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# Normy w komunikowaniu retorycznym
# Norms in rhetorical communication

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## Ethos – between *vir bonus* and VIA: Virtue ethics in contemporary rhetorical education
## Etos – między *vir bonus* a VIA: etyka cnót we współczesnej edukacji retorycznej

## Abstract

The aim of this article is to present an original didactic concept that integrates the classical ideal of *vir bonus dicendi peritus* with the theory of rhetorical ethos and contemporary positive psychology, represented by the VIA character strengths model. The point of departure is the assumption that the speaker's ethos – as a rhetorical category – has deep roots in the tradition of virtue ethics, developed from Aristotle through Quintilian to contemporary philosophers such as MacIntyre, Nussbaum, and Hursthouse. The article demonstrates that contemporary psychological tools, such as the VIA test, can serve as practical instruments for cultivating ethos in rhetorical education. The proposed didactic project, implemented within the framework of practical rhetoric classes, is based on an individual analysis of students' character strengths and their mapping onto various rhetorical genres. The article seeks to build a bridge between rhetorical theory and the ethical and psychological formation of the speaker.

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie autorskiej koncepcji dydaktycznej, która łączy klasyczny ideał *vir bonus dicendi peritus* z teorią etosu retorycznego oraz współczesną psychologią pozytywną, reprezentowaną przez model mocnych stron charakteru *VIA*. Punktem wyjścia jest założenie, że etos mówcy – jako kategoria retoryczna – ma trwałe zakorzenienie w tradycji etyki cnót, rozwijanej od Arystotelesa przez Kwintyliana aż po współczesnych filozofów (m.in. MacIntyre, Nussbaum, Hursthouse). W artykule pokazano, że współczesne narzędzia psychologiczne, takie jak test *VIA*, mogą służyć jako praktyczne środki wspomagające kształcenia etosu w edukacji retorycznej. Przedstawiony projekt dydaktyczny realizowany w ramach zajęć z retoryki praktycznej opiera się na indywidualnej analizie mocnych stron charakteru studentów i ich mapowaniu na różne gatunki retoryczne. Artykuł stanowi próbę zbudowania pomostu między teorią retoryki a formacją etyczną i psychologiczną mówcy.

## Key words

virtue ethics, ethos, vir bonus, VIA, rhetorical education
etyka cnót, etos, vir bonus, VIA, kształcenie retoryczne



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# Ethos – between *vir bonus* and VIA: Virtue ethics in contemporary rhetorical education

## 1. Introduction

The starting point for the present reflection on contemporary university-level rhetorical education is the classical concept of *vir bonus dicendi peritus*, formulated by Quintilian (*Institutio oratoria* XII.1.1–6), which is regarded as one of the most comprehensive models for the formation of the orator in the rhetorical tradition (Kennedy 1994; Murphy 1983). A crucial element of the educational project of classical rhetoric was *ethos* – a category rooted in Aristotle's understanding of virtue as a stable moral disposition (*hexis*), shaped through the practice of public and civic life (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* II, 1 [1103a14–1103b1]; Garver 1994; Vickers 1989). Both categories – *vir bonus* and *ethos* – belong to the anthropological perspective characteristic of rhetoric as the art of embodied speech and rest on the same foundation, namely virtue ethics (aretology) (MacIntyre 1981; Nussbaum 1988, 1997). The aim of this article is to show how these classical categories can be adapted to reflection on contemporary practical rhetoric and translated into the design of a concrete university course – a class oriented towards developing students' rhetorical self-awareness.

Contemporary rhetorical education faces a serious challenge: how can we cultivate the orator's ethos under conditions of deep social polarisation and axiological pluralism? Traditional rhetoric, grounded in the classical models of *paideia* and *institutio oratoria*, treated ethos as the foundation of effective persuasion – not merely as an impression made on the audience, but as a real moral and social disposition of the speaker. In Quintilian's thought, the ideal of *vir bonus dicendi peritus* synthesised this way of thinking: effective speech must flow from the character of a morally upright person.

Against this background, it is worth recalling the ongoing debate in contemporary rhetorical theory on the relationship between eloquence and the speaker's

morality. Richard Lanham (1993) labelled this problem the "Q-question": does rhetorical education lead to becoming a "good person", or only a "good speaker"? Reinterpreting Quintilian's figure of *vir bonus*, Robert E. Terrill shows that in the *Institutio oratoria* this ideal functions as a description of a particular kind of disposition (*dynamis*) – a civic virtue realised in symbolic action – rather than as a simple catalogue of traits or techniques (Terrill 2016). At the same time, he points out that Quintilian does not offer an unambiguous mechanism for the transition from rhetorical formation to ethical formation, assigning this role primarily to the practices of *imitatio*. In this article, I treat this gap as a space for contemporary didactic recontextualisation: I propose to read the figure of *vir bonus* through the VIA character strengths framework (an acronym for *Values in Action*) as a starting point for identifying individual ethical potential on which each speaker may build their own rhetorical ethos.

