Is Mountaineering a Sport?

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Amusement, diversion, fun. This was the definition of sport offered by the first dictionary I consulted in preparation for this lecture, and if we accept it then there is at least a sporting chance that we will all be able to agree: mountaineering is a sport. But it is not a definition that sits easily with much of what sport is currently thought to be. This talk is part of a series on Philosophy and Sport timed to mark the London Olympics, and amusement and fun are probably not the first words to spring to mind there, certainly not for the competitors. They may be a part of it, but I don't think it unreasonable to think more immediately of commerce, competition, achievement. So this evening I need to consider mountaineering within that context. I also want to make clear at the outset that I shall take mountaineering to mean not just the climbing of high snow-covered peaks, but mountain travel and exploration, and simply recreational mountain walking. There doesn't need to be anything technical involved. At the same time, I must include rock-climbing within my brief, and for at least two reasons. One is that rock-climbing and mountaineering are closely connected historically. In it's early years, alpine climbing often led to rock climbing, the latter being seen as geographically convenient training for 'the real thing' – namely, the annual alpine holiday. When I was a teenager in the 1970s the influence went the other way: I began with rock-climbing in the Lake District, and proceeded to alpine climbing. And secondly, rock-climbing and mountaineering are administratively and politically connected. I suspect that the former, which in Britain as often as not doesn't take place in mountains at all, now absorbs the major part of the public funds devoted to these matters. And it is predominantly on the British experience that I want to draw.

I'd like to start with some history and what one might call the traditional mountaineering outlook with which it is associated. Strictly speaking, mountaineering has no definable beginning. There must always have been farmers who found they had to climb some wretched hill, taking time they could ill afford to rescue a recalcitrant sheep; military men who were ordered to reach some strategic high point and spy out the land; Himalayan traders who found themselves delving ever deeper into mountain country to drum up business; and

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so on. This is not to say that these people didn't find in the mountains unexpected rewards; rewards that we would entirely understand. It is not even to say they went unwillingly. But broadly speaking we can say that they were driven by necessity, whereas mountaineers in the usual sense of the word are not; they do not have to climb, explore, sit in snowdrifts, admire the view. They choose to do these things. Immediately then, one has the characteristic of choice, and that means privilege. If one adds to that the fact that mountaineering is demanding of time or money – one generally needs one or the other, and both are welcome – then it is not surprising that mountaineering as we understand it today grew out of increasing affluence in the West and was for a long time dominated by a social elite.

For how long was this the case? From it's beginnings in the late eighteenth century until well into the twentieth. Alpine climbing began as the playground of an economically comfortable and culturally sophisticated group, which is part of the reason the British played a leading role despite having no alpine-sized mountains of their own. It was pushed forward by, among others, clerics and schoolmasters, because of the disposable time these groups enjoyed.

That of course leaves unexplained why they should have chosen mountains. They might have chosen basketball, or the discus, or salmon fishing, or ocean sailing. It's not hard to see the odd ones out here. Mountaineering, fishing and sailing certainly have things in common, and one very important thing: all of them are the expression of a belief in the inherent good of the outdoors, the worth of communing with an unsullied nature. And no doubt some of those who might have become mountaineers in Whymper's day did indeed take up fishing or sailing. And some did all three. All this springs from and mixes with wider movements in thought and belief: with Wordsworth and romantic poetry, with muscular Christianity and the University reading party, not least with the requirements of an empire which throughout the nineteenth century needed recruits who were excited by the prospect of adventure in remote mountain country. My thesis, then, would be that we can identify a set of values and beliefs to associate with this period which are those of privilege and a degree of sophistication. We could reasonably expect that if we put the question 'Is mountaineering a sport?' to one of its protagonists, he would not merely deny it, but deny it vociferously. Mountaineering, he might say – and it probably would be a he – is more than mere 'sport'. It is more important. Not in the sense of filthy lucre, or that embarrassing tendency to gush that one's interest is not in fact merely an interest, but 'a way of life', but in the sense of subtler, deeper.

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Now, quite apart from generalisation, for which I want to apologise now to those in the audience who have an expert knowledge of these things, we have with all this the usual problems of historiography. It's hard to know quite how accurate this view of mountaineering history really is. But it's not a complete fiction. We have the evidence of the written word. In club journals, newsletters, and books we can trace a literary achievement whose characteristics are distinctly those of an educated and privileged class. It is often claimed – by mountaineers needless to say – that mountaineering has a more distinguished literature than any other sport or pastime. This may be correct. Certainly, the best of what is written in the major journals stands comparison with the best essay writing in the English language. Mountaineering has produced a huge library of books, and a significant number of them are of lasting importance. In addition, I am old enough to have seen something of the 'grand old men' of traditional mountaineering at first hand. I remember meeting people like John Hunt, leader of the first ascent of Everest, David Cox, the eminence gris of Oxford mountaineering when I was a student, and Charlie Houston, the leader of the tragic and heroic 1953 American expedition to the world's second highest mountain, K2.

