

***A Critical Reading of Robert Pirsig's  
Metaphysics of Quality in Zen and the Art of Motorcycle  
Maintenance***

Thomas Dylan Daniel

In Robert Pirsig's famous work, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, a metaphysical concept is born. Pirsig explores his relationship with his son as he explores the US on a motorcycle and as he explores the very concept of sanity. The goal he seeks is what he refers to as Quality. The work itself is structured as a novel, but this thin veil barely conceals some of the deepest postmodern philosophical insights into the dialectical nature of reason that had ever been published in 1974. The main thrust of Pirsig's argument is a flourish that is seldom encountered in academic philosophy (and perhaps this is why he remains something of an outsider to present day). Put simply, Pirsig believed that the most important part of subject/object relations consisted of an attentional guidance which precedes, in every case, the material which is discussed: *care*. People do better work, feel better about their lives, and generally succeed more often when they care about the problems they address. This simple point is addressed by neuroscientists, psychologists, and a wide variety of technical personnel—but it has yet to receive its due as a core component of analytical philosophy. Things change based upon the disposition of the subject who apprehends them.

Despite a wide following outside of academia, few scholars have taken time to critically examine Pirsig's most popular work. For this reason, I write with the goal of unpacking the deepest nuances of the philosophical position the prose and story of the work construct. This essay will attempt to argue that Pirsig's rightful place as one of the greatest philosophers of postmodernism is not only well-deserved, but that the emerging philosophical movement itself will do well to heed the lessons he has taught.

Deliberately, Pirsig's instructive study of the relationship between rhetoric and dialectic unfolds in the space between his realization that there is a need for a direct exploration of Quality and the conclusion he ultimately reaches: that we cannot help but *care* about it. Why must we care about Quality? Because, for Pirsig, Quality is the only thing that can actually become real to us.

That is, our perceptions of Quality precede and determine our perceptions of everything else. The neurosciences of attentional guidance and emotional attachment, as well as the body of literature surrounding the subconscious, tend to support this sort of underpinning element to human consciousness, but Pirsig seems to have happened upon it without too much external influence.

Though widely read, the style of ZMM's authorship makes it extremely difficult to retroactively compile bibliographic evidence of Pirsig's literary footprint. This is likely one major hurdle for contemporary scholars such as Dr. Anthony McWatt of Liverpool who have been working for some time to see Pirsig included alongside his more academic contemporaries, but perhaps it serves to isolate Pirsig's own work in an effort to seclude the reader, forcing would-be Pirsig scholars to think more deeply for themselves. In this essay, I will attempt to sum up a little over ten years' worth of Pirsig scholarship on my own part under the remote tutelage of several secondary authors as well as Dr. McWatt himself.

Though the subject-matter is quite difficult, and it is occasionally necessary to argue with the concepts put directly forth within the work or even take inference from the plot of the story regarding the philosophical prize modern scholars would prefer to see stated as plainly as possible, I believe it is possible to understand ZMM in a way which both benefits the reader and does justice to the work as it stands amongst the constellation of postmodern philosophical works.

### **Dialectic, Mythos, and Logos**

Pirsig's attitude toward the centerpiece of philosophy, dialectic, shifts throughout the work. The narrator alternately approves of it, then rejects it, and finally seems to regard it as a necessary piece of a larger puzzle by the end of the work. Dialectic, for Pirsig, is a problematic concept because it attempts to prioritize rationality and sacrifice relatability; it may clarify our thoughts for us but it cannot do so without pushing them away in a sense—dialectic analyzes, and this makes it difficult for us to care about what is analyzed by distancing it from our conscious minds. Rhetoric is the

opposite of dialectic in this sense, and it is the subject that Phaedrus,<sup>1</sup> the narrator's alter-ego, taught as he embarked upon his exploration of philosophy. Pirsig's natural preference for rhetoric over dialectic is a central feature of the emerging concept of Quality, but this one-dimensional understanding is not enough.

