Ethics, Rhetoric, and Discourse

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Intellectual assessments of the relationship between ethics, rhetoric, and discourse date back to the ancient Greeks and their concern with the ethical function of public moral argument in the workings of the body politic. The most famous philosophical starting point of the assessments arises when Socrates and Plato (trans., Gorgias; Phaedrus; Sophist; 1973a, 1973b, 1973c) take exception to how the discursive practice of coming to terms with “the truth” is too easily and too readily impeded by the manipulating and deceptive ways of the orator’s art. Hippocratic physicians, for example, had to deal with this problem when these first men of scientific medicine sought to define and defend their techne during public debates against traveling sophistic lecturers and those quack doctors whose practice still admitted the use of magical charms (Edelstein, 1967; Hyde, 2001).

With the Hippocratics in mind, Socrates and Plato argued that as medicine is currently developing a rational understanding of the body and its diseases, so must rhetoric develop a rational understanding of the soul and of any topic that is discussed to influence it. Rhetoric, in other words, must become scientific in scope and function; it must know itself to be a true medica-
ment of the soul. Aristotle modifies this claim somewhat so as not to destroy what he takes to be rhetoric’s “true nature” (physis). For unlike medicine, rhetoric is not a science; it has no definite subject matter to call its own. Rather, it makes its living by dealing “with what is in the main contingent” (Aristotle, Rhetoric, trans., 1357a15). Rhetoric is there to help human beings deliberate about the certainty of their uncertain existence. It stands ready to answer the call of those who find themselves in situations where “definitive evidence” that can guide moral action is lacking, but where such action, nevertheless, is required (Blumenberg, 1987). Rhetoric is a competence that gives expression to our ability to be persuasive, to make known the useful and the inexpedient, the fitting and the improper, the just and the unjust, thereby enabling us to engage others in collaborative deliberation about contestable matters (Farrell, 1993).

A history of the Western rhetorical tradition is documented throughout the many entries composing The Encyclopedia of Rhetoric (Sloane, 2001). With this 837 page book in hand, one gains a sense that the literature on the art’s relationship with ethics and discourse is, to say the least, immense and complex. Indeed, the scope and function of the relationship is such that it warrants the attention of many disciplines besides rhetoric and philosophy that recognize the relationship’s necessary presence in the midst of their teaching and research interests. Theology, literature, sociology, political theory, law, economics, science, and, of course, communication studies, are cases in point. Within this last mentioned field, rhetoric’s relationship with ethics and discourse is most commonly associated with the related professional divisions “Communication
Communication scholars interested in “discourse analysis” also speak to the importance of rhetoric’s relationship with ethics in their investigations of language-in-use, the interactive production of meaning in conversational encounters (Bavelas, Kenwood, & Phillips, 2002) and the moral implications of the media in contemporary public life (Chouliaraki, 2006; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). Jacobs’s (2002) observation regarding the history of this research procedure is noteworthy: “Knowing what language does has commonly been thought to be superfluous to knowing what language is. While this attitude has begun to fade, the term language has been so thoroughly appropriated by the technical structural interests of sentence grammarians that any effort to study the uses of language or the structures of language beyond the sentence requires use of a whole new term: discourse” (p. 213). Discourse analysts make much of how language is actually employed in structuring specific interpersonal communication transactions (e.g., the physician/patient/family relationship; see Beach, 2008). Focusing on how language functions in such transactions necessarily brings a rhetorical perspective to the circumstances under consideration; for rhetorical analysis, as the ancient Greeks first made clear, is concerned not only with what a given text means, but also and primarily with how it means: the various ways that its discourse produces understanding, attitudes, and beliefs, calls for critical judgment, and encourages action (Farrell, 1993). Discourse analysts distinguish their research agenda from those of rhetorical scholars by attending to how, for example, “turn taking” and creating “openings” in conversations affect their evolving meaning and establish power relationships between the involved parties (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974; Schegloff & Sachs 1973).

Ethics, rhetoric, and discourse show themselves in our everyday existence. Their display admits an ontological status. Ethics, rhetoric, and discourse lie at the heart of human being. The purpose of this essay is to clarify this fact of life by offering a phenomenological assessment of the phenomena’s relationship. Such an assessment allows us to appreciate the empirical presence of the phenomena from “the ground up”: from the fundamental spatial and temporal fabric of existence to the constructed social and political domains that we create and inhabit on a daily basis with the help of ethics, rhetoric, and discourse. The assessment thereby also enables us to appreciate certain ontological presuppositions that inform all else that can be said about the relationship’s existential presence and dynamics (no matter what discipline has the floor). The presuppositions I emphasize here include: the “dwelling place” (ethos) of ethics, the “call of conscience,” “emotion and the happening of truth,” “the life-giving gift of acknowledgment,” and “otherness.” The relationship of ethics, rhetoric, and discourse calls to mind a host of matters that, as I hope to make clear in what follows, are crucial for the well-being of humankind.

