



Crespo, H. (2014). Reasonings about Philodemus' *On Frank Criticism*, Part II: The master as a moral model. *Society of Friends of Epicurus Journal*, 3, pp. 15-16.

Reasonings about Philodemus' *On Frank Criticism*, Part II: **The Master as a Moral Model**

By **Hiram Crespo**, editor.

There is one parallel between the Eastern Secular Humanism of Confucius and the Western one of Epicurus which deals with the moralizing role of shame in both traditions.

... I hope you too are well and your mamma, and that you are always obedient to Papa and Matro, as you used to be. Let me tell you that the reason that I and all the rest of us love you is that you are always obedient to them. – Epicurus, in his [Letter to a Boy or Girl](#)

Confucius said that when leaders are virtuous, the people naturally feel shame when they are wrong whereas when leaders are not virtuous, they rule by fear instead and people follow the law for fear of punishment. This is an interesting observation, particularly when we look at societies ruled by religious or political fear versus lenient, liberal societies. What does this tell us about the leaders of these societies and their consistent ability to earn the trust of the people by their virtue or corruption?

Fear, not mercy, restrains the wicked. – Proverbs 69:17, AC Grayling's *The Good Book: A Humanist Bible*

We must also, to be fair, distill one further insight from Confucius' observation. Liberal societies are not a good thing in themselves: healthy association and wholesome leadership are required to make them virtuous and happy societies. In other words, it's not enough for people to not be ruled by fear, and one of the ways in which Epicureanism is meant to work for our constant moral self-betterment, is by us avoiding the shame of disappointing the love and loyalty of our caring friends, particularly the wisest and most virtuous among them.

When I brought up this Confucian observation among the Epicureans, Cassius Amicus tied it to Epicurus' statement about reverencing the sage being of great benefit to those who do the reverencing, and also to the official adage of the Society of Friends: "*Do all things as if Epicurus were watching*".

I share this because, within the writings of Philodemus, we see the profiles of some of the original Epicurean Masters as they were affectionately remembered by their pupils for generations: virtuous, truthful, powerful in speech.

The Examples of Metrodorus and Polyaeus

Some of the little that we know of Metrodorus came to us indirectly through people like Philodemus, which indicates that there was, among early Epicureans, a(n oral?) tradition of passing down anecdotes about the activities and the moral example of the previous Masters, or at least perhaps stories related to the original four (known collectively as *the Men*), a sort of early Epicurean extra-canonical *hadith* tradition which is mostly lost to us.

Philodemus frequently cites Metrodorus as an authority when he makes assertions about very important matters. In one passage, he casually characterizes him as an attentive teacher given to frequent pruning of students:

... in the process of teaching ... they will in no way differ from Cleanthes or Metrodorus (for it is obvious that an attentive teacher will employ a more abundant frankness) ... – Philodemus, *On Frank Criticism*, Column Vb

This paints a picture of an original Garden where, under the tutelage of the first four teachers, the first Epicureans developed a culture of frank speech and philosophical friendship. We also find mention in *On Frank Criticism* of the following commentary:

... Even if one is rather sententious, as Metrodorus says Polyaeus was, “often insinuating himself into conversation and quite sociable” ... – Philodemus, *On Frank Criticism*, Column VIa

The word *sententious* translates as:

1. abounding in pithy aphorisms or maxims
2. given to excessive moralizing; self-righteous
3. given to or using pithy sayings or maxims
4. of the nature of a maxim

... with pithy being a word that indicates vigor and forcefulness. This paints the picture of a Master who carries in him an encyclopaedia of wisdom and acts as an efficient and wise instructor, constantly dispensing philosophy in a manner that is both powerful and easy to memorize and learn.

We know that aphorisms and maxims are short and can be easily memorized through repetition, and much of what survives of Epicurus’ 300 scrolls and the writings of the other Four Men is in the form of sayings and short doctrines, which might be an indicator of the frequency and universality with which these maxims were shared and utilized.

The pharmacology, the spiritual cures of Epicureanism, originally took the forms of these small but vigorous pills of wisdom. Perhaps the frequency of [short but forceful Epicurean memes](#) on social media (twitter, facebook, etc.) might be a modern variety of them.