

“The Most Effective Means of Persuasion”

Aristotle states that “[a speaker’s] character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses”,¹ and so he lists *ethos* first in his categorization of means of persuasion. But though his emphasis on the effectiveness of *ethos* is clear, there is a disconnect between the importance that he ascribes to *ethos* and the clarity of the advice he gives on how to use it.

That disconnect is first seen between Aristotle’s definition of *ethos* and his explanation of the factors that comprise it. Persuasion by means of *ethos*, he writes, “should be achieved by what the speaker says, not by what people think of his character before he begins to speak.”² As he explains it, however, *ethos* is comprised of characteristics that must be known by the audience before the speech. For example, Aristotle mentions the characteristics of age, of status at birth, of wealth, and of power.³ Thus, either Aristotle’s requirement that *ethos* be achieved in the speech and not before is impossible to achieve or his exposition of the components of *ethos* is deficient.

There is a second, more significant disconnect between the importance that Aristotle ascribes to *ethos* and his advice concerning it. If Aristotle can claim to improve the rhetoric of his students, then he must not only teach them how to construct an enthymeme or stir up emotions; he must teach them how to improve their *ethos*. And yet the characteristics that he mentions—age, wealth, birth, strength—are not qualities that can be improved upon. A speaker’s *ethos* is therefore predetermined, unchangeable by the aspiring rhetorician. Aristotle is not wrong to ascribe a high, perhaps even a preeminent position to *ethos*, but he is wrong to limit his exposition of *ethos* to a few insignificant characteristics and neglect characteristics such as honesty, morality, competence, and wisdom.

¹ Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, eds, *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present* (Boston: Bedford, 1990), 154.

² Bizzell and Herzberg, 153.

³ Bizzell and Herzberg, 175-179.