
A Few Thoughts on the Ethics of Climbing

GEORGE DVORSKY

The problem of ethics in climbing is not a new one, but recently it seems to have been attracting more and more attention. This is probably because the popularity of climbing and its fast development during the past decades have raised some controversial issues. In the Himalaya our sport has developed very quickly from the first pioneering steps of mountain exploration, through the era of the first ascents, to the present highly competitive approach. 20 years ago, a successful climb in the highest mountains on earth commanded our admiration. Today this is not enough, and we find ourselves evaluating what route was chosen, how large the team was, at which time of the year the peak was climbed, etc.

New technology has helped us to produce equipment which enables climbers to scale the most difficult mountain faces in alpine style, in small teams without large numbers of supporting climbers and high-altitude porters. We consider every spur, face or ridge potentially climbable, and it is only the highest mountains in the greater ranges that can today provide us with real challenges.

Alongside these developments there has been a vast increase in the number of climbers coming to the mountains. Superstition and fear of mountains are things of the past and our sport has been popularized through books, magazines and television. The time is also long since gone when most top climbers knew each other and, as a result, we hear about widely differing ideas, motivations and aims. Some clashes are inevitable and lively discussions take place about what is right and what is wrong. These often develop into full-scale debates about the ethics of climbing, about climbers' attitudes to each other and to the natural environment, and about what the unwritten rules governing our behaviour should be.

It is only natural that we all try to promote our own ideas on these matters – and there is nothing wrong with that. The philosopher Immanuel Kant said: 'Nobody can make me happy by forcing his own ideas of happiness upon me. Everyone should be free to find his own way to happiness, unless by so doing he obstructs others on their way.' If our own primary aim in coming to the mountains is to achieve personal satisfaction, or 'happiness', then we should not deny a similar satisfaction to others, even if their ideas and motivation are different. It is surely up to each person to decide whether he is climbing for his own inner contentment, for wider recognition, or for other reasons.

Climbing has one specific advantage over many other sports – it can bring fulfilment at widely different levels of skill. We probably all remember our first alpine route and the satisfaction it brought us; a great contrast to our feelings

when we first hold a tennis racket in our hand. In tennis many hours of practice are needed before one gains enjoyment in one's skill, but I believe there is no intrinsic difference between the feelings of a beginner on an easy mountain route and those of a top climber reaching the summit of a Himalayan giant.

However, I am not suggesting that freedom in the mountains should have no limits. I see such limits defined by the last part of the quotation from Kant: '... unless he obstructs the freedom of others ...' That freedom refers not only to freedom of thought and expression but also to that paramount 'freedom' – the safety of others. And this is where I doubt whether we can depend for much longer on ethical, unwritten rules alone. With increasing numbers of people coming to the mountains to climb, it is unrealistic, where lives are at stake, to rely solely on conventional behaviour and goodwill. There should also be well-established and well-known rules.

The much-discussed tragedy on K2 in 1986 demonstrated the need for such rules; they would help to prevent a similar situation occurring again. We can no longer expect that our own team will be the only one on the mountain at any given time, and there will inevitably be more conflicts of interest between different climbing parties in the future. The kind of problems which are likely to arise – language problems, misunderstandings, conflicting arrangements – should not be allowed to endanger human lives. I believe it would be possible to work out a set of clear rules, so that in cases of conflict the answers would be at hand. The climbing community would be able to judge whether someone had broken these rules deliberately, and one would hope that sponsors would react appropriately. Discussion and debate in the outdoor magazines and climbing clubs could lead to the formulation of a set of fair rules binding everyone.

The clubs and periodicals have a similar task in dealing with the threat to the environment inherent in our sport. That is another example where 'the freedom of others' is relevant. If new equipment and technology allows us to climb even the most difficult terrain, it should also help us to remove all signs of our presence in the mountains.

I am eagerly awaiting the time when every expedition report announces that all used and unused equipment has been brought back to civilization and that Base Camp has been left exactly as it was found. Why should the next party have to camp on the smelling tip left by its predecessors, or stumble over the remains of old camps and fixed ropes? I know the descent is sometimes a fight for survival, but that is not always the case. Many parties manage to retrieve their most expensive pieces of equipment while leaving everything else behind. Anyone who has seen pictures of the much frequented Base Camps and of Everest's South Col, or has been to these places, will know what I am talking about.

Would it not be possible for the journals and magazines which publish the climbing reports to ask for details of what condition the route was found in by the expedition, and in what state it was left? That is another sphere where current behaviour is not good enough, and we should not hesitate to criticize those who endanger the very existence of our sport and 'our way to happiness'.

I believe that a positive response from the climbing community on these matters could change established attitudes and lead to some harsher measures

when required. We could even exert pressure on countries which are less environmentally conscious than we are to stop issuing climbing permits to those who neglect the environment or break accepted rules of ethical conduct.