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Ontological Inquiry: The Absent Heart of the University
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Abstract: After defining and outlining the three movements of ontological inquiry, the author makes the case that ontological inquiry is rhetorical education at its best, concluding that making such inquiry central to the mission of the university may contribute to responding effectively to the complex of crises that academia and the world currently faces.

What is Ontological Inquiry?

In the 1955 Looney Tunes animated short entitled “One Froggy Evening,” a construction worker dismantles an old, dilapidated structure to make way for a new one and discovers Michigan J. Frog erupting into a song and dance number. The construction worker then seizes the opportunity to capitalize on his discovery, except that he cannot get anyone to provide third-person verification of this anomaly which, if it did have objective existence, would be a true marvel to behold—no one saw, nor could they see and know anything but a mere frog! Needless to say, after numerous and increasingly disastrous failures to enact his agenda to exploit this discovery, the construction worker resigns himself to hiding the frog away in a nook of the new building going up on the old site, only to be discovered in the next century by another dismantler, who then seeks to gain his own advantage through putting to use this singing, dancing, marvelous frog.

I offer this narrative as an analogy to the reception of the practice of ontological inquiry within a modernist worldview, which has rarely, if ever, permitted such inquiry to walk about freely within and between the fora of the university. Rather, it has been kept at the margins of higher education, in part, because of the threat it poses—its tendency to question and disrupt whatever is taken for granted; its seductive call to look for the first time at what the world is and who we are in it; its uselessness in increasing one’s advantage in all the areas of concern for us moderns, whether economic, social, and political arenas. But what is it and why would anyone undergo such inquiry?

I suggest the following definition to begin to open up the realm this inquiry hails from: inquiry that is ontological enacts three movements. It discloses the limits of being human, evokes new possibilities for being and acting, and in sharing these possibilities with others in the world reiterates the inquiry. The first movement discloses what it means to be a human being—the ways of being and acting as given by the worldview we have inherited from our culture, traditions, disciplines—and in the process of this disclosure, those engaged in the inquiry begin to discover the limits imposed by those ways of being in the world in a very real, day in, day out sense. This first movement requires receptiveness to critical discoveries of our limits and what structures these limits. One such limit that gets disclosed in this movement is what is called “Cartesian subjectivity” in the light granted by “ontological subjectivity” (see below).

With the discovery and appropriation of our limits, the next, second movement becomes available: through the process of the inquiry itself a new possibility of being for human beings—beyond the options enframed within our inherited (and thus inauthentic) worldview(s)—gets revealed. That is, through appropriating one’s inherited and generic ways of being and acting in
the world, new ways of being and acting inside a created possibility become available—informed by, but also unconstrained by, our inherited worldview, its cultures, traditions, disciplines. In this second movement, history is made in some way within the inquirer’s world, that is, the world as it occurs (shows up for the inquirer, here and now) does so in the light of the invented possibility and a new range of ways of being and acting become available.

The third movement that follows from the invention of a new possibility of being is the complex rhetorical activity of sharing the discovery of ontological subjectivity, which invites others to enter the inquiry and undergo its movements. A fundamental premise here is that any such possibility, if it is to impact our social and historical being in the world, must be brought to language and communicated to those actual audiences crucial for any given possibility to exist beyond the moment of its having been invented. This rhetorical process serves to alter those inherited cultures, traditions, and disciplines in ways that break open new social spaces for people to be and act within, freely, indeed, making history in the process. This third movement of ontological inquiry provides higher education with an avenue, a curricular roadmap, to articulate and enact the value of rhetorical education for our era as the art of making history. Indeed, I would venture a little further to claim that ontological inquiry is rhetorical education at its transformational best by virtue of the impact its practice has on who we are, from the personal and local to the civic and global. The practice of ontological inquiry challenges us to constitute who we are in the world by altering the very discourse that gives us our being and shapes our actions in the world.¹

Ontological inquiry begins and ends and begins again with a phenomenological approach to what is aptly called first-person experience, wherein epistemological concerns are valuable, but secondary to discovering for oneself in the “here and now” what it means to “be.” However, academic inquiry is ruled by the dominant Enlightenment paradigm of knowledge production, namely, epistemological objectivity, which requires anything—if it is to count as knowledge—to submit to third-person verification. From such a point of view, any ontologically subjective experience cannot have epistemologically objective existence: I simply cannot show you my ontologically subjective experience within an epistemologically objective framework. However, with the discovery of one’s own ontological subjective reality, the curtain of epistemological objectivity is “peeled back,” so to speak, putting into question the drive to acquire, use, and impart knowledge within and according to our inherited modernist worldview. Enframed within this worldview, each of us are given by what it means to be Cartesian, named after Rene Descartes, the father of modern philosophy, who distinguished the modern liberal subject as the “I” or “me” rooted in maintaining certainty—being “right”—in the face of all doubt, for the doubter cannot doubt that he is doubting.

¹ Each of these three movements serves a metonymic role within a complex and ever shifting network of the three dominant worldviews at play in our historical and contemporary social life: the traditional, the modern, and the post-modern (McIntosh 2020). Briefly put, consider that the highest value for the traditional worldview is to maintain alignment with the source of existence; for the modern, to break out into and fulfill wholly new possibilities; and for the post-modern, to reveal the impact on the marginalized, administer care for all (including the planet), and enact justice on those views that continue to do harm. All three movements comprise an integral whole, and thus, when one dominates, the others serve as correctives within a larger rhetorical dialectic. The “history-making practices” of Spinoza, Flores, and Dreyfus (1997)—articulation, cross-appropriation, and reconfiguration—provide another powerful avenue to distinguish what is at work in these three movements of ontological inquiry. This is the subject of a future project that builds from my previous work (Kopp 2011, 2012).
Indeed, epistemological objectivity presupposes a correlative self-certain *Cartesian subjectivity* essential to conducting inductive inquiries that provide sufficient reasons and explanations for any phenomena that show up within the paradigmatic light of a given field of study, or any area, from the precise and discipline specific to the generic and everyday. And it is always “right” about its conclusions drawn from certain premises, especially premises grounded in what is already known to be certain: its own indubitable existence. Ontological inquiry, in contrast, serves the critical function of revealing the source of any interpretation of human being (for instance, human being as contained within Cartesian subjectivity and epistemological objectivity) as lacking any ultimate foundation or reason. The being of human beings is rhetorical and historical, that is, human beings are always and already in a meaningful narrative wherein the future (whether inherited or invented) exists for us in language that shapes the way the world occurs for us, moment by moment, and in which occurring world our ways of being and acting are correlated in the present. However, in the everyday, tranquilized, and obvious way we go about life and living, we remain unaware of this rhetorical nature of historicity that conditions our current ways of being and acting. If pressed, we good Cartesians might acknowledge those obvious scientific, social, cultural, educational, religious, and psychological sources for how we wound up being and acting the way we do, but beyond a certain horizon determined by the forms of our knowing, the perspective endemic to the everyday has little or no access except after the fact.

