Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ROBERT PIRSIG

Robert M. Pirsig was born in 1928. His factual biography adheres more or less to the life story of the narrator and his past self, Phaedrus, chronicled in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Pirsig was an academic prodigy: at age nine, with an I.Q. of 170. In 1943, at just 15, he was already enrolled at the University of Minnesota to study biochemistry. However, he was expelled in 1945 for poor academic performance.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Pirsig's philosophy aims to remedy the widespread cultural dissatisfaction he sensed in the United States during the mid-twentieth-century. The years from 1950-1975 saw many distinct protests against the establishment, including organized efforts to grant civil rights to African-Americans, nationwide protests against the Vietnam War, and counterculture groups like the Beat Poets and the "hippie" movement. This multifaceted disaffection with the status quo is likely what inspired Pirsig to publish his philosophy.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Because *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* uses an unconventional format that blends autobiography, fiction, and philosophy, it connects to a wide array of works. The book engages explicitly with the 18th-century Scottish philosopher David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*, as well as the 18th-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Pirsig's narrator also references the *Tao Te Ching*, an ancient philosophical and religious text by the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu. Notably, the character Phaedrus is named after a participant in a dialogue with Socrates from Plato's text, *Phaedrus*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values*
- **When Written:** Early 1960's to 1973
- **Where Written:** Bozeman, Montana
- **When Published:** 1974
- **Literary Period:** United States Counterculture
- **Genre:** Philosophical novel; semi-autobiographical
- **Setting:** Various parts of the United States, roughly 1943-1974
- **Climax:** Phaedrus's psychotic break
- **Antagonist:** For Phaedrus: "The Chairman of the Committee." For the narrator: Phaedrus.
- **Point of View:** First-person narrator

EXTRA CREDIT

Life Imitates Art. Bob and Gennie DeWeese, mentioned in the book as friends of Phaedrus and the narrator from Bozeman, are real historical figures. Bob worked as an art instructor at Montana State College, and together the couple helped introduce contemporary art into Bozeman's very conservative cultural environment. The DeWeeses have received many visits from diehard *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* fans, eager to make a pilgrimage to a site mentioned in the book.

Anchors Away. Pirsig isn't just a motorcycle travel enthusiast. His wanderlust has taken him on many extensive sailing trips as well. In 1977, he wrote an article for *Esquire* magazine entitled "Cruising Blues and Their Cure," which details the depression and liberation that can be experienced on the open ocean.

PLOT SUMMARY

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance interweaves two parallel plots: the first is the chronicling of a transcontinental motorcycle journey taken by the narrator and his eleven-year-old son, Chris. The second plot details the life and thought of a man named Phaedrus, a solitary intellectual obsessed with a philosophical concept called Quality. At the beginning of the story, the narrator and Chris leave Minneapolis on a motorcycle trip with their friends, John and Sylvia Sutherland. As the group travels, the narrator intersperses accounts of the trip with philosophical discourses that he calls Chautauquas.

The narrator's first Chautauqua discusses John and Sylvia's aversion to technology, which he aligns with a "romantic" approach to life—one that values surface impressions over rational analysis. The narrator's own outlook is a more analytical one that he terms "classic." As the party travels along, the narrator has uncanny recognitions of the terrain they pass, and repeatedly refers to "ghosts" in his thoughts. Shortly thereafter, the narrator explains these strange mental episodes by revealing that Phaedrus suffered a nervous breakdown and was subjected to electroshock therapy, and the new consciousness that appeared in his brain is that of the narrator. In other words, Phaedrus and the narrator are the past and present identities of the same individual, and the uncanny recollections the narrator has are "fragments" of memory left over from Phaedrus's life.

As the travelers move through Montana, the narrator gives a history of Phaedrus's life. Phaedrus was a scientific prodigy, but dropped out of school after he lost faith in scientific reason's ability to explain the world. Phaedrus explored other kinds of truth for several years, and eventually got a job teaching English at Montana State University in Bozeman, Montana, which is the travelers' destination. In Bozeman, the travelers stay with Robert and Gennie DeWeese, friends of Phaedrus's.

The narrator and Chris leave to hike a mountain. On this trip, the narrator describes Phaedrus's attempts to pin down the concept of Quality: that which makes something good. Torn between whether Quality is a subjective or objective phenomenon, Phaedrus eventually comes to the epiphany that it is in fact neither. Quality precedes subjectivity and objectivity—in fact, it is what allows for the separation of the world into subjective and objective realms in the first place. During the hike, Chris complains and misbehaves. When he and his son are camped out on the mountain, the narrator has a disturbing nightmare about a **glass door** that separates him from his family. Worried that something bad will happen if they reach the summit of the mountain, the narrator cuts the hike short and the two head back to Bozeman.

Back on the road and heading west, the narrator begins a series of Chautauquas that illustrate how Quality can manifest itself in the proper practice of **motorcycle maintenance**. He elaborates several phenomena, such as the "stuckness" that can foster innovative insights, the "gumption" that fuels sustained work of Quality, and the "gumption traps" that can prevent an individual from developing an awareness of and sensitivity to Quality. Rigid, dualistic thinking is a chief obstacle to an attunement with Quality.

The narrator's **glass door** dream recurs, and the narrator realizes that it signifies his divided identity and struggle with Phaedrus. The narrator recalls spending time with Chris as Phaedrus and concludes that he will have to explain his mental state to his son. The narrator describes Phaedrus's enrollment in an interdisciplinary program at the University of Chicago and his obsessive study of Ancient Greek philosophy. There, Phaedrus has an intellectual faceoff against the Chairman of his interdisciplinary committee, whose Aristotelian ideas run counter to Phaedrus's philosophy of Quality. Following this confrontation, Phaedrus becomes completely insane, and is hospitalized and administered electroshock therapy.

As the narrator and Chris travel towards San Francisco, their relationship wears thin. The narrator plans to send Chris home and then to check himself into a hospital. He explains his mental instability to Chris and warns his son that he may suffer the same illness. This distresses Chris profoundly. Chris asks why the narrator did not open the **glass door** that separated them at the hospital, and the narrator explains that he was not permitted to. This spurs the mutual realization that Phaedrus was not, in fact, insane. The narrator begins to reconcile his once-divided identity, and he and his son ride towards San Francisco in high spirits.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Narrator – The entire novel is told from the perspective of the narrator, a forty-year-old man who writes technical manuals for a living. He is undeniably based on Robert Pirsig, the book's author, as the two's biographies overlap quite similarly. However, this similarity is never stated explicitly in the book. The narrator's identity began after a man he refers to as Phaedrus was given electroshock therapy to treat mental illness. Following that therapy, the narrator's consciousness replaced Phaedrus's, though they occupy the same body. As the book progresses, the narrator recounts what he has pieced together of Phaedrus's history, in parallel with his narrative of the trip he and his son Chris take across the United States. Through a series of directed talks he calls Chautauquas, the narrator explains the philosophy of Quality that Phaedrus developed, and uses **motorcycle maintenance** as a metaphor to illustrate how this philosophy can be practiced.

Phaedrus – Phaedrus, named after an Ancient Greek Sophist who appears in Plato's Socratic dialogue *Phaedrus*, is the name by which the narrator refers to the consciousness that once occupied his body. Phaedrus was a highly analytical academic prodigy who grew disenchanted with the western intellectual tradition's limited notion of reason. While teaching English at Montana State University in Bozeman, he begins to develop a philosophy that revolves around a concept he calls Quality. Quality is a single concept that encapsulates the subject/object duality that dominates western thought. Phaedrus pursues further study at the University of Chicago, where he reads the Ancient Greek philosophers that engendered the problematic subject/object distinction in contemporary academia. During his time in Chicago, Phaedrus suffers a mental breakdown, and he is hospitalized and subjected to electroshock therapy. Following this therapy, Phaedrus's consciousness changes to that of the narrator.

Chris Pirsig – Chris is the oldest son of the narrator/Phaedrus. He is eleven years old when he accompanies the narrator on the transcontinental motorcycle trip that forms the bulk of the storyline. Chris frequently complains of psychosomatic **stomachaches**, and the narrator fears that his son may inherit his mental illness. The narrator's fractured relationship with Chris is a primary impetus in the narrator's quest to reconcile his identity with Phaedrus's. The novel's afterword reveals that Chris was murdered by muggers just before his 23rd birthday.

John Sutherland – John is a friend of the narrator's from Minneapolis. With his wife, Sylvia, John accompanies the narrator and Chris to Bozeman, Montana. John rides a BMW

motorcycle that he has no interest in maintaining, and the narrator uses John's emotion-based "romantic" perspective to contrast with the narrator's own "classic" perspective.

Aristotle – Aristotle was an Ancient Greek philosopher from the fourth century B.C.E., and a successor to Plato and Socrates. His rigid taxonomies of philosophical concepts have provided much of the groundwork for the western intellectual tradition, and are especially influential to the Chairman of the Committee who oversees Phaedrus's studies at the University of Chicago. Phaedrus seeks to repudiate Aristotle's devaluation of the art of rhetoric, and to remedy the inattentiveness to Quality in the modern world that he views as a consequence of Aristotelian thought.

Plato – Plato was an Ancient Greek philosopher who lived during the fourth and fifth centuries B.C.E. He is famous for his Socratic dialogues, which depicted the philosopher Socrates in conversation with other thinkers; his work *Phaedrus* is one of these dialogues. Phaedrus studies Plato at the University of Chicago and realizes that Plato turned the Sophist thinkers' Quality-like notion of "the Good" into a rational concept, thus allowing other philosophers like Aristotle to diminish the role of Quality in western thought for millennia to come.

The Chairman of the Committee – The Chairman of the Committee, a thinly veiled reference to the American academic Richard McKeon, oversees the interdisciplinary study program at the University of Chicago, in which Phaedrus enrolls. The Chairman is a staunch Aristotelian, which puts him in opposition to Phaedrus's ideas on Quality. He is therefore a chief antagonist to Phaedrus, and the two clash in the classroom on several occasions.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Sylvia Sutherland – Sylvia is John's wife. She rides with him as they travel to Bozeman with Chris and the narrator. She shares John's romantic aversion to technology.

Robert DeWeese – Robert "Bob" DeWeese teaches art at Montana State University in Bozeman. He and his wife, Gennie, are old friends of Phaedrus's, and they host the narrator, Chris, and the Sutherlands when the travelers come to Bozeman.

Gennie DeWeese – Gennie DeWeese is Bob DeWeese's wife. She and Bob talk with the narrator about his philosophy of Quality when he arrives in Bozeman with Chris and the Sutherlands.

Socrates – Socrates was an Ancient Greek philosopher who lived during the fifth century B.C.E. He appears in many works by Plato, and in *Phaedrus* he uses his trademark style of logical argumentation to refute the rhetorician Phaedrus.

David Hume – David Hume was an 18th-century Scottish philosopher whose work, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, influenced Phaedrus's understanding of intellectual reason and helped him shape his philosophy of Quality.

Immanuel Kant – Immanuel Kant was an 18th-century German philosopher who wrote *A Critique of Pure Reason* as a response to David Hume's analyses of reason. Kant's *Critique* marked a point of inflection in western philosophy, and was instrumental in guiding Phaedrus towards his philosophy of Quality.

Lao Tzu – Lao Tzu was an Ancient Chinese philosopher from approximately the sixth century B.C.E. His text, the *Tao Te-Ching*, established the Taoist religion. Phaedrus, after reading the *Tao Te-Ching*, realized that his concept of Quality is identical to Lao Tzu's concept of Tao.

Jules Henri Poincaré – Jules Henri Poincaré was a French mathematician and philosopher who lived from 1854 to 1912. His struggles to answer mathematical and scientific questions that lay beyond the scope of scientific reason are very similar to the struggles Phaedrus experienced during his formative years.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

QUALITY

At the heart of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* is Phaedrus's quest to understand something that he refers to as "Quality." He has found that the rational division of the world into "subjective" and "objective" spheres does not appropriately encompass human experience. A pivot point for this division is the phenomenon that allows us to discern the good from the bad, which seems to be neither subjective nor objective, and a great deal of the text chronicles Phaedrus's personal and professional attempts to understand and categorize this phenomenon.

After years of study, Phaedrus derives a new philosophy to solve his dissatisfaction. He places the subjective and objective realms in subordination to a new concept, which he terms Quality. In this configuration, Quality is the overarching entity that allows thinkers to perceive in terms of the subjective and the objective in the first place. Quality allows individuals to transcend the impulse to divide the world into separate categories of science, art, and religion; Phaedrus later realizes that his Quality is the same as Lao Tzu's "Tao." Ultimately, however, Quality is less a monistic, religious entity than it is a more robust means of understanding the world. The text's discrete lectures and lessons, called Chautauquas, are largely discourses on Quality, and they aim to teach what Quality is

and encourage the reader to pursue it.

IDENTITY

Early in the text, the narrator reveals that he underwent electro-convulsive therapy to treat mental illness. This treatment altered the narrator so deeply that he regards his post-therapy self as an entirely different person. The narrator strictly separates his present-day self from his past identity and refers to the latter in the third person, using the name Phaedrus. His is "a mind divided against itself."

The narrator's conflicted identity complicates his relationship to his son. Chris is too young to fully grasp his father's mental turmoil, but he does notice a personality change once the narrator returns from treatment. When Chris laments his father's altered persona, the narrator observes, "I can imitate the father he's supposed to have, but subconsciously, at the Quality level, he sees through it and knows his real father isn't here." The narrator feels obligated to replicate a role he fulfilled when he was a completely different person, even though such a replication is impossible. He sees this paternal discontinuity as one of the root causes of his son's anxieties.

This divided identity is especially discordant when considered in the book's larger context. Through his Chautauquas, the narrator strives to resolve the problems that arise when the world is intellectualized in terms of opposing dualities. However, all the while, the narrator maintains such a strict division between his past self and his present persona that he refuses to consider them the same person. Finally, at the end of the book, the narrator acknowledges this dilemma: "the biggest duality of all, the duality between me and [Phaedrus], remains unfaced." *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* details Phaedrus's attempts to provide a unifying philosophical framework that explains the universe in all of its physical, scientific, and subjective manifestations. While this new system is a fascinating one, the narrator's psychological disunity is a constant reminder that Phaedrus's philosophical system has not yet been perfectly actualized and put into practice.

RATIONALITY AND IRRATIONALITY

Throughout the book, Pirsig's narrator juxtaposes rational, objective thought with more mystical, subjective ways of thinking. This contrast is evident in the difference between John's and the narrator's views on motorcycle maintenance. The narrator calls his own methodical, almost scientific approach the "classical" mindset, while the idealistic, repair-averse outlook John and Silvia share is the "romantic" mindset. The romantic view is a reaction to the classical view's inability to encompass some aspects of human experience. However, as the book illustrates, neither approach suffices on its own.

The inadequacy of classical reason stymies Phaedrus's pursuit of knowledge. Phaedrus reasons that there is not yet an explanation for the phenomenon that allows the infinitude of equally rational hypotheses and facts to be sorted and evaluated in terms of their merit. This rational process forces him to abandon the traditional rationality of the scientific method and embark on a new series of philosophical investigations, which culminate in the discovery of Quality. Instead of supplanting reason, however, Quality simply expands it: the narrator writes that Phaedrus "showed a way by which reason may be expanded to include elements that have previously been unassimilable and thus have been considered irrational."

