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The Practical Relevance of Philosophy in the 21st Century: Ethics, Governance, Technology, and the Self



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Abstract

In an era marked by technological disruption, ethical dilemmas, political uncertainty, and increasing mental health challenges, philosophy proves to be more essential than ever. This paper examines the contemporary relevance of philosophical thought across key societal domains—ethics, governance, education, technological innovation, and personal well-being. Through recent scholarship, the paper moves beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries to address not only what philosophy contributes, but also how and why it shapes practical engagement with global problems. From algorithmic bias in artificial intelligence to educational equity and moral autonomy, philosophical frameworks guide critical inquiry and responsible action. This study advocates for a renewed understanding of philosophy as a living, dynamic force for justice, sustainability, and meaning-making in the 21st century.

Keywords: *Political Philosophy, Critical Thinking, Digital Privacy, Virtue Ethics, Mindfulness*

1. Introduction

Philosophy has traditionally been regarded as a reflective discipline concerned with timeless truths and abstract reasoning. However, the 21st century—characterized by rapid technological change, rising inequality, climate crisis, and ethical ambiguity—demands renewed engagement with the practical dimensions of philosophical thought. Rather than being a peripheral intellectual pursuit, philosophy now serves as a necessary compass in navigating some of the most urgent and complex questions facing global society.

This paper explores the relevance of philosophy not only by asking what contributions it makes to contemporary issues, but more importantly, by addressing the how and why behind its continued significance. Why do societies still turn to philosophy for guidance amid ethical confusion? How does philosophy tangibly influence domains such as artificial intelligence, political governance, education, and personal mental health?

Through critical analysis and incorporation of recent interdisciplinary research, this study situates philosophy as both a method of inquiry and a tool for civic, moral, and existential resilience. Structured around five major fields—ethics, politics, education, technology, and personal development—this paper investigates how philosophy operates as a transformative force at the individual and institutional level.

2. Research Background

The philosophical tradition, spanning from ancient Greek rationalism to contemporary critical theory, has always concerned itself with the search for meaning, justice, and knowledge. Thinkers such as Plato, Confucius, and Ibn Rushd laid the foundations for debates on morality, education, and politics—many of which remain unresolved. Yet in modern times, philosophy has often been dismissed as overly speculative

or disconnected from real-world application.

This perception began to shift in the post-World War II era, as philosophical engagement with human rights, decolonization, and scientific ethics gained urgency. With the emergence of fields like bioethics, digital ethics, and feminist philosophy, the discipline evolved from a static tradition to an agile, interdisciplinary practice. In the 21st century, questions surrounding algorithmic justice, AI consciousness, planetary ethics, and mental resilience have reignited the importance of philosophical analysis in public and academic discourse.

The background to this paper is thus a dual recognition: that philosophy has a long-standing historical relevance, and that it now demands reinterpretation in light of new sociotechnical realities. Rather than merely reflecting on problems, philosophy offers conceptual clarity, critical questioning, and normative grounding—three elements essential for social and personal progress.

3. Philosophy and Ethics

In the face of increasingly complex moral dilemmas—from climate change to algorithmic surveillance—the role of philosophy in shaping ethical norms has become indispensable. The 21st century presents a shift in ethical inquiry: it is no longer sufficient to ask what actions are right or wrong. We must now understand why specific ethical frameworks are needed and how they can be applied within evolving technological and social contexts.

Why philosophy is essential in ethics today- Traditional normative theories like utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics are being actively adapted to new frontiers. For instance, as artificial intelligence becomes embedded in systems of healthcare, law enforcement, and employment, questions about autonomy, fairness, and harm surface prominently. According to Westerstrand (2024), Rawlsian justice principles can be reinterpreted to construct AI ethics grounded in fairness and rights-based reasoning, not just utility maximization.

How philosophy engages contemporary challenges- Luciano Floridi's concept of "information ethics" positions digital agents within moral ecosystems, urging policymakers to adopt frameworks beyond human-centered ethics. Recent reviews show a surge in AI ethics literature drawing on diverse philosophical traditions—Islamic, African Ubuntu, and feminist ethics—to expand the moral imagination of AI governance (Elmahjub, 2023; Corrêa et al., 2023).

Further, algorithmic injustice, as analyzed by Birhane (2021), underscores the importance of relational ethics, which focus on power, context, and structural inequality—elements often absent in computational approaches to fairness.

Hence, ethics informed by philosophy does more than offer answers—it creates deeper questions that reveal blind spots in policy, technology, and public discourse.

4. Philosophy and Politics

Modern political turbulence—from populist nationalism to technocratic governance—necessitates not just policy reforms but a return to foundational political philosophy. The why of political philosophy lies in its capacity to imagine just societies, while the how emerges through the articulation of values like liberty, equality, and capability.

Why political philosophy is urgently needed- In an age where democratic institutions are eroding and surveillance capitalism is expanding, philosophical critique becomes vital. Sahebi & Formosa (2024) argue

for integrating global justice into AI policy, noting that ethical concerns must be addressed in light of international inequality and historical injustice. This underscores a key contribution of political philosophy: it transcends local norms to interrogate global structures of power.

