ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Saturation as a methodological principle for philosophical research

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Abstract

How can philosophers determine when they should conclude their research process? This paper introduces the saturation principle to philosophical methodology. The idea of saturation, first formulated by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, has become an influential quality criterion for qualitative research in the hermeneutical and pragmatist traditions in the social sciences. By taking a pluralist and gradualist approach, this paper explores how different types of saturation may guide philosophers in deciding when to conclude their research activities. It identifies five core activities that are central to philosophical research projects and describes which type of saturation is most relevant to each of them. It also introduces two new forms of saturation: namely, perspectival and reflective saturation. While the paper concludes that saturation is a valuable methodological principle for philosophical research, it does not provide strict rules, let alone checklists. Saturation should be understood as a gradual process rather than one cut-off point.

KEYWORDS

hermeneutic tradition, interpretation, literature research, philosophical methodology, reflection, research methods, saturation

1 | INTRODUCTION

Will I ever be able to finish this project? There is so much literature, and there are so many different views and arguments. This feeling of desperation may be familiar to many academic philosophers. Researchers can be overwhelmed by the wealth of literature, but also by the

fear that they will never be able to master the complex field well enough to write anything serious. When can we be sure that we have not missed crucial insights, counterarguments, and counterexamples?

This question will be especially familiar to supervisors of master's and doctoral theses. Sometimes, students stop too early with their literature search and must be pressed to search further for relevant literature and to address important counterarguments. At other times, supervisors might suggest that students stop reading new literature, in order to focus on writing and finishing the thesis. It may be difficult to strike a balance when doing research oneself, but it is even more difficult to explain to students when they should stop or continue with further literature study and analysis. Most of the time, researchers seem to rely on an intuitive middle ground—or they simply stop because in the publish-or-perish culture they don't have the time to continue. Of course, one way to prevent, or at least minimise, the experience of feeling drowned in the research process is to establish a good research design at the start of the project. Good research questions and sub-questions will already demarcate the topic and the materials needed for a study. Thorough reflection on the methodology and the resources to be studied, as well as reflection on how to minimise bias in the collection and interpretation of those resources, are essential. Even with a good research design, however, there is still an overabundance of materials to select from.

In the literature, there is limited guidance on when to stop or to continue one's research. We suggest that the methodological principle of saturation may help to understand and address these questions. The saturation principle was coined in the social sciences by Glaser and Strauss (2017, originally 1967) some fifty years ago, and since then it has become widely accepted. The core notion is that we may stop searching for further input when we have reached a level where adding new input no longer changes our theoretical understanding. Since its introduction, it has been further developed and expanded to other contexts and research approaches but hasn't been discussed in the context of philosophical methodology.[1]

In this article, we argue for the relevance of the saturation principle to the discipline of philosophy. We begin with a brief discussion of philosophical methodology to embed our research question (section 2). We then distinguish different versions of the principle. We take a pluralist approach: there is not just one, there are multiple defensible approaches to saturation (section 3). After this groundwork, we discuss the uses of saturation in philosophy and adapt the underlying idea to the specific context of philosophical research. We distinguish five core activities that are central to most philosophical research projects and discuss how different versions of saturation might be useful to guide us in deciding when to stop. We also introduce two new forms of saturation, namely, perspectival and reflective saturation (section 4), and address the risk of bias and ways to reduce it. Finally, we conclude with a reflection on the limitations of this paper and some suggestions for further research (section 5).

This article is primarily meant as a contribution to the discussion on philosophical methodology, but we hope that it also provides some practical guidance for beginning researchers and Ph.D. students. In order to make it accessible to a wider audience, we have tried to refrain from technical discussions and have included many examples. Glaser and Strauss were embedded in both the pragmatist and the hermeneutical tradition, and we believe that saturation also fits best in philosophical research embedded in those two traditions. Even so, we hope that our analysis might also be inspiring for philosophers with different backgrounds.[2]

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[1]Jean-Luc Marion and others use the notion of saturation in a non-methodological context when discussing saturated phenomena (Marion 1996; Mackinlay 2009).

[2]Even so, the philosopher among us, Wibren van der Burg, focuses on legal, moral, and political philosophy and has a background in the pragmatist tradition; this is evident in this article.

2 | METHODOLOGY IN PHILOSOPHICAL RESEARCH

Compared to other academic disciplines, philosophy has little general methodological literature. One reason it is difficult to develop methodologies for philosophy is the nature of philosophy. Philosophy can be broadly defined as systematic and critical reflection. As such, philosophy has no specific object: everything can be the object of philosophical reflection. There is also no standard way of reflection: reflection can be quite unmethodical, especially in more creative processes. Nor does philosophical reflection have specific input: many elements can be potentially included in the reflection process, such as texts, ideas, phenomena, or simply one's own intuition.[3] The way we reflect on them may vary widely. Philosophical reflection is therefore sometimes quite unmethodical and creative.

