National Institute for Civil Discourse Research Brief No. 4: Classical Rhetoric, Contemporary Science and Modern Civil Discourse

Key Issues

Must ethical civil discourse rely on rhetoric that limits appeals to some kinds of emotions?

What are feasible and desirable ways to limit but at the same time invoke and channel emotions in service to reasoned debate about political issues and policies?

Overview

Concern about rhetorical manipulation of emotion is as longstanding as the study of rhetoric itself. The classical rhetoricians remind us that audiences always are in a precarious position when rhetoric is deployed. Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian expressed awareness of the manipulative powers of rhetoric and the vulnerability of audiences, and offered guidelines for how rhetoric could be deployed ethically. The connotation of the term “rhetoric” today is not always positive, and this is based on the misconception that the art of rhetoric condones and encourages persuasion by any means necessary. But the teachings of Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian reveal an imperative to promote what each perceived as an ethical solution to public discourse, and all three shared a common purpose of maintaining integrity in civic oratory. Collectively, these classical rhetoricians expressed great concern about appeals to emotions, including anger and fear.

Given advances in the science of emotions since the time of the classical rhetoricians, we can ask whether—and to what extent—teachings of the classical rhetoricians can be useful today. Upending a longstanding presumption of the Western tradition, contemporary science instructs that emotion is not the antithesis of reason. Because the capacity to experience emotion may be a perquisite for reasoned decision-making, and no political issue or object is devoid of emotional resonance, an “emotional politics” does not present a stark contrast to a “rational politics.” At the same time, current research suggests that emotion-based appeals are more persuasive than cognition-based appeals. Appeals to some emotions in some situations can impede reasoned discussion.

In light of the classics, contemporary science, and fidelity to the First Amendment, we presume that politics involves passionate commitments and arguments, as well as fundamental disagreements. We can likewise draw on the force of the emotions underlying our commitment to civil discourse to help create an ethic, culture and set of institutional incentives for civil discourse. These would aim to dramatically reduce purposive or careless deception, falsehood and “misinformation,” exaggerated claims, verbal abuse and intimidation, ad hominem attacks and personal vitriol, while enhancing issue-focused discussion, empathy and mutual respect, as well as willingness to debate in good faith, listen as much as we speak, consider the evidence, explain the reasoning behind our points of view, and remain open to ideas and evidence suggesting that our established opinions could be wrong, so that we can hear and consider seriously the reasons of those with whom we disagree.

Arguments and Findings

Classical Thought

The common thread in the teachings of the rhetoricians of the ancient world was an underlying but tangible fear of the susceptibility of audiences and their emotions to the persuasive powers of an unscrupulous rhetorician. For instance, the ancient rhetoricians collectively understood that emotional stimulation is effective and perhaps inevitable in political discourse. But they wanted to discourage rhetoric that directly targeted an audience’s emotions, prompting anger and enmity.
Plato (ca. 428-347 BCE) believed that rhetoric as practiced in his time was necessarily deceitful, and he blamed rhetoric for the political chaos in Athens.² Plato’s charges against rhetoric were directed toward the Sophists, teachers in ancient Greece whose relativistic philosophy was antithetical to Plato’s pursuit of a higher order of truth. Plato’s dialogue Gorgias portrayed how politically opportunistic rhetoric could deceive and manipulate audiences. Gorgias provided a limited and unjust portrayal of the Sophists and their philosophy and pedagogy. The Sophists likely were not as morally corrupt as Plato has suggested³--for example, they were among the earliest opponents of slavery in the ancient world.⁴ But Plato’s apprehension of and warnings about rhetoric wielded by an opportunistic speaker of manipulative prowess have had an enormous influence on the Western intellectual tradition, so much so that today the term “sophistry” connotes deception to most, and “rhetoric” connotes unscrupulous manipulation to many.

Aristotle (384-322 BCE), a student of Plato’s, was less interested in dismissing rhetoric and more interested in providing guidelines for how it could be deployed effectively and ethically. Although Plato popularized a myopic conceptualization of rhetoric associated solely with the Sophistic tradition, Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric survived to remain prevalent today in most scholarly circles. Aristotle defined rhetoric as “an ability, in each particular case, to see the available means of persuasion.”⁵ Rhetoric, Aristotle argued, is the “antistrophos [counterpart, correlative or coordinate] to dialectic,”⁶ a process by which two or more individuals engage in a discussion about some topic and collectively determine what is true.