The problem of identifying a "good speaker" becomes particularly acute today when, in contemporary rhetorical education, we try to present students with Quintilian's concept and ask them who, among contemporary figures, might be said to meet the standards of *vir bonus dicendi peritus*. The answers diverge radically and depend on political, ideological, and generational identity. In evaluations of contemporary public debates, the same speaker may be perceived as trustworthy by some and as manipulative or inauthentic by others – not because of differences in rhetorical skill, but because the evaluators operate within incommensurable value systems. It is difficult to agree on a universal model of the "good orator", and it is even more difficult – within an academic setting – to teach what ethos is in a way that remains free from ideological suspicion. The difficulties in operationalising the category of "goodness" in an educational context shift the focus away from the search for a single model toward thinking in terms of a framework that combines ethical stability with individual differences in character.

Contemporary reflection on the category of *vir bonus* cannot ignore its problematic socio-historical status. In classical Rome, the term *vir bonus* was reserved for a man of senatorial or equestrian rank, that is, someone of appropriate birth, wealth, and education (Flower 2011, 271–287). Thus this ideal, although theoretically universal in ethical terms, functioned in practice as a tool for reproducing elitism. Recent interpretations (e.g. Leff 2003; Garsten 2006) indicate that this formula may carry the ideological weight of normalising certain types of rhetorical identity while marginalising alternative voices – for instance, those of people outside the elite or speakers representing different styles and registers of discourse.

For this reason, the main problem in the uptake of classical rhetorical concepts – I argue – is not so much identifying a model acceptable to the community and

worthy of imitation, but creating a pedagogical space that enables students to recognise and develop their own ethos in a conscious, ethical, and functional way. Discussion of categories such as *ethos* or *vir bonus* should therefore not remain merely a matter of historical-doctrinal analysis, but should become an impulse for reflection on one's own practice and a tool for shaping it.

I propose an approach that brings together three interrelated areas of reflection, which at the same time structure the argument of this article:

(1) **the classical ideal of *vir bonus dicendi peritus*** and the associated understanding of **the orator's ethos in the rhetorical tradition**, taken as a starting point for examining the relation between character and rhetorical skill;
(2) **the concept of virtue ethics** as a common background for classical rhetoric and selected strands of contemporary moral philosophy;
(3) **the theory of character strengths** (VIA, Peterson and Seligman 2004) as a contemporary operationalisation of virtue ethics, allowing for the identification of an individual profile of moral and communicative dispositions.

On this basis – that is, after reconstructing the relations between these three areas – I present, in the final part of the article, a pedagogical project that uses this theoretical framework as the basis for the concrete design of a university course.

## 2. Vir bonus and ethos

### 2.1. In Quintilian's rhetoric

The pedagogical aphorism passed down to successive generations of students, *vir bonus dicendi peritus* – "a good man, skilled in speaking" – formulated by Quintilian in the *Institutio oratoria* (XII.1.1), is commonly regarded as the most concise expression of the classical ideal of the orator. To move beyond the level of aphorism and reach a deeper understanding of this category, it is necessary to immerse oneself in Quintilian's text and in the context of republican Rome. The idea marks a key point of intersection between rhetoric, ethics, and civic education in Roman culture. In Quintilian, the training of the orator rests on the assumption that uprightness of character is not an addition to rhetorical competence, but its necessary condition. Moral goodness precedes and legitimises rhetorical skills. This approach reverses the relationship between technique and ethics known from the sophistic tradition, in which the effectiveness of speech was the primary value (Schiappa 2003; Jarratt 1991).

As Fleming (2018) emphasises, Quintilian's vision of *vir bonus* does not end with a mere postulate; it is implemented within an educational system that encompasses the entire life course, from birth to old age (1.1–12.11). This programme combines

rhetorical exercises with moral formation, stresses the imitation of exemplars of virtue, and rests on the integrated development of intellect and character (Fleming 2018, 399). In Book XII of *Institutio oratoria*, we find the recommendation that the orator's education should include the shaping of character in the spirit of philosophy, drawing in particular on Stoic ethics. History and philosophy are to form not only style and argumentation, but also civic virtues and moral attitude. Unlike philosophers, who have withdrawn into their schools, the orator is expected to act in public – like the Stoic wise man-citizen (Walzer 2003).

Quintilian further develops this category in the direction of a more detailed conception of *ethos,* that is, the way in which the speaker's character is revealed and operates in speech. Focusing on the importance of *ethos* thus signifies not only a shift of emphasis from the overall moral formation to its rhetorical manifestation, but also a deepening of reflection on how the orator's virtues affect the force and credibility of their discourse. In Book VI of the *Institutio oratoria*, Quintilian specifies what the orator's ethos should be and what stylistic features express it (*Institutio oratoria* VI.2; Leigh 2004).

