

The heart of the matter

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Many writers have set out to explain why we climb and why mountains are able to arouse so consuming a passion. Their writings have usually been enjoyable and interesting, sometimes brilliant and illuminating, but none, to my mind, has really answered the question. One reason for this is that the balance of satisfactions varies between individuals, and another that in a sense there is no answer. *De gustibus non est disputandum*. You like snails, I don't; there is no more to be said.

Nevertheless we all feel that the passion for mountains is so deep, the exaltation they can give so high, that there must be more to it than that. This has led some to ascribe a peculiar moral virtue to mountaineering and, indeed, inspired their enthusiasm with a missionary flavour. The moral value becomes a categorical imperative, and they go out into the motorways and secondary roads and compel the recruits to come in. Any compulsion we reject; Queen Victoria wished to use compulsion in the opposite direction and to prohibit the Alpine explorations of our founding fathers. Equally I reject persuasion as a means of recruiting climbers, partly because I believe any man with the root of the matter in him will find his way to the hills, but mainly because climbing involves a sanction which should only be accepted from an inner compulsion, not from external persuasion.

Moral values are involved in all pursuits, but probably more so in mountaineering than in most. The opportunity for virtue involves correlative opportunity for vice. To be a mountaineer is not in itself a guarantee of good character. A gallery of mountaineers defective in various solid virtues would not be difficult to compile, indeed initial essays by Sir Arnold Lunn and Mr T. S. Blakeney encourage one to hope for a definitive study under their joint authorship. That would blow some dust away. Yet we do believe that mountaineering is a better occupation than many other innocent pursuits such as gin-rummy; we do not accept the celebrated equation of push-pin and poetry. It would therefore be consoling to have some good reason for persisting in a course which is nearly always arduous and even, at times, dangerous.

The simple answer is that we enjoy it, but what we enjoy is not simple but multiple and the make-up of the total pleasure out of the multiple elements will vary considerably from one mountaineer to another.

There is the pleasure of physical action and the happy resulting state of muscular satisfaction in which we eat, drink and sleep well. This is shared by very many other pursuits, such as hunting and football.

There is the pleasure of carrying out a project, of reaching an objective. This is common to success in any field, but is not necessary to mountaineering;

we can have a very good day even when we fail to make our peak or pass. We still have all the other elements and the peculiarly British pride in a well-conducted retreat.

There is the pleasure of an activity carried out amidst superb natural scenery. This can be shared by, for example, fishing and sailing.

There is the pleasure of escape, escape from the squalid and polluted environments in which most of us spend most of our time.

There is the pleasure of change, life in mountain huts and villages is very different from the work-a-day life of most of us. Change is different from escape; there would still be a muted pleasure in change to another city and language even if there was no escape from squalor and pollution.

There is the pleasure of carrying out a difficult movement or series of movements neatly and safely. This applies to any technique, whether with gun, rod, bat, racket or pencil.

There is the pleasure of companionship. This may be found elsewhere, but in climbing the mutual dependence is unusually, perhaps uniquely, great.

There is the presence of a sanction which sharpens the senses and heightens awareness. By precluding sloppy permissiveness it insists on the order of the universe, rank on rank the army of unalterable law. The presence of a remote risk is a gentle stimulant and so pleasurable; large doses of fear should not be taken, the drug must be used with caution. There have been distinguished mountaineers who have made a cult of danger; this is an aberration.

There is the pleasure of topography; of finding one's way across difficult country or in difficult weather; of reaching a ridge and looking out over a new valley; of unravelling the convolutions of a contorted landscape; the insight into spatial relations, as in very good architecture.

There is the pleasure of contrast, as of coming round a corner out of gloom and cold into sun and warmth, or perhaps even more blessed, just getting out of the wind. There is rhythm as in music or dancing. There are climbs in major keys, climbs in minor, and climbs that modulate. Rock, snow, ice and even grass have each a manifold of textures and each demands a subtle adjustment. The mountain gives us an orchestra in which we must ourselves play each instrument, keeping time and tune.