Figures such as these always put me in mind of the immortal remark of Maurice Herzog, leader of the French expedition that in 1950 put himself and Louis Lachenal on the summit of the first of the world's 8000 metre peaks to be climbed: 'there are other Annapurnas in the lives of men'. So much so that it is tempting to suppose that the traditional mountaineer had a civilising sense of proportion that is lost on his modern counterparts. Tempting, but perilous, I think. Less perilous, I hope, to suggest that a sense of proportion is characteristic of the best, or perhaps I should say the most admirable, mountaineers of every epoch.

So: if we grant at least some truth to this image of the 'traditional' mountaineer and 'traditional' mountaineering, is there a distinctly different, 'modern', outlook with which to compare it? Well, I'm not sure how distinct it is, but I think in contemporary approaches we can sense differences. In Britain, one way to do this might be to compare past issues of, say, The Alpine Journal, published continuously in London since 1863, with contemporary issues of 'Summit', the house magazine of the British Mountaineering Council. The BMC is not the governing body of British mountaineering because there is no governing body, but it is as close to one as exists, a government sponsored bureaucracy which does valuable work representing mountaineers' and rock-climbers' interests, in particular over the ever-present problems of open access to rock climbing venues and

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wild country. Thirty years ago the head of the BMC was the general secretary; he or she is now called the chief executive officer, which may or may not be significant.The umbrella organisation of such national bodies is the International Mountaineering and Climbing Federation, whose website informs us that it belongs to, I quote, 'the group of International Federations who agree to be guided by the Olympic Charter and who recognise the authority of the International Olympic Committee', something which you may or may not find disturbing. Like most house magazines, the BMC's is image conscious and slick. It is full of how-to adverts; not just how-to climb, but how not-to kill yourself in the process, how to rescue yourself from a crevasse if you fall in, how to read clouds and come up with a weather forecast, how to make yourself as comfortable as possible during a bivouac, how to plan your activities, how to train for them, how to up your standard. All the sorts of things that my generation, or at least my social milieu, didn't know about 30 years ago, still doesn't know about, and no doubt should. Though in defence, the traditionalist might argue that there are so many things one should know that if one insisted on waiting until one knew them all, one would never actually get around to going climbing. The traditional mountaineer is an amateur and the modern a professional, and in at least two senses. As I have implied, the traditional mountaineer was assumed either to have a 'proper' job, often in education, or to have a private income; and in any event there was little market for the professional, except in exceptional cases such as Everest. That has changed. The huge increase in outdoor leisure in recent decades has created an audience, and there is now a cadre of professional mountaineers to satisfy it. But when all is said and done, only a small proportion of mountaineers, even today, earn a living from it. A more widespread aspect of professionalism is something hard to define, but perhaps connected to a greater sense that time is limited and must be used efficiently. It involves an increased focus on planning, including training, and being generally well organised. And if all this preparedness backfires and starts to blunt the excitement that all mountaineers crave, then in Summit magazine the modern will find further courses advertised that are likely to be of interest to today's multi-activity outdoor enthusiast-paragliding, kayaking, deep-sea diving, horse riding, sailing. Though interestingly, no salmon-fishing so far as I can see.

To caricature outrageously, we have on the one hand the slightly unworldly traditionalist, badly dressed, with a copy of Horace in the rucksack, a bumbling enthusiasm, and an unspoken assumption that finding himself here, in this previously unexplored corner of

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the Himalaya, with a few other chaps, some jolly keen Sherpas and a couple of months to conquer everything in sight, is really no more than the natural order of things; and on the other the 'modern', resplendent in day-glo lycra, topo guide to hand, with a planned and steely competence and complete focus on one very particular 30 foot cliff of white limestone, where the next chapter in the history books is about to be written.

Some caveats are necessary at this point. I have talked about the 'traditional' and the 'modern', but these are convenient designations, which cannot be tied too closely to historical eras. Perhaps Bonington was one of the first of the moderns, but then what about a figure like Frank Smythe, already writing books of his adventures with a wider public in mind in the 1930s, or Captain John Noel, filming on Everest long before the modern circus arrived? And it works the other way round too – the contemporary climber who is really a throwback. What of a figure like Stephen Venables, extant in this audience and so presumably a modern in the flesh, and certainly a modern in that he earns his living from mountaineering, and yet in character and culture so reminiscent of the great Presidents of the Alpine Club of London in the nineteenth century? Or Julian Attwood, in all essentials an imperial explorer on the borders of British India in the days of the Great Game?

