

Discussion Questions:

Notes

- Strategy of using a narrative mixed with philosophical thoughts
 - Broke up the flow. It let ideas digest.
 - Gave actual characters and personalities to compare/contrast (John's disdain for technology, DeWeese's relationship to it -- not educated in it, but not mistrustful)

Practical Takeaways

- The distinction between Science and Art is a human one, the knife we pick. ("The universe can be divided into Bananas and Non-Bananas"). This may be the source of our biases and frustrations.
- There exist "gumption traps" that can drain our enthusiasm (which is the source of real understanding, enjoyment, mastery).
- Power of our a priori concepts (our mental models) which is what we deal with, not our sense data directly.
- Writing - experience things directly. Writing about one side of one coin, the back of your thumb. It's your experience now.
- Working through things at a speed / pace consistent with your nature (walking up the mountain.) To live only for some future goal is shallow.

General notes

- Taking notes in the printed book, reviewing them and typing them here is helping ideas synthesize much more clearly. Doing a digital-only read, I don't think I'd have the same effect.

Part 1

- "What's new?" vs. "What's best?"
- John's pride / ignorance at not knowing tech
 - "Not stubborn, not narrow-minded, not lazy, not stupid. There was just no easy explanation."
 - "It's all of technology they can't take."

- (But isn't tech useful and necessary?)
- "But there are human forces stronger than logic."
 - Kalid: The need for Quality and aesthetic appeal
- "I just think that their flight from and hatred of technology is self defeating. The Buddha, the Godhead, resides quite as comfortably in the circuits of a digital computer..."
- "But if the mood is right, then physical discomfort doesn't mean much."
 - Gumption trap, mood isn't right so discomfort discourages you.
- Why were the mechanics bad?
 - Their radio. Their speed. Their expression good-natured, friendly... and uninvolved. "They were like spectators."
 - His thesis: To have Quality you need to immerse yourself.
 - Bad writing: "These were spectator manuals."
 - "Caring about what you are doing is considered either unimportant or taken for granted."
- "Modern man has his ghosts and spirits too... the laws of physics and logic, the number system... we believe in them so thoroughly they seem real."
- "Your common sense is nothing more than the voices of thousands and thousands of these ghosts from the past."
- Idea: reading a book 2-3 sentences at a time and ruminating on it. "It's a form of reading done a century ago..." Says it's pleasant.
- "That is impractical, but practicality isn't the whole thing with gloves or anything else." (On repairing old gloves over and over.)
- On John: He wasn't so interested in what things *mean* as in what they *are*.
 - I was seeing what the shim meant. He was seeing what the shim was.
 - He will not or cannot believe there is anything in this world for which grooving is not the way to go.
 - "It looks incompatible with reason."
 - What we have is a conflict of visions of reality.
- "Causes and effects don't seem to fit. Causes and effects are the result of thought."
 - We create a separation of "before" and "after". The cause, and the effect. Where does an event start and stop? Is it all one event?

Ch6

- Classical - underlying form. Romantic - immediate appearance.
 - Thesis of book: These are both elements of Quality
- Classical - everything's got to be measured and proved. Oppressive. The Death Force.
- Romantic - frivolous, untrustworthy, shallow.
 - Most people think in one mode and underestimate the other.
- "I want to turn the analytic approach back on itself."
 - Endless analysis. Endless subcomponents. Duller than dishwater.
 - But what is missing: "good" and "bad" and value judgments.
 - We don't notice the knife that is cutting components into groups.

- “Later I will want to show how an ability to use this knife creatively and effectively can result in solutions to the classic and romantic split.”
 - (Even the words “classic” and “romantic” are examples of the knife split.)
 - Zen ideas of non-duality. Experiencing a whole without separating it.

Ch7

- “From all this awareness we select, and what we select and call consciousness is never the same as awareness because the process of selection mutates it.”
- “We take a handful of sand from the endless landscape of awareness and call that handful of sand the world.”
 - Has a lot of good analogies, along with the train: the boxcars (classical), the leading edge (romantic), the track (Quality)
 - “To see the landscape without seeing the figure is not to see the landscape at all.”
- “When analytic thought, the knife, is applied to experience something is always killed in the process... But what is less noticed in the arts - something is always created too.”
- “This is the ghost of normal everyday assumptions which declares that the ultimate purpose of life, which is to keep alive, is impossible but that this is the ultimate purpose of life anyway, so that great minds struggle to cure diseases so that people may live longer, but only madmen ask why. One lives longer in order that he may live longer. There is no other purpose. That is what the ghost says.”
 - That’s the ghost of rationality. Proving and measuring things without regard for the experience.
- “That’s what’s really wearing them down. The thought.” (On John/Silvia getting tired of things..)
 - How much is the circumstance, the heat, responsible for?
- “You have a new personality now.” vs. “You are a new personality.”
 - “They had made the mistake of thinking of a personality as some sort of possession, like a suit of clothes, that a person wears.”

