

## Lecture 8: Logos, Ethos, Pathos

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Martin Luther King Jr.'s *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (ed. James M. Washington).

### Every argument uses logic, ethics, and feeling in different ratios. Why?

In the previous lectures, we came to understand rhetoric as a kind of speech-act in which we have to convince an audience, an interpretive community, of something. Then we moved on to the macro-structure of arguments, how they are assembled in the large scale. Then we delved into the internal, logical structure of arguments: where you start (the enthymeme) and how you link things together (*If* → *Then* statements, syllogisms). Finally, we looked at the ways logic can go wrong and how it can be manipulated via logical fallacies. Now we are ready to move into analysis of the elements of arguments that everyone usually *recognizes* as rhetorical: In this lecture, we will look at the differing proportions of logic, ethics, and emotion in arguments; in the next lectures, we move to figures of speech.

### Logos, Ethos, and Pathos

All arguments (even scientific journal articles; even weepy television commercials for Save the Children) contain *some* elements of logic, ethics, and emotion. Aristotle recognized this in his *The Art of Rhetoric*, noting that all arguments contain *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*—to be slightly more precise, he said that logos, ethos, and pathos were the three types of rhetorical proof. If it is helpful for memory purposes, you can think of the three pieces, logos, ethos, and pathos, as logic, ethics, and sympathy (the root words are recognizable).

### Logos

Logos is the Greek word for “word” or utterance. Although we think of a logical argument as being somewhat mathematical (for good reasons), Aristotle’s point in using “logos” here is to say that the argument is constructed out of words, not so much emotions or feelings or moral values, but simply the words themselves and how they fit together. Logos is focused on abstract relationships and rationality.

All arguments have to have logic. Even when you are talking about the heartfelt pleadings of a mother asking for clemency for her son about to be executed for murder, there is still logos in the argument: Please spare my son because not doing so will hurt me. Even the most rabid screed of a Red Sox fan about how the Yankees are the root of all evil still has a core of (twisted perhaps) logic: I love the Red Sox, the Yankees are an obstacle to the success of the Red Sox, therefore the Yankees are evil (because anything the Red Sox do is good). Even the most mindless advertising or political slogans

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have a core of logos: Our product or candidate is good. Therefore you should buy or vote for him.

## **Ethos**

Ethos, the second of the three essential elements of an argument, is defined as an appeal to the character of the speaker. When someone says, “As a wife, a mother, and a member of the school board for twenty years, I think I am qualified to tell you how to vote on this issue,” she is focused heavily on ethos.

What I am about to claim goes against what major rhetorical handbooks and professors of rhetoric say, but I nevertheless believe that it might be useful—in the sense of helping you with your own rhetoric—to expand Aristotle’s definition of ethos to include not only individual character but also general ethical and moral systems. I say this because it makes the whole three-fold system work a little bit better. Let us take ethos, then, as also including reference to principles of human behavior that cannot necessarily be proven by syllogism but may be widely shared by an audience. For instance, if a speaker says “the real measure of our society is how well we treat our most vulnerable citizens” he or she is not really working completely in logic, but instead is attempting to invoke agreement from a hearer based on an assumed shared ethical and moral system.

Drout’s modification of Aristotle is to treat “ethos” as “ethics” rather than as personal character. I think it does explain the workings of arguments a little more effectively: Sometimes a writer or speaker will use cold, rational logic (but this can get enormously boring). Sometimes the speaker or writer uses emotion (pathos), and sometimes the speaker focuses on ethics.

Remember that even when a speaker is focusing on “ethos,” he or she also needs to have logic in place. Without some logic, arguments become random or confusing messes. This necessity of logos means that even when we are working in an ethical system, we need to follow cause and effect, syllogism, and consistency.

But, Aristotle noted, logos and ethos are not enough. Strictly logical arguments can be beautiful in mathematics, but if they often do not have a human component, it is going to be hard to get anyone to care about them. And arguments about human things—what actually happened, what we should do (forensic and deliberative)—are the most important arguments that we have.

