



STORY



# Sensing Then Story

## The layers of our Experience

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### I. Introduction: The Unnamed Feeling

To sense is to know something without needing to explain it. Human experience unfolds on two intertwined levels: the immediate, raw sensory deluge of the present moment, and the narrative or story we construct to make sense of that conglomeration of sensations. Feeling precedes story, serving as the foundation upon which all interpretation is built. Yet as soon as we attempt to articulate our feelings and experiences in language, we introduce a layer of interpretation that can clarify but also distort. The interplay between pre-verbal experience and linguistic narrative is complex, revealing both the power and the limits of language in capturing reality.

We explore this interplay by first examining the nature of raw sensation, qualia, and acknowledging its primacy and ineffability. We then discuss how naming and language, though essential for communication, inevitably simplify and alter the experiences they seek to describe. Pushing language to its limits reveals a kind of recursive collapse, exposing how our stories, while necessary, are built on inherent misunderstandings.

Finally, we consider what lies beyond language, a post-linguistic mode of awareness, and how, after recognizing the limits of story, we might consciously craft our narratives while maintaining a reverence for the unspeakable remainder of experience that no story can capture.

### II. Sensing Precedes Story

At the root of all experience is a layer of raw feeling that comes before any thought or narrative. Before we can explain or interpret what is happening, we simply feel it. A newborn child knows hunger, warmth, or discomfort without knowing any story about these sensations. Even in adults, an emotion like anxiety or joy often arises first as a physical and emotional sensation, and only afterward do we try to explain it by telling ourselves a story about its cause or meaning. In this way, feeling precedes story both in time and in importance: the immediate sensation is the original reality, and the story is a secondary construction.

This primacy of feeling means that our narratives are always built on a foundation of pre-verbal experience. Any story we create, about who we are, about why something happened, about how the world works, is a response to an underlying bedrock of felt experience. We often assume that our thoughts and explanations lead to our feelings, but in truth the process is reversed: we feel first, and then we seek to make sense of that feeling. Our interpretations and narratives arise to answer the wordless prompt that feeling provides. Understanding this order is

crucial because it reminds us that every story, no matter how convincing, is ultimately an attempt to interpret something more fundamental and ineffable.

### **III. Qualia as Raw, Irreducible Experience**

The raw feeling at the heart of experience is often referred to as qualia, the basic qualitative aspects of our sensations and perceptions. Qualia are the "what it is like" of experience: the redness one sees when looking at a rose, the bitter taste of black coffee, the ache of nostalgia on a quiet evening. These are raw in that they are directly felt, not derived from anything more fundamental, and they are irreducible in that they cannot be broken down into simpler components. No matter how much one might analyze the wavelength of red light or the chemical signals of taste on the tongue, such analysis will never by itself convey the actual experience of seeing that color or tasting that bitterness. The only way to truly know a qualium, a single instance of qualia, is to experience it firsthand.

Qualia are the immediate, subjective reality of a moment, and as such they resist full communication. We can attach names and descriptions to them, but any description is an abstraction that strips away the directness of the experience. For instance, one may describe a pain as a dull throbbing ache, yet those words do not capture the living reality of the pain itself; they are at best a rough pointer. Likewise, one might try to explain the color red to someone who has never seen it: one can say it is warm, or that it is the color of blood or of sunsets, but such comparisons fall short of imparting the true sensation.

In the end, qualia remain elusive and private. They are the experiential facts that language can gesture toward but never fully hold. This intrinsic ineffability of raw experience means that when we do attempt to communicate or conceptualize our qualia, we inevitably have to simplify. And yet, we must try; this is where naming becomes necessary, even as it distorts what we seek to express.

### **IV. The Necessity and Distortion of Naming**

Given that raw experience defies perfect communication, we are nevertheless compelled to name our experiences. Attaching words to feelings and sensations is how we make sense of them and share them with others. By assigning a name to a particular qualia or emotion, we carve out a discrete concept from the continuous flow of experience. This act of naming allows us to remember, think about, and convey aspects of our experience that would otherwise remain ambiguous or fleeting. In a very real sense, naming is not a luxury but a necessity: without names and labels, we would struggle to organize our world or to let anyone else know what we are feeling or perceiving.

Yet in the very act of naming something, we inevitably alter what it is we name. To name a feeling is to abstract it, to pull it out of its context and freeze it under a general category. The unique nuances of a particular experience get partially lost the moment we say "I am sad" or "I

feel angry," because each instance of sadness or anger has its own texture and cause that the simple label cannot convey. The richness of the actual feeling is thinned out when compressed into a single word. We take a fluid, complex state and pin it down with a term, and in doing so, we impose a certain interpretation or boundary on it that was not there before. The necessity and distortion of naming are two sides of the same coin: we need to name to understand, yet by naming we inevitably misunderstand in part.

