

## "Areté, Quality and The Good"

by Robert Pirsig

from *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*

*(In this excerpt, Pirsig is describing the intellectual investigation of the nature of Quality by a friend he calls Phaedrus. In it, he examines the roles of Plato, Aristotle, the Sophists and Buddhism in the nature of Quality.)*

I think it was Coleridge who said everyone is either a Platonist or an Aristotelian. People who can't stand Aristotle's endless specificity of detail are natural lovers of Plato's soaring generalities. People who can't stand the eternal lofty idealism of Plato welcome the down-to-earth facts of Aristotle. Plato is the essential Buddha-seeker who appears again and again in each generation, moving onward and upward toward the "one." Aristotle is the eternal motorcycle mechanic who prefers the "many." I myself am pretty much Aristotelian in this sense, preferring to find the Buddha in the quality of the facts around me, but Phædrus was clearly a Platonist by temperament and when the classes shifted to Plato he was greatly relieved. His Quality and Plato's Good were so similar that if it hadn't been for some notes Phædrus left I might have thought they were identical. But he denied it, and in time I came to see how important this denial was.

The course in the Analysis of Ideas and Study of Methods was not concerned with Plato's notion of the Good, however; it was concerned with Plato's notion of rhetoric. Rhetoric, Plato spells out very clearly, is in no way connected with the Good; rhetoric is "the Bad." The people Plato hates most, next to tyrants, are rhetoricians.

The first of the Platonic Dialogues assigned is the Gorgias, and Phædrus has a sense of having arrived. This at last is where he wants to be.

All along he has had a feeling of being swept forward by forces he doesn't understand...Messianic forces. October has come and gone. Days have become phantasmal and incoherent, except in terms of Quality. Nothing matters except that he has a new and shattering and world-shaking truth about to be born, and like it or not, the world is morally obligated to accept it.

In the dialogue, Gorgias is the name of a Sophist whom Socrates cross-examines. Socrates knows very well what Gorgias does for a living and how he does it, but he starts his Twenty Questions dialectic by asking Gorgias with what rhetoric is concerned. Gorgias answers that it is concerned with discourse. In answer to another question he says that its end is to persuade. In answer to another question he says its place is in the law courts and other assemblies. And in answer to still another question he says its subject is the just and the unjust. All this, which is simply Gorgias' description of what people called Sophists have tended to do, now becomes subtly rendered by Socrates' dialectic into something else. Rhetoric has become an object, and as an object has parts. And the parts have relationships to one another and these relations are immutable. One sees quite clearly in this dialogue how the analytic knife of Socrates hacks Gorgias' art into pieces. What is even more important, one sees that the pieces are the basis of Aristotle's art of rhetoric.

Socrates had been one of Phædrus' childhood heroes and it shocked and angered him to see this dialogue taking place. He filled the margins of the text with answers of his own. These must have frustrated him greatly, because there was no way of knowing how the dialogue would have gone if these answers had been made. At one place Socrates asks to what class of things do the words which Rhetoric uses relate. Gorgias answers, "The Greatest and the Best." Phædrus, no doubt recognizing Quality in this answer, has written "True!" in the margin. But Socrates responds that

this answer is ambiguous. He is still in the dark. "Liar!" writes Phædrus in the margin, and he cross-references a page in another dialogue where Socrates makes it clear he could not have been "in the dark."

Socrates is not using dialectic to understand rhetoric, he is using it to destroy it, or at least to bring it into disrepute, and so his questions are not real questions at all...they are just word-traps which Gorgias and his fellow rhetoricians fall into. Phædrus is quite incensed by all this and wishes he were there.

The next day he is at the library waiting for it to open and when it does he begins to read furiously, back behind Plato for the first time, into what little is known of those rhetoricians he so despised. And what he discovers begins to confirm what he has already intuited from his thoughts the evening before.

Plato's condemnation of the Sophists is one which many scholars have already taken with great misgivings. The Chairman of the committee himself has suggested that critics who are not certain what Plato meant should be equally uncertain of what Socrates' antagonists in the dialogues meant. When it is known that Plato put his own words in Socrates' mouth (Aristotle says this) there should be no reason to doubt that he could have put his own words into other mouths too.

