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For philosophers, art is also in the mind

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr.
College Talk

Many college professors start with a broad range of interests, but often it's the example of a gifted teacher that shows them the way. That was the case with Dr. Jonathan Gilmore. "I was a pre-med student taking hard science courses, but I had to take a philosophy course as well, and I had an extraordinarily dynamic art history professor. And then I thought, 'This is what I want to do.' So I shifted career plans, moved to New York right after college, enrolled at Columbia and did a PhD in Philosophy, but also studied for the PhD in art history at the same time."

"Some people enter into philosophy because they're interested in philosophy itself. I was actually interested in art," he says. A native of Shaker Heights, near Cleveland, Ohio, Gilmore is today an assistant professor in the Department of Philosophy of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College/CUNY.

As a good philosopher, he is always asking deep questions about the world around us. "I was interested, for example, in why it is that when we read a novel and we know the characters are fictional, we still feel sad when somebody is in trouble or somebody suffers. Or why, when we watch a film with scary monsters in it, we know it's all computer-generated technology, but nonetheless we feel afraid. That kind of question I found compelling, and that was a question about the arts. Then I discovered there's this field called philosophy of art or aesthetics, where people actually take these kinds of questions seriously and try to answer them."

Gilmore is not afraid to tackle more complex questions in everyday terms, like, for example, beauty. "Beauty itself is, strangely, something that triggers a certain kind of admiration, a certain kind of respect, a certain kind of belief in a person's honesty."

He knows that valuing works of art is always a difficult task. "My own view is that oftentimes artists aren't understood in the period in which they



Dr. Gilmore at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City.

create their work in part because a set of criteria for evaluating the work is being applied that just isn't appropriate to it, but we haven't yet come up with the standards that we're supposed to use to judge the work."

Gilmore reminds us how ancient Greek philosophers wrestled with these questions. "Plato saw that works of art, dramatic theater for him, could be very dangerous in that, although it might not be true to life, it can still influence audiences to regard certain forms of behavior as appropriate or admirable. The philosophical question that many people are concerned with today is to what extent, say, the political unsavory content of films like *Birth of a Nation* or the relatively anti-feminist popular films you see today—to what extent the moral and political defects in those works affect their artistic value."

When one visits a museum, we see many people looking at paintings and statues in a cursory way, and one wonders whether they are really appreciating what they are seeing. Gilmore has an explanation. "One thing I find is that people have lost a certain capacity to sustain looking at something for a long time. We too readily assimilate our experience of looking at paintings to the kind of quick flipping-through photos that we do on our phones. I think something is lost there."

But have philosophers given a convincing answer to the question of what makes something beautiful? Gilmore says no. "This was one of the motivating factors in my entering philosophy of art. I could see beauty all around me. There's the beauty of individuals, the beauty of landscapes, the beauty of paintings, the beauty of sculpture. But

what all these things have in common that makes me say they're beautiful whereas those other things are not is just an extraordinarily difficult question to answer."

He sees that different people bring different backgrounds to the experience of art. "We bring to it certain kinds of knowledge, certain kinds of sensitivity. And sometimes what we have actually might not be adequate to the task. When I look up at the stars, if I'm standing next to an astronomer, I just see twinkling lights. The astronomer, of course, sees the constellations, this planet, that planet. We're looking at the same thing by definition, and yet she sees much more than I do."

But how about his students? After all, we have seen a lot of different cultural changes in the last few years. "I love their reactions. I can see what's happening when I say that Shakespeare invented our concept of love or something else along those lines. I see their minds working; they're trying to figure out in their own experiences—in the film they just saw, in the television shows they're watching, in the book they're reading—to what extent that's happening for them as well. This is what I think philosophy does best," says Gilmore.

But an important question remains. How can philosophy and philosophers offer a better understanding of human experience, whether in the arts or anything else? In other words, why is philosophy important for us to understand? "Philosophy doesn't, as it were, discover something that is thought about. What philosophy does is to bring our experience to the surface—to clarify it, to expose it, to give us tools to conceptualize and understand it. The students really like that, because now they have a certain kind of vocabulary, a certain kind of conceptual apparatus that they can use to describe what before this moment was just an inchoate hunch."

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/23555248>

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