Three interconnected themes stand out in this characterisation: (1) the ethical dimension of *ethos*; (2) style as a vehicle of character; and (3) the practical use of *ethos* in interpersonal relations. Quintilian firmly rejects any reduction of *ethos* to a superficial impression, suggesting that genuine persuasive power flows from the speaker's real goodness – not from their role, but from their person. In his account, *ethos* is inseparably tied to kindness, mildness, and courtesy, that is, to a relational ethics of presence whose aim is to build goodwill and trust. Style should be a reflection of character, not its mask: words are to arise "from the nature of things and persons" and thereby disclose the speaker's identity and values. Effective rhetoric is meant to bind being to speaking.

Quintilian sees the particular importance of *ethos* in interpersonal contexts – where communication serves to repair relationships, to forgive, to admonish. In such situations, style should be free of excessive affect, anger, or accusation; here *ethos* becomes a tool for easing tensions and restoring community.

## 2.2. Ethos – a survey of approaches

### 2.2.1. Aristotle vs. Quintilian

The category of *ethos* – one of the three basic modes of persuasion in Aristotle – has undergone both marginalisation and revival in the history of rhetoric. Initially understood as the effect of the audience's perception of the speaker, *ethos* was closely tied to credibility arising from practical wisdom (*phronēsis*), virtue (*aretē*), and goodwill (*eunoia*) toward the audience (*Rhetoric* I.2, 1356a). Aristotle did not treat *ethos* as a matter of prior reputation, but as a quality displayed by the speaker

in the speech itself (*en tōi logōi*). It was thus a performative *ethos*, constructed in the course of speaking – and at the same time an *ethos* "authorised" rhetorically rather than "borrowed" from external sources.

Aristotle described the means of persuasion available to any speaker and was well aware that they could serve a variety of ends (not always commendable). Quintilian, by contrast, adopts an idealistic and pedagogical stance: he consciously sketches a model of the orator as almost utopian in ethical terms. Many commentators note that Quintilian develops the concept of the "good orator" to an extreme, even unrealistic degree (Vickers 1989), expecting moral perfection from the orator – something that in practice could rarely be found. Yet this ideal served educational purposes: it was meant to counteract a cynical approach to rhetoric (for example, associated with sophistic practice) and to resist the abuses of court orators in the Empire (Walzer 2003).

### 2.2.2. Contemporary perspectives on ethos

In the twentieth century, research on ethos underwent a significant shift, marked above all by criticism of its reduction to an individual trait of the speaker. Instead of being treated as a property of the author of a message, ethos came to be understood as an effect of interaction, discourse, and social relations. In approaches inspired by Foucault (1972) and Bourdieu (1991), ethos becomes a cultural construct – a product of the symbolic field, social habitus, and the power of discourse, which does not so much reflect the speaker's identity as produce and negotiate it under specific communicative conditions. In Bourdieu's account, various forms of capital – economic, cultural, social, and symbolic – play a key role in determining the boundaries of what counts as credible and "authoritative". Ethos thus does not exist in a vacuum: its persuasive force depends on the capital the speaker possesses and on how effectively it can be converted within a given communicative field. Whether a statement is recognised as persuasive depends not only on its content, but also on prior power relations: who is speaking, from what social position, and in what relation to the audience. In this way, ethos becomes an element in the struggle for recognition and symbolic dominance.

A similar stance can be found in theories of enunciation (Benveniste 1971) and in discourse-analytical work (Maingueneau, 1999, 2014; Amossy 2001). In these approaches, ethos is understood as a strategy of positioning the speaker within a shared space of meaning: a dynamic self-presentation before an audience that is negotiated in relation to norms, expectations, and cultural codes. Although these perspectives emerge from different traditions than classical rhetoric, they retain a key feature of the Aristotelian concept of ethos as a communicative effect constructed in the speech itself. In a similar vein, Michael C. Leff (1998) emphasises

the link between ethos and text: the speaker is recognised not only in what is said, but in how it is said and in how personality is revealed in the composition of the discourse. Leff, in the Aristotelian spirit, treats ethos as a performative effect of discourse itself, inferred by the audience from the rhetorical form of the utterance rather than from the speaker's prior reputation.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson develops an understanding of ethos as a response of the audience: the trust a speaker inspires is, in her view, a function of reception rather than a stable property of the communicator. Jamieson participates in the broader project of reinterpreting Aristotle: she preserves his conviction about the fundamental role of ethos in persuasion, but adapts it to conditions of mediatization and public communication. She reconceptualises ethos as the result of audience perception – the trust the speaker builds is a function of how the message is received, not solely of the speaker's traits. In her analyses (2003; 2008), she shows that a speaker's credibility is formed through the interaction among message, media, and audience, rather than as something innate or enduring. Jamieson thus preserves the persuasive centrality of ethos familiar from Aristotle, while adapting it to the realities of mediatized, mass communication.

