



The big questions

From racial inequality to the climate crisis, philosophers are being called on to guide us through some of the greatest challenges of our times

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Does free will exist? Are there moral absolutes? Can we experience anything objectively? Whereas once it might've been easy to dismiss questions philosophers ponder as abstract or obscure, today they feel profoundly – perhaps disconcertingly – relevant. Whether it was helping doctors make unthinkable moral decisions during the pandemic or developing guidance for the likes of NASA on the ethics of emerging technology, philosophers are increasingly being called on to help us navigate this era, which feels like it could be the making or breaking of us. Here four philosophers share their take on some of the biggest challenges we face... →

Philosophers on...

Race and gender equality

Professor Briana Toole is Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy at Claremont McKenna College and Executive Director of Corrupt the Youth, which aims to bring philosophy to high-school students from low-income backgrounds

In the first philosophy class I took we explored the idea that society is flawed because we make criminals, then punish them for doing what their 'training' predisposes them to do, training that society enables by not protecting against poverty. I was gripped - it was such a radical way to think about a familiar problem. That's what philosophy is good at.

When I work with high-school students, we explore police brutality through the lens of Socrates. I sketch out the basic idea of the ring of Gyges - if we had a ring that made us invisible, would we act in a just way? We use this framework to discuss whether police should wear body cameras. If so, is surveillance OK? Should everyone be surveilled? What about privacy?

We start with issues such as police brutality because kids are exposed to these conversations, so we're equipping them with tools to defend, or revise, their position.

A lot of my work is about shifting perspectival focus - asking someone to imagine inhabiting a different body. An easy way is to get someone able-bodied to imagine how they'd get to work in a wheelchair. Once you realise you're engaging with the world from an able-bodied perspective, you realise there's lots about the lives of people with disabilities you're missing. Then you can ask, is it possible that if you're engaging with the world from a white and/or male perspective, you're also missing things from a black - or female - point of view that you need to take seriously?

Philosophy has armed me with tools I would've appreciated when I was younger and dealing with racism. I silenced myself because I felt if someone challenged me I wouldn't be able to explain why something was racist or sexist. I want to show young people how to put weight behind their arguments.



The new normal

Dr Vittorio Bufacchi is Senior Lecturer at the Department of Philosophy, University College Cork, Ireland. His book, *Everything Must Change: Philosophical Lessons from Lockdown* is out in June

There's a wonderful quote from [20th century philosopher] Bertrand Russell that says that the best thing about philosophy is it teaches us "how to live without certainty". The pandemic brought an unprecedented level of uncertainty, raising many questions such as what is the role of the state? Is our right to freedom absolute? How should we relate to the elderly? Philosophy helps us think things through.

We've also faced massive ethical dilemmas. Philosophy can guide us. In ethics we explore different moral principles and whether they can be justified. Take utilitarianism, which is about making decisions in terms of the greatest benefit for the greatest number and in so doing sacrificing a

minority. It's morally problematic. But then you have a pandemic, too few ventilators, and - it's horrific - but you do need a principle to decide who gets one. That's the realm of philosophical analysis.

Philosophy helps us make clear distinctions when facing problems - for example, between misfortune and injustice. It's tempting to view the pandemic as a global misfortune. But the other way to see it is that it has exposed the structural injustice in society. People who've suffered most tend to be from certain social classes and ethnic backgrounds, and women have suffered more than men. People say, "Once this is over, we'll go back to normal," but that's exactly what we don't want. The impact has been so devastating because of the spectacularly unequal normality we created. The pandemic has shown that perhaps autonomy is overrated in society - interdependence is a fact of life and the only way to achieve wonderful things. →



The climate crisis

Dr Elizabeth Cripps is a philosopher who specialises in climate-change ethics at the University of Edinburgh. Her book *Climate Justice: What It Means and Why We Should Care* is out next year

Our lifestyles in the global north revolve around climate-damaging behaviours so much, it's difficult for us to accept the impact - and to change. But philosophical thought experiments can help give perspective. Take this one from Henry Shue: if someone planted landmines along a popular path, set to go off in a few months' time, we'd all agree that this was morally wrong. If they set them to go off in 150 years, it's no less morally wrong, despite that feeling of distance. It's easy to see the comparison with climate change...

