



Crespo, H. (2014). Reasonings about Philodemus' *On Frank Criticism*, Part I: The role of frankness in a philosophy of freedom and friendship. *Society of Friends of Epicurus Journal*, 3, pp. 11-14.

## Reasonings about Philodemus' *On Frank Criticism*, Part I: **The Role of Frankness in a Philosophy of Freedom and Friendship**

By **Hiram Crespo**, editor.

Among the most important works written by Philodemus is *Peri Parrhesias*, usually translated as *On Frank Criticism*. I sought a single-word definition for *parrhesia* in English, but failed to find one. I considered candor, or frankness, but here is dictionary.com's definition of *candor*:

1. the state or quality of being frank, open, and sincere in speech or expression
2. freedom from bias; fairness; impartiality

I find the definition does not go far enough. Epicurean discussions on this matter invariably get into territory that is filled with tension. We believe that a friend **MUST** tell the truth to a friend, and sometimes this is done with suavity, but not always. Truth can be bad medicine, but it is **ALWAYS** medicine to us. The criticism portion of the translation is crucial in order to understand what we mean and how we use *parrhesia* in therapeutic ways to help heal the moral ills of the soul and to mutually encourage constant self-betterment among true well-wishing friends.

I do wish to discuss some points on the dictionary definition, as well as the history, of the word *frank*:

1. honest and straightforward in speech or attitude
2. outspoken or blunt
3. open and avowed; undisguised

Frankness must certainly be a quality of *parrhesia*. Notice also the history of the term: *francus* was Latin for *free*, and when Gaul was governed by the Frankish tribes only the Franks were free. This meant that they could express their minds without fear of tyrants or elites.

Similarly, in the ancient Greek world, as democracy flourished, *parrhesia* was tied to the egalitarian and democratic ideals of the polis, sort of similar to how we understand the concept of free speech, which to us Westerners is sacred and enshrined in our Constitutions and books of laws. Free speech is quintessential to citizenship in a free country. **Only the free can be frank.**

But by the time Philodemus was teaching philosophy in Italy, values had shifted. He found himself in a Roman society that honored social class divisions, in fact he was instructing wealthy Romans, and *parrhesia* no longer carried the political weight that it did in the polis. Among his chief preoccupations we find tensions having to do with people of lower class giving frank criticism to the wealthy and with how to distinguish between friend and flatterer, a matter of great concern among wealthy Romans.

### **The Garden: a Habitat for Wisdom**

**All the revered ancestral wisdom traditions of humanity evolved organically in settings where people came to those who were deemed wise in order to seek practical guidance when they were confused or in need of counsel from a trusted friend.** Invariably, these traditions celebrate friendship and warn people about distinguishing between true and false friends, because **not being able to distinguish clearly between true and false friends has always been one of the most prevalent sources of disillusion and suffering among mortals.** This is why we notice that every wisdom tradition, from the oral Yoruba tradition in Africa, to the Ramayana epic in India, to the Scandinavian Havamal, and certainly within our own Epicurean tradition, this issue has always had to be addressed.

There are many examples of friendship-related advise in the wisdom traditions. They begin by stressing the importance of association, and then elaborate the finer details on how to nurture wholesome friendships.

The Havamal, which emerged among the Nordic skalds (poets), compares the lonesome man with the stump of a dead tree. The Biblical wisdom tradition, which according to legend was nurtured in the court of Kings Salomon and David, also contains the following prudent and beautifully expressed advise:

***Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up. Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken.*** - Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Krishna exemplifies the ideal friend when he gives the saddened and confused Arjuna frequent encouragement in the Bhagavad Gita: "Carry on, champion! Conqueror of your enemies", and the many dramatizations of how an ideal friend should behave in the Hindu epic of the Ramayana, where Rama and Hanuman frequently verbalize how they love each other like brothers. The didactic value of these dramatizations is undeniable, as they help children to understand what a supremely important human value friendship is.