Challenging this interpretation forgotten as an interpretation requires a rigorous and performative language game that puts into question the modernist understanding of language as transparent, as merely descriptive. In ontological inquiry, language *acts*, it *performs*. Language is turned back on itself such that what it means to “be” gets presenced, and participants in the dialogue discover for themselves their own direct access to being as a lived experience. This performative and reflexive use of language is constituted within an interlocking body of language acts that participates profoundly in what is called “rhetorical education,” which, I argue, is available to anyone who undergoes the inquiry with integrity.

Indeed, rhetorical/ontological education is already available and practiced, here and there, sometimes intentionally, but more often unintentionally, within the institutions of higher education and the marketplace. In such moments of undergoing rhetorical/ontological education, new realms of possibility and new futures are created, futures written and spoken and shared that may contribute to our inherited narratives and traditions or even break with them. The optimal result from engaging in ontological inquiry is an unprecedented freedom to be in the world given by who we have created ourselves to be. As a form of rhetorical education, ontological inquiry challenges us to constitute who we are in the world by altering the very discourse that gives us our being and shapes our actions in the world, putting at risk our inherited traditions and disciplines in ways that break open new social spaces for people to be and act within, indeed, making history in the process.

**Cartesian Subjectivity and its Ontological Limit**

From a modernist perspective, ontological inquiry poses a seemingly irresolvable contradiction: anyone who lacks the self-verified evidence ontological inquiry makes available will be hard-pressed to take up such claims as valid prior to any verification. Consequently, not only are so-called subjective experiences marginalized, so too are the rhetorical and educational practices that cultivate such experiences. At the same time, through the effective exercise of rhetoric it
becomes possible to communicate what I have discovered in my own lived experience in such a way that my addressee has the opportunity to discover it for herself. For any such addressee, to take this risk requires falling prey to rhetorical seduction: to relinquish, if but for a moment, the perspective protectively enshrined in Cartesian subjectivity and epistemological objectivity.²

As a way of being and acting dominant in Western cultures, Cartesian subjectivity grounds epistemological objectivity as the privileged set of practices that determine what counts as true and valuable. These practices serve to reiterate a certain understanding of the self, the world, and tools used to cope with events that occur in the world “outside.” Expressed phenomenologically and without employing the term, Alan Watts distinguished Cartesian subjectivity as the everyday “sensation that “I myself” [am] a separate center of feeling and action, living inside and bounded by the physical body—a center which ‘confronts’ an ‘external’ world of people and things, making contact through the senses with a universe both alien and strange,” and in the process of distinguishing this everyday sense of self, Watts outlined its essential limit (The Book 8). This separate center of feeling and action operates over and against the indeterminate world of events and relationships that cannot be contained definitively in any item of knowledge, though this fact, that life as a presence cannot be reduced to what we know and say about it, has not stopped those beholden to the drive to be right—the relentless and singular movement at the heart of Cartesian subjectivity—from the attempt. Any and all attempts to fix the unfixable world become the positions we hold—or more accurately, the positions that hold us in a state of forgetfulness that we are not the positions we hold.

What is the central dynamic that establishes and maintains any such position? The boundaries of Cartesian subjectivity are kept in place by what Richard J. Bernstein, in Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, calls “Cartesian anxiety,” an anxiety borne of “Descartes’ demand that we should not rely on unfounded opinions, prejudices, tradition, or external authority, but only upon the authority of reason itself,” the sense of self-certainty that derives from the facticity of our own consciousness of self. Furthermore,

the problems, metaphors, and questions that he bequeathed to us have been at the very center of philosophy since Descartes—problems concerning the foundations of knowledge and the sciences, mind–body dualism, our knowledge of the “external” world, how the mind “represents” this world, the nature of consciousness, thinking, and will, whether physical reality is to be understood as a grand mechanism, and how this is compatible with human freedom. (17)

² The ultimate aim of the Enlightenment project has been the eradication of superstition, and Descartes’ cogito (“I think, therefore I am”) provides the most certain premise from which all investigations could proceed without fear, for if an indubitable subject observed the world, his judgments concerning the world would surely be valid. However, the problem of the modern cogito, according to Foucault in The Order of Things, lies not merely within its claim to certainty as a conscious method for inquiry and knowledge acquisition, but more so with the degree to which this certainty relies on the cogito’s domination of what he calls the “unthought,” that which remains just beyond the boundary of certainty. “The modern cogito,” asserts Foucault, “must traverse, duplicate, and reactivate in an explicit form the articulation of thought on everything within it, around it, and beneath it which is not thought, yet which is nevertheless not foreign to thought” (324). The cogito always and already articulates with certainty its method of knowing the world within any given situation, even the most unfamiliar. However, whatever is foreign to thought forever remains so. Thus, inherent to Cartesian subjectivity is the seemingly unassailable view that human beings are necessarily capable of comprehending that which is already valid; anything unthought that is valid in any way ought to be immediately understandable, and anything that does not lend itself to understandability is a candidate for easy dismissal.
I extend Bernstein’s assertion, arguing that these “problems, metaphors, and questions” are not contained within some refined philosophic domain, but are operative at the level of everyday being-in-the-world, and even find expression in the practice of ontological inquiry as constituting the “who” that is questioned. Ontological inquiry necessarily addresses Cartesian subjectivity and in such a way that intentionally triggers Cartesian anxiety: by exposing the drive to “be right” about what we already know as a means to ensure our “looking good,” ontological inquiry calls into question the identity that being right and looking good posits, an identity that reiterates with each repetition of practices that lead to the survival of that identity. Thinker and entrepreneur Werner Erhard, whose work provides a paradigm in ontological inquiry, characterizes in an American idiom (circa 1976) the dynamic of Cartesian subjectivity and the correlative anxiety that keeps it in place. Here, Erhard’s use of the word “inhuman” points at what I am defining as Cartesian subjectivity:

“An enormous amount of what makes us inhuman,” Erhard says, “comes out of our fear of being conned. Until you know that you can’t be conned your life is run by the fear of being conned…. In judo any motion that stops becomes a position. The instant your opponent takes a position he is vulnerable … The man who has no position is invulnerable … The same is true in the [est] training [an instance of ontological inquiry practiced between 1972-1984]. In order to reveal people to themselves, you need them to take a position … And essentially the position that you can almost predict people are going to have is, ‘YOU'RE NOT PULLING ANY WOOL OVER MY EYES! NO! NO! YOU’RE NOT GOING TO GET ME!’ We call that the unwillingness to get off it. Everybody takes that position. That’s why the training works with everybody eventually.” Erhard laughs gleefully. “The thing to do is to make that position so blatantly obvious to people that they begin to see that it is that very position that makes them comical.” (Litwak, “Pay Attention Turkeys!”)

