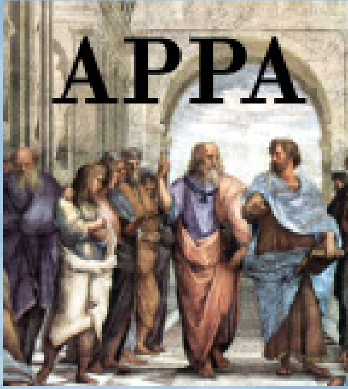

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Book Review

Jill Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015. ISBN: 978 0231171502. 240 pages.

Reviewed by Helen Douglas
Cape Town, South Africa

> The experience of persecution was, at the very bottom, that of an extreme loneliness. At stake for me is the release from the abandonment that has persisted from that time until today.
>
> —Jean Améry (epigraph, 1)

The cover of *Ethical Loneliness* features "The Widow", one of Käthe Kollwitz's stark woodcuts from the First World War. A woman in a shapeless black dress stands with her head nestled to her shoulder, mouth curved down in grief. Her large hands are folded across her breast, embracing no child or lover. The image evokes complicated feelings of pity, compassion, fear and sorrow. The widow, along with the orphan and the stranger, is a traditional figure of those who, having lost a world, have a moral claim to hospitality and comfort from others. This obligation is often disregarded or betrayed, even when we try to honor it. Such failures are the concern of this book.

One of our guides is Jean Améry, the Austrian-Jewish philosopher and Auschwitz survivor whose 1966 *At the Mind's Limits* explored the phenomenological reality of the camps. When the book was reissued in 1977— as atrocities proliferated in Czechoslovakia, the USSR, South America and Southeast Asia—it was clear to Améry that the post-war pledge of "never again" had fallen away. He saw this as Hitler's posthumous triumph. Améry committed suicide in 1978.

Jill Stauffer takes Améry's testimony as a template of the condition of ethical loneliness: "the isolation one feels when one, as a violated person or as one member of the persecuted group, has been abandoned by humanity, or by those who have power over one's life's possibilities" (1). This abandonment is perceived when survivors return to a world that will not or cannot "properly hear … their claims about what they suffered and what is now owed them—on their own terms" (1).

The book addresses this "failure of just-minded people to hear well—from those who have suffered —what recovery or reconciliation require" (2) through a fundamentally philosophical question: what does it mean that we could owe something to a suffering stranger, particularly when that suffering has been caused by human evil and injustice, and particularly when the evil was not our doing? It seems unreasonable, at the very least, if we believe ourselves to be autonomous, independent and sovereign individuals, responsible only so far as our own choices, actions and intentions take us. So either this sense of obligation and the victim's sense of abandonment must be mistaken or our view of human being has to be adjusted to account for it. Stauffer takes up the latter possibility: the obligation is real and it falls to us regardless of our will or desire because we are always already mixed up with others, mutually interdependent for the creation and continuity of identities and worlds. As Stauffer puts it, "There is a whole lot that is unchosen at the heart of a self's liberty. My sovereignty depends" (19).

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When we understand personal autonomy and integrity as dependent upon their recognition by others, we can better understand the devastation that violence can inflict and how necessary—and obligatory—it is for others to help return a sense of self and a place in the world. In the words of psychiatrist Judith Herman (cited, 24), "Traumatic events destroy the victim's fundamental assumptions about the safety of the world, the positive value of the self, and the meaningful order of creation." Such survivors cannot come back to life unless those assumptions are consciously restored or replaced. Their predicament calls for just-minded persons who will listen and hear their experience. To "hear" in this sense is to apprehend what they have been through, that it *did* happen and that it *should not* have; to make whatever reparations are possible and appropriate in meaningful material ways; and to take meaningful material steps to assure them of their worth and their safety in a shared community. Beyond listening for facts, to hear is to commit oneself, to change and to be changed. Failures to do so are experienced as social abandonment: ethical loneliness, the injustice of not being heard. One could add that this kind of obligation is expressed in many cultures and traditions, such as the Hebrew *tikkun olam* ("repair the world") or southern Africa's *ubuntu*, an understanding of humanness as interdependent co-creation often expressed as "I am because we are."

Stauffer turns to another Holocaust survivor and philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, to sketch the philosophical ground of ethical intersubjectivity. Here we find a self that is "compound, made up of parts we might call self, ego, and me, all residing in a bodily frame that is vulnerable and undeniably affected by others" (23). Autonomy is not a starting point from which we get to choose how we live for and by ourselves, but a more "fragile accomplishment" (92) that is contingent on how we treat and are treated by others and on the confirmed reality of a shared world. This view is amplified by testimonies from truth commissions investigating political atrocities, and from memoirs such as those by Améry and rape survivor and philosopher Susan Brison (29), whose *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* also describes the agony of abandonment: "each time someone failed to respond, I felt as though I were alone again in the ravine, dying, screaming. And still no one could hear me. Or, worse, they heard me, but refused to help".

