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Summary and Analysis of

ZEN AND THE ART OF MOTORCYCLE MAINTENANCE

An Inquiry into Values

**Based on
the Book
by Robert
M. Pirsig**





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Summary and Analysis of
Zen and the Art of Motorcycle
Maintenance
An Inquiry into Values
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Context

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance by Robert M. Pirsig is often called “an unclassifiable book.” Is it a novel? Narrative nonfiction? Philosophy? In fact, it is unquestionably all three. Born from a motorcycle trip the author took with his son and some close friends in 1968, the book evolved from a series of essays, a bit of memoir, and a creative juxtaposition of ideas and metaphors. It grew from what Pirsig saw as modern society’s deep malaise as technology exerts more and more influence over our lives.

When the book was first published, it was both lauded and panned by critics, and many readers did not know how to perceive it because it asked one of life’s most difficult questions: How do we know what is true and what is not? Written in an era when “truths” were being questioned, “the establishment” was anathema to many. The power of this book lies in its ability to make the reader think about the underlying structure of reality itself.

Since its first publication, the book has sold more than five million copies in twenty-three languages and has attained recognition as a modern classic. Praised by the BBC and *The Telegraph*, the press called it “the most widely read philosophy book, ever.”

Overview

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance juxtaposes two parallel stories using a philosophical meditation as the mortar between them. The first story tells of the narrator's motorcycle journey from Minnesota to California with his eleven-year-old son, Chris, and two close friends. The second story describes the life of a man the narrator calls Phaedrus, an intellectual genius who becomes obsessed with a philosophical concept he calls Quality.

As the group travels, the narrator intersperses the parallel plots with philosophical discourses he calls Chautauquas (named after traveling education and entertainment tent-shows popular at the turn of the twentieth century). Pirsig's Chautauquas begin with the narrator discussing his friends—John and Sylvia—and their aversion to the technology that pervades the modern world. He calls this the “romantic” view. His own view is what he calls the “classical,” a pragmatic, analytical approach that includes a zeal for motorcycle maintenance. He also experiences strange memories of places on the trip, as if he's been there before.

As the story unfolds, the narrator reveals that Phaedrus is, in fact, the narrator's previous persona, an alter ego destroyed by electroshock therapy after a nervous breakdown. The electroshock treatments all but destroyed the Phaedrus personality. The strange memories are fragments of Phaedrus's recollections.

The narrator relates Phaedrus's life from journal writings. Phaedrus was a child prodigy, a hyperintellectual genius who entered college at the age of fifteen but quickly grew disgusted with the scientific method, feeling it raised more questions than it answered. Years later, he earned a degree in English and found work teaching composition and rhetoric at Montana State University (MSU) in Bozeman. Phaedrus's mind was like a pit bull: Once it got its teeth into something, it was incapable of letting go.

It was at MSU that he became fixated on the question of Quality. Ultimately, his quest to find the meaning of Quality would define Phaedrus's life and eventual downfall. He finally realized that Quality is neither subjective nor objective, romantic nor classical. It is the bridge

between these binaries.

On the road westward, the terrain and the travails of the trip mirror the narrator's state of mind. His son Chris exhibits signs of mental illness and psychosomatic stomachaches. The most difficult external circumstances echo the most challenging intellectual mountains that Phaedrus had to climb. His Chautauqua topics include motorcycle maintenance in real life and as a metaphor for his approach to life; "stuckness," which can lead to profound leaps of progress that take us out of the box of our everyday thinking; and how "gumption" can lead us to an awareness of Quality. It is the classical, dualistic thinking of the modern world that holds us back.

The narrator also explores a recurring dream with a glass door between him and Chris. He eventually realizes that the dream symbolizes the struggle between his identity and that of Phaedrus. He believes Phaedrus is reasserting himself.

Phaedrus enrolled in an interdisciplinary PhD program at the University of Chicago to satisfy his obsession with ancient Greek philosophy. He quickly clashed with the chairman of the interdisciplinary committee, whose classical ideas ran counter to Phaedrus's ideas of Quality. It was this humiliating confrontation that caused Phaedrus's mental breakdown, leading to the shock treatments that destroyed his identity—but not before he made the final connection he'd been seeking.

The Quality he had been seeking for so long was nothing other than the Tao of Lao Tzu, the ancient Chinese wisdom from which all Eastern religions and philosophies sprang. Quality was the source from which both romanticism and classicism grew, not a result of either way of thinking. And it was ancient Greek philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle that destroyed this way of thinking in the West more than twenty-four centuries ago, crippling our ability to experience Quality.

By the time they reach San Francisco, Chris and the narrator reach a climax of conflict between them. Phaedrus was the boy's father, not the narrator. The narrator fears that Chris might be slipping into the same kind of insanity as Phaedrus. The narrator wishes to send Chris home on a bus and then commit himself, explaining what happened when he broke down before. The glass-door dream was a real memory in the hospital where Phaedrus was taken away and Chris couldn't reach him. This realization sparks Phaedrus's reawakening, merging his persona with the narrator's

once again.

Summary

PART I

1

The narrator and his son Chris are on a motorcycle trip across the Central and Great Plains, passing through Minnesota with friends John and Sylvia, who are on another motorcycle.

Traveling by motorcycle is completely different from traveling by car. On a bike, one becomes part of the landscape rather than viewing the world through a window. During this trip, the narrator wishes to offer the reader a series of Chautauquas—similar to the traveling educational assemblies that brought culture and entertainment to rural communities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

His first Chautauqua is to lament modern humanity's dependence on—and loathing of—technology. It's a destructive love-hate relationship. John and Sylvia despise technology even as they're addicted to it. There are instances of suppressed anger at the role technology plays in their lives, evidenced through anger at a leaky faucet and refusal to do their own motorcycle maintenance, but the narrator does not define them based solely on these feelings.

Need to Know: The narrator's view of motorcycle maintenance differs diametrically from John's view. The narrator does all maintenance himself—he knows his bike inside and out; no one will ever approach it with the same care he does. John staunchly believes it's better to take his bike to a dedicated mechanic. This difference will become a metaphor for their approaches to life.

2

The narrator, Chris, John, and Sylvia see a storm on the horizon as they approach the Dakotas.

The narrator recounts a previous trip during which he and Chris were caught in a terrible thunderstorm. Due to inexperience, they found

themselves bogged down with too much baggage, and drenched, with lightning crashing around them. The motorcycle then quit, stranding them in the middle of nowhere. He assumed this was because of the storm, but he was just out of gas.

After getting the motorcycle home, the narrator took it to a shop, resulting in a series of costly repairs by incompetent or rushed mechanics. Because of these experiences, he now espouses the philosophy of thorough maintenance done personally: Know your bike. The narrator applies this experience to his life overall, too. He takes care in what he does and tries to be as knowledgeable as possible. This story really comes back to the adage “If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself.”

Need to Know: The author wishes to explore the idea of taking time and paying attention to your task—doing whatever it is without allowing distractions. This is not yet discussed in detail, but it is one of the central tenets of Zen practice.

3

The group waits out a storm under a tree and eventually stops at a small-town motel.

Chris asks his father if he believes in ghosts. The narrator says no at first, but then he changes his answer. He says that we live in a world of ghosts, which can take the form of teachings and beliefs that no longer have relevance. If something exists only in people’s heads, it is a “ghost.”