As the book progresses, calcified forms of academic, scientific, and institutionalized reasoning frequently stand in opposition to Phaedrus's philosophical goals. Quality is meant to bolster reason by remedying the persistent disharmony between objective "classical" and subjective "romantic" perspectives. However, this disharmony is so entrenched that Phaedrus's frameshift comes across as irrational. In this way, Pirsig illustrates the tenuous division between the rational and the irrational, and emphasizes the status of "reason" as an arbitrary apparatus that remains in a state of flux.

DUALITY

Many of the patterns of thought that Pirsig challenges in the novel are informed by dualist principles. Phaedrus's breakthrough, for example, comes when he chooses not to subscribe to the duality of the subjective versus the objective that has governed western thought for millenia. The narrator, too, surprises his friends by delivering a long speech condemning the arbitrary dichotomy between art and technology. Later on, he uses the example of the Japanese "**mu**"—a word that means "no thing"—to expose "the process of dualistic discrimination" that has become ingrained in much of contemporary American thought. The narrator encourages readers to value moments of "mu," moments when a yes/no answer cannot be furnished. It is these moments that catalyze the most meaningful breaks from habituated thought and expose the most valuable insights—and accordingly, help foment Zen.

However, it is important to note that even as the narrator deconstructs duality after duality, the novel leaves a core duality almost completely ignored. Even as Phaedrus and the narrator both use logic to dismantle dualistic misconceptions, the narrator is never reconciled with his previous identity. The characters' troubling dual identity offers an ironically self-aware reminder that harmful and intractable dualist beliefs may persist in spite of reason.

ZEN

In his Afterword, Pirsig suggests that his book was so successful because it offered, at a pivotal time in American culture, "a positive goal to work toward that does not confine." In the years leading up to the book's 1974 publication, romantic and classical ideologies were at odds in the United States. The narrator observes rejection of the capitalist American Dream and mounting popular disgust with the effects of technology as hallmarks of a burgeoning form of anti-classical thought. Ultimately, however, the narrator believes that these sorts of negative ideologies cannot erect anything meaningful in place of the thought they oppose. In response, the narrator weaves into his text a subtle set of prescriptions that can be pieced together to form an approach that transcends both classicism and romanticism. Though this approach is never given an explicit name, it can be understood as Zen.

The narrator uses motorcycle repair as an allegory to describe his concept of Zen—when done right, the craft offers precisely the "positive goal" Pirsig recognized was needed. Devoted motorcycle maintenance fosters an attunement, a sense of presence, and most of all a commitment to Quality work that allow the mechanic to pursue the process out of an intrinsic sense of reward. Importantly, the Zen process is divorced from egotistical concerns. Throughout the book, characters driven by ego are met with failure: for instance, Chris is unsatisfied by his adventures, and Phaedrus's egotistical attempts to argue his thesis antagonize the academe and ultimately destroy his sanity.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

MOTORCYCLE MAINTENANCE

Motorcycle maintenance is, not surprisingly, the central symbol of the text. It is used as a real-life practice that can serve as a conduit for an individual's awareness of Quality. Across his Chautauquas, the narrator details the ways in which individuals can use motorcycle repair to cultivate "peace of mind" and a focus on simply being present, all of which contribute to a way of life that is mindful of Quality. In essence, motorcycle maintenance serves as a concrete vessel for the narrator's abstract theses about Quality and its proper role in an individual's life.

MU

Mu is a Japanese word that the narrator explains as meaning "no thing." It is used when a question cannot be adequately answered with a yes/no response. Mu represents a refusal to conceptualize issues in terms of dualistic logic, and thus offers a glimpse into the world of Quality that the narrator describes. The narrator emphasizes that mu responses can be much more useful than yes/no responses, because they force an individual to step back and broaden his preconceived systems of logic to accommodate different interpretations of reality.

THE GLASS DOOR

The **glass door** is the dominant image in a recurring nightmare the narrator experiences. In this dream, the narrator is separated from Chris and the rest of his family by a glass door. While his family urges him to open the door, the narrator refuses. This dream is likely based on an episode that transpired during Phaedrus's hospitalization. The narrator's failure to open the glass door and reunite with his family literalizes the barrier that his split identities have erected between him and his kin.

CHRIS'S STOMACHACHES

Throughout the motorcycle trip, Chris repeatedly complains of **stomachaches**. The narrator reveals that these stomachaches have no physiological basis, and that they have been diagnosed as indicators of a predisposition to mental illness. These persistent stomachaches—and Chris's ignorance of their significance—ominously foreshadow the mental illness that the narrator fears may be in Chris's future.

SEED CRYSTAL

A **seed crystal** is a small particle used to induce crystallization in a liquid. It is a metaphor that the narrator borrows from Phaedrus's background in biochemistry to express the insight-based processes that allowed Phaedrus's thoughts to suddenly take shape.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the HarperTorch edition of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* published in 1974.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ What is in mind is a sort of Chautauqua...that's the only name I can think of for it...like the traveling tent-show Chautauquas that used to move across America, this America, the one that we are now in, an old-time series of popular talks intended to edify and entertain, improve the mind and bring culture and enlightenment to the ears and thoughts of the hearer. The Chautauquas were pushed aside by faster-paced radio, movies and TV, and it seems to me the change was not entirely an improvement. Perhaps because of these changes the stream of national consciousness moves faster now, and is broader, but it seems to run less deep.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8-9

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator begins with visual descriptions and the motivation behind the motorcycle journey that he is taking with his son, Chris. He describes images seen from the cycle, the feeling of his feet inches above the pavement, and the type of winding country road he and his friends prefer for such trips. With the time such a trip provides for deep thought, the narrator here introduces the philosophical inquiries he will undertake. To these inquiries he give the name Chautauqua, "traveling tent-show," which provided popular adult and spiritual education at the turn of the 20th century.

The narrator's assertion that Chautauquas were "pushed aside by faster-paced radio, movies, and TV" looks forward to much of the content of his philosophical inquiry, which deals with responses to changing technology and the American way of life. Here he says that the change has not been entirely good, since it has increased the "stream of national consciousness" in speed and breadth, but reduced the *depth* of culture and general inquiries. Much of the book will deal with what the narrator calls a "romantic" response to technology, also linked to the irrational, which resists the changes and romanticizes the past (much like this nostalgia for Chautauquas). The narrator will try to reconcile this romantic perspective with the "classical" perspective, linked with the rational, which embraces changes and new technologies.

❝ I would like, instead, to be concerned with the question "What is best?," a question which cuts deeply rather than broadly, a question whose answers tend to move the silt downstream. There are eras of human history in which the channels of thought have been too deeply cut and no change was possible, and nothing new ever happened, and "best" was a matter of dogma, but that is not the situation now. Now the stream of our common consciousness seems to be obliterating its own banks, losing its central direction and purpose, flooding the lowlands, disconnecting and isolating the highlands and to no particular purpose other than the wasteful fulfillment of its own internal momentum. Some channel deepening seems called for.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9-10

Explanation and Analysis

The central question of the narrator's Chautauqua will be "What is best?" Eventually, this question will lead to a philosophical inquiry into what the narrator calls Quality. The question "What is best?" he says, "cuts deeply rather than broadly," meaning that it requires intensive focus. The narrator suggests that at certain times in human history popular thought and human consciousness was too focused and deeply ingrained so that no change or progress was possible. What was "best" was determined only by the principles and decisions of authority.

The narrator observes that the current "stream of our common consciousness" is now running wild without a "central direction or purpose." Using figurative language to describe the river of thought, the narrator says that popular thought and culture are breaking into new directions, isolating people and ideas, and wasting energy in a purposeless, unfocused broadening. Again, he presents a duality or dichotomy, two sides pitted against each other like Romanticism and Classicism in the quote above. And again, the narrator will try to find a middle ground. Here he says that some deeper thought ("channel deepening") is required, but he will attempt to get deep without reverting to the entrenched, dogmatic characteristics of some eras.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ And it occurred to me there is no manual that deals with the real business of motorcycle maintenance, the most important aspect of all. Caring about what you are doing is considered either unimportant or taken for granted.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has been captivated by the memory of previous times that his motorcycle has broken down. He remembers with embarrassment a time that he thought the cycle was broken when in fact it simply ran out of gas. He tests the heat of the cycle he is riding, and explains that since this machine has had past "seizures," he tests it from time to time to make sure they wont recur.

After the first time the engine seized, the narrator took the bike into a shop. At the time, he felt it was too important to do the repair himself. The mechanics completely botched the repair, demonstrating a lack of interest in their work. They were detached from the job and rushed it, ultimately causing damage to the machine. The narrator says the young mechanics were spectators in their work, much like the authors of the computer manuals he edits for his profession. Here, he realizes that "there is no manual that deals with the real business of motorcycle maintenance, the most important aspect of all." All current volumes simply deal with the detached, spectator business of repairing the cycle in a disinterested vacuum. The most important aspect to the narrator is simply caring about the work and being invested in what you are doing. This desire for investment, interest, and active awareness will lead to and be further explicated by the narrator's quest for a philosophy of Quality.

The novel itself can thus be seen as the narrator's manual to fill this niche. By showing the attitude required for quality, meaningful motorcycle care, the narrator hopes to communicate a productive overall life philosophy.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ A second flash...WHAM and everything brilliant—and then in the brilliance of the next flash that farmhouse—that windmill—oh, my God, he's been here! -- throttle off—this is his road—a fence and trees—and the speed drops to seventy, then sixty, then fifty-five and I hold it there.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Phaedrus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

As the group is traveling through the prairie, a storm hits. The quote here describes the sensation of thunder and lightning beginning, coupled with the strange memories that the suddenly illuminated surroundings bring. The second flash is lightning and "WHAM" is its thunder, and in the third flash a familiar farmhouse and windmill are momentarily illuminated. These images spark the narrator to say "oh, my God, he's been here!" and "this is his road." This "he" is the first mention of Phaedrus, though he is not named until later in the chapter.

Once they stop to get out of the rain, the narrator has uncanny knowledge of the town, as if he has been there before. This is the first indication that there is more to his identity than we yet know. We will come to learn about Phaedrus, the narrator's alternate past personality who haunts him like a ghost, after a psychotic break and convulsive therapy caused a mental split. The narrator-as-Phaedrus has been to the town before, which is how he knows where to find the best motel. Later, when the narrator tells Chris a ghost story and introduces Phaedrus, Chris asks his father if he saw Phaedrus out in the storm, since Sylvia said the narrator looked like he had seen a ghost.Chris doesn't know how perceptive his question really is, of course.

❝ Laws of nature are human inventions, like ghosts. Laws of logic, of mathematics are also human inventions, like ghosts. The whole blessed thing is a human invention, including the idea that it isn't a human invention. The world has no existence whatsoever outside the human imagination. It's all a ghost, and in antiquity was so recognized as a ghost, the whole blessed world we live in....Your common sense is nothing more than the voices of thousands and thousands of these ghosts from the past.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43-44

Explanation and Analysis

At the motel, Chris tells ghost stories and asks the narrator if he believes in ghosts. The narrator then launches into a

philosophical lecture suggesting that reason and science are ghosts in their own way. He gives the example of gravity, which he ultimately argues did not exist until Isaac Newton thought of it. Thus he argues that the "laws of nature are human inventions, like ghosts." Believing in science is no more rational than believing in ghosts.

Logic and mathematics and laws like gravity are all only human invention, and thus they only exist within human minds. The narrator argues that everything we know falls into this category. The world as we know it only exists in the human imagination. Everything is a ghost. Ideas that we take for granted all originated from historical figures, now long gone, but their words and ideas still linger as ethereal guides to our assumptions about the world. Thus "common sense is nothing more than the voices of thousands and thousands of these ghosts from the past." This philosophical conversation quickly gets out of hand, as John and Sylvia and Chris all become confused and slightly uncomfortable. It also leads to a private conversation / ghost story between Chris and the narrator, in which the narrator formally introduces Phaedrus.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ What we have here is a conflict of visions of reality. The world as you see it right here, right now, is reality, regardless of what the scientists say it might be. That's the way John sees it. But the world as revealed by its scientific discoveries is also reality, regardless of how it may appear, and people in John's dimension are going to have to do more than just ignore it if they want to hang on to their vision of reality. ...
What you've got here, really, are two realities, one of immediate artistic appearance and one of underlying scientific explanation, and they don't match and they don't fit and they don't really have much of anything to do with one another. That's quite a situation. You might say there's a little problem here.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), John Sutherland

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 68-69

Explanation and Analysis

Thinking about the very different approaches to motorcycle maintenance that he and John have, the narrator recalls an incident where he tried to help John repair a bike in order to get him interested in mechanics. He realizes that beyond viewing motorcycles differently, the two men have completely different world-views and understanding of reality. The narrator is interested in what things *mean*,while John is only interested in what things *are*.

John is invested in the present experience of things. The world how he sees it is reality, "regardless of what scientists say it might be." But the narrator asserts that the world and reality are also described by scientific discoveries, and that "people in John's dimension are going to have to do more than just ignore it." The romantic dimension involved with what things are is aligned with a frustration with and distrust of technology. The narrator also calls it "grooving." But to hold on to that type of living and that reality of immediate artistic appearance, "hip" people must also try to understand the alternate reality of "underlying scientific explanation." These realities, however, seem completely at odds and like they don't relate at all. This dichotomy and contrast is one of the main problems that the narrator will try to reconcile in the Chautauqua.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ But he saw a sick and ailing thing happening and he started cutting deep, deeper and deeper to get at the root of it. He was after something. That is important. He was after something and he used the knife because that was the only tool he had. But he took on so much and went so far in the end his real victim was himself.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Phaedrus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter the narrator describes Phaedrus and his style of thought, which is quintessentially classical. It is organized and rooted entirely in logic and reason. To give an example, the narrator breaks down the components of a motorcycle in an extremely detailed, organized list. It is pure analysis; there is no room for the romantic or for value judgements or anything in line with John's worldview. Phaedrus mastered this type of rational thinking and used it as a tool. The narrator refers to the tool, used to cut things and organize them into pieces like the motorcycle, as Phaedrus' knife.

The narrator also reveals that Phaedrus' obsession with an idea or philosophical project seemingly drove him to

insanity. But rather than calling him an assassin, the narrator calls Phaedrus a poor surgeon. He does this to make the point that Phaedrus was trying to do something—"he was after something and he used the knife because that was the only tool he had." The "sick and ailing thing" that Phaedrus operates is the dichotomy that the narrator has so far been outlining. The tragedy of this inquiry is that eventually he cuts so far that he ends up permanently damaging himself.