Fragments by other ancients seemed to lead to other evaluations of the Sophists. Many of the older Sophists were selected as "ambassadors" of their cities, certainly no office of disrespect. The name Sophist was even applied without disparagement to Socrates and Plato themselves. It has even been suggested by some later historians that the reason Plato hated the Sophists so was that they could not compare with his master, Socrates, who was in actuality the greatest Sophist of them all. This last explanation is interesting, Phædrus thinks, but unsatisfactory. You don't abhor a school of which your master is a member. What was Plato's real purpose in this? Phædrus reads further and further into pre-Socratic Greek thought to find out, and eventually comes to the view that Plato's hatred of the rhetoricians was part of a much larger struggle in which the reality of the Good, represented by the Sophists, and the reality of the True, represented by the dialecticians, were engaged in a huge struggle for the future mind of man. Truth won, the Good lost, and that is why today we have so little difficulty accepting the reality of truth and so much difficulty accepting the reality of Quality, even though there is no more agreement in one area than in the other.

To understand how Phædrus arrives at this requires some explanation:

One must first get over the idea that the time span between the last caveman and the first Greek philosophers was short. The absence of any history for this period sometimes gives this illusion. But before the Greek philosophers arrived on the scene, for a period of at least five times all our recorded history since the Greek philosophers, there existed civilizations in an advanced state of development. They had villages and cities, vehicles, houses, marketplaces, bounded fields, agricultural implements and domestic animals, and led a life quite as rich and varied as that in most rural areas of the world today. And like people in those areas today they saw no reason to write it all down, or if they did, they wrote it on materials that have never been found. Thus we know nothing about them. The "Dark Ages" were merely the resumption of a natural way of life that had been momentarily interrupted by the Greeks.

Early Greek philosophy represented the first conscious search for what was imperishable in the affairs of men. Up to then what was imperishable was within the domain of the Gods, the myths. But now, as a result of the growing impartiality of the Greeks to the world around them, there was

an increasing power of abstraction which permitted them to regard the old Greek mythos not as revealed truth but as imaginative creations of art. This consciousness, which had never existed anywhere before in the world, spelled a whole new level of transcendence for the Greek civilization.

But the mythos goes on, and that which destroys the old mythos becomes the new mythos, and the new mythos under the first Ionian philosophers became transmuted into philosophy, which enshrined permanence in a new way. Permanence was no longer the exclusive domain of the Immortal Gods. It was also to be found within Immortal Principles, of which our current law of gravity has become one.

The Immortal Principle was first called water by Thales. Anaximenes called it air. The Pythagoreans called it number and were thus the first to see the Immortal Principle as something nonmaterial. Heraclitus called the Immortal Principle fire and introduced change as part of the Principle. He said the world exists as a conflict and tension of opposites. He said there is a One and there is a Many and the One is the universal law which is immanent in all things. Anaxagoras was the first to identify the One as *nous*, meaning "mind."

Parmenides made it clear for the first time that the Immortal Principle, the One, Truth, God, is separate from appearance and from opinion, and the importance of this separation and its effect upon subsequent history cannot be overstated. It's here that the classic mind, for the first time, took leave of its romantic origins and said, "The Good and the True are not necessarily the same," and goes its separate way. Anaxagoras and Parmenides had a listener named Socrates who carried their ideas into full fruition.

What is essential to understand at this point is that until now there was no such thing as mind and matter, subject and object, form and substance. Those divisions are just dialectical inventions that came later. The modern mind sometimes tends to balk at the thought of these dichotomies being inventions and says, "Well, the divisions were there for the Greeks to discover," and you have to say, "Where were they? Point to them!" And the modern mind gets a little confused and wonders what this is all about anyway, and still believes the divisions were there.

But they weren't, as Phædrus said. They are just ghosts, immortal gods of the modern mythos which appear to us to be real because we are in that mythos. But in reality they are just as much an artistic creation as the anthropomorphic Gods they replaced.

The pre-Socratic philosophers mentioned so far all sought to establish a universal Immortal Principle in the external world they found around them. Their common effort united them into a group that may be called Cosmologists. They all agreed that such a principle existed but their disagreements as to what it was seemed irresolvable. The followers of Heraclitus insisted the Immortal Principle was change and motion. But Parmenides' disciple, Zeno, proved through a series of paradoxes that any perception of motion and change is illusory. Reality had to be motionless.

The resolution of the arguments of the Cosmologists came from a new direction entirely, from a group Phædrus seemed to feel were early humanists. They were teachers, but what they sought to teach was not principles, but beliefs of men. Their object was not any single absolute truth, but the improvement of men. All principles, all truths, are relative, they said. "Man is the measure of all things." These were the famous teachers of "wisdom," the Sophists of ancient Greece.

