Plato, Xenophon, and the Uneven Temporalities of Ethos in the Trial of Socrates

Abstract

Many rhetorical theories of ethos mark their relationship with time by focusing on two temporal poles: the timely ethos and the timeless ethos. But between these two temporal poles, ethos is also durative; it lingers, shifts, accumulates, and dissipates over time. Although scholarship often foregrounds the kairotic and static senses of ethos popularized in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, this article highlights how the chronic elements of ethos are no less important to rhetoric. By examining Xenophon’s and Plato’s representations of the trial of Socrates, this article contends that these competing views about the temporalities of ethos have a storied history that predates Aristotle’s writings. This analysis also expands received understandings of Plato’s contributions to rhetoric by illuminating how his view of ethos is deeply intertwined with ongoing philosophical practice. The article concludes by arguing that rhetorical studies has much to gain by more closely attending to the cumulative aspects of ethos.

Keywords: Plato’s Apology; the Apology of Socrates; rhetorical character; philosophy and rhetoric; rhetoric and time; kairotic ethos; chronic ethos

Acknowledgements: Special thanks to Paul Woodruff for first helping me see Plato’s writings through a more capacious lens. Thanks also to Dana Anderson for his patience in shaping early iterations of these ideas. I’m also grateful for the feedback from Ned O’Gorman, Erik Bengtson, Craig A. Meyer, and the blind reviewers.

In 399 BCE, Socrates was accused by his political enemies of serious crimes, convicted in court, and subsequently executed. Today, only two texts about Socrates’ trial remain: Plato’s *The Apology of Socrates* and Xenophon’s *Socrates Defense to the Jury*. [[1]](#endnote-1) Both Plato and Xenophon treat Socrates’ ethos as an essential aspect of his demise, but they provide conflicting views of the role that character plays in a rhetorically informed democracy. Xenophon positions the abrasive ethos that Socrates kairotically crafts during his defense speech as the cause of his conviction and execution. Plato, on the other hand, sees the ethos that Socrates has accumulated over years of philosophical inquiry in Athens as the primary source of his death sentence. While neither author offers a wholly novel conceptualization of ethos in these texts, their contribution is significant precisely because it underscores how understanding ethos requires attending to specific moments in time as well as an awareness of how rhetorical actions unfold over time. Such a well-rounded understanding of ethos is necessary, moreover, because the persistent prominence of Aristotelian rhetoric in our discipline leads to a tendency to focus scholarly attention on individual kairotic displays of ethos, as Xenophon does. Although studying such discrete moments of rhetorical interaction are undoubtedly vital to the practical art of rhetoric, ethos also has an important way of accumulating rhetorical force over time, as Plato depicts. Together, then, these texts demonstrate how developing a more complex understanding of rhetorical character necessitates contending with the many temporal aspects of ethos. Thus, while Plato has a complicated relationship to rhetoric and Xenophon is often overlooked by rhetoricians altogether, I contend that these two accounts highlight an significant, albeit uneven, tension in scholarly understandings of ethos that persists to this day.

To build this case, I begin by examining the different ways that time itself functions as an implicit assumption embedded in theories of ethos. Here, I show how Aristotelian notions of rhetoric that still predominate rhetorical scholarship tend to bifurcate ethos into two opposing temporal poles. Next, I demonstrate how other rhetorical scholarship gestures toward notions of ethos as a rhetorical force that unfolds over time but also how these temporal claims tend to be either implicit or limited to the context of print and digital media. To draw attention to the long history of different temporal conceptions of ethos, I turn to the two accounts of the trial of Socrates penned by Xenophon and Plato. Following James L. Kastely (1997; 2002; 2015), who understands Plato as dramatizing key aspects of rhetorical theory in his dialogues, I read both authors’ accounts of the trial and show how, in their different representations of character, Xenophon and Plato underscore a central tension in the timeframes associated with theories of ethos. In so doing, this analysis affirms and clarifies Plato’s contribution to rhetorical studies by situating Plato’s view of ethos as deeply intertwined with ongoing philosophical practice. I conclude by arguing that rhetorical studies has much to gain by more closely attending to the cumulative aspects of ethos.

Although this cumulative side of ethos may be complicated for scholars to trace and difficult for rhetors to alter once established, its implications for rhetorical theory and practice are nonetheless important. Indeed, as this analysis will show, understanding the accretive dimension of ethos sheds light on the ways that a single discursive display of ethos may be constrained or overdetermined by the compounding effect of earlier ethotic moments. Concomitantly, a heightened attunement to the cumulative aspects of ethos reminds scholars and practitioners alike that each kairotic display of character has rhetorical consequences that linger beyond each immediate encounter. Ultimately, then, attending to both the kairotic and chronic elements of ethos—and their interplay—presents a richer picture of the role of character in rhetoric and philosophy.

