

Philodemus - On Frank Speech

Post by "Don" of September 16, 2023 at 10:49 AM

A big part of classical Epicurean practice in the original Garden through the time of Philodemus and beyond to even Oenoanda appears to be the one on one consultation or counseling between student and teacher to correct mistaken views and actions. Philodemus outlines this practice and its implementation and importance in *On Frank Speech*. That is a major component that is lost in our current moment, not to say that we don't help each other hone our understanding, but there are no teachers with authority per se.

Some quotes from On Frank Speech:

Even if we demonstrate logically that, although many fine things result from friendship, there is nothing so grand as having one to whom one will say what is in one's heart and who will listen when one speaks. For our nature strongly desires to reveal to some people what it thinks.

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]?

Fr. 45: ...we shall admonish others with great confidence, both now and

when those {of us} who have become offshoots of our teachers have become

eminent. And the encompassing and most important thing is, we shall obey

Epicurus, according to whom we have chosen to live, as even..

And so on.

Post by “Kalosyni” of September 16, 2023 at 10:55 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

A big part of classical Epicurean practice in the original Garden through the time of Philodemus and beyond to even Oenoanda appears to be the one on one consultation or counseling between student and teacher to correct mistaken views and actions. Philodemus outlines this practice and its implementation and importance in On Frank Speech.

Is it not true that we have no evidence of what was happening in the original Garden regarding special consultation or counseling?

And perhaps Philodemus could have developed the ethical aspect much further than Epicurus, and all while remaining true to the core doctrines. I am wondering if perhaps during Philodemus' time there may have been less emphasis on natural physics/science and more emphasis on ethics...but yet I don't know if that is true or not.

Post by “Cassius” of September 16, 2023 at 11:02 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

I am wondering if perhaps during Philodemus' time there may have been less emphasis on natural physics/science and more emphasis on ethics...but yet I don't know if that is true or not.

Well taking Lucretius as an example it would appear that the physics and epistemology was as front and center as ever around 50 BC. From that, one might deduce that until it became politically impossible to discuss the physics and epistemology with the rise of Abrahamic monotheism, those subjects were considered to be the core Epicurean curriculum with the ethics being a creative and important but pretty much common sense deduction. It's always been the denial of providence and immortality that's much more the truly explosive center, rather than the practical advice on being happy. I don't mean to slight the ethics, but you won't get yourself killed standing on the streetcorner saying "don't you want to be happy?"

And given that the ethics flows from and is dependent on the physics and the making of proper deductions from it, I would expect that to be the case all the way through. I would likely argue too that the demotion of the physics and epistemology explains many of the issues that have

arisen in interpreting the ethics.

Post by “Don” of September 16, 2023 at 11:07 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Is it not true that we have no evidence of what was happening in the original Garden regarding special consultation or counseling?

Philodemus quotes Epicurus as well as uses specific examples of interactions in the Garden with Epicurus, Metrodorus, Leontion, Pythocles, etc. to illustrate the practice of parrhesia, frank speech. I see no reason to think Philodemus didn't know about the practice firsthand since he trained in the Garden in Athens before coming to Herculaneum.

Post by “Don” of September 16, 2023 at 12:09 PM

Ex.

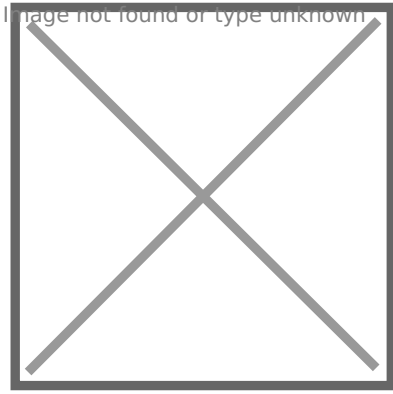
Fr. 49: ...that Heraclides is [praised] because, deeming the censures for the things that would be revealed to be less {important} than their benefit, he disclosed to Epicurus his errors. Polyaenus too was such a man, who indeed,

when A[polloni]des was remiss, [would go] to Epicurus...

Fr. 55: ...and they (present] for frank criticism what concerns themselves in the presence of the students, to be put before Epicurus and for the sake of correction.

