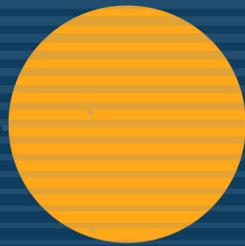


SUMMARY

ZEN AND THE ART OF *MOTORCYCLE* MAINTENANCE

ROBERT M. PIRSIG



Summary of “Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance” by Robert M. Pirsig

Written by Lea Schullery

An Inquiry Into Values

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Introduction

Our story begins on the back of a motorcycle. When you vacation on a motorcycle, you see things in a completely different way from any other. You see, in a car, you're always in a compartment, and you don't realize that through that car window everything you see is just more TV. You simply become a passive observer and it's all moving by you boringly in a frame. On a cycle, however, the frame is gone. You're in contact with everything. You're *in* the scene rather than merely watching it. As the concrete whizzes by five inches below your foot, you recognize that it's the same stuff you walk on, but you can never put your foot down and touch it. This story is about the narrator and his son, Chris, traveling to Montana on a motorcycle with some friends. Throughout their journey, they prefer secondary roads. Paved country roads are the best, then state highways. Freeways are the worst. The back roads that twist and turn are much more enjoyable on a cycle. "Roads free of drive-ins and billboards are better, roads where groves and meadows and orchards and lawns come almost to the shoulder, where kids wave to you when you ride by, where people look from their porches to see who it is, where when you stop to ask directions or information the answer tends to be longer than you want rather than short, where people ask where you're from and how long you've been riding." It's on these roads that our narrator goes through a spiritual journey and tells the story of Phaedrus and his search for Quality. So if you're ready to go on the journey, then let's begin.

There Are Two Modes of Thinking: Classic and Romantic

The narrator begins his spiritual journey on a motorcycle road trip with his eleven-year-old son Chris and another married couple, John and Sylvia Sutherland. The road trip doesn't follow a strict schedule as they prefer to take the uncrowded, rural roads that aren't necessarily marked properly. Throughout the journey, the narrator uses the opportunity to talk in-depth about important topics. He calls this process *Chautauqua*, a reference to the traveling tent shows that used to move across America and perform popular talks meant to entertain, improve the mind, and bring culture and enlightenment to its listeners.

As the group travels along, the narrator reflects on the Sutherland's aversion to repairing their own motorcycles and their discomfort with technology. He explains how on several occasions, John's motorcycle had broken down, yet he still makes no attempt to learn how to fix anything himself. This lack of interest baffles the narrator. You see, when traveling through middle America, few repair shops can fix John's BMW R60. Once throughout their journey, the BMW began to experience some problems. In the middle of nowhere, the narrator suggested using a thin, flat strip of metal, or a shim stock, to make a quick adjustment. When John asked where to buy one, the narrator held up his can of beer: "best shim stock in the world." John, however, was horrified he would suggest such a fix that would simply take away from the sleek aesthetic appearance of his expensive BMW.

Furthermore, he remembers a time in which John and Sylvia had a leaky faucet. John made a hasty attempt to repair it. Of course, it failed. He then noticed Sylvia lose her temper at her children as she suppressed her anger at the dripping faucet. Suddenly, the narrator recognized that it's not the motorcycle maintenance or leaky faucet that the Sutherland's struggle with. It's the technology they can't take. Like other clichés and stereotypes like "beatnik" or "hippie," they react against "the system." While the narrator

disagrees with them about motorcycle maintenance, he is sympathetic to their feelings about technology. Unfortunately, their flight from and hatred of technology is self-defeating. In fact, “The Buddha, Godhead, resides quite comfortably in the circuits of a digital computer or the gears of a cycle transmission as he does at the top of a mountain or in the petals of a flower.”

As the narrator goes through his journey with his son, John, and Syliva, he discovers that the Sutherlands represent the romantic mode of thinking. The romantic mode is primarily inspirational, imaginative, creative, and intuitive. They see life as neither predictable nor controllable. Like the Sutherlands, romantic thinkers would rather admire the beauty of their motorcycle than learn about its inner workings. Classical thinkers, like the narrator, would rather understand the ins and outs and make sense of the world around them, including the inner workings of the motorcycle.

While the Sutherlands represent the romantic mode of thinking, the narrator identifies as a classical thinker. The classic mode, by contrast, proceeds by reason and laws. In other words, motorcycle *riding* is romantic whereas motorcycle *maintenance* is purely classic. A classical understanding sees the world primarily as the underlying form itself while romantic understanding sees it in terms of immediate appearance. To explain further, the narrator uses the metaphor of motorcycle maintenance, comparing the classical mind to that of an engineer or mechanic.

For instance, if you were to show a motorcycle engine to a romantic, he would not see much interest in it, he would only see its surface. Meanwhile, a classical person might become fascinated by it because he sees the underlying form within the various lines and shapes. The rational, analytical, and classical mind understands all parts of the motorcycle: the power-delivery system, the ignition system, the feedback system, and the lubrication system. Ultimately, the classic aims to control his environment and bring order to chaos, whereas the romantic understands life is full of chaos and emotion.