Ch8

- People think there’s a “knack” for motorcycle maintenance. But it’s a rational process.
 - Like programming.
- In general - author wants to stay down-to-earth and approachable with actual examples. Most philosophy texts don’t have this and seem to be purposefully confusing and abstract.
- “You go flying across the countryside under a power that would be called magic if it were not so completely rational in every way.” “He thinks I’m working on parts. I’m working on concepts.”
 - **Like math! It’s not about the parts, the symbols. It’s about the ideas underneath.**
- The system - the hierarchy of related parts.

- People working in a factory because that is the system. There's not a nefarious "bad guy", that's just the arrangement.
- "But to tear down a factory or revolt against a government ... is to attack effects rather than causes."
- "The motorcycle is primarily a mental phenomenon."
 - Welder sees "steel" as having no shape at all, like water.
 - "But what's 'potential'? That's also in someone's mind."

Ch9

- Scientific method: slow, laborious, invincible.
 - Make sure nature hasn't misled you into thinking you know something you don't actually know.
 - An experiment is never a failure solely because it fails to achieve predicted results.
 - Only a failure when it doesn't test the hypothesis in question.

Ch10

- Einstein's quote about what brings people to study. Not pride, not utility... no single answer will cover. To gaze on the contours of the mountain (of understanding).
- Einstein: "There is no logical path to these laws; only intuition."
 - What determines the next hypothesis? Not the scientific method!
 - Too many possible hypotheses. An infinite multitude.
 - Is it... aesthetic appeal to simple foundational principles?
- "Whole structure of reason handed down... emotionally hollow, aesthetically meaningless, spiritually empty."

Ch11

- Lateral knowledge, coming from a wholly different direction
 - "Lateral truths point to the falseness of axioms and postulates underlying one's existing system of getting at truth."
- Classical - primarily theoretic, portions are aesthetic. Romantic - primarily aesthetic, partly theoretic.
- Science cannot study the scientific method without getting into a bootstrap problem.
- The romantic objection to classical science/rationality is that it's *too* effective and has dominated all thought / society. It dominates man himself.
- Hume - empiricist - all knowledge from senses.
 - From what sense data is knowledge of causation received? (Hume's answer: none. No evidence for it.)
- Kant - trying to save scientific empiricism from its self-devouring logic.
 - "But though all knowledge arises with experience, it doesn't follow that it arises out of experience."
 - "A priori" knowledge not supplied by the senses. (Time.)
 - Called an "intuition".

- A priori have origin in human nature, provide a screening function for what sense data we accept.
- The a priori motorcycle built up over our experience, constantly changing as new sense data comes in.
- **“It’s quite a machine, this a priori motorcycle. If you stop to think about it long enough you’ll see that it is the main thing.”**
 - We are working with our mental models of objects, not the sense data.
 - “The sense data confirm it but the sense data aren’t it.”
 - Copernican Revolution changed our a priori understanding of the world. Not because of new sense data, but because of a new mental model.

Ch12-13

- Unlike the Sutherlands, who hate technology, DeWeese is so far removed from it he didn’t feel it any particular menace.
 - Like people who hate math vs. are ambivalent about it.
- “Thou art that” -- there is no separation between YOU and that thing over there
 - Illusion of separation between subject and object
 - Goal of Zen meditation?
- “He had somehow become much more mature, as if abandonment of his inner goals had caused him to age more quickly.”
- Teaching college - false appearance of genuine education.
- Church of Reason
 - The real University is not a material object... The real University is a state of mind. The real University is nothing less than the continuing body of reason itself.
 - To serve, through reason, the goal of truth.
 - (The problem then, is assuming reason is the sole path to truth.)
- “You are never dedicated to something you have complete confidence in.”
 - It’s when the dream or goal is in doubt they become dedicated. Interesting.

Ch 14

- It’s not the technology that is scary. It’s what it does to the relations between people.
 - This is a pre-internet quote.
- “Assembly of Japanese bicycle requires great peace of mind.”
 - That’s the goal we all want right?
 - “Peace of mind isn’t at all superficial, really... it’s the whole thing.”
 - “The test of the machine is the satisfaction it gives you.”
 - “What if the machine is wrong and I feel peaceful about it?”
 - “The act of pronouncing it wrong is a form of caring.”
- “The divorce of art from technology is completely unnatural. Rotisserie assembly is actually a long-lost branch of sculpture.”
 - Feynman quote on art and science. Science just *adding* to the understanding art gives, not taking away. The cut can destroy, but it does create, and can you hold the created version alongside the previously romantic one?