Chapter 7 Quotes

What has become an urgent necessity is a way of looking at the world that does violence to neither of these two kinds of understanding and unites them into one. Such an understanding will not reject sand-sorting or contemplation of unsorted sand for its own sake. Such an understanding will instead seek to direct attention to the endless landscape from which the sand is taken. That is what Phædrus, the poor surgeon, was trying to do.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Phaedrus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

Just before this quote the narrator introduces the metaphor of a handful of sand to describe both the Classical and Romantic modes of thought and being. Some sort of sorting, says the narrator, is essential and is done by everyone, since we are exposed to so many experiences at once that if we were aware of it all at once we could not even think. The landscape of awareness available to us is endless and unfathomable. From that landscape, we take a handful of sand, which represents details and experiences and the world we are conscious of. Taking the handful alone is an act of sorting.

But the romantic seeks to look at the whole handful of sand at once, and the classicist seeks to sort the handful into specific piles by the means of Phaedrus' "knife"—logic used to divide the world we are conscious of into distinct parts.

In the quote, the narrator describes the major project of Phaedrus and of the book itself, to find a way of looking at the world that "does violence to neither of these two kinds of understanding and then unites them into one." By violence, he means that when you attempt to look at the handful all at once, you lose some of the nuance found in the sorting, and when you sort, you lose some of the beauty of the whole. Something is always lost. Phaedrus attempted to embrace both means of viewing the world and unite them. He wanted to look at the endless landscape itself, and the idea that we grab sand at all.

Chapter 10 Quotes

The number of rational hypotheses that can explain any given phenomenon is infinite.

Related Characters: Phaedrus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, the narrator is elaborating on Phaedrus' quest for "the ghost of rationality" and the goal of uniting the classical and romantic realities. He gives a quote from Albert Einstein which talks about the different reasons that draw people to become scientists. Phaedrus, by age 15, was studying biochemistry at a university. His break occurred when he became interested in the nature of hypothesis.

During the course of his studies, he realized that the easiest part of science was coming up with a rational hypothesis to explain the data. No matter how many times he was stifled, he could always come up with another hypothesis, and the more and more he learned he realized the more hypotheses he could generate. The quote excerpted here is Phaedrus' coined law, which was intended to be humorous. But the more he studied and questioned, the less humorous it became.

Eventually, Phaedrus realized that if the law was true, it was nihilistic and a complete disproof of the scientific method. If science is meant to test and eliminate hypotheses, and hypotheses are generated faster than they can be tested and eliminated, then any scientific conclusion lacks certainty and "falls short on its goal of establishing proven knowledge." This discovery drove him to abandon science, and was a key step in his unraveling and eventual path to insanity.

Chapter 14 Quotes

This divorce of art from technology is completely unnatural. It's just that it's gone on so long you have to be an archeologist to find out where the two separated. Rotisserie assembly is actually a long-lost branch of sculpture, so divorced from its roots by centuries of intellectual wrong turns that just to associate the two sounds ludicrous.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

The travelers have arrived at their destination in Bozeman, Montana, where Phaedrus used to teach, and have met DeWeese, the old friend of Phaedrus with whom they will stay. There they are greeted by a small welcoming party, during which at one point DeWeese asks the narrator to review an instruction manual for a rotisserie (a cooking appliance for roasting meat). The inspection of the manual sends the narrator on a long philosophical speech.

In this speech he returns to the split of the classical and the romantic, explaining some of the content of his private Chautauqua to his friends. Here, he elaborates on the false dichotomy between technology and art, saying that it is "completely unnatural." This idea, he says, has been carried throughout history much since the invention of reason. He says "rotisserie assembly is actually a long-lost branch of sculpture," suggesting that technology and art are one. He explains that instead of there being only one right way to assemble a piece of machinery, there are actually infinite ways. The art is in approaching the problem with peace of mind, and in the process of figuring out and choosing which way to proceed.

Chapter 15 Quotes

❝ Quality—you know what it is, yet you don't know what it is. But that's self-contradictory. But some things are better than others, that is, they have more quality. But when you try to say what the quality is, apart from the things that have it, it all goes poof! There's nothing to talk about. But if you can't say what Quality is, how do you know what it is, or how do you know that it even exists? If no one knows what it is, then for all practical purposes it doesn't exist at all. But for all practical purposes it really does exist.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 231

Explanation and Analysis

Visiting the school where Phaedrus used to teach, the narrator recalls the question which acted as a "seed crystal" for his ideas and for his eventual mental breakdown. One question was a tiny catalyst that enabled him to produce an immense body of thought in a short period of time. The question was, "are you teaching Quality this year?" Phaedrus became obsessed with the question, at one point asking his students to write an essay describing what Quality is.

Here, he gives the paradox that drove Phaedrus' breakdown and much of the book's central philosophy. We know what Quality is, but it is very difficult to define it. We can name things as better than other things, but when you try to say what that "betterness" really is, it seems to not exist. He wonders, if no one knows what it is, does it exist? At the same time, it must exist! The concept eludes all rational analysis. Phaedrus cannot use his knife of reason to understand what Quality is. The chapter ends with the problem unresolved. The narrator simply asks, "What the hell is Quality? What *is* it?"

Chapter 17 Quotes

❝ Mountains should be climbed with as little effort as possible and without desire. The reality of your own nature should determine the speed. If you become restless, speed up. If you become winded, slow down. You climb the mountain in an equilibrium between restlessness and exhaustion. Then, when you're no longer thinking ahead, each footstep isn't just a means to an end but a unique event in itself.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 258

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator and Chris are hiking through the mountains. The narrator has compared this hike to Phaedrus' intellectual journey, so while the lines quoted refer to the literal climb, they also speak to the mindset the narrator thinks best for approaching other tasks, like intellectual pursuits or motorcycle maintenance. As he does elsewhere with the ideal mindset for fixing a motorcycle, the narrator here describes the "Zen" of mountain climbing.

The climb should be done with little effort and with no desire, the narrator says, and the speed should only be determined by the climber's reality. If you are a slow

climber, climb slow. If you feel energetic, speed up. When climbing in between "restlessness and exhaustion," you are able to live in the moment. Every step and task are not just means to accomplish some goal, but rather are events for you to experience and cherish. The narrator suggests noticing things, paying attention to nature, observing, and caring. Later, he will say that someone who climbs just for the goal of reaching the top or satisfying their ego will never be happy during the hike, since they will always wish they were further ahead on the trail. The point (which itself is very "Zen") that the narrator is essentially trying to make here is that we should live in the moment.

Chapter 18 Quotes

❝ Phaedrus' refusal to define Quality, in terms of this analogy, was an attempt to break the grip of the classical sandsifting mode of understanding and find a point of common understanding between the classic and romantic worlds. Quality, the cleavage term between hip and square, seemed to be it. Both worlds used the term. Both knew what it was. It was just that the romantic left it alone and appreciated it for what it was and the classic tried to turn it into a set of intellectual building blocks for other purposes. Now, with the definition blocked, the classic mind was forced to view Quality as the romantic did, undistorted by thought structures.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Phaedrus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 282

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator and Chris are still hiking, and the narrator says he wants to make one last point about Quality. He begins by summarizing some of the points he has made about the split between classical and romantic, or "hip" and "square." He briefly goes over the analogy he has previously made, which says that life and awareness are an infinite landscape, and from that landscape we take a handful of sand. The romantic approach is to appreciate the whole handful; the classical approach is to sort the handful into piles.

Using this analogy again, the narrator explains that Phaedrus' refusal to define Quality in the classroom and in his thought can be understood as him trying to "break the grip of the classical sandsifting mode of understanding." Phaedrus wanted to challenge classical reason. Instead of using his "knife" or sifting the sand (using reason) to define Quality, Phaedrus wanted to find a concept that could bridge the classic and romantic worlds and unite them.

Phaedrus determined that Quality was the concept that united hip and square (classical and romantic), and that both worlds used Quality and knew what it was. Because of these ideas, Phaedrus thought that Quality was the thing that could bring rationality and irrationality, hip and square together. The romantics like John knew what quality was, and "they left it alone and appreciated it." Classicists would try to define Quality and use it as a tool for reason. But by blocking the classic mind from defining Quality, Phaedrus would force a classicist to see Quality how a romantic might, free from the confines of rationality and logic. In this way he might bridge the gap that has occupied so much of the Chautauqua.

❝ This means 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, which are then mistakenly presumed to be the cause of the Quality!

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 304

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has recounted more of Phaedrus' thought process, describing in detail what followed after the Bozeman English faculty asked Phaedrus to tell them if Quality was subjective or objective. This question proves to be a dilemma, which the narrator likens to a charging bull: each side is a horn that would destroy his argument. Ultimately, Phaedrus chooses to reject both sides of the dilemma, saying that Quality is neither subjective nor objective, but rather it is a third entity; the three (subject, object, and Quality) make up the world in some kind of trinity.

But after a while, this trinitarian, three-part definition of the world no longer satisfies Phaedrus. He realized that Quality could only be found in the relationship of the subject to the object—"It is the point at which subject and object meet." After this realization, Phaedrus decides Quality must be an event instead of a thing. After a series of small steps like these, Phaedrus ultimately comes to the definition presented in the excerpted quote, which he believes has completely defeated the dilemma and satisfied his lengthy frustration with the duality of classicism and romanticism. Quality, he realizes, is the event that causes subjects and objects. Quality predates the divide between romantic and

classic, and even causes this divide and is responsible for the creation of each side. With this bold move Phaedrus challenges the subject/object dualism that has been a foundation of Western thought for centuries.

Chapter 20 Quotes

❝ Any philosophic explanation of Quality is going to be both false and true precisely because it is a philosophic explanation. The process of philosophic explanation is an analytic process, a process of breaking something down into subjects and predicates. What I mean (and everybody else means) by the word quality cannot be broken down into subjects and predicates. This is not because Quality is so mysterious but because Quality is so simple, immediate and direct.

Related Characters: Phaedrus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 319

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator decides that it is unsafe to climb to the top of the mountain. During the descent, he continues describing Phaedrus' breakthrough. He conceptualizes Quality as "preintellectual reality." Quality is reality, and classical quality and romantic quality become different modes of perceiving and processing it. He also reasons that people think different objects have Quality not because of any difference or variability within Quality itself, but because people are all so different and bring a different set of memories each time they interpret quality.

Here, Phaedrus writes to his colleagues at Bozeman that "any philosophic explanation of Quality is going to be both false and true precisely because it is a philosophic explanation." Analytic thinking, we know, is breaking things down into its components (the narrator has previously used sandsifting and knife metaphors to help us understand this point). But Quality, he says, cannot be broken down into any more parts. It cannot be broken down or cut apart not because it is complicated or mysterious, because it is so simple. Quality is the event of reality itself. He goes on to say, "Quality is the response of an organism to its environment."

Chapter 21 Quotes

❝ No, he did nothing for Quality or the Tao. What benefited was reason. He showed a way by which reason may be expanded to include elements that have previously been unassimilable and thus have been considered irrational. I think it's the overwhelming presence of these irrational elements crying for assimilation that creates the present bad quality, the chaotic, disconnected spirit of the twentieth century.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Phaedrus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 327-328

Explanation and Analysis

Still descending the mountain, the narrator says that he wishes to move way from the abstract intellectual pursuits of Phaedrus and connect those ideas back to everyday life and the general dissatisfaction with technology and the spirit of the 20th century. He says that he cannot say for sure if Phaedrus' comparison between Quality and Tao was correct, or good, and he even says that it's possible to "hurt" Quality just by trying to define it.

Rather, the narrator says that Phaedrus' work was done in the service of reason. By climbing the intellectual mountain (investigating Quality), Phaedrus showed how to include irrational and emotional issues under the umbrella of reason. He found a way to connect what had "previously been unassimilable" in reason and academia. The narrator goes on to say that it is the presence of irrational ideas and the need to assimilate them (understand them, and bridge the gap between classic and romantic) that is driving all of the "bad quality' and the "chaotic, disconnected spirit of the twentieth century" which drove him to begin the Chautauqua in the first place.

Chapter 24 Quotes

❝ There has been a haze, a backup problem in this Chautauqua so far; I talked about caring the first day and then realized I couldn't say anything meaningful about caring until its inverse side, Quality, is understood. I think it's important now to tie care to Quality by pointing out that care and Quality are internal and external aspects of the same thing. A person who sees Quality and feels it as he works is a person who cares. A person who cares about what he sees and does is a person who's bound to have some characteristics of Quality.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 353

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has woken up from a Glass Door nightmare. The nightmare shows an incident at the hospital, where Phaedrus sees his family on the other side of a glass door and is unable to open it. Note that the nightmare chapter is written in a different font, since it is from Phaedrus's perspective. After waking, the narrator and Chris get back on the motorcycle, and the narrator continues with the Chautauqua.

He explains that there has been a "haze, a backup problem" so far. He began with the issue at hand, the technological hopelessness of people like John, but in order to get to Quality, he had to back up and explain "classical" and "romantic" and give the history of Phaedrus' breakdown. Now, finally turning back to his original point, the narrator shows how Quality is linked to caring. He says that the two ideas are "internal and external aspects of the same thing." In other words, someone who cares a lot about their work produces Quality, and someone who produces something with Quality is someone who cares. Motorcycle maintenance, then, is the real-life application of Phaedrus' ideas, and the narrator has thus been talking about Quality in a way even before it was formally introduced.

❝ Stuckness shouldn't be avoided. It's the psychic predecessor of all real understanding. An egoless acceptance of stuckness is a key to an understanding of all Quality, in mechanical work as in other endeavors. It's this understanding of Quality as revealed by stuckness which so often makes self-taught mechanics so superior to institute-trained men who have learned how to handle everything except a new situation.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 366

Explanation and Analysis

At this point in the Chautauqua, the narrator is discussing the feeling of stuckness that occurs when reason fails to solve a problem. The example he uses is of a screw stuck in a motorcycle you are trying to repair. Like the screw itself, you become stuck, unable to remove it and unable to proceed. Such a moment can be extremely frustrating.

However, the narrator suggests that moments like this are actually key to new ideas and recognizing Quality. Stuckness is what comes before true understanding. Rather than avoiding stuckness, he says it should be embraced. Without ego, we need to accept this position of stuckness as a key to understanding Quality. It is this patience and embrace of stuckness, he says, that makes self-taught mechanics better than "institute-trained men." The self-taught person knows how to move past stuckness and figure out ingenious solutions to new problems, but the institute-trained person knows only a set of procedures which sometimes can lead to the unfamiliar stuckness he or she can't handle.

Chapter 25 Quotes

❝ The way to solve the conflict between human values and technological needs is not to run away from technology. That's impossible. The way to resolve the conflict is to break down the barriers of dualistic thought that prevent a real understanding of what technology is ... not an exploitation of nature, but a fusion of nature and the human spirit into a new kind of creation that transcends both. When this transcendence occurs in such events as the first airplane flight across the ocean or the first footstep on the moon, a kind of public recognition of the transcendent nature of technology occurs. But this transcendence should also occur at the individual level, on a personal basis, in one's own life, in a less dramatic way.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 373-374

Explanation and Analysis

Here the narrator reiterates a point made earlier in the Chautauqua. The aversion that John and Sylvia feel to technology needs to be solved, and running away from it wont solve the problem. Indeed, the narrator said early on how reliant they all are on technology, despite their hatred of it. The best way to approach the conflict, he says, is "to break down the barriers of dualistic thought" (classicism vs romanticism) which prevent a true understanding of what technology really is.

