
The Big Issues

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The Effects of Change on Mountaineering Ethics

The *raison d'être* of mountaineering has never been easy to define. There are few physical activities in which we voluntarily engage which provide such a contrasting range of experiences. The writings of the Alpine pioneers leave little doubt that they were deeply moved by the magnificence of the mountains, and by their power to stir the spirit and refresh the mind. Theirs was a personal relationship, largely untainted by selfish or ulterior motives. Since then, material development and overcrowding have progressively diluted some of the natural beauty of the mountains, which seem no longer to excite the same sensations of awe and wonder as they did to past generations. Moreover, spiritual exaltation and aesthetic satisfaction appear to be in decline as sources of inspiration. There have been changes, too, in traditional values which would probably shock our forebears.

Change, the essential process on the road to development, has affected mountaineering in many different ways. But change is too general a term to apply to the various forms in which climbing has evolved, especially during the second half of this century. Diminishing opportunities for pioneering ventures have transformed the scope of the challenges now open to climbers. This has led to the attainment of previously unimagined levels of climbing skills, and to the acceptance of inconceivable degrees of danger. The publicity cult that is fashionable today, relating to every form of human activity, now exercises a strong influence upon the once eccentric and unintelligible sport of mountain climbing. This has encouraged an egotistical and competitive outlook which is glaringly exposed to the all-pervading and unforgiving power of the media, where it is often distorted and manipulated. At the same time, the advance of spectacular skills, and the dependence upon increasingly sophisticated equipment have become essential to the pace of development in the modern climbing scene.

Commenting in 1872 on the changes that followed the Alpine 'Golden Age', Leslie Stephen wrote:

The great difference is not that the more recent performers are braver, nor ... more skilful than their predecessors. The difference is chiefly that their imaginations have become familiarised with the mountains ... and no particular courage is required to take liberties in which the boldest formerly dared not indulge.¹

In modern climbing, it is probably this sense of confidence which has provided one of the mainsprings of change: confidence that equivalent climbs have been done before; confidence in the reliability of modern equipment; confidence that a broken body need not follow a false step, that isolation is rarely total, that a rescue service is usually on call; in other words, that it is now possible to discount the inhibiting psychological factor. Whilst this aspect was rightly emphasised by Stephen, he could never have foreseen the fundamental changes in moral and social perceptions, emerging gradually over the last fifty years, which have brought about some of the recent changes in mountaineering practice. A F Mummery was, perhaps, closer to current thinking when he commented on our desire to encounter natural forces more powerful than ourselves:

The essence of the sport [of climbing] lies, not in ascending a peak, but in struggling with and overcoming difficulties ... I like to feel that our best efforts may be needed, and that even then we may be baffled and beaten.²

But Mummery held distinct views about the methods he employed; and essential to his spirit was the purity of the struggle against natural forces, 'to set one's utmost faculties, physical and mental, to fight some grim precipice or force some gaunt ice-clad gully ...' Mummery's ethos did not strike at the traditions of mountaineering. He climbed because he rejoiced in the physical challenge, in the magnificence of the scenery, and in the search for adventure. He climbed because, with a deep passion for the mountains, he simply had to.

During the thirty or forty years after Mummery's death, a handful of climbers, possessing similar skills and enterprise, were imbued with much the same spirit. But it is impossible to compare the impulses which drove George Mallory beyond human limits on Mount Everest in 1924, with those of the forty men and women who reached Everest's summit on a single day in 1993. Was Mallory in pursuit of a personal ambition? Or did he sacrifice himself in a rescue attempt to save his companion? Discussing the chances of success, it was Mallory himself who said:

It might be possible for two men to struggle somehow to the summit, disregarding every other consideration ... The ill-considered acceptance of any and every risk has no part in the essence of persevering courage ... Principles must be respected in the ascent ... and of all the principles by which we hold the first is that of mutual help.³

