**An excerpt from Philosopher ROBERT PIRSIG’s
*ZEN AND THE ART OF MOTORCYCLE MAINTENANCE (1976)
A novel combined with a philosophical exploration of human understanding and the concept of “the Good”*
On “Classical” and “Romantic” modes of thought:**
I want to divide human understanding into two kinds...classical understanding and romantic understanding. In terms of ultimate truth a dichotomy of this sort has little meaning but it is quite legitimate when one is operating within the classic mode used to discover or create a world of underlying form. The terms classic and romantic … mean the following:

-A **classical understanding** sees the world primarily as underlying form itself.

-A **romantic understanding** sees it primarily in terms of immediate appearance.

If you were to show an engine or a mechanical drawing or electronic schematic to a romantic it is unlikely he would see much of interest in it. It has no appeal because the reality he sees is its surface. Dull, complex lists of names, lines and numbers. Nothing interesting. But if you were to show the same blueprint or schematic or give the same description to a classical person he might look at it and then become fascinated by it because he sees that within the lines and shapes and symbols is a tremendous richness of underlying form. The romantic mode is primarily inspirational, imaginative, creative, intuitive. Feelings rather than facts predominate. ``Art'' when it is opposed to ``Science'' is often romantic. It does not proceed by reason or by laws. It proceeds by feeling, intuition and esthetic conscience. In the northern European cultures the romantic mode is usually associated with femininity, but this is certainly not a necessary association.

The classic mode, by contrast, proceeds by reason and by laws...which are themselves underlying forms of thought and behavior. In the European cultures it is primarily a masculine mode and the fields of science, law and medicine are often unattractive to women largely for this reason. Although motorcycle riding is romantic, motorcycle maintenance is purely classic. The dirt, the grease, the mastery of underlying form required all give it such a negative romantic appeal that women never go near it. Although surface ugliness is often found in the classic mode of understanding it is not inherent in it. There is a classic esthetic which romantics often miss because of its subtlety. The classic style is straightforward, unadorned, unemotional, economical and carefully proportioned. Its purpose is not to inspire emotionally, but to bring order out of chaos and make the unknown known. It is not an esthetically free and natural style. It is esthetically restrained. Everything is under control. Its value is measured in terms of the skill with which this control is maintained.

To a romantic this classic mode often appears dull, awkward and ugly, like mechanical maintenance itself. Everything is in terms of pieces and parts and components and relationships. Nothing is figured out until it's run through the computer a dozen times. Everything's got to be measured and proved. Oppressive. Heavy. Endlessly grey. The death force.

Within the classic mode, however, the romantic has some appearances of his own. Frivolous, irrational, erratic, untrustworthy, interested primarily in pleasure-seeking. Shallow. Of no substance. Often a parasite who cannot or will not carry his own weight. A real drag on society. By now these battle lines should sound a little familiar.

This is the source of the trouble. Persons tend to think and feel exclusively in one mode or the other and in doing so tend to misunderstand and underestimate what the other mode is all about. But no one is willing to give up the truth as he sees it, and as far as I know, no one now living has any real reconciliation of these truths or modes. There is no point at which these visions of reality are unified. And so in recent times we have seen a huge split develop between a classic culture and a romantic counterculture...two worlds growingly alienated and hateful toward each other with everyone wondering if it will always be this way, a house divided against itself. No one wants it really...despite what his antagonists in the other dimension might think.

(“Classical”) rationality has been used since antiquity to remove oneself from the tedium and depression of one's immediate surroundings. What makes it hard to see is that where once it was used to get away from it all, the escape has been so successful that now it is the ``it all'' that the romantics are trying to escape. What makes this world so hard to see clearly is not its strangeness but its usualness. Familiarity can blind you too. This way of looking at things produces a kind of description that can be called an ``analytic'' description. That is another name of the classic platform from which one discusses things in terms of their underlying form. And to give a fuller description of what this is I want now to turn this analytic approach back upon itself...to analyze analysis itself.

I want to do this first of all by giving an extensive example of it and then by dissecting what it is. The motorcycle is a perfect subject for it since the motorcycle itself was invented by classic minds. So listen:

A motorcycle may be divided for purposes of classical/rational analysis by means of its component assemblies and by means of its functions. If divided by means of its component assemblies, its most basic division is into a power assembly and a running assembly.

The power assembly may be divided into the engine and the power-delivery system … The engine consists of a housing containing a power train, a fuel-air system, an ignition system, a feedback system and a lubrication system. The power train consists of cylinders, pistons, connecting rods, a crankshaft and a flywheel. The fuel-air system components, which are part of the engine, consist of a gas tank and filter, an air cleaner, a carburetor, valves and exhaust pipes…

And so on. I could go on about which functions occur in their proper sequence during each of the four cycles, then go on to the operator controlled functions and that would be a very summary description of the underlying form of a motorcycle. It would be extremely short and rudimentary, as descriptions of this sort go. Almost any one of the components mentioned can be expanded on indefinitely. I've read an entire engineering volume on contact points alone, which are just a small but vital part of the distributor. There are other types of engines than the single cylinder Otto engine described here: two-cycle engines, multiple-cylinder engines, diesel engines, Wankel engines...but this example is enough. This description would cover the ``what'' of the motorcycle in terms of components, and the ``how'' of the engine in terms of functions. It would badly need a ``where'' analysis in the form of an illustration, and also a ``why'' analysis in the form of engineering principles that led to this particular conformation of parts. But the purpose here isn't exhaustively to analyze the motorcycle. It's to provide a starting point, an example of a mode of understanding of things which will itself become an object of analysis.

