

# Robert Pirsig's Metaphysics of Quality

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Dan Cryer of the New York "Newsday" had this to say about Robert Pirsig in a 1991 article:

"Like the village crank hanging out at the public library, the guy really believes he has discovered the secret of the universe."

Maybe Pirsig hasn't quite discovered the secret of the universe but since writing the best-selling "Zen & the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" (ZMM) in 1974, he has been working out a new metaphysics from the ground-up. This is his "Metaphysics of Quality" which by using an ancient Greek term for the Good he is seeking to re-unite the fields of Art, Religion and Science in a new framework.

Much in the same way as the narrator in Robert Pirsig's LILA was unprejudiced against the bar lady he picked-up, (noticing she had quality in at least one respect), it was with the same open-mindedness I read "Zen & the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" in 1989. ZMM and its follow-up LILA are certainly not texts written in the analytic tradition of philosophy. They introduce a largely aesthetic approach to the subject and, in fact, present Pirsig's ideas in the form of novels.

I studied Art at degree level from 1986 and always felt uncomfortable with the notion that the value of a work of art was purely subjective. Just because artistic skill and effort can't be measured as precisely as a laboratory experiment does not automatically mean they do not contribute anything of value to a piece. I already felt that considerable truth about life can often be found in fictional work (Shakespeare probably being the foremost example that springs to mind) so I was interested in what Pirsig had to say and also in the way he said it.

Dr Alison Loughlin explains one of the reasons Pirsig presents his ideas in the form of novels:

"There is no more natural and accessible way to approach a new subject than through the medium of the novel. In a good novel, the exploration of new, and sometimes difficult, ideas are bound up with our exploration of the characters, their struggles and

their journey through life. It is in this way that ideas are most effectively brought to life."

(Handout from ZMM evening class, University of Liverpool, January 1998)

Karl Marx also states that philosophy must relate to everyday experience to be of any use. Maybe this is where a writer like Pirsig is beneficial, his fictional work reflecting the real pain and joy he's had in his life. As Pirsig states himself, philosophy is not worth a damn if it doesn't improve real life.

Pirsig reduces absolutely everything down to the Good or what he calls "Quality"; Quality and values are the lynchpin in his philosophy. In the following I hope to show you some of the reasons why he takes this particular route and to introduce you to the main ideas in his "Metaphysics of Quality" (or "MOQ").

### 1. So who is Robert Pirsig?

Pirsig is the 84 year old author of ZMM and LILA, the former being the best ever selling philosophy book. This year, his paper "Subjects, Objects, Data and Values" is due for publication in volume eight of "Einstein meets Magritte". Pirsig is presently living quietly in New Hampshire, USA with his wife Wendy and daughter Nell. He admits to being a bit of a recluse and won't even answer the phone. He explains his behaviour thus:

"The Buddhist monk has a precept against indulging in idle conversation, and I think the basis of that precept is what motivates me."

(letter from Robert Pirsig to Bodvar Skutvik, August 17th, 1997)

His present philosophical interest can be traced back to 1959 when he was an English teacher at Montana State College. He was under legal contract to teach "quality" even though it was not made clear by the college authorities what was meant by this term. He soon realised that for centuries English rhetoric teachers had been passing and failing students on the quality of their work without any viable definition of what quality actually was. This strange state of affairs is what Pirsig attempted to end with his research.

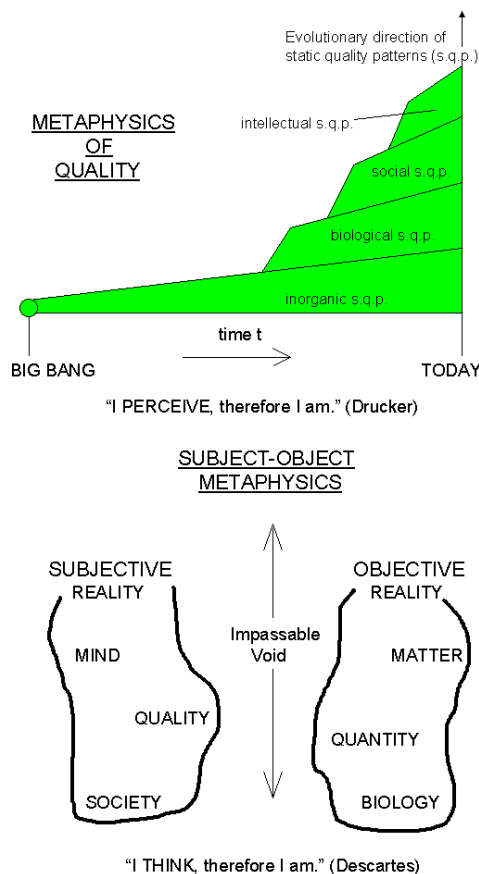
His first book ZMM explored the history of the term all the way back to Plato and Aristotle. Pirsig thought the strange position of rhetoric and of Quality (or what the Ancient Greeks called the "Good") was due to Plato's division of the human soul into reason and emotion in his dialogue "Phaedrus". In this dialogue, Plato gave primary placing of reason over emotion; this way of emphasizing dialectic and analysis was taken-up by Aristotle and eventually developed into the largely dominant subjective/objective way of thinking we have in the West.

As Lawson-Tancred says (on page 57) in the introduction of his 1991 translation of Aristotle's "Rhetoric":

"...there are few things that are to be deplored in Greek culture, and notably in the legacy of Plato, than the wholly forced and unnatural division between (the) ...two sister studies (of rhetoric and philosophy). It is, at least arguable that the evolution of both moral philosophy and the psychological and social sciences would have been permanently hindered had it not been for the reintegration of those studies of human nature which Platonic obsessiveness had driven into different camps."

So, now in the West, we have objectivity, reason, logic and dialectic, on the one hand, while we have subjectivity, emotion, imagination, intuition and rhetoric, on the other. The former terms suggest scientific respectability while the latter are often assumed to be artistic terms having little or no place in science or rationality.

It is this conception of rationality that Pirsig seeks to challenge by re-assessing how the spiritual, scientific and artistic worlds relate to each other. Pirsig seeks to transcend the subject/object dichotomy (and the metaphysical problems such a division causes) by replacing it with a unifying paradigm which he terms as the "Metaphysics of Quality" (or MOQ for short). This was first elucidated in LILA in 1991.



