



University of Sussex

SPRU – Science Policy Research Unit



From ethics of quantities to politics of qualities:

mitigating power-driven closures

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presentation to virtual workshop on

Ethics of Quantification

CWTS, Leiden University, Netherlands

Friday, 5th February 2021

www.steps-centre.org/

www.sussex.ac.uk/spru/

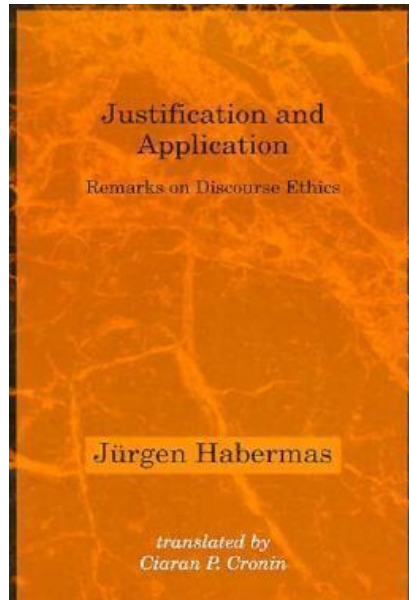
www.multicriteria-mapping.org

www.sussex.ac.uk/spru/people/peoplelists/person/7513

Ubiquitous pressures for justification



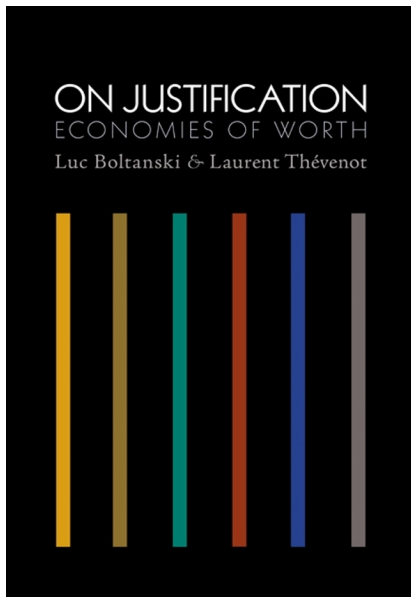
David Collingridge (1980)
the social control of technology



Jürgen Habermas (1993)
justification and application

**decision justification
is the most valuable
political commodity...**

... it is more important in politics
than a decision being “right”,
that **justification** be secured for
fostering **trust**, pressuring
acceptance & passing **blame**



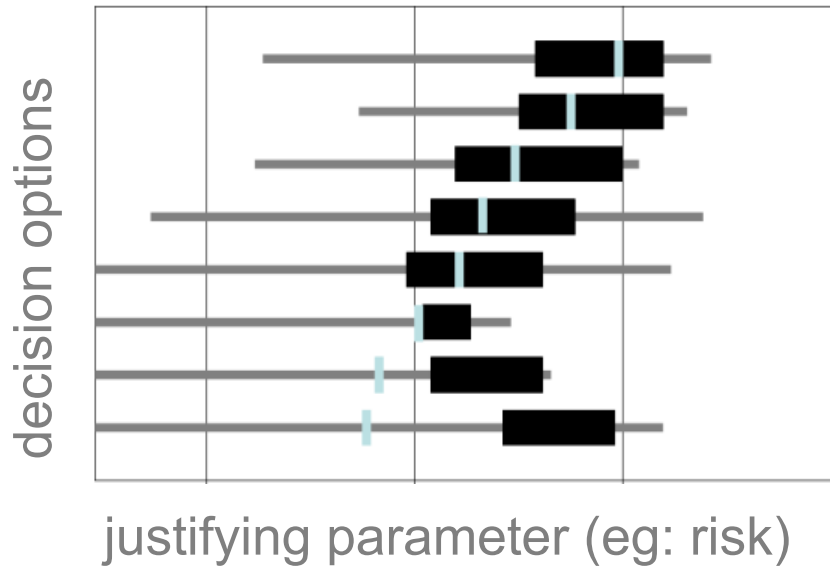
Luc Boltanski &
Laurent Thevenot (2006)
on justification: economies of worth

The tortured closure of policy numbers

Across global governance of science, technology, trade ...

