

Preface

The idea for this book came to mind while I was completing its predecessor, *The Call of Conscience: Heidegger and Levinas, Rhetoric and the Euthanasia Debate*.¹ There, in light of a critical assessment of Martin Heidegger's and Emmanuel Levinas's respective phenomenological investigations of the workings of conscience, I examined the relationship between this phenomenon and the practice of rhetoric. I then went on to analyze how the relationship shows itself in the ongoing debate in the United States over the justifiability and social acceptability of euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide. In this debate, no matter whether people are on the side of the "right to die" or the "right to life," the issue of acknowledgment is right in one's face.

The ontological assault of a life-threatening illness or accident disrupts a person's conditioned and typical ways of understanding and inhabiting the world. This disruption, in turn, incites anxiety over the question of the person's Being—his or her *ability to be*. In anxiety one stands face-to-face with the not-yet of the future, trying to decide about what is to become of his or her existence now that it is no longer what it used to be and perhaps may never be again. This is what makes the experience of anxiety so disquieting and so dreadful, and thus quite distinctive: More than any other emotion, anxiety reveals the ontological fact that one's ability to be is finite and thus fated to breakdown. With life comes death—the ultimate source of anxiety. Situations of life and death emit a "call of conscience"—a call that summons a person (qua patient) and his or her loved ones and caretakers to assume the ethical responsibility of affirming their freedom through resolute choice in order to reestablish a sense of meaning, order, and control in their lives. The patient's pain, suffering, and expressed desire to live or to die enhance the call's moral urgency: "Where art thou?" The euthanasia debate is informed by the rhetoric of those who come into conflict as they argue for the most "humane" way to attend to the patient's circumstances and requests, to say "Here I am!" to one who is in desperate need of help and whose wounded presence is likely to make others wonder anxiously about what life would be like if nobody cared enough to acknowledge their existence.

My involvement in and study of the euthanasia debate confirmed time and again the importance of what I will continue to term here the life-giving gift of acknowledgment. Being all alone when you are sick and dying is a terrible way to

live and a terrible way to go. Such is the case whether the patient's call of "Where art thou?" is intended as a plea for life or for death. Although it may sound strange to speak of the life-giving gift of acknowledgment when considering the second alternative, the rhetoric of the euthanasia debate, especially as it comes from the advocates of the right to die, emphasizes the existential legitimacy of the juxtaposition. Hence, the argument that helping one to die with dignity does not merely put an end to dignity; rather, it also may help both to demonstrate and to serve as a reminder of this virtue's essential worth. Being the ultimate sacrifice, dying with dignity can define a holy act (*sacer facere*, "to make holy")—one that not only allows a patient a last chance for taking some control over the final chapter of his or her life-story before it is too late, but also one that pays homage to the "good life" of others and their need for stories that, as much as possible, have a good ending. Self-respecting human beings who hold a loving concern for others have an interest in the kind of memories that will survive after death. When they call out "Where art thou?" and request release, we owe it to them to say "Here I am!" It is a matter of mercy, not murder; a matter that calls for the life-giving gift of acknowledgment as a way of being for others who want to be remembered for the way they lived and died with dignity rather than for the way they ended up suffering in a prolonged and abject state of "living death." Human beings have a desire to *live on* in the *fond* memories of others.

Although I am not one who favors the legalization of euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide, at least at the present time, I am taken with the above argument. For the various ways the argument is made known in the rhetoric of the euthanasia debate attests to the *ontological significance* of acknowledgment. I write about this phenomenon here not only because there is more to say about it than I have said in the past, but also because in talking about it with students, colleagues, family, other close friends, and members of academic and non-academic audiences, I became convinced that, despite the crucial role acknowledgment plays in our lives, it remains a topic that is all too easily taken for granted, forgotten, and even forsaken until the lack of it in our lives threatens our well-being—and then it sometimes is too late to fix all (or any) of the hurt.

We need acknowledgment as much as we need such other easily taken for granted things as air, blood, and a beating heart. Without the life-giving gift of acknowledgment, we are destined to exist in ways that are marked by the loneliness of what I describe as "social death." One senses the presence of this state of being, for example, in the lives of college students who "don't fit in with the crowd" or who are suffering from a disturbance brought on by breaking up with their girlfriend or boyfriend. "Where art thou?" Not hearing a familiar "Here I am!" can sometimes even lead a young person to admit that he or she "feels like dying." Like their teachers who publish so as not to *perish* and who then worry incessantly over who, if anyone, is even reading their work, students are an especially vulnerable

population when it comes to dealing with the hurt of being unacknowledged by their peers (*and*, to be sure, their teachers).

The life-giving gift of acknowledgment reveals itself in the midst of everyday existential disturbances that, even if they are less powerful and anxiety provoking than a serious illness or accident, are still “death-like” in how they bring something in our lives to at least a momentary end and thereby call into question our well-being. As creatures whose evolutionary progress remains at the point where death and its approximations give rise to the dreaded emotion of anxiety, it is not “unnatural” for us to want to avoid thinking about the ontological significance and workings of acknowledgment. The euthanasia debate provides a constant reminder of how such “uncourageous” behavior can prove to be disastrous at a moment’s notice.

