

To begin, I think it would make the most sense to define what I interpreted the phrase “the life of the mind” to mean. I read that phrase as taking the mind to be a separate entity of its own, with its own actions and desires, completely separate from the person to whom it belongs. An easier way to think about it, I suppose, is what the subconscious wants, out of control of the person.

Now to actually start answering the question, I don’t have a single idea regarding the life of the mind that I find most interesting—rather, I have a multitude of ideas that I think can be tied along the same string of thought because they’re all about the same concept. The concept that I think is most interesting is the lengths that the mind will go to understand a difference of opinion. I say “the mind” because I believe, and the book makes it clear, that sometimes we, as people, do things to try and understand when we aren’t entirely sure why.

Robert Pirsig describes it as a “freeze-out” when a subject comes up in conversation that two people don’t agree on. This happens to him when he has the conversation with John about the maintenance of a motorcycle; even though he is interested in it, John just isn’t. Pirsig compares this discovery to finding a tooth with a missing filling—once you know it’s there, you can’t just leave it alone. You *have* to mess with it. It’s with that same tenacity that he starts pushing John, even though Pirsig knows that it will only irritate him.

It’s his explanation of why he does it that I find very interesting. Pirsig says that as he continues to push the subject, John gets increasingly irritated, which only makes Pirsig want to push it more. It isn’t just to irritate him, he says, but because the irritation seems “symptomatic of something deeper”, something not immediately apparent. This idea pops up again later on in the novel when Pirsig discusses the different visions of reality; John has a more romantic, take-it-as-face-value kind of view of the world and Pirsig has a classical, see-how-it-all-works kind of take on everything.

While I do associate my own viewpoint with the former more than the latter, I completely share in Pirsig’s fascination with what happens when we try to understand something that we don’t know. Even though he knew that he was making John angry, Pirsig kept going because it was like the anger was fueling his desire to understand even more. It’s an almost uncontrollable cycle. The desire to understand and sympathize outweighs the frustration that it causes in the meantime, which is what I think is so baffling. Is that pursuit worth running the risk of making the other person angry? The mind’s answer is yes, because the ultimate quest is all about gaining knowledge and understanding. And besides, the other person will probably get over it soon enough. The reason why I find this so strange is that I’m usually pretty sensitive to other people’s feelings and if I stop to think about it, I think, “Yeah, if they get mad at me for pushing something, I’m obviously going to stop” but I can think of *multiple* instances where I did exactly the opposite, just like Pirsig. I wouldn’t call it a subconscious decision, necessarily, but I find it very interesting that being in that moment or not affects what you do.

Along that same thread, there is one sentence in the book that really stood out to me. It says, “When you’ve got a Chautauqua in your head, it’s extremely hard not to inflict it on innocent people.” My mom has always teased me about having a one-track mind, so I can very much relate to this. But it’s the wording that he used that is what got to me the most. To “inflict [a Chautauqua] on innocent people”

frankly sounds kind of painful and violent, and I couldn't help but connect it to the life of the mind as I mentioned it earlier.

It's easy when you've got a lot of time on your hands, like Pirsig did, to refine an idea and sharpen it to the point when it actually might hurt when you just throw it out at an unsuspecting person. Learning how to respond to ideas that you're unfamiliar with or don't agree with, as well as putting your own ideas out there, is part of the mind that has to be controlled.

I think that the concept of exchanging ideas between people is one of the foundations of education; therefore, it has to be a part of college education. Everyone's ideas are shaped by their experiences, and because no two people have the same experiences under their belt, they're going to have different ideas and viewpoints. It's my thought that the main purpose of continuing an education into college is to be able to understand the world in a way that you've never seen it before, whether that understanding is a scientific understanding, a cultural understanding, an artistic understanding, or (preferably) all of those things. Exchanging ideas is central to gaining all of that understanding, so that collaboration has to be a part of my studies.

To address the parts of the book concerning the idea of a university, I'd like to begin by saying that while I do like to tell myself that I am a good student and I know the system very well, which is why I can say that I agree with a flaw that Pirsig found within the education system.

As Pirsig pointed out, students are taught things by imitation, specifically in writing. I've had more than one assignment in the past where I was told to read some short stories and then write a story of my own, imitating the style of the author. I can say that it was beneficial to me to some extent (particularly in broadening my syntax), but I found that being focused on imitation, rather than forcing me to be creative, put limits on the ideas that I was trying to express. I found it very frustrating. I would much rather be able to clearly express my ideas in a way that isn't as stylish than to muddle them up by focusing on making all of the different stylistic flourishes that other authors could get away with.

But if I didn't complete the assignments as instructed, I would get a bad grade on it, which was worse to me than trying to develop really good ideas. And so I did the work without putting any *real* thinking into it and managed to get great grades. Even Pirsig admits that the key to success in a class is to imitate the teacher "in such a way as to convince the teacher you were not imitating [them]".

I think that's absolutely ridiculous, but that idea of imitation has become so engrained in education that it brings up a problem that Pirsig also points out in the section where he tells his students that he can't really answer his own question about what quality is. They were outraged, and he imagined them thinking that their job as students was "to *fake* this search for the truth, to *imitate* it. To actually search for it was a damned imposition".

I think that we, the population of students, have gotten so comfortable with how easy it is to imitate that we either don't know how to develop our own ideas or see it as too much work. That's also what I think is part of a university's job. Universities are meant to further education in a way that people learn how to think and even learn metacognitive thinking. I'm really hoping that as an undergraduate student, I learn how to develop original ideas.