Philosophy
Making Philosophical Discoveries

Thaddeus Metz

Philosophy, or at least a lot of it, consists of a rational reflection on important issues that underlie or are beyond the sciences. Scientists explain and describe, but philosophers evaluate, judging something as good or bad, and prescribe, making a case for what merits belief or how one ought to treat others. Scientists appeal to concepts such as causation and fact, whereas philosophers enquire into exactly what it is to be a cause or a fact. Scientists appeal to claims about the physical, while philosophers seek to ascertain whether there is also a spiritual realm. Because it is so abstract and fundamental to the human condition, the best philosophical works can be read for hundreds of years; for instance, Aristotle's book *The Nicomachean Ethics* is still assigned in classrooms after more than two millennia.

I remember what it was like to be a postgraduate student in philosophy, unsure whether I would ever publish, let alone have something original worth publishing. Once I had successfully defended my PhD at Cornell University in 1995, you might have thought that would help. After all, to be awarded a doctorate means that one has added to the stock of knowledge, or at least three people out there think so.

In my case, however, it didn't do me any good in terms of making me sanguine about my future as a philosopher. I could appreciate I had an interesting position – I argued for the best version out of at least a dozen social contract theories of justice on offer by first pointing out that they all shared a certain common ground and then drawing on the values implicit in it to weed out some theories and favour others.

Nearly 30 years later, I still think there's something to it. However, it wasn't deep enough and I also wasn't quick enough. It took me many years to learn how to package an essay in a form suitable for publication in a competitive journal (to the point I nearly was forced to drop out of academia), and, once I had finally figured out how to do it, an editor known for being a straight shooter wrote me and said more or less, 'Yup,

35

Metz, that's a good argument, but the field has moved on and is no longer interested in social contract theory'. I never did publish a journal article from my doctoral thesis. Although I do take myself to have made something of a discovery in it, it was not one sufficiently penetrating to warrant attention from philosophers beyond a certain generation, and my contribution had unluckily come at the end of it. Bummer. I had to try again.

I think it was worth trying again. Over the years I have met colleagues who, on the surface, do not aspire to make a discovery that their fields would take an interest in for a long while. For example, I remember one person who gave a talk based on a paper, later published, in which she argued that, as scholars, we should not care about citations. While I realize citations are not the only thing to care about, I did think to myself, 'Surely, she wants this very piece of work of hers to be read – and indeed cited (if only as a marker of having been read)'.

For another example, I recall a group of colleagues who published a collection of essays arguing against using excellence as a way to evaluate scholarship. However, I again thought to myself, 'Don't these authors think their position is excellent or at least weren't they trying to make it so?'.

These colleagues were based in South Africa and have been motivated at least in part by concerns that Global North standards are being imposed on the Global South, ones that are tough to meet by those in the latter, and indeed sometimes because of gatekeeping on the part of those in the former. Still, I think it would be unfortunate if reacting to this dynamic led colleagues either to avoid striving to make an excellent discovery that makes a difference to their field or to exhibit discordance in suggesting outwardly that it is not worth doing while implicitly aiming for precisely that.

In any event, after I had failed to publish from my doctorate during the initial two years of my first tenure track job – that is, during 1997–1999 at the University of Missouri in the US – I had to start new research projects unrelated to social contract theory. Some of them went better, at least in terms of finding publication homes and being taken up by the field (even if they of course could have always gone better still). In hindsight, I see that my more revealing discoveries, and typically those that colleagues have found of interest, have involved three kinds of approaches.

One has been to apply a new method to an issue that has been treated for a long while in other ways. The second has been to look for data that are not entailed or adequately explained by existing theories and then to develop a theory that accounts for them while also making sense of the data for which existing theories can account. The third has been to find an assumption common to two long-standing disputants and to advance an

alternative to them both that does not rely on it. A salient instance of this third approach has involved finding what are sometimes called 'orthogonal distinctions', illustrated below.

The first approach was familiar to me from work on creativity by the novelist-cum-non-fiction author Arthur Koestler (1964). The second is I have known what those in the natural sciences do all of the time. The third had been mentioned by the brilliant philosopher Robert Nozick (1981) in one of his books and is illustrated by the probably even more brilliant philosopher Immanuel Kant, who is well known for having drawn orthogonal distinctions: before Kant, we knew about subjective relative truths and objective universal truths, but, after him, we came to appreciate that there might also be subjective universal truths, and, before Kant, we knew about analytic-a priori knowledge and synthetic-a posteriori knowledge but, after him, we considered the possibility of synthetic-a priori knowledge. (If that is not how you were taught to read and appreciate Kant, you likely missed something.) You don't need to know what those concepts involve to see something of the novelty of the positions Kant articulated and defended.