He offers the example of the Isaac Newton’s discovery of gravity. Before Newton, no one had conceived of gravity; it simply *was*. Science and the laws of nature and mathematics exist only in the mind.

The narrator is haunted by Phaedrus, a “ghost” that he recognizes as the consciousness that once occupied his body, a previous persona.

Need to Know: The narrator hints at a past that was drastically different from the life he’s living now, begging the question of what happened to change him so profoundly.

4

The narrator provides a list of valuable things to take on motorcycling trips

—“Clothing, Personal Stuff, Cooking and Camping Gear, and Motorcycle Stuff”—with brief explanations of why those things are important.

Each machine—each motorcycle—has its own personality, the accumulation of maintenance and experiences that can make two machines of the same model and year feel and behave very differently. The narrator calls these differences “the real object of motorcycle maintenance.” With personal maintenance, the motorcycle becomes a “healthy, good-natured, long-lasting [friend].”

The next morning’s ride is terribly cold, and they pull into the next town suffering from the beginnings of hypothermia. When the weather finally warms and they move on, John laments how difficult it is to photograph stunning natural vistas. Sylvia says that as a child, she once spent half a roll of film trying to photograph the scenery on a family trip. When she got the pictures back, she cried because “there wasn’t anything there.”

Photographs simply can’t capture the beauty of the natural world because they put everything into frames. The narrator equates this to traveling by car, the windows of which automatically frame everything, narrowing our views.

Need to Know: Beauty is in the details: the details of the things carried, the details of each unique machine, the details of the trip.

5

Their journey continues across South Dakota.

In the past, John’s handlebars had grown loose, and no amount of tightening would fix the problem. The narrator suggested using a beer can as a shim, but John balked at the idea of a simple beer can being used to fix his expensive BMW motorcycle. He was more worried about perception than efficacy.

For the narrator, this raises the idea of conflict between visions of reality. There are two realities: one of immediate artistic appearance and one of underlying scientific explanation.

Chris loses his appetite, suffering stomach pains, and exhibits behavioral problems. The narrator says it might be the beginning of mental illness, but he doesn’t trust doctors and psychiatrists because they’re not “kin.” Chris doesn’t need “emotional Band-Aids,” he says.

The ghost of Phaedrus continues to bear down on the narrator's psyche.

Need to Know: Chapter by chapter, the narrator is building the idea of conflicting worldviews, the artistic and abstract versus the scientific and concrete. Chris's behavior might be tied into this conflict while also revealing the nature and history of "Phaedrus" one step at a time.

6

The narrator experiences a few snatches of memory from Phaedrus's experiences, but for the most part, Phaedrus's entire personality has been expunged somehow.

The conflicting world views above are labeled *classical* (the scientific, the rational, the reasoning) and the *romantic* (the artistic, intuitive, imaginative, the inspirational). Each view has its dark flip side: To a person of the classical side, the romantic side can seem frivolous, erratic, and untrustworthy. To a person of the romantic side, the classical can seem dull, oppressive, and over-regimented.

The motorcycle is a perfect example of the classical side, a collection of systems and sub-systems, the explanation of which is "duller than ditchwater." It does not take into account the humanity that must be present in order to operate one.

Need to Know: Phaedrus was a hyperrational genius of the classical side, a master of slicing ideas and systems apart to understand how they fit together. According to the narrator, he used this skill in a "bizarre, yet meaningful way," but ultimately, he ended up making himself a victim of his own methods.

7

The next stage of the trip is blistering hot, which starts to take a toll on the motorcycles.

Phaedrus's temperament made him uniquely skilled at using the "knife" of analysis to cut ideas and systems into infinitely smaller divisions, forever sorting and categorizing. But when "analytic thought, the knife, is applied to experience, something is always killed in the process." But something is always created, too, forming a kind of "death-birth community that is

neither good nor bad, but just *is*.” (Phaedrus was, in a sense, killed off and replaced by the narrator.)

At some point in the past, the narrator woke up as if from a significant loss of time. With no knowledge of why he was there, he awoke in the hospital. He was told that he had a new personality now. Phaedrus was dead, destroyed by shock treatments called “Annihilation ECS.” But wisps of Phaedrus’s memories remain, emerging now as the narrator travels west.

Need to Know: The narrator apparently underwent shock treatments in response to a severe episode of mental illness, and in the process, his previous personality, called Phaedrus, was destroyed.

PART II

8

In a small town in Montana, the narrator tunes up his motorcycle. The operation of an engine requires incredible precision, with parts fashioned down to the thousandth of an inch, but this kind of perfection can only ever be an ideal. True perfection is impossible. Maintenance of a motorcycle requires understanding of its hierarchy of systems and the structure.

Governments and institutions are also systems, but revolt against them is useless because systems are only symptoms of the underlying structure: systematic, rational thought. If a factory is torn down but the underlying rationality that built it is left in place, then someone will build a new factory. The systematic patterns must also be destroyed.

Need to Know: A motorcycle is an analogy for the systems of government and “the establishment”—a construct of rational systems, a hierarchy. But these things are illusions created by rational thought and epitomized by the scientific method.

9

The group follows the Yellowstone Valley into Montana and the narrator and his son are nearly killed by an oncoming car in their lane. In the aftermath of this close call, a cardboard carton flops around in the turbulence left by the car. Sylvia later says that she thought the cardboard

was the narrator's motorcycle rolling over and over on the highway.

The scientific method is broken down into six steps: statement of the problem, hypothesis, experimentation, predicted results, observed results, and conclusions. This process is compared to the methods a mechanic uses to fix a motorcycle.

Need to Know: Sylvia's comment signifies just how fragile they all are compared to other traffic—and how fragile we all are in life.

The scientific method is not unlike motorcycle maintenance, which is why mechanics so often appear deep in thought.

10

Every discovery made via the scientific method creates more questions. But do those questions come from within the scientist or from outside? Phaedrus began to question the nature of scientific hypothesis itself. According to the narrator, he “became interested in hypotheses as entities in themselves,” which led him into a rabbit hole that eventually caused a breakdown. The more questions he answered, the more new questions were raised. This disproved the validity of the scientific method itself.

Scientific truths apparently possess a temporal condition. “Some scientific truths seemed to last for centuries, others for less than a year. Scientific truth [is] not dogma, good for eternity, but a temporal, quantitative entity that [can] be studied like anything else.” This idea upset Phaedrus greatly.

Need to Know: The act of answering questions creates a multitude of new questions, increasing chaos rather than reducing it. Phaedrus believed that the current societal ills stemmed from the hollowness and spiritual emptiness of the rationality to which Western thought clings.

11

The motorcycle trip takes the group over the alpine tundra, crossing a stunning landscape above eleven thousand feet. In this high country, nothing but low-lying moss and tiny wildflowers can grow. It is an ecosystem unto itself.

This “high country” equates to the kind of intellectual region that

Phaedrus threw himself into, a place where few people venture. Those who do, however, find no end of austere wonders to explore. This dogged intellectualism drew Phaedrus into the study of philosophy, called the greatest of intellectual disciplines by its adherents. It is the study of the boundaries between thought, existence, and substance. Until he discovered philosophy as a course of study, Phaedrus was intellectually adrift. The study of two Renaissance philosophers—the Scotsman David Hume and the German Immanuel Kant—forms the foundation of a breakthrough Phaedrus experiences later.