Technology is *not* an exploitation of nature. Rather, it is a

"fusion of nature and human spirit.. a new kind of creation that transcends both." We recognize this special transcendence of nature in major technological revolutions or events, like the first airplane or the moon landing. But the narrator says we also need to recognize how special and artful technology is on a personal (and "less dramatic") level. As we know by now, proper understanding and application of Quality, both as a designer of technology and as a user and a consumer, will alleviate the problem and help us to recognize technology for what it truly is and should be. This sort of recognition, the narrator believes, will make people like John and Sylvia feel like they don't want to or have to run from technology any more.

Chapter 26 Quotes

If you're going to repair a motorcycle, an adequate supply of gumption is the first and most important tool. If you haven't got that you might as well gather up all the other tools and put them away, because they won't do you any good.

Gumption is the psychic gasoline that keeps the whole thing going. If you haven't got it there's no way the motorcycle can possibly be fixed. But if you have got it and know how to keep it there's absolutely no way in this whole world that motorcycle can keep from getting fixed. It's bound to happen. Therefore the thing that must be monitored at all times and preserved before anything else is the gumption.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 389-390

Explanation and Analysis

In this stage of the Chautauqua, the narrator addresses the necessity of *gumption*, meaning spirit, initiative, or drive. He says that in order to repair a motorcycle (or approach any task), first and foremost you need enough gumption to get you through it. No matter what else you have, like literal tools and expertise, without gumption you won't get anywhere in your repair.

The narrator deems gumption the "psychic gasoline" that energizes and sustains the whole process. Without it the motorcycle will never be fixed, since you won't have the energy or the drive to fix it and break past "stuckness" and frustration, and to keep focusing and striving for Quality.

With enough gumption and the ability to sustain your gumption levels, however, nothing in the world can stop you from completing your task and fixing the motorcycle. Therefore, the narrator says, when repairing a motorcycle one must constantly monitor and preserve his or her levels of gumption. He will go on to explain "gumption traps," or possible pitfalls which might enable you to lose gumption, and methods to avoid them and keep your drive at a healthy, working level.

A very strong case can be made for the statement that science grows by its mu answers more than by its yes or no answer. Yes or no confirms or denies a hypothesis. Mu says the answer is beyond the hypothesis. Mu is the "phenomenon" that inspires scientific enquiry in the first place! There's nothing mysterious or esoteric about it. It's just that our culture has warped us to make a low value judgment of it.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 413

Explanation and Analysis

Here the narrator is continuing to discuss possible "gumption" traps. He has introduced the truth trap, which is concerned with "yes" or "no" questions. The narrator introduces a third option: the Japanese Mu, which means "no thing." It is a kind of "no" answer; it means that the question is too small, or the answer is *neither* yes nor no. Our natural inclination is to resist "mu," but it is even present in the sciences.

What's more, the narrator asserts that mu answers actually contribute more to science than yes or no answers. The reason he gives is that yes or no simply tells you that a certain hypothesis is correct or incorrect. But "mu says the answer is beyond the hypothesis." Mu, he says, is the very "phenomenon" that inspires scientists to study and explore in the first place. The narrator says that we should place more value on mu, and that it is an error that "our culture has warped us to make a low value judgment of it." Like embracing "stuckness," the narrator says that we should embrace mu as part of his Zen solution.

Note also that much of his (and Phaedrus') project has been to unify or break the duality of classic and romantic. Mu is the same type of answer and gesture—a rejection of duality.

It refutes what seems like should only be "yes" or "no," and provides a third option.

Chapter 29 Quotes

Quality! Virtue! Dharma! That is what the Sophists were teaching! Not ethical relativism. Not pristine "virtue." But areté. Excellence. Dharma! Before the Church of Reason. Before substance. Before form. Before mind and matter. Before dialectic itself. Quality had been absolute. Those first teachers of the Western world were teaching Quality, and the medium they had chosen was that of rhetoric. He has been doing it right all along.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 484-485

Explanation and Analysis

This excerpt comes at the end of a long, detailed chapter which continues to describe Phaedrus' struggles with other academics at the University of Chicago, leading closer and closer to his psychotic break. The narrator describes Phaedrus' experience in a philosophy class about ancient Greek literature, and the research he did into Sophists, the pre-Socratic thinkers who supposedly taught virtue. These Sophists are given a bad name by Plato, who pits them against Socrates in his *Dialogues*. Phaedrus, for some reason, aligns himself with these Sophists, and distrusts Plato's rejection of them.

Looking at the ancient Greek heroes, Phaedrus has an epiphany. What we translate as "virtue" is the Greek word "areté," which means excellence. Here he realizes "Quality! Virtue! Dharma!" are all the same thing. The Sophists, he believes, were teaching Quality, not the "ethical relativism" that we commonly associate with the English word virtue. Before reason, substance, mind, and matter, and before the classical / romantic duality, Quality was absolute. These Sophists, the "first teachers of the Western world," were "teaching Quality," and they taught it through rhetoric, just as Phaedrus had been doing all along.

This realization is a major epiphany for Phaedrus in the context of his struggles with the university, and it demonstrates again that Quality is trans-historical and multicultural.

Chapter 31 Quotes

I can imitate the father he's supposed to have, but subconsciously, at the Quality level, he sees through it and knows his real father isn't here. In all this Chautauqua talk there's been more than a touch of hypocrisy. Advice is given again and again to eliminate subject-object duality, when the biggest duality of all, the duality between me and him, remains unfaced. A mind divided against itself.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Phaedrus, Chris Pirsig

Related Themes:

Page Number: 517

Explanation and Analysis

The book is winding down; Phaedrus' psychotic break has been reached in the narrator's retelling, and the Chautauqua is mostly complete. Phaedrus is returning, has been slowly resurfacing, and the narrator finally realizes that Chris misses Phaedrus. Chris hates the narrator and is so frustrated because he isn't Phaedrus anymore. At night during nightmares, and in some other moments Phaedrus returns briefly, but these small episodes seem only to further torture Chris.

The narrator says here that he can imitate Phaedrus, the father that Chris wants to have and is used to, but on the level of Quality and the subconscious, Chris can tell that the narrator just *isn't* Phaedrus. The narrator says that in the Chautauqua he has been hypocritical, since he has worked so hard to eliminate duality—subject/object and classical/romantic—but the "biggest duality of all, the duality between me and him, remains unfaced." His mind is still divided. He is still both Phaedrus and himself.

Finally, the narrator appears ready to confront this rift within himself, and makes preparations for Phaedrus' return. He believes that his current split makes him unreliable as a father, and even plans to send Chris home and check back into a mental hospital. But in the course of the climactic, emotional conversation with Chris, in which the narrator tries to explain his insanity and his plan to send Chris home, Phaedrus emerges to comfort his son.

Chapter 32 Quotes

For God's sake relieve him of his burden! Be one person again!

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 528

Explanation and Analysis

Chris has asked Phaedrus if he really was insane, and Phaedrus answers "No!" To this Chris responds, "I knew it." This phrase resonates with Phaedrus, who realizes that the split of his personality and the idea that his father was insane have been plaguing Chris for years, causing many of his problems. He realizes that Chris has been carrying Phaedrus this whole time, and that Chris is the only reason that he ever emerged from the hospital. Feeling new understanding and empathy for his son, Phaedrus/the narrator urges himself to "be one person again!" and to relieve Chris of his burden and the pain the split is causing him.

Note that this chapter, the last in the book, is written in Phaedrus' font. The narrator seems to have reconciled and become one with Phaedrus, finally, to save Chris.

> Trials never end, of course. Unhappiness and misfortune are bound to occur as long as people live, but there is a feeling now, that was not here before, and is not just on the surface of things, but penetrates all the way through: We've won it. It's going to get better now. You can sort of tell these things.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 531

Explanation and Analysis

These are the last lines of the book, excepting the Afterward. Chris has asked if one day he can get his own motorcycle, and Phaedrus is confident that his son will approach motorcycle maintenance with the right attitude. Phaedrus reflects that "trials never end," and that unhappiness and bad things are bound to happen, but now there is a new feeling that has been absent. It's not just a surface feeling, but a deep feeling that seems to be on the Quality level (though he doesn't say this for sure). The feeling is this: "We've won it. It's going to get better now." Phaedrus ends by asserting that finally he has reconciled with himself, and that he and Chris (and he and the narrator) have won and completed their journey. Things are going to get better for everyone. His reason for believing this fact recalls the instinctual way that Phaedrus asserts we make Quality judgements: "You can sort of tell these things."

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

The narrator rides a motorcycle through the American Central Plains with his eleven-year-old son Chris. It is a muggy July morning. The narrator points out a blackbird to Chris, but realizes that his son is too young to be impressed by the nature around him. Traveling by a motorcycle, the narrator comments, offers a much less passive experience of the surrounding world than a car ride. The motorcycle rider must be immediately present and attuned to his environment.

The narrator's attunement with and reverence for his surroundings makes Chris's lack of interest in nature seem jarring.

Chris and the narrator are on a trip from Minneapolis to Montana with the narrator's friends, John Sutherland and his wife Sylvia, who ride a motorcycle ahead of them. They have no strict schedule and prefer to take uncrowded, rural roads to avoid the impersonal bustle of highways. The narrator uses his time on the motorcycle to meditate upon and discuss important issues. He calls this philosophical process the Chautauqua, a reference to traveling lectures that were popular in America at the turn of the 20th century. The philosophical question of interest at the moment is "what is good?"

"What is good?" is a question that will prove central to the book's overall philosophy. The narrator's patient, meditative approach to his surroundings comes as a result of his committed study of this very question, and the fact that his behavior is not the norm suggests that society as a whole might benefit from pondering the question in more depth.

The group stops for a rest. Sylvia reflects on a grim and dissatisfied-looking group of Monday morning commuters that she saw earlier. The four resume travel, and the narrator begins to discuss a "disharmony" he observes in John and Sylvia's marriage. Despite the narrator's urgings, John is opposed to learning how to repair his own motorcycle, an aversion his wife shares. The two are uncomfortable with the technology and prefer not to understand it. The narrator describes several occasions on which John's motorcycle has broken down, yet John has inconvenienced himself by rebuffing the narrator's efforts to teach him about **motorcycle maintenance**. There are very few shops in middle America that can repair John's motorcycle, a BMW R60, but John has nevertheless brought no replacement parts and has no desire to learn how to do so himself.

Proper motorcycle maintenance is used throughout the book to symbolize the narrator's philosophy. John and Sylvia's aversion towards learning this skill suggests that they have yet to adopt, or even to recognize or understand, some of the principles that guide the narrator's life.

The narrator also recollects a time he visited the Sutherlands' house and found they had a leaky faucet. John had made only a perfunctory attempt to repair it, which failed, and the couple made no further efforts to fix it. He notices Sylvia lose her temper at her children and realizes that she has been worn down by trying to suppress her anger at the malfunctioning faucet.

The Sutherlands' reliance on technology that they resent causes them great anxiety. The narrator recognizes that his friends' attitude towards technology is negative and untenable.

The narrator realizes from these anecdotes that John and Sylvia are distressed by technology—or humankind's mechanistic tendencies in general. They, like other "beatniks" or "hippies," react against "the system" in a way that he finds self-defeating. To the narrator, technology is not to be utterly eschewed—the Buddha can reside in artifice as easily as it can in a flower.

The Sutherlands' reactionary position is an unfulfilling response to an unfulfilling reality. The philosophy that the narrator will develop throughout the book represents an attempt to unite the two extremes of belief into a constructive, positive whole.

CHAPTER 2

The group enters the prairies of the Great Plains from the Central Plains. The narrator recognizes inclement weather on the horizon and remembers a rain-soaked trip to Canada he took with Chris several years before. That trip ended early because the cycle broke down and the narrator couldn't repair it. Two weeks after returning home, the narrator realized he had simply run out of gas.

The narrator's failure to check the gas tank when he thought that the motorcycle had broken down showcases how individuals can be undermined by rigid patterns of thought.

John points out that the group has missed a turn but they decide to continue anyway. The narrator remembers a time when he decided to take his motorcycle to a shop instead of repairing it himself. The mechanics carelessly botched the repair, and damaged the machine. The narrator attributes this shoddy work to the mechanics' impersonal detachment from their craft.

The behavior of the mechanics and their shoddy work is one of the first depictions of how one's approach to motorcycle maintenance can reflect the strengths and weaknesses of one's overall life philosophy.

CHAPTER 3

The travelers move through the prairie, and a storm hits. They take refuge in a town, and the narrator surprises his companions with an uncanny knowledge of where to find the best motel in town. At the motel, Chris asks to hear ghost stories. Initially, the narrator debunks ghosts as irrational fantasy. Chris then explains that an American Indian friend of his believes in ghosts, and his father reverses his position. The narrator explains to his companions that the laws of science are no more reasonable than a belief in ghosts, as both are simply fabrications of the human mind.

The narrator's almost supernatural behavior suggests that there is more to his persona than has been revealed so far. His philosophical discussion is the first of many in-depth explorations about the nature of reason.

John and Sylvia are taken aback by the ideas the narrator expounds, and the conversation winds down. Later, in bed, Chris asks to hear another ghost story. The narrator tells him about a man named Phaedrus, who spent his life hunting for a ghost, only to become a ghost himself. Chris asks more questions, but his father snaps at him to go to sleep.

This episode marks the first explicit mention of Phaedrus, a man who, as the text will later indicate, has deeply influenced the narrator's personality.

Lying awake, the narrator confesses to the reader that Phaedrus has seen the land the group now travels through, and has led them to this motel. The narrator also confesses that the ideas he elaborated about science and ghosts actually belonged to Phaedrus, and hopes that Phaedrus will allow him to sleep after making this confession.

Though this confession seems obscure and difficult to interpret, later discussion of Phaedrus's identity will reveal that he can only be introduced in an oblique manner.

CHAPTER 4

The narrator remarks that every Chautauqua requires a list of valuable things that can be consulted later. For this reason, he provides a long, categorized enumeration of the materials and provisions necessary for a long motorcycle trip. Surprisingly, this list includes three books: the narrator carries the motorcycle's manual, a general guide to maintenance, and a copy of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*.

The narrator's enumeration of items showcases the rational order that typifies the "classic" approach to life.

The narrator wakes Chris and the Sutherlands up early, and they embark on a bracingly cold ride. When they stop for breakfast, John and Sylvia are upset at the narrator, and they insist on waiting for it to warm up before they continue. The narrator muses that their intolerance of physical discomfort is incompatible with an aversion to technology.

Because of their exclusively "romantic" outlook, John and Sylvia are unable to resolve fundamental disharmonies between their romantic impulses and their more classical needs.

At a stop to admire the scenery, Chris complains, asking to leave and camp out. The group decides to camp out that night.

Chris's bratty behavior plays a well-defined role later in the text, when the narrator must introspect to find its cause.