Judicial responses to social and political violence are already informed by ideas of the nature of harm undergone and what is required for victims, perpetrators and society. By establishing an alternative understanding of personhood, Stauffer wants to "change the subject" in the larger discourse of transitional justice and political reconciliation: "Instead of talking about procedure, legality, and blame, I focus on how abandonment and loss are achieved and how they may be alleviated or compensated" (65). She is concerned with the ways that courts and commissions which are specifically set up to provide a platform for individual testimony ironically fail to hear what those witnesses are trying to communicate in the first place and then fail again to notice and understand their own failure.

I am writing this in South Africa, where the complex and ambivalent achievements of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) served as a fulcrum for our complex and ambivalent transition from apartheid to democracy. I agree with Stauffer that such "just-minded" processes often fail to do justice, and that they will do better only with a deeper appreciation of what is at stake for victims and communities, and with proper regard for their fundamental claims for solidarity and reparation. *Ethical Loneliness* provides the necessary philosophical and critical material to strengthen that case, as well as to understand more realistically what institutions can do for victims and other constituencies. After all, they are political beasts, built from compromise and operated by their own administrative and juridical processes. The first sitting of the TRC committee on human rights

violations demonstrated the relationship between "hearing" and "hearings" when Archbishop Desmond Tutu put his head down and wept. It was an ethical interruption of the political proceedings, which nevertheless needed to proceed once the chairperson regained control of his emotion.

Stauffer is also very clear that, although institutions can and should do better, the responsibility for justice and restoration falls to all of us, personally, as persons. Her introduction of the term "ethical loneliness" has the double intention "to get us to think differently about what is at stake in recovery from violence and oppression, and to try to force a rethinking of what it means to take responsibility for building worlds where such violence might not be repeated" (Stauffer, 2016).

However inadvertently, this is where the book opens a tremendous challenge ¬and resource for thinking about philosophical practice, especially for those of us who work with people who have suffered violence through political persecution or within family and other intimate relationships. In this review, therefore, I will pass over some of the legal institutional questions she raises (particularly her provocative discussion of desert, punishment and "restorative retribution" for perpetrators) and focus on personal/interpersonal matters.

Within a philosophic dialogue that would be therapeutic or reparative or emancipatory, what does it mean to hear someone who feels persecuted and abandoned? Beyond objective listening or professorial theorizing, we are called to personal responsibility: to take their experience to heart, to be moved and changed by it, to offer companionship to worlds that are broken, to mourn what is lost, and to join the search for signs of life. It means to think about how we think about repair: "how to make judgments about what can be repaired, what should be, what cannot be, and, perhaps, what should be left broken" (35). It means acknowledging that we are all in the same existential boat, exposed and trembling. Like Tutu, we have to be willing to be interrupted in our proceedings. This does not come easily. Citing Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist Dori Laub, Stauffer lists six ways that people insulate themselves from traumatic testimony, "sometimes to the point of denial of reality." I know the temptation of all of them: mental paralysis, outrage and anger, withdrawal and numbness, flood of awe and fear, foreclosure, and hyper-emotionality (75). This is why such a large part of our philosophical practice has to be self-directed. "Such resistance," Stauffer writes,

> may be a good adaptation of a psyche that somehow knows how much knowledge it can live with. But if ethical loneliness consists in being abandoned by humanity and then not being heard, then the will to believe in the world's benevolence—the drive to take existence for granted—contributes to that loneliness whenever it fails to hear the stories survivors tell of misfortune and injustice. (77)

The elegance of Stauffer's approach is apparent here. Both compassionate and resolute, she does not minimize either the difficulty or the fact that the difficulty does not get us off the hook. The stakes are high. As she explained to the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy:

> I've mentioned three philosophical thinkers whose works have driven much of the thinking behind this book: Levinas, Nietzsche, Amery. None of these thinkers are very interested in making people feel good about themselves. If you really understand what they are saying, all of them can be terrifying to read at times. Levinas says: even though you're so fragile that other people can destroy you, the whole world's justice hangs on your response. Nietzsche says: if you want to love life you have to embrace everything that has ever happened to you,

> no matter how good and bad it was, and will to live it again. And Amery says: time on its own is never going to fix a harm imposed on you by the violence and indifference of other people.
>
> Who wants to hear any of that? I do. Because I believe these difficult truths give us the only real reason we might have for hope: the hope is that we can take what we have and do the best we can with it. (Stauffer, 2016)

A chapter on "Hearing" looks at the interpretation of victim testimony in order to explore "how the tension between what is said and what is heard manifests itself" (71) under conditions of inequality and high stakes. Much of what Stauffer raises here is also resonant for philosophical counseling practices, especially the notion of "inequalities of knowledge." We know how fragile communication is in our daily lives, and that it is impossible to design away all the possibilities for miscommunication and misunderstanding. How much more so, then, when trying to share experience that is difficult or painful to bear, to say and to hear.

