

# Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values* (ZAMM), first published in 1974, is a work of philosophical non-fiction, the first of Robert M. Pirsig's texts in which he explores his Metaphysics of Quality.

The book sold 5 million copies worldwide. It was originally rejected by 121 publishers, more than any other bestselling book, according to the *Guinness Book of Records*.<sup>[1]</sup>

The title is an apparent play on the title of the book *Zen in the Art of Archery* by Eugen Herrigel. In its introduction, Pirsig explains that, despite its title, “it should in no way be associated with that great body of factual information relating to orthodox Zen Buddhist practice. It’s not very factual on motorcycles, either.”

The book is generally regarded as an American cultural icon in literature.

## 1 Structure

The book describes, in first person, a 17-day journey on his motorcycle from Minnesota to Northern California by the author (though he is not identified in the book) and his son Chris. They are joined for the first nine days of the trip by close friends John and Sylvia Sutherland, with whom they part ways in Montana. The trip is punctuated by numerous philosophical discussions, referred to as Chautauquas by the author, on topics including epistemology, ethical emotivism and the philosophy of science.

Many of these discussions are tied together by the story of the narrator’s own past self, who is referred to in the third person as Phaedrus (after Plato’s dialogue). Phaedrus, a teacher of creative and technical writing at a small college, became engrossed in the question of what defines good writing, and what in general defines good, or “Quality”. His philosophical investigations eventually drove him insane, and he was subjected to electroconvulsive therapy which permanently changed his personality.

Towards the end of the book, Phaedrus’s personality begins to re-emerge and the narrator is reconciled with his past.

## 2 Writing

In a 1974 interview with National Public Radio, Pirsig stated that the book took him four years to write. During two of these years, Pirsig continued working at his job of writing computer manuals. This caused him to fall into an unorthodox schedule, waking up very early and writing *Zen* from 2 a.m. until 6 a.m., then eating and going to his day job. He would sleep during his lunch break and then go to bed around 6 in the evening. Pirsig joked that his co-workers noticed that he was “a lot less perky” than everyone else.<sup>[2]</sup>

## 3 Philosophical content

In *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Pirsig explores the meaning and concept of quality, a term he deems to be undefinable. Pirsig’s thesis is that to truly experience quality one must both embrace and apply it as best fits the requirements of the situation. According to Pirsig, such an approach would avoid a great deal of frustration and dissatisfaction common to modern life.

In the book, the Narrator describes the “Romantic” approach to the life of his friend, John Sutherland, who chooses not to learn how to maintain his expensive new motorcycle. John simply hopes for the best with his bike, and when problems do occur he often becomes frustrated and is forced to rely on professional mechanics to repair it. In contrast, the “classical” Narrator has an older motorcycle which he is usually able to diagnose and repair himself through the use of rational problem-solving skills.

In an example of the classical approach, Pirsig explains to the reader that one must pay continual attention: when the Narrator and his friends came into Miles City, Montana<sup>[3]</sup> he notices that the “engine idle is loping a little,” a possible indication that the fuel/air mixture is too rich. The next day he is thinking of this as he is going through his ritual to adjust the valves on his cycle’s engine. During the adjustment, he notes that both spark plugs are black, confirming a rich mixture. He recognizes that the feel-good-higher-altitude-mountain-air is causing the engine to run rich. New jets are purchased, and installed, and with the valves adjusted, the engine runs well again.

With this, the book details two types of personalities: those who are interested mostly in gestalts (romantic viewpoints, such as Zen, focused on being “In the moment”, and not on rational analysis), and those who seek

to know the details, understand the inner workings, and master the mechanics (classic viewpoints with application of rational analysis, vis-a-vis motorcycle maintenance) and so on.

The Sutherlands represent an exclusively romantic attitude toward the world. The Narrator initially appears to prefer the classic approach. It later becomes apparent that he understands both viewpoints and is aiming for the middle ground. He understands that technology, and the “dehumanized world” it carries with it, appears ugly and repulsive to a romantic person. He knows that such persons are determined to shoehorn all of life’s experience into the romantic view. Pirsig is capable of seeing the beauty of technology and feels good about mechanical work, where the goal is “to achieve an inner peace of mind”. The book demonstrates that motorcycle maintenance may be dull and tedious drudgery or an enjoyable and pleasurable pastime; it all depends on attitude.



*Ancient Greek philosophy in Athens, romantically depicted by Raphael*

Pirsig examines the modern pursuit of “Pure Truths”, claiming it derives from the work of early Greek philosophers who were establishing the concept of truth in opposition to the force of “The Good”. He argues that although rational thought may find a truth (or The Truth) it may never be fully and universally applicable to each and every individual’s experience. Therefore, what is needed is an approach to viewing life that is more varied and inclusive and has a wider range of application. He makes a case that originally the Greeks did not distinguish between “Quality” and “Truth” – they were one and the same – and that the divorce was, in fact, artificial (though needed at the time) and is now a source of much frustration and unhappiness in the world, particularly overall dissatisfaction with modern life.

Pirsig aims towards a perception of the world that embraces both sides, the rational and the romantic. This means encompassing “irrational” sources of wisdom and understanding as well as science, reason and technology. In particular, this must include bursts of creativity and intuition that seemingly come from nowhere and are not (in his view) rationally explicable. Pirsig seeks to demonstrate that rationality and Zen-like “being in the moment”

can harmoniously coexist. He suggests such a combination of rationality and romanticism can potentially bring a higher quality of life.

It has been noted that Pirsig’s Romantic/Classical dichotomy resembles Nietzsche’s Dionysian/Apollonian dichotomy as described in *The Birth of Tragedy*. For example, in his book *The Person of the Therapist*, Edward Smith writes, “In his popular novel, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Robert Pirsig (1974) also addressed the Apollonian and Dionysian worldviews, naming them respectively classical understanding and romantic understanding.”<sup>[4]</sup>

## 4 See also

- Pirsig’s metaphysics of Quality
- *Lila: An Inquiry into Morals*
- Quality (philosophy)
- Emotional intelligence
- Gestalt psychology
- Gumption trap
- List of books about philosophy
- Ideasthesia

## 5 References

- [1] Adams, Tim. “The interview: Robert Pirsig”, *The Guardian*, 19 November 2006. Retrieved on 2010-09-08.
- [2] ‘Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance Author’ Robert Pirsig at NPR online audio archive
- [3] Part II, Ch. 8, pages 80,81 in the paperback edition for which the image is shown,
- [4] Smith, Edward W.L. *The Person of the Therapist*, McFarland & Company Inc, 2003: p.97.

## 6 External links

- [robertpirsig.org](http://robertpirsig.org), A website containing a number of papers concerned with the Metaphysics of Quality.
- Pictures taken by Pirsig from the trip made famous in his book
- Audio: 1974 NPR Interview with Pirsig
- Audio: 1992 NPR Interview with Pirsig
- Guardian interview from 2006 Short version and Long version.