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 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.

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 medicament 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.” 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. 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.

A history of the Western rhetorical tradition is documented throughout the many entries composing *The Encyclopedia of Rhetoric* (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 Ethics” and “Rhetorical Theory and Communication” (National Communication Association) and “Philosophy of Communication” (International Communication Association).

Communication scholars interested in “discourse analysis” also speak to the importance of rhetoric’s relationship with ethics in their investigations of “language in use” and “the interactive production of meaning” in “conversational encounters.” Scott
Jacobs’s recent 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.”

Discourse analysts make much of how language is actually employed in structuring specific interpersonal communication transactions (e.g., the physician/patient relationship). 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. Discourse analysts distinguish their research agenda from those of rhetorical scholars by attending to how, for example, “turn taking” in conversations affect their evolving meaning and establish power relationships between the involved parties.

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.

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