

Aristotle's Legacy

Brief: To be effective, today's public speakers should follow the guidance of the Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, who taught us that "ethos," a public speaker's overall character and history, is essential in establishing credibility with their audience.

Learning Objective: Understand the importance of ethos in the context of its historical roots.

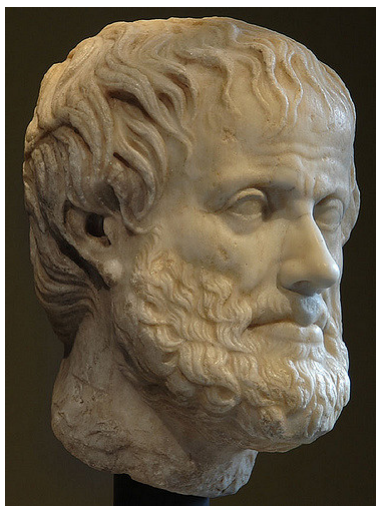
Key Terms:

- Aristotle: An influential ancient Greek philosopher, logician, and scientist.
- Ethos: The character or fundamental values of a person, people, culture, or movement.
- Rhetoric: The art of using language, especially public speaking, as a means to persuade. Also, the title of Aristotle's writings on persuasive speaking.
- Applied Ethics: A discipline of philosophy that applies ethical theory to real-life situations.

Ancient Greece: The Foundation of Western Culture

Ancient Greece, the period from 1100–146 BCE, is considered by most historians to be the foundational culture of Western civilization. Greek culture exerted a powerful influence on the Ancient Roman Empire, which then carried a version of it to many parts of Europe. More than 2000 years later, the influence of Ancient Greece on language, politics, educational systems, philosophy, art and architecture is still readily seen.

Aristotle: The Father of Western Philosophy



A marble bust of Aristotle

Most historians consider Aristotle, an ancient Greek philosopher and scientist born in 384 BCE, to be Ancient Greece's most influential figure. Known as the "Father of Western Philosophy," Aristotle devoted his life to making the various existing philosophies of Greek culture, including those of his famous predecessors Plato and Socrates, easier to understand and therefore more accessible.

One of Aristotle's most important works, *Rhetoric*, proposes that a public speaker can use three basic kinds of appeals to persuade his audience: ethos (an appeal to the speaker's character), pathos (an appeal to the audience's emotion), and logos (an appeal to logical reasoning).

Ethos

Ethos, a Greek word meaning "character," is used to describe the guiding beliefs or ideals that characterize a community, nation, or ideology. In public speaking, a speaker's ethos extends to and is shaped by their overall moral character and history. In the 21st century, we often equate ethos with credibility.

According to Aristotle, there are three categories of character that contribute to a person's ethos:

- Phronesis: useful skills and wisdom
- Arete: virtue
- Eunoia: goodwill towards the audience

In Aristotle's view, ethos does not really belong to the speaker. Instead, a speaker's ethos, or credibility, belongs to the perception of to the audience. In other words, the audience determines whether a speaker has credibility or not.

From Ethos: Ethics

The English word "ethics" is derived from the Ancient Greek word *ēthikós* meaning "relating to one's character," which itself comes from the root word *ēthos* meaning "character, moral nature." In the academic world, ethics is a branch of philosophy that involves systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong conduct. In our everyday world, our ethics is our guide to help us determine how to "do the right thing."

In the 21st century, the three major areas of academic study within ethics are:

- Meta-ethics: concerning the theoretical meaning and reference of moral propositions
- Normative ethics: concerning the practical means of determining a moral course of action
- Applied ethics: concerning what a person is obligated (or permitted) to do in a specific situation or a particular domain of action

Applied Ethics

Applied ethics is a discipline of philosophy that applies ethical theory to real-life situations. The discipline has many specialized fields, such as engineering ethics, bioethics, geoethics, public service ethics, and business ethics.

Public speaking ethics refers to how ethical standards, also known as an “ethical code,” are applied to real-life public speaking situations—a concept that transcends the centuries, from Ancient Greece to modern times.

From Concept to Action

Think of a real-life situation you experienced that required you to make an ethical decision. What factors influenced your decision? How did you know you were “doing the right thing?”

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