

Philosophical Moods

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Nietzschean, Heideggerian, fascist, anarchist, libertarian, brilliant genius, blabbering nutjob – these and many other labels have probably been used to describe Peter Sloterdijk, who is one of Germany’s most widely known contemporary philosophers. He has achieved rock-star status in the echelons of contemporary German thinkers, perhaps because none is more apt than Sloterdijk at fulfilling the true purpose of a public intellectual: inculcating his audience with an insatiable desire to think. His fans adore him; his critics are maddened by him. Few, if any, experience indifference when they encounter the provocateur Sloterdijk.

Sloterdijk achieved fame in Germany after publishing his masterpiece *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft* (1) (English translation: *Critique of Cynical Reason* (2)) in 1983, but his hosting of the regular late-night talk show *Das Philosophische Quartett* on the major German TV network ZDF for 10 years turned him into a cultural icon and a household name. I realize that it might seem strange to non-Germans that philosophers instead of comedians can host TV talk shows; however, Sloterdijk would probably be the first to agree that there isn’t much of a difference between a true comedian and a true philosopher. Not only do we Germans have TV philosophers, we even enjoy the TV gossip and cockfights that they indulge in. When the ZDF network decided to get rid of Sloterdijk and replace him with the younger, more handsome, and less thoughtful philosopher Richard David Precht, they started engaging in reciprocal mockery and name-calling.

Unfortunately, Sloterdijk is not quite so well known in the English-speaking world, and this may in part be due to the fact that much of his oeuvre has only recently been translated into the English language. It is no easy feat to translate his writings, in part because his playful mastery of German words is one of his signatures. Sloterdijk is a wonderful storyteller who weaves in beautiful images and puns into his narration, many of which are unique to the German language. His storytelling also makes it difficult to understand some of his texts in the original German. One may be enthralled by his stories, but after reading a whole chapter or book, it is quite difficult to condense it into a handy “message” or “point.” Sloterdijk is a professional digresser, going off on tangents that are entertaining and exciting but at times quite frustrating. He shares his brilliant insights on a broad range of topics ranging from metaphysics to politics with his readers, but he also offers practical advice on how we can change our lives, as well as making bizarre and pompous statements.

One of his more recent books is called *Philosophische Temperamente: Von Platon bis Foucault* (3), which can be translated as *Philosophical Temperaments: From Plato to Foucault*, and it is not yet available in an English translation. In the 1990s, Sloterdijk assembled a collection of texts and excerpts by 19 philosophers (Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Bruno, Descartes, Pascal, Leibniz, Hegel, Schelling, Fichte, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche, Husserl, Wittgenstein, Sartre, and Foucault) that he felt ought to be studied. Sloterdijk was convinced that the best way to truly approach a philosopher was to read the primary texts instead of relying on secondary sources. He also wrote short prefaces for the 19 volumes, each containing 400 to 500 pages of texts by one philosopher. The prefaces were intended to serve as brief introductions, enticing the readers to delve into the main volume. These prefaces were not academic-style summaries of the lives or works of

the philosophers; they were verbal portraits painted by Sloterdijk. They were subjective impressions of their philosophical moods and temperaments, which explains why the collection of these 19 prefaces was released under the title *Philosophical Temperaments*.

As with so many portraits, they reveal more about the painter than the subject of the portrait. *Philosophische Temperamente* allows us to take a peek into Sloterdijk's own temperaments. These portraits are stand-alone essays, but what is most striking is that despite their brevity, they are packed with provocative insights. The whole book has only 144 pages, and only few of the essays are longer than seven pages. Even in these tiny portraits, Sloterdijk manages to digress, using a few core ideas of the philosopher as a starting point and then drawing parallels to our lives today. But it is precisely these kinds of digressions and parallels that remind us why these dusty classics of philosophy continue to be relevant for our lives.

This past decade has seen the rise of the TED talk mentality. The idea of providing a forum for innovative thinkers to share their ideas with rich conference attendees, as well as the not-so-rich general public via a free Internet broadcast, has become a hot fad. Now that we are inundated with thousands of [TED talks](#) and TED copycats, many of us have developed TED fatigue. The expression "TED talking" may soon become a new form of insult, referring to the watering down and oversimplifying of complex ideas, the sharing of touching and life-changing personal stories, or exuding excessive positivity that fills the audience with vacuous joy and earns a heartfelt applause. I always thought of Sloterdijk as the prototypical anti-TED talker because his writings do not attempt to leave the reader in a happy and cozy place. Sloterdijk likes to challenge us, evoking intellectual unease and restlessness in our minds, and invites us to disagree. His essays and books with all their digressions tend to be so long that I thought it was inconceivable for him to condense them into a 15-minute TED time slot. Sloterdijk does not offer any convenient prefab take-home messages or TED-style smug happiness.