That very position is precisely what Cartesian subjectivity maintains in the face of the radical indeterminacy ontological inquiry brings with its performance, a performance that necessarily employs rhetoric to address a Cartesian subjectivity that arises to defend its protected position against being put into question.

From the grandest epistemic constructions that explicate the phenomena of the physical universe and thereby ground the institutional and social systems that reinforce Cartesian subjectivity, to the simplest everyday ways of being with others in the world, Cartesian anxiety arises in response to an unresolvable antithesis. To overcome its paralyzing effects, nothing short of a complete transformation is necessary, which can only come with relinquishing one’s hard set position, precipitated by what Erhard calls the act of “getting off it,” that is, the ontological experience of relinquishing the drive to be right about whatever our point of view is at any given moment. Jeffrey Bineham asserts that the antithesis at work in Cartesian anxiety is grounded in the assumption that only two options are available for those who inquire into matters of knowledge and action: either some ultimate ground for knowledge and action exists, some objective and ahistorical foundation against which claims to know can be measured and the utility of actions ascertained, or we are beset by relativistic skepticism and are unable to speak of knowledge or “justified” action in any meaningful sense. We are enveloped, in the latter case, by a moral and
intellectual chaos that stems from an ever-expanding plurality of positions.
(Bineham “Cartesian Anxiety” 1990 44)

Building from Bernstein and Bineham, my contribution is to bring to language the inescapable coincidence of these opposites, and to offer a third way, the way of transformation that is made available through the performance of ontological inquiry. To define Cartesian anxiety more succinctly: a mood that arises when the most certain knowledge, a given “position” held by the Cartesian subject, namely, the “self,” is revealed—together with the world it inhabits—to be irreducibly indeterminate, and when in such a mood, Cartesian subjectivity is compelled to retreat to either one of the extreme poles of Cartesianism—to be rescued in the arms of absolute epistemological objective certainty or to succumb to despair in the inescapable darkness of subjective indeterminacy. Or it relinquishes its position, opening up to the ontological event called transformation. Such a transformation occurs where rhetorical and ontological being-in-the-world emerges in the wake of exposing Cartesian subjectivity as a superstitious fiction. Indeed, the self-certainty of Cartesian subjectivity is such only by virtue of that of which Cartesian anxiety is anxious that being-in-the-world is at its core, core-less, and anxious that all meaning and significance is rhetorically constructed within networks of conversations enacted by interpretive communities, and are forgotten as such. This forgetting then binds those inheriting these positions such that they no longer occur as positions: they occur as real as rocks are hard and water is wet.

My Rhetorical Education

I want to make it quite clear that ontological inquiry participates in a wider phenomenological and rhetorical tradition, which has been employed variously throughout human history, under many titles. For instance, what Aldous Huxley has called the “perennial philosophy” points to this phenomenological approach exercised across history and culture that brings the investigator—when provided expert assistance—to directly experience the ontologically subjective domain of experience in such a way that leaves any such investigator “transformed.”

In many cases, the need to communicate this transformation to others has been attempted through a variety of means: education, music, the plastic arts, poetry, literature, theater, narrative, philosophy, religion, etc., and from within a range of disciplines grouped together over many centuries, which may be loosely termed “rhetorical.” These extraordinary efforts to communicate ontological discoveries have provided the assistance essential to guiding initiates through a series of steps, that is, a rhetorical curriculum of ontological inquiry, which is meant to produce a kind of being who is able to perform powerfully in any given set of circumstances. That is, a way of being becomes available, a disposition emerges that does not merely contain a conceptual grasp of what ontological inquiry is after; rather, a kind of being emerges who is able to be and act, freely, with or without such a conceptual grasp.

Assistance for me came in 1992, a full ten years before I began my PhD program at the University of Arizona, where I studied Rhetoric, Composition, and the Teaching of English, 2002-2009. Nearing graduation with a B.A. in English Literature, 21 years old and mostly clueless concerning my next steps in life beyond graduation, I attended a weekend-long course in

3 Aldous Huxley’s book *The Perennial Philosophy* explores how a multitude of philosophical and religious traditions spanning history and geography have nonetheless sought a dimension of human experience that is common to all human beings, which dimension ontological inquiry promises to make available to the investigator.
February of 1992 called the Landmark Forum, which course brought me to experience a remarkable transformation. Together with around a hundred people in a hotel ballroom—over a Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and a concluding session the subsequent Tuesday evening—I entered a conversation led by someone trained in the skillful delivery of ontological inquiry. The result of entering this conversation, of maintaining myself within it over the three days and an evening it took to unfold, was nothing short of the opening up of a new world that had previously been entirely inaccessible to me. It was a world in which all the significances of social and economic and political institutions, of relationships, of interminable quests to be right and to look good before others in my life, all the significance taken for granted in my world—was exposed as constructed and was subsequently reduced to nothing. This was not some theoretical point of view about life in general, some conclusion I came to; no, I directly experienced nothing as an ontological context for “my” existence, and the astonishment, the wonder that struck in that moment is something over which I have never gotten. A new realm of possibility opened up along with an exhilarating freedom to be and to act in my life, within the very circumstances I still had before me—I suddenly had access to respond to these circumstances fearlessly, as who I had invented myself to be. I got then that I would not have traded that experience of transformation for anything. Nothing in my four years of undergraduate education came close to providing this sort of learning experience, though it should have. Rather, this one single weekend granted me access to invent a new future for myself, which future sharpened my performance as a student, and in such a way that the impression I left allowed two professors to recommend me for graduate study nearly a decade later.

