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### Review of 'Trauma and Transcendence: Suffering and the Limits of Theory'

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*Trauma and Transcendence: Suffering and The Limits of Theory. Edited by Eric Boynton and Peter Capretto. New York: Fordham University Press, 2018*

This is a rich and diverse collection of papers on trauma and trauma theory, written from a variety of perspectives, including psychoanalysis, philosophy, cultural studies, and religious studies. For the book's editors, it is also an attempt to grapple with some central challenges of trauma theory. To appreciate the nature of these challenges, it is necessary to understand what is meant by "trauma theory," which is not the same thing as the theory of trauma.

The theory of psychic trauma has a long and continuous history. Psychoanalysts hardly need to be reminded of this, for the nineteenth-century roots of the theory of trauma—in the work, most notably, of Charcot, Janet, and the early collaboration of Breuer and Freud—are the roots of psychoanalysis itself, and "every phase of theory-making in psychoanalysis" subsequently has "influenced the . . . concept of trauma" (Khan 1963, p. 286). In contrast, what is now commonly referred to as "trauma theory," or trauma studies, is a relatively recent development. Its origins are in the 1980s and 1990s, and its principal home is in the humanities and the humanistic social sciences, where it has blossomed with particular fecundity in the fields of literature, film studies, cultural studies, and religion. It is distinguished from many earlier approaches to trauma both in the range of materials it treats and in the generality of the phenomena it encompasses. Trauma has traditionally been regarded as an aberrant event or series of events, and as pathogenic—although within psychoanalysis itself there have been important differences on these matters (see, e.g., Klein 1928, pp. 160–170; Klein 1946, p. 100; Lacan 1966, p. 153; Lacan 1973; Laplanche 1992; Rank, 1924). Trauma theory has taken up trauma as a paradigm of an "experience" or "event" that cannot be fully experienced or assimilated—"unclaimed experience," as in the title of one of the founding texts of trauma theory (Caruth 1996)—and that persists as a presence that appears, at least in part, through gaps, absences, and deferrals. The concept of trauma has been extended within trauma studies in a variety of directions. In the broadest versions, trauma has come to be regarded as part of the fabric of the human condition—for some an historically situated characteristic (that by implication may be unequally bunched), for others a universal feature of human ontology or epistemology.

The generalization of trauma has naturally led to a good deal of reflection within the field about whether the concept has been stretched too far and too thin. (This same question has been raised within psychoanalysis since at least 1967, when Anna Freud warned of the danger "that as a technical term in psychoanalysis, trauma was in danger of being emptied of meaning through overuse and overextension" [Levine 2014, p. 214]). I have referred to trauma as a "paradigm," and one way of posing the question at the heart of this reflection is in terms of the sense in which this is so. Is it a paradigm in the classic sense of an exemplary case of a larger class of phenomena with which it shares some characteristic? Is trauma, that is to say, a particular kind of unorganizable experience or event that cannot be fully represented—others in the class being nontraumatic? Or is it a paradigm in the sense used by Thomas Kuhn in the *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) to refer to a characterization of the whole class? In the extreme case, is trauma the name of (something like) that which is unrepresentable—or in the terminology of semiotics, of "nonreferentiality"? How extensive is the range of phenomena to which the concept of trauma is usefully applied? As the cultural theorist Susannah Radstone asks in the introduction to a special journal issue on the topic, does trauma refer to a "qualitatively particular response or . . . type of event," or has it come to refer to a "crisis posed to realism" and its assumptions about referentiality itself? "Does trauma theory answer to a growing acknowledgement" that our understanding of representation was always flawed, that behind a representation or reference "there never was anything 'there'"—at least in the sense in which it was once imagined to be? Or is it only that "sometimes and under certain conditions . . . there [is] 'no there there'?" Or does it reflect "a new historical/cultural context in which there is 'no there there'"? (2001, p. 190).

It is in this spirit of self-reflection that Trauma and Transcendence appears. The particular problematic that frames the book is articulated by the editors in terms of the opposing dangers of “reductionism” and “obscurantism.” The precise meaning of each of these terms is not wholly clear (at least to me), and the discussion of them in the introduction suggests several sets of overlapping concerns. The first is a general concern about the relationship of the theory of trauma, with its “promise of intelligibility” (p. 3), to the “irreducibility” (p. 2) of trauma itself. Within this there are, it seems, two yet more specific concerns: one with the possibility of theory grasping the ungraspable; the second with the relationship between the ethical demand to bear witness to the uniqueness and overwhelmingness of trauma and the aim of a theory of trauma to give an account of it across differences. With respect to each of these, the dangers, as the editors see them, are that on the one side the attempt to “articulate” trauma may eviscerate its character as inarticulable and, on the other, that to respect the character of trauma in theorizing it will mean that “trauma can only be theorized as an aporetic phenomenon to which one is drawn yet of which no one can speak” (p. 3).

