

An interview with Robert Pirsig

The following is the complete email exchange between Julian Baggini and Robert Pirsig. Because some emails followed up on questions in earlier ones, the order of the questions and answers has been changed, but all Robert Pirsig's answers are given complete and nothing else but the order has been rephrased or altered.

BAGGINI: Earlier this year we saw the first ever academic conference dedicated to the Metaphysics of Quality. Does it surprise or disappoint you that it has taken so long?

PIRSIG: I'm not sure if Anthony has passed along my opening statement for the conference, but since it answers this question very specifically I'm attaching it below. [\[1\]](#) Feel free to quote from it as you wish.

BAGGINI: There are all sorts of echoes and references to the mainstream philosophical tradition in your books, yet it is not obvious where or how you fit into that tradition. You have, for example, been referred to as an American pragmatist philosopher. Where would you locate your work in the history of philosophy?

PIRSIG: The Metaphysics of Quality is not intended to be within any philosophic tradition, although obviously it was not written in a vacuum. My first awareness that it resembled James' work came from a magazine review long after "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" was published. The Metaphysics of Quality's central idea that the world is nothing but value is not part of any philosophic tradition that I know of. I have proposed it because it seems to me that when you look into it carefully it makes more sense than all the other things the world is supposed to be composed of. One particular strength lies in its applicability to quantum physics, where substance has been dismissed but nothing except arcane mathematical formulae has really replaced it.

BAGGINI: Although the metaphysics of quality is important in "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance", it seems to me that perhaps more important is a certain attitude to existence which it advocates. Is it possible to separate the metaphysics from this attitude and if so, which is more important to you?

PIRSIG: Yes, the Metaphysics of Quality itself is static and should be separated from the Dynamic Quality it talks about. Like the rest of the printed philosophic tradition it doesn't change from day to day, although the world it talks about does. To use an

Oriental metaphor, it is just another finger pointing toward the moon. The static language of the Metaphysics of Quality will never capture the Dynamic reality of the world but some fingers point better than others and as the world changes, old pointers and road maps tend to lose their value. Religious orthodoxy is composed of old pointers. Classical science is now an old road map, and modern science keeps looking for new ones. It is this looking for new pointers, not the pointer itself, that is the essence of Dynamic philosophy. What is meant by Dynamic philosophy was explained best in my introduction to "LILA's Child" and is now included below.^[2] Again, feel free to quote from it as you wish.

As to which is more important, Dynamic or static, both are absolutely essential, even when they are in conflict. As stated in LILA, without Dynamic Quality an organism cannot grow. But without static quality an organism cannot last. Dynamic liberals and radicals need conservatives to keep them from making a mess of the world through unneeded change. Conservatives also need liberals and radicals to keep them from making a mess of the world through unneeded stagnation. This also holds true for philosophy. My feeling is that subject-object way of interpreting the world is stagnant and inadequate for our time, but without that base of subject-object understanding to build from, the Metaphysics of Quality, by itself, has no value either.

BAGGINI: Does it bother you that LILA was not as successful as "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance"? If someone were only going to read one, which of your two books would you want it to be, and why?

PIRSIG: LILA is a sequel to "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" so "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" should be first.

Sequels are almost never as popular as their predecessors, so a diminution of sales was expected. Also, while "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" is a skeleton of a philosophy enclosed within a full-bodied novel, LILA is a skeleton of a novel enclosed within a full-bodied philosophy. Since many more people read novels than philosophy books, this also explains the lower sales. But you can't really call a book that has had six weeks on the New York Times best seller list, rave reviews in the New York Times and Washington Post along others, and sold more than six hundred thousand copies with royalties to match, to be a much of a failure, especially for a book that is primarily about philosophy.

Still it does bother me that LILA is not as successful as it should be among academic philosophers. In my opinion it's a much more important book than "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance." My feeling is like that of someone trying to sell five-dollar bills for two dollars apiece and hardly making a sale. Readers of LILA are naturally leery because they're not used to the idea of a Metaphysics of Quality, but I think that if they eventually understand what is being offered, there will be a change of mind. Perhaps these questions in The Philosopher's Magazine mark a beginning. After all these years I'm grateful to hear them stated openly.

BAGGINI: But there are also some more charitable ways of looking at what seems like a conservatism among established philosophers. When people do philosophy entirely independently, there is almost invariably a tendency towards the grand metaphysical system. From the submissions sent to me at The Philosophers' Magazine, I know independent scholars almost invariably think that their philosophy explains everything...

PIRSIG: I don't receive these submissions and so don't have the skepticism you must acquire from reading so many contributions that are supposed to explain everything. But as I think about this I wonder if, other things being equal, which philosopher is preferable; one who only tries to explain a few things and succeeds or one who tries to explain everything and succeeds. Isn't the purpose of philosophy to explain everything? Which philosopher is best trying to live up to the ideal of his profession?

BAGGINI: ...I know independent scholars almost invariably think that their philosophy explains everything. In contrast, academics are much more circumspect...

