

Quality and Morality: The Secret to Life

One of my personal bits of wisdom goes as follows: The secret to life is that there is no secret. I think I use this response when my intellectual back is against the wall or when I want to confirm my open system view of the world.

When a problem gets too complex for my brain and the paradigms it has adopted or invented, my brain sometimes slips into the “no secret to life” mode while waiting for a breakthrough in logic and understanding. Then, at another time, the thrill of completing these unfinished logic projects becomes one of life’s great rewards.

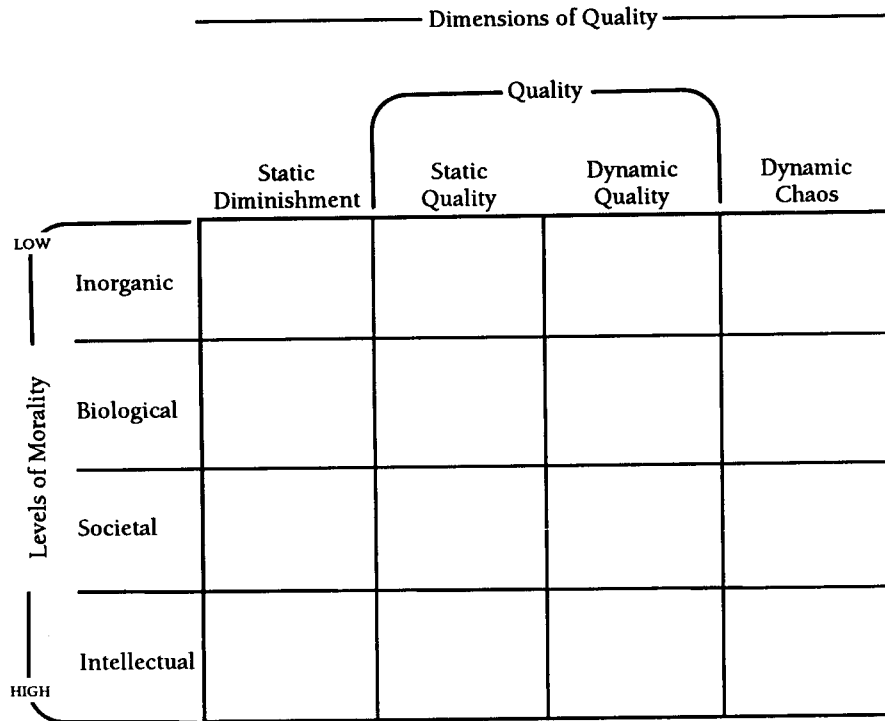
Robert Pirsig, through his new book, *Lila: An Inquiry into Morals*, recently penetrated my logic workshop and finished up a whole bunch of difficult projects that have been lying around for several years. What a gift. Although it would have been nice to have completed them all myself, I am delighted to have these hard-thinking projects out of the workshop and back in my functioning life.

Lila may be the most important book I have ever read. It already has changed my life. Pirsig’s work is about the metaphysics of quality. He has gathered up an explanation of our being that is both intellectually holistic and functionally relevant. Unlike the linear lists of commandments or principles we get from management and religious gurus, the model Pirsig provides does not require blind adoration and it leaves me in the driver’s seat. Needless to say, I am thrilled.

Pirsig is a very bright man and a crafty author. Through his sailboat journey from Minnesota to New Jersey, and his deeply emotional relationship with *Lila*, Pirsig kept me reading and thinking about stuff that pushes my brain to its limits. Metaphysics, according to Pirsig, “is the high country of the mind.” Thank goodness for passion and boats. Even so, I spent three days reading this book, and it was not easy. To cope with the complexity of the book, I made a picture. That is not quite right, I actually made about a dozen pictures. The first one was in pen—all the others were in pencil. Reading this editorial or seeing the picture should not ruin Pirsig’s book for you. Rather, they are intended to entice you to get it and read it. And, if you come up with your own picture, please send us a copy and consider writing a piece for the Forum section of *HRDQ*.

My graphic model catches, for me, the essence of Pirsig’s work (see Figure 1). The matrix has two axes, “Dimensions of Quality” and “Levels of

Figure 1. Conceptual Map of the Metaphysics of Quality



Morality.” The substance of each axis is singularly profound. I offer a few more words to entice you further into reading Pirsig.

The key to the “Dimensions of Quality” axis is Pirsig’s realization that quality has two already existing, opposing sides: static quality and dynamic quality. Pirsig’s earlier book, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values* (1974), was also about quality, but there he restricted quality to the arena of dynamic quality. Pirsig now says that is not adequate. Dynamic quality alone becomes chaos. Thus, *static quality* is also required and it should be open to and in search of *dynamic quality* elements with which to join.

In the early stages of the dynamic side of the equation, the terrorist elements of *dynamic chaos* are unfortunately indistinguishable from the *dynamic quality* elements. Whereas, on the static side of the equation, because of their inherent orderliness, the rigid and suffocating elements of *static diminishment* can be more easily distinguished from the *static quality* elements.

The second axis, “Levels of Morality,” creates an unexpected valuing tension on the pursuit of quality. Pirsig lays out four levels of morality: inorganic, biological, societal, and intellectual. These levels are in a hierarchy, with inorganic the lowest and intellectual the highest.

In the space I have here, I cannot do much more than tease you a bit about the potential significance of this hierarchy. To Pirsig, if a lower form of life feeds on a higher form of life, it is immoral. This is a powerful concept and one on which I plan to chew for a long time. How about the idea of a social pattern of values—playing video games—devouring an intellectual pattern of values—reading books? What about the drug problem in our nation viewed as an addict’s biological pattern that feeds off the societal pattern without adequate intervention at the intellectual level? Pirsig’s levels of morality would never tolerate the biological level feeding off the societal level, or the societal level feeding off the intellectual level. Read the book.

Most of us live lives that are a unique combination of dynamic and static quality. Our lives are concurrently threatened by dynamic chaos and static diminishment that push us to make choices. This helps make the milieu of life a bit clearer. Yet, the complexity of the choices that we have to make and those that others are trying to make for us, remains. *Ta da*—morality on a hierarchy!

Darn, I wish I had written this book! Oops, that sounds like envy. Let’s see, envy is “static diminishment” at a “societal level.” On second thought, let me adjust that thought: I’m really fortunate to have read Pirsig’s book, and I hope I can continue to integrate his ideas into my life.

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References

- Pirsig, R. M. (1974). *Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance: An inquiry into values*. New York: Morrow.
- Pirsig, R. M. (1991). *Lila: An inquiry into morals*. New York: Bantam.