These partly unmethodical and creative aspects of philosophical reflection are associated with the hermeneutic, interpretive character of philosophy. Philosophers interpret texts, like theologians and literary scholars, and they also interpret phenomena such as life, mind, society, knowledge, and so on. Philosophy aims at understanding, and understanding goes beyond—but includes—knowledge of facts; philosophers aim to give meaning to them and present them in a coherent, holistic account (Goodman and Elgin 1988, 161; Elgin 2017, 37). Even the construction of a radically novel theory is embedded in an interpretation—and criticism—of existing theories, and in an understanding of human behaviour and society. We can acquire a better understanding in many ways. Sometimes, we need to study philosophical texts, but viewing movies and reading fiction can also provide a deeper understanding. For instance, game theory may help us to understand war, but so can reading *All Quiet on the Western Front* or watching the movie *Full Metal Jacket*. Understanding also has a subjective dimension because it builds on our current insights and previous experiences. A child and an adult will have a different experience of discrimination, and consequently a different understanding of it. Understanding also depends on implicit background characteristics such as gender, race, class, and nationality.

In our view, however, the fact that there are creative, unmethodical, and subjective elements in philosophy does not make methodology for philosophers impossible or even superfluous. Methodologies provide specific approaches on how to study specific questions or problems and to address, avoid, or correct bias and error or at least compensate for them. Philosophical research is often iterative and dialectic. We go back and forth between all the relevant elements, enriching our understanding, testing and refining our insights in a process of mutual criticism and refinement.[4] This reflective process is open-ended and variable, but that does not mean that anything goes. Not only in the presentation and justification but also during the process of reflection, we must check whether we might have overlooked important sources or arguments, whether our arguments are complete and logically valid, whether our understanding is biased, and so on. This is why methodology is important for philosophy.

Since the turn of the century, increasing attention has been paid to philosophical methodology.[5] In the academic literature various useful guidelines have been suggested.[6] Some of these are embedded in a specific philosophical tradition or subfield of philosophy; others apply more generally. Despite the progress made in recent decades, there is still much work to do. Our suggestion is that we may find much inspiration for topics like these in the social sciences, in other humanities, and in legal research. Though not across all areas, the humanities and (in many aspects) legal research share a hermeneutic approach at their core.[7] It is this

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[3]Rescher 2017, 34: "There is no limit to the scope of philosophy's potentially useful data."

[4]A similar point can be made with regard to legal doctrinal research. See Taekema and Van der Burg 2024, 148.

[5]Haug 2014, 1: "The last few years have seen a surge of interest in philosophical methodology." Useful general introductions are Daly 2010 and 2015, Williamson 2020, and Fosl and Baggini 2020.

[6]For example, principles such as epistemic conservatism, simplicity, and explanatory power (Daly 2010, 20 and 147–52), and the avoidance of fallacies, vagueness, ambiguity, and category mistakes (Fosl and Baggini 2020).

[7]We use "hermeneutic" here in the broad sense of interpretive.

shared hermeneutic approach that makes methodological crossovers between those disciplines productive in many areas. Among the social sciences, the hermeneutic and social interactionist traditions in particular may prove useful, for three reasons. First, because they also put interpretation and understanding at the core of their methodology; second, because their methodologies have been much more explicitly developed than in various humanities; and third, because they follow, much like philosophy, an iterative research cycle with constant and open reflection at all stages of the cycle.

In this article we focus on one specific problem: when to conclude the philosophical research process, or certain parts of that process. We identify two specific risks. The first risk is that we might prolong our research endlessly, with the result that our research never terminates and our text is never finished. The second risk is that we might miss important elements in our research and that our selection of materials might be selective and biased. We should at least be aware of these risks and try to deal with them in an optimal way. The research question of this article should be understood against this background of avoiding both risks and can be formulated as: How should philosophers determine when to finish their research process? There are no methodological objections to continuing the research process for longer than strictly necessary—although there may be practical ones, like deadlines and the need to keep on publishing in modern academia. So methodology cannot determine when researchers *must* stop, only when they *may* stop. Therefore, we can formulate the question more precisely as: When may philosophers feel justified to end the research process? Our suggestion is that the notion of saturation may be helpful to address this question. It does not provide clear methodological guidelines and rules but rather provides a principle, and it may help one to understand the problem and suggest when it is justified to conclude one's research.

