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## Reasonings about Philodemus' *On Frank Criticism*, Part II: **Against the Charlatans**

By **Hiram Crespo**, editor.

*Men who are charlatans, too, divert many, seizing them after some stress and enchanting them with their subtle kindness. – Philodemus, On Frank Criticism, Fragment 60*

Things haven't changed much since Philodemus. Our world is still teeming with charlatans, and many of them have gained quite a following. Mormonism –which originated as a polygamy ranch cult– is one of the most recent cults to become mainstream enough to be called a religion. Its founder, Joseph Smith, had over 30 wives. Some were also married to his own followers, others were only 14 when he appropriated them.

While pretending to be the latest member of the long list of God's revered ventriloquists, he wrote a holy book that taught that the Native Americans were descended from a lost Jewish tribe –a claim which has been proven fraudulent by modern genetics research and for which there is no archeological base– and even promised his followers an afterlife as gods in their own planets with multiple wives.

Perhaps if triangles had gods, their gods would have three angles.

But let's not digress: Philodemus claimed that charlatans enchant people with subtle kindness. Christian churches have elevated the ability to charm with subtle kindness to an art. They believe that there is a God-given mysterious ability known as charisma, which comes from the Holy Ghost.

### **cha·ris·ma**

1. a divinely conferred gift or power.
2. a spiritual power or personal quality that gives an individual influence or authority over large numbers of people.
3. the special virtue of an office, function, position, etc., that confers or is thought to confer on the person holding it an unusual ability for leadership, worthiness of veneration, or the like.

This belief has opened the door for a tsunami of false prophets –too many to mention– that have throughout history claimed Christian revelation. There are many prominent examples, both [funny](#) and [tragic](#), of false prophets. Marjoe, who made a name for himself as a child preacher, later in his life [filmed a documentary](#) exposing the entire evangelical industry.

Benny Hinn, a notorious and very wealthy televangelist, [prior to being exposed](#) once [declared the false prophecy](#) that in the mid-90's "God would destroy the homosexual community of America". The prophecy was obviously false and never materialized, but when he uttered it, he elicited **the applause** of his followers.

*"Yet, crafty fellow that I am, I caught you by trickery!"* – Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:15-17

Sadly, crafty fellows have sometimes lacked creativity and have also appropriated aspects of Epicurean tradition to oblivion. One of the revelations that emerges from reading Norman Dewitt's [St. Paul and Epicurus](#) has to do with the way in which the New Testament took over our epistolary tradition. The first literary evidence of didactic epistles being written in order to be read publicly by an entire community happens among ancient Epicureans. It's one of the ways in which our teachings propagated. Today, most people know of the New Testament's epistles, but almost no one knows of the original Epicurean ones, which were mostly destroyed by the enemies of Epicureanism.

### ... Seizing Them After Some Stress

We can cite mountains of examples of how everyday charlatans prey upon the vulnerable: prison ministries, for instance, have had the repercussion of producing a nearly cancerous growth of Islam in Western prisons.

I've visited a prison as part of journalistic efforts to help uncover injustices against men, whom I believed were innocent and wrongfully convicted. It was a very heart-wrenching experience, and I realize that it may seem unfair to criticize the noble efforts of people who visit prisons. But we must recognize that **people sometimes do noble things for the wrong reason**. This is a moral problem that should be pondered.

Christopher Hitchens eloquently pointed out once that Hamas is the largest charitable organization in the Gaza Strip. I was reminded of this when, after Katrina, the Mormons were very active in the charity efforts in Mississippi and Louisiana, where many poor African Americans suffered greatly. In these cases, Hamas also encourages people in these ailing communities to become suicide bombers and the Book of Mormon teaches that being black is a curse.

*Wherefore, as they were white, and exceedingly fair and delightsome, **that they might not be enticing unto my people the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them.*** – 2 Nephi 5:21, Book of Mormon

And so, these forms of charity (as I see it, altruism **for the wrong reasons**) have a certain price, and it's extremely important to stand firm in the knowledge that the fact of their existence has nothing to do with neither the truth value nor the wholesomeness of the beliefs of people who engage in these charitable efforts, be it for ostentatious purposes or with sincerity.

It would be a fanatical mistake to consider altruism or charity to be evil merely on account on being carried out for the wrong reasons. We also must recognize that there are many well-meaning persons who engage in altruism out of genuine compassion and kindness and for no personal gain, and that their beliefs are merely accidental facts. Perhaps we should encourage people to consider not just the underlying reasons for their charitable efforts but also the effects of not discerning between charity for the right reasons versus for the wrong reasons, as well as encourage people to consider choosing intelligent channels for our altruistic tendencies.

