

Pirsig Part 2
Morality through the Lens of the Metaphysics of Quality
Delivered at the Douglas Flat Meeting of the UUFTS
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In January I introduced us to the Metaphysics of Quality described in Robert Pirsig's book Lila. I read extensive selections, which have set the stage for understanding this framework for each of us to analyze what is the moral thing to do in any circumstance. I will begin by paraphrasing his notions and drill down to specific examples of what, according to the Metaphysics of Quality, is or is not morally right, and why.

Metaphysics is a framework for viewing and understanding reality. Most metaphysical systems split reality into two realms, mind and matter. Everything in our reality is either of mind (subjects) or matter (objects). This tradition is called the subject-object metaphysical system.

The Metaphysics of Quality is very different. From this outlook everything, mind or matter, springs from quality. Quality is not easily labeled. Quality includes the creative force, what we know but we can't describe, that we feel but we can't touch, the mythic truth, the Tao. Remember Pirsig's excerpt about causality? By removing the subject and substituting the word "prefer" for "caused" we can reorient our outlook to appreciate this perspective. The magnet doesn't cause the metal filings on the table to align, no. The metal filings "prefer" to align when in the presence of a magnet. This flip removes the philosophical causation conundrum, whatever that was. Quality precedes perception. Quality is the mother of all things – but how does that help us with our moral dilemmas, huh?

According to the Metaphysics of Quality, Quality has two aspects: dynamic and static. Dynamic quality springs forth capriciously to insert innovation and change into static quality systems. Dynamic quality is transformative, it is an upset, an aberration, and inspiration, and innovation – like mutations on a gene. Static quality is the gene, the framework of order, the rigid system of laws, physical, social or intellectual that maintains a stable platform for thriving. Dynamic quality creates or destroys, and static quality maintains.

The Metaphysics of Quality defines three hierarchical levels: the physical, the social and the intellectual. Despite the so-call hierarchy, each is independent of the other, and each competes for domination when ever there is overlap. The hierarchy is based on observations of the evolution of thriving, what thrives when. Everything is evolving towards optimal thriving. In the Metaphysics of quality, the direction of that evolution is from the static to the dynamic.

In the beginning, there was only chaos, but dynamic quality asserted influence on the alignment of atoms and molecules to build an equilibrium, a state of static quality at the physical level. The physical laws define and constrain the physical realm. Dynamic quality expresses itself at the physical level by finding ways to beat the laws, the Law of Gravity, Conservation of mass, electrochemical processes, the second Law of Thermodynamics, etc. To do this it evolved the organisms. Organisms evolve ways to beat the physical laws so they can use the physical reality better, compete amongst themselves for the physical resources; to propagate, and to thrive. We beat the heat, control our internal chemistry, evolve ways to fly. At the top of the pile, the most successful competitor in the physical realm is the self-conscious individual, Man. You and I are at the apex of the physical static quality level. Humankind has conquered the physical system better than other organisms, we best beat the physical laws – so far. Individuals thrived. But then something greater occurred.

Individuals were competing at cross purposes; destroying one another for individual gain. (That is the whole point at the physical level.) So then Dynamic Quality ratcheted the system up to a new plateau. It evolved culture! This is the second level. We discovered that different people who are good at different things can band together to create greater opportunities for thriving, as a group. Interdependence trumps independence. The social quality level evolved to control individual excesses – we evolved shame, guilt, peer pressure and rules to box in the individual urges that destroy social order. A Society can thrive so much better! It's better for the individuals too! We can get through lean times when we cooperate, grow crops, build canals, highways, cities, invent machines and create churches. The selfish urges of individuals were repressed by group mores to create an ordered static quality system. It is not acceptable to murder, to covet thy neighbor's wife, etc., etc. Morals, by that name were born. They are the static quality platform, the rigid rules, the constraints to individual excess.

While it is good that the group can dominate the individual, who holds the group back, it came to pass that the group's own rigid static quality likewise created competition and conflict - at a higher and fearsome level. Murder by the individual at the physical level was replaced by war and genocide by groups at the social level. The mindlessness of social movements is confronted by the last level of the hierarchy – the intellectual level. Reason can expose and trump the mindlessness of static social quality. Historically the transition from one to the other takes centuries, starting maybe with the American revolution?

The hierarchy goes like this: The individual interests trump the interests of inanimate things and even lower organisms, because, after all we are the most efficient and effective individual organisms. Thus to crush an ant is not a particularly troubling moral problem, (though some would have a problem with it), most of us would not. But what say of the issue of hitting the rabbit with the car rather than risk an accident. That bumps the issue up a few notches doesn't it? The rabbit is higher in an evolutionary progression so we have a few more qualms about its demise. Considering the risk, however of losing control of the vehicle, injuring yourself or others, it still hardly causes us to pause. In this way, the Metaphysics of Quality gives us a lens through which we can test all sorts of moral questions.

Let's look at abortion. The freedom to have abortions in America began as an individual, Rowe, suing for freedom from a rigid social more, murder of another human. Stated this way, in the Metaphysics of Quality it would be immoral for Rowe to prevail, because the individual should not prevail over the static social quality, which is at a higher level. However, the prevailing argument hinged on the viability of the fetus, an *intellectual* definition of "humanness." The intellect asks, "Why should the rights of a nonviable lump of cells trump the rights of a fully developed individual?" And further, we can consider the argument: Why should blind obedience to a social taboo allow unwanted children to be born? When viewed through the Metaphysics of Quality lens, intellect frees us from mindless social constraints. The morality shifts because that intellectual argument prevails.

Can we rationalize any argument? Perhaps – but at least then, we are thinking about them and seeing our moral dilemmas from perspectives that provide for fruitful and insightful analysis.

(Solicit members of the Fellowship for a moral dilemma to analyze through the Metaphysics of Quality lens.)

If none...

How about capital punishment?

In a straightforward application, capital punishment is moral for the society to prevail, because social trumps the physical. But if it is cruel or unusual or disproportionate for the crime, then there are intellectual arguments that trump the social justification. (There is potentially a curious twist here, because dynamic quality trumps even the highest level of static quality. The fount of dynamic quality is the consciousness in individuals. To kill this is to extinguish potential dynamic quality, and can any among us can judge which individual has the potential for truly transformative dynamic quality to appear?)

Or how about something more mundane, like is it morally right to avoid donating to a cause, or to donate to one cause over another?

In summary, “Quality” is an elusive term. It is what we value in things, groups and ideas. The aspect of good quality is what makes us agree that a book is a good read, or that certain music is pleasing, that a well engineered piece of machinery works well, etc, etc. Good static quality creates consistency and it is moral for us to support good static quality if it doesn’t conflict with static quality at a higher level or quash beneficial dynamics. Bad quality is attached to things that no longer work, or aren’t pleasing to us. Good and bad quality are not universal, that is, we value things differently than a Taliban Imam, and that is generally the difficulty in finding a consistent moral code to live by. The Metaphysics of Quality provides a useful framework to the morality of our decisions – always filtered through our own perception of what trumps what. I hope you enjoy the possibilities this viewpoint has for resolving moral dilemmas in your own lives.

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