3 | SATURATION IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES: A PLURALIST APPROACH

Methodological questions assume a central role in the social sciences, especially when it comes to empirical research, where quality considerations focusing on data collection and analysis determine the trustworthiness of a study's results (Creswell and Poth 2016). This has led to a great number of methodological guidelines and ongoing discussions regarding the design and conduct of specific research approaches.[8] In this paper we focus on one of the more prominent methodological concepts in qualitative inquiries: the *saturation principle*. The saturation principle was introduced by Glaser and Strauss in 1967 for their hermeneutic approach to qualitative research also known as grounded theory. Grounded theory aims to develop new social theory through bottom-up (inductive), qualitative, empirical data collection.[9] A theory is constructed by first identifying the most important or salient aspects or components of the phenomena, called categories, and then further elaborating the properties of these categories by carefully analysing the data. In this context, saturation refers to the moment when no additional data are found (sometimes incorrectly equated with 'informational redundancy') (Saunders et al. 2018) that may help to further develop the properties of a certain social category.

Since Glaser and Strauss first presented the concept of saturation, the principle has been transferred to other qualitative research approaches.[10] Currently, various conceptualisations

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[8]E.g., Boeije 2009; Corbin and Strauss 1990; Charmaz 2006; Cresswell and Poth 2016; Denzin and Lincoln 2011; Lichtman 2013; Mason 2010; Saldaña 2021.

[9]In grounded theory, the term "theory" refers to a coherent description and explanation of certain phenomena.

[10]Such as phenomenological and ethnographic traditions. For a more extensive reading of different research approaches see Low 2019.

of saturation are used in research practice. This raises conceptual and methodological issues, such as how we should define saturation; how we should evaluate whether something is saturated; and what standard(s) we should abide by to achieve saturation. Despite this conceptual unclarity that has crept into social research as the saturation principle began to be applied by different types of scholars and in diverse research traditions/approaches, the importance of the concept is undebated. Saturation is considered one of the main quality criteria in qualitative research (Saunders et al. 2018).

For the purposes of this paper, we refrain from a comprehensive discussion of the different understandings of saturation in the literature (for comprehensive discussions of saturation, see Saunders et al. 2018; Hennink et al. 2017; Low 2019; Sebele-Mpofu 2020). Instead we present the two most relevant types, to provide a better general understanding and useful connection points for our discussion of saturation in philosophical research. Basically, the difference between the two types outlined in what follows is a different focus: a more abstract focus on constructing a theory that explains social phenomena (theoretical saturation), and a concrete focus on analysing the individual data in terms of general themes that describe social phenomena (thematic saturation).[11] Against this background we argue for a pluralist understanding of saturation.

3.1　|　Theoretical saturation

Theoretical saturation addresses the question when, in the process of developing new conceptual categories and a new theory, we may stop collecting additional data. Glaser and Strauss described the aim of theoretical saturation as generating new theory based on original data collection or, as Saunders and colleagues explain: "[Grounded theory] uses the development of categories and the emerging theory in the analysis process as the criterion for additional data collection" (Saunders et al. 2018, 1895). The focus is on generating theory, where "the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes [their] data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop [their] theory as it emerges" (Glaser and Strauss 2017, 45). In this context, theoretical saturation is described as the instance where "no additional data are being found, whereby the researcher can [further] develop properties of the category. As [the researcher] sees similar instances over and over again, the researcher becomes empirically confident that a category is saturated … [and] nothing remains but to go on to … other categories and attempt to saturate these new categories also" (Glaser and Strauss 2017, 61). In layperson's words, when the data collected do not further alter the insights of the theory developed, saturation for the category has been reached (see also Sandelowski 2008).

3.2　|　Thematic saturation

Thematic saturation addresses the question when, in the process of analysing our data, we may stop adding conceptual categories, also known as themes. Accordingly, thematic saturation is connected to the practice of coding in social sciences: that is, a part of the process of analysis in which a researcher labels and organises the empirical data to identify different themes and the relationships between them.[12] Thematic saturation is described as the moment where there are

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[11]In the sociological literature we find other versions such as meaning saturation, but these are not relevant for our use of saturation in the context of philosophy, so we do not discuss them here.

[12]A code is a tag that refers to a concept or theme. Examples of codes can be DIRECT DEMOCRACY, FREE SPEECH, EXPRESSING EMOTIONS, INSERTING INFLUENCE; these can be put in the text of the interviews or other research materials. Doing so makes a more systematic study of the contexts of these texts possible. On codes, see Saldaña 2021.

"mounting instances of the same codes, but no new ones … ; additional data do not lead to any new emergent themes."[13] Thematic saturation focuses on the level of concrete analysis, where researchers utilise themes to analyse the data. It is different from theoretical saturation, as it is concerned with the prevalence of themes in the data rather than the completeness of a coherent theory that can explain social phenomena. Thematic saturation is related to the termination of coding in the process of analysis rather than to the collection of new data. The approach of thematic saturation described here is inductive (bottom-up), as it focuses on the emergence of new themes. It can, however, also be used to test and refine an existing theory by collecting data. Achieving saturation through this top-down use of theory, also known as deductive analysis, may be done by gathering sufficient data to falsify the theory (Saunders et al. 2018, 1895).

