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Pistis – The common Ethos?

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ABSTRACT: The classical Greek term pistis (trust) is presented as a relevant norm in the analysis of parliamentary debate. Through exploration of pistis apparent similarities to the term ethos have appeared. It is proposed that pistis can be viewed as the equivalent to ethos, concerning the common space or connection between the speaker and the audience. Tentatively "truth", "faith" and "respect" are proposed as the elements equivalent to phronesis, areté and eunoia.

KEYWORDS: democracy, ethos, parliamentary debate, pistis, trust

1. INTRODUCTION

Looking at virtues of argumentation, trust – or the rhetorical term: pistis – is an important factor and a kind of meta-norm, often established early in our training, but seldom discussed or applied in our daily work. I perceive pistis as a meta-norm, because it is prerequisite for there to be any point in arguing in the first place.

This line of thought can be traced back quite far and we find the point in a variety of texts, for example with 18th century Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid:

It is evident, that, (...), the balance of human judgement is by nature inclined to the side of belief; ... If it was not so, no proposition that is uttered in discourse would be believed, until it was examined and tried by reason; and most men would be unable to find reasons for believing the thousandth part of what is told them. (Reid, 1769, p. 423)

Every time you thus choose a norm to navigate by, other norms are disregarded, as is always the case when making a normative analysis and critique. Besides being a prerequisite for argumentation, I find the norm to be especially relevant and interesting in relation to the material of my analysis: parliamentary debates. I found that pistis can be brought forward and be of practical use, especially in the strengthening of parliamentary debate as the common practice of our democratic rights.

Parliamentary debate is one of the pillars of a democratic society; this means openness about decision-making and that the arguments of the politicians and the reasons for the choices must be accessible to the public.

Following World War II Danish thinker Hal Koch worked on the themes of democracy and how we perceive it:

The nature of democracy is not decided by polls, but by dialogue, negotiation, mutual respect and understanding and the hence growing sense of a common good. (Koch, 1945, p. 23)

And later he wrote:

In a democratic society it is admitted, that all decisions are relative, only an approximation of what is right, and therefore the discussion of a subject does not cease. (Koch, 1945, p. 25)

These quotes represent the perception of democracy with which I grew up and they also establish two important rhetorical points: that dialogue is the basic rhetorical situation and that decisions are ever only temporary, disagreement will exist, even after a sober and well-argued debate. And if democratic dialogue, as ideally expressed in parliamentary debate, is to succeed, I find pistis a very relevant and applicable norm.

Another reason to work critically with norms for parliamentary debates is that despite the fact that it has been a priority with the Danish Parliament to increase the accessibility and variety of the debates available to the public, the debates – and the politicians themselves – are regularly subject to open criticism. Hence, openness alone is not enough. And even though the debates have always been considered fundamental to democracy, surprisingly little research has been conducted concerning their functions and overall objective.

As we all know, neither the course or results of research are ever a given, so suffice it to say that this analysis has been both explorative and borne by a guiding hypothesis, namely that it would be possible to utilize the concept of pistis in a practical, rhetorical analysis.

2. PISTIS

Former professor of Rhetorics at the University of Copenhagen, Jørgen Fafner, is one of only very few, who have touched upon the concept of pistis. In the article “Rhetorics and Cognition” he states:

Pistis is in its broadest sense the cement of society, an emanation of the ethos of a single individual in human society. In this sense, pistis is something you possess. But it is also something that can be acquired and strengthened. It is remarkable, that pistis is a prerequisite in the speech (...) But this pistis can also be established through speech itself. (Fafner, 1999, p. 36)

Fafner mentions pistis on several occasions and it is clear that he considers it a key concept in the study of rhetorics. In every mention of the term, he relates that it can be acquired and strengthened through rhetorical activity. I had a suspicion that the opposite must also be the case: that it could deteriorate or be compromised and hence arose the hypothesis, that it must also be possible to find concrete examples of exactly that in a rhetorical analysis.