As a corrective, she provides Eve Sedgwick's distinction between "paranoid" and "reparative" reading. Paranoid reading "structures experience of the world for predictability" (76), setting out to uncover oppression and abuse with "the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader as new" (Sedgwick, cited, 69). Stauffer calls it "a kind of insurance policy" against disappointment. Reparative reading instead "opens the reader to surprise, to finding the world in a state she did not expect, for better or worse" (70). Although paranoid reading is willing to hear the worst, its determination to hear only the worst turns out to be another form of self-protective denial or resistance. For the affected person, uncovering the injustice and abuse is only

> a weak beginning. Stories will be crafted out of what gets revealed, and it will matter who gets to tell those stories, where they are told, who decides what ought to be done about what happened, and whether those who listen assume that hearing and understanding stories about what happened is an uncomplicated task. (104–5)

While there are inequalities of knowledge in the counseling relationship, it is the visitor who has the upper hand in knowing what happened to them and when they have been properly heard. Whether their experience is given a paranoid or reparative reading is up to each of us and is often negotiated between us. In fact, this seems like a big part of what I do as a counseling philosopher.

The chapter on "Repair" considers different strategies for victims to re-inhabit a relational world. Revisionary practices make use of our ordinary ability to revise memory, to "live the past differently" in the present, "with the hope of opening up a future not fully determined by past harms" (113). Again Stauffer challenges contemporary memes of forgiveness, forgetting and moving on, noting at the same time that "current social and political conditions affect what kinds of revision are possible" (3).

For Jean Améry, the trial and execution of every individual who tortured him would not be sufficient, because so many more were implicated. As long as society failed to reconfigure itself against the possibility of future offences, he also rejected reconciliation as "either insanity and indifference to life or the masochistic conversion of a suppressed genuine demand for revenge" (cited, 125). "Rather than wanting a present moment in which everyone lets the past be" (123), Stauffer writes,

Améry wants all victims and all perpetrators to be "joined in the desire that time be turned back and, with it, that history become moral" (cited, 123). Failing that, the only appropriate response to his dehumanization and abandonment is resentment. Stauffer allows that resentment is an anger that expresses a moral harm. "Resentment seeks response—acknowledgment of the dignity of the person harmed—and safety: assurance that the harm will not recur. It is a reasonable reaction, voicing just demands" (115). Yet it is not an "unqualified good". Resentment may indicate victims' inability to get anyone in power to listen to them. It not always just, and can be stultifying and even "silly".

This brings us to Nietzsche's "glowering and mustachioed" (123) view of r*essentiment* as undermining one's own future by insisting that the past should have been otherwise. His recommended response to past injury is *amor fati* (love of one's fate): if what has happened cannot be changed, one can "will backwards" to accept it fully, as it was and as it is. This

> frees the will from being "a cripple at the bridge" and opens up new futures. Zarathustra counsels the will to "unlearn the spirit of revenge" and reconcile itself with time or, better, aim at "something higher than any reconciliation". It is no easy feat (indeed it may be impossible for some), but one who achieves it will have learned how to live with the past. (117)

Again, one can add that Nietzsche's audacious thought is also found outside of Western philosophy. Tibetan Buddhism, for example, has the "three terrible oaths" of Dorje Tröllö: Whatever happens; may it happen! Whichever way it goes; may it go that way! There is no purpose! With *amor fati*, Stauffer again presents a meaningful alternative to current responses to trauma, thus challenging us to think differently and to think with others—to change and be changed—which is surely a core philosophic practice.

Legal and political institutions are certainly essential for the recognition and redress of injustice. If they do their work properly, former victims can be readmitted as full members of human society, and societies can move towards peace, stability and a better life for all. But what we learn from *Ethical Loneliness* is that persons also have to be heard and received on their own terms, as singular persons in the company of other singular persons. This is what we get to do. I also agree with Stauffer that these "difficult truths" give reason for hope. Maybe not Améry's demand for history to be made moral, but the hope that we can face up to what we know, for better or worse; that we can work with each other, with what we have been given, with solidarity and kindness; and that this is enough for us to be going on with.

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Stauffer, J (2016). *When the Author Thinks About the Book from Outside of the Book, with the Help of Others*. Medium. October 22. Retrieved May 4, 2017 from https://medium.com/@jillstauffer/when-the-author-thinks-about-the-book-from-outside-of-the-book-ac2c811020e3

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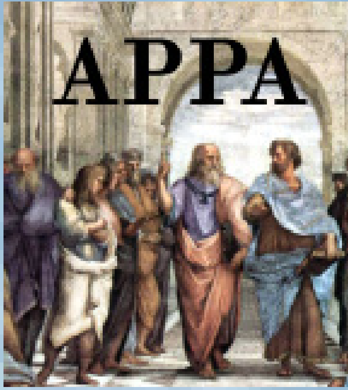

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Philosophical Practice is a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the growing field of applied philosophy. The journal covers substantive issues in the areas of client counseling, group facilitation, and organizational consulting. It provides a forum for discussing professional, ethical, legal, sociological, and political aspects of philosophical practice, as well as juxtapositions of philosophical practice with other professions. Articles may address theories or methodologies of philosophical practice; present or critique case-studies; assess developmental frameworks or research programs; and offer commentary on previous publications. The journal also has an active book review and correspondence section.

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