

CHAPTER 16

CYCLING AND PHILOSOPHICAL
LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY

Riding Out of the Cave

The first serious cycling trip I took was from where I live in Pennsylvania to a town named Carlisle, near the state capitol of Harrisburg. I was talked into this by my friend Tim, who had an aunt and uncle living down in Carlisle and was just starting to get into cycling. We decided to do the ride down in one day – 95 hilly miles and two mountain crossings. The longest bike ride I had taken before

this trip was maybe 30 miles. Well, I thought I was in fairly decent physical shape; I was playing singles tennis two or three times a week, was riding my bike the six miles to the tennis courts, and walked to work every day. My cycling gear at that time consisted of a Schwinn World Sport 18-speed with a fat padded seat. I figured I needed to do a couple of longer rides before the big Carlisle trip, so I stretched out by riding to the neighboring town, a scenic, flat ride by the Susquehanna River that was 23 miles round-trip. I did that a couple of times. I felt ready to go. I can hear you veteran cyclists already laughing.

In Plato's allegory of the cave, chained prisoners see only flickering shadows on the walls, and mistake them for how things really are. It is philosophy that lets us climb – painfully and with resistance – out into the blinding sun of knowledge. Like Plato's prisoners, I had a lot to learn. Here are six philosophical lessons I've managed to learn pedaling out of the cave.



Tim showed up at my place, I strapped a book-bag-sized backpack to my back and we took off. The first 40 miles weren't too bad, and we rode them without pause, until we pulled into a sandwich joint for lunch. We threw down some calories and decided we deserved a good rest. After an hour, when I stood up, my legs had the flexibility of Frankenstein's monster. OK, not a good sign. We got back on the bikes, and after 20 miles I couldn't believe how wiped out I was. My butt hurt, my legs hurt, my back hurt, and I was just plain exhausted. We pulled off for another rest. Then we did another 10 miles, and needed a break. Then five miles. We were both bonking. Did I mention that one of the long uphill had been repaved that very day, and our tires were sinking into the hot asphalt?

Besides exhaustion, the other thing I hadn't really been prepared for was boredom. My whole family plays golf, which as a teenager I gave a good, fair try. It bored me silly. Plus the fact that after a crappy shot, I had a 150-yard walk while cursing myself before I had a chance to improve things. Tennis was my sport. The great thing about tennis is that it is fast-paced: hit a bad shot and you can redeem yourself within seconds. Two hours of tennis is a high-concentration, high-action workout. Numerous hours on a bike saddle slowly grinding through the rolling Pennsylvania countryside was boring. And painful.

Finally, finally, we pulled into Tim's aunt and uncle's house. My butt felt like I had spent two weeks as a new fish in gen pop in Sing-Sing. My neck had the remaining strength of a piece of limp asparagus. Tim's aunt had assumed we would be famished and laid out a huge spread for dinner, but I was so tired I could barely eat a thing. Even passing out smacked of too much effort. For weeks afterwards I would be fearful at even modest inclines in the road, even though I was driving a car. The psychological scars took a while to heal.

Discipline and Diet

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 188, the great German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote that, "What is essential 'in heaven and on earth' seems to be ... that there should be *obedience* over a long period of time and in a single direction: given that, something always develops, and has developed, for whose sake it is worthwhile to live on earth; for example, virtue, art, music, dance, reason, spirituality – something transfiguring, subtle, mad, and divine." In part Nietzsche means that nothing of



value comes easy, and even the appreciation and understanding of what is valuable is rarely seen in advance. I understood and enjoyed the fast-paced, variable action of tennis. But the relatively slow-paced, systematic action of long-distance touring on a bicycle required not just a different kind of effort, but a changed mindset.

It wasn't enough to choose to go on the ride, or even attempt it. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche writes of "the laughter of creative lightning which is followed obediently but grumblingly by the long thunder of the deed."¹ That is, there is a joy and excitement in a new idea, a new project, ambition, or adventure, but carrying it through to fruition is something else again, often arduous and slow. With cycling, I had to learn the devotion, almost the meditation, of the long thunder of the deed.

On one 80-mile ride in a rainstorm I remember feeling like a mechanism, tucked in, my legs rhythmic pistons, water sluicing over me like machine oil, hammering out the miles. There was a sort of perverse pride I felt, riding all day in the cold rain and getting coated in road grit. It was only through obedience to the implicit orders of cycling that I could learn its virtues, the silent, solitary, almost survivalist nature of riding far from home. To ride is to reduce life to simplicity, with no other demands but to keep pedaling. "Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life?" Thoreau writes in *Walden*.² Simplify, simplify.