In his Rhetoric, Aristotle outlined the three types of appeals: ethos, logos, and pathos. Ethos pertains to the speaker’s character, logos to “what is said,” or simply the “reason or argument inherent in speech,”⁷ and pathos to the emotional appeal. Scholars have debated what Aristotle meant precisely by his concept of ethos, but Aristotle did directly claim that persuasion through ethos was the most authoritative appeal. Aristotle argued that persuasion from character should result from the speech itself, and not from a previous opinion of the speaker held by the audience.⁸ A persuasive speech would reflect three traits in the character of the speaker: practical wisdom, virtue, and good will.⁹

Aristotle’s concept of rhetoric was based on his knowledge of the civil court system, in which citizens (there were no professional lawyers) generally did not rely on their fame or reputation to sway a jury.¹⁰ Thus, he would not have foreseen modern audiences’ tendencies to be swayed by various aspects of a speaker’s reputation,¹¹ or the vitriolic political rhetoric of particular concern today. While it is probable that arguments ad hominem—attacks on an opponent’s character in a manner not relevant to issues or policies at hand—are not as prevalent today as conventional wisdom would presume,¹² such arguments still are of great concern. The unfortunate reality is that irrelevant attacks on an opponent’s character occur frequently not because they are scrupulous means of persuasion, but rather because politicians and their campaign advisors perceive that vilifying an opponent will be effective, even though systematic research does not necessarily support this claim.¹³

In addition to his emphasis on ethos, Aristotle discussed in considerable detail the role of logic in the persuasive act. He offered guidelines for common lines of argument (topoi), such as the use of examples, maxims, and enthymemes (rhetorical syllogisms based on probable opinion), refuting arguments to amplify a speaker’s own claims, and avoiding fallacies in logic.¹⁴ Despite this emphasis on ethos and logos, Aristotle’s discussion of pathos makes it clear that he understood that humans are emotional beings. Several handbooks on rhetoric in ancient Greece primarily focused on providing guidelines for emotional appeals. Aristotle generally eschewed the handbook tradition, but nonetheless provided taxonomies of emotions and devoted much space in his own work to discussing how a speaker could manipulate audience emotions including: anger, calmness, friendliness, enmity, fear, confidence, shame, shamelessness, kindliness, un-kindliness, pity, indignation, envy, and emulation.¹⁵ In short, although he does not explicitly advise his users to avoid appealing to the emotions of an audience, Aristotle seemed...
to presume that even the most logically-sound argument presented by the most righteous and good-willed speaker could be dismissed easily in favor of an emotionally manipulative speech deployed by his or her unscrupulous opponent.

Cicero (106-43 BCE) was the most influential rhetorician of the Roman period, and the political climate in which he wrote was turbulent and violent. While Rome experienced extreme governmental instability, there were political leaders who acquired power and influence through questionable means. After Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 BCE, Cicero was fearful that Mark Antony would rise to power as a tyrant, exercising his power and rule through military force. Cicero saw it as his duty to protect the Roman citizenry from Mark Antony. Oratory was threatening to ruthless dictatorship, and orators who opposed the state were censored, or in the case of Cicero, executed.16

The desire to subdue tyranny and restore political stability compelled Cicero to compose his most famous work, De Oratore (On the Ideal Orator). Where Aristotle insisted that appeals to a speaker’s character should be based on the speech itself, Cicero was more realistic in acknowledging how readily audiences were won over by a speaker’s prestige, accomplishments and reputation.17 Cicero understood that audiences could be swayed by external knowledge of the speaker’s character.

De Oratore suggested that appeals to a speaker’s character be deployed subtly but that such an effort was inconsequential if a speaker could rely on violent emotional arousal of the audience.18 Cicero added that an orator could easily manipulate an audience’s susceptibility to fear and anger.19 Cicero likened a speaker who possessed oratorical prowess, but lacked integrity and the highest measure of good sense, to a madman in possession of weapons.20 Cicero argued that the ideal orator—one who did not exist at the time but who, if he existed, could rescue Roman society from its dilapidated, tumultuous state—need not summon such formulaic and exploitative rhetoric. The obvious and unfortunate limitation to Cicero’s treatise is that refraining from use of unscrupulous rhetoric does not mean that one’s opponent will do the same.