## 2. So why introduce a new metaphysics?

North American literary and professional elites still continue to churn out reams of sociological and “phil-o-so-pho-logical” (a Pirsig word for secondary literature about the primary texts written by philosophers but usually misleadingly calls itself “philosophy” in the same way literary critics talk about literature) commentary that contain the old Platonic Cartesian and post-Protestant presumptions which, despite all their varying and even conflicting forms, have nothing new to offer. When North Americans find themselves in the mood for debate, they tune in to the same arguments that crop up decade after decade: science vs. religion, evolution vs. creation (or more recently so-called “Intelligent Design”). As Caryl Johnston (an MOQ blogger) noted in 2010, “the characters retire; the arguments never do.”

At least in the USA, Europe and East Asia, there are now some academics (such as David Granger, Andrew Sneddon, Ron DiSanto, Caryl Johnston & Michael Sexson) who have embraced the Metaphysics of Quality and have established websites, blogs and/or published books over the last few years. However, in the US especially (and, of course, where America, its lapdog, England, is never too far behind!), this is still very early days for the MOQ to reach the mainstream of modern academia.

As Caryl Johnston notes: “In America intellect is always proving itself, and because it always has to fight so many demons, real and imagined, it never really has had to renovate itself, challenge itself by going into the roots of thought. The resulting intellectual stagnation leads to a kind of deviousness in our political life. [[1]] Pirsig is simple, honest and direct in his persona, disarming, unaffected, and apparently not in the quest for academic honors, tenure, or having his best selling book made into a movie. And on top of it all -- a motorcycle trip! It’s enough to make an American intellectual sneer – as sadly, many of them have.

The value of metaphysics is that it forces a confrontation with one’s basic beliefs, and therefore, with one’s strategies for deviousness. It seeks to suspend or disrupt that which is purely automatic in us. According to Ortega (y) Gasset, metaphysics has to do with the sphere of fundamental beliefs. [[2]] He noted that the original word for philosophy, as practiced in the mystery-schools of the Sophists and Presocratics, *aletheia*, the unveiling or “truth-finding process,” was too unsettling and uncomfortable for people, and in the later classical age Plato and the others came up with a more neutral term, the “love of wisdom.” [3]

Robert Pirsig would find Ortega’s train of thought – going back to the early Sophists and rhetoricians of Ancient Greece, very congenial. For he recapitulated the same journey in his quest to overcome what he calls the “Metaphysics of Substance.” This Metaphysics of Substance relates to the primary division, in Western philosophy,

between subjects and objects. Only “objects,” that is, things with substantial being, are considered to be objectively real. To Pirsig, it was an artificial dividing line which elevated the rational at the expense of the good. This habit of thinking was detrimental to society, creating chaos in the realm of morals and values. For according to its tenets, those very morals and values lay in the “subjective” side of the equation and therefore culminate solely as expressions of personal preference. [4]

Pirsig’s quest, therefore, led him to make his attack at the very citadel – the subject-object division. More fundamental than a subject which thinks and objects which are thought about is the “Quality” which leads us to postulate the existence of subjects and objects. “...at the cutting edge of time, before an object can be distinguished, there must be a kind of non-intellectual awareness... You can’t be aware that you’ve seen a tree until after you’ve seen the tree...” (ZMM, p.250) And: “Reality is always the moment of vision before the intellectualization takes place... Since all intellectuality identifiable things must emerge from this preintellectual reality, Quality is the parent, the source of all subjects and objects.” (ZMM, p.251)

It is true that in his original discovery of Quality... Pirsig wonders if the mystical Tao of Zen is what he means by the metaphysical “Quality,” and says, yes, This was what he meant all along. But the rapprochement with Zen is of short duration. He finds the kinship, but it is almost too great a burden and in some inexplicable way his mind gives way. On the motorcycle trip with Chris, he recalls this sequence of events from his past. His task is to confront Western philosophy, to battle the ghost of Reason. It is not to proclaim the Tao. His is in the deepest sense a Trinitarian quest.[5]

On the surface, ZMM is an account of a motorcycle trip Pirsig took across the Western states with his son Chris, then about 15. Father and son have their good and difficult moments – the father, as we learn, a survivor of shock treatments, having formerly spent some time on the inside of an insane asylum, and the son having premonitory hints of depression and dysfunction. In company with another couple, John and Sylvia, they begin somewhere in Minnesota and end up in Oregon, with a longer stay en route in Bozeman, Montana where the father used to teach.

The philosophy grows slowly through the book in order to get to Montana and its aftermath, the father’s “nervous breakdown” and commitment. There’s a ghost, Phaedrus, who is actually the name of one of Socrates’ interlocutors in the Platonic dialogue of that name. Phaedrus is the father’s former self, the one who taught rhetoric in the Montana college. He once asked his students to write a 350-word essay answering the question: “What is quality in thought and statement?” This was the first, or “non-metaphysical” phase of his quest, which he says had to do with his teaching and which could be evaluated on its own terms, apart from his later speculations. His sense of what happened in this phase was that while neither he nor his students could define Quality, they still had an ability to recognize it. Quality could not be defined,

but we know that it exists, because without it life would be impossible or unrecognizable. One way of getting at it is to say that Quality is the immediate participatory relation with things. His reflections on Quality are very much in agreement with modern theories of perception, e.g. as R.L. Gregory puts it, in *Eye and Brain: The Psychology of Seeing* (1966; 1971): "... Objects are far more than patterns of stimulation; [they] have pasts and futures; when we know its past or can guess its future, an object transcends experience and becomes an embodiment of knowledge and expectation without which life of even the simplest kind is impossible." Quality is the immediate experience, our original familiarity which enables our cognition to become re-cognition. [6]

The very definition of "being dull" or "being square" is the "inability to see quality before it's been intellectually defined." Don't we all know people like this? Everything has to be spelled out for them. "They have eyes but see not; they have ears but hear not," as the Bible describes idolatry, which is the term that expresses the absence of participatory relation. The square television screen, apart from what it being shown in it, seems to me to epitomize this "squareness" of the modern mind, which seems to have such difficulty in understanding Quality.

