Teufel thinks that we need philosophers more than ever.

Aldemaro Romero Jr.

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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-so-fia.’ Sofía 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 at 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 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 we’re never in reality (or at least it’s very difficult to justify that we’re in direct touch with reality), 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.

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