These concerns, taken individually or collectively, do not, I think, pose an intractable dilemma. The aim of theorizing about trauma is not (or ought not to be) to duplicate the experience of it, and because of this, the unrepresentable aspect of trauma is not an inherent problem for a theory of trauma. As for the tension between bearing witness to trauma, including its overwhelmingness, and giving an account of it, this is a tension, or at least a balance, with which psychoanalysts are familiar: the need, at times, to dwell with a patient in what is incomprehensible or unrepresentable (to him/her or at all), including trauma, and also, at times, of seeking to understand and, however partially or inadequately, to make sense of it. There are many ways of going wrong in either direction, and at times, it seems, the concern of the editors is that in trauma studies things have sometimes gone wrong in both directions. Yet the tone of the problematic that frames the volume at times seems to suggest something more dire: not only about the challenges of navigating these waters, but about whether such a course can be steered at all.

To appreciate the real force of these concerns, it is, I think, necessary to see them as bound up with a second general set of concerns. This involves the tension between recognizing the wide breadth of phenomena that might be understood in the language of trauma, and the desire to give a general account of trauma. Here, the danger of “obscurantism” arises from extending the idea of trauma so far that it loses any core meaning; the danger of “reductionism” arises from overly narrowing the range of traumatic phenomena to a “standard definition” (p. 3) of the “essence” (p. 4) of trauma. This is, indeed, an important problem, posed by the editors on behalf of the field at this moment in its evolution. As trauma studies have proliferated and the concept of trauma has been extended to an increasingly diverse array of phenomena, how coherent is the meaning of the term? How are the various phenomena that are understood through the idea of trauma related to one another? Are their differences subsumable under a general description? Or are they related more as “family resemblances” (Wittgenstein), with no single characteristics common to all? And if they are a family, how close are the relatives? Is there such a thing as a general theory of trauma, or only theories of particular kinds of trauma? The editors have done a fine job of bringing together a number of papers that raise these questions. By and large, however, they raise them not so much by discussing them as by illustrating them. Not all the papers in the volume touch on these questions at all; there are some fine papers that take up other important questions of trauma and our relation to it. But it is on these questions that I will focus for the remainder of this review.

These questions—concerning the tension between the specificity of various kinds of trauma and the desire to offer a general theory of trauma—are raised in one form by Robert Stolorow’s ambitious and suggestive paper, “Phenomenological Contextualism All the Way Down.” Stolorow begins by summarizing the view of developmental trauma that he has elaborated in greater detail elsewhere and with which many readers of this journal will be familiar. For Stolorow, trauma originates developmentally in the malattunement of a caregiver to a child’s painful affect, resulting in an “unbearable, overwhelmed, disorganized state” and an “unconscious conviction” that these “unmet, developmental yearnings . . . [and] reactive painful feeling states are manifestations of a loathsome defect or of an inherent inner badness” (p. 55). Stolorow, however, immediately broadens the scope of this account beyond childhood

development: “such claims,” he writes, “hold, *pari passu*, for adult-onset trauma as well” (p. 55). His example of the latter is personal and moving: he recounts the impact on him of his beloved wife’s death only four weeks after her diagnosis of metastatic cancer. “When Dede died, the person whom I would have longed to share in and hold my overwhelming grief was, of course, the very same person who was gone” (p. 55); “my world was shattered,” he writes a few pages later, “and I was . . . consumed with horror and sorrow. An unbridgeable gulf seemed to open up, separating me forever from my friends and colleagues” (p. 58). Anyone who has suffered the shock of an unexpected death of a loved one can well empathize with Stolorow’s feelings of “estrangement and isolation” (p. 58). Trauma it is, but how is it related to the developmental trauma he has described? Are instances of adult trauma such as these necessarily, insofar as they are traumatic, “manifestations of [a sense of] loathsome defect or of an inherent inner badness?” The question is yet more urgently raised by Stolorow’s view, which emerged for him from his study of Heidegger, that trauma is intimately connected with the very truth of human existence: “Trauma shatters the illusions of everyday life that evade and cover up the finitude, contingency, and embeddedness of our existence and the indefiniteness of its certain extinction” (p. 60). In this respect, “emotional trauma produces an affective state whose features bear a close similarity to the central elements in Heidegger’s existential interpretation of anxiety and accomplishes this by plunging the traumatized person into a form of authentic Being-toward-death” (p. 60). But if trauma is something like what authenticity feels like, what is the relationship between the existential condition that trauma is said to reveal and the specific kinds of developmental traumas that Stolorow describes? Is the character of developmental traumas the truth of our condition revealed? If not, and if instead developmental traumas (and perhaps also adult traumas of the sort that Stolorow experienced) share some features with an authentic Being-toward-death, is the traumatic what they share or what distinguishes them? These are important questions to which Stolorow’s paper points us.

