

## Interpretowanie zrównoważoności z użyciem poziomów jakości Roberta Pirsiga

### Interpreting Sustainability Using Robert Pirsig's Levels of Quality

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#### Streszczenie

Jakość, według pisarza Roberta Pirsiga (autora książki *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*), to zasadniczo dobroć, która ludzie powinni zrozumieć, cenić i do której powinni dążyć. Podkreśla on przy tym rolę zrozumienia, uznając ją jako warunek *sine qua non* sukcesu wszelkich działań podejmowanych w kierunku Jakości. Rozwój zrównoważony jest Jakością – i to pożądaną! Pirsig rozważa Jakość tworząc system hierarchiczny uwzględniający następujące poziomy: Naturalny, Biologiczny, Społeczny, Intelktualny i Mistyczny, uporządkowane wraz ze wzrostem znaczenia w tej właśnie kolejności. Wierzy on, że gdy poziom Jakości na niższym poziomie zaczyna się rozprzestrzeniać i rozwijać jedynie dla własnego dobra, nie przynosząc postępu i sprawiając wrażenie bycia lepszymi od zwykłego wzrostu i rozwoju, wtedy nadchodzi czas na poziom Mistyczny, którego zadaniem jest pobudzenie ludzkiej świadomości, wskazując, że prawdziwy cel życia sięga wyższych poziomów. Ten esej nie jest metafizycznym mini-traktatem. Nie jest także recenzją. Jest on interpretacją myśli, które Pirsig tak wspaniale zawarł w swojej książce: *LILA: Badanie Moralności*.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Jakość, rozwój zrównoważony, moralność, poziomy jakości Pirsiga

#### Abstract

Quality, according to writer Robert Pirsig (of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* fame), is essentially goodness which humans should comprehend, appreciate and strive towards. It is the understanding or the comprehension he stresses on, in the said book, as a *sine qua non* for the success of any undertaking towards Quality. Sustainable Development is a Quality; a desirable one at that! Pirsig breaks up Quality into different hierarchical levels – Natural, Biological, Social, Intellectual and Mystic, in that ascending order of importance. He believes that when the Quality levels on the lower rungs start running amok and developing merely for their own sakes, without striving to bring about progress – visualised as being superior to mere growth and development, the mystics need to step in and create awareness of one's true purpose in life. This essay is not an esoteric, metaphysical mini-treatise. It is also not just a book review, but an interpretation of the thoughts Pirsig has so wonderfully put into words in his book – *LILA: An Enquiry into Morals*.

**Key words:** Quality, sustainable development, Morals, Pirsig's Levels of Quality

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The source of inspiration for this essay is Robert Pirsig's *LILA: An Enquiry into Morals*, a novel published in 1991, and nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. Holistic global sustainability has been mapped onto holistic individual sustainability, and the indispensability of the latter in making the

former attainable has been explicitly brought out (Venkatesh, 2010). Quality, according to Pirsig, is essentially goodness which humans should comprehend, appreciate and strive towards. It is the understanding or the comprehension he stresses on, in the said book, as a *sine qua non* for the success