The following summer Tim tried to talk me into another bike ride, this time from Providence, Rhode Island, out to Provincetown at the end of Cape Cod and back again. After all the climbing on the Carlisle trip, Tim swore this trip would be flat as a corpse's EEG. Well, the memory of pain from the previous summer had sufficiently faded and I told him I was in. I had learned from the previous year, though. I had to train. I determined my training ride would be a fairly short 11-mile loop, but it had a killer climb (for me!) in the middle – over 400 feet in a mile. It took me half a dozen attempts before I could get to the top without having to stop and catch my breath halfway up.

The training paid off. I still wasn't strong on distance, but I wasn't fazed by any kind of incline. One thing I was starting to notice was the huge calorie burn of days of distance riding. Halfway through the Cape Cod trip, we bunked overnight with friends Jim and Lynn, who were astonished at the amount of mussels, clams, lobster, and chardonnay we could put away. Jim started thinking about taking up cycling too, after seeing us knock back a pâtisserie's worth of breakfast pastries. But I really didn't figure out the incipient lesson here until the following summer.





The next year Tim wanted to take a big ride. We decided to ride from Montréal, Canada, to Providence, Rhode Island, over 450 miles. We boxed our bikes, took a bus to Montréal. The first day's ride would be my very first true century: 105 miles to Derby Line, Vermont. Now, I was still riding the Schwinn with the spongy seat, I had flat pedals and no clips, and was carrying the backpack on my back. My advanced cycling gear was two water bottle holders, a little pack under the seat, and bike shorts. I think I was using old weightlifting gloves as cycling gloves. Obviously, my learning curve was steeper than Mont Ventoux.

We got up, had a hearty breakfast, and lit out. Once we got out of the city into the countryside, we discovered that cycling in Canada is a true pleasure, with wide shoulders, reasonably courteous drivers, and many bike lanes and paths. We made good time and rode into Granby for lunch; we'd had nothing but water since breakfast. We saw a charming crêperie, and thought that was the kind of quaint French Canadian nosh perfect for ... a couple of hardcore cyclists in the middle of a century ride? Alright, we were stupid – what the heck kind of sports nutrition are crêpes? If only we had first pursued Nietzsche's idea that what we really need is a philosophy of nutrition to study the moral – and, more generally, the psychological – effects of different foods.³ But we had our lunch and went on our way.

About this time my back was really starting to bother me. I had ridden about 80 miles that day laden under this green book bag and my back was aching. Tim, marginally smarter, at least had a rack, and his backpack was strapped to the top of it. I finally told Tim that we had to stop at a bike shop, because I had to get a rack. In fact, I had been entertaining fantasies of this item called “panniers” that I had vaguely heard of. It was like a Penthouse centerfold for a computer science major – glorious, unattainable salvation. We found a bike shop in Magog, with a vast wall of panniers, racks, and other exotica. At this point my back hurt so much I was willing to pay literally any price for a rack and panniers.

If “you have to train” is lesson number one, “you have to have adequate gear” is lesson number two. Not necessarily carbon fiber frames, Shimano Dura-Ace derailleurs, and a GPS unit, but something better than a grungy backpack for a multi-day tour.

We were in the home stretch for Derby Line. The problem now was that we had long ago burned off those crêpes and our brains had forgotten the sweet taste of glucose. So we would look at the maps and try to memorize “we go three miles, turn right at the light, and then make the first left.” We'd ride three miles and couldn't remember what we were supposed to do, which meant laboriously stopping, getting off the bikes, pulling out the



maps, and trying again to memorize two turns. We were like two Alzheimer's patients escaped from the nursing home and taking a road trip. That night, after having finally, somehow, made it to Vermont, there was not enough food in the world to feed us. We went to a pizza place, ate salads, split their biggest pizza with all the toppings, then had dessert. Even then, after we walked back to the Bed and Breakfast, Tim was still so hungry he ate all of the candy from the B&B's candy dish. He just couldn't stop himself.

The next day we found out about this magical food called Powerbars. Our lives would never be the same. You would think that a couple of Ivy-educated PhDs would be smarter than this, but apparently not. As a philosopher nobody expects me to have any contact with the empirical world, but Tim's a physicist and has less of an excuse. In any case, it turns out that the factory schedule of three meals a day is not what cyclists need. Regular, steady calorie intake is what keeps your legs churning those pedals and keeps the brain working well enough to retain directions.

