

Jennifer Falcon

Rhetorical History I

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Tracing Ethos from Isocrates to Cicero

Rhetoric defined as an art of persuasion carries with it a level of suspicion. It is the word persuasion that suggests there is an element of trickery, or underhandedness associated with rhetoric due to understanding, by its very definition, that its primary goal is to persuade. This weariness of rhetoric and those who practice it dates back to the earliest origins of rhetoric. The questioning of the role, and purpose of character in practicing rhetoric has an equally long history. In ancient rhetoric the purpose of character in practicing rhetoric is as important as it is criticized. Aristotle and Cicero present their understanding of ethos as a necessary part of successfully practicing rhetoric, or oratory. Before them the lack of expertise and questionable character/morals of practicing rhetors came under fire by Plato in his dialogue *Gorgias*. His contemporary Isocrates saw ethos as the good character of the speaker, something that was ultimately cultivated in all actions of the speaker prior to giving the speech. This paper will attempt to trace the term ethos and ideas associated with it through the works of Isocrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero. However, it should be noted that each work may not directly use the term ethos it is clear that they are addressing issues of character, trustworthiness, and credibility, which are heavily associated with our modern understanding of ethos.

In *Gorgias* Plato, through the speaker Socrates, gives forth a very unfavorable view of rhetoric, and any person that teaches and practices rhetoric. In the dialogue the speaker Socrates is very critical of the practice of rhetoric. One of his critiques of rhetoric is the lack of expertise needed to practice rhetoric. In 459c (p. 24) Socrates addresses this when he brings to

the attention of Gorgias that the rhetorician “never has to know the actual facts of any issue; instead he’s equipped himself with a persuasive ploy,” and it is that ploy which allows him to make members of the audience that are non-experts believe he knows more than **any experts**. This causes trouble for Socrates. He begins to liken this lack of expertise and knowledge needed to be persuasive as a reflection of the morality of the rhetorician. He views it as dangerous that a rhetorician “lacking expert knowledge of good or bad, morality or immorality, or right or wrong,” can “make non-experts think he’s more of an expert than an expert, even though he isn’t” (459d: p. 24). Without the knowledge or morality Plato, through Socrates, views the practicing rhetorician as untrustworthy. It is the skill of using rhetoric, and what he calls “persuasive ploys” that the rhetorician relies on to be successful in their persuasion as opposed to knowledge and truth. Plato in Gorgias does not use the term *ethos*, nor does he outright address character in the exchange in 459c, but he does bring up the general concerns of practicing rhetoric without good character, knowledge and trustworthiness, which are commonly understood as elements that make up a speaker’s *ethos*. One who practices rhetoric does not need to be an expert in a given subject. It is viewed as a skill, and not an art. This specific criticism sets up the relationship between a successful rhetor and *ethos*, which may be referred to as credibility, and/or trustworthiness. For Plato, the rhetor is not of the same level of trustworthiness because he does not need to be an expert. His speech is not made up of credible information.

His contemporary Isocrates does directly address the speaker’s character. In *Antidosis*, a speech interpreted as a defense, he speaks on the role and purpose of character. Isocrates practiced rhetoric, therefore his view of rhetoric is not a critical one. Rather, he uses *Antidosis* to expand on some of the abilities needed to be a successful in giving speeches. For Isocrates *ethos* is a source for and effect of practicing ethics. Men of good nature and character would receive

praise. This praise would give them power, and this power, according to Michael J. Hyde (2004) is what Isocrates “associates such powers with a person’s rhetorical competence” and that these powers are part of one’s “natural capacity to use language to deliberate skillfully and artfully with oneself and others about the importance of matters and about the goodness of actions (xv). Character, for Isocrates, comes from the actions of the speaker before the speech is given. The speaker’s actions and education help him to cultivate a good character. This good character, in addition to a natural speaking ability, and the study of rhetoric will lead to becoming successful in rhetoric. Therefore, when faced with the process of mounting a defense the speaker in Antidosis believes they can make a good case by relying on their character. It is the “character of my life and conduct” that would separate him from the judgment associated with other Sophists, and negativity towards rhetoric. Like philosophers who see no reason to defend themselves, Isocrates in Antidosis believes his good character is enough to justify his actions, because “the power to speak well,” which he possesses, is part of what makes up “the surest index of a sound understanding of discourse.” This understanding of discourse “is true and lawful and just” as is “the outward image of a good and faithful soul.” (Antidosis, 255). The power of the good character in addition to eloquence in speaking ability is the power that gives the practicing rhetor persuasive power.

