

ISSA Proceedings 2010 - The Ethos Of Classical Rhetoric: From Epieikeia To Auctoritas



From antiquity onwards *rhetorical ethos* has represented a concept bearing many different notions, which generally refer to a speaker's character presentation. Despite conceptual differences *ethos* still plays an important part in rhetorical analysis and presents one of the elements in various contemporary rhetorical and argumentative theoretical models (proposed by prominent scholars such as Perelman, Brinton, Leff, Tindale, van Eemeren and Grootendorst, Walton etc.).

When we consider contemporary notions of ethos as being the result of a long tradition, our questions are: can a study of the ancient conceptions of rhetorical ethos still provide us with interesting and useful starting points? Might such a study refine our conception of the role of a speaker in the contemporary models of rhetorical and argumentative analysis? In search for a positive answer the aim of this paper is to present in our view some of the crucial points in the conceptualizations of classical ethos. We will try to show how ethos, when seen as a multifaceted rhetorical concept, above all things reflects different social roles of a public speaker in the Greco-Roman society. We believe that such a perspective combined with the well known ancient theoretical models of rhetorical ethos can provide us with a more thorough understanding of the concept of character presentation, which can contribute to its use in the contemporary rhetoric and argumentation as well.

The study of rhetorical ethos from a classical perspective has prospered ever since the end of the 19th century and it has focused mainly on the research of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. With modern scholars such as Wisse (1989), Fortenbaugh (1979, 1988, 1992, 1994, 1996), May (1988, 2002), Gill (1984), Braet (1992, 1996, 2004) the focus has changed and the subject has been expanded. *Rhetorical ethos* as it is perceived in the context of this kind of research generally holds for a concept that can be understood in terms of different types and observed through different genres of the ancient rhetorical and oratorical practice.

Modern theories of rhetoric and argumentation assign different roles to ethos, which highly depend on their dialectical or rhetorical perspective. However, their common characteristic is usually the priority that they assign to Aristotle's conception. Theories of argumentation mostly deal with ethos in the framework of their view of *informal fallacies* such as *ad verecundiam* and *ad hominem* (e. g. van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, Walton et al. 2008) or present it as a part of specific argument schemes, for instance the so called *ethotic argument* (Brinton 1986; Walton et al. 2008). Scholars like Leff (2003) and Tindale (1999, 2004) draw features from rhetorical tradition and combine them with some contemporary views. Based on Aristotle's triad *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* they define the character or ethos as an essential part of any argument and they present its further developments. As Leff pointed out (2009), there are considerable references to the role of a speaker in Perelman's theory of argumentation as well. According to Leff (2009, p. 310) those references can be related to the concept of rhetorical ethos and represent an important starting point in understanding the relationship between dialectic and rhetoric.

One of the modern aspects of ethos in argumentation theory as defined in Perelman and Olbrechts-Thyteca's *New Rhetoric* and lately known as the theory of *argumentation in discourse* comes from Ruth Amossy (2009). In her conceptualization of rhetorical ethos she integrates views about a speaker's authority and credibility that originate from the classical rhetoric, pragmatics and sociology. Based on these three theoretical fields she presents a model that tries to reconcile the two well-known perspectives of ethos: as a language related construction and as an institutional position or *discursive* and *prior ethos* (Amossy, 2001).

Since both perspectives originate from ancient conceptions of ethos, let us once more return to the realm of Greco-Roman rhetoric and try to shed light on some of their elements from two perspectives: firstly, as a part of the ancient rhetorical system and secondly, as a significant feature of public speaking, that is one of the most important social practices in Greek and Roman society.

In the classical rhetorical theory ethos is usually defined as a character presentation in the context of three means of persuasion, which come from Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (Rh. 1.2.3 1356a1-4) and constitute one of the most widely used classical models - *ethos* (the speaker), *pathos* (the audience) and *logos* (the speech):

Of the *pisteis* provided through speech there are three species; for some are in the character of the speaker (*en tô êthei tou legontos*), and some in disposing the listener in some way (*en tô ton akroatên diatheinai pôs*), and some in the speech itself, by showing or seeming to show something (*en autô tô logô dia tou deiknynai ê fainesthai deiknynai*)[i].

