

Unfolding Quality

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In his inaugural lecture, Hardjono (1999) compared attempts at defining quality to catching mussels. They do not exist, but you still try to catch them. This book shows that the theme still has his attention. Together with Van Kemenade, he makes an admirable attempt to obtain a grip on quality. Whether or not this attempt has been fully successful yet remains to be seen, as it may be all too easy to classify a colorful variety of things under the four paradigms. Below, I want to try to stand on their shoulders and understand more about quality.

Earlier I defined quality as fitness for purpose (De Vries, 1999). That term also appears in this book, but I saw it in a broader sense: aligning with how something is meant. Then quality is a multi-dimensional concept, in which the dimensions coincide with the fifteen distinctive aspects of Christian philosophy ranging from the numerical aspect to the aspect of faith. The aspects are not reducible to each other. Each aspect is a window to observe reality. This is exactly what Hardjono and Van Kemenade have to say about paradigms.

Another concept of Christian philosophy is unfolding. That which has been provided in creation may be unfolded by man. He extracts what is already present in principle, while a rich variation may be possible. This process of opening up is visible in the breadth of entities to which quality applies; i.e. products, services, processes, people, organizations, and society. And in the attention for more aspects—ranging from technological to (also) economic to (also) aesthetic to (also) ethical to (also) religious aspects.

So our understanding of reality is limited — “Now we are looking in a reflection of a hazy mirror” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Measuring, which is so common in quality management, helps to understand reality, but may also be misleading: that which is not measured is excluded. In that case, quality control and quality improvement may even be going in the opposite directions. Hardjono shows something similar in his four-phase model. The Christian tradition uses the concept sin—missing the target, deviating from the “fitness for purpose”.

In what Hardjono and Van Kemenade refer to as the Empirical Paradigm, the emphasis is on the given reality and getting to know this by measurements, and by management according to PDCA. Measuring is fine, provided we see the relativity thereof. Humanity has the divine command to rule creation (Genesis 2). This is also fine, yet contains the risk of derailment. Man can be mangled in anonymous control systems; the system world may rule over the “living world”. This may be avoided by taking into account different aspects in a balanced way (De Vries, 1999; De Vries & Haverkamp, 2015).

In the Reference Paradigm another party will determine the requirements to be met. In this case, there is unfolding respectively toward the social and legal aspects. The Reflective Paradigm adds disclosure to the psychic aspect. The Emergence Paradigm reveals more aspects and that is confusing. My previous booklet shows which they are, and indeed, confusion is partially inescapable, not only due to the multi-sidedness, but also due to the reflection in the hazy mirror.

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In short, the four paradigms described in the book in their entirety in and of themselves are an example of unfolding. Yet they are incomplete. There are too many aspects lumped together. It is better to base the distinction of a parallel disclosure of:

- (1) Entities (from product to society),
- (2) Types of “requirements” for those entities (related to one or more of all fifteen aspects),
- (3) Establishment of such “requirements” (with fewer or more different parties),
- (4) Status of such requirements (from voluntary to imposed),
- (5) Manners of measuring of meeting the requirements,
- (6) Forms of control,
- (7) Forms of improvement,
- (8) Models that may be helpful for this.

Moreover, there is a broadening in the geographical sense (from local to global), and related to this from mono to multi-cultural. This in turn evokes the question of the intrinsic, the authentic. Which again relates to disclosure, since it is multi-faceted, the opportunities embedded in creation may be disclosed in many different ways. Failed disclosure is sin, which requires forgiveness and restoration.

The quality expert is the professional who, given the organizational situation, its context, as well as the organization’s direction, knows in which way the quality of products, processes, persons, and the organization in its entirety may gain shape, and who guides the organization in this respect.