– spanning all sectors: energy, chemicals, biotech, pandemics ...

background peer-reviewed data



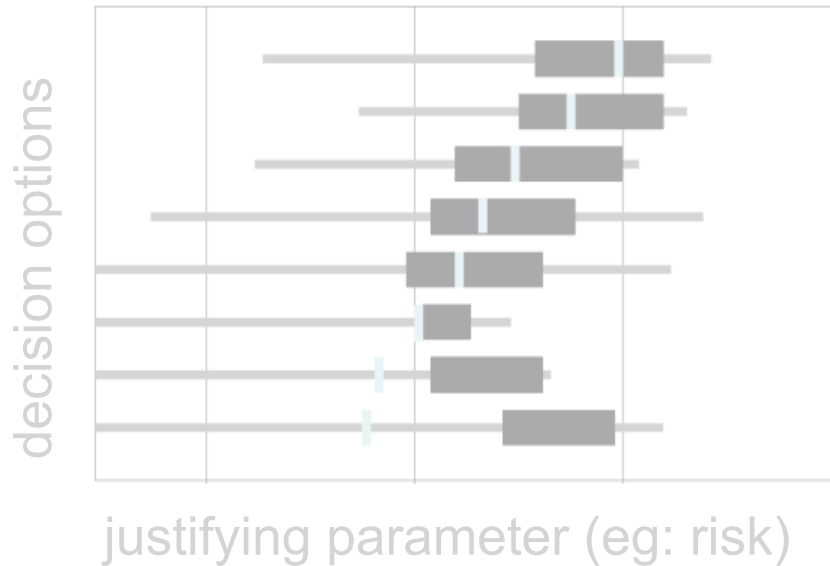
‘the evidence base’ can often justify any among a wide variety of different decisions

The tortured closure of policy numbers

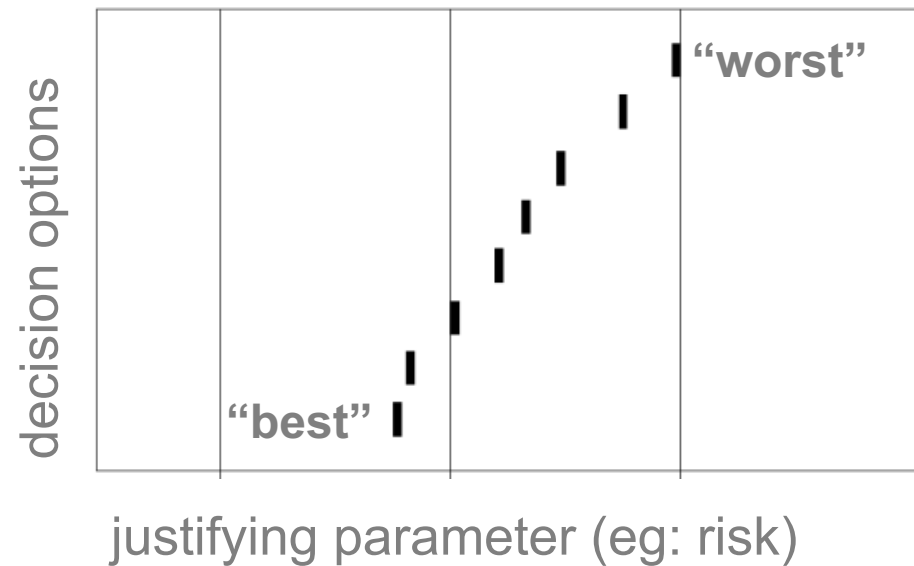
Across global governance of science, technology, trade ...