Phaedrus's teaching career comes to an end when he decides to enroll in the University of Chicago in order to pursue a Ph.D. degree. By that time he has figured out where his philosophical sympathies lie. He has mapped out his territory, scouted the encampments... identified his friends and his enemies. Those sympathies are not with Plato and Aristotle but with the ancient rhetoricians, the Sophists, as Plato called them. Phaedrus holds that Plato's hatred of the Sophists was a part of a much larger struggle – "in which the reality of the Good, represented by the Sophists, and the reality of the True, represented by the dialecticians, were engaged in a huge struggle for the future mind of man. Truth won, the Good lost, and that is why today we have so little difficulty accepting the reality of truth and so much difficulty accepting the reality of Quality, even though there is no more agreement in one area than in the other." (381)

The argument here becomes very subtle, because there would appear to be a fundamental similarity between Plato's idea of the Good and Phaedrus's notion of Quality. Phaedrus acknowledges the significance of the idea of truth, which became the centerpiece in the progressive unfolding of Western science. But a mind grappling with philosophy that it is determined to win anew cannot rest content with platitudes – no matter how true or elevated. Such a mind seeks to become nourished with something akin to a historical imagination. That is to say, it will not merely rest content with what has been gained, but ponder on what might have been lost. What might have been lost in the victory of Plato and Aristotle over the Sophists?

Plato dismissed the Sophists as teachers of “ethical relativism,” but Phaedrus finds this to be a piece of propaganda. The Sophists were concerned with aretê, virtue, or excellence – i.e., “Quality.” Phaedrus finds in the Platonic dialectic – that is, logical argumentation through cross-examination – not a real concern with beauty or wisdom in the sense of understanding, love, or desire to achieve or possess them, but rather a device to install Reason as their usurper—Reason to enthrone itself. “...muscling in on all that is Good and seeking to contain it and control it.” Thus Phaedrus

“...began to see for the first time the unbelievable magnitude of what man, when he gained power to understand and rule the world in terms of dialectic, had lost. He had built empires of scientific capability to manipulate the phenomena of nature into enormous manifestations of his own dreams of power and wealth – but for this he had exchanged an ... understanding of what it is to be part of the world, and not an enemy of it.” (ZMM, p.387)

[So now we begin to see that...] the division of classical metaphysics into subjects and objects plays into our global economic mindset. In the next part of this paper, I will discuss Pirsig’s second book, LILA, with the following question in mind: what difference to one’s view of the world if we begin to interpret it in terms of Quality? I hope to show that Pirsig’s terminology of Quality and its ramifications in biology, social theory and the intellectual life provides a real key for understanding many of our present difficulties.

For if it is true, as Pirsig argues, that subject-object metaphysics is an unsatisfactory way of doing metaphysics, its persistence as the dim ground of unconscious values, assumptions and presuppositions must in the end [almost certainly] have dire consequences. Pirsig argues that the Metaphysics of Quality can adequately account for subjects and objects. But (and this is a critical point) he argues that the converse is not true: a subject-object metaphysics cannot properly account for values. If everything objective is merely an extension of “substance,” where do values lie? Thus (as Pirsig points out in ZMM) there is the absurdity of trying to assign “values” to some region of the brain, as if their assignment to a real physical location would somehow grant them real existence.

But the subject-object metaphysics has been plagued throughout its history with many problems of this kind: free will vs. determinism, mind vs. matter, causation, the apparent purposelessness of the universe, reality vs. appearances, fact vs. values. In a substance-centered view, ethics and morals can have no real presence in the face of the mechanical forces of nature. Thus a purely deterministic outlook quietly comes to occupy the mind. It is one thing when this determinism is purely philosophical. It is another thing altogether when it becomes the ruling value-set of those who wield economic and political power.

As Caryl Johnston notes, this is the thesis of John McMurtry's 2002 book, *Value Wars: The Global Market versus the Life Economy*. McMurtry, a Canadian Professor of Philosophy, examines the assumptions of the globalist neoliberal or New World Order doctrine in terms of its "unseen moral syntax." He writes:

"The profound metaphysical error...occurs when the believer supposes that whatever is not validated by scientific method does not exist. This is a dogma which has penetrated the very grammar of modern thought... [The] implications are not widely recognized; yet, eliminate choice at this a priori level, do so as a given principle of scientific method, generalize its structure of understanding to market demand and state policy formation, and you have the master assumption of the totalitarian value-set – that no real choice exists..."[8]

McMurtry thus speaks the language of Pirsig when he writes that "Lines of force follow lines of value." [9] The trajectory from a philosophical activity of severing the world's reality into objective and subjective components to this "triumphal economic fatalism" is of course a complex history comprising many elements extraneous to pure philosophy. Nevertheless, that a habitual cast of philosophy issues into a "global cosmology of determinism" [10] which is completely at odds with the spirit that traditionally animated Western philosophical activity, is a remarkably forceful illustration of the processes of intellectual inversion and decay. A modern philosophical tradition incapable of apprehending values has been rear-ended, so to speak, by an economic regime which has covertly incorporated a set of values which remain non-discussable and outside the realm of discourse.

But examples of intellectual decay in Western societies are all around us. In *LILA*, Pirsig takes the *Metaphysics of Quality*, develops it further, and uses the insights thus gained to examine the conditions of society. The story ostensibly develops as a boat-trip down the Hudson River, in which the solitary Pirsig-Phaedrus (or "Captain") finds himself as the ferryman for Lila, a young and confused woman to whom he is simultaneously attracted and repelled. He is attracted because Lila undoubtedly has "biological quality." She's sexy. He is repelled because she is not that young, doesn't have great social skills and is intellectually, nowhere.

Lila's particular quality or lack thereof form the backdrop for the continuing clarification in Pirsig's mind regarding the *Metaphysics of Quality*. He reaches an important moment, which he confides to the reader with characteristic understatement, that came "after many months of thinking about it." It is the reward of two terms: dynamic good and static good. "Not subject and object but static and dynamic is the basic division of reality." Dynamic Quality is the cutting edge, the force in life that leads to betterment. But life cannot exist on pure Dynamic Quality alone: "Without



Dynamic Quality the organism cannot grow. Without static quality the organism cannot last. Both are needed.”

