

# DEPENDING ON STRANGERS

Freedom, Memory and the  
Unknown Self

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## About the author

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# Introduction

This book was completed during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic radically altered people's lives along a number of significant dimensions. Among these, one of the most important was a widespread increase in the anxiety associated with tasks that made up everyday life. Thus, to take one important example, trips to the grocery store that are, by their nature, filled with casual contact with strangers became potentially fatal encounters with people who could transmit a deadly disease. The pursuit of the things we needed to sustain our lives was now a life-threatening activity. When our sustenance depends on strangers, it depends on trust in strangers. The pandemic challenged the links of trust between people and therefore undermined their confidence that they could safely interact with and even depend on one another.

Beyond the matter of becoming infected, the adverse impact of the pandemic on the availability of some of the goods needed for everyday life, due in large part to hoarding prompted by anxiety, undermined the conviction that our well-being is secure when we depend on strangers to provide us with the things we need. Anxiety about the availability of the things we need prompts an urge to hoard, an urge that can be both

shared by others and projected onto them. The result is to create the shortages hoarding is meant to protect against and transform strangers into competitors for scarce goods.

This situation puts the “goods” over which we compete with strangers and the danger of infection they pose into a clearer light. Strangers can become the incarnation of loss or absence of care (strangers do not care about us) and the source of a life-destroying infection, both literally and symbolically. The good that is lost is the good (safe) feeling about the self that depends on the availability of emotional nutrients in the form of affirmation of our presence by others. The virus can come to represent the external shape of an internal aggression mounted against the self. The internal aggressor is projected onto those perceived to be our competitors over scarce goods. These goods in the external world also represent those things possession of which makes us a locus of the good self so that our inability to possess them becomes a sign that we have an impaired or bad self, which is a self unable to care for itself and unworthy to receive the care of others.

One way of coping with this situation is what Donald Winnicott refers to as “hiding” the self (1965, p. 46). During the pandemic, hiding the self took the tangible form of retreating into our homes and keeping strangers out. Strangers, then, are used to contain both our own loss of contact with ourselves and our own aggression against the self, which is held responsible for that loss.

The threat posed by others, however reality based it might be, has now formed a connection with an internal threat and, as a consequence, there develops an impulse to substitute the latter for the former in coping with the danger. Once others have come to occupy a place in our inner world, we are no longer indifferent to them; they have come to *matter* to us. But the movement away from indifference need not be a movement in the direction of a positively invested emotional connection but instead toward hostility born of the danger they are perceived or imagined to pose. To matter to another may mean to be loved by them, but it can also mean to be distrusted, even hated, by them.

In a world where livelihood depends on exchange, we depend on strangers. We depend on strangers because we have a significant degree of separation from the groups on which we depended before they were

displaced by systems of private transactions. As a result of this displacement, our sustenance is no longer secured by our group attachment.

In the individual life, this separation from the group is enacted first as a separation from our family of origin. Separation from the family leaves us on our own in a world of people we must depend on without the kind of trust in dependence we had when we were growing up. Put in another language, strangers do not have the obligation of care family members did, so that, to some important extent, we now must find a way to care for ourselves, most notably through entering into the kinds of relations with strangers through which we acquire what we need from them not because they care about us, but because we can make use of each other without caring.

Group dependence also differs from dependence on strangers in that, while the former implies sharing a group identity that is defined externally to the individual, the latter does not. Groups significantly limit the space allowed in our lives for a personal sense of who we are. Put another way, the group is not a space in which a connection to what is uniquely personal about us—the self—can safely be made. Because of this, freedom means a significant degree of separation from the group and therefore a significant measure of dependence on strangers. This dependence extends beyond the market and applies even where dependence is on public institutions. Public institutions are not groups to which we belong; they are not friends or family. The eclipse of the group as the setting for need satisfaction means that where we cannot depend on the market, neither do we have recourse to groups as an alternative. Rather, dependence on strangers becomes the rule.

Freedom, then, requires that we have the emotional capacity to engage with and depend on strangers. When strangers provoke anxiety, our ability to depend on them is undermined. Because, in a market-centered economy, self-reliance means managing relations with strangers, by undermining our ability to depend on strangers, stranger anxiety undermines our capacity for self-reliance. Stranger anxiety is an emotional interpretation of others. The foundation for this emotional interpretation is set early in life through internalization of relations with caregivers. The emotional information contained in the internalization guides us in negotiating relationships with those outside the family.

More specifically, the stronger the basis for trust established early on, the less anxiety will be built into our interpretation of strangers; and conversely, the weaker the foundation of trust established early in our lives, the more our emotional interpretation of strangers will take the form of anxiety.

