

Review: Zen and the art of Motorcycle maintenance

Chapter 1 Summary

The novel, published in 1974, uses a long motorcycle trip to frame a prolonged exploration of the world of ideas about life and how best to live it. It references perspectives from Western and Eastern Civilizations as it explores the central question of the how to pursue technology so that human life is enriched rather than degraded. Narrated in the first person, it incorporates a parallel presentation of trip details and an ongoing retrospective concerning dramatic events from the Narrator's past, creating rich symbolism and including numerous analogies reinforcing the overall theme of coming to terms with the mysteries of why we exist and how best to live.

Chapter 2, 3 and 4 Summary

Traveling through the Central Plains into the Great Plains, the Narrator notices gathering storm clouds. This prompts a digression in which the Narrator tells about a trip with Chris to Canada during a warm front that resulted in a heavy rainstorm. They got soaked as the narrator forgot to dig a trench around the tent. They had cycle problems on that trip, and the Narrator illustrated the poor level of motorcycle-maintenance capability that he had at that time by relating that he aborted the trip, because he mistook being out of gas for a serious problem. He uses this story as a warning against making foolish, quick assumptions. Coming back to current trip time, the narrator shares that John informs him that they had missed a turn. They decide to continue on and to adjust their route accordingly.

Chapter 5 and 6 Summary

Continuing, they approach the high plains. They stop for fuel at Hague and inquire about places to cross the Missouri River between Bismarck and Mobridge, only to learn that no such places exist. They decide to head south the 90 miles to Mobridge on a bad road. They rest at Herried, where the Narrator senses a change having to do with the thoughtless use of space in the town, calling it a Western town and intending no compliment thereby. At Mobridge, they cross the river and start out through reservation land. During this part of the ride, the Narrator describes John's way of seeing things as they are as opposed to what they mean and asserts that this is an important Chautauqua point.

Chapter 7 Summary

Chapter 7 finds them heading toward Bowman on a hot day. They encounter an old stockman who used to have a cycle and converse with him. The Narrator is impressed with his demeanor. Riding on through the heat, the Narrator speaks of practicing mind control to counter the heat. He introduces a discussion of Phaedrus' knife. Using a handful of sand analogy, the Narrator attempts to describe the process involved in analytical thought, stressing the importance of the agent who is sorting the sand into piles. The Narrator observes that analysis kills, but simultaneously creates, resulting in a balance of death and birth continuously moving along. They pass through Marmarth and on into Montana. The Narrator shares that Phaedrus went insane and that in order to understand him correctly, it would be necessary to see what he saw.

Chapter 8, 9, and 10 Summary

Chapter 8 opens with them in Miles City, Montana at eight in the morning. They had arrived exhausted the previous day. The Narrator speaks of motorcycle maintenance being a completely rational enterprise. As he examines his dirty spark plugs, he feels as if he's in church performing a religious rite. He discusses the need for precision instruments to use for working on cycle parts and for working on concepts. This leads him to the idea of hierarchies and how they comprise systems and our present construction of systematic thought. He finds a loose fourth tappet and adjusts it. Then he speaks of Phaedruss' nearly photographic memory and its organizational style. Continuing his thoughts related to the environment at the school where Phaedruss had taught, he covers the list of 50 radical professors targeted by the school's president for dismissal.

Chapter 11 Summary

The narrator awakes invigorated by the mountain air. They plan to go south through Yellowstone Park, using the Red Lodge route to get to Bozeman. The Narrator shares that Phaedruss was very familiar with this road, having used it to access backpacking areas in the Absaroka Range. The Narrator then presents the independent nature of Phaedruss' thoughts and his way of drifting while exploring lateral truth. He speaks of Phaedruss' army career, which took him to Korea and of a vivid memory involving a wall shining across a misty harbor that was somehow symbolic of a turning point. Phaedruss' letters from Korea indicated an explosion of enthusiasm for noting descriptive details. Another memory from the period involved a nod- yes answer-no confusion stemming from a session he had with some Koreans.