This paradox is a fundamental feature of human life. We depend on names and categories to navigate reality; imagine trying to communicate without common words for objects, colors, or emotions. Yet we must constantly remind ourselves that the name is not the thing named. The word "water" will not quench thirst, and the word "fear" does not capture the visceral shock of fright in the body. Language gives us a handle on experience, but it is a handle that fits only roughly. Naming is both our bridge to others and a first step away from the purity of what we actually feel.

## **V. Language as Both Bridge and Barrier**

Language extends the principle of naming into a vast, complex system that enables us to share our inner worlds with others. It is our primary bridge between individual minds. Through language, one person's experiences or ideas can be conveyed to someone who has never lived that experience. We use shared words and grammar to build a common reality: stories, knowledge, and cultures are all constructed through this exchange of language. In speaking or writing, we lay down a bridge from our subjective world into the collective space, allowing others to walk across and get a glimpse of our thoughts. Without language, each of us would be confined to our own isolated perceptions; with language, we can reach out, coordinate our understanding, and build communities of meaning.

Yet for all its connecting power, language is also a barrier. The very fact that it is a shared code means that it operates through generalization and interpretation. When we put an experience into words, we encode it in a symbolic form, and whoever receives those words must decode them; in that process, some meaning is inevitably lost or altered. Each person interprets words through the lens of their own memories, associations, and understandings. As a result, the idea that arrives in the listener's mind is never an exact replica of what the speaker intended.

Moreover, language can act as a barrier by its very structure. It segments continuous reality into discrete pieces, nouns, verbs, categories, and in doing so, it can obscure the fluid nature of what is actually experienced. People can become trapped in their own language, mistaking the labels and definitions for the reality they represent. Two individuals might argue heatedly, not realizing that they are envisioning different underlying experiences or definitions for the same words. In this way, language can impede true understanding just as easily as it facilitates it. It is simultaneously a unifying bridge and a source of division.

## **VI. Recursive Collapse: The Limits of Language and Thought**

When we push language and conceptual thought to their extremes in an attempt to capture reality fully, we encounter their inherent limits. No matter how we phrase and rephrase our descriptions, there is always some aspect that eludes us. We might try to define our terms ever more precisely or pile explanation upon explanation in hopes of finally pinning down the truth. This process can become recursive; we use language to analyze language, thought to scrutinize thought. Each new layer of analysis may clarify something, but it also brings us face to face with new abstractions that themselves need explanation. We find that for every concept we rely on, we must use other concepts to define it, and those in turn require further definition or are ultimately grounded in our own undefinable experiences.

In the end, our efforts to nail down the fullness of a simple feeling in words collapse under their own weight, revealing how much escapes our nets of words and logic. Consider the attempt to explain a profound emotion or a mystical experience in exhaustive detail. One might start with a simple description, then realize it is not quite right and add more detail or qualifiers. One clarifies one word with another, only to find that those clarifications need further clarification themselves. The more one tries to corner the experience with precise definitions, the more the meaning seems to recede or split into ambiguities.

Eventually, one may end up with a long, tangled explanation that still feels unsatisfying, or one might run into paradoxes and contradictions born from the limitations of the concepts themselves. At that point, the structure of explanation crumbles: one realizes that an elaborate tower of words has been built, but the essence one wanted to convey is still outside it, unchanged and not truly captured. In such moments, we confront the limits of what thinking and speaking can do. This confrontation can be disorienting or liberating. We are compelled to reevaluate the role of story itself. Perhaps every story we tell, no matter how logical or convincing, is fundamentally a structure of misunderstanding.

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## **VII. Story as the Structure of Misunderstanding**

When we recognize the strict limits of language and thought, we begin to see that what we call understanding is often just a well-organized misunderstanding. Our stories give structure to our experiences, but that structure is built out of imperfect symbols and assumptions. Every narrative simplifies and organizes reality, filtering and reshaping it to fit human perception and communication. A story takes the chaotic, inexpressible reality and arranges it into a coherent sequence with apparent cause and effect, beginnings, and endings. This provides a sense of meaning and predictability.

However, the coherence of a story comes at the cost of filtering out or warping parts of reality. We select certain facts or impressions to include, emphasize some over others, and ignore what does not fit. What results is not a mirror of reality but a simplified model of it, a structured misunderstanding that we often adopt as our view of the world. Understanding that every story is a structured misunderstanding allows us to hold our narratives more lightly. We can still use stories to navigate life, but we do so with the awareness that they are provisional. The story is the map, not the territory; it is an interpretation, not the thing itself.