Hume posited that all knowledge and thought is derived exclusively from the senses, a philosophy known as “empiricism.” Kant refuted this position by asserting that knowledge may start from the senses, but through experiences, we build mental constructs of things that continue to exist even if we are not actively perceiving those things at the moment.

In Hume’s position, we reach an intellectual impasse, because our “reason, which is supposed to make things more intelligible, seems to be making them less intelligible, and when reason thus defeats its own purpose something has to be changed in the structure of reason itself.”

Kant refutes Hume’s empiricism with the thesis that our thoughts are independent of sensory data and, in fact, screen and shape what we experience. He called this position a philosophical revolution comparable to Copernicus’s view of the universe.

Phaedrus was thrilled with Kant’s work at first, but it quickly began to feel ugly and repressive to him.

Need to Know: Just as the “Copernican revolution” forms a boundary that distinguishes modern thought from that of our medieval ancestors, Kant’s work forms a sea change in metaphysics. Phaedrus lost himself in this “intellectual high country” for a long time, seeking what he did not know.

12

The group arrives at Yellowstone Park, a place that Phaedrus despised. They are to meet with some of Phaedrus’s old friends, the DeWeeses. Mr. DeWeese is an impressionist painter, and he fascinated Phaedrus. The narrator explains, “Phaedrus had a high regard for DeWeese because he didn’t understand him. For Phaedrus, failure to understand something

created tremendous interest.”

After studying Kant, Phaedrus moved to India to study Oriental philosophy. He studied Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism and decided their doctrinal differences were not remotely as deep and important as the differences between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Holy wars were not fought over Eastern religions. The Eastern religions all derive from the Sanskrit phrase *Tat tvam asi*, which means *Thou are that*. What you are and what you perceive are undivided.

After growing frustrated with Eastern philosophy, Phaedrus returned to the United States, where he got married, had two children, and pursued a career as a writer, allowing his intense philosophical questing to go into hibernation.

Need to Know: The narrator is, in many ways, retracing his steps to learn more about who Phaedrus was and what he did, like a quest for the specter of his past.

13

The more he delves into the life of Phaedrus, the more the narrator experiences great trepidation, like an archaeologist unsure of what he'll find.

In the 1950s, Phaedrus worked at a teaching college in Montana, the kind of institution where no academic research was done. The college entered a dispute with the right-wing governor and legislature, and Phaedrus found himself at the forefront of the struggle about what a university is meant to be.

He delivered a lecture to his students that he called the Church of Reason lecture, in which he explained that the University was an idea: a collective agreement that knowledge and truth must be pursued. Where there is no quest for truth and knowledge, there can be no University, only the hollow, deceptive shell of a collection of buildings.

Need to Know: Phaedrus's academic career was a tumultuous one, both as an academician and as an educator. His students found his classes to be too intense and avoided them. Unearthing old notes and memories makes the narrator feel like an archaeologist wondering “if some tombs are better left

shut.”

14

In present day, the group arrives at the home of the DeWeeses. Other friends of the hosts are also in attendance, and everyone shares in dinner and conversation. Moments of awkwardness come and go as the DeWeeses struggle with the difference between the man before them and the man they knew. The narrator and Chris apparently lived with the DeWeeses for some time.

The conversation turns to technical writing, and the narrator then takes it into the relationship between technology, art, and self.

Peace of mind “[is] the whole thing,” he says, the ultimate goal, which relates back to mechanics. He suggests that a machine that runs smoothly does so because it was created and taken care of with “good maintenance.” He goes on to say that the builder—the creator, the mechanic—brings his psyche into his work. If he is not working with peace of mind, his negativity will be transferred to the machine. He argues, “technology presumes there’s just one right way to do things, and there never is.” Though we might wish that there was a manual or guide to making choices, there is not, and we must consider not only ourselves in the actions we take, but also the world, because our choices do not exist in a vacuum.

Mr. DeWeese says this sounds like art, and the narrator agrees that it is. “The divorce of art from technology is completely unnatural.” He contends that reason, as it currently exists, needs to be reimagined, because existing modes of thought cannot cope with the modern situation.

Need to Know: We need to invent a new form of reason, much like Newton invented a new way of thinking about mathematics, by expanding on what has come before to explain new paradigms. The narrator says that present-day reason is an analog of the flat earth beliefs of the medieval times.

15

The narrator and his son part ways with John and Sylvia in order to remain in Bozeman, Montana, with the DeWeeses for a few days. The narrator visits the college where he used to teach, seeking out the building itself. Chris flees the building after taking only a few steps inside.

The narrator encounters a woman who apparently knows him, but of whom he has no recollection. She is shocked to see him back, as if she has encountered a ghost, and is even more shocked to hear that he is no longer teaching. “You’ve *stopped?*” she says. “You can’t do that.” But he has moved on to writing and motorcycle maintenance.

His office brings memories of the way he struggled with the concepts of rhetoric, spending untold hours trying to nail down intellectually slippery concepts, such as the nature of Quality, flooding back. What does Quality writing mean? How could he teach something he couldn’t understand himself?

Need to Know: As in precipitating a solid crystal from a super-saturated chemical solution, this question of Quality forms the “seed crystal” that will unleash a major life event.

PART III

16

The narrator and his son hike up a long valley above the DeWeeses’ house, a valley that goes seventy-five miles without touching roads or civilization on its way to the top of a mountain. It is this struggle toward the peak that can be juxtaposed with Phaedrus’s struggle for understanding.

Phaedrus had set out to determine the meaning of Quality. The first phase of his exploration was to determine, in a systematic way, the definition of what he wanted to explore. The second phase was to create rigid hierarchic structures of logic to support that definition—this phase proved to be a disaster.

Phaedrus had one young student whom he believed to be dull-witted. She kept trying to write a paper, but she lacked creativity and failed to find anything to say. So he kept narrowing her focus—from the United States to Montana to Bozeman to a single street to the old opera house to a single brick in the facade.

Only when she could focus on that single brick was she able to overcome her own belief that she had nothing original to say. What was holding her back, he believed, were all the things that had been taught before. Therefore, imitation of previous masters was not effective teaching.

He began to argue for abandonment of the grading system. He believed that students should pursue knowledge for its own sake and of their own accord. But the quarter during which he implemented this model as an experiment was a complete failure, so he went back to the grading system, dissatisfied with the results and ready to resign.

Need to Know: As Phaedrus struggles with systematic definitions of Quality in rhetoric, he is constantly stymied by the elusive nature of what he's trying to grasp. Nevertheless, he seems to be on the cusp of a breakthrough.

17

The narrator and his son struggle up increasingly steep, rocky slopes. It is a difficult climb for Chris, because it has become a proof of manhood for him, an ego-driven thing, a yearning to be farther up the trail than he is, which means that he's ignoring the *now*. Their journey has become both a literal and metaphorical climb.

In class, Phaedrus's students erupt over his assignment to have them consider Quality. They toiled, they lost sleep, they cried, and they were unsuccessful. Ultimately, Phaedrus's definition was: "Quality is a characteristic of thought and statement that is recognized by a non-thinking process. Because definitions are a product of rigid, formal thinking, quality cannot be defined." The "definition" was a refusal to define.