However, scholars believe (cf. Fortenbaugh, 1994) that this model did not have a direct influence on the classical theory and practice. Aristotle particularly influenced contemporary rhetoric[ii], while the Greco-Roman rhetorical system was far more focused on a somewhat different notion of ethos. This ethos was formed through a process of social changes and belongs to diverse oratorical practices. Thus, it seems logical to investigate other forms of character presentation that define classical notions of ethos, since they might provide us with a more coherent answer to the questions about the role of the speaker in the Greco-Roman rhetorical theory.

Readings in the ancient oratory reveal rhetorical ethos as a persuasion strategy that in the broadest sense denoted a speaker's effective character presentation as well as a presentation of any character in a speech. The concept of character was seen as a pragmatic category that consisted of moral elements (in terms of vice and virtue) and was not oriented towards a personal or inner world of the individual. A person's character was seen as a result of his/her actions and their evaluation (whether socially acceptable or not), as well as a result of particular social categories, such as that person's origin, his/her social position, vocation and political engagement. As a part of rhetorical ethos a presentation of any character would therefore have to be acceptable to the audience with regard to the moral and social norms that Greek (and/or Roman) society acknowledged. In Greek society the term 'acceptable' particularly denoted a person who was reasonable, fair or morally good, which is an equivalent for Greek words *epieikês* and *epieikeia*[iii]. Although these notions were used in many different contexts (from juridical to ethical) Aristotle in *Rhetoric* (1.2.4 1356a4-8) explicitly connects rhetorical ethos with the notion of *epieikeia* as well, when he says that it is very important for a speaker to present himself as such, since we generally much more believe good (or fair-minded) people:

[There is persuasion] through character whenever the speech is spoken in such a way as to make the speaker worthy of credence; for we believe fair-minded people (*tois gar epieikesi*) 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.

In the framework of rhetorical ethos terms such as »good« and its opposite »bad« are not to be taken in a narrow moral sense, since they are – as in the most ancient non-philosophical works – to a large extent defined by the abovementioned pragmatic categories: by origin, social position, vocation or political affiliation. However, a speech had to point out that a speaker is a good, reliable and benevolent person. Such character traits set up an image of a person, which ancient Greeks described with an adjective *axiopistos* or 'trustworthy'. Again, we find a definition of this notion in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (2.1.5-7 1378a6-20), where rhetorical ethos as a strategy of constructing a trustworthy image of a speaker is explicitly described as a presentation of a speaker's practical wisdom (*phronesis*), virtue (*arête*) and goodwill (*eunoia*). As many contemporary scholars point out, these notions were not invented by Aristotle, for they can easily be traced all the way back to the Homer's *Iliad*. Moreover, such a view of a character presentation is identified in a number of ancient speeches and rhetorical treatises and can therefore be explained as an element of Greco-Roman notion of credibility. What is significant in Aristotle's conceptualization of *phronesis*, *arête* and *eunoia* as a part of rhetorical ethos is the function that he assigns to this persuasion strategy – when the speech is *spoken* in such way, a speaker *becomes* trustworthy.

It is a thoroughly researched fact that Aristotle's famous conceptualization, which became a foundation of many modern discussions (e. g. Amossy 2001, Tindale 2004), in fact presents one direction in ancient conceptions of rhetorical ethos. It concerns *a discursive construction or representation of a character*, which is an important part of persuasion but does not necessarily represent a speaker's actual personality. Aristotle (*Rh.* 1.2.4 1356a8-13) says:

And this (sc. persuasion through character) should result from the speech, not from a previous opinion that the speaker is a certain kind of person; for it is not the case, as some of the handbook writers propose in their treatment of the art, that fair-mindedness (*epieikeia*) on the part of the speaker makes no contribution to persuasiveness; rather, character is almost, so to speak, the most authoritative form of persuasion (*kyriôtatên ekhei pistin to êthos*)[iv].

As Kennedy (1991, p. 39) observes, Aristotle excludes from rhetorical ethos anything except for what is actually said in the speech. The authority, which the

speaker might possess due to his position in society, previous actions and/or reputation were all the elements, which Aristotle would regard as important but 'inartistic' or 'extrinsic' to the art of persuasion - as something that is included but not constructed in the speech.