At this time mountaineering was still regarded as a private affair between the individual and the mountain, even though fatal accidents in the mountains were reported in the newspapers in detail and were sometimes

greeted with outrage by the public. The circumstances in which Mallory and Irvine died on Everest in 1924 were no exception. But such lack of privacy was felt to be not only undesirable but disagreeable. With characteristic irony H W Tilman, as leader of the 1938 Everest Expedition, voiced his disapproval:

It usually happens that the newspaper gets hold of the wrong mountain wrongly spelt, adds or deducts several thousands of feet to or from its height, and describes what the wrong man with his name wrongly spelt did not do on it.⁴

By the 1930s, the mountaineering 'playground' that had belonged essentially to the European Alps had begun to shift to more distant horizons. Spurred by a spirit of competition and fed by growing public interest, ambitious climbers began to focus upon the great unclimbed mountains of the Himalaya, where the relatively modest expeditions of Conway in 1892, Freshfield in 1899 and Longstaff in 1905, 1907 and 1909, were followed in the 1930s by the large nationally-driven attempts to climb Everest, Kangchenjunga and Nanga Parbat. It was at this time that the first environmental forebodings were sounded:

The arrival of an army of porters led by sahibs apparently possessing boundless wealth and wasting valuable material along the route makes a most corrupting impression.⁵

When receiving payment for his wares, the village headman would cry, 'What good will the silver do?'. In regions where the balance between production and consumption was already precarious, and where there were no reserves to draw upon, the passage of a large expedition could be materially disastrous. The age of Western pollution – material, moral, and social – had begun.

When expedition activity resumed in the Himalaya in the late 1940s, traditional mountaineering values were still unshaken. A Swiss party visiting the Gangotri glacier in 1947 brought their activities to a halt for ten days to rescue and succour a Sherpa injured in an accident. The French expedition to Annapurna I in 1950 abandoned all further ambitions in order to ensure the rescue and safe return of two frostbitten climbers. Several examples of this kind were seen during the Himalayan 'Golden Age' – 1950 to 1960 – when thirteen 8000m, and an equal number of 7000m mountains were climbed for the first time.

By the mid-1960s, the easing of entry restrictions opened the floodgates to expeditions large and small spread across the Himalayan regions. The powerful desire to achieve some kind of 'first' gave rise to a breathless race, initially on a national basis, and later with a stronger individual emphasis. It was during the following decade that a different set of climbing ethics

began to take shape in Europe and to threaten traditional mountaineering values.

Referring to the changes already so clearly in existence, Charles Evans, in his 1970 Valedictory Address, quoted Eric Shipton:

'... directly people allow the element of competition to *rule* their activities and care *more* for trophies or record breaking or acclamation than for a real understanding of their craft ... they are in danger of losing the real touchstone of values which alone makes anything worth while.'

Charles Evans continued:

I return here to my own fear that the shift of emphasis from preoccupation with the setting to preoccupation with the performance and the technique could be so great as to be an important loss to us and to our successors as mountaineers.⁶

In the Himalaya, the changes that began to emerge seemed to represent a watershed. It was a terrible shock, at first, to realise the implications. Starting as unusual examples of irresponsibility, growing in a sinister way, and later almost beginning to lose the stigma of unacceptable behaviour, the new mountaineering practices seemed to suggest that a climber's presence on a mountain was a matter that concerned the individual alone, and that it was his responsibility to set his own limits, expecting neither to receive nor to provide assistance in the event of an emergency. This looked like the abandonment of every time-honoured principle respected by generations of climbers. Solo ascents became less uncommon; greater hazards were accepted; and growing accident lists inevitably involved porters, who could hardly be expected to share the ambitions of their employers. How outdated, in the new Himalayan scene, would George Mallory's words have sounded:

It might be possible for two men to struggle somehow to the summit [of Everest] disregarding every other consideration ... it is a different matter to climb the mountain as mountaineers would have it climbed.⁷

Climbing has claimed the lives of some of its greatest heroes, occasionally arising from some trifling or unforeseeable accident. But 'accidents' happen *accidentally* only rarely. They are most likely to occur when the body has passed its physical limits, and the perceptions are no longer responsive to the reality of the situation, whether in terms of security or of personal satisfaction. The 1995 disasters on Everest (11 died), and those of 1986 and 1995 on K2 (13 and 7 died), have aroused indignation and the need,

sometimes unjustly, to apportion blame. Responsibility should be looked for elsewhere: ignoring warning signals (meteorological and physical), judgement clouded by ambition, competitive pressures, or perhaps simply playing the game for too long too close to the knife-edge.

