Rethinking Ethos: A Comparative Analysis of Persuasive Character Building in Classical Antiquity through the Lenses of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian

Ganlin Zhuang*

Xianda College of Economics and Humanities, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, China

Abstract. This text aims to reexamine the role of ethos in persuasion through a comparative analysis of the viewpoints of the great classical rhetoricians Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian. By comparing these viewpoints, it seeks to demonstrate their similarities and differences. The study reveals that Aristotle emphasizes the moral aspect of character, Cicero focuses on the artistry of rhetorical techniques, and Quintilian places greater importance on adapting to the practical context of the audience. The perspectives of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian provide us with profound insights that contribute to a reconsideration of the role of ethos in persuasion.

1. Introduction

The realm of ethical persuasion, rooted in the art of rhetoric, has held a central place in human communication for millennia. Among the luminaries who shaped and expounded upon the concept of ethos, or personal appeal, during the ancient times were philosophers and orators from Greece and Rome. Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, whose profound contributions continue to influence modern rhetoric and communication theory, explored the multifaceted dimensions of ethos and its pivotal role in effective persuasion.

In this article, we delve into the rich philosophical and rhetorical heritage of these three distinguished figures, each hailing from distinct periods within the ancient world. We embark on a journey through time and thought to examine their unique perspectives on ethos and its implications for the art of persuasion. By shedding light on their profound insights, we aim to gain a deeper understanding of how ethos has evolved over centuries and how these enduring philosophies continue to resonate in contemporary discourse.

2. Definition of ethos

The concept of ethos, deeply rooted in the art of persuasion, has evolved over time while maintaining its central role in effective communication. To understand the essence of ethos as conceived by Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, let's embark on a historical journey that uncovers the nuanced layers of this persuasive tool.

Ethos, which concerns the character and credibility of the speaker, has always been pivotal in influencing the beliefs and decisions of an audience. In ancient times, its meaning had subtle differences. For instance, in the Iliad, ethos referred not to character but to a habitual place of activity. It was a public matter, connecting the speaker and audience, as noted by Tindale. Ethos personalized statements, giving the audience a voice to connect with, not just a series of claims.

Aristotle also emphasized the importance of ethos, stating that we become virtuous by practicing virtuous actions. This echoes the idea that ethos is built through actions and character.

As we delve into the philosophies of these ancient thinkers, we’ll explore their unique interpretations of ethos, recognizing the subtle variations and resonances in their definitions. This exploration will help us comprehend the multifaceted nature of ethos and its enduring significance in persuasion. In the subsequent sections, we will unravel how Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian applied their respective ethos definitions to rhetoric, shedding light on the nuances of their persuasive techniques and their lasting impact on contemporary discourse.

3. Insights on Ethos from Aristotle

Aristotle, often regarded as the progenitor of rhetorical theory, laid the foundational definition of ethos within his seminal work, Rhetoric. For Aristotle, ethos extended beyond mere character; it encompassed the perception of trustworthiness, competence, and moral standing projected by an orator to their audience. It was, in essence, the bedrock upon which successful persuasion was built, as Aristotle believed that an audience was more likely to accept arguments from a speaker they found credible and virtuous.
3.1 The Three Modes of Persuasion

Aristotle identifies three key elements that inspire confidence in the orator’s character: good sense, good moral character, and goodwill. According to Aristotle, these elements are instrumental in persuading the audience to believe in the orator’s message even without requiring explicit proof. As stated in Rhetoric, Aristotle writes, “There are three things which inspire confidence in the orator’s own character—the three, namely, that induce us to believe a thing apart from any proof of it: good sense, good moral character, and goodwill”.[3]

To cultivate good sense, the orator must demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. Aristotle mentioned in Rhetoric: “The way to make ourselves thought to be sensible and morally good must be gathered from the analysis of goodness already given”[3]. Through careful analysis and well-reasoned arguments, the speaker can project wisdom and intellect, fostering credibility and trust. As Aristotle points out, discussing topics related to virtue, vice, nobility, and baseness in persuasive oratory can align arguments with the audience’s ethical values, further enhancing the orator’s persuasive power. Referring to Aristotle’s words, “We have now to consider Virtue and Vice, the Noble and the Base, since these are the objects of praise and blame” [3], it becomes clear that understanding and discussing moral concepts are fundamental in building a persuasive case.