This is the germinal idea that leads him to a new understanding of evolution, which is not just a forward movement. Rather, every dynamic advance has to be followed by a stabilizing hold or “static latch.” Unless the dynamic movement forward can be encapsulated by the static latch, the gain will not be permanent, and deterioration or reversion will set in. In the history of life this dynamic-static conversation can be seen in how the static molecule, protein, surrounds and protects the dynamic DNA. All biological and higher forms show this static-dynamic pattern, from semi-permeable cell walls that protect the dynamic interior process of the cell to “bones, shell, hide, fur, burrows, clothes, houses, villages, castles, rituals, symbols, laws, and libraries. All of these prevent evolutionary degeneration.” With this insight he has undercut the materialism from the Darwinian evolutionary idea and freed it to become a usefully (dynamic) concept. Life is the response to Quality, on whatever level of discourse it may be. And human society, too, can be understood in a new and non-reductive way as a taking account of static and dynamic quality.

It seems to me very sad that people in the United States who are resisting the aggressive (and regressive) influence of Darwinian materialism – a resistance I thoroughly support - seem not to have any acquaintance with Pirsig’s interpretation of the evolutionary scenario. Pirsig’s approach does not derive from religion but *it* is compatible with it, as indeed it is also compatible with science. To miss such an opportunity for creative development and social rapprochement on this divisive issue in American life seems to me a telling commentary on the fragmented intellectual life of our time and the lack of dialogue among different segments of Western society.

Pirsig’s views would be dismissed by scientists and anti-Darwinians alike, though for different reasons. The causes for such stiff-necked incuriosity and wilful intellectual isolation can be found, but they are ultimately not very interesting. What is interesting is when people begin to demand Quality in thinking, i.e., when they have grown tired of an endless debate framed in trivializing and demeaning terms, and seek to transcend it by acquiring a new and more generous framework for understanding it. [11]

### 3. So what is Pirsig's "Metaphysics of Quality"?

The Metaphysics of Quality is a theory that perceives reality as being in a evolutionary moral order of intellectual, social, biological and inorganic (or chemical) patterns. It gives intellectual patterns moral primacy, then primacy to social patterns, then to biological patterns and finally to inorganic patterns. It describes and explains the nature of reality in the context of values and patterns (note: Patterns are repeated regular or logical forms of order; methodical and/or harmonious arrangement).

Pirsig adds the following:

"The Metaphysics of Quality subscribes to what is called empiricism. It claims that all legitimate human knowledge arises from the senses or by thinking what the senses provide. Most empiricists deny the validity of any knowledge gained through imagination, authority, tradition, or purely theoretical reasoning. They regard fields such as art, morality, religion, and metaphysics as unverifiable. The Metaphysics of Quality varies from this by saying that the values of art and morality and even religious mysticism are verifiable and that in the past have been excluded for metaphysical reasons, not empirical reasons. They have been excluded because of the metaphysical assumption that all the universe is composed of subjects and objects and anything that can't be classified as a subject or an object isn't real. There is no empirical evidence for this assumption at all. It is just an assumption."

(Robert Pirsig, LILA, Black Swan, 1991, rep.1994, p.121)

4. What does Pirsig mean by the term "Quality"?

Well, in his book LILA he states that it is "...the first slice of undivided experience."  
(Robert Pirsig, LILA, Bantam Press, 1991, p.111).

That is to say immediate experience BEFORE any division consciousness may make before internal or external states. This follows the Cittamatra tradition in Buddhism which asserts that entities exist within the flow of perceptions but not as independent external objects. As Williams confirms: "(in)...the Cittamatra tradition... external objects are constituted by consciousness and do not exist apart from it... There is only a flow of perceptions."

(Paul Williams, "Mahayana Buddhism", Routledge, 1989, p.87).

Herbert Guenther adds:

"...experience is the central theme of Buddhism, not theoretical postulation and deductive verification. Since no experience occurs more than once and all repeated experiences actually are only analogous occurrences, it follows that a thing or material substance can only be said to be a series of events interpreted as a thing, having no more substantiality than any other series of events we may arbitrarily single out. Thus the distinction between "mental" and "material" becomes irrelevant and it is a matter of taste to speak of physical objects. In other words, although we shall continue to speak about matter and mind, we must bear in mind that it is but a figure of speech as untrue as the statement that the sun rises or sets."

"...there is no reason to believe that the objective constituent of a perceptual situation is literally a spatio-temporal part of a physical object, because the idea of a physical

object can not be abstracted from the data of sense but is a hypothesis and is defined by postulates..."

(Herbert V. Guenther, "Philosophy and Psychology in the Abhidharma", Random House, 1957, p.144/146).

5. So what is meant by "immediate experience"?

Immediate experience is experience where there is no distinction between what is experienced and the act of experiencing itself. Only after the experience do concepts such as perceiver and perceived arise. It is illogical to put them otherwise.

Experience (or Quality as Pirsig terms it) is an awareness of the changing flux of reality before any conceptual distinctions such as subjects and objects are made. Pirsig equates "Quality" with F.S.C. Northrop's "aesthetic continuum" which Northrop defines as "what is IMMEDIATELY perceived in an all embracing (emotion producing) field" (see Northrop's 1948 "Logic of the Sciences & Humanities"). Northrop explains this field further:

"The field is as immediately given as any specific quality, whether secondary or tertiary, within it. Moreover, most of the directly experienced field is vague and indefinite. Only at what William James termed its center is there specificity and definiteness. Thus it is evident that the indefinite, indeterminate, aesthetic continuum is as immediately apprehended as are the specific differentiations within it."  
(F.S.C. Northrop, "Logic of the Sciences & Humanities", Macmillan, 1948, p.97)

"Immediate, undivided, experience" is perceived as an event by Pirsig. He phrases it thus:

"Quality is not a thing. It is an event. It is the event at which the subject becomes aware of the object... The Quality event is the cause of the subjects and objects, which are then mistakenly presumed to be the cause of the Quality!"

(Robert Pirsig, paper on "Subjects, Objects, Data and Values", 1995, p.12)

i.e. it is from experience that concepts such as subjects and objects arise; such concepts do not create experience or perceptions. It is worth emphasising here that subjects and objects are solely intellectual concepts derived from reality as a whole. The problem with the terms "subjects" and "objects" is that they have been ingrained into us from an early age so, without question, we accept their literal existence. They don't. Subjects and objects are just concepts and no concept exists outside the mind.

6. Pirsig divides "immediate experience" into "Dynamic Quality" and "static quality". Dynamic Quality refers to what Buddhists would call unconditioned reality and static quality refers to conditioned reality.

Why does Pirsig formulate his metaphysics specifically using the words "static" and "Dynamic"?

