

“Lila: An enquiry into morality”, published in 1994, was Robert Pirsig’s long delayed follow up work to “Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Enquiry into Values” itself published in 1974. The delay was, to a large extent, the result of the real life murder of Pirsig’s son Chris, himself the other main character in “Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.” Although the murder was committed in broad daylight, on a busy street, with multiple witnesses and the group of men involved were quickly arrested, no-one was ever convicted of his murder because witnesses could not agree on who had actually stabbed Chris through the heart. Obviously, this event was profoundly traumatic for Pirsig.

Like Pirsig’s first book, ‘Lila’ is not a typical philosophic treatise, but rather a novel with a plot used to raise philosophical questions around which he reveals his philosophical ideas. He prioritises the narrative qualities of the book over precise philosophic argumentation making it a very difficult work to summarise.

However, to give the plot a quick summary. Pirsig is sailing his boat east from the Great Lakes to New York for a meeting with Robert Redford about a film adaptation of “Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.” He stops for some food, ends up getting drunk and picks up a mentally ill woman, Lila, who has just broken up with her boyfriend and has no money and no where to stay. After having sex with Lila, Pirsig is now stuck with her, much to his annoyance, at least until they get to New York where Lila says she has old friends. Pirsig then spends a great deal of time describing his filing method for organising his new book, the details of his yacht and how to sail it, a long discussion of; mental illness, platypus, the nature of celebrity, what makes New York New York, the cultural changes that took place between the Victorian age and the Hippies, an episode from his past where he went to an Indian reservation with an anthropologist friend to spend a night taking the hallucinogen Peyote with an Indian shaman and a discussion of the looming culture war that he fears might tear America apart. The rest of the book deals with the events as the pair sail down the Hudson river to New York interspersed with his philosophical ideas on how to resolve this growing cultural divide. Somehow he makes the plot and his philosophic ideas all tie together.

As far as his philosophy goes he starts with restating his ideas from “Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance” where he proposed his “Metaphysics of Quality.”

“Metaphysics ... is a collection of the most general statements of a hierarchical structure of thought. On one of his slips he had copied a definition of it as that part of philosophy which deals with the nature and structure of reality. ... Does the external World exist apart from our consciousness of it?” (p79)

“Quality is a direct experience independent of and prior to intellectual abstractions. Quality is indivisible, undefinable and unknowable, in the sense that there is a knower and a known. ... this means that a “Metaphysics of Quality” is essentially a contradiction in terms.” (p81)

or

What Pirsig meant by the term Quality was that “Quality was value.” (p74)

or

“Quality is morality. Make no mistake about it. They’re identical. And if Quality is the primary reality of the world then that means morality is also the primary reality of the world. The world is primarily a moral order.” (p119)

However, for Pirsig the ***most important thing to say about Quality*** was that it was undefinable and outside intellectual analysis. If you tried to define it you always leave some part of it outside the analysis and so only delude yourself. If you have read “Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance” you will remember that he is endlessly making this point.

So, as Pirsig admits himself, it is very surprising when, in his second book, he goes on to define ‘Quality’. Pirsig admits that he should really not do this, but says he can’t help himself. So he takes this task on in a sense of “playfulness.” This is a reference to the Hindu concept of ‘Lila’ which argues all reality is just a playful exercise by God. (However God is defined in Hinduism.) It would probably have been better if God had not done this, and created the World for His own playful amusement. But there you go. God did it anyway. This is not to say Pirsig’s view’s relate directly to Hinduism.

Pirsig then breaks Quality down in to three components:

1) Quality as defined in “Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.” The ultimate good that we can experience empirically yet is an ineffable, undefinable, unknowable absolute value that is beyond our comprehension. It has been likened to an ancient sailor using the North Star to navigate at night. The sailor, or any other sailor for that matter, can see the star, so it is empirical, it appears as a constant so the sailor can use it to navigate. But the ancient sailor has no idea what the North Star is or how far away it is so it is unknowable to him.