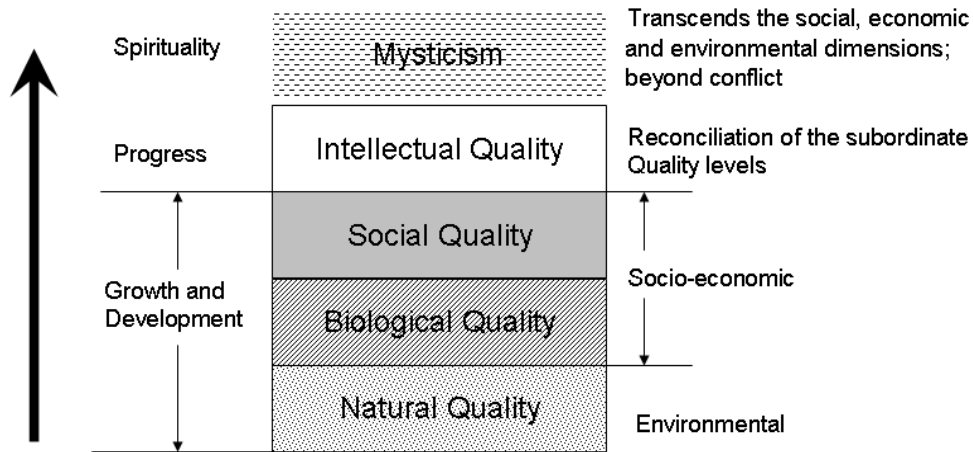


Figure 1: Robert Pirsig's quality levels and sustainable development (Pirsig, 1991)

(or any possibility of it) of any undertaking towards Quality. It is elusive, by virtue of its abstractness, and all-encompassing, even while it is undefinable. One sees a parallel to sustainable development (the path) or sustainability (the goal pursued by the path referred to) here – the adjectives ‘elusive’, ‘all-encompassing’ and ‘undefinable’. As Kallio, Nordberg, & Ahonen has said, the phenomenon we label as sustainable development can never be exhaustively defined; it would constantly change with time, interpreters and their needs (Kallio et al., 2007; Sánchez, 2008; Redclift, 2009; Russel, 2010; Kras, 2011).

What is ‘Quality’ and what is not, is likewise subjective and is temporally and geographically variable. Cultures, traditions and religious beliefs determine what is right and what is wrong, what is ethical and what is immoral. It follows that what is ethical today, may no longer be in the future, and/or may not have been in the past. What is right in the developed world, may be detestable and inadvisable in the developing world; and vice versa. No matter how complex and different the interpretations are, as one ascends the Quality ladder depicted in Figure 1, one moves towards an increasing degree of harmony and like-mindedness, just as it has been said time and again, that all religions despite their conflicting viewpoints, drive mankind towards the same end-goal. To use an oft-quoted adage, all roads lead to Rome. The Rome here is the peak, the acme of quality – spirituality or mysticism which transcends the social, economic and environmental dimensions of human existence, subject to conflict and differences of opinion. In this essay, the five levels of Quality depicted in Figure 1 are discussed from a sustainable development (or sustainability) point of view.

There is a hierarchy which is evident in the Quality levels. Every higher one is superior to the lower one, controls and dominates it. The lower one often tends to have its freedom restrained by the higher

one. The higher one, in an ideal system, would not devour and destroy the lower one for its own sake, but nurture and maintain it even as it continues to depend on it for its upkeep. There is a contradiction in terms – a paradox – at once evident in this statement. This can at once be resolved when one introduces the concept of sustainability. The lower levels of Quality need to be sustained and maintained, if the higher ones have to develop and evolve over time.

Natural Quality or Natural Value is that which has existed even before Biological Quality (as applied to human beings), Social Quality (as applied to communities, settlements, villages, towns and cities) and Intellectual Quality (as applied to art, literature, education, science and technology) appeared. The air, water, soil, mineral resources, and also the lower strata of Biological Quality – flora and fauna – are more primal in nature, *vis-à-vis* the ones which have built themselves upon it. Very similar to the foundations of an edifice, it is this Natural Quality which sustains the evolving Biological, Social and Intellectual Quality levels, which flourish in the edifice above. The Natural Quality is essential for growth – it is essential as the bedrock for human existence and source of nourishment for biological human survival.