Moreover, Aristotle emphasizes the significance of narration in portraying character and moral purpose, influencing the audience’s perception of the speaker’s credibility. In Rhetoric, he states, “The narration should depict character; to which end you must know what makes it do so. One such thing is the indication of moral purpose; the quality of purpose indicated determines the quality of character depicted and is itself determined by the end pursued” [3]. By using narration to reveal moral intent behind actions and choices, the orator can effectively shape the audience’s view of their character.

3.2 Maxims or common sayings

Aristotle further highlights the use of maxims or common sayings to persuade the audience, particularly if they align with moral goodness. Quoting his words from Rhetoric, “And one should even use trite and common maxims if they are applicable; for because they are common, they seem true, as though everyone agreed. if the maxims are morally good, they make the speaker seem to have a good character”[3], it becomes evident that employing morally sound maxims can contribute to enhancing the speaker’s character perception.

3.3 Language and style

Language and style play pivotal roles in persuasion. The orator should adapt their speech to match the audience’s character, using appropriate language that reflects emotion and character while remaining in harmony with the subject matter. Aristotle stressed that “People always think well of speeches adapted to, and reflecting, their own character”[3], highlighting the importance of tailoring the message to resonate with the audience. This approach fosters rapport and trust.

Moreover, Aristotle cautioned against artificiality in language and style, as it can diminish persuasiveness. He advised, “Authors should compose without being noticed and should seem to speak not artificially but naturally. Naturalness is persuasive, artificiality is the contrary”.[3] When the audience detects insincerity or contrived language, it can lead to suspicion and reduced persuasiveness.

In line with this perspective, the aptness of language is a crucial element that influences whether people believe in the truth of a story. As cited in Rhetoric, “This aptness of language is one thing that makes people believe in the truth of your story: their minds draw the false conclusion that you are to be trusted from the fact that others behave as you do when things are as you describe them; and therefore they take your story to be true, whether it is so or not”[3]. In essence, a natural and sincere approach to language and style is more likely to be persuasive, as it aligns with the audience’s expectations and fosters trust.

In conclusion, Aristotle’s principles of persuasion, including good sense, good moral character, goodwill through effective narration, use of maxims, and appropriate language and style, all contribute to building the orator’s credibility and character in persuasive discourse. By understanding and skillfully employing these elements, the orator can gain the audience’s trust and belief, making the persuasive message all the more compelling.

4. Cicero's Oratory Philosophy

Cicero, the eminent Roman orator and philosopher, expanded upon Aristotle’s groundwork. In De Inventione, Cicero delineated a triad of virtues that constituted ethos: wisdom, justice, and benevolence. He emphasized that ethos was not confined to the speaker’s character alone but was intrinsically tied to the ethical virtues they embodied. Thus, an orator’s ethos was not merely a matter of credibility but a reflection of their moral character and ethical principles. This part explores Cicero’s insights on these concepts through direct quotations from his works, highlighting their significance in crafting persuasive discourse.

4.1 The Three Modes of Persuasion

Cicero emphasized the critical role of extensive knowledge in oratory. He stated that “a knowledge of various subjects must be grasped to avoid oratory becoming empty and ridiculous verbiage” [4]. In essence, he argued that without a broad knowledge base, oratory lacks substance and depth, appearing superficial and immature. Cicero went on to stress that true oratory excellence requires the orator to acquire knowledge across various subjects and arts. He asserted, “No one can be a complete orator without attaining knowledge of
all important subjects and arts. Oratory derives its beauty and fullness from knowledge, and without it, speeches lack depth and appear almost childish” [4].

Moreover, Cicero pointed out that achieving excellence in both wisdom and eloquence demands unwavering dedication, zeal, and rigorous study. He maintained, “No one can attain high distinction in wisdom and eloquence without a great amount of zeal, industry, and dedicated study” [4].

Cicero’s doctrine differs significantly from Aristotle's perspective. While Aristotle believed that ethical persuasion primarily relies on the actual content of the speech, Cicero places a significant emphasis on the speaker’s character and the prior impression they create[5]. According to Cicero, achieving the goals of oratory requires a deep understanding of human character, the vast spectrum of human nature, and the underlying motivations driving individuals. In his own words, Cicero explained, “A speaker cannot hope to accomplish their objectives through words alone unless they have acquired profound insights into the intricacies of human character, the entire panorama of human nature, and the underlying motives that either propel our souls forward or hold them back.”[6]

Cicero extended his perspective to propose a profound connection between eloquence and virtue, suggesting that eloquence itself represents a form of virtue[4]. Cicero advocated for qualities such as kindness, loyalty, and a disposition that resonates with the audience, as these traits hold the power to garner favor and resonance. He noted, “Displaying good-nature, kindness, calmness, loyalty, and a pleasing disposition is very helpful. Qualities like uprightness, unassumingness, and avoiding haste, stubbornness, strife, or harshness are powerful in winning goodwill” [4].