Despite being aware of these three theoretical moves at an abstract level, I don't recall quite having set out with them in mind. I think what happened is instead that, having read a lot of philosophy and work in related fields and having acquired a sense of what was intellectually revealing and significant, I knew at some subconscious level what to look for when undertaking my own projects. Looking back in order to write my contribution to this volume, it is now clearer to me that I have often used these three approaches, but I did not quite plan to do so. Perhaps upon reading this essay, other budding philosophers will be more systematic about how they undertake their enquiries.

In the rest of this essay, I illustrate how each of the three approaches has grounded different kinds of discoveries I have made over the years as a philosopher. In addition, on the supposition that the reader would be keen to deploy them in her own career, at the end I provide some strategic advice about how to facilitate that, which I also now see more clearly I have been following myself.

* * *

When I was in high school and for much of my time as an undergraduate at the University of Iowa in the 1980s, I studied continental philosophy and particularly valued the social criticism found in the work of Karl Marx, the Frankfurt School, the Situationist International, André Gorz, and

Henri Lefebvre. Although some of these thinkers decried the injustice and misery salient in modern capitalist, industrialized, and statist societies, another disvalue of meaninglessness was even more prominent in their critique, at least as a group. For these thinkers, there is a way to organize our economy, politics, and civil society so that our lives would become much more meaningful than they typically are. The continental tradition is known for being concerned with expression and style, and so many of these thinkers write with passion, creativity, and a dash of flair.

I pretty much forgot about all that when I went on to do my master's and doctoral studies at Cornell in the 1990s. At that point I switched to studying Anglo-American or 'analytic' philosophy, which is characteristically dry. One is to define the terms carefully, articulate general principles, and evaluate competing principles with evidence, especially the extent to which they entail and explain the data of 'intuitions', relatively uncontroversial judgements about particular cases.

For example, in respect of the latter, it would be intuitive for most readers to judge that it is morally wrong to poke babies with needles just to hear how loud they can scream and also that those babies would be quite unhappy. If someone disagrees with these claims about morality and happiness, it would be hard to take that person seriously as an interlocutor (or at least that person has a lot of explaining to do), and if the theory could not make sense of these claims, it would be a major strike against the theory.

For about 400 years, at least since the work of Thomas Hobbes (see especially *The Leviathan* published in 1651), philosophers in the English-speaking world have been addressing the values of morality and happiness using the method of seeking the tightest fit between a controversial general principle and uncontroversial particular cases.

For instance, they have constructed and defended theories in the form 'An act is morally right if and only if it . . .', where in the West one might fill this out with 'maximizes the general welfare', 'treats rational nature with respect', or 'would be agreed to in a social contract', looking for the principle that best captures a wide array of intuitive judgements about the rightness or wrongness of particular actions. If a given one of these principles can entail and powerfully explain why it is wrong to torture babies for fun, that is a plus in favour of it, but if one cannot do so easily, that is a (serious) minus.

Philosophers have done the same with well-being, spelling out and evaluating principles in the form 'A person is happy if and only if she . . .', where 'gets what she wants', 'experiences pleasure', or 'has

emotions of satisfaction and contentment' have been prominent Western contenders for completing the statement. For any such principle that a philosopher might suggest, one goes ahunting for intuitive support on the one hand, and counter-examples, that is, exceptions to the putative universal rule, on the other, seeking the principle with the greatest support and the fewest counter-examples.

Now, what had not been done thoroughly at the time I needed a new research project was to use such an analytic method to address issues of meaning in life, that is, to apply what many would describe as an 'Anglo-American' method to a quintessentially 'continental' topic. It had been done sporadically, to be sure. In fact, when I was in graduate school, I saw Susan Wolf present at a colloquium where she pretty much did that, and it had stuck with me after I had left and acquired my first permanent job.

However, at the time there was no proper field in analytic philosophy devoted to life's meaning. In contrast to the values of morality and happiness, talk of 'life's meaning' had not been carefully defined, there were no familiar competing principles of the form 'A life is meaningful if and only if . . .', and, above all, there had not been a rigorous consideration of the extent to which a given principle fits or flouts intuitions about what makes life meaningful, such as that painting a masterpiece or donating to charity would confer real meaning on one's life but that chewing gum or exploding the Sphinx just to watch the spectacle would not. I made a meal of the opportunity and have for more than 20 years now applied the philosophical technique I learned in graduate school to the sort of value orientation I prized as an undergraduate.