CHAPTER 5

The group is forced to travel through a more populous area in order to cross the Missouri River. As they reenter the prairie, the narrator thinks more about the difference between his approach to motorcycle maintenance and John's. He recalls one instance where John refused the narrator's easy fix for his shaky handlebars simply because it involved an improvised part, not a factory-issued one.

The contrast between John's and the narrator's approaches to motorcycle maintenance is used to highlight a fundamental duality in contemporary western thought.

The narrator realizes that he and John regard motorcycles—and reality in general—in a completely different manner. John subscribes to a reality of "immediate artistic appearance," while the narrator is more focused on scientific reasoning.

Much of the narrator's later philosophizing aims to reconcile the differences he perceives between John's emotional approach and his own more rational one.

While setting up camp, Chris acts out and subtly disobeys his father. Chris complains excessively and unreasonably, rankling John and Sylvia as well as his father. The boy refuses his dinner and walks away from the camp complaining of a **stomachache**.

From the reader's perspective—and that of John and Sylvia—Chris's disobedience is hard to justify.

The narrator reveals to John and Sylvia that Chris suffers frequent **stomachaches** that rarely have any physiological basis. These pains were diagnosed as precursors of mental illness. When John and Sylvia hear this, their frustration with Chris turns to sympathy. The narrator goes on the explain to them that in spite of this diagnosis, he cannot stand to send Chris to a psychiatrist—the medical professionals lack the empathy and concern of family.

Until the narrator revealed its origins, Chris's misbehavior was difficult to justify in John and Sylvia's worldview. The narrator's revelation expands their logic and their empathy. Furthermore, the narrator's reluctance to seek psychiatric treatment for Chris illustrates his jaded view of the mental health community.

Chris returns to the tent and gets ready for bed with his father, whining interminably. He cries himself to sleep. Meanwhile, the narrator lies in his sleeping bag, exhausted but unable to sleep. He has a haunting vision of Phaedrus, whom he describes as an "Evil spirit. Insane. From a world without life or death." The narrator fears that Phaedrus has come to claim Chris.

The narrator's conflict with Phaedrus mounts, and Phaedrus's role becomes still more mysterious and threatening.

CHAPTER 6

The group awakes on a scorching hot day, demoralized by a mosquito-ridden night. Chris complains at breakfast of another **stomachache**. The narrator decides to devote that day's Chautauqua to describing Phaedrus's world, because he doesn't think it's appropriate to omit Phaedrus from the story at this point. Phaedrus was the only one who fully understood his own ideas, but he can no longer speak for himself. The narrator has pieced together some of Phaedrus's story by using the writings he left behind, and he hopes that discussing Phaedrus's ideas will help bury the man forever.

This description of Phaedrus further exposes the monumental significance that the man has exerted on the life and thought of the narrator—while still keeping Phaedrus's precise identity a mystery.

Phaedrus, the narrator explains, divided human understanding into two approaches, "classic" and "romantic." Phaedrus's approach was a classic one: he saw the world in terms of its underpinning structures, and was predisposed to logic and the scientific method. Romantics see the world in terms of its surface appearance, and are predisposed towards emotions and intuitions. The narrator explains that motorcycle riding is a romantic experience, while **motorcycle maintenance** is more of a classic task.

Phaedrus's analyses of human consciousness typify an analytical, dualistic approach to knowledge and understanding.

The classic approach aims to order the universe in a rational, economical way, and romantics can see this as dull and joyless. For this reason, classic and romantic ways of thinking are often at odds with one another, and people can rarely straddle the two approaches. The narrator explains that in the present day there is an ever-widening gap between classic culture and romantic counterculture.

The narrator's explanation of classic and romantic approaches to life is a vital introduction to a duality that remains at the center of the novel.

Phaedrus, the narrator says, operated within this alienating context of opposing ideologies. His ideas made others believe he was insane, and this social antagonism in turn made Phaedrus still more insane. This detachment from reality culminated in Phaedrus's arrest and removal from society.

Phaedrus's observations were unintelligible to his peers, and his unique way of understanding his world made him unable to function normally.

The group stops for gas and coffee, and the narrator explains to Chris that he must eat with the rest of the group or not at all. Back on the road, the narrator continues to think of Phaedrus's "rational, analytical, classical" brand of thought. The narrator demonstrates this sort of thought by dividing a motorcycle into an extremely specific list of systems and their components: the power-delivery system, the ignition system, etc.

The narrator's explanation of motorcycle structure offers a practical illustration of Phaedrus's classical approach to knowledge and understanding.

Following his classical outline of the motorcycle, the narrator explains that this way of thinking has four important deficiencies: it eliminates the romantic surface impression necessary to understand what a motorcycle is; it eliminates the observer of the motorcycle; it leaves no room for value judgments; and its knife-like divisions give the deceptive impression that things are organized a certain way out of necessity, when the classical process is actually much more surgical and arbitrary.

Though both Phaedrus and the narrator seem predisposed to a classic perspective, the narrator readily acknowledges that the classical outlook cannot encompass many important aspects of perception and understanding.

According to the narrator, Phaedrus used this knife of logic to cut the world into very fine parts that he could analyze. He tried to cut so far into a reality that he saw as deficient that he ended up hurting himself.

This cryptic description of Phaedrus further emphasizes the tragedy of his philosophical mission.

CHAPTER 7

The narrator and his companions arrive in a small town, where it is 102 degrees. The group continues to travel and the narrator recognizes that he should not mentally fight against his discussion of Phaedrus.

The narrator's willingness to discuss Phaedrus in detail is the first step towards reconciling himself with the man who has so influenced and affected him.

Phaedrus's "knife," the narrator explains, is the tool that every human uses to discern his or her environment and classify his or her observations. Phaedrus was interested in the infinitude of awareness from which we first separate out our understanding of the world. To learn about the entire landscape of awareness, one must understand the role played by the individual who seeks to study that awareness.

In order to fully comprehend the rational world, Phaedrus relies on reason to study aspects of the rational outlook that, ironically, normally lie outside the scope of rational inquiry. These aspects include the unique perceptual situation of each rational individual.

The discussion of classic and romantic understanding is necessary to introduce Phaedrus, because the man must be described obliquely. Phaedrus was in pursuit of the "ghost" of inscrutable rationality that undergirded all of western thought.

Phaedrus relies upon the rational distinction between classic and analytic viewpoints as a point of departure for his rational analysis of reason itself.

John and Sylvia want to travel fast, but the narrator suggests moving slowly. They quickly outpace him on the highway, but he takes his time and continues his contemplation.

The narrator has cultivated a sense of presence and a comfort in his surroundings that more hurried individuals have yet to grasp.

The narrator describes some of Phaedrus's biographical background. He was an expert at manipulating the world analytically and logically, so much so that he had an I.Q. of 170, an extraordinarily high score. He was an isolated man who remained unknowable even to his wife and family. The narrator recalls a "fragment," in which Phaedrus encounters a timber wolf in the woods. The man makes eye contact with the animal, and is struck with the realization that he has seen a vision of himself. The narrator thinks of the wolf as a timeless expression of Phaedrus's being.

Phaedrus's biography corresponds to the real-life biography of the book's author, Robert Pirsig.

Phaedrus studied the ghost of reason because he saw it as a way to study his own identity. If he could destroy reason, he could liberate himself.

Phaedrus's pursuit of reason indicates a fundamental drive to understand his identity.

The narrator says that the time has come to explain his own relation to Phaedrus. At a party several years ago, the narrator felt overwhelmed by carousing and went to lie down. When he awoke, he found himself in a hospital. He figures out that his recollections prior to waking up were dreams, and he is told that he now has developed a new personality. The narrator comes to understand that Phaedrus was destroyed by a court-ordered treatment of electroshock therapy. The narrator's body was once Phaedrus's, but after the treatment, the narrator came to inhabit that body. The narrator has never met Phaedrus, but is terrified that he can never run from him, since his body once belonged to Phaedrus.

At long last, the reader is finally informed of Phaedrus's true nature. The narrator's initial unwillingness to acknowledge Phaedrus's role as his past self points to a deeply conflicted sense of identity which you might be able to describe almost as a duality.

At a stop, John and Sylvia express their anger at the narrator for moving so slowly. As they continue riding, however, a light shower begins. The rain ceases and the group reaches the top of a hill, feeling restored and admiring the land before them.

The rain and the beauty of the land dissipates the animosity caused by the group's different approaches to life and travel, and they are left feeling renewed.

CHAPTER 8

The travelers reach Miles City, Montana, and are in noticeably higher spirits after a relaxing night at a hotel. While others run errands, the narrator tunes his motorcycle and muses that the process is a largely rational one. He expands upon this idea, saying that the process that allows for the taxonomical organization of the components of a motorcycle is the same idea that allows for all sorts of systematic hierarchies across the world. However, although governments and technology may be products of this "system," rejecting these products isn't the way to address the unfulfilling aspects of systematic thought.

In this discourse, the narrator uses motorcycle maintenance as a means of explaining the way the classical outlook manifests itself in human affairs.

The narrator goes to a friendly mechanic's shop to get a motorcycle part, and notices that the mechanic works very efficiently even though his shop is disorganized. He meets back up with John, Sylvia, and Chris for dinner. The narrator explains that right-wing politics dominate the state, and that the college in Bozeman was so conservative that it deemed Eleanor Roosevelt too much of a radical to speak there. Leaving town, the narrator recognizes a bench that Phaedrus has slept on as he made his way to that college in Bozeman.

As the narrator approaches Bozeman, he encounters more and more reminders of Phaedrus's existence. This suggests that a fuller confrontation with Phaedrus will take place in the future.

CHAPTER 9

The party makes its way through the Yellowstone Valley. The narrator begins a Chautauqua that explains the two types of logic: inductive and deductive. Inductive logic extends particular observations to form general truths, and deductive logic does the reverse by using general laws to make conclusions about particular cases. Some problems are so complicated that solving them requires a disciplined interweaving of induction and deduction called the scientific method.

The narrator uses this Chautauqua to explain the capstone of rational inquiry: the scientific method. This method will inform the narrator's discourses on motorcycle maintenance, as well as his chronicle of Phaedrus's rational inquiries.

The narrator enumerates the steps of the scientific method and explains that its primary role is to eliminate any mistaken preconceptions that evaded notice before. The most important—and least visible—part of the scientific method is devising hypotheses that can be suitably tested to explain a phenomenon. For this reason, mechanics' most important work is not physical labor, but rather the analysis of the underlying forms of a motorcycle.

The narrator seeks to dismantle misconceptions about the scientific method as something mindless or robotic. Rather, scientific inquiry requires the ingenuity of devising hypotheses that can be tested experimentally.

On the road, a car with a trailer can't get out of the passing lane and nearly collides head-on with the motorcyclists. Shaken, the narrator and his companions rest at a bar.

This brush with death illustrates the way that real-life emergencies can intrude upon and affect philosophical meditations.

CHAPTER 10

The narrator begins to elaborate on Phaedrus's quest for the "ghost of rationality." He reproduces a quote from Albert Einstein that details the different factors that motivate people to pursue science: ambition, commitment to the utilitarian good, and, most profound of all, the pure desire to escape into the eternal, rational world. Phaedrus is a member of the latter group.

Phaedrus's commitment to understanding the ins and outs of scientific reason comes as a result of his desire not to use science as a means to a particular end, but because he views the realm of science as an essential component of his understanding of life itself.

By age 15, Phaedrus had already completed a year of university biochemistry. He becomes fascinated by the formation of hypotheses—potential explanations for a phenomenon—because they appear to be supplied neither by nature nor by the mind of the scientist alone. He concludes that any phenomenon can be explained by infinite possible hypotheses. This conclusion discredits the scientific method as a route to decisive truth; moreover, as more scientific thought is conducted, more hypotheses arise, and established scientific truths are refuted and revised at a faster pace. Thus, sustained application of the scientific method actually makes stable truth harder to attain.

This epiphany marks a serious crisis for Phaedrus. Until this moment, the scientific method has informed his entire view of the world. Now that he has realized that some facets of experience cannot be suitably explained by the scientific method, he must search for a way to comprehend the larger truths that lie outside the grasp of his reasoning.

Phaedrus reasons that this use of the scientific method showcases a harmful deficiency in the state of reason—one that causes many social problems. He becomes disenchanted with his academic pursuits, and fails out of the university at age 17. From there, he begins to drift "laterally" in search of truth, no longer searching for truth directly before him.

Phaedrus's crisis of reason dramatically alters the course of his life. Out of his realization of the inadequacy of scientific thought comes a determination to explore alternative—and perhaps more true—means of understanding the world.

CHAPTER 11

The narrator wakes up and his surroundings feel very familiar to him. The group decides to reach Bozeman by a road that Phaedrus traveled often. Phaedrus would traverse the area during his frequent multi-day excursions into the wilderness. He took these trips in order to work out his thoughts in solitude, away from institutional constraint.

The narrator's awareness of his surroundings shows that, for better or worse, he is becoming steadily more in touch with Phaedrus's experiences.

After dropping out of college, Phaedrus's "lateral drift" led him to enlist in the military. He is sent to Korea. His writings from this period are more emotional than before. The narrator recalls fragments of Phaedrus's encounters with the country's unfamiliar culture. Another memory dates from Phaedrus's voyage back from Korea, on which he reads a book about Oriental philosophy. This book, *The Meeting of East and West* by F.S.C. Northrop, details the Eastern affinity for the esthetic and the Western affinity for the theoretic—a split that parallels Phaedrus's "romantic" and "classic" divisions, respectively.

Phaedrus's search for alternative forms of truth brings him into contact and with forms of thought unlike the western intellectual tradition. His increased knowledge helps him better comprehend the split between romantic and classic thought that he so passionately desires to address.

Once Phaedrus returns from Korea, he spends two weeks in deep thought. After this time, his lateral search for truth is finished, and he decides to enroll in a university to study philosophy. Phaedrus sees philosophy as a higher discipline than science, one that allows him to ask the sorts of larger questions that the scientific method cannot support. As the narrator relates this story, he also describes the group's ascent through the scenic mountains of Montana.

Phaedrus's time spent drifting has expanded his reasoning and afforded him a broader perspective than science alone could have provided.

This "high country" of Montana parallels another sort of "high country"—one that exists solely in the mind. Phaedrus traverses this mental terrain, and he reads many philosophical texts for guidance. However, he reads at first in an uncharitable, adversarial manner.

The travelers' ascent into the high country literalizes Phaedrus's advances into more esoteric regions of thought.

By reading the texts of David Hume and Immanuel Kant, Phaedrus begins to better understand the predicament of classicism versus romanticism. Hume is an empiricist: he believes that all knowledge stems from sensory input. Therefore, humans cannot perceive any "substance" that emits this sensory data; only the sense impressions can be apprehended. This in turn means that humans cannot deduce causation or establish natural laws, since they possess sense impressions alone. It seems, then, that Hume's conclusions invalidate empirical reason.

The narrator's discussion of Hume and Kant serves to legitimize Phaedrus's thought by contextualizing it alongside the established philosophical canon.

Kant, a later philosopher, seeks to redeem empirical reason from Hume's somewhat nihilistic conclusions. Kant posits that humans possess *a priori* conceptions of things, which exist independently of sense data but are reinforced by sensory input. The narrator gives the example of a motorcycle, which is an *a priori* concept that is modified by continuously changing sense data: the wear and tear on the tires, paint job, etc.