– spanning all sectors: energy, chemicals, biotech, pandemics ...

background peer-reviewed data ... typically stated quantification



‘the evidence base’ can often justify any among a wide variety of different decisions



particular subsets of evidence that get highlighted are often far more narrow in what they justify

The hidden politics of framing

Some sites of legitimately diverging assumptions in quantification

setting agendas	defining problems	characterising options
posing questions	prioritising issues	formulating criteria
deciding context	setting baselines	drawing boundaries
discounting time	choosing methods	including disciplines
handling uncertainties	recruiting expertise	commissioning research
constituting 'proof'	exploring sensitivities	interpreting results

All analysis requires framing ... all framing involves qualities ...

all qualities are about values ... all values are political

quantitative rhetorics around of 'sound science' & 'evidence-based decisions'
are driven by political pressures for justification – and so are deeply political

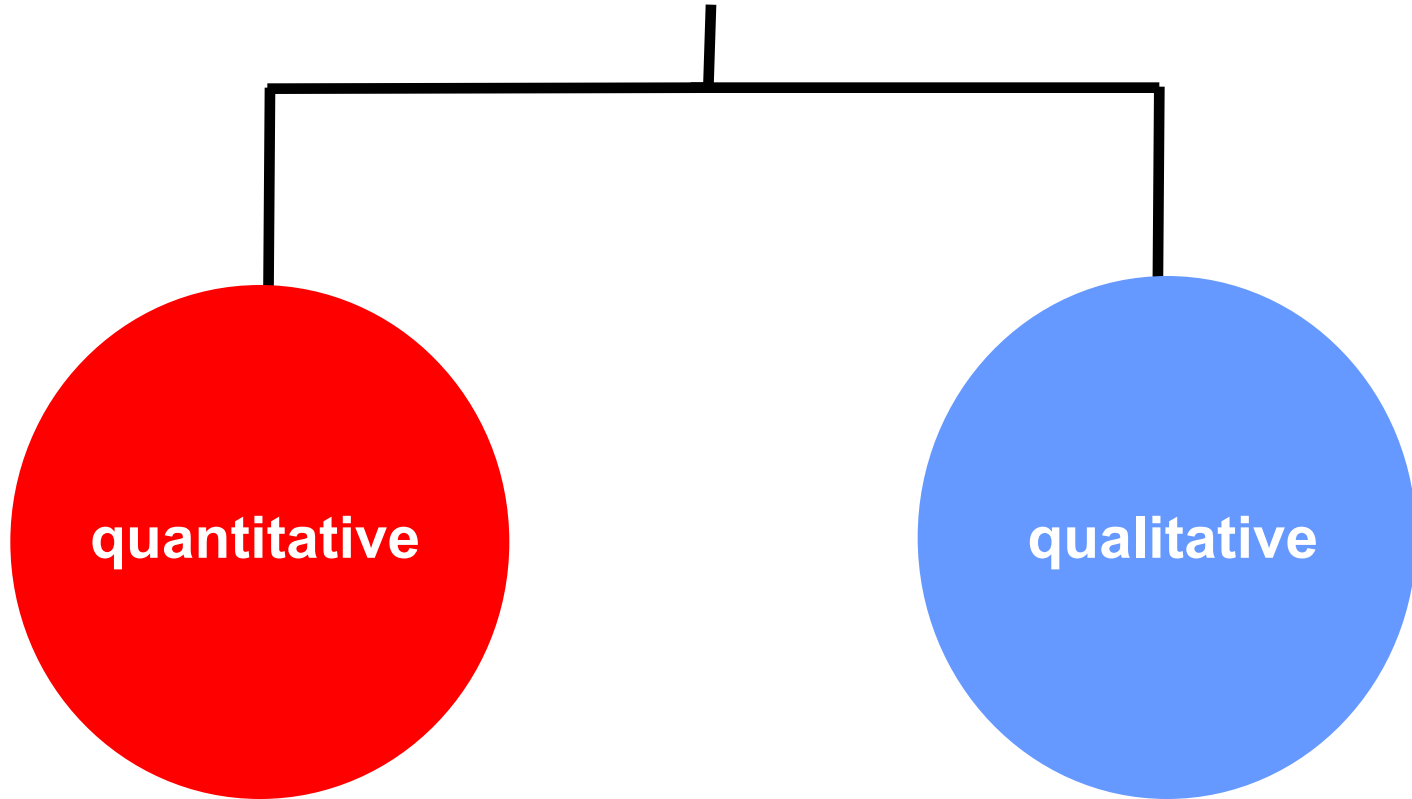
... appraisal should be as rigorous about validating questions as answers