Temporal Assumptions in Theories of Ethos

Many rhetorical theories of ethos mark their relationship with time by focusing on two temporal poles: the timely ethos and the timeless ethos. On one hand, rhetoricians often describe ethos as part of rhetorical invention and a product of discourse. Aristotle calls this ethos “artistic,” or *entechnoi*, because it is crafted by the rhetor (*Rhetoric* 1.2.2) and, as Ruth Amossy explains, “built at the level of uttering” (2001, 20). Similarly, Jim W. Corder describes this timely sense of ethos as “character as it emerges in language” (1978). And Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee give this display of character the term “invented” because it is created anew for each subsequent engagement (2011, 197). In terms of time, this invented ethos is a temporary response to a single kairotic moment, and like the kairotic moment itself, this invented ethos fades with the dissipation of the exigency that called for its crafting. On the other hand, rhetorical scholarship also identifies a second kind of ethos that is, as Aristotle describes it, “inartistic,” or *atechnoi*, meaning that it is not part of rhetorical invention (*Rhetoric* 1.2.2). This inartistic ethos precedes the speech act and, Aristotle suggests, is beyond the control of the speaker. Crowley and Hawhee describe this phenomenon as a “situated” ethos that necessarily invokes power relations (2011, 197). Race, class, gender, sexuality, ability and authoritative roles give shape—unjustly, in many cases—to a rhetor’s situated ethos even before communication occurs. Amossy’s notion of a “prior ethos” similarly highlights the importance of social status and pre-figured authority in ethos (2001). She assigns this kind of rhetorical character the adjective “prior” because this ethos exists before any single rhetorical engagement. In terms of temporality, this prior or situated ethos appears timeless. It seems to function outside of time because the authority, or lack thereof, that accompanies one’s subject position typically does not have a clear antecedent event in the rhetor’s life. Collectively, these frameworks foreground the ephemeral and fossilized elements of ethos, and in so doing, they emphasize two key aspects of time that matter to rhetorical notions of character.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Additional scholarly understandings of ethos point implicitly toward the temporal longevity of rhetorical character. Researchers know, for instance, that a rhetor’s ethos is deeply intertwined with sociocultural norms (Yarbrough 2005, 499; LeFevre 1987, 45-46). But those social standards are not formed overnight; rather, they take a long time to ossify. Thus, while a person may give a speech that displays a certain kind of ethos, those ethotic qualities only become legible within a larger sociocultural context that has formed over time. Of course, this elongated time frame for shifting culturally accepted displays of ethos poses a serious challenge to marginalized rhetors. As Ryan, Meyers, and Jones explain in *Feminist Ecological Ethos*, “[the] classical concept of ethos was created and used, primarily, in a homogenous community among male orators in positions of power…[and the] powerful influence of this historical legacy remains in circulation” (2016, 5). In other words, the dominant cultural paradigms that give shape to localized instantiations of ethos often take a long time to change, and in many cases, they have shifted very little, if at all. Time as duration is therefore an essential, albeit tacit, component in the sociocultural dimensions of ethos.

Scholarship about ethos and location also gestures toward the temporal persistence of rhetorical character. This research derives from the two etymological antecedents of ethos in ancient Greek: ethos (ἦθος) and eethos (ἔθος). While ethos (ἦθος) is directly connected to notions of character and ethics, place-based research about ethos pays special attention to the meanings of eethos (ἔθος). Arthur B. Miller explains that ἔθος (eethos) “is not character, but ‘an accustomed place’” (1974, 310), and Judy Holiday calls this ethos “habitual gathering places” (2009, 389). Together, the terms that these scholars use—“accustomed” and “habitual”—imply that ethos arises from repeated actions that unfold over time in a particular locale. Similarly, Michael J. Hyde asserts that ethos refers “to the way that discourse is used to transform space and time into ‘dwelling places’ (ethos; pl. ethea) where people can deliberate about and ‘know together’ (con-scientia) some matter of interest” (2004, xiii). Hyde’s use of “dwelling places” as a metaphor for an ontological state suggests that ethos emerges in sites where one has lived for a long period of time, not a place that one visits on a single occasion. In using “dwelling,” therefore, Hyde further indicates that ethos is linked to recurrent rhetorical engagements at a place over time. Indeed, as Nedra Reynolds notes in “Ethos as Location,” “ethos…shifts and changes over time, across texts, and around competing spaces” (1993, 326). As a whole, then, this location-based scholarship about ethos underscores the implicit yet important role that protracted timelines play in notions of rhetorical character.

Further scholarship explores, more explicitly, how specific technologies give rise to periodic changes in ethos over time. Vicki Tolar Burton, for instance, develops the idea of “rhetorical accretion” to describe how the ethē of women writers is susceptible to being re-written by men in editorial roles who arrange subsequent and posthumous re-printings of their texts (1999). Her model provides an salient way of attending to the accumulation of character in printed texts. And in digital communication systems, Kristie S. Fleckenstein advances the concept of “cyberethos” to emphasize how the complex temporalities that undergird networked discourse often render it impossible to pin character to a single time and place (2005). For Fleckenstein, cyberethos can fluctuate over time as digital relations in the network shift. In both print and digital environments, then, ethos extends beyond any single rhetorical situation and evolves over time.

As a whole, this body of scholarship paints a complex picture of the relationship between ethos and time. On one end of the temporal spectrum, an artistic ethos is kairotically crafted anew for each unique rhetorical encounter; and on the other end, an inartistic ethos appears fixed and frozen in time. Between these two temporal poles, crucially, ethos is figured as durative; it lingers, shifts, accumulates, and dissipates over time. And yet, scholarly attention continues to foreground the kairotic and static senses of ethos popularized by Aristotle while overlooking the chronic ethos that unfolds over time. For example, the most recent edited collection about ethos, *Rethinking Ethos: A Feminist Ecological Approach to Rhetoric*, employs a feminist lens to offer a powerful critique of patriarchal notions of ethos; but in terms of temporality, many of the case studies focus on the ethos that a particular subject crafts for specific occasions, akin to an artistic ethos (2016). And in the context of rhetorical pedagogy, Crowley and Hawhee’s popular textbook, *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*, now in its 5th edition, provides students with a complex picture of ancient rhetorics; but in terms of temporality, this textbook emphasizes the usefulness of ethos as a heuristic for analyzing and producing individual speeches and texts, a move that again centers the kairotic temporality of an artistic ethos (2011). Even the scholarship that gestures toward other temporal aspects of ethos—like those enumerated in the paragraphs above—tends either to downplay these temporalities or to limit those temporal claims to the context of print or new media. Thus, while rhetorical scholarship has a rich history of considering the multifaceted relationship between ethos and time, some ethotic temporalities get more airtime than others. Specifically, rhetorical studies continues to emphasize the kairotic elements of ethos while overshadowing the ways that ethos also evolves over time.