If one form of the problem of the generalizability of a theory of trauma is raised within Stolorow’s paper, other versions arise between papers and throughout the volume more generally. For instance, in “Two Trauma Communities,” Vincenzo Di Nicola argues that “trauma is not the generic name of a predicament or even of a particular experience but a generic name for the destruction of experience” (p. 19). This is a poignant and suitably blunt depiction of trauma as an event that overwhelms the capacity for assimilation, an “experience” that cannot be experienced. We can wonder whether “destruction of experience” is quite the right characterization of the whole of the category of traumatic events, or whether it is a subcategory of these non-experiences—which also includes, for example, the *Nachträglichkeit* of Freud’s early description of the trauma of seduction, which is then taken up so centrally in Laplanche’s work. But whether the characterization is of destruction of experience or whether it includes other non-“experiences,” the broader question raised is how trauma, thus conceived, relates to the range of all that has come to be discussed under the heading of trauma.

That question can be asked about many of the depictions of trauma offered throughout the volume. George Yancy, in “Black Embodied Wounds,” offers a powerful account of the psychic-somatic injuries of racial trauma, constituted by the repeated, quotidian encounters of violence or the threat of violence, the regular “cancellation and hatred” (Audre Lorde, quoted by Yancy, p. 151) of white gazes, or the cumulative “corporeal impact” on the body-psyche of “‘N[\*\*\*\*\*] this’ and ‘N[\*\*\*\*\*] that’ heard hundreds of times” (p. 154)—including by Yancy himself in hundreds of pieces of hate mail and death threats received after his “Dear White People” letter appeared in the *New York Times*. The impact of such encounters is severe and bodily-psyche: they “hit with the force of a stick, a blow to the body” (p. 144), they can bring about a “fragment[ation]” of the body, producing a “lived amputation,” and a “fissure” in one’s very “spatial movement,” such that one “no longer move[s] through space lithely” (pp. 145–146). Tina Chanter, in “The Artful Politics of Trauma,” suggests that, with the normalization of war, the sense of “insecurity . . . disaffection, and alienation” from work for many, and “austerity cuts,” we “are living in an era that might be characterized as a culture of trauma, one in which it is becoming increasingly difficult to isolate trauma from the everyday experience of life for many of us” (p. 138). Mary-Jane Rubenstein, in an afterword, refers to the “massive distribution and duplication” of trauma “in

the recursive forms of interminable wars, forced migration, unnatural disasters, neo-colonial capital, elemental toxicity, the serial execution of black Americans, and the normalization of sexual assault,” as well as the effects of climate change and stop-and-frisk policies (pp. 285–286). All of these, and many other forms of trauma described in the pages of this volume, clearly involve an experience of destruction. But do they necessarily all involve the destruction of experience, or even an experience that is missing? Is “destruction of experience” what characterizes trauma beyond a certain threshold? Or is there some measure of the destruction (or absence) of experience in all trauma? If so, in what way? These are not questions that the volume takes up. Indeed, few papers (the Stolorow and Di Nicola papers are among them) focus on the question of the structure of trauma at all. This is not necessarily a criticism of the volume. Its strength lies in the diversity of the traumatic phenomena it comprehends and the multiplicity of perspectives it brings to bear on the topic. But to the extent that within the field of trauma studies there is sentiment on the part of some that the very attempt to understand the structure of trauma—of what it is that is traumatic about trauma—is itself reductionistic, the volume may reflect this reticence.