Character, or ethos, comes about differently for the rhetorician in Aristotle’s work *On Rhetoric*. Aristotle is not as critical of rhetoric as Plato, however does not praise it in the same way that Isocrates did. For Aristotle rhetoric is defined as “an ability, in each case, to see the available means of persuasion” (1356a). Establishing ethos is one means used to successfully persuade an audience. Persuasion through character, for Aristotle, is the use of ethos in rhetoric. This persuasion can be accomplished through the person giving the speech. That is to say that

“the speech is spoken in such a way as to make the speaker worthy of credence” (1356a: p.38). Aristotle goes on to explain that an audience is more likely to believe “fair-minded people” quicker and easier “on all subjects in general and completely so in cases where there is not exact knowledge but room for doubt” (1356a: p.38). This is not established solely on the good character of the speaker, as Isocrates stated. Rather, for Aristotle the character of the speaker comes from the speech itself, and not any opinion or judgment of the speaker based on previous actions or perceptions. In this sense ethos comes from the speech and how the speaker delivers it to an audience. There are necessary ways in which to expand ethos by taking into account the audience that will hear the speech. For Aristotle, the most authoritative form of persuasion is the character established in the speech. It is the character that is “distinctive” and “most persuasive” and it is the “deliberate choice directed to an end” (1366a, p. 74). It is necessary that the speaker understand not only ethos, but also how to establish his ethos for each audience.

Up to this point rhetoric has been criticized in Plato for not being trustworthy, due to lack of expertise by the rhetorician. Isocrates and Aristotle understand the persuasive nature of rhetoric, and elements that help the rhetorician successfully persuade an audience. Each believe character, or ethos, as a necessary component, but differ in how the rhetorician can establish ethos. Isocrates, as previously stated that the good character of a man establishes him as trustworthy, which will aid his persuasiveness. Socrates presents ethos as a means to persuading that comes from the speech itself, and not any previous opinion of the speaker. Cicero’s ethos differs from both, but in his definition of both rhetoric and ethos one can see the ways in which it was built upon previous notions and ideas about ethos, or character, and it’s effectiveness in persuasion.

In *De Oratore* Cicero expresses his views on rhetoric. For Cicero an orator must know as much

as possible about all subjects, be of good character, and have natural abilities to give a speech. According to Cicero, “people’s minds are won over by a man’s prestige, his accomplishments, and the reputation he has acquired by his way of life.” (182, p. 171). This ethos comes from the actions of the speaker. These actions are not limited to his life outside of the speech, like Isocrates suggests, and nor are they limited to just the speech. Ethos according to Cicero is also established in how you deliver the speech. The orator is more effective when using a “gentle tone of voice,” and “kindliness in the use of his words” (182, p. 171). The manner in which the orator speaks, looks, and acts help him to establish his ethos. If the orator acts in such a way that employs “thoughts of a certain kind and words of a certain kind, and adopting besides a delivery that is gentle and shows signs of flexibility,” then he will “appear as decent, as good in character,” (184, p. 171) which make him a good man. David A. Bobbitt (1991) explains in “Cicero's Concept of Ethos and Some Implications for the Understanding of Roman Rhetoric” Cicero understood the ways in which “ethos infuses all aspects of the speaker's craft, including style, delivery and arrangement, and that it cannot clearly be delineated from emotional appeal (p. 6).” Through these actions the trustworthiness, and ethos of the speaker are established. Abbot (1991) continues to demonstrate that Cicero’s notion of ethos was deeper than Aristotle’s, and that Cicero “observed that ethos functions not only in the speech proper, but is also a result of the reputation and personality that the rhetor brings to the speaking situation (p. 6).” Cicero’s deeper understanding of ethos, its importance, and all of the ways ethos is formed continues to inform current approaches to studying, and comprehending ethos.

Through these works character, or ethos, is an important element of the speaker successfully persuading an audience. The character, or ethos, of the speaker is as important as the words used within the speech. The modern understanding of ethos is linked to credibility of the

author or speaker. This credibility can come from being an expert in the field written or spoken about, which harkens back to Plato's criticism that rhetoricians know the skills or tricks to persuade, but not the knowledge of the experts on any given subject. Over time ethos continued to develop to include the character of the speaker, which is not too dissimilar from credibility. There are actions, and deliberate decisions a speaker or writer can make to establish their ethos. The concerns of ethos in persuading, or informing, an audience have not greatly changed over time, but the language used may differ from author discussing ethos may differ. However, the concepts and understanding of the importance of ethos in studying, and practicing rhetoric remain remarkably similar. This is an important area of inquiry due to the fact that establishing ethos as a writer/speaker is important. Therefore, its history and evolution should be researched so as to create in more informed writers/speakers and audience members.

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