- “People are asking if we must always suffer spiritually and aesthetically in order to satisfy material needs.”
 - When does the argument “it helps our survival” stop?
 - The solution isn’t to abandon rationality, it’s to expand it.
 - Calculus analogy of expanding notion of quantity to handle instantaneous change.
 - Present-day reason like the flat-earth model.
 - Nonrepresentative art “doesn’t make sense” to reason.
 - Classical sense can’t grasp it.
 -
- **On writing: “The trouble is that essays always have to sound like God talking for eternity, and that isn’t the way it ever is.”**
 - The philosophical narrative structure works better than a giant essay. Gives breaks.

Ch15

- Post-hoc rules of writing. We write down the rules *afterwards* about what makes good writing. The author isn’t consciously trying to follow them. (Royal order of adjectives.)
 - But how are you to teach something that isn’t premeditated?
 - Prescriptive rhetoric like empty table manners, not derived from any source of decency or kindness or humanity
- Quality... you know what it is, yet you don’t know what it is. Self contradictory. Yet some things are better than others.
 - But when you try to say what Quality is, apart from things that have it, it goes poof. (Like defining humor?)
 - Skillful vs. “non-skillful”

Ch16

- Most people stand in sight of the spiritual mountains all their lives and never enter them, being content to listen to others who have been there and thus avoid their hardships.
- On writing: Narrow it down to one town, one street, the front of one building. Start writing about a single brick.
 - Writing about one side of a coin for an hour. Or the back of your thumb.
 - Learn to experience things directly for yourself. You can write with a freshness (and enthusiasm?) that comes from your direct experience.
 - What were *your* aha moments?
- Grading system -- repeating what the prof said is an A-. Originality gets you from A to F.
- People don’t want to expose the hypocrisy that most students are in college for a degree credential and not learning.
 - Conditioned to work for a grade and not the knowledge it represented.
 - He’d be a knowledge-motivated person, not a grade-motivated one.

- Motivation of this sort, once it catches hold, is a ferocious force. (Unlocking your own motivation, you have it there, waiting to be unleashed.)
- Description of how students reacted.
 - Better students (A-B) didn't want grades
 - Worse students (D-F) wanted grades so they knew how much they needed to skirt by.
 - Reminds me that any reward system gets gamed.
- "Grades cover up a failure to teach"
- "Decide for themselves what good writing was."
 - But you can't tell them what to work towards without becoming the authority.
 - Like a Zen Koan you need to understand yourself, you can't have someone give you the answer.
 - Trying to teach enlightenment. Can be learned, but not taught.

Ch17

- Walking up a mountain.
 - Goal is not to get tired. Not to exhaust yourself.
 - The reality of your own nature should determine the speed.
- To live only for some future goal is shallow. (Being in the moment, enjoying the sides as well as the top. The top defines the sides.)
- Quality. Can't grab it, ineffable. (The Dao)
- **Reversing the rule that all things which are to be taught must first be defined.**
 - **Yes! Show the experience, then explain the definition.**
- Ego-driven goals ultimately unsustainable and destructive, they are never satisfying enough.
 - Haunted by the fear that the negative image is true, need endless validation

Ch18

- Esthetics - branch of philosophy for Quality. What is beautiful?
- How do you refuse to define something? To say there's no good or bad? (blank wall looks just as good?)
- If Quality were dropped, rationality would be unchanged. But aesthetic beauty would disappear.
 - Eating vitamins and ungraded meat.
 - The world can function without it, but why bother?
 - When you subtract quality you get squareness
- Does quality exist in the subject or the object?
 - Not subject - can it be whatever you like? Just make up everything?
 - Not object - can't measure
 - dilemma -- two premises (never noticed that)
 - Third choice - it's the source of both
- "Undefinable"

- Philosophical mysticism (as Scott says, closer to Dao than Zen [emptiness])
- Subjective isn't imaginary
- Zero doesn't exist?
 - Math as a tool for thinking. Many math metaphors / thought experiments.
 - Is zero unscientific?
- Quality decreases subjectivity, takes you out of yourself
- The present is our only reality
- Preintellectual reality
 - To see shapes and forms is to intellectualize
- The zen at the top of the mountain is the zen you bring with you
- Replacing Quality for Dao
- Science can't tell you what you ought to do.
- Poincare - our axioms are conventions. Convenient ones.
- Freedom is a purely negative goal. Want to move towards something.