also affects qualitative appraisal, but is typically less concealed there

A doubly expedient category mistake

The conventional picture of 'approaches to policy appraisal'

approaches



quantitative

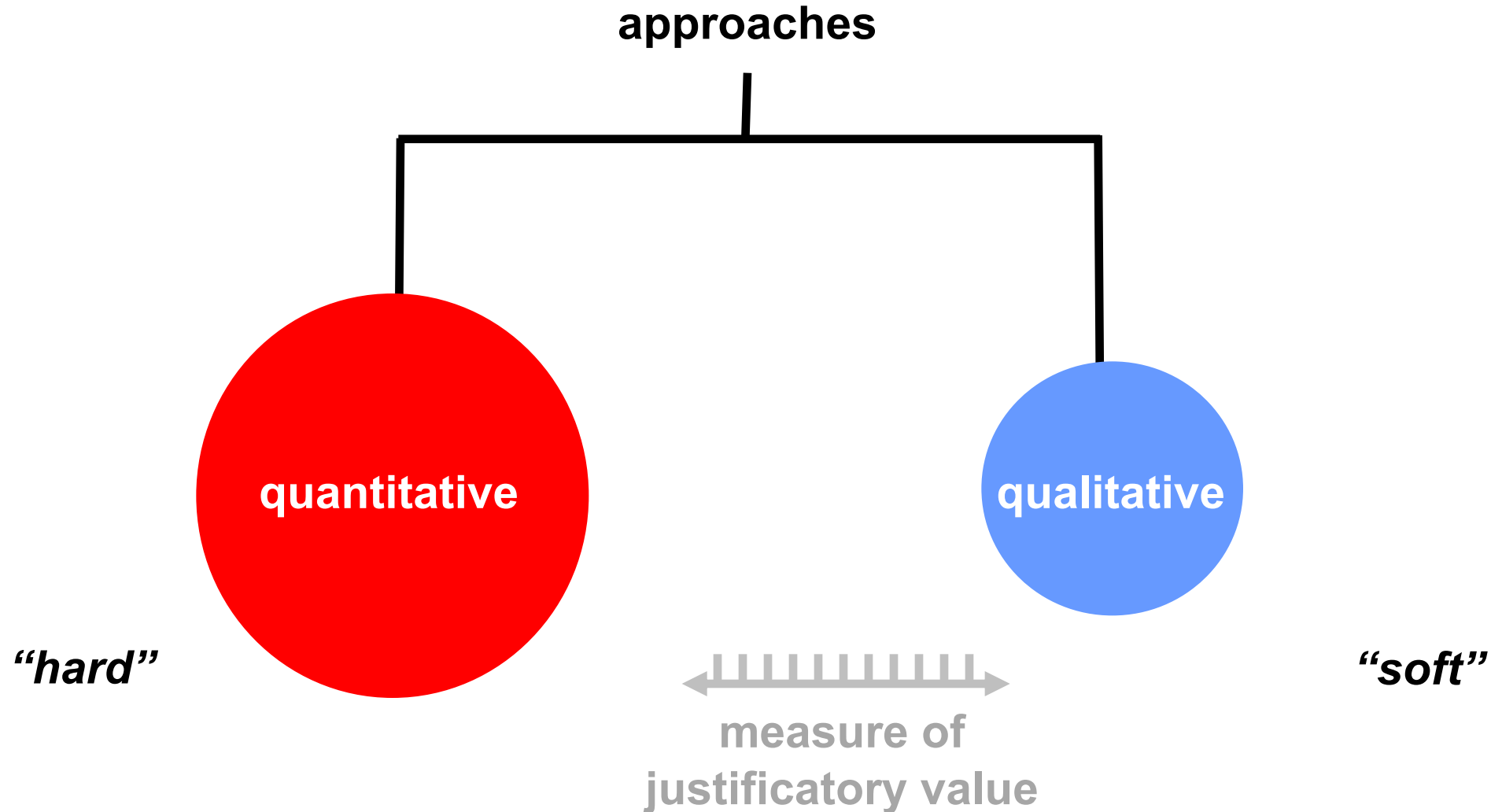
qualitative

“hard”

“soft”

A doubly expedient category mistake

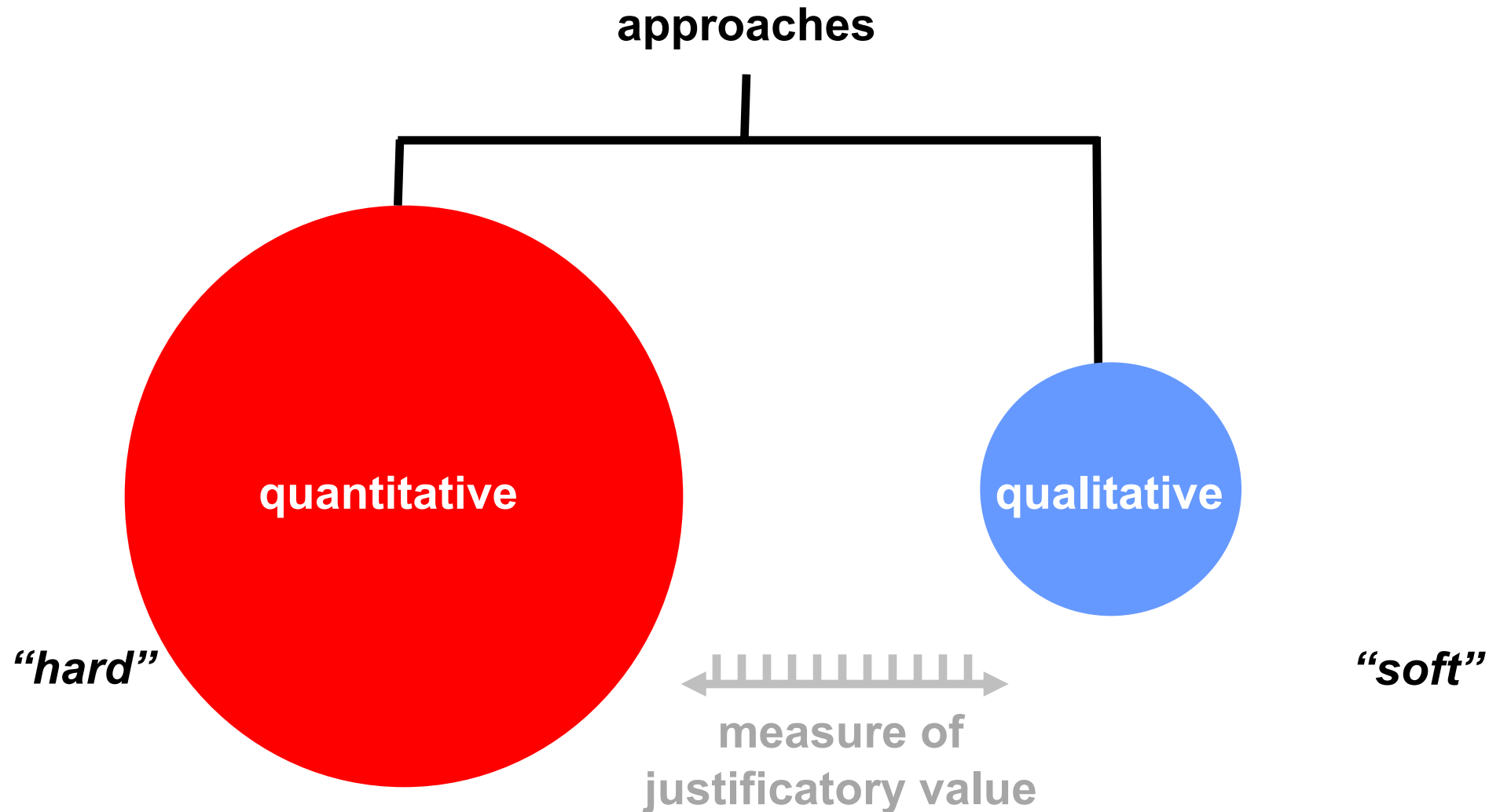
This is often normatively slanted in favour of quantitative methods ...



