

Jill Stauffer

Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard

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Reviewed by Christine M. Koggel , 2016

Narrated by Theodra Bane

Jill Stauffer defines ethical loneliness early in her book as “the experience of having been abandoned by humanity compounded by the experience of not being heard” (1). Seemingly simple, but it will take the rest of the book for Stauffer to unpack the complexity of what this means. The result is one of the most interesting philosophical works that I have read in a long time. *Ethical Loneliness* positions itself in the literature on justice and demands that attention be paid to those who are abandoned in and through experiences of violence, oppression, and power. The book is at times unrelenting in describing examples of cruelty wrought by human beings on other human beings and of the effects of this on those who are subjected to the vilest forms of violence. Reprieve from the difficulties of “hearing” these stories comes in the form of a sort of “trigger” warning: “this book full of stories of violence and injustice is also describing the human condition: our intersubjective reliance on one another” (3). Unexpectedly, what softens the blow is Stauffer’s account of “our intersubjective reliance on one another” and her promise to intermingle stories of ordinary examples of ethical loneliness with those of violence.

If ethical loneliness describes the human condition, then it is mundane and widespread as well as extraordinary and implacable in its grip on those in contexts fraught with violence, conflict, genocide, and war. It can be found in the day-to-day lives of ordinary people, in the experiences of many in colonial and post-colonial societies, in rights-violating societies transitioning to rights-respecting ones, in perpetrators as well as victims of violence, and in those participating in the very institutions designed to address injustices but who are then abandoned because what they say about harm and suffering is not heard. Stauffer’s extensive use of testimony “delivered in diverse settings--South Africa, Argentina, Holocaust archives, Native American dealings with US legal proceedings, American prisons, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia” (6)--makes her case for understanding ethical loneliness as an injustice very convincing. Failures to hear or understand are rampant and have resulted in unsuccessful, inadequate, or botched attempts to address this kind of injustice. Sometimes the very processes of reparation, restoration, amnesty, or reconciliation meant to achieve justice fail to really hear what those who have suffered great harms say. When this happens, those who are abandoned may be unable to move on in a world that has not changed and will not change.

*Ethical Loneliness* has implications that go well beyond what has been described thus far. Capturing what is important about the book is no easy task. I will be selective and highlight some of the most important ideas by following the structure of the book’s chapters. The first point to make is that although Stauffer situates her work in the literature on justice, she pursues the unusual path of using insights from continental philosophers to build the case for understanding ethical loneliness as an injustice. It is hard not to be impressed by the dexterity with which Stauffer makes continental thinkers accessible and convincing to an audience familiar with the justice literature. As I note later, she could have drawn from some feminist literature, for example, to employ similar insights. However, her strategy of zeroing in on continental thinkers not only elucidates ethical loneliness as an

injustice but also nicely bypasses age-old divisions between continental and analytic philosophy.

Chapter 1 starts with descriptions of Jean Améry's account of his experiences in Nazi concentration camps and then turns to Emmanuel Levinas's account of being and existence to provide a base for a critique of justice theory that will have unique twists and turns. *Ethical Loneliness* challenges the very conception of the self at the heart of liberal approaches to autonomy, independence, trust, security, responsibility, and freedom. What emerges from Stauffer's reading of Levinas is the rejection of an unproblematic account of autonomy as the defining feature of humanity: "If the self just is defined as exposed, vulnerable, and formed in part in relation to others, it may make it more intelligible for us why human beings are able to destroy the selves and worlds of other human beings" (23). In my own work and that of other relational theorists, a relational conception of the self has been used to reconceive concepts central to traditional liberal theory. Stauffer also starts with a relational (intersubjective) conception, but does so in order to locate the injustice that is the topic of the book: "Ethical loneliness begins when a human being, because of abuse or neglect, has been refused the human relation necessary for self-formation" (26). If selves are shaped intersubjectively, then we are all vulnerable to "being abandoned by those who have the power to help" (5). Moreover, institutions that focus on isolating and punishing individuals who harm others (who do not respect another's right to be left alone) fail to "restore--or in many cases, to build for the first time--social relationships, or at the very least, conditions of meaningful safety" (30). Autonomy is not enhanced when people are left alone (abandoned!) to pursue their own interests, projects, and goals and justice is not fully achieved when those who harm others are identified, isolated, or punished. As she puts it so aptly near the end of the book "all liberty is the result of human interaction" (169).