This further elaboration of philosophical tradition gives untrained readers a gloss of the philosophical underpinnings of Phaedrus's thought.

To the narrator, Kant's thought is a revolutionary breakthrough in reason, reminiscent of Nicholas Copernicus's theory of a heliocentric solar system. According to the narrator, Phaedrus performs a similar shift in reason in order to reconcile romantic and classic viewpoints.

The narrator's description of Kant's philosophy lends perspective to the philosophical shift that Phaedrus hoped to achieve.

CHAPTER 12

The narrator distinguishes his Chautauqua orations from the work a novelist might do, saying that he prefers to consider John and Sylvia as friends and not characters. However, he acknowledges that his philosophical musings necessarily distance him from his companions, and laments the isolation that modern life frequently provokes.

This reflection represents a deliberate effort by the author to resist categorization of his book as a novel, which might diminish the gravity of his philosophical propositions.

The narrator tells his companions about the man they'll be visiting in Bozeman, an abstract painter named Robert DeWeese who teaches at the college. He is an old friend of Phaedrus's, and the narrator worries that DeWeese will expect him to be the same person as the Phaedrus he knew. The narrator recalls that Phaedrus could not understand DeWeese, and for that reason respected him. The two had a habit of reacting to events in bafflingly opposite ways, and the two's opposing perspectives make each think the other has access to a special type of knowledge.

The narrator's worries about meeting DeWeese show that there is still a deeply troubling disjunction between his current identity and that of Phaedrus.

Though the narrator's account obscured this chronology, Phaedrus did not move to Bozeman immediately after his epiphany about Kant's philosophy. Before Montana, he studied Oriental philosophy in India. He studies, but has difficulty subscribing to philosophy that advocates breaking down the separation between subject and object. He does not practice Zen meditation because he relies too much on logic and sense.

Phaedrus is not able to shake the dualistic mindset through which he perceives the world in terms of subjects and objects. For this reason, he is unable to fully commit to his studies in India.

One day at the Indian university, Phaedrus's teacher explains that the world is illusory, and Phaedrus asks whether the atomic bombing of Hiroshima was illusory. The teacher answers yes, and Phaedrus decides to leave India. Back from India, Phaedrus settled down in the United States, worked as a journalist, married, and had two children. His life became more comfortable, but when he moved to Montana, his old intellectual anxieties began to resurface.

Phaedrus's response to the teacher's analysis of the bombing of Hiroshima—which as he sees it took so much human life and affected the world so tremendously that it can't be viewed as anything but very real—shows that he is, at this point, very much anchored in day-to-day reality. His more practical life choices back in the United States affirm this.

CHAPTER 13

The narrator is nervous to return to the college in Bozeman, because it holds a great deal of significance in Phaedrus's personal development. Teaching there made Phaedrus very anxious, because of his solitary nature. Right-wing state politicians began to suppress academic freedoms at the college, and Phaedrus protested this mistreatment by working to remove the college's accreditation.

Phaedrus refused to let socialized codes of conduct interfere with his academic pursuits, and this intellectual purity is what motivates him to stand up to the university administration.

Phaedrus's efforts against accreditation scandalized some students, and during one of his classes, he delivered a defense of his actions that he called the Church of Reason lecture. In this lecture, Phaedrus compares the university to a church. A church building can be repurposed without affront to the religion because religion is not dependent on any physical structure. Similarly, the real university exists not as the physical campus, but as a body of reason within the minds of students and teachers. Stripping the university of its accreditation is like de-consecrating and repurposing a church building; it simply signifies that a requisite mindset is no longer present.

Phaedrus's Church of Reason lecture offers a helpful analogy that highlights the ways in which a rigid, dualistic mode of thinking can stand in the way of an understanding of the true meaning of various phenomena.

The narrator praises the logical prowess of Phaedrus's Church of Reason speech. He goes on to explain that true adherents of the Church of Reason are beholden to the pursuit of truth alone, not to any sort of university bureaucracy. Though Phaedrus's behavior was impolitic, he was spared from outright condemnation because people recognized he was simply speaking out of his obligation to pursue rational truth.

Phaedrus's devotion to reason transcends more worldly concerns.

The narrator also observes that Phaedrus's devotion to the Church of Reason likely came as a result of his understanding of its weaknesses. Phaedrus's mastery of reason allowed him to comprehend its deficiencies—thus, he devoted himself fanatically to a cause he didn't quite have faith in himself.

Paradoxically, Phaedrus's lack of faith in reason is what motivates his passionate dedication to the institution. This parallels the counterintuitive way in which Phaedrus uses reason to question reason itself.

CHAPTER 14

The party arrives in Bozeman, and the narrator's surroundings feel familiar, but slightly alien. The group meets DeWeese at the idyllic home he shares with his wife, Gennie. The travelers have a conversation with the DeWeeses and some other visitors. The narrator largely tunes out from the conversation, but notices that there is some friction between DeWeese and John because of their differing conceptions of the narrator's identity.

Not only does the narrator's divided identity discomfit him upon his return to Bozeman, it also puts stress on the relationships of the people around him, who have different conceptions of who he is.

The travelers and the DeWeeses dine together, and more guests arrive after dinner. During conversation, DeWeese brings out a set of instructions for assembling a barbecue and says he's been having trouble following them. This launches the narrator into a discussion of a set of instructions from a Japanese bike manual, which required "peace of mind" for proper bicycle assembly. Peace of mind, the narrator explains to his companions, is required for this mechanical work because proper assembly depends on assembling a machine that satisfies the one who assembles it. He explains that the work of a true craftsman is independent from codified instructions, and really lies much closer to art. The narrator even goes so far as to liken rotisserie barbecue assembly to a kind of sculpture.

The narrator's extended philosophizing at the dinner party illustrates that he is still captivated by the same thoughts that fascinated Phaedrus. The "peace of mind" philosophy that the narrator espouses offers a means of bridging the gap between technical and artistic approaches to construction, and thus achieving a better product.

The narrator's lengthy speech leaves the dinner party dumbfounded. After the rest of the guests leave, the narrator stays up with Robert and Gennie DeWeese, who ask him to explain his theses in more detail. He tells them that his pontifications about technology and art stem from the disconnect between reason and emotion that has become pronounced in the present day. He explains that rationality must be expanded in order to offer a solution to the discontentment that Americans feel towards their own culture. Classical reason cannot explain new feelings, and reason is ripe for a frameshift not unlike the one that occurred when Columbus reached the New World.

The narrator's explanation of the rotisserie assembly manual grounds Phaedrus's philosophy in a real-life procedure. Once again, Phaedrus's philosophy is presented as the expansion of reason that contemporary Americans need in order to reconcile their discordant and unfulfilling perspectives on reason and feeling.

The narrator continues, telling the story of the Ancient Greek figure named Phaedrus. The Phaedrus of ancient times was a rhetorician who is immortalized as an interlocutor in one of Plato's Socratic dialogues. Phaedrus was present for the invention of reason, the narrator explains, and when reason is excavated, his ghost reappears. The DeWeeses listen earnestly and recommend that the narrator try and write his thoughts down as some sort of treatise. At two in the morning, the narrator goes to bed, after getting instructed by DeWeese on where best to go camping with Chris later in the trip.

This passage offers the first explanation of why the narrator refers to his past self as Phaedrus. The historical significance of Phaedrus the Ancient Greek implies that Phaedrus's 20th-century ideologies may similarly rebel against the classical Greek philosophers who shaped western intellectual tradition.

CHAPTER 15

After two days of hanging around Bozeman, John and Sylvia head home. The next day, the narrator and Chris revisit the college where Phaedrus taught. When the father and son enter the building, Chris gets deeply uncomfortable and runs away. The narrator explores the building alone, and comes across Phaedrus's old classroom, where the ghost's presence is palpable.

The university is a highly charged place for the narrator, and Chris's panicked exit suggests that the memories the campus triggers for the narrator may not be benign.

A woman comes upon the narrator in the classroom, and recognizes him as Phaedrus. She may have been one of his students. She treats the narrator extremely reverently and is shocked to hear that he no longer teaches. The interaction is uncomfortable, and the woman quickly leaves.

This interaction, like that between the narrator and DeWeese, highlights the change in personality that has taken place since Phaedrus's electroshock therapy and the division it has rent in the narrator's personality.

On his way out of the classroom, the narrator comes across Phaedrus's old office, and is overcome with memories of his philosophical breakthroughs. He also recalls a woman named Sarah coming by Phaedrus's office to ask if he has begun teaching Quality to his students. Sarah's remarks about Quality unsettled Phaedrus's notions about teaching writing. His approach strikes him as too prescriptive, and because he is unable to determine what exactly Quality is, he asks his students to write an essay on what the concept means to them.

This is a watershed moment in Phaedrus's intellectual development: the question of Quality will come to be the defining issue of Phaedrus's philosophical explorations.

The essay assignment vexes the students, and Phaedrus believes they must be having the same definitional troubles as he. He wonders how people can recognize what Quality is by evaluating things as good and bad, yet be unable to say what it is in explicit terms.

Because the concept of Quality eludes his and his students' attempts at rational analysis, Phaedrus is spurred to investigate it further.

CHAPTER 16

The narrator and Chris begin their hike into the mountains. He compares their trek through the mountains to Phaedrus's mental odyssey towards discovering Quality. The narrator divides Phaedrus's thought on Quality into two phases: in the first, he refused to establish a definition for the term. In the second, he set up a rigid structure to explain Quality's relationship with the universe. This second phase was what drove Phaedrus insane. The narrator explains that he has been left with fragments of Phaedrus's thought, and has tried to use them to piece together the man's conclusions.

The narrator and Chris's trip into the mountains acts as a metaphor for the odyssey into rarefied philosophical terrain that Phaedrus takes in search of Quality.

Phaedrus's nonmetaphysical explanation of Quality hinges on his teaching of rhetoric. He gives students assignments aimed at teaching them how to make their own observations instead of simply reiterating memorized facts or techniques. He realizes that the best way to instill this kind of thinking may be to abolish grade-giving in education, and asks one of his brighter students to write an essay on the topic. She delivers a persuasive essay, and Phaedrus decides to withhold his students' grades for an entire quarter to test the model.

Phaedrus realizes that, although he doesn't quite know what Quality is, the institutional setting of the university likely stifles Quality. For this reason, he eschews one of the most inflexible and institutional components of higher education: grades.

On the hike, Chris acts stubbornly and refuses to do a task he's asked to do. The narrator continues to muse about Phaedrus's new grade-less teaching scheme. The goal is to discourage students who aren't interested in education for its own sake. This way, students will not be forced to behave like beasts of burden, and their motivation for schooling will be knowledge-based, not grade-based. At first, students are confused by Phaedrus's refusal to grade their work. Gradually, though, the A students begin to turn in excellent work, and soon after, B and C students also begin joining class discussions with unprecedented enthusiasm. Only the D and F students refused to participate out of panicked confusion.

Phaedrus's dramatic alteration of educational conventions is jarring to his students, but it eventually succeeds in expanding their outlooks and enhancing their ability to perform Quality work independent of institutional coercion.

At the end of the term, Phaedrus surveyed his students to see how they liked the grade-less system. An overall majority preferred grades, but the best students showed a strong preference for not being graded. Phaedrus observes that giving grades serves to obscure bad teaching, but also notes that it is unfair of him to refuse to give grades without giving students a positive goal to work towards. He investigates alternative systems, but next semester gives up on the system and grades normally again. In the narrator's words, he awaited a "**seed crystal**" to solidify his thought.

The results of Phaedrus's experiment show that he has certainly made progress in his quest to understand the nature of quality. However, his inability to provide his students with a positive goal indicates that there is still work to be done to come up with a viable, constructive concept of Quality.

CHAPTER 17

Chris becomes visibly demoralized as the hike continues. The narrator recognizes that his son fears he won't be able to climb the mountain. To distract Chris, he tells a story of how he and his wife came across a bull moose when they camped in a similar location years before.

Chris's insecurities hinder his attempts to hike; like Phaedrus's students, he is not motivated by the right impulses.

The narrator recalls the aftermath of Phaedrus's assignment that asked his class to define Quality. The students are baffled and indignant when they hear that Phaedrus did not have a single correct answer in mind. Phaedrus furthers the discussion of Quality by refusing to define the concept. This unorthodox inversion of teaching principles compels his students to engage more deeply with his class, and they later confess to him that they've become more interested in English than ever before.

By subverting the definition-oriented logic of traditional education, Phaedrus ends up with a class of students that are far more engaged than they would ordinarily be. This indicates that some aspect of conventional academic logic stands in the way of a high-Quality pursuit of knowledge.

Chris struggles with the climb. The narrator guesses that his son is treating the ascent like an ego-fulfillment task, an approach that leads only to failure or unsatisfying success. He recalls a failed attempt Phaedrus made to climb Mount Kailas as part of a pilgrimage in India, and concludes that Phaedrus failed because he did not venerate the mountain's holiness as the other pilgrims did, and was unable to succeed by physical and intellectual strength alone. Chris's ego-climbing is out-of-touch with the here-and-now, and this is his shortcoming.

Because ego-climbing—climbing with the purpose of "beating" the mountain and in so doing making one feel better about oneself—places the self above the environment, it relies on a harmful, dualistic division of subject and object. This prevents an individual from connecting with his surroundings and achieving goals—just as Phaedrus's egotism prevented him from scaling Mount Kailas.

CHAPTER 18

Phaedrus begins to examine "esthetics," the formalized study of Quality, but is repulsed by the intellectualism of the field. He arrives at an understanding of Quality that states that the concept cannot be defined, but is bothered by his anti-rational refusal to define a central concept.

Phaedrus's rational approach to Quality stands in his way of truly understanding the concept—his preoccupation with defining something that may not be definable vexes him.

Chris falls down, angry about the hike. The narrator does not condemn his son's bratty behavior, and the pair resumes hiking. Meanwhile, the narrator recreates Phaedrus's image of a world without quality, and concludes that a world without quality is a completely "square" one, devoid of artistic interest. He uses this revelation to divide the world into classic and romantic spheres.

The realization that a quality-less world is a "square" one helps Phaedrus realize that Quality may be at the root of the disagreement between "hip" and "square" ideologies in American culture.

Chris pretends to have hurt his ankle. The narrator carries Chris's share of the equipment and they continue hiking. While the two rest, Chris begins to cry, and the narrator laments his son's egotism.

Chris's selfish concerns contrast with the narrator's contentedness in his surroundings.

The narrator emphasizes that Quality bridges the gap between romantic and classic modes of thought. Phaedrus's refusal to define Quality means that the concept cannot be viewed from an analytical, classic standpoint. As he and Chris hike on, Chris's spirits seem to have improved. The pair then sets up camp for the night.

Phaedrus's inability to define Quality has become less of a frustration and more of an indication of how groundbreaking the concept is: it transcends the conventional mechanisms of reason.

