

ENDURING PHILOSOPHY: PRACTICE AND RELEVANCE IN THE AI ERA

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Abstract: Philosophy as a practice, not just an academic discipline, can confront the growing threat to critical thinking. Doing philosophy has the potential to translate innovative methods into cultivating process-oriented learning, critical inquiry, and intellectual resilience. Philosophical Counseling is not a distant or abstract discipline, but an active, engaging practice that trains thinkers in real-time intellectual pursuit through questioning. Instead of emphasizing results, philosophical counseling cultivates habits of questioning, dialogue, and reasoning as exercises of critical thinking. This article addresses why and how philosophers might take an interest in advocating for the relevance of philosophy as a perspective towards the world rather than a specific activity. The moment is ripe when the public conversation is questioning the benefits and consequences of technological advances and realizing that society is changing irreversibly – philosophers are the ones most equipped to inform and lead the search for alternatives.

Keywords: philosophical practice, critical thinking, AI, pedagogy, society.

THE THREAT: TO THINKING, TO SOCIETY, AND BEYOND

Critical thinking has always been essential to humanity, but it faces unprecedented challenges today. Digital technologies, immediate and effortless access to the internet, and most recently artificial intelligence offer consumers polished shortcuts – answers that look complete but easily bypass deeper reasoning processes required for humanity’s essential thinking skills. These tools can support thinking in valuable ways, as well as reshape the conditions under which critical thinking is cultivated and evaluated. Thinkers risk confusing outcome with process: they can generate a solution quickly, but may never wrestle with the intellectual labor that leads to discernment, resilience, and creativity.

Many individuals overestimate their competencies (Kruger & Dunning, 1999; Miller & Geraci, 2011; Nietfeld *et al.*, 2005). A consequence of students taking

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readily available shortcuts is that students do not employ, challenge, and cultivate their abilities to compose, process, evaluate, critique, or reject information responsibly. The issue is not the existence of technologies, but how students engage with them: as tools that supplement critical inquiry or as shortcuts that bypass it.

Research shows that when a less effortful path is available, students tend to take it – even when it undermines deeper learning (Bjork *et al.*, 2013; Kornell & Bjork, 2007; Mueller & Oppenheimer, 2014). The overestimation of competencies and the temptation of efficiency often outweigh the awareness of need or commitment to *build mastery*, which is why cultivating habits of process-oriented thinking is urgent in this digital environment.

This problem is compounded by the fact that modern education is often structured around measurable goals, objectives, and learning outcomes (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Bloom *et al.*, 1956; Tyler, 1949). While these frameworks aim to provide accountability, they also inadvertently encourage a product-oriented mindset: students learn to aim for the deliverable that satisfies assessment criteria, rather than nurturing interest in the intellectual journey (Barnett, 1997; Brookfield, 2017). Bypassing the early and middle stages of Bloom's (1956) taxonomy – remembering, understanding, and applying – students may reach for higher-order skills like analysis or evaluation when the necessary foundations may not have been developed, resulting in a fragile and superficial form of competence. These sources are education oriented, but we find similar attitudes in business, in life, and importantly in the parents, educators, and role models of the next generation.

Scholars have long argued that critical thinking is best cultivated as a process-oriented exercise, not a final product (Paul & Elder, 2006). Dialogue, writing exercises, and problem-based inquiry are valuable precisely because they demand that students engage with uncertainty, weigh evidence, and revise or refine their positions (Ennis, 2015). These practices develop habits of mind – skepticism, creativity, and resilience. How faculty approach their teaching and assessment is even more important as the mentors of intellectual formation. By designing learning experiences that reward engagement, revision, and reflection, educators can rethink pedagogy and evaluation to prioritize intellectual curiosity. This seems to be what is going to distinguish AI from actual humans in the future, although we can only conjecture here. While the foundation of these interventions can begin in the realm of education, a direct form of inspiration, there are implications for all fields and ways education can affect these various fields.

In an era saturated with misinformation, bias, and unsourced assertions, this is an *academic* issue as well as a *civic* and *social* one. As Carpini & Keeter (1996) and Kahne and Bowyer (2017) argue, self-assessment of knowledge and competencies in media literacy influence not only how individuals think but how they participate as citizens. Critical thinking in higher education is therefore not merely about producing stronger essays or grades, but about preparing students to evaluate information responsibly in a democratic society and to resist the allure of easy answers when evidence demands careful scrutiny.

PHILOSOPHY'S UNIQUE RESPONSE

Philosophy as a practice, not just an academic discipline, can confront the growing threat to critical thinking in the contemporary world. *Doing* philosophy has the potential to translate innovative methods into cultivating process-oriented learning, critical inquiry, and intellectual resilience. Philosophical Counseling is not a distant or abstract discipline, but an active, engaging practice that trains thinkers in real-time intellectual pursuit through questioning. Instead of emphasizing results, philosophical counseling cultivates habits of questioning, dialogue, and reasoning as exercise of the mind.