THE ETHOS OF ETHICS

Ethics is a discipline that deals with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation. The Greek for ethics is ethos. This specific term is also commonly associated with a person’s “moral character.” This second sense of ethos is what Isocrates has in mind when considering the nature of the orator’s art: For “who does not know that words carry greater conviction when spoken by men of good repute than when spoken by men who live under a cloud, and that the argument which is made by a man’s life is more weight than that which is furnished by words?” (Isocrates, trans., 1982, p. 278). Ethos is both a legitimating source for and a praiseworthy effect
of the practice of rhetoric. Heeding the call of public service as a person of “good repute,” the orator’s presence and rhetorical competence are a display of a “principled self” that instructs the moral consciousness and actions of others and thereby serves as a possible catalyst for them to do the same for the good of their community (Hyde, 2004, pp. xiii–xxviii; Hyde, 2010, p. 63).

Isocrates anticipates the doctrine of ethos developed in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, but with this doctrine comes a significant change in the technical use of the term. For Aristotle, *ethos* is not primarily associated with the orator’s reputation for being a wise and honest soul, but rather with the actual rhetorical competence displayed in the orator’s discourse. The practice of rhetoric constitutes an active construction of character; *ethos* takes form as a result of the orator’s abilities to argue and to deliberate and thereby to inspire trust in an audience. Aristotle thus directs our attention away from an understanding of *ethos* as a person’s well-lived existence and toward an understanding of *ethos* as an artistic accomplishment (Garver, 1994).

Although Isocrates and Aristotle emphasize different senses of *ethos*, there nevertheless exists a more fundamental existential and ontological connection between the two. Aristotle’s understanding of artful ethos presupposes that the character that takes place in the orator’s specific text is itself contextualized and thereby made possible by past social, political, and rhetorical transactions that inform the orator’s and his audience’s ongoing, communal existence: the “places,” “habitats,” and “haunts” (*ethea*; plural of *ethos*) wherein people dwell and bond together. This use of *ethos* as “dwelling place” dates back to Homer and Hesiod (Chamberlain, 1984; Heidegger, 1977/1947; Miller, 1974). Aristotle develops this particular usage of *ethos* when, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he discusses how, beginning in childhood, “ethical” virtues can be trained and made habitual (2.1.1103a17-30).

What I am emphasizing about *ethos* and its relationship to rhetorical discourse directs our attention to the “architectural” function of the orator’s art (McKeon, 1971): how, for example, its practice grants such *living room* to our lives that we might feel more *at home* with others and our surroundings. The *ethos* of rhetoric would have one appreciate how the *premises* and other materials of arguments are not only tools of logic but also mark out the *boundaries* and *domains* of thought that, depending on how their specific discourses are *designed* and *arranged*, may be particularly inviting and moving for some audience. The *ethos* of rhetoric makes use of our inventive and symbolic capacity to construct dwelling places—or what discourse analysts term “architecture[s] of intersubjectivity” (Heritage, 1984; Jacobs, 2002; Rommetveit, 1974)—that are stimulating and aesthetically, psychologically, socially, and morally instructive. With architecture in mind, we might also speak of the construction as an “edifying” discourse (to edify, Latin: *aedificare*; *aedes*, “dwelling” + *ficare*, “to make” or “to build”) whose communal character (*ethos*) takes form as the communication and rhetorical architect uses materials (e.g., tropes, figures, topics, arguments, narratives, emotions) to attract our attention, maintain our interest, and encourage us to judge the work as being praiseworthy and persuasive.

As we direct our communicative and rhetorical competence toward achieving this goal, we accept the responsibility of becoming *home-makers*, builders of those special places where “the heart” is suppose to be and where others thus feel welcome and at home while thinking about and discussing the truth of some matter of interest. The genuine enrichment of interpersonal relationships and public opinion require as much. Indeed, it is discomfiting to feel “out of place” in the company of others (Casey, 1993; Hyde, 2006, pp. 60–116; Hyde, 2010, pp. 243–279).

In meeting this challenge, people place their own characters on the line and in the text. The ethical practice of rhetoric entails the construction of a speaker’s or a writer’s *ethos* as well as the construction of a dwelling place for collaborative and moral deliberation. The process was at work when Hippocratic physicians made their case for the importance of scientific medicine. The same can be said whenever people are constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing their
social and political ideologies. An ideology is a dwelling place: a discursive habitat offering a worldview that, for “good reasons,” commends certain habits of thinking and acting, promotes with its guiding narratives notions of progress and perfection, and thereby encourages specific ways of being with and evaluating others (Aune, 1994; Fisher, 1987). Discourse analysts and rhetorical critics make their living by analyzing data housed in these habitats. Here, too, is the founding place of research in organizational communication (Cheney, 1991; McMillan & Hyde, 2000); for in addition to whatever else can be said about their nature, organizations present concrete forms of what is being defined here as a dwelling place.