Chapter 12 Summary

They arrive at Cooke City in a good mood. However, the Narrator discusses how specialization has led to problems with human closeness and how his own emotional remoteness negatively affects his son. He presents a story told to Phaedruss by DeWeese, an abstract painter and former colleague at Bozeman, involving an operative during World War II who, because of a remarkable physical resemblance, had attempted to impersonate a German officer to gain vital intelligence. The operative was anxious the first time that he was in the presence of that officer's circle, and the Narrator speaks of how his relationship with Phaedruss is in many ways the same, especially with regard to being again in the presence of DeWeese. The travelers enter Yellowstone Park, and the Narrator mentions how Phaedruss had despised the park atmosphere for its artificiality.

Chapter 13 and 14 Summary

As they near Bozeman, the Narrator experiences nervousness and a feeling of being haunted in a way similar to what an archeologist opening tombs might feel. He even thinks of turning back. He brings up memories of Phaedruss throwing up from tension. He goes on to develop Phaedruss' concept of the university as a Church of Reason, and speaks of the political tension present on campus during Phaedruss' teaching days. He shares that Phaedruss had delivered a speech in defense of academic freedom in which Phaedruss had distinguished between professors viewed as employees of a corporation and professors viewed as keepers of the flame of truth. He characterizes Phaedruss' behavior as good in many ways, but as flawed by its fanatical intensity. He observes that the fanaticism masks a basic lack of faith in the very reason Phaedruss professed to be defending.

Chapter 15 Summary

They enjoy two days at the DeWeese's with John and Sylvia, and then John and a worried Sylvia leave to return home. Her worry reinforces the idea that the Narrator is evincing some signs of being in the midst of an internal struggle. She worries because of that and about the fact that the Narrator is traveling with his young son and may not be in a state of mind to properly care for him. The Narrator takes his cycle for repairs and spends some related downtime walking around town. He ends up at the school, with Phaedrus memories dominating. The Narrator shares that Phaedrus experienced discomfort with the routine of teaching rhetoric. They enter the very building where Phaedrus taught. It is deserted, and Chris wants to leave.

Chapter 16 and 17 Summary

The chapter begins with the Narrator and Chris starting on their hike into the mountains outside the DeWeese's. The Narrator mentions the conventional use of mountain climbing to represent spiritual quests, suggesting thereby that the climb he will be describing has spiritual import. He then begins an exposition of Phaedrus' exploration of the concept of Quality. Phase 1 had no rigid definition of Quality and persisted for most of his teaching days. He presented this as a productive period. Phase 2 featured a rigid definition for Quality, destroyed his life, and led to electrodes being implanted in his head. Examining Phase 1 in more detail, the Narrator reveals that it included creative experimentation with teaching methods intended to stimulate genuine engagement of the students in the pursuit of Quality work and thought. Receptivity and attentiveness were the hallmarks of this phase.

Chapter 18 Summary

The chapter begins with the Narrator rejoining an examination of Phaedrus' dealings with Quality. By not defining it, Phaedrus had removed it from any intellectual field of study. Esthetics, on the other hand, which Phaedrus had resisted, provided him with an impetus to study philosophy rather than the narrower field of rhetoric. Returning to the hike circumstances, the Narrator notes that Chris falls down and angers the Narrator by asserting that he no longer cares about the hike at all. It is no longer any fun. Returning to the Quality investigation, the Narrator traces how Phaedrus used Realism to justify Quality. This involved Phaedrus discovery that if Quality were removed from consideration in all sensory and realistic contexts of life, only pure rationality would remain unchanged.

Chapter 19 and 20 Summary

The Narrator dreams of a white painted room with a glass door with him on one side and his family on the other. Family faces reveal varying levels of distress. Chris beckons him to open the door, but the Narrator turns away instead. It is a recurrent and disturbing dream. When he awakes, he hears from Chris that they had been talking until almost three in the morning. This perplexes him, and he begins to wonder if Chris is dreaming or if he is starting to lose his mind to the ghost of Phaedrus. They resume the hike before breakfasting as the Narrator had neglected to plan for a water source. He rejoins the discussion of Phaedrus and Quality, the metaphysical stage.