A similar line of thought is developed by Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee (2009), who stress that ethos results from the interaction among speaker, text, and the culturally conditioned expectations of the audience. Their account relies heavily on a reinterpretation of classical rhetorical sources, including Aristotle, and demonstrates how his concept can inform the analysis of contemporary communicative practices.

Within interpersonal communication research, James C. McCroskey and Jason J. Teven (1999) empirically test and extend the classical concept of ethos known from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. They propose a three-dimensional model of source credibility comprising competence, moral trustworthiness, and goodwill. The Source Credibility Scale they developed makes it possible to measure the perceived ethos of a speaker as a receiver-based evaluation in a specific communicative context. This model represents a modern, psychometric continuation of the Aristotelian understanding of ethos, adapted to empirical research.

### 2.3. Towards integration: ethos as a point of intersection between ethics, rhetoric, and culture

Contemporary conceptions of ethos present it as a dynamic, relational category that cannot be considered apart from its social, linguistic, and cultural context. Although they differ methodologically, many of them remain in dialogue with the Aristotelian idea of ethos as a means of persuasion shaped with a view to a particular audience.

When considering ethos in the context of rhetorical education, it is useful to adopt a model that integrates different dimensions of this category:

- **personal ethos** – refers to who I am as a person and as a speaker; it encompasses relatively stable moral and emotional dispositions rooted in the individual's values and identity (the Quintilian tradition);
- **strategic ethos** – concerns the way in which I shape the image of myself in a concrete act of speaking; it is linked to such elements as style, tone, argumentation, and adaptation to audience and situation (the Aristotelian tradition);
- **cultural ethos** – refers to how I am perceived within a broader social and axiological context; it includes norms, social roles, and communicative patterns rooted in a given community (the Bourdieusian tradition).

## 3. Virtue ethics – a broad overview

When situated within a broader intellectual context, reflection on ethos and standards of public conduct emerges directly from the philosophical tradition of virtue ethics (*aretē*), in which virtue denotes a stable disposition to act in accordance with reason and the common good (*Nicomachean Ethics* II.6). Virtue ethics (aretology) was the dominant ethical doctrine up until the Enlightenment (Scheler 1994; Hellerstedt 2018). In systematic philosophy, literature, and later in paraenetic writing, virtue functioned as a norm-generating principle. Aretology had both a descriptive and a normative character: catalogues of virtues were elaborated, together with their characterisations aimed at promoting action for the common good, as well as personal exemplars embodying those virtues. The aretological concepts of the major ancient philosophers differed from one another both as regards the nature of virtue and the possibility of attaining it (Budzyńska-Daca 2005, 35–45). What united them, however, was the very elevation of virtue as a normative ethical principle.

This situation changed in the cultural history of the Enlightenment, when virtues were gradually displaced from the repertoire of ethical principles in favour of universal rules of reason, formulated in terms of moral laws. Traditional aretology – virtue ethics understood as the cultivation of stable dispositions for moral action – was replaced by projects grounded in deontology (Kant 2017) or utility (Bentham 1958; Mill 2005). At the centre of reflection was no longer the moral character of the person and its formation, but the abstract moral act, whose value was assessed in terms of conformity to a principle (the categorical imperative) or in terms of consequences (the greatest good for the greatest number).

As a result, virtue ceased to be treated as a dynamic property of the person – something to be developed and nurtured – and became instead a by-product of obedience to moral law or of the pursuit of social benefit. Enlightenment rationalism assumed that morality must be universal, abstract, and independent of the concrete traits of the person, which led to a weakening of the role of personal exemplars, educational ideals, and catalogues of virtues in paraenetic literature and ancient philosophy.

In this way, virtue ethics lost its status as the leading doctrine in favour of normative systems that did not require inner moral formation on the part of the individual but only behavioural conformity to rationally derived rules. As Max Scheler (1994) observes, this shift reveals a profound anthropological transformation: the human being is no longer seen as a being perfecting itself towards the good (*telos*), but as a rational and autonomous subject, capable of recognising and applying moral rules in an objective and impersonal manner.

The revival of virtue ethics, initiated in moral philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century (e.g. MacIntyre 1996; Hursthouse 1999; Nussbaum 1997), constitutes one of the most significant paradigm shifts in contemporary ethical thought. After decades of the dominance of deontological and utilitarian approaches, focused on evaluating actions in terms of rules or consequences, these thinkers restored attention to the moral character of the individual and to the concrete context of human life as the space in which virtue is formed (Annas 2007).