This is probably explained best by my Norwegian friend Bodvar (Skutvik) and the quality/quantity paradox in subjective-objective thinking (see diagram on subjective-objective (or "SOM") metaphysics):

"In the objective world there are no qualities, only quantities: sight-colours are various wavelengths of the electromagnetic spectrum; sound-music are air pressure waves; smell-odours are molecular configurations, as is taste and touches are pressure sensation. Nowhere out there is quality (or values) to be found. The impacts on our sense organs are transmitted into electrochemical impulses travelling to the brain where it is translated back into our subjective perception. There is NO direct connection between the two realms ...if you start with the subjective/objective metaphysics (or the mind/matter idea if that sounds less "metaphysical")... subjectiveness is subjectiveness from here to eternity as is objectiveness; nowhere does the two overlap."

(e-mail from Bodvar Skutvik to Anthony McWatt, September 30th, 1997)

As can be seen from the diagram on SOM, quality is on one side of a metaphysical chasm and quantity is on the other. Quantity is perceived as inhering in substance, qualities are perceived as being non-substances. They are mutually exclusive and should therefore not be able to have an effect on each other. However, the fact that your mind can decide to move your little finger (a physical object) and a few pints of beer (a physical substance) can alter your mind totally dispels this idea. There is a serious metaphysical problem here.

Pirsig classifies metaphysical mistakes as playtpli and he has this to say about this SOM way of thinking:

"When a subject-object metaphysics regards mind and matter as eternally separate and eternally alike, it creates a platypus bigger than the solar system. It has to make this fatal division because it gives top position in its structure to subjects and objects. Everything has got to be a subject or object, substance or non-substance, because that's the primary division of the universe. Inorganic-biological patterns are composed of 'substance', and are therefore 'objective'. Social-intellectual patterns are not composed of 'substance', and are therefore called subjective."

(Robert Pirsig, LILA, Black Swan, 1991, rep.1994, p.184/185)

This points to a fundamental error in the SOM map of reality and is just one of the reasons Pirsig has produced a new map of reality from the ground-up. To continue...

"Pirsig has chosen "static" and "Dynamic" because in his opinion they have the highest quality. He thinks they have the highest quality because by identifying all thought as static they block the philosopher's compulsive habit of thinking that anything that is talked about is nothing but words and never goes beyond words."  
"The Dynamic reality that goes beyond words is the constant focus of Zen teaching. Because of their habituation to a world of words, philosophers do not often understand Zen. When philosophers have trouble understanding the distinction between static and Dynamic Quality it can be because they are trying to include and subordinate all Quality to thought patterns. The distinction between static [quality] and Dynamic Quality is intended to block this."

Pirsig notes further:

"'Patterned' and 'unpatterned' might work as well except that 'unpatterned' suggests that there is nothing there and all is quiet. There is nothing in the sense of no 'thing', that is, 'no object', and the Buddhists use nothingness in this way, but the term Dynamic is more in keeping within the quotation, "Within nothingness there is a great working", from the Zen master, Kategiri Roshi."

"...The logical positivists fundamental error in my opinion is the assumption that because philosophy is about words it is therefore about words alone. This is the fallacy of "devouring the menu instead of the meal". Their common argumentative tactic is to say that anything they cannot feed through their little box of linguistic analysis is not philosophy. But if discussion about "the good" (which is fundamentally beyond words) is not philosophy then Socrates was not a philosopher since that was his primary subject."

(letter from Robert Pirsig to Anthony McWatt, August 17th, 1997)

## 7. So how is Dynamic Quality differentiated from static quality?

Dynamic Quality is the term given by Pirsig to the continually changing flux of immediate reality while static quality refers to any concept abstracted from this flux. Pirsig equates Dynamic Quality with F.S.C. Northrop's "indeterminate aesthetic continuum" which refers to the divine in experience and can only be understood properly through direct apprehension. Hence the use of the term "dynamic" which

indicates something not fixed or determinate. Ultimately, it is apparent that Dynamic Quality can't be defined as such and that true understanding of it can only be given through a mystic experience such as enlightenment. Guenther adds:

"The Ultimate, in Buddhism, is something knowable, though not known by theory or discursive method, but by direct experience"

(Herbert Guenther, "Philosophy and Psychology in the Abidharma", Random House, 1957, p.235)

In other words, the Buddha can't tell you what Dynamic Quality is, but he can point a way so you can experience it for yourself and then you'll understand. Moreover, Pirsig states that...

"It's important to keep all 'concepts' out of Dynamic Quality. Concepts are always static. Once they get into Dynamic Quality they'll overrun it and try to present it as some kind of a concept itself. (For instance) I think it's better to say that time is a static intellectual concept that is one of the very first to emerge from Dynamic Quality. That keeps Dynamic Quality concept-free."

"Time is only a problem for the SOM people because if time has none of the properties of an object then it must be subjective. And if time is subjective that means Newton's laws of acceleration and many other laws of physics are subjective. Nobody in the scientific world wants to allow that."

"All this points to a huge fundamental metaphysical difference between the MOQ and classical science: The MOQ is truly empirical. Science is not. Classical science starts with a concept of the objective world - atoms and molecules - as the ultimate reality. This concept is certainly supported by empirical observation but it is not the empirical observation itself."

(letter from Robert Pirsig to Anthony McWatt, October 6th 1997)

Paul Williams mentions in his book "Mahayana Buddhism" the "Three Aspects" which are the central teachings of the Cittamatra (pron. Chitta-martra)(or Mind Only) school of Buddhism. In the First Aspect it is the falsifying activity of language which attributes independent and permanent existence to things. In the second aspect of the Cittamatra teachings it is emphasised that objects are only conceptualised (or constructed) aspects of experience. This is basically what the MOQ says from its Dynamic (or mystic viewpoint).

There are no objects or subjects as traditionally thought within the MOQ. However, for pragmatic reasons (i.e. it makes life a lot easier) it conceptualises reality into four

patterns of static quality (intellectual, social, biological and inorganic). Pirsig uses these quality patterns in the MOQ rather than subjects and objects because he thinks they work better in describing reality.

However, both metaphysical systems are just ways of conceptualising (or dividing) our experience and neither are necessarily more truthful than the other. From a mystic point of view, to say quality patterns are more truthful or false than subjects and objects is meaningless.

