

Psychological Aspects of Mountaineering

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IT would indeed be a very confident and naive person who believed that, at this stage in the history of mountaineering, anything new could be said concerning the reasons which lead, or even impel, human beings to climb. In a recent notable book by an accomplished mountaineer, it is stated that no convincing reasons can be given.¹ On the other hand, mainly outside the circle of climbers, although apparently occasionally supported by those within it, there is the prevailing view, that it is danger, as such, which chiefly attracts the mountaineer, who thus embodies a form of incipient madness. Dissenting from both these views, the writer considers that it may be worth while to raise a few points concerning the more subjective aspects of mountaineering, for discussion.

It is a striking fact that few English mountaineers who are writers have stressed the attraction of the intimacy one feels with nature, on the way up the heights. Very scarce are those who admit that they climb for the views; the writer has heard only two mountaineers admit that they underwent the exertions solely to enjoy the incomparable sights, an attitude to which he himself would not subscribe; although he feels that if this factor were eliminated, mountaineering would be shorn of one of its greatest delights. One can today, of course, supplement the panorama of the mountain territories and assist one's knowledge of the relative positions of peaks, glaciers, valleys and rivers, by looking at these from the air. For a surveyor of the mountains such views are immensely helpful; but they can never take the place of the closeness and zest of the experiences gained by scrambling up the peaks themselves, or by lying on a snow-field on a lovely day. When one is on the summit of the highest peak of a district, the view is not always the finest; for from such a point, the lower peaks, even if fairly high, appear to be diminished and flattened out; their relative proportions and outlines become quite changed or obliterated. It can hardly be because they are lower and we look down on them, that they cease to be objects of desire, as has been suggested by a recent writer.² One may,

¹ Climbs and Ski-Runs, by F. S. Smythe, chap. 16.

² M. M. Strumia in a stimulating article in the *A. A. J.*, I, pp. 31-39.

indeed, feel more exhilarated and uplifted when on the top of Mt. Blanc than on the Jungfrau, but does the Petit Dru, if not previously climbed, therefore cease to be an object of attainment?

An individual may love climbing and be indifferent to scenery. Mere collectors of peaks and exponents of acrobatic alpinism, whose virtuosity some of us envy, may remain without any appreciation of beauty. Others may love the scenery and care less for climbing as such. Because, however, an individual cultivates the muscular side of his nature and develops his mountaineering skill, this need not impair his capacity for aesthetic pleasures.³ For the most part, the circumstances of the sport tend to make the mountaineer more responsive than other men to natural beauty. Those who are most attracted by the mountains and constantly return to them, are those who can enjoy the fun and frolic of a sport with the aesthetic delight which is produced by the marvelous forms of the great ranges with their many colored rocks and their glistening glaciers. Such visual delights constitute an integral element in the total complex of factors, which induce the mountaineer to explore and ascend. This factor of aesthetic enjoyment is the unique and elevating aspect in mountaineering. It does not enter, either in the same way, or to the same degree, into any other sport. One must be a lover of nature and feel an intimate contact with nature in order to derive the fullest enjoyment, both immediately and retrospectively, from the hours spent on the heights.

A strange thesis has been maintained by a writer already referred to, namely, that in order to admire the scenery on mountaineering expeditions, one must be relatively fatigued, because it is only when our sportive mood is exhausted, that we can contemplate. "If we are completely without sense of muscular labor, we will be restless and less appreciative of the outer world."⁴ Yet he admits that "fatigue is not essential to contemplation or meditation." On the contrary, we should be inclined to say that it impairs the keenness of both perception and contemplation. "If we could be brought," writes Dr. Strumia, "to the summit of a peak without fatigue, the sensations would be entirely different than on viewing the subject

³ "We fancy at such times that we are creating a masterpiece of beauty, and we certainly draw nearer to that abstract goal that was aimed at by those who partook in the classical games when they derived a pure artistic enjoyment from muscular exercises."—*Guido Rey*.

⁴ *A. A. J.*, Vol. I, p. 37.

after a climb.”⁶ Undoubtedly; and whereas, in the latter event, there might, and probably would be, a fuller satisfaction, “a more heroic tone,” as Dr. Strumia puts it, yet, in the former event, the appreciation of the scenery would probably be more intense and discerning. Fatigue, as Dr. Strumia is aware, lowers psychological activity and discrimination. It is in the early morning hours (although, perhaps not in the earliest when one is scarcely awake) when one’s organism is still in a fresh and energising condition, when one appears to cover the ground without any effort, that one’s aesthetic enjoyment of the external world is deepest; or again on easier climbs, where one does not have to hang on his fingers and there is an opportunity to look and to contemplate. It is then that the impressive immensity of the starry heavens, the wonderful reds, purples, orange and saffron colors of the sunrise, the beryl blue and deep sea-green of the crevasses, the enchanting curves of the wind-driven snow, the outlines of the magnificent precipices stretching away into unmeasured spaces, make the strongest sensational appeal.