3.3 | A pluralist and gradualist approach to saturation

These two types of conceptualizing saturation, thematic and theoretical saturation, only illustrate two main categories within a variety of versions in the methodological literature. There are other versions that combine different elements, focus on different aspects of the research process, or overlap in content but not in terminology. We take a pluralist and contextualist approach here: each of these versions offers a conceptualisation for slightly different research endeavours. In general, the saturation principle aims at providing methodological guidance on when we may conclude our research. It is a principle, not a set of strict rules, and the principle can be adapted in light of the specific research project; it can relate to different parts of the research process, such as the collection of data and their analysis. It is important to emphasise that the criteria for saturation depend on the research question posed and the method applied. The research question demarcates and focuses the research, and accordingly it also gives insight into what research method should be appropriate to answer the research question. The research method decides what type of data should be saturated. Achieving saturation suggests that the findings of a study are adequate or complete and that therefore no new data need to be collected.

Recently, some scholars have begun to reconceptualise saturation in a pragmatic way that orientates itself back towards theoretical saturation but provides more practical guidance for social researchers in the form of checklists to assess the level of conceptual rigour, which leads to saturation. Most importantly, a pragmatic understanding argues that saturation should not be perceived as an "absolute or complete end point" of the research process (Low 2019, 138). Low concludes that "understanding saturation as the point at which no new information emerges is a logical impossibility. … Analysis is never complete; there is always something new to discover, some new insight to be made" (Low 2019, 135–36). We agree with this gradualist approach to saturation in the context of philosophical research as well. Full saturation is an ideal that will never be fully reached; the question is: When is the degree of saturation enough to terminate the research process?

4 | SATURATION IN PHILOSOPHICAL RESEARCH

Departing from a pluralist and gradualist perspective, we move now to analysing the value and conceptualisation of saturation for specific activities of philosophical research projects.

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[13]Urquhart and Given in Saunders et al. 2018, 1895. There is an overlap here with what in Hennink et al. 2017, 592, is called "code saturation," defined as "the point when no additional issues are identified." The subtle differences between codes and themes, and between code and thematic saturation, are not relevant to our philosophical purposes, and so we simplify the sociological discussions here.

In this section, we discuss five activities that are usually part of philosophical research. The relative importance of each of these activities may vary, depending on the type of research project. They are not distinct stages in a chronological order; philosophical research, due to its hermeneutic character, is more like an iterative process in which we combine these activities in an often unsystematic order.

For each of these activities, the problem arises of when to end the research. In what follows we show how different versions of the saturation principle may be relevant for the activities and can be adapted to the context of philosophical research. Moreover, we introduce two novel versions, suited to the specific nature of philosophy: perspectival and reflective saturation.

4.1 | Literature search

Philosophical research always includes a study of the relevant literature. Sometimes literature is the focus of research; for example, when interpreting the work of Hanna Arendt, we must begin with studying her work and at least part of the secondary literature. Often we use literature to develop our own arguments and views in a dialectic and iterative process by building on what has already been written, criticising and reconstructing those views and adding new insights.

This is not the place to discuss methods for literature research; we merely address the question of when to finalise our search.[14] Our suggestion is that we may terminate our search for further literature when we are convinced that additional sources we study will merely repeat what we have already found. For example, we find that we have a good overview of the most important positions on when civil disobedience can be morally justified: they either largely copy Rawls, with some minor modifications, or belong to a small number of more radical non-contractarian positions, like that of Raz (Rawls 1999, originally 1971; Raz 1979). All the additional publications that we found in our search in the past few days simply repeated one of those familiar positions—no new relevant insight was gained at all.

This corresponds nicely to the notion of thematic saturation, which focuses on the prevalence of themes, although this notion must be modified to fit philosophy. "Themes" can be interpreted in the philosophical context as ideas in a broad sense; that includes arguments, definitions, criticisms, metaphors, images, and so on. At some point in their literature study, philosophers will find that additional texts do not provide any additional themes or any new definitions, critiques, arguments, or other ideas not yet found in the literature studied so far. For example, all criticisms on Rawls's justification of civil disobedience seem to have been collected, and it is not likely that a more extensive literature search will yield more. At the same time, the researcher might already have developed an overview on which of these criticisms are more common and which are less so, which have been acclaimed and which rejected by other scholars. In other words, we may confidently stop our literature search when the ideas and arguments start to be repeated and we develop an understanding of their weight in the philosophical discourse.[15]

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[14]Literature research is still a neglected topic in philosophy. For example, neither of the methodological introductions in footnote 5 above discusses how to find and select relevant literature.

[15]Of course, this conclusion is only warranted if we have taken adequate care to address bias in our search, for instance by explicitly searching for non-mainstream literature, non-Western authors, and modified keywords and by sharing our work with other researchers for their input.

