



Aesthetics and Philosophy of the Arts

Quality as Presentation: The Art of Speaking and the Science of Imitation

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ABSTRACT: The underlying thesis examined here maintains that meaning is simply subjective value which has been presented (i.e., enlarged or made explicit) in words or in some other plastic or static medium. This presentation of meaning consists in the extending of what is felt by the creator-subject to the other subjects. Although this extension of the primary agent may be the very thing which ultimately creates the space from where reflection might occur, the act of expression itself is not explicitly reflective. In other words, one might say that integral meaning is not reflective but rather is purely informing, while reflective meaning has to some degree lost its integrity. Working from these basic claims, I will examine how quality (or qualification) and quantity (or quantification) are related as functions of the languages of art and of science.

PART ONE: The Distinction

The use of language both as an art and also as a science, i.e., physics, biology, chemistry, mathematics, geometry, etc., is the explicit formulation of knowledge (as *information*), but can we make some clear distinction between these two ways of using language? Is it possible to separate those values as *presented* through natural language in dialogue from those values as *represented* by scientific discourse?

One way to make such a distinction explicit is to divide the domain of *formulation* into '*presentation*' and '*representation*.' Dialogic language use at its most effective appears to express itself in our spontaneous conversation without the "reflecting will" of a knowing subject.⁽¹⁾ Such is not the same sort of language use involved in a scientific articulation. While the aim of science is to accurately *represent* its area of study through descriptive measurements and mathematical formulae, a true conversation is the creative attempt to *present* values which are felt by the speakers.⁽²⁾ In such everyday discourse, the values of the conversants are not *per se* re-presented, but rather, it is through articulation in language that these meaningful affects can originally be 'broadcast' beyond the aesthetic, emotional, or perceptive life of the speaker.⁽³⁾ Language becomes the 'living palette' which in fact helps to create the "ideas" (and in further consequence to produce a reflective "subject") in direct response to certain felt values. Without the language, there would be no way to express these integral values apart from the specific physical acts of the individual or reflectively in the chaos of dream experiences.

One might argue that art, through whatever mode it is brought forth, is intrinsically representational. We have been handed many theories throughout the history of aesthetic evaluation which have claimed that art is an undertaking of imitation. Plato comes to mind

as an early proponent of such a view. I would argue that to what ever extent art was and is imitative, whether it be in painting, in dance, in music or in some other medium, that representational aspect of art is in fact its scientific content. Such a content is always present in art, but the quality of a work's aesthetic value is surely not found in that content. It is in its presentational quality that art can truly be appreciated, while science is best admired for its representational accuracy.

In a further examination of this distinction, I would like to give some support to my claim that our presentational use of language in everyday speech is largely interested in expressing qualities and in making our intrinsic values qualifiable in a larger field of discourse. Science, on the other hand, is the attempt to move into a different epistemic level. In science, the language is primarily a tool and precision must be followed in order to properly articulate the represented matter under the scrutiny of professional "sign-knowers." The study of linguistic signs (semiology) is a scientific treatment of language in which the signs are regarded as tools. But tools are something we use for some deliberate end, we pick them up when we need them and when we are done we put them away, yet speaking is not at all like that. Gadamer makes this point well,

"Semantics is a doctrine of signs, in particular, linguistic signs. Signs, however, are a means to an end. They are put to use as one desires them and then laid aside just as are all other means to the ends of human activity. "One masters one's tools," it is said, that is, one applies them purposively. And certainly we would say in a similar fashion that one must master a language, if one is to express oneself to another in that language. But actual speaking is more than the choice of means to achieve some purpose in communication. The language one masters is such that one lives within it, that is, "knows" what one wishes to communicate in no way other than in linguistic form. "Choosing" one's words is an appearance or effect created in communication when speaking is inhibited. "Free" speaking flows forward in forgetfulness of oneself and in self-surrender to the subject matter made present in the medium of language."(4)

We can safely say that in scientific discourse there is also a surrender of a self, however it is not as an absorption into one's feelings as one is speaking freely, but on the contrary, one actually surrenders one's capacity for free speech and becomes imprisoned within the required jargon of one's specialization. Free speech usually ruins the formalized matrix of scientific discourse.