However, there are at least three other traditions that can be identified within ancient conceptions of rhetorical ethos. Firstly, a conception that originates in Plato and Isocrates' view of rhetoric. It represents *rhetorical ethos as a revelation of a speaker's moral character, which preexists discourse and should be reflected in the discourse*. This ethos was also known under the term *epieikeia* with somewhat clearer ethical and moral connotations, be it as a part of Plato's philosophical view of rhetoric or the more pragmatic conceptions of Isocrates. Particularly in *Antidosis* (278) Isocrates presents a very clear picture of his conception of rhetorical ethos, which enters into the discourse as *a part of speaker's moral character and his proper way of living*:

...[t]he man who wishes to persuade people will not be negligent as to the matter of character; no, on the contrary, he will apply himself above all to establish a most honorable name (*hôs epieikestatên*) among his fellow-citizens; for who does not know that words carry greater conviction when spoken by men of good repute than when spoken by men who live under a cloud, and that the argument which is made by a man's life is of more weight than that which is furnished by words? Therefore, the stronger a man's desire to persuade his hearers, the more zealously will he strive to be honorable and to have the esteem of his fellow-citizens.

Secondly, there are diverse notions of character presentation that come from sophistic and textbook rhetoric and are parts of other rhetorical concepts or notions (such as *topoi*, parts of speech, style, performance etc.), which constitute the ancient rhetorical system. Before we present a brief sketch of them, we have to mention another characteristic, which is a part of the ancient conceptions of rhetorical ethos. Namely, in ancient rhetoric there was a close connection between the strategy of trustworthy character presentation and a speaker's influence on audience's emotions (a persuasion strategy most commonly known as rhetorical *pathos*). With exception to Aristotle's model of the three *pisteis*, which presents ethos and pathos as a generally two distinct categories, most of other ancient notions demonstrate a certain conceptual and semantic overlap of a character presentation and arousal of emotions[v]. Considering this

circumstance, it seems particularly important to point out the traditional notions of both persuasion strategies, which precede Aristotle and Isocrates and were particularly recognized in rhetorical instruction of logographers and sophists.

A well known rhetorical treatise *Rhetoric to Alexander*, which is ascribed to Anaximenes of Lampsacus and originates approximately from the same period as Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, proves to be a good example for the research of some pre-conceptual or traditional notions of rhetorical ethos and pathos, which can be defined as *textbook* and *sophistic notions*. A textbook notion of ethos and pathos corresponds to the practical examples or simple precepts that were connected to the construction of a speech, especially that of prologues and epilogues and originate probably in the earliest rhetorical textbooks. In *Rhetoric to Alexander* such a notion of rhetorical ethos shows a close relation to winning the audience's goodwill (*eunoia*) and presents one of the most important elements within prologue as a part of Greco-Roman rhetorical system[**vi**]. The second conception of ethos (and pathos) in *Rhetoric to Alexander* shows traces of the sophistic tradition, particularly because of its connection with argumentative strategies, which are usually associated with sophists such as Thrasymachus, Gorgias, Protagoras and others. In the standard rhetorical theory this notion of rhetorical ethos could also be understood as a part of diverse conceptions of *topoi* and would correspond to various traditional (pre-Aristotelian) argumentative strategies such as *argument schemes* and *ready-made arguments* (Rubinelli 2009, pp. 101-109). In *Rhetoric to Alexander* we can find many examples of argumentative strategies that contain character presentation and would correspond to these notions, especially in the sense of producing a certain effect in the audience or in the sense of justifying a certain conclusion[**vii**].

The third tradition within ancient conceptions of rhetorical ethos would be the so called Roman view of character presentation, which is the result of the conflation of a Greek rhetorical system and Roman traditional oratory. We can find notions from Greek traditions of character presentation, such as *topoi (or loci)* for gaining goodwill in *Rhetorica ad Herrenium* (1.5; 2.30-31) and in Cicero's *De inventione* (1. 22) or conceptualizations of ethos (and pathos), which reflect Roman traditional notions of the character of the speaker as well as traces of Aristotelian peripatetic tradition respectively, such as in Cicero's work *De oratore* or in Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*. When studied in the context of ancient rhetoric all these traditions (from Aristotle to Quintilian) reveal a multifaceted nature of the

rhetorical ethos and largely depend on the different conception of the role of a speaker in Greek and Roman society, which we shall address a little later.