4.2 | Collecting cases

The views in most philosophical projects are developed at least partly in a dialectic process with concrete examples and problems, in short: cases.[16] Cases may be used to illustrate, test, revise, and refine a theory. Sometimes they are the focus of the research, as in applied ethics, where we may want to assess whether certain actions are morally justified or not. In approaches like casuistry and reflective equilibrium, they form the basis or one of the constitutive elements of philosophical theories. At a minimum, cases may help to better understand abstract theories and ideas by visualising them.

Cases may be distinguished in clear cases and hard cases.[17] Clear cases are those where we are strongly convinced that we have a correct description and answer. Therefore, they can be used for testing and refining a theory. If a theory cannot justify that murder is morally wrong, the theory must be rejected or revised. Cases may also be used to demonstrate the weaknesses in certain views. For example, Thomson's fictive example of someone being kidnapped and attached to a violinist with a kidney ailment for nine months to save the violinist's life was meant to criticise strict prohibitions of abortion (Thomson 1971; cf. Williamson 2020, 47). A hard case is where we are uncertain: should vaccines be mandatory for every health care worker?[18] Was classical Athens a democracy, despite its very restricted citizenship? Philosophical analysis should help to better understand the hard cases and to solve some of them.[19]

In philosophical research, our findings should fit with (almost) all clear cases, and they should be able to adequately deal with most hard cases, or at least to explain why they are hard cases. To make this possible, we collect all relevant (types of) cases.[20] But how do we know whether we have included all relevant cases? Philosophers do not only use actual cases, like the Dudley case, they also use science fiction cases or imaginary cases specifically constructed to highlight certain dimensions of a problem.[21] We may include assorted variables in our initial selection of cases to draw attention to different relevant dimensions to our research question, and we might construct novel test cases ourselves. But when should we stop collecting and constructing more cases?

From a hermeneutical perspective the answer is simple: when we are reasonably justified in believing that more cases no longer give rise to further refinement of our views. Perhaps we could modify the trolley case by adding even more new variations, but after a while they are merely insignificant variations on a common theme.[22] Perhaps we could find additional examples of moral dilemmas, but they will not change our analysis. Although this may sound simple in theory, how do we apply it in practice? The problem of when to stop collecting cases shares many similarities with the problem answered by theoretical saturation. If after some period of

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[16]Cases in this broad sense include our intuitive responses to problems and examples, as in Rawls's considered judgments.

[17]This distinction can be found in Dworkin 1978, applied to legal cases. Of course, theoretically this distinction may be easy to make, but whether something is a clear case is a matter of controversy, and it may change. It is best to regard clear cases as what Rawls (1999, 18) calls "provisionally fixed points."

[18]What is a hard case for one person in a specific national context or in a specific philosophical tradition may be a clear case for someone else. Such cases must nevertheless be considered hard cases, because there is a difference of opinion.

[19]Sometimes a problem may be a tragic case without a simple solution. In situations like this, clarifying what makes the case tragic may help us better understand the problem.

[20]Weinberg 2017 provides an important warning: merely collecting or constructing cases is not enough, as cases may be influenced by all kinds of implicit biases and errors. We should critically reflect on those cases not merely by using armchair philosophy but also by using experimental philosophy, which may be a reason to discount some cases. See also Levy 2014.

[21]*Dudley v. Stevens* (1884), 14 QBD 273 DC, was a case in which two shipwrecked sailors killed and ate a cabin boy in order to survive. On imaginary cases or thought experiments, see Daly 2010, chap. 3; Williamson 2020, chap. 5. Thomson's violinist is an imaginary case. Another famous imaginary example is the trolley case introduced by Foot, which has given rise to a rich literature (e.g., Kamm and Rakowski 2016).

[22]This is how the trolley case is mostly used in teaching: adding small but significant variations so that initial judgments must be doubted.

serious searching we have not found any new cases that lead to further criticisms or refinements of a theory, we may stop.

4.3 | Interpretation

Both philosophical and non-philosophical sources must be interpreted. Simply reading Kant is not enough; we must interpret and understand his work. Observing human behaviour is not enough; we must try to make sense of it to understand it. A problem might arise when there are conflicting interpretations. Moreover, we may want to construct a novel interpretation. Perhaps a queer reading of Kant will enrich our understanding as well as provide new critiques, by focusing on the tension between queer theory's celebration of diversity and Kant's notion of universalisability.

