Itinerant Philosophy: On Alphonso Lingis

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Becoming-Troglodyte

by Joff Peter Norman Bradley

This essay mines the phenomenal oeuvre of Alphonso Lingis to explicate his theory of communication. It is argued that there is such a theory and it is one intimately and inextricably linked with a philosophy of community. Cartographically and genealogically, to chart how his theory of communication has taken shape, I shall draw on a number of thinkers who have informed his thought over the years. While completing such a task presents formidable exegetical challenges, this essay claims that while Lingis indeed has a theory of communication, it is one synthesized and inflected by an eclectic reading of continental philosophers such as Bataille, Deleuze and Guattari, Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, and Nietzsche, among others.

However, this foray into the thickets of his dense and richly descriptive prose aims not to reproduce verbatim what Lingis has penned in his translations, numerous lectures, books, and monographs, because extrapolating a consistent theory is a difficult, nigh impossible task to accomplish, given, and by his own omission, Lingis’s thought-experiments do not always form a consistent whole. And in another way, it is perhaps wise to resist the urge to render the fragmentary
writings of Lingis into some form of pristine totality: to say terminally what he should have said, to say at the end yes that is what he meant. His writings are best understood if the reader appreciates his monographs are honed in to a particular time, place, and ethical moment. His thought-experiments are sometimes performative and material, primed for a particular muse on the nature of things. It is therefore difficult to think Lingis as writing an oeuvre of a single trajectory across time and space. His writings are specific to location, solitary perspective, and singular theme.

**LEVINAS**

Levinas’ influence on Lingis cannot be underestimated. It is difficult not to hear Levinas’ voice when one reads Lingis. Indeed, Lingis discerns in Levinas a philosophy of limits, a philosophy of the limits of language, the limits of the said. Lingis, following Levinas, scrutinises the idea of non-relationality to the other. The other is irreconcilable difference, beyond commonly held bonds and shared thoughts, on the thither side of das gerede. For Lingis, the fundamental relation of the self to the other is prior to that which is common. Heterogenic difference to alterity is pre-ontologically ethical. There is an inescapable appeal before any information is bartered or shared.

Today theories of communication induce us to depict the others about us as agencies with which we exchange information. But when we actually communicate with people about us, the exchange of information is the least part of our conversation; most of the time we utter words of welcome and camaraderie, give and receive clues and watchwords as how to behave among them and among others, gossip, talk to amuse one another. The other is evidently there, a person, for us not as an agency that issues meaningful propositions, information, but as an agency that orders us and appeals to us.¹
Lingis investigates the intrusive horror and overwhelming proximity of the other. The relation to the other is one of exposure, vulnerability, and sensibility. Above all, the ‘I’ is essentially contested by the other and is irrevocably responsible. The relation is one of precarity. The proximity of the other implies the suppression of ethical distance, as one is bound to reciprocate and respond. The self is fissured. Subjectivity is constituted heteronomously as the other is anarchical. For Lingis, the self-legislating, autonomous subject of Western reason is undermined in such a non-relation to the other, and subjectivity is subjection to the infinite demands of the other, to an uncertain compassion. As he says: “Thought is obedience; subjectivity is constituted in subjection.” And again, in discussing the defenestration of Gilles Deleuze, Lingis writes: “Becoming someone who stands on his or her own and speaks in his or her own name—subjectification—is then subjection and subjugation.

The responsibility for another is precisely a saying prior to anything said. For Lingis, as for Levinas, language is precisely the expression of a relation prior to the transmission of ideas. Communication with things is not extraction of information or data, but of finding oneself invaded and populated. The saying as communication is exposure. Proximity and communication are not modalities of cognition per se as communication is irreducible to the process of transmitting messages from one ego to another. Moreover, communication exceeds the data from the signals sent from one ego to another. It is something other than the simple transmission and reception of signs. Communication is more than its contents.

At the limit of communication is the gesture towards the other. It is at the limit of communication which for Lingis gives rise to communication as an ethical event. It is in irreconcilable alterity that we locate a fundamental relationship with the other. The relation to the other qua other is a non-
relation, the quintessence of communication. For Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*, first philosophy is an ethics.\(^5\) As such, the concern for the other is pre-ontological; it is formed neither through rational calculation nor contract. More fundamentally still, it is the very basis of ethically heteronomous subjectivity, which is decentred through exposure and openness, through a subjection to the other. Moreover, subjectivity is constituted through a vulnerability and sensibility, and concern for the other is located precisely in this responsibility.

One is exposed, presented as vulnerable and sensitive to the other who appears as a face. It is through the face that the other addresses me silently and makes demands upon me. The face is the locus for the beginning of language. Through its silence, the face beseeches. And in terms of the proximity of the face, there is a suppression of ethical distance.