To Phædrus, this backlight from the conflict between the Sophists and the Cosmologists adds an entirely new dimension to the Dialogues of Plato. Socrates is not just expounding noble ideas in a vacuum. He is in the middle of a war between those who think truth is absolute and those who think truth is relative. He is fighting that war with everything he has. The Sophists are the enemy.

Now Plato's hatred of the Sophists makes sense. He and Socrates are defending the Immortal Principle of the Cosmologists against what they consider to be the decadence of the Sophists. Truth. Knowledge. That which is independent of what anyone thinks about it. The ideal that Socrates died for. The ideal that Greece alone possesses for the first time in the history of the world. It is still a very fragile thing. It can disappear completely. Plato abhors and damns the Sophists without restraint, not because they are low and immoral people...there are obviously much lower and more immoral people in Greece he completely ignores. He damns them because they threaten mankind's first beginning grasp of the idea of truth. That's what it is all about.

The results of Socrates' martyrdom and Plato's unexcelled prose that followed are nothing less than the whole world of Western man as we know it. If the idea of truth had been allowed to perish undiscovered by the Renaissance it's unlikely that we would be much beyond the level of prehistoric man today. The ideas of science and technology and other systematically organized efforts of man are dead-centered on it. It is the nucleus of it all.

And yet, Phædrus understands, what he is saying about Quality is somehow opposed to all this. It seems to agree much more closely with the Sophists.

"Man is the measure of all things." Yes, that's what he is saying about Quality. Man is not the source of all things, as the subjective idealists would say. Nor is he the passive observer of all things, as the objective idealists and materialists would say. The Quality which creates the world emerges as a relationship between man and his experience. He is a participant in the creation of all things. The measure of all things...it fits. And they taught rhetoric...that fits.

The one thing that doesn't fit what he says and what Plato said about the Sophists is their profession of teaching virtue. All accounts indicate this was absolutely central to their teaching, but how are you going to teach virtue if you teach the relativity of all ethical ideas? Virtue, if it implies anything at all, implies an ethical absolute. A person whose idea of what is proper varies from day to day can be admired for his broadmindedness, but not for his virtue. Not, at least, as Phædrus understands the word. And how could they get virtue out of rhetoric? This is never explained anywhere. Something is missing.

His search for it takes him through a number of histories of ancient Greece, which as usual he reads detective style, looking only for facts that may help him and discarding all those that don't fit. And he is reading H. D. F. Kitto's *The Greeks*, a blue and white paperback which he has bought for fifty cents, and he has reached a passage that describes "the very soul of the Homeric hero," the legendary figure of predecadent, pre-Socratic Greece. The flash of illumination that follows these pages is so intense the heroes are never erased and I can see them with little effort of recall.

The Iliad is the story of the siege of Troy, which will fall in the dust, and of its defenders who will be killed in battle. The wife of Hector, the leader, says to him: "Your strength will be your destruction; and you have no pity either for your infant son or for your unhappy wife who will soon be your widow. For soon the Achaeans will set upon you and kill you; and if I lose you it would be better for me to die."

Her husband replies:

"Well do I know this, and I am sure of it: that day is coming when the holy city of Troy will perish, and Priam and the people of wealthy Priam. But my grief is not so much for the Trojans, nor for Hecuba herself, nor for Priam the King, nor for my many noble brothers, who will be slain by the foe and will lie in the dust, as for you, when one of the bronze-clad Achaeans will carry you away in tears and end your days of freedom. Then you may live in Argos, and work at the loom in another woman's house, or perhaps carry water for a woman of Messene or Hyperia, sore against your will: but hard compulsion will lie upon you. And then a man will say as he sees you weeping, 'This was the wife of Hector, who was the noblest in battle of the horse-taming Trojans, when they were fighting around Ilion.' This is what they will say: and it will be fresh grief for you, to fight against slavery bereft of a husband like that. But may I be dead, may the earth be heaped over my grave before I hear your cries, and of the violence done to you."

So spake shining Hector and held out his arms to his son. But the child screamed and shrank back into the bosom of the well-girdled nurse, for he took fright at the sight of his dear father...at the bronze and the crest of the horsehair which he saw swaying terribly from the top of the helmet. His father laughed aloud, and his lady mother too. At once shining Hector took the helmet off his head and laid it on the ground, and when he had kissed his dear son and dandled him in his arms, he prayed to Zeus and to the other Gods: Zeus and ye other Gods, grant that this my son may be, as I am, most glorious among the Trojans and a man of might, and greatly rule in Ilion. And may they say, as he returns from war, 'He is far better than his father.'