There's certainly nothing strange about this description at first hearing. It sounds like something from a beginning textbook on the subject, or perhaps a first lesson in a vocational course. What is unusual about it is seen when it ceases to be a mode of discourse and becomes an object of discourse. Then certain things can be pointed to.

The first thing to be observed about this description is so obvious you have to hold it down or it will drown out every other observation. This is: It is just duller than ditchwater. Yah-da, yah-da, yah-da, yah-da, yah, carburetor, gear ratio, compression, yah-da-yah, piston, plugs, intake, yah-da-yah, on and on and on. That is the romantic face of the classic mode. Dull, awkward and ugly. Few romantics get beyond that point. But if you can hold down that most obvious observation, some other things can be noticed that do not at first appear.

The first is that the motorcycle, so described, is almost impossible to understand unless you already know how one works. The immediate surface impressions that are essential for primary understanding are gone. Only the

underlying form is left. The second is that the observer is missing. The description doesn't say that to see the piston you must remove the cylinder head. ``You'' aren't anywhere in the picture. Even the ``operator'' is a kind of personalityless robot whose performance of a function on the machine is completely mechanical. There are no real subjects in this description. Only objects exist that are independent of any observer. The third is that the words ``good'' and ``bad'' and all their synonyms are completely absent. No value judgments have been expressed anywhere, only facts.

The fourth is that there is a knife moving here. A very deadly one; an intellectual scalpel so swift and so sharp you sometimes don't see it moving. You get the illusion that all those parts are just there and are being named as they exist. But they can be named quite differently and organized quite differently depending on how the knife moves.

For example, the feedback mechanism which includes the camshaft and cam chain and tappets and distributor exists only because of an unusual cut of this analytic knife. If you were to go to a motorcycle-parts department and ask them for a feedback assembly they wouldn't know what the hell you were talking about. They don't split it up that way. No two manufacturers ever split it up quite the same way and every mechanic is familiar with the problem of the part you can't buy because you can't find it because the manufacturer considers it a part of something else.

It is important to see this knife for what it is and not to be fooled into thinking that motorcycles or anything else are the way they are just because the knife happened to cut it up that way. It is important to concentrate on the knife itself. The application of this knife, the division of the world into parts and the building of this structure, is something everybody does. All the time we are aware of millions of things around us...these changing shapes, these burning hills, the sound of the engine, the feel of the throttle, each rock and weed and fence post and piece of debris beside the road...aware of these things but not really conscious of them unless there is something unusual or unless they reflect something we are predisposed to see. We could not possibly be conscious of these things and remember all of them because our mind would be so full of useless details we would be unable to think. 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.

Once we have the handful of sand, the world of which we are conscious, a process of discrimination goes to work on it.

This is the knife. We divide the sand into parts. This and that. Here and there. Black and white. Now and

then. The discrimination is the division of the conscious universe into parts. The handful of sand looks uniform at first, but the longer we look at it the more diverse we find it to be. Each grain of sand is different. No two are alike. Some are similar in one way, some are similar in another way, and we can form the sand into separate piles on the basis of this similarity and dissimilarity. Shades of color in different piles...sizes in different piles...grain shapes in different piles...subtypes of grain shapes in different piles...grades of opacity in different piles...and so on, and on, and on. You'd think the process of subdivision and classification would come to an end somewhere, but it doesn't. It just goes on and on.

Classical understanding is concerned with the piles and the basis for sorting and interrelating them. Romantic understanding is directed toward the handful of sand before the sorting begins. Both are valid ways of looking at the world although irreconcilable with each other. What has become an urgent necessity is a way of looking at the world that does violence to neither of these two kinds of understanding and unite them into one. Such an understanding will not reject sand-sorting or contemplation of unsorted sand for its own sake. Such an understanding will instead seek to direct attention to the endless landscape from which the sand is taken.
When analytic thought, the knife, is applied to experience, something is always killed in the process. That is fairly well understood, at least in the arts. Mark Twain's experience comes to mind, in which, after he had mastered the analytic knowledge needed to pilot the Mississippi River, he discovered the river had lost its beauty. Something is always killed. But what is less noticed in the arts...something is always created too. And instead of just dwelling on what is killed it's important also to see what's created and to see the process as a kind of death-birth continuity that is neither good nor bad, but just *is.*

Response to Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance Excerpt:

1. Do you see yourself as primarily “classical” or “romantic”? Why?

2. What are some modern examples of classicism and romanticism