

Zen and the art of paper aeroplane manufacture - preliminary thoughts only

For awhile during the 1950s to 1980s we were all assailed with articles and books with titles like "Zen and the art of ...". By now there are more than 200 books with titles beginning "Zen and the art of ...".

It seems that the spate was actually begun by "Zen and the Art of Archery" by Eugen Herrigel. That book contains often reasonably accurate ideas about motor learning and control. These may be said to give rules for learning any sport or physical activity. For example, a central idea in the book is that through years of practice, a physical activity becomes effortless both mentally and physically, as if the body executes complex and difficult movements without conscious control from the mind.

The most famous of the "Zen and the art of ..." books was perhaps Robert Pirsig's "Zen and the art of motorbike maintainance" which sold 4 million copies in some 27 languages. This book appears to have been written around 1972 when Pirsig seems to have become acquainted with details⁽¹⁾ of Zen, a subject which was of popular interest to many a good deal earlier in the 1950s and of course had been proposed by Pirsig shortly after his evident catatonia (or possibly Zen enlightenment around 1961) and the subject had been discussed with him during his involvement in the war in Korea in 1947. This book has always seemed to me to have had a great deal to do with Zen, and indeed motorcycle maintainance, although many people, possibly including Pirsig, construe it to be a review of Pirsig's so-called "metaphysics of quality". Pirsig seemingly tries to explain that he seeks a middle ground between rational understanding and romantic perception.

Particularly intriguing is the so-called "Pirsig's Paradox" (Appendix).

In some ways one could glibly argue that all this is something like a union of the McTaggart A series and the McTaggart B series. But as, hopefully, we have seen, it is not quite that simple. For example the work of Alan Watts⁽⁶⁾ seems to actually try to involve both rationality and contemplation into the Zen concept.

Then again, Pirsig appears to have been mad and Watts a supporter of the use of hallucinogens, and both approaches are clearly at variance with present efforts.

While a consideration of such views persist, up to a point modern sceptics can readily rebut Pirsig's views⁽²⁾, perhaps along the lines of reasonable reification arguments. But we bear in mind that our aim is not to establish a view on scientific materialism, or atheism or anything along those lines. There are many practical problems with the (metaphorical) 'new Turks' or Dawkins style views on atheism, as for example in the idea of a higher intelligence such as some form of AI⁺⁺⁽⁶⁾ or maybe simply the notion a quite likely⁽⁷⁾ more advanced entity which must in many ways be equivalent to or even coexist with even a quite banal God concept. That idea is almost like a very basic view of Hinduism! In the present context one tries to stand back from such contests and there seems to be an ultimate irony in the idea of atheists attacking a godless religion like Buddhism. But such argumentation is, at most, a side issue. Pirsig seems to think he is saying something and we are trying to extract a useful root view from it, or relate to a useful root view. We basically could appear somewhat like the 'six blind men of Indostan' in the John Godfrey Saxe poem about the six blind men and the elephant. Rovelli⁽³⁾ may say "everybody hears everybody else stating that they see the same elephant he sees" but it is far from clear that even that is the case and we can easily find that we are in some kind of philosophical regress. This is not our desired territory and we do not want to juggle with words either.

So we presently neither want to seek some rebuttal, nor are we intending to promote a view on medical or non medical drug applications. Rather we are studying time and consciousness, often in terms of the A series and the B series.

We therefore consider the relation of modern neurophysiology to Buddhism^(9, etc) and also the waterfall effect, the McCollough effect, the reverse-McCollough effect, and so on, and get as close as down and dirty as we can with paper aeroplanes⁽⁴⁾ and similar modern ideas which may be of a similar nature in

application to Zen archery and contemplation. This is less to improve mental or physical agility but more to improve and re form our ideas and concepts.

We note also the well-intentioned thoughts of Adrian Bejan and his constructal ideas, "Cognition is the name of the constructal evolution of the brain's architecture, every minute and every moment," Bejan said. "This is the phenomenon of thinking, knowing, and then thinking again more efficiently. Getting smarter is the constructal law in action."

Here, too, the work of Prigogine and his believed temporal entropic direction ideas may be considered, as thermodynamics is also being implied by Roy Baumeister as being directly related to free will and decision making. Here our own Romeo and Juliet concepts⁽⁶⁾ using Sprott's ideas may help even to introduce an implied mathematical formalism.

Appendix

In "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" page 38, Pirsig writes "(ghosts) are unscientific. They contain no matter and have no energy and therefore according to the laws of science, do not exist except in people's minds. Of course, the laws of science contain no matter and have no energy either and therefore do not exist except in people's minds. It's best to refuse to believe in either ghosts or the laws of science." Pirsig then explains that he does believe in ghosts. "you will go round and round until you realize that the law of gravity did not exist before Isaac Newton. So the law of gravity exists nowhere except in people's heads. It is a ghost!"

References

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