

Climbing and the Deep Ecology Movement

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Reality as we know it has an abstract structure and an unsurveyable richness of content. Modern physics and cosmology study its abstract structure with extreme success. The “soft” sciences, poetry, literature, and the arts, reveal concrete contents.

A mountain may be defined in terms of structures such as geographical coordinates and physical properties. As to contents, we may acquaint ourselves with its beauty or ugliness, its threats or its support, its mysteriousness or clarity, its hugeness or its insignificance, its fecundity or barrenness. So far as I can judge, all these properties belong to reality known to humankind. It is a blind alley to say that it *really* is a swarm of atoms, or simply a void. This way of thinking confuses abstract structure with concrete content.

As supporters of the deep ecology movement, we try to emphasize the positive contents as part of the general fight for preserving what is left of the planet Earth in its unsurpassable splendour.

Let us mention avalanches. They are more often conceived as threats than as splendid, awe-inspiring natural phenomena. In part, this is due to population pressure, pressing people too high up the valleys against their own common sense; in part, it is due to overestimation of our own strength and insights, as when peasants with great élan have pushed far up the valleys, and have brought their wives and children to tragic deaths. Our sympathy is with these people, and we are apt to think of avalanches with horror and even with anger and moral censure. But for a mountaineer, not overpowered by competitive urges but in love with all the life processes of the mountain, the observation and meditation of avalanches are positive encounters, every time different and never adequately describable to outsiders. Consequently, if the avalanche does not hit somebody, or at least nearly hit somebody, it is of slight interest to the media.

Avalanches are only one kind of mountain phenomena, and of course a very special kind. We have narratives and works of art, some going back at least 3000 years, and testimonies from the most diverse cultures—Chinese, Japanese, Aztec, Indian, Greek—showing positive acquaintance with mountains. There is a far-reaching similarity of descriptions: testimonies of the majestic, awe-inspiring, unreachableness, their serenity and purity, of their protective function, their job to make us see far, to let us survey, to make us free, strong in a good sense, concentrated on the essentials in life.

Using the somewhat misleading term *symbols*, the mountain has symbolized the upward, the lofty and the high in a positive sense, and therefore, of course, what is nearest to heaven.

On the other hand, the symbol of what goes downwards is associated with what is low, flat, hollow, and evil. The devil never has been located very high. The evil spirits in nature are mostly in caves, hollows, or, if in rocky landscapes, not in the really great mountains.

Perhaps the surge upwards rather than downwards is millions of years old. In any case, from early infancy, climbing up is a positive experience: up stairs, up on chairs and tables, and with age, up on windows, roofs, trees, rocks. It is difficult to explain why some children dislike these activities unless it is through certain bad experiences or depressed moods. For me, it is difficult to understand why grown ups let such experiences go, and thus, with increasing routine, do not go on from trees to mountains. The question: “Why do you still climb?” should be countered by the question: “Why did *you* stop?”

But in cultures like ours, where people do not, like certain tribes, live in caves on vertical cliffs, the climbing of mountains by adults is taken to be something extraordinary, hard to explain. Some time ago in Norway, it was seen as something foolhardy and even on the verge of insanity, or as something admirable as an expression of great courage, toughness, masculinity or whatever. As if climbing were more dangerous than skiing!

Consider the following scenario. A little girl, perhaps 10 years old, rows out into the Arctic Ocean in big waves to meet the local steamer and gets a big, heavy sack of potatoes that is lowered down from the ship. The little boat moves up and down and so does the sack above the head of the girl. I am amazed. Not so the other people lazily looking at what is happening. Why? Because it is part of a culture, a tradition, and

it is more or less trivial. But a lot of training, years of training, and some unruffledness (*uforferdethet*) is required. Later some of the bystanders discover our climbing outfit, ropes etc. Amazement. What folly! Dare-devils! Admiration mixed with outrage. What we do is part of the Arctic Norwegian culture. A mountain with some 70 to 80 degree precipices looks vertical. No place to put hands and feet are seen at a distance. We may explain that some training and much experience on steep surfaces make climbing mountains a safe thing, as safe as skiing and other outdoor activities. But they are not convinced.

Climbing is not more dangerous than skiing. But unlike easy skiing in moderate surroundings, easy climbing on moderate precipices requires attention, like driving a car. You cannot turn around looking for a piece of chocolate on the back seat. You must turn the wheel at the proper moment and not confuse the brake with the gas pedal.

But what about the challenge, excitement, technical virtuosity of climbing? Is the all-round mountaineer perhaps a serious person, engulfed in meditation and deep experiences of mountains as they have developed in famous cultures? This is a misconception. There is no contradiction between the well-rounded mountaineer and virtuosity in climbing techniques.

The excitement is there. And the risks to life and limb. Think of a crack that seems to lead to a beautiful little ledge near the summit. It seems that the crack stops just a couple of yards below the ledge. It takes hours and hours to enter the crack, and time is short. We risk a very unpleasant bivouac if we do not reach the ledge. Excitement, challenge, fear of not reaching the ledge, but a moderate fear, a fear that elicits smiles.

To risk life or limb is stupid and, considering the consequences for one's nearest, often irresponsible. So, it is felt a great shame when a mountaineer falls or obviously does things recklessly. It is practically like cheating in sport. Somebody "succeeds" in reaching a summit, but as a climb it is unsuccessful because rules of safety were ignored. The party was not strong enough to carry the 30 pounds each, which is the minimum on that climb needed to survive safely a week in a snow cave in case of increased chance of avalanche at a certain spot.

Many young climbers stop climbing after getting married or through mild pressure from their nearest, who suffers every time a climb is planned. They do not give up skiing or fast driving! Implicitly, a form

of climbing is taken for granted that reflects the image not created, but gladly maintained and nourished, by the media.