In order to enjoy the beauty of the higher peaks, the mind must be thoroughly self-controlled and self-possessed. With fatigue, the scenery may take on a depressing tinge. If one is anxious, a mountaineering expedition may pass from a joy to a nightmare; even the sparkle of the snow may appear to be a cruel glitter. If his equanimity be disturbed, the climber will not see beauty, but a harsh and hostile aspect of the universe. Climbers in the Himalayas have declared that the peaks look cruel and fail to supply the aesthetic enjoyment provided by the Alps.

On a difficult, technically interesting and exhaustive climb, one may not pay much, if any, attention to the scenery. Strivings to overcome unusual obstacles and avoid dangers, may obliterate nearly everything but the realities of the actual climbing, and many of the details of the latter would probably be forgotten, were it not for the camera which occasionally reveals something new and affords us the pleasure of living over again later the emotions of the day. After giving our bodies an initial impulse, we continue to act as if under the influence of suggestion, and overcome difficulties which might appal us were we fully alive to them.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38. Perhaps the writer has not sufficiently distinguished between the feelings connected with the actual experiences and those arising from retrospective contemplation. Possibly also a doubtful metaphysical viewpoint has not been without influence.

A psychological cause of greater endurance in mountaineering than in ordinary exercise is the mental distraction which excludes boredom. Several hours walking on a dull road, or trudging over monotonous moraines, may suggest feelings of fatigue before the muscles are actually tired. The variety of movement, and the change of scene in mountaineering, combined with the excitement of an ascent, may postpone the sensation of exhaustion for many hours. Sometimes, too, we may not experience the expected fatigue, because feelings of exhaustion have been submerged in intenser feelings of satisfaction produced by our achievement. What causes, or wherein lies the essence of such satisfaction?

There appears to be a general agreement that a high peak like Everest or Aconcagua, or a both difficult and high one like Kangchenjunga, or a rock peak like the Grépon, or south face of the Marmolata, presents a challenge by inanimate nature to the physical and mental powers of man. We wish to show that, in a struggle with the unsympathetic forces of nature, skill and intelligence, supported by prowess and courage, can successfully compete and carry the day. It is a case of a bloodless fight against impersonal forces, in which there is involved, neither the defeat of other human beings, nor suffering to the lower orders of animal existence. This is an aspect of a non-competitive and sophisticated sport which is also elevating, since in its successful pursuit, there need be no regret over the shedding of blood or the disappointment of rivals.

How exhilarating to be the first to stand on a summit after stressful climbing, which has demanded thought and experience to pick out the route and skillful adjustments of movement to surmount the difficulties! An equally high and oft-trodden summit, which you can reach with your hands in your pocket, will never produce the same sort or degree of satisfaction, although the view from it may be equally fine, or even finer. It does not call forth all the latent powers of man, who derives the keenest satisfaction from exploiting to the utmost the resources of the human body, and the cognitive and conative forces of his mind. "A severe rock climb, partly because it is a supreme test of the physical and mental qualities, is its own reward," declares Arnold Lunn.

But difficulty is often, in the minds of the uninitiated, confounded with danger, which, as such, does not appeal to the genuine mountaineer, although it may to the oromaniac. The sense of pleasurable excitement which an expert cragsman experiences on

an exposed traverse or in a difficult crack, or on a thousand feet of perpendicular rock wall, is not due to an impression of danger, but to a sense of security; the contrast between what is and what might happen enhances the dramatic factor in the sport. But "the contrast between the thing one is, and the thing one might so easily become, seems the most absurd of paradoxes to those secure in the confidence founded on trusted handholds and sound rock," and, one may add, knowledge of themselves. The leader may, of course, have exhausted the margin of safety, may have over-estimated his powers, and, in consequence, being over-strained, may be irritable and liable to slip. To escape from a perilous situation, affords a most satisfactory sensation of relief. But, in general, the good amateur, like the good professional mountaineer, does not take illegitimate risks as such. What he aims at, and finds satisfaction in achieving, is bringing risks of this kind under the class of pleasurable and reasonable exercises and reducing otherwise unwarranted dangers to a minimum through the application of experience, skill and intelligence (which is involved in the first two).⁶ An expert, even on the Mer de Glace side of the Grépon, is, as Arnold Lunn has rightly said, safer than a nervous woman trying to cross Piccadilly.