We need to be certain that we grasp the fact that the very presence of rhetoric is closely tied to subjectivity, to individuality, and to *care*. For Pirsig, dialectic may be said to explore what it is that exists, but rhetoric explores, in every case, *why THIS particular thing matters*. So, while dialectic strips us of the care we have for its subjects, rhetoric enhances that emotional value. These concepts of rhetoric and dialectic need to be addressed in a deeper way than Pirsig explicitly instructs the reader to do in the text of ZMM, but with a bit of external insight it is nonetheless possible to understand the Metaphysics of Quality as a metaphysical undertaking.<sup>2</sup>

The result of this reading of Pirsig is a deeper understanding of the core concept which can be seen as the ultimate end served by all postmodern philosophers, namely that truth itself is dialectical and never immutable or absolute. Postmodern philosophy in general is attacked as an attempt to undermine the value that we as a species seem to know things to have, as well as an attempt to disprove foregone conclusions such as the existence of God, or the absolute nature of morality. However, as a postmodern philosopher myself, I might like to remind the reader that such goals are not a priority for postmodern thought.

Rather, postmodernism is simply the realization that our thinking must be translated into verbal action to become communicable—we can only mean what we can say. Though the observation seems trite at first, the philosophical ramifications of the necessity of condensation into speech are markedly more significant than any of the particular philosophical questions the philosophers of prior ages have argued at length. Hence, the core of prior philosophical insight is felt to be under attack by adherents of the various schools due simply to the fact that the assumptions which undergird it have come into question.

---

<sup>1</sup> Phaedrus is a name Pirsig uses to refer to himself as he was prior to his mental breakdown and eventual admission to a mental hospital where he underwent electroshock therapy before being released.

<sup>2</sup> Metaphysics as a subject is generally conceptualized in terms of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, which was a relational term applied after his time. The story goes that it was the book found after the physics book, and the Greek for after is meta.

For Pirsig, along with the postmodern movement in general, the traditional metaphysical practice attempts to conceive of the one universal, absolute Truth. This truth is thought of in postmodernism as the truth which must only ever be stated once. Pirsig frequently argues that traditional metaphysics is problematic because it seeks definitions which produce absolute Knowledge—knowledge of the world in itself, knowledge of the ultimate *logos* without a hint of the *mythos*.<sup>3</sup> This is a somewhat plainer way of speaking than the riddles of Deleuze & Guattari, or the strange machinations of the mind of Derrida, but the general point is the same: we must reconceptualize our worldview in light of the realization that our speech cannot be absolute. Pirsig's *mythos* is the unfolding of the larger story of which we are all playing a different part, which on the wide stage of postmodern philosophy results in a variance from individual to individual in the perception of a hypothetical absolute reality somewhere beyond us, or perhaps made up of us. Pirsig, like many postmodern philosophers, would argue that regardless of a given philosopher's choice to pay attention to it or not, the *mythos* is a fundamental part of our reality. Further, Pirsig thought it would be fair to say that, if one wants to push beyond the *mythos* and find oneself in some sort of absolute, one has become stuck in *logos*. Being stuck in *logos* is not a good thing—it is to be imprisoned in a false reality where everything must be rationally expressed to be understood at all, a severe limitation that has confounded thinkers including Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore—but Pirsig traces the history of this flawed, mythical, ideal principle all the way back to Plato. The key to understanding the value of the Metaphysics of Quality is that metaphysics itself is *of the mythos* just as physics is. A traditional conception of metaphysics might consist of an attempt to connect *logos* with the patterns which comprise the morals of the stories we tell each other in the process of communication.

Pirsig took a deep look at this concept, determined that we communicate mostly through analogy, and concluded that it was unlikely that we would ever draw out a universal principle from this mostly-contextual information, even if we had the 'sum total' of all that had ever taken place.