One remarkable result from this extended encounter with ontological inquiry was my entrance into doctoral studies in 2002, ten years after completing my B.A. During the interim of my formal education, I worked and thrived in the world of film production, courted and married my wife, lived and traveled throughout the Peoples’ Republic of China, teaching conversational English along the way. While in China I discovered my love for writing and the teaching of writing, which discovery compelled me to enter graduate school. Once I began my study of rhetoric and writing studies, indeed in my first semester, I realized I had already undergone a significant rhetorical education with Landmark’s “Curriculum for Living,” which had prepared me for this moment, and the rest of my academic career announced itself to me in a flash: my scholarly mission was to articulate the value of ontological inquiry within higher education, starting with the work of Werner Erhard as a paradigmatic example that could be studied and practiced and included within the mission of the university.

Many years later, in 2019, with the publication of Speaking Being: Werner Erhard, Martin Heidegger, and a New Possibility of Being Human (co-authored with Bruce Hyde†), I had at last accomplished what I began in 2002 as a new PhD candidate writing rhetorical analyses of the Introduction to the Landmark Forum, writings that intrigued my peers and professors in my first graduate courses. In 2003 I discovered Bruce Hyde’s dissertation, “Saying the Clearing: A Heideggerian Analysis of the Ontological Rhetoric of Werner Erhard” (1990), which revealed to me that my trajectory was not only possible, but quite feasible once bolstered by Hyde’s acceptance to serve as an external advisor on my dissertation committee. My dissertation explored the possibility of articulating ontological paideia (using the paradigmatic example of Erhard’s work) as central to general education, specifically the teaching of first-year composition (“Ontological Paideia: Articulating the Value of Rhetorical Education in

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4 After completing work on Speaking Being, Dr. Bruce Hyde died October 13th, 2015.
Composition Pedagogy” 2009); as much as First Year Writing is central, indeed, a universal requirement, so too, I argued, should be ontological inquiry. Two of the chapters of my dissertation were revised and published while I was in a tenure track position at Rowan University’s Writing Arts department: the book chapter “The Risk of Rhetorical Inquiry: Practical Conditions for a Disruptive Pedagogy” (2011), and the article “Cutting the Edge of the Will to Truth; or How Post-Process Pedagogy is Biting its Own Tail” (2012). In “The Risk of Rhetorical Inquiry” I provide a theoretical outline for a practice of rhetorical inquiry in the university writing classroom, and present three conditions that permit this inquiry. The first condition is to amplify the performative and constitutive dimension of language to challenge Cartesian subjectivity, whose self-certainty is enframed within a relationship to language as transparent to the world it describes, triggering Cartesian anxiety. Second, students and teachers undergo dialogic encounters between incongruous perspectives, reconfiguring (transforming) their current perspectives. Third, these performative and dialogic encounters must reiterate with increasing complexity and within increasingly unfamiliar and complex contexts that expand out beyond the classroom. In “Cutting the Edge of the Will to Truth,” I distinguish a common value historically operative within both process and post-process composition pedagogies, namely, the pedagogic commitment to cultivate rhetorically intelligent subjectivities, that is, subjectivities willing to risk participating in the making of history (as Spinoza et al distinguish this) in various social domains, including the personal, professional, academic, and civic. Central to the argument is distinguishing the “will to truth” as a dominant drive that relentlessly seeks to reduce the irreducible into transmissible content. I argue that the performative dimension of language games may serve to include the will to truth in order to move beyond it, while at the same time avoiding the trap of falling into interminable critiques of power that preclude active participation in historical development.

But the real work of bringing forth and studying the work of Werner Erhard as a paradigmatic example would come with the book Speaking Being, where Bruce Hyde and I present a transcript of an entire course led by Werner Erhard in 1989 juxtaposed with an inquiry into the thought of Martin Heidegger and his own ontological approach. Our argument is that

5 Whenever citing Heidegger’s work, regardless of the era of his career it comes from, it is necessary to address his involvement with the National Socialist movement (circa 1933), the documented efforts of Heidegger and his executors to downplay and even excuse evidence of such involvement in his published writings, anti-semitic statements made in his recently published Black Notebooks, and ultimately, his lack of any substantive response to the horrors of the Holocaust. I turn the reader to Michael E. Zimmerman’s Afterword to Speaking Being: Werner Erhard, Martin Heidegger, and a New Possibility of Being Human, as well as his book Heidegger’s Confrontation with Modernity. While the latter, larger work provides an exhaustive historical and philosophical context for Heidegger’s involvement with National Socialism, Zimmerman’s Afterword to Speaking Being brings to light the inevitable risk ontological inquiry poses, wherein anyone taking a stand may stray from the possibility opened up from ontological inquiry. This argues for the third movement of ontological inquiry—sharing the discoveries of ontological inquiry with others, and being impacted by and with critical involvement with others—which requires the continuous development of a wide range of rhetorical powers (e.g., listening, speaking, leading, managing) when communicating with all relevant parties necessary for the fulfillment of a given project that emerges from the first two movements (disclosing our historicity and inventing a new possibility). Ultimately, ontological inquiry is not a respecter of persons (nor of cultural, social, religious, and political movements and institutions emerging within a given worldview); however, that has not kept persons impacted by ontological inquiry from taking such impacts personally, with—more often than not—disastrous results. The exigence brought on by this inescapable risk calls for a fully developed rhetorical curriculum within the university to provide mentorship as students discover for themselves their own access to ontological subjective reality and to then support them as they enact in their lives what matters most to them.
Erhard’s practice of ontological inquiry is a “technology of transformation” cut from the cloth of the technological way of being that currently enfames our being in the world. The instruments of techne are not making us more and more technological; rather, the technological way of being that we always already are provides the clearing in which technology shows up as inextricably linked to our being modern humans. The rhetorical maneuver, the techne par excellence—speaking in such a way that what cannot be said (namely, “being”) gets said—is at its root, self-reflexive and utterly contradictory. Erhard’s “technology” transforms the investigator as the investigator puts the technology to use: a technology that permits inquiry into the technological “modern” way of being that is at the heart of being a human being, discloses its limits, and at the same time occasions a release. Such a release is not away from being technological, but rather more fully towards being free to be technological. However, the interminable problem I continue to struggle with, that Speaking Being only begins to work out, is that any description of ontological inquiry is necessarily inadequate unless part of a rhetorical structure that allows the addressee to discover it for herself.

