

Teufel thinks that we need philosophers now more than ever

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

Most people don't know what a philosopher does, but philosophers take their profession seriously, no matter what first drew them into it. "I tried to decide what to do, and I figured one way to know how to become an artist would be to find out what philosophy is and also what philosophy is not in order to then be able to paint," says Dr. Thomas Teufel, who initially wanted to become an artist.

"The word philosophy comes from the Greek 'filo-sofia.' Sofia means 'wisdom,' filo means 'lover of.' Thus, a philosopher is a lover of wisdom—as the Greeks would say, wisdom in all of its forms," explains Teufel.

He cites one of the most famous of all philosophers to describe how philosophers operate. "Plato has a very nice encapsulation of what philosophers do. He said that 'the unexamined life is not worth living.' That's what philosophers do. They examine life in all of its forms."

A native of Neuss am Rhein, Germany, close to the border with the Netherlands, he has had quite a journey as an academician. His education includes an undergraduate degree from the Heinrich Heine Universität in Düsseldorf, a master's from the University of Western Ontario, and a Ph.D. from Harvard. Today he is an associate professor and Chair of the Department of Philosophy at the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences in Baruch College of the City University of New York.

In these times of "post-truth" and "alternative facts," one wonders how philosophers feel about their reputed devotion to seeking the truth. "That's one of the questions that philosophers are engaged in: What is truth? Is there such a thing as truth? If there is such a thing as truth, what would it be and how would we know it? All of these are philosophical questions," he says.

That doesn't mean that their importance is always acknowledged in the academic world. "I think philosophers have been marginalized to some extent in academia. There's a real need for us to spread our wisdom and be out there more. The technological



Dr. Teufel at his office.

revolution of the past several years has actually helped us, because there are many blogs and online outlets now for philosophers to reach folks who aren't necessarily already engaged in academic philosophy. Philosophy has a PR problem in the sense that there's a misconception about what it is and another PR problem in the sense that we're not very good at broadcasting what it is that we do," Teufel observes.

Despite the fact that science has answered many questions posed by philosophers in the past, he believes scientists and philosophers have mutually benefited each other. "Karl Popper in the 20th century famously described scientific inquiry as engaged not in a pursuit of truth so much as in theory formation, and then the idea was that what you do with these theories is you try to falsify them," he says. "That's why so many scientists working on big theories were

also very interested in philosophy."

Philosophers are stereotyped as people who spend all their time thinking, but the reality is much more complex than that. "I sometimes like to tell my students—you know how there's a saying, 'It's all in your head'? I give a slightly different version of this. I like to say that it's all in your head, including your head. In other words, we can't escape thought, and this is an insight that the famous rationalist René Descartes had, that somehow thought has primacy, thought comes first," explains Teufel.

"On the other hand, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant tried to complicate that picture by saying, 'Wait a minute, you're forgetting reality over here; but thought has this inescapability that means we're never in reality (or at least it's very difficult to justify that we're in direct touch with reality), be-

cause the direct touch is always modulated, mediated through some measure of thinking,'" he says.

Teufel is currently working on several projects. "One is a book on Kant's teleology—that's essentially Kant's philosophy of biology. 'Telos' is a goal or an end state that you're trying to reach, and one of the ways in which we understand biological life is to think of it in terms of organisms that are somehow functionally organized, that pursue aims, goals and purposes; and that's what makes biological organisms different from physical and inanimate objects."

Teufel's interest in these ideas comes from the fact that he is always studying the interface between science and philosophy. "Kant has a lot to say about what that biological teleology is, what it looks like, how we can understand and justify it and so forth."

The other book project Teufel is working on is related to the previous topic but is bigger in a way. "My main interest is Kant's third critique. He wrote three big books: the first critique is the Critique of Pure Reason; the second is the Critique of Practical Reason; and the third is the Critique of Judgment. I've been working on this third book for a long time now, and my medium-term project is to write a monograph on the book in its entirety, because it's a very difficult book, and it hasn't really been treated as a coherent book," he says.

"People kind of dig into it and pick and choose what they can find," explains Teufel, who adds, "It's very difficult to see what the coherence of this thing might be. Which is strange, because it's his book on systematicity and on the integration of parts into a whole, so it'd be very funny to have that book in particular be the one that's kind of unorganized and unsystematic. My goal is to show how the book on systematicity is in fact systematic."

When asked if we need more philosophers in our times, his answer is overwhelming: "Yes."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York. The radio show on which these articles are based can be watched at: <https://vimeo.com/208339816>

He can be contacted via Aldemaro.Romero@baruch.cuny.edu

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