

Reflections on Philosophy and *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*

Graham Priest

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance was published in 1974. As demonstrated by its sales, and the fact that it achieved something of a cult following, the book was a highly successful one. It was also a philosophical book. Interspersed with the details of the road trip it describes were philosophical reflections which painted a picture of the world and ways of being in it. To what extent this was a Zen picture, one might argue about; but that it was a philosophical picture which was presented is not in doubt.

Despite these facts, the book and its ideas were never taken up by professional philosophers. Why? To a certain extent, this was because it was drawing on a tradition that Western philosophers have usually regarded as not philosophy at all. The entrenched attitude has been that the Asian philosophical traditions, such as Zen Buddhism, are not philosophy, but religion, mysticism, oracular pronouncements. The attitude, it must be said, can be held only from a position of ignorance; and it is changing, if slowly. However, in the 1970s and '80s, Asian philosophical traditions had no presence in Western philosophy departments. This, however, is only a small part of the explanation. There is a much more important part of the picture.

For my sins, I am a professional philosopher—meaning that I earn my living my teaching and researching in philosophy. Several times a year I receive letters, articles, and even books, from amateur philosophers—by which I mean no more that they are people who do not earn their living in this way. The letters, etc., contain philosophical thoughts, ideas, views of the world. Some of the authors are just curious about my views on the ideas expressed; but many seek my help in getting the ideas published, or at least circulated and acknowledged by professional philosophers.

Sometimes, the works verge on the crankish. But generally speaking, they are produced by thoughtful people, advocating potentially interesting ideas, aimed at important issues. And maybe with sufficient work, the thoughts could be made to fly. But as pieces of philosophy, these works all appear amateur, in the same way that a college baseballer will appear amateur to a professional: it is just not up to the standard required in the major leagues.

Contemporary professional philosophy is a highly sophisticated enterprise. Ideas are not only put forward. They are analyzed; their strengths investigated; their weaknesses probed and counter-probed; their connections with other areas of philosophy and the history of philosophy are explored. The communications I am sent rarely get beyond putting forward an interesting idea.

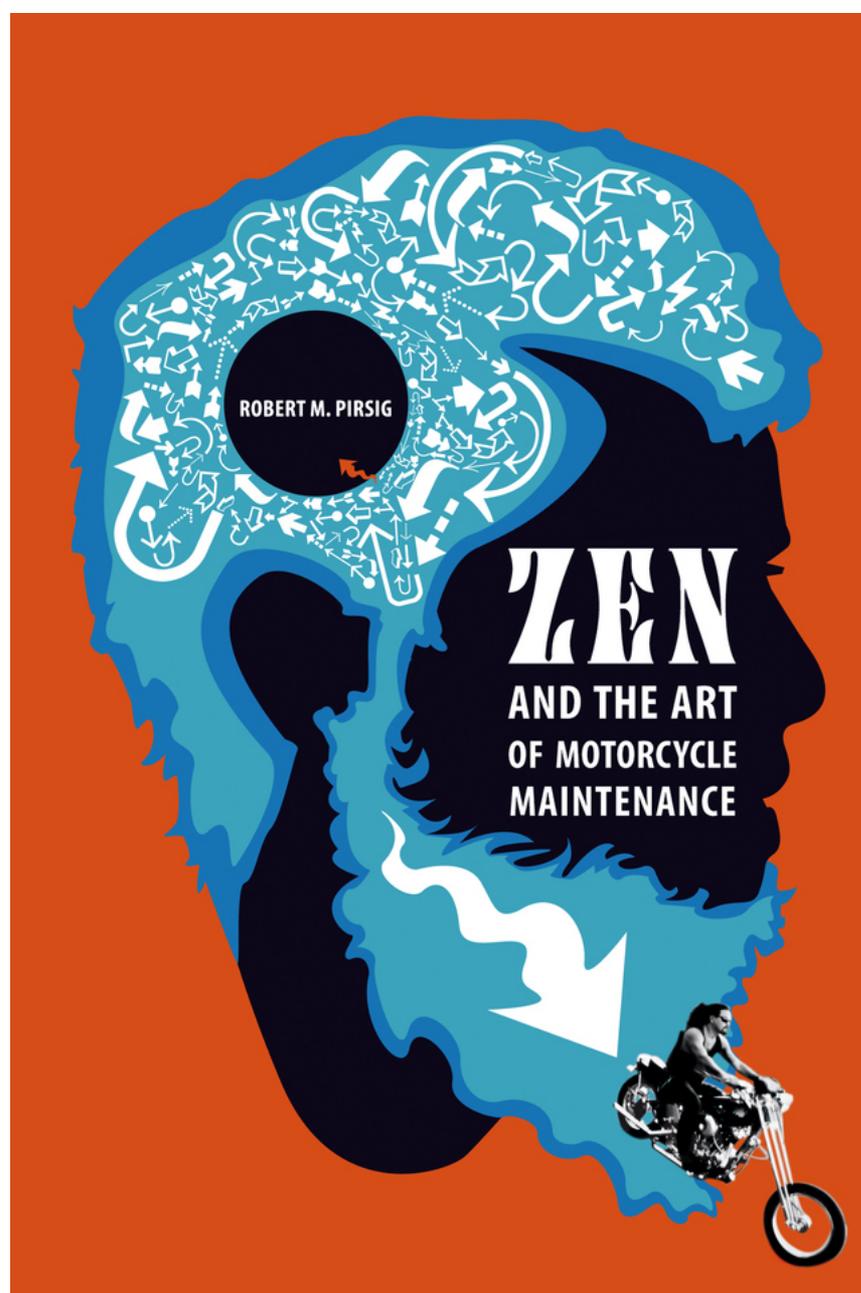
The contemporary philosophical profession is sometimes criticized for losing the wood for the trees—becoming obsessed with the analysis of minutiae—or even for forgetting the wood entirely. I think that there is a certain truth in this criticism. But it remains the case that good philosophy has always done more than put forward ideas. Analysis and criticism have forever been central to it. One has to have only a passing acquaintance with the work of Plato, Aquinas, Hume, Kant, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, to come to appreciate this fact.