THE CALL OF CONSCIENCE

Ethics and moral character presuppose a dwelling place wherein they can take form and be cultivated. Heidegger (1977) makes much of this point in his ontologically oriented discussion of humankind’s ethical nature. He emphasizes that, in its most primordial form, ethos “names the open region in which man dwells” (p. 233). This open region shows itself in the ongoing and future-oriented process of human being: the way the objective uncertainty of our spatial and temporal existence—before it is reduced to the measurements of clocks, calendars, and maps—is forever opening and exposing us to the unknown and thus challenging us to assume the ethical responsibility of affirming the burden of our freedom of choice. The challenge calls us to think and act such that we can bring a sense of order and meaning to our lives and to our relationships with others. This is how systems of morality (e.g., institutionalized religion) come into being in the first place. The perfectionist driven language of morality is the language of responsiveness and responsibility that is called for by the ontological workings of human being (Hyde, 2010).

History is the recorded consequences of our answering this challenging call—a call that permeates the fabric of our being but that is not a human creation. We had nothing to do with creating the original dynamics of our spatial and temporal existence that came about approximately 15 billion years ago with a Big Bang and that appear to be infinite. The ethos of human being thus has something about its nature that is more and thus other than what we decide to make of it—something whose objective uncertainty is the basis of “mystery.” What will happen tomorrow? Who can say for sure? Otherness lies at the heart of human existence; it makes its presence known even when we are all alone.

Ontologically speaking, this otherness of human existence is its own evocation and provocation, an event of deconstruction-reconstruction in its most primordial form. Before we have anything to say about it, the open-ended dwelling place of our spatial–temporal being is at work calling us into question and demanding a response. The ethos of human being functions first and foremost in accordance with a challenge–response logic. When this logic occurs “within” a person, on an intrapersonal level, we speak of it as an “act of conscience,” whereby the person is judging his or her own character, thoughts, and actions. Pointing to its original revelation in and through the spatial and temporal workings of human being, Heidegger (1927/1962) identifies its dynamic character as the most original and empirically verifiable “call of conscience” (pp. 313–325). The ontological structure of human existence places before us the challenging tasks of ethical responsibility, freedom of choice, thoughtful action, living a meaningful life, and being with others. Compared to a particular person’s conscience, the call of conscience that comes with human being never rests.

This call defines an epideictic display of existence in its most original form: a “showing forth” (epi-deixis) or “saying” (logos) of the truth of something that is and that can be represented symbolically for others to understand. The call of conscience is existence disclosing itself to the
one who is living it and who can and must respond to its challenge (Hyde, 2001, pp. 108–115). Here, at this ontological level of existence, the logos of the call, its discourse, is not understood first and foremost as a capacity of communication but rather as the original and silent manifestation of what is. “The call dispenses with any kind of utterance,” writes Heidegger (1927/1962). “It does not put itself into words at all; … [c]onscience discourses solely and constantly in the mode of keeping silent” (p. 318).

Heidegger speaks to us of a discourse, a silent “voice,” that is more original than anything he or anyone else has to say about it and that defines the “being of language” (Logos) in its most primordial state: the original presenting and “saying” of all that lies before us.

The essential being of language is Saying as Showing. Its showing character is not based on signs of any kind; rather, all signs arise from a showing within whose realm and for whose purposes they can be signs….

Even when Showing is accomplished by our human saying, even then this showing, this pointer, is preceded by an indication that it will let itself be shown. (Heidegger, 1959/1971, p. 123)

Elsewhere Heidegger (1987/2001) provides a description of what he is doing in describing the saying/showing of the call of conscience when he notes: “To speak means to say, which means to show and to let [something] be seen. It means to communicate and, correspondingly, to listen, to submit oneself to a claim addressed to oneself and to comply and respond to it” (p. 215). The call of conscience (of our being and its otherness) is nonverbal communication in its purest, most original form. We are “voiced” before we learn to speak.

Regarding the genre of rhetoric (epideictic) most steeped in this primordial discourse, Quintilian (trans., 1921/1985) has said: “Indeed I am not sure that this is not the most important department of rhetoric in actual practice” (2.1.10). The above assessment of the call of conscience lends ontological support to this claim. Although epideictic rhetoric is typically associated with discourse that bestows praise or blame on the actions of others, its most original form takes place before any such assessment is made. Recall, the disclosing of our spatial and temporal existence defines the most primordial form of epideictic speech and “public address.” There is something fundamentally rhetorical about the call of conscience that happens at the heart of human being and that speaks to us of something other than our own making.

