



IS QUALITY A NORMATIVE NOTION? A SOCIO- EPISTEMOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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COOL



NOT COOL



NOT COOL



COOL

David Hume, *Of the Standard of Taste*

“The great variety of Taste, as well as of opinion, which prevails in the world, is too obvious not to have fallen under every one’s observation. Men of the most confined knowledge are able to remark a difference of taste in the narrow circle of their acquaintance, even where the persons have been educated under the same government, and have early imbibed the same prejudices. But those, who can enlarge their view to contemplate distant nations and remote ages, are still more surprized at the great inconsistency and contrariety. We are apt to call barbarous whatever departs widely from our own taste and apprehension: But soon find the epithet of reproach retorted on us”.

Ok, but quality is not just a matter of taste:

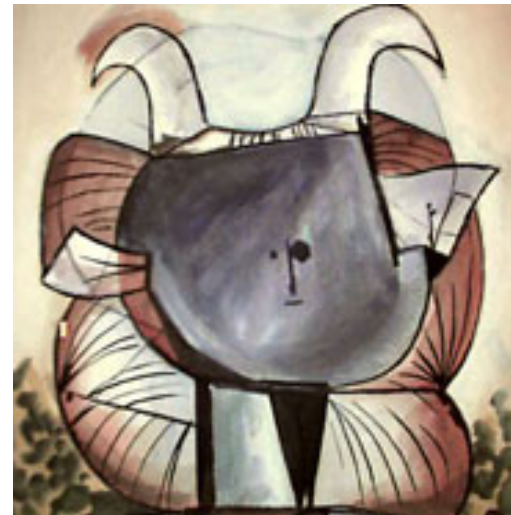
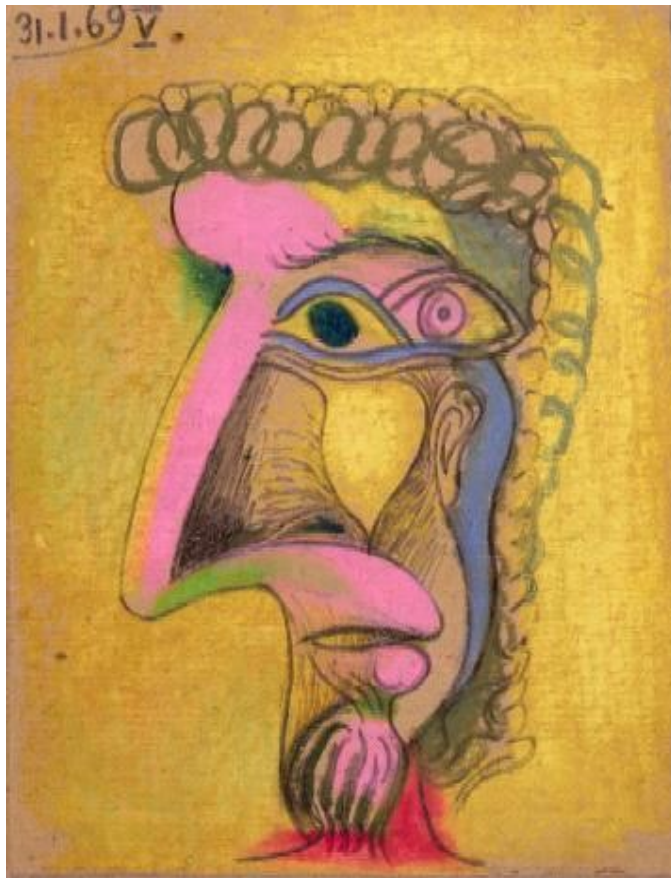
- Epistemic quality (the quality of knowledge: T, F)
- Food quality
- Industrial production quality
- Quality of life parameters
- ...etc.

What does “quality” mean?



- Is it possible to get rid of a normative notion of quality and rely only on mechanisms of aggregation of lay judgments?
- How is a collective standard of quality constructed and maintained in a culture?
- Are there “better” and “worse” systems of quality assessment?

Which one is “better”?



... and which one is fake?

My main point:



- Quality is an intrinsic normative notion that doesn't make it less "objective".
- It is a normative notion based on the historical records of an item, i.e. its *reputation* in a community

Quality, Reputation and Categorization:



- “Quality” as a term has always been employed with reference to a scale of value.
- In philosophy the “quality” of an item is an attribute of the item that makes it fit into a certain category
- The activities of categorizing items and that of ranking are intrinsically dependent one on the other

The Power of Traditions:



- Traditions are evaluated taxonomies and rankings that are selected and stabilized in a culture by many different “forces”:
 - Institutions
 - “Sacred values”
 - Functionality
 - Problem-solving
 - Biases

An example: Writing



- Writing is a cultural technique that, among other functions helps us to categorize our past history.
- It is stabilized by many forces: schools, “sacred values” against illiteracy, and functionality.
- Even if hand-writing is a very complex graphical technique that is no more “functional” to acquiring writing skills (typing is enough in many contexts) other forces such as “sacred values” maintain handwriting in our school programs.

Traditions are learned:



- When we enter a new domain of knowledge or a new cultural corpus we acquire the “taste” of the authorities in the domain in order to orient ourselves (the “you have to like this” effect).
- Who are the “good” and who are the “bad”?
- This is the way in which a *canon* is constructed.

Edmund Burke on Traditions:



« We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages »

That is:




- Quality commons are structured in received traditions that are “learned” and amended from one generation to another

What is a “Classic” ?



Quality “symptoms”



- Robust signals, that is signal that are difficult to “fake” (Zahavi-Zahavi 1997)