But most importantly, I am not in this lecture trying to make a judgement of whether the traditionalist or the modern is 'better'. I am interested in discussing what 'is', and perhaps what is going to be, not what ought to be. And that for the very simple reason that I am unclear what criteria one would use to decide on right and wrong, ought and ought not. It seems to me that even the incomparable Kant became unconvincing here. I hope any professional moral philosophers in the audience will forgive me, but I am not clear of the possible objective basis for these things beyond two – and two which, typically it seems, offer very different perspectives. If you believe in God, then God decrees right and wrong, ought and ought not; that is a part of his purpose. You follow his law, and there is no more to be said. Or, like me, you are a Darwinian, in which case you might be led to conflate an 'is' with an 'ought', to believe that the way things are becomes in itself their justification. This position is generally regarded as fallacious, and I shall agree. Having thereby rejected two possible sources of a moral system, I am left with sophistry, the belief that right and wrong, ought and ought not are based, if not purely on fashion, then very largely on the everyday practicalities of a society and it's convenience. What we are used to, what we have imbibed from those around us,

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becomes the basis of our moral system. Works like *The End of History* or John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* could only have been written by contemporary liberal intellectuals; in them, the values of contemporary liberal intellectuals emerge, against all statistical probability, as the objectively 'best' values by which a society can live. But that they are perilously close to being no more than statements of fashion is not the problem; the problem is that their authors would like to think otherwise. Again, the difference between naturalism and sophistry as I understand the terms is that the former is in the camp of those who believe that the moral truth exists in some absolute space, rather like a mathematical axiom, if only it can be found; whereas sophistry, so easily criticised as a resignation of moral courage, a degeneration into mere laissez-faire, is asserting that the very notion of an absolute moral system is intellectually incoherent; that morality must, of its nature, relate to life as we find it.

So, returning from this rather presumptuous foray into serious philosophy, it is perfectly true, and spectacularly unsurprising, that I have my own prejudices about how mountaineering should be practised, and perfectly true that these conform, as one would expect, and to a laughably high degree of accuracy, with the ideas and values of my own formative years – that is, British mountaineering circa 1970 to 1980. This much is natural I think, and not a problem. It would only become a problem if I assumed my imbibed attitudes were somehow 'right'. I hope I have made this clear. I am attracted, for a variety of reasons, to a particular way of doing things. I have no evidence, or even belief, that my own preferences are really 'better' than others.

Or have I?

Mountains deliver certain experiences to us, including some that we might find difficult to experience elsewhere. If we can show that a certain way of doing things, certain attitudes, deliver these experiences more fully or more reliably than other ways, then we might argue that this is the 'right' way. So what are these experiences?

Some of you will know that I have a theory about this, and I want now to summarise it, though I accept that any theory has disadvantages. It can be accused of being too analytical, if not reductionist. As I have indicated, mountain literature contains plenty of successful attempts to convey the experience of mountaineering, and without theorising. Amongst contemporary authors, Al Alvarez produced such an evocation in his book *Feeding the Rat*, the rat, who is male incidentally, even when inhabiting the body of a woman, being some vague amalgam of all those frustrated, craving, bored, freedom-loving aspects of the human psyche that want to throw off convention

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and safety and indulge in a little hair-raising adventure from time to time. The rat may have a fast or a slow metabolism – I am tempted to say it gets slower as one gets older – but sooner or later he will demand a meal. To my mind, this is an arresting and effective image. So I am not trying to suggest that in the attempt to explain mountaineering an analysis is superior to a literary approach. Rather that the two are complimentary.

In any event, the theory. Human beings are complex animals, with desires and sources of meaning in their lives which if not downright contradictory are sometimes very close to it. Two of these I believe form the essence of mountaineering; but more that that, mountains give us the opportunity to experience both of them simultaneously. And it is in that simultaneous as opposed to sequential experience that we can find our highest degree of contentment, satisfaction, or exhilaration.