He showed them they knew Quality by giving them two papers—one good, one bad—and noting that they knew the difference without being able to define it. This progress with his students became a brilliant lead-in to the teaching of rhetoric. The aspects of good writing were not just techniques and gimmicks they were forced to memorize, but facets of Quality that they could then actively pursue. His quest for the definition of Quality became something they could point to, something that was real, even if they couldn't quite grasp it.

Need to Know: Phaedrus's struggle to seek the definition of Quality led to a breakthrough in the teaching of rhetoric. By having to seek something they couldn't quite define, his students embraced the tools and techniques of rhetoric of their own accord.

18

The central question of aesthetics, a branch of philosophy, is: *What is beautiful?* It was a field of inquiry Phaedrus despised, yet he found himself obsessed with the same question, the definition of Quality. He was delighted; therefore, when he realized that by refusing to define Quality, he obliterated an entire branch of philosophy.

He concluded that even though Quality cannot be defined, it is of almost supreme importance. Without it, societies become like those imagined by George Orwell and Aldous Huxley or those created by Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong. Without it, we have “squareness.” Without it, there is no art, music, good food, sports, or enjoyment.

Phaedrus began to see that the question of Quality both separated and joined the classical and romantic worlds, arguing that “you take your analytic knife, put the point directly on the term Quality and just tap, not hard, gently, and the whole world splits, cleaves, right in two—hip and square, classical and romantic, technological and humanistic—and the split is clean.” It was at this point that he started to become aware of his path toward intellectual suicide.

In present day, Chris struggles with something internal on his way up the mountain, something he’s not yet ready to reveal to his father. The pair sets up their camp just in time to protect themselves from a rainstorm that breaks overhead.

Need to Know: Quality is central to a life worth living. We must embrace Quality, or we have none of life’s enjoyments and are left with only a square, blockish existence. In pursuit of the definition of Quality, however, Phaedrus has been put on a path toward destruction.

19

Phaedrus’s colleagues presented him with the question that could break him: *Does Quality exist intrinsic to the things we observe, or is it subjective, existing only in the observer?* He likened this dilemma to the horns of a charging bull. If he accepted that Quality is subjective, he would be skewered on the opposite horn, and vice versa.

However, he worked through ideas to sidestep the bull or even refuse to

get in the ring altogether. Trying to analyze Quality was an “analytic meat grinder.” His Church of Reason was beginning to break down.

His conclusion was that Quality is neither objective nor subjective. It was neither mind nor matter, but a third entity independent of both. It “could be found *only in the relationship of the two to each other.*” It was the event that preceded both mind and matter. The subject and object were subordinate to Quality. This epiphany was the summit toward which he had been striving.

On the trek up the mountain, part of Chris’s struggle is that he’s afraid he’ll never be able to relate to his father—no matter how hard he tries. The two of them have a strange conversation during which, Chris asserts, his father keeps him up talking until 3:00 a.m., sounding funny somehow, drunk maybe, saying they would meet at the top of the mountain. Was Chris dreaming, or was his father talking in his sleep?

They arrive at the summit of their mountain to find blue sky and the joy of accomplishment.

Need to Know: Phaedrus reached a tremendous conclusion in his struggles to find the nature of Quality. This epiphany is juxtaposed with the narrator and his son arriving at the summit of a mountain, the end of an arduous climb. The culmination of the symbolic, metaphorical journey is presented with the success of the concrete.

20

Chris says that when his father was up talking until 3:00 a.m., he sounded like before, like the persona the narrator calls Phaedrus. The narrator worries about this, perhaps because he’s concerned about slipping back into the Phaedrus persona. The incessant sound of small rockslides convinces him to descend rather than remaining at the summit.

Phaedrus never recovered from his third stage of metaphysical crystallization. Quality is the parent, the source from which mind and matter spring. “Quality,” Phaedrus said, “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.” When he wrote these words, he felt something let go internally, as if he’d just broken something after long over-straining it.

Quality was not a metaphysical trinity, but the “source and substance of

everything.”

On impulse, he grabbed a copy of *Tao Te Ching* and began to read, substituting the word *Quality* for *Tao*. The connection was a perfect match.

And then his world fell out from under him.

Need to Know: Through Phaedrus’s long, arduous intellectual struggle to find the true nature of Quality, he arrived at the 2,400-year-old Chinese wisdom of Lao Tzu. Quality *is* the Tao. This realization, this connection between the metaphysical and the mystical, is what led to his breakdown.

21

The narrator steps back from the motorcycle narrative and considers Phaedrus’s understanding and application of Quality/Tao to daily life. The two go on a hike in the mountains. He doesn’t know whether Phaedrus’s claim is true, that Quality *is* the Tao, because there’s no way of testing it, but there might be a way to bring reason into this new way of thinking. Reason’s inability to process these ideas is what “creates the present bad quality, the chaotic, disconnected spirit of the twentieth century.”

If it can be shown that Phaedrus’s statement, “Quality is the Buddha,” is, in fact, true, it opens the door to unify the three areas of human experience: Religion, Art, and Science.

Returning to the motorcycle trip, the narrator and his son make their way down the mountain into Bozeman and stay at a hotel, dirty and weary.

Need to Know: Even such a grand epiphany as “Quality is the Buddha (God)” is useless unless it can be applied in practical ways.

22

In trying to reconcile and fully understand Phaedrus’s breakthrough, the narrator did his own research into the history of philosophy, trying to discover if anyone else had reached the same conclusion. He discovered the writings of a Frenchman named Jules Henri Poincaré, an astronomer, physicist, mathematician, and philosopher who lived from 1854 to 1912.

Einstein’s Theory of Relativity destroyed one of the foundations of science, the illusion of certainty. Other discoveries further shook the foundations of mathematics and geometry, such as the refutation of Euclid’s

fifth postulate—through a given point there can be only one line that is parallel to a given straight line—by two separate mathematicians. This basic geometric “truth” was successfully negated, which proved that the very nature of mathematics lacked certainty.

Poincaré worked on these questions, and his work, in essence, approached the question of Quality from the opposite direction from Phaedrus. They were working on two halves of the same equation. Poincaré talked of scientific harmony, of knowing which facts were real. Together, their work formed the harmony that Poincaré discussed.

The narrator and his son leave Bozeman, heading west. They camp at the top of an abandoned logging road. Chris suffers a bout of diarrhea. They go to sleep exhausted.

Need to Know: The narrator experienced a powerful moment of recognition when he realized that Poincaré and Phaedrus had been approaching the same question from two different directions and that their conclusions meshed seamlessly. More and more, the narrator is stepping back from the motorcycle narrative to address directly the signposts of Phaedrus’s rocky intellectual journey. This may signify the coming together—the inexorable overlapping—of the Phaedrus persona and the narrator.

23

The narrator relates a dream in which he sees his family through a glass door that is actually the door of his sarcophagus. Chris wants to speak to him, but Death will not allow him to respond. He cries out to Chris that he will meet him at the bottom of the ocean. Then they are gone, and he is alone in a ruined city.

