

# The Ethics of Logos, Pathos and Ethos

It is generally understood that there are three primary approaches to making a persuasive argument: logos, pathos and ethos. Furthermore, it is generally believed that the best persuasive arguments use all three in some combination. Perhaps twenty years ago, I would have simply agreed to this and not thought much about it. After all, as I will show, all three are powerful persuasions, and it is only logical that a cocktail of them will be exponentially more powerful still. But in those days, it seems to me, there was a prevailing sense of sanity and integrity in most discussions. Perhaps it was a delusion, but I'm hard-pressed to find specific examples of rampant deceit to show me otherwise. Also, there was a time when mainstream left was more comfortable talking to mainstream right than with the radical left (I have never experienced a time when mainstream right embraced the radical right).

There was a time when politicians and media personalities of both sides would use phrases like "They make a good point, but they go too far with it," on a regular basis. Today, I almost never hear any proposed policy promoted based on its value to society, but instead on whether it supports a political ideology or not. I forget who said it, but I remember when Sonny Bono (a strong liberal) died and a fellow congressman claimed that the last of the great negotiators of congress died with him. Sadly, this observation has proven to be prophetic (ironically, the original draft of this document was unintentionally typed almost exactly 25 years to the day of his death).

**A) Definitions:** Before I go into detail on what I think is wrong in persuasive arguments today and a proposal to fix it, let me explain what each of these words mean, how they are used in debates and arguments, and how they are being abused.

## 1) Logos:

The whole secret of mysticism is this: that man can understand everything by the help of what he does not understand. The morbid logician seeks to make everything lucid, and succeeds in making everything mysterious. The mystic allows one thing to be mysterious, and everything else becomes lucid.  
-G.K. Chesterton

When used in debate or argument, this term refers to using logic and reason to promote one's ideas. Known facts, reasonable assumptions and logical inferences are presented in order to arrive at a desired conclusion. One could describe the answer a student comes up with in his math class after solving a problem as an argument of logos. Unless a mistake is made in his logic process, he should have an answer that is very persuasive as being the right answer. However, few things in the rest of our lives are so regimented and well-defined that logos can be so dominant as it is in the field of mathematics.

Unlike most math problems, not all relevant facts for other arguments may be known (and many may never be known), meaning assumptions need to be made. Facts may be presented that seem important at first glance, but are actually irrelevant. Even facts that can be agreed upon as being true may be considered more important to some people than to others. Besides these considerations, misapplications of logic (fallacies), are commonly made by even the smartest and most experienced people. But I do not have an issue with any of these problems. Indeed, it is because of these problems that good debates and well-explained arguments are necessary. We need a good representation of

people's views so such problems can be exposed and fixed as best as possible.

No, the real problem is quite the opposite. The real problem is acedia (intellectual laziness) on the part of the listener. Rather than execute one's rightful and moral obligation to find errors, weaknesses, and other problems in another's argument, most people are all too happy to assume that ideas they like must be right (voluntarism) and those they don't like must be wrong (skepticism). As a result, much noise is made on even small matters, but honest debate with logos rarely takes place today. If people were willing to spend half as much time learning about current political and local events as they do their fantasy football stats for the week, this country would have a strong logos going into debates that dictate how our daily lives will be lived. Twenty years ago, this country still had a strong Christian foundation. Even the most deceitful news makers and news tellers were careful to avoid saying or doing anything that would be seen as obviously lying, distorting, or slandering. There was a time when too much deceit could, and often did, lead to ruination of oneself and redemption for the one they attacked. But Christianity in the U.S. is a shell of its former self, with less than 1 in 5 going to church now, and things are getting worse every year. It should be no surprise that we are now seeing shameless efforts to lie to, cheat on, and steal from We the People in the news and politics. Unless We the People demand logos in how our country is run, we will get even more of what is happening now.