The study of means of persuasion in the Roman rhetoric is undoubtedly related to the above mentioned Greek concepts, but on the other hand it must also consider the characteristics of Roman traditional rhetoric. This rhetoric existed as an original communication practice in the Roman public life long before Romans came into contact with the Greek culture. When Romans took over Greek theoretical models of their art of persuasion, the traditional elements of Roman oratory maintained a significant influence on particular concepts within the rhetorical system. And this especially holds for rhetorical ethos.

For scholars such as Kennedy (1963, 1972), May (1988) and Wisse (1989) the main difference between Greek and Roman rhetorical ethos exists in the relationship between constructed and preexisting ethos. The goal of a Greek speaker was more or less to construct a credible self image within the speech and/or at the same time gain the goodwill of the audience. However, his preexisting image generally did not interfere with argumentation, scholars say. As we can see from Isocrates' conceptions of ethos and the examples of a speaker's character presentation in *Rhetoric to Alexander*, ancient Greeks did not exclude the speaker's existing reputation from persuasive discourse; rather, they held a different view of the knowledge they had of such a character presentation: it could not serve as a primary means of proof, but it was often seen and/or presented in the context of probability (Kennedy 1998, p. 205). Something completely different is true for the so called Roman rhetorical ethos: as a rhetorical strategy it almost entirely consists of the speaker's preexisting reputation and the authority that comes from it. In Roman judicial oratory this kind of rhetorical ethos was not only a part of argumentation, but often presented its main feature; in funeral oratory ethos presented the central and crucial element that substantiated the purpose of a funeral speech (*oratio funebris*) and thus essentially differed from the Greek public funeral orations. In the construction of a speaker's authority Romans went all the way to the point where in the framework of deliberative speech the speaker without distinguished predecessors, who could grant him a credible character and consequently an authority as well, was permitted to explicitly point out virtues of his own. Hence, the lack of modesty in Roman oratory, for this circumstance could represent a key element in an act of persuasion especially in the case of *new men* like Cicero and

Cato the Elder.

Let us point out another interesting feature of ancient rhetorical ethos: The essential difference between Greek and Roman rhetorical ethos can be explained in terms of two kinds of rhetoric, namely the *rhetoric of quarrel* (or 'agonistic' rhetoric) and *the rhetoric of consensus* (or 'traditional' rhetoric) as Kennedy conceptualized these two social practices that existed in Greek and Roman society. He says that Greek rhetoric can be characterized as rhetoric of quarrel, since it shows a close connection to the combative nature of Greek society (Kennedy 1998, pp. 197ff.). The latter is evident in vibrant discussions and contentious arguments of the Greek assemblies or courts, where every free male citizen could speak his mind. Early Roman rhetoric seems to be completely different especially with respect to the function and selectivity of speakers. In the words of Kennedy this rhetoric is much closer to the traditional forms of public speaking or as he names it, the rhetoric of consensus. The main goal of public speaking in traditional societies was usually to calm down the opposition and achieve a group consensus on some important issue. Further, public speaking served to establish and renew social ranking within the society as well as to reinforce traditional values. As such, the rhetoric of consensus often proves to be the more conservative and corrective force and not so much a tool of changes (Kennedy 1998, pp. 67-68). Readings in early Roman orators, such as Aemilius Paulus, Scipio Africanus and Fabius Maximus prove that the use of their strategies of persuasion correspond to the rhetoric of consensus, since they focus mainly on the elements of authority and emotionality, which are known as primary elements of such a public address.

Since the Roman social system prevented from speaking anyone but members of the ruling elite, public speaking for the most part did not consist of a series of probable arguments with elaborate structure and strong probative force in a controversy. Much more notable characteristic in the first speeches of Roman orators was the repeated use of a speaker's authority as means of proof (Kennedy 1972, p. 42, 100; May 1988, p. 9). As a persuasive strategy it corresponded to a speaker's character presentation or rhetorical ethos, which was founded on his preexisting social status. It is important to know that a speaker's social status was determined by a person's age, experience and influence in the public life, wealth, family reputation and also certain rhetorical skill.