Ethics helps us think about the assumptions underpinning our choices and policies: do we think current human lives are more important than future ones? Is the right to have children more fundamental

than the right to travel (both of which have a climate impact)? What does it mean to be a 'good parent'? Philosophy forces us to follow our principles to their logical conclusion to test whether we can *really* stand by them.

I believe we have a moral duty to join forces as climate activists to promote global change - and that parents have an additional duty to do so to protect their children's future.

While philosophy can guide us, we can't apply it in a vacuum. For example, while affluent people having smaller families may be good for the climate, it's a different proposition for people in countries where a large family may be the only way to be fed in old age, or for women of colour who've historically been victims of reproductive injustice.

If you want to shock yourself into taking action on climate change, you don't need a thought experiment: just read the accounts of people already suffering the devastating effects.

The ethics of emerging tech

Professor Ryan Jenkins is Associate Professor of Philosophy at California Polytechnic State University. He specialises in the ethics of technology such as autonomous vehicles and artificial intelligence (AI)

For a long time, philosophers have been treated as stargazers. But recently there's been an increasing tempo of mis-steps by the tech industry and they're realising there are difficult ethical questions they need to answer. Philosophers have been thinking about what actions are right and wrong for about 2,500 years, so Silicon Valley companies are increasingly interested in consulting us.

Take autonomous vehicles, for example. They need to be programmed to make decisions. You can't catalogue every single possible ethical dilemma they might face and say, "Do this in this situation." So it's about developing general principles to programme them with. But what principles? There's a philosophical thought experiment called the trolley problem: a runaway trolley is racing down train tracks where it will kill five people. You're stood by a lever that could divert it onto a different track where one person would be killed instead. The question goes, should you intervene to sacrifice the one person to save the five?

People have latched onto the idea that this could serve as an analogy for the kinds of decisions autonomous vehicles might be confronted with - and it has spread like wildfire. If one of the prime goals of driverless cars is reducing loss of life from traffic accidents, then people ask: what should a driverless car do when faced with a version of the trolley problem on a road?

You see headlines like, "Your autonomous vehicle might decide to kill you" with this idea that it might swerve and sacrifice its driver for the 'greater good'. I think the trolley problem is too simplistic an analogy. But there are still questions about distribution of benefits and harms. How much space should an autonomous vehicle give a cyclist if the more space it gives, the more it edges its passengers into oncoming traffic? If someone is driving an autonomous car the people around it are being treated a bit like test subjects for a more or less experimental technology without consent - is that OK?

We tend to hold technology to higher standards than humans - it seems more shocking if someone is killed by a driverless car. But is that justified? Clinging to the idea that driverless cars should be perfect means sacrificing the potential benefits. The cost to life of human-driven cars is unconscionable - today, in America alone, over 35,000 people a year are killed in car crashes.



Get your philosophical juices flowing with these...

A podcast *Overthink* hosted by two philosophy professors. Episodes include the likes of 'Why millennials love homemaking' and 'How nostalgia shapes empathy'.

A book *The Pig That Wants to be Eaten and 99 Other Thought Experiments* by Julian Baggini (Granta Books). A collection of thought experiments you won't be able to stop thinking about.

An Instagram account [@corrupttheyouth.org](https://www.instagram.com/corrupttheyouth.org). Using philosophy to explore everything from police brutality to gaslighting, it's targeted at high-school students so it's perfect for the rookie philosopher.

A community theschooloflife.com. Founded by philosopher Alain de Botton, The School of Life creates articles, books and workshops on everything from how to fail to how to procrastinate well. ♦