... by an implicit epistemic hierarchy between academic disciplines

A doubly expedient category mistake

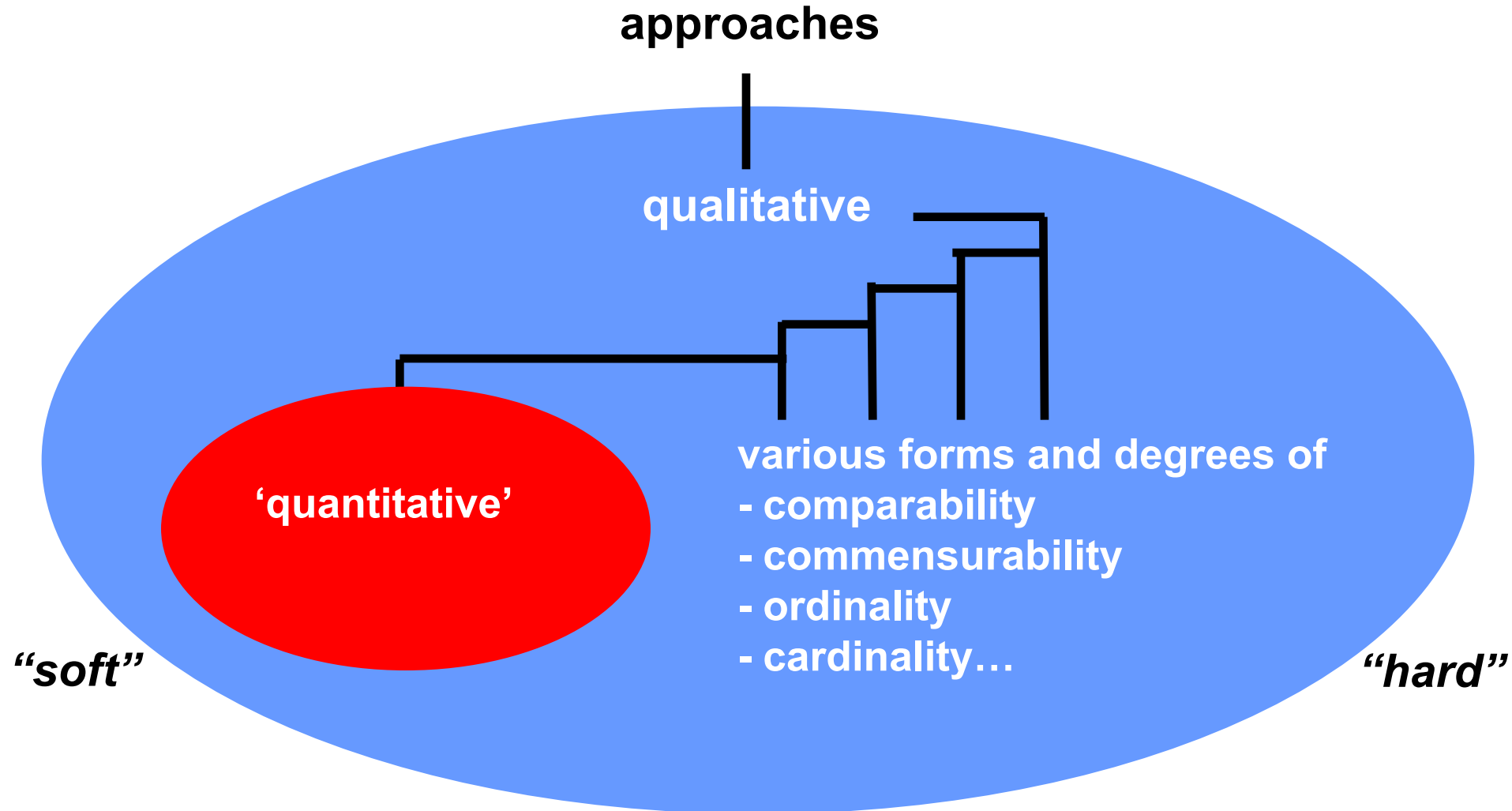
... further driven by, and reinforcing of, pressures for policy justification