PIRSIG: I wonder if circumspect is always the right word. There is a line in Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance where a University of Chicago professor says to the student, "Sir, we are not here to learn what you think! We are here to learn what Aristotle thinks!" That is exact quote from an actual University of Chicago classroom. Should we call it circumspection? I would rather call it a blind static refusal to face the possibility of any genuinely new idea. Similarly, I really don't think that to completely ignore the Metaphysics of Quality is an act of circumspection. I will welcome circumspection any time I can find it...

BAGGINI: ...This is, I think, not just because of a lack of ambition, but because the constant scrutiny of peers pulls them back from advancing giant theses without a very thoroughly argued foundation...

PIRSIG: It is my opinion and the opinion of many others, this foundation exists for the Metaphysics of Quality. Where those arguments seem to be lacking I try to provide them.

BAGGINI: ...As they might put it, they are stopped from getting carried away with the beauty and ingenuity of own ideas at the expense of the truth of them...

PIRSIG: I think the Metaphysics of Quality would say that true ideas are more beautiful than false ones.

BAGGINI: ...The question is, where are the arguments that show this way of understanding the world is actually the true one?

PIRSIG: I and many others think that these arguments are in fact contained in Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance and Lila. I do not know of any philosophical system that leaves all questions answered to everyone's satisfaction in one volume. The MOQ.org website since 1997 has averaged about 500 posts per month, containing arguments for and against the Metaphysics of Quality. That comes to 42,000 posts. That's a lot of arguments.

There is an entire book called, Lila's Child that is extracted from these arguments, with annotations by myself. It is available from www.amazon.com and also from Barnes and Noble bookstores.

BAGGINI: I was struck by an uncomfortable tension in LILA between the way in which the MOQ was presented as a static philosophy and the idea of dynamic quality. I think this tension was heightened by a tendency to present the MOQ as a complete system that you had totally worked out. For example, a phrase you often use, with many variants, is, "The Metaphysics of Quality says" as though the MOQ was a kind of philosophical Rosetta Stone and once you had it you could simply read off what it has to say about whatever philosophical problem confronts you.

Do you think you made a mistake in presenting the MOQ in such static terms in LILA?

PIRSIG: The alternative to "The Metaphysics of Quality says," would be "I, Robert Pirsig, says," and that repeated many times sounds worse to me. I don't understand this objection to a complete metaphysical system that someone has worked out. It seems to imply that some kind of confusion is preferable. It also seems to be an objection to the rhetorical style of the Metaphysics of Quality rather than a discovery of any falsehood in it, and in philosophy rhetorical styles are supposed to be irrelevant to the truth. If the term, "static" is being used here as it is used by the Metaphysics of Quality itself, then the answer is, "All metaphysical systems are static intellectual patterns. There isn't any other kind of metaphysics." This is so because the MOQ describes intellect itself as a set of static patterns.

BAGGINI: One final question about aspects of the MOQ that might help explain academic resistance to it. LILA has a remarkably wide scope and as a result it often deals with, dismisses or solves ideas rather brusquely.

For example, at one point you say “[The theory of evolution] goes into many volumes about how the fittest survive but never once goes into the question of why.” (p144)

Most biologists would see that as blatantly untrue, and that furthermore, if you think the question of why the fittest survive hasn't been answered by the theory of evolution, you just haven't understood it. Now it may well be that you have responses to this and can explain why it is you think the question of why the fittest survive hasn't really been addressed. But if you present your thesis in this telescopic, sweeping way, surely you can't complain if informed critics dismiss you. You can't expect them to take it on trust that behind these assertions are more careful, fuller arguments that justify the claims.

PIRSIG: That line was an integral part of an entire chapter on the subject and thus cannot be called telescopic. I would answer that biologists who think my question doesn't understand the theory of evolution are biologists who do not understand the difference between “how” and “why.” The answers they give for “why” are usually “competitive advantage” or “survival of the fittest.” But if you look closely you will see that these are not scientific terms. “Fittest” is a subjective term. It exists only in the mind of a scientific observer. It isn't out there in the nature he observes. The same is true of “advantage.” Ask a biologist who thinks my question doesn't understand the theory of evolution, to define in exact scientific terms the meaning of these evaluative words. If he takes time to do so I predict he will give up or he will come up with nonsense or he will find himself drifting eventually toward the solutions arrived at by the Metaphysics of Quality.

Finally I must say how pleased I have to have these questions raised and the manner in which they are raised. This is circumspection at its best.

BAGGINI: Ok, so enough of the scepticism. Let's turn now to some key ideas in the metaphysics itself.

There are some striking similarities between MOQ and various other monist metaphysics, such as that of Spinoza. Stated crudely, what these philosophies have in common is that they try to dissolve the puzzle that the world seems to contain many things that are real yet seemingly incommensurable - such as mind and matter, fact and value, objectivity and subjectivity - by arguing that these are all just aspects of one, unified thing.

You talk of the MOQ as a Copernican revolution on a par with Kant's, but isn't the key revolution of ZAMM just the one monist philosophers like Spinoza already made? In other words, your innovation was not to be the first to overturn the subject-

object metaphysics, but to identify Quality as the fundamental constituent of the universe, rather than, as Spinoza claimed, “god or nature”?

PIRSIG: I may have read Spinoza incorrectly but it has seemed to me that his assertion that God is the fundamental constituent of the Universe was not very revolutionary, given the church attitudes at the time.