Particularly in the later periods (from the late republic when rhetoric in Rome

developed as a discipline) this circumstance deeply shaped the concept of the so called Roman rhetorical ethos, which consequently represents a much wider concept, be it on the qualitative or quantitative level. Along with the adopted Greek ethotic elements, a character presentation of a Roman speaker is always a preexisting social category that consists of entirely Roman elements as well. One of them is a speaker's family or gens, also known as *collective ethos* (May 1988, p. 6), which provides his stability, since it is secured by distinguished ancestors (*mores maiorum*). It also consists of a speaker's *individual ethos*, which is determined by *collective ethos* and reflects some typical Roman notions of character. May (1988, p. 6) provides a thorough explanation:

The Romans believed that character remains essentially constant in man and therefore demands or determines his actions. Since character does not evolve or develop, but rather is bestowed or inherited by nature, an individual cannot suddenly, or at will, change or disguise for any lengthy period his ethos or his way of life; nor is it wise to attempt such alteration. The Romans further believed that in most cases character remains constant from generation to generation of the same family.

Other important elements belong to the realm of Roman traditional values and had to be gained during a speaker's life. If a speaker wanted to use his character as a means of proof and persuasion respectively, he had to demonstrate *dignitas* (or being worthy of high office), *honor* and *gloria* (or an excellent personal and public engagement) and oratorical reputation (*existimatio*). But one of the most important values was the *auctoritas*, which represents the key element in the context of Roman rhetorical ethos. In Roman society *auctoritas* signified admiration for the person that demonstrated wisdom, proficiency and a sense of responsibility in personal and public matters (especially in the context of the *patronus-cliens* relationship). A Roman orator could earn his *auctoritas* partly through his ancestors, but mainly he had to gain it with his own praiseworthy actions that came from his political activity and public office service. The latter at the same time offered an opportunity for earning the privilege of public performance and a place, where he could use rhetorical ethos as an effective persuasive strategy.

But what is significant about *auctoritas* is that it often replaced logical argumentation. Extant Roman speeches show that speakers could (and would often) simply use their own (or somebody else's) *auctoritas* when they wanted to

demonstrate causes for some action[viii]. Specific social relations in Roman society – especially that of *patronus* and *cliens* – presented a foundation for a wide selection of characters that could be used in a speech as a very successful *ethotic* strategy. Beside his own character, a speaker (usually he would be a respected *patronus* with notable *auctoritas*) could also employ a presentation of the character of his client, his adversary or his adversary’s pleader and combine these without restraint and solely for the purpose of an oratory success. Particularly in the judicial speeches and because of the advocacy system (that differed from a Greek one in terms of representation) this persuasive technique played an important part in the process of presenting a case (cf. Quint., *Inst.* 4.1.6-7). In addition, such a character presentation was often highly emotional and was according to rhetorical treatises believed to be one of the most effective strategies in Roman rhetoric (cf. Cic. *De or.*, 2.182).

In *Brutus* Cicero presents a series of ancient orators, who would successfully use *auctoritas* as a means of proof. In their hands this *auctoritas* presented “a powerful, sometimes frightening, occasionally even subversive oratorical weapon” (May 1988, p. 8). In addition, there is an interesting passage in *De oratore* (1.198), where in the context of Roman juriconsults and their Greek counterparts Cicero describes the power of Roman *auctoritas*:

They began by creating an esteemed position for themselves on the authority, so to speak, of their natural ability (qui, cum ingenio sibi auctore dignitatem peperissent), but subsequently even managed to make their prominence in rendering legal opinions depend less on this natural ability than on the personal authority they had gained (ut... auctoritate plus etiam quam ipso ingenio valerent)[ix].