The call of conscience is an empirical phenomenon, although the otherness that it announces registers a “transcendence” of material reality that is known to send us metaphysical creatures toward spiritual realms in the hope that we may someday understand how and why it is that we are here on earth (Eco, 1993/1997). Cognitive scientists have shown that the brain has evolved to accommodate the impulse at work here, thereby explaining, at least for the time being, “why God won’t go away” (Gazzaniga, 2005; Hamer, 2004; Newberg, D’Aquili, & Rause, 2001). We are wired to be ethical and moral creatures.

The rhetoric of religion offers itself as a way of understanding the “true” origins of this evolutionary happening. “In the beginning was the Word”: Its proclamation informs the ontological structure of our existence, with its deconstructive–reconstructive dynamics, its challenge–response logic, its call of conscience. The ethos of human existence exhibits a self-questioning design that motivates us with its mystery to ponder the One who brought this design into being. God uses the spatial and temporal structure of existence to call attention to Itself. God interrupts our everyday routines, our habits of thinking and acting, with the call of conscience, with an ever-present happening that encourages us to question what, why, and how we are and “to know together” (con-scientia) with God and the rest of humankind as much of the truth as possible. This particular interruption serves a crucial rhetorical function: It calls for acknowledgment.
Hence, the memorable question–answer sequence found throughout the Old Testament: “Where art thou?” “Here I am!” (Hyde, 2006).

One of the most famous Christian enactments of the sequence is found in the influential rhetoric of St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, with its many suggestions about how the orator’s art can and must open others to the teachings of the Almighty. The word *confess* is from the Latin *confiteri*, meaning “to acknowledge.” Augustine (trans. 1992) acknowledges that “the language” of God that inspires the Scriptures is “rich in meaning,” allowing for a “diversity of true views.” He also confesses: “I would not be using the language of my confessions [appropriately] if I fail to confess to you that I do not know which of these views correspond ‘supremely’ to both ‘the light of truth and to the reader’s spiritual profit’ (XII.xxx.41).

Still, for Augustine, this truth exists. In moments of existential crisis and great emotion, he heard its call of conscience. This call was there all along—as soon as God initiated the “beginning” with a specific speech act, an “avowl”: “Let there be…” God is the Great Avower: the One who declares most assuredly, openly, bluntly, and without shame. Such an open declaration or avowal is also known as an instance of acknowledgment. By way of acknowledgment, God created the dwelling place—the cosmos; the earth—where all other acts of acknowledgment could happen. Without acknowledgment, God is a rather vacuous concept.

**EMOTION AND THE HAPPENING OF TRUTH**

Is the empirical and ontological phenomenon of the call of conscience, with its vivid affirmation of otherness, a product of God’s will? What is more “Other” than this most famous heavenly source of ethical and moral behavior? Science rightly cautions against accepting the all too “easy” suggestion raised by this question. As the physicist and cosmologist Paul Davies (1983) notes: “Our ignorance of the origin of life leaves plenty of scope for divine explanations, but that is purely a negative attitude, invoking ‘the God-of-the-gaps’ only to risk retreat at a later date in the face of scientific advance.”… Hence:

To invoke God as a blanket explanation of the unexplained is to invite eventual falsification, and make God the friend of ignorance. If God is to be found, it must surely be through what we discover about the world, not what we fail to discover. (Davies, 1983, pp. 70, 209)

A phenomenological assessment of the matter sides with this position. Empirically oriented assessments and descriptions of “the things themselves” should go as far as they possibly can in disclosing the truth of these things before we allow our metaphysical impulses for order and completeness to encourage a rush to judgment and a corresponding “leap of faith.”

Science and phenomenology share a specific ethic of inquiry: With the greatest diligence and for as long as possible, remain open to the materiality and dynamics of the data in question. This ethic abides by the *ethos* of human being: its openness to otherness, its call of conscience. The Nobel Prize winning physicist Richard Feynman (1998) has this ethic in mind when he emphasizes how in science “openness to possibility is an opportunity. Doubt and discussion are essential to progress” (pp. 49–50). Openness allows us to become what Feynman describes as “atoms with curiosity” that look at themselves, wonder why they wonder, and thereby help to promote the evolution of knowledge and moral consciousness (p. 39).

Although curiosity can have its drawbacks, it nevertheless demonstrates an ontological aspect of our existence. It is a way of taking an interest in, being attuned to, and showing concern for the world. Attunement is a “state of mind,” a moodful way of being with things, others, and oneself (e.g., “I am in a curious mood”). Everyday existence defines a realm of emotional ori-
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entations and attachments (moods) that are constantly attuning us to and helping to disclose the situations of which we are a part and that are forever unfolding before our eyes. This disclosing capacity of emotion is ontologically significant in that it calls attention to how the phenomenon serves a “truthful” purpose.