A few years ago, a well-known climber said: 'An eight-thousander is only yours once you are safely down from it – before that you belong to the mountain.'⁸ It has also been said that only those capable of making a safe descent should rank among the class of climbers competent to reach a summit of 8000m. The second statement has been outdated by the current fashion for guided ascents of the highest mountains, sometimes with regrettable results. During the past decade there have been, unhappily, a few climbers who, 'disregarding every other consideration', have struggled on towards the summit and failed to return. In a critical situation, the decision whether to continue or not can only be judged by the prevailing circumstances and by the personal sense of values of the individual, provided that it neither interferes with the pleasure, nor endangers the safety, of others; and observes the crucial principle that a climber's priority should be to make a safe descent. After having attained the summit, who would maintain that there is no distinction between descending safely, and failing to descend?

Mountaineering is an activity in which we engage because of its mental and physical demands against forces greater than ourselves. There is no place in such a contest for self-deception. After A F Mummery had climbed the north summit of the Grépon in 1881, he was kept awake by the troubling thought that a further tower forming the south summit might be the highest point. Thirty-six hours later he repeated the climb, reached it, and found that the south summit *was* higher.* One hundred years later, in 1981, Bonington, Boardman, Tasker, and Rouse reached the summit of Kongur to find that the ridge continued towards a point further ahead, which they feared might be slightly higher. They spent the night in a snow bivouac at about 7700m, and it took them two hours the next day to reach the further summit – which turned out to be a shade lower. Kurt Hahn once defined integrity as 'the triumph over self-swindle'.

Now that mountain climbers have climbed to new levels of notoriety, climbing, like other popular sports, is growing into a form of mass entertainment, attracting the publicity and the material rewards of a highly commercialised world. Such developments have stimulated a relentless race for ever more spectacular deeds. Signs are appearing in Europe of ways in which to remove as many as possible of the hazards and challenges of climbing – which, for the majority, provide a large part of its appeal – by employing an excessive array of safety techniques, including a mechanical drill, as an adjunct to rock-climbing equipment. These developments, together with the growing popularity of artificial climbing walls, seem to

* The respective heights of the Grépon summits are: north 3478m, south 3482m.

be drawing the sport closer to the point where, to quote Mummery, 'the art of mountaineering becomes lost in that of the steeplejack.' Mummery's mountaineering ethic was simply stated: 'The true mountaineer is a wanderer ... a man who loves to be where no human being has been before, who delights in gripping rocks that have previously never felt the touch of human fingers.'⁹

Mountaineering, in its widest aspects, is a way of life. During the latter part of this century, attitudes towards various aspects of our lives have undergone some remarkable changes, and will no doubt continue to do so. But there are certain fundamental values which do not change: such as the instinctive inner feelings which, I believe, were an essential part of the origins of mountain climbing. Happily, practices adopted by the new wave of Himalayan climbers are by no means universal. There is recent evidence to prove that George Mallory's 'first principle' of mutual help is still very much alive. On K2, in 1993, four British climbers abandoned their own chance of success on the mountain in order to save the life of a Swedish climber whom they found in a weak condition on the descent. The following year, during another Karakoram expedition, a seriously-ill climber was rescued by three climbers, not of his party, who climbed through the night to find him, place him on an improvised stretcher, and haul him across a glacier to his party's base.

Je ne saurais dire si c'est l'alpinisme qui forme de tels caractères ou si de tels caractères sont attirés instinctivement vers l'alpinisme.

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