



On quality

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Abstract

From the objective description of essence or substance (ουσία) to an expression of its ‘goodness’, quality is a key issue of concern in many contexts.

1 Introduction

Quality (ποιότης [Gk]) refers to the inherent properties of essence or substance (ουσία)¹, describing ‘how things are’, and is used in many senses — for instance: permanent ‘habits’ (e.g. various kinds of knowledge or virtue); ephemeral ‘dispositions’ (e.g. disease, health); inborn capacities or incapacities (e.g. for boxing or running); ‘affective’ qualities (e.g. sweetness, whiteness) with the capacity to affect the taste, vision, or other senses — but contrasted to temporary conditions, or ‘affections’, such as blushing, which are so short-term that are not to be considered as qualities (Aristotle, 350BC, Part 8).

Among Aristotle’s primary examples of quality are ‘white’ and ‘warm’, which can exist in varying degrees such as ‘whiter’ or ‘warmer’ — contrary to *essence*, such as ‘man’ or ‘horse’, which itself excludes variations of degree (e.g. ‘more of a man’), but may exhibit variations in quality (Aristotle, 350BC, Part 4). The quality of essence or substance is difficult to analyse (literally, de-compose) and describe or measure. And to make things more difficult, quality becomes *subjective* when associated with ‘goodness’, such as in ‘good boxer’ or ‘good runner’ (Aristotle, 350BC, Part 8).

2 Specifications

Essence or substance, including the more abstract situations, circumstances, or states of affairs, may exist in any quality as a result of the actions and conditions that created them — e.g. white paper, whiter paper. Humans as users or consumers, or even creators or constructors of essence or substance (i.e. entities or circumstances), may demand certain *specifications* of quality according to their expectations or standards. It is then when issues of quality begin to matter — otherwise, any kind or degree of quality would not make a difference.

For simple, measurable things, we can lay down numerical specifications — for example, ‘red light of 650nm wavelength’. But, in the same way as seen in the ‘Sum of the parts’ (Perdicoulis, 2012c)

¹ Essence (from *esse* [L], to be) is more appropriate for entities, while substance (from *substare* [L], to underlie/be the cause or basis of something) is more appropriate for phenomena

and in ‘Shadow measurements’ (Perdicoulis, 2013c), in complex issues — such as those related to people or life at large — those ‘specifications’ cannot be meaningfully expressed in numerical form; and if (or when) they are expressed numerically, they do not show respect or dignity to the object or situation of reference (Perdicoulis, 2013c). In such cases, descriptions or expectations of quality must be provided in ways other than numerical. Such *qualitative* descriptions can be fairly precise with the choice of appropriate media of expression — for instance, diagrammatic narrative for documenting causality in events (Perdicoulis, 2010). Scientific rigour does not necessarily demand quantitative expressions, provided that communication is satisfactorily achieved through qualitative means (Perdicoulis, 2012b, 2013b).

3 Goodness

In Aristotle’s objective definition, quality exists in varying degrees (Aristotle, 350BC, Part 4) — for instance, a coat can be more hardwearing or more lightweight than another. However, in people’s expectations, quality is often associated with ‘goodness’ across a number of dimensions — for instance, a ‘quality coat’ is hardwearing, lightweight, and pleasing in design. Socrates, in his latest years, defended that ‘not life, but a good life, is to be chiefly valued’ — referring to justice and honour (Plato, 360BC) — and this could be a claim for ‘quality of life’.

The most challenging cases in which we care for ‘goodness’ are abstract, such as the quality of life, relationships, ideas, art, and writing. We could rely on experts for their opinions (Perdicoulis, 2013a), but one could argue that in such abstract and all-encompassing issues we should all be experts — with life being the greatest example. Who should not form one’s own idea and sense of what is a ‘good life’, or ‘quality of life’?

4 Examples

What is ‘good’ and how we can tell? How do we perceive or ‘know’ quality? And how do we ‘measure’ quality? Through which parameters? This can be evidenced in both simple and advanced subjects that many people are familiar with nowadays, including food and clothes, friends and friendship, websites and software, books, journals, and articles.