That the mountaineer has not a perverse liking for danger may appear to be questionable when one remembers the utterance of an illustrious climber like A. F. Mummery, who, while recognizing that the great ridges sometimes demanded their sacrifice, wrote: "But the mountaineer would hardly forego his worship, though he knew himself to be the destined victim." I think that if anyone knew, i. e., realized with certainty, that he would not return from a climb, he would be very foolish to attempt it, unless he had strong reasons for ending his life in a spectacular or sensational manner. It is quite intelligible that Empedocles may have thrown himself into the crater of Aetna, and yet been quite sane. Those to whom mountaineering is a religion as well as a sport, will not hesitate to take risks, as genuine and enthusiastic adherents of all religions have done and will always do; and if they be unusually expert

⁶ There seem to be three sources of danger which intelligence cannot altogether eliminate, although it can greatly reduce them: falling stones, ice-avalanches and the rarer one of sudden and unforeseeable changes of weather. Whether dangerous and concealed crevasses can always be detected is a disputed point among the craftsmen. In "The Kangchenjunga Adventure," F. S. Smythe calls attention to exceptional forms of danger which encompass the Himalayan climber; p. 228.

and daring, they will not realize the risks to the same degree as will those who are less skilled and less adventurous. In moments of exaltation it is possible to write in retrospect like Mummery, feeling confident that one can pull through the greatest dangers. Over-confidence in one's own powers as against the unsympathetic forces of nature has, however, been the undoing of some of the greatest mountaineers. Mummery's disappearance in the Himalayas serves to remind us that

Sie halten die Herrschaft in ewigen Haenden
Und koennen sie brauchen wie's ihnen gefaellt.⁷

At the root of mountaineering is the love of exploration, of doing, seeing, finding out something new. The unexplored places of the earth arouse the curiosity of human beings, whose intelligence prevents them from lying down complacently like the beasts of the field. This is why a virgin peak, if unusually high or difficult, is especially attractive in that it is a fresh challenge to human powers. Mountaineering is a concentrated form of exploration, in which the tedium of delay is cut out and the dramatic intensity thereby heightened.⁸ A big and long climb of a distant peak resembles a miniature campaign. And one of its incidental attractions is the opportunity for detailed planning, which becomes more exciting as the time approaches to put the plan into operation.

A difficult virgin peak involves a succession of problems to be solved on the spot. Those who have climbed can best realize how broken up and intricate a mountain face can be, and how pleasant are the sensations connected with overcoming it. They are akin to those accompanying the solution of a mathematical or any intellectual difficulty. And these difficulties may be equalled by those presented by ice or snow. A broken-up glacier, snow slope or ice-wall presents a maze of séracs and crevasses which may involve greater risks, if not greater difficulties, than any rock climb. After a peak has been climbed many times, new routes on it have to be tried, in order to keep up the interest in, and significance of, the

⁷ "There is nothing friendly about a Himalayan peak," says Mr. F. S. Smythe. "You feel that it is coldly hostile, that it resents intrusion. It will kill you, if it can. And so, if you climb it, you climb it only for the sake of achievement. When you have reached its summit, you have finished with it. There is no desire to renew acquaintance or make a friend of it." In bad weather on any high peak, the indifference of nature to human life is borne in on the dullest mind.

⁸ Hardly true of Himalayan climbing.

game: just as in other sports new hazards and new instruments have to be conceived. This is why in Europe, today, it is not so much the instinct to explore as the desire to devise new and hard routes, that impels the expert mountaineer. The standards of mountaineering have been continually rising because the sport has become more intellectualized and sophisticated. A climb that calls forth all the special physical and mental capacities of his organism, as well as his experience, is the one that now especially attracts the well-trained European mountaineer; and an experienced cragsman is safer on a difficult than on an easy climb just because he will remain more alert. It is on the easy places when attention relaxes and one is off one's guard, that accidents are more likely to happen.* After a hard struggle up the rocks, even the oldest and most cunning climbers on the descent have to guard against the feeling that all the difficulties are over and care is no longer essential. Even relatively to the number of climbers, there have been fewer accidents on the Grépon than on the Jungfrau or Wetterhorn, which shows that difficulty and danger are not synonymous. The dramatic, although for the most part illusory, impression of danger on such an ascent and descent as the Grépon, enhances both the thrill and pleasure of the climb. Is it not most satisfactory and exciting to feel that one's forearms can still be relied on for one's own life, and perhaps for the lives of the party? And in what other kind of sport is a human being brought into more untrammelled and delightful relationships with so high a class of companions?

