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Book Review: Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

by Rohan Mathur

Introduction

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance by Robert M. Pirsig was first published in 1974. This visionary book details the travails of an unassuming writer who lives in Saint Paul, Minnesota. The book is told from the perspective of the narrator, a forty-year-old man who writes technical manuals for a living. Interestingly, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974) was apparently rejected by over 120 publishers, going on to become a major bestseller a few years later (over five million copies sold). *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* is an entire experience in philosophy and spirituality condensed into an extremely thought-provoking novel combining themes of spirituality and quality. It has three main streams of thought: the story of the motorcycle-riding narrator and his son, the story of Phaedrus, and the Chautauqua that is the narrator's way of explaining Phaedrus' philosophy. The principle of *Quality*, a word capitalized by Pirsig and elevated into the metaphysical ether, lies at the heart of the book, which is really a philosophical tract half-heartedly disguised as a novel. The book is subtitled *An Inquiry into Values* and it weaves an intricate and often meandering storyline as the reader is taken through a road trip with the narrator's son Chris and two friends (John and Sylvia Sutherland).

The book begins on the central plains of Minnesota and the road trip continues into the Dakotas, Montana, Idaho, Oregon and California. The author is never named, but the man inside him, his former self, is called Phaedrus and is mentioned on a regular basis. Phaedrus is the central character in Plato's play *Phaedrus*.

Through Phaedrus, the readers are taken into the philosophical inquiry into the nature of Quality—which is the main theme of the book. The book is also a story of a man running from a ghost of his former self after a mental illness. It is an interesting, often confusing back and forth between the classical/romantic angles of quality versus the analytical angle. I had read this book approximately seven years ago for an undergraduate class and on my first read, the book seemed to detail the workings of a motorcycle and all its vagaries. On my second read, the underlying relationship between the author's frequent dive into defining quality and his personal life started to build an intricate story in my mind.

Summary

The main argument of the book is that Quality is the primary source of how we see the world around us, outside both the object and the observer. The author states forcefully that Quality can't be defined, but everyone knows what it is, at least if they have eyes to see it. He laments that too often we get fooled into thinking that style is quality. Quality can't be defined as it's all encompassing. The author compares Quality to God, stating that any attempt to describe it must by definition fail as the concept is just too big to ever be contained in mere words. Philosophical questions in the book routinely include a motorcycle analogy. The ruminations range from ghosts to technology, Eastern philosophy to empiricism, rationalism to rhetoric. These discourses take place on the back of a motorcycle, in the form of a lecture which Pirsig compares to the Chautauqua (Indian tribe) assemblies of the

19th century.

Evaluation/Analysis

Many times during the book, I found myself both skipping and slowing, depending on the depth of what I was reading. The narrative is constructed rather loosely, even though the book can nose-dive deeply into philosophy at times. Some of the themes are light and some are almost too heavy to digest in one sitting. I found myself many nights thinking about the book as I prepared to sleep so that I could properly digest what I had read. Interestingly, the author states: "The place to improve the world is first in one's own heart and hands, and then work outward from there. Other people can talk about how to expand the destiny of mankind. I just want to talk about how to fix a motorcycle. I think that what I have to say has more lasting value" (Pirsig, 1974, p.267).

As I read the book for the second time, many parts of the book came back to me. I was surprised to find my memory of certain key sections was inaccurate. However, my memory of Pirsig's arguments about the indefinability of Quality were clear. And they remain a fascinating element of a book that is enthralling. The author states:

In our highly complex organic state we advanced organisms respond to our environment with an invention of many marvelous analogues. We invent earth and heavens, trees, stones and oceans, gods, music, arts, language, philosophy, engineering, civilization and science. We call these analogues reality. And they are reality. We mesmerize our children in the name of truth into knowing that they are reality. We throw anyone who does not accept these analogues into an insane asylum. But that which causes us to invent the analogues is Quality. Quality is the

continuing stimulus which our environment puts upon us to create the world in which we live. All of it. Every last bit of it (Pirsig, 1974, p.317).

Somehow the central thesis of the article, Quality, manages to be not only understandable but enjoyable and deeply thought-provoking. The author, however, has been successful in polarizing readers over decades; some think it's all tedious and pretentious while others such as me who are of the analytical bent take it as groundbreaking. The author urges readers through various musings to do a quality job in whatever they do irrespective of the task. This can neatly be applied to leadership as a quality leader stands out in the public eye versus people who become leaders by force. The author states:

My personal feeling is that this any further improvement of the world will be done by individuals making Quality decisions and that's all. [...] We've had that individual Quality in the past, exploited it as a natural resource without knowing it, now it's just about depleted. Everyone's just about out of gumption. And I think it's about time to return to the rebuilding of this American resource--individual worth (Pirsig, 1974, p.323).

Conclusion

The book offers many deep and powerful lessons. The author implores us to live an authentic life, which transcends into our leadership skills, our ethos and our careers. Using motorcycle maintenance as an example, Quality is life in general, is equal parts science, art and religion; with science is the very basis of robust products, and in the recent years, artists and designers are considered a primary facet of the new economy. The author states that by this criterion General Motors produced pure art, whereas Picasso did not. The author also states this to make his point stronger, "The state of mind which enables a man to do

work of this kind is akin to that of a religious worshipper or love. The daily effort comes from no deliberate intention or program, but straight from the heart” (Pirsig, 1974, p.98).

The book is a tug of war between the mechanical and prosaic versus the vibrant and awesome. One is a drag while the other has too much levity. The central theme the author brings up but fails to tackle conclusively is the classical versus romantic debate; (I thought the main argument was the importance of Quality). The afterword summarizes the book as “The book also appeared at a time of cultural upheaval on the matter of material success. Hippies were having none of it. Conservatives were baffled. Material success was the American dream.” (1974, p. 376). Overall, I highly recommend the book now after reading it twice but a word of caution, it is not for light-hearted reading.

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