---

<sup>3</sup> "The term *logos*, the root word of 'logic,' refers to the sum total of our rational understanding of the world. *Mythos* is the sum total of the early historic and prehistoric myths which preceded the *logos*," (ZMM, p. 315). Pirsig's usage of *logos* differs somewhat from a literal translation of the Greek, which uses the term alternately as language, thought, or idea.

This is textbook postmodernism at its surface, but in Pirsig the concept is both deeper and clearer than its analogues, found in thinkers from Deleuze & Guattari to Foucault and Derrida, from Alasdair MacIntyre to Bernard Williams. Pirsig's key insight is unique because it contains the only postmodern critical theory which can be said to posit something beyond itself, by which we mean, of course, Quality.

Finding an absolute law which could be considered absolute Truth or Knowledge here would be the surest way to know that our thoughts have been trapped by the *logos*. When we get stuck in this problem, we only need to realize that we have started using dialectic to try to tell ourselves how we should always live, and the only likely outcome is that we will instead bankrupt our lives of *why* we should live. In practice, this error comes with a definite result: we will forget to live in a way that lends Quality to our lives. Following Socrates, the Metaphysics of Quality urges us to employ dialectic instead of rhetoric when a problem is encountered, but turns back to rhetoric and silence when we deal with relationships—when we need to *care*.

The Metaphysics of Quality is in every sense a continuation of the work Plato wrote Socrates doing in Athens. Its purpose is to produce in the reader an understanding of the way that dialectical reasoning can lead to a full understanding of one's situation when there is a problem to solve. For example, in his attempt to explain certain aspects of the world in terms of *logos*, Phaedrus encounters contradictions and conceptual difficulties faced by the philosophers of the past, which he then deals with by focusing his energy into a dialectical attempt to reconcile the *mythos* with the *logos*. In so doing, Phaedrus is forced to destroy the web of analogies that constitute his understanding of his place in the world by analyzing it.

Analogies are produced by rhetoric. They are stacked upon one another and thus constitute the *mythos*.<sup>4</sup> Phaedrus arguably attempts to move beyond his own *mythos* to find a replacement for what he believes to be a broken *logos*. The *logos* is the domain of rationality, the opposite of the web of analogies that constitutes a person's identity and the stories we tell ourselves about who and what we are. Attempting to reconcile rational knowledge with the analogical and creative aspects of human life is what drives Phaedrus mad in the story because the only

---

<sup>4</sup> ZMM, 316-318.

satisfaction we ever find in asking why is rooted in our own identities, our own situations. Phaedrus loses his personal situation and the resulting madness nearly costs him everything.

This madness, however, is the point of origin of the Metaphysics of Quality. Once the concept becomes more fleshed out, and after Phaedrus is eliminated, the unnamed narrator rehashes the old thoughts and arrives at new conclusions. Instead of futilely attempting to mix oil and water, going mad when the task is proven impossible, and throwing up his hands in defeat, Pirsig's unique mind managed to reframe the problem. The Metaphysics of Quality, then, is a framing mechanism which contains the assumption that *personal* meaning and *care* are outside of the domain of *logos*, and thus beyond the reach of the dialectic. Instead of applying dialectic to the world at large, then, we should allow *care* to be the frame within which *logos* is found. By creating this metaphysical construct, Pirsig has contributed not a scientific theory, but something bigger. He's developed a set of tools for dealing with the difficult thoughts.

### **Rhetoric as the Key to Pirsig's Thinking**

Perhaps the key to Pirsig's work is rhetoric. His claim can be understood in terms of knowledge, but not the kind of knowledge that will lead a person to absolute Truth. Absolute Truth is a construct of the *logos* and hence, rather than understanding itself as a knowledge of what has been said, a knowledge of the strongest and most effective analogies, Absolute Truth attempts to frame the question of whether a claim is true or false as *logos* transcending the *mythos*. By contrast, the function of the Metaphysics of Quality, perhaps ideally the function of any metaphysics, is to provide a person with a working ability to engage with the world and to communicate with other people—the function of metaphysics is thus *practical*, and not the recovery of the absolute. This is the single clearest statement one can make about postmodern metaphysical thinking.