Speaking Being provides a historical corpus of a distinctive pedagogy, a living paradigm of ontological inquiry now available for academic investigation. Moreover, this journal, Turning Toward Being: The Journal of Ontological Inquiry in Education, continues to expand this conversational, interdisciplinary space within academia, while also providing those who have encountered ontological inquiry in any of its current forms a whole new perspective on the transformation they experienced in events like that transcribed in Speaking Being. Along with several other contributors to the journal, I claim ontological inquiry to be essential to the mission of the university, and as I strive to share the marvel of ontological inquiry within the epistemological framework—as my discipline of rhetoric and writing studies also strives—I am hard-pressed to apologize: “you see, you have to discover the frog for yourself through dismantling the epistemological foundations that have constrained you your whole life long.” And so, rather than trying to yet again get another to glance out from the ensconced window of the Cartesian stronghold, to see and then perhaps to hear this utterly strange song, I write somewhat unapologetically. While I engage in a discursive presentation that appears at times to employ the “serious” conventions of academic discourse, I aim to “come from” the world of ontological inquiry and rhetoric in such a way that calls upon readers to discover it for themselves.

The Serious and the Rhetorical

In the normal course of events within the disciplines of higher education, discoveries are made and shared, but the quality of those discoveries are largely to do with knowledge and knowing, and the contributions that ensue with this dissemination of knowledge are impactful to the degree they support and forward the functioning of the current paradigm of social, economic, and political activity. Who and what we are is largely absent as a question worth asking, let alone a question at all. Because it derives from and has thrived within this epistemological paradigm, higher education subordinates all inquiry to a paradigm born of and maintained by Enlightenment values and practices, such that, as our social, economic, and political activity has shifted in ways that threaten to render higher education either inadequate or simply redundant, a university education has diminished in value even while the institutions of higher education have rushed urgently to meet the demand for relevancy.
Richard Lanham in his book *The Motives of Eloquence* provides a lens that impacts and expands this conversation. Lanham presents a narrative account of some of the practices operative in ancient rhetorical education, a series of steps—*paideia*—a curriculum for living that focused on the practical use of words to impact specific audiences within those situations that matter most in private and civic life, that is, rather than focusing on the ideas and things language represents, rhetorical education focuses on words and sentences and their relationships and the worlds and correlative ways of being and acting that emerge thereby. Education given by the representative and transparent view of language Lanham terms *serious*, and the certain (Cartesian) subject and obdurate world that subject inhabits is the prime content of a serious epistemology, one that requires a pedagogy divorced from rhetorical and ontological concerns. The serious approach embodies the value system that has placed the natural sciences at the forefront of the university mission, followed by the social sciences employing a shadow of their betters’ methodology. As a consequence, the Humanities have been relegated to a position that will, admittedly, permit them to assist the mission of the university, but diminished, pushed to the margins, glimmering in a long twilight. Reading this situation with Lanham’s categories, rhetorical education has only become further attenuated through placing itself within the terms of the *serious*, that is, the project of rhetorical education has been knee-capped from the constraints imposed by the epistemological approach. As a result, rhetorical education serves as a mere accessory to the mission of the university: important, but essential only insofar as students advance within their specialized disciplines and graduate prepared for professional employment. The consequences of pushing rhetoric to the margins of the university have been disastrous, and the field of rhetoric and writing studies—among several sister fields within the Humanities and Social Sciences—has emerged inside the mission to provide a corrective, to restore rhetoric to the heart of the university mission, with mixed results.

The historical moment of marginalization occurred within North American higher education during the 19th century, when several key figures actively carried over institutional practices from the German university into North American educational institutions still operating with a long and rich tradition of rhetorical education that prepared an elite class of men for civic engagement that promised to support the young democratic republic. With the cross-appropriation of these practices that focused on specialization endemic to a given discipline of study—designed to better train entering members in the methods that would more adequately disclose objects that were the focus of a particular field—the tradition of rhetorical education fell into neglect and desuetude, and ultimately was relegated to remedial general education courses in writing and public speaking. Devoid of the expansive rhetorical focus of prior centuries, this specialization model became the ideal and the everyday reality for higher education, from the most elite institutions, to their imitators, to the grade schools who accepted the task of preparing the unwashed to become worthy candidates to enter the new order. And so, the *serious* won out over the *rhetorical*. Despite suffering this relegation into a remedial role, rhetoric would continue its activities, if not in the shadows and margins of the university, then perhaps within the marketplace beyond.

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6 In his “Rhetoric in the American College Curriculum: the Decline of Public Discourse,” Michael S. Halloran places the blame concerning the loss of rhetorical education in the university at the hands of those policy makers who received degrees at German universities in the 19th century, who sought to instill “new ideals of specialized scholarship and learning for its own sake rather than for the public use to which the rhetorical tradition would direct it” (260).
The emergence of the academic field of rhetoric and composition circa 1970 (now rhetoric and writing studies), is due in large part to those tasked with teaching first-year composition who noticed, examined, and then brought out into pedagogical practice the marginalized role of rhetoric within the institution of higher education and its project of general education. The formation of what became known as the “process movement” resulted: a reaction to the so-called “current-traditional” pedagogy—a corollary to Lanham’s “serious” educational practices—which since the late nineteenth century focused on inculcating skills meant to effect acceptable writing products. Needless to say, this current-traditional pedagogy overlooked and minimized processes of the rhetorical canons of invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery, processes that cannot easily be codified in advance and taught formulaically. For instance, a student can learn all the conventions of writing and telling a good joke, and reproduce them on a test, but that knowledge does not translate to being funny in the perspective of a given audience. Proponents of the process movement in composition studies noted this anomaly and then experimented with reconfiguring the canon of rhetorical invention as the primary object of study and practice in composition pedagogy. As a consequence, the process movement seemed to provide a body of material that could help establish rhetoric and composition as a field; it allowed for the study of a set of phenomena that could then be taught to others.

Beginning as early as 1980, critiques of the process movement emerged to distinguish something particularly disharmonious: that despite their best efforts to avoid doing so, the process movement had continued to enact the Enlightenment project and its epistemological approach (endemic throughout higher education). Together with the Cartesian compulsion to distrust anything open to doubt in favor of the certainty of the knowing subject, the Enlightenment focus on entities and the production of finished products allowed for the absorption of process pedagogy into the larger institutional fold. Post-process critiques noted that codifying the process so as to better teach it was in effect allowing the transformative pedagogic practices of the process movement to diminish in the wake of getting into line within the disciplinary hierarchy, where the serious reigns, and the rhetorical serves in the shadows.