"What moves the Greek warrior to deeds of heroism," Kitto comments, "is not a sense of duty as we understand it...duty towards others: it is rather duty towards himself. He strives after that which we translate 'virtue' but is in Greek areté, 'excellence' -- we shall have much to say about areté. It runs through Greek life."

There, Phædrus thinks, is a definition of Quality that had existed a thousand years before the dialecticians ever thought to put it to word-traps. Anyone who cannot understand this meaning without logical definiens and definendum and differentia is either lying or so out of touch with the common lot of humanity as to be unworthy of receiving any reply whatsoever. Phædrus is fascinated too by the description of the motive of "duty toward self" which is an almost exact translation of the Sanskrit word dharma, sometimes described as the "one" of the Hindus. Can the dharma of the Hindus and the "virtue" of the ancient Greeks be identical?

Then Phædrus feels a tugging to read the passage again, and he does so and then -- what's this?! -- "That which we translate 'virtue' but is in Greek 'excellence.'"

Lightning hits!

Quality! Virtue! Dharma! That is what the Sophists were teaching! Not ethical relativism. Not pristine "virtue." But areté. Excellence. Dharma! Before the Church of Reason. Before substance. Before form. Before mind and matter. Before dialectic itself. Quality had been absolute. Those first teachers of the Western world were teaching Quality, and the medium they had chosen was that of rhetoric. He has been doing it right all along.

Kitto had more to say about this areté of the ancient Greeks. "When we meet areté in Plato," he said, "we translate it 'virtue' and consequently miss all the flavour of it. 'Virtue,' at least in modern English, is almost entirely a moral word; areté, on the other hand, is used indifferently in all the categories, and simply means excellence."

Thus the hero of the Odyssey is a great fighter, a wily schemer, a ready speaker, a man of stout heart and broad wisdom who knows that he must endure without too much complaining what the gods send; and he can both build and sail a boat, drive a furrow as straight as anyone, beat a young braggart at throwing the discus, challenge the Pheacian youth at boxing, wrestling or running; flay, skin, cut up and cook an ox, and be moved to tears by a song. He is in fact an excellent all-rounder; he has surpassing areté.

Areté implies a respect for the wholeness or oneness of life, and a consequent dislike of specialization. It implies a contempt for efficiency...or rather a much higher idea of efficiency, an efficiency which exists not in one department of life but in life itself.

Phædrus remembered a line from Thoreau: "You never gain something but that you lose something." And now he began to see for the first time the unbelievable magnitude of what man, when he gained power to understand and rule the world in terms of dialectic truths, had lost. He had built empires of scientific capability to manipulate the phenomena of nature into enormous manifestations of his own dreams of power and wealth...but for this he had exchanged an empire of understanding of equal magnitude: an understanding of what it is to be a part of the world, and not an enemy of it.

One can acquire some peace of mind from just watching that horizon. It's a geometer's line -- completely flat, steady and known. Perhaps it's the original line that gave rise to Euclid's understanding of liness; a reference line from which was derived the original calculations of the first astronomers that charted the stars.

Phædrus knew, with the same mathematical assurance Poincaré had felt when he resolved the Fuchsian equations, that this Greek areté was the missing piece that completed the pattern, but he read on now for completion.

The halo around the heads of Plato and Socrates is now gone. He sees that they consistently are doing exactly that which they accuse the Sophists of doing...using emotionally persuasive language for the ulterior purpose of making the weaker argument, the case for dialectic, appear the stronger. We always condemn most in others, he thought, that which we most fear in ourselves.

But why? Phædrus wondered. Why destroy areté? And no sooner had he asked the question than the answer came to him. Plato hadn't tried to destroy areté. He had encapsulated it; made a permanent, fixed Idea out of it; had converted it to a rigid, immobile Immortal Truth. He made areté the Good, the highest form, the highest Idea of all. It was subordinate only to Truth itself, in a synthesis of all that had gone before.

That was why the Quality that Phædrus had arrived at in the classroom had seemed so close to Plato's Good. Plato's Good was taken from the rhetoricians. Phædrus searched, but could find no previous cosmologists who had talked about the Good. That was from the Sophists. The difference was that Plato's Good was a fixed and eternal and unmoving Idea, whereas for the rhetoricians it was not an Idea at all. The Good was not a form of reality. It was reality itself, ever changing, ultimately unknowable in any kind of fixed, rigid way.

Why had Plato done this? Phædrus saw Plato's philosophy as a result of two syntheses.