BAGGINI: It seems an extraordinary claim to say that Spinoza's views were not very revolutionary. The impersonal god-or-nature he postulated was entirely different from that of the Jewish or Christian religion. He was actually excommunicated from the Jewish community for his views, which is testament to how far from the mainstream his views were.

PIRSIG: If the claim seems extraordinary to you, then I withdraw it. I am not a “Spinozist” and made it clear that I may have read him incorrectly. However, the following points by Dr. McWatt look good to me.[\[3\]](#) You are correct in saying that the revolutionary assertion of the Metaphysics of Quality is that “Quality’ or “value” is the fundamental constituent of the universe. However, the classification of metaphysics into monism, dualism and pluralism, seems to me to be an arbitrary classification where none is needed. The Metaphysics of Quality is all three: Quality is the monism. Static quality and Dynamic Quality are the dualism, and the four levels of static quality contain a pluralism of things.

BAGGINI: I don't see why you think the classification of metaphysics into monism, dualism and pluralism is arbitrary.

PIRSIG: I think it is arbitrary the way a count of the length of sentences in a metaphysics would be arbitrary. It doesn't add anything to the truth or falsehood of the metaphysics being described. It is a form of philosophology, if I may use a favorite word, a classification of philosophy rather than philosophy itself.

BAGGINI: Of course, many systems have pairs, trios, quartets and so forth of concepts. But it seems perfectly reasonable to classify metaphysical systems as monist or dualist on the basis of how many *basic* substances they believe the universe *most fundamentally* comprises.

PIRSIG: The “Quality” of the Metaphysics of Quality is not a basic substance, or anything like it. The Buddhists call it “nothingness” precisely to avoid that kind of intellectual characterization. Once you start to define Quality as a basic substance you are off on a completely different path from the MOQ.

BAGGINI: Of course, there are differences between the MOQ and anything that has gone before: every particular metaphysical system has its defining characteristics which make it different. But you claim more than just it is different: for you it marks a “Copernican revolution”: it doesn't just offer something new but turns philosophy on its head in an unprecedented way. And my original question, and these follow ups, is pressing you to justify this claim, in the light of what seems to me like various precedents for key philosophical moves.

PIRSIG: The allusion to Copernicus is based on his assertion that the sun does not revolve around the earth, the earth revolves around the sun. Similarly the MOQ says that Quality does not revolve around the subjects and objects of the world. The subjects and objects of this world revolve around Quality. The purpose of this statement is to explain by analogy what the MOQ is actually saying.

BAGGINI: What matters is if the MOQ is right, not whether it's the greatest leap since Kant, and making the latter claim breeds suspicion that it's a philosophy that hasn't taken enough account of what has come before it.

PIRSIG: During the writing of the MOQ a long search was made through an encyclopedia of philosophy to see if the MOQ was repeating what someone else had said. And this was so stated in ZMM. None of the traditional European philosophers seemed to match in any close way. The closest finds were Plotinus, Lao Tsu, and Professor F.S.C. Northrop of Yale University . These similarities have been acknowledged many times.

BAGGINI: If we buy into this kind of monism, why not follow a more Kantian line and say that the exact nature of the world as it is remains unknowable?

PIRSIG: Within the dualism of the Metaphysics of Quality, static quality is knowable and static quality is part of the exact nature of the world.

BAGGINI: What justifies identifying it as Quality and what do we gain by doing so?

PIRSIG: We gain a far better way of organizing our understanding of everything, from physics to religion. That gain is its own justification.

BAGGINI: Even if we set aside monism, there do seem to be other past attempts to escape the subject-object metaphysics. In LILA you write, “The culture in which we live hands us a set of intellectual glasses to interpret experience with, and the concept of the primacy of subjects and objects is built right into these glasses.” The metaphysics of quality is supposed to get us beyond this “subject-object metaphysics” and the various problems with it. But aren't there plenty of other alternatives? Phenomenologists, idealist and postmodernists all seem to have rejected any kind of absolute subject/object distinction. Am I therefore wrong to read LILA as arguing that the MOQ is the first major alternative to the subject-object metaphysics, or is it just that you think it's the best alternative?

PIRSIG: If you follow the development of the Metaphysics of Quality as it is explained in Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance you see that it did not start with the question, “What is the best alternative to subject-object metaphysics?” It started with the question of “What is quality?” A question was then asked, “Is quality in the subject or in the object?” The answer was, “Neither one. It is independent of the two and is the source of the two.” Given this answer there was no need to shop around for other alternatives to subject-object distinction, since that was never the original question. And in fact the Metaphysics of Quality actually supports the absolute subject-object distinction as a subordinate part of its own structure.

BAGGINI: I don't understand this. How can the MOQ support an ABSOLUTE subject-object distinction when quality is the source of the distinction, and in its unity is more fundamental and “absolute” than that distinction? Isn't the whole problem with the subject-object metaphysics not that it makes the subject-object distinction, but precisely that it is absolute? It seems the term “absolute” is shifting senses.

PIRSIG: I think you are right. Let's drop the word, “absolute,” and simply say that “And in fact the Metaphysics of Quality actually supports the subject-object distinction as a subordinate part of its own structure.” This was the only intended point of the sentence.