*I summon you to continuous pleasures and not to vain and empty virtues which have but a desperate hope for rewards. – Epicurus*

Even if charity work is done for the wrong reasons, it might be deemed by some to be praiseworthy. However, when the money raised by religious organizations funds lawyers and institutions who hide sexual predators from justice, when it funds the efforts of people who are trying to convince the world that gays should not have a family, or when it funds the activities of terrorist organizations, the problem of charity for the wrong reasons becomes obvious.

False-faith-mongers also have their lavish lifestyles subsidized by funds raised in the tax-exempt schemes of their churches. Their flying around in private jets did not stop after the earthquake in Haiti or any of the other major fund-raising excuses that history furnished. There are many worthy causes where money can be better spent than financing the Benny Hinn's, the Marjoe's and the Cardinal Bernard Law's of the world.

### **Love Dances Around the World ...**

There are other stresses after which people are seized into religion. One of the most prevalent ones is particularly poignant, and here we are inclined to agree with many of the great personalities of religion.

*There is not enough love in this world. - Ammachi, the hugging saint of Hinduism*

There is no doubt that Ammachi's hugs have comforted thousands of lonely people. In our own tradition, Norman DeWitt can be quoted as saying that **Epicureanism runs on philos**, which is more than friendship: it is love.

Friendship is an expression of love: it is more than solidarity, which is not entirely impersonal but also not entirely personal. We can be in solidarity with an idea, but we can only befriend a person. Friendship is definitely a personal and intimate relationship with another with whom we feel safe and can be ourselves. It provides safety. Ours is a philosophy of community and of friendship.

### **The City Without Walls**

One final stress leaves people vulnerable to being seized by charlatans. It is the universal problem of our mortality and that of our loved ones.

*It is possible to provide security against other ills, but as far as death is concerned, we men live in a city without walls. – Epicurus*

Death leaves us extremely vulnerable. We develop strong bonds with our kin and some people never fully recover from losing loved ones. It produces great anxiety, and being a universal source of suffering, it is of course the main vulnerability by which charlatans entice the souls of mortals.

Religion also sublimates the idea of death by using euphemisms tied to paradise. Perhaps the opium of religious belief here acts more or less, to use a metaphor from nature, as the *compassionate venom* of spiders or serpents who sedate their victims so that they will not suffer as they die. But like other forms of opium, this sedative can become seductive and addictive, and many mystics embrace their desire to escape this world so fully that they might as well live on another planet.

In this city without walls, we Epicureans must challenge political atheists to become involved in the healing of the human condition. The Epicurean teaching mission is of great importance because, while some of us may think it's noble to join John Lennon in *imagining no religion*, it is pointless to engage in atheist politics without dealing with the human condition which produces the neuroses and vulnerabilities on which religion preys. We can't address the many dangers of religion if we don't address, by living an analysed life, our anxieties and the causes of wanting an exit from this world. The Hellenistic philosophers taught us that we must teach each other to take care of our existential health.

### **The Two Forms of Frank Speech**

I realize that some of the issues I've addressed in this piece are difficult for some people. Philodemus' indictment against the charlatans occurs in a fragment of his book *On Frank Speech*, and if we place the fragment within its context we begin to realize why this reasoning is needed.

[The translation of the book](#) that I am reading includes commentary and mentions that the role of the philosopher is to give two forms of frank speech: one is to the individual and another one is to society in general. Let's call them **private and public forms of frank speech**. Both are crucial and necessary for different reasons. We have seen, in the first part of this trilogy of articles, the reasons why private frank criticism is necessary.

The philosopher must speak frankly and openly to outside society in order to help emancipate others from ignorance or from tradition, and from the forms of suffering that ignorance and tradition generate.

Confucius, for instance, confronted the ancient Chinese custom of burial of live slaves with their master with great moral stamina before a local ruler, and with his eloquence and intelligence singlehandedly ended the practice. Siddhartha Buddha confronted the caste system and the Vedic practices of animal sacrifice. Ancient Greek atomists confronted false healers with the theory that germs produce illness and assuaged people's fears about the gods, prophecy, heavenly bodies, and earthquakes by teaching that natural laws govern the way things are.

The confrontation of charlatans by Epicurus, Lucian, Philodemus and other Epicureans is no less morally urgent and important. It is this form of public frank speech that incites progress and evolution in human society.

*Through love of true philosophy, every troublesome and disturbing desire is ended.* – Epicurus