



## *Moving Quality; Leading Thoughts*

Exploring the Philosophy of Quality

### **Abstract:**

What is the Philosophy of Quality (POQ)? Within this presentation, the influence of our philosophical presuppositions will be explored. It will be argued that our current-state philosophical commitments to *being*, *knowing*, and *meaning*, to a large extent, shape and determine Quality as we practice it. Innovation within Quality requires excavating these assumptions and reconstructing them. To not explore the POQ will result in a philosophical vision that is not only unchallenged and pre-modern (several centuries old) but will also leave in place a formidable barrier to the cultivation of a customer-centric culture. An alternative future-state, as based in the philosophies of William James and John Dewey, will be sketched.

Keywords: ontology, epistemology, semantics. Quality, quality standards, voice of the customer, organizational theory, philosophy of quality, American philosophy, William James, John Dewey.



What is the philosophy of quality (POQ) and what actual benefit does it offer?

What if the following were being quietly determined by an unchallenged set of assumptions:

- Our conception of what Quality *ought* to be
- What constitutes the *proper* way to practice Quality
- What are the *legitimate* expectations or end results of Quality
- What is a *real* tool

Given the influence these key drivers may have, not taking the time to examine what might be termed our *philosophical vision* could have a staggering cost to quality. What is the cost, after all, of adhering to a vision that is not only unquestioned but is also pre-modern (several centuries old)?

This presentation will explore our *philosophical vision* through the lens of the POQ. I hope to encourage critical reflection on both the current and future state of Quality.

The presentation will explore the current philosophical assumptions concerning knowing, being, and meaning in turn. Each will be explored within the context of Quality.

Let's begin!



So how are our philosophical assumptions “key drivers”?

Let’s examine each one in turn...

### Being

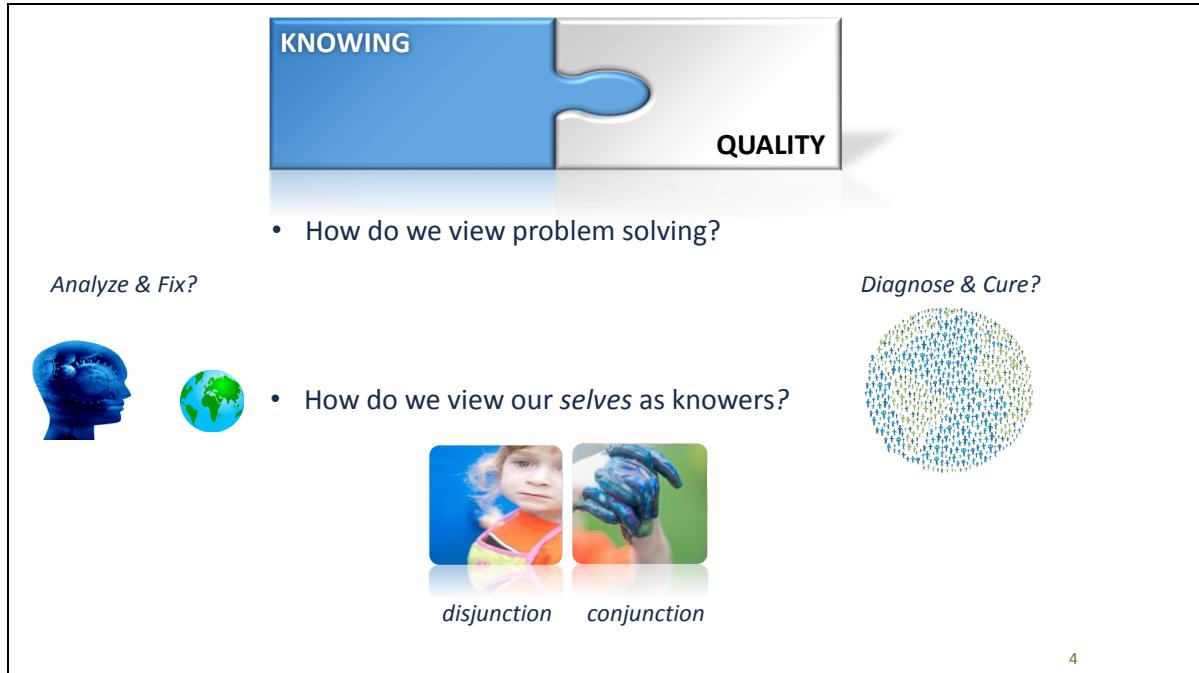
One way to understand “being” is through the examination of life or of reality in general. It might be helpful to think of being in this sense as “Big B” being, i.e. the universe, all reality, being as a collective or “umbrella” term. Believe it or not, we do ask “Big B” questions within Quality. We also make “Big B” assertions based upon the answers we formulate in response. For example, within process improvement, we tend to view what it is that we want to improve as a “closed” system. Quietly lurking within our “Big B” view is the notion that reality is more like a machine than like a living and breathing entity. In turn, this quiet but influential assumption shapes how we understand the very purpose or point of Quality itself. The point is to restore optimal functionality to the “machine” (or the “closed” system). Other “Big B” assumptions follow from our unquestioned acceptance of the “reality as machine” metaphor. Stability, for lack of a better term, is good; instability is, for lack of a better term, bad. In order for a process to be “in control” we stipulate that it must be stable. The “reality as machine” view also tacitly asserts that nature is predictable and consistent. Causality, for example, is advanced and simply assumed as a result of the reigning “sensibility.” Both Quality and