MacIntyre (1996) in particular diagnosed the breakdown of contemporary moral discourse, arguing that the separation of norms from traditions of practice and from exemplars of life leads to ethical chaos and relativism. The proposed response was a restoration of a *telos*-oriented understanding of the human being – as a creature that realises itself through participation in communities of practice and through the cultivation of virtues embedded in concrete forms of life. Nussbaum (1997), for her part, emphasised the importance of narrative identity and moral imagination, pointing out that virtues develop within the spheres of culture, literature, education, and politics, rather than solely in the domain of abstract reason.

Following developments in moral philosophy, the revival of virtue ethics has also become visible in the social sciences and the humanities, where scholars increasingly seek categories that allow them to describe not only individuals' behaviours, but also their dispositions, motivations, character formation, and capacity to act in a responsible and integrated way. In pedagogy, psychology, rhetoric, sociology, and media and communication studies, there is growing interest in the category of virtue as a tool for understanding subjectivity and agency, as well as a normative category that can help build relationality, trust, and communal ethos (Wright, Warren, Snow 2021).

A prominent example of this trend is the development of positive psychology, which in the project of Peterson and Seligman (2004) offers a contemporary classification of virtues and character strengths, treating them as universal resources of the individual that serve personal and social development. Similar approaches appear in professional ethics, leadership theory, and civic and communication education, where scholars and practitioners search for ways to renew the language of responsibility, civic courage, justice, honesty, and temperance – not through mere normative prescription, but through the cultivation of virtue in lived practice.

## 4. Positive psychology and contemporary accounts of virtue – the VIA model

The aretological strand in psychology, initiated by Martin Seligman, raises the question of the conditions for a good life, personal growth, and well-being. A key work representing this approach is Peterson and Seligman's *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (2004), in which the authors propose a systematic classification of 24 character strengths, grouped into six universal virtues.

The VIA – *Values in Action* – model was developed as a counterbalance to deficit-oriented classifications of mental disorders (e.g. the DSM). It facilitates the identification of positive personality traits that foster both individual development and the good of the community. The authors derive their classification from research on major ethical traditions (Greek philosophy, Buddhism, Confucianism, monotheistic religions), in which they identified a repertoire of recurring moral virtues. From this repertoire they distinguished six core virtues, each encompassing a set of specific character strengths:

| **Virtue** | **Character Strengths** |
|---|---|
| Transcendence | Appreciation of beauty and excellence [awe / wonder / elevation] |
| | Gratitude |
| | Hope [optimism / future-mindedness / future orientation] |
| | Humor [playfulness] |
| | Spirituality [religiousness / faith / purpose] |

| | |
|---|---|
| Temperance | Forgiveness [mercy] |
| | Humility [modesty] |
| | Prudence |
| | Self-regulation [self-control] |
| Justice | Citizenship<br>[social responsibility / loyalty / teamwork] |
| | Fairness |
| | Leadership |
| Humanity | Love |
| | Kindness [generosity / nurturance / care / compassion / altruistic love / "niceness"] |
| | Social intelligence [emotional intelligence / personal intelligence] |
| Courage | Bravery [valor] |
| | Persistence [perseverance / industriousness] |
| | Integrity [authenticity / honesty] |
| | Vitality [zest / enthusiasm / vigor / energy] |
| Wisdom and knowledge | Creativity [originality / ingenuity] |
| | Curiosity [interest / novelty-seeking / openness to experience] |
| | Open-mindedness [judgment / critical thinking] |
| | Love of learning |
| | Perspective [wisdom] |

**Table 1.** Catalogue of Virtues and Character Strengths
*Source: Peterson and Seligman (2004)*

Each of these virtues is manifested – in Peterson and Seligman's account – through specific "character strengths" that can be identified and developed over the course of a person's life. The authors of the model assume that these strengths take the form of relatively stable tendencies toward certain ways of thinking and acting, while at the same time emphasising their susceptibility to change under the influence of life experience. VIA thus does not so much confirm the "existence" of objective virtues as operationalise certain aspects of virtue ethics in the form of a schema of traits that can be subjected to reflection and practical training (Park,

Peterson, Seligman 2004; Gander et al. 2020).

Any individual – by completing the free VIA survey – can obtain a profile of their 24 character strengths, ranked from the most to the least strongly endorsed. It is important to stress that this profile is a self-descriptive "snapshot" of how the person perceives their own dispositions at a given moment, rather than definitive proof of possessing particular virtues. The highest of these (the top five on the list) are the so-called *signature strengths* – those traits that respondents recognise as most truly their own, spontaneously present in their everyday functioning. From a pedagogical perspective, these strengths can serve as working hypotheses about the basis – within a person's own experience – of their sense of a "moral and communicative self" (Niemiec 2018).