The myths, the analogies, even the scientific truths that make up the *mythos*—these are merely a means to the end of communication between ourselves and the world outside of ourselves. This is why Pirsig never uses *logos* to define the what-it-was-to-be-that-thing of reality; his encounter with Zen has taught him that there is a bit more to reality than can be explicitly stated. As a result, Pirsig refuses to see science as anything more than a means of engaging the world

dialectically: per his favorite example, *logos* is useful as a means of keeping the motorcycle running. This view has the impact of dispelling any mysticism in the operation of machines—whether they be metaphysical, cultural, or mechanical—and it utterly eliminates any possibility of Absolute Truth as a valid theorem.

The significance of the term *rhetoric* for Pirsig becomes apparent with the realization that Phaedrus' status as a rhetorician is to blame for his resistance to dialectic. His rhetoric is merely a skill by which he can effectively organize the *mythos* and make people care about it: it will never prevent a dialectician from wreaking havoc on his worldview. Phaedrus describes the development of dialectic, as he sees it having happened in ancient Greece:

*Dialectic* generally means “of the nature of the dialogue,” which is a conversation between two persons. Nowadays it means logical argumentation. It involves a technique of cross-examination, by which truth is arrived at. It's the mode of discourse of Socrates in the *Dialogues* of Plato. Plato believed the dialectic was the sole method by which truth was arrived at. The only one. That's why it's a fulcrum word. Aristotle attacked this belief, saying that the dialectic was only suitable for some purposes - to enquire into men's beliefs, to arrive at truths about eternal forms of things, known as *Ideas*, which were fixed and unchanging and constituted reality for Plato. Aristotle said there is also the method of science, or 'physical' method, which observes physical facts and arrives at truths about substances, which undergo change.<sup>5</sup>

Pirsig goes on in a speculative, unsupported, and hypercritical fashion to elaborate a story of Plato's confrontation of the Sophists' *Good* in ancient Greece in terms of dialectic and rhetoric as methods of finding value. The victory of Plato's *Truth* is significant in the sense that it is the origin

---

<sup>5</sup> ZMM, 330

of the modern drive to place dialectic hierarchically above rhetoric.<sup>6</sup> The replacement of the ancient Greek *arête*<sup>7</sup> with Truth by Plato is the first discovery Phaedrus makes as he moves toward the moment of enlightenment which destabilizes him. His second realization is that Aristotle created a second binary division between dialectic and science. At this point in the text, Pirsig is setting the stage for the implosion of Phaedrus' identity and the three days and three nights he spends in his bedless bedroom, staring at the wall, unable to function. Phaedrus has mounted an attack upon Aristotelian *logos* without realizing it. The result is an internal dialectic that he cannot stop because he cares too much about the result. He obsessively analyzes himself until his mind shuts down.

In addition, at this time, we must remember that Phaedrus has opted to eradicate the *mythos* within which he formerly understood himself. By attacking these binaries—which he sees as the primary process at work in the formation of the structures he is at odds with—he is effectively attacking himself and everything else he believes in. Thus, the dialectical inquiry he engages in is itself responsible for the mental breakdown he suffers.

Phaedrus' mistake, in my view, was that he placed Quality before everything, but he failed to understand that access to the contents of the *mythos* is enhanced by dialectic—essentially, the means to destroy the former divisions and create something better are *already part of the mythos*. I.e., Quality is primary because it is primary for the *mythos*. The ability of Aristotle to differentiate between science and dialectic is a refinement in the process of seeking truth, not a destruction of it. In fact, following Pirsig's analogy,<sup>8</sup> it could be said that binary distinctions are the only way for growth to take place. Rhetoric is good for constructing analogies to describe relationships between these binaries, but we must never forget that dialectic must be used to unpack them. Dialectic comes from the Greek *to converse with*; but it is separated from dialogue and more closely related to the word *dialect*, which, if I may speculate, positions it to combine the analytic character of philosophy (*dia*, through the) with that which pertains to the dialect (*logos*, language,

---

<sup>6</sup> (ZMZ, pps. 342-345).