Need to Know: This appears to be a variation of a dream he had earlier, in which he told Chris to meet him at the top of the mountain, but in this dream, the mountain is gone.

24

The flipside of Quality is *caring*. They are internal and external aspects of the same thing: “A person who sees Quality and feels it as he works is a person who cares. A person who cares about what he sees and does is a

person who's bound to have some characteristics of Quality," the narrator says.

In the repair of a motorcycle, as in science and in creative endeavors, there are often moments of "stuckness," where progress simply cannot be made. But this stuckness is invaluable because it forces us to reach beyond what we know, beyond "the book," beyond the scientific method. And if we *care*, we will overcome the obstacle. Zen Buddhism actually attempts to induce stuckness through meditation, deep breathing, and the introduction of *koans*—unsolvable puzzles.

In another analogy, the Romantic side of Quality is a two-dimensional plane at the front of a moving locomotive. It precedes everything. The train represents Classic Knowledge, the Church of Reason. The track itself is called Quality. This plane is the leading edge where everything happens, the division between past and future. The eternal Now.

The narrator's journey takes them to Idaho on their way to the Pacific coast.

Need to Know: Caring is the flipside of Quality, two aspects of the same thing. And the common occurrence of getting stuck on a given problem or effort is necessary to achieving real, meaningful breakthroughs, because we are then forced to find new, undiscovered ways around the obstacles.

25

In an inquiry about an apparent conflict between humanism and technology, the narrator speaks of our inability to avoid machines (art, creations) and counsels that we "break down the barriers of dualistic thought that prevent a real understanding of what technology is—not an exploitation of nature, but a fusion of nature and the human spirit into a new kind of creation that transcends both."

This kind of transcendence can be found in grand efforts like moonshots and trans-Atlantic solo flights, but also in the everyday. The modern efforts to stylize technology represent the opposite of Quality, however. Style is nothing but a fake, hollow veneer. It is a crutch. Real Quality is there at the beginning, not applied after the fact.

Peace of mind is the key to approaching technical work. That which produces peace of mind is good work, and that which destroys it is bad

work. This brings us back to the idea that peace of mind is “the whole thing.”

Peace of mind exists at three levels in order of ascending difficulty: physical quietness (the body is still); mental quietness (the mind is still); and value quietness (in which desires are discarded). “When one isn’t dominated by feelings of separateness from what he’s working on, then one can be said to ‘care’ about what he’s doing. That is what caring really is, a feeling of identification with what one is doing. When one has this feeling, then he also sees the inverse side of caring, Quality itself.”

The narrator and Chris will be in Oregon tomorrow. The boy still wishes to relate to his father, but can one person truly understand what’s in the mind of another?

Need to Know: This is, according to the narrator, his most important Chautauqua. Peace of mind—oneness with what one is doing—is the key to bridging the conflict between Art and Technology, between the Classical mind and the Romantic.

26

The narrator wakes up from camping, finding that his mind is strangely fixated on one of Phaedrus’s favorite poems, *The Rubáiyat of Omar Kháyyam*. He doesn’t even like the poem, which suggests that his and Phaedrus’s personalities are coming together, symbolizing the erasure of the duality between the Classical (Phaedrus) and the narrator (Romantic).

His lesson today is about *gumption* (enthusiasm), an old word used by pioneers that has fallen mostly out of modern use. Keeping one’s *gumption* high is the key to successful maintenance. Without it, there’s nothing that can keep you going. With it, there’s nothing that can stop you.

There are a multitude of traps that steal one’s *gumption*, and of these traps, the two main types are *setbacks* (external circumstances) and *hang-ups* (internal conditions). In the discussion of these traps, motorcycle maintenance continues to serve as concrete example and metaphor.

The first type of setback is the *out-of-sequence reassembly setback*, in which you discover that you’ve reassembled something only to find a critical component left over. The first technique to prevent this setback is to use a notebook to record your disassembly process in detail. The second is

to arrange all the parts as if arranging a newspaper on the floor, placing all the parts in the same order as you would read the newspaper.

The second type of setback is the *intermittent failure*, a problem that comes and goes inexplicably, such as an electrical short. The only way to deal with these is to look for correlations and causations over time.

The third and most common is the *parts setback*. Parts that are the wrong size, defective, out of tolerance, etc., will bring your maintenance to a halt. Defend against this setback by taking your old parts with you to the parts store. Get to know your parts vendor personally. You can even learn to machine your own parts, a process that is long and laborious but builds gumption.

There are a variety of internal gumption traps. *Value rigidity*—clinging to beliefs and values or the unwillingness to re-evaluate—is the most common and pernicious of these. The next is the *ego* trap, which is one of the causes of value rigidity. Ego makes us unwilling to admit when we've goofed and makes us accept falsities that make us look good. Another trap is *anxiety*, in which you're so afraid to make a mistake that you do nothing at all. The next is *boredom*, a state in which you've gotten away from Quality and caring.

Boredom is one of the most dangerous traps, because it means the next thing coming is a Big Mistake. Another is *impatience*, which always results from an underestimation of how long the job will take. Impatience can also be the cause of a Big Mistake.

Another trap is the *truth* trap, which results from clinging to yes/no logic. What we need to see is that there is always a third option, which is the Japanese concept of *mu*. *Mu* means “no thing,” not yes, not no, not one, not zero. It steps outside of the binary. It says to “unask the question.” “*Mu* says the answer is *beyond* the hypothesis. *Mu* is the ‘phenomenon’ that inspires scientific inquiry in the first place!”

The next kind of trap is a *psychomotor* trap. Bad tools and surroundings are a major trap, so use good tools, the right tools, in a well-lit space. *Muscular insensitivity* is another dangerous gumption trap. The “mechanic's feel” is that sense of knowing when a bolt or nut is tight, an understanding of how metal and plastic behaves. Without it, precision parts can be easily destroyed.

The biggest gumption trap of all, though, is what he calls the *funeral*

procession, “the one everybody’s in, this hyped-up, fuck-you, super-modern, ego style of life that thinks it owns this country.”

“The real cycle you’re working on,” the narrator says, “is a cycle called yourself. The machine that appears to be ‘out there’ and the person that appears to be ‘in here’ are not two separate things. They grow toward Quality or fall away from Quality together.”

Need to Know: The narrator covers a lot of ways that one’s gumption can be sucked away and how to prevent those occurrences, bringing together the metaphor of the motorcycle as the Self. They are one and the same.

PART IV

27

The narrator has another variation of the recurring dream, but this time, he tries to kill some shadowy, hiding thing. Chris wakes him in a panic, saying that his father was threatening to kill him. The narrator realizes that the dreamer is actually Phaedrus reawakening. Phaedrus was trying to kill him.

Need to Know: The narrator is a man divided against himself. Both halves are struggling against each other, and Phaedrus wants to return.

28

The narrator turns the motorcycle down the Pacific coast, heading for San Francisco, struggling with fear that the insanity that consumed Phaedrus will return. Chris sees it but doesn’t understand. He desperately wants to understand his father, but he can’t.

