REPLY

Disorientation, Distrust, and the Pandemic

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In their article, 'The Collective Disorientation of the Covid-19 Crisis', Fernández Velasco, Perroy, and Casati reflect upon the "multifarious state of disorientation" that many of us have found ourselves in during the pandemic. They provide a rich and insightful account, which ties together complementary strands of research in various disciplines. In particular, they do an excellent job of bringing phenomenology into dialogue with relevant findings in the cognitive sciences. The term "disorientation" can be used to describe a range of experiences, arising in contexts that include illness, bereavement and loss, political change, and migration. What might these experiences have in common? For instance, how does feeling spatially disoriented in unfamiliar surroundings resemble disorientation in the face of political upheaval? In an earlier study of disorientation, Harbin (2016, pp.13-17) settles for *family resemblance* between the various forms of disorientation. Instead, Fernández Velasco, Perroy, and Casati seek to identify a feature shared by all. Disorientations, they propose, involve a feeling stemming from the "evaluation and regulation of processes integrating frames of reference pertaining to a variety of domains." I have some sympathy with this overall approach and accept that all disorientations may well share something in common. However, in what follows, I want to draw a distinction between two importantly *different* types of disorientation (both of which accommodate considerable further variety). This will involve further reflecting on the interpersonal and social dimensions of disorientation.

In finding our way around different "domains", from the spatial to the political, we do not rely exclusively on internalized frames of reference. Instead, we often proceed under the assumption that specific individuals or other people in general will be able and willing to provide information, guidance, and support, if and when needed. The following predicaments can thus be distinguished: (a) an experience of uncertainty over how to proceed; (b) an

experience of uncertainty that further incorporates a sense of being unable to depend on others. In the former case, the experience of disorientation is limited; it arises against a backdrop of social relations and associated norms that may offer the prospect of relief. The latter, however, can amount to what we might call *existential* disorientation, something that is not experienced as contingent and escapable.

Fernández Velasco, Perroy, and Casati mention the example of being lost in a forest, something that is often used as a metaphor or analogy for conveying other forms of disorientation experience. It can also serve to illustrate the contrast between experiences of being lost and being lost without a guide. Consider the opening Canto of Dante's *Inferno*, where the author finds himself in a dark forest, having lost sight of any path through life (Alighieri, 2006). The norms, values, commitments, and projects that once provided direction and purpose are now absent. In their place is a sense of threat; routes that might otherwise have been taken are blocked by beasts. It is only by following Virgil that Dante finds direction and, without his guide, he could not have navigated a course through the circles of Hell. As this illustrates, an orienting structure need not consist in a wholly internalized frame of reference; crucial parts of it may be delegated to others. Through them, some degree of orientation is discovered and sustained, even within a wider context of disorder.

So, the profundity of disorientation hinges – to a substantial degree – on whether and to what extent one is still able to draw on others. Fernández Velasco, Perroy, and Casati observe that, during the Covid-19 pandemic, "social distancing measures have doubtlessly destabilized the habituality of our social world." However, it can be added this is *doubly* so, at least in those instances where measures interfere with interpersonal relations that would more usually contribute to the navigation of uncertainty and upheaval. In his *General Psychopathology*, Karl Jaspers (1963, p.104) writes, "if socially accepted reality totters, people become adrift". As I understand Jaspers, he intends this in two complementary ways. Becoming adrift involves *losing what was habitually taken for granted*, with the consequent removal of norms that once guided activity and thought. Where this disruption incorporates lack of access to interpersonal and social support, it further involves *losing the means to reorientate oneself*. And that is what it is to be truly adrift, lost.

One important condition for reliance on others is the *ability to trust*. Fernández Velasco, Perroy, and Casati mention losses of trust within "domains," how these can generate more conservative attitudes, and how clear messaging can help to sustain trust in experts. However, it can be added that enduring and pervasive losses of trust are central to those disorientation experiences that involve no prospect of rescue. Erosion of trust in certain types

of people (e.g., politicians or scientists) might lead to excessive avoidance of certain sources of evidence or advice and excessive reliance on others, with consequent risk of dogma and inflexibility. One might object that this involves being *overly attached* to a certain framework for thinking and acting, rather than being disoriented. However, there are wider-ranging experiences of distrust and disorientation, in the context of which one might cling on to certain things. A form of disorientation experienced by some of us during the pandemic involves what Jackson (2019) calls being "epistemically adrift". One is bombarded with diverse, conflicting, and confusing assertions and recommendations from numerous sources, all boasting one or another form of expertise. It is at least apparent that not all of them can be trusted, given that some conflict with and undermine others. Yet, there is no reliable procedure for determining which are dependable and which not. Consequently, one may start to feel epistemically, and perhaps also morally, lost – unable to draw on social resources in confident and consistent ways, so as to supplement and potentially revise incomplete frames of reference.

There might still remain the prospect of a Virgil appearing from somewhere. However, more profound losses of trust no longer accommodate that possibility. Distinctions can be drawn between trusting a person to do *p*, trusting a person full stop, and simply *trusting* others, without reference to specific individuals or actions. The latter is – for many of us – the default attitude towards social situations in general. This is not to claim that we simply trust everyone, but that we tend to encounter people through a certain, habitual set of expectations, other than in those instances where there are reasons to make an exception (Ratcliffe et al., 2014). This type of nonlocalized trust or confidence in other people amounts to an overarching, pre-reflective *style of expectation*, something that shapes how we experience the social world as a whole and is taken for granted when we seek guidance from others (Ratcliffe, 2017). For many people, this trusting orientation has been challenged during the pandemic. Others in general may no longer appear as well-meaning potential interlocutors, but instead as loci of threat and unpredictability – vehicles of disease transmission that are best avoided. Furthermore, those whose counsel would otherwise have been sought may now be off limits, due to social restrictions. Meanwhile, news channels and social media deliver incessant reports of disease, death, bad behaviour, tragedy, and all manner of other things that erode one's general sense of familiarity and safety.

This can add up to a social world that is not only disorienting, but also lacking in forms of interpersonal and social support that could otherwise aid in negotiating disruption. At its most pronounced, the experience consists in a sense of disorientation without reprieve:

a world that is bereft of previously established norms and imbued with danger, where other people no longer point to any alternatives. Where many members of society undergo such experiences simultaneously, this could be termed a form of "collective" disorientation. However, this need not imply any sense of togetherness or solidarity. For some people, pandemic-experience has indeed involved a strong, even heightened, sense of kinship: we're all in this together. In contrast, where disorientation is exacerbated by pervasive distrust, there is a sense of estrangement from all those who are untrustworthy. In the most extreme case, one is utterly alone, unable to depend on anyone in order to regulate the structure of one's life.

Hence, I suggest that disorientation in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic is likely to involve various combinations of (a) disruption of habitual practice, and (b) differing degrees and types of disturbance in the ability to depend on other people, including the erosion of trust. The combination of (a) and (b) is importantly different in character from (a) alone. Likewise, being *oriented* in the social world is not just a matter of having stable, enduring frames of reference for navigating various domains. It also involves having the trust or confidence to let those frames remain indeterminate to some degree, relying on others to fill in the gaps if and when the need arises.

References

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