Leadership, in their current states, are quite fond of causality. Most often, this preference is visible through the many faceted expressions of what we will call the “control-and-command” perspective, i.e. if a cog is not functioning properly then according to the “control-and-command” perspective we must overcome the lack of inertia displayed by the defect and replace it.

In addition to “Big B” being, we sometimes narrow the scope of our attention to individual things. This “little B” approach usually attempts to reduce the entity under scrutiny to a simple and static “what” or definition. We tend to believe that if we can grasp the essence (the “what’ness”) of a thing then we will have captured the very core of what it means to be that thing.. We express essence through definitions. We *rest* in our definitions; if we have the proper definition then we have grasped clearly the identity of the entity. Equally as important, we rely on the definition (a static snapshot of Truth) in order to realize how a thing is different from all other things. Within the mechanistic view (the reality as machine metaphor), division and difference is central. For example, we may assert that a leader is a leader and is different from a follower by virtue of a certain something that makes a leader a leader. The mechanistic view tends to promote an *affect* of disjunction and alienation rather than conjunction and community.

To review:

- Reality is best understood in terms of a machine metaphor
- Reality is linear, predictable, and consistent
- Every entity is defined by an essence
- An essence is static and prior to experience



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## Knowing

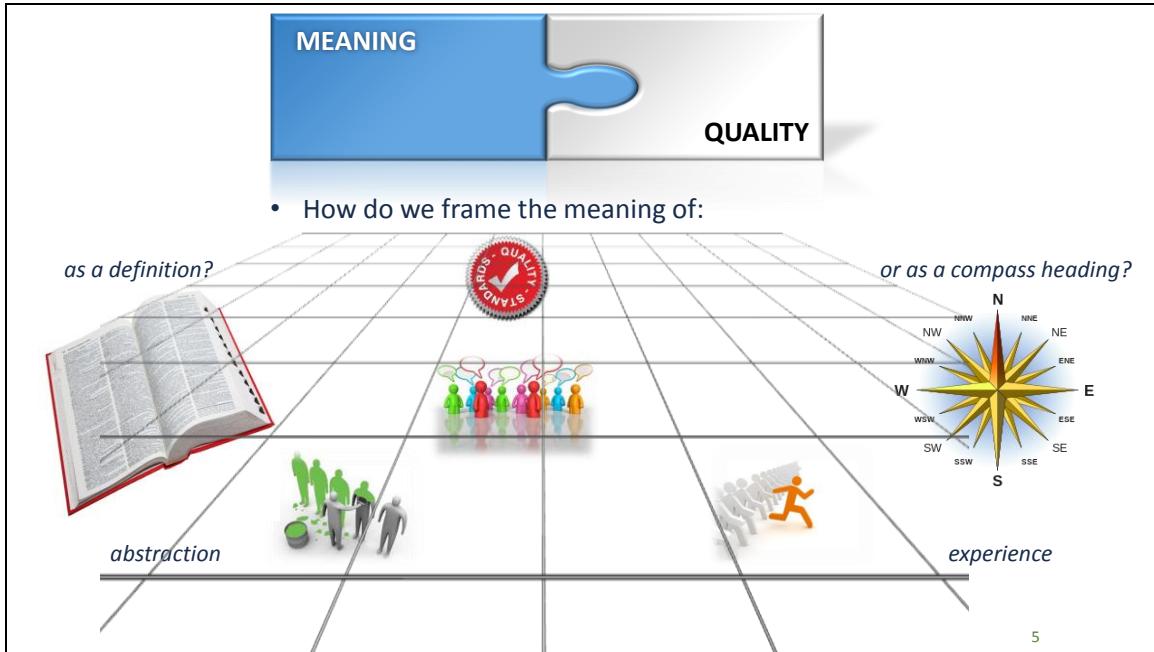
As our assumptions concerning Being force an affect of separation, so, too, do our assumptions concerning knowing reinforce the same *affect*. The knower is separate and distinct from the thing known, e.g. an auditor is separate and distinct from the auditee. As we will discuss in the following slide, not only is the auditor separate from the auditee but from Truth itself. As a result, our role is not an active in the sense that we should discover, explore, or create (cf. innovation). Our role is a passive one and is more aptly expressed by verbs like “to align” and “to monitor.”