2) Dynamic Quality is a creative force that continuously strives for new and better values. It is still pre-intellectual but it blindly directs progress towards something better i.e. Quality. It is the value of change and possibility.

3) Static Quality emerges in wake of Dynamic Quality. Static values don’t change by themselves, there are the glue that holds things together. Unless they are altered by Dynamic Quality they can stay the same year after year. Static Quality may be good to start with but as time passes it can become stale and negative. It is the value of order and predictability and conservation.

The substrate of all this is the underlying Chaos that constitute the primordial nature of the World. As Dynamic Quality acts on this Chaos dragging it towards the direction of Quality it creates patterns of Static Quality in its wake. These patterns are the entities we experience in the world.

Pirsig is not arguing against science, natural selection, philosophy, etc. as they currently stand. He thinks that the “Metaphysics of Quality” is a necessary pre-condition to create the entities that allow these intellectual disciplines to function.

The part that always interested me is where he goes next with all this.

“In this plain of understanding static, patterns of value are divided into for systems: inorganic patterns, biological patterns, social patterns and intellectual patterns. They are exhaustive. That’s all there are. If you construct an encyclopedia of four topics – Inorganic, Biological, Social and Intellectual – nothing is left out. No ‘thing’ that is. Only Dynamic Quality, which cannot be described in any encyclopedia, is absent. [Technically he will later allude to another element, the base source of the Inorganic patterns, Chaos, which is also no ‘thing.’]

But although the four systems are exhaustive they are not exclusive. They all operate at the same time and in same ways that are almost independent of each other.

This classification of patterns is not very original, but the Metaphysics of Quality allows an assertion about them that is unusual. It says they are not continuous. They are discreet. They have very little to do with one another. Although each higher level is built upon a lower level it is not an

extension of that lower level. Quite the contrary. The higher level can often be seen to be in opposition to the lower level, dominating it, controlling it where possible for its own purposes.” (p179)

Pirsig divides up reality into two types of ethical structures;

the ethics inside each static pattern that make up the world around us. (i.e. the ethics of the inorganic static pattern (aka the laws of physics) literally create physical objects, the ethics of biologic static pattern (aka the laws of the jungle) literally create all living things, the ethics of the social pattern (aka social morality) literally create our social institutions – democracy, marriage, rule of law, religion etc., and the ethics of the intellectual patterns (aka rules around Truth, fairness, beauty, etc.) literally create the intellectual objects like ideas, beliefs, art and culture.)

the ethics of how static patterns relates to the level below it.

“The Metaphysics of Quality says there are not just two codes of morals, [i.e. ethics. He means Natural ethics of physical things and biology, on the one hand, and human ethics of society and the intellectual disciplines.] There are actually five: inorganic-chaotic, biological-inorganic, social-biological, intellectual-social and Dynamic-static. This last, the Dynamic-static mode, says what’s good in life isn’t defined by intellectual, social or biological patterns. What’s good is freedom from domination by any static pattern, but that freedom doesn’t have to be obtained by the destruction of the patterns themselves.” (p351)

For example, Pirsig points out that philosophers have continuously failed to show how social morals could be derived from physical laws or the laws of Nature. But as he points out his system explains why, “They [social morals] are more commonly opposed to biological patterns than they are supportive of them. And that is the key to the whole thing.” (p189) So many natural biological things like blood, pus, spit, shit, disease and death are considered socially repulsive. Also many socially desirable things like money, fame, status and success are rejected from an intellectually ethical perspective.

