

Pirsig Essay: Learning and Peace of Mind

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Part 1: Imperfect Understanding, Imperfect Communication

In *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Robert Pirsig indulges in an extended contemplation of the duality of nature and thought between two modes which he refers to as “classical” and “romantic,” demonstrating throughout the text the need for these two modes of thought to be intertwined in order to achieve a more balanced view of the world. He describes the “classical” mode of understanding as that which is analytical, rational, law-based, and focused on underlying form insofar as the form leads to function; most people would consider subjects such as science and mathematics to be primarily “classical” as Pirsig describes it. The “romantic” mode of understanding, in contrast, is aesthetic, intuitive, and creative. Most people would categorize subjects such as Literature or Art to be primarily “romantic” (Pirsig, 1974, p. 85).

The narrator of the text, perhaps an extension of Pirsig himself, exemplifies the relationship between the “classical” and the “romantic” first by referring to the structure of a motorcycle. Technical accounts of a motorcycle’s construction can be listed and detailed in a straight-forward, analytical way, though he points out that even the decision on how to organize the different mechanical systems is interpretive, and changes between one manufacturer and another (Pirsig, 1974, p. 90-92). However, no system of organization or description of the motorcycle’s consistent parts offers a full understanding of the machine, as it would encompass *what* the machine consists of and perhaps *how* the parts work together, but not *where* they are in an artistic, illustrative way or *why* they are arranged as they are. Furthermore, such technical manuals are object-obsessed, considering only the machine as a sum of its parts, and never considering the *subject* -- the operator as a person, the interaction between man and machine, and

the value judgments inherent in any human endeavor (p. 91-92). As a result, such a text can not encompass the full experience of using, operating, constructing or repairing a motorcycle, as such an endeavor requires a fullness of interaction with both classical and romantic modes of understanding. The narrator's deep connection between artistic and analytical modes is acknowledged in Chapter 14, when he joins a dinner party where a sculptor is present. At first he is dismissed by the sculptor as a non-artist, but their relationship warms up after the sculptor learns that the narrator welds as part of his hobby of motorcycle maintenance (p. 203). The sculptor recognizes, in this way, that the narrator's hobby is creative as well as analytical.

Pirsig repeats the theme later on in reference to the construction of a barbeque rotisserie. The interaction begins with an examination of the instruction manual, which is poorly organized and is puzzling to the other characters. The narrator explores the misinterpretive nature of the manual, which separates text and illustration and is written in a technical way which chops up information and relies on the reader to create continuity on their own. The other characters cannot understand the manual, as their worldviews are more romantic than classical. They look instead for continuity in the text--for aesthetic form, an overall understanding of what the rotisserie should be--which is not present, and they are unable to piece it together themselves (Pirsig, 1974, p. 205).

This lead to a discussion of what it means to successfully assemble a thing. Does it mean to follow the instructions exactly as written? Who is to say that the person who wrote the instructions communicated in the best way, or even understood the best method of construction? Once it is constructed--regardless of whether or not the machine is constructed "correctly" and would work well--does that mean anything, if the person who put it together does not trust they

did so correctly, and so hesitates to use it? The thing is only successfully constructed, the narrator says, not when it works “to spec,” but when the person who constructed it has a “peace of mind” about the product (Pirsig, 1974, 206-208).

Though it may not be perfectly clear why, these musings on motorcycle maintenance and rotisserie construction have everything to do with the process of education. When an idea is communicated from one person to another, it is not done by wire--there is no direct way to pour information from one mind to another. Even if there were, it would not work, because the way that one person understands a thing is based upon their prior knowledge and experiences, and knowledge is situated in along with memories, sensations, feelings, and opinions. Instead, students classically learn by reading textbooks and listening to lectures--imperfect shadows, dead facts that can only truly come back to life in the mind of an active, reasoning participant.

The practices of reading texts and passively observing lectures can be likened to the reading of a technical or instruction manual; delivered by an imperfect human who may or may not know the “best” way to understand or operate, who chooses how to chop up information and concepts, and who does so operating from their own point of view--of course--and not from that of their audience. The audience is always, then, having to gather bits and pieces and attempt to organize them in ways that fit into their own memories, opinions, and worldviews. Hence, we see a multitude of misconceptions and misunderstandings in the learning process.