Essential human needs – food, clothing and shelter; and human comforts and luxuries – entertainment and travel – which enhance Biological Quality (or the standard of living in other words), are dependent on and thereby detrimental to Natural Quality. An improvement in one necessitates a deterioration of the other, over time. After a given point, the improvement becomes unsustainable, because of the said dependence. The higher Quality Level follows the lower one, with a time lag. All along when this happens, one assumes that the Social Quality and the Intellectual Quality remain inert, stagnant and static, and thereby powerless in influencing the Natural and Biological Quality Le-

vels. By deteriorating, Natural Quality keeps a check on Biological Quality – it martyrs itself, in other words, in order to avoid Biological Quality from developing *ad infinitum* (Refer Figure 2). While biological quality is an inferior level of quality, parasitic in nature, dependent on and inimical to Natural Quality, the Social and Intellectual Quality levels which are associated with the Heart and Mind of mankind (refer to Venkatesh, 2010, for the body-heart-mind-soul hierarchy in human development), are on higher rungs of the development hierarchy.

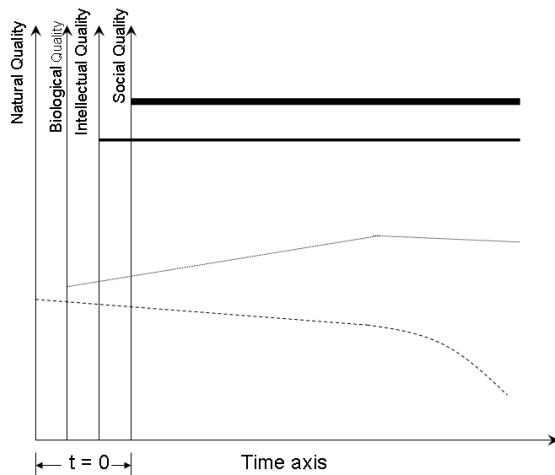


Figure 2: Biological Quality improves at the expense of Natural Quality (Pirsig, 1991)

If the stagnation of the Social and Intellectual Quality levels prevails, growth collapses to decay, and fails to metamorphose into ‘development’ – used in a sense which implies superiority to mere growth. There is a limit to which growth can happen in the absence of ‘development’. When signs of decay are imminent, the static Social Quality needs to kick in, and its dynamism needs to take societies and thereby the world for that matter, out of the *degringolade* into self-destruction. The development of Biological Quality even when the Natural Quality decays, is possible when Social Quality also starts developing. Social Quality here represents policies, rules and regulations which restrict while not being repressive, austerity measures which are incorporated into lifestyles, a stress on equitable distribution of resources without retarding development and curbing initiatives, etc. Social Quality is akin to an authority which does not lord it over the biological entities in society and thereby refrains from impacting Biological Quality wilfully, but steps in to interfere when there is evidence of the Biological Quality’s destroying itself in an attempt to keep developing. The equitable distribution referred to above, and the rules and regulations, lead to balanced socio-economic development. It is only when the element of repression and suppression is not there, that Social Quality remains ‘Quality’ –

‘Good’ is the simple synonym which Pirsig uses in the concluding paragraph of *An Enquiry into Morals*.

Social Quality as it evolves, may, at times, come into conflict with Biological Quality – and in certain instances, may override the wishes of the subjects (the biological entities of society). Here, it must be pointed out that Social Quality is nothing but some Biological Quality rising up and becoming more powerful than the others and exercising the right of might. This is quite akin to the Lower Courts and the Higher Courts not seeing eye to eye on an issue. If the Social Quality starts asserting itself and crosses limits, Biological Quality is impacted negatively and there is a conflict. Unlike Natural Quality which affects Biological Quality, by silently sacrificing itself, Biological Quality fights for its upkeep and sustenance against Social Quality, whenever the latter fails to honour the purpose for which it needs to develop. Not very different from the opposition parties in the parliament of a national government, keeping the ruling party under check and reminding it of the purpose for which it is at the helm of affairs.