## 5. Virtue as the foundation of ethos

In both Quintilian and Peterson and Seligman, virtue (or character strengths) is not a purely abstract ideal but something that can – and should – be trained and expressed in action. There is, however, a significant difference between these approaches in how they understand "stability". The classical account emphasises virtue as a condition of being worthy of trust: the *vir bonus* is to be someone whose enduring character justifies faith in his words. The positive psychology approach shifts the focus to personal growth and well-being: character strengths are meant to promote the individual's "good life" by enhancing agency and resilience (Gander et al. 2020). In both perspectives, the ethical quality of the speaker – his or her character – is not an add-on to communicative abilities but their foundation; what differs is the theoretical and epistemic status of these dispositions (moral *hexis* vs. psychological "character strength").

The VIA model makes it possible – in a certain sense – to construct a contemporary reconstruction of the figure of *vir bonus*: not as a historical ideal of the citizen-orator to be directly imitated, but as a speaker who is aware of their strengths, values, and rhetorical responsibility. The figurative force of *vir bonus* is thus shifted from the level of an external ideal to the level of self-reflection: the search within oneself for the potential to embody certain virtues in communication.

The differences between these models nevertheless remain crucial. *Vir bonus* was an explicitly normative and strongly universalised ideal, linking the "goodness" of the speaker with a particular, socially privileged type of moral and civic stance. The VIA model, if adapted to rhetorical reflection, by contrast, values the diversity of personalities and life histories, offering the possibility of individualised paths of self-cultivation. Whereas *vir bonus* effectively declared, "this is what the orator ought to be", VIA suggests instead: "see who you are – how you perceive your

own strengths – and try, on that basis, to shape your ethos consciously." In this sense, VIA introduces a strong element of self-awareness and authenticity into the rhetorical tradition, without replacing the classical notion of virtue; rather, it translates that notion into the language of empirically observable (though not absolutely stable) dispositions.

## 6. A pedagogical project – cultivating ethos through the VIA model and genre-based practice

From an educational perspective, combining the classical idea of *vir bonus*, theories of rhetorical ethos, and the VIA model makes it possible to develop a method that, while teaching effective communication, grounds it in the personality of the rhetor as a person capable of conscious, responsible, and value-rooted symbolic action.

The project is implemented within a course in practical rhetoric and is organised as a sequence of activities: (1) theory, (2) self-knowledge and reflection, (3) mapping, (4) practice, and (5) self-evaluation. The structure of the method is presented in the model below.

### 6.1 Stage 1: Theoretical foundations and axiological context

The first stage of the course provides the axiological and philosophical background for teaching practical rhetoric. Its aim is to present ethos as a stable feature of the speaker, rooted in character, responsibility, and the relationship with the audience. This stage is divided into three complementary phases:

**Phase 1. Classical conceptions of the speaker's character and virtue ethics**

The course begins with reading and discussing selected passages from Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* (XII.1.1–6) and key fragments on *ethos* from Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (1356a) and from Quintilian (*Institutio oratoria* VI.2). The concept of *vir bonus dicendi peritus* is then situated within the broader context of ancient virtue ethics.

**Phase 2. Contemporary concepts of ethos and its measurement**

In the second phase, participants are introduced to selected contemporary theories of ethos, including the approach of James C. McCroskey and Jason J. Teven (1999), who adapted Aristotle's theory to empirical research by distinguishing three dimensions of speaker credibility: competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill.

In class, students evaluate selected contemporary public speakers (e.g. social leaders, politicians, activists) in order to confront theory with observation and to become more attuned to the relational and axiological dimensions of their discourse, using the Source Credibility Scale (included in the Appendix to this

article).

**Phase 3. Positive psychology and the VIA model as a contemporary virtue ethics**

The third phase focuses on the theory of character strengths (VIA Classification) developed by Peterson and Seligman (2004). The map of character traits grouped under six universal virtues is presented and discussed.

The aim of this part is to familiarise students with the tradition of rhetoric grounded in ethical assumptions and to make them aware that *ethos* is not merely an image-building strategy, but the consequence of a developed character and relational responsibility. The starting point for further work is thus a shift of emphasis from the question "how to speak effectively?" to "how to speak in a way that is true to oneself and responsible toward others?".

### 6.2. Stage 2: The VIA survey and individual reflection

Each student is asked to complete the VIA Survey of Character Strengths on the official website viacharacter.org. As a result, they receive a list of 24 character strengths, ordered according to the degree to which they are manifested in their everyday life. Of particular importance are the so-called *signature strengths* – the five highest-ranked traits that are most typical and natural for a given person.