Levinas in his discussion of language makes a distinction between the sayable and the said.\(^6\) Briefly expressed, the said is the material of language which imparts information, knowledge, and meaning by means of representation. It registers the correlation between a thing and the thought of that thing. The said brings the world into language and language into the world by eliding the difference between things and words.

On the other hand, the saying expresses a relation to the one being spoken to. It signifies a modality in the approach to the other. Language is therefore an expression of relation rather than the simple transmission of ideas. Language *qua* the saying is an expression of relation, of drawing close to the other, of proposing a proposition to the other. For Levinas, the responsibility for another is precisely a saying prior to anything said. The saying, still entwined in the said, impresses before it makes sense; it affects before it effects.

Contact is therefore the elemental relation, the groundless foundation of ethical relationship. This is vital for Lingis’s
communication theory as he is interested in the ways in which language make contact and touches. Heidegger interprets common knowledge as a multiplicity of statements that circulate, that are picked up and passed on from one to another. The speakers appear as simple relay points, equivalent and interchangeable with one another. Statements are enunciated and repeated because they are of what is said; anyone and everyone says them. No one speaks in his own name, no one takes responsibility for what is said. In fact, the talk does not just circulate in all directions, as interlocutors are not merely the relay-points of anonymous refrains. They are ordered. There are directions and directives in the talk. For Lingis, who sees in language something more fundamental at work, Heidegger was bound to misinterpret this as he reduces the function of the talk to that of communicating information and hence not the phenomenology of the unsayable.

**THINKING AS MATERIAL AND PERFORMATIVE**

Philosophy in the Lingisian mode is multi-mediated performance as it conveys a wider philosophical message. Lingis’s methodology is to ruminate on the limits of the sayable. His utterances are made against a backdrop and background of images, music, and noise. For the audience there is some confusion as to what is being said, what meaning is being expressed. While it is debatable that this is always successful, Lingis is trying to express or murmur something more fundamental. The words that come from the philosopher’s mouth are perhaps only part of the tapestry of meaning. The disembodied voice is posited as secondary as Lingis’s mode of communication bespeaks of different ways of expression and languages, of something more elemental. There is Lingis dressed as geisha, Lingis speaking against a cacophony of Latin American music, Lingis speaking in the dark, with only torchlight to read his script. And scattered throughout
his books are photographs of faces, faces from different races, cultures, across time and places. Faces which disrupt and unnerve, which interrupt his text. He is a philosopher who dares to live in a world of shadows, where nothing is certain, to play with masquerade and camouflage. He is a thinker who transports his readers away from the world of light to the dark and dingy places of the world, to culturally subterranean pockets of resistance to the banality of things.

Seemingly contrary to honouring the logos of Western metaphysics, he becomes ichthyophagan so as to speak from the cave, from the shadows, or the nether world. He becomes troglodyte, a cave dweller, in order to know other worlds, to speak of the worlds, to nestle in these worlds. Yet, how can these subterranean musings be trusted as the thoughts of a philosopher? What does it mean for a philosopher to speak amid the sumptuous and sensuous arousals and carousals of Latin American dance and samba? What is the nature of the philosophical voice, the disembodied voice that purports to express the truth, devoid of rhetoric and ploy? What does it mean for a philosopher to adorn a kimono and play with his femininity with coquettish flair and poise? What does it mean for him to wander amid the poor and dispossessed seeking a humanity stripped of formal rights, responsibilities, and legal contracts? Yet, again, perhaps this is still too harsh. To speak of the darkness of the cave is perhaps to speak metaphorically of the hither side of rationality, above and beyond the staid, death-in-life of the solitary-philosopher. It is to speak amidst the chaos and darkness, betwixt the cadences, shrieks, and coos of the animal kingdom and the baying of blood and throbbing of the heart.

Thitherto, for a philosopher to perform as Lingis does, in the material and performative mode would be to risk ridicule. He is indeed an experimenter! Yet, perhaps therefore a different kind of philosophy is at work, for this is a philosophy which incorporates phenomenological description, anthro-
poloogy, psychoanalysis, sociology, as well as anecdote and personal observation. He writes both of the non-places of the world and of sites of authentic human communication. In the non-places of the world, amidst the rumble of the world of work and reason, across the transnational, gleaming, technocratic-commercial archipelago of urban technopoles, Lingis notices the art of ignoring, the seeing without looking. Lingis finds in the network of non-places a fundamental non-communication. Intent on exploring the dark side of globalisation, those places and anonymous spaces through which one passes without communication, he forges a dualistic philosophy which differentiates the rational, Western, universal, Enlightenment societies of advanced planetary capitalism with mystical, religious societies, those Othered communities of difference.