CHAPTER 19

During the night, the narrator dreams that a **glass door** separates him from his wife and two sons. In this recurring dream, Chris asks him to open the door but the narrator declines. The narrator understands it as signifying Chris's fear of being unable to relate to his father. That morning, Chris informs the narrator that he had been talking worryingly in his sleep about meeting Chris upon a mountaintop and being able to see everything from there.

The glass door dream is a significant symbol that reappears throughout the book. It illustrates the division between the narrator and his family, and implies that some aspect of the narrator's identity may be to blame for it.

Phaedrus is asked by the Bozeman English faculty whether Quality is a subjective or objective phenomenon. This dilemma preoccupies Phaedrus greatly, since there seems to be no fulfilling answer, so he decides to subject it to an exhaustive logical analysis. After extensive deliberation, he chooses to reject *both* possibilities: Quality is neither subjective nor objective, but together the three form a trinity that constitutes the world.

Phaedrus's move is a break from the dualistic logic that governs academia. This step in defining Quality begins to show how radically it will depart from traditional western thought.

Phaedrus is very excited by his tripartite model of reality, but he decides to revise it. He concludes that Quality is actually the phenomenon that allows for the separation of the world into subjective and objective realms in the first place. This makes subjectivity and objectivity subordinate to Quality.

By placing Quality above subjectivity and objectivity, Phaedrus repudiates this dualism. This is a very bold move: the subject/object move has been a defining characteristic—a foundation—of centuries of Western intellectual tradition.

Just as Phaedrus's breakthrough is recounted by the narrator, he and Chris break out of the tree line. Chris sprints to the summit and gloatingly declares himself the winner. The narrator seems upset by this egotistical behavior.

The travelers' arrival at the summit coincides with the narrator's description of Phaedrus's success. Chris's egotistical behavior suggests that Phaedrus, too, may have been egotistically motivated to reach his accomplishment.

CHAPTER 20

The narrator and Chris take a nap on the summit. When he wakes, the narrator hears some rockslides and dwells more on the mysterious and concerning things he said to Chris in his sleep. Chris awakes, and the two listen to ominous rockslides and talk more about the narrator's sleep-talking. The narrator decides that ascending to the top of the mountain is unwise. Chris is disappointed, but the two begin trekking down the mountain.

The rockslides symbolize the threatening lack of control that the narrator's sleep-talking betrays. Because the narrator fears what his unconscious is capable of, he backs down from his goal.

Phaedrus conceptualizes Quality as a "preintellectual reality." He explains that some people view it differently because they approach it with different experiences. He then realizes that his conception of Quality treats it as an absolute monism much more than as the trinity he had previously envisioned. Phaedrus pulls out the *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tzu and realizes that his Quality corresponds to the Tao exactly. He is overwhelmed by this sudden epiphany.

Phaedrus's discovery that Quality equates to the Tao makes it seem as though he has broken into a plane of eternal wisdom.

CHAPTER 21

As he and Chris descend the mountain, the narrator muses that he cannot evaluate how truthful it is that the Tao and Phaedrus's Quality are one and the same. What Phaedrus's philosophizing really accomplished, however, is an expansion of reason: reason can now encompass thoughts that would have seemed irrational before.

The narrator's point here is an important one: Quality is not a religious concept. Rather, much like Kant's or Copernicus's revelations, it is simply a means of expanding the scope of reason. It only seems irrational because reason hasn't yet been able to assimilate it into its corpus.

Chris and the narrator complete their descent and arrive in Bozeman at night. Exhausted, they check into Bozeman's main hotel so as not to disturb the DeWeeses.

The duo's departure from the mountain signifies the end of this particular story of Phaedrus's groundbreaking realizations about Quality.

CHAPTER 22

The following morning, the narrator and Chris say farewell to the DeWeeses and leave Bozeman. The narrator begins a new Chautauqua about the thought of the French polymath Jules Henri Poincaré. Poincaré was, like Phaedrus, very interested in testing the limits of scientific reasoning. During Poincaré's lifetime, different mathematical systems were invented, which demonstrated an uncertainty in a supposedly rational discipline. Poincaré addressed this predicament as well as the problematic possibility of infinite hypotheses that bothered Phaedrus, by proposing an attribute of facts that made some better than others. This melding of art and science brought tears to the narrator's eyes when he read about it, because it was so reminiscent of Phaedrus's thesis about Quality.

Like the references to Hume and Kant, this Chautauqua is designed to portray Phaedrus as a committed intellectual innovator, rather than as a crazy person. When his thought is compared with that of earlier intellectual pioneers, Phaedrus's conclusions seem like logical continuations of these thinkers' theses.

The narrator and Chris head through Missoula and continue westward. They pause to camp by the side of the road and Chris confesses sheepishly that he has diarrhea. After walking around a logging road, the narrator feels inexplicably wistful, and the two travelers go to sleep.

Because the narrator's identity is so conflicted and connected to Phaedrus, his departure from Phaedrus's longtime home evokes mixed feelings.

CHAPTER 23

The narrator's recurring nightmare is described in detail. A **glass door** separates him from his wife and sons. The narrator realizes that his wife is grieving and that the glass door is the door of his own coffin. The narrator tries to cry out to his family but is unable to do so. He is then transported away to a deserted city, which he walks through alone.

The narrator's nightmare is a highly traumatic reminder of the way his divided personality interferes with his role as a husband and father.

CHAPTER 24

The narrator awakes from his nightmare, feeling disoriented and worried. He and Chris get back on the motorcycle, and the narrator begins a Chautauqua that equates an awareness of Quality with a sense of caring about what one does. He will illustrate the concepts he has related—that "Quality is the Buddha," "Quality is scientific reality," and "Quality is the goal of Art"—by showing how they come together in **motorcycle maintenance**.

Motorcycle maintenance is the book's central, real-life illustration of how an individual can put Phaedrus's philosophy of Quality into practice in a straightforward and rewarding way.

The travelers get breakfast and the narrator helps Chris write a letter to his mother. Back on the road, the narrator continues his Chautauqua, choosing to talk about the problems that impede motorcycle maintainers. The first he describes is "stuckness"—a state of being without hypotheses for solving a problem, caused by traditional reason. To combat this, the narrator advocates adopting a more flexible and dynamic—and less classic—approach to the problem at hand. From this point of stuckness, the reality of Quality will get a person unstuck from the rigid conception of the world that was stymying him, and steer him towards a viable solution.

Value rigidity is a stumbling block to solving problems in innovative ways. Moreover, and more broadly, this inability to see existing facts in new ways is part of the societal "stuckness" that Phaedrus's philosophy of Quality is meant to solve.

The narrator and Chris have made good time on the motorcycle. They pass through Grangeville, Idaho and begin to cross a desert.

As the narrator elaborates ways to progress through work quickly and rewardingly, he also maintains a quick and rewarding pace on his motorcycle.

CHAPTER 25

The narrator moves away from "stuckness" to discuss a problem of a different nature: the romantic aversion to technology produced by classic reason. Technology and its materials, the narrator says, are not inherently bad. What can be objectionable about technology is when humans are not invested in its creation, when it is not regarded as an art form of its own. For technology to have Quality, its creator must rebel against the 20th-century mindset that prevents a craftsman from identifying with his work.

This Chautauqua explains John and Sylvia's motivations for refusing to learn motorcycle maintenance. They aim to avoid the Quality-less technology that has become a defining characteristic of the 20th century. However, simply negating this technology, as John and Sylvia attempt to do, is not the solution to the predicament. Rather, one must attempt to imbue technology with Quality once again.

The rational tediousness of technology is superficially remedied by stylization—a strategy the narrator finds ineffective. Instead of veneering classic understanding with romantic esthetics, the two modes of thought should be more deeply connected. The narrator stresses that "peace of mind" is necessary to achieve this synthesis, in which one understands what is good as well as the reasons why it is good.

Quality presents itself as a means of reconciling the classic and romantic viewpoints not just philosophically, but practically, as well. However, this practical reconciliation does require the appropriate philosophical mindset: "peace of mind."

"Peace of mind" requires a calmness of body, of mind, and of values, which requires one to perform one's work without desire. In order to perform Quality work, one must not let the subject/object duality cloud one's work, and instead enter a state of "just doing." When conducted properly, the act of **motorcycle maintenance** prevents one from separating one's self from one's surroundings. This reformed individual consciousness is, to the narrator, the starting point for more sweeping improvements to life worldwide.

Achieving "peace of mind" is no simple task. It requires unifying the physical, intellectual, and preintellectual principles advocated by Phaedrus's philosophy of Quality. When achieved, this "peace of mind" allows not just for exemplary motorcycle maintenance, but also sets the stage for more sweeping improvements to the contemporary human psyche.

The narrator and Chris camp out for the night and prepare to head into Oregon the next day. The narrator reflects that his son often feels both familiar and unfamiliar to him, and wonders whether genuine interpersonal connections are ever possible.

Even as the narrator espouses a method of connecting with one's environment, he still finds himself unable to connect with his son. This dilemma indicates that he has yet to fully incorporate the principles of Quality into his own life.

CHAPTER 26

The next morning, the narrator muses that he will likely never sell his motorcycle. The countryside reminds him of a poem, The Rubàiyat of Omar Khayyàm, which he recites to himself as he rides along.

The narrator's discussion of Quality appears to have put him in high spirits, and he is inspired by the countryside that surrounds him.

The narrator then addresses a concept he calls "gumption," which is what motivates an individual to perform a Quality task like fixing a motorcycle. Gumption is vital, and the narrator observes that "gumption traps" can drain an individual's motivation and ability to perform Quality work. He aims to catalogue these traps for a reader, so that others can learn how to avoid being stymied by gumption traps.

With this discussion of "gumption," the narrator outlines another facet of his system for achieving Quality. This is likely the sort of productive pedagogy that Phaedrus hoped to achieve as a university instructor.

The narrator divides gumption traps into two broad categories: "setbacks," which come from external circumstances, and "hang-ups," which come from the individual himself. He details several setback scenarios as they relate to **motorcycle maintenance**, such as failing parts and intermittently functional machinery.

Interestingly, the narrator's approach to teaching about gumption is a very analytical, taxonomical one. This shows the way that classic and romantic outlooks reappear and intermingle within discussions of Quality, which encompasses them.

The internal gumption traps, the hang-ups, are divided into three categories: "truth traps," which block intellectual comprehension; "muscle traps," which block physical actions; and, most dangerous of all, "value traps," which interfere with internal understanding. The most common and dangerous value trap is "value rigidity," in which a calcified understanding of the world prevents repairers from reevaluating problems as they work. Repairers can conquer this value trap by slowing down and developing a genuine interest in the workings of the motorcycle, which will allow them to see their project in new ways.

The principles that allow an individual to overcome gumption traps are very similar to those that allowed Phaedrus to come up with his philosophy of Quality in the first place. Reason stagnated in Phaedrus's time because people were unwilling or unable to look past their established values to find appropriate ways to address the new sorts of problems that plagued them.

The narrator and his son stop for lunch. The narrator reflects that his relationship with Chris is stuck in a value trap—the facts he wants to discover about his son are right before his eyes, but obscured due to value rigidity. The narrator brainstorms some possible explanations for Chris's behavior, but ultimately concludes that he doesn't understand it. He reflects again on his dream of a **glass door** separating him from his son, and wonders about its significance.

The narrator's awareness that a value trap stands in the way of his relationship with Chris illustrates that intellectual understanding alone is not enough to solve a Quality issue.

Back on the road, the narrator begins to discuss the internal gumption trap of ego. Ego insulates the individual from the reality of Quality, because it makes one more likely to believe flattering details and less likely to believe unflattering ones. To overcome this trap, the narrator suggests adopting a modest outlook.

The detriments of egotistical behavior have been illustrated several times previously, most poignantly in Chris's unfulfilling climb up the mountain.

Anxiety is another gumption trap, in which nervousness forces one to commit errors that hinder repair efforts. The best way to avoid these errors is to work out anxieties separately from the repair process, and in so doing achieve the required peace of mind. Boredom is the opposite of anxiety, and the narrator encourages readers to take a break as soon as boredom sets in, or else learn to relish the ritualized familiarity of their tasks. Impatience, another gumption trap, can be staved off by good organization and lack of time pressure.

This discussion simply represents the narrator's attempts to exhaustively explain his knowledge of value traps, in the hopes that it can help readers avoid the predicaments that have vexed him.

The narrator and Chris rest in a small, relaxed town. As they resume travel through the desert, the narrator continues his Chautauqua, explaining that truth traps often arise from yes-no logic's inability to handle certain input data from reality. This dualism prevents us from seeing that for some scenarios, the proper answer is neither yes nor no but the Japanese term "**mu**," which means "no thing." The nature of the Buddha, for example, cannot be encompassed by yes or no, and is an illustration of mu. Mu also appears in the scientific world, and reveals that a scientist must widen the context of his inquiry in order to properly understand the phenomenon being studied. In **motorcycle maintenance**, mu answers to questions may point a mechanic to the true nature of the problem at hand more effectively than yes/no answers.

Mu is an important symbol in the text because it shows that in order to achieve Quality, an individual must break free of the dualistic impulse to conceptualize the world in terms of "yes" and "no." It also speaks to a major philosophical difference between Japanese tradition and western philosophy's way of viewing the world.

Finally, the narrator details psychomotor traps, which can be engendered by unsuitable tools, physical discomfort, or a lack of "mechanic's feel." To cultivate the proper feel, one must become comfortable interacting with and manipulating the array of materials used in motorcycle construction and repair.

Psychomotor traps must be overcome by a romantic process. They are difficult to explain because the romantic process of "feeling" defies intellectualization.

The narrator concludes his discussion of gumption traps by warning that an understanding of possible traps isn't enough to ensure flawless **motorcycle maintenance**. Most importantly of all, one must live one's entire life in a way that avoids gumption traps and channels Quality in all activities. This attitude prevents one from viewing motorcycles and their maintenance as objects separate from one's self, and allows for seamless, Quality work.

This footnote to the discussion of motorcycle maintenance serves as a reminder of the process's symbolic status. Maintaining a motorcycle with Quality isn't a path towards living with Quality. Rather, the ability to maintain a motorcycle with quality is an indication that one has already achieved a life attuned to Quality.

The narrator notices that the people sharing the road with them appear more distracted and alienated than before. He realizes this is because they have reached the west coast, and condemns the area's impersonal, egotistical way of life. At long last, after 325 miles of travel that day, Chris and the narrator call it a night and set up camp near Bend, Oregon.

The impersonal attitude of the West Coast offers a striking contrast to the principles of presence and oneness emphasized in the narrator's Chautauquas.

CHAPTER 27

This chapter describes in greater detail the narrator's recurring nightmare involving the **glass door**. The narrator addresses the "figure in the shadows" that stands between the narrator and the glass door, on the other side of which stands Chris. The narrator becomes less afraid of the shadowy figure and realizes that it is cowering from him. The narrator lunges to grasp the figure and reveal his face, only to be woken up by Chris before he can do so.

The narrator's assertive action within his nightmare shows that he has made progress in confronting the specters of his past. However, the dream's unfulfilling conclusion shows that his mission is not yet complete.

