On The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common

by Jeffrey Nealon

A note from the author about the following text: This is an archival text, delivered at a Penn State Philosophy Department session on Al’s book in 1995, shortly after it had been published. Despite my desires to change, update, and fudge, I preserve the original discourse in accordance with what I learn from Lingis’s example—the difficult joy of response, the irreducible singularity of the encounter, and the liveliness of memory, among so many other things.

I find myself in a somewhat odd position here this afternoon, having been charged with the task of “briefly reviewing the main ideas” of Alphonso Lingis’s truly remarkable book, The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common. The difficulty, I guess, is two-fold. First is the problem that one encounters before any such rich and engaging text, the uncomfortable difficulties of paraphrase: Have I gotten it right? Are these really the stakes of the project, or am I just making this up? How to impart a sense of the text’s rich complexity, while still performing some kind of recognizable summary?
And then there’s the second problem—the fact that Al is sitting right here, across the table from me, face-to-face. I’m thinking he could review the main ideas for us a lot better than I could, so what do you need me for, I begin to wonder? But I press on, trying to find a path, as we always do in Al’s work, for productively engaging the joyously cramped space of response.

One is tempted, in confronting these initial difficulties, to introduce the book by situating it within an ongoing scholarly conversation. And Lingis’s book certainly does intervene decisively among a series of recent philosophical works that take up the question of community from a continental perspective—most notably, Jean-Luc Nancy’s *The Workless Community*, Maurice Blanchot’s *The Unavowable Community*, William Corlett’s *Community Without Unity*, and Derrida’s *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today’s Europe*; in turn, these books expand on certain themes of alterity and community articulated by Heidegger, Levinas, Bataille, and others. Then, of course, there is also much work on community that comes out of Hegelian, Marxist, and postcolonial traditions—say, Charles Taylor’s work or Habermas’s or Fanon’s—and one could perhaps introduce Lingis’s work by situating it within the debates among communitarianism, Marxism, and postcolonial studies.

However, as tempting as it is, such scholarly situating will never get to the heart and singularity of a work like Lingis’s. Even from within the attempt to convene a community of works on community, I am inexorably thrown back on the difficult question of responding adequately to *this* work, to *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*. Its specificity calls *not* for comparison to a community of other works, but rather for a radically singular response.

Of course, maybe this isn’t such a big deal, insofar as this type of problem is confronted and eventually overcome all the time, in any successful philosophical discussion of a theme within a
community of like-minded inquirers. Something like this difficulty, in fact, is issue one in many scholarly studies of community: How does one adequately respond to the rich complexity of alterity while still building the rational consensus necessary for mutual discussion and progress? How does one begin to form a community out of a bunch of people who have nothing in common? As Lingis himself writes on this model, “To build community would mean to collaborate in industry which organizes the division of labor and to participate in the market. It would mean to participate in the elaboration of a political structure, laws and command posts. It would be to collaborate with others to build up public works and communications” (5). These are certainly pressing, difficult themes, and ones that could potentially occupy us in discussion for quite some time this afternoon. We could debate, for example, whether it really does take a village to raise a child.

However, an other, more essential, difficulty is presented to us by The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common: from the beginning, this text is not primarily interested in philosophical discussions—in the progress of knowledge or the parsing deliberation of arguments; it’s not interested in founding a rational community based on the properly communicated abstraction or the triumphant conclusion. Rather, the stakes of The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common lie irreducibly elsewhere.

At the same time, Lingis’s text most certainly is concerned with communication and community; it just asks us to consider a communication that happens or community that forms around situations other than the rational exchange of information within a community of like-minded individuals. As he writes, “Beneath the rational community . . . is another community, the community that demands that the one who has his own communal identity, who produces his own nature, expose himself to the one with whom he has nothing in
common, the stranger. The *other community* is not simply absorbed into the rational community; it recurs, it troubles the rational community, as its double or its shadow” (10).

It is, then, toward this other community—the community before, beneath, or beyond the rational community of progress and consensus—that Lingis relentlessly draws our attention. In a sentence that might be said to mark the book’s most insistently recurring gesture, Lingis writes that “Before the rational community, there was the encounter with the other” (10). And, for Lingis, this kind of encounter with the other is one that necessarily takes place both inside and outside the dominant laws and norms of any given political culture; such an encounter demands that we respond to the other, without any concrete sense of how we might adequately render such a response. As he puts it, “To respond to the other, even to answer her greeting, is already to recognize her rights over me. Each time I meet his glance or answer her words, I recognize that the imperative that orders his or her approach commands me also. I cannot return her glance, extend my hand, or respond to his words without exposing myself to his or her judgment and contestation” (33).

As Lingis shows throughout his text, much “philosophical” discussion of community unfortunately boils down to a series of questions concerning how one can overcome difference—how a community can put its differences aside and work together toward common goals, in the project of forming what Hegel famously calls the “I that is We and We that is I.” For Lingis, however, the I or the subject is related less to a common “We” [W-E] than it is a singular *oui* [O-U-I], to an imperative saying—yes to alterity. This yes, this other *oui*, cannot merely be understood as a rational or normative rule of the community’s law; as he writes, “It is not only with one’s rational intelligence that one exposes oneself to an imperative” (11); rather, as Lingis shows us through the many interventions and encounters in his text, the imperative to
respond to the other shows itself and becomes compelling precisely at the limits of the rational community—at those places or in those moments where the content of what we say is less important than the raw, phatic fact of speaking, being-there, accompanying the other, responding to the other’s approach, answering the other’s call.