The idea that our rational minds (useful for remembering directions) and our physical appetites (the need for regular feedings) are separated is an ancient one. In Plato's *Republic*, he argues that the soul is tripartite, divided into reason, appetite, and spirit. Reason is devoted to guidance and knowledge, whereas the appetitive part satisfies our animal instincts, primarily the desires for food, drink, and sex. The spirit is concerned with public recognition and honor. We may often have conflicting interests – to eat the chocolate cake and to stay on the diet, for example, or to hew to our moral principles or compromise them to get elected to office. Plato explains these conflicts in terms of the different parts of the soul at odds with each other, and argues that human excellence, the good life, is attained when the parts of the soul are in mutual harmony.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, philosophers tended to view our rational side and our emotional nature as in conflict with each other, and that our passions needed to be kept in check and controlled by reason. In 1649 the French philosopher René Descartes published his treatise, *The Passions of the Soul*. In it he argues, among other things, that there are six primitive passions: wonder, love, hatred, desire, joy, and sadness. "The chief use of wisdom," he writes, "lies in teaching us to be masters of our passions and to control them with such skill that the evils which they cause are quite bearable, and even become a source of joy."⁴ The Scottish philosopher David Hume, taking a somewhat contrary view in 1739, averred that "reason is and ought to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them."⁵ So, is reason to master and dominate our emotions, or is





reason simply a rationalizing tool at the subconscious beck and call of our arational passions?

What we learned on the ride from Montréal was that maybe neither Descartes nor Hume had it quite right. One needs to be adequately fed for one's reason to operate; reason is not exactly enslaved to the appetites, but it is not wholly master of them either. We are not pure creatures of intellect whose abstract logic is rudely corrupted by the parade of sensation and emotion. Nor does it seem right that we are merely instinctual animals whose reflective minds are merely a post hoc generation of those instincts. It may be that Plato was closer to the truth when he suggested that virtue is had in the harmonious operation of the components of the soul. I'm sure that Nietzsche, at least, would advocate a philosophy of cycling nutrition that included Will to Power Bars.

The third lesson of cycling is: keep fuel in the tank.

Toughing It Out

After the Montréal trip, our friend Jim decided that he wanted to give cycling a shot and go along on our next summer ride. I told him that was great, but I wanted to impart the little cycling wisdom I had acquired so far. No reason he had to learn everything the hard way like I did. So I told Jim that he needed to train, and train hard. We started going out on a 23-mile training loop with lots of climbing. I could hit 50 mph on one of the descents. Sometimes we did a double loop, or when we got to the bottom of the big hill we would stop, turn around, and climb back up it. We were getting strong. We decided to tackle Jonestown Mountain. Jonestown is one of the most challenging local rides, just over a 20-mile loop with a steep 850-foot climb in the middle.⁶ Jim came over to my house to start the ride, but when he got there he realized he had forgotten his helmet. I lent him an old one of mine and we started out. There was a light drizzle, but we decided we were manly riders and didn't mind getting a little wet. We would just take the descent from the mountain slowly.

About four miles out we made a right turn onto an open-grate steel bridge spanning Fishing Creek. I was about 30 feet ahead of Jim in the middle of the bridge when I heard a sickening crash behind me. Jim had laid his bike down on the slick wet steel, and it looked like he had done a face-plant over the handlebars. His helmet was shattered, his glasses broken and the pieces missing, blood was pouring from his nose, his knee



was gashed open, and it looked like he might have broken his wrist. Jim staggered to his feet and knew he was messed up. He kept asking me how he looked. I felt like I was in one of those war movies where some private has his guts blown out and keeps asking his sergeant if he was OK. “You’re gonna make it, buddy,” I said. I tried to sound reassuring. I took a handkerchief and tied it around the gaping wound in Jim’s knee, mostly so I wouldn’t be grossed out by looking at it.

Jim had broken his nose, took stitches in his knee, severely sprained his wrist, and needed new glasses. Three weeks later he saddled up to ride with Tim and me to the New York Finger Lakes, and the very first day Jim pedaled a heavy Trek hybrid 115 miles through very hilly terrain. That is still my longest one-day ride.

In *The Enchiridion*, Epictetus wrote that “With every accident, ask yourself what abilities you have for making a proper use of it ... If you are in pain, you will find fortitude ... And thus habituated, the appearances of things will not hurry you away along with them.”⁷ Epictetus was born a deformed Greek slave in Imperial Rome in the first century AD, and probably had some knowledge of pain and suffering. But here he expresses the Stoic ideal that the flourishing life is to strive for what is possible, with a sense of imperturbability. A Stoic sage is insulated from misfortune because he does not value the objects of the external world, and believes it is virtue alone that ensures the good life. For the Stoics, one undergoes emotions: they are things that happen to you, and are to be distinguished from actions that one performs. The proper attitude toward the emotions is to not be buffeted and controlled by them, but to be self-sufficient and even-keeled. The Stoics tried to live apathetically, meaning in its original sense unmoved by *pathê*, the passions. Thus we can live in accordance with nature. As the fellow Stoic and Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius wrote, don’t say “‘this is a misfortune,’ but ‘to bear this nobly is good fortune.’”⁸

The fourth lesson of cycling, as I learned from Jim and the Stoics: quit whining and tough it out. Also: always wear a helmet.

