

When Discomfort Motivates Action: A Feminist Philosophical Account of Moral Agency and Structural Ignorance

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Experiences of disorientation, as described by feminist epistemologies of ignorance, may give momentum to efforts for individual and collective emancipation from oppressive knowledge structures. Drawing from Ami Harbin's work on disorientation and moral agency, I will provide an account of the potential for awareness and political action to arise from experienced disorientations.¹ Additionally, I will describe structural ignorance, as well as the possible implication of moral agents within Nancy Tuana's taxonomy of ignorance.² Furthermore, I will discuss the role of discomfort in inciting movements of social change by exploring the work of social justice movements in actively working against structural ignorance, willful ignorance, and epistemic injustice. I conclude by suggesting a role for Tuana's classification of 'loving ignorance' in justice-oriented moral agency and its considerations of empathy, which, when strengthened by experiences of disorientation, is a force against complacency.³ I attempt to give an account of the corporeality and materiality of manifested ignorance, and of how awareness of the constraints stemming from ignorance might be conducive to emancipation.

Harbin understands "experiences of disorientation" to be "human experiences of feeling positioned such that relevant goals are not evident and reachable, and such that relevant actions are ones we struggle to enact or envision ourselves enacting."⁴ She supports Gail Weiss' position for a corporeal account of moral agency and writes that everyday agency is full of moral import.⁵ With this recognition, Harbin seeks to call into question aversions to and vilifications of disorientation, suggesting that there are positive and productive capac-

ities of certain experiences of discomfort. Harbin acknowledges that embodied experiences translate to expressions of morality, though she notes that morality is more often conceived in the abstract. Harbin discusses the learned nature of orientations, arguing that "being oriented is not always synonymous with well-being."⁶ Harbin explains that if our oriented embodiments are shaped by and complicit in oppressive social norms, senses of *disorientation* can be sites for awareness-building, creating the conditions for potential political action. Additionally, Harbin writes that shifts in attention caused by lack of ease might lead to "morally productive reflection" and politically transformative action.⁷ For instance, "the surprising momentum sometimes present in periods of disorientation is often generated by experiences of our bodies as more open, flexible, or relational than we have previously thought."⁸ Harbin suggests that experiences of disorientation might not only "jostle" our sense of embodiment and moral agency, but "propel" us toward material action.⁹

Following Lorraine Code, Harbin would likely reject the false dichotomy between the 'social' moral agent and the 'detached' epistemic agent, insofar as the ethical and the epistemic are invariably interwoven.¹⁰ This relationship must be considered when examining the place of moral agency within and against structured ignorance. If the epistemic and the ethical are interwoven and the ethical is corporeal, then embodied experiences are surely epistemically relevant. For the moral agent, the corporeal experience of disorientation is inseparable from the implications of this disorientation in the agent's sense of self and situation. Another important acknowledgement made by Harbin is that

disorientation might reveal something about relationality. According to Harbin, “relationality is in every case a condition of our identification and action.”¹¹ Furthermore, “disorientations can support moral agency in another way by heightening sensitivity to vulnerability.”¹² Since a study of the epistemology of ignorance relies on an understanding of relativity, interdependence, and domination, this sensitivity to vulnerability is integral to grasping the link between disorientation and emancipation. Harbin suggests that the realization of one’s limitations which accompany experienced disorientations “feeds directly into a vision of political urgency and the need to prioritize action.”¹³ It is through these realizations that the political momentum of disorientation finds its impetus.

Epistemologies of ignorance, a recent body of work within feminist philosophy, aim to uncover ignored knowledge, examine knowledge that has been withheld, reclaim denied or suppressed knowledge, and develop new knowledge “freed from the confines of traditional frameworks.”¹⁴ These epistemologies recognize that ignorance, like knowledge, is situated and influenced by implicit power structures.¹⁵ According to this view, epistemic injustices and their material implications are perpetuated and proliferated in varied and complex ways. Tuana suggests that most feminist epistemologies are “liberatory” epistemologies “that go beyond establishing warrantability of knowledge claims to uncovering the power dimensions of knowledge practices.” Tuana claims that the goal of feminist epistemologists is not simply to know differently, but to undermine oppressive practices, to enhance and, in some instances, to make possible, epistemic responsibility.¹⁶ Tuana asserts that, where current epistemic standards are embedded in oppressive systems, “epistemologies of resistance and transformation are a key response.”¹⁷ Tuana’s formulation of a proposed taxonomy of ignorance is wholly based on her account of the women’s health movement, which was focused on epistemic injustices and their material implications in the lives of women. I suggest that *any* movement for social change is either implicitly or explicitly tied up in the reevaluation, rejection, or reclamation of knowledge claims, since knowledge claims, as situated, are ideologically and materially pervasive.