BAGGINI: You seem to think that the MOQ is the first major alternative to the subject-object metaphysics, as, for instance, you write, “But he [Phaedrus] realized that sooner or later he had to stop carping about how bad subject-object metaphysics was and say something positive for a change.” Yet it seems to me he already had various positive alternatives to turn to.

PIRSIG: As I understand them, none of these alternatives center around the original question of, “What is quality?”

BAGGINI: I don't see why where a line of reasoning starts from should determine what questions are ultimately asked or what alternatives are ultimately considered. Thinkers come to their conclusions by many routes. In the case of the MOQ, the first question may have been “What is quality?” but Phaedrus ends up, in LILA, seeing the MOQ as a rival to subject-object metaphysics, and often argues for the superiority of the former by comparing it to the latter. But then if there are many other alternatives to the traditional subject-object metaphysics, perhaps these too would not only win a similar contest, but triumph over the MOQ as well. My concern is that the MOQ only comes out the victor because it is never set against a worthy opponent, though worthy opponents exist.

PIRSIG: Using a starting line of reasoning to determine what questions are ultimately asked can be described as, “sticking to the subject.” Ultimate questions and ultimate alternatives are never found. Questions and alternatives go on and on, and one can wander endlessly among them. Even if it were possible to know what they all are it would certainly be impossible to include them in a single book. The moq.org website has been quite exhaustive in searching for these questions and alternatives. Anyone who has a new question or alternative has a standing invitation to place it there.

In contrast to your “concern... that the MOQ only comes out the victor because it is never set against a worthy opponent, though worthy opponents exist,” I also have a concern of my own. This is the concern that philosophers, instead of coming to grips with the philosophy at hand, sometimes dismiss it by saying, “Oh he is saying the same as someone else,” or “someone else has said it much better.” This is the latter half of the well known conservative argument that some new idea is (a) no good because it hasn't been heard it before or (b) it is no good because it has been heard before. If, as has been noted by R.C. Zaehner, once the Oxford University Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics, I am saying the same thing as Aristotle; and if, as has been noted in the Harvard Educational Review, I am saying the same thing as William James; and if as has been noted now that I may be saying the same thing as Spinoza: then why has no one ever noticed that Aristotle and Spinoza and William James are all saying the same thing?

This kind of commentary has a parallel in literary criticism where various authors are compared to one another in an easy way without any serious attempt to fathom what

any of them are really saying. So, if Hemingway says death is a terrible thing, why then Hemingway is saying the same thing as Shakespeare! What a discovery! And Shakespeare has said it so much better. Who needs to read Hemingway?

BAGGINI: Returning again to your idea that the MOQ is “just another finger pointing toward the moon”, what would say to the suggestion that we should see take that comment perhaps more literally than you intended and say that all your talk of quality and value should be seen merely as useful ways of seeing things, and we shouldn't worry about whether it is literally true? Should we just see metaphysics as metaphor?

PIRSIG: I think that we should see metaphysics as metaphor to the extent that metaphor is literally true.

BAGGINI: In what sense can a metaphor be literally true? We normally understand metaphor in contrast to literal truth. “The sun is shining” is literally true; “The sun is shining in my heart” is metaphorically true. Whether metaphysics deals in statements of the first or second kind seems to me an important question.

PIRSIG: I am really not familiar with the question but seem to remember reading that if the “mythos-over-logos” line of thought is followed, then metaphors are literally true since all our knowledge, including scientific knowledge, is metaphorical. In a subject-object metaphysics metaphors are clearly subjective and literal truth is clearly objective. But if the foundations of the subject-object metaphysics are rejected then the question of whether metaphysics is metaphor or literal truth goes out the window with it. It becomes moot.

BAGGINI: At the Liverpool conference, a paper was submitted by Richard Loggins called “Quality in the New Millennium”. This was accepted and, I understand, well received by both you and Anthony McWatt. The paper, however, was a spoof by Glenn Bradford. I would imagine it was embarrassing to be “had” in this way, but was it more deeply troubling in any way? Were you not concerned that those within the MOQ circle were so impressed by something written to mock you? I'd be interested to hear your response to this spoof.[\[4\]](#)

PIRSIG: The purpose of the conference was largely to bring together people who had been corresponding by internet and email for years, and to talk and have a few beers and celebrate Anthony's success at the University. With the exception of David Buchanan's paper, I did not volunteer comment on any of the papers at the conference,

including the 'Loggins' paper. When my wife and I later learned of the deception we were depressed, as anyone would be. But that's part of life. We had a good time.

BAGGINI: I like the idea of "philosophology" as opposed to real philosophy. And I am sure that one of the main trappings of academic philosophy is that it encourages the former rather than the latter. But I'm not sure the distinction is as neat as you present it, and this is what I think serves as an obstacle to the reception of the MOQ.

PIRSIG: No, it isn't neat, since most philosophologists also philosophize and most philosophers also philosophologise.