What I have to say here about the scope and function of acknowledgment is intended to extend both the depth and breadth of the observations that I made about the phenomenon when considering the role it plays in the rhetoric of the euthanasia debate. I thus will have more to say about the origins of acknowledgment; how it operates as a form of consciousness that transforms time and space into dwelling places where people can feel at home; how this transformation is facilitated by the rhetorical competence of human beings; how an appropriate use of such competence happens as an acknowledging caress; how the refusal to engage in this caress contributes to the disease of social death; how postmodern culture, with its computer revolution, offers itself as a *pharmakon* in the treatment of this specific ailment; and how the rhetorical accomplishment of acknowledgment, especially in times of crisis, speaks of the importance of humankind’s ability to have a way with words dedicated to showing-forth the truth of matters of importance. When all is said and done, the reader will have been told a story about the life-giving capacity of the workings of acknowledgment. There is “hope” to be found in this story—the very thing that such noteworthy intellectuals as George Steiner, in his *Grammars of Creation*, maintains has been made “problematic” by sociopolitical, scientific, and philosophical developments happening throughout the twentieth century.² More will be said about Steiner’s position in chapter 1.

Both Heidegger and Levinas once again provide philosophical direction for the narrative. Rhetorical theory, religion, and science continue to be sources of inspiration. I also occasionally draw insights from the literatures of architectural design and evolutionary psychology. The various case studies that are presented to illustrate in a concrete way all the theory going on here are drawn from non-fictional and fictional literature, poetry, film, history, politics, the world of computer technology, and the hellish happenings of terrorism. With these case studies I also will be offering rhetorical artifacts that both display and speak to the importance of the specific type of competence that facilitates the giving and receiving of the gift of acknowledgment.

I realize, of course, that with such a wide range of sources of inspiration and case studies I risk telling a story that is unwieldy. This risk, however, is worth it. Acknowledgment warrants respect as a robust phenomenon that brings life to people and their social and political relationships. This way of thinking about acknowledgment aligns the phenomenon with such key terms in communication and rhetorical theory as “affirmation” and “validation.” Gregory Bateson’s general theory of communication, for example, which culminated in the double-bind theory of schizophrenia, in effect describes what happens when a child repeatedly is not affirmed, validated, or acknowledged.³ Another highly influential orientation towards acknowledgment employed by communication and rhetorical scholars is found in Martin Buber’s theory of “confirmation”:

The basis of a man’s life with man is twofold, and it is one—the wish of every man to be confirmed as what he is, even as what he can become, by men; and the innate capacity in man to confirm his fellow men in this way. That this capacity lies so immeasurably fallow constitutes the real weakness and questionableness of the human race: actual humanity exists only where this capacity unfolds. On the other hand, of course, an empty claim for confirmation, without devotion for being and becoming, again and again mars the truth of the life between man and man.⁴

Psychological researchers R. D. Laing, Paul Watzlawick, and Evelyn Sieburg bring together the work of Bateson and Buber in their respective examinations of the various nuances of the human need for confirmation. For example, some people, given their particular “psychological makeup” and family situations, need validation more than others; some actions can be affirmed on one level while being simultaneously disconfirmed on another; some people are more, some less, sensitive to not being acknowledged.⁵ Buber’s theory is especially prominent in the writings of communication theorists Kenneth Cissna, Rob Anderson, and Ronald Arnett, who all emphasize how confirmation informs and is informed by our everyday “dialogical” interactions.⁶

With their various research projects, all of these authors help to address the problem referred to above by Buber regarding how the capacity for confirmation “lies so immeasurably fallow.” I agree with this observation; I am thus supportive of the theory and research offered by these authors. I believe, however, that more can be specified about the fundamental workings of acknowledgment than what one finds in these authors’ writings. The capacity of “confirmation” or “affirmation” or “validation” retains something of a “fallow” character as long as its essential (ontological) nature remains under-theorized and thus unclarified. An ontological assessment of the life-giving gift of acknowledgment is thus warranted.⁷ Such an assessment emphasizes how acknowledgment is something that should

never be taken for granted, forgotten, or forsaken for too long of a time. To make such a mistake is to put others and ourselves in uncomfortable, if not dangerous, situations. Granted, the lesson is at least as old as the biblical story of Adam and Eve and their anxious response to One who, with a simple question (“Where art thou?”), demanded acknowledgment. I believe, however, that we are still in need of learning how to improve our ability to offer a genuine response for the sake of others as well as ourselves. Evolution continues and so must the ethics and rhetoric that help guide its moral direction.

Based on reactions I have received from academic and nonacademic audiences who have heard some of what can be read here, I suspect that there will be certain observations about acknowledgment that strike readers as being “obvious.” I certainly hope that this is the case, especially given my claim about the ontological significance of the phenomenon. The reader who comes away from this book “dazzled” by all that it has to offer will have to admit that he or she is *really* lacking in an understanding of something that is essential to the good health of humanity. I would find such a person to be a bit “scary.” The smiles, chuckles, and nervous laughter that I have perceived coming from audiences who have heard me admit as much is reassuring. Is there anyone out there who has *no* appreciation for the life-giving capacity of acknowledgment? Is there anyone out there who is certain that he or she knows *everything* there is to know about the phenomenon? I possess no such wisdom. Still, I hope that at least some of what I have to say about acknowledgment is enlightening—even to those who take great pride in knowing themselves to be the kind of people who are *always* there to say “Here I am!” when they hear a call for help.