

# Quality: Zen and now

by Amir Izadi

Robert Pirsig continues his quest for 'quality', which he began some twenty years ago in his first book, *Zen and The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. That book was initially rejected by over 200 publishers, but soon became a best seller, and still stands today as a classic for its unique and highly entertaining discussion of an important philosophical issue.

**BOOK REVIEW**

**Lila: An Inquiry into Morals**  
Robert Pirsig  
Bantam Books (409 pages)

*Lila: An Inquiry into Morals* is only Pirsig's second book to date. This time, however, instead of a motorcycle as vehicle and his son for a companion, Pirsig (or rather Phaedrus, the mythological character he sometimes prefers to adopt as storyteller) has a sailboat which he and Lila take down the Hudson River.

The book begins with his encounter with Lila in a seedy bar on the banks of the Hudson not far from Kingston. She's something of the Mae West type, voluptuous and seductive, though with her best years behind her, tenaciously holding on to what grace and beauty she had in her youth. Both cockeyed drunk, they pick each other up and she decides to go to New York city with

*"Does Lila have quality?"*

him instead of her own sailing party. The next morning, Rigel, another yachtsman with very traditional Victorian values, asks Phaedrus why he picked up a common "bar whore" and challenges him with the question, "Does Lila have quality?" Instinctively, he answers, "Yes!" but then can't explain why since she is characterized as somewhat vulgar and superficial, without much intelligence and quite immature, though not pretentious. And this challenge or dilemma which Phaedrus faces renews his quest for that ever elusive thing called 'quality.'

In *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* Pirsig raised the point that the quality of a thing, though outside of objective scientific facts and as such undefinable, is yet very real. But he wasn't quite content with the idea that quality is subjective and prone to value judgments either. (It doesn't depend on one's personal bias, after all, to recognize the difference in quality between Shakespeare and Ayn Rand.) But in that book Pirsig didn't really elaborate further because he went mad (as he did in real life) and the book ended like an unfinished work of art with patches of coalescing beauty without an observable outline. In short, Pirsig posed a very important question in *Zen*: what constitutes the 'quality' of a thing? In *Lila* he attempts to answer it.

This, no doubt, is an enormous task for which Pirsig has to lay much ground work before explicating his theory of quality. As a result, we're treated to a highly educational synopsis of how our contemporary moral values have evolved over time, primarily in this century.

Pirsig begins by challenging the traditional subject-object view of reality. He alludes to the fact that such a distinction never really existed until Galileo and the early scientists assigned 'objectivity' to their endeavors in an attempt to extricate themselves and their areas of study from papal authority. They conceded 'subjective' matters such as morals, politics, and values to the Church in exchange for authority over the 'objective' sciences. The result is the modern-day dichotomy between arts and sciences and the widely held belief that only science inquires about the truth, whereas morals and values like art are subjective and hence merely relative or arbitrary. They are believed to have no genuine intrinsic worth or value except for that given to them by humans.

How Pirsig's theory of Quality alleviates the subject-object dichotomy is far too involved to be done justice here in so few paragraphs. Suffice it to say that most people should find his ideas highly illuminating for their common sense appeal and their applicability to so many different disciplines in both the arts and sciences, not to mention ethics and psychiatry.

It is interesting, but not perhaps surprising, that unlike his first book, which got rave reviews, *Lila* got very few favorable reviews in the popular press. After all, he is challenging the most sacred realm of human inquiry: that is, the nature of reality and how we ought to act. That is something nearly everyone has settled comfortably for themselves. Whether they act in accordance with the dictates of an outside agent (society or God) or however they damn well please because they

believe morals are all subjective and relative, most people are content to look no further. When one tries to bring morals into the realm of rational inquiry and assert that there is some objective and intrinsic value to them, people are either confused or offended. What is surprising is how few critics even understood his main ideas about static versus dynamic quality and their moral ramifications. Granted, the explanations at times may appear incoherent, but then metaphysics is not for

*Highly educational synopsis of how our contemporary moral values have evolved our time*

the indolent in mind. Also, the transitions from textbook to novel are admittedly often sloppy, but this book is mainly about ideas and how they affect our conception of morality. It is possible to understand his ideas only if one actually sees a problem with contemporary theories of morality. "If it ain't broke why fix it?" you might ask, and the theories will blow right over you head as happened to an MD friend of mine who had the highest MCAT scores in the country. Who said one has to philosophize to run mazes?

This is truly an important book which transcends outdated right-versus-left ideology and attempts to deal with morality in a rational way. It can revolutionize the way one sees the world without robbing it of its mystery.

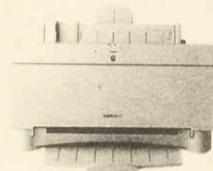
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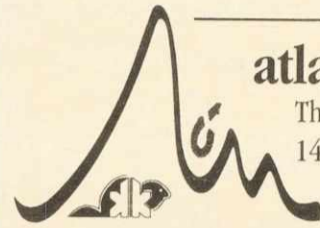
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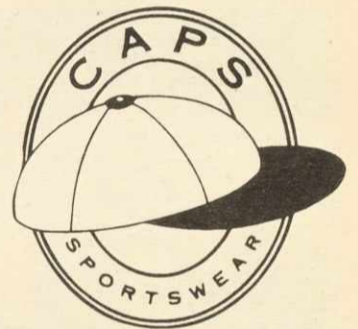
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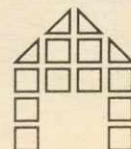
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