How it is applied in current contexts- Amartya Sen's capabilities approach and Martha Nussbaum's work on human development continue to inform policies on education, healthcare, and public welfare. Recent contributions have adapted these theories to digital equity and algorithmic access. Buccella (2023) frames "AI for All" as a question of distributive justice, emphasizing the necessity of equitable access to technology.

Philosophical engagement with political institutions also addresses the meaning of democracy in a digital era, offering a critical lens on disinformation, political manipulation, and epistemic inequality.

In sum, political philosophy does not offer technocratic fixes; it provides the moral grammar necessary to evaluate power, justice, and legitimacy.

5. Philosophy in Education

Education is not merely a mechanism for knowledge transmission; it is a site for moral development, critical inquiry, and civic empowerment. The why of philosophy in education lies in its ability to cultivate reflective agents capable of questioning societal norms, while the how reveals itself through pedagogical methods rooted in dialogue, inquiry, and transformation.

Why philosophy remains vital in education- Educational philosophy frames schooling as a process of forming human beings—not just skilled workers. John Dewey's experiential learning and Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy continue to influence global educational reform. However, recent research shows an urgent need to re-engage with these ideas in light of digital learning ecosystems and algorithmic instruction (Smith & Vickers, 2024).

Freire's argument that "education is never neutral" holds renewed weight as AI platforms increasingly shape classroom decisions and student profiling. If unchecked, such systems can reproduce bias and diminish student autonomy, making philosophical reflection imperative.

How philosophy shapes 21st-century education- Philosophy fosters the meta-cognitive tools necessary for students to assess not only what they learn but also how they are taught and why it matters. Storozhyk (2024) demonstrates how the integration of philosophical methods into education and AI interaction promotes not just technological fluency but also ethical literacy and intellectual independence.

Additionally, Holmes & Porayska-Pomsta (2023) explore how ethics of care, dignity, and justice should shape AI-powered educational technologies—reminding us that education is ultimately a philosophical act.

6. Philosophy and Technology

The exponential rise of artificial intelligence, neuro-enhancement, and datafication of life poses profound questions that cannot be answered solely by engineers. Philosophy steps in to interrogate assumptions about humanity, responsibility, and the common good.

Why philosophy is necessary in the technological domain- Technological systems increasingly make decisions that affect human lives, yet they often operate according to opaque rules. The urgency of

philosophical intervention lies in the ethical vacuum left by purely instrumental reasoning. Zimmermann and Vredenburg (2022) argue for integrating political philosophy into data governance to ensure that AI systems align with justice and not just efficiency.

How philosophy addresses real-world tech dilemmas- Floridi's "information ethics" posits that all informational agents—whether human or artificial—deserve consideration within ethical networks. This principle informs contemporary debates on AI rights, algorithmic transparency, and digital personhood.

Recent scholarship, such as Corrêa et al. (2023), compiles over 200 global AI ethics guidelines, demonstrating widespread philosophical influence, particularly from virtue ethics, Rawlsian justice, and feminist ethics.

Furthermore, Giovanola and Tiribelli (2023) explore how healthcare AI can embody or violate philosophical ideals of fairness and dignity. These frameworks are critical not only for regulating technology but for preserving humanity within it.

6. Philosophy and Personal Growth

In an age of mental health crises, social fragmentation, and existential anxiety, philosophy has reemerged not merely as an academic discipline but as a deeply personal practice. The why of philosophy in personal life is rooted in its power to help individuals seek meaning and resilience. The how is expressed through traditions that offer practical wisdom for navigating emotional and existential challenges.

Why individuals are turning to philosophy for self-understanding- Contemporary life often isolates individuals within cycles of productivity, social media comparison, and rapid change. In response, ancient schools such as Stoicism and existentialism, as well as non-Western traditions like mindfulness, have found renewed relevance in therapeutic and wellness contexts.

Stoicism, with its emphasis on rational control, self-discipline, and acceptance, has informed modern cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). Robertson (2010) argues that Stoic techniques of reframing and self-dialogue directly contribute to mental resilience, helping individuals manage anxiety and uncertainty.

How philosophical frameworks shape personal development today- Existentialist thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir provide tools for confronting meaninglessness and alienation. Their call to create meaning through freedom and responsibility resonates deeply in today's individualized, choice-saturated culture.

Mindfulness, rooted in Buddhist philosophy, encourages present-moment awareness and emotional regulation. It is widely integrated into psychotherapy, as evidenced by Kabat-Zinn's work (1994), and increasingly supported by empirical research on its effects on attention and well-being.

Thus, philosophy becomes not only a mode of inquiry but a way of being—a path to authenticity, peace, and purpose in an often chaotic world.

7. Conclusion

Philosophy is not a relic of the past, nor is it confined to ivory towers. It is a living, breathing discipline that answers the deep "why" and complex "how" questions that define our times. From shaping ethical standards in artificial intelligence to defending justice in political discourse, fostering critical inquiry in

education, guiding responsible innovation, and cultivating inner resilience—philosophy is more relevant than ever.

The paper has demonstrated how philosophy bridges abstract theory and practical application, offering society both ethical direction and existential grounding. Each section illuminated how philosophical reasoning operates within—and responds to—the structures of modern life.

As the 21st century confronts unprecedented technological power, ecological limits, and psychological strain, philosophy remains a vital force for reflection, reform, and renewal. It does not simply ask what the world is; it compels us to ask why it is this way—and how it might be better.

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