After reading *Philosophische Temperamente*, I have begun to reconsider my views on Sloterdijk and TED talks. In these 19 mini-essays, Sloterdijk gives TED talks without TED talking. His TED stands for "Tease Entertain Disagree," and instead of the traditional TED motto of "Ideas worth spreading," Sloterdijk presents us with "Ideas worth critiquing." Perhaps the organizers and presenters at TED conferences could learn something from Sloterdijk's style.

Each mini-essay is a teaser that could potentially ignite discussions, not only about a specific philosopher, but also about the role of philosophy itself. The portrait of Augustine, arguably the least flattering of all portraits in the book, suggests that he infused Western thought with a sense of debasing anti-humanist "masochism," the idea that humankind would be worthless were it not for the grace of God. This idea thus directly connects Augustine to contemporary debates revolving around the role of religion, which do not only apply to Augustine or Christianity, but to all religions. All other portraits also offer similarly provocative statements.

Here are translations of a few short excerpts from the book:

Plato

The chapter on Plato is the longest in Sloterdijk's book, but it discusses far more than just Plato, ranging from the purpose of philosophy to the ills of contemporary fundamentalism.

„Der Fundamentalismus, der heute weltweit aus dem Mißtrauen gegen die Modernität entspringt, kann immer nur Hilfskonstruktion für Hilflose liefern; er erzeugt nur Scheinsicherheiten ohne Weiterwissen; auf lange Sicht ruiniert er die befallenen Gesellschaften durch die Drogen der falschen Gewißheit.“

“The world-wide phenomenon of fundamentalism which in today's world is rooted in a distrust of modernity can only serve as futile aides for the helpless; it generates pseudo-certainties without the desire for further knowledge; in the long run it ruins the afflicted societies with the addictive drug of false certainty.”

Schopenhauer

The portrait of Schopenhauer introduces him as the pioneering thinker who quit the “Church of Reason” (“Vernunftkirche”).

„Von Schopenhauer könnte der Satz stammen: Nur die Verzweiflung kann uns noch retten; er hatte freilich nicht von Verzweiflung, sondern von Verzicht gesprochen. Verzicht ist für die Modernen das schwierigste Wort der Welt.“

“Schopenhauer might have uttered the phrase: Only desperation can save us. Yet he did not speak of despair, but of renunciation. Renunciation is the most difficult word for the modern world.”

Marx

This passage from the chapter on Marx includes a fascinating statement about contemporary media:

„Telekommunikation läßt sich von Televampirismus immer schwerer unterscheiden. Fernseher und Fernsauger schöpfen aus einer verflüssigten Welt, die kaum noch weiß, was widerstandsfähiges oder eigenes Leben wäre.“

“It is becoming difficult to distinguish between telecommunication and televampirism. Television and Telesuction draw from a liquefied world that hardly knows the concept of an independent or resistant life.”

It is difficult to translate Sloterdijk's neologism “Fernsauger,” which literally means “tele-sucker” or “tele-suction device.” In the original German, it is a beautiful play on the words

Fernseher (television or tele-viewer) and the German word for a vacuum cleaner (“Staubsauger,” literally a “dust-sucker”).

Sartre

„Was Sartre angeht, so blieb er zeitlebens seiner Weise, die bodenlose Freiheit zu leben, treu. Für ihn war das Nichts der Subjektivität kein herabziehender Abgrund, sondern eine heraufsprudelnde Quelle, ein Überschuß an Verneinungskraft gegen alles Umschließende.“

“As for Sartre, he remained true to leading a life of boundless freedom. For him, the void of subjectivity was not an abyss that pulls us down. Instead, it was a spring, gushing upwards and resisting all forms of enclosure.”

English-speaking readers will soon be able to read a [translation of the complete book](#) (4), to be published by Columbia University Press. I have not yet seen the translation, but I suspect and hope that the nature of this particular Sloterdijk book will be one of the most accessible introductions to Sloterdijk’s thinking and provide a reason why we should continue to study classic Western philosophers.

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