**Serres**

One communes to become an other for the other, for the interlocutor. Serres’ neo-Socratic theory is a model of the polis and police. In the ideal metropolis of rational community and communication, the paragon is the phantasmagoria of harmonious dialogic, the purging of noise. The theory maps a milieu in which digitally encoded information and data is instantly graspable and where the equivocal voice of the outsider is jammed. In the ideal republic, Serres claims that communication is indeed possible as the ‘I’ and other are trained to code and decode meaning by using the same key. Communication is the said, the dematerialised, rendered ethereal.

In searching for a theory—an ethical theory—outside the confines of information science and beyond a model of the simple exchange of messages, Lingis critically reads the search to expunge the world of noise and the parasite. For Lingis, communication is phenomenologically the exposure
of oneself to the other. He considers the thither side of the sharing and decoding-recoding of the same key to expose the underside of the *a priori* sense of what is held in common. In his brilliant work *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*, Lingis critiques Serres’ idea of noise and the view that the *parasite* of noise is an obstacle to communication. Lingis makes a fundamental distinction between the rational community and the community of those who have nothing in common. As he says:

Anyone who thinks we are only emitting noise is the one who does not *want* to listen. The one who understands is not extracting the abstract form out of the tone, the rhythm, and the cadences—the noise internal to the utterance, the cacophony internal to the emission of the message. He or she is also listening to that internal noise—the rasping or smouldering breath, the hyperventilating or somnolent lungs, the rumblings and internal echoes—in which the message is particularized and materialized and in which the empirical reality of something indefinitely discernible, encountered in the path of one’s own life, is referred to and communicated.10

In the latter, all are strangers for each other. However, such a community is the one which may appear from time to time in the non-places of the world of which Marc Augé writes,11 as it is in the language of the latter community when breakdown occurs that we evince a language of responsibility—a veritable ethical and political language—which enables the interlocutor to speak in a singular voice. The non-places of which Augé writes are populated with dividuated impersons who by their very nature pursue the goals set by the world of work and reason. It is in the Heideggerian moment,
according to Lingis, when the facade of the everyday erodes, the singular voice speaks, must speak, and must be heard.

For Lingis, in the ideal republic—the city of communication maximally purged of noise—universal, unequivocal communication would assume the form a transparent, albeit machinic, intersubjectivity. He reads Serres as positing the paragon of unequivocal communication as crystallised in the case of two modems, transmitting and receiving information-bits simultaneously.

The community in which one has nothing in common interrupts the rational community, the world of work and reason. Contra such interference and confusion, interlocutors unite against those intent on scrambling communication. The one who speaks in his own name, in the first person singular, denudes himself or herself in the exposure to the other. As Lingis explains: “It is to risk what one found or produced in common.”

In the rational community, people speak as agents or representatives of the common discourse. They engage in serious speech which conveys the imperative that determines what is to be said. The voice is of the rational community, but it is not a singular voice. In the community of those who have nothing in common I speak for myself as a stranger, an outsider, as a newcomer. As Lingis says, I find my own voice and words which only I can singularly enunciate. It is in the act of enunciating the singular that I expose myself as a unique individual. I am at once exposed, vulnerable, and sensitive to the other. I engage in a language of responsivity and responsibility. Of singular importance for Lingis here is the response and the responsibility we assume.

Yet, Lingis takes exception to the argument that in some sense the authentic sayable of the said is external or outside the loop of information exchange, and transgressive of the incessant transmitting of messages. Critical of computer technology and the military for informing contemporary communication theory, Lingis counters this view by contending that what we
often say to one another makes so little sense. “So little of it makes any pretense to be taken seriously, so much of it is simple malarkey, in which we indulge ourselves with the same warm visceral pleasure that we indulge in belching and passing air.”

Elsewhere, commenting on the nature of cues, watchwords, and passwords, Lingis makes the point equally well. Writing in Michael Strysick’s *The Politics of Community*, Lingis claims: “So much of that language is non-serious or nonsensical. Greetings, hailing or confirming whatever the other is doing or saying, and jokes, teasing, and banter—much of the talk that goes on among us does not aim at truth but provokes smiles and laughter. Whoever laughs with us—or weeps with us—is one of us.”

In probing the *talk* and the idle chatter of *das gerede*—the talk which passes for communication, Lingis interprets the will to eliminate noise as a plot to eliminate the other, a xenophobic plot to eviscerate the other. As he says, communication is an effort to silence not the other, the interlocutor, but the outsider: the barbarian.