## 2) Pathos:

In the higher aspect of this first temptation [turning stones to bread], arising from the fact that a man cannot feel the things he believes except under certain conditions of physical well-being dependent upon food, the answer is the same: *A man does not live by his feelings any more than by bread.*

-George MacDonald, UNSPOKEN SERMONS, First Series, *The Temptation in the Wilderness* (italics mine)

Pathos is an argument made by appealing to emotions. When a child wants a toy and the parent buys it for him because the parent knows he will cry otherwise, the child has won an argument by pathos. Almost any emotion can be used in an argument, and this is not necessarily a bad thing. Slavery, women's right to vote, laws against animal cruelty, and many other cases have been won primarily because emotional appeals convinced people that something needed to be done. Much good can and has been done this way.

But there seems to be a massive increase in using guilt, shame and fear while arguing with pathos, and I find this a terrifying concept. In 1999, Peter Singer wrote *Singer Solution to World Poverty*, and it was almost exclusively based on the pathos of guilt and shame. Ultimately, Singer concluded that anything an American had that was in excess of an absolute need should cause that American shame for not instead donating it to the poor (specifically, any income over \$30,000 per household should be donated). Otherwise, one "failed miserably as a moral agent." And Singer is not just some random writer; he is one of the most influential voices in colleges today on the topic of ethics.

Prior to the Dobbs decision, over a million lives a year were ended in the U.S. through abortion (representing almost half the fatalities in the U.S. each year). I remember hearing of a congressman (whose name now escapes me) saying that he was originally against abortion until two women talked to him about how horrible it would have been for them to have to raise their children. He then began supporting an industry that proudly killed a million unborn children a year for the sake of protecting two women who did not want to face the consequences of their actions. Such is the power of pathos.

While emotions are real, an emotion is only real for the one experiencing it. One may sympathize with another, but one cannot have the exact same experience of that feeling. An emotional appeal is an appeal of one person to the many. This is why pathos must never be the primary, much less the only, means of winning an argument. The best place for pathos is to entice the audience to consider one's idea in a favorable light. It may also be used in trivial matters, or to break a deadlock when logos finds itself at a standstill.

### 3) Ethos:

Perhaps you'd better come in, Mr. Walters. May I present Boris Podolsky, Kurt Gödel, Nathan Liebknicht? Three of the greatest minds of the 20th century, and amongst them they can't change a light bulb.  
-Walter Matthau as Albert Einstein, from romantic comedy film *I.Q.*

Ethos is an argument founded on one's credibility. One's education, celebrity status, how well one presents oneself, one's connections, etc., are all used to prove that one must be right simply because one is who one is.

Certainly, one should expect an expert within a particular field to answer a given question correctly in his field of expertise more often than a non-expert. And if one does not talk or write like one is well-educated, then another has a right to be skeptical of whatever argument is made by one. But even so, the expert may still be wrong, and the apparently uneducated may be right. Again, logos comes back into play. An expert speaking within his field should be given the benefit of the doubt *unless* a case can be shown proving how he has been wrong, and research may likewise validate what the apparently uneducated person had to say.

And while it is not necessary to question every statement an expert has to say (why ask them in the first place if one is going to do all the research anyway?), it is dangerous to never question them at all, especially in fields they are *not* experts in. Albert Einstein, whose area of expertise was in theoretical physics, often gave opinions on political and economic matters that favored socialism, about which he knew little or nothing. For his efforts, socialists classified him as a "useful idiot." He was useful for endorsing their policies, but they knew he had no business helping them develop these policies. This is the greatest danger of ethos, especially when supported by acedia on the opposing side.

The second greatest danger of the ethos/acedia cocktail is self-serving experts. Will an expert be truthful when he stands to gain tens of millions of dollars from deciding one way as opposed to another (as Dr. Fauci did during the Covid panic)? I call this the second greatest danger, as it is generally easy to tell that an expert stands to gain from his bias. Of course, it might still be the right decision even if he does stand to gain. Once again, we come to the matter of logos. If something seems shady when an expert makes an argument, ask him to explain why he thinks so, and possibly even subject him to peer review.