The validity of any truth claim (e.g., “It is raining.”) presupposes at least two specific acts of disclosure: (1) the presence of some subject matter disclosing itself to a witness, and (2) the ability of the witness to disclose in some symbolic manner this original disclosure. Truth thus shows itself as an event of disclosure, an act of revelation, of something “that is the case”—something that shows some aspect of itself in the openness of the light of day and thereby makes itself available for interpretation and understanding. Something making itself available “means” nothing, however, if it is not perceived, interpreted, and understood by a witness. This hermeneutic process of perceiving, interpreting, and understanding takes place only to the extent that the witness takes some interest in an original act of disclosure. Emotion thus becomes a crucial factor in the situation. Matters may be as simple as “1 + 1 = 2.” Or a bit more complicated: E = mc². Sometimes the truth of a given disclosure requires the artistic genius of a Vincent Van Gogh or Abraham Lincoln to show us what, for example, the meaning of a “wheat field” or a “civil war” truly is. But in every case some emotional involvement with the matters at hand is a prerequisite for coming to terms with the truth.

The cognitive determining of “clear reason” poses no exception here. Even when reason is couched in the most positivistic language (such that it can be “objective” in its registration of “facts”), its announcements will always be rooted in what emotion makes possible: an interpretation of some matter of interest, a concern for being. Hence, the so-called dispassionate claims of reason—as made by science, for example—can never escape the emotion that begets their existence. The scientist claims to be a “disinterested” observer. Disinterestedness, however, is a state of mind, a particular way of being attentive to the presence of some object or subject. As commented on for years by health communication researchers, it is this “cold” and “calculating” emotional orientation that too often deadens the heartfelt attention that patients are known to desire in their interpersonal communication with their physicians (Charon, 2006). When we are ill, it is nice to be in a dwelling place where people are willing to go out of their way to make us feel at home by seeing us as being more than some diseased body in some bed. Physicians are trained to understand and treat the pathophysiology of a patient’s disease. Acknowledging a patient’s personhood requires additional emotional and rhetorical effort.

THE LIFE-GIVING GIFT OF ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The phenomenon of acknowledgment was mentioned previously in conjunction with Augustine’s responding to what he considered to be the true and Holy source of the call of conscience. Such metaphysical speculation (God-of-the-gaps thinking), however, is not necessary in order to advance an empirical assessment of the phenomenon that relates it to ethics, rhetoric, and discourse.

Acknowledgment is a capacity of consciousness that enables us to be and remain open to the world of people, places, and things so that we can “admit” (Middle English: acknow) its wonders into our minds and then “admit” (Middle English: knowlechen) to others the understanding that we have gained and that we believe is worth sharing. This entire “admission” process is mandatory for establishing the truth of anything and the knowledge that comes with it. Recall that truth happens first and foremost as an act of disclosure, an epideictic display of something that shows itself to us and that, in turn, can be disclosed by us to others in some symbolic manner for the purpose of knowing together what is the case regarding some matter of concern. Acknowledgments initiate
and continue to sustain our being open to the status of some truth claim. “Knowledge,” insists Ludwig Wittgenstein (1969/1972), “is in the end based on acknowledgments” (p. 378). Emmanuel Levinas (1990) stresses the importance of the interpersonal function of the phenomenon when he argues that acknowledgment of otherness is a moral act that “accomplishes human society” as it promotes “the miracle of moving out of oneself,” of egoism becoming altruism (p. 9). It is this moral act that is consistently emphasized by communication scholars and philosophers whose research focuses on the role played by “dialogue” in fostering and sustaining the health of interpersonal relationships and the body politic in general (Anderson, Baxter, & Cissna, 2004).

Those who remain unacknowledged in everyday life are isolated, marginalized, ignored, and forgotten by others. They suffer the disease of “social death.” The suffering that can accompany this state of being is known to bring about fear, anxiety, sadness, anger, and sometimes even death in the form of suicide or retaliation against those who are rightly or wrongly accused of making our lives so lonely, miserable, and unbearable. Social death is present, for example, whenever people are victimized by racism, ageism, and gender inequality; mocked for their sexual orientation; denied equal rights, freedom of speech, and educational opportunities because of their physical and mental disabilities; forced to live in abject poverty; refused decent medical care; or otherwise left to live a hellish existence that defaces the human spirit (Hyde, 2006, 2010).