Part 2: Achieving Unity

Like the character attempting to piece together a rotisserie barbeque, many students engage with technical communication only as long as they need to to achieve their purpose. There is no joy in reading the manual, only the goal of building the barbeque. Over time, if they

continually struggle with the process of interpreting the instructions, and continually fail to build the barbeque, they lose faith in the process, and come to wonder, *Why am I building this barbeque in the first place?* In the case of too many, this thought is really, *Why am I bothering to get an education in the first place?*, as students engage again and again with lectures and texts they find incomprehensible and are disappointed with their own products.

It's not difficult to imagine why a student would feel this way; no one enjoys repeatedly failing. Pirsig's narrator observed this loss of faith in the failing students, sitting in the back of the class, "contemptuous because they didn't understand [the rational, intellectual process]" (Pirsig, 1974, p. 190)--or perhaps they understood it but did not personally connect with it. They were not at peace with it, and therefore, they were disconnected from it.

Neither does the process suit the teacher who delivers the information. Pirsig's narrator recalls a time he worked at a "Teaching University" that eschewed research and forced professors to only teach, without time for intellectual endeavors: "Just teach and teach and teach until your mind grows dull and your creativity vanishes and you become an automaton saying the same dull things over and over to the endless waves of innocent students who cannot understand why you are so dull" (Pirsig, 1974, p. 182).

Yet, many educational systems--especially at the primary and secondary levels--insist on the classical, analytical, chopped-up approach rather than a holistic one. A perfect example of the classical approach to teaching and learning is in the writing of educational standards: State what the student must know, and how they must be able to demonstrate that knowing. Chop the concepts up into pieces that will be addressed at different times in a distinct order (though, like motorcycle manufacturers, different states and districts will chop differently). Gather data before

teaching, teach, gather data after teaching, and repeat. Evaluate and judge the results. Assign a grade.

This, Pirsig argues through his narrator, is not what a school is meant for. “The real University is a state of mind. It is that great heritage of rational thought... regenerated throughout the centuries by a body of people who traditionally carry the title of professor... [and is] nothing less than the continuing body of reason itself” (Pirsig, 1974, p. 186). The goal of such an institution is to “serve, through reason, the goal of truth” (p. 188). So we must ask... does the American school system serve the goal of truth?

Truth is that which is real both externally and internally, in the context of the student. Imagine the world before Galileo--although the Earth may have always been an oblate spheroid, this was not “true” until the idea had been accepted as true by people. Only then did it become truth, as the external reality came into alignment with internal understanding. It is imperative, then, to consider the subject--the student--and promote learning that involves the student’s thought process and “peace of mind” (p. 206). This is what we mean to achieve when we emphasize modes of learning such as the NSTA’s Science and Engineering practices, which guides the way students should interact with information, not just how they observe and absorb information.

There is a moment in the text, brief and fleeting, which illustrates beautifully the power of creative thought and problem solving in the mind of a student. After Pirsig’s narrator goes on complaining about the inelegance of the rotisserie instructions, how it is laid out so one must flip back and forth between text and illustration, his son Chris acts without speaking: “Chris, meanwhile, takes the instructions and folds them around in a way I hadn’t thought of so that the

illustration sits there right next to the text” (p. 205). In this moment, Chris sees a problem, considers it in a novel way, and elegantly solves it. It is a small act, one ignored by most of the characters, but it amazes the narrator. In this moment, his son embodies the connection between the analytical and the romantic--the creative force, living within us, that can create connections and solve problems in ways others have not thought to. This is the power of a student who is empowered to think, to engage, and to act.

Pirsig’s vision cannot be executed in a world obsessed with adherence to norms. “Standards” in the sense of “maintaining an academic standard” is necessary, but we must be cautious not to take the concept too far. “Standard” also means sameness, inflexibility and immovability. It is the opposite of “creative”--it is limited and limiting. Really *teaching* students is not the act of *imparting information*, in our imperfect human ways. Instead, it is the act of inviting students to engage with content in an exploratory manner in order to fit it into their modes of understanding--modes which should include both Pirsig’s “classical” and “romantic” conceptions, both the pieces as well as the whole picture.

References

Pirsig, R. M. (1974). *Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance: An inquiry into values*. New York, NY: Harper Torch (Reprinted in 2006).