Williams confirms the relativity in metaphysical systems:

"In order to understand what is being said here, one should try and imagine all things, objects of experience and oneself, the one who is experiencing, as just a flow of perceptions. We do not know that there is something "out there". We have only experiences of colours, shapes, tactile data, and so on. We also don't know that we ourselves are anything than a further series of experiences. Taken together, there is only an ever-changing flow of perceptions (vijnaptimatra)... Due to our beginningless ignorance we construct these perceptions into enduring subjects and objects confronting each other. This is irrational, things are not really like that, and it leads to suffering and frustration. The constructed objects are the conceptualised aspect. The flow of perceptions which forms the basis for our mistaken constructions is the dependent aspect."

(Paul Williams, "Mahayana Buddhism", Routledge, 1989, p.83/84).

The third and final aspect of the Cittamatra teachings is called the perfected aspect and as far as I can gather this refers to enlightenment (i.e. the discovery of the true nature of things) through meditation. The Buddhist text "The Sun my Heart" explains this aspect further:

"When we look at a chair, we see the wood, but we fail to observe the tree, the forest, the carpenter, or our own mind. When we meditate on it, we can see the entire universe in all its interwoven and interdependent relations in the chair. The presence of the wood reveals the presence of the tree. The presence of the leaf reveals the presence of the sun. The presence of the apple blossoms reveals the presence of the apple. Meditators can see the one in many, and the many in the one. Even before they see the chair, they can see its presence in the heart of living reality. The chair is not separate. It exists only in its interdependent relations with everything else in the universe. It is because all other things are. If it is not, then all other things are not either."

(Thich Nhat Hanh "The Sun My Heart", Parallax Press, 1988)

Though we do appear to have our own independent existence, ultimately, we are connected with the whole universe. This is why Pirsig's metaphysics uses the mystic term "Dynamic Quality" to denote the one and the philosophical term "static quality" to denote the many. Dynamic Quality refers to ultimate reality which includes absolutely everything while static quality refers to the intellectual constructions derived for pragmatic purposes from this reality. Hence the phrase "The one is in the many, and the many in the one".

8. Why does Pirsig use "Dynamic Quality" to denote the ultimate reality and not other mystic terms such as "nothingness" or "oneness" in his metaphysics?

"Oneness is one intellectual path up the mountain of understanding. "Nothingness" is another such path. (Dynamic) Quality is a third. When a scientifically orientated mind hears the term "substance" it says "that's reality". When it hears about "oneness" and "nothingness" it says, "That's just empty, meaningless, metaphysical claptrap for the "Mind of God" which we have already rejected for empirical reasons.' Scientifically those words have no meaning."

"The word "quality" is superior to "oneness" and "nothingness" because it is impossible for scientists to reject as metaphysical claptrap. They try, but they cannot get away with saying there are no values in the world. Even a so-so philosopher can cut them to pieces dialectically... The Metaphysics of Quality is valuable because it provides a central term that the Western, scientifically structured mind cannot dismiss."

(letter from Robert Pirsig to Anthony McWatt, December 24th, 1995)

"If Dynamic Quality were merely called "God" or "oneness" (scientists) would have it shoved out of... bounds without question. But they can't shove Quality out of bounds. Mystic or not, they can't deny it exists. They cannot eliminate it as a meaningful term. In fact "meaningful" means having social or intellectual quality."

(letter from Robert Pirsig to Anthony McWatt, August 17th, 1997)

Bernard Dixon, the author of "What is Science for?" emphasises science's reliance on values:

"One crucial consequence of the fact that science is a social activity is the legendary belief that it is an entirely amoral, intellectual game of problem solving. On this view, scientists are... calculating machines, whose work is determined solely by meter readings and what they can deduce from them. The truth is very different. Far from being amoral and coldly logical, science actually generates values. These include intellectual humility, an unusually acute regard for honesty, respect for the revolutionary and the apparent crank, and stress on the importance of co-operation. These are not optional extras for the scientist; they arise directly out of the pursuit of



science. The degree to which a scientist lives by them will be reflected in the health of the scientific community and in an individual's scientist's long-term success in his trade. Even the most inveterate liar must, if he is to succeed in science cultivate a deep respect for the truth when he is about his work."

(Bernard Dixon, "What is Science for?" 1973, rep.1975, p.56)

## 9. So what is static quality then?

By static Pirsig doesn't refer to something that lacks movement in the Newtonian sense of the word but is referring to any repeated arrangement whether "inorganic" (e.g. chemicals, quantum forces), "organic" (e.g. plants, animals), "social" (e.g. cities, ant nests) or "intellectual" (e.g. thoughts, ideas) i.e. any pattern that appears long enough to be noticed within the flux of immediate experience.

The static patterns of quality being concepts about reality are analogous to subjects and objects. But only analogous; there are some important metaphysical differences in how static quality patterns relate to each other which are absent in subjective-objective metaphysics. In the MOQ the static...

"...patterns of value are divided into four systems: inorganic patterns, biological patterns, social patterns and intellectual patterns. They are exhaustive. That's all there are. If you construct an encyclopaedia of four topics - inorganic, biological, social and intellectual - nothing is left out. No 'thing', that is. Only Dynamic Quality, which can not be described in any encyclopaedia is absent."

(Robert Pirsig, LILA, Black Swan, 1991, rep.1994, p.179)

## 10. How do these four static patterns of quality relate?

The MOQ recognizes that the four static patterns of quality are related through cosmological EVOLUTION.

If the Big Bang is taken as the starting point of the universe, it is seen that at this point of time there were only inorganic quality patterns. That is to say chemicals and quantum forces. Since then, at successive stages of history, plants and animals have evolved from inorganic patterns, societies have evolved from biological patterns, and intellect has evolved from societies.

"...the universe is evolving from a condition of low quality (quantum forces only, no atoms, pre-big bang) toward a higher one (birds, trees, societies and thoughts) and in a static sense (world of everyday affairs) these two are not the same."

(letter from Robert Pirsig to Anthony McWatt, March 23rd, 1997)

As the cosmologist, Edward Kolb notes:

"In perhaps nature's most miraculous transformation, the universe evolved the capacity to ponder and understand itself."