Our emotional interpretation of strangers, especially our interpretation of their reliability as sources of sustenance, is bound up with our trust in ourselves. Trust in ourselves refers first to our capacity to enter into a deliberative process likely to produce solutions to problems, including those signaled by anxiety, and second on our ability to act on those solutions. Both moments are important. The second moment—the ability to act on our decisions—depends on the instantiation in the mind of memories and fantasies of experiences in which what we did made a difference, most notably in commanding the attention of others, attention that affirmed our presence and its significance to them. This is vital to living in a world marked by dependence on strangers because it establishes, as a core element of our inner worlds, the conviction and expectation that our need, once clearly expressed, will be responded to in a positive way. Thus, memory, freedom, and the ability to live with strangers are bound together in a single emotional reality.

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If we were to attempt to identify the quality of the contemporary world that poses the greatest emotional challenge to those who must live in it, it might be the necessity just considered of living with and depending on people we do not know and who do not know us. The necessity of living with people we do not know requires that we live a significant part of our lives outside the sphere of family and friends: in “society.” In this book, I explore both the emotional burden we experience living with people we do not know and the unique opportunity doing so affords. While our emotional struggles are not all derived from this necessity, many are, and those that are have special importance when we focus our attention on the interplay between the inner world and the world outside.

In understanding both the opportunity and the emotional burden of living in society, the term freedom is of special importance. Here, I use that term to refer to the opportunity to escape, or negate,

predetermination of our lives, by which I have in mind determination of how we live and experience our lives independently of our presence in them. Freedom is absent in our lives when we live exclusively with people who have a claim to prior knowledge of who we are and can impose that knowledge on us. But the matter of freedom does not end in the world of relating to others; it also has its place in the inner world: the world of thoughts and ideas. Knowing and not knowing, being known and not being known, all engage the matter of the free movement of thoughts and ideas as an internal matter.

Free movement of thoughts and ideas is one dimension or moment of freedom, the one we refer to as “inner freedom.” But inner freedom cannot sustain itself on its own. For inner freedom there must also be two other dimensions: freedom to relate, which is also the freedom not to relate, and freedom in relating, which is the possibility of maintaining secure self-boundaries in relating to others. In this book I explore the reality of freedom, which is the integration of its three moments.

The free movement of thoughts and ideas is a vital part of the activity we refer to when we speak of “introspection.” Distrust of introspection is common in the world in which many of us live. Distrust of introspection means distrust of the urge to inhabit a private world, a world kept safe from the unwanted intrusions, or, in Donald Winnicott’s term, “impingements,” of others (Levine, 2017). Distrust of introspection is, then, closely linked to distrust of an inner world that only those we invite are allowed to share with us.

As Heinz Kohut (1982) reminds us, psychoanalysis is a special form or method of introspection. It follows that, where introspection is viewed with distrust and even hostility, psychoanalysis will also be viewed that way as will the psychoanalytic study of society. One way to think about the end or purpose of psychoanalysis is to think about a way of being and living that emerges out of the exercise of the ability to negate or turn away from the external world so that the inner world can be fully experienced and known.

Doing so can be considered an end in itself. But it also opens up the possibility of engaging the world outside on a new and different basis, one in which a particular kind of internal experience shapes doing and relating. Coming to know the inner world is an ongoing process. It is not, then, only knowing the inner world that is the goal but the process

of coming to know that world. The end of psychoanalysis can, then, be considered the internalization of a process the ongoing nature of which alters the experience both of self and of others. I take this to be the intent of those psychoanalytic ideas and methods that emphasize object relations and especially the shape of the internal object world. My purpose in this book is to make use of psychoanalytic ideas to further our understanding of the meaning and possibility of freedom, to understand better what freedom is and why it matters.

Consideration of the importance of introspection can also highlight the importance of certain norms of living typical in contemporary society. These are norms of privacy that, on the societal level, protect the integrity of the inner world. Notable among these are the private spaces in which we live: our homes. Private space mirrors or reproduces the privacy of the inner world in the physical reality of the world outside. None of this diminishes the importance of relating to others, but only highlights the importance of assuring that relating expresses, so far as possible, the individual's "freedom to relate" as Roger Kennedy (1993) so aptly terms it.

So far as the capacity to relate to strangers is poorly developed or impaired to some significant degree, encounters with people not known to us create anxiety and carry the potential for violation of boundaries and therefore also of norms of privacy. In this way, impairment in the capacity to live with strangers undermines respect for the privacy and autonomy of others. In the limit, this can lead to various forms and degrees of violation of rights including assault. Anxiety about living with strangers can drive people away from others. It can sponsor a powerful impulse to insist that strangers are not strangers at all but already well known to us as emanations of our inner worlds (internal object relations). And it can foster attacks on those we experience as strangers aimed at resolving our anxiety by eliminating what we imagine to be its source.