Post by “Don” of September 16, 2023 at 12:36 PM

I had forgotten about this Sedley paper:



[Epicurus and the mathematicians of Cyzicus](#)

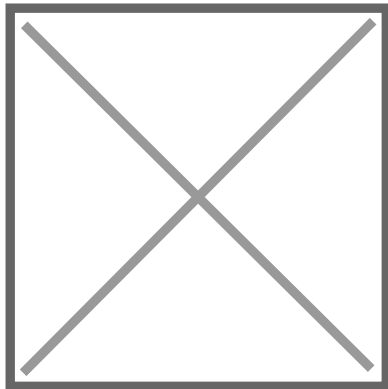
Epicurus and the mathematicians of Cyzicus

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It provides some tantalizing facts about Pythocles but also how the philosophical schools interacted with each other.

Philodemus's On Frank Speech περί παρρησία is mentioned on p.46 but the biographical info on Polyaenus and Pythocles is fascinating!

Post by “Don” of September 16, 2023 at 2:38 PM



[Criticizing Love’s Critic: Epicurean parrhesia as an Instructional Mode in Ovidian Love Elegy](#)

Within several of his works that take love as their subject, Ovid employs parrhesia or “frank criticism,” a typically Epicurean instructional mode, to...

www.academia.edu

Post by “Cassius” of September 16, 2023 at 4:35 PM

Thanks for the link to the paper on "Criticizing Love's Critic."

It gives me the chance to play the role of Don questioning DeWitt! 😊

harsh teachings, that serve the poem's larger instructional purpose.³ Such "wearing down" by the repetition of blunt truths is, in fact, one key aspect of an Epicurean mode of instruction, *parrhesia*, or "frank criticism," delineated by Lucretius' contemporary, and fellow Epicurean, Philodemus of Gadara in his *Peri parrhesias*.⁴ I would submit that when Ovid self-consciously employs the repetition of his own, often harsh teachings on love, coincident with alluding to Lucretian verses like the ones cited here, he calls attention to his own use of a key element of *parrhesia*, that is, of a Lucretian didactic strategy.⁵

I'm glad for anybody to bring up Lucretius or Epicurus in any context, but it makes me a little uneasy to suggest that anyone who uses frank criticism or repetition in any communication is channeling Epicurus.

So I find myself in the position of Don's concerns with some of Dewitt's claims of parallels to or references in Christianity to make too strong a claims that "frank criticism" has an Epicurean trademark on it. 😊 There are too many things that do have Epicurean trademarks on them to jeopardize one's credibility by stretching when a comparison isn't necessary, and I agree with Don that this is a blemish on what I consider to be deWitt's other highly creditable work.

As to frank criticism, if this comparison were easy to establish, then I would have to conclude that when I was much younger I came across many unknowingly Epicurean teachers in my decidedly un-Epicurean schooling.

So the context in this particular is Kalosyni's questioning of Philodemus' possible deviations from Epicurus, I don't see much deviation in Philodemus - as to "frank criticism" I see that as largely common sense and totally consistent with Epicurus' emphasis on clarity and honesty.

Post by "Don" of September 16, 2023 at 6:20 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I don't see much deviation in Philodemus - as to "frank criticism" I see that as largely common sense and totally consistent with Epicurus' emphasis on clarity and honesty.

Agreed. *On Frank Speech* is an interesting read.

Post by "Don" of September 16, 2023 at 8:27 PM

btw here's the LSJ entry for parrhesia "frank speech"

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, παρρησία](#)

"outspokenness, frankness, freedom of speech, claimed by the Athenians as their privilege"

So, frank speech was not something unique to the Epicurean school, but they definitely seem to have raised it to an integral part of their instruction.

As you'll see there are a number of citations in that definition entry to other authors, including:

Euripides, *Hippolytus*

they may live in glorious Athens as free men, *free of speech* (παρρησία) and flourishing, enjoying good repute where their mother is concerned.

Euripides, *Bacchae*

I wish to hear whether I should tell you in *free speech* the situation there or whether I should repress my report,..

Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazousae*

Have we not the right to speak frankly at this gathering?

Plato, *Republic*

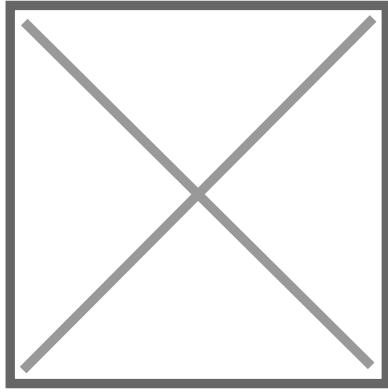
"It is plain," he said. "To begin with, are they not free? and is not the city chock-full of liberty and freedom of speech? and has not every man licence¹ to do as he likes?"

Demosthenes, *Philippic 2*

I vow that I will *boldly tell you the whole truth* and keep nothing back.