There are times when Social Quality dominates Biological Quality by the use of force – immoral and undemocratic means which are not acceptable to a majority of entities in society; just as Biological Quality devours Natural Quality without a care, for its own sake. Then, one appeals to a higher court of justice – Intellectual Quality. This is beyond narrow-minded cultural prejudices and political preferences. It takes a more holistic view and is as applicable in one part of the world as in another, irrespective of the religious beliefs, administrative policies, cultural practices and traditions that prevail. It talks a universal language – through the media of science, technology, art, philosophy and literature. It does not of course provide elixirs or panaceas but tailor-makes its solutions to problems thorough understanding of the Natural Quality, Biological Quality and the Social Quality levels that obtain in different parts of the world. It evangelises to an erring ‘Social Quality’, by positing universal truths that need to be respected. Just as a small part of Biological Quality ascends to become Social Quality – the leaders for the masses – a small part of Social Quality ascends further upward to reach Intellectual Quality. This is often criticised as the Ivory Tower, or Cloud Nine – a high level of enlightenment (sometimes pretentious) which is divorced from the harsh realities of mundane existence. But when stagnation threatens and Biological Quality is at the mercy of a suppressive Social Quality, which forgets its main purpose of protecting Natural Quality and sustaining Biological Quality at the same time, it is Intellectual Quality that provides ideas – the so-called creative destruction popularised by Joseph Schumpeter (Wikipedia, 2011). In the event of non-cooperation of the Social

Quality with Intellectual Quality, both Biological Quality and Natural Quality may decay, often irreversibly.

The ascent results in a movement away from the concrete and the gross to something increasingly subtle. Control, domination and dependence associated with the lower strata of Quality fall away and with better comprehension, comes an awareness of the spiritual Self. Intellectual Quality attempts to preserve the Natural, Biological and Social, as without such preservation, the ascent to the top would become impossible for the generations to follow. The Natural, Biological and Social form the rungs on the step-ladder which cannot be bypassed en route to the top. Biological, Social and Intellectual Qualities have their static and dynamic components, the former setting strong foundations to build on (the rungs which support one's ascent to the top), and the latter, responsible for the actual development over time. Sustainability is impossible without any of these. 'Static' is not as backward or 'bad' as one would make it out to be, *vis-à-vis* 'Dynamic'. It is like the springboard which is a must if one wants to launch oneself or one's ideas to take Biological, Social or Intellectual Quality onto the next rung.

Mysticism – the final rung on the ladder of Quality is beyond Quality, if that statement makes sense. Mystic Quality is however not akin to ignorance. It is not the Ignorance of the adage – Ignorance is Bliss, though at times it is mistaken for the same. While Biological, Social and Intellectual Qualities use the Body, Heart and Mind to sustain and self-propagate, mysticism uses a more subtler tool, which is beyond the reach and comprehension of one who is struggling to move up the rungs. It does not need to develop any further to sustain itself. It is beyond sustainable development. However, when Intellectual Quality runs amok and develops merely for its own sake, without striving to bring about progress – visualised as being superior to mere growth and development (Cameron, Neal, 2003) – the mystics need to make the intellectuals aware of their true purpose in life. In a perfectly self-regulating system – like Mother Nature was, before the higher levels of Quality emerged (from the point of view of human existence), no higher control was needed. When Biological Quality reared its head, the emergence of the others was necessitated. The higher controls are essentially enablers with a purpose to serve; or rather should be so, if they are not, at the time of writing. Governments need to enable the masses to lead happy and satisfied lives. The intellectuals among the masses who are at once accountable to the governments and have a moral responsibility to keep them under check, need to ensure that the governments are enabling the masses to lead happy lives. Moving over to the spiritual realm, the mystics, also members of the masses, who are accountable to the Governments,

need to take it upon themselves to remind the intellectuals to step up their Quality in order to ensure that the Governments step up theirs with the end-goal of augmenting the Quality (biological) of living of the masses. All this can be done, it goes without saying, only by the realisation that Natural Quality cannot be improved forever. Biological and Social Qualities need to adapt themselves to this piece of information (which is a consequence of the progress of Intellectual Quality), and rethink their respective Quality goals – in other words, cooperate and enable each other in the thrilling journey towards the elusive goal of sustainability, rather than working at cross-purposes with each other.

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