Additionally, Cicero’s ethos is intricately associated with style[6]. Cicero highlighted the connection between the speaker’s amiability and the style of expression. He suggested that sometimes, a speaker may adopt a slightly different style to magnify the virtues of another person or downplay their own qualities. This strategic adjustment, when motivated by goodwill rather than insincerity, reflects the speaker’s ability to connect with the audience through artful manipulation of their speech. In essence, Cicero’s approach places greater emphasis on elements such as style[6].

In summary, Cicero’s oratory philosophy integrates knowledge, character, and style into a holistic approach to persuasion. It underscores the importance of understanding human nature, adopting virtuous qualities, and skilfully employing style to connect with the audience and achieve persuasive success.

4.2 Fostering Persuasion Through Humor

Cicero’s exploration of oratory extends to the artful use of humor as a persuasive tool and its intimate connection to an orator's character. He recognizes that humor can be a powerful means to engage emotions, establish rapport, and reveal aspects of the speaker’s personality. Cicero’s insights into the strategic deployment of humor underscore its role in fostering connection and making arguments more relatable: “what excites laughter is disappointing expectations and ridiculing other people’s characters and imitating a baser person and assembling and saying things that are rather silly and criticizing points that are foolish, and consequently a person who wants to speak humorously must be equipped with a disposition and character that is suited to artifices of this kind, so that even his expression of countenance may be adapted to each kind of variety of the ridiculous.” [5]

“For my own part, I vow I am also much amused by those petty and rather ill-tempered jests—but not when they are spoken by an ill-tempered person, for then it is not his wit but his character that we laugh.” [5] Cicero’s insights highlight that humor is not only a skilful technique but also a reflection of the orator’s disposition and character. “More specifically, verbal jesting and irony are seen as appropriate because those forms of humor are not used primarily to entertain the audience, but to demonstrate the speaker's cleverness.”[7]. When humor is thoughtfully integrated into the fabric of a speech, it can effectively break down barriers, create emotional resonance, and offer glimpses into the speaker’s personality. This interplay between humor and character enhances the speaker’s ability to persuade, making their arguments more relatable and their presence more engaging.

4.3 Eliciting Emotions and Demonstrating Character in Oratory

Cicero’s perspective on oratory places virtue and emotion at its core, highlighting their pivotal roles in effective persuasion. He eloquently states, “Who indeed does not know that the orator’s virtue is pre-eminently manifested either in rousing men's hearts to anger, hatred, or indignation, or in recalling them from these same passions to mildness and mercy” [4]. This reflects Cicero’s belief in the transformative power of oratory, where an orator can influence and guide the emotions of their audience.

In comparison to Aristotle’s more rational concept of ethos, Cicero’s ethos is broader and encompasses a range of emotions, particularly milder ones closely related to pathos[8]. Cicero’s ethos is intertwined with the speaker's character and their ability to evoke and manage emotions effectively.

Cicero also underscores the significance of style in persuasive speaking, emphasizing the importance of surprise and emotion as key elements in effective oratory. He argues that a speaker’s character plays a pivotal role, whether by expressing their own judgment, humanity, and liberality of mind, or by skilfully modifying their style to enhance others while downplaying their own views, all driven by goodwill rather than insincerity [4]. This aligns with Sattler’s analysis, which suggests that Cicero primarily associates ethical proof with the mild emotions conveyed by the speaker. Thus, Cicero places great importance on the speaker’s character and emotional impact in the realm of persuasion.
In conclusion, Cicero’s exploration of emotion and character in oratory underscores the intricate interplay between language and personality. By strategically employing unexpected elements, evoking emotions, and aligning their style with their own character, an orator can craft speeches that resonate deeply with their audience. This not only showcases the speaker’s skill but also establishes a genuine connection that enhances the impact of their words. Cicero’s oratory philosophy is a testament to the enduring power of ethos and emotion in the art of persuasion.

5. Quintilian’s \textit{Institutio Oratoria}: A Holistic Approach to Oratory Mastery

Quintilian, another luminary of Roman rhetoric, contributed a nuanced perspective. In \textit{Institutio Oratoria}, he argued that ethos emerged from consistent ethical behavior and virtuous living. Quintilian posited that a persuasive speaker must not merely simulate ethical virtues but genuinely possess them. He underscored the moral and ethical dimensions of ethos, emphasizing the significance of sincerity and authenticity in persuasion. Throughout the text, Quintilian’s insights offer a holistic approach to oratory that resonates with Cicero's emphasis on virtue and authenticity.

