

A Doctoral Colloquium: Examination of a Doctoral Theses: From a Theatre of Control to a Space of Collective Learning and of Knowledge-Making

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Abstract: *“Human society has not developed in accordance with a prearranged plan, but empirically, in the course of a long, complicated and contradictory struggle” (Trotsky, 1986, pp.24).* This paper reports on the reflective engagements about the topic, *From a Theatre of Control to a Space of Collective Learning and of Knowledge-Making*, with a co-researcher in the collaborative international research space. The engagement emerged from the following question, *“Why do some peer reviewers expect a manuscript to bend to their will, as though the author’s intellectual labour is merely a vessel for their own unfulfilled agenda?”* At ECRM 2024, I tried to address this matter as the need to continuously engage the tight boundary objects and gatekeeping strategies in the pursuit of the intellectual project. At ECRM 2026, I proposed a rejoinder, specifically about why a Meta-theory matters in a Doctorate Study? A Doctorate Qualification, while significant, its success measure is to reflect the claims that portray new knowledge as transcendence into new trajectories of knowledge. However, the nature of a Doctorate examination may make the character of the process susceptible to the inherent power dynamics about knowledge. The claims in this paper follow a personal experience of a theses rejection twice. I understood those rejections as navigating the Doctoral Journey, as being in conversation about the examination in a process which is open and complex. While at ECRM 2024, the focus was on the three thinking tools (Judgemental Rationality, Epistemic Relativism, and the Ontological Collapse of the Natural Necessity), at ECRM 2026, the discussion revolved around the value of the meta—theory chapter. Therefore, the findings of these reflections entail what must be the value of casting a deep eye into the system of examination as the reflexive generative methodology, that is, by reflecting in more critical ways about the history and social relations about a Doctorate Study. Such a system need to understand the complexity of power relations and its inherent politics of knowledge/knowledge wars. The ability to manage the power dynamics in the latter context refers to the growth and maturity about the field, both as the nexus of theory and of practice. In the case under review, the processes entailed questioning the ideological positions of both the candidate and of the examiners, where the examination process could be described as a discursive space. By role playing the paper refers specifically to the examination process as the exercise of agency where the implicit assumptions about the examination process is a social system, and in ways that the potential disjuncture between the elements, can make for the examiner not to be able to understand fully the life world of the candidate, at least from a philosophical position.

Keywords: Transcendentalism, Critical Realism, Social Realism, Doctorate-ness, Reflexive Generative Methodology, Supervision

1. Introduction

1.1 The Doctoral Examination as a Contested Social Space

The doctoral examination is conventionally framed as a neutral process of quality assurance: a mechanism for verifying that a thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge and meets disciplinary standards. Yet for many candidates, the examination experience reveals itself as something more complex and contested. It functions as a social system where epistemic judgments, institutional power, and personal identity intersect. In this system, peer reviewers and examiners do not always engage the thesis as an autonomous intellectual project. Instead, expectations can arise that the manuscript should conform to the reviewer’s own theoretical commitments, methodological preferences, or unfulfilled research agenda.

This paper emerges from sustained engagement with a co-researcher in a collaborative international research space and from my own experience of having a thesis rejected twice (Dwayi, 2023; Dwayi, 2024). These rejections were not merely administrative outcomes. They were moments of rupture that exposed the underlying power dynamics, boundary-work, and gatekeeping strategies that shape what counts as legitimate doctoral knowledge. The experience reframed the examination process as a “theatre of control,” where the candidate’s life-world and philosophical position risk being rendered invisible or illegible to the examiner.

1.2 The Problem: Power, Gatekeeping, and the Absence of Meta-Theoretical Reflexivity

A persistent challenge in doctoral education is the tension between the claim to originality and the reality of examination as a site of epistemic and political contestation. At ECRM 2024, I addressed this tension by examining three thinking tools—judgemental rationality, epistemic relativism, and the ontological collapse of natural necessity—as resources for navigating tight boundary objects in academic gatekeeping (Gendron &

Rodrigue, 2021, for example). The analysis suggested that without explicit meta-theoretical reflexivity, candidates are ill-equipped to articulate and defend the philosophical coherence of their work against examiner expectations that may be tacit, incommensurable, or ideologically driven (Kuhn, 1970).