PART TWO: How Does Quality Relate To Quantity?

Perhaps the first introduction of a numbering system into a language changes the focal point of interest for its users. This perspectival shift from quality to quantity is a radical cognitive innovation. This shift initiates the speakers into a different realm of abstraction.

We can first look at how quality becomes informed. In speaking a language which is concerned primarily with the qualifying of sensual and emotional values, the speaker makes words or phrases the focal point of conscious attention, while being truly and fully immersed in the background of living values which drive the agent to make those utterances. The candid speaker can in turn learn to reflect on these expressed values by listening to one's own verbalizations along with the responses of the interlocutor or by merely "speaking" to oneself. Eventually the agent learns to meditate linguistically in silence. How each person's values relate to those of the community is mildly ambiguous because meanings tend in some degree to be idiosyncratic, but as the reflective capacity increases through more and more conversations, so too does the precision of one's communicative praxis.

Now, one can know quantity only in explicit reflection, i.e., through the use of numbers, by making the immediate conceptual background a concern for quality (not as intrinsic value but as a concern for quality in terms of words or concepts such as 'soft' or 'fast' or 'round'),

while the foreground is taken up by nominal concerns played out against that sensually perceived and then spoken or conceived background in terms of identity. We generally value *quality* and we evaluate *quantity*. Here we can see several interesting shifts in cognitive capacities taking shape and I will address three in particular.

1) In speaking a language (descriptively) the foreground of attention is focused on the presented vocalizations or utterances brought out from a living background of perceptions or feelings in the form of basic values. But in doing a numerical analysis or in doing a quantifying process utilizing mathematics, the primary interest (or foreground) which was first expressed in conceptual qualities, e.g., blue, soft, sweet, etc., is moved into the background and replaced by a new set of abstracted values, i.e., quantity, e.g. six *blue* things, three feet of *width*, etc.. So we see a shift of foregrounds and backgrounds in moving from qualitative to quantitative expression. Again, in conversational language-use the foreground is the conceptual language (of expressed qualities) playing out against a background of living values; in mathematical language-use the foreground is the doubly abstracted notion of numerical identities playing out against a conceptual background of linguistically presented qualities.⁽⁵⁾

We can actually comprehend here a process of objectification taking place. The interest of expressive behaviour changes from the direct living relation, i.e., of the subject to its apprehended 'phenomenal world,' into a more distanced or dead relation of the subject's linguistically abstracted concepts to its idea-centered, object-filled environment. Of course, having any access to symbolic language already creates this latter, disengaged perspective, but such a perspective cannot even exist without language, and this paper is an attempt to make more explicit the background of that original relation, namely, the phenomenal quality of being human.

2) We can see a definite shift from *presenting* a reality in ordinary language to *representing* a reality in scientific language. While language as an art is born out of living activity, science is born out of linguistic activity. It becomes quite obvious that we use our language primarily to express our values or the "what it is like to be in the sensual (or conceptual) 'spacetime X' that we happen to occupy." But we use numerical abstractions to give us an accurate and precise representation of our already conceptually objectified realities. This switch from art to science is a radical change in our primary interest from quality to quantity.⁽⁶⁾ Of course science will influence art, as did Winkelman's analysis of Greek Art, but it alone can neither destroy nor actually revive that original living interest.