Of course, this emphasis on the kairotic dimension of ethos makes sense for the discipline of rhetoric that has a long history as a practical art. From ancient Greece to the present day, rhetorical thinkers and practitioners alike have tended to focus on the artistic aspects of rhetoric because those are the things that speakers and writers can, through rhetorical invention, more directly shape. It is much more difficult, on the other hand, to “transform”—as Ellwanger terms it in his study of *metanoia*—an ethos that has been well-established over time (2020, 3). Rhetors simply have more immediate control over their artistic ethos than they do over the cumulative effects of their past ethē. For marginalized rhetors, moreover, this emphasis on the kairotic ethos of speakers and writers has proved an essential site for inventing ways to subvert dominant paradigms of credibility and for creating powerful new modes of authority. For instance, David G. Holmes examines how Frederick Douglass and Frances E. W. Harper each struggle to craft, in the face of white oppression, an African American ethos in their writing (2004, 8-24). Similarly, Carolyn Skinner outlines the strategies that nineteenth century American women physicians use within a male dominated profession to construct an ethos “‘between’ femininity and medical professionalism” (2014, 175). And in the contemporary composition classroom, Juanita Rodgers Comfort suggests that reading Black feminist essays can help students develop their writerly ethos by learning to use self-disclosures as a means for articulating their positionality relative to a larger discourse community (2000). Rhetorical studies is therefore a discipline that deeply, and rightly, values the significance of a rhetor’s immediate artistic ethos.

But this emphasis on the kairotic dimension of ethos means that less attention is paid to the significant ways that ethos also accumulates rhetorical force over time. This imbalance in scholarly attention to the temporalities of ethos is not, however, new. This disparity, in fact, predates Aristotle’s codification of ethos in the *Rhetoric*. As I demonstrate in the following section, competing views about the temporalities of ethos were circulating in Athens prior to Aristotle’s writings, and they reached particular prominence in Xenophon’s and Plato’s representations of the trial of Socrates. While these two texts obviously raise significant questions about Athenian politics, society, and culture, they also tacitly dramatize this tension between seeing character as a timely discursive construct or as a phenomenon that persists over time. And although neither author positions his text as a lesson on ethos, I show how both authors together make an important contribution to scholarly understandings of ethos and time.

Xenophon’s Portrayal of Kairotic Ethos

Published after Plato’s *Apology*, Xenophon’s *Socrates Defense to the Jury* offers a vivid picture of the power of a kairotically-crafted discursive ethos, a depiction that anticipates Aristotle’s subsequent articulation of an artistic ethos. Without mincing words, Xenophon opens his brief account of the trial by directly stating his purpose:

I think it’s also worth remembering what Socrates thought about his defense and about the end of his life when he was summoned to court. Of course, others have written about this, and all of them have captured his defiant way of speaking, which makes it clear that Socrates really did speak that way. What they don’t make clear, though, is that he already believed he would be better off dead, and so they make his defiance seem rather ill considered. (1)

Xenophon immediately draws attention to Socrates’ “defiant way of speaking” (1), which he corroborates by pointing to other accounts of the trial that similarly depict Socrates speaking like an agitated firebrand.[[3]](#endnote-3) But Xenophon is unsettled by the lack of rationalization for Socrates’ way of speaking in these accounts. He worries that, without explanation, Athenians may not understand why a defendant in a criminal trial would knowingly speak in a way that increases the chances of his conviction and execution. More specifically, Xenophon is concerned that students of philosophy may struggle to comprehend why a rational thinker like Socrates—someone who is deeply invested in issues of truth and justice—would deliberately speak in a way that appears to undermine the philosophical ideals he cherishes. Xenophon therefore psychologizes his former teacher to provide a logical justification for Socrates’ defense and to reframe how subsequent students understand the philosopher’s legacy.

Xenophon’s explicitly-stated motive for penning his account also gestures toward Athenians’ view of ethos as a discursive construct composed for a discrete occasion. By arguing that Socrates’ defiant speech requires additional rationalization, Xenophon implies that the people of Athens believe the rational thing for a defendant to do during such a criminal trial would be to speak in a placating manner that would appease the court and persuade the jury to find him not guilty. Rational Athenians, in other words, seem to hold that Socrates should have composed a defense speech with a more conciliatory ethos that would win over the jurors through rhetorically adept speech-writing. This view of rational behavior for a defendant hints at Athenians’ deep regard for the power of a kairotic ethos during a criminal trial. And yet, Socrates eschews every opportunity to craft a humble and taciturn ethos. Instead, he speaks in an unabashedly cocky manner during his defense and eventually earns the condemnation of the jurors. A prime example of Socrates’ insolent discursive ethos occurs in a memorable moment from Plato’s account of the trial. After the jury returns a guilty verdict, Socrates is asked to propose an apt punishment for his impiety, and he famously proclaims, “if I’m indeed to propose a penalty that I truly deserve…[n]othing could be more appropriate, men of Athens, than for such a man to be given free meals in the Prytaneum” (2002a, 36d). In moments like this, Socrates uses his speech to cultivate a provocative ethos that invites the jurors’ censure. This goading declaration epitomizes the incendiary character that Socrates crafts throughout his oral defense and, as Xenophon posits, directly influences the jury’s decision making. Xenophon’s account therefore indicates that ancient Athenians viewed the discursive ethos that a defendant crafts during his speech as central to the outcome of the trial.

Likewise, Xenophon expresses his own confidence in the rhetorical prowess of a rhetor’s discursive ethos when he rationalizes Socrates defiant speech by claiming that the septuagenarian had already accepted and embraced his own death. According to this justification, Socrates’ boastful character is not indicative of irrational behaviour but rather the marker of a calculated rhetorical strategy. Such a view repositions Socrates’ defiant speech as an effort to erect an arrogant ethos that would help him achieve his rhetorical goal: conviction and execution. At the close of his account, Xenophon explicitly articulates this view of ethos in this tidy conclusion: “Socrates, by singing his own praises in court, then, brought the resentment of the jurors down upon himself and forced them to condemn him all the more” (32). Xenophon’s confidence in the causal logic of a discursive ethos is clear: the philosopher’s defiant ethos leads directly to his death. And because Xenophon claims that Socrates sought execution, the philosopher’s affrontive ethos becomes the central rhetorical vehicle for achieving this aim. Xenophon’s account therefore not only explains Socrates’ actions, it also underscores the significance of the crafting a compelling ethos during an Athenian trial by jury. Xenophon, like Aristotle after him, sees a speaker’s artistic ethos as central to public speech-making in Athens. And although Xenophon is not recognized as a rhetorical theorist or even as a teacher of rhetoric, his depiction of the trial of Socrates nonetheless highlights the incredible life-or-death stakes of crafting a particular kairotic ethos in a rhetorically-informed democracy.

