Beckett and Interdisciplinarity: A Reply to Hill

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Vladimiro: Ha trovato.
Pozzo: Adesso vi spiego come funziona.
Estragone: Come funziona cosa?
Pozzo: Ora vedrete. Ma è difficile a dirsi.
Vladimiro: E lei non lo dica.
Pozzo: Oh! Non abbiate paura, ci arriverò. Ma voglio essere breve: si sta facendo tardi. E ditemelo voi, come si fa a essere brevi e al tempo stesso chiari. Lasciatemi riflettere.
Estragone: Provi a essere lungo, ci vorrà meno tempo.[1]

—from *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, Giulio Einaudi, Editore, Turin 1956. Translation in Italian by Carlo Fruttero.

I am extremely pleased by Scott Hill's response to my article, and the appreciation that he gave for the majority of it. The acknowledgement by one of the protagonists of my drama was one of my objectives. It was the recognition of the fruitful debate that happened on these pages. The article is an in-depth development of an earlier one published in Italy by the review *Le Meraviglie del Possibile* (LMDP), a journal of high popularisation in science, history and social sciences. That article was meant to inform scholars and the **cultivated** public of the level of depth that the debate on 'conspiracy theories' on the SERRC had reached and, even more so, of the incommunicability that had developed between scholars of different disciplines.

Interdisciplinary Misunderstandings

In my new article, a similar reconnaissance intent has led me to neglect to fully define my conclusions in the *epilogue*. Fearing to dwell too long, I made the mistake I often point out in others: not realising that we do not live in our neighbour's head, especially if that head is thinking about another discipline.

Hill makes only one remark in his reply regarding the following passage:

> Hill's semiotic position deprives social epistemology of the interdisciplinary contribution of its conceptual analysis. By neglecting such an analysis, it might be missed that the social scientists in *Le Monde's* statement failed to realize the theoretical consequences in adopting, without declaring it, the narrow meaning of 'stereotypical theories' (the pejorative formulation),

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[1] **Vladimir:** He found.
Pozzo: I will now explain how it works.
Estragon: How does what work?
Pozzo: Now you will see. But it is difficult to say.
Vladimir: And you don't say that.
Pozzo: Oh! Have no fear, I will get there. But I want to be brief: it's getting late. And you tell me, how to be brief and at the same time clear. Let me reflect.
Estragon: Try to be long, it will take less time.

> which I believe is not so much of 'ordinary people' but of the mass media. In
> this, *Le Monde's* statement shows a theoretical superficiality that was rightly to
> be stigmatized, as did the philosophers, since in reality it was no longer clear
> what the social scientists were referring to (Censon 2024, 20).

What Hill reads in the passage is this:

> Censon, as I understand him, agrees with Basham and Dentith (2016)
> and Duetz and Dentith (2022) that people ordinarily use 'conspiracy theory'
> in a broad way rather than in the narrow way that I think they use the term.
> And he agrees with the worry, expressed by Duetz and Dentith, that it is for
> this reason misleading for social scientists to report their results as being
> about conspiracy theories since they were using the narrow way of talking
> and ordinary people use the broad way of talking (Hill 2024, 38).

I regret this misunderstanding, for which I blame myself for not being more explicit: in
truth, in the passage of my article quoted by Scott Hill, I do not adhere to what the scholar
reports about Basham, Duetz and Dentith. I think the misunderstanding arose when I wrote
that 'pejorative wording' does not concern 'ordinary people', but the mass media; I did not
actually mean to assert anything about ordinary usage—a subject on which I feel
inadequate—but only suggested that this pejorative usage is the one that is most widely used
by newspapers and generalist television in Italy.

As an independent researcher, on the level of personal impression, it seems to me that the
meaning consistently chosen by the Italian mass media is the narrow and pejorative one.
This is intentional for cultural, social and political reasons: in short, mainstream
communication actually tries to defend our hierarchies, epistemic and otherwise, and
especially itself. Whether this mass media use has been successful or not I am unable to say,
but the use is there.

Hill is right, indeed, to ascertain whether this usage is broad or narrow one needs a specific,
and contextualised investigation of the various countries, as Basham (2022, 12) also says, for
both ordinary and mass-media usage, paying particular attention to measuring them
separately. And this shortcoming also applies to me, since in referring to the pejorative
meaning used by the mass media, I have not brought any evidence to bear, not even for
Italian journalism.

My considerations started from Hill's observation that what the scholars in *Le Monde* meant
was the restricted sense; but this crucial aspect was nowhere stated in the initial blurb in *Le
Monde*.[2] I, however, did not claim to identify what the ordinary usage was, and therefore

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[2] In the response article by Dieguez et al. (2016), the social scientists do not directly speak of narrow meaning
but of *conspiracy mentality,* which could endorse Hill's interpretation of 'stereotypical theories'. At the same time,
however, the social scientists, as Duetz and Dentith (2022, 54) later observe, admit that ordinary use is not
functional for research Dieguez et al. (2016, 22).

made no judgement on the problems of misunderstanding, intentional or otherwise, between researchers and the public.

