



David P. Levine, *Depending on Strangers: Freedom, Memory, and the Unknown Self*
 Reviewed by Elliott Schwebach

Many books that take psychoanalytic approaches toward politics and society do so without exploring, at least in great detail, the concept and meaning of freedom. This is unfortunate, for notwithstanding its difficulty to theorize, freedom undeniably represents a fundamental motivating concern for both psychoanalysis and democratic political life. To his credit, David Levine addresses this challenging but crucial topic head on, analyzing “the essence of freedom” and working to unpack the dynamics of its relationship to individual psyches and the broader society within which they are shaped (Levine 2021, 3). In so doing, Levine makes a unique contribution by arguing that freedom, which he models as an internally-mindful capability to make choices without predetermination, demands “that we have the emotional capacity to engage with and depend on strangers” (xi).

While most psychoanalytic studies, and especially those from an object relations perspective, focus on familial relationships as they are internalized from birth, Levine urges his readers to consider the significance of how one relates to the “outside world [that] is not our family” (121). Levine posits that securely relating to strangers requires a different form of relating than that which characterizes the ambivalent emotional attachments we have to familiar others; instead, it requires a form of relating marked by “the exercise of negative capability” or the accommodation of absences or unknowns in one’s internal self (136). Levine further argues that relating to strangers in this way provides an important psychological basis for the collective maintenance of democratic institutions.

Although Levine develops this argument in an often circuitous way, his overall claim is cogent enough. It is provocative, as well, and may help spur one’s thinking in new and unforeseen directions. The best part of this book, and one which is likely to move readers regardless of their theoretical inclinations or their sympathies to the overall argument, is the case study that Levine presents in Chapter 6: that of wartime photojournalist and serial street photographer W. Eugene Smith. Here, Levine connects “Smith’s compulsive need to make and save recordings of all kinds,” and especially of strangers, whose lives populate Smith’s walls, with a tumultuous inner life and fragile sense of self (89). Smith’s “unfreedom” – as evidenced by his intensely obsessional behaviors and heavy use of intoxicants – stems, Levine surmises, “from the unavailability of [personal] memories suitable to freedom” (90). This represents the life of an individual who cannot depend on strangers *as strangers*, and who therefore looks to them in a continuous attempt to capture and develop what is missing within. Even as a standalone chapter, readers will find this vignette poignant and astute.

However, it is also the case that many readers will find points of contention or even glaring problems throughout the wider text – especially, I imagine, readers outside

of the object relations or deliberative democratic traditions. Readers literate in radical democratic theory or critical social theory, or who are attentive to the ways in which Western rights doctrine serves a universalizing and oftentimes violent function, will challenge Levine's easy claim that "[t]he more significant and widespread the sphere of rights, the greater our freedom" (6), a claim which he extends even to the right of private property (20). Similar such readers will problematize Levine's normative emphasis upon "deliberative structure" and reason in democratic life (51), or his simple conflation of democratic decision-making with "the will of the majority" (8).

There is also room to challenge Levine's reliance upon the assumption that Freudian drive theory entails a reductionistic and mechanistic determinism – an assumption that, despite its commonness, is rather inaccurate (see e.g. Maze 1983). Claiming that drives constitute "impediments to freedom" and that "there is no sphere of self-determination [if] all that we do is dictated by instinct or drive" (Levine 2021, 6-8), Levine rejects drive theory and opts instead for a model that distinguishes sharply "between making choices and impulse-driven conduct" (12). This approach, which fails to account for drives' interactivity with the agencies of given internal and external environments, forecloses possibilities for acknowledging freedom as it may emerge in tandem with (or even be partially enabled by) the instinctual apparatus of the body, as it also reproduces Cartesian dualism and human exceptionalism: "What differs in the uniquely human experience of the world," Levine writes assuredly, "is freedom from programming" (27). Many will find these outcomes to be unfavorable for critically expanding established notions of freedom.

The most flagrant drawback of this text, however, emerges in Chapter 7, where Levine attempts a critique of contemporary proposals for reparations for Black Americans using Ta-Nehisi Coates' activism as a foil. Here, Levine exemplifies in stark relief a problem identified seventy years ago by Fanon: the inadequacy of psychoanalytically examining racial oppression without accounting for social structures as they function to racialize modern subjects, reproduce racial trauma, and maintain white privilege and domination (Fanon [1952] 2008). Seeing that Coates takes the fundamental significance of reparations to reside in their capacity to catalyze reckoning and healing, Levine essentially frames the question of reparations as a matter of how living Americans relate psychologically to the history and legacy of slavery in the US. Yet, in so doing, he excludes from consideration the deeply-rooted structural impediments to freedom that persist for people of color into the present. By asserting that America's racist history "lives on in the present as memory and fantasy," but disregarding the means by which it lives on quite virulently otherwise, Levine argues that "[w]hat black people need is relief from the burden of the past" and that reparations are ultimately "meant to take bad feelings away from African Americans, relieving them of the conviction that there is a dark stain on their soul" (Levine 2021, 96-97).

The author concludes that even if reparations do so (i.e., take the bad feelings away), they would fail to do so in a manner conducive to wider societal freedom, for it is allegedly "an act of aggression and provocation" to "ask or demand" that white people "take responsibility for [the] inner freedom" of Black Americans, and that white people conceding "continues a kind of dependency of blacks on whites" (98-102). This argument is summarized somewhat succinctly in the passage below, although complicating things

further, Levine does not sufficiently evidence or explain why he describes Black Americans' racial trauma in terms of guilt, nor why instilling guilt in white people is said to be a purpose or necessary result of reparations activism:

Because it is intended to free black people from the guilt they feel for their condition and the suffering associated with feelings of guilt and the domination of the inner world by a guilty self, reparations, whatever their actual result would be, are intended to expand the inner freedom of black people precisely by freeing them of the need to adapt themselves to external expectations.

Reparations do so at the expense of the internal freedom of white people, who will now find their inner worlds tyrannized by the presence there of a guilty self. This trade-off exists because, in Coates' world, there is no escape from the guilty self, there is only a struggle over who will have it. And, because projecting guilt onto others does not purge the world of those suffering from their guilt, but only limits the degree of their suffering, the policy of reparations should be understood as a sharing of the guilty self rather than as a solution to the problem it poses. (100)

Of course, reparations alone are not a solution to racial suffering, although Coates does not suggest this. He calls them a first step, "the price we must pay to see ourselves squarely" (Coates 2014). To follow through on reparations' capacity to engender reckoning and growth, they must operate within a wider framework of anti-racist strategy aimed at uprooting the sources of the injustices that reparations would symbolically redress. In addition, the reparations proposal is not inherently uncriticizable; there exist compelling cases against embracing or foregrounding reparations as an anti-racist tactic (e.g. Harney & Moten 2013, 151-152). I would not, however, consider Levine's to be one of them. Moreover, Levine's chapter on reparations has the unfortunate effect (at least for this reader) of negatively overshadowing the rest of the text and weakening the author's overall argument, which are otherwise decent.

I admire Levine for engaging in inquiry about freedom as a concept and lived experience, this being one of the more challenging but potentially revealing endeavors for those investigating psychoanalysis and society. Furthermore, attuning to strangers as they might bear an important relation to freedom constitutes a creative and generative contribution on Levine's part. It is also timely in an era when social media, protests and rallies, and essential workers reveal the importance of, and likely further shape, our internal relationships to unknown others. However, while Levine is clearly asking the right sorts of questions, many will be unsatisfied with the conclusions that he draws. In this sense, *Depending on Strangers* may be profitably considered an invitation for further study.

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