Plato’s Depiction of Chronic Ethos

Xenophon’s emphasis on the here-and-now of ethos stands in direct contrast to Plato’s depiction of ethos and time in the trial of Socrates. To understand Plato’s view requires turning first to the text that precedes the *Apology* in the chronology of Socrates’ life: the *Euthyphro*. This text depicts a meeting between Socrates and the prophet Euthyphro near the court of Archon where Socrates must attend a pre-trial hearing regarding his indictment. In his opening lines, Euthyphro asks, “What’s new, Socrates, to make you leave the Lyceum, where you usually spend your time, to spend it here at the court of the King Archon?” (2002b, 2a). Euthyphro’s question refers to the regular philosophical teaching that Socrates has done for many years at the Lyceum, a primary recurring activity that contributes to the ongoing development of the philosopher’s ethos. But before Socrates can respond to this initial question, Euthyphro adds, “Surely *you* don’t have some sort of lawsuit before the king, as I do” (2002b, 2a). Here, the prophet’s incredulous tone belies his belief about Socrates’ good character. Even though Euthyphro does not yet know whether Socrates is the accused or the litigant, he is baffled by the philosopher’s presence at a pre-trial hearing because, in Athenian lawsuits, the ethos of *both* the defendant and the plaintiff were at stake. Unlike many contemporary legal systems in which only the defendant’s character is in question, if the accused was found not guilty in ancient Athens, the plaintiff was then required to pay a fine for wasting the court’s time, which doubled as a kind of public humiliation. This context amplifies the stakes of Euthyphro’s exclamation: he is so thoroughly persuaded by the golden reputation that Socrates has built over time as a teacher of philosophy that Euthyphro cannot imagine a situation in which Socrates’ integrity hangs in the balance even for a moment. By Euthyphro’s logic, only people of dubious character are involved in trials, and Socrates has—over the course of a *lifetime* of philosophical teaching—constructed a pristine ethos; therefore, Socrates has no place at a trial.

Socrates’s response to Euthyphro’s opening query further develops Plato’s focus on the ethos that his teacher cultivates over time. Socrates answers the prophet, “Athenians don’t call it a lawsuit, Euthyphro, but an indictment” (2002b, 2a). Here, Socrates distinguishes between a lawsuit, or *dikē* (Δίκη), and an indictment, or *graphē* (γραφή). Rather than registering their complaint as private suit such as *dikē* or *enklema* (ἔγκλημα), Socrates’ primary accusers, Meletus and Anytus, filed their case as a special kind of public indictment, or *graphē*. In ancient Athens, *dikē* and *enklema* typically referred to a grievance between an alleged criminal and one or more named individuals, as in the case of theft or battery (Lanni 2016). *Graphē*, on the other hand, described suits in which the purported offender posed a threat to the safety and well-being of the *polis* (Gagarin 2012). And while *dikē* and *enklema* often revolved around the specific details of a single event, a *graphē* might be based on a series of actions (Lanni 2016). By emphasising the fact that Socrates’ case was filed as a public indictment, Plato suggests that Socrates’ crimes were not just the product of a single event or an individual personal dispute; instead, he positions Socrates’ criminal activity as a chronic problem that threatened the entire citizenry of Athens. In rhetorical terms, the public indictment levied against the septuagenarian foregrounds the cumulative rhetorical danger that Socrates’s ongoing misbehaviour—that his miscreant ethos—posed over time to the entire *polis*.

The significance of the cumulative impact of Socrates’s ethos to this case is also visible in the particular kind of indictment levied against the philosopher: impiety. Accusations of impiety, or *asebeia* (ἀσεβείας), were severe offences in Athens, but the boundaries of what constituted impious behavior were not always straightforward. Sometimes *asebeia* referred to specific actions such as the desecration of a temple or the breach of protocols during religious celebrations (Bowden 2016). But ambiguities in Athenian law also allowed juries to establish grounds for conviction without pointing to individual events (Lanni 2016). Many Athenians, in fact, viewed *asebeia* “as a condition rather than an offense” (Bowden 2016). In this context, allegations of impiety may have been more closely tied to a figure’s moral character, or lack thereof, than to a particular religious crime committed on a specific time and date. In rhetorical terms, then, the formal accusation of *asebeia* implies that Socrates’ crime was the result not of a particular event but rather of the aggregated force of his impious ethos over time.

As a way of further highlighting the accretive imprint of Socrates’s ethos, Plato goes on to detail the specific crimes that the philosopher allegedly committed. In the *Apology*, Socrates recounts the affidavit filed against him: “Socrates is guilty of corrupting the young, and of not acknowledging the gods the city acknowledges, but new daimonic activities instead” (2002a, 24b). While almost any criminal charge puts the ethos of the accused in doubt, these particular allegations—scandalous teaching, irreverence toward divinities, and sacrilegious behaviour—raise serious and potentially damning questions about Socrates’ character. But unlike many contemporary legal cases where the details of a single kairotic event hang in the balance, Socrates’ accusers pin his alleged misconduct on a series of recurrent civic activities.[[4]](#endnote-4) As proof of corrupting the young men of Athens, they identify the many philosophical lessons that Socrates held in the Lyceum. As an example of his irreverence to the gods, they point to the series of questions about wisdom that Socrates asked the politicians, poets, and craftsmen of Athens. And as an illustration of Socrates’ iconoclastic behaviour, they claim that he has ongoing conversations with unknown spirits or demons. In compiling this list of evidence, however, his accusers do not identify one specific moment when Socrates broke the law by engaging in these activities. Instead, they speak generally about his repeated behaviours in the polis. In framing the accusations in this way, Plato implies that Socrates’ indictment is not based on displaying a malevolent ethos during a single event or at an isolated moment in time. Rather, Plato indicates that Socrates is put on trial for the accumulated threat that his seemingly immoral ethos posed over timeto Athens.