**Bataille and Community**

In a similar vein to Deleuze and Guattari, Lingis’s melding of phenomenology of the speculations on the nature of the singular is not for a contemporary readership, it is for those yet to come. He writes for those who seek experiences and ecstasy away from the classroom where students identify and assimilate information, away from the workplace and factory and the regulation of clock time. Thinking takes place among the poor and destitute, in places distant from the comfortable and suburban lives in developed countries. In *Dangerous Emotions*, Lingis says that to lead comfortable and suburban lives is *to skim over reality*. As Lingis says in an essay *Joy in Dying*: “Heroes are those who live and die in high
mountains and remote continents far from our comfortable and secure rooms in the urban technopoles, where we meet to read to one another what we have thought out on our computers.”

Embracing elements of Bataille’s solar economy of expenditure without return, communication is perceived as functional, transgressive of the rational order of discourse. The mode of communication of value for Lingis is that which pertains to haecceity or singularity. In the exclamations, cries, and guffaws of laughter, nothing is reciprocated. This is expenditure without return. There is a waste of energy. Nothing is exchanged. Outside the rational economy of equilibrium, Lingis says it is among those who we have nothing in common that we expose ourselves to expenditure, loss, and sacrifice. We find this sense of the nothing beyond exchange in Contact and Communication, when Lingis says: “This beyond is from the first empty; it is the void, nothingness.” The desire for communication breaks open the self-sufficiency of a sovereign being, her autonomy, her integrity, and opens her upon something beyond herself. To communicate with another then is to break through integrity, independence, autonomy, and nature. It is to intrude, unsettle, and wound. Lingis says that community forms a movement by which one exposes oneself to the other, to forces and powers outside oneself, “to death and to the others who die.”

What we bear witness to is the inapprehensible, the inassimilable, and the irrecoverable. We can think of Bataille’s theory of ‘unemployed negativity’ as a collapsing of the work, of l’oeuvre. It is the non-productive. Jean–Luc Nancy derives the concept of the inoperable community from Bataille. The inoperable implies a sense of worklessness and idleness (dé-soeuvrement). It is a community nonproductive of itself. Lingis takes from Nancy the notion of distress and asks how knowledge is gained through the coexistence with the other. To understand Lingis’s theory of communication it is im-
important to appreciate how distress in the outer zones becomes our distress. He inquires into the shared sense of distress when we become cognisant of the “exterminations wrought upon peoples in and also the culture of technicization and simulation that reigns in the richest urban technopoles.” If the outer zone is the site of the sacred, then Lingis is a philosopher of the outer zone, a philosopher of the sacred.

Lingis thinks contact with the other as constitutive of a fundamental communication that is literally destructive. At stake in the risk of communication is a violation and de-composition of the integrity of the body; a collapse of self-possession and self-positing subjectivity, a loss of control. In fact, a base communication and materialism demands a destatification of identity, or according to Bataille, a sovereignty without mastery. Communication implies moments in individuals when sovereignty is neither autonomy nor domination over others; it is a state individuals find in themselves. It is through contamination and contact with alterity, in a relation of exposure and abandon, that communication takes place. One cannot appropriate the sovereignty of the other through communication. On the contrary, it is the giving without return, a fusion of subject and object. Identity with the other is through non-rational means in the sense of laughter, tears, or the erotic. Laughter and tears tear apart from the world of work and reason. And for Lingis, it is in laughter, tears and eroticism that we find the conditions of possibility for communication in rational, instrumental thought. Lingis finds in blessings and cursings a primary form of speech. Lingis writes: “Laughter and tears, blessing and cursing break through the packaging and labeling of things that make our environment something only scanned and skimmed over. They are the forces with which we impact on nature, which we had perused only as the text of the world. They are forces that seek out and engage reality.” Humans through blessings and curses—as instances of fundamental
modes of language and community—converse over that which is amusing or tormenting.

Contra Kant, Lingis is sceptical of the universal rational agent and the law of the categorical imperative which set examples for everyone. Contrary to the notion that the rational agent respects the other via respect for the law that rules and binds, Lingis finds in Bataille an alternative model in which communication pertains not to the contract but to the contact of an individual with what is and remains beyond him. Sovereignty is ridiculous. It is a danger. For Lingis, the communication of sexual pleasure comes closest to the essence of majesty. It is through the intermingling of bodies that we come to know the other. Lingis finds in Bataille the idea that communication pertains to the contact of a sovereign being with what is other, a communication with the sacred and demonic and a communication with other species, inanimate things, and the material universe: an ecology. Yet the anxiety that composes it is speechless.