Some people do not appreciate this 'discovery' or at least the systematic carrying out of what some call an 'analytic existentialism'. There is a fellow who has in an Amazon review of my first book on life's meaning hammered it with a low score for lacking feeling and focusing on logic. However, would it not be fascinating to know what all meaningful conditions of a life have in common as distinct from the meaningless ones? That is what an analytic method aims to give you, and my initial answer to that question is in *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study* (Metz 2013, 235).

* * *

Exposure to different philosophical traditions, first continental and then Anglo-American, hence made a real difference to my career. That has been even more the case in respect to my work in the philosophies of the Global South, above all, African traditions.

I first came to South Africa in June 1999, in the hot pursuit of a human rights lawyer from Durban I had met the previous October at a Halloween party in St. Louis, Missouri. We married in 2000, and, having acquired a job at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) Department of Philosophy in Johannesburg, I relocated permanently to her native land so that she could be near her family and contribute to her country. Upon joining Wits, it was obvious to me that I had to teach African philosophy to my students (something that had never been done before, it turns out). It also seemed like a good idea to use some of my research time to help bring African philosophy to a global audience; at the time, it did not feature much at all in mainstream international journals or books.

What I had done under the banner of 'analytic existentialism' became 'Yankee ubuntu' upon moving to South Africa, in the teasing and friendly voice of Pedro Tabensky at Rhodes University. In the way I had applied a characteristically Anglo-American method to an unusual, continental topic of life's meaning, so at Wits I began to apply the same method to a similarly unusual African ethic, roughly one directing us to become a real person (or a genuine human being) through harmonious relationships with others.

Western philosophers had been constructing moral theories for hundreds of years appealing to intuitions salient in their cultures. My key questions have been, 'What would an African moral theory, one heavily informed by intuitions salient in Indigenous sub-Saharan cultures, look like?' and 'Could it give the Western principles of right action a run for their money?'. I read philosophical, anthropological, and sociological discussions about a wide variety of sub-Saharan peoples, looking for recurrent moral beliefs and practices, and then drew (largely, but not exclusively) on them to construct a principle in the form 'An act is morally right if and only if it . . .'.

For more than 15 years I have worked to specify this principle with care, to evaluate it rigorously in the light of intuitions about right and wrong, and to show that it in fact captures more about ethics than the Western approaches that have dominated moral-theoretic enquiry around the world for more than 200 years. I have sought to show that the long-standing African tradition has something substantial to contribute to global philosophy, at least in a principled form that would be of interest to many international enquirers.

Not everyone is happy with Yankee ubuntu – that is, an African moral theory. The analytic method is not one that African philosophers had characteristically used before (although quite a number do now), and some

hold that departure from the wisdom of elders about ubuntu is to be discouraged. For instance, one senior African philosopher in print has advised that people must avoid the 'spontaneous incantation' that is my work, apparently alluding to witchcraft being responsible for the unwelcome novelty. He and some others call me 'colonial', 'imperialist', and worse.

However, I have never forced anyone to use my method or read my work, and instead have welcomed (indeed, actively supported) a variety of interpretations of ubuntu on the part of my students and colleagues. *One* interpretation, I submit, would provide an answer to the question, 'What do all permissible actions have in common as distinct from the impermissible ones?', and an answer that a global audience of philosophers and related thinkers must take seriously. That is what the analytic method aims to give you, and my answer to that question is in *A Relational Moral Theory: African Ethics in and beyond the Continent* (Metz 2022, 110).

* * *

So far, I have treated the application of a new method to a long-standing topic to be a kind of philosophical discovery. It is at least a sort of novelty. I have been coy up to now about what the employment of this analytic method has revealed, which would count as a distinct sort of discovery. Let me now say more about that.

Consider the approach of seeking a general principle that coheres best with a wide array of intuitions, which are widely shared claims about particular cases that are less controversial than the principles being evaluated. In the context of the meaning of life, a small portion of that proceeded for me in roughly the following way.

Which actions clearly confer meaning on a life, if anything does? Ah, surely, being in a romantic relationship, rearing children, and working for charity à la Mother Teresa (or at least our stereotypical image of her). What do these intuitions have in common? A good candidate is a broad sense of 'love'. Let's start with this principle: a life is meaningful if and only if it is loving of people (Eagleton 2007).

Have we missed anything? That is, are there other actions that intuitively confer meaning to a life that are not loving? Einstein establishing the theories of special and general relativity was important, and that seems to be about knowledge, not love. So, our initial principle looks too narrow.