“In general, given a choice of two courses to follow and all other things being equal, that choice which is more Dynamic, that is, at a higher level of evolution [in his Metaphysics], is more moral. An example of this is the statement that, ‘it’s more moral for a doctor to kill a germ than to allow the germ to kill his patient.’ ... In the moral evolutionary conflict between the germ and the patient, the evolutionary spread is enormous and as a result the morality of the situation is obvious. But when the static patterns in conflict are closer the moral force of the situation becomes less obvious.” (p190)

To make all this work he adds one more idea – ‘latching’. He thinks there is some form of ethical memory built into this evolutionary process. When Dynamic Quality creates a new static pattern it may destroy the old static pattern but if it turns out the new static pattern is not an improvement the whole structure could collapse completely. So new static patterns are only created provisionally at first, if they fail the old static pattern can re-emerge.

The final point Pirsig makes is to define the highest Quality itself, the one that was supposed to be indefinable and unknowable and the ultimate meaning of everything. Pirsig’s answer at first seems very strange. He says the ultimate value of everything is ‘stability’. If everything is a pattern of values trying to overcome Chaos then the ultimate goal of any pattern is to exist permanently but all the patterns must exist permanently together. Another way to think of this is that, if Dynamic quality is always acting on these static patterns to make them better then they will get better and better until they can’t get any better. But if they can’t get better and there is nothing to make them worse they

will not change. Thus Dynamic quality will have achieved its goal and the result will be unchanging static patterns. Hence Stability.

End

To return to his ideas on the US's culture wars, Pirsig thinks that the cultural divide opening up in the US is primarily a divide between those who view the world scientifically and those who view it mystically. The scientists see the world analytically and intellectually, breaking it down into parts and trying to understand it by deductive reasoning. The mystics see the world as a unity and indivisible, seeing all division as false, except when you are either part of 'their whole' or you are outside it. The scientists use predictive logic, see the world in terms of true or false, are educated, are experts, technical, elites, academics, globalists, abstract and dismissive of values. The mystics use metaphors, imagery, allegories, narratives and folk wisdom. The mystics are the Indians, the beatniks, the hippies, the punks, the libertarians, (and will become the Tea party and the MAGA people.) Both sides wall themselves in so as to make any communication impossible. The problem is these two groups see the world in a mutually exclusive way. He takes his primary example as the scientific anthropologists studying the Indians, on the one hand, and the mystical Indians themselves. He thinks that whilst the scientists and the mystics may be two mutually exclusive groups they are still connected through his "Metaphysics of Quality" because Quality is what links everything to the ultimate reality.

He argues the root of this divide was the way the US was settled. As the immigrant arrived on the coast those who were more social tended to remain in the big cities near the coast whilst the more individualistic types tend to move to the more isolated centre of the country. Those who stayed near the coast kept European morals, those who moved inland adopted the ways of the Indians.

Pirsig quotes a passage from the anthropologist E A Hoebel to make his point:

"Although in many primitive cultures there is a recognized division of function between the priests and the shamans, in the more highly developed cultures in which the cults have become strongly organized churches, the priesthood fights an unrelenting war against shamans ... Priests work in a rigorously structured hierarchy fixed in a firm set of traditions. Their power comes from, and is vested in, the organisation itself. They constitute a religious bureaucracy.

Shamans, on the other hand, are ardent individualists. Each is on his own, undisciplined by bureaucratic control; hence a shaman is always a threat to the order of the organised church. In the view of the priests they are presumptive pretenders. ... The struggle between shaman and priest may well be a death struggle." (p137)

In the case of the US, Trump represents an atheist shaman whilst the Democrats represent an atheist priesthood. The priests represent an older moral order whose values have become disconnected with the realities of the present and are in crisis, the people then look for a shamanic disrupter, without really knowing what they are looking for, who can introduce new values that can reinvigorate the culture. No-one knows what values will work so you tend to find there is a series of such shamanic figures that arise until one is able to dominate the society and create a new orthodoxy. This is a pattern that is universal across all cultures and goes back to the beginning of history, and probably long before that. The only way to bridge this divide is to go up the metaphysical hierarchy and try to find a compromise not in ideas or through rational argument but by way of shared values.