For Lingis, the thirst for communication is for contact with beings unlike ourselves. He argues that humans seek communication with those different from themselves. And in more exotic terms, he writes: “Our most important conversations are with prostitutes, criminals, gravediggers. We seek to be freed from the carapace of ourselves.” Beyond the world of work and reason, Lingis thinks the outer zone, the world of the other, the world of the sacred. Seemingly uninterested in the world of abstract, disembodied thought and the profane sphere of everyday existence, Lingis speaks of the time of the sacrificial and the mystical. Here perhaps is the secret to understanding Lingis. If the sacred is the zone of the decomposition of the world of work and reason, and if following his reading Bataille, we find the most sacred things in the spilling of bodily fluid, then we can take Lingis as saying that the deep-seated and ancient sense of communication is the longing to communicate with those most unlike ourselves—
with sacred and demonic beings. Then, it would seem that Lingis’s theory of communication is a theory of communication of the sacred. Lingis understands those who perform sacrifice as the true identifiers with the victim. It is through wounds that communication takes place between humans and sacred beings. One is exposed to the others by wounds. Moreover, for Lingis following Bataille, communication with the sacred and with natural things is in some sense prior to communication with other humans. At a more fundamental level, communication takes places between human beings when we share laughter, grief, and erotic feelings, when dignity is punctured.

To communicate effectively with those who fascinate us is to break through their integrity, their natures, their independence, their autonomy—to wound them.²⁶

For Lingis, sovereign existence is lived in conversations, shared laughter, friendship, and eroticism. Indeed, fundamental truths are revealed in laughter, friendship, and eroticism. It is in moments of conversation and laughter, in perversity in all its myriad forms that we live a sovereign existence. And it is precisely when we laugh together that humans recognise each other as the same kind, as kindred. In similar ways, we know one another as human through our tears, and through the sexual appetite and attraction. At the limit of communication and community is the ‘nothing-in-common’ through which communication takes place. This is the moment of unemployed negativity that we find in Bataille.

**Order-Words**

In *A Thousand Plateaus*,²⁷ Deleuze and Guattari consider slogans or order-words (mots d’ordre) in non-ideological terms. Interpreted as such, they are the cues, prompts, watchwords,
and passwords which we attach and avail ourselves to as representatives of this or that discipline, body, or group. For Deleuze and Guattari, the talk or indirect discourse communicates what someone has heard and what someone has been told to say. Order-words command the informative content of sentences. Deleuze and Guattari perceive obedience as the honouring of order-words. In speaking to others, we transmit to them what we have been told to say.

In the anti-Chomskyan linguistic thrust of Deleuze and Guattari, a positive emphasis is put on fleeing their inherent command. While acknowledging the forlornness in seeking to escape order-words, Lingis, echoing Deleuze and Guattari, claims the trick is to escape the death sentence and the verdict they contain. Such order-words are a “verdict”—a “death sentence.” Yet Lingis is interested in how the ‘T’ speaks in its own name. He says that this will to disclose is not derived from a moment of Heideggerian authenticity but is forged through a collective, a social machine that compels the ‘T’ to speak in its own name. And in doing so blocks other paths of creativity and flight, for order-words isolate “an inner core of lucidity and will,” and excise a “swarming within of becomings—becoming woman, becoming animal, becoming vegetable, rhizomatic, becoming mineral, becoming molecular.” For Lingis, to speak in one’s own name is to disconnect from a vital environment. To delimit one’s possibilities is a process of subjectification, a subjection and subjugation.

**Conclusion**

Lingis writes from the perspective of the ‘I,’ from the singular, from the perspective of saying things simply in one’s own name as Nietzsche exhorted his readers to do. He probes the T’s relation and bond with the l’autrui, the other, and explores why it is that we understand so little of the other. We might say that his linguistic theory is liminally orientated as
it contests what can be said or not—it addresses limits of the sayable in words and thoughts. He thinks the outside of language, the unsayable, the non-rational and unrepresentable and transgressive. In a sense, he searches for the compulsions to act and speak. As a phenomenological archaeologist of desire, he suggests there are communications more profound than the babble of the everyday, the talk of the they. He beseeches his readers to consider the traumatising question ‘are you everyday?’

18 Lingis, *Dangerous Emotions*, 164.
22 Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 190.
23 Lingis, *Dangerous Emotions*, 78
24 For more on Lingis’s idea of ecology in relation to blessing see Lingis, *Dangerous Emotions*, 71: “A thinker who comprehends with the hands, hands made for blessing, sees swallows and owls, wetlands and tundra pullulate with grace. Blessing is the beginning and the end of all ecological awareness.”
26 Lingis, *Dangerous Emotions*, 101.