(For the links: see below)

Ultimately, May (1988) showed that the elements of traditional Roman oratory regarding character presentation were important parts of Cicero’s oratory as well. Furthermore, Cicero’s theoretical works and speeches present rhetorical ethos as a “confluence of notions of a speaker’s social role” and as a “synthesis of” several Greek and traditional Roman “concepts that interact in different ways” (Enos and Rossi Schnakenberg 1994: 193). And such an interaction of concepts, which extends from different social roles to diverse discursive practices and theoretical models of ancient rhetoricians and philosophers, is perhaps the best way to understand rhetorical ethos.

Let us sum up: Why should ancient rhetorical elements – in the context that we presented them in – be important to contemporary rhetorical and argumentative models? Our answer points in three directions. Firstly, a careful analysis of different notions of a supposedly unified rhetorical concept contributes to the awareness that the reconstruction of a model of ancient rhetorical ethos leads to a complex concept. This concept significantly extends over a dichotomy of Aristotle's or Isocrates' conceptualizations and should always be considered as a part of Greco-Roman social world as well. Secondly, ancient conceptions of rhetorical ethos when presented from the social perspective enable us to identify the relationship between constructed and preexisting image of a speaker and thus further open possible research questions regarding the agonistic (i. e. Greek) or consensual (i. e. Roman) nature of rhetorical discourse. And lastly, the model of ancient rhetorical ethos that includes theoretical and practical insights from the Greco-Roman rhetoric provides us with diverse ethotic strategies with regard to the nature of rhetorical discourse. And with such a model new directions in the study of other rhetorical and argumentative concepts such as *topoi*, rhetorical figures and argument schemes might open.

NOTES

[i] All translations of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* by G. A. Kennedy (1991). All Greek parentheses are ours (JŽ).

[ii] See especially Tindale's study of rhetorical model of argumentation (1999). Together with contemporary logical, dialectical and pragmatic views on argumentation Tindale tries to develop a comprehensive model of argument that is fundamentally rhetorical and founded on Aristotle's conception of rhetoric.

[iii] LSJ lists the following classical meanings of a Greek adjective *epieikês*: I. in Homer: fitting, meet, suitable; II. after Homer: 1. of statements, rights, etc.: a) reasonable, specious; b) fair, equitable, not according to the letter of the law (opp. *dikaios*); 2. of persons: a) able, capable; b) in moral sense, reasonable, fair, good; c) with social or political connotation, the upper or educated classes. For *epieikeia* we can find the following meanings: I. reasonableness; 2. equity, opp. strict law; 3. of persons: reasonableness, fairness; also, goodness, virtuousness.

[iv] The Greek parentheses are our addition (JŽ).

[v] This stands out in the Roman treatises as well, since they present rhetoric as an already standardized system. Cf. Quintilian's treatment of *ethos* and *pathos* as two degrees of emotion, namely as *leniores* and *vehementes affectus* (6.2.8-9).

[vi] Anaximenes presents many examples, where a speaker's character

presentation is a part of precise instructions for composing prologues. Goodwill is discussed in 1436a33-1438a42, where we can find precise instructions for composing prologues in deliberative speeches. For judicial oratory see 1442a6-14 about winning goodwill of the friendly and neutral audience and 1442a20-1442b28 that describes the case of hostile audience. Cf. also 1445b39-1446a4.

[vii] Cf. Rh. Al. 1428b29-32 for character presentation as a part of an argument scheme and 1431b9-19 for character presentation as a ready-made argument or a special type of authority argumentation. This view was particularly studied by Braet (1996, 2004), who showed that Rhetoric to Alexander contains a typology of argumentation schemes.

[viii] Cf. especially a presentation of oratory of Marcus Antonius in Cicero's discussions Brutus and De oratore.

[ix] Translation by J. M. May and J. Wisse (2001). Latin parentheses are our addition (JŽ).

[x] Due to its complexity we shall not present Cicero's conception of rhetorical ethos in this paper. For detailed study of 'Ciceronian ethos' see especially Wisse (1989) and May (1988).

[xi] The possible set of questions could be the following: What social relations and values in the given rhetorical discourse shape a speaker's use of rhetorical ethos as a persuasive and/or argumentative strategy? What are the predominant discursive elements, which relate to these social relations and values, and constitute speaker's trustworthy image in the given discourse? Are those elements to be found in the realm of speaker's character presentation, which is mainly created within the discourse or is more based on his/hers preexisting authority?

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