But the above rather general observations regarding pistis are nowhere near a solid tool for analysis of rhetorical artefacts. So I wished to examine and enhance
the understanding of the concept of *pistis* by exploring the approaches to “trust” in other fields of study.

2.1 Pistis in antiquity

As *pistis* is a term coined in ancient Greek rhetorical practice, a natural point of departure was to examine the original meaning of the concept. Consulting Liddell & Scott’s “A Greek-English Lexicon” the meaning is first: “trust (in others), faith or belief” and second: “that, which provides such faith, either assurances, warrants or arguments, proof or persuasion”. In the translation from ancient Greek to Latin this dual meaning becomes even clearer, as *pistis* is divided into two separate words; it translates into either *argumentum* or *fides*. The term itself holds a duality, in that it encompasses both the effect and the reason (cause): both the state of having faith or trusting, and the very things that create said trust.

2.2 Pistis as trust

Another obvious place to look for thoughts on trust is in philosophy. The concept is widely discussed in this field, with arguments both for and against trust as a basic human condition, but I will leave that discussion to the philosophers and here only mention a few specific quotes, arguing the case for trust.

The 18th century philosopher Thomas Reid states, that human beings have an inherent or natural urge to speak the truth and a faith that their fellow human beings do too. Reid names these principles “the principle of veracity” and “the principle of credulity” (Reid, 1769, p. 419) and state that these are absolutely necessary for there to be any communication at all:

> This is, in reality, a kind of prescience of human actions; and it seems to me to be an original principle of the human constitution, without which we should be incapable of language... (Reid, 1769, p. 423)

Another to argue for trust as a basic factor in our lives and societies is Danish theologian and philosopher K.E. Løgstrup, who touches upon the concept of trust in a number of places, for example:

> Trust in its most elementary sense is an inherent element of any conversation. By conversing at all, you lay yourself open to the other, manifesting by the mere fact of having opened the conversation, that you lay a claim to the other person. (Løgstrup, 1956, p. 24)

With a basic democratic aspect and a rhetorical point of view concerning the conversation as a basic rhetorical situation, I also found it relevant to address the field of deliberative democracy. It is an extended and widespread field, with its roots in a philosophical and theoretical approach, but later increasingly emphasizing the practical aspects. The discussions of definitions etc. within the field continue, but in this context I find the work of Gutmann & Thompson to be of interest.
They describe a basic sentiment of “reciprocity” (Gutmann & Thompson, 2000), which among other things entails that debaters owe each other mutual respect. This respect is shown by accepting the duty to substantiate one’s views with arguments, by taking the views of the opponent seriously and by acknowledging the existence of “reasonable disagreement”, in the sense that there will be disagreement, even after an otherwise successful debate. This also entails a duty to practice “economy of moral disagreement”.

Especially where “reasonable disagreement” and "economy of moral disagreement" is concerned, Gutmann & Thompson seem inspired by the court philosopher John Rawls, who also worked with the concepts of democracy and deliberation. According to Rawls, the purpose of political discussion is to reach “reasonable agreements” and the discussions must to the best of everyone's ability be conducted in such a manner, as to best achieve this result.

These principles entail a number of consequences. Firstly, you must be careful of accusing your opponent of looking out for their own or group interests, of being prejudiced or blinded by ideology, because these accusations lead to resentment and hostility, and will hence block the way to “reasonable agreements”. Secondly, you must acknowledge the existence of “reasonable disagreement”, especially on matters of high importance, even after the debates. Lastly, Rawls states:

(... when we are reasonable, we are ready to enter discussion crediting others with a certain good faith. (Rawls, 1989, p. 238)

Another relevant contributor to the discussion is professor of political science John Dryzek, arguing that democracy must hold a deliberative aspect, and that in public deliberation you must appeal to common values, interests and the common good, as in justice, fairness, the defence of your country or economic stability etc. (Dryzek, 2000) and Dryzek & List, 2003) It would be detrimental to your credibility, if your arguments were too one-sidedly based on mere group interests.