A well-trained and easy-running mechanism of nerves and muscles yields a peculiar exhilaration in ascending a vertical rock-wall. In mountaineering, as in other sports, some of the fascination results from the exercise of a successful technique. The effect permeates one's organism and is reflected in a consciousness of more vigorous individuality. It realizes the philosophic doctrine that the more we act and the less we are acted upon, the freer we are. It may produce an illusory feeling of a mastery of existence.

On a perfect day, when the stillness of the upper regions is unbroken, except occasionally by shouts and laughter of merry companions, when the sense of being out of the world and of looking down upon its kingdoms is uppermost, when one sinks into the glory and profusion of nature and one feels existence in a many-sided sensa-

* The few fatalities which have occurred in the Canadian Rockies have with one possible exception taken place either on easy peaks or at easy places.

tion, then, in the exaltation of the moment, one may be led to believe that he has grasped the world in a single act of intuition; *uno intuitu sub quadam specie aeternitatis*.¹⁰ But when our scientific spirit is uppermost we realize that the hills are not eternal and that the core of existence may be impenetrable by our minds.

In the last chapter, entitled "The Philosophy of a Mountaineer," of a book by one of the leading contemporary mountain scribes and climbers, the author confesses himself unable to give an adequate reason for his predilections and love of the hills. To the question: "Why do you climb?" Mr. F. S. Smythe replies, "The mountaineer has no answer." The love of the hills, he declares, is indefinable. Now, the love of mountaineering is indefinable only in the same sense as it is difficult to convince a sufferer from sea-sickness of the delights of sailing, or to explain the love of the prairies to one who prefers the heights. People who do not possess steady heads, or who prefer the soft things and flesh-pots, will never understand the attractions of mountaineering; while those who hold their individual lives extremely precious, ought to take serious thought before indulging in any sport that is worth while.

Mr. Smythe backs up his pronouncement by another doubtful statement, that the best things in the world cannot adequately be expressed in speech or print: they are part of the soul. What is termed the soul is only known through certain manifestations, and psychologists nowadays are not disposed to admit the existence of any mystical entity to which problems can be conveniently referred and thereby shelved. Mr. Smythe emphasizes the discomfort, the doubt, the anxiety and weariness, the poor food, scanty ablutions, "clothes odorously reminiscent of sardines and rancid butter," the decline in the general appearance of the mountaineer, and declares, that he cannot possibly explain why he goes back to the mountains, season after season. The foregoing pages embody an attempt to suggest the main reasons for such conduct.

To the exhilaration which one anticipates and enjoys from exercise in that "higher purer air," where one is "unapproachable by worry and oblivious quite of care," to the freedom of living, absence of conventionality, escape from a monotonous round of social duties, have to be added the attraction of adventure and the ever buoyant hope of success against the opposing forces of nature. We go to the hills "for fresh draughts of simplicity and beauty," which

¹⁰ Spinoza: *Ethic*, Part II. 44.

we need more and more, under the present-day conditions of life in large centers of population. The discomfort, the hard beds, the temporary decline in one's social appearance count as nothing against the factors which make for a freshening and strengthening of the cragsman's nerves and morale.

It is also not to be overlooked that in retrospect less pleasant experiences, unless they are of an unusually intense or terrifying character, become dimmer, while more pleasant experiences persist with greater vividness in memory. For this selective tendency of the human mind, there is probably a physiological cause, which we shall not inquire into here. The author against whom we are arguing recognizes the psychological fact, and at the same time supplies, unwittingly(?) a partial answer to the alleged unanswerable question by writing: "To remember well is to have lived well. Mountaineering stores a fund of memory that will endure through a man's lifetime. Seen through the mists of time, its harsher features are smoothed away. We still see the struggle with the *tourmente* on the ice-glazed slabs, we hear the furious howl of the wind and smell the dark mist wreaths. But we do not feel the pain of numbed fingers, the ache of cheeks slashed by the hail, the weariness that assails the joints. We remember, too, the vistas that have delighted our gaze, the host of peaks raising their silver shields to heaven."¹¹ In this and other passages of his brilliant book, his rapturous eloquence has supplied some of the reasons which impelled him to the adventure of Kangchenjunga.

¹¹ This and the foregoing quotations are from "Climbs and Ski-Runs," chap. 16.