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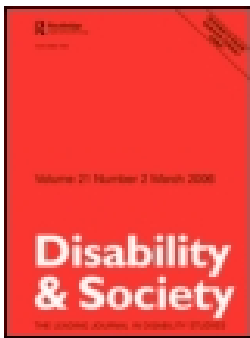
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Zen and the art of aut-ethnography: a tribute to Robert M. Pirsig

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ABSTRACT

With the passing of Robert M. Pirsig, I felt that it was an appropriate time to write a tribute to his work and the influence it has had on my own theorising in regard to autistic ways of being. This reflection utilises the concept of an 'aut-ethnography' to examine passages that I had highlighted word by word when I first read Pirsig's book: *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. These fragments contain links to a number of theoretical 'lines of flight' within my own work and that of others, from his concepts of dynamic 'quality' to his discussion on the tension between scientific method and lived experience.

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Introduction

Luckily, one might say, I grew up in a family that loved books. Although I was of the persuasion of reading the Atlas, or Observer books, there was one book on my mother's shelf that stood out above all the others with a strange and enticing title. That book was the best-selling philosophical novel *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (Pirsig 1974). It was not until I was a young adult that I actually read it, yet it was to have an impact upon me that perhaps few other books have, and so this article is a tribute to that influence.

When I first opened *Zen* and read the introductory phrase I was intrigued by the riddle of what it meant and what would lay ahead for me in reading it:

What is good, Phaedrus, and what is not good – Need we ask anyone to tell us these things? (Pirsig 1974, 9)

At the first time of reading, I was not sure if there was anything of meaning, let alone 'good'. In what sense did he mean 'good' anyway? Need we ask others? Perhaps, if one is not confident in one's own views? Can we trust such views though? Also, who was this mysterious Phaedrus character? Within the first few pages, however,

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I had started to underline passages in the text, each word underlined separately to show their significance.

Aut-ethnography

Unlike auto-ethnography which often seeks to construct a coherent narrative of self over time, to me an aut-ethnography (at least my experience/version) is a fragmented one, where snippets of information are formed into 'rhizomatic' patterns of shifting meanings. This article seeks to simply reflect on the passages I underlined some 25 years previously in my reading of Pirsig's first book (Pirsig 1974). I wanted to trace the passages I had originally highlighted and decipher patterns in the fragments that resonated with my work since that time.

Ghost in the machine

As a child I had experienced significant psychological trauma following a road-traffic accident and resultant symptoms that one might consider today as post-traumatic stress disorder. Having had some negative experiences with psychiatrists, I tended to avoid them. For a number of reasons I had also withdrawn from university. For years I had felt a 'presence' in my life that I found difficult to explain. Was it a 'displaced super-ego'? Was it just a symbolic manifestation of hidden influences upon my being as it was then, and is now? I called this alter-ego 'the conductor' and wrote poems about my relationship with this figure. It was quite a revelation to find interesting parallels with these experiences in Pirsig's work and the use of his Phaedrus, along with his accounts of trauma at the hands of psychiatric professionals. Making such a connection made me feel less isolated, less alone.

Your common sense is nothing more than the voices of thousands and thousands of these ghosts from the past. Ghosts and more ghosts. Ghosts trying to make their place among the living. (Pirsig 1974, 43)

This passage resonated with me then and now. Perhaps the 'conductor' was not a 'ghost' as such, but symbolic of my own cultural conditioning, the idiosyncratic vessel that absorbed and produced discourse and praxis within a habitus, the conditioning of my own sociality and disposition, my very own Phaedrus.

He felt that institutions such as schools, churches, governments, and political organisations of every sort all tended to direct thought for ends other than truth, for the perpetuation of their own functions, and for the control of individuals in the service of these functions. He came to see his earlier failure as a lucky break, an accidental escape from a trap that had been set for him, and he was very trap-wary of institutional truths for the remainder of his time. (Pirsig 1974, 124)

Whilst giving me solace from the traumatising experiences of school life and political alienation, this passage also gave my guilt some release of pressure for having withdrawn from university. Paradoxically, it was the tales of university life and philosophical subversion that gave me the 'gumption' to return to university.

When I returned to academia, I did so embodying the spirit of Phaedrus that I had read about. I was to be a natural philosopher, to playfully destabilise the taken-for-granted assumptions of anyone when I came across them. Perhaps it was I who was the ‘ghost in the system’ of sorts? At that time I had not come across ‘cripping’ or ‘queering’, let alone the concept of the ‘neuroqueer’ (Walker 2015), yet these ideas were certainly not alien to me when I did.