In the next step, students:

- carry out a self-analysis of their strengths in terms of their relevance for communication, using the trait descriptions provided on viacharacter.org;
- identify which of their character strengths can serve as the foundation of their credibility;
- prepare a brief written or oral reflection that connects the test results with their personal communicative experiences: do the results in fact correspond to their self-knowledge, or were they surprising? If so, why, and in what respect?

### 6.3. Stage 3: Mapping character strengths onto rhetorical genres

At this stage, students learn to perceive the relationship between the structure of their own character and the demands of different rhetorical genres. The instructor presents a typology of selected communicative genres. In a practical rhetoric course, these may include various kinds of public monologic speech (motivational speeches, self-introductory talks, congratulatory or jubilee speeches, eulogies, farewell speeches), civic appeals, intervention speeches, as well as social media genres: columns/op-eds, online comments, TikTok stories, thematic podcasts, etc. This set is open and should be tailored by the instructor to the specific profile of the study programme and to the students' interests.

Students then create a map of the rhetorical potential of particular genres. By the potential of a genre, I mean its capacity to generate change and to achieve communicative goals (Budzyńska-Daca 2022, 117). Drawing on normative descriptions of genres, previously collected examples of genre realisations in multimodal form, and the participants' own experience, students estimate what kind of cultural ethos would be expected for the fulfilment of particular communicative tasks (for example, a person conducting a press briefing on behalf of an institution should display factuality, composure, credibility, and transparency, while avoiding excessive emotionality). This phase takes the form of workshop-based group work, which is important for gathering observations concerning the cultural background of specific genres.

Once the rhetorical potentials of the individual genres have been identified, each student chooses 2–3 genres (depending on the size of the group and the duration of the course) in which they would like to perform their own public speech. This kind of work makes students aware that ethos – understood as the visible manifestation of character – is not an abstract category, but something that can both be recognised and appropriately expressed depending on the communicative genre. At this point, it is useful to return to the theoretical accounts of ethos and to highlight the differences between personal, strategic, and cultural ethos, that is, the theory underpinning this method. Students should be shown that their ethos is complex: on the one hand, it is a relatively stable dispositional feature of personality – something that can be shaped and developed (the spirit of *vir bonus*); on the other hand, it requires skilful adaptation to the communicative situation (the spirit of symbolic capital) and to genre-specific strategies (the spirit of Aristotle's *technē*). This perspective makes it possible to link self-knowledge with rhetorical competence: the development of character with the ability to express it.

### 6.4. Stage 4: Genre-based practice

The key stage of the course consists in the practical application of reflection on one's own ethos in concrete communicative actions. Students are asked to choose one or several rhetorical genres (e.g. an epideictic speech, a civic appeal, an intervention speech, an opinion column, an online commentary) in which they can test how their individual traits – previously identified as signature strengths – may find an appropriate and authentic expression.

This task presupposes a conscious translation of character into the form of discourse, which means that participants must grapple both with the challenge of selecting rhetorical strategies appropriate to the given genre and communicative situation, and with the question: how can one speak (or write) in a way that is true to oneself – and yet persuasive?

Students learn that each genre requires not only an understanding of its structure, function, and purpose, but also the adjustment of language, tone, composition, and persuasive means to their own communicative profile. Work on the speech thus becomes an exercise in integration: linking self-knowledge with the ability to communicate within social and rhetorical conventions.

### 6.5. Stage 5: Final reflection and self-evaluation

The final stage of the project consists in preparing a written reflection in which students summarise the process of recognising, expressing, and developing their own ethos in communicative actions. The key questions guiding this reflection are:

- Which of my character strengths actually proved visible in action?
- In which communicative genre do I feel / would I feel most myself?
- How can I continue to develop my ethos / character strengths as a speaker in the future?

The self-evaluation is not technical in nature, nor is it aimed at assessment according to external criteria; on the contrary, its goal is to build an inner communicative compass that allows the student to consciously connect who they are with how they speak and act in the public sphere.

To structure the process of evaluating rhetorical performances and to align it with the ethical and communicative assumptions of the project, a two-dimensional evaluation model has been developed, based on the concept of potential (*dynamis*), both generic and ethos-related. Genre potential is understood here as the speaker's ability to make conscious use of the resources of a given rhetorical genre (Budzyńska-Daca 2022), while ethos potential indicates the ability to express one's personal profile in a speech in the spirit of the VIA framework. Taking both dimensions into account makes it possible to evaluate both rhetorical competence and the ethical authenticity of the performance. An evaluation form with a description of the criteria and space for assessment and comments is included in the Appendix. It can be used both as a teacher's evaluation tool and as a self- or peer-assessment sheet.

From the perspective of rhetorical pedagogy, this reflection has particular importance. Introducing the VIA model means that students not only describe their ethos but also confront it with the results of a test that maps their strengths only. They receive a profile in which "lacks" or "deficits" do not appear, but rather resources – dispositions on which they can build. In many self-evaluations, the motif of "confirming intuition" recurs: students write that the test and subsequent rhetorical tasks validated their own hunches about which forms of discourse are "for them" and in which genres they feel most themselves.