BAGGINI: The good reason many philosophers spend a lot of time discussing the ideas of other philosophers is because they appreciate that the ideas they have do not come into a vacuum, but have been shaped and preceded by the ideas of many great thinkers. Further, by constantly thinking about how their ideas relate and compare to those of their peers and the greats of the past, they hope to learn from them, and not to repeat errors.

In your introduction to Lila's Child you say "Philosophy itself is opinions of the speaker himself about the general nature of the world, not just a classification someone else's opinions." That "just" is important. But it is also a mistake when a philosophy is constructed with reference *just* to the "opinions of the speaker". Such a philosophy is almost invariably weaker because one person thinking alone is unlikely to do better than one thinker being helped along by philosophers past and present.

PIRSIG: The division between authors and literary critics throws light on this subject. The author is a creator and the critic is a judge. Literary critics normally do not pretend they are authors when they judge a book, but philosophologists do pretend they are philosophers when they judge someone else's philosophy. The best of literary critics know that an author has to work alone and not go around showing his manuscript to everybody, because his source is not what everyone else has said. He has to be out there finding things where nobody has gone before. Because philosophologists think of themselves as philosophers they do not understand that a real philosopher is not doing the same thing they are, and should not be doing the same thing they are if he wants to come up with genuine philosophy, and not just more of the usual repetition and dissection of old ideas.

BAGGINI: Your alter-ego Phaedrus is the epitome of the lone philosopher. He doesn't ignore other philosophers completely, but he doesn't have well-informed fellow

philosophers to push him and test him, and he develops his own philosophy mostly independently from that which has gone before. I would suggest, however, that he makes the opposite error of the philosophologists he seems to feel superior too: they spend too much time rehearsing the ideas of others, but he underestimates the extent to which others can help us to raise our game and think better.

PIRSIG: Any time others want to help me raise my game and think better, I'm all for it. The problem has been that those academic others who should be engaging the Metaphysics of Quality have remained silent for 31 years in contrast to the response of the general public. Fortunately Dr. McWatt has done just what you are asking for in his Ph.D. thesis and I am told that others are considering similar Ph.D. study.

BAGGINI: I'll finish off by summing up my on personal response to ZAMM and LILA and ask you how you'd respond to it. I think both books reveal an author of exceptional intelligence and insight. However, I do feel that in seeking to build an all-encompassing system to connect all these insights, we end up with a whole which is less than the sum of its parts. Perhaps this does little more than reflect the extent to which my own thinking has been affected (or infected) with the anti-metaphysical bias of recent Anglo-American philosophy. But I don't think it is just that. I think rather that it connects to the above point about philosophology. You have not allowed yourself to be constrained by other philosophers, which has given you the benefit of more freedom and more originality. But constraints also provide checks and balances, and without them, I fear you've constructed a system on foundations that are not up to the job of supporting it.

PIRSIG: The foundations are okay, in fact they are rock-solid, but we never got to discuss them. We have come to a standoff here, where I have refused to talk about what other philosophers are saying, and you have neglected to ask underlying questions about what I am saying. What is most remarkable to me about this interview is that not a single question has been asked about what the Metaphysics of Quality actually says. You say there is more to philosophy than I know, and that is no doubt true. I have a degree in philosophy and know quite well that no one knows it all. But there is more to the Metaphysics of Quality than you have shown any indication of understanding, and there was an opportunity to find out more that has been missed. In journalism, where I hold an M.A., it is mandatory that when you interview someone you try sincerely to understand what they are saying, not just try to impose other people's views on them, including your own.

My wife who has been following this interview, keeps asking, "Why don't you tell Baggini what the Metaphysics of Quality says? How is a reader who hasn't read LILA going to know what this is all about.?"

My reply has been, "Why doesn't Baggini ask?"

BAGGINI: I've thought about your comments about how our discussion has developed. I agree that I never asked you to simply set out what the MOQ is, for reasons I explained, and you have now furnished me with an outline. But you also said, "you have neglected to ask underlying questions about what I am saying."

Looking back over our discussion, this doesn't strike me as true. For example, I asked about where the arguments to support the MOQ were and you pointed back to ZAMM, Lila and Lila's Child. You also got to answer that the reason we should accept the MOQ is that "We gain a far better way of organizing our understanding of everything, from physics to religion. That gain is its own justification." We also discussed MOQ's relation to the subject-object distinction. We also discussed what it meant to think of the MOQ as metaphorical.

We also had an exchange in which I tried to pinpoint what was revolutionary about the MOQ. You said that the answer is that the MOQ states that "'Quality' or 'value' is the fundamental constituent of the universe". And so on. So I'm therefore inclined to say that I have indeed asked several questions about the MOQ and its basis. If I have tended to frame many of these in relation to other philosophers, it is to help bring out what makes the MOQ different.

Perhaps I could add one more (for now at least). As I just recalled, you said that the MOQ states that "'Quality' or 'value' is the fundamental constituent of the universe". Then you later say "The 'Quality' of the Metaphysics of Quality is not a basic substance, or anything like it." Given that "substance" in the broad sense is usually understood to mean the constituent of whatever exists, and is not taken to refer solely to physical matter, can you explain further how quality is a basic constituent but not a substance?

