

An Interdisciplinary Approach to Alphonso Lingis's Community

Emily McDill

Humanities 103

Professor Wills

November 1, 2019

Alphonso Lingis's concepts of the "rational community" and the "community of those who have nothing in common" defines the term "community" and seeks to explain how we can reach beyond its confines and bond with others over intrinsic human experiences and characteristics<sup>1</sup>. Lingis's work has many different interpretations, some believing that "those who have nothing in common" is the collective group of people shunned by the rational community, and others interpreting it to mean that all humans have "nothing," or death, in common. Lingis's work inspires many different scholarly conversations in the fields of philosophy, linguistics, education, and interdisciplinary combinations of these areas. The examination of Lingis's theories through the lenses of emblematic sources from various disciplines reveals the broader themes of Lingis's work.

Although Lingis is a philosopher himself, other scholars of philosophy have varying interpretations of his theories. Albert Crim tackles the meaning of the "community of those who have nothing in common" in the philosophy journal *Research in Phenomenology* with his article "Deathbound Community: What Calls for Speaking?" In the article Crim analyzes the instances in which the language of the rational community is no longer effective. Crim explains how a common language is one of the defining characteristics of the inherently exclusive rational community. Therefore, he asserts, death, or "nothing" unifies humankind, because it is an indescribable and unavoidable human experience that renders the language of the rational community obsolete. Crim writes, "straddling the abyss between all and none, perhaps, is the

<sup>1</sup>Lingis, Alphonso. *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*. Studies in Continental Thought. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

mortal community of those who are we, and who have everything and nothing in common.”<sup>2</sup>

Similarly to Crim, Ruyu Hung’s article, “Caring About Strangers: A Lingisian Reading of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*” for the journal *Educational Philosophy & Theory* equates “death” with “nothingness” in the context of the community of those who have nothing in common. Hung takes Crim’s interpretation of Lingis’s work a step further by viewing Lingis’s definition of community through the lense of the novel *Metamorphosis* and poses the question: “Did Gregor’s family abandon him because he was a stranger?”<sup>3</sup> Hung advocates for empathy toward the stranger, explaining that we are all strangers at some point in our lives, and therefore, “I am the stranger and the stranger is me.”<sup>4</sup> Hung interprets Lingis’s community of those who have nothing in common to mean both strangers and members of the rational community have death in common, and are therefore unified by the sympathy produced by that shared experience.

Educational scholars also advocate for the empathy defined by Lingis’s community of those who have nothing in common in the context of the rational community. According to Gert Biesta in his article, “The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common: Education and the Language of Responsibility” the rational community is defined by “common discourse.” When members of the rational community speak, they often lose sight of their own ideas in order to fit into the framework of common discourse. Our education system propagates this rational discourse through the implementation of a curriculum that guides the student’s thoughts. This uniform schema of thought limits the unique ideas of individuals, and rejects those who do not

<sup>2</sup> Crim, Albert. “Deathbound Community: What Calls for Speaking?” *Research in Phenomenology* 25, no. 1 (January 1995): 296.

<sup>3</sup> Hung, Ruyu. “Caring About Strangers: A Lingisian Reading of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*.” *Educational Philosophy & Theory* 45, no. 4 (April 2013): 436–37

<sup>4</sup> Ruyu. “Caring About Strangers,” 440

conform, labeling them as “strangers.”<sup>5</sup> Biesta suggests that schools should disrupt the rational community by encouraging “learning as responding” to new, uncomfortable experiences.<sup>6</sup> Learning as responding protects the student’s individuality because it forces them to adapt and find unique ways to communicate outside of the common discourse.<sup>7</sup> Thus, he argues, schools should include opportunities within the curriculum for students to engage with things that are foreign to them, because otherness causes one experience responsibility for people different from themselves, and forms a community of those who have nothing in common.

Mary Hinsdale similarly applies Lingis’s theories to issues in education in her article “Responsive Mentorship.” She claims that academic institutions frequently focus on diversifying the student body in terms of race or socioeconomic status, yet neglect to nurture “intellectual plurality” and diverse thoughts among students that will expand “the circles of our collective knowledge.”<sup>8</sup> Mentors, particularly in higher-level education, are often confined to the rational community of their field and strictly follow the “norms of their discipline” which limits the creativity and diversity of thought of the students they are mentoring.<sup>9</sup> She argues that mentors need to disrupt the rational community of academics by allowing their students to take risks and push the boundaries of their academic discipline. She encourages mentors to “meet our students in exchanges that require us to use our own unique voice so that we might respond to them outside the strictures of our academic discourse.”<sup>10</sup> Hinsdale claims mentors should employ

5 Biesta, Gert. “The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common: Education and the Language of Responsibility.” *Interchange* 35, no. 3 (September 1, 2004): 307–24.