Surprises Down the Road

A couple of years later I had a further occasion to learn from cycling. Tim and I had planned a ride from Reading, Pennsylvania, to Ocean City, Maryland. This time our friend Pete was going to join us. Pete was an experienced rider who once attempted the Nightmare Ride (a double



century around Lancaster County), and had logged thousands of miles on his bike. The first day we rode about 90 miles or so with a big headwind, and the sun was setting as we neared Dover, Delaware. We were taking a breather when we saw on the map that there was some sort of racetrack in Dover. We had no clue what they raced there. Horses? Was it a dog track? We joked that maybe it was bicycle racing. As we rounded a curve, the stadium came into view. And then we knew. NASCAR.

Yes, we had managed to arrive in Dover during NASCAR weekend. The stadium seats 135,000 people, and it was jam-packed. Before we left Pennsylvania, we figured that nobody was going to be in Dover on a random weekend after Labor Day; there would be plenty of places to stay and we would just grab a convenient motel. We rode to the first hotel we saw and the clerk literally started laughing at us. Dover – every single place in a 40-mile radius around Dover – had been booked for weeks. We were seriously thinking that we would be sleeping in the park. We got the Yellow Pages and started making calls. Finally we found some Motel 8-grade place down the road that had had a last-minute cancellation. All three of us could share a room for the special NASCAR rate of \$350 for one night. But clearly, if we wanted a hot shower and a bed, we had no choice. After that, we referred to the town as Ben-Dover.

The next day we rode to Ocean City. Tim assured us that he had been to Ocean City before, that it was a huge resort town, and there would be thousands of hotel rooms. We would find something easily when we got there. After another day of grueling headwinds, we pulled into Ocean City only to discover that it was Sun Festival Weekend, and, yes, every hotel room was booked. To make a long story short, we did finally find a place to stay, a fairly dodgy motel flying the gay pride flag in front of its office.

The philosophical problem that we had failed to adequately appreciate is the problem of induction. When we reason inductively, we use our past experiences and past knowledge to reach conclusions about what we can expect in the future. For example, when you turn on the tap at your kitchen sink in the morning, you expect water to come out, not chocolate. That's because, in the past when you have turned on the tap, it was never chocolate and always water. We, too, reasoned inductively – in the past, on a non-holiday weekend after Labor Day, in a non-resort town, there was no difficulty finding a place to stay. Therefore we would have no difficulty on our trip.

As David Hume writes, “From causes which appear *similar*, we expect similar effects. This is the sum of all our experimental conclusions. Now it seems evident, that, if this conclusion were formed by reason, it would be



as perfect at first, and upon one instance, as ever after so long a course of experience. But the case is far otherwise.”⁹⁹ In other words, if the way that we formed expectations about the future on the basis of past experience were a matter of pure reason alone, then we would never be wrong about what the future holds. But we are often wrong. The British philosopher Bertrand Russell comments that a chicken that associates the farmer with the arrival of food is surely surprised when one day the farmer comes and the chicken, instead of receiving dinner, becomes dinner instead. Induction, as we found in Ben-Dover and Ocean City, is unpredictably fallible.

The fifth lesson: expect the unexpected.

From Tribulation to Wisdom

The last summer cycling trip I took was from Watkins Glen, a tourist town at the southern tip of Seneca Lake in upstate New York, out to Niagara Falls and back. It was a good four-day ride, including two centuries. Jim was riding with me, along with a new rider, Todd. Todd had done some local rides, although nothing over 50 miles. Yet he had trained and was ready to go. Todd asked me what sort of gear he should pack along, and I sent him the list of things I was bringing: a set of civilian clothes and shoes, rain jacket, swimsuit, two biking shorts, three biking jerseys, two water bottles, biking helmet, gloves, and shoes, sunglasses, link remover, CO₂ cartridges, two spare tubes, patch kit, tire levers, dozen Powerbars, multitool, black plastic tape, chain lube, cable lock and key, panniers, shaving kit, wallet, camera, and cell phone. According to Ronny at our local bike shop, The Dutch Wheelman, the most important tools to carry on a big bike ride are a cell phone and a credit card. With those two you can get everything else.