In philosophical counseling, the work is routine practice of critical thinking. Philosopher and interlocutor are actively engaged: dialogue is used to provoke participants into genuine intellectual exercise, much like athletes are encouraged to stretch and employ muscles. They are also critically challenged: the exploration invites participants to investigate assumptions, confront ambiguities, and evaluate easy answers rather than settle for them. This practice is nicely posed to translate into a broader application for which those with concerns about the increasingly automated world are so desperately searching.

WHY SHOULD PHILOSOPHY CARE

Why and how might philosophers take an interest in advocating for the relevance of philosophy as a perspective towards the world rather than a specific activity? This seems to be a moment ripe for seizing. Society is cautiously, a bit skeptically, trying and adopting large language models in any and every way imaginable. At this moment while there are visible limits, questions of humanity's role in relation to AI, and conversations about healthy use of this substantial thinking aid, philosophers have a role to play.

Distinguishing thinking from critical thinking, distinguishing thinking output from humanity's capabilities, distinguishing production from humanity's role in life is the work of the philosopher.

John Dewey (1917) might have just as fittingly been writing for today's audience in his essay *The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy*. He compels philosophers to turn from the problems of epistemology and metaphysics to the problems of humanity in order to revitalize philosophy. The academics grapple with interesting, complex, and rather excluding intellectual interests. He thinks of philosophy, and its value to the people, as grappling with the inclusive human questions. "Philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men" (Dewey, 1917). To engage with others regarding the human predicament, while remaining dialogic, is the role of philosophy if philosophers want to engage others in the market, in the classroom, at the dining table.

Burroughs argues that philosophy has historically been “a public-facing practice of questioning, critical thinking, and expression in service of the public good” (Burroughs, 2018). Academic values and priorities such as barrier to access publishing restrict and discriminate against the public’s ability to engage in meaningful ways with philosophy, where the image of philosophy is placed superior to *hoi polloi*. This image is a product of modern academia and played into by philosophers to establish and maintain their credentials and rights to call themselves philosophers. Yet philosophers have been and can be great social critics who lead the conversation of dissent and revolution, notably including Plato, Bartolomé De Las Casas, Hannah Arendt, Angela Davis, Bertrand Russell, Michel Foucault, and bell hooks (Burroughs, 2018). Burroughs concludes “we must think creatively and systematically about ways to better support philosophers who want to engage with problems germane to civic life, about how to make this work not merely supererogatory, but a valued form of professional philosophy” (Burroughs, 2018). He prescribes a reevaluation of philosophy as a public practice which helps individuals think about the nature of the world and humanity’s place within it.

Philosophy needs effective advocacy. The moment is ripe when the public conversation is questioning the benefits and consequences of technological advances and realizing that society is changing irreversibly.

Philosophy can equip a thinker with excellent tools to do many essential human tasks.

Intellectual Resilience

Philosophy can strengthen intellectual resilience, the ability to persist through complex problems rather than defaulting to quick solutions. Philosophy is process oriented, and this orientation is becoming increasingly rare where finished products are the point of many jobs and goals are the measurable outcomes. Philosophical dialogue is about grappling with the thinking process, it is slow and inefficient, it makes demands of the thinking competencies instead of praising the outcomes. If there is a significant difference long term between the thinkers and the increasingly smarter large language models, it is the abilities to enjoy being the creatures blessed with reason, to critique themselves, to care about expanding their own abilities, and to be accountable to reason and ethics.

Improved Communication

It can enhance communication skills, learning to listen, build arguments, and collaborate in ways that respect disagreement while pursuing clarity. The human element in society is the artistic, the imperfect, the ethical, the meta, the pursuit. Philosophical dialogue is strikingly full of this humanness. Soviet block architecture could be called efficient, but immediately the coldness leaves a desire for human warmth. Essays written by large language models, at least while the technology is still fresh, is mind numbingly vague and lacking in heart. Diplomacy, teaching, fiction, business, and art all need this heart and community element.

Civic Readiness

It can develop civic readiness, equipping thinkers to navigate misinformation, evaluate evidence, and make reasoned decisions in democratic society. At the beginning of philosophy and democracy, Aristotle composed the *artes liberales*, the seven skills citizens should be competent in to participate in a free society and for a democracy to endure. In order to combat disinformation, in order to identify hallucinations of large language models, in order to have a healthy skepticism and critique the world and its vast offerings of information, individuals need exercise in interpretation, dialogue, and discernment. Philosophers practice an agility of worldviews, building arguments with different perspectives, and understanding how ideologies relate to each other. Large language models offer many benefits to the user who is capable of curating a prompt, critiquing the answers, and investigating the sources.

Critical Thinking

Philosophy implements proven strategies that encourage questioning, dialogue, and resilience. These practices can be adapted across disciplines and activities to strengthen individuals' engagement with uncertainty, evidence, and revision as they increasingly integrate technology aids into their thinking processes. Technology available at the everyman's fingertips is only as powerful as the user is competent. Just as a search engine's results are dependent on the wording of the prompt, large language models depend on their programming and the user to return content that is useful and meaningful. Likewise, the user evolves in skills and thinking competencies as they develop their relation to the technology. Just as a gardening tool or a calculator need not replace fundamental skills, but as aids, they will exercise and stress different dexterities, resources, and aptitudes. The philosopher acknowledges their role as the thinking being while employing different equipment and engaging with different modes of thinking, with excitement of exploring human capabilities and an objective to refining critical thinking competencies.