When contrasted with Euthyphro’s perception of Socrates’ ethos, the allegations of his accusers foreground how Socrates’ accumulated character was deeply contested in ancient Athens. Euthyphro presents Socrates as a blameless victim, while Meletus and Anytus paint Socrates as cunning villain. Clearly, some citizens viewed Socrates as immoral menace to the polis, while others saw him as the moral compass for a wayward city. There was, in short, no consensus about the quality of Socrates’s character in ancient Athens. It makes sense, of course, that Socrates’ character was so controversial because his primary philosophical teaching tool, *elenchus* (ἔλεγχος), had a polarizing effect on Athenians. Often called the Socratic method, elenchus involved asking a series of philosophical questions of interlocutors and then catching them when they claimed to hold competing convictions. In terms of ethos, this technique functioned as a zero-sum game for Socrates’ character and that of his interlocutor’s. At the end of each dialogue, his discussants looked foolish for holding incompatible beliefs, and Socrates looked wise for cleverly uncovering those foundational inconsistencies. Even though Socrates claimed not to deliberately undermine the authority of his conversers, the effect was the same: Socrates gained credibility, and his interlocutors lost it. This method of philosophical inquiry, in turn, contributed to the bifurcated views of his character. The students who identified with Socrates—including Plato and Xenophon—saw the philosopher as a beacon of virtue and principled morality (Xenophon 2002, 34). Meanwhile, the people who were interrogated by Socrates began to form an oppositional camp with their political allies that viewed the philosopher as a dishonourable imposter who lacked integrity.

In fact, the publicly contested nature of Socrates’ character likely contributed to the growth of his ethos over time, a phenomenon that is humorously dramatized in Aristophanes’ *Clouds*. This comedy tells the story of a father, Strepsiades, who at first lauds the “good and true” character of Socrates (2002, 101-102). But after enduring a beating from his insolent and philosophizing son, Strepsiades comes to despise Socrates and his colleagues who he sees as “babbling bastards” and “charlatans” (2002, 1485-1490). Although Aristophanes’ depiction of Socrates is clearly a comedic caricature, telling the story through the lens of the once-enamoured and later-aggrieved father highlights the central debate about Socrates’s ethos. Is the character that the philosopher develops through his teachings a force for good or ill in Athens? The fact that satires like this typically mock existing—and widely circulated—cultural knowledge suggests, moreover, that discussions about Socrates’ character were already well underway when the play was first performed in 423 BCE. And the subsequent written circulation of the *Clouds* likely spurred further debates about the philosopher’s character in the following two decades. In Plato’s version of the trial, for instance, Socrates speculates that the indictment levied by Meletus and Anytus stems in part from the ways that Aristophanes’ play amplified Athenians’ fears about his reputation as a troublemaker (2002a, 18d). The *Clouds* thus serves as a humorous yet pointed example of a text that derives much of its narrative momentum from the accumulated force of Socrates’s controversial ethos and, at the same time, further augments the rhetorical impact of his ethos over time.

The impact of Socrates’s contested chronic ethos was not, however, limited to the series of pre-trial events depicted in the *Clouds* and the *Euthyphro*. Socrates’s concatenated ethos also plays a significant role in Plato’s account of the trial itself. Plato’s *Apology* shows the philosopher spending a considerable amount of his defense attempting to rebut *decades* of attacks on his character. “You see,” the philosopher explains to the jury, “many people have been accusing me in front of you for very many years now…they got hold of most of you from childhood and persuaded you with their accusations against me—accusations no more true than the current ones” (2002a, 18a-b). Here, Socrates sketches a direct connection between these prior subversions of his character and the more recent accusations levied by Meletus and Anytus. But rather than responding to and refuting their specific allegations (as was customary for Athenian defendants), Socrates next argues, “you should consider it proper for me to defend myself against [these earlier attacks] first, since you’ve heard them accusing me earlier, and at much greater length, than these recent ones here” (2002a, 18d-e). In these lines, Socrates suggests that these earlier “slanders” (2002a, 23a) form the foundation from which the current accusations about his impiety emerge. And because these earlier attacks have circulated in the public domain for so many years, Socrates implies that they have grown into a more powerful persuasive force than the recent assertions made by Meletus and Anytus. Later, Socrates even claims that if he is convicted, it will be due to “the slander and malice of many people” rather than the immediate accusations of Meletus and Anytus (2002a, 28a). For Plato, then, the cumulative impact of Socrates’s character over time is both the originary source of his trial and the principal force the philosopher argues against in his defense.

After the jury finds Socrates guilty, Plato uses the sentencing of Socrates to identify again the accumulated force of Socrates’s character over time as a key factor in the outcome of the trial. At this point, Socrates admonishes the jurors and their legal system: “if you had a law, as other men in fact do, not to try a capital charge in a single day, but over several, I think you’d be convinced. But as things stand, it isn’t easy to clear myself of huge slanders in a short time” (2002a, 37a-b). Here, Plato identifies time as a crucial element in the way that ethos persuades. He highlights how Socrates’s defense speech—as a single discursive event—struggles to muster enough suasive influence to upend the snowballing rhetorical impact of a character constructed over the course of multiple decades. Socrates needs more time in the present to undo the past work of his ethos. Thus, in addition to serving as an overriding factor in the accusations that led to this lawsuit, Plato positions Socrates’ accumulated character as a central, and ultimately insurmountable, role in the trial itself. Although it can be tempting to view, as Xenophon does, Socrates’ conviction and subsequent execution as a direct consequence of the brazen character he expresses in his defense, Socrates’ discursive ethos is clearly not the only aspect of his character that has a rhetorical impact on this story. As Plato illustrates, the aggregated influence that Socrates’s ethos accrues over years of philosophical questioning and teaching also plays a significant rhetorical role in the philosopher’s trial. This sequence of events thus illuminates the incredibly high stakes and the powerful rhetorical potential that one’s ethos can amass over time. For Socrates, his accumulated character was both a source of great pride and a key contributor to his death. For the Athenian polis, Socrates’ chronic ethos was a divisive force that roused the Athenian youth and threatened to upend the authority of the political establishment.