At ECRM 2026, this discussion is extended through a focused inquiry into the value of the meta-theory chapter in doctoral studies. The central contention is that the absence of a robust meta-theoretical account leaves the thesis vulnerable to misrecognition. When the history, social relations, and philosophical commitments underpinning the research are not made explicit, the examination process defaults to an exercise of power rather than a dialogue about knowledge-making. The result is a disjuncture between the candidate's intellectual trajectory and the examiner's interpretive frame—a disjuncture that undermines the possibility of the thesis functioning as a discursive space for collective learning.

1.3 Purpose, Argument, and Contribution

The purpose of this paper is to argue for the meta-theory chapter as a reflexive, generative methodology for doctoral examination. It proposes that making explicit the meta-theoretical architecture of a thesis—its ontological, epistemological, and axiological commitments—allows the examination to shift from a theatre of control to a space of collective learning and knowledge-making.

The argument unfolds in three moves. First, it examines how power dynamics and the politics of knowledge manifest in doctoral examination, drawing on personal experience and critical realist accounts of judgemental rationality (Dwayi, 2024). Second, it demonstrates how a meta-theory chapter makes visible the social and philosophical relations that constitute a doctoral study, enabling examiners to engage the candidate's life-world rather than impose external criteria (Dwayi, 2023). Third, as the main argument, it positions a doctorate examination/practice as a contribution to the growth and maturity of the field at the nexus of theory and practice, where ideological positions can be negotiated rather than policed.

The contribution is both practical and theoretical. Practically, it offers doctoral candidates and supervisors a strategy for managing the politics of examination without capitulating to epistemic violence. Theoretically, it advances the case for meta-theory as integral to doctoral-ness, understood as the capacity to enact transcendence into new trajectories of knowledge while remaining accountable to the history and social relations of the field (Boghney & McKenna, 2021).

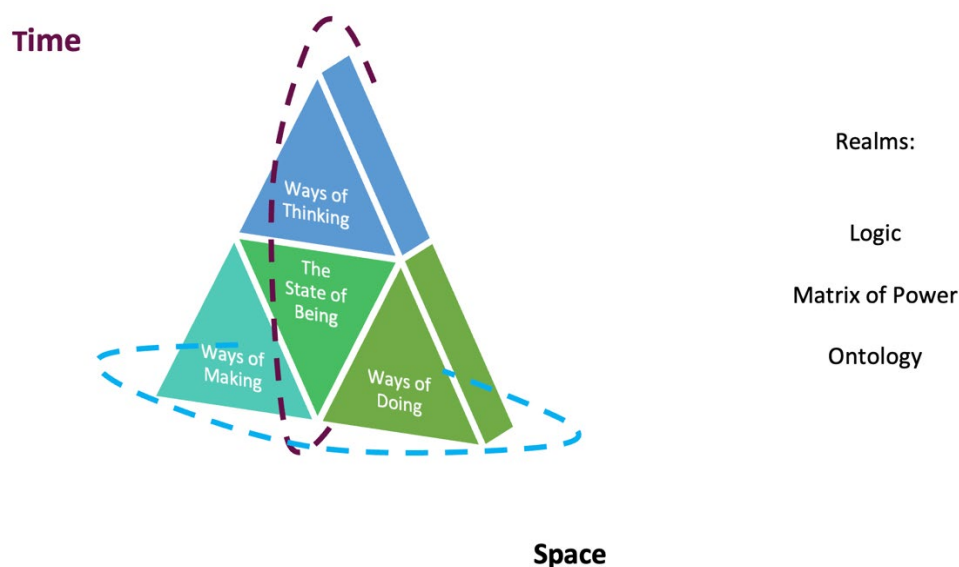
1.4 Structure of the Paper

- Section 2 revisits the three thinking tools introduced at ECRM 2024 and explains their relevance to understanding examination as a social system.
- Section 3 develops the argument for the meta-theory chapter, situating it within critical realism, social realism, and transcendentalism.
- Section 4 examines the examination process through a role-playing lens to surface the implicit assumptions that produce misrecognition between candidate and examiner.
- Section 5 concludes by outlining how a reflexive, generative approach to examination can transform doctoral assessment into a practice of collective learning.