<sup>7</sup> "Excellence," (ZMM, 340).

<sup>8</sup> (ZMM, p. 315).

thought, idea) of the language a given person speaks, writes, etc. This is why the classical philosophical starting points are, in fact, questions.

The beginning of a dialectical discussion can often be found in a question such as “What is the meaning of life?” Any subsequent unpacking of that question is what I mean by dialectic. It can be done by a single person, or by two or more, and Plato’s dialogues are an excellent place to look for examples. Aristotle, instead of describing these questions as dialectical, however, called them ‘bastard questions’ and suggested that they resulted from category errors.

Pirsig’s solution to the problem of these tremendous, insoluble questions is different: he suggests we ask a question in return that begs clarification, such as “Whose life?” or some such focus point whereupon a particular is reintroduced to the conversation to clarify the issue at hand.<sup>9</sup> The resulting relationship—a call for balance between dialectic and rhetoric—is the key to understanding the true philosophical significance of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. The rhetorical construction of the moral of the novel itself, for example, is effective if and only if the reader is willing to perform an interrogation of Pirsig’s rhetorical construct by using dialectic. To more critically unpack this notion, it will be helpful to draw upon Pirsig’s own sources.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Care: The Root of Proper Dialectic?***

For Pirsig, we must not forget that dialectic is a means to the end of solving problems that must come from a position of *care*. Dialectical reasoning, as applied to the motorcycle, leads Pirsig to a complete understanding of its parts and their functions. *Care* about the motorcycle is what leads him to engage it dialectically. Perhaps he would not pay such careful attention to the working of the machine if he was not interested in recognizing problems with it that might leave him stranded.

The second, main motorcycle trip portrayed in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* is differentiated from the first attempt the narrator and Chris made by the fact that Pirsig’s involvement with the machine is sufficient to keep the machine running well in the second

---

<sup>9</sup> Dmitri Nikulin, in his book, *Dialectic & Dialogue*, puts it thus: “Dialectic is an art or method of reasoning that initially occurs in dialogue and has to clarify the essence of a notion - that is, ‘what’ a thing is” (D&D pp. 5).

<sup>10</sup> See: Plato’s Apology, Symposium, Phaedrus and Euthyphro.

trip.<sup>11</sup> The first trip to Canada involves the characters in the story running out of gas and giving up. The second trip, when the story unfolds, is different—Pirsig has, by studying the mechanisms that govern the workings of the machine, earned the right to take part in a mechanical discourse with the cycle during the second trip.

This deep emotional involvement with the wellbeing of the motorcycle itself is what makes the second trip possible. Pirsig's newfound, *care*-driven relation to the motorcycle makes the trip more fun, makes it possible, and enables the growth of his relationship to his son, Chris, which plays out through a development of the character's general disposition: at the beginning of the work, he is disengaged and reluctant to indulge his son's frivolous desire to express himself. Toward the end of the book, Pirsig changes; he becomes more open to fun and more accepting of the developments which have led him to the end of the journey—to Chris's benefit, as well as his own.

The personal growth narrative of the work is intended to convey an understanding of the world as more fully accessible through engagement in terms of *care*. Words themselves refer to things to which they bear no relation; try petting the word “dog” on this page (or screen) for an example.<sup>12</sup> In this way, talk or thought is always removed by at least one degree of abstraction from its subject. Hence, doing dialectic upon language as Socrates does is an analogy. It represents the way in which Socrates interacts with the world.<sup>13</sup>

As Pirsig sees it toward the end of the book, Aristotle takes the mode of engagement with reason demonstrated by Socrates and applies it to everything imaginable; not to exclude future generations from doing so as Phaedrus accuses him of, but rather because it can be effectively done now that Socrates has shown the way to do it. Pirsig's dislike of Aristotle comes from the fact that Aristotle was the philosopher who demonstrated the need for an application of dialectical reasoning to the world around him rather than merely to rhetorical constructs.

