *A Grief Observed*. HarperCollins, 1994. (p.15).

¹⁶¹ McShane, Paddy J. “The non-remedial value of dependence on moral testimony.” *Philos Stud*, 2018. (p.636).

that strengthen their friend's moral character; for example, they might advise them to have more empathy or patience.

Another potential concern is what a disoriented agent should do when their disorientation is *about* their friends. Perhaps they experienced some kind of betrayal or abandonment, or there is reason to believe a friend is no longer reliable. Certainly, this seems that it would set a morally disoriented agent up for a disadvantage. In the case of disorientation about only some of their friends, the agent can simply rely on the ones who seem most reliable. Though, unfortunately, in the case that there is moral disorientation about *all* of their friends (or all of their friends who are also friends of virtue), there is no helpful answer beyond the recommendation to find new friends. However, there should be some hope that admiration should lead one, eventually, to those whose "moral beauty" attracts them. Thus, despite the significant setback, the morally disoriented person still has hope in finding new friends of virtue that can offer orienting insight and perspective. While it is difficult to find a true friend, as I have argued previously, going it alone is not an option. So, now that the morally disoriented agent knows they can defer to moral exemplars who are friends, if the need arises, they should go looking for some.

Conclusion

Moral disorientation challenges certain assumptions of how self-reliant people can be. For a morally disoriented person who has experienced a loss of moral beliefs, disorientation cuts through the illusion “that a person can always turn within, regardless of external and physical hardships, to find a reliable bedrock of clarity and resolve.”¹⁶² In other words, moral disorientation forces us to recognize our interdependence with others when it comes to making moral judgments.¹⁶³ So, how should the morally disoriented person who wants to be good reorient themselves? They should defer to moral exemplars about morality, including about their own moral character. Moral exemplars are more easily and reliably identifiable when they are friends. Relying on others is also constitutive of the ideal friendship of virtue. In the case of the morally disoriented, friendships are essential in navigating moral life. As Raphael Bob-Waksberg once wrote, “in this terrifying world, all we have are the connections we make.”¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Springer, Elise. “Disorientation and Moral Life.” *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, 29 Nov. 2018, ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/disorientation-and-moral-life. (emphasis in original).

¹⁶³ Harbin, Ami. *Disorientation and Moral Life*. Oxford University Press, 2016 (p.59).

¹⁶⁴ Bob-Waksberg, R. (n.d.). Bojack Horseman: Season 3, Episode 4 "Fish Out of Water" [Cartoon].

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