Quintilian firmly believed that a good man makes for a good orator, emphasizing that the perfect orator should possess not only exceptional speaking skills but also virtues that exemplify integrity, ethics, and good conduct. He stated, “My aim, then, is the education of the perfect orator. The first essential for such a one is that he should be a good man, and consequently we demand of him not merely the possession of exceptional gifts of speech, but of all the excellences of character” [9].

Quintilian’s definition of ethos aligns with this perspective. He defines ethos as character and courtesy (decorum, the becoming) and repudiates the notion that it is limited to mild emotions. Quintilian sees ethos as an end in itself, divorced from the character of the speaker, giving new emphasis to the strictly classical concept of rhetorical ethos [9].

Moreover, Quintilian places considerable emphasis on the speaker’s authority and character, noting that an orator’s credibility and influence depend on their perceived wisdom and moral character. He asserts that a speaker’s advice should align with their moral character, resonating with Cicero’s contention that an orator’s character should harmonize with their message. Both philosophers emphasize that genuine trust and influence stem from the speaker’s wisdom and virtue. Quintilian stated, “For he, who would have all men trust his judgment as to what is expedient and honorable, should both possess and be regarded as possessing genuine wisdom and excellence of character” [9].

Quintilian’s views align with Cicero’s belief that eloquence and virtue are intertwined. He emphasized that the teacher of oratory should be distinguished for both eloquence and good character. In both Cicero and Quintilian’s perspectives, the perfect orator is not only a proficient speaker but also a virtuous individual. They view goodness and skill as inseparable components of an orator’s character. Quintilian stressed that a skilled orator not only presents compelling arguments but also upholds a virtuous character, ensuring authenticity and resonance with the audience.

Furthermore, Quintilian’s perspective on the relationship between knowledge and virtue underlines his emphasis on well-roundedness. He argued that a truly effective orator should possess both virtuous character and a comprehensive knowledge base, acknowledging that knowledge extends beyond rhetoric and encompasses a broad understanding of various subjects and arts.

In addition to virtue and knowledge, Quintilian also highlights the importance of goodwill in oratory. He advises orators to include words of praise for their audience to secure their goodwill. Quintilian’s work represents a comprehensive approach to oratory that integrates character, knowledge, adaptability, and eloquence. This alignment between their philosophies reveals a holistic paradigm for oratory mastery. Quintilian’s practical guidance and incorporation of various dimensions of effective communication enrich Cicero’s foundations with nuanced techniques, making his work an invaluable resource for aspiring orators.

6. Conclusion

In our exploration of the views on ethos by ancient Greek and Roman philosophers Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, we have gained profound insights into this concept’s pivotal role in the art of persuasion. Each philosopher contributed unique perspectives that illuminate the multifaceted nature and enduring significance of ethos in communication and rhetoric.

Aristotle, often regarded as the father of rhetoric, underscored that ethos encompasses the persuasive power of an individual’s character and credibility. He emphasized the importance of an orator’s trustworthiness, competence, and moral standing as essential elements for effective persuasion. Aristotle’s principles revolved around cultivating good sense, demonstrating wisdom, and employing appropriate language and style to establish ethos.

Cicero, the Roman orator and philosopher, built upon Aristotle’s foundation by introducing a triad of virtues that constitute ethos: wisdom, justice, and benevolence. Cicero expanded the concept by highlighting that ethos is not solely dependent on one’s character but also reflects the ethical virtues they embody. He emphasized the significance of goodwill, kindness, and a disposition that resonates with the audience in establishing a persuasive ethos.

Quintilian, another influential Roman rhetorician, offered a nuanced perspective, stressing that ethos emerges from consistent ethical behavior and virtuous living. He believed that persuasive speakers must genuinely possess ethical virtues rather than merely simulating them. Quintilian placed strong emphasis on sincerity and authenticity as fundamental elements of persuasion.
In summary, the philosophies of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian collectively provide a comprehensive understanding of ethos, emphasizing its deep connection to character, knowledge, and virtue. Their enduring ideas continue to shape contemporary discourse and the art of persuasion. These ancient perspectives serve as a foundational guide for modern communicators seeking to effectively employ ethos in their rhetoric.

References