Pirsig ironically takes this technique one step further and makes the dialectic work upon a physical system, just as Aristotle did. The motorcycle is a tool Pirsig sees as a way of making a claim about

---

<sup>11</sup> ZMM, 19-20.

<sup>12</sup> From discussion of de Saussure's “arbitrariness of the sign,” (Pinker, S. p. 83, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> An excellent example of this occurs toward the end of *Phaedrus*, in the discussion about writing.

the applicability of this method of reasoning to the world itself and not simply to dialogue. This is not because he understands the motorcycle in the only way in which a motorcycle can be understood, but rather because he has developed the dialectical means for understanding his *particular* relationship with his *particular* motorcycle—a phenomenon which occurs because he *cares* about the motorcycle. His technical writer's approach would likely be dramatically less effective in discussing the workings of a car<sup>14</sup> because the engagement his mind has in its relationship to the motorcycle is responsible for the emergence of his ability to *care* about it. Take away the *care* and you may as well take away the motorcycle.

Phaedrus, on the other hand, is disgusted by Aristotle and his dialectical method because the teachers, the system, whose stated purpose is to help everyone learn to *think*, is instead teaching them how to act *like they are capable of thinking*, filling their heads with facts that have no relation to an understanding of the subject matter—about which, it is impossible to care. I might suggest Paulo Freire's experience in Brazil as evidence that Phaedrus is right about everything except his unfair notion that no one else understands. The discovery at the end of the book which allows Pirsig to reunite himself with Phaedrus consists of a revelation: the understanding is finally reached that dialectic is not always malicious, that the teachers and people who do not reach this height of cognitive virtue are not deficient in dedication, but rather in terms of their relation to their world.

Characters in the book repeatedly enact this deficient engagement with technology, with each other, and with themselves—learning to forgive himself for his mistakes enables Pirsig to forgive his son, his friends, and his society, for the difficulties each faces in building proper Quality relations with their respective environments. The motorcycle mechanic who damages the machine<sup>15</sup> is guilty of a lack of care—it isn't just that he doesn't know what he is doing, it is rather that his work lacks Quality for the simple reason that he cannot own it. He is not properly existing in relation to it because his application of dialectic does not correspond to an equal application of rhetoric: he cares about his paycheck, not about the bike's engine.

---

<sup>14</sup> "Through that car window everything you see is just more TV," ZMM, 4.

<sup>15</sup> ZMM, 22-23.

Later, when the “talkative fellow” repairs his chain guard, Pirsig’s narrator does see Quality in the work that is done—but the man responsible thinks absolutely nothing of it.<sup>16</sup> The difference between these two mechanics is precisely that they have different levels of mastery over what they *care about*. The older, better mechanic is able to *care* more deeply about this new motorcycle than the younger one. It might be said that Quality is its own reward: rather than being Pirsig’s lackey as he does the job, the older mechanic acts like Pirsig’s *boss*, making him clean the grease out of the chain guard and take it apart himself. Hence, if there is one fundamental, definitive characteristic of Quality as it emerges in the text, it is the agency of the subject in choosing the object.

This *agency* is the fundamental ground for the emergence of Quality in a life, and it is enabled by an understanding of *mythos* which then calls for an application of *logos*. Without this mechanism of restraint by which the dialectic can be contextualized, there is still Quality in the world, and it is still fundamental, but there is an additional need to achieve a state of unity with the object toward which *care* is to be directed. The way to do this is to accept the framework of the *mythos* as the context within which the work is to be done—and the older mechanic here clearly accomplishes this to a greater degree than the younger mechanic.