There is the pleasure of solitude. Some pleasures, like concerts and operas, are necessarily gregarious; where so many are involved in the performance the presence of a sympathetic audience is irrelevant. But a crowd in a picture gallery is tiresome, and the Milestone Buttress on a Bank Holiday is a less than ideal climbing ground. The contemplative element in mountaineering is destroyed by interruption. Sessions of 'sweet silent thought' require isolation. Wordsworth's 'Boy' stood alone when the visible scene entered unawares into his mind. Solitude, or at least complete abstraction from the irrelevant part of the environment, is necessary for adequate aesthetic experience.

All these separate pleasures alternate and combine but do not get to the heart of the matter which is an aesthetic experience to which each and all of these elements predispose and contribute.

The philosophers have not been very helpful about aesthetics, providing only a page here and there for each volume they have devoted to the related subject of ethics, perhaps because a sense of shame is commoner than a love of beauty. Schopenhauer is the best on this subject and we follow his general line.

He held that we (and everything else) are governed by Will, which implies a succession of ends after which we strive. During this process the supremacy of the will is such that only objects or events relevant to attaining the objective are perceived. The most general and universal objective is survival and during the long process of evolution our senses have so developed that they bring us only representations relevant to survival. There is no reason to suppose that everything or every fact is so relevant; indeed there is very good reason to suppose the opposite—to what element in brute survival is the Jupiter Symphony or the 'Ode to a Nightingale' relevant? There are certainly rare moments when we perceive the irrelevant, these are the moments of aesthetic experience. Naturally such moments are more likely when the world is not too much with us, when the tyrant will is quiescent. Mountain scenery and solitude are favourable to this condition.

Time and space are merely the ways in which our mechanism orders experience so that it comes within our practical grasp. Obviously we cannot grasp at once everything that is; representation of the world is made possible by being dribbled out in succession, to left, to right, above and below. Genius is less bound in this way and can hold much more than our ordinary specious present. Mozart, it is credibly reported, could simultaneously grasp a whole symphony just as you or I can simultaneously grasp a whole phrase, if it is short and simple enough. In aesthetic experience we dispense with the filters of time and space and become, however inadequately, aware of the world as timeless and non-spatial. This vision is naturally more complete and satisfying, more 'real', than our normal practical sight, so necessary for getting and spending. Confined to this practical sight, 'we lay waste our powers; little we see in Nature that is ours'.

On this view the vexed relation of Appearance to Reality becomes the simple relation of part to whole and not a more complex relation such as of sensible world to an unknown cause, of many to one, or indeed any of the ingenious solutions which have been fashionable in various times and places. This conclusion conforms to common sense. We are all ready to accept that the world¹ is *more* than what we see, while it takes an effort to accept any of the standard theories under which the 'real' world is quite other than what we see.

¹ The 'world' here has no limiting reference to this planet, rather is it the world defined in the opening of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: 'The world is everything that is the case. The world is the totality of facts, not of things.' (Translation by C. K. Ogden of 'Ogden and Richards', where Richards is the I.A.R. of the N ridge of the Dent Blanche.)

This 'more' over and above the everyday world of practical action, is what we glimpse in an aesthetic experience. Schopenhauer in fact thought that what we then glimpsed were the Platonic Ideas which he equated to Kant's things-in-themselves, but this assumption is not necessary to my case. What we have at such times is a perception not limited by the normal conditions of perception, time and space. This gives colour to the assumption that the aesthetic percepts are things-in-themselves, though Kant, when consistent, regarded these as unknowable.²