Our philosophical assumptions shape an often unchallenged belief in what we might call “Big T” truth. What is real is what is true and what is true is what is real! We “capture” “Big T” truth by isolating those facts which are the most stable and enduring; stability, after all, is favored by our outlook. Our preferences might help explain, at least in part, why Quality demands decisions based on facts and data (as analyzed through quantitative methods) and is distrustful of the “merely qualitative.”

Reason becomes the central tool through which we attend to the business of Quality. Reason must be central as it is our sole access to “Big T” truth. We assume that if we just put our *minds* to it, we can figure out what the problem is and “solve for ‘x’” in all scenarios. Mystery is reduced to a literary genre but is merely a tense error in regards to human knowing (and

Quality). For example, we can reduce issues to  $Y=F(x)$  and as long as our assumptions are founded in data that was collected properly and analyzed appropriately. Given these pre-conditions we suppose that we will eventually arrive at Truth. You might say that “Big T” Truth (as opposed to mere imposters and opinion, i.e. “little T” truth) is “out there.” If we ask the right questions, apply the right methodologies, and employ the proper tools we will stabilize the current-state. How can any other output result given that reality is linear, predictable, and orderly? Is it difficult to introduce innovation and emergence into an environment in which stability is cherished and order is mandated.

Building upon the centrality of reason, the most important of all of the assumptions concerning knowing is raised: knowing (or *cognition* to use a philosophical term) is the primary way in which people interact with reality. Descartes famous “cogito” is an explicit reflection of this same assumption! As a result of this assumption, we and the world we inhabit are thinned. We become mere calculators. Emotion and passion are distractions. Imagination is an activity suited for children and maybe those “artistic” types but is not central to the business of Quality. As our assumptions concerning *Being* force an *affect* of separation, so, too, do our assumptions concerning knowing reinforce the same *affect*.