Most of the descriptions of trauma that are offered are in terms of trauma’s subjective effects. This is, needless to say, a crucial part of any understanding of trauma; trauma would not be trauma without the character of its psychic impact. But there has long been an equal focus on the character of the precipitating actions that give rise to traumatic responses. This was so, of course, for Freud, from his early theorizing about trauma through that of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In “The Psychic Economy and Fetishization of Traumatic Lived Experience,” Peter Capretto, one of the editors of the volume, suggests that it is because of the concern that the “basic theoretical structure of [Freud’s] psychic economy of trauma . . . [would] lead to an inherently reductionistic theory of experience in trauma” that “humanistically inclined research within the social sciences has prioritized the ‘lived experience’ of others as a primary mode of engaging trauma” (p. 205). Capretto himself attributes this response to Freud to a skewed reading of him, in which the biological strand of his thought is exaggerated and the intersubjective strand neglected. But if the volume is an accurate reflection of prominent trends in the field, the concern of reductionism would seem to be not just with Freud’s account, or with the worry about biological reductionism, but with the attempt in general to try to understand the nature of trauma as an event rather than only in terms of its effects.

To be sure, in any description of trauma as an event or series of events, precipitation and effect are closely bound together: trauma is always an acting upon (or being acted upon), and this implies both the “acting” and the “upon.” (The word “trauma” itself can, notably, refer both to the precipitating act and its effect.) Still, how certain actions (or non-actions) produce their impact remains a crucial question, and it emerges in an interesting way at the intersection of Stolorow’s paper and several of the others already mentioned. For Stolorow, trauma is the result of “painful emotional states . . . [that] cannot find a context of emotional understanding . . . a ‘relational home’ . . . in which they can be shared and held” and are thus “experienced alone” (p. 54). In the context of a developmental theory, the absence of a properly related other describes both the precipitation of the trauma and the effect it produces. But Stolorow applies this formulation not merely to developmental traumas, but to trauma in general, and that is where questions arise. Trauma is, indeed, often experienced as a kind of isolation. But that this is so cries out for further investigation. For what of the kinds of trauma described, for instance, by Yancy or Chanter, or the trauma of the Holocaust—so central to the development of trauma theory, and referenced by a number of contributors to this book? Traumatic experience may well be shared, in the sense of being experienced by many victims, and sometimes simultaneously—victims who can, and often do, offer a “context of emotional understanding.” Yet if despite this, the effect may nonetheless be an experience of isolation, we need to understand more about why this is so. A first thought might be that even when there are others who understand, it is precisely those who understand best who stand in a similar relation to the power of

the perpetrator.<sup>1</sup> If this is so, isolation must be understood not merely in terms of the absence of an “other,” but in relation to the violence of a perpetrating other.

It is indeed difficult to think about the nature of trauma without thinking of violence in some form, and it is perhaps the consequence of the volume’s focus on the impact or “lived experience” of trauma that while violence seems to be running always in the background, it is given relatively little explicit attention. (Yancy’s paper is the major exception.) Even Ronald Eyerman’s thought-provoking paper, “Perpetrator Trauma and Collective Guilt: My Lai,” which focuses on the horrors of the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, offers a thesis of perpetrator trauma—as “occur[ring] when individuals and collectives feel they have acted in ways that are contrary to deeply held moral beliefs”—in which violence plays no special role. Certainly, physical violence is not necessary to the traumatic, and there are those who might argue that even violence in general characterizes only some kinds of trauma. Yet there has been a sense that trauma (from the Greek “wound”)—even cumulative trauma, or trauma that is the *Nachträglichkeit* of an original seduction, etc.—must be understood according to the kind of particular violence it enacts. Whether or not one accepts this idea, there is reason to engage it. This is not (quite) a criticism of the volume. A collection of papers is not obligated to take up every aspect of a subject, and together these essays offer an abundant array of deeply thoughtful considerations of trauma, spanning—and often at the intersection of—therapeutic, philosophical, and political concerns. Moreover, the editors of this volume themselves pose the question of whether, from fear of reductionism, the field of trauma studies has shied away too much from questions of the nature of traumatic events. The volume’s achievement, then, is at two levels: in what the individual papers, taken on their own, provide; and in reflecting some of the questions that, for the field of trauma studies, remain to be addressed.

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<sup>1</sup> Primo Levi’s description of life in Auschwitz brilliantly illustrates how a common traumatic experience may produce psychic seclusion rather than empathic joinder.