Acknowledgment provides an opening out of such distressful situations, for the act of acknowledging is a way of attuning consciousness toward others in order to make room for them in our lives. With this added living space comes the opportunity for a new beginning, a second chance, whereby we might improve our lot in life and feel more at home with others. There is hope to be found with this transformation of space and time as people work to construct dwelling places that make us feel wanted and needed. Offering positive acknowledgment is a moral thing to do. I know of no theory of communication ethics worth the name that does not acknowledge and encourage the doing of this act.

Notice that my remarks about acknowledgment do not contain the word recognition. People oftentimes speak of these two phenomena as if they were synonymous. For the purpose of the present discussion, however, their difference must be kept in mind. As Calvin Schrag (2002) reminds us, “The blurring of the grammar of acknowledgment with the grammar of recognition is one of the more glaring misdirections of modern epistemology” (pp. 117–118). The definition of “recognition” found in the Oxford English Dictionary reads: “The action or fact of perceiving that some thing, person, etc., is the same as one previously known; the mental process of identifying what has been known before; the fact of being thus known or identified.” The phenomenon of acknowledgment, however, entails more than the mental process of identifying what has been known before.

For example, it is often quite easy to recognize that one of the eight graduate students taking my seminar in “Communication Ethics” is for whatever reason during class showing some signs of distress about the seminar or about something else that is going on in their lives. Acknowledging this student’s situation at the appropriate time and place initiates a transformation of the situation. The ethos of acknowledgment establishes an environment where the student and I can take the time to know together the reasons for the distress, perhaps gain a more authentic understanding of the matter, and feel more at home with each other as we deal with it. Recognition is only a preliminary step in this process of attuning one’s consciousness toward another and his or her expression of a particular concern in order to facilitate the development of such existential knowledge and personal understanding. Acknowledgment makes possible the moral development of recognition by enabling us to remain open to what is other than ourselves, even if, at times, matters become boring or troublesome.

The process should not be taken for granted. What would your life be like if no one acknowled-
edged your existence? How would you feel if you found out that some assumed benefactor was actually deceiving you with his or her initial show of acknowledgment (at best, you were only being recognized; the person did not really care about your welfare)? Research in deception tells us that in such situations the “bedrock of civilized society”—that is, “trust”—is weakened, if not totally destroyed. Trust, “is accomplished in no small measure through principles of mutuality, cooperativeness, and truthfulness in discourse” (Burgoon, 2005, p. 5). These principles, however, presuppose the workings of acknowledgment, which, as they open us to others, begin the process of our learning to establish trustful relationships with them. This same process, of course, is also one that makes us vulnerable as it opens us to the deceptive practices of others. Acknowledgment entails risk (Hyde, 2006).

Rhetorical discourse and acknowledgment go hand in hand. Rhetoric is at work whenever language is being employed to open people to ideas, positions, and circumstances that, if rightly understood, stand a reasonable chance of getting people to think and act wisely. Orators are forever attempting to create these openings, for this is how they maximize the chance that the members of some audience will take an interest in what is being said. Neither persuasion nor collaborative deliberation can take place without the formation of this joint emotional interest. “We interest a man by dealing with his interests,” writes Kenneth Burke (1954, p. 37). Acknowledgment happens as such dealing transpires. The “good” speaker is always seeking acknowledgment from some audience whose “good” members are also waiting for the speaker to acknowledge their interests in some meaningful way. Rhetorical competence has a significant role to play in providing dwelling places (openings) where a life-giving gift can be received.

Training in rhetorical competence, or what Cicero termed the “art of eloquence” (oratio) in developing his social, political, and moral theory of civic republicanism, instructs one on how to equip (ornare) knowledge of a subject in such a way that it can assume a publicly accessible form and function effectively in the social and political arena. Rhetorical competence displays the human capacity to be inventive, to arrange materials in an appropriate, orderly, and beautiful way, to favor the good and the just, and, of course, to speak “the truth” of what is. For Cicero, such symbolic activity admits the potential of being “heroic.” Robert Hariman (1995) makes much of this point when he notes that “The republican politician achieves greatest glory as the heroic individual seizing the moment by voicing immortal words at the height of great events (p. 121). Ralph Waldo Emerson’s way of stating the point in his discussion of “eloquence” is also noteworthy. “Certainly there is no true orator who is not a hero…. The orator must ever stand with forward foot, in the attitude of advancing…. His speech is not to be distinguished from action. It is action, as the general’s word of command or shout of battle is action” (cited in Whicher, 1957, p. 306).