In Danish political science hardly anyone has worked with the actual debates in the Danish Parliament “Folketinget”, but I did manage to find one relevant study (T. K. Jensen, 1993). It showed that Danish politicians spend considerable amounts of time on dialogue and networks and concludes that work in the Danish Parliament is highly oral by nature (T. K. Jensen, 1993, p. 281). This for two reasons: the speed of oral communication and the credibility attached. And trust is the factor that binds the two together, making everyday political work flow smoothly.

2.3 Pistis as argumentum

If you wish to utilize pistis as a tool for analysis, it is necessary to address the “other” meaning of the word: pistis as argumentum. Materials abound, but I have chosen the article “Sensible Disagreement” by professor Kock to represent this angle (Kock, 2008).

The main thesis of the article maintains that debate is important for the sake of the audience, for them to form a reasonable impression of the debated matter
and, afterwards, in a deliberate, well-grounded manner, may form their own opinion of the case at hand. And as it is in the role as part of an audience, Kock maintains, that most citizens will realistically find themselves, it renders it even more important for the debates to hold such a quality, as to assist the audience in the formation of their individual opinions.

Through a minute, comparative examination of – amongst others – Rawls, the antique studies on stasis and informal logic, Kock finds a high degree of consistency in the ways of assessing argumentation. Three elements prevail in the assessments: acceptability, relevance and “good grounds”, the last pertaining to the quality of the actual grounds given for a certain argument. And by including also incommensurability and pluralism of values he arrives at the following conclusion:

> The basic situation is, in any case, that there may be relevant, acceptable arguments on both sides; these cannot be measured by any common, objective scale; but the individual will still need to compare arguments for and against the matter at hand. (Kock, 2008, p. 75)

This becomes the reason why we as citizens need political debate, to help us assess and clarify our own stance in the matter discussed and this requires of the debaters involved:

> The voter above all needs: 1) that arguments are explicit, both for the debaters’ own views and in the critique of the arguments of their opponents, and 2) that debaters both acknowledge and address the relevant arguments of the opponent. (Kock, 2008, p. 76)

**2.4 Pistis as the ethos of the community**

Working through all these areas it became increasingly clear to me, that I sense a certain affinity between ethos and pistis, as Fafner touched upon in the aforementioned quote. Ethos is established between the speaker and the audience, but is still largely tied to the speaker, her skills and relation to the audience.

It is my belief, that pistis in a similar way arises in the relation between a speaker and an audience, but the relation is not merely between an individual speaker and a specific audience, but to the community or common space, which exists between the speaker and the audience. And since we have established that pistis can be constructed or deteriorate through rhetorical activity – as is the case with ethos – it would for instance be possible to find an initial, derived and terminal pistis like we do with ethos (McCroskey, 2001, pp. 83-102).

If ethos and pistis are indeed related in such a manner, the next question would naturally be: “What elements of pistis correspond to the three elements of ethos: phronesis, arete and eunoia?” I am very well aware that I am now navigating in uncharted waters, but tentatively I propose “truth”, “faith” and “respect”. “Truth” here understood in a rhetorical sense, namely the absence of lies and willful distortion of fact; “faith” here meaning the expectation that the opponent is (also) participating in the dialogue or debate with the aim of reaching the best possible solutions for the common good; and mutual “respect” as an indispensable element, if
general trust is to be maintained.