3) In this shift of our primary interest from quality to our fascination with quantity and quantification, we see also our abandonment of value as a living aesthetic, it being replaced with value as a quantitative simulation or model. This abandonment of the integral "what it is like to be..." in favour of the abstract "how many is that?" tends to make the perceiving subject valueless and unvalued; it makes the quantified object the center of attention. We abandon *presentation* and "embrace" *representation* in the same breath as we abandon the living subject and embrace the dead conceptual object.⁽⁷⁾

The words of a language are conventions and as quality-expressions of our values, words themselves are already a form of abstraction. However, all spoken words have a meaning which reveals those certain values held by their speaker. We can posit here two types of meanings, one could be called semantic and is derived from the analysis of linguistic facts through synonymity and substitution; the other might be called hermeneutic and its concern is interpretation in reference to the process of speaking. Words, therefore, have a linguistic (semantic) meaning as part of a written text but that meaning can never be fully expressed as such except to say that it is related to the whole of the language by definition.⁽⁸⁾ So although words are abstracted symbols, each person has some set of primary values to which all known words point. But numbers have no such value-laden meanings. Numbers

are pure abstractions which can escape from the sensuousness of qualities and exist in a perfect realm of their own. Numbers are dead values. (Mathematical values are resurrected concepts without a living body; they exist in a perfect "life after death" realm.) Uttering sentences always entails some meaningful need for that particular expression but counting need not be embedded in such value-laden lived experience. In fact, counting is a good way to fall asleep, because it can mean absolutely nothing.

The odd thing about numbers or quantification is that once they are established in their perfect abstract realm, they can literally treat qualities as interchangeable. Whether you are counting apples or cars, or apples and cars; whether you are adding oceans or notions, it ultimately makes no difference because the value is no longer in the phenomena themselves as qualified by living beings, but rather, the value is self-sustained by the concepts of quantity themselves.⁽⁹⁾ The quality (as a concept) must still play some backgrounding role in the pursuit of quantification, but whatever are those living values that constitute the expressions of quality it makes no difference. Counting crows is essentially no different from counting colours in as far as the value of what we are doing is concerned. Quantity is about representation, and its value turns away from existential understanding toward epistemic accuracy, from living wisdom to factual knowledge.

Again these three shifts are: 1) the foreground of kinds (or conceptualized qualities) becomes the background; 2) the primacy of presenting gives way to representing; and 3) the concern for living value is replaced with that of idealized value.

PART THREE: Another Look At The Distinction

The intent of this paper is not meant to diminish the value of scientific and epistemic concerns but, rather, it is meant to revive our interest in those values which underlie and thus constitute representational knowledge.⁽¹⁰⁾ One way to make this revival more easily understood is to turn to a description of the various ways of 'playing.' There are, at least, two very different ways of playing. The first can be called *spontaneous play* and it lives in the present experience of those who are playing as the dynamic tension which is not specific to any individual player but lives like the 'spirit of the game' in a field which encompasses all those who are actually playing. Gadamer describes it in his own way, "...absorption into the game is an ecstatic self-forgetting that is experienced not as a *loss* of self-possession, but as the free buoyancy of an elevation above oneself. We cannot comprehend this in a unified way under the rubric of self-understanding."⁽¹¹⁾ This sort of play appears to be what two kittens experience as they engage in their constant rambunctious behaviour, it is what children do when they play doctor. The applied rules are rather plastic and dynamic if they can be said to exist at all (they surely don't exist as such for kittens). And it is this very same thing that goes on in all sorts of conversations when one is truly absorbed in the dialogue and not explicitly conscious of the language of engagement.

The second type might best be called *rule play*. In this sort of engagement the field is made explicitly clear and the parameters of the activity are delimited and defined by a set of rules. Interestingly enough the players or participants in this sort of game best exemplify their full absorption into the sport when they have managed to immerse themselves so completely within the rules that they are no longer explicitly conscious of them. When such absorption occurs, the spontaneity of the play returns and that experience of the transcending joy of playing, once again becomes most prominent.