This claim calls into question a well-known maxim of our culture—“Actions speak louder than words”—that is famous for its “put-down” of the practice of rhetoric. And the metaphor that informs the eloquence of Emerson’s claim lends it further force for, indeed, heroes and war are readily related. When speaking of the true orator’s heroism, however, Emerson’s understanding of “war” emphasizes what he terms “a military attitude of the soul” that is not directed toward the actual killing of others. Instead, this attitude is needed by the orator who would “dare the gibbet and the mob,” the rage and retribution of a misinformed and closed-minded public, when attempting to move its members beyond the blinders of their “common sense” beliefs and toward a genuine understanding of what, for the orator, is arguably the truth of some immediate matter of concern. For Emerson (2000/1836), the heroism of the true orator is made possible not only by one’s “power to connect his thought with its proper symbol, and so to utter it,” but also, and primarily, by one’s “love of truth and…[the] desire to communicate it without loss” (pp. 15, 228).

Eloquence is born of such power, love, and desire. Kenneth Burke (1968) puts it succinctly:
“The primary purpose of eloquence is not to enable us to live our lives on paper—it is to convert life into its most thorough verbal equivalent” in order to better understand, appreciate, and deal with the reality of which we are a part (p. 167). The true orator, the rhetor as hero, is a person committed to this task of eloquence, of constructing dwelling places where the well-being of humankind is respected and advanced. Hence, Cicero’s (trans. 1942) praise for the art: For

what function is so kingly, so worthy of the free, so generous, as to bring help to the suppliant, to raise up those who are cast down, to bestow security, to set free from peril, to maintain men in their civil rights?… The wise control of the complete orator is that which chiefly upholds not only his own dignity, but the safety of countless individuals and of the entire State.” (1.8.32)

Cicero’s words certainly speak to the importance of the relationship between acknowledgment and rhetoric. In his phenomenological study of the functions of speech and its corresponding theory of communication ethics, Georges Gusdorf (1953/1965) expands on and further clarifies the matter by associating the rhetorical artistry needed to acknowledge the truth, others, and to cultivate civic virtue with what he terms “the ceaseless heroism necessary in pursuing the struggle for style”—a struggle where “Concern for the right expression is bound up with the concern for true reality: accuracy (justesse) and integrity (justice) are two related virtues” (pp. 74–75). The phenomenon of rhetorical style discloses itself in discourse dedicated to opening people to the truth of some matter of concern as well as to each others’ judgments about the matter. Working together, these openings define a dwelling place, an ethos, where people can “know-together” (con-scientia) and, at least to some extent, experience the life-giving gift of acknowledgment.

These related goals of open-mindedness, conscience-formation, and civility lie at the heart of Jurgen Habermas’s (1981/1984) highly influential theory of “communicative action” and “discourse ethics.” Here he speaks to us of “the pragmatic presuppositions,” “the substantive normative rules” or “validity conditions” of argumentation that promote “the ideal community of communication”—a community that thrives on the capacity for acknowledgment and thus the open-mindedness of its participants toward each other and toward discovering the truth of some matter of concern. These conditions include: choosing a comprehensible expression, intending to communicate a true proposition, expressing intentions truthfully, and choosing an appropriate expression with respect to the rhetorical situation at hand. Anyone who sincerely participates in argumentation, according to Habermas (1983/1990), “has already accepted these substantive normative conditions—there is no alternative to them. Simply by choosing to engage in argumentation, participants are forced to acknowledge this fact” (p. 130). Indeed, we are not the creators of these conditions and the open-mindedness that they call for. Rather, these conditions come with the very nature of human existence, with our “given” (es gibt) way of being homo loquens—creatures distinguished by our unique and related abilities to acknowledge others and to communicate with them about all that can be understood in our everyday lives. Habermas would thus have us acknowledge that “morality as grounded by discourse ethics is based on a pattern inherent in mutual understanding in language from the beginning” (p. 163).

Habermas grants us a way to “ground” the life-giving gift of acknowledgment in the “rational” workings of language-use, especially as they show themselves in interpersonal contexts where argumentation is necessary for adjudicating some contested matter. I have suggested throughout this essay that this grounding actually goes deeper than Habermas is willing to dig. He is not interested in developing a phenomenological and ontological understanding of the relationship between the ethos of human being, its call of conscience, and our capacity for acknowledgment. Rather, he is content to disclose the validity conditions of communicative action that are “already built into” this action and that thereby assume a “transcendental” status (pp. 99–100).
With these conditions in mind, Habermas (1983/1990) makes a crucial distinction between his theory and what he terms “the model of strategic action”:

If the actors are interested solely in the success, i.e., the consequences or outcomes of their actions, they will try to reach their objectives by influencing their opponent’s definition of the situation, and thus his decisions or motives, through external means by using weapons or goods, threats or enticements. Such actors treat each other strategically. In such cases, coordination of the subject’s actions depends on the extent to which their egocentric utility calculations mesh. The degree of cooperation and the stability is determined by the interest positions of the participants. By contrast, I speak of communicative action when actors are prepared to harmonize their plans of action through internal means, committing themselves to pursuing their goals only on the condition of an agreement…about definitions of the situation and prospective outcomes. (pp. 133–134)