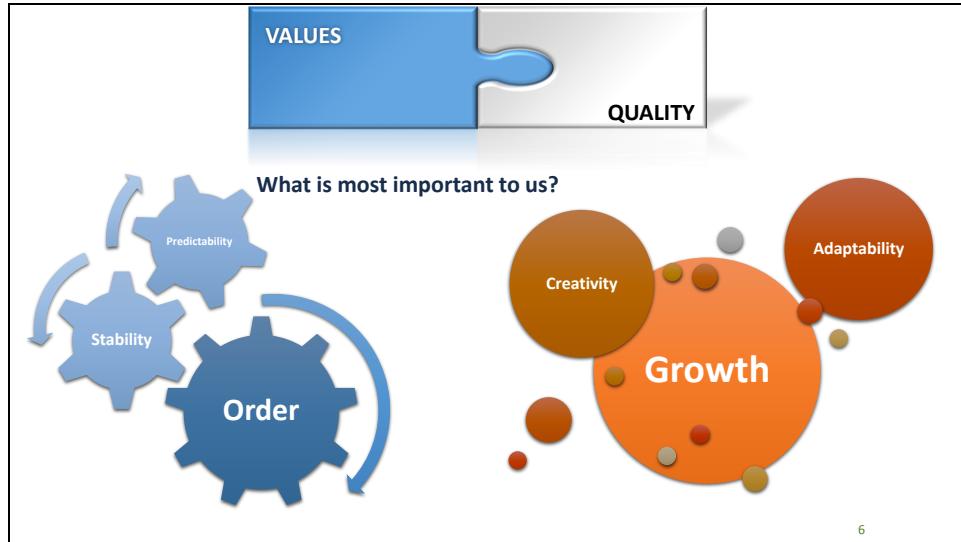


## Meaning

Given how we frame being and knowing, we tend to employ a “dictionary” view of meaning. One entry (definition) exists across all contexts. What we need to do is to search for the correct entry and “know” it so that we may gain insight. Generally speaking, as noted above, our role is more passive than active. From time to time, entries may change but that does not sway us from our devotion to the dictionary view. The definition, if errant, was due simply to bad data or the best data available. As definitions are central, by extension, nouns are all important within this view; verbs are distractions. Even change itself is considered a noun within this view; maybe that also helps to explain the rarity of innovation? After all, change understood as a static state is not quite that vibrant. Even when experience demands otherwise, in certainty and abstraction we trust!

The reigning philosophical assumptions force the intellectual superimposition of a Cartesian grid upon experience. Once the grid is accepted, the understanding, i.e. what you might call our field’s “common sense,” follows.

In the end, it is a question of values...



### **"Thy Heart; thy treasure"**

If we favor a philosophical outlook through which:

- Reality is most appropriately likened to a machine
- Knowing is the central way through which people engage reality
- People are best conceived of as calculators
- Meaning is fixed and antecedent

we will tend to set our values accordingly. Order and stability will be highly stressed.

Quantification and empirical approaches will be central. Quality is a business and/or an engineering science.

On the other hand, if our philosophical outlook embraces:

- Reality as emergent
- Knowing as joined with purpose
- Meaning as necessarily plural as it is an expression of purpose

our values will be markedly different than above. From this latter "angle of vision," making a concrete difference to somebody, somehow, and somewhen is what matters. Quality is only marginally about statistics and formulae – it is a craft that needs to be honed constantly.

What advantages might follow from accepting this "New Angle Land?"



What if, following the trail as blazed by American philosophy, we turned towards the aesthetic to assist in our reconstruction of our POQ?

Admittedly, the aesthetic seems like a curious place to start when discussing Quality. Since Quality is traditionally ratiocentric (or reason based) and since art seems intuitively non-cognitive, art seems like the last place we should start a discussion of how Quality may evolve.

So, why art? Because art captures something significant about being human and about our shared meanings. It does so because it recognizes that humans are more than just thinking creatures. We are living, moving, and breathing creatures. Art, unlike solely rational endeavors, joins organically, in a lived and real way, the fullness of being human. As HBR blogger Dan Pallotta observed on September 9<sup>th</sup>: "I believe that the best creativity comes from a much deeper place than the desire to win. It comes from a desire to contribute to the lives of others, either by introducing something new that improves the quality of their lives or by showing people that something thought to be impossible is in fact possible. When you change people's perceptions about what can be accomplished or achieved, you contribute to their humanity in the richest possible way."

What if Quality sought *that* kind of meaning?

## Art, Possibility & Meaning

"Art is... prefigured in the very processes of living."

- Not solely a matter of mastering a BoK in order to acquire cognitive expertise
- People, through purpose and imagination, drive quality.
- The new preference would change our role from that of passive spectator to that of an artisan crafting possibilities through the purposive use of imagination.

"The value of an instrument depends upon what is to be done with it."

"Moving Quality Toward the Aesthetic," JQP, vol. 36. no 2.

