

UNPUBLISHED AND SELECTED WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR OF
*ZEN AND THE ART OF
MOTORCYCLE MAINTENANCE*

ON QUALITY

AN INQUIRY INTO EXCELLENCE

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Preface

Bob's Quest

by Wendy K. Pirsig

After dark on a cold New Year's night in 1980, my husband, Robert Pirsig, and I pulled into a casino near Carson City, Nevada. We were on our way east from San Francisco, following the funeral of Bob's son Chris, who, at age twenty-three, had been murdered in a street mugging six weeks before.

The casino gave us a decent supper at a low price, and that cheered us a little. Bob recounted good memories of the days when he and his first wife, Nancy, worked as dealers at a casino in Reno back in 1954, the year they were married.

That night, with the holidays ended, the place was quiet. Bob decided to play keno, sometimes known as the Chinese lottery, the game he ran twenty-six years before. He picked up the special Chinese brush and ink and marked off the combination spelling CHRISTOPHER on a keno card, a thin sheet of square newsprint with numbers in orange squares. With gestures that still felt familiar, he made marks looking like little ship's sails.

"When I was a keno dealer, making those little marks was a way to find Quality in the job," he said.

At the window a young cashier with a pleasant round face copied our ticket with her brush. Like Bob, she made triangular blocks on the numbers. She wrote \$1.00, which we'd played, and

9, the number of spots marked, with her own distinctive style. She smiled at us in a friendly way. We played to win \$50,000, and lost. But we felt better than we had when we'd arrived that night.

We stood a few minutes watching the blackjack dealers before heading to our motel. They all dealt cards with smooth, trance-making motions.

“Like the keno dealer. Everybody finds their Quality operating in their job,” said Bob as we left.

He often made remarks like this. Quality was on his mind.

The purpose of this book, published five years after Bob's death in 2017, is to offer a small selection of writings on the central theme of his life's work: Quality, a concept that is revealed but sometimes overshadowed in his published work by colorful descriptions of motorcycling through the American West, engine maintenance, a mental health crisis, and a father-son relationship.

QUALITY IS EVER PRESENT

At the start of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Bob chose an epigraph he paraphrased from Plato: “And what is good, Phædrus, and what is not good—Need we ask anyone to tell us these things?” No, Bob was saying, we don't need anyone to tell us. It surrounds us, constantly guides us, and actually is us. And we know it.

“Good,” “excellence,” and other words for “Quality” have been exhaustively examined in philosophical thinking, especially in the scholarship of the West. Developing the Metaphysics of Quality, Bob took a new angle, placing Quality at the center of existence, where science typically places substance.

Values and the ancient Greek term *aretê* are other terms he explored.

Bob's choice of the word "Quality" was suggested by chance, in about 1960, by a colleague who taught college English. Bob had been a philosophy major who had spent time in Korea in the army and then studied in India. He saw Quality as a potential unifier of two major philosophical systems around the globe. He hoped to use it in the classroom to guide students in their writing.

But he came to see that philosophical reasoning is not our only connection to Quality. Values direct our every move, every thought, every impulse, and those of all living things, all the time. And no, we don't need to ask anyone—we can see values everywhere.

Think of that: Quality is self-evident to everybody. To demonstrate, imagine a delicious food or drink in front of you right now. Feel Quality when reaching for it. Or think of music you are drawn to. The sight of someone you love. Their touch. Or imagine relief from pain. In his second book, *Lila*, Bob used the example of leaping away after burning yourself on a hot stove:

Any person of any philosophic persuasion who sits on a hot stove will verify without any intellectual argument whatsoever that he is in an undeniably low-quality situation: that the value of his predicament is negative. This low quality is not just a vague, woolly-headed, crypto-religious, metaphysical abstraction. It is an experience. It is not a judgment about an experience. It is not a description of experience. The value itself is an experience.

Bob began exploring this subject when he was trying to get his students to engage their own innate sense of good writing rather than try to guess what Bob wanted as the professor. His

classrooms explored various devices to reveal to the students that they did indeed recognize Quality in writing of their own and of each other. He opened up their sensitivity to value.

Bob became convinced that not only is Quality common to all living things and all experience, it pervades the entire world. The natural world, including each of us, is actually composed of it.

And yet Quality's central importance is easily missed.

Returning to the hot stove, he noted that the scientific test of burning yourself "is completely predictable." He continued in *Lila*: "It is verifiable by anyone who cares to do so. It is reproducible. Of all experience it is the least ambiguous, least mistakable there is. Later the person may generate some oaths to describe this low value, but the value will always come first, the oaths second. Without the primary low valuation, the secondary oaths will not follow."

But we don't see it as value. By the time we are cursing and jumping around, what we see is a hot stove. *Lila* argues that humans have a "culturally inherited blind spot." We know Quality, we experience it continuously, but we fail to recognize it for what it is.

Why is Quality's importance so hard to perceive? Living beings have evolved an elevated sense of "self," or subject, as a lens through which all of reality, "other" or object, is interpreted. Our honed ability to protect our individual lives creates a perception that we are separate from the rest of existence. It's all Quality, but we usually don't see it that way.

Buddhism, especially Soto Zen, which Bob studied years after he left teaching, tackles the "blind spot" through experiential training. In Zen, and in Buddhism generally, Quality/Buddha is not approached as a concept. Instead, practitioners explore such centuries-old methods as meditation, mantras, and