In the next Section, the paper focusses on the three thinking tools and how they apply to the examination process

2. Three Thinking Tools for Navigating the Doctoral Examination as a Social System

The doctoral examination does not occur in a philosophical vacuum. It is a site where competing claims about reality, knowledge, and value are adjudicated (Clegg, 2005). Without explicit tools for navigating these claims, candidates and examiners default to positional conflict rather than reasoned engagement. At ECRM 2024, I introduced three resources drawn from critical realism and social realism—judgemental rationality, epistemic relativism, and the ontological collapse of natural necessity—as a way to map this terrain (Dwayi, 2024). Together, they provide a meta-theoretical grammar for understanding why examinations break down and how they might be reconstituted as spaces of collective learning (Dwayi, 2023).



Transformative Agency as the Criticality-Reflexivity-Praxis Chain

Figure 1: Dimensions & Realms about the Doctoral Examination where the theatre of control has to shift to dialogue through transformative Agency, adapted from Dwayi, 2021)

Diagram 1 portrays not only the time and space factors about doctoral examination as a social phenomenon but also the dimensions and realms thereof which need to be understood and explained within the criticality-reflexivity-praxis chain where the roles of examiners and the candidate constitute the transformative agency (Dwayi, 2021). The views expressed in the conversations with the colleague in the collaborative international research project (Section 1: Introduction) took place in 2026, despite the publication on similar issues in 2024 (Dwayi, 2024). The latter could be reflecting what can be argued as the aetiology about the old regimes of power and of truth. Despite the existing body of knowledge about how a doctoral examination can be weaponised to serve apparent power relations in the politics of knowledge (Clegg, 2005), such knowledge does not go far enough until it can be adequately engaged at the point of human agency.

Doctorate examination can easily become a procedural and a checklist approach which reproduces the theatre of control, whether inadvertently and/or unwittingly. A theatre of control therefore arises at the point of realms about the doctoral examination, which, with the criticality-reflexivity-praxis chain, allow for the engagement of the main concerns, claims and issues as the reflexive generative methodology. That ought to be the methodology whereby the discourses that inform particular choices on the part of the examiners, versus the candidate, can make for the exercise of agency. Only the transformative outcomes should matter here. That is, the nature of outcomes that promote the idea of university education as the public good (praxis). Such outcomes become a new possibility only when the experts in field of study can also be experts in the sociology of learning and of knowledge making (as spaces for collective learning and of knowledge making).

1.5.1 Judgemental Rationality: Defending Claims Without Claiming Certainty

Judgemental rationality is Bhaskar's (2008) response to the false choice between epistemic absolutism and radical relativism. It holds that while all knowledge is fallible and socially produced, it is still possible to make rational judgements about which theories, explanations, and methods are better at accounting for the real world (Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 1975). In the examination context, this means a candidate can argue that their thesis offers a more adequate account of the phenomenon under study, even while acknowledging the contingency of that account (Dwayi, 2023).

The practical problem arises when examiners conflate critique with dismissal. A reviewer may demand that a manuscript "bend to their will" not because the thesis is incoherent, but because it violates their preferred paradigm. Judgemental rationality equips the candidate to respond by shifting the debate from authority to argument: What is the evidence? What mechanisms are proposed? How well do they explain the phenomena compared to alternatives?

For the examination to function as a space of learning, both parties must accept that rationality is fallible and dialogical. The thesis becomes a claim open to rational contestation, not a vessel for the examiner's unfulfilled

agenda. Without this stance, the examination collapses into a power play where the candidate's labour is subordinated to the examiner's theoretical preferences.

2.1 Epistemic Relativism: Acknowledging the Situatedness of Knowledge

Epistemic relativism recognizes that beliefs are formed under specific historical, cultural, and institutional conditions. It does not entail "anything goes," but rather that knowledge claims must be understood in relation to the context of their production (Archer, 1995). In doctoral work, this is particularly salient when the research draws on indigenous knowledge systems, creative economies, or non-Western epistemologies, for example, that sit uneasily within dominant disciplinary norms (Eurocentrism).

The disjuncture in examination often occurs here. An examiner operating from an unacknowledged positivist or Eurocentric frame may interpret the candidate's methodological choices as "lacking rigour" simply because they do not conform to familiar conventions. The candidate's life-world—their ontological commitments, community relations, and research purpose—remains illegible.