In the final days and weeks before his mental collapse, Phaedrus decided to seek out a university where he might pursue his convictions about Quality. At the University of Chicago, he found a program that seemed to suit his purposes, an interdisciplinary program called “Analysis of Ideas and Study of Methods.” Instead, he found a chairman clinging to Aristotelian ideas of duality and Classical Reason, a man Phaedrus quickly alienated due to his megalomaniacal convictions about Quality. The program committee lay at the epicenter of an upheaval Phaedrus had been unaware of until he arrived.

Through his study, Phaedrus comes to despise the ancient Greek philosophers for all the damage they have done to the world over the millennia. To those philosophers, our rationality was shaped by the sum-total of the ancient legends and prehistoric myths, called the mythos-over-logos argument (myths over rational understanding of the world). The only way to understand Quality, however, is to step outside of the mythos, which was the definition of insanity.

It all comes together for the narrator then when he says, “Religion isn’t invented by man. Men are invented by religion. Men invented *responses* to Quality, and among these responses is an understanding of what they themselves are.”

Need to Know: The Greeks had it backward. It is the mythos that is insane; rationality versus romanticism, the duality, the subjective/objective—Quality is the true understanding.

29

The narrator and his son travel down the coast, the conditions and mood of their trip becoming darker and stormier in tandem with the narrator’s thoughts on the heart and soul of Western civilization, which was set on course millennia ago in the debates between Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle. This entire leg of the trip, he is surrounded by lonely people who cannot see past their own loneliness. In the process of doing some road repairs, he encounters a welder who epitomizes the ideal mechanic described in previous chapters, a person supremely skilled and at one with his craft.

Phaedrus’s contempt for Aristotelian thinking landed him squarely in conflict with his philosophy professor, and they spent an entire term in a silent battle of wills. Aristotle placed Truth over Good (equivalent to Phaedrus’s Quality) and thus created the system of thought that gave us the vast technological progress of the scientific age—and left the modern human race spiritually bankrupt. Until Socrates, “there was no such thing as mind and matter, subject and object, form and substance. Those divisions are just dialectical inventions that came later.” This is the nucleus of all human systems, science, technology, etc.

But Quality opposes this. Quality creates the world and “emerges as a *relationship* between man and his experience. He is a *participant* in the

creation of all things.”

In pre-Socratic Greece, however, the great heroes pursued not Truth, not the Good of All, but something called *aretê*—“excellence.” That was a lightning bolt for Phaedrus. The great Greek heroes of myth pursued Quality.

Need to Know: It was Aristotle and his followers, triumphant over the Sophists, who irrevocably altered the course of Western thought, giving us one major thing—the structure of Reason and dualistic thinking, which is the cause of our modern societal malaise—and depriving us of something invaluable—Quality, or Excellence.

30

Phaedrus’s class on Aristotelian philosophy took a turn when the regular professor fell ill and was replaced by the chairman of the committee, whom Phaedrus alienated early on. In class, they read one of Plato’s Dialogues, *Phaedrus*, in which Socrates has a dialectical conversation with his foil, Phaedrus.

Immediately, the class became a battle of will and intellect between the chairman and Phaedrus, and Phaedrus proved himself the winner, catching the chairman in his own traps. This victory, however, was the tipping point in Phaedrus’s sanity. He stopped going to class, stopped teaching his own classes, and ended up sitting on the floor of an empty room in a puddle of his own urine. At that point, his wife had him hospitalized.

The narrator and Chris find a cheap motel somewhere, he doesn’t know where. His mind is walking the path of Phaedrus’s final dissolution. He’s lost focus and cognition. Chris is worried, troubled by demons he won’t share with his father—except to say that he misses the way his father was before. He misses Phaedrus.

Need to Know: Phaedrus managed a final victory over the forces of Classical Reason. Aristotle had been vanquished, as had the institution that clung to this paradigm of Western thought. It was in Phaedrus’s descent into madness that Quality, *aretê*, finally became clear to him and put his soul at rest. In the present, however, the narrator is experiencing some disturbing echoes of Phaedrus’s downfall and seeing evidence of mental illness in his

son.

31

Chris's behavior turns sour and he complains of illness, but his father knows it's something else, a terrible truth neither of them has yet faced. He's starting to feel like *he's* the ghost and Phaedrus is the reality. Along the road, they stop for a talk, and the narrator tells Chris that he fears he's slipping back into insanity.

But Chris is also slipping into insanity—behavioral problems at home and school as well as trouble with neighbors and friends—sharing many of the personality traits that led Phaedrus to ruin. His father, however, has been keeping anyone from doing anything about it.

Chris has terrible memories of the day his father was committed, and reality blurs as Phaedrus's persona reasserts itself. The narrator has become Phaedrus again. Chris happily recognizes him. His dad is back.

Need to Know: Phaedrus has reemerged from a long slumber, supplanting the narrator's persona.

32

Phaedrus has not emerged to take over. Instead, a reintegration of the two personas has occurred. He is a whole person again. Chris was his reason for finally leaving the hospital. He has not been supporting Chris, but the other way around.

As this epiphany settles in, Chris asks if he can have a motorcycle when he's older. He can, his father says, if he takes care of it. It's not hard if he has the right attitudes.

Need to Know: Finally, the narrator accepts that the reintegration with Phaedrus is a good, necessary thing. Chris knows it, too. For the first time in the book, he recognizes his father.

Cast of Characters

The Chairman: The Chairman of the Committee for Analysis of Ideas and the Study of Methods at the University of Chicago oversaw (and initially denied) Phaedrus's application for admission into their PhD program.

Chris: The narrator's eldest son, who accompanies him on the long motorcycle journey from Minnesota to California and who suffers from psychosomatic stomachaches that the narrator fears might herald a descent into hereditary mental illness.

Bob DeWeese: Artist and teacher at Montana State University in Bozeman, friend of Phaedrus, whom the narrator barely remembers.

Gennie DeWeese: Wife of Bob DeWeese.

The Narrator: A forty-year-old technical writer, ostensibly the point of view of the author, but there is an omniscience at times that suggests he is meant to be a voice of greater authority.

Phaedrus: The narrator's prior hyperrational alter ego or persona, named after an ancient Greek Sophist who appears in Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus* and thought to have been annihilated by shock treatments when the Narrator suffered a mental breakdown.

John Sutherland: A friend of the narrator who accompanies the Narrator and Chris for much of the motorcycle journey. He drives a BMW motorcycle that he doesn't care to maintain himself.

Sylvia Sutherland: John's wife, who also accompanies the Narrator and Chris on the motorcycle trip.

Themes and Symbols

Motorcycle maintenance: The book's central metaphor; it represents the author's—and the reader's—quest for awareness, the quest for what the Narrator calls “Quality.” Maintenance of this kind can be cultivated in the here and now—and, in fact, cultivates awareness of the here and now—and thus can be a real-life path toward Quality, resulting in true peace of mind.

Mu: *Mu* is a Japanese word that means “no thing.” It means a yes/no response is inappropriate or impossible. Yes/no questions require dualistic logic. *Mu* says there is no such question. Refusing to conceptualize the world in the classical way opens the door to Quality. *Mu* can force the individual to “think outside the box” of classical, dualistic thinking and lead to new and equally valid interpretations of reality.

