

ZAMM AND THE ART OF PHILOSOPHICAL FICTION

Special Issue on Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, A Retrospective Roundtable, Forty Years Down the Road, *International Journal of Motorcycle Studies*, 10: Fall 2014

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Abstract

How should *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (ZAMM) be classified as a piece of writing? Is it a work of fiction or a work of philosophy? The author, Pirsig, is keen to classify it as philosophy; the publisher classifies it as both philosophy and fiction. We think that it is closer to the truth to see it as falling into an interesting category of work, that of 'philosophical fiction'. For if it is taken to be a work of philosophy proper, it is a very poor example. As such, it fails as a piece of writing when subjected to those standards. As philosophical fiction, however, its chances of success look more promising, at least initially. An analogy for our classification is the well-known category of 'historical fiction'. If works of historical fiction were judged against the standards which works of history proper are judged, they would be evaluated as failed pieces of work. If judged against the standards which works of fiction are judged, however, such works may well be judged a success. And similarly, for the genre known as 'science fiction'.

Our discussion of how ZAMM fares as philosophical fiction uncovers a reading of ZAMM which maximises the book's philosophical interest; one which treats the narrator of the story as *unreliable*. The interest here is that readers, as well as the actual author, Pirsig, may well be unaware of its unreliable claims. This, we think, explains some readers' misclassification of ZAMM as a work of genuine philosophy rather than of fiction. (The unreliability is something which philosophers will be sensitive to, which explains the common observation that no professional philosopher has engaged with the proposals put forward by Pirsig.) Being fiction but not being *recognized* as such carries the danger that readers (as well as the author) have an unreliable basis for drawing philosophical conclusions on the basis of reading the book.

So we suggest that what *is* philosophically interesting about ZAMM is not so much its own philosophical proposals but rather in how it is possible to engage with it when taken to be a particular kind of fiction. In other words, we'll propose, for those who do not find its arguments and proposals compelling or engaging, a way of reading ZAMM which maximises how good it is as a piece of writing.