Problems arise when we forget this and cling to our stories as if they were absolute truth. Many conflicts between people, and many internal conflicts within a person, come from taking one particular narrative too seriously and ignoring the fact that it might be incomplete or skewed. By recognizing that story is the structure of misunderstanding, we become more open to questioning our own narratives and listening to others. We also become curious about what lies outside all our stories. This curiosity naturally leads us toward a state beyond story, toward post-linguistic awareness, where we seek to encounter reality without the intermediating structure of narrative.

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## **VIII. Post-Linguistic Awareness: Living the Ineffable**

Post-linguistic awareness is the state of mind that emerges when we step outside the continuous chatter of language and rest in raw experience. In this mode of awareness, one does not immediately translate feelings or perceptions into words. Instead, one simply observes what is present, the sensations in the body, the sounds in the air, the emotions moving through the heart, without labeling or analyzing them. There is a silence in the mind, not an empty silence but one filled with the texture of the moment itself.

Without the filter of language, experiences are felt in their fullness and immediacy. One might notice details and qualities that were previously glossed over by the mind's habit of naming and categorizing everything. In post-linguistic awareness, the boundary between the self and the experience can feel less rigid. Without words to assert separations and definitions, one may feel more integrated with what is happening.

Rather than thinking "I am feeling anxious" and thus separating oneself from the feeling, one simply experiences the sensations: the fluttering in the stomach, the quickening of the heart. In that wordless acknowledgment, the experience is just what it is, neither good nor bad, neither something to solve nor something to explain. This kind of awareness allows reality to present itself without immediately being boxed into concepts.

Of course, we cannot live entirely without language. Post-linguistic awareness is often a temporary state or a practice we enter into, rather than a permanent abandonment of words. We are linguistic creatures by nature and necessity. Eventually, we return to thinking, speaking, and making narratives. But having experienced a mode of being beyond words, we return to

language with a new perspective. We carry an understanding that the words in our heads are just one layer over reality, not reality itself.

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## **IX. Conscious Narrative Authorship After Collapse**

After the collapse of our naive faith in language and the experience of a wordless reality beyond it, we can return to the realm of stories with a new awareness. Instead of being unwitting characters swept along by a narrative we once mistook for reality, we become the conscious authors of our narratives. This means taking responsibility for the stories we tell about ourselves and the world, crafting them deliberately while knowing that they are constructions.

We can choose how to interpret events in our lives, which aspects to emphasize, and what meanings to ascribe, all with the understanding that we are, in a sense, writing fiction that serves a purpose rather than uncovering an absolute truth. This does not make our stories deceptive; rather, it acknowledges that there are many possible stories that could be told about any given set of facts. We have the freedom to choose the narrative that is most honest and useful for us, without confusing that narrative with the totality of reality.

Conscious narrative authorship allows us to reshape our personal narratives in light of deeper insights. A person who once told themselves a story of failure about a setback can, after recognizing the story's provisional nature, rewrite it as one of learning or resilience. They are aware that neither failure nor lesson is the literal truth of the event, but they understand that choosing one story over another has real consequences for how they live. Our narratives become flexible, adjustable to context and perspective, rather than rigid scripts that define us without our input.

With this flexibility comes a sense of creativity and an ethical responsibility. If we are the authors of our stories, we can aim to tell better stories, ones that foster understanding, compassion, or progress. We become more tolerant of ambiguity and differing narratives because we see them as different constructions rather than threats to a single, correct truth. We can collaborate with others to form shared narratives while remaining aware that these are chosen frames, not ultimate realities.

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## **X. Reverence for the Unspeakable Remainder**

After all the analysis, interpretation, and conscious storytelling, there is still something that lies beyond the reach of words. This is the unspeakable remainder: the aspect of experience that no story can capture. Every time we translate our life into language, some part of it remains untranslated. It is the immediate quality of being, the raw suchness of a moment, which persists outside of any narrative we construct.

Recognizing this remainder calls for reverence. Reverence here means a respectful acknowledgment of the mystery that remains when words run out. Instead of filling the silence with another story, we can appreciate the silence itself. We approach this wordless aspect of life with humility, understanding that it is not a gap to be filled but a permanent feature of being conscious. The unspeakable remainder is what gives our experiences their profound significance.

In practical terms, reverence for the unspeakable remainder means carrying a sense of the sacred into everyday life. It means listening more carefully, speaking with more precision, and being willing to leave some things unnamed. It invites us to be present with our feelings and with reality even when we have no narrative for them. When we tell stories, as we inevitably must, we do so with the knowledge that something important will always escape the telling.

That knowledge does not weaken our stories. It gives them depth. It reminds us to be humble authors and attentive listeners, always aware that life is larger than the frames we place around it. Feeling then story: feeling first, story second. Beyond the story, feeling remains. That remainder is not a failure of language. It is the space where wonder lives.