I don't think we got five miles before I had my first flat. Of course it was the rear tire, which meant taking the panniers off and getting greasy from the chain. All right, I put in a new tube and we were off. It was a beautiful sunny day with gorgeous views over the long glacial lake and I was in a good mood. A few more miles and I had another flat. Crap. This was bad luck. We all got off the bikes and I changed it again. Now I had used both of the tubes I brought with me (I hate patch kits, and regard them as a last resort). We went maybe another 10 miles and I had another flat. I couldn't believe this. Was I underinflating and getting snakebite flats? Was there something in the tire itself? I inspected the interior of the tire. It looked





clean. I borrowed a tube from Jim, put it on and blew it full with the CO₂. I examined the dead tube – just one little hole, no snakebite.

But it kept happening, again and again, over 100 miles. I had seven flats, used up all the spares we had brought with us, all of my CO₂ cartridges, and was immensely frustrated at being unable to figure out the root problem. I was tired, hot, greasy, and cranky. We hit a bike shop and resupplied. Finally, the next morning, we were looking closely at my tire when Todd saw a minute pinhole in it. Then we figured it out: under pressure from an inflated tube, the pinhole expanded enough that when the tire flexed, the pinhole would pinch the tube and cause a puncture. I pulled out the black plastic tape and lined the interior of the tire, covering the pinhole. Problem solved – I had no more flats.

Todd stared at me, shaking his head. “When you put *black plastic tape* on the packing list I thought ‘who does he think he is, fucking MacGyver?’ But I guess that’s about right.” We all laughed. I realized that that’s something I’ve come to appreciate about cycling; there’s a sort of pioneer self-reliance that one needs to get through. I’ve gotten flats, broken spokes, thrown bearings, and once snapped my rear derailleur cable. If you’re 20 or 30 miles from the nearest bike shop, then you’re on your own and you have to rig a solution.

In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), Søren Kierkegaard reflects upon the technological wonders of his age, the railways, steamboats, encyclopedias, and telegraphs that “benefit mankind.”¹⁰ They make our lives easier for us, so easy, in fact, that we might actually wish for difficulty to overcome. Kierkegaard thinks that his contribution to humanity might just be to provide that difficulty. One wonders how Kierkegaard would react to modern ease, with Google, flat-screen TVs, and climate-controlled homes. Kierkegaard thinks that it is rumination upon philosophy, thoughts on what it means to be an individual and not merely a member of a mob, contemplation on how to live, and the nature of truth – *that* is what is difficult. This study, this contemplation, will never be aided by any amount of web surfing. Cycling has the same sort of challenge, demanding a kind of measured attention to the task. The joy in difficulty that Kierkegaard has in mind is not climbing a hill at mile 85 when your glutes are long since shot, but the larger, expansive satisfaction of having completed the trip. Analogously, there is little pleasure in parsing Kierkegaard’s own obtuse prose, although there is the happiness of wrestling with his thoughts once they have been revealed.

What good is your Blackberry or Blu-Ray when you’ve blown a spoke in the middle of nowhere and it is getting dark and pouring rain? Your





credentials, your ego, and your money will not get you home again. It is in this situation that you learn something about yourself, about your ingenuity and self-sufficiency. The condition of the cyclist is the human condition, writ small – all of us must craft for ourselves the kinds of lives we wish to lead, we must decide how we are to live, what we will do, and how to pull it off. Like Kierkegaard, we can find exhilaration and self-knowledge in this challenge instead of ennui or despair.

The sixth lesson I have learned is that cycling is a way to Delphi, with the demand to know thyself inscribed over the portal to the oracle. Take heart in Emerson’s words from *Self-Reliance*: “He cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time.”¹¹ With the happiness of riding, that strength of character, you can find your way back.

NOTES

- 1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1884), part III, “The Seven Seals,” 3.
- 2 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1854), p. 89.
- 3 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1882), section 7.
- 4 René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul* (1649), in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), section 212.
- 5 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), book II, section III.
- 6 Readers will find the map I made of the Jonestown ride at www.gmap-pedometer.com/?r=2363457.
- 7 Epictetus, *Moral Discourses, Enchiridion, and Fragments* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1910), §10.
- 8 Marcus Aurelius, *The Meditations* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), book IV, 49a.
- 9 David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), sec. 4, pt. 2, ¶20.
- 10 Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974).
- 11 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Self-Reliance*, from *Essays: First Series* (New York: Charles E. Merrill, 1841), p. 98.