("Astronomy", February 1998, p.37)

#### 11. Why is evolution an important consideration in the MOQ?

Evolution is an important consideration in the MOQ as a code of ethics can be generated from the four basic levels of quality patterns. Though each level of static patterns have emerged from the one below, each level follows its own different rules i.e. there are physical laws such as gravity (inorganic), the laws of the jungle (biology), co-operation between animals (society), and the ideas of freedom and rights (intellect). It is important to note that the different laws of the four static levels often clash e.g. adultery (biological good) v. family stability (social good).

The MOQ combines the four levels of patterns to produce one overall moral framework based on an evolutionary hierarchy (as seen on the MOQ diagram). The entity that has more freedom on the evolutionary scale (i.e. the one that is more Dynamic) is the one that takes moral precedence. So, for instance, a human being is seen as having moral precedence over a dog because a human being is at a higher level of evolution.

The MOQ does not follow any theories of evolution that are finalistic or postulate some form of teleology or program. As the professor emeritus of zoology at Harvard University, Ernst Mayr states:

"The proponents of teleological theories, for all their efforts, have been unable to find any mechanisms (except supernatural ones) that can account for their postulated finalism. The possibility that any such mechanism can exist has now been virtually ruled out by the findings of molecular biology."

("Scientific American", September 1978 "Evolution" issue, p.6)

The MOQ follows a form of Darwin's "survival of the fittest" where the fittest is equated with the best. As Pirsig points out:

"...'survival of the fittest' is one of those catch-phrases... that sounds best when you don't ask precisely what it means. Fittest for what? Fittest for survival? That reduces to 'survival of the survivors', which doesn't say anything. 'Survival of the fittest' is only meaningful only when 'fittest' is equated with the 'best', which is to say 'Quality'." (Robert Pirsig, LILA, Black Swan, 1991, rep.1994, p.179)

In this context, the best generally refers to the choice which produces the most freedom for a given situation. It is an increase of freedom all the way. For instance, quantum forces can change their energy levels, earthworms can control their distance and direction, birds are able to fly in the sky while people manage to get to the moon. "The MOQ says, as does Buddhism, that the best place on the wheel of karma is the hub and not the rim where one is thrown about by the gyrations of everyday life. But the MOQ sees the wheel of karma as attached to a cart that is going somewhere - from quantum forces through inorganic forces and biological patterns and social patterns to the intellectual patterns that perceive the quantum forces. In the sixth century B.C. in India there was no evidence of this kind of evolutionary progress, and Buddhism, accordingly, does not pay attention to it. Today it's not possible to be so uninformed. The suffering which the Buddhists regard as only that which is to be escaped, is seen by the MOQ as merely the negative side of the progression toward Quality (or, just as accurately, the expansion of quality). Without the suffering to propel it, the cart would not move forward at all."

(letter from Robert Pirsig to Anthony McWatt, March 23rd 1997)

12. So what's the value of such a moral framework?

By removing morals from social convention and placing them on a scientifically based theory of evolution the MOQ removes much of the cultural subjectivity that is inherent in many ethical beliefs.

Pirsig produces the following example:

"Is it moral, as the Hindus and Buddhists claim, to eat the flesh of animals? Our current morality would say it's immoral only if you're a Hindu or a Buddhist. Otherwise its OK, since morality is nothing more than social convention."

"An evolutionary morality, on the other hand, would say it's scientifically immoral for everyone because animals are at a higher level of evolution, that is, more Dynamic than are grains and fruits and vegetables. But... it would add ... that this moral principle holds only where there is an abundance of grains and fruit and vegetables. It would be immoral for Hindus not to eat their cows in a time of famine, since they would then be killing human beings in favor of a lower organism."

(Robert Pirsig, LILA, Black Swan, 1991, rep.1994, p.190/191)

Moreover, by the use of an all-encompassing point of view taken from the very beginning of the universe, the MOQ produces new solutions to previously difficult problems. These include the relationship between mind & matter, the ontological problem of causation and the problem of free-will & determinacy. Two of these are solvable when an evolutionary approach is applied to them.

For instance, as all subjects and objects in the Metaphysics of Quality are reduced to value patterns the division between substance or non-substance becomes irrelevant. Inorganic-biological-social-intellectual patterns are related through evolution and are all forms of static quality. Therefore, mind and matter though seemingly very different and following different laws are still both patterns of value and have an evolutionary relationship (as seen on the MOQ diagram).

Pirsig states the following about the mind/matter problem:

"The mind-matter paradoxes seem to exist because the connecting links between these two levels of value patterns have been disregarded. Two terms are missing: biology and society. Mental patterns do not originate out of inorganic nature. They originate out of society, which originates out of biology which originates out of inorganic nature. And, as anthropologists know so well, what a mind thinks is as dominated by social patterns as social patterns are dominated by biological patterns are dominated by inorganic patterns. There is no direct scientific connection between mind and matter. As the atomic physicist, Niels Bohr, said, 'we are suspended in language.' Our intellectual description of nature is always culturally derived."

(Robert Pirsig, LILA, Black Swan, 1991, rep. 1994, p.185/186)

Bohr's view is also supported by the human biologist Roger Lewin who states in his 1993 book on human evolution that:

"...anthropologists are beginning to see the importance of social interaction as the engine of the evolution of hominid intelligence. Consciousness and language go hand in hand with that."

(Roger Lewin, "Human Evolution", Blackwell Scientific Publications, 1993, p.180)

Pirsig continues...

"In a value-based Metaphysics of Quality the four sets of static patterns are not isolated into separate compartments of mind and matter. Matter is just a name for certain inorganic value patterns. Biological patterns, social patterns, and intellectual patterns are supported by this pattern of matter but are independent of it. They have rules and laws of their own that are not derivable from the laws of substance. This is not the customary way of thinking, but when you stop to think about it you wonder how you got conned into thinking otherwise. What, after all, is the likelihood that an atom possesses within its own structure enough information to build the city of New York?"

(Robert Pirsig, LILA, Black Swan, 1991, rep. 1994, p.184/185)

So "...what the Metaphysics of Quality concludes is that all schools are right on the mind and matter question. Mind is contained in static inorganic patterns. Matter is contained in static intellectual patterns. Both mind and matter are completely separate evolutionary levels of static patterns of value, and as such are capable of each containing the other without contradiction."

i.e. inorganic patterns are perceived by intellectual patterns while intellectual patterns depend on inorganic patterns to operate.

For the problems of causation, and of free-will & determinism, Pirsig's theory can be related to Karl Popper's theory of propensities. By propensity, Popper means the tendency for things in the "real world" to happen or behave in a way that is greater than chance.