Epistemic relativism does not require the examiner to abandon their own position. It requires them to bracket it sufficiently to understand the internal logic of the thesis on its own terms. As I argue elsewhere, for example in Dwayi, 2024, when this bracketing fails, the examination reproduces gatekeeping as epistemic closure. When it succeeds, the examination becomes a site for negotiating incommensurability rather than enforcing conformity.

2.2 The Ontological Collapse of Natural Necessity: Resisting the Reification of Method

The "ontological collapse of natural necessity" refers to the tendency to treat methodological conventions as if they were natural, necessary, or universally valid (Bhaskar, 1998). In practice, this appears as the assumption that only quantitative methods can be rigorous, that theory must follow a particular structure, or that a thesis must mirror the reviewer's own published work.

This refers to the tendency to treat methodological conventions as natural and necessary (Bhaskar, 1998). In examination, it appears as the assumption that only certain methods are rigorous. The meta-theory chapter interrupts this collapse by making ontological and epistemological commitments explicit, allowing methodological choices to be justified in relation to the object of study.

In doctoral examination, this collapse manifests as procedural gatekeeping masquerading as quality control. The candidate's transcendence into new trajectories of knowledge is foreclosed because the examination process mistakes disciplinary habit for epistemic necessity. The meta-theory chapter directly interrupts this collapse by making the ontological and epistemological commitments explicit, thereby showing that methodological choices are reasoned responses to the nature of the phenomenon, not arbitrary deviations.

By restoring the distinction between the real and our knowledge of it, the ontological collapse of natural necessity opens space for methodological pluralism. It allows the examination to assess whether the chosen methods are appropriate to the stratified reality under study, rather than whether they match the examiner's methodological biography.

2.3 From Tools to Examination Practice

Taken together, these three tools reframe the examination process. Judgemental rationality enables a debate about the adequacy of explanations. Epistemic relativism enables recognition of the situatedness of both candidate and examiner knowledge. The ontological collapse of natural necessity enables methodological justification that is responsive to the object of study rather than to disciplinary orthodoxy.

When these tools are absent, the examination defaults to a theatre of control: a performance where the candidate must anticipate and appease the examiner's implicit expectations. When they are present, the examination becomes a reflexive, generative methodology—a structured conversation about the history, social relations, and philosophical commitments that constitute the doctoral project.

Section 3 builds on this foundation to argue that the meta-theory chapter is the institutional mechanism through which these tools can be operationalized in the doctoral thesis. Therefore the next Section, continues on the meta-theory chapter and how it functions as a reflexive, generative methodology.

3. The Meta-Theory Chapter as a Reflexive, Generative Methodology

If the three thinking tools provide the philosophical grammar for engaging examination, the meta-theory chapter provides the institutional mechanism for enacting it. This section argues that the meta-theory chapter is not an optional add-on or a literature review in disguise. It is a reflexive, generative methodology that makes explicit the ontological, epistemological, and axiological architecture of the thesis, thereby transforming the examination from a theatre of control into a space of collective learning and knowledge-making.

3.1 The Purpose of Meta-Theory Chapter

The meta-theory chapter addresses the question: What must be true about reality, knowledge, and value for the claims made in this thesis to hold? It does three things simultaneously,

- a. It makes the implicit explicit: Doctoral research always rests on assumptions about the nature of the world, the status of knowledge, and the purpose of inquiry. In most theses these remain tacit, buried in methodology sections or inferred from citation choices. The meta-theory chapter brings them to the surface and subjects them to scrutiny.
- b. It traces the history and social relations of the project: Drawing on social realism, this section maps how structural conditioning, social interaction, and structural elaboration have shaped the research design, the selection of literature, and the candidate's positionality. It shows the thesis as a product of a specific social system, not as knowledge produced in a vacuum.
- c. It creates a discursive space for judgemental rationality: By stating the meta-theoretical commitments clearly, the chapter enables examiners to engage the thesis on its own terms. Disagreement can then focus on the adequacy of the reasoning and evidence, rather than on unstated paradigm clashes.

In this sense, the meta-theory chapter operationalizes transcendentalism within the thesis itself. It asks and answers the transcendental question that underpins the research: what conditions must obtain for this study to be possible and coherent?