The Glass Door: The narrator experiences a series of recurring dreams in which a glass door separates him from Chris and the rest of his family. The dream stems from the episode in the hospital when Phaedrus was committed after his mental breakdown. In the dream, the family begs him to open the door, but he won't. This barrier represents the split between the narrator's identity and his previous persona as Phaedrus, as well as how that split separates him from his family. In chapter 23, the glass door is not a door but the lid to a coffin in which the narrator lies, his family having come to say their final good-byes.

Mountains: The narrator speaks about the spiritual symbolism of a mountain. Pilgrims climb mountains to where sages dwell, seeking enlightenment. Mountains are symbolic in all cultures because of their reach toward heaven, or the dwellings of the gods. But mountains are as changeable as all nature. The routes up the symbolic mountain change as society changes. This is one of the book's central metaphors. Mountains are symbolic in world religions for spiritual quests and pilgrimages. In this instance, the narrator is talking about both a climb up a particular mountain and also a quest for spiritual growth. An ego-driven quest for enlightenment will always fail.

Seed crystal: A supersaturated solution is a solution with more dissolved solute than the solvent would normally dissolve, achieved, typically, by increasing the temperature to allow more solute to be dissolved. When the solution cools, a seed crystal is a small particle used to induce crystallization of the solute. Crystals form around the seed. Phaedrus's thoughts on Quality—supersaturated by his obsessive, relentless philosophical quest—begin to grow around the seed crystal of an idea.

Stomachaches/illness: Along the motorcycle trip, the narrator's son Chris complains of a series of stomachaches that do not have a physiological cause. Psychiatrists have told the narrator they are the result of incipient mental illness. The stomachaches lead the narrator to fear that Chris will experience the same kind of mental illness as he has.

Direct Quotes and Analysis

“After a while [John] says, ‘This is the hardest stuff in the world to photograph. You need a three-hundred-sixty-degree lens, or something. You see it, and then you look down in the ground glass and it’s just nothing. As soon as you put a border on it, it’s gone.’”

This conversation highlights the difference between traveling in a car and traveling on a motorcycle. Breathtaking vistas are reduced to nothing by photographing them or by viewing them through a window. A photo simply cannot do the scene justice. This comparison is significant for two reasons: First, a motorcycle places the rider *in* the landscape to experience it first-hand. The window of a car forms a barrier—and a frame—through which the landscape is viewed, like a photograph, which removes the passenger from the landscape. Second, one of the book’s central themes is human beings’ relationship to technology. The technology of the camera removes us from experiencing the now, the present, the breathtaking landscape, by taking the human one step further away from the real world.

“We take a handful of sand from the endless landscape of awareness around us and call that handful of sand the world.”

Drawing a distinction between awareness and consciousness, this passage illustrates one of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*’s central tenets: Our consciousness inherently limits and warps the things we perceive. Our minds think a “handful of sand” accurately represents the vastness and wonder of the universe because that is all we have experienced; it is all that we can see at one time.

“You are never dedicated to something you have complete confidence in. No one is fanatically shouting that the sun is going to rise tomorrow. They know it’s going to rise tomorrow. When people are fanatically dedicated to political or religious faiths or any other kinds of dogmas or goals, it’s always because these dogmas or goals are in doubt.”

Phaedrus gave his most passionate arguments in defense of Reason because his faith in it was slipping, evidenced by what the narrator calls the Church of Reason lecture that Phaedrus gave to his students. The oration was delivered during a political and financial confrontation between the college where he worked and the right-wing governor and legislature of Montana. His own weakening of faith in Reason made him a fanatic evangelist for it.

“The way to see what looks good and understand the reasons it looks good, and to be at one with this goodness as the work proceeds, is to cultivate an inner quietness, a peace of mind so that goodness can shine through.”

Peace of mind is a bridge between the Classical and the Romantic, between Art and Technology. Efforts that result in—and result from—peace of mind inherently possess Quality. The fusion exists in skilled mechanics, craftsmen, machinists, etc. Patience, care, and focus are inherent in everything they do.

“And now [Phaedrus] began to see for the first time the unbelievable magnitude of what man, when he gained power to understand and rule the world in terms of dialectic truths, had lost. He had built empires of scientific capability to manipulate the phenomena of nature into enormous manifestations of his own dreams of power and wealth—but for this he had exchanged an empire of understanding of equal magnitude: an understanding of what it is to be part of the world, and not an enemy of it.”

One of Phaedrus’s great epiphanies was the realization of what dualistic, rational, Aristotelian thought had robbed from the human race: recognition and veneration of Quality. With man’s evolution, technical advances, and industry, we lost our sense of the ineffable, of the knowledge that we are part of the world.

Trivia

1. The author submitted the book proposal for *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* to 122 publishers before it was accepted. Twenty-two were initially interested, but after four years of writing the book, the number dropped to six. In the end, only one accepted the completed manuscript.
2. *Phaedrus* does not mean “wolf” in Greek, as the original narrative states; it means “brilliant” or “radiant.” The Greek word for “wolf” is *lykos*, which is similar to the name Lycias, a name from Plato’s dialogue *Phaedrus*.
3. When marketing his book proposal to publishers, the author mass-produced 122 letters on an electronic typewriter with a punched-paper-tape memory.
4. A reader and fan named Mark Richardson was inspired to replicate the original journey from North Dakota to California on a motorcycle and to learn about the persons featured in Pirsig’s work. In 2008, Richardson published a book that documented his trip and findings titled *Zen and Now: On the Trail of Robert Pirsig and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.
5. At age nine, Robert Pirsig possessed an IQ of 170. He skipped several grades and started college at age fifteen.
6. Robert Redford tried to buy the movie rights to *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, but Pirsig refused him.
7. Pirsig’s son Chris was killed in a mugging at the age of twenty-two, five years following the publication of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. After Chris was stabbed near the Zen Institute in San Francisco, one hundred Zen students kept watch over his body.
8. Pirsig does not identify the make and model of the motorcycle he rides in this journey, but in an interview, he was photographed on a Honda SuperHawk CB77.

9. In 2012, Montana State University hosted a weekend-long symposium dedicated to the life, works, and influence of Robert M. Pirsig, who taught at the university years before writing his seminal work.

What's That Word?

A priori: A type of knowledge based on deductive reasoning, not personal experience or observation—such as the certainty that $2+2=4$. Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* addressed this in great detail as the antidote to the breakdown of David Hume's *empiricism*. *A priori* knowledge can drastically change our perceptions of the world. For instance, if we “know” that the world is flat and at the center of the universe, this “knowledge” colors all our subsequent perceptions and reasoning. If our *a priori* knowledge drastically shifts to the view that the earth circles the sun, which circles the center of the Milky Way galaxy, which is also moving through the universe, our common-sense knowledge changes with it.

Aristotelian: A tradition of philosophy that is defined by the works of Aristotle. This is the Church of Reason that, according to the narrator, has led Western civilization on the path to ruin, leading us away from Quality, for over two thousand years.

Chautauqua: A nineteenth- and twentieth-century traveling show that originated in the American northeast; these performances, often held in tents, were meant to both entertain and teach.

Dilemma: A difficult choice between two or more things, particularly if both options are undesirable, such as having to choose between sacrificing a loved one to save many or sacrificing many to save a loved one.

