
The Trouble with Qualities

If you are pursuing a qualitative science, sooner or later someone is bound to ask, “Can you define ‘quality’ for me?” It can be a little embarrassing, since no satisfactory answer is close at hand. True, part of the problem lies, as we will see, in the contradictory nature of the request itself. But there’s much more to be said. If you are like me, you may suspect that our difficulty in saying what a quality is reflects a striking cognitive deficit in ourselves.

This is That (So What?)

Recognizing the deficit may be the most difficult thing. Personally, I always assumed (without much reflection) that qualities were obvious, even if science, beginning with Galileo, had explicitly decided to leave them out of consideration. But things left out of consideration tend eventually to be lost from view, and this seems to be what has happened with qualities. If we fail to attend to something long enough, we forfeit the ability even to experience it. My own fear is that humanity today risks losing the qualitative world altogether, as it disappears behind a veil of abstractions.

“But,” you may ask, “where is the problem? Surely we have no difficulty recognizing qualities such as green, coolness, the fragrance of a rose, the peculiar roughness of a surface, the taste of salt, the timbre of a musical instrument!” True enough. Yet bare recognition, it turns out, does not carry us very far. Yes, I recognize that a green leaf is green, but what does my recognition consist of beyond the assertion, “This is the same as that” — this color is identical to that other one I’ve already experienced? Have I grasped the *content* of the sameness? What is it, exactly, that I am calling “the same” both here and there? We can all too easily classify without having much of a sense for the expressed qualities we are classifying. We just say repeatedly, “the same,” and are done with it, which amounts to little more than counting. Counting, of course, is what science embraced when it ruled qualities out of consideration.

One indication of the extremity of our loss is the not-uncommon conviction within the cognitive sciences that qualities simply don’t exist in any fundamental sense. We may *speak* of them as given realities, but they are actually a kind of mirage, purely subjective in nature, thrown up by the computational apparatus of our brains. As cognitive scientist Paul Churchland puts it, our senses betray us by not

revealing things as they really are, and the qualitative presentation of the senses is therefore a kind of deception:

The red surface of an apple does not *look* like a matrix of molecules reflecting photons at certain critical wavelengths, but that is what it is. The sound of a flute does not *sound* like a sinusoidal compression wave train in the atmosphere, but that is what it is. The warmth of the summer air does not *feel* like the mean kinetic energy of millions of tiny molecules, but that is what it is. (*Matter and Consciousness*, MIT Press, 1988, p. 15)

While this statement appears to me hopelessly confused, it is not my intention to address the confusion here. More important, as a starting point, is to realize how natural such a view becomes once we have lost any vivid experience of qualitative content. Take away qualities and we are left with the kind of abstraction that presents us with molecules, wavelengths, and kinetic energies, as if these were the sole valid content of experience.

Our abstracting capabilities are crucial to our efforts at understanding, but when the sophisticated pursuit of abstraction becomes one-sided, we lose the world. Abstractions, and especially mathematical abstractions, give us clearly outlined, narrowly defined, precise concepts serving our need for accuracy and clarity. But the more we move in this direction alone, the more we lose significant content, which is always qualitative. We become more and more precise about less and less, until finally we become perfectly precise about nothing much at all. We begin with stars and planets and landscapes, and we end with featureless particles moving in the void. We begin with a living, breathing, behaving organism, and we end with millions of genetic “code” fragments that are, in and of themselves, meaningless.

So perhaps we can, to begin with, think of qualities as the content without which our precise formulations are not *about* anything — certainly not about anything significant or meaningful.

Logic and Image

But concern with qualities is not a luxury reserved for poets straining after meaning. Science itself cannot do without qualities. Look at a tree and subtract all the qualities from what you see, and there is no longer anything —

anything at all — there. Nothing remains from which to abstract our desired quantities, nor is anything left for such quantities to refer to. So we can't even count without qualities. Qualities are what give us the possibility for an empirical, sense-based science. Without them we lose the world of experience we initially set out to understand. The fact that science relies so profoundly on qualities while refusing a disciplined reckoning with them can only be seen as a grave vulnerability.

Qualities are problematic for science because their existence in the world and their existence in us seem to be one and the same existence. This flies in the face of the radical diremption of matter from consciousness upon which science was founded. Yet the same problem applies even to conventional scientific knowledge. Does the law of gravity reside within human consciousness, or in the world? Some favor one answer and some the other. But the more profound answer may be: "Both" — because human consciousness is at the same time the interior of the world. This conclusion, which once would have been taken for granted, is, of course, terribly perplexing for us today. But it may be exactly the perplexity we need to wrestle with.

This, in any case, is the sort of conundrum raised by qualities. More directly, and out of our own experience, perhaps we can say: a quality is always the expressive shape of some inner gesture, a gesture of consciousness. To ask about a quality is to ask about an expression; it is to ask what something is *saying*. We are in the realm of the word, in its broadest sense. Presumably, we can enter the world of qualities in a disciplined way only through concentrated and trained attention to these inner, word-like gestures, something our culture at large does not encourage.

Image and Definition

The fact that qualities *express*, and that we find ourselves speaking of the *shape* of an inner *gesture*, suggests that qualities also have an imaginal character. Owen Barfield

contrasts images with the discrete, sharp-edged concepts of logic this way:

It is characteristic of images that they interpenetrate one another That is just what the terms of logic, and the notions we employ in logical or would-be logical thinking, must *not* do. *There*, interpenetration becomes the slovenly confusion of one determinate meaning with another determinate meaning, and there, its proper name is not interpenetration, but equivocation....



To take just one element of images: colors, considered qualitatively, can blend together and modify each other in a way that defies the either-or imperatives of logic. Add a little yellow to some red. Does the result still have the quality of red? Well then, does it *not* have the quality of red? We can, of course, start

thinking of numerical wavelengths, which work quite well in the formulations of mathematical logic; but color as particular, qualitative content is no longer present in the numbers.

One other thing. A definition, as Barfield points out — so far as it is not given by metaphor or example — is the attempt to grasp a thing in the most clearly delineated, abstract, logical terms we can manage. So the definitional stands at the opposite pole from the qualitative — which is why there's something contradictory about asking for a definition of "quality." Unlike perfectly definable terms, qualities cannot be precisely conveyed to a passive recipient, but can only be suggested. If a quality is the shape of an inner gesture of consciousness, it stands to reason that it cannot be received passively; the recipient must participate in the gesture in order to experience "what it is like" or "what it is saying."

These are just a few brief reflections intended to highlight the problem of quality. Take them more as fodder for rumination than as clear, definitive statements. Better yet, consider your own experience and write us with your own additions and amendments to these preliminary thoughts. "The trouble with qualities" may become an ongoing theme for *In Context*. SLT

Drawing by Martina Müller