**B) The Contemporary Persuasive Argument:** In a culture where one can reasonably expect people to tell the truth, even if biased, then how one presents an argument (logos, pathos, ethos) may very well not matter too much. But when *Roe v Wade* was decided, the U.S. broke from its Christian roots (contrary to popular belief, 51 of the 55 framers of the Constitution were practicing Christians, and in those days most churches required a vow to obey its tenets in order to be a member). Christianity is the

only religion in the world where honesty is more important than pragmatism. Since we broke from our Christian past, we can no longer reasonably assume other people are going to be honest in presenting their ideas. We cannot simply rely on pathos or ethos to convince us that an argument is right. We need to demand the logos so we can tell for ourselves. And this requires listening to both sides of an argument (although the logos of some ideas are so weak that only a little listening may be necessary). But this is not what is happening.

Pathos is being rigidly controlled today. Patriotism, honor, self-respect, dedication and many other positive emotions exist. But they are rarely seen anymore in an argument, mainly because they are now associated with racism, bigotry, misogyny, abuse and so on. Instead, people are being fed a steady diet of greed, fear, guilt, shame, hatred and insecurity in persuasive arguments. And ethos is not faring much better. Gone are the days when people like Princess Diana raised money to remove minefields in third world countries. Today, A-list movie and music stars are telling Americans that they will "have to leave the planet" (Cher) if a certain person were to be elected president. Even the smallest application of logos should have destroyed this ethos argument. But ethos won the day and people continue to pay higher and higher ticket prices to see these people perform.

We spent years being told to "listen to the science," and yet the science was never made available. A watchdog group made a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request for information from the FDA concerning their decision to allow vaccinations, and were told it will take 75 years to provide this information (a few months later, the process was streamlined so the wait was "only" going to be 50 years). It has literally taken congressional hearings (with Senator Rand Paul being the staunchest advocate for the truth) to force these agencies to release what little information has been made public. This should have been unacceptable, and the deceit was blatantly obvious. "Listening to the science" implies a persuasion by logos, yet it was really a persuasion by ethos. This was coupled with heavy censoring on social media sites. There is currently a lawsuit filed against the FDA, but for the vast numbers of people already inoculated, any dangers are now too late to be avoided. This is what ethos without logos looks like, and we have governments who want to make this the new *status quo*. Biden has already tried to start two Orwellian "Ministry of Truth" offices and is now (January 2023) talking of a third, while the European Union already claims they have this power and will use it if Elon Musk doesn't bend to their will with Twitter.

**C) The Ethical Persuasive Argument:** As mentioned above, logos is the only persuasive argument style that actually seeks the truth, even if it falls short of this goal. Pathos can only explain the truth of a single person, and ethos is an act of faith that truth is being represented. Accepting an argument of pathos and ethos leaves one vulnerable to deceit.

Logos, therefore, should be the foundation of any persuasive argument. Pathos and ethos still serve important purposes. Pathos can tip the scales of a closely argued logos debate, and ethos can help avoid going over boring minutia and/or speed up the debate by not having to constantly reference everything. If I may use an analogy, it is true that a bike frame (logos) is useless without tires (pathos and ethos), but tires without a frame are worse than useless -- they have no purpose or direction.

With this in mind, anyone listening to a persuasive argument or debate should be suspicious of arguments that are made largely or entirely on pathos/ethos. Demand a logos to justify why this is a matter of concern at all. If the persuader is unwilling or unable to provide a meaningful logos, then the argument should be discarded out of hand. This person does not have an argument; he is trying to be manipulative.

**Conclusions:** While I do not question the usefulness of any of the three primary forms of persuasive argument, I feel society has focused more on what it *can* do as opposed to what it *should* do. It is extremely naive to believe those abusing these forms will correct themselves on their own good will. It is also pointless to expect some hero to suddenly show up on the scene and fix the problem. As long as people, through their acedia, do not demand and accept a true logos, then all this hero will accomplish is to add to the noise already going on.

If one is not willing to make the time and effort to demand logos, then one is going to be abused by the very people he supports (and probably won't realize it). They will play one's emotions to their benefit and/or dazzle them with impressive but meaningless celebrity status. While there are some cases where addressing the logos is difficult or impossible, the internet has removed nearly every barrier for the common man in determining the logos himself. There is almost no excuse for not knowing better. At least until some celebrity is able to convince enough people to be afraid of "misinformation." If that happens, I fear all is lost.

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