However, in its exhortations to remain suspicious of totalizing theory, post-process critiques have simultaneously fallen back into a Cartesian orbit. At the extreme end, due to the relentless drive to put theory to use in pedagogical application, post-process unwittingly reiterated and extended the Enlightenment project to the extent that such critique remains entirely suspicious of any institutional structure, relying instead on its endless quest to deconstruct hegemonic structures. It is in this sense that post-process succumbs to the Cartesian quest to undermine any effort to articulate a foundation built upon belief and superstition. I recognize here the central antithesis that posits Cartesian subjectivity and the correlative anxiety in the face of this antithesis between either a foundational ground or an infinite multiplicity of perspectives, none of which is the one.

I propose to navigate between the Scylla and Charybdis of this antithesis, and to make way for the university to be a site where the performance of ontological inquiry, and not merely the study of effecting transformation in academic, civic, and private worlds, is a core activity. Ontological inquiry asks after being—who and what am I? What are the structures that limit and constrain what is possible for being a human being? What is possible beyond the ways of being and acting I have inherited? Here, the investigator is called upon to perform possibilities generated in language that in turn evoke an experience of being, with the promise, if shared, to make history within actual relationships, communities, institutions, and society at large.
A notion I must clarify at this point is the performative nature of the steps necessary to perform ontological inquiry. By performative, I not only mean the commonplace sense of a rhetor engaging in various acts of literacy within “real” situations with “real” audiences, but I also include the more specialized sense, introduced by Austin (1962), wherein a speech act performs precisely through the speech act itself: it does what it says (e.g., “I declare…”). Within the pedagogical method of ontological inquiry, this performative dimension brings the investigator to reach toward and act within rhetorical domains that would allow participants access to inventing possibilities for being in private, civic, and academic arenas beyond the customary. Simply put, the pedagogue performs a series of requests that call for responses in the form of promises to perform in such a way that fulfills the request, despite lacking a certain prescription. But these are not everyday requests; they are requests that call for responses only possible to perform from a decidedly uncommon point of view, a point of view called into being through performing what Martin Heidegger calls hermeneutical phenomenology, a kind of rhetoric that “communicates in the unspoken realm of language to provide its listeners with access to the realm of Being” (Hyde and Kopp 35). Furthermore, such ontological rhetoric shapes “the way the circumstances of life occur so that a new way of being with those circumstances arises naturally” (44). One such instance of this form of ontological education is present within a pedagogy that emerged in the North American marketplace right around the same time the field of rhetoric and composition began to emerge: the work of Werner Erhard.

The est Training (1971-1984), The Forum (1985-1991), The Landmark Forum (1991-present, which I described above), and more recently, the Being a Leader and the Effective Exercise of Leadership Course (2004-the present)—all are expressions of the work of Werner Erhard, and each provide practicable models of rhetorical education where ontological inquiry is the aim. Emerging along with what has been called the human potential movement (not to mention the emergence of the process movement in composition pedagogy in the early 1970s), Erhard sought to answer the call from college educated and working classes to continue their education, but not the traditional specialized education that served instrumental and specialized purposes within the horizon of epistemological objectivity; activated by the promise of the human potential movement, certain segments of the North American public sought in the est Training an education that was more somatic, pragmatic, and performative. However, Erhard’s pedagogy is novel in its approach to this quintessential American value to improve oneself as a means to gain advantage in life. And so, rather than leaving people “more, better, or different” than they were, Erhard’s distinctive pedagogy left participants empowered to be with their current circumstances, free to perform speech acts that transformed their social spaces, transforming themselves and others in the process. Given the “serious” climate provided by the current hegemonic educational practices rooted in the Enlightenment project, Erhard’s education attracted suspicion from several fronts in North American public discourse, reactions reminiscent of Plato’s concerning his wily sophistic competitors.

Then, late in 1980, when Erhard met and began working with Fernando Flores, who introduced Erhard to several academic philosophers such as Hubert Dreyfus and Michael E. Zimmerman, something remarkable happened. Working closely with Flores and others, Erhard revised the est Training, cross-appropriating components of Heidegger’s existential analytic of everyday Dasein into a North American idiom in order to create and launch The Forum at the beginning of 1985. Operating within the basic practical structure of the est Training, The Forum was at first a two-weekend course that promised for its participants nothing short of “transformation: the genesis of a new realm of possibility,” though only through the performance
of various rhetorical acts within a participant’s everyday life, including bringing authenticity to one’s inauthenticities, being cause in the matter of the inherited significances in life, from the personal to the social, and perhaps most importantly: the endless practice of honoring one’s self as one’s word through which new contexts for the living of life were invented, lived, and shared.

What is historical here is the retrieval of what we have lost and/or what has been dispersed in the wasteland of our digitalized, virtual lives, where our psyche is split into fragments, where we are cut off from possibility by having misidentified ourselves as our feelings, our opinions, as a particular historical fragment destined to fulfill its function within a machine for the sake of capital and to be used up in the process, or cast aside if not fit for the role. Across the decades of its widespread activity, Erhard’s work has served to disrupt the “tranquilized obviousness” of everyday being in the world, whatever form it has taken, from the “let it all hang out” ethos of the 70s, to the apotheosis of the workplace into the early 2000s, and the hegemony of the digital revolution we have inherited in our post-capital, post-pandemic world where uncertainty has been unmasked as the ground of our being with all former bulwarks shattered into fragments scattered across an empty consumerist wasteland that grows with malevolence as the Earth’s climate lurches ever closer to catastrophe.

The Ontological Difference: Mistaking Being for Beings

Erhard’s ontological rhetoric brings its interlocutors to encounter what Heidegger called the ontological difference, and to assist the discovery of this difference in my reader, I begin with a somewhat simplified history of the Western philosophical tradition as following a path that diverged from the rhetorical and ontological and into the serious and epistemological, what might be termed traditional ontological, an early form of materialism. Following in the wake of Plato and Aristotle and their interpreters, traditional ontology involves the study of beings, of entities of various kinds, including the wide range of natural elements, physical properties, geometrical figures and arithmetic formulae, abstract concepts, animals, and of course, human beings. Using the basic categories of quality (something either is or it is not), quantity (all, some, or none), and modality (from actuality to possibility), the traditional ontological investigator primarily sought to delimit the morphology and etiology of a given being—seeking to reach a definitive end, the final word on the exact description of a given being’s form and the most correct justification for its existence in a particular place and time. The fundamental controlling value of this approach promises that the more comprehensive the investigator is in describing those aspects proper to a given entity, the closer the investigator comes to knowing the thing itself. The ultimate end, of course, is mastery of the physical and even spiritual universe, especially given the traditional ontological project to know and delimit the godhead, its qualities and modalities.