Quintilian (ca. 35-96 CE), in his Institutio Oratoria (The Orator’s Education), like his predecessors, sought a corrective to the corrupt uses of rhetoric. He emphasized the integrity of the speaker and tried to ground the art of rhetoric in moral philosophy. Quintilian insisted that a good orator be of good moral character, and he claimed this to be an essential trait of the child or young adult seeking instruction in oratory.21 It then would be the instructor’s responsibility to develop and nurture the student’s capacity for honesty, integrity and humility.22

Emphasis on the moral character of the student of oratory is understandable given Quintilian’s concerns about the role of audience emotions in the persuasive act. Quintilian believed that the emotional appeal was the “queen of all” appeals,23 so much so that skillful emotional manipulation could sway even the most impartial audience member. He argued that it could even draw a courtroom judge away from what is factually true.24 Quintilian reminded his readers that even judges could be swayed, through their emotions, to develop a personal investment in a court case, much akin to impassioned lovers who were not able to think rationally.25

Quintilian famously declared that a good orator must be a good person.26 For Quintilian, oratory practiced by an evil person was in fact not oratory, since eloquence could not be possessed by a person of vice.27 In other words, an evil person could be persuasive and move audiences at will, but this was not oratory as conceived by Quintilian. The solution Quintilian offered was to educate students in moral philosophy at an early age.28 It is not clear what Quintilian’s “moral philosophy” curriculum would resemble today, but his underlying argument suggests that a well-educated and well-informed speaker could persuade an audience without resorting to deceit or other unscrupulous methods.
In sum, the rhetorical treatises of Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian would suggest that appeals to the emotions will invariably be a part of a persuasive act. None of the aforementioned figures overtly discouraged all emotional appeals. All acknowledged the significant role that emotion plays in audience persuasion, but likewise, all were apprehensive about the possibility of systematic exploitation of an audience’s emotions by an opportunistic or self-serving orator.

Modern Scientific Findings

Current scientific work, from cognitive neuroscience to social and cognitive psychology, sociology and political science is consistent with the classics in suggesting the persuasiveness of various kinds of emotional appeals.\(^2\) From the contemporary sciences, we have considerable research investigating, for example, how emotion is implicated in consciousness, rational appraisals and decision-making,\(^3\) the different ways specific emotions are rooted in and elicited by social structures and social interaction, the ways emotions likewise are consequential for social structures and social interaction, including political discourse and behavior,\(^4\) and the diverse emotional resonances and persuasiveness of various kinds of political messages and policies.\(^5\) Consider the following:

- “Affective cues” (i.e., emotional cues) are known to have “considerable influence on voter judgment.”\(^6\)
- Not only political candidates, but also political institutions (such as Congress), issues, and positions generate emotional responses.\(^7\)
- Emotionally resonant messages “prime” individuals’ responses to a broad range of economic and social policies and issues.\(^8\)
- The persuasiveness and motivational capacity of symbols such as national flags and war memorials comes at least in part from their emotional component.\(^9\)
- While political attitudes are based both in affect (emotion) and cognitions, affect-based persuasion is more influential than cognition-based persuasion in changing an attitude that is affect-based. Meanwhile, cognition-based persuasion is not more influential than affect-based persuasion in changing an attitude that is cognitively based.\(^10\)

In short, and consistent with the concern of classical rhetoricians, “affect-based persuasive messages have an advantage over cognitive appeals, a finding that is especially pertinent during political campaigns.”\(^11\) As Aristotle recognized, political appeals can evoke a wide variety of both negative and positive emotions including anger, fear, guilt, shame, anxiety, contempt, disgust, dislike, resentment, envy, hope, optimism, empathy, compassion, satisfaction, happiness, liking and pride. Current scholarship focuses on the political role of both such positive emotions as hope,\(^12\) and such negative emotions as anger\(^13\) and fear.\(^14\) Not only do different emotions have different likely consequences in politics,\(^15\) but the same type of event (such as an individual’s loss of social status) can lead to different emotional consequences for the individual depending on their attributions of responsibility for that situation.\(^16\) Similarly, the same emotion (such as fear) can lead to different behavioral consequences, again depending on the person’s attributions of responsibility for her feelings.\(^17\) Attributions also are important in distinguishing between such emotions as guilt and shame, which in ordinary parlance are often equated, but which researchers have shown are distinct and are likely to have different consequences, with guilt more likely to be associated with pro-social emotions such as empathy and with amending one’s own behavior, and shame more likely to be associated with defensiveness, distance, anger and aggression.\(^18\) Making things even more complicated is that, depending on their own general perspective and political partisanship, people evaluate differently the issues and policies that cause some to experience and channel their anger into a politics that they believe expresses appropriate moral outrage.\(^19\)