Hazlewood points out the connection between the two philosophers:

"Both writers think that preference is a key term in understanding why the universe is as it is. Popper, when writing about the evolution of species, talks of "preferences of organisms for certain possibilities" thus making them propensities and Pirsig writes "what appears to be absolute cause is just a consistent pattern of preferences," and he means by this, (is) preference for certain valued relationships which we can just as easily recognize as propensities."

(Richard Hazlewood, paper on "The Metaphysics of Value and Propensity", 1997, p.3)

For both Pirsig and Popper, values are perceived as being part of a whole situation. They can not be reduced to subjects and objects but are part of the relationship between them.

Popper puts it like this:

"I have stressed that propensities should not be regarded as properties inherent in an object, such as a die or penny, but should be regarded as in a situation (of which, of course, the object is a part)."

(from Richard Hazlewood, paper on "The Metaphysics of Value and Propensity", 1997, p.4)

(Note: For instance, though in mathematical models a die may be equally weighted, in physical reality a perfectly weighted die is impossible to manufacture and a perfectly level table is impossible to produce; i.e. propensities (or values) are always present.)

Towards the end of his life, Popper realised the inadequacy of determinist (or causal) explanations:

"The World is no longer a causal machine - it can be seen as a world of propensities, as an unfolding process of realizing possibilities and of unfolding new possibilities".

(from Richard Hazlewood, paper on "The Metaphysics of Value and Propensity", 1997, p.2)

While Pirsig has this to say about causation:

"In the Metaphysics of Quality "causation" is a metaphysical term that can be replaced by "value". To say "A causes B" or to say that "B values precondition A" is to say the same thing. The difference is one of words only... Scientifically speaking neither statement is more true than the other. It may sound a little awkward, but that's a matter of linguistic custom not science. The language used to describe the data is changed but the scientific data itself is unchanged... The term "cause" can be struck out completely from a scientific description of the universe without any loss of accuracy or completeness."

(Robert Pirsig, LILA, Black Swan, 1991, rep.1994, p.126/127)

Again, Pirsig's conception of causation is similar to the Buddhists viewpoint, as Guenther points out:

"Buddhists never admitted the rule "A causes B", except as a crude suggestion in non-philosophical parlance. As a matter of fact, the Buddhist conception of causation is (that) there is no indefinable (i.e. mysterious) relation, except conjunction and succession and that our tendency to accept such propositions as "this causes that" is to be explained by the laws of habit and association."

(Herbert V. Guenther, "Philosophy and Psychology in the Abhidharma", Random House, 1957 p.180).

(Note. For instance, to take into account that no event is 100% predictable, the determinist phrase "John Smith will do that" translates in the MOQ as "John Smith prefers to do that" or "John Smith values that course of action".)

The February 1998 edition of "Astronomy" gives an example of why a determinist explanation of the universe is inadequate. It states that the prevailing view in physics and cosmology is that life only arose due to propensities (weighted probabilities) of quantum fluctuations (or oscillations) preventing the inorganic matter in the universe from becoming perfectly uniform. The quantum fluctuations present at the "Big Bang" resulted in an uneven distribution of matter which (after about 30,000 years) enabled

gravity to gain a foothold on slightly denser areas of material and compress these areas so tightly that they became hot and dense enough for nuclear reactions to commence and form stars. Without the uneven distribution of matter caused by quantum preferences the universe would still be just an equal distribution of gas and dust. To quote page 42 of "Astronomy":

"...structure would never have formed if the entire universe was completely uniform. Without (quantum fluctuations to act as) primordial seeds in the universe... gravity would not have been able to shape the universe into the form we now see. A seedless universe would be a pretty boring place to live, because matter would remain perfectly uniform rather than assembling into galaxies, stars, planets, and people."  
("Astronomy", February 1998 edition)

In the MOQ, as probability and preference are both subsets of value the terms are interchangeable when describing action from the quanta to the human level. Pirsig has this to say about probability and preference:

"When the distinction between them is examined an interesting fact appears. Preference is always supposed to be subjective. It exists only at the intellectual and social levels. At the biological level it becomes controversial as to whether animals such as cats have a preference or if they function according to Skinnerian stimulus-and-response probability. And at the atomic level it is assumed that only probability exists."

"The MOQ puts an end to this ancient freewill vs. determinism controversy by showing that both preference and probability are subsets of value. As the distinction between subject and object becomes relatively unimportant in the MOQ, so does the distinction between probability and preference. There is no basic difference between mind and matter with regard to free will, only a difference in degree of freedom. Subatomic forces can express limited preferences too."

(letter from Robert Pirsig to Anthony McWatt, May 3rd, 1997)

i.e. preference is seen as being on a continuum rather than suddenly manifesting itself at the human level. In the MOQ, the higher up the evolutionary ladder you go (from sub-atomic particles to people) the more freedom you have in making preferences. This is why generally a person's experience will be that much richer and complex than a dog's while the dog's experience will be that much better than a tree's which will be better than a piece of rock's and so on.

From a mystic point of view, I think you can say that experience (or what Pirsig terms the "Quality Event") creates all entities from sub-atomic particles to people so the question for whom or what HAS the experience does not arise (as experience has them).

However, it is worth pointing out that Pirsig does not say that all mystic experiences are the same. He is just saying that they should be taken into account in a comprehensive description of reality. He also warns against making too many connections between physics and mysticism:

"I have seen popular books on this subject: *The Tao of Physics*, *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*, that seem rather eager to jump from an observation of similarity to a statement of identity. But be careful to follow the scientific rule of saying no more than you really know. My personal belief, from talking to physicists and trying to gauge their level of understanding of Buddha's world is that they don't know anything. The whole stance of science is hostile to mysticism. The (physicists) may have arrived at a rejection of objectivity but that isn't where they start from. No high school physics class begins with the statement "All the world is an illusion" ...talking mysticism in a scientific community is like talking Judaism in Damascus. They may listen to you but it goes completely against the grain of their education."

(letter from Robert Pirsig to Anthony McWatt, March 29th, 1997)

Finally, though it may be argued that a metaphysics that incorporates a central term that isn't defined (i.e. Dynamic Quality) isn't a real metaphysics, it can also be argued that the strength of the MOQ is its ability to incorporate the indeterminate divine within a coherent and logical paradigm.