Clearly, Habermas’s conception of strategic communication harkens back to what Plato condemned in his critique of rhetoric. The importance of this critique and all that it warns against should never be taken for granted and forgotten. But the actual workings of rhetorical discourse are a far more complicated matter than what Plato had to say about them. Habermas avoids the issue. He thus ends up marginalizing a major empirical concern of the rhetorical critic and discourse analyst: how discourse is specifically invented and arranged with style, eloquence, and other forms of communicative and rhetorical know-how in order to be expressed in an appropriate, truthful, and effective manner. By way of this heroic process of acknowledgment, we create the dwelling places or openings where collaborative deliberation, conscience-formation, and civility become possible. Acknowledgment is a life-giving gift.

OTHERNESS: A MORAL VOCATION

The giving of this gift defines a moral vocation, one of learning to “let beings be” and, in turn, of trying to know together (by way of discussion, argument, and persuasion) the truth of all that stands before us. It is a vocation that requires ethical and rhetorical fitness. Jacques Derrida (1978) offers the following description of this vocation:

It conditions the respect for the other as what it is: other. Without this acknowledgment, which is not a knowledge, or let us say without this “letting-be” of an existent (Other) as something existing outside me in the essence of what it is (first in its alterity [or “otherness”]), no ethics would be possible…. To let the other be in its existence and essence as other means that what gains access to thought, or (and) what thought gains access to, is that which is essence and that which is existence; and that which is the Being which they both presuppose. Without this, no letting-be would be possible, and first of all, the letting be of respect and of the ethical commandment addressing itself to freedom. Violence would reign to such a degree that it would no longer even be able to appear and be named. (p. 138)

We are saved from an all-encompassing violence by our ability to attune our consciousness toward things and others so that they can be acknowledged and respected for what, who, and how they are. Derrida’s above description of this vocation echoes Heidegger’s assessment of the fundamental relationship that holds between Being and human being (Dasein): we are those beings who exist in such a way that we make a dwelling place for Being to show and call attention to itself. This showing and calling for thought and resolute action define the primordial “ethical commandment” upon which all moral systems are based. The commandment calls for a respecting
of the being of beings, for a letting-be of what gives and shows itself to and for thought and that thus is "other" than the consciousness that perceives it.

Derrida (1984) aligns his "deconstructive" way of doing criticism with the necessity of answering this call. He writes: "...deconstruction is, in itself, a positive response to an alterity which necessarily calls, summons or motivates it. Deconstruction is therefore vocation—a response to a call" (p. 118). Moreover, Derrida would have us understand that deconstruction offers itself to others as a way of helping them to realize that "every culture needs an element of self-interrogation and of distance from itself, if it is to transform itself" and thereby become something different, something other and perhaps "better" than what it presently is under the "official political codes of governing reality" (pp. 116, 120). Deconstruction, in other words, is especially attuned to that deconstructive dimension of the moral vocation of human being that shows forth in the temporal openness of this being's existence and that continually calls into question the truthfulness of whatever human beings create in order to make their lives meaningful. Deconstruction does something of what existence tells it to do: it is a critical activity; it "intervenes" in meaning systems in order to call attention to the potential pitfalls that accompany our strict adherence to these systems and that are too often taken for granted and forgotten when "all is well" with the system's functioning. This act of rhetorical intervention is done out of respect for the "otherness" of the other, which calls for acknowledgment. The cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard (1995/2008) would have us place no limits on the enactment of such respect: "All that seeks to be singular and incomparable, and does not enter into the play of difference, must be exterminated.... We must reconcile nothing. We must keep open the otherness of forms, the disparity between terms" (p. 123). The ethical challenge is immense.

CONCLUSION

We are back to the beginning: The otherness of the other is an ontological feature of human existence. It shows itself in the presence of other things, other people, the validity conditions of argumentation that are already built into communicative action, and the fundamental spatial and temporal dynamics of our very being. This last instance of otherness is known to call to mind "God's presence." Taken all together, the otherness that permeates human being is an awesome presence that is never without absence. The empirical relationship between ethics, rhetoric, and discourse originates in the presence of this absence, disclosing itself as a call of conscience that intervenes in and interrupts our everyday existence, stimulates emotions, and opens us to the objective uncertainty of our existence. Faced with the awesomeness of this uncertainty, we are called to think, act, and construct dwelling places where moral consciousness can be cultivated. It is a heroic thing for us to do: create those habitats or openings where collaborative deliberation, moral consciousness, and civility become possible and where a life-giving gift can be shared with others.

REFERENCES