Now, Einstein did share his findings with others. That was loving, and so the love principle might seem OK. And, yet, wasn't Einstein's life made

somewhat more meaningful by virtue of his discoveries *before* he shared his findings with others? That seems right, and so there is indeed an exception to the love principle.

Hmm, but not so fast. Einstein no doubt loved his work, which conferred meaning on his life before he shared his findings with others. So, let's revise the principle this way: a life is meaningful if and only if it is loving of something (maybe people, maybe work; Frankfurt 2004). This second principle avoids the counter-example.

A new counter-example arises, though, since, implicitly according to this second principle, loving torture of people could make one's life more meaningful. That can't be correct. Meaning cannot come to one's life by loving anything at all; one has to love the right sort of thing. Let's try a third principle: a life is meaningful if and only if it is loving of something worth loving (Wolf 2010). People and scientific work are worth loving, while the torture of them is not. OK.

Are there any glaring exceptions to that principle? I think so. Suppose that, instead of loving, I were to hate, and specifically to hate injustice, pollution, and ugliness. That would indeed make my life more meaningful, at least if the hatred included or prompted doing something to reduce their presence in the world.

However, is that only because to hate these things you have to love their opposites, so that it's really love doing the work? I doubt that; why couldn't someone hate ugliness but not love beauty? Seems you could get some meaning in your life simply by cleaning up a mess, even if you do not then go on to paint a masterpiece. Also, wait a minute, suppose that Einstein had hated his intellectual labour but had put in the slog anyway; his life still would have been notably meaningful for what he learned about space-time and, again, prior to having told other people about it.

So what might the act of loving people, plus hating injustice/pollution/ugliness plus making scientific discoveries (despite disliking the process) all have in common? Which fourth principle now emerges to consider, and what exceptions to it might there be?

And on it goes. I'm here to report that this process takes years. Coffee helps to keep going.

Is there a bullet-proof comprehensive principle to be found at the end? I have colleagues who doubt that there is and who think it's a pointless (yeah, meaningless) exercise. One scholar who wrote a critical notice of my latest book compared it to searching for a needle in a haystack when there is no needle to be found. Ouch.

However, I remain optimistic, in part because the search in respect to life's meaning (and also ubuntu) has not been undertaken for very long yet. Back in 2013 I advanced a principle that I thought was a pretty good contender, but I have had to modify it in various ways over the past 10 years and, I accept, likely will again over the next 10. For the purposes of this essay, I find it less important to tell you what I think I have discovered so far as a result of seeking a fit between a general principle and particular cases than to get you to see how that approach could lead to an interesting and important discovery. Even if we do not ever find a principle invulnerable to counter-example, we will have learned an awful lot about what does and does not make life meaningful in the process. I'm gonna keep going.

I have for many years now applied the same approach to ubuntu, evaluating candidate general principles in the form 'An act is morally right if and only if it . . .' by drawing heavily on African sources and considering how well or poorly they account for intuitions about what is permissible and impermissible. Rather than recount some of that dialectic, I turn to the remaining major approach I have routinely used to make philosophical discoveries.

* * *

The last approach, recall, involves pointing out that two sides that have been debating for a long while and perhaps are at an impasse share a common assumption, one that may reasonably be doubted. Although a third view that does not rely on that assumption is not necessarily true or most justified, it can turn out to be a position worth taking seriously and exploring further. In philosophy, it's hard to ask for more.

Learning about the African tradition for nearly 20 years has enabled me to suggest promising alternatives to standard views in 'modern' Western philosophy. To get a taste, consider that the two most influential accounts of the morally right action in the West have been the principle of utility, prescribing whichever action would maximize happiness and minimize unhappiness in the long run, and the Kantian principle of respect for persons, which directs one to treat people's capacity for rationality or autonomy as having a dignity. There are at least three respects in which the clash between these two titans over the past two centuries has involved common premises that the African tradition has prompted me to question.

For one, both utilitarianism and Kantianism are individualist, in the sense of ascribing ultimate moral value to features internal to an individual and making no essential reference to anyone else, whether that is pleasure

or rationality. However, the African tradition's prizing of harmony occasions awareness of the possibility that a person is morally important because of its relational properties, specifically its capacity to come closer to others by being party to harmonious or loving relationships.

For a second example, utilitarianism and Kantianism have typically presumed that to be morally important is an all-or-nothing matter, where for the former animals count equally to human persons (since they can feel pleasure) and for the latter animals do not count at all (since they are not rational). In contrast, one idea prominent in the African tradition is a 'great chain of being', with all things that exist mattering (traditionally, for being offshoots of God), but to differential degrees, which prompts the view that animals morally matter for their own sake, but not as much as human persons.