The Birth and Death of Phaedrus

As the narrator continues his road trip, he begins to discuss a character he calls Phaedrus. Named after an Ancient Greek Sophist, Phaedrus is the name given by the narrator to the consciousness that once occupied his body. He describes Phaedrus as an expert at manipulating the world both analytically and logically. Additionally, he had an I.Q. of 170, which occurs in only one in fifty thousand people. He isolated himself, with no close friends, and completely alone despite having a wife and family. No one really knew him.

Phaedrus was a philosophy student and an English professor. By the age of 15, he had already completed a year of university biochemistry where he became fascinated by the formation of hypotheses. These potential explanations appeared to be formed by neither nature nor by the mind of a scientist. So where did they come from? He concluded that any phenomenon could be explained by an infinite number of possible hypotheses; therefore, he believed the scientific method could no longer be used to determine decisive truths. As a result, Phaedrus continued to question the concept of reason and made it his mission to understand the true meaning of the world. To many people, these behaviors of isolation and the challenging existing systems of thought would be a clear sign of mental illness.

The narrator then tells the story of how one Friday he had gone to work and had a seemingly normal, productive day. That weekend he went to a party where he drank too much and decided to lie down for a bit in one of the back rooms. Upon waking up, he realized he'd slept there the whole night! A bit embarrassed, and a bit confused, he walks out the door to discover he's not in a stranger's home at all. He opens the door to find a long corridor where strangers stopped him to ask how he felt. Surely they were referring to the hangover he should have after being in such a drunken condition, right? Eventually, he discovers that he is in the hospital, one that

he has been in for several months. Not only that, but he has a new personality.

Phaedrus is now dead. Destroyed by the order of the court, the narrator went under electroshock therapy to liquidate him without a trace. Yet now, as the narrator rides along the roads on his motorcycle, memories of Phaedrus suddenly appear. He is now torn between embracing these re-emerging memories or fighting them. Phaedrus's views on life starkly contrast the narrator and he's unsure of how to lessen the tension fighting within him. Despite his disappearance, the narrator aims to understand the classical mind of Phaedrus throughout the long cross-country ride.

Phaedrus's Search for Quality

When Phaedrus began to question the existing systems of thought, he became a drifter. After all, drifting is only natural when you can't follow any known method of procedure and search for lateral truth. So he drifted. That drift led him to the Army, which sent him to Korea. In Korea, Phaedrus began writing letters which began looking radically different from his earlier writing, suggesting that he had gone through a change.

Now, Phaedrus was writing with emotion. Page after page, Phaedrus discussed the tiny details of his surroundings: marketplaces, shops with sliding glass doors, slate roofs, roads, thatched huts, everything. Sometimes, he was even filled with wild enthusiasm, sometimes depressed, other times angry, or even humorous. He then returns to Korea where he spends two weeks in deep thought, in which his lateral search for truth is finished, so he decides to enroll in university to study philosophy. Philosophy, he believed was the highest echelon of the entire hierarchy of knowledge and would cure his "madness."

It's during Phaedrus's study in Philosophy that he begins to explore the definition of Quality. On a hike with his son, the narrator begins to compare the trek in the mountains to Phaedrus's journey towards discovering Quality. Phaedrus eventually concludes that Quality is a concept that cannot be defined; therefore, the narrator attempts to imagine a world in which Quality does not exist. In his attempt, he concludes that a world without Quality is one that is "square" and without artistic interest. Quality then bridges the gap between romantic and classic modes of thought since Phaedrus's refusal to define Quality means it cannot be viewed from an analytical or classic view.

Those who are classically minded tend to acknowledge how they perceive the world and then classify them and divide them based on individual characteristics. In other words, they create order out of chaos. On the other hand, romantics admire the chaos of life's experiences. Phaedrus, however,

believes that Quality doesn't necessarily mean having to reject one or the other. You see, "Quality is the response of an organism to its environment...In our highly complex organic state, we advanced organisms respond to our environment with the invention of marvelous analogues. We invent earth and heaven, trees, stones, and oceans, gods, music, arts, language, philosophy, engineering, civilization, and science. We call these analogues reality. And they are reality...But that which causes us to invent the analogues is Quality." In other words, Quality integrates romanticism into rational thought and reflects upon the vast analogues from which we assemble our versions of reality.

The Church of Reason Changed the Way Phaedrus Approached Thinking

The philosophy of Quality is aimed to harmonize the classical and romantic modes of thought; however, this proved to be difficult for the narrator who struggled with understanding the romantics. For instance, throughout the narrator's travels, he recognizes a tension within himself. The calmness of his surroundings conceals things he is afraid of. It conceals haunted places. This tension brings forward another memory of Phaedrus.

When Phaedrus was a professor, he felt tension so intense he would throw up each morning before he arrived at his first classroom. He experienced a "stage fright" when appearing in front of students and talking; an action that went completely against his isolated way of life. Of course, the tension was interpreted by his students as a strong, intimidating intensity. The moment Phaedrus walked into the classroom all eyes turned on him and followed him as he walked to the front of the classroom. Conversations died down and they waited in silence for Phaedrus to start teaching. Their eyes never strayed from him. His reputation preceded him as the majority of students avoided his classes like the Black Death.