Chapter 21, 22 and 23 Summary

Farther down the mountain, they stop for a snack. Chris observes that the Narrator is not very brave. He agrees, but says that he's smart. They rest, and Chris offers to carry more of the load. The Narrator remarks that metaphysical thinking is a barrier to spiritual understanding and that assimilating irrational aspects of experience is much needed in the 20th century. They must bushwhack their way through some thick brush for a while. The narrator asserts that Quality can unite religion and science and that Quality and Godhead can be similarly grounded in the roots of the word 'good.' He insists that value-free science is an evil that has to go. They hike out of the mountains and hitch a ride into Bozeman, spending the night in a hotel.

Chapter 24 Summary

The Narrator awakes from last chapter's dream and does some exercises, all the while repeating the word 'good.' He remarks that "caring and quality are internal and external aspects of the same thing." Then he links Phaedrus' pursuit of a technological meaning of Quality to his attempt to resolve the problem of technological hopelessness and follows that up with a summary of the philosophical terrain covered so far, ending by asserting his preference for down-to-Earth contexts over mountaintop contexts. This means that the Narrator has learned to value a balanced approach in his pursuit of spiritual meaning, an approach that pertains to and nurtures his everyday involvements and relationships. They eat breakfast, during which Chris attempts to write to his mom. At first he is stuck, but then brainstorms for three pages.

Chapter 25 and 26 Summary

The Narrator notes the ugliness of technological artifacts produced by technicians using traditional reason. These artifacts do not flow from a Quality process. Both the products and the technicians involved are degraded by this kind of value-free process. They arrive in White Bird and then follow the Salmon River in heavy, fast-moving traffic. The Narrator informs us that technology originally meant art, and that the ugliness of modern technology stems from the uncaring attitude of the producers of such. Opposed to this, the Narrator presents an example of Quality technology: the wall in Korea; he attributes it to the state of mind of its producers. He then elaborates on the importance of self-culture for establishing any kind of Quality in life.

Chapter 27 and 28 Summary

The Narrator continues his exposition of gumption problems. He opens with value rigidity. They eat in Prairie City, and Chris spends some time writing his letter to his mom while the Narrator ponders his dream about the door between him and Chris. Ego traps are next in line for the narrator's remarks, followed by anxiety, boredom, and impatience. They arrive in Dayville and fuel up at a station where they are attended to by the owner of a station across the street from the one they're using. They establish an acquaintance and end up spending some time napping there, during which the Narrator observes the now-retired station attendant and the one who had helped them conversing while rocking away in rocking chairs. He is impressed with their ability to have a quality conversation.

Chapter 29 Summary

The chapter starts with a flashback in which we find Phaedrus in a very disoriented state driving around Bozeman with Chris looking for the bunk bedders. They flounder for hours before arriving home to a

furious wife and mother. The Narrator reveals his plan to head toward San Francisco, put Chris on a bus home, and check into a hospital. He later decides to skip that last step because of its futility. In the meantime, he plans to keep going and hope for improvement. Before they take off, he exercises and tunes his cycle.

Chapter 30 Summary

The next morning, the Narrator checks out their beat up gear and makes a list of things to acquire and replace. He wakes Chris to help him with the laundry and leaves him to attend to that while he goes in search of a chain guard. Finding none, he locates a welding shop, but no one is there. He returns to get Chris, and they eat breakfast. There, they encounter a waitress who eyes them with a lonely look that catches the Narrator's attention. After this, they go to the welding shop again. The owner, after requiring the Narrator to do some initial cleaning up of the grease-covered, mangled guard, skillfully welds it to a serviceable state, greatly impressing the Narrator. They resume traveling and reach California.

Chapter 31, 32 and 33 Summary

They dine in Arcata, and resume the journey to San Francisco. Back in time at Chicago, the Platonic dialogue of "Phaedrus" was assigned to the class. This provided Phaedrus with an opportunity to challenge and perplex the professor in charge to such an extent that Phaedrus felt completely victorious in his quest to resolve his metaphysical dilemmas. However, he is overwhelmed by his new understanding and proceeds by stages into complete personality disintegration. Back on the road to San Francisco, it is dark and rainy. The Narrator pulls off to find lodging and after considerable difficulty locates a run-down motel. There, Chris again confronts him about not having a decent explanation of what they're up to and is reduced to fetal rocking. The Narrator realizes that Chris misses Phaedrus.

P.S.

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