However, justice movements and other resistance movements identify with a multiplicity of “theories of change.” Some movements are critical, aiming to point out and break down unjust struc-

tures. Other movements are positive, suggesting ways to create new and just conditions. Despite this multiplicity, all justice movements presuppose a knowledge of injustices, and are therefore relevant for epistemological analysis. Some justice movements might not be founded on the imperative of consciousness-raising, but instead prioritize the urgent need for tangible change in the lives of marginalized peoples above or in addition to educating the general public. However, the subversive, activist nature of justice movements will inevitably come up against the barriers resulting from different types of ignorance, no matter if the movement claims critical or positive status, and no matter its primary imperative.

Many justice movements use various forms of public protest and civil disobedience to spread awareness of their cause and the injustices they fight. Such public displays sometimes incite discomfort, fueling awareness and action. One such example of this is the 1990 ‘Capitol Crawl’ in the United States, which will be discussed in my illustration of Tuana’s taxonomy of ignorance.

Tuana proposes a taxonomy in which she distinguishes between six interwoven forms of ignorance. Her argument draws on the efforts of the women’s health movement and its fight for epistemic and social justice.¹⁸ These kinds of ignorance are described in the language of the collective. Additionally, Tuana emphasizes “the ability partially to translate practices of ignorance among very different—and power-differentiated—communities,” which she asserts is necessarily contextual and intersectional.¹⁹ In the following account of Tuana’s taxonomy, I will attempt to identify how the moral agent, through an experience of disorientation, might challenge or break down the constraints of these six forms of ignorance.

The first form of ignorance suggested by Tuana is “knowing that we do not know, but not caring to know,” in which a certain knowledge is deemed unrelated to one’s present interests and therefore judged unworthy of attention.²⁰ Sometimes, Tuana suggests, ignorance results from a lack of interest. The corporeal, emotional, affective discomfort of experienced disorientation might draw an individual’s interest to a particular issue. One group’s lack of interest in a particular issue may reveal, when realized by disorientation, whose interests are being served within a particular domain. This form of ignorance might be produced by and highlight injustices in these domains.

The second form of ignorance arises when “we do not even know that we do not know.”²¹ This kind of ignorance occurs when current interests or situations block certain knowledges. It is often only recognized in retrospect and might simply be a product of the individual’s situation. This kind of ignorance calls for a reach outside of the individual’s current conception of reality. Harbin and others suggest that the momentum caused by moments of disorientation often make individuals reconsider their sense of reality, which could effectively lend itself to a strengthened moral agency in acknowledging experiences and realities outside of the agent’s previous considerations. Retrospective consideration of these knowledges might also compel individuals to encourage others to shift their conception of reality.

The third form of ignorance is characterized as the systematically cultivated ignorance of certain groups.²² Tuana references instances where types of knowledge are, by those in positions of power and domination, deemed dangerous or unnecessary in the context of an external agenda.²³ Individuals come to recognize this type of cultivated ignorance when they are propelled into politically charged situations. Whether it be for profit, for the perpetuation of societal norms, or for another agenda, this type of knowledge is often a direct target of justice movements who aim to subvert such cultivations of ignorance in recognizing the injustices it produces. This carefully cultivated and systematically maintained ignorance can create complicit individuals. In this struggle, the role justice movements must be to raise awareness and provoke individuals who complicitly participate in unjust structures and movements.

Moreover, “willful ignorance” is described by Tuana as one where “they do not know and they do not want to know.”²⁴ This ignorance is not only extremely pervasive within structural injustice, but might also be the most difficult type of ignorance to face. For instance, Tuana references Charles Mills, who asserts that “racism involves an active production and preservation of ignorance” in the norms and beliefs which pervade racist societies. Those complicit in oppressive structure often do not know that the institutions and systems within which they exist are materially and ideologically oppressive, but also do not *want* to know. This has much to do with the ways in which they benefit from these structures. Knowing the truth, says Tuana, would be much more difficult for these individ-

uals than continuing in blissful ignorance. Because the perpetuation of injustice for some often occurs in tandem with the perpetuation of comfort and ease for the other, willful ignorance is a challenge for social justice movements. It is difficult to imagine anything other than a particularly intense experience of disorientation that might compel a moral agent to acknowledge and take action against this complicity. It is from this kind of ignorance which marginalized individuals must be emancipated, and against which many social justice movements work; this dangerous and harmful phenomenon is at the root of structures of domination. When we encourage each other to sit with discomfort, we can acknowledge willful ignorance.