2.5 Pistis as a tool for analysis

The division into three elements renders the concept far more useful as a tool for concrete analysis, enabling us to look for places, where “truth”, “faith” and “respect” are constructed or diminished. To this end, I’ve chosen to elaborate on the division in a schematic form, based on the observations I’ve made in the aforementioned sources. I’ve chosen to group the various statements into the three categories (“truth”, “faith” and “respect”), from an intuitive sense of where they belonged. Certain statements appear more than once, for example under both “truth” and “faith”. The form (table 1) served as my frame of reference throughout the analysis of the debates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Truth</th>
<th>Faith</th>
<th>Respect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Absence of lies</td>
<td>No references to private conversations</td>
<td>Adhering to agreements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absence of willful distortion of fact</td>
<td>Abstaining from criticizing the opponent</td>
<td>Respecting your opponent/The fact that we owe each other due respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tactics are allowed</td>
<td>The process of decision-making must be clear</td>
<td>Taking into consideration peer interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A clear process of decision-making</td>
<td>Acknowledging the arguments of the opponent</td>
<td>No references to private conversations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A nuanced presentation of the case</td>
<td>Argumentation</td>
<td>Acknowledging the arguments of the opponent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argumentation</td>
<td>The natural propensity to believe your opponent</td>
<td>Economy of moral disagreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance, acceptability and “good grounds”</td>
<td>To understand the words in the sense that they are spoken</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That arguments are explicit, both for the debaters’ own views and in the critique of the arguments of their opponents</td>
<td>It is generally negative to be wary of one another</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The natural urge to speak the truth</td>
<td>Avoiding accusations of self- or group-interests, prejudice or ideological blindness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutually acceptable and generally accessible grounds</td>
<td>Acknowledging the existence of reasonable disagreement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acknowledging and accepting that disagreement exists and acknowledging the fair motives of the opponent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1 (Andersen 2012 p. 38)*
3. THE ANALYSIS

The material for my analysis I defined as debates of law proposals presented by the government and subsequently passed, concerning topics relevant in the everyday lives of the citizens and/or of high political interest. These topics were integration, traffic, environment, health, culture, social services, legal affairs and one debate on an ethical matter and were chosen for the immediate consequences on the lives of the citizens and hence the assumed interest, that would (or should) be placed on the corresponding debates.

The Danish Parliament is unicameral, and formally three debates are required to pass a new law, but in reality often only one debate is held. One concern specific to the Danish Parliament, which must be kept in mind, is the fact that work in parliament is highly controlled by the organization into political groupings and by a high degree of party discipline. This entails that the members have already taken their stance on a subject – and the decision of the party group to vote for or against a certain proposal will have been made – long before anyone enters into the public debate. And thus, the purpose of each speech will not be to persuade the other debaters to change their minds.

3.1 The aim of parliamentary debate

When making a normative analysis and critique of a rhetorical artifact, you obviously expect there to be an aim with the artifact you’re dealing with. I expected to be able to find sources describing the nature and purpose(s) of parliamentary debate, but my results were more than meager. I sadly concluded, that in Denmark it has hardly been analyzed, defined, clarified or debated what a parliamentary debate is or should be, neither from an ideal or a practical perspective. The only concrete result was the statement that the debates are paramount for our democracy and that they must always be accessible to the public. Why they are important or what the politicians, citizens or media are supposed to yield from them, was never examined.

Besides the function of official setting for the passing of laws, I did – through a historical approach – identify two important functions of the debates: 1) they must ensure that politicians can publicly stand by the agreements reached in backroom negotiations (I refer to this as the element of responsibility) and 2) the classical, deliberative aspect, namely setting forth arguments for and against the proposal (I refer to this as the element of content). My analysis showed with great clarity that it is very much the elements in the realm of responsibility that take up the majority of the space in the debates. Each debate of a law proposal becomes more of battle of general political points, attacks and image building, than an actual presentation of arguments for or against the proposal. If the debates are to be of use to the interested citizen in forming an opinion on the subject, this is a highly inexpedient prioritization of the elements, where pistis is concerned.

Through several readings of the material I became aware that the most interesting focal points from a pistis-perspective, would be where the debaters express doubt as to their own opinion of a proposal and also the points, where it
was difficult to define whether they were actually debating or simply attacking each other.

3.2 Debates containing elements of doubt

The reason I found these debates especially interesting in relation to pistis, is the likeness of the situation of the speaker to that of the spectator or interested audience – the speaker puts forth (usually) reasonable and relevant questions to the proposal, which need to be answered, before it is decided how their party will vote on the matter. My analysis, however, uncovered two problems in correlation to this. Firstly, the speaker is often attacked or punished for expressing this doubt, usually in the form of accusations of stupidity, since the speaker could not immediately appreciate the wonders of the proposal. This is detrimental to pistis, because it undermines mutual respect and because the duty to acknowledge and address the arguments of the opponent is disregarded. Secondly, it caused me to reconsider whether the debates in their present form (or at least as they are at present executed) are suitable for handling the situations of doubt.