The first synthesis tried to resolve differences between the Heraclitans and the followers of Parmenides. Both Cosmological schools upheld Immortal Truth. In order to win the battle for

Truth in which areté is subordinate, against his enemies who would teach areté in which truth is subordinate, Plato must first resolve the internal conflict among the Truth-believers. To do this he says that Immortal Truth is not just change, as the followers of Heraclitus said. It is not just changeless being, as the followers of Parmenides said. Both these Immortal Truths coexist as Ideas, which are changeless, and Appearance, which changes. This is why Plato finds it necessary to separate, for example, "horseness" from "horse" and say that horseness is real and fixed and true and unmoving, while the horse is a mere, unimportant, transitory phenomenon. Horseness is pure Idea. The horse that one sees is a collection of changing Appearances, a horse that can flux and move around all it wants to and even die on the spot without disturbing horseness, which is the Immortal Principle and can go on forever in the path of the Gods of old.

Plato's second synthesis is the incorporation of the Sophists' areté into this dichotomy of Ideas and Appearance. He gives it the position of highest honor, subordinate only to Truth itself and the method by which Truth is arrived at, the dialectic. But in his attempt to unite the Good and the True by making the Good the highest Idea of all, Plato is nevertheless usurping areté's place with dialectically determined truth. Once the Good has been contained as a dialectical idea it is no trouble for another philosopher to come along and show by dialectical methods that areté, the Good, can be more advantageously demoted to a lower position within a "true" order of things, more compatible with the inner workings of dialectic. Such a philosopher was not long in coming. His name was Aristotle.

Aristotle felt that the mortal horse of Appearance which ate grass and took people places and gave birth to little horses deserved far more attention than Plato was giving it. He said that the horse is not mere Appearance. The Appearances cling to something which is independent of them and which, like Ideas, is unchanging. The "something" that Appearances cling to he named "substance." And at that moment, and not until that moment, our modern scientific understanding of reality was born.

Under Aristotle the "Reader," whose knowledge of Trojan areté seems conspicuously absent, forms and substances dominate all. The Good is a relatively minor branch of knowledge called ethics; reason, logic, knowledge are his primary concerns. Areté is dead and science, logic and the University as we know it today have been given their founding charter: to find and invent an endless proliferation of forms about the substantive elements of the world and call these forms knowledge, and transmit these forms to future generations. As "the system."

And rhetoric. Poor rhetoric, once "learning" itself, now becomes reduced to the teaching of mannerisms and forms, Aristotelian forms, for writing, as if these mattered. Five spelling errors, Phædrus remembered, or one error of sentence completeness, or three misplaced modifiers, or -- it went on and on. Any of these was sufficient to inform a student that he did not know rhetoric. After all, that's what rhetoric is, isn't it? Of course there's "empty rhetoric," that is, rhetoric that has emotional appeal without proper subservience to dialectical truth, but we don't want any of that, do we? That would make us like those liars and cheats and defilers of ancient Greece, the Sophists...remember them? We'll learn the Truth in our other academic courses, and then learn a little rhetoric so that we can write it nicely and impress our bosses who will advance us to higher positions.

Forms and mannerisms...hated by the best, loved by the worst. Year after year, decade after decade of little front-row "readers," mimics with pretty smiles and neat pens, out to get their Aristotelian A's while those who possess the real areté sit silently in back of them wondering what is wrong with themselves that they cannot like this subject.

And today in those few Universities that bother to teach classic ethics anymore, students, following the lead of Aristotle and Plato, endlessly play around with the question that in ancient Greece never needed to be asked: "What is the Good? And how do we define it? Since different people have defined it differently, how can we know there is any good? Some say the good is found in happiness, but how do we know what happiness is? And how can happiness be defined? Happiness and good are not objective terms. We cannot deal with them scientifically. And since they aren't objective they just exist in your mind. So if you want to be happy just change your mind. Ha-ha, ha-ha."

Aristotelian ethics, Aristotelian definitions, Aristotelian logic, Aristotelian forms, Aristotelian substances, Aristotelian rhetoric, Aristotelian laughter -- ha-ha, ha-ha.

And the bones of the Sophists long ago turned to dust and what they said turned to dust with them and the dust was buried under the rubble of declining Athens through its fall and Macedonia through its decline and fall. Through the decline and death of ancient Rome and Byzantium and the Ottoman Empire and the modern states...buried so deep and with such ceremoniousness and such unction and such evil that only a madman centuries later could discover the clues needed to uncover them, and see with horror what had been done.