There is an important subjective dimension to choosing between different available interpretations. New life experiences may change our understandings and accordingly our interpretations. Speaking with victims of social injustice, living in a poorer part of the city, becoming part of an elitist private club may all provide what DePaul (1993, 144–83) terms "formative experiences." Experiences like these may improve our perceptive and moral faculties and broaden our mind. But how far should we go with new experiences? Should we try all drugs ourselves to be able to reflect on drug policies?[23] How much more should we try to live through certain experiences vicariously by reading literature (Nussbaum 1990), doing interviews, and so on? And even then: can white men ever fully understand what racial or sexual injustice is?[24]

In social research these formative experiences are part of what is called the researcher's "positionality." Positionality refers to the stance or position of the researcher in relation to the social or political context of the study. Accordingly, knowledge production is shaped by the particularities of a researcher's positionality. Taking positionality into account is referred to as reflexivity, the questioning of one's own assumption and the way researchers' identity may shape their research. This asks for researchers' ability and commitment to self-reflection, empathy, and curiosity during every stage of the research process—before and during the empirical gathering of data, as well as during the analysis and writing down of the findings (Haraway 1988; Rose 1997). To acknowledge your positionality as a researcher is to acknowledge the subjective and perspectivist dimensions of research.[25] It is also to acknowledge that the research project is approached from a certain perspective and experience and that we, despite our best efforts (as we sketch below), may not be able to catch all other perspectives. In other words, it is to acknowledge the limitations of our research project.

Besides acknowledging the limitations of our research project, we should at the same time make the effort to include a variety of interpretations. Taking all the above into account, we find that there are two aspects to knowing when to stop searching for new interpretations. The first is that of collecting all possible variations that can be found in the literature. This is not different from literature research as discussed above. More difficult is the second aspect, namely, determining when to stop acquiring new formative experiences, reading more literature, seeing more movies, and so on so that one's subjective perspective on a case is corrected and enriched. Even so, we can partly find a way around it by determining the most important implicit biases and errors that may be associated with our

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[23]This is not without risk: some formative experiences may not be enriching but corrupting (DePaul, 1993, 160–64).

[24]Here all types of critical studies, such as critical race, feminist, and queer studies, as well as experimental philosophy can help to highlight possible, usually implicit, biases and errors in the way we frame and interpret certain texts and phenomena.

[25]To report on how your positionality has influenced research results is to be reflexive. Various authors believe that it is impossible to be truly reflexive, among them Rose (1997).

own perspective.[26] And then find ways to address these specific ones—at least as far as practically possible. For some philosophical projects, it may be irrelevant whether the researcher is male or female, Black or white. But for many projects, it is highly relevant. For instance, when studying ethical issues with regard to HIV infection, excluding gay perspectives may lead to significant bias; when studying COVID-19 infection, the resulting bias might be less important. Another strategy is to set up a diverse research team that includes the most relevant perspectives in light of the research question. When these strategies have been used, there may come a point when philosophers believe that they have done justice to the most relevant and significant perspectives. Then they will have reached a high degree of what we might call *perspectival saturation*. Perspectival saturation aims at developing a better understanding that is less prone to criticism by preventing, correcting, and compensating for perspectival one-sidedness and bias. At the same time, the limitations of these findings should still be acknowledged, as these are tied to the philosopher's positionality. Knowledge creation remains situated.

4.4 | Reflection

The three activities discussed so far focus on the input of the thinking process; they are largely similar to those in other disciplines. The typical philosophical activity, however, is that of reflection. We can illustrate the role of saturation in philosophical reflection with three examples of philosophical research projects: author analysis, conceptual analysis, and practical ethics. In author analysis, philosophers analyse a philosophical text, read the various competing interpretations of it in the literature, confront these with various cases, and mull all this over. After some reflection, the philosophers become convinced that one of the interpretations—or a combination of them—is better than the alternatives. Perhaps they also, after extensive reflection, feel that something is missing and provide a slightly or radically different interpretation. Reflection is basically mulling over the various materials and ideas, analysing them, and associating and confronting them with different ideas, until a largely coherent image arises.[27]

In conceptual analysis, philosophers suggest definitions for certain concepts and refine them, make distinctions, and clarify the relations between associated concepts.[28] They may introduce new concepts, as when Wittgenstein introduced the notion of family resemblance. The input for such analysis is provided by philosophical texts that offer definitions and conceptual clarification; but also by our own personal and collective experience, by ordinary language, and especially by many cases. Conceptual analysis aims to make our implicit understandings explicit and often also to suggest novel ways of understanding concepts. Therefore, it combines systematic, critical, and creative thinking. The analysis may stop when further reflection no longer leads to revision and we are convinced that we have mastered the subject, satisfied that our analysis is as coherent and justified as possible.

Finally, in practical ethics, philosophers combine available theories, case discussions, and morally relevant facts, then try to suggest justified answers to concrete problems. They reflect on all the available input, analyse the normative positions, criticise them, and present arguments and counterarguments, until they become convinced that they have mastered the subject and that further reflection does not lead to further refinements.

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[26]For various tools for radical critique, see, e.g., Fosl and Baggini 2020, chap. 6.

[27]To avoid misunderstanding: a largely coherent image may acknowledge, for example, fundamental antinomies, tragic dilemmas, and incommensurabilities.

[28]Even within the analytical tradition, there are many different views about how to do conceptual analysis: see, e.g., Daly 2010, chap. 2. We take no sides in those debates. Moreover, conceptual analysis is not restricted to the analytical tradition.