For a third example, utilitarianism and Kantianism are impartial theories, in the first instance prescribing the same treatment of intimates and strangers as either equally capable of un/happiness or equally being autonomous to the requisite degree; if one has additional reason to help family members, that will be for a contingent reason such as that one happens to know how to help them better (utilitarianism) or that one promised to help them (Kantianism). The African tradition's valuation of 'family first' grounds a different approach, according to which we necessarily owe somewhat more aid to those with whom we have been in a harmonious/loving relationship.

In addition, reflection on ideas salient in the African tradition has led me to posit orthogonal distinctions as meriting consideration. For one major example, note that philosophers of justice have usually based their views on people's intrinsic features, ones that make no essential reference to others, such as their autonomy or well-being. In addition, often critics of basing politics and law on justice, whether in the feminist/care, Marxian, or Confucian traditions, have appealed to non-intrinsic values as leverage, contending that relationships are more important than justice. In contrast to both major camps, I have articulated and defended accounts of justice based on the dignity of people's relational nature. A proper valuation of people's capacity to be party to harmonious relationships does not transcend categories of justice but instead calls for certain sorts that differ in plausible ways from those grounded on intrinsic properties. In essence, instead of intrinsic justice and relational non-justice, I have advanced relational justice as a promising alternative.

* * *

The three intellectual moves I have routinely made are not the only ways to make discoveries as a philosopher, even ones that might be discussed for a while. However, for those who might want to take these kinds of approaches to their philosophical work, I close with some recommendations.

Perhaps the most important tip is to expose yourself to a variety of viewpoints, ideally ones espoused by people you have to engage with face to face. Upon moving from a department in which I had been able to focus on continental philosophy to one where I had to grapple with the Anglo-American tradition, my horizons were broadened. Similarly, upon moving from a country where Western philosophy was nearly exclusively discussed to an African country, where people would say initially incomprehensible things to me like 'A person is a person through other persons' (which says virtually nothing in plain English), I again came to view the world through a different lens. I am not a social scientist, but I am not surprised to have come across studies that have attributed a significant amount of creativity to having networked.

In addition to having been exposed to a variety of intellectual traditions, in each one I have read a lot. And when I have read, I have organized the ideas in such a way that I can see what is missing, what gaps there are to fill. For example, early on when approaching the meaning of life analytically, I composed an article titled 'Recent Work on the Meaning of Life' (Metz 2002), which imparted taxonomy and more generally structure to what little literature on the topic by English-speaking philosophers there was at the time. I then could see, for two examples, that little work had been done on definitional matters and that there had been an insufficient comparative evaluation of the principles advanced in, or at least intimated by, the literature. I knew what to do next.

I did something similar with ubuntu. In my first publication on the topic, 'Toward an African Moral Theory' (Metz 2007), I pointed out that one could read the literature as suggesting six different theoretical interpretations of it and then considered the pros and cons of each, showing in the end that none of them did a particularly good job of capturing intuitions about right and wrong action. I knew what to do next.

Having read this essay, dear reader, you might now have an idea of what to do next regarding making a philosophical discovery, perhaps one that will turn out to be deep enough to warrant and, with some luck, receive attention for a decent amount of time. Consider: approaching a familiar topic with a methodology that has been under-utilized; not merely pointing out exceptions to a rule but also working to find a rule that avoids them; and seeing whether two long-standing opposing views both

share a dubious assumption that a third view does not. No guarantee your work will last as long as Aristotle's or even longer than a generation, but these are the kinds of intellectual moves that help to advance the field.

REFERENCES

Aristotle. 340 BCE. *The Nicomachean Ethics, 2nd ed*. Trans. Terence Irwin. Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 1999.

Eagleton, Terry. 2007. *The Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Frankfurt, Harry. 2004. *The Reasons of Love*. Princeton University Press.

Hobbes, Thomas. 1651. *Leviathan; or, the Matter, Form and Power of a Commonwealth, Ecclesiastical and Civil*. Repr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Koestler, Arthur. 1964. *The Act of Creation*. Macmillan.

Metz, Thaddeus. 2002. 'Recent Work on the Meaning of Life'. *Ethics*, 112 (4): 781–814.

2007. 'Toward an African Moral Theory'. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 15 (3): 321–341.

2013. *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study*. Oxford University Press.

2022. *A Relational Moral Theory: African Ethics in and beyond the Continent*. Oxford University Press.

Nozick, Robert. 1981. *Philosophical Explanations*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wolf, Susan. 2010. *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*. Princeton University Press.