For rhetoricians, studying the cumulative impact of Socrates’ ethos in Plato’s texts sheds light on an underarticulated aspect of rhetorical character. Although some theories of ethos gesture toward the ability of character to shift over time in the context of print and digital media, Plato’s *Apology* suggests that the persistence of character is not just the product of certain media but, more broadly, an essential attribute of ethos itself. Plato thus places a spotlight on the importance of considering the ongoing evolution of ethos in rhetorical analysis. In addition to Aristotelian analyses that identify and describe a subject’s verbal ethos in a particular speech, Plato’s texts encourage researchers to also examine the impact of the ethotic moments that precede, and therefore inform, a particular discursive ethos. Doing so augments studies of ethos that focus on the kairotic elements of character by situating that timely ethos within a longer history of ethotic encounters and considering how the cumulative imprint of ethos intersects and competes with a momentary discursive ethos for primacy in both present and future rhetorical encounters. This kind of multifaceted consideration of ethos enriches rhetorical studies by underscoring the temporal complexity in issues of character. After all, ethos, as Plato indicates, is not just a momentary and isolated discursive event. Rather, ethos evolves over the course of a lifetime, and the contours of its evolution give shape to—and are shaped by—the ever-shifting rhetorical ecologies through which that ethos moves. This chronic aspect of ethos, as convoluted as it may sometimes be, matters to both rhetoric and philosophy.

Connecting Platonic Philosophy and Rhetoric Through Ethos

Despite the compelling illustration of ethos that Plato paints throughout the *Apology*, any contributions that this text makes to rhetorical studies must also contend with Plato’s complex relationship to rhetoric. Indeed, Plato’s critiques of rhetoric in the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus* along with his depiction of an ideal *polis* in the *Republic* seem to pit his philosophy against rhetoric and democracy.[[5]](#endnote-5) And yet, Platonic dialogues have at their core what Arabella Lyon calls a kind of “doubleness, playfulness, puzzlement, and skepticism” (2016, 347). Plato is, she asserts, “the writerly critic of writing; the dramatic censor of plot, setting, and character; and the myth-teller who denounces mimesis” (2016, 347). For instance, Plato derides *doxa* in the *Phaedrus* and *Republic*, but he positions *doxa* as essential to *epistēmē* in the *Theaetetus* and the *Meno* (Bengtson 2019, 77-94). And Plato’s *Republic* can be read as a “purely totalitarian” political polemic (Popper 1945, 169) or, on the other hand, as a “model of Platonic rhetorical psychology” (Jasso 2020, 176) and an epic poem that dramatizes the centrality of both rhetoric and philosophy in a democracy (Kastely 2015, 12-13). In a similarly conflicted vein, Plato’s *Apology* offers its own paradox: in a text that vividly dramatizes the rhetorical significance of a diachronic ethos, Plato nonetheless begins with an outright denunciation of rhetorically-informed oratory.

In the *Apology*, Socrates begins his defense by sardonically juxtaposing the showy language of oratory with the philosophical pursuit of truth. He declares, “I don’t know, men of Athens, how you were affected by my accusers. As for me, I was almost carried away by them, they spoke so persuasively. And yet almost nothing they said is true” (17a). In the context of his accusers’ speech, Socrates pits persuasive language and the truth as antitheses. And when referring to his own speech, he maintains this oppositional framing but inverts it: “I’m not a clever speaker at all…unless, of course, the one they call ‘clever’ is the one who tells the truth. If that’s what they mean, I’d agree that I’m an orator—although not one of their sort…from me, you’ll hear the whole truth. But not, by Zeus, men of Athens, expressed in elegant language like theirs, arranged in fine words and phrases” (17b-c). Again, Socrates distinguishes between his truth-telling and the rhetorical flourishes of his opponents. For him, rhetorical language and the philosophical pursuit of truth appear, at first glance, to be posed as diametrical opposites, defined in opposition to the other. As Baumlin explains, “Plato is uncompromising in asserting this equation: truth must be incarnate within the individual, and a person’s language must express (or, first, discover) this truth” (1994, xiii). The opening to Socrates’s defense therefore seems to reinforce well-rehearsed differences between rhetoric and philosophy and, ultimately, to position the two disciplines as incompatible.

And yet, when read in light of the expanded view of ethos that Plato develops later in this text, the opening of the *Apology* takes on new meaning. If Plato understands ethos as something that reaches beyond individual speeches and accumulates over time in citizens’ quotidian interactions, then that suggests that Plato also sees rhetoric as a practice that extends beyond discrete moments of deliberation in the assembly or the courts. And if Plato views rhetoric as a diachronic activity, then Socrates’s opening remarks in the *Apology* are not a condemnation of rhetoric as a whole but rather an admonishment of a narrow view of rhetoric as an art concerned only with composing “elegant language” for present exigencies. Erik Bengtson makes a similar case for a Platonic view of rhetoric as ongoing practice in his reading of the *Republic*. Bengtson claims that Plato frames Socrates’s inability to persuade Thrasymachus in *Book I* not as a failure of persuasion but rather as an “acknowledgement that such persuasion must be a long-term project and include many steps rather than a singular event” (2019, 194). Seen in this light, Plato does not oppose rhetoric as an entire discipline but does challenge limited notions of rhetoric as a practice centered on writing individual speeches. Plato thus opens the *Apology* by mocking logographers in the same way that he ridicules the popular speech-writer, Lysias, in the *Phaedrus*.[[6]](#endnote-6) Undermining the speech-writers’ reductive view of rhetoric, in turn, sets the stage for the rest of Socrates’s defense when he makes the case for the importance of an augmented view of ethos—and by extension, of rhetoric—as a phenomenon that stretches across a lifetime.