6 Biesta, “The Community,” 319

7 Biesta, “The Community,” 320

8 Hinsdale, Mary Jo. “Responsive Mentorship.” *Philosophy of Education Yearbook*, December 2011, 139.

9 Hinsdale, “Responsive Mentorship,” 141

10 Hinsdale, “Responsive Mentorship,” 144

the ideas of Lingis's community of those who have nothing in common and break away from the academic jargon in order to communicate with students in a way that is unique to them.<sup>11</sup>

Other scholars take a more linguistic approach to Lingis's work, both deconstructing his use of pronouns and deciphering how language plays a role in distinguishing the rational community from the "others". Alexander Hooke argues that Lingis's community of those who have nothing in common is a collage that "highlights unpredictable ways that humans and other life forms come together" in his article "Alphonso Lingis's We: A Collage, Not a Collective."<sup>12</sup> He comments on how Lingis freely uses "we" in his writing, which emphasizes shared truths and brings together seemingly unrelated things<sup>13</sup>. Hooke describes this use of we as a "paradoxical sense of we". He also claims that the "we" is a "contested we" because one has to interact and engage with the sufferings of others when their imperatives act as a call to action.<sup>14</sup> Language plays a large part of Lingis's definition of community, and Bard Bertelsen and Tor Boe also take a Lingisian approach to examining the power of language in a therapist-patient relationship in an article for the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*. They analyze the language used by a young patient receiving mental health treatment, and note that although the patient feels indebted towards his doctor, he cannot articulate his gratefulness in terms of the common discourse practiced by the rational community of psychologists.<sup>15</sup> The authors draw a parallel between the connection the patient feels toward the doctor and the community of those who have nothing in common, because in this situation, speaking solely using the language of

<sup>11</sup> Hinsdale, "Responsive Mentorship," 145

<sup>12</sup> Hooke, Alexander E. "Alphonso Lingis's We: A Collage, Not a Collective." Edited by Alphonso Lingis. *Diacritics* 31, no. 4 (2001): 11

<sup>13</sup> Hooke, "Alphonso Lingis's We," 13

<sup>14</sup> Hooke, "Alphonso Lingis's We," 18

<sup>15</sup> Bertelsen, Bård, and Tore Dag Bøe. "'He Is Quirky; He Is the World's Greatest Psychologist': On the Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common." *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy* 37, no. 3 (2016): 370

rational discourse is ineffective. Bertelsen and Boe's Lingisian interpretation of the psychological interview illuminates the merits of dialogical practices, which stress the use of more vernacular, accessible language when communicating with patients.<sup>16</sup>

Lingis's theories of the rational community and the community of those who have nothing in common have applications in a broad range of subjects, from linguistics, to education, to psychology. An exploration of scholarly interpretations of his work reveals many scholars encourage the disruption of the rational community in favor of bonding over shared human experiences, so that one may connect with those whom they have nothing in common.

<sup>16</sup> Bertelsen and Bøe, "He Is Quirky," 374

## Bibliography

- Bertelsen, Bård, and Tore Dag Bøe. “‘He Is Quirky; He Is the World’s Greatest Psychologist’: On the Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common.” *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy* 37, no. 3 (2016): 367–380. <https://doi.org/10.1002/anzf.1155>.
- Biesta, Gert. “The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common: Education and the Language of Responsibility.” *Interchange* 35, no. 3 (September 1, 2004): 307–24. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02698880>.
- Crim, Albert. “Deathbound Community: What Calls for Speaking?” *Research in Phenomenology* 25, no. 1 (January 1995): 296. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156916495X00202>.
- Hinsdale, Mary Jo. “Responsive Mentorship.” *Philosophy of Education Yearbook*, December 2011, 139–47.
- Hooke, Alexander E. “Alphonso Lingis’s We: A Collage, Not a Collective.” Edited by Alphonso Lingis. *Diacritics* 31, no. 4 (2001): 11–21.
- Hung, Ruyu. “Caring About Strangers: A Lingisian Reading of Kafka’s Metamorphosis.” *Educational Philosophy & Theory* 45, no. 4 (April 2013): 436–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2012.718102>.
- Lingis, Alphonso. *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*. Studies in Continental Thought. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.