PIRSIG: I'm not original on this point, except to identify Quality with the Tao and with Buddha-nature (hence the title of ZMM). The amount of material on these two would overflow most library rooms, but it is essential to both that the basic constituent of the universe is nothingness, and by this is meant not empty space but "no-thingness." It is somewhat incorrect to call "no-thingness" a basic constituent since it is not really even that, (it is not even an it) but in an everyday philosophic "finger-pointing-toward-the-moon" discourse that's about as good as you can get. It is very incorrect to call it a substance in the way that substance is usually meant today.

For more on this subject I'm attaching an article on the website of Nanzan University in Nagoya, Japan. It attacks this majority view of what Buddhism is about or should be about in a way that seems more informative than if it supported it. I was just starting to read it when your email came in. its URL is:

<http://www.nanzanu.ac.jp/SHUBUNKEN/publications/nlarc/pdf/Pruning%20the%20bodhi%20tree/Pruning%204.pdf>

Summary description of the MOQ by Robert Pirsig

The Metaphysics of Quality, or MOQ, is simply a philosophic answer to the question of what is Quality, or worth, or merit, or value, or betterness or any of the other synonyms for good. There are many possible answers but the one the MOQ gives is that you can understand Quality best if you don't subordinate it to anything else but instead subordinate everything else to it.

It says there are two basic kinds of Quality, an undefined Quality called Dynamic Quality, and a defined quality called static quality. Static quality is further divided into four evolutionary divisions: inorganic, biological, social and intellectual. Our entire understanding of the world can be organized within this framework. When you do so things fall into place that were poorly defined before, and new things appear that were concealed under previous frameworks of understanding. The MOQ is not intended to deny previous modes of understanding as much as to expand them into a more inclusive picture of what it's all about.

Further questions about the foundations of the MOQ are always welcomed.

References

1. Conference opening statement by Robert Pirsig

It has been nearly half a century since the ideas in the Metaphysics of Quality first appeared to me in Bozeman , Montana . That is a very long time. Yet this is the first academic conference on the subject I have ever attended, and for all I know, the first one ever held.*** This long delay in academic interest has a number of reasons that are worth thinking about.

The first reason, I think, is the title of the book, 'Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance,' which seems almost calculated to invite academic disrespect. One hundred and twenty one publishers turned it down, setting a Guinness World Record for editorial rejection. The paperback publishers themselves classified it as 'New Age,' which translates as beads and incense and drugs and free love and the sort of low-class uninformed speculation called 'pop philosophy.' It is to the credit of just one famous literary critic, the Cambridge professor, George Steiner, that my first book got off the ground at all.

The second reason for the delay in academic recognition has been myself. For many years now I have avoided publicity of any kind after discovering that this publicity seemed to be going away from what I was writing about. Though what I was writing about was camouflaged as the biography of a madman, underneath that camouflage was a serious attempt to describe a newer and better way of looking philosophically at the world. Some saw what I was saying, some did not. I have always been grateful for those who have seen it and especially those who are here today. What has been most dismaying in the past was the discovery that among those who did not see it were the very people who should have been first to take an interest, that is, philosophic

scholars whose duty is not just to preserve past views of the world but to carefully examine new ones.

Over the years my response to this neglect has been the same as the response that carried me through the mental hospital, a kind of Socratic internal voice that kept saying, 'Don't worry. Stay calm. Time is on your side.' Time has indeed been on the side of the Metaphysics of Quality since it was first set down and the best evidence of that is that here we are today in Liverpool.

I would like to say a word about England . As many of you know, this is the country where I learned to read and write and acquire a love of language that has shaped my life. In addition to the English word 'quality' which I think most would agree I have really run into the ground, there is another word, a uniquely English word, that I have not talked about at all, That is the word 'fair.' I've read that there are at least 16 different meanings of the word, fair, but that the word itself has never been successfully translated into a foreign language. Yet it is a word that runs through the deepest roots of the English culture, and is the reason, I think, for why we are here today. England has certainly seen enough evil and unfairness in its long history, but from my outsider's perspective it has seemed to me that in the end, when all accounts are settled, it is this sense of fairness that has been the prime mover of the evolution of England, and which governs the attitudes of English people today to an extent they may not see as easily as outsiders do. One of the early things I noticed about Anthony McWatt's writing is that he cannot condemn anything without stopping and making sure that he is being fair. At times I have wanted to say to him, 'Why don't you stop watering down your criticisms with all this fairness and just damn the opposition all to hell as they so properly deserve?' But he never does, and I think this trait will serve him well over the years to come.

In addition to Anthony McWatt's fairness, there is the fairness of a person we all know as 'Horse,' without whose website on the 'Metaphysics of Quality', this meeting could never have taken place. There is the fairness of this philosophy department at the University of Liverpool which is the first in the world to admit a Ph.D. thesis on the Metaphysics of Quality. There is the fairness of those members of the faculty who, though they have shown no agreement with the Metaphysics of Quality, have helped it through. In particular, I would like to thank Professor Stephen Clark, who has come through to me as a philosopher whose fairness has done more than that of any other single person to guide Anthony's thesis through to its successful conclusion.

The Metaphysics of Quality has a long way to go toward complete academic and social acceptance, and, at 76, I'm a little sad that I won't be able to see all the progress in the years ahead. But I'm confident now that the ideas are in good hands and I can relax a little and calm down and feel that my efforts of a lifetime will make a positive difference for this world.