At the same time, the longstanding presumption of the western tradition—that emotion is the antithesis of reason\(^20\)—cannot be maintained at least in the specific sense that neurological research suggests that the capacity to experience emotion is a prerequisite for the capacity to make
decisions in real-life situations.\textsuperscript{48} Unsurprisingly, research on emotion in politics now emphasizes that emotional politics should not be seen as a stark contrast to a rational politics.\textsuperscript{49} While researchers distinguish conceptually between emotion and cognition and have examined the independent influence of emotional and cognitive processes respectively,\textsuperscript{50} they likewise have discovered that affective evaluations generally arise before conscious perception, and that “instead of a contrast between cognitive and affective evaluations, there is a contrast between affective only and cognitive plus affective evaluations. It is highly unlikely that any target of consideration is devoid of emotional content or influence.”\textsuperscript{51}

\textbf{In Sum}

\textit{Pathos} or emotion-based appeals are common and often effective in political life, but emotion and cognition are deeply intertwined, and emotion need not detract from, but rather may be a prerequisite for, “reasoned” deliberation. Consistent with this, perhaps we can draw on the force of the emotions underlying our commitment to civil discourse to help create an ethic, culture and set of institutional incentives for civil discourse. These would aim to dramatically \textit{reduce} purposive or careless deception, falsehood and “misinformation,” exaggerated claims, verbal abuse and intimidation, \textit{ad hominem} attacks and personal vitriol, while enhancing issue-focused discussion, empathy and mutual respect, as well as willingness to debate in good faith, listen as much as we speak, consider the evidence, explain the reasoning behind our points of view, and remain open to ideas and evidence suggesting that our established opinions could be wrong, so that we can hear and consider seriously the reasons of those with whom we disagree. All of this would be consistent with the necessarily passionate debates, fundamental disagreements, and First Amendment principles that characterize a vibrant representative democracy.

1. Jerry W. Lee, Department of English, The University of Arizona, and Robin Stryker, Department of Sociology and Director of Research, National Institute for Civil Discourse, The University of Arizona, prepared this brief.
2. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, “Plato,” In \textit{The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings From Classical Times to the Present}, ed. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001, pp. 80-87, 81.
18. The dialogue of Cicero’s \textit{De Oratore}, contains two main speakers: Crassus (who generally is seen as representing Cicero), and Antonius, whose ideas Crassus (and Cicero by proxy) generally opposes. The character of Antonius argues that appeals to a speaker’s reputation and prestige are “enhanced by a gentle tone of voice on the part of the
orator, an expression on his face intimating restraint, and kindliness in the use of his words” but that “this entire mode of speaking is most effective in cases where there is not much opportunity to use some form of violent emotional arousal to set the juror’s heart aflame” (Cicero, 2001, supra n. 16, 2.182-183).

19 Cicero, 2001, supra n. 17, 2.186.
22 Quintilian, 2001, supra n. 17, 2.186.
23 Quintilian, 2001, supra n. 17, 3.55.
24 Quintilian, 2001, supra n. 17, 6.2.5.
25 Quintilian, 2001, supra n. 17, 6.2.6.
26 Quintilian, 2001, supra n. 17, 12.1.1.
27 Quintilian, 2001, supra n. 17, 12.1.32.
28 Quintilian, 2001, supra n. 17, 12.2.15-20.

33 Marcus 2000, supra n. 29, p. 231, citations omitted.
34 Marcus 2000, supra n. 29.
35 Kinder and Sanders 1996, supra, n. 32; Mendelberg 2001 supra, n. 32.
36 Marcus 2000, supra n. 29.
43 Turner and Stets 2006, supra n. 31.
44 Turner and Stets 2006, supra n. 31.
46 See e.g. Ost 2004, supra n. 41. Where anger leads to “simpler cognitive processing, less attention to available information and greater reliance on heuristics,” this can be reversed when people are told that they must justify their reactions. Thus, anger need not lead to lower quality decision-making (Marcus 2000, supra n. 29, p. 233, citing Jennifer S. Lerner, Julie H. Goldberg and Philip E. Tetlock, “Sober Send Thought: The Effects of Accountability, Anger and Authoritarianism on Attributions of Responsibility,” Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 24, 1998, pp. 563-574.
48 Damasio 1995, 1999, supra n. 30; Tangey et al 2007, supra n. 31. Damasio argues that affect is central to rational decision making involving the weighing of costs and benefits of alternative courses of action pertaining to personal and social situations.
49 Marcus 2000, supra n. 29; Goodwin et al 2001, supra n. 29; Aminzade and McAdam 2001, supra n. 39.
51 Marcus 2000, supra n. 29.