Reflection never stops. Even so, in all three examples, philosophers may come to the point where they believe their reflection is comprehensive. They have mastered the topic and, even when they mull it over for many more days, no new thoughts come up. They have looked at their topic from all sides, reflected on all arguments, cases, ambiguities, and so on, and they are convinced that this is as much as can be done—at least by them. This story is probably recognisable to many philosophers. For one of the present authors, the experience is that his creativity often is the result of long walks, reflecting for hours on the subject. And then, at some point, no new ideas come up anymore.

We suggest a novel version of saturation that might help to understand this philosophical process: *reflective saturation*. Reflective saturation has been reached when we may reasonably expect that further reflection will not lead to significant revisions. In defining it, we further distinguish between subjective and intersubjective reflective saturation.

Subjective reflective saturation is the conviction that we have adequately mastered the topic and that if we were to reflect yet again on the materials, no new ideas would come up. Our reflection is saturated. This should be distinguished from feeling stuck—also a feeling probably highly recognisable to many philosophers. In both cases, one has been mulling over the same materials and getting nowhere for some time. When feeling stuck, however, we believe that we have missed something, that there is a crucial problem we have not solved, and that we have not yet fully mastered the topic. Reflective saturation requires the conviction that we have at least reached a justified understanding. We are convinced that "no new dimensions, nuances, or insights of issues can be found" (Hennink et al. 2017, 592). In Rawls's famous terminology, we have reached reflective equilibrium (Rawls 1999).[29]

Of course, philosophers may be mistaken in thinking that they have reached reflective saturation; often they are. We can theoretically distinguish between saturation, being stuck, and simply not having finished yet, but that does not mean it is easy to tell the difference in our concrete research processes. Because it is easy to be mistaken about subjective reflective saturation, it needs to be supplemented. This connects to the social and intersubjective character of doing philosophy. A project itself can be a form of intersubjective cooperation; a co-written article—like the present one—provides an example. When authors are writing together, a critical intersubjective discussion is already part of the writing process. Yet even in these cases the work should be presented to colleagues and students, and perhaps to laypersons. Philosophers should present their work in an academic forum—and often in non-academic forums as well—to receive crucial input by others for their process of reflection. Audiences might suggest sources that the authors have overlooked, powerful cases, counterarguments, and so on.

Again, after some time, we may get the feeling that we do not get any new criticisms or suggestions. Nor may we ever be able to answer all questions completely. Philosophy is a pluralist discipline; it is simply impossible to convince everyone. At some stage, we become convinced that further presentations will not lead to significant revisions. If this applies, we have reached what may be called *intersubjective reflective saturation*. This holds when we have the conviction that further discussion of our views with colleagues and other audiences will not lead to further improvements in our understanding of an issue, nor in our presentation of that understanding. We seem to have heard the most important critiques and have come up with the best replies we can find. We have incorporated some of them and have accepted that some critics cannot be convinced. It is time to finalise the manuscript.

Even then, we should accept that our texts always embody provisional insights; they are the best that we can do—for now. Our insights are submitted to the academic community, and others may build on them, revise and refine our insights, or even reject them. Saturation is always

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[29]We use this term here in a broad, non-technical sense.

provisional and gradual. It may be that we ourselves cannot improve on our understanding at the moment our texts go out into the world, but academic research is a social, collective enterprise, and knowledge construction is a continuous process.

4.5 | Theory construction

So far, we have discussed the input process and the reflection process. It is now time to focus on the output. Philosophy often results in a theory of some kind. Sometimes, it is a comprehensive theory, like Rawls's theory of justice (Rawls 1999). Sometimes, it is more restricted, like his theory of civil disobedience (293–343). For our purposes here, we can understand theory as a coherent set of propositions on a specific subject.[30] The main criteria for assessing a theory are whether it is justified, coherent, and fits the relevant input, but also whether it is robust and useful.[31]

In constructing a theory, our doubts about whether we have finished our work at least provisionally may be most clearly felt. After all, a theory usually builds on all four of the other activities discussed above and thus requires a sufficient degree of saturation for each of them. Moreover, a theory should fit with all input and be robust; that means that in principle all possible additional information and insights might be relevant. Leaning on the notion of theoretical saturation, philosophers have fully developed their theory when all of its components are accounted for. Here, the holistic character of interpretive disciplines is most apparent.[32] A theory is necessarily selective; it cannot include everything, because then we would never be able to finish. The question is thus not whether we are selective but whether our selection is associated with an unacceptable bias. Have we addressed the most relevant examples and counterexamples, as well as the most relevant arguments and suggestions for definitions? And have we developed a theory that could be elaborated for similar cases as well? For example, when constructing a theory of justice, have we included the most important perspectives, such as those from various oppressed groups and the Global South? Did we address the historic injustices of colonialism and slavery?