## **Pathos**

Exactly because our arguments are important, and because they are about humans, the third element of Aristotle’s triad is necessary: Pathos, feeling, is also a part of every argument. Pathos can be the primary component of an argument or it can be a minor element, but it is always there. Even the driest-seeming scientific paper contains a tiny bit of pathos. Even when we are at a “just the facts, ma’am” stage of an argument, there is enough implicit pathos in the argument to at least justify our paying attention: “This is important!” includes pathos, even “this is at least important enough to pay attention to.”

Pathos leavens the supposed sterility of logic or the equally dangerous pitfall of hectoring that a strict ethical argument can fall prey to. Pathos often puts a human face on difficult issues, and because our human minds are wired to be

particularly interested in the doings of other humans, we are more likely to pay attention to, and apply our intuition to, arguments that use the right amount of pathos.

The key point in this lecture, then, is that each argument includes some logos, some ethos, and some pathos; the art of rhetoric lies in blending them in the right proportions. This is often very difficult to do. Effective speakers and writers are those who are good at choosing which arguments require which balance of the three ingredients: In law school, there's a saying, "When the facts support your case, argue the facts. When the law supports your case, argue the law. And when neither the facts nor the law support your case, pound on the table." Logos, ethos, pathos.

As an analyst of rhetoric, you should, of course, be suspicious of pathos, because it is in some ways the easy way out, and it is sometimes an attempt to short-circuit reason. But given a lot of the history of the twentieth century, we can also note that completely ignoring pathos is a common and very dangerous failure of large bureaucracies and other impersonal structures: In our current social structure, it may be a little too easy to forget about individual humans and human suffering, and the use of pathos can help us avoid that problem.

For the remainder of this lecture, then, I want to look at some elements of a great piece of rhetoric and show how the author uses logos, ethos, and pathos in various combinations. It is, again, Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail." As he gets toward the middle of the letter, King writes:

**"We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights."**

This is an example of ethos. The very conception of "rights" is a form of ethos, and by saying "constitutional" and "God-given," King is invoking the two major value systems in play in the United States at the time he gave the speech. But note there is also some logos here. The number "340" requires logic for you to figure out what he means (it is the time since the arrival of the Pilgrims to the year 1963, when King gave his speech). He continues:

**"The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jet-like speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter."**

This is a combination of logos and ethos, with just a little pathos thrown in: The nations of Asia and Africa were indeed moving quickly toward political independence in the 1960s, and America was moving slowly away from segregation. The ethos here is that America should not be behind Asia and Africa. The pathos is generated by the contrast of jet-like speed for something as large as political independence with the horse-and-buggy pace for something as small as the right to buy a cup of coffee. King goes on:

**"Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, 'Wait.' But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an**

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airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children . . .”

I'm going to stop there, because this is such a beautiful example of the *effective* and *correct* use of pathos. King brings in the tears in a child's eyes and uses this as a symbol of the entire, larger problem of segregation. The ethos is obviously there, and the logic is also there, particularly when King continues to say how his daughter's mental world is beginning to be clouded by the idea of inferiority and by bitterness toward white people. But the pathos of the tears in the eyes of King's daughter is what pulls the entire piece together, and to my mind, at that moment, early in the letter, King had already won the argument. Everything works (logos, ethos, and pathos) and the argument performs the highest function that rhetoric can perform: to convince a hostile and unwilling audience of something that is not merely what the speaker wants, but which is, in the much larger sense of the world, true.

The use of logos, ethos, and pathos is essential to all arguments, and all arguments have to have all of the foundations that we have discussed previously. But there is a lot more that speakers can do to delight and move their audiences.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. What did Aristotle say are the three elements of all arguments?
2. Why are people more likely to pay attention to arguments that contain elements of pathos?

### Suggested Reading

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King, Martin Luther, Jr. *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Ed. James M. Washington. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990.