The scientific method and lived experience

What you’ve got here, really is *two* realities, one of immediate artistic appearance and one 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. (Pirsig 1974, 63; original emphasis)

Reminiscent of the work of C.P. Snow or the ‘science wars’ of the 1990s, Pirsig highlighted the ‘two realities’ of art and science. Also in this passage is the notion of two sides of his metaphysics of ‘quality’ which he was to frame later in *Lila* (Pirsig 1991) as ‘dynamic’ and ‘static’: the perception of immediate tacitly lived experience, and the formation of explicit and solidified codifications of experience. However:

When analytic thought, the knife, is applied to experience, something is always killed in the process. (Pirsig 1974, 86)

Similarly to Deligny (2015; Milton 2016) in his work with young autistic people, this form of analytic dissection is seen as a form of violence to the person and their experiences. Something is always lost in the process, whilst other things can become strangely reified through where our attention happens to be driven towards:

From all this awareness we must select, and what we select and call consciousness is never the same as the awareness because the process of selection mutates it. We take a handful of sand from the endless landscape of awareness around us and call that handful of sand the world. (Pirsig 1974, 85)

Monotropism, dispositional diversity and the double empathy problem

Some things you miss because they’re so tiny you overlook them. But some things you don’t see because they’re so huge. We were both looking at the same thing, seeing the same thing, talking about the same thing, thinking about the same thing, except he was looking, seeing, talking and *thinking*, from a completely different *dimension*. (Pirsig 1974, 62; original emphasis)

In this passage, Pirsig (1974) highlights how differences in dispositional perceptions can be markedly different, even if ostensibly ‘looking at the same thing’, an idea that was no doubt influential on ideas that I would develop into the theory of the ‘double empathy problem’ (Milton 2012). It is perhaps of particular interest that he should frame this within a context of a perception missing out on details, or in contrast missing out on something seemingly ‘huge’, a kind of split often

cited in relation to differences in perception between autistic and non-autistic people. A number of autistic scholars (Chown 2016; Lawson 2010; Murray, Lesser, and Lawson 2005) following the work of Murray (1992) have utilised notions of 'monotropism' or an 'interest' model of autism, suggesting that interest, attention and motivation can become differently channelled in autistic development. Pirsig (1974) uses the term 'gumption' in order to talk about such interest/motivation. A kind of fuel for engagement with the dynamic quality of immediate lived experience. Yet he also talked about 'gumption traps', where such interest can become blocked, sidetracked or entangled. He splits these into those which one may have little conscious control over (set-backs) and those one may have more input into (hang-ups), further broken down into: ego, anxiety and boredom.

Quality and flow

But some things *are* better than others, that is, they have more quality, but when you try and say what the quality is, apart from the things that have it, it all goes *poof!* There's nothing to talk about. (Pirsig 1974, 187; original emphasis)

The metaphysical concept of 'quality' that Pirsig utilises in *Zen* (Pirsig 1974) was further distinguished in *Lila* (Pirsig 1991) between 'dynamic' and 'static' quality. Far from being a binary analogy, Pirsig (1991) meant these terms as aspects of a dialectical monism. This quote from *Zen* indicates a description more akin to 'dynamic quality' as outlined in *Lila*. This aspect of 'quality' refers to perceptual sensory experience that precedes the intellectual construction and interpretation of experience. A similar concept was deployed in the work of Deligny (2015) in relation to autistic people. When the 'quality' of phenomena becomes more 'static', it means it becomes explicit and definable. One can question whether such 'quality' is truly 'static', yet such ideas are relatable to notions of tacit and explicit knowledge (see Milton 2014) and also the concept of flow (McDonnell and Milton 2014).

In previous work (McDonnell and Milton 2014) I have argued that the repetitive behaviours often referred to in relation to autistic people could be interpreted as 'flow'-like states, where someone is fully immersed in the 'dynamic quality' of an activity. Flow in this sense can be linked to the notion of 'gumption' (or interest). Interestingly, however, Pirsig relates notions of 'quality' and absorption in an activity with 'care':

When you want to hurry something, that means you no longer care about it and want to get on with other things. (Pirsig 1974, 36)

Where there is a lack of flow, a blockage in 'gumption', a lack of interest in an activity one is supposed to be engaging in, then one could also say that one does not 'care' for the activity. Such blockages can be said to lead to a state of alienation and anomie:

When one isn't dominated by feelings of separateness from what he's working on, then one can be said to 'care' about what he's doing. That is what caring really is, a feeling of identification with what one's doing. (Pirsig 1974, 300)

Could flow-like states of dynamic quality be said to ward against alienation and anomie, increase a sense of well-being and reduce negative experiences of stress? I have also previously theorised that autistic people may not be as dependent on previously learned mental schema and potentially more reliant on directly perceived phenomena 'in-the-moment' (Milton 2013). In this sense, autistic people could be said to be more in tune with the 'dynamic quality' that Pirsig speaks of, although perhaps less attuned to the more 'static' forms of 'quality' referred to?

What we think of as reality is a continuous synthesis of elements from a fixed hierarchy of a priori concepts and the ever changing data of the senses. (Pirsig 1974, 136)

What if the synthesis of elements for autistic people operates in idiosyncratic ways, as suggested by many autistic authors (Chown 2016; Lawson 2010; Murray 1992; Murray, Lesser, and Lawson 2005)? Would that not lead to challenges in building mutual understandings within social interaction (Milton 2012, 2014)?

Final remarks

In just two philosophical novels, Pirsig offers a myriad of insights that this article has merely scratched the surface of, and so I would encourage readers to dust down those old copies and read them anew.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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