Stauffer describes her strategy as changing the subject of much of liberal political theory: "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. In doing so I emphasize harms undergone more than wrongs inflicted" (5). Institutions that isolate individuals and address the harms they perpetrate on others are crucial for some people and in contexts that are committed to processes of repair and reconciliation. However, they cannot do the job of identifying let alone addressing the harms that come about from not being heard by the very institutions designed to address those harms. In a clever twist on the liberal understanding of individual autonomy and sovereignty, Stauffer argues that "it is not so difficult to understand something of the suffering imposed on a person who is 'forced to become an individual'" (161).

It comes as no surprise, then, that chapter 2 turns to a discussion of international trials and truth commissions that have been set up to address harms with the goal of rebuilding and repairing nations and peoples. Again, the "subject" now is what these institutions and processes do not know and cannot do. Stauffer knows these contexts well and draws on multiple sources to discuss the kinds, histories, and purposes of truth commissions in various countries as well as the testimony of people at the hearings who, in the end, were not heard or not understood. She calls on this evidence to argue that what happened, what is heard and not heard, and what remains by way of ethical loneliness for those who are abandoned has broader implications for how we theorize about repair, reconciliation, forgiveness, resentment, recovery, and revision (topics she turns to in more detail in chapters 4 and 5). And always and throughout, the juxtaposition of what the world presents by way of violence with what those who have suffered these harms undergo by being abandoned gives content and substance to not being heard as an injustice that needs to be recognized and addressed.

Stauffer is adept at finding the spaces where what particular people said in the hearings before South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, for example, does not fit easily with what was heard and quickly assimilated into what was expected or desired. If the goal is reconciliation through amnesty and the expectation is that hearings will allow those who were harmed to forgive, forget, and move on, then it may be difficult to recognize, let alone address, the injustice left over from processes that fail to listen or hear well. This is especially true in the aftermath of truth commissions when the promise of what they can achieve is dampened by the reality of what lies ahead for those who were harmed and are abandoned once again. Living in a country trying to deal with its colonial past, I was easily convinced of how testimony can work in these ways. Canada's Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission (IRS TRC), set up in 2008 with a mandate to collect testimony from Indigenous people across Canada, issued its final report to the Canadian government in December 2015. As Stauffer acknowledges in the context of other TRCs, there is (and should be) widespread support for a process that finally gives voice to those harmed by atrocities. In Canada, giving voice to generations of Indigenous people harmed by church- and state-sanctioned policies of removing children from their homes and communities was taken to be the right thing to do. For over a century, over 150,000 Indigenous children were removed from families and communities with the explicit objective of isolating them from the influence of their homes, families, traditions, languages, and cultures so as to assimilate them into the dominant white settler culture. Importantly, the IRS TRC hearings recorded the testimony of children, parents, families, and communities who suffered psychological, sociological, cultural, and physical harms. Yet the idea that the process can achieve closure for those who testify or even for those who listen and hear well is a false hope. It is an ideal that cannot be achieved if we understand the full force of what ethical loneliness means--for those who were abandoned and are being abandoned anew by the process itself.