Empiricism: A type of philosophy that states that all knowledge comes from experience. The narrator equates modern-day common sense and the scientific method of experimentation to empiricism. Without experiential knowledge, we can know nothing. Scottish philosopher David Hume wrote extensively on empiricism in the eighteenth century. The trouble here, according to the narrator, is that our reason is muddling the water rather than clarifying it, and “when reason thus defeats its own purpose something has to be changed in the structure of our reason itself.”

Koan: A riddle or puzzle used by Zen Buddhists during meditation to

wrestle with greater truths about the world and themselves. It can be a simple question or phrase that highlights the inadequacy of logical thought, such as “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” The author describes how Zen practitioners use *koans* to induce a sense of “stuckness,” which forces the abandonment of rigid, logical thinking.

Sophist: A type of teacher in Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire. Eschewing Aristotelian rationalism, Sophists specialized in using philosophy and rhetoric as a pathway to excellence and virtue—called *aretê*. Their worldview eventually lost to Aristotelian Reason, but Phaedrus found himself firmly in the camp of Sophism and confronted the Aristotelian chairman of his PhD program.

Zen: A school of Mahayana Buddhism that emphasizes rigorous self-control, meditation, Buddha nature insight, and personal expression in daily life, particularly as it pertains to helping and benefitting others. The entirety of the narrator’s quest for Quality leads the reader straight to the door of Zen practice.

Critical Response

“This book may very well be a profoundly important one—a great one even—full of insights into our most perplexing contemporary dilemmas.” —*The New York Times Book Review*

“A detailed technical treatise on the tools, on the routines, on the metaphysics of a specialized skill; the legend of a great hunt after identity, after the salvation of mind and soul out of obsession, the hunter being hunted; a fiction repeatedly interrupted by, enmeshed with, a lengthy meditation on the ironic and tragic singularities of American man – the analogies with ‘Moby Dick’ are patent.” —*The New Yorker*

“The book mainly centers on the search for quality—what it is and how to define it. But far from reading like a dry philosophy textbook, Pirsig’s work weaves these thoughts into a compelling adventure. The book has sold 5 million copies and inspired several ‘Pirsig Pilgrims,’ devotees that retrace the author’s route in search of similar stimulation.” —*Time*

“Pirsig’s idea—that by improving our machines, we improve ourselves—has become a mantra for today’s Silicon youth. It is not surprising that ... *Forbes*, *Business Insider*, and *Fast Company* periodically run articles with titles like ‘Why Every Entrepreneur Should Read *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.’” —*The Daily Beast*

About Robert M. Pirsig

Robert M. Pirsig was born on September 6, 1928, and was raised in Minneapolis, Minnesota. A prodigiously gifted child, possessing an IQ of 170 at nine years old, he skipped several grades and received his high school diploma in May 1943, at the age of fifteen. That autumn, he entered a course of study in biochemistry at the University of Minnesota but was greatly troubled by the existence of a potentially unlimited number of workable hypotheses to explain a given phenomenon, an experience he describes in the book. This led to an obsession with how scientific hypotheses were created, seeking their ultimate source. This question so vexed him that his grades suffered, and he was finally expelled from the university.

In 1946, at age eighteen, Pirsig enlisted in the US Army and was stationed in South Korea, another experience that proved to be formative for him. After his discharge from the military, he earned a bachelor of arts in Eastern philosophy. He then traveled to India to study Eastern philosophy and culture at Banaras Hindu University.

Pirsig married Nancy Ann James on May 10, 1954, and they had two sons: Chris, who is featured prominently in his book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, and Theodore.

After teaching for two years, starting in 1958 at Montana State University in Bozeman, he moved to the University of Chicago to pursue a PhD in philosophy. His experiences at the University of Chicago were extremely difficult—he describes them as “humiliating”—and contributed to a nervous breakdown that prevented him from graduating.

Between 1961 and 1963, Pirsig was in and out of psychiatric hospitals, diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia and clinical depression. He was subjected to a now banned form of electroconvulsive therapy on numerous occasions, an experience that he says all but destroyed his previous personality.

His wife, Nancy, sought a divorce during his period of mental illness, but they did not officially separate until 1976. Their divorce was finalized in

1978. Later that same year, he married Wendy Kimball, with whom he had a daughter, Nell, in 1980.

After receiving a Guggenheim Fellowship, Pirsig published *Lila: An Inquiry into Morals*, the sequel to *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.

On December 15, 2012, Montana State University awarded Robert M. Pirsig with an honorary doctorate in philosophy.

Pirsig died on April 24, 2017, at the age of eighty-eight.

For Your Information

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Critique of Pure Reason by Immanuel Kant

The Dancing Wu Li Masters: An Overview of the New Physics by Gary Zukav

Lila: An Inquiry into Morals by Robert M. Pirsig

The Meeting of East and West: An Inquiry Concerning World Understanding by F.S.C. Northrop

Tao Te Ching by Lao Tzu

The Tao of Pooh by Benjamin Hoff

On the Road by Jack Kerouac

Zen and Now: On the Trail of Robert Pirsig and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance by Mark Richardson

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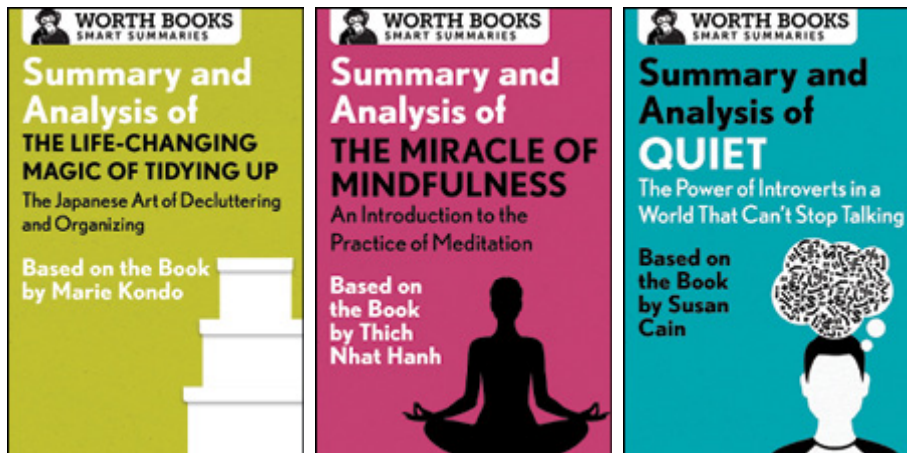
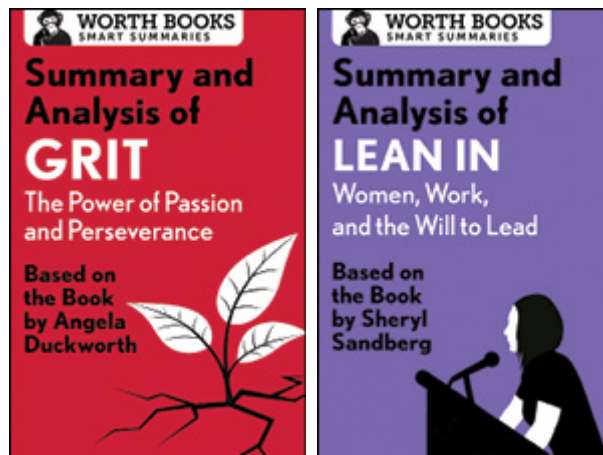
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