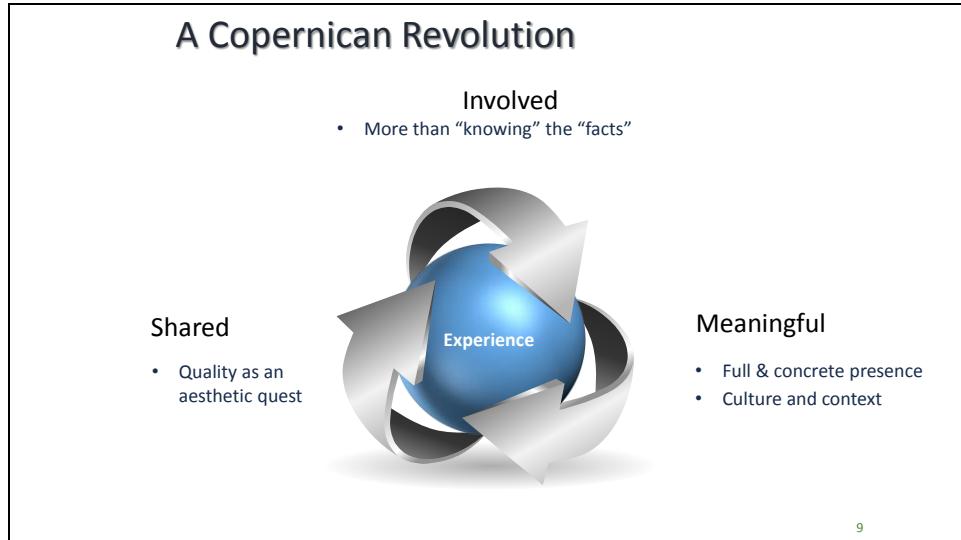
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Dewey, like others in the American school, rejected the primacy of cognition in our engaging of reality. Within the stream of experience, static bodies of knowledge, closed definitions, and clarity are all abstractions lost to and in the *current*. Art as experience is, therefore, not a matter of mastering an *episteme* or what we would call a body of knowledge so that we may acquire cognitive expertise. Equally art is not a matter of passively gazing upon relics to *know* the proper meaning.

Art, as reconstructed through experience, is “prefigured in the process of living.” Translation: any human endeavor in which a person has fronted the world through an “audacity of imagination” is potentially aesthetic. In any instance in which a person has dared to breathe life into his or her intentions by “convert[ing] materials that are stammering or dumb in ordinary experience into eloquent media” is potentially aesthetic. Playing baseball or soccer, preparing a meal, plowing a field, or even conducting an audit are all potential examples of art and of an aesthetic endeavor.

For Dewey, the interaction between artist and product (or specific instance of art), and between the appreciator of art and a specific product of art, can be captured in the term “**experience**.” You do not have to be a philosopher to understand what the term “experience” means. All of us have had “experiences;” we may not have reflected upon what exactly is meant by the term (it may be a pre-critical type of knowledge for us) but, we are all “experienced.”

For Dewey, experience is best understood as an **involved, meaningful, and shared** response to the world and to each other. Let’s unpack each in turn...



### Why does Dewey describe “experience” in terms of being “involved”?

Involvement necessitates becoming invested. A transaction among and between the parties “involved” results and the opportunity for growth (as well as the possibility of failure) are present within *that* given moment. Involvement is much more than simply “knowing” the pertinent facts. Involvement rejects an affect (or outlook) based on separation and abstraction and demands our full and concrete presence as living beings.

### What does Dewey mean by “meaningful”?

For Dewey, meaning can be described as the struggle to make life coherent. The struggle is bound to a specific setting (**culture**) and the meanings (symbols) that are found within the culture. Here again is a rejection of separation and abstraction, of static truths and immutable essences.

### Experience is shared in that the transformation is not only individual but can resonate throughout the culture.

From this view, meaning is born of experience on an individual level and on a collective or cultural level. The call here is to become – not just for ourselves but for the sake of the many. In this sense, culture can be reconstructed as the artistic quest to realize (in a concrete way) the ideal possibilities for human life.

## Moving Quality



The work ahead requires our passion and creativity first and then, in a secondary sense, admits of the necessity for instruments. Plainly stated, people, through purpose and imagination, drive quality.

*"Moving Quality Toward the Aesthetic," JQP, vol. 36. no 2.*

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How in a “lived” & “concrete” way, would the POQ be reconstructed through the inversion of abstraction and experience?

To be clear, we can still employ goodness-of-fit tests to quantify improvement results. We can still utilize process spreads to demonstrate that the voice of the process is aligned with the voice of the customer (VOC). We can continue conducting audits to measure the distance between processes as they ought to be and as they are. The point of our passion, however is “not to perfect tools, but is found in what tools accomplish, the products they turn out.” While standards may remain, the value of any standard “depends upon what is to be done with it.” The work ahead requires our passion and creativity first and then, in a secondary sense, admits of the necessity for instruments. Plainly stated, people, through purpose and imagination, drive quality.

## Questions?

### Additional Resources

- “*Moving Quality Toward the Aesthetic*,” JQP, vol. 36.  
no 2.
- Moving Quality Blog @ <http://www.movingquality.org>
- Moving Quality Resources Link
- #kurtstuke