Post by "Don" of September 16, 2023 at 10:40 PM

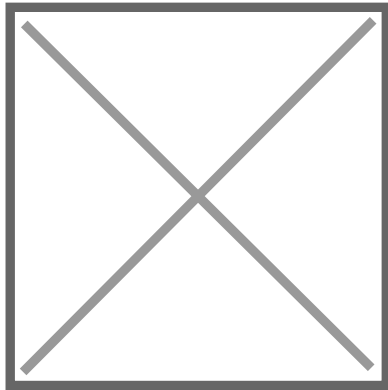
See also



[Parrhesia in Cassius Dio \[in C.H. Lange and J.M. Madsen \(eds\), Cassius Dio - Greek Intellectual and Roman Politician \(Brill's Historiography of Rome and its empire Series 1\), 2016\]](http://www.brill.com/products/book/cassius-dio)

<http://www.brill.com/products/book/cassius-dio>

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[Thoreau, Parrhesia, and the Socratic Tradition of Philosophy](http://www.academia.edu)

Most objections against Henry Thoreau aim at his “unfriendly” provocations. In this article, I argue that we need to situate his exhortative style in...

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Abstract Most objections against Henry Thoreau aim at his “unfriendly” provocations. In this article, I argue that we need to situate his exhortative style in the context of practicing parrhesia or the bold expression of truth in the Socratic tradition of philosophy. Philosophical parrhesia can be defined as the practice of speaking the truth with an eye to bringing home the realization that one must change one’s life. The transformation Thoreau has in mind is hinged upon acquiring the practical knowledge of cultivating the senses through what he calls “excursion.” This, I argue, is his key contribution to the said tradition.

Post by “Kalosyni” of September 17, 2023 at 9:35 AM

I don't recall there being anything in the early extant texts (PDs etc) that gives reference to "frank speech" and in Lucretius honey is put onto the cup of wormwood (which would be to emphasize a pleasant way of speaking).

Post by “Don” of September 17, 2023 at 11:26 AM

παρρησία "Frank speech" isn't a pleasant way of speaking. In many cases, it's uncomfortable and can be biting. It's compared in the text to a doctor administering a remedy that may be painful but necessary. It's often even translated as "frank criticism."

It appears that Philodemus's "On Frank Speech" is based in large part on his notes of lectures given by his teacher Zeno of Sidon

[Zeno of Sidon - Wikipedia](#)

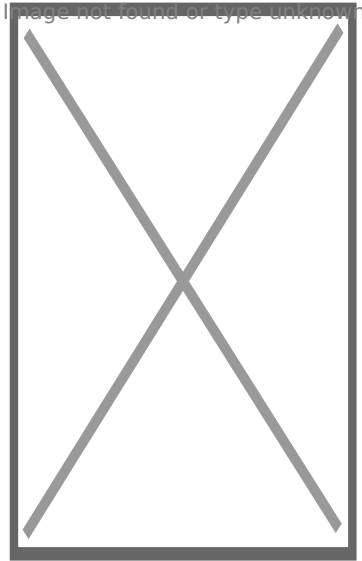
If that's the case, this practice or method of instruction would have been widespread.

For my part, I think we have to consider any Epicurean texts from ancient Greece or Rome as early extant texts, with the caveat to understand how much is reconstructed from fragments and how much still appears as full paragraphs and pages. One thing that looking at the manuscripts has shown me is that even Diogenes Laertius and Lucretius have issues and questions when it comes to their texts. We have so few texts widely available that when we find translations of *On Nature* or Philodemus, we need to mine them for all they're worth. We have lost so much.

I see the practice of frank speech in the Garden as a natural outgrowth of wanting one's friends and students to stay on the path. The Garden provided opportunities for much more social interaction and one on one time than we will most likely ever have. I don't think we should think of frank speech between teacher and student as "confession," which perverts the notion of correction and instruction to a means of punishment and shame. It strikes me that the Garden provided an environment where the student genuinely wanted to follow the path of Epicurus, and the teacher genuinely wanted to help the student. Some students may have been more amenable to this correction than others, but that didn't stop the teacher from administering the medicine.

Post by “Don” of September 17, 2023 at 11:43 AM

Here's a book that can be checked out from Internet Archive that could prove interesting:



[Paul and Philodemus : adaptability in Epicurean and early Christian psychagogy : Glad, Clarence E : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

xiv, 414 pages ; 25 cm

archive.org

Post by “Don” of September 17, 2023 at 12:13 PM

Ex. From above book...