Cartesianism and its epistemological aim to ground all investigations on the certainty of the subject’s existence (“I doubt, that is, I think, therefore I am”) ultimately replaced traditional ontology as the focus of philosophical investigation. Instead of beginning with the object, the what, the investigator began with how the subject can come to know any object at all. With Immanuel Kant’s first critique (The Critique of Pure Reason 1781), Western metaphysics reached its ultimate boundary situation: our ways of knowing were revealed to be the ineluctable intermediary between the investigator and the thing (being) in itself. Kant demonstrated that “reason” was incapable of applying traditional ontological categories to the thing in itself.
because these categories derived entirely from the knowing subject’s epistemological stance, which is finite and therefore cannot be transcended to come to know the thing in itself.

By the early 20th Century, ontology had nearly disappeared from a philosophical scene whose members had already more or less embraced a positivistic and analytical domain within which to continue inquiries guided by the Enlightenment project to expose and ultimately remove all superstition from interfering with and hindering scientific progress. One exception was Martin Heidegger, who sought to reintroduce a new inquiry into the being of beings through undercutting the foundational split between subject and object that the Enlightenment project inherited from the thinking of Plato, Aristotle, and Descartes. In order to do so, Heidegger worked to rethink the tradition of Western metaphysics, reaching far back and behind the thinking of Aristotle and Plato to the pre-Socratics: he sought to articulate a lost but valuable path toward an ontology radically different from that which Cartesian rationality operates within, a phenomenological ontology that would elucidate our being-in-the-world, rather than merely provide accurate formal descriptions and causal explanations for beings as beings.

With a phenomenological focus (following the slogan of his mentor, Edmund Husserl: “to the things themselves”) in *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger developed this new approach termed the *existential analytic*. This approach requires the use of categories that greatly diverged from those of traditional ontology. Branding these categories *existentiales*, Heidegger understood them as revealing and thematizing (bringing to language) the first-person phenomenon of being a human being. He used these existentiales to guide this *different* ontological inquiry into being as-lived, as be-ing rather than as product, not as *a* being among beings, nor as a reified essence. Instead of beginning with mere entities (the object) or with epistemology (the subject who knows wherever and whenever there is knowledge), he began with both (and thereby eluded both), namely, *there-being*, a literal translation of the commonplace German expression for everyday existence: *Dasein*, the thrown-open clearing in which beings ex-sist and stand-out in a meaningful world, thrown within the horizon of self-interpreted existence. Beginning with everyday existence at the level of practice, the investigator discovers the customary ways of being and acting in the world with others and with equipment, and from there the existential analytic seeks to unfold a fundamental ontology: the meaning of human being-there in the world, which meaning (or ground) Heidegger terms *care* (*Sorge*), which itself is rooted in *time*, the ultimate horizon of *being*.

Thus the key aspect to the existential analytic involves acknowledging the finitude of human being revealed in the ontological difference, which everyday being-in-the-world is largely unaware of because of the relentless Cartesian tendency to seek out answers that provide familiar avenues for dealing with problems. We can know beings, but being itself—who we are—cannot be known. In a pithy illustration that captures the elusiveness of this difference, Heidegger complained that as long as we remain within an epistemological focus, we cannot see the forest for the trees, the principle of which he states as follows, with emphasis:

*ordinary understanding cannot see the world for beings*, the world in which it must constantly maintain itself simply to be able to be what it itself is, to be able...
to pick out this or that being in each case as such in the sense of a possible object of assertion. (Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics 347)

The ontological difference involves an opening up to the question of being as distinct from beings, which is the difference between episteme and phronesis, between representation and what cannot be represented with certainty and yet grants being and action in the world. As such, ontological inquiry is not at all defined by the traditional aim to master epistemic knowledge of entities; rather, it is a methodology that transforms the practitioner at the level of being, of who we are at a practical level, in the world. Furthermore, as Sloterdijk noted, this difference “cannot be learned according to discursive rules and can hardly be anchored in academic situations. By nature, it belongs to the realm of attunements rather than to that of statements, and hence is transmitted not so much by instruction as by retuning” (“The Domestication of Being” 89).

Consequently, undergoing the process of this existential analytic, “retuning,” includes a shift in subjectivity: beginning as a Cartesian subject searching to master the unknown by bridging it back to the certain and familiar, subjectivity transforms through owning up to Cartesian boundaries and inherited customary practices. I contend that such a transformed subjectivity engages more freely with others in a world that is rhetorical and ontological rather than epistemologically certain. Following the series of performative steps the inquiry requires of the investigator is all that is necessary to undergo this transformation. This series of steps—what I call ontological paideia—is inherently rhetorical, since it begins and ends and begins again with everyday existence, with being in the world with others. Articulating Heidegger’s existential analytic in this way casts ontological inquiry as an effective, performative pedagogy that discloses the world as a rhetorically constructed occurring (and not “fixed”) world.

The catch involved with the performance of ontological inquiry is that one may become and so be one’s own authentic being only with others and in-the-world, that is, in and through language in actual, lived (hence historical and rhetorical) situations. Rhetorical performance of history-making practices only becomes possible through actual performances with others, which performances work to transform both one’s being-here (Dasein), and the world (i.e., with others). While Cartesian subjectivity acquires certain epistemic knowledge from a safe distance, rhetorical subjectivity acts pragmatically with receptivity to actual situations, and places a low premium on certain answers applicable across numerous cases. Indeed, as the acting out of a designed possibility—with receptivity to the actual situation—transformation is impossible.