### **Care in The Metaphysics of Quality**

The final piece of the puzzle in Pirsig’s notion of Quality revolves around the realization that Pirsig deals with his motorcycle out of *need* rather than choice. In Pirsig’s own words: “...Quality is not just the *result* of a collision between subject and object. The very existence of subject and object themselves is *deduced* from the Quality event. The Quality event is the *cause* of the subjects and objects...”<sup>17</sup> So, the younger mechanic who did a bad job on Pirsig’s motorcycle was not *trying* to wreck his work; he was *blind* to the fact that he did not do the job well because he did not care about it enough.

*Care* about Pirsig’s motorcycle is the result of a Quality event—as are the details which reveal themselves afterward. This care Pirsig developed for his motorcycle when it broke down was

---

<sup>16</sup> ZMM, 321.

<sup>17</sup> ZMM, 215.

the ground for Pirsig's discovery of the motorcycle and the process through which he came to realize that he was the only one who could take excellent care of it. Indeed, phenomenology supports the claim that objects in the world can be more *there* or less *there* for different people. Psychology supports a variety of attentional guidance claims and can even suggest neurobiological mechanisms by which memories and experiences are made more vivid based upon one's frame of mind or attitude toward a given object. Pirsig simply seizes this operant mechanism and asserts its dominance over all of the others in human experience.

Having established the place of rhetoric and dialectic, and even carved out a niche for the symptom of a Quality event in terms of *care*, it is now time for the emergence of Quality to be treated. Quality exists prior to anything else, attracting its counterpart *care*. To *be* a Quality person can be said to be the aim of the struggle for *arête*, as Pirsig claims, but it can also be said to be the goal of many different Eastern approaches: Taoism, Confucianism, Zen Buddhism; even Hinduism rather transparently reveals itself to be an attempt to order society in a way that promotes Quality. In fact, the much-analyzed Western culture can be said to be an attempt to produce Quality. Pirsig's stinging indictment of the Western approach is couched in the assertion that, in the West, the priorities are all wrong—he never argues that the goal itself is fundamentally different.

The dualistic outlook that one approach is better than another in one way, inferior to that other in another way, and should or should not be adopted instead of the other, is reducible to a rhetorically constructed analysis. I might be tempted to speculate that the defining moment of Quality is what *actually happens* here, when Pirsig's Phaedrus collapses: "And the Quality, the *arête* he has sacrificed for, has *never* betrayed, but in all that time has never once understood, now makes itself clear to him and his soul is at rest."<sup>18</sup> This is to say Phaedrus' mental breakdown is triggered by the realization that Aristotle's method *is* a pursuit of Quality—which Phaedrus himself conceives of as *the fundamental ground for the emergence of subject and object*.

The man who emerges from electroshock therapy, with all of his deficiencies, is in the end only able to begin to live a good life when he reunites with Phaedrus and teaches himself how to

---

<sup>18</sup> ZMM, 359.

*care* about an imperfect world that cannot be solved or put aside. The journey is an allegory for the need to unite living with thinking, rhetoric with dialectic, and reason with the pursuit of a high-Quality life. Thus, Robert Pirsig can find a place among the greatest postmodern philosophers, despite his plain speech and few bad habits, because he understood and communicated the goal of postmodern living more completely and more correctly than any other, without handing down a stone tablet carved with absolutes. Perhaps the Socratic adage that the unexamined life is not worth living, ultimately, expresses a valuable observation: we care about that which we examine.

## References

- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by C.D.C. Reeve. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2014.
- Metaphysics*. Translated by Hugh Lawson-Tancred. London: Penguin Classic Books, 2004.
- Nikulin, Dmitri. *Dialectic and Dialogue*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010.
- Pirsig, Robert M. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. New York: Bantam Books, 1975.
- . *Lila*. New York: Bantam Books, 1991.
- Popper, Karl. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1945.

Original publication. 02.11.19 ©Archive Humanitas. Somewhere in Los Angeles.