Justice Murray Sinclair, the Chair of the IRS TRC, says: "Reconciliation is about forging and maintaining respectful relationships. There are no shortcuts" (Sinclair 2016). This may appear to fit uneasily with what Stauffer says when she writes, "reconciliation with time" reflects the desire, separate from any will to renew a relationship with an enemy, to be able to live with what the past has been" (7). Sometimes all that will be possible for those harmed is living "with what the past has been." There are indeed no shortcuts on the road to forging or building respectful relationships. If this sort of building comes about at all, it will depend on being heard in ways that can unsettle entrenched relationships of inequality and upset norms and structures of power that have shaped and continue to shape who gets abandoned in a world that will not face the injustices that are spoken but not heard. In what many would describe as the aftermath of Canada's TRC issuing a final report with a comprehensive set of recommendations for rebuilding relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians, many Indigenous Canadians are justifiably skeptical of entering a new future that is world-building rather than world-destroying. Hearing takes work and is ongoing. It does not end when truth commissions mete out punishment, declare amnesty for some, distribute payments to those harmed, hold hearings, or issue final reports. The upshot of examining these processes and what they can and cannot achieve is, as Stauffer puts it, "if ethical loneliness is the outcome not only of being abused but also of not being heard, then criminal trials, with their limited capacity to hear, are not likely to assuage, on their own, the kind of loneliness caused by social abandonment" (42).

Chapter 3 then turns to unpacking the importance of hearing. This chapter brought to mind an often ignored (and misunderstood) passage in Carol Gilligan's "Letter to Readers 1993," written ten years after *In a Different Voice*:

In listening to people's responses to *In a Different Voice*, I often hear the two-step process which I went through over and over again in the course of my writing: the process of listening to women and hearing something new, a different way of speaking, and then hearing how quickly this difference gets assimilated into old categories of thinking so that it loses its novelty and its message. . . . When I hear my work being cast in terms of whether women and men are (essentially) different or who is better than whom, I know I have lost my voice, because these are not my questions. Instead my questions are about our perceptions of reality and truth: how we know, how we hear, how we see, how we speak. My questions are about voice and relationship. (xii-xiii)

I take the two-step process of hearing something new and assimilating it into old categories to be what Stauffer also reveals in a too-ready framework for understanding what justice is or requires. Those tasked with hearing testimony are already invested in assimilating what is new into old categories of thinking. As Stauffer puts it, "responding well to others, especially survivors of wrongdoing, may require that we open ourselves to hearing something other than what we expect or want to hear, even when what we hear threatens our ideas about how the world is ordered--as listening to survivor testimony might do" (6-7).

If I had to identify what some readers may find dissatisfying in this important book, it is that Stauffer refuses to prescribe when, where, and how reconciliation, forgiveness, recovery, or revision should come about. In my view, Stauffer's refusal is the inevitable (and legitimate) outcome of starting with a conception of an intersubjectivity that shapes and reshapes people, relationships, and contexts. When Stauffer steps into this difficult terrain of what to do or how to do it in chapter 4, "Revision," and chapter 5, "Desert," what emerges is not a theory or set of policies but a reckoning of what may be appropriate for particular people and in particular circumstances and contexts. Possibilities for addressing ethical loneliness will depend on having the kind of social support and institution-building that is different from standard solutions or proposals. In other words, the starting point of an intersubjective humanity contains within it possible solutions in the "broad social support that functions as a promise that, though she was once abandoned by humanity, that will not be allowed to happen again" (7). Stauffer refers to this as a world-building and rebuilding that is cooperative, social, intersubjective, and hard to achieve in a world in which harms of dehumanization, violence, and abandonment seem so widespread and overwhelming. There will be times when those who have been abandoned and are still not being heard should stay steadfast in their refusal to live with what the past has been. The refusal, as in the case of Amnesty, will mean that the harms done have not been heard in ways that have resulted in broad social support or any real change. In such a world, it may be difficult to conceive how to rebuild selves, lives, communities, or worlds.