There is a further relevant aspect of Schopenhauer's doctrine, that aesthetic experience also involves the temporary disappearance of the self with its whole rag-tag-and-bobtail of desires and worries. In such moments he says 'we let our whole consciousness be filled by the calm contemplation of the natural object actually present, whether it be a landscape, a tree, a rock, a crag, a building, or anything else. We *lose* ourselves entirely in this object, to use a pregnant expression; in other words we forget our individuality, our will, and continue to exist only as a pure subject, a clear mirror of the object, so that it is as though the object alone existed without anyone to perceive it, and thus we are no longer able to separate the perceiver from the perception'. And, a little further on, 'Then all at once the peace, always sought but always escaping us on that first path of willing, comes to us of its own accord, and all is well with us. It is the painless state, prized by Epicurus as the highest good and as the state of the gods.' No mountaineer but will recognise that description; we have all been as gods on ridge or slope, cliff or peak.

'If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite'. Blake is saying just what I struggle to express but he, being a poet, uses shorter words and is easier to understand. His 'Infinity in the palm of your hand and Eternity in an hour' are my world timeless and non-spatial.

Thus when we experience an exaltation, a translation, among the mountains we are escaping both the tyranny of the will and the shutters of time and space, and so experiencing the world more amply. The same thing can happen in the concert room or before a great work of art; it can also happen in the library when a great writer suddenly gives us a piercing insight, an insight which is often, alas, irrecoverable.

The main reason why we go to the mountains, why we sweat up to huts in the heat of the day and shiver out of them again in the cold darkness, why we rub our noses on rock and freeze our fingers on ice, is because the mountains provide a very propitious environment for these moments of insight.

It is not only the light and mass and architecture of mountains that cleanse the doors of our perception; it is also the physical exertion, the necessary precision

² What Schopenhauer says on this subject is mainly in the Third Book of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*. The translation usually found on English bookshelves is that by Haldane and Kemp, which is inaccurate, even in the title of the book. The more recent translation by E. F. J. Payne is to be preferred. It must not be assumed that Schopenhauer would support all I have written, or that I accept all Schopenhauer's views.

of movement and the presence, however shadowy, of the sanction of injury or death³ which sharpen our senses. A climbing day includes all these cleansers of the doors and thus gives quite exceptional opportunities to see past the practical but limiting arrangement of our representations in temporal succession and spatial order; and this is the condition and nature of all aesthetic experience. Those states described as mystical would fall under my general class of aesthetic.

It has often been suggested that this type of experience is a manner of seeing through the creatures to the Creator. While I do not claim to have seen God, or even to have received any reliable intimation of immortality, I concede that such modes of expression may be a useful and widely understood shorthand, although philosophically going beyond my evidence. One is constantly tempted to use other-worldly terms to describe these moments of insight, but it is my main contention that what is then perceived is still the world, but seen more fully without the filters of time and space which are necessary for all practical purposes. But Wittgenstein's definition of the world, which we have adopted, includes God, provided He is a fact. Thus, while my thesis does not imply, it in no way precludes, a theocentric view of the mountaineering experience.

The fact that mountains are particularly propitious to the aesthetic moments described is the reason for that numinous quality which has been recognised in them since the earliest times. Primitive peoples (and their successors, for fifth-century Athens was far less primitive than London or New York today) put the gods at home in the mountains. In later and darker years the gods became devils and only the *genius loci* survived who managed to get christened as St This or St That. So, for fear of burning in this world as well as the next, it became dragons and ogres, rather than gods and oreads, with which mediaeval man peopled the mountain fastnesses. But god or dragon, oread or ogre, the popular instinct was right. The mountain is not the domain of *l'homme moyen sensuel*.

³ In an excellent paper (*AJ* 52 22) Michael Roberts considers this sanction as central to mountaineering. He stresses the wholly gratuitous nature, the absolute uselessness, of the risks and disasters and finds in that their prime justification. Absolute uselessness is the same as the suspension of practical objective, the release from the tyranny of the will, which, I have argued, is the precondition of aesthetic experience, the seeing more, i.e. experiencing beauty.