3.2 Structure of the Meta-Theory Chapter

While there is no single template, an effective meta-theory chapter typically includes four elements (Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 1975):

- a. **Ontological Position:** An account of the nature of the reality being studied. For example, a critical realist stance would posit a stratified, open, and emergent social world where mechanisms operate independently of our knowledge of them. This distinguishes the study from approaches that collapse reality into discourse or observable events.
- b. **Epistemological Stance:** An account of what counts as knowledge and how it can be known. This includes engagement with epistemic relativism—acknowledging that knowledge is situated and fallible—while retaining judgemental rationality to evaluate competing claims.
- c. **Axiological Commitments:** An explicit statement of the values and purposes driving the research. Doctoral work is never value-neutral. Stating the ethical and political commitments avoids accusations of hidden agendas and allows examiners to assess coherence between purpose and method.
- d. **Methodological Implications:** A derived account of why the chosen methods, data, and analytical strategies are appropriate to the ontology and epistemology. This is where the ontological collapse of natural necessity is avoided. Methods are justified as responses to the nature of the object, not as disciplinary habit.

Together, these elements form a meta-theoretical contract between candidate and examiner. The meta-theory chapter rebalances this relationship.

3.3 Why It Matters for Power Dynamics and Knowledge Wars

Doctoral examination is a site where the politics of knowledge are enacted. Examiners hold institutional power to confer or withhold the degree, and that power is often exercised through appeals to “standards” that are rarely made explicit. Candidates, particularly those working at the margins of disciplines or drawing on non-Western epistemologies, experience this as gatekeeping.

The meta-theory chapter rebalances this relationship. It does not remove power from the examiner, but it changes the basis on which power is exercised. Instead of judging the thesis against an implicit norm, the examiner is invited to judge it against the internal coherence and external plausibility of the meta-theoretical framework presented. This shifts the encounter from “Does this look like my kind of research?” to “Does this hold together on its own terms, and does it advance understanding of the object?”

This shift is crucial for the growth and maturity of the field. Fields advance not by policing boundaries but by negotiating them. When the meta-theory is visible, the thesis becomes a discursive space where ideological positions can be articulated, contested, and potentially transformed. Knowledge wars become conversations about mechanisms, not contests of authority.

3.4 From Defence to Dialogue: Examination as Collective Learning

When a thesis includes a robust meta-theory chapter, the viva or examination report changes in character. The examiner is no longer positioned as a gatekeeper defending disciplinary purity. They become a critical interlocutor in a shared inquiry into the object of study. The candidate is no longer defending a manuscript; they are defending and elaborating a way of knowing.

This is what is meant by moving from a theatre of control to a space of collective learning. Control is exercised through hidden rules and retroactive demands for conformity. Collective learning occurs when the rules are made explicit, when the life-world of the candidate is made legible, and when the examination is treated as a continuation of the research process rather than its termination.

Unlike what could have been, as discussed in Dwayi, 2024, the meta-theory chapter does not guarantee a pass. What it does guarantee is that rejection, if it occurs, is based on reasons that can be engaged, learned from, and responded to. That is the minimum condition for a doctoral examination to function as an intellectual project rather than an exercise of power.

3.5 Limitations and Misuse

A meta-theory chapter can be misused if it becomes a perfunctory exercise in name-dropping philosophers or a defensive pre-emption of critique. Its value depends on its integration with the substantive chapters. It must inform the research design, analysis, and interpretation, not sit alongside them as a separate piece. When done well, it is not a shield against critique but an invitation to deeper critique. To support this main argument, section 4 then uses a role-playing analysis to show how the absence and presence of a meta-theory chapter change the dynamics between candidate and examiner in practice.

4. Role-Playing the Examination: How the Meta-Theory Chapter Changes the Dynamics

To make the argument concrete, this section uses a role-playing analysis of the doctoral examination as a social system. The aim is not to simulate a specific viva, but to surface the implicit assumptions and interactional patterns that produce misrecognition between candidate and examiner. I contrast two scenarios: examination without a substantive meta-theory chapter, and examination with one. The comparison shows how the presence of an explicit meta-theoretical architecture alters the distribution of power, the focus of critique, and the possibility of collective learning.

