

Literary Review: The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common

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Alfonso Lingis, a modern philosopher, reflects upon different communities and communication amongst and within them in *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*. This work explains our ability to empathize regarding our relationships with others. Lingis refers to a rational community as well as a community of those who have nothing in common.¹ His rational community consists of groups with a common trait, a group that is therefore able to communicate effectively. A community of those who have nothing in common, however, refers to a group that relates only in mortality, what he believes is the one shared human experience. Lingis discusses the vulnerability that stems from people who have nothing in common, so-called “strangers,” and how everyone can be a stranger at some point. Scholars discuss Lingis’s ideas and how they relate to empathy for those we do not understand, not only in times of war, but in everyday life, reflecting on his language and evidence for his beliefs; additionally, scholars discuss Lingis’s practicality and possible applications of his philosophy.

Lingis’s philosophy is regarded by some scholars as practical, but by others as idealistic; in addition, his work has been criticized for his diction. Nicholas remarks that Lingis holds some important passages, but criticized that they are too “loosely linked,” explaining that they are presented weakly.² Nicholas believes that Lingis’s work is also weak for its issues with language, with the word “perception [being] vastly extended, blurring sensation, sensibility, and conception,” creating confusion for the reader.³ Overall, Nichols believes that the work “leaves little real value for social or political theorists,” due to Lingis’s lack of clarity and realism.⁴ Similarly, Ross believes that Lingis’s work is flawed in its structure and arguments.

¹ Alphonso Lingis, “Community in Death.” in *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994): 8

² Ray Nicholas, “Reviews : W.J. Stankiewicz, In Search of a Political Philosophy: Ideologies at the Close of the Twentieth Century (Routledge, 1993): 145

³ Nicholas, *In Search of a Political Philosophy*, 146

⁴ Nicholas, *In Search of a Political Philosophy*, 146

Ross states that there is an unclear “relationship among vulnerabilities, authority, and honor,” explaining that this, along with a shift in and out of western rationalism, creates confusion for the reader, as these issues are not addressed by Lingis.⁵ However, Ross does believe that Lingis’s work has redeeming qualities in its “web of reflections,” that readers can understand more easily than typical, empirical observations.⁶ Overall, Ross refers to Lingis’s work as a “project still in the making,” as there is a lack of clarity in his philosophy.⁷ One scholar, however, finds Lingis’s work a realistic philosophy. Ryder views Lingis’s work as a “pragmatic and historically situated approach to revolution,” as it bases community around mortality, which is shared by all of humanity.⁸ Ryder also believes that Lingis is “anecdotal... [and] empiricist,” as he recounts many memories from his travels that provide evidence for his claims.⁹ Ryder, Ross, and Nichols hold different views on the practicality of Lingis’s philosophy, all referring to his language and methods of supporting his arguments.

Many scholars who respond to Lingis focus on his interpretation of humanity as a whole. Hung discusses Lingis’s philosophy with regards to empathy and exclusion, particularly in response to Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. Hung applies Lingis’s beliefs to the shift from being a member of a rational community to a stranger of the main character of *Metamorphosis*, Gregor. Lingis’s influence is woven throughout Hung’s three main discussions of exclusion, embodying, and caring for strangers. Hung first discusses why Gregor becomes a stranger, due to his “inability to use language, [showing] his failure to become a member of the moral community,” referring to the community of his family.¹⁰ Hung depicts Gregor’s struggles as that of a “moral

⁵ Ross, Jamie P. *The Personalist Forum* 12, no. 2 (1996): 187

⁶ Ross, *The Personalist Forum*, 187

⁷ Ross, *The Personalist Forum*, 187

⁸ Andrew Ryder, “Revolution without Guarantees: Community and Subjectivity in Nancy, Lingis, Sartre and Levinas.” (August 13, 2012): 118

⁹ Ryder, *Revolution without Guarantees*, 118

¹⁰ Ruyu Hung, “Caring About Strangers: A Lingisian Reading of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*.” (April 2013): 440

stranger, an ethical alien,” as his family no longer shares similar traits with him, as members of a rational community do.¹¹ Hung, however, ties this to the broader idea of why we should care about strangers and if we can even do so. He states that all people eventually become strangers, as “ageing, or death, is the inescapable destiny of life,” the trait that ties together the community of those who have nothing in common.¹² Hung encourages empathy for others, and that we recognize our own cruelties, as all humans share certain traits, even as we become foreign to one another. In the same vein of discussing Lingis’s work with regards to all humanity, Alexander Hooke focuses on the language Lingis uses to refer to all people. Hooke begins his work referencing Lingis’s “unabashed... uses of we,” exploring the intentions of this language.¹³ Hooke explains that, although Lingis’s use of “we” is controversial, it is justified; Hooke states that Lingis portrays experiences that most people face, even if they appear surprising to the reader. Hung believes that all people share the traits of exclusion, embodying, and caring for strangers, and Hooke explains that Lingis’s use of “we” helps connect these ideas to all people. Again, Hung brings the conversation back to humans as a whole – much of his argument is written referring to “we,” as humans. Rejecting the notion of maintaining distance from one’s philosophy, Hooke and Hung focus on the applicability of Lingis’s ideas to all people.

A more practical view of Lingis’s perspective is given in the disciplines of psychology and education. Psychologists Bertelsen, Bård, and Tore Dag Bøe, as they reflect upon Lingis’s ideas in relation to therapeutic practices. They explain that members of rational communities “put on performances,” also known as “rational interaction,” in everyday life to conform to

¹¹ Hung, *Caring About Strangers*, 440

¹² Hung, *Caring About Strangers*, 442

¹³ Alexander E. Hooke, "Alphonso Lingis's We: A Collage, Not a Collective." (2001): 11

group behavior, explaining that this behavior makes people replaceable.¹⁴ They comment on this concept of “serious speech,” in which the content of your words does not matter, as long as you are communicating within the guidelines of the rational community. While this depersonalization may seem negative, they explain that it is fundamental to the formation of society. They explain that the more interesting interactions in life - specifically ones that are “quirky” - occur outside of this space, in the community of those who have nothing in common. They refer to these interactions as the method in which “we come into the world as *ourselves*,” explaining that Lingis’s concept of strangers is necessary for individuality, even though it can be isolating.¹⁵ Another scholar, Biesta, reflects on the practicality of Lingis’s philosophy in education. Biesta also reflects upon the idea of “serious speech,” which, again, suggests that what you say does not matter, as long as it conforms to the rational community.¹⁶ This extends into the field of education, insinuating that “schools provide students with a very specific voice... [de-legitimizing] other ways of speaking,” forcing students to conform.¹⁷ Biesta believes that this holds dangerous implications, as many students are afraid to speak what they believe. This connects with Bertelsen, Bård, and Tore Dag Bøe’s idea that “quirkiness” makes us individuals in the community of those who have nothing in common. In both psychology and education, Lingis’s ideas are applied to give explanations for individuality and lack thereof in society.

¹⁴ Bård Bertelsen and Tore Dag Bøe. “‘He Is Quirky; He Is the World’s Greatest Psychologist’: On the Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common.” (September 2016): 371

¹⁵ Bertelsen, Bård, and Tore Dag Bøe, *He is Quirky*, 375

¹⁶ Gert Biesta, “The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common: Education and the Language of Responsibility.” (September 1, 2004): 7

¹⁷ Biesta, *Education and the Language of Responsibility*, 8

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