This type of experience is empowering on several levels. First, the strengths profile gives their previous communicative choices the status of something more than mere coincidence – it becomes a kind of objectified legitimation of their potential. Second, students acquire a vocabulary with which they can name what previously existed only as a vague sense of "I like writing", "I like talking", "I feel comfortable in debate". Third, the positive character of the feedback (the absence of any classification of "weaknesses") supports motivation: course participants more often declare that they "have something to build on" in shaping their ethos, rather than feeling they must construct it from scratch or "fix themselves".

In my teaching experience, such an encounter with one's own VIA profile – combined with work on concrete genres – deepens the understanding of ethos as a rhetorical category. Students cease to treat it as an abstract element of the ethos–pathos–logos triad and begin to perceive it as a real force operative in their own performances. In their final reflections, a recurrent theme is the "discovery within oneself" of the capacity to be a credible speaker in specific communicative roles: moderator, commentator, deliberative speaker, author of a personal essay or narrative. In this sense, the project enables them to grasp something like a contemporary, individualised version of *vir bonus*: not an externally imposed model, but an awareness that they possess genuine moral and communicative resources on which they can build their presence in the public sphere.

## 7. Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to propose a concept of rhetorical pedagogy grounded in virtue ethics, bringing together the classical ideal of *vir bonus*, contemporary understandings of rhetorical ethos, and the psychological theory of VIA character strengths. Starting from the question of how to cultivate the speaker's ethos in an age of value pluralism and social polarisation, I have outlined an educational method whose central element is the ethical and characterological profile of the person – treated as a resource that can be consciously developed and applied in communicative practice.

The pedagogical project described in this article assumes that contemporary rhetorical education can – and should – serve not only to train linguistic skills, but also to shape the person: the speaker as an ethical subject. The VIA survey, reflection on one's character strengths, the mapping of competences onto rhetorical genres, and practical exercises in different genres enable students to identify their own communicative and ethical potential and then reinforce it through action.

Both the classical formula *vir bonus dicendi peritus* and the contemporary VIA model, based on the recognition of character strengths, stem from the same

conviction: that rhetoric does not begin with technique, but with the human person. At the foundation of effective and responsible communicative action lies ethos – understood as a value-rooted disposition to be oneself in and through speech.

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**Appendix 1**

**Source Credibility Scale**

Adapted from McCroskey & Teven (1999); compiled by Elizabeth E. Graham (2009: 204-205).

Instructions: Please evaluate the person indicated by your instructor by circling a number from 1 to 7 between each pair of traits. The closer the number is to a given trait, the more strongly you agree that the person demonstrates that trait.

**Competence**

**Goodwill**

**Trustworthiness**

| No. | Trait A | Rating (1–7) | Trait B |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Intelligent | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Unintelligent (R) |
| 2 | Untrained (R) | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Trained |
| 3 | Inexpert (R) | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Expert |
| 4 | Informed | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Uninformed (R) |
| 5 | Incompetent (R) | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Competent |
| 6 | Bright | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Stupid (R) |
| No. | Trait A | Rating (1–7) | Trait B |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 7 | Cares about me | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Doesn't care about me (R) |
| 8 | Has my interests at heart | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Doesn't have my interests at heart (R) |
| 9 | Self-centered (R) | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Not self-centered |
| 10 | Concerned with me | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Not concerned with me (R) |
| 11 | Insensitive (R) | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Sensitive |
| 12 | Not understanding (R) | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Understanding |
| No. | Trait A | Rating (1–7) | Trait B |
| 13 | Honest | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Dishonest (R) |
| 14 | Untrustworthy (R) | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Trustworthy |
| 15 | Honorable | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Dishonorable (R) |
| 16 | Moral | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Immoral (R) |
| 17 | Unethical (R) | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Ethical |
| 18 | Phoney (R) | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Genuine |

Note: Items marked with (R) are reverse-coded for statistical analysis.

**Appendix 2**

**Rhetorical Speech Evaluation Form**

Please evaluate the speech according to two key criteria. For each criterion, select a score on a scale of 1–5 and add a brief comment. Scale: 1 – minimal realization of potential, 5 – very high realization of potential.

| Criterion | Description | Score (1–5) | Comment |
|---|---|---|---|
| Genre Potential | Was the speech consciously situated within the given genre? Are the form, style, and strategy appropriate to its conventions and communicative goals? | | |
| Ethos Potential | Does the speech authentically reflect the speaker's character strengths (signature strengths)? Does it demonstrate ethical awareness, responsibility, and relational sensitivity? | | |

Adapted by: A. Budzyńska-Daca