Another reason why it is difficult to think through how repair and revision might work is that complicity in harm is so pervasive: from accountants finding loopholes that enable the wealthy to avoid taxes, to the clothes we buy that are made by slave labor, to the food we eat that is harvested by workers without citizenship or protection, to powerful nations that exploit the natural resources of poor nations, and so on and so on. From these and other examples, Stauffer draws the following conclusion:

But if reconciliation, transition, or peaceful cohabitation is [sic] to last, victims and perpetrators cannot be the only sites of transformation. Those lucky enough to have remained relatively safe and secure will need to perform revisionary practices on themselves so that they will be able to see that they are implicated both in the destruction of worlds and in a responsibility to rebuild those worlds. (138)

And so we return to Stauffer's strategy of changing the subject by rejecting a framework of justice that accepts that "in the wake of the kind of harm caused not only

by acts of violence but also by widespread complicity in or indifference to that violence, people are only either innocent or legally guilty” (140). Again, it isn’t that building and rebuilding just institutions through processes of transitional justice, reconciliation, amnesty, or forgiveness are not important. Rather, “ethical loneliness is also one of the things to which those who wish to address an unjust past must attend if what is desired is justice, a hopeful future, or even a stable present moment” (167). Stauffer’s book presses readers to ask themselves whether they are among the lucky ones who can live a life without “ever having the false sense of the self’s autonomy interrupted.” If the answer to that is yes, then we need to listen well to “stories told by those who have not been so lucky” as but one way of “shaking that confidence” (169).

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<p><a href="#\_ednref1" name="\_edn1" title="">[i]</a> A collection of relational theorists using this approach to reconceive liberal concepts such as justice, autonomy, equality, rights, identity, and memory can be found in Downie and Llewellyn 2012.</p>

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<p><strong><em>References</em></strong></p>

<p>Downie, Jocelyn, and Jennifer Llewellyn, eds. 2012. <em>Being relational: Reflections on relational theory and health law and policy</em>. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.</p>

<p>Gilligan, Carol. 1993. <em>In a different voice: Psychological theory and women’s development</em>. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.</p>

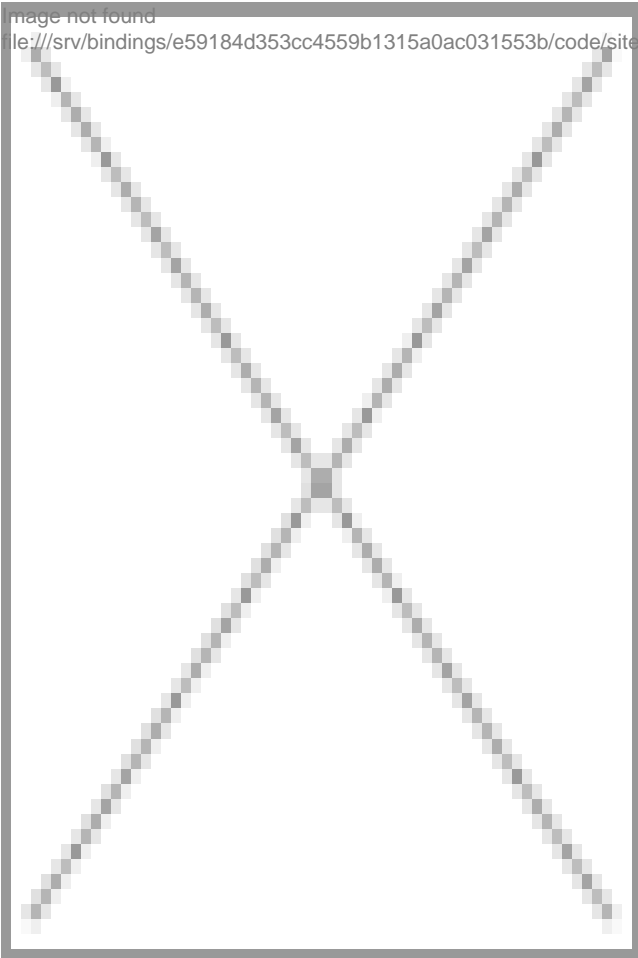
<p>Sinclair, Justice Murray. 2016. TRC final report. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. <a href="http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=3">http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=3</a> (accessed February 27, 2016).</p>

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