Effective Pedagogy

Doing philosophy also models reflective pedagogy, encouraging educators to rethink their approaches to teaching and assessment in ways that reward persistence and intellectual struggle rather than simply polished deliverables. Already in the past half a century research and recommendations in good pedagogy have moved from lecture towards active learning methods (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Meanwhile the Socratic dialogue has persisted through millennia as an effective form of intellectual engagement. Socratic dialogue meets the interlocutor where they are, encourages preparation in reading and thinking,

assumes no right and wrong answers but explores possibilities, and focuses on process and development of discernment. In an age where answers can easily be acquired by a simple search, outcomes based learning no longer meets its objective of involving the individual in the thinking process. Students can easily skip the active role of finding, discovering, and critiquing the final product, and do take this shortcut when the final product is what is being assessed. The process of Socratic dialogue can nicely provide an alternative method of discovery. When students show their work, refine and revise, engage intelligently about their work in small groups or dialogue with the instructor, they demonstrate a process of thinking and critical thinking which outcomes seeks to access and philosophy successfully engages.

Critique Structural Orientations

Philosophy can also aid a possible transition from goal oriented thinking when artificial intelligence is exponentially quicker at producing results. While there is increasingly the movement towards active learning methods, there is also a current focus on Outcomes Based Education, where measurable Student Learning Outcomes are a required standard of accreditation compliance (Spady, 1994). Performance is measured with results. This is engrained in the system of higher education in such a way that it will be difficult to unravel, even while research considers this criterion as conditional and contested, since it is the standard of measurement. And now results are obtainable faster than they can be assessed. For instance, in 2023, Amazon set a limit for their Kindle Direct Publishing to a maximum of three books a day (Creamer, 2023). Whether these are books anyone wants to read is likely not, although algorithms and professional quotas can possibly be satisfied or trained with these items. The system is failing. When society is ready to critique its structural orientations, philosophers are the ones most equipped to inform and lead the search for alternatives. The nature of knowledge, the criteria to assess what is good versus bad, the meta conversation about what is and what ought to be is the dialogue philosophers have engaged in since Socrates.

Society will reject philosophers. Society will ignore philosophers. Society will play by values that directly and indirectly contradict the work of philosophy. And yet Socrates compels one to return to the cave. These characteristics of philosophy are at this moment in demand by humanity. If philosophers have any interest of answering Socrates' entreaty, of being relevant outside of select halls in ivory towers, of daring to present a public philosophy instead of being safe and comfortable in arrogance and exclusion, philosophers ought to engage in this societal shift.

HOW MIGHT PHILOSOPHERS ENGAGE

Philosophical counseling demonstrates the applicability, efficaciousness, and value of critical thinking work and dialogue being applied to uses beyond one liberal art discipline. Education is also increasing its dialogue based pedagogical practices to more effectively engage students. Rare but notable instances where businesses hire philosophers signify that there is some interest even in the realms of competitive, results oriented streets of capitalism. Yet there is so much more that philosophy can teach humanity, not just under an intimidating name that invokes a memory of an elective in undergraduate studies, but a way of life and attitude of what it is to be human.

Lee (2008) examines the questions of whether public philosophy is possible, whether philosophers have an obligation to engage with the public, and what methods can be used. Bertrand Russell is his example of a public philosopher. Russell wrote on topics relevant and present in the minds of the people such as nuclear warfare, democracy, and pursuing happiness. Russell employed methods to speak to the people via public speeches, publishing more widely and more inclusively than in academic circles, and publicizing himself. *Content and mode*. Yet to combat the common view that “philosophers are a bunch of elitists who refuse to condescend to communicate with the *hoi polloi*” (Lee, 2008), some delicacy might be considered. Although, *there is a fine line between gadfly and Sophist* which Socrates did not walk, earning him the death penalty, which he gracefully accepted. To be a philosopher is also to accept being a rebel. Lee concludes that what separates modern society from that of Plato is an idea that democracy can be taken a step further as a development towards “human flourishing” (Lee, 2008). One imagines there is not much difference between ancient Greece and the problems of the world today. The desire to improve the self, the interest in understanding oneself and one’s place in the world, a discomfort with taking certainties and grounding for granted, and the inquiry into the beauty of discovery can be invoked in any individual.

Recent movements demonstrate momentum of interest. Some classic examples many philosophers recognize include philosophical practice, café-philo, and philosophy for children. Some more recent examples have played with modern modes of promotion successfully such as Ryan Holiday and the Stoic revivalism, UNESCO’s World Philosophy Day, a few radio shows, and some notable podcasts. There are also increasingly visible Substacks, an updated blog format with impressively recognizable public intellectual authors from various fields. Notable as well are online reading groups such as the Catherine Project that have emerged from a surge of interest in engaging with the classics. These efforts are visible, engaging people where they are, interacting by making ideas accessible and unpretentious.

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