***Since the conference it dawned on me that my opening statement that this is the first academic conference on my work is not completely accurate. This was the first PHILOSOPHIC conference and the first conference of any kind entirely on the Metaphysics of Quality that I know about. However, there was a Modern Language Association conference panel in the 1980's, a psychology conference in the 90's and also a physics conference in the 90's in which I was one the participants.

2. Introduction to LILA's Child by Robert Pirsig

It was fortunate I stayed out of this online discussion of my books, LILA, and Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. Not many writers get to read a body of criticism of their work as intense and diverse as this. It could never have achieved its insights and discoveries if I'd been participating in it, dominating others with my 'expert' opinion.

One of the most valued members of this group has written that this discussion should not even be published at all because it is not a finished work. Much of what is said here sounds amateurish and mistaken. People will laugh at it, it was said, because it sounds so ill-informed. I believe 'crap' was the word used. I don't agree with this at all, but think that the objection is an important one that needs a close examination.

What we see in the following pages is what I would call 'real philosophy' rather than 'philosophology.' This term, philosophology, is one I find myself using all the time to make a point that most academic philosophers seem unaware of: that when they speak of the ideas of such famous philosophers as Plato or Hegel they are giving us a history of philosophy, an 'ology' of philosophy, not philosophy itself. Philosophy itself is opinions of the speaker himself about the general nature of the world, not just a classification someone else's opinions.

This may seem a minor point but I remember hearing many years ago how a professor of art, Jerry Liebling, was outraged when he heard that an Art Historian told one of his students that he should give up painting because it was obvious the student would never equal the great masters. At the time I didn't see what Liebling was so upset about but as the years have gone by I understand it better. Liebling loathed this attitude of Art Historians because, while they thought they were preserving the standards of art, they were in fact destroying them. Art is not just the static achievements of the masters of the past. Art is the creative Dynamic Quality of the artist of the present. Neither is philosophy just the static achievements of the masters of the past. Philosophy is the creative Dynamic Quality of the philosopher of the present.

There are similarities to chess. Both are highly intellectual pursuits in which one tries to manipulate symbols within a set of rules to improve a given situation. In chess one can benefit greatly by studying the games of the masters. In philosophy one can also benefit greatly by studying the writings of the great philosophers. But the important point here is that studying chess masters is not chess itself and studying philosophy masters is not philosophy itself.

The real chess is the game you play with your neighbor. Real chess is 'muddling through.' Real chess is the triumph of mental organization over complex experience. And so is real philosophy.

Although what we see on these pages could be classed as philosophological, that is, the study of someone else's work, what we see is dominated by the philosophy of the members: nothing is cut and dried, nothing is asserted with mind-numbing scholarly

precision, no big reputations are at stake, there is just the happy process of thinking about things. The participants don't always get it right and no one expects them to. They are just trying out different ideas against each other just to see how they work out. The fact that everyone knows that everyone else might be wrong makes it much more interesting, and as you read along you see that the thinking gets better and better.

Personalities emerge: There is Magnus, dour at times but insightful and to the point; Bodvar, loyal, honest and combative for what he believes in; Diana, cutting away verbiage and getting to the point; Hugo, brilliant and discriminating; Maggie, putting things into a social perspective; Platt, hitting bulls-eyes like a Zen archer; Horse, solid as a rock; Doug, ahead of the pack with a suitcase full of Dynamic acronyms; Ant., who is doing his Ph.D. on the Metaphysics of Quality, and has to face academic opposition head-on. There are many others and you can discover them for yourself.

Dissenters also abound: There is Donny, who wants to put the Metaphysics of Quality in a larger philosophical context. There is Keith, who is such a model of courtesy and fairness and care that you immediately pay close attention to what he says. His questions go to the root of the difficulty many people have in understanding the Metaphysics of Quality. And there is Struan, Keith's mirror image, who makes an art form out of the personal insult. It's been said in philosophy that, 'Where there is no heat there is no light.' Struan has generated plenty of both.

But If dissenters didn't exist we would have to invent them because no set of philosophic ideas is worth much until it is tested by dialectical opposition. In the usual printed academic essays dissent comes weeks or months later in the form of reviews. But here, on the internet, affirmation and dissent appear together. If a writer tries to belittle someone else in the manner of a polished literary critic he can find himself belittled right back three minutes later. It makes for more careful criticism.

After reading through these and many other comments I've concluded that the biggest improvement I could make in the Metaphysics of Quality would be to block the notion that the Metaphysics of Quality claims to be a quick fix for every moral problem in the universe. I have never seen it that way. The image in my mind as I wrote it was of a large football field that gave meaning to the game by telling you who was on the 20-yard line but did not decide which team would win. That was the point of the two opposing arguments over the death penalty described in LILA. That was the point of the equilibrium between static and Dynamic Quality. Both are moral arguments. Both can claim the Metaphysics of Quality for support. Just as two sides can go before the U.S. Supreme Court and both claim constitutionality, so two sides can use the Metaphysics of Quality, but that does not mean that either the Constitution or the Metaphysics of Quality is a meaningless set of ideas. Our whole judicial system rests on the presumption that more than one set of conclusions about individual cases can be drawn within a given set of moral rules. The Metaphysics of Quality makes the same presumption.