In the next few lines of the *Apology*, Plato doubles-down on this expanded view of rhetoric by connecting it to philosophical practice. When Socrates describes the kind of language that he plans to use in his defense, he states that rather than employing “elegant language” he will use “the same sort of language that [he’s] accustomed to use both in the marketplace next to the bankers’ tables—where many of you have heard me—and also in other places” (17c). In pointing to the regular speaking that Socrates has done over the course of decades in the city, Plato gestures toward notions of ethos as something that evolves over time; he also crucially links his defense speech with the language he uses when engaged in the philosophical practice of elenchus, or refutation. By bringing the language of elenchus into the court, Plato suggests that Socrates’s apologia is philosophical. And conversely, by linking the acts of oratory in the court with Socrates’s prior teaching, Plato suggests that elenchus is rhetorical. Kastely also sees a rich connection between Socrates’s philosophical teaching and his views of rhetoric. In *Rethinking the Rhetorical Tradition,* Kastely argues that Plato’s depiction of refutation in the *Meno* is rhetorical (1997). In fact, Kastely contends that refutation à la Plato is essential to rhetoric and, moreover, that practicing refutation is less about the pursuit of knowledge and more about the development of character (1997, 215). Given this Platonic synergy among elenchus, rhetoric, and character, it makes sense that Plato opens his illustration of ethos in the *Apology* by drawing attention to the interconnected ways that rhetoric, philosophy, and character unfold together over time.

Plato further reinforces this relationship between rhetoric, philosophy, and ethos when Socrates concludes his opening statement. At this point, the septuagenarian reminds the jurors that their job is not to determine who’s the best speaker but rather to serve justice: “For that’s the virtue or excellence of a juror,” he declares, “just as the orator’s lies in telling the truth” (18a). Rather than tying the orator’s excellence to the creation of outstanding individual speeches, Plato locates the orator’s virtue in the ongoing philosophical pursuit of truth. For Plato, the rhetorical activity of speechmaking is therefore secondary to the rhetorical significance of the daily search for truth and justice that the philosopher works toward in dialogue with others. Kastely comes to a similar conclusion in his rhetorical reading of Plato’s *Republic*. He argues that the *Republic* encourages the discipl(in)es of rhetoric and philosophy “to get beyond their ancient opposition and welcome the dialectical interactions that would enrich both practices” (2015, xvi). In the same spirit, the *Apology* positions philosophical inquiry as vital to ongoing rhetorical activity. Whether in the Lyceum or the court, then, Plato sees rhetoric, philosophy, and ethos as deeply intertwined.

Amplifying the Chronic Aspects of Ethos

Together, Xenophon’s and Plato’s depictions of the trial of Socrates highlight a tension that is central to the concept of ethos and to rhetorical studies more generally. On one hand, as Xenophon demonstrates, rhetors craft ethos anew for each rhetorical engagement, responding to nuanced differences in each context. This kairotic view of ethos aligns with notions of rhetoric as an art concerned with composing and analysing discrete speeches and texts that are designed to address unique kairotic moments. This view of rhetoric was, of course, very popular at the time and later codified by Aristotle in *The Rhetoric*. On the other hand, as Plato depicts it, a rhetor’s ethos also has a way of accumulating over time and gathering strength from one engagement to the next. This accretive notion of ethos, in turn, gestures toward an understanding of rhetoric as an art that, though it manifests in individual moments, nonetheless stretches across a series of encounters. This chronic sense of both rhetoric and ethos also echoes other ideas that were in circulation in ancient Greece. Isocrates claims, for instance, that “words carry a greater conviction when spoken by men of good repute than when spoken by men who live under a cloud, and that the argument which is made by a man’s life is of more weight than that which is furnished by words” (2000, 278).[[7]](#endnote-7) Likewise, ancient Greek approaches to virtue ethics position good character as something that develops through habituated action (Annas 2011; Aristotle 2014; Hursthouse 1999).[[8]](#endnote-8) Crafting an ethos, then, like practicing the art of rhetoric itself, requires attending to specific moments in time as well as an awareness of how actions unfold over time in human lives. This dual focus of rhetoric—the kairotic and the chronic—comes into focus when these two competing accounts of the trial of Socrates are juxtaposed.

Despite the ways that rhetorical theory and practice may recognize the significance of both synchronic and diachronic activities, teachers and practitioners of rhetoric—both ancient and contemporary—still tend to foreground the former over the latter. In ancient Greece, this emphasis on the production and analysis of discrete texts makes sense given the central role that speech-making played in the everyday functioning of Athenian democracy. Whether in the assembly, the agora, or the courts, the direct democracy of Athens meant that eligible male citizens could exert their influence on specific contemporary events by crafting excellent speeches that conveyed a compelling ethos. Statesmen like Xenophon therefore viewed single orations as imbued with great rhetorical power. This particular social context also shaped Aristotle’s understanding of rhetoric. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle narrowly circumscribes his art of rhetoric around the act of speechmaking. Like other thinkers and teachers of rhetoric before him, Aristotle treated rhetoric as a practical art, one that primarily concerned itself with the production and analysis of individual speeches that are customized for each unique moment in time. When it comes to ethos, then, it is no surprise that Aristotle, like Xenophon and others at the time, focuses on individual displays of ethos rather than on the accumulated imprint of ethos. Today, too, scholars of rhetoric often emphasize the Aristotelian analysis and production of individual texts.[[9]](#endnote-9) Baumlin and Meyer argue that, in terms of ethos, “Aristotle’s dominance” is due to “his systematic approach; his ‘demystifying’ of persuasion…and, above all, his commitment to ‘reason’ (logos) [that] reinforced the intellectual foundations of modernism. In sum, Aristotelian rhetoric serves the Enlightenment discourses of science, technology, and neoliberal political philosophy” (2018, 9). Aristotle’s rhetoric is, in short, pragmatic and teachable. Hence, Aristotle’s notion of an artistic ethos remains popular, and rhetorical studies continues its long-standing tendency to privilege the kairotic over the chronic.