Plutarch's remark on frank speech as the "language of friendship" and as the "most potent medicine in friendship," needing all care to find the right occasion, shows the close connection of frank speech with friendship and the difficulties in its use.²¹ Both of these aspects of παρρησία surface in *On Frank Criticism* where Philodemus discusses frank speech under the topic of how and when frankly to reprimand your friends' failings. The topic of frank speech is thus a part of the theme of moral education, or the correction of faults among friends in the improvement of character, discussed earlier by Plato, Aristotle, Xenophon, and Isocrates.²² It is especially in Isocrates that we find the change in connotation of the word παρρησία that was originally used in the political sphere of the right of the free-born Athenian to express his views unhindered. From then on, the word παρρησία was seen as a sign of goodwill towards one's friends and close in meaning to ἐλέγχω and βουθετέω.²³ The pinnacle of this development is

Post by "Don" of September 17, 2023 at 4:24 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

in Lucretius honey is put onto the cup of wormwood (which would be to emphasize a pleasant way of speaking).

It seems to me that Lucretius is using the honey/wormwood as a metaphor for administering medicine to a sick patient. Frank criticism is often compared to medicine as well. This is in the commentary to Philodemus' work:

Not only is frank speech "akin to friendship," it is the "language of friendship" and the "most potent medicine in friendship," to be employed in mutual moral reform among friends.

Lucretius uses a pleasant method of delivery (poetry) to administer what some see as bitter medicine (no afterlife, no gods looking over us, etc.). Once administered, however, the philosophy does the person good, in fact cures them of fear and anxiety etc. Frank criticism is another tool to administer medicine.

Here are some quotes from On Frank Criticism talking about treating (θεραπεύειν *therapeuein*) patients/students:

Col. XVIIa: ...but when they observe that their character is prone to error, they are stung. And just like those who call skilled doctors to an operation when they apply the scalpel to those who are ill, so too when what is stinging in frank criticism meets the eye of these people and they believe that they will commit no error, or that they will escape notice even if they have erred many

times, they call upon {their teachers} to admonish...

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]?

Fr. 79 (=81 N): ...{so that} he can be treated either by us or by another of his fellow-students, and not to do it {i.e., criticize frankly} continually, nor against everyone, nor every chance error, nor {errors} of those whom one should not {criticize} when they are present, nor with merriment, but rather [to take up the errors] sympathetically [and not to] scorn [or insult] on..

Post by “Pacatus” of September 19, 2023 at 3:53 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

don't think we should think of frank speech between teacher and student as "confession," which perverts the notion of correction and instruction to a means of punishment and shame.

Since the Garden community was based in friendship as well as learning, I would think that a good amount of **δῖαλεκτική** was permitted – and even encouraged – as opposed to a strict master-disciple dictate-and-absorb regime (ala Epictetus, maybe?). Likely a good amount of humor sprinkled in as well. (No question as to whom the “master” – as in mastery – was, of course.)

Post by “Kalosyni” of October 3, 2023 at 9:05 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

It strikes me that the Garden provided an environment where the student genuinely wanted to follow the path of Epicurus, and the teacher genuinely wanted to help the student. Some students may have been more amenable to this correction than others, but that didn't stop the teacher from administering the medicine.

Even if at times there was frank speech between two students, I can imagine that it was based on the teachings (it wouldn't be random). It seems that between students the frank speech would have been cited/referenced to specific teachings which were found in Epicurus' books.

Some questions to consider (and if anyone wants to reply):

At what point does frank speech come across as rude, harsh, or insensitive? Is the phrase "frank speech" ever used to justify harsh speech? What is harsh speech and when should we avoid it? And, 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?

Post by “Don” of October 3, 2023 at 9:45 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Some questions to consider (and if anyone wants to reply):

At what point does frank speech come across as rude, harsh, or insensitive? Is the phrase "frank speech" ever used to justify harsh speech? What is harsh speech and when should we avoid it? And, 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?

Those are all excellent questions, and I believe Philodemus addressed most or all of them in *Peri Parrhesias (Concerning Frank Speech)*. Voula Tsouna also addresses the topic in her *The Ethics of Philodemus*. If I get a chance soon, I'll try to find some specific citations.

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:

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.

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.

Post by “Kalosyni” of October 4, 2023 at 8:37 AM

Thank you [Don](#) for pulling out all those references to Philodemus! We can all benefit from considering these helpful ideas.

And also, [Elli](#) hope you can take a look at this topic and the above two posts, when you get a chance, as this may be of interest to you 😊