Lingis thematizes this distinction between two kinds of communications, two communities, as follows: “There are then two entries into communication—the one which depersonalizes one’s visions and insights, formulates them in the terms of the common rational discourse, and speaks as a representative, a spokesperson—equivalent and interchangeable with others—for what has to be said. The other entry into communication is that in which you find it is you, you saying something, that is essential” (116). This speaking other-wise is the radically singular saying that comes before the general or translatable said of rational communication; such saying is, then, literally the origin of community and dialogue, but it is itself not a generalizable or translatable component of rationalist discussion. The simple fact of my speaking in response to the approach of an other is already a testament to the other’s primacy and irreducibility; but, as Lingis insists, “it is also a beginning, the beginning of communication” (114).

Throughout The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common, Lingis consistently calls our attention to these other entries into “communication” (or these entries into an other communication) at the margins of a community: encountering a stranger in a foreign land, our call to the bedside of a dying loved one, the caress in desire, our stammering confrontations with language. Such radically singular events mark “A situation in which the saying, essential and impera-tive, separates from the said, which somehow it no longer orders and hardly requires” (109). And it is, Lingis shows, precisely at these limits of communication—at those moments when response is always necessary, yet always irration-
al and out of our control—that communication itself is born.

As he writes, it is “the surfaces of the other, the surfaces of suffering, that face me and appeal to me and make demands on me. In them, an alien imperative weighs on me. The weight of the imperative is felt in the surfaces with which the other faces me with his weariness and vulnerability and which afflict me and confound my intentions” (32). Communication begins or happens, in other words, not when I confidently transfer my abstract meaning or ideas to the other, but rather in those moments when my self-assured projects falter, where my spontaneity is called radically into question by the sheer presence of the other. Such limit-experiences comprise an irrecoverable movement outside the self, a gesture that “has no idea of what to do or how to escape. Its movement is nowise a project; one goes where one cannot go, where nothing is offered and nothing is promised” (178). Such a gesture of response, in other words, moves inexorably toward the exterior, toward the other.

There certainly is, then, a surviving notion of community in Lingis’s text—a quite literal community of those who have nothing in common—but such a community is formed not by a closing in, by the issuing of ID cards or by the creation of a common interior space, safe from irrational intrusion; rather, Lingis holds that “Community forms in a movement by which one exposes oneself to the other, to forces and powers outside oneself, to death and to the others who die” (12).

In the end, it seems to me that Lingis’s interventions into the discourses of community are essentially ethical interventions; both the philosophical stakes and—just as importantly—the metonymic or empirical operations of the surface of his text comprise powerfully compelling ethical movements. However, the ethical component of this text is not to be found in abstract systems of reciprocal obligation; rather, ethics in *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common* is born and maintained through the continuing necessity
of *response*—to other people, to animals, to the earth itself. And such a responsiveness or responsibility comes always *before and beyond* the solidification of any theoretical rules or political norms of ethical conduct. This is why, throughout the text, Lingis consistently calls us to consider the primacy of what we might call “non-philosophical” experience—that is, he continually calls attention to the primacy of an experience of sociality or otherness that comes before any philosophical understanding or reification of our respective subject positions.

In this insistence, perhaps we see Lingis’s debt to Levinas’s (non)concept of the “face-to-face” encounter with the other. As Levinas writes, in Lingis’s translation, the face-to-face “situation is an experience in the strongest sense of the term: a contact with a reality that does not fit into any a priori idea, which overflows all of them. . . . A face is pure experience, conceptless experience.”

In Lingis’s work, like Levinas’s, such an “experience” exceeds all my categories of knowledge or understanding. This relation between self and other cannot simply be translated into rational, conceptual thought, because to do so would be to destroy the unmotivated, spontaneous character of encounter. But, at the same time, there is an obligation to respond built into the very situation of the face-to-face encounter, insofar as the experience of the other person is also a concrete, social phenomenon. As Lingis writes, “The face of the other is the original locus of expression” (63), and we must respond to this social fact of otherness just as we must respond to the experiential fact that fire burns flesh or food nourishes it; such response does not simply—or even primarily—find its origin in the subject’s “choice.”

Ethics is born(e), then, not in the time of the community’s progress—in the reciprocity of offers or promises made to the others—but rather in the time of the other, which Lingis calls “an utterly alien time where nothing is offered or prom-
ised” (178). All of my possibilities and enjoyments are, from the beginning and in the end, owed to the other. As Lingis writes near the end of his text, “For me, the world is, from the start, a field of possibilities others have apprehended and comprehended, possibilities for others. What I find as possibilities for me are possibilities others have left me” (177).

And, in, or at the end, it is just such a gift—a toolbox of possibilities for becoming-other—that Alphonso Lingis leaves for us, in the pages of his extraordinary *Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*.

Thank you, Al. Really.

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