Normal dialogue wavers between these two sorts of play, but in normal conversations the spontaneity or integrity is more *valuable* than the grammatical accuracy. However, in most scientific enterprises the rules become so predominant as to the point of eradicating the joy of the experience from the game. In most works of art, the experience of the phenomenal

impact is the thing both sought by the artist and desired by the audience. Art appeals to value as a form of presentation, while science clings to value in the sense of an objective representation. It should be noted here that the 'best' science is usually the result of a joyful discovery at the expense of the preconceived rules. In fact, the history of science reveals that only when someone played with the rules were the most fascinating advances usually achieved.⁽¹²⁾ At the turn of the twenty-first century, we have become so over-fascinated by the adequacy of our laws that the imagination, the joy, and the creativity of real discovery have all but been abandoned for the sake of accuracy according to our predetermined criteria for "success."⁽¹³⁾ This robotic "zeal" for the acquiescence to objectification has penetrated into all human endeavours. Our system of education and our social institutions are being restructured according to the "perfect world" of statistics and theory. Our governmental structure and objectives have fallen under the trance of business acumen and financial accounting. We have abandoned quality in terms of human values and meaning, and replaced it with the finely measured calculus of scientific method. Even our art suffers from the banal intrusion of theory and formula at the expense of its transcending quality.

In conclusion we can ask one overarching question, "What is the value that makes our lives worthwhile and meaningful?" The answer, it appears to me, lies not in our ability to represent reality quantitatively, but it lies, rather, in our qualitative experience of life as a presentation within a human community. Our obsession with technologies has certainly not enhanced the meaningfulness or the value of life but has diminished them. This obsession with representation has not even led us to that more contemplative, aesthetically fulfilling existence which it once promised. We have allowed ourselves to become imprisoned by the objectives of our technology in mistakenly thinking that value was some quantity that we could accumulate as possessions (of both objects and knowledge). Perhaps we are finally discovering that value is something intersubjective, something like an understanding; value is a quality of life and a way of living with others in a shared experience. Perhaps we must extend that living perspective to the planet as a whole through our science.

The true strength of art as well as science is that transcendent experience toward which they direct us: the immediate transposition of living into valuing the quality of all forms of life.

Notes

(1) Gadamer makes this point on countless occasions. For example, in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, "No individual has a real consciousness of his speaking when he speaks. Only in exceptional situations does one become conscious of the language in which he is speaking." (p. 64) I would contend that the practice of scientific discourse is precisely such an exception.

(2) I would, naturally, concede that a good percentage of what we say in conversational activity is of the representational aspect where we try to measure or somehow mirror the objective world in which we are immersed. However, for anyone participating in the linguistic dimension, it goes without saying that we have some impelling *need* to communicate measurability, and it is that *need* or drive to express which constitutes all conversations (even those which deal exclusively with scientific texts).

In order to undertake the sort of analysis which I am here attempting, it is necessary to clearly articulate the distinctions, i.e., presentation versus representation, even though neither could exist entirely on its own in symbolic language use. It should be further pointed out that the separation of science from art in the practical sense depends on those differences which can never actually occur in isolation, and are employed here in the

conceptual sense only. For example, there is no such thing as pure *presentation* and neither is there pure *representation*.

(3) If conversational or meditational use of language was in fact primarily representational, we would have to readopt the Platonic-Cartesian-Lockean thesis on the innate existence of formal ideas. What may appear to be representational may be in fact due to our overwhelming immersion into the life of our language. We are always thinking about stuff in language, before we utter, or write, or draw. Yet since we have already rejected the innate idea perspective and maintained that ideas, as such, originate with symbolic language use, then we can maintain that whenever we use a language in that spontaneous conversational way we are presenting our values as meaningful expressions. It must be clearly maintained that the expression itself is not a reflective activity.

(4) *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 87.

(5) It is interesting to refer to a study of how children learn to use quantity words such as 'more' or 'less.' It appears that at first any mention of quantity means 'more than' so when a quantity word is the task command in a sentence the children pick the one with the most qualifying objects. When asked to "point to picture of the tree with less apples" those children who were as yet unfamiliar with the quantitative concept of 'more and less' seemed to always pick the picture with the most apples. To them any reference to quantity meant 'much' so they chose the one with the most of those items that qualified in their test. Interestingly enough, even words such as wide and narrow, or high and low, were originally chosen in terms of the greatest amount of that quality, so when they were asked to choose the narrower space, they chose the widest one (or the one with the best example of the quality of 'width'). And when they were asked to choose the lower building, they chose the highest (or the one with the best exemplification of the quality 'height').