Finally, you will see that throughout the discussions I've added notes of my own. With them has come the question, 'Why make them?' Having done so well so far by staying out of this discussion, why don't I just continue the good work and keep staying out of it?

One justification for the notes is that there are questions raised here that only I can answer and this is probably the only time and place that I can answer them. But beyond this are a lot of comments that can only be classified as kibitzing.

A kibitzer is the guy who stands behind your shoulder in a chess match and tells you all the great moves you could have made if only you were as smart as he is. Not a very popular thing to do, but that is surely what is being done here. I have tried to keep it to a minimum and passed over much that I disagree with where it does not seem to destroy the Metaphysics of Quality, but it's still kibitzing.

After worrying about this for weeks I finally I found an alibi. Kibitzers only interrupt current chess games and current conversations. These discussions are now several years old and getting older every year. They're historical. I am not talking about current philosophy but about the philosophy of the past. That makes me not a kibitzer but a philosophologist. As everybody knows, philosophologists are not kibitzers but responsible dedicated well-liked respectable people!

3. I've added a couple of comments for the more philosophological issues about Spinoza to save you a bit of time as I don't think the issue concerning his exact philosophical ideas and the Jewish Church are as clear cut as the impression given by Julian in his question.

Firstly, if Spinoza was revolutionary (in any sense) it was his contention that God and nature weren't two different type of substances (a divine and a mundane one) but rather one type of ongoing divine action. As T.S. Gregory notes in his 1910 Introduction to Spinoza's "Ethics", p. viii:

For Spinoza... "God is Pure Act. The actual is divine... Spinoza thinks of God rather as a verb and of all existent things as modes of this activity."

Moreover, Spinoza's ex-communication in 1656 occurred over 20 years before "Ethics" was published in 1677 (just after his death). Which critically means, as Professor Matthew Goldish of Ohio State University claims...

"There is no reason to think the rabbis knew his philosophy at this time. Among the considerable literature dealing with Spinoza's excommunication, one of the best articles in English is Asa Kasher and Sh. Biderman, 'Why was Baruch de Spinoza Excommunicated?', in D.S. Katz and J.I. Israel (eds.), *Skeptics, Millenarians and Jews*. Their position would tend to support Boaz's claim that the issue was largely 'social', or perhaps political."

(http://www.kheper.net/topics/philosophy/Spinozas_excommunication.html)

(Of course, do remember there's been 95 years of philosophological discussion since T.S. Gregory wrote his introduction and no doubt many other opinions have appeared since this time. If these have been anything like the numerous opinions on MOQ Discuss you can begin to see the difficulties with knowing what the "definitive" Spinoza actually is).

4. Anthony McWatt added his own reply to this:

The July Conference was arranged at the last minute on an ad hoc basis by myself to give attendees an opportunity to present a paper on Pirsig's work if they so desired. Please keep in mind that anyone invited to the Conference was free to present a paper of whatever viewpoint they wanted.

Parts of the “Loggins” paper did strike me as a rather strange reading of Pirsig's work but not enough to be disallowed especially as it would not have been in the spirit of free speech and the author was meant to have an unusual reading and writing disability.

Moreover, there were time restraints which didn't help (for instance, I had to organise, amongst other things, hiring rooms for the lectures and the social events, the catering facilities, the IT equipment, photocopying, the documentary film crew, a boat cruise, the invitations, the conference papers, chairing the conference as well as accommodation – which I vetted beforehand - for a number of attendees including the hoaxer). As such, I only proof read the “Loggins” paper regarding grammar and phrasing and, even still, this resulted in over fifty corrections.

In addition, because “Richard Loggins” conveniently dropped out at the last minute, by appealing to his supposed reading and writing disabilities, one of my former students (a trained actor, David Boyce) was asked to read it out. As such, David edited the paper to remove the more sycophantic and over the top remarks (what David termed “star-fucking”) so don't assume that any of the Conference attendees was fooled by the paper as it appears on the “hoax” website. It was never read out in that form.

David Boyce spent half a day practising reading out the paper and Mark Maxwell (another student of mine) drove sixty miles on a round trip to David's house to deliver some “last minute” changes that “Richard Loggins” requested on the Sunday evening before the Conference week. In July, Mark was driving his mother to and from hospital three times a week so he could have certainly done without any unnecessary driving. David and Mark at least deserve an apology from the “hoaxer” (Glenn Bradford) though - as far as I can see from his website - the latter still hasn't appreciated how much time and hard work that he wasted by people who had no argument with him.

Finally, it's worth noting that Glenn Bradford had been banned in 2003 from contributing to MOQ Discuss (the Pirsig internet discussion group) and had been using the pseudonym “Richard Loggins” since 2004 to avoid the ban. If Bradford had a problem with the ban he should have addressed his concerns directly with the administrator of MOQ Discuss starting off with an apology to the latter for his repeated poor behaviour which led him to being banned in the first place. Instead, Glenn Bradford now owes apologies to a lot more people.