Phaedrus taught at a teaching college, a place in which all you do is teach and say the same dull things over and over again to uninterested students. However, before Phaedrus left teaching, he began calling it a "Church of Reason," which confused many of his colleagues. Why call it Church of Reason? You see, the university eventually came under the influence of right-wing state politics. As a result, certain freedoms and academic standards became compromised. For instance, professors were told that all public statements must be cleared through the college public-relations office before they could be made. Additionally, academic standards were demolished as the legislature prohibited the school from refusing entry to any student over the age of twenty-one. Even worse, the legislature passed a law fining the college eight thousand dollars for every student who failed, essentially stating each student must pass.

Phaedrus was disgusted by the changes being made and began publicly calling for an investigation of the school and made efforts to stop accreditation. He responded to his confused students by giving his Church of Reason lecture. He began his lecture with an article about a country church building with a beer sign hanging on the entrance. You see, the church was sold and was now being used as a bar. The article stated the Catholic church had complained, believing the church was a sanctified place and deserved more respect. But what constitutes a church? Is it the brick, boards, and stained glass windows? Is it the shape of the roof? In the end, it was deemed that the building in question was not holy ground. It had been desanctified and the beer sign remained over the bar, not the church.

Phaedrus used this story to illustrate the confusion he felt about the University's loss of accreditation. He explained that when a University loses its accreditation, it doesn't simply shut down. Classes don't stop. Everything continues as it did before, and students still receive the same education. When a university loses its accreditation, all that happens is that the university simply becomes "excommunicated." The legislature can no longer dictate what happens inside its walls; it becomes no longer "holy ground." In other words, like a church, a university is not the property it sits on or the salaries it pays. The real University is a *state of mind*. "It's a state of mind which is regenerated throughout the centuries by a body of people who traditionally carry the title of professor, but even that title is not part of the real University. The real University is nothing less than the continuing body of reason itself."

The Effect of Phaedrus on His Son and Relationships

Once Phaedrus made the realization that a real University has no specific location, owns no property, pays no salaries and receives no material dues, he began to question why he so long pursued only rational explanations. Rational or classical thinking cannot be the only path to understanding; instead, Phaedrus recognized the need for a romantic, spiritual way of life. This attempt to combine classical and romantic thought, also known as aiming for Quality and balance in life, is what led to Phaedrus's madness and personal hardships.

The narrator worries throughout the road trip that Chris is also suffering from mental illness. For instance, Chris often complains of stomach aches, once it was so bad, they thought he had appendicitis. He was screaming so loudly that nobody could touch him, but when he finally made it to the hospital they found nothing. After a few more instances of the same stomach aches, the narrator became certain that the stomach aches were the beginning symptoms of mental illness. Additionally, Chris exhibits dramatic mood swings, but the narrator only blames himself for the illnesses plaguing his son.

By the end of the road trip, the narrator recognizes the disconnect between him and his son; the two don't seem to ever be on the same page. For instance, when they stop at the top of a cliff, the narrator sees Chris move to the edge, too close for a one hundred foot drop! He swiftly grabs the shirt of his son and pulls him back, stating "Don't do that." All Chris does is give him a strange squint. The narrator begins to recognize that Chris wants to hate him because he is no longer Phaedrus. He realizes that his failure to reconcile his identity with Phaedrus leaves him unable to become the father-figure that his son needs him to be.

Furthermore, the combativeness that Chris exhibits reminds the narrator of Phaedrus. He realizes that he must talk to his son about Phaedrus and the

“madness” that he experienced when Phaedrus was around. Chris doesn’t take the news well, especially when the narrator explains that Chris too may be predisposed to insanity. As a result, he begins to cry uncontrollably. Eventually, Chris asks, “Were you really insane?” The narrator responds with, “no.” Suddenly, astonishment hits and Chris’s eyes sparkle. “I knew it,” he says and the two climb onto the motorcycle and drive off. This realization is exactly what Chris needed to fuel his self-identification, no longer struggling with the idea that his father was insane or that he too might be predisposed to insanity.

By the end of the story, the narrator can embrace his old identity. As a result, he and his son can move on and ride away on their motorcycle, happy and content with who they are.

Final Summary

The divide between science and humanities has long existed. However, that doesn't mean that you can't have the qualities of both. In fact, if you want to achieve Quality and live a completely balanced life, then it is necessary to bridge the gap between the two. In the end, Pirsig refers to *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* as a "culture-bearing" work, one that challenges cultural value assumptions. At the time it was published, hippies were rejecting the capitalist American dream, and their ideology of freedom was negatively viewed by the public. Pirsig's book, however, was able to offer a positive approach to life that was more than an alternative to material success. It's more of an expansion of the meaning of "success," something larger than just getting a good job and staying out of trouble. It's also more than mere freedom. It gives a positive goal to work toward that does not confine. In the end, if you want a balanced life, it's important to embrace both the classical and romantic ways of life.



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