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8 For Aristotle phronesis is an intellectual virtue, a disposition (hexis) that “divines” the mean, the place in the middle between excess and deficiency, where no certain rubric is available to guide judgment (that is, where things could be otherwise), and such divination then guides praxis or action (Nicomachean Ethics Book 6). I offer a slightly revised definition: phronesis is that agency in being human (in-the-world) that is both receptive to the particularities—the differences—within a situation and creative in bringing any given rhetorical topic (for instance, “similarity” and/or “difference,” or what Spinosa, Flores, and Dreyfus call the history-making practices of articulation, reconfiguration, and cross-appropriation) into relation to those very particularities to meet the exigence of the immediate situation. When the facticities of the situation and the topical and figural possibilities for performance are brought into relationship, transformation of both the audience and rhetor occurs, that is, a shift, a transformation in subjectivity results, from epistemological objectivity to ontological subjectivity.

9 With this disclosure, avenues for the performance of history-making practices become possible. History-making practices call for a way of being in the world beyond the customary, according to Spinosa, Flores, and Dreyfus, (1997), whose argument builds from Heidegger’s existential analytic. Please see Kopp (2013) for an exploration of the history-making practices presented by Spinosa, Flores, and Dreyfus.
without endless iterations of rhetorical performance appropriate to endlessly shifting relationships and situations.

**Conclusion**

By 1991, after Erhard sold his company to his employees, who then called their enterprise Landmark Education (now Landmark Worldwide), the two-weekend Forum became the three-day Landmark Forum, which is now part of a multi-part curriculum, which participates in a genre of rhetorical education I am calling an ontological _paideia_. The promise of this curriculum is that through participation in these courses, participants are left powerful and effective in every aspect of their lives while living a life they love. Likewise, the ontological/phenomenological method of the Being a Leader and the Effective Exercise of Leadership Course promises “to leave students actually being leaders and exercising leadership effectively as their natural self-expression” (Erhard, Jensen, Granger 246). This sort of educational promise is not new. The pre-Socratic philosopher Protagoras made similar promises for any given customer, namely, that his customer will develop “prudence [phronesis] in his own affairs, so that he may manage his own household in the best way, and prudence in the affairs of the city, so that he may be most effective in action and in speech in matters concerning the city” (Plato _Protagoras_ 319a as quoted in Sprague).

Such promises, Plato, through his proxy, Socrates, vigorously attacked as ungrounded in real knowledge, and even deemed outright dangerous. Paying someone to guide you by speech to abandon one way of life for another, without knowing in advance from whence comes the guide—that was Plato’s greatest fear of several of the most prominent sophists, including Protagoras and Gorgias. I call this response “platonic anxiety,” the predecessor and archetype for “Cartesian anxiety,” and its analogue occurs within the rhetorical revision any of Erhard’s courses hails its participants to make, in which identity transforms within a series of performative and dialogic moments of ontological inquiry, leaving others in that person’s life to marvel over the performance of these novel (to them) speech acts, including most spectacularly, the restoring of destroyed relationships through apologies, expressions of love, and the making of new promises, all performed with an unprecedented freedom to be and act beyond the commonplace concerns for looking good and being right about one’s point of view governed by a given worldview. It is remarkable to note that over the course of the past five decades, over three million people across the planet have undergone the experience of this expression of ontological _paideia_. With the university facing an unprecedented cluster of crises decades—centuries—in the making, exploring ways to bring ontological inquiry into the curriculum, I argue, could make the difference.

Certainly, regardless of what discipline each of us operates within, few can ignore what is unfolding right before us. In his prescient 2013 address to the Conference on College Composition and Communication, the flagship conference for rhetoric and writing studies in North America, Chris Anson highlighted a disharmony within higher education that has haunted the mission of the university for decades, with no easy answer ready at hand:

> students are paying for a transformative experience, and they’re getting a pedagogy that hasn’t changed in hundreds of years. ... If we keep doing the same old same old—the tired lectures, the boring assignments, the lack of attention to
students’ development—we have no right to print out the hefty invoice. And we will be outcompeted by all these new forms of learning. (336-7)

Indeed, and so with the emergence of forms of education that not only promise a transformative experience but actually deliver it, then higher education will inevitably lose the ground it so desperately has striven to maintain, even if it is already a small swath to begin with, unless it admits those new forms (that is, ontological forms) of education into the curriculum. The disharmony now has only been amplified during the years since Anson’s address: we are now staring into a veritable abyss exposed by a confluence of disruptive factors—including the global pandemic response, itself a harbinger of the emerging climate catastrophe, together with the introduction and commercial development of artificial intelligence and other technologies, not to mention the resurgence of fascism in our time—is forcing the centuries old pedagogy to dissolve before our eyes, willy nilly.

The luxury of avoidance has expired, and the task before us is ripe with exigence: to examine and expose the inauthenticity at the heart of the university mission. Who could gainsay that we are here to cultivate and bring forth the leaders who will be trusted to steer humanity itself through the greatest existential threats to our existence brought about by the endless expansion of capital—where life, liberty, justice, and sustainability are forsaken for immediate gain? And yet, all we are doing for the most part is equipping soldiers to fill the ranks of those used up in the machinery, making room for the next set of shark’s teeth. There’s a sharp contrast between what we say we are up to and what we are actually doing, and we have been ignorant of the gap and thereby ignorant of the cost of remaining so willfully ignorant.

We have an opportunity to not only own up to this vast self-deception, but to create a whole new context, a new mission for the university that would grant us—the entirety of academia—ways of being and acting in the present that promise to answer the call, to provide real transformative education that leaves our students—and ourselves—being leaders and exercising leadership effectively, not as a program to remember to apply when the situation finally appears to be ripe for action, but as our natural self-expression, and in the face of the set of circumstances currently before us, coming at us, point-blank.

Until we create and live from this new vision, a vision that totally reorients each of us, we will likely fail to honor the promise of the university, and up until the present moment, we have most certainly failed to keep this word. Indeed, despite all our efforts to educate the public, to bring forth leaders to cultivate the civic arena such that the matters of deepest concern are dealt with ably, the world is currently facing a complex of irresolvable problems that have resulted from the success of the Enlightenment project, but that we are currently incapable of resolving by virtue of the very limits posed by that very same project. The constellation of crises calls: the crises of climate change, racial injustice, poverty, hunger, public health, war, and totalitarian regimes, which are bent on maintaining power through taking advantage of the ubiquitous lack of the ability to recognize and respond appropriately to the findings of science without falling prey to political spin. There is no easy fix for all this. Nevertheless, we all know a new kind of leadership is called for here and now. But before we can even open up that conversation, we must own up to our unquestioned, unexamined ways of being and acting that serve insistently to reiterate this constellation of crises.

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