My answer would be that they are not, because the questions asked by the doubting speakers are seldom answered and hardly ever does the situation lead to an actual dialogue. This is a problem in terms of pistis, since the audience doesn’t get any answers to the questions either; we are lacking the explicit response to the arguments of the opponent.

3.3 Debates containing elements of uncertainty

As mentioned above, I found many points where it was uncertain whether it was real debate or merely attacks on the opponent. I got the feeling that politicians often came extremely close to conducting real, sober debates, but then tripping on the finish line, when giving it their final entertaining or even slick “twists” in order to discredit the opponent or to highlight themselves. And this of course makes for some very interesting points in the discussion of pistis, since any attack is a breach of pistis and even more so when they come in the disguise of real debate.

It became increasingly clear that the points, where I wasn’t sure whether real debate or attacks were taking place, had one common denominator: the intention to demonstrate a dissension of some kind in the opponent. This is a well-known move in argumentation and is often described as very potent in political debate. I identified four different types of accusations of dissension in the debates as shown in table 2.
Dissension of ideology | Departing from the fundamental ideology of the speaker
---|---
Dissension of practice | Departing from what the speaker (or his or her party) “usually” stands for or defends
Dissension of position | Departing from former positions or actions on the same or similar subject matters
Dissension of cooperation | Departing from the positions of known partners or allies

**Table 2**

I very much doubt the strength of this line of argumentation. Admitting to a change of position as a result of solid arguments may on the contrary, I believe, increase your credibility. My studies also showed that these accusations of dissension are very seldom answered either – the opponent simply never admits to the dissension, and furthermore dissension is often constructed on a straw man-version of the opponent’s arguments, ideology or current position. Except for “dissension of position”, which may be both relevant and legitimate, the accusations of dissension are overall negative, where *pistis* is concerned, partly because their numbers take up a disproportionate amount of time better spent on real debate and argumentation concerning the actual law proposal. And partly because they are highly detrimental to both respect and, especially, faith.

4. CONCLUSION

My hypothesis was, firstly, that *pistis*, in the interpretation of Fafner, would be relevant as a norm for a normative, rhetorical criticism of parliamentary debates. And that it would hence be possible to define the norm in a manner to render it useful in a practical analysis.

Even from the scarce material I discovered certain functions of the parliamentary debates. They are a formal setting for the passing of laws, they ensure that politicians can publicly stand by the agreements reached in backroom negotiations (the element of responsibility) and provides an arena for setting forth arguments for and against the law proposals (the element of content).

Especially from what I refer to as the elements of responsibility and content, I argue that *pistis* is a relevant and expedient norm in the evaluation of parliamentary debate, since trust is of paramount importance, both among the politicians themselves and in their relationship with their voters, if the debates are to be of relevant use to the audience.

Inspired by other fields of study I have elaborated on the concept of *pistis* and it has emerged in the course of my work that *pistis* is in some ways akin to *ethos*; it can – as is the case with *ethos* – be established, but also deteriorate through rhetorical activity. And as *ethos* is composed of *phronesis*, *arete* and *eunoia* I have tentatively suggested a composition of *pistis* comprised of: “truth” (in the rhetorical sense of the word), “faith” (the expectation that everyone participates in the debate with the aim of reaching the best possible solutions for the common good) and
“respect” (an indispensable element, if general trust is to be maintained).

In my analysis I have focused on the more striking areas or points where *pistis* is compromised or otherwise dismantled. But I would like to conclude by urging that more comprehensive studies be made in the future, of the positive, constructive aspects of *pistis*, that I hope and believe will help us to develop a more useful version of parliamentary debate.

REFERENCES