The evolution of a wisdom tradition requires what I like to think of as a habitat for wisdom: a socially acceptable outlet for this dynamic where people seek out trusted and wise friends, a space where prudence can be nourished within the culture. I choose the word habitat, firstly to stick to naturalist verbiage and metaphors, and secondly to accentuate the importance of spacial and relational factors as well as time and stability, all of which are always required for organic things to emerge wholesomely as they should. Such is the case with philosophical friendship.

Within this context, frank criticism becomes a process of pruning the plants within the Garden. It has evolved from its original political context into a new contextual framework: to us, it serves philosophical friendship. It is here that we find the Epicurean sense and use of the word *parrhesia*.

A true friend must never lie to us and must always be a good influence, never a bad one.

**Philodemus taught that the words of a true friend must be profitable morally.** They must help us to live a good life and become happier, more productive and wholesome people with good character.

Good friends must be like a philosophical Gardener pruning us with their speech, which constitutes constructive criticism. They must be a good influence and must from time to time be willing to give us bad medicine for our own good in the form of frank criticism.

Only those who love us will give us this frank criticism in a spirit of friendship and love, with sincere desire to help us get better and not out of envy or animosity. They will choose their words carefully. Their intention will not be to hurt us, but to help us.

### **The Flatterers and Other False Friends**

What's more: flattery is specifically treated as a form of evil speech which opposes frank speech. In the Nordic Havamal, in the writings of Philodemus, and in other wisdom traditions the flatterer is invariably a type of false friend. He is the one who tells us what he thinks we wish to hear without caring whether or not it's profitable to our character and happiness. In the Havamal, the friend is not the guy that laughs at our jokes, but the one with whom we can fully blend our mind.

The man and woman of wisdom is always unmoved by the apparent grace and innocence of a superficial "Daaarling, you look fabulous!" and will look for whether an acquaintance demonstrates a genuine interest in the wellbeing and happiness of the other before considering that acquaintance a friend of the other.

This does not mean that praise is a sign of a non-friend: it simply means that frank speech is always a sign of a true one. A true friend will feel at liberty to both praise and criticize whenever it's prudent.

If I bruise a friend's ego but, in doing so, save him from addiction to drugs or gambling, from ending up in jail or from an abusive relationship, then I deserve that friend's love, loyalty and trust. If I watch a person self-destruct and make no attempts to assist, then I do not deserve that person's trust and loyalty.

In addition to the flatterer, there is also the kind of false friend who tells the truth harshly and inspired by ill-will. Truth-telling is not in itself a sign of a true friend: one always needs care and prudence to identify a true friend. In Philodemus' instruction book about frank criticism, he refers to this false friend under the heading that helps to discern between "one who is frank from a polite disposition and one who is so from a vulgar one". He goes on to list the virtuous qualities of a polite truth-sayer:

*... everyone who bears goodwill and practices philosophy intelligently and continually and is great in character and indifferent to fame and least of all a politician and clean of envy and says only what is relevant and is not carried away so as to insult or strut or show contempt or do harm, and does not make use of insolence and flattering arts ... – Philodemus, On Frank Criticism, Column Ib*

Similarly, it is oftentimes difficult to know the true intentions of a person who is friends with an enemy, or whether or not that person is a well-wisher. The Havamal counsels plainly that a friend of our enemy is no friend of ours. It is always advisable to be mindful of alliances.

### **The Imprudent and the Incurable**

The dynamics and the mellows of the pleasure of friendship are many and complex. It is natural in all friendships that difficulties and differences of character will surface. This does not mean that there isn't genuine love between friends.

It is understood that oftentimes people who are well-meaning lack the wisdom to provide frank speech to friends. A man's inability to be a loving, guiding presence for another does not translate into his being a vicious or evil person. There are superficial friends, and then there are deep, intimate, caring friends. There are prudent friends and those who are less prudent. In this case, we should encourage the friend with the most prudence, if he is or wishes to be a true friend, to provide from time to time pruning to the one with less prudence, always noting that we all learn with our own heads and that some don't take frank speech well and will display animosity or anger, or suspect ill intentions when they encounter it. These are called *incurable* by Philodemus.