

Êthos and Persuasion in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*

Êthos is the Greek word for “character.” The general subject of *êthos* and considerations relating more specifically to the *persuasive use* of character reappear frequently throughout the *Rhetoric*. Not all of the passages in question appear to relate directly to the “artistic proof” through character announced in book 1, ch. 2. But it’s often hard to say. Here are some of the ways *êthos* figures in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*; there may be some overlap between the categories: Can you see where?

I. A speaker’s reputation – good or bad – prior to speaking

II. The artistic proof (*pistis entechnos*) through *êthos*

The creation in the speech of a sense of trustworthiness through statements that lead the auditors to infer that the speaker possesses practical wisdom (*phronêsis*), moral virtue (*aretê*), and goodwill (*eunoia*). (*Rhet.* 2.1)

“There is persuasion through character whenever the speech is spoken in such a way as to make the speaker worthy of credence (*axiopistis*); for we believe fair-minded (*epieikeia*) people to a greater extent and more quickly [than we do others] on all subjects in general and completely so in cases where there is not exact knowledge but room for doubt” (*Rhet.* 1.2.4)

Statements reflective of “deliberate choice” (*proairesis*) are especially effective in conveying sense of (credible) character.

(See also comments on the “ethical/characterful” (*ethikê*) quality of maxims at *Rhet.* 2.21.16)

This seems to be the idea most often referred to in shorthand fashion as “Ethos”

Chief passages: *Rhet.* 1.2 and 2.1 (see also 1.8, 1.9, 2.21, 3.16, 3.17)

III. Adaptation of a speaker’s character to that of the audience

Composing and delivering the speech in such a way as to lead the audience to think “This speaker is *like me*”. Aristotle suggests that people are more inclined to believe speakers who share their background, values, education, etc. For example, he writes:

“. . . we should be acquainted with the kinds of character distinctive of each form of constitution [monarchy, aristocracy, democracy, etc.]; for the character distinctive of each is necessarily most persuasive to each.” (1.8.6)

This consideration seems to be the reason for the inclusion of the “character sketches” in bk. 2, ch. 12-17. These chapters outline characteristics associated with various ages and fortunes (e.g., the young, old; the rich, well-born), generalities that might prove useful to a speaker preparing to address audiences of these sorts.

This area of Aristotle's theory might be compared to recent work in CMC & Internet studies which treat the subject of "community" or "group ethos"

Chief passages: *Rhet.* 2.12-17 (also 1.8, 3.7)

IV. Performing "true to character-type"

The basic idea is that each sort of person has a characteristic manner of speaking or writing, and that, to be persuasive, a speaker's language or style should "match" the type of person he appears to be. We expect different styles from people of different ages, sexes, fortunes, levels of education, place of origin, etc. These characteristics are for the most part *external* attributes, relatively easily observed and sized-up from even short interactions and minimal clues.

The idea of performance "true to type" comes forward especially in the chapters on style and on maxims. Aristotle notes, for example, that older speakers typically speak in maxims, but maxims don't befit a younger man (see 2.21), and that younger men (adolescents) (and angry men) are likely to employ hyperbole, but this device is inappropriate for older men (3.11.15)

The core piece of advice here is this: To be persuasive, do not say things that people of your type (sex, class, etc.) wouldn't normally say, or speak in a style that people of your type wouldn't use. Violation of this precept will result in a disconnect between speaker and speech; if the disconnect is sensed by the audience, the speaker's character will come under suspicion and, hence, his speech will be less persuasive.

Some recommended sources for further study of Aristotle and *Êthos*:

- Baumlin, James S., and Tita French Baumlin, eds. 1994. *Ethos: New Essays in Rhetorical and Critical Theory*. Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press.
[Essays in this collection are of varying quality]
- Bruss, Kristine, and Richard Graff. 2005. "Style, Character, and Persuasion in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*." *Advances in the History of Rhetoric* 8: 39-72. ****PDF Posted on course website****
- Cope, Edward M. 1867. *An Introduction to Aristotle's Rhetoric*. London: Macmillan.
- Fortenbaugh, W. W. 1992. "Aristotle on Persuasion through Character." *Rhetorica* 10: 207-244.
- . 1996. "Aristotle's Accounts of Persuasion through Character." In *Theory, Text, Context: Issues in Greek Rhetoric and Oratory*. Ed. C. L. Johnstone. Albany: SUNY Press. 147-168.
- Garver, Eugene. 1994. *Aristotle's Rhetoric: An Art of Character*. Chicago: U of Chicago Press.
[Especially the chapter titled, "Making Discourse Ethical"]
- Grimaldi, W. 1990. "The Auditor's Role in Aristotelian Rhetoric." In *Oral and Written Communication: Historical Approaches*. Ed. Richard Leo Enos. Newberry Park, CA: Sage.
****Included in course pack****
- Halloran, S. Michael. 1982. "Aristotle's Concept of Ethos, or If Not His Somebody Else's." *Rhetoric Review* 1: 58-63.
- Kraus, Manfred. "Ethos as a Technical Means of Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory."
****PDF Posted on course website****

- Sattler, William M. 1947. "Conceptions of *Ethos* in Ancient Rhetoric." *Speech Monographs* 14: 55-65.
- Wisse, Jakob. 1989. *Ethos and Pathos from Aristotle to Cicero*. Amsterdam: Hakkert.