4.1 Scenario 1: The Theatre of Control – Examination Without a Meta-Theory Chapter

In this scenario, the thesis presents methods, findings, and discussion but leaves its meta-theoretical commitments implicit. The candidate assumes that coherence will be evident from the substantive chapters alone.

- a. Examiner’s position: The examiner reads the thesis through their own disciplinary habitus. Without a stated ontology and epistemology, they interpret deviations from their preferred methods or literature as deficits. Phrases such as “lacking rigour,” “unclear contribution,” or “methodologically inconsistent” appear in the report, often without engagement with the internal logic of the work.
- b. Candidate’s position: The candidate experiences the feedback as arbitrary or contradictory. Because the meta-theoretical rules were never stated, they cannot defend the thesis on its own terms. The viva becomes defensive, with the candidate attempting to guess what the examiner wants and to retrofit justification after the fact.

- c. Systemic outcome: The examination functions as a theatre of control. Power is exercised through the examiner's ability to impose unstated criteria retroactively. The disjuncture between the candidate's life-world and the examiner's interpretive frame remains unaddressed. The thesis is rejected or subject to major revisions that do not advance the intellectual project, but merely force compliance. Knowledge-making is suspended; gatekeeping prevails.

This scenario illustrates the problem identified in the opening question: why do some peer reviewers expect a manuscript to bend to their will? The absence of a meta-theory chapter makes the thesis vulnerable to being treated as a vessel for the examiner's unfulfilled agenda, because there is no alternative framework against which to judge it.

4.2 Scenario 2: The Space of Collective Learning – Examination With a Meta-Theory Chapter

In this scenario, the thesis includes a meta-theory chapter (Dwayi, 2023) that articulates its ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological commitments. It explains why the study is conducted in this way and what it assumes about the nature of the object.

- a. Examiner's position: The examiner now has access to the rules of the game before evaluating the moves. Critique shifts from "this is not how I would do it" to "given these commitments, does the argument hold, and does it account for the phenomenon better than alternatives?" Disagreement remains possible, but it is grounded in judgemental rationality rather than paradigm imposition.
- b. Candidate's position:* The candidate can respond to critique by referring back to the meta-theoretical framework. They can acknowledge limitations without abandoning the core logic of the study. The viva becomes a dialogue about mechanisms, evidence, and coherence, not a test of conformity.
- c. Systemic outcome:* The examination becomes a space of collective learning. The candidate's life-world and philosophical position are made legible. The examiner's role shifts from gatekeeper to critical interlocutor. Even when the outcome is revision or rejection, the reasons are explicit, contestable, and generative. The field advances because the boundaries of legitimate inquiry are negotiated rather than policed.

4.3 What Changes in Practice

The role-playing analysis highlights three concrete shifts that occur when the meta-theory chapter is present:

- a. From implicit to explicit criteria: Examination criteria move from tacit and variable to articulated and contestable. This reduces the arbitrariness of feedback and makes appeals or resubmissions more tractable.
- b. From authority to argument: The locus of authority shifts from the examiner's status to the quality of the argument. Judgemental rationality replaces positional authority as the basis for evaluation.
- c. From closure to opening: Epistemic closure is replaced by epistemic opening.
- d. The examination becomes a site where incommensurable positions can be mapped, compared, and potentially integrated, rather than a site where one position is enforced.

These shifts do not eliminate power dynamics. Examination is always a power-laden practice. What changes is the mode of power: from arbitrary control to accountable judgement. That shift is what makes transcendence into new trajectories of knowledge possible.

4.4 Implications for Supervisors and Institutions

If the meta-theory chapter has this effect, then doctoral programmes have a responsibility to support its development. Supervisors, especially at post graduate studies and for senior degrees (Masters and Doctorate qualifications) need to be trained to facilitate meta-theoretical reflexivity, not just methodological technique. Examination guidelines should require candidates to articulate their meta-theoretical commitments, and examiner training should include guidance on how to engage those commitments fairly.