Chris, alarmed, wakes the narrator, and tells him he had been yelling in his sleep about killing someone. The narrator explains to his son that his threats weren't aimed at Chris. The narrator realizes that Phaedrus is actually the one dreaming, and that this signifies Phaedrus's reawakening. The narrator himself is the hateful figure in the shadows. Resigned to this, the narrator resolves to prepare for Phaedrus's inevitable return, and pities his son's situation.

The narrator's identity struggles are coming to a head, and he doubts his own ability to deal with them safely and sanely.

CHAPTER 28

The chapter opens with a flashback: Phaedrus and a six-year-old Chris drive in a car through a desolate cityscape. Neither of them knows where they are, but Chris says they are looking for "bunk-bedders." The pair wanders for hours, and return home empty-handed. At home, Chris's mother is infuriated by the time the two wasted. This flashback seems to inspire the narrator to seek hospitalization once he and Chris reach San Francisco.

The narrator is becoming more and more aware of his former mental state, and this awareness is making him very concerned.

The narrator decides to recount the conclusion of Phaedrus's story. Phaedrus asks his colleague Sarah where he could find more lessons on the nature of Quality, and she recommends the Ancient Greek philosophers. From there, Phaedrus decides to apply to an interdisciplinary Ph.D. program at the University of Chicago, which he thinks may synthesize the currents of thought that will help him elucidate Quality.

By engaging with the Ancient Greeks, who greatly influenced the western intellectual tradition, Phaedrus hopes to better understand how Quality has been marginalized in the present day.

Chris asks the narrator what the purpose of their traveling is. The narrator tells his son that their goal is simply to see the country, but this response leaves both of them feeling unsatisfied. The narrator realizes that he will need to explain his past to his son before they part ways.

The narrator's unwillingness to come to grips with his identity is disgruntling both him and his son.

Phaedrus is admitted to the program by its interim acting chairman based on his résumé. When the program's Chairman returns, Phaedrus interviews with him for a scholarship, but the Chairman distinguishes between substance and methodology in a way that contradicts Phaedrus's principles. Phaedrus returns to the mountains, flustered and disappointed that the committee's approach to substance and methodology might undermine the whole of his theses about Quality. Phaedrus researches the committee's principles and the writings of its Chairman, and finds them all to be obscure—perhaps deliberately so.

Phaedrus's antagonistic interaction with the Chairman sets a bad precedent for the rest of his studies in the program.

The narrator and Chris arrive at Crater Lake and the narrator is perturbed by how disingenuously pristine the area seems. Chris complains that he is having a bad time, but cannot explain his discontentment when the narrator questions him. The two then leave the park.

Chris's irritation may not be rationally explicable, but that does not make it any less pressing or legitimate an issue.

The narrator recollects a fragmented memory of Phaedrus commenting to the Assistant Chairman that he hadn't noticed Aristotle in the committee's curriculum. The Assistant Chairman was aghast that Phaedrus did not know that the University of Chicago program is at the center of a controversy surrounding the role Aristotle's thought should play in higher education. The Chairman is one of the last eminent Aristotelians, and is known for demanding his students to subscribe to Aristotelian ideas as well. Phaedrus writes the Chairman a letter that explains that his theses on Quality refute a dualistic division between substance and methodology, and thus likely reach an anti-Aristotelian conclusion. This, Phaedrus says, makes the University of Chicago a good place for him to present his ideas, because they contribute to a dialogue about Aristotelian philosophy.

The University of Chicago program will be a crucial stage for Phaedrus to test his conclusions about Quality, as they aim to refute the dualistic pattern of thought that grounds the entire curriculum.

Phaedrus's letter to the Chairman comes across as deluded and megalomaniacal. The interdisciplinary committee suggests that he study with the Philosophy department instead, but out of a sense of competition, Phaedrus sticks with the interdisciplinary program because he has already been admitted.

Phaedrus's motivations for continuing his study begin to seem more and more egotistical, which is an ominous sign.

Phaedrus's family relocates to Chicago, and since Phaedrus has no scholarship to study at the program, he must support himself by teaching rhetoric full-time at the University of Illinois's Navy Pier campus. Phaedrus studies the Ancient Greeks obsessively, and becomes convinced that the unconscious internalization of their thought has caused damage to western society. Through his studies, Phaedrus begins to understand that to reject the subject-object division that is the Greeks' legacy, he will have to reject the Greek notion of "mythos"—one's cultural surroundings—in favor of a pre-mythos Quality. This, Phaedrus realizes, will make him seem insane, even though he believes that the real insanity lies in the "mythos" that Aristotle has made people believe by default.

Phaedrus realizes that the Ancient Greek thinkers—particularly Aristotle—are responsible for the problematic dualist thought that he perceives in contemporary society.

The narrator and Chris reach a town called Grant's Pass, where they stay in a motel. On the way to the town, the motorcycle's chain guard has been damaged, and will need to be repaired. The narrator laments having to repair the cycle when he plans to sell it shortly afterwards.

Though the narrator earlier asserted that he would never sell his motorcycle, worsening circumstances seem to have moved him to reconsider.

CHAPTER 29

In town, the narrator and Chris take care of errands. The narrator finds a welder to take care of the chain guard repair. The welder is very surly, but an immensely skilled craftsman who repairs the part seamlessly. He seems nonplussed when the narrator complements his work.

The interaction with the welder illustrates how impersonal culture has alienated people from their work, even when they execute their craft with Quality.

The narrator observes that people on the American coasts are much more emotionally isolated than they are in middle America. He attributes this isolation to a problematic, dualistic view of technology, and thinks it can be overcome by attentiveness to Quality.

The narrator's prescriptions for motorcycle maintenance are designed to help correct this American tendency towards dualistic thinking and isolation.

Phaedrus reads Aristotle fastidiously, so that his truculent Professor of Philosophy cannot dismiss him as a poor student. Phaedrus's ideas are hostile to the Professor's, and Phaedrus believes that the Professor will take any chance he can get to criticize him. As he studies, Phaedrus becomes enraged by Aristotle's elaborate taxonomies of thought that devalue rhetoric. Phaedrus also objects to what he sees as a murky use of the term "dialectic" in Aristotle's writings.

Phaedrus studies out of a sense of gamesmanship, not out of a pure thirst for knowledge—yet another sign that his quest will end in lack of fulfillment.

Plato is the next thinker to be studied in Phaedrus's class, and Phaedrus disagrees with the philosopher's equation of rhetoric with "the Bad." Phaedrus has lost track of time, and is dedicated only to studying and furthering his theses on Quality. In class, the Professor of Philosophy tries to engage Phaedrus in a dialectical discussion that, Phaedrus believes, will diminish rhetoric. Phaedrus strategizes obsessively, but this causes him to sit silently as the class waits for him to respond after the Professor asks him a question. Phaedrus takes too long to answer, and the class moves on.

As Phaedrus becomes more and more devoted to proving his thesis, his grip on reality weakens, and he soon starts behaving antisocially.

The narrator gives some historical context for Plato's rejection of the Sophistic rhetoricians. Plato so vehemently repudiated the Sophists, the narrator says, because they posed a threat to his idea of Truth. Phaedrus also remembers that the Sophists were teachers of virtue and excellence, and to clarify these concepts he performs an academic analysis of Hector of Troy. From here, Phaedrus has the epiphany that the excellence—"arête"—that motivated the Greek heroes is what he calls Quality. He again grasps the trans-historical unity of Quality.

Phaedrus's recognition of arête recalls the experience of universality he had while reading the Tao Te Ching. Quality once again appears to be a timeless concept.

Phaedrus then realizes that Plato has simply made arête into a fixed concept: the Good. This allows Aristotle to manipulate the idea later on and place it in a subordinate role—and explains western society's inattention to Quality.

With this revelation, Phaedrus understands how the Ancient Greeks shaped western thought into the unsatisfying form it now appears.

CHAPTER 30

At the University of Chicago, Phaedrus's Professor of Philosophy is out sick for many consecutive weeks. In the interim, Phaedrus studies Plato's text, *Phaedrus*. His health and sanity are faltering, as his obligations force him to work and study for 20 hours a day.

At this point, Phaedrus's philosophy has almost completely consumed him.

After several weeks, Phaedrus's class meets again, this time taught by the Chairman of the Committee. Phaedrus understands that this is the time when his ideas will be torn apart in public. The Chairman explains the dialogue, and Phaedrus raises his hand to offer the competing assertion that some of Socrates's observations are actually analogies. Phaedrus quotes from the text to back up this thesis, and the Chairman is forced to back down. Following this exchange, the Chairman becomes visibly unnerved before the class. He tries to trap Phaedrus with another question, but Phaedrus gives a response taken verbatim from one of the Chairman's articles.

Phaedrus uses rhetoric to respond to the Chairman's Aristotelian logic. The success of this approach demonstrates rhetoric's power.

In the next class, Phaedrus tries to defer to the Chairman, but the Chairman snaps at him nastily. After this class, Phaedrus stops attending. His lectures at Navy Pier grow more and more frenzied, and his grip on reality dwindles. He stops sleeping. He loses track of time and wanders the city aimlessly. He passes out on a sidewalk and returns home, where he sits catatonically. He tells his wife to leave him, burns his hands with cigarettes, and urinates on the floor. His wife tries to find help. Phaedrus feels that Quality has finally made itself clear to him.

Phaedrus's understanding of Quality has removed him completely from the "mythos" of his time. This makes him behave in a manner that appears insane.

The narrator and Chris pull off the freeway and drive aimlessly until they find a motel for the night. In their motel room, Chris asks the narrator when he will get to go home, and complains about the journey. He begins to wail and rock on the floor in a way that reminds the narrator of the mental hospital. Chris then says that the narrator used to be "fun," but now is just silent.

The narrator's change in persona has clearly damaged the continuity of his relationship with Chris. In order to preserve Chris's sanity, the narrator will have to come to grips with his divided identity.

CHAPTER 31

The next morning, Chris is aloof, and he and the narrator ride south along the coast. They stop to look off a cliff, and the narrator grabs his son when he gets too close to the edge. Chris begins to complain, and the narrator realizes that Chris wants to hate him because he isn't Phaedrus anymore. The narrator realizes that his inability to reconcile his own identity with Phaedrus leaves him unable to satisfy the role his son needs him to fulfill.

At long last, the narrator appears ready to confront the rift in his identity that he has left unaddressed throughout the book.

The narrator observes that Chris's inquisitive, combative nature reminds him of Phaedrus. The two stop at a diner, and Chris says he has no appetite because of a **stomachache**. The two then ride to a cliff, where the narrator explains to Chris that he is going to send him home. The narrator explains that he has been insane, and is likely to have another break. He also warns Chris that he, too, may be predisposed to insanity. Chris begins to wail uncontrollably. The narrator tries to reassure his son, but talks in a voice that is no longer his own.

This confrontation between the narrator and Chris is the emotional peak of their relationship. The narrator finally fulfills his obligation to explain his past to Chris.

Chris asks the narrator why he refused to open the **glass door** between himself and his family at the hospital, and the narrator realizes that he may be in another dream. He explains to Chris that he was instructed not to open the door, and Chris confesses he thought it was because his father did not want to see him. The narrator begins to recall more of his time in the hospital as Phaedrus. Chris then asks whether the narrator was actually insane, to which the narrator responds no. Chris seems delighted to hear this, and says, "I knew it." The two ride off on the motorcycle together.

The revelation that Phaedrus was not allowed to open the glass door is crucial. It illustrates that Phaedrus's isolation from his family was not self-imposed, but rather provoked by external forces. This, in turn, validates the notion that Phaedrus was not insane. After all, his least sane action—refusing to open the glass door—was a result not of his own free will, but of his obedience to institutionally-ordained standards for behavior. The narrator's realization also fuels Chris's self-identification, as he no longer must contend with the idea that his father was crazy or that he himself might be predisposed to craziness.

CHAPTER 32

As the two ride along the coast, Chris continues to repeat "I knew it." The narrator realizes how his split identity has harmed Chris, and urges himself to come to grips with his past, for Chris's sake.

The narrator's newfound empathy for Chris gives him a selfless reason to make an effort to better understand himself.

The two take their helmets off and the narrator notices that they no longer have to yell to communicate. Chris stands up on the foot pegs and marvels at the view that he can see, instead of just staring into the narrator's back at all times. He asks whether he can have a motorcycle of his own one day, and the narrator responds that he can, as long as he takes good care of it and has the right attitude.

Now that the narrator has given his son the guidance and support he yearned for, Chris is immediately emancipated. By standing up on the motorcycle and removing his helmet, he actively engages with his surroundings in a way that he was never capable of, or interested in, doing before.

The narrator tells Chris that he should have no problem approaching his motorcycle with the right attitude. The two ride towards the San Francisco Bay, and the narrator reflects that "there is a feeling now, that was not here before, and is not just on the surface of things, but penetrates all the way through: We've won it. It's going to get better now. You can sort of tell these things."

The narrator's belief that Chris will approach motorcycle maintenance with the proper attitude shows how the narrator has placed his son on a path to "peace of mind."

AFTERWORD

Pirsig reflects that his literary career is best viewed the way the Ancient Greeks viewed time: with the past receding from view and the future coming up from behind. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* had been declined for publication 121 times before one editor decided to publish it, and neither Pirsig nor his editor expected the book to be at all successful. The enormous popularity the book achieved has come to dominate Pirsig's outlook, while the future remains unknown.

Pirsig's willingness to embrace this aspect of the Ancient Greek outlook shows that he has moved well past Phaedrus's petty, egotistical jealousies.

Pirsig refers to his book as a "culture-bearing" work: it gives a "positive goal to work toward that does not confine," at a moment when American counterculture yearned for exactly that. Hippies had rejected the capitalist American dream, but their ideology of freedom was an exclusively negative one, and Pirsig's Zen approach to life offered a way to react positively to the cultural dissatisfaction of the sixties and seventies.

The narrator's guidance for motorcycle maintenance is designed as a practical, constructive approach that helps address the problems o f contemporary life.

Chris has been murdered in a botched robbery, just weeks before his 23rd birthday. He was a student at the San Francisco Zen Center. Pirsig's grieving causes him to recognize that Chris was not an object, but a "pattern," and Chris's death has removed the central part of that pattern. He likens the remnants of this pattern entity to the spirit or ghost.

Pirsig's departure from scientific convention has helped him make sense of Chris's senseless murder, and to be able to see an eternal nature to people, all of whom are patterns.

Pirsig's wife became pregnant, and the couple initially decides to abort. Later on, they choose to keep the child, and a daughter named Nell is born. Pirsig thinks of Nell as a way of repairing the hole rent in the pattern by Chris's murder.

By refusing to approach his tragic scenario with rigid values, Pirsig allows himself to appreciate, and benefit from, an unexpected development in his life.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Sobel, Ben. "*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 22 Jan 2014. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Sobel, Ben. "*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.*" LitCharts LLC, January 22, 2014. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/zen-and-the-art-of-motorcycle-maintenance.

To cite any of the quotes from *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Pirsig, Robert. Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. HarperTorch. 1974.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Pirsig, Robert. Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. New York: HarperTorch. 1974.