Tuana notes that those “types of knowers” who are discredited by the structures within which they exist are the “ignorances produced by the construction of epistemologically disadvantaged identities.”²⁵ These knowers are seen as questionable and untrustworthy by virtue of their perceived identities and set of experiences. This highlights the privilege and domination within the epistemic realm. It is from here that feminist epistemologies seek not only to “know differently,” but also to “undermine oppressive practices.”²⁶ Perhaps a moral agent who becomes subject to a certain experience or assumed identity is more capable of understanding what it is to exist within an oppressive epistemic realm. The experience of moving from a position of epistemic privilege to one of disadvantage would certainly be “disorienting.” Without having this direct experience, however, moral agents who find themselves to be in privileged positions, wishing to understand and work against epistemic injustice, must rely on their capacity for empathy and an acknowledgment of their epistemic limitation to see the urgency of these injustices.

During the Capitol Crawl in 1990, a thousand supporters gathered as sixty disabled protestors “cast aside their wheelchairs, crutches and walkers to crawl or drag themselves, step by step, up the 78 marble stairs of the Capitol’s West Front,” in Washington, D.C.²⁷ Although this protest did not overcome all ableism and disableism in the United States, this example is still useful in illustrating the challenges that ignorance poses for justice movements and how they can use discomfort to call into question widely held conceptions of reality.

In the case of the Capitol Crawl and disability rights activism in the United States, it is possible that many non-disabled Americans were not inter-

ested in the struggles faced by those with disabilities. Perhaps actions like the Capitol Crawl sparked interest for an issue not previously judged worthy of attention. It is possible that the social positions and privileges of many Americans place the issues of disabled people in the periphery. There may have also been a cultivated ignorance on the part of structures whose proponents might have benefited from the marginalization of disabled people. Perhaps ignorance of these issues was willfully preserved by a society entrenched with inequality. And perhaps the knowledge of disabled people was, and still is, disadvantaged by traditional conceptions of epistemic validity. Similar to the work of other justice movements, the Capitol Crawl has faced criticism for its methods. Michael Winter, a leader of the independent living movement, said “some people may have thought it was undignified for people in wheelchairs to crawl in that manner, but I felt that it was necessary to show the country what kinds of things people with disabilities have to face on a day-to-day basis. We had to be willing to fight for what we believed in.”²⁸

Tuana’s final characterization of ignorance is that of “loving ignorance.”²⁹ Loving ignorance is different from the other forms of ignorance in that its recognition can be integrated into the individual’s sense of situatedness to strengthen their

epistemic responsibility and, I suggest, their moral agency. This form of ignorance exceeds our capacities for knowing. Through acknowledging this kind of ignorance, the “lovingly ignorant” moral agent realizes that there are some experiences that are not shared, and that “alterity is not something we attempt to remove.”³⁰ Moreover, this should be approached with humility and wonder. Just as disorientation is often averted and vilified, this kind of humility is often met with apprehension by conventional epistemology.

Tuana quotes Haraway in suggesting that epistemologies of ignorance should be tools for “widening all kinds of orifices to improve observation and intervention in the interest of projects that are simultaneously about freedom, justice, and knowledge.”³¹ In recognizing the potential held in moments of experienced disorientation for the bettering of the moral agent, and in acknowledging the interweaving of the epistemic and the ethical, it seems that a reconception of the ways in which we conceive of the corporality of vulnerability and relationality lends itself to a deepened and humbled epistemic empathy that might provide opportunities for emancipation. This emancipation would not only be for those marginalized by structures of domination, but also for all implicated in these structures.

Notes

1. Ami Harbin, "Bodily Disorientation And Moral Change," *Hypatia* 27, no. 2 (2012): 261–80.
2. Nancy Tuana, "The Speculum Of Ignorance: The Women's Health Movement And Epistemologies of Ignorance," *Hypatia* 21, no. 3 (2006): 1–19.
3. Tuana, 15.
4. Harbin, "Bodily Disorientation and Moral Change," 262.
5. Harbin, 263.
6. Harbin, 265.
7. Harbin, 265.
8. Harbin, 277.
9. Harbin, 277.
10. Lorraine Code, "Care, Concern, And Advocacy: Is There A Place For Epistemic Responsibility?," *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (2015): 1–20.
11. Harbin, "Bodily Disorientation and Moral Change," 272.
12. Harbin, 272.

13. Harbin, 274.
14. Tuana, "The Speculum of Ignorance," 2.
15. Tuana, 2.
16. Tuana, 13.
17. Tuana, 14.
18. Tuana, 3.
19. Tuana, 3.
20. Tuana, 4.
21. Tuana, 6.
22. Tuana, 9.
23. Tuana, 9.
24. Tuana, 10.
25. Tuana, 13.
26. Tuana, 14.
27. "'Capitol Crawl' – Americans With Disabilities Act Of 1990," 2013, *History By Zim*. <http://www.historybyzim.com/2013/09/capitol-crawl-americans-with-disabilities-act-of-1990/>.
28. "Capitol Crawl."
29. Tuana, "The Speculum of Ignorance," 15.
30. Tuana, 16.
31. Tuana, 16.