Drawing on the pragmatic reconceptualisation of theoretical saturation, philosophers, like social researchers, should understand that saturation is usually not an end state we can fully achieve; it can be realised only more or less fully. Research can be more or less saturated. Therefore, the success of achieving some degree of saturation mainly depends on a careful demarcation of the subject through the research question. Here it is important to be as explicit as possible, even in cases when demarcation is forced by external circumstances. Finally, we should also situate philosophical research in the real world. In other words, we should be realistic here: especially in more comprehensive research projects saturation may never be fully achieved, but we have to cut off the research process. Our time is up, our financial resources are limited. There is a deadline for our thesis or report. We have to strike a balance between further collection of materials and reflection, on the one hand, and practical restrictions, on the other. We have not reached full saturation, but the degree of saturation is enough for our practical purposes.

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[30]Of course, there are more elaborate and precise definitions of 'theory', but for our purposes a broad and neutral understanding suffices. Daly 2010, 155: "Understood informally, a theory is a systematic set of claims."

[31]For a discussion of criteria for a good conception or theory, see Taekema and Van der Burg 2024, 218; see also Dworkin 1978. For other, largely equivalent, criteria, see Kuhn 1977, listing five theoretical virtues: accuracy, consistency, scope (unification), simplicity, and fruitfulness. Coherence is broader than mere consistency and may partly include simplicity; scope and fruitfulness are equivalent to robustness and usefulness, respectively. Especially in normative theories, "justification" is a more adequate term than "accuracy."

[32]On philosophy's holism, see Rescher 2017.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

We have argued here that saturation is a valuable methodological principle for philosophical research and that it should be understood as a gradual process rather than one sudden cut-off point. We emphasised that it does not provide guidance in the form of strict rules, let alone checklists. Saturation should be considered a principle, not a (strict) rule. As a principle, it is open to different interpretations; therefore, we have advocated for a pluralist and contextualist approach in which different interpretations of the principle can be used in a variety of contexts. This is in line with the hermeneutic or interpretive character of both the social science tradition, in which the saturation principle was conceived, and the hermeneutic and pragmatist traditions in philosophy. Since its introduction to the social sciences, the notion of saturation has been adapted in different ways. Recognizing the conceptual diversity, we have described the most relevant versions of saturation, including Glaser and Strauss's original notion of theoretical saturation, and its pragmatic reconceptualisation—as well as thematic saturation.

In order to adapt the general notion to philosophy, we described five essential activities that are central to philosophical practice. We then analysed which type of saturation is most suitable per activity. For the first activity, literature research, the cornerstone of any serious research endeavour, we suggested applying the concept of thematic saturation that focuses on the prevalence of ideas or themes. When ideas or themes start repeating, we may conclude our search for new material. The second research activity is collecting cases through which to develop or test and refine a theory. Leaning on the concept of theoretical saturation, we may stop our case collection when we no longer find any cases or case variations that are able to alter our theory. Third, we described interpretation, for which we highlighted the relevance of formative experiences, positionality, and reflexivity. To saturate our understanding of a phenomenon, we should reach *perspectival saturation*, a state in which we have addressed the most important possible biases and errors of our positionality, and in which insights from different perspectives are combined to provide a fuller understanding of the topic. Fourth, we identified reflection as the most distinctly philosophical research activity. Reflection never stops, but it may be saturated when we can reasonably expect that further reflection will not lead to significant revisions. Here we introduced *subjective* and *intersubjective reflective saturation*. The former is reached when further individual reflection does not lead to new insights, the latter when we are convinced that further discussions with others might not result in new insights. The last research activity is theory construction, which may be considered a combination of the other activities. Here again we drew on theoretical saturation, more precisely the pragmatic reconceptualisation that highlighted the importance of perceiving saturation as a principle rather than an objective end point. Perhaps some of our analyses may seem trivial, because they describe what philosophers are already doing. Indeed, in a sense, we may have explicitly formulated what is already implicit in the practice of philosophical research. But with the differentiation of research activities and the pluralist adaption of the saturation principle, we aim to encourage a more explicit practice of methodological reflection.

Lastly, we would fail to adhere to our own suggestions if this paper did not include a careful description of what we did *not* cover. First, one cut-off point is the depth of our discussion of saturation in the social sciences. We discussed only what was absolutely necessary for discussing saturation in philosophy and ignored many nuances and methodological debates regarding saturation in the social sciences. Second, we did not address other methodological notions, such as demarcation, focus, and authority, and methodological notions that aim to address bias. These methodological notions are, however, important criteria, together with the saturation principle, for evaluating whether a research project is of sound quality. Third, as the purpose of this paper was to introduce saturation as a useful principle for philosophy and to elaborate specific conceptions of it that can be applied to specific research activities, we

provided only rough outlines of practical guidance in philosophical research. Further elaborations of saturation might benefit from examining its conditions more closely.

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