Jennifer Falcon

Rhetorical History I

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Ethos from Classical Rhetoric to Today

The questioning of the role, and purpose of character in practicing rhetoric has a long history. In ancient Greek and Latin rhetoric the purpose of character in practicing rhetoric is as important as it is criticized. Over time character became heavily associated it with the definition of ethos. Aristotle and Cicero move 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, Cicero, and while each work may not directly use the term ethos in their work 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 in is the lack of expertise needed to practice rhetoric. In 459c (p. 24) Socrates addresses this when he brings to Gorgias’ attention 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 rhetorican “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” (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 e

Plato has other criticisms of rhetoric, but this exchange on the lack of expertise needed to be persuasive supports his overall disdain of rhetoric, and attempts to solidify the philosopher as the better of the two. Socrates continues questioning Gorgias about the lack of expertise

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 speaker. 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 (2013) 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 speakers 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 faitful 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” (book 1, chapter 2). 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” (Book 2, Ch. 1). 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). 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). 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. The

Cicero’s \_\_\_\_\_\_. Isocrates \_\_\_\_. Modern views of ethos in the composition classroom \_\_\_\_\_\_\_. Overall, the general definition of ethos has not greatly changed over thousands of years, but each speaker or author, develops a slightly different and expanded definition of ethos. This trace will attempt to navigate each author and/or speaker’s understanding, definition and use of ethos Ethos, as character may address or be defined as \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_QUOTE

A contemporary of Plato, Isocrates, also addressed the issue of character. In his work “Andiois” Isocrates sets himself apart from other Sophists.

Aristotle in “On Rhetoric” has a slightly more positive view of rhetoric, which is to say he does not outright object to its use and see no value in it.