

# Why Parrhesia is Necessary

**Post by “Matt” of December 29, 2021 at 2:06 PM**

When dealing with friends, family and even philosophical adversaries alike, it is sometimes important to employ parrhesia. This doesn't mean that we use it unnecessarily but rather with prudent judgment.

Parrhesia is coupled with suavity, suavity can help make the “bitter medicine” go down. But many times it is important to be frank about certain matters to avoid confusion.

Say for instance you know that a person's cherished beliefs or behaviors will lead them into danger or error, is it better to obfuscate the situation by non-confrontational speech? Or would you be direct? Depending on the immediacy of danger you may need to be very direct. Coupling parrhesia with suavity will help this situation in that explaining that though the discussion may be direct and harsh, you do this because you “care for or love” the person involved and you let them know this fact.

Again we don't use parrhesia all the time and for every situation. We do however use it often against antagonistic philosophical adversaries. In this realm suavity is still recommended to preserve a person's standing and perception, however it's not required. If an adverse person continues to harangue you with their position, you have every right to be “frank” with them. This is why it is again to have prudent judgement in that you know which battles to get into and what hills you are willing to die on. Many arguments are not fruitful and not worth the energy and will only be unpleasant. But there are times that an Epicurean will run up against a staunch religionist, stoic or any myriad of believer in other philosophies and that Epicurean will need to defend their position.

Going head first into a fight with stoics, Buddhists, Vedantists, Islamists, etc. isn't wise especially if you are the one in the minority, but sometimes it can be a good way to spread Epicurean thought among those who have never heard of Epicurus. But slogging it out online isn't usually fruitful and the effort will be wasted.

Just like the ancient world, the modern world is not always friendly and pleasant place. There are always people that will hate your philosophy for what it represents, it's been this way for over two millennia. It's critical to know how and when to defend it. Be brave, be wise and use prudent judgement. Parrhesia is a hard fought freedom use it well!

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**Post by “smoothiekiwi” of January 7, 2022 at 4:40 AM**

Yep, you're right! I think that Aristotle has a good thing to say on that- "virtue is the middle of two excesses". Sometimes it's necessary to stand your ground and defend what you believe is right, but more often than not the source of disagreement is misunderstanding, ignorance, etc.

That's also one of my main flaws with Pyrrhonism: if I understand this philosophy correctly, every viewpoint has the same right to be right. Yet I refuse to accept that a Nazi or a mass murderer deserves my tolerance. I will try to be compassionate and understanding, and I will try to understand where their hate comes from, but I won't tolerate their opinion. Obviously, in dealing with friends and family, these cases don't appear so often, but I have a recent example (maybe I'll do another thread on this, because I'm still struggling this situation).

The situation is as following. January 1st, and my family decided that it would be a good moment to go visit my grandma. We would simply bring her a bit of salad, say hello to her and then head home.

My family expected me to come along, but I refused. I've thought about the "why" for a while: they assumed that I was lazy, and that's probably how I communicated it. But inside of me, there was such a strong resistance that it couldn't be simply due to laziness or the cold weather outside. I can't really say what it was, but it screamed out: "no, don't go!" And, after doing a hedonistic calculus, I decided that I would endure the discussion and the anger of my family, but stay true to that inner feeling. There was a lot of anger and the "you're lazy"- argument, but I'm happy that I listened to that inner feeling and stayed strong.

I draw three conclusion out of this whole event. First, that Epicurus's focus on pleasure and the hedonistic calculus allowed me to stay true to myself. A Stoic would get up and go, because it's his duty. A Pyrrhonist would also stand up and go, because he should suspend judgement on whether it's worth to go or not. But Epicureanism allowed me to listen inside me and realize that there was something inside of me which simply refused to go to my grandma. And, even a week later, I still believe that it was the right choice. It obviously hurts a bit to know that my grandma had to enjoy January 1st alone, but because my only job is to listen to me, I could do the best thing for all of us.

The second conclusion is that Epicureanism isn't egoistic. That may sound strange, but by watching me and my feelings, I also managed to care for my grandmother. I can't really put it into words, but it probably goes into the direction of "before you love other people, you first have to love yourself".

And, the last conclusion, is that it's necessary to employ parrhesia in order to come to peace with myself. I (sadly) didn't had the choice of simply not coming with them without explanation. And, although I couldn't really explain to my family **why** I couldn't come with them, I draw a conclusion for **myself**. And that's the most important part, in my opinion.

## Post by “Cassius” of January 7, 2022 at 5:15 AM

i think your point here is correct. Some people will look at situations and prejudge them "how could someone not want to go visit their grandma?" and jump to the application of a one-size-fits-all rule and say "He should!"

We don't need to get into the specifics of your situation or any other of the situations you mention as to what you should tolerate and what you should not. You may or may not be making the decision that others would make on any of those situations. But you're right to be looking at YOUR situation and adding up all the implications of YOUR situation, without thinking that there's a universal rule that answers the question for her. That's all that anyone can do. We should work to look at the universe and the way things are with the most clear possible analysis, but in the end we cannot hold ourselves to standards of omniscience and we have to make our choices on the best information, and using the best analysis, that we have access to.

And you are right here too - Epicurean philosophy is often thought to be "egoistic" - and it is from a certain perspective, but the difference between Epicurus and Ayn Rand style egoism is that Epicurus stresses clarity of result -- We should not do anything just because we decide it is our will to do it, we should keep the focus on why we do anything - pleasure - and measure the whole situation according to how much pleasure and pain will result to us. There are MANY situations in life were "doing what we want to do" is not going to produce the best pleasure/pain result for us.

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## Post by “smoothiekiwi” of January 7, 2022 at 5:37 AM

Thanks for the encouragement, I needed it 😊

### Quote

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Absolutely! I think that recognising that everything is relative and has to be viewed in the context isn't easy, but at the same time extremely liberating. At another time, I would've certainly visited my grandmother, just as I did in the past. By removing the rule „thou shall go to your grandmother“, I was able to make a much more informed and- well, responsible- decision. And that feels great!

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**Post by “Don” of January 7, 2022 at 6:43 AM**

It's important to remember that parrhesia (frank speech) wasn't just used with philosophical adversaries or people the Epicureans disagreed with. According to Philodemus's work, it was a tool of instruction within the Epicurean community. If someone wasn't living up to their potential in putting the philosophy into practice in their life, the teachers would engage in frank speech to correct the student.

I keep meaning to read Voula Tsouna's *The Ethics of Philodemus* cover to cover which includes a section on this (and to try and get ahold of Philodemus's *On Frank Speech*). I've mostly used Tsouna's book to harvest citations and excerpts from Philodemus.

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**Post by “smoothiekiwi” of January 7, 2022 at 6:53 AM**

Yep, I've heard about that. Once again, a thing the Christians took and used for their religion