... putting quantitative methods to the fore as means to hide politics

The realities of quality / quantity relations

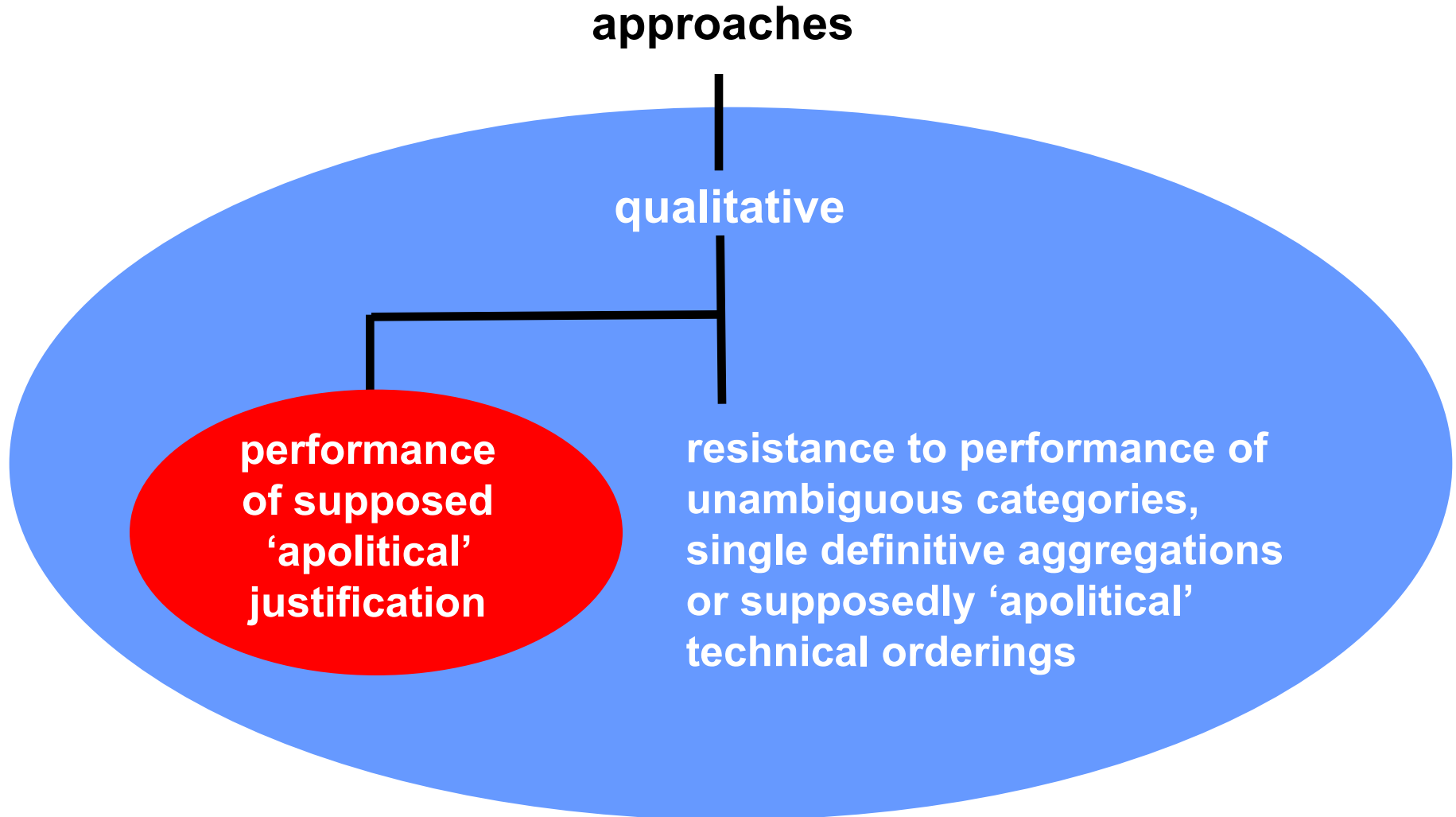
“quantification” = supporting of cardinal orderings for policy justification