Let us examine a relatively simple example: choosing a tin of ‘quality’ peeled tomatoes among a variety of brands on the supermarket shelves. Before anything else, the typical purchaser would see the image (visual indications) and/ or read the label on the tin: ‘*Per 100g of product — Energy: 110kJ; Protein: 1.0g; Lycopene: 11.4mg*’. Assuming the measurements are trustworthy, this information represents various qualities of the peeled tomatoes inside the tin, so we can be informed about common characteristics that current nutrition science obliges the manufacturer to put on the tin’s label. But how do these tomatoes taste? Organoleptic information is subjective, but some manufacturers even provide for this by adding something like ‘great taste’ on the label — although far away from the ‘scientific’ description of quality. Perhaps the demanding buyer would buy a sample — one that would appear ‘good’ by the criteria on the tin — and taste it. And the even more demanding buyer would also ask how these tomatoes were bred and grown: GMO? organic? Quality of a complex essence such as food is multi-dimensional and information-rich, but some of this information cannot be transmitted satisfactorily by measurable indicators or composite indices (Perdicoulis and Glasson, 2011): it must be experienced, and then transmitted with media suitable for experiential knowledge — well into the domain of art and communication techniques (Perdicoulis, 2013b, 2011).

And now let us examine a more abstract example: the case of academic writing. The quality of scientific articles (or ‘contributions’, in general) has been a concern since the proliferation of academic publications in the 20th C. (Perdicoulis, 2013a). Regarding the form of the communication, scientific writing is expected to exhibit *traceability* (and, as implied, trustworthiness) of information, *objectivity* (even in judgements), as well as *precision* and *accuracy* — that is, be coherent and ‘to the point’, respectively (Perdicoulis, 2012b). However, under the influential guidance of Eugene Garfield (Garfield, 2005, 1955), in apparently favourable circumstances, academia as a whole bypassed issues of quality (such as the aforementioned expectations) and proceeded with a surrogate: *popularity* (Perdicoulis, 2013a). It can be argued that popularity is far from being an indicator of quality, as is widely known in the notorious cases of music and literature: ‘pop’ versus ‘classic’. Thus, academic writing remains largely un-assessed for quality *per se*, save for ‘speciality checks’ by peers, often with *ad hoc* (i.e. non-uniform or non-ubiquitous) criteria. The concern is not so much for the particular cases: this popularity assessment, using a kind of ‘shadows’ of quality instead of quality itself (Perdicoulis, 2013c), is creating an academic culture in which (many, or perhaps most) academics are losing sense of what ‘good’ academic writing is about.

5 Challenges

Due to variability in people’s sensory perception (e.g. regarding colour or other physical qualities), physical (e.g. geographic) position and related point of view, or even interests (and hence expectations), the identification or description of quality is not universal — i.e. it exhibits variations. This is similar to what happens with the ‘truth’ — e.g. evidencing a road accident: everyone may have a different registration and interpretation according to their own experience. Hence, human variability creates some uncertainty in the perception of quality, which could imply a collective ‘richness’, or a less ‘scientific’ reality.

To get to know an object of interest, and to understand what is ‘quality’ and what is not, we should think and talk about that object explicitly: make it an object of study, reflection, and culture (Perdicoulis, 2013a). Knowing good quality is not a personal issue: it is a cultural issue, as people communicate and influence each other. Simpler objects of interest, such as light, heat, and electricity, become the domain of (quantitative) ‘science’. Quality seems to be largely descriptive, and does not readily lend itself to quantification and measurement. This is a reality that we must learn to live with: we must learn to describe well, and ‘scientifically’ — i.e., at least with accuracy and precision. Trying to bypass or substitute this (or any) reality is not a smart option — how about bypassing life itself?

As a final, global, or ‘zoom-out’ (Perdicoulis, 2011, p.11) reflection: no matter which approach is considered more suitable, numerical or not, the quest for quality should never come to an extent that we always judge quality and we stop enjoying anything ever again, such as writing and reading, food, or life itself.

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