For me, there is another problem: it is not only important whether or not the public agrees with the use of a term, whether or not ordinary people understand it correctly as it is also their use; I find that scholars, and here we are talking about authoritative social scientists, should in no context ignore to specify what they are referring to, on pain of confusing their statements from a semantic point of view. As 'history' has shown, *Le Monde's* statement triggered a chain reaction of interdisciplinary misunderstandings.

Exit From the Theatre of the Absurd

It seems to me that we are, from the *Le Monde* blurb onwards, faced with an overlapping of two epistemological questions, both fundamental. The first, of strong political and cultural value, investigates what effect the concepts that scholars use have on important aspects of cultural life, such as 'Conspiracy Theories'. The question—a social epistemological one, certainly fundamental and fruitful as evidenced by the continuous interventions on the SERRC—encompasses various aspects such as Hill's (2024) 'ordinary meaning', Basham and Dentith's (2016) 'pathologisation', Shields's (2024) 'the site of conceptual domination' and 'conceptual engineering'.[3]

Personally, I also have an interest in this topic, but from a reversed point of view, as I would like to investigate 'the rejection of the dominant source of knowledge in our society', as I said at the end of my article.

At the present time, however, I have focused on the other issue—mirroring the first—which is just as fundamental: the communication gaps between disciplines that deal with objects that are thought to be identical, and the chasm that opens up if there is no attempt to communicate effectively.

The title of my annotated review of the debate on these pages, 'An Interdisciplinary Drama', was not accidental: it was meant to emphasise that dialogue between scholars, and especially between scholars from different disciplines, requires scrupulous attention since all are heuristically anchored to their own categories. Interdisciplinarity is not the effort to juxtapose one perspective against the others, as many do—this is the always deserving multidisciplinarity—but the transformation of certain specific categories, required by the object under consideration, to form a 'composite' instrument.

My deep appreciation for the article by Duetz and Dentith (2022) stems precisely from the fact that I recognise the beginning of a true interdisciplinary operation. When the two scholars separate 'theories' from 'beliefs' and allocate each to a specific discipline, they

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[3] How 'Conspiracy Theories', the dichotomy of particularism/generalism, should be evaluated is a subject for epistemology without attributes, rather than for social epistemology, although there are repercussions in the latter.

initiate an *interdisciplinary research process*; this takes the form of a *conceptual form* that uses different tools in a *hierarchical* combination. The process starts with an epistemological conceptual analysis to identify the characteristics of the research object; in this case, a difference between 'theories' and 'teliefs' was identified.

Given that 'beliefs' can be held to be true even without a secure basis for verification, adherence to unfounded beliefs can occur on the basis of situational or dispositional factors; at this point, depending on the supposed origin, one or the other factor will be attributed the pre-eminent conceptual position. In the first case—situational factors—we will use the tools of the social, historical and cultural disciplines, and secondarily those of psychology, social or otherwise; in the other case—dispositional factors—we will proceed inversely.

What I am emphasising is that in an *interdisciplinary research process,* aimed at a certain phenomenon, or a specific aspect of it, the disciplines and their conceptual tools are not equal, but are used under the hegemony of one of the disciplines involved.[4] This was the way of working of Ernesto De Martino, ethnologist, historian of religions, who was among the first in Italy to adopt an interdisciplinary method, applying it to his investigation of 'Tarantismo'. He wrote more than 50 years ago:

> Tuttavia, a parte le obiezioni metodologiche che possono sollevare anche le forme più organiche di tale collaborazione — per esempio il tipo di collaborazione fra etnologo e psicologo inaugurato da Cora Du Bois e dall'Oberholzer a proposito degli Aloresi —-, le ricerche interdisciplinari più vaste compiute sul terreno appaiono innegabilmente esposte al pericolo della mancanza di una prospettiva specialistica centrale che coordini e subordini a sé le altre collaborazioni integrandone e unificandone i risultati: di guisa che, malgrado lo stimolo unificante che esercita sui membri dell'équipe l'analisi sul terreno di uno stesso gruppo umano concretamente impegnato in un certo ordine di risposte culturali, i singoli contributi collaborativi rischiano di restare irrelati o scarsamente relati fra di loro, privi cioè di quel che potremmo chiamare un focus della comprensione (De Martino 1966, 229).[5]

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[4] I suspect that the difficulty in creating 'interdisciplinary conceptual forms' stems precisely from this, from a scholar's understandable reluctance to 'serve' the field of others. From this point of view, multidisciplinary practice is much more reassuring.

[5] However, apart from the methodological objections that even the most organic forms of such collaboration may raise—for example, the type of collaboration between ethnologist and psychologist inaugurated by Cora Du Bois and Oberholzer with regard to the Aloresis -, the most extensive interdisciplinary research carried out in the field appears undeniably exposed to the danger of the lack of a central specialist perspective that coordinates and subordinates the other collaborations, integrating and unifying their results: so that, in spite of the unifying stimulus exerted on team members by the analysis in the field of the same human group concretely engaged in a certain order of cultural responses, the individual collaborative contributions risk remaining unrelated or poorly related to each other, i.e. lacking what we might call a focus of understanding (De Martino 1966, 229).

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