Hubris & conflation with aggregation conceals intractable challenges.

The realities of quality / quantity relations

“quantification” = supporting of cardinal orderings for policy justification



A categorical quantitative / qualitative divide is a artefact of justification

So: all quantities are also qualitative!

Whether hidden or not, quantification is intrinsically and self evidently, necessarily a later analytical stage *after* much *qualitative reasoning*

- selection between *possible metrics* is qualitative
- defining a *particular denominator* is qualitative
- the *framing* and *partitioning* of *categories* is qualitative
- the constituting of *analytical procedures* is qualitative
- reconciling *contexts, scales & perspectives* is qualitative

Disciplinary & political *pressures for justification* force amnesia on this – *epistemic prestige of quantification* is a *resource for power*

Irony: the stronger the technical language of ‘apolitical’ quantification, the greater the intensity of the political forces that are actually at work

Are 'ethics of quantification' enough?

Pressures of justification mean ethics is **necessary but not sufficient?**

Qualitative methods *no more resist closure* than does quantification,

It is prevailing structures of academic **privilege** and policy **patronage** that give impression of immunity in interpretive or participatory methods

In fact, even 'participatory' and 'ethics' based practices, institutions and discourses also display **imprints of justificatory pressures**

- priority of '**consensus**', '**evaluation**' & '**impact**' in participation
- strong tendencies towards instrumentalised '**pre-fixed ethics**':
 - eg: '*bio-*' / '*nano-*' / '*neuro-*' / '*repro-*' / '*cyber-*' ... '*numero-*'

Ethics is actually about the **contingency** of definitive moral justifications

- if 'ethics' are treated as free of **subjectivities, contexts, conditions** then the same **politics-denying justificatory pressures** are in play

Ethics to 'open up' the politics of justification

Discourses, institutions, and practices around ethics of quantification are crucial – not in themselves but as **means to deeper ends** of more **transparent, accountable, democratic** politics of policy justification

For this ethics to be *rigorous*: it must deliberately **balance against**

- prevailing structures of academic *privilege* and policy *patronage*
- pressures for *technocratic closure* that **hide underlying politics**

For ethics to aid **democratic struggles** in science & innovation needs:

- *humility & scepticism*: about quality being prior to quantity
- *transdisciplinarity*: beyond quantity vs quality barricades
- *hybrid mixes*: to triangulate quantitative & qualitative methods
- **'plural & conditional' results to open up politics of justification**