So it becomes clear that a child has to reach a second level of abstraction in order to grasp the meaning of comparative quantification, even when already knowledgeable in numerical identities. A child is so attached to the primary value of the quality of experience that the leap to quantity requires some crucial shift in conceptual understanding.

Refer to *The Emergence of Language: Development and Evolution*; ed. W. Wang (W.H. Freeman & Co., 1991).

(6) For those who can see here a thread of common bond with Robert Pursig's "*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*," let me acknowledge that insight. The thesis of that superlative book is of the same theme expressed here; a theme which concerns the different interests of people. Some people have become interested in value as a quantity, while others have remained interested in value as a quality. The former have somehow managed to alienate themselves from integral concerns about how things feel and how to put yourself in the feeling-place of the other; they have lost their connection to life and the spontaneous moment and can only rationalize things and events in terms of theory, quantity, and calculated feelings. The latter, although perfectly fluent in understanding the theoretical implications, have maintained their connection to the pulse of life as a pure phenomenon; they are perfectly capable of complex abstract thought, but they act intuitively rather than by deliberate calculation and measurement.

(7) It appears to me that true art is presentation; it is the further bringing about of what is already in the process of *becoming* in a deeper mode of experience. Art makes what is felt or dreamt by one enlarged to the point where it can be similarly experienced by another. In this case the art can be music or drama or painting or dance or text or whatever medium one might choose to express those integral values as living meaning.

Science is not presentation, but rather, it is representation. Science is the intended perfect replication of some (objective) reality in a virtual form. So while art extends or expands the horizon of experience, science attempts to define that horizon in the confines of the very mirror of its language: a language of pure qualities-become-quantified; a language which is devoid of any real human values (replaced, it seems, by mathematical, virtual values).

All forms of art must, of course, appeal to representational value in order to reach expression. Some paintings, for instance, might be better called the 'science of colour'; some sculpture might be better called the 'science of human form.' But regardless of its formal properties, the intentional impulse of the artist to express always out-values the representational significance of the work of art. It is the presentational quality of art that makes it valuable.

(8) I am thinking here in terms of the literal meaning of a word being denoted as the "gap" or the "difference" in the language as a whole. Taking the widely accepted Structuralist view that what a word means (as a part of a text) is merely the foreground which stands out against the background of the whole language, we can claim agreement here with Post-structuralists such as Derrida, and in an entirely different sense, with many American philosophers of language.

(9) As a further note, it can be said that computers are perfected examples of number-crunching machines and they work exceedingly well as such, but we cannot rely on computers to generate the measured value of a Van Gogh painting. The fact remains that a computer cannot be programmed to appreciate value as presentation of quality. A computer is not a living entity and it cannot be brought to life through the application of formulae.

(10) Our science must become an living, quality-conscious undertaking if it is to have real, valuable meaning in our lives.

(11) *Philosophical Hermeneutics*; p. 55.

(12) Kepler, Galileo, Darwin immediately come to mind.

(13) I would like to point out here Charles Taylor's reference to "rightness" as practised by science in opposition to "rightness" as practised in other human communities. Science sees its success in terms of representational accuracy, while the 'unspecialized' language-using community sees correctness in terms of moral value, that is, values which are right in terms of meeting their social (and personal) commitments to life. These commitments are always changing in the face of alterations in the way life is presented to the members of the community. Language-use is one of the more explicit domains in which our communal-commitments are *displayed*. A brief survey of the different words and vocabularies that are acceptable to the public ears over as little as a decade will surely make it clear that the "rightness" of dialogic engagement changes rather quickly. "Rightness" has social, moral, historical and political resonances due to the simple fact that we are still learning how best to cope with our interpersonal situatedness. Yet it should not be surprising to acknowledge that in our relationship to the planet and to all living beings, we remain also in some conflict and turmoil. Our scientific perspectives are changing and perhaps we must abandon our zealous commitment to objectivity and begin to see scientific "rightness" as also being embedded within moral and historical perspectives.