

Philodemus - On Frank Speech

Post by "Don" of October 3, 2023 at 10:40 PM

I went through quickly in Philodemus's work to try and pull out some quotes and to add some commentary of my own. Please keep in mind this is quick and dirty but I didn't want to leave you waiting for a response:

1. At what point does frank speech come across as rude, harsh, or insensitive?

Philodemus states that the one using frank criticism has to tailor it to the individual. If the person is amenable to correction, one can apply kind, reassuring words to set them back on track. If the student is arrogant, etc., a harsher treatment may be required to get them to listen.

Frank criticism seems very context specific in the way it is applied, by whom, and for whom. The teacher has to be skillful and to be aware of how they think the student will respond to the criticism, or feedback if you will. Even so, the practice appears to have been considered essential.

Fr. 40: ...for it is necessary to show him his errors forthrightly and speak of his failings publicly. For if he has considered this man to be the one guide of right speech and [action], whom he calls the only savior, and {to whom}, citing the phrase, "with him accompanying {me}," he has given himself over to be treated, then how is he not going to show to him those things in which he

needs treatment, and [accept admonishment]?

2. Is the phrase "frank speech" ever used to justify harsh speech? What is harsh speech and when should we avoid it?

To answer the question directly: No, frank speech is not just a synonym for being harsh to someone. I think Philodemus covered some topics like that in On Anger but I don't have ready access to that book.

Fr. 7: ...and toward those stronger than the tender ones and those somewhat more in need of treatment, he intensifies [frankness], and toward the strong who will scarcely change {even} if they are shouted at, he will also employ the harsh form of frankness.

It seems "harsh speech" used simply because someone is angry or wants revenge on someone is completely out of bounds. There has to be a good reason to use "the harsh form of frankness" where the word harsh in Greek conveys "falling upon, attacking, assailing" in other words, going on the offensive. Contrast that with "sharp frankness" below.

Fr. 60: ...and [some] have judged it right to speak frankly [to] such people, but [moderately], given that sharp frankness bears a similarity to insult, as if insulting indeed out of ill will. Men who are charlatans, too, divert many, seizing them after some stress and enchanting them with their subtle kindnesses.

So, selfishly buttering someone up with kindness is as bad as insulting someone with sharp frankness. The word used for "sharp" there is pikros: bitter, hateful; embittered, angry, hostile; relentless, spiteful, vindictive

3. what kinds of word choices appear to have a domineering, shaming, or power-over (controlling) attitude? When is frank speech just an expression of anger and a kind of punishment?

It doesn't seem to me that skillful frank criticism would have any of traits of being "domineering, shaming, or power-over (controlling) attitude?" For example:

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Philodemus appears to acknowledge some aren't skillful in frank criticism and, indeed, some do it for base reasons:

Col. Ia: ...[to distinguish] one who is frank from a polite disposition and one who is so from a vulgar one. It is indeed possible to [distinguish [the nature] of one who practices frankness from a polite disposition and that of one who in turn {does so} from a base one. And some...

Col. Ib: ...[from a polite one], 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].

Col. IIIb: [And] {not}, as in the case of those who train choruses [skillfully], in philosophy: both that one {teacher} is irascible and snappish toward everyone, as certain others are in turn, while another is always mild; and that one speaks frankly about everything in a good way, but another does so deficiently on some matter. For all {wise men} both love {their students} alike in accord with the worth of each and see their faults alike and, through [frankness], the...

It's important to remember that frank doesn't mean rude. It doesn't give license to be a bully or to speak disparagingly or to insult. The dictionary gives "honest, especially in a manner that seems slightly blunt; candid; not reserved or disguised." It's basically saying something that has to be said for the good of the person hearing it. We may not like constructive criticism but sometimes it's necessary to hear of one wants to improve on their behavior at work or in living.