Institutions that retain a procedural, checklist approach to examination will continue to reproduce the theatre of control, regardless of individual goodwill. As discussed in the previous sections, Doctoral Examination, a great phase in accreditation of knowledge acquisition, even for its radical challenge to exclusivist conceptions of knowledge, can be dragged down in the politics of Knowledge - by logical extension empowers previously

resistant forces to justify further social exclusion and marginalisation. On the other hand, institutions that institutionalise meta-theoretical reflexivity create the conditions for doctoral-ness as a practice of collective learning. The examination of such doctoral projects are intentionally understood more as a co-creation project about knowledge. In the next section, I synthesize these arguments and outline what a reflexive, generative examination system would look like in practice.

5. Conclusion: From Control to Collective Learning

5.1 Synthesis of the Argument

This paper has argued that the doctoral examination, as currently practiced, often functions as a theatre of control in which candidates are expected to conform to examiners' implicit theoretical and methodological preferences. Drawing on a personal experience of two thesis rejections (Dwayi, 2024) and on ongoing engagement in collaborative international research (Dwayi et al 2025), I have shown how this dynamic produces misrecognition, stalls knowledge-making, and undermines the claim that a doctorate constitutes an original contribution to knowledge.

The rejoinder proposed here is methodological and institutional: the inclusion of a robust meta-theory chapter as a reflexive, generative methodology. By making explicit the ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological commitments that underpin the research, the meta-theory chapter enables judgemental rationality to operate. It allows examiners to engage the thesis on its own terms, reduces the arbitrary exercise of power, and transforms the examination into a discursive space for collective learning.

The argument has been developed through three moves.

- a. First, I outlined three thinking tools—judgemental rationality, epistemic relativism, and the ontological collapse of natural necessity—that provide the philosophical resources for navigating contested examination encounters.
- b. Second, I demonstrated how a meta-theory chapter operationalizes these tools within the thesis itself, making the history and social relations of the project visible and contestable.
- c. Third, I used a role-playing analysis to show how the presence or absence of such a chapter fundamentally alters the dynamics between candidate and examiner, shifting the encounter from control to dialogue.

5.2 Practical Implications

For doctoral candidates, the implication is to treat meta-theoretical reflexivity as integral to the research process, not as an afterthought. Articulating one's meta-theoretical commitments early helps to align research design, analysis, and interpretation, and prepares the candidate to engage critique productively.

For supervisors and examination convenors, the implication is to support this practice through supervision, training, and policy. Examination guidelines should require candidates to state their meta-theoretical position, and examiner briefings should include guidance on how to assess theses against their internal coherence rather than against an implicit norm.

For institutions, the implication is to recognize that quality assurance in doctoral education cannot be reduced to procedural checklists. A reflexive, generative approach to examination is necessary if universities are to fulfil their role in producing new trajectories of knowledge rather than reproducing existing ones.

5.3 Contribution to Knowledge and Practice

The contribution of this paper is twofold. Theoretically, it extends the application of critical realism and social realism to doctoral education by showing how meta-theoretical reflexivity addresses the politics of knowledge in examination. Practically, it offers a concrete strategy for candidates and institutions to manage the power dynamics inherent in the doctorate without surrendering the claim to originality.

In framing doctoral-ness as the capacity to enact transcendence into new knowledge while remaining accountable to the history and social relations of the field, the paper repositions the thesis as a discursive space. Within that space, ideological positions can be articulated, contested, and transformed, and the examination becomes a continuation of the research process rather than its termination.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

This paper is grounded in personal experience and philosophical argument rather than in systematic empirical study of examination practices across institutions. Future research could test the argument through comparative studies of examination outcomes where meta-theory chapters are present and absent, and through interview studies with examiners and candidates about their experiences of reflexivity in the viva. Further work is also needed on how to train supervisors and examiners to engage meta-theoretical accounts without defaulting to their own paradigmatic preferences.

5.5 Final Reflection

A doctorate is significant not because it confers a title, but because it claims to move knowledge into new trajectories. That claim can only be sustained if the examination process is capable of recognizing and engaging the conditions under which the knowledge was produced. The meta-theory chapter does not eliminate conflict or guarantee success. What it does is make the potential conflict productive and what can be declared as success accountable. In doing so, it moves the doctoral examination from a theatre of control toward a space of collective learning and of knowledge-making.

AI Declaration

I can confirm that AI tools were used to generate the broad outline of the paper to understand the main aspects about the topic before the actual write up took place in order to broaden the main claims, concerns and issues about the topic from relevant literatures for advancement of scholarship.

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