But this emphasis on the here-and-now of rhetoric overlooks the important ways that rhetorical interactions slide from moment to moment, accruing force over time. As Plato demonstrates in his version of Socrates’ trial, repeated displays of ethos can, over time, erect or erode a reputation and, in so doing, serve as a prime example of the chronic power of rhetoric. By underscoring the accumulated rhetorical work of ethos, Plato counters prevailing notions of rhetoric as an art primarily concerned with making individual speeches and foregrounds instead the rhetorical impact of a *lifetime* of philosophical-cum-rhetorical activity. For Plato, moreover, this attention to the ways that certain aspects of rhetoric *persist* casts doubt on the centrality of individual speeches in the democratic process and points instead to the significant impact that a that a sedimented ethos can have on a tenuous democracy. This sense of rhetorical activity as ongoing is crucial to our understanding of both ethos and rhetoric more broadly.

While it may be easier to analyse discrete rhetorical encounters or to produce speeches that address a specific kairotic moment, rhetoric as a discipline might benefit from spending more time tracking the accumulation of rhetorical features, like ethos, over time and tracing their aggregated impact on subsequent encounters. Without sufficiently attending to the chronic aspects of ethos, the work of rhetoric becomes narrowly circumscribed around individual displays of character. Studies of kairotic ethos can, for example, be amplified by considering the longer histories from which that artistic ethos emerges as well as the ways that artistic ethos seeps into subsequent rhetorical encounters. For studies involving marginalized rhetors, such an expanded view of ethos could highlight the cumulative impact of laboring—for years, decades, centuries—to resist, subvert, and reinvent ethotic norms. Teachers of rhetoric, too, might augment their students’ understanding of rhetoric by helping them consider the longer trajectory of their student ethos as it evolves with each text they produce during their time at university. In sum, although the study of discrete displays of rhetoric is undoubtedly vital to such a practical art, those individual moments only convey part of the rhetorical work of ethos. More closely attending to the chronic aspects of ethos is therefore instrumental to rhetorical studies and, as the trial of Socrates indicates, may also expand our understanding of the relationship between philosophy and rhetoric.

Epilogue

One of the joys of writing an article while moving across the globe involves the opportunity to see your own work from a new perspective. After taking a job in Aotearoa New Zealand, I have begun reading the research of my Māori colleagues and learning about the rich Indigenous knowledge systems here. Recently, I was struck by the notion of *mana wahine*, often translated as “the power and authority of Māori women” (Forster, et al. 2016, 324). For feminist activists, *mana wahine* is “about reclaiming and celebrating what [Māori women] have been and what [Māori women] will become” (Te Awekotuku, 10). And in the context of Māori leadership, *mana wahine* acknowledges that “the connection between the individual [woman], her past and her present, determines how leadership is enacted” (Fitzgerald 2010, 99). Although *mana wahine* is richer than I can fully account for here, the temporal language in the above summaries gestures toward the complex ways that time is intertwined with authority for Māori women. This idea of *mana wahine* therefore seems like a productive point of convergence between this Indigenous knowledge system and the rhetorical concepts I describe herein. I look forward to seeing what else I—and the discipline of rhetoric—have to learn from my Māori colleagues.

Notes

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1. In this article, I use James Doyle’s translation of Xenophon, C.D.C. Reeve’s translation of Plato, and Peter Meineck’s translation of Aristophanes. All translations are available in *The Trials of Socrates: Six Classic Texts*, edited by C. D. C. Reeve (2002). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. 1. These two aspects of ethos are, to be sure, interconnected. Amossy explains how rhetors may sometimes foreground their prior ethos, and at other times they may privilege their discursive ethos, but, she insists, “the influences between the institutional ethos and the discursive ethos are mutual” (2001, 21).

   [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Xenophon was away on military duty during the time of Socrates’ trial, so his account is second-hand. Plato, however, claims to have attended Socrates’ trial in person and inserts himself as a named figure in the text (Plato 2002a, 38b). Today, these are the only two extant accounts of the trial of Socrates, although Xenophon’s opening lines indicate that other versions were likely in circulation at the time. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The voices of Socrates’ accusers, admittedly, play a very small role in Plato’s and Xenophon’s accounts of the trial. Nevertheless, many of their claims can be inferred from Socrates’ language because his defense is framed as a dialogue in both extant accounts. See, for example, Plato (2002, 24b-28a) and Xenophon (2002, 10-21). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See Jasso (2019) for a thorough discussion of rhetoricians who position Plato as “the enemy of rhetoric” (351) as well as a contrasting summary of rhetorical scholarship that is sympathetic toward Plato. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See Baumlin (xi-xiv) for a thoughtful analysis of Socrates’s two speeches on love as they pertain to ethos. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. This quotation from Isocrates is technically phrased as a question, but it reads as a rhetorical question designed to emphasize the implausibility of disagreeing with his premise. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. For more information about the intersection between virtue ethics and contemporary rhetoric and writing studies, see Duffy, Gallagher, and Holmes (2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Of course, some adjacent fields and subfields of rhetorical studies—notably digital rhetorics, circulation studies, mobility studies, and affect studies—emphasize the *flow* of rhetorical activity rather than the rhetorical work of discrete texts. Such research is invaluable in continuing to shift scholarly focus in rhetoric to more closely attend to the diachronic implications of rhetorical activity. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)