One might then think it an act of hubris for amateur philosophers to want to play in the professional leagues. After all, for an amateur to suppose that they could make an important contribution to modern physics, economics, or psychology would certainly appear such (though I do receive manuscripts that try to do this too sometimes!). I don't think this is true in most cases, though. Philosophy is different from these other subjects. Most philosophical problems and ideas are ones that any thoughtful person can understand; many are important to people's

lives; and—unsurprisingly—people discuss them with friends when the conversation turns from the mundane to more serious topics. (I once heard Tom Stoppard say that the difference between a philosopher and a plumber is that when philosophers go to the pub, they discuss philosophy; whereas when plumbers go to the pub, they discuss . . . philosophy.) I think that this fact may make someone who has never had a professional training in philosophy think that they can contribute to contemporary philosophy in a way that they would never dream of thinking that they could contribute to physics or these other disciplines.

Anyway, the gulf between professional and amateur philosophers is every bit as wide as that between professional and amateur physicists. And that is why it will always be hard for the profession to engage seriously with amateur ideas. This is not to say that the ideas have no value. But it is to say that if they are to be made to shape up, this can be done only with the hard, critical work, which is necessary for taking them seriously. The technique for doing this is one of the things that a professional training in philosophy aspires to give people. And though I would not go so far as to say that it is impossible without this, it is certainly exceptionally difficult.

Now, and to return to *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*: its philosophical content just did not meet the standards of rigorous thought that contemporary professional philosophy requires. Thus, for example, one of the most central philosophical chapters is Chapter 20, where the metaphysics of Quality is laid out. Quality, it transpires, is an indefinable something which we experience and then conceptualise to produce our *Lebenswelt*. Any Western-trained philosopher at this point would think immediately of Kant, and would locate the view being discussed with



respect to his thought. Neither is this simply an act of scholarship. Western philosophers have had over 200 years to think through the problems associated with Kant's view; and a natural question is whether the view at hand is subject to some of the same problems, or can avoid or provide novel answers to them. Later in the chapter, it turns out that Quality is like the Dao of the *Dao De Jing*. Fair enough. But Chinese philosophers have had over 2000 years to ponder and comment on the notion, its problems and ramifications. No Eastern-trained philosopher dealing with the matter would ignore these sophisticated discussions.

Of course, it will be said that considerations such as these are out of place in a novel. And that is exactly right. But ideas expressed in fiction can only ever be the start of a conversation. It should be remembered that perhaps the greatest philosophical literary figure, Sartre, did not just write novels and plays. He wrote *Being and Nothingness* to provide the tough theoretical underpinnings of the ideas expressed in the literary works.

None of this is meant to denigrate *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* as a work of fiction; nor is it to say that the philosophical ideas in the book are uninteresting or unimportant; nor is it even to say that fiction is an inappropriate philosophical vehicle. It is simply to explain why the book was not taken up by the philosophical profession.