One of them, which I will call 'the return to the primitive', flows from the arena that is mountain country. That is, we operate in places which inevitably take us back to a more archaic way of living and thinking, and this seems to satisfy a deep seated need – not in everyone I hasten to add, but in many of us. Dr Johnston, not simply on the basis of prejudice but even after travelling to the Scottish Highlands with Boswell, seems to have been quite clear that he preferred London, and he's not alone. Nevertheless, if we believe in the influence of the past, not just culturally but genetically, then it is plausible that wild and remote country feeds into us in a profound way. We might regard much of this as a spiritual experience. In mountains we are returned to fundamental things in terms of what we do – getting comfortable, trying to stay safe, relying on each other, making camp, these things often being repeated day after day in the same way, hence attaining the flavour of ritual. But also we are reminded of philosophical truths – or simply truths. The mountains are big and don't care about us. Once, in past centuries, we might have anthropomorphised them, or filled them with dragons, as indeed was the case in the European Alps pretty much until mountaineering began, and in this sense we cannot, today, relive the mental lives of our ancestors. But so far as reminding ourselves of our insignificance is concerned, we can. There is a change in perspective, a change in the value of things, which soaks into us in wild country. By just being there and undertaking the tasks which need to be done, we engage in what the darling of British mountaineering in the 1970s, Pete Boardman, called 'serious play' – a good phrase, because mountaineering is serious, that is profound, in a way which a theme park is not. But it is also, for us, all play. We visit a more archaic world on a temporary basis, with the knowledge that we can return to our western lifestyle at any time we wish. What we are doing is drawing the benefits of a more

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natural way of living, but in general without paying the price that the true primitive pays. So there is nothing in the philosophy I am propounding that requires us to idealise or sentimentalise the rural poor, or the primitive, or to rail against western materialism. We are not required to follow Rousseau and arrive at the flawed concept of the noble savage, or even more disastrously to sail with Margaret Mead to the south seas and fantasise over Samoa. We can remain with our feet on the ground and admit that this is all fantasy, yet still claim that wild country, and being forced to operate in it, satisfies us. And even those who do not want to claim that much can at least agree that it's all one hell of a contrast. There are so many fewer people out there than in Oxford street. The sounds of man are less, even if the sound of the wind is greater. There is less to do, but more time to do it properly. In fact there is altogether less confusion-assuming a refusal to countenance satellite phones, lap-tops and other such impertinent paraphernalia. There is suffering, but arguably less anguish. There is in some senses less freedom, but thereby less stress. You do not decide what to do – you do what has to be done. You decided days or months ago what you were going to do – climb this peak, cross that pass. All you have to do now is get on with it. And most of that is already defined – put on your boots, get moving, put up the tent, make supper. And in the unlikely event there is any time left, you can always read all those dauntingly long Russian novels you've always intended to get around to.

All of this amounts in large degree to a lesson in humility, an encouragement to downgrade the importance of one's own ego. But shadowing it in mountaineering is the complete reverse – the celebration of the ego, the explicit goal of giving it free rein. Mountaineering is an egocentric pursuit, an opportunity for the individual to assert him or herself not only against nature but against other people. The image of the mountain climber, ice axe raised, standing in triumph on top of some conquered snowy summit, is accurate. He has proved he can 'do', that determination leads to results, that he has climbed higher and further than the competition. If the humility of the Taoist ideal leads to peace, it is equally true that exercising the muscles of the ego, the sense of being a big cheese, leads to exhilaration.

It is an obvious thought to connect return to the primitive to what I have called the 'traditional' approach, and the egocentricity of individual achievement with the 'modern' – but the merest consideration of history shows us that this is false. The great climbers and explorers of the golden age-these people were as egocentric as Messner, or Bonington, or any of the teenage superstars of today. And I know of no evidence to support the notion that today's climbers are any

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less appreciative of wild country and of a return to the primitive in general than their predecessors were. In fact, as you listen to this lecture you may be beginning to feel, as I do, that a historical division into traditional and modern is looking distinctly tenuous. A neat division into categories is always a pitfall for intellectuals, and perhaps that's the case here. Furthermore, I think there is something in the role of commentator, as opposed to participant, that encourages one to overstate change. If as a commentator one considers, say, the number of people involved in climbing, if one looks at the statistics, then yes, the numbers have gone up dramatically. It's true that if you go to Stanage, a gritstone outcrop outside Sheffield, you will find more people there on an average weekday than there used to be on a Bank Holiday Sunday. But as a participant, it feels less dramatic. Many of the mountain crags in the Lake District have fewer visits today than they did in the 1970s. In any case, when you are climbing your world contracts to a few feet; there is you, your companion, and the immediate surroundings. What is happening globally is not part of the experience.

So if an historical progression from traditional to modern is to be rejected, is there nevertheless a change in focus within the experience of each individual? I have argued that a return to the primitive and an expression of egocentricity are both essential to the fullest satisfaction mountains can deliver, and furthermore that our most treasured moments occur when we experience them together. But that does not mean they need be equally important throughout our lives. And in general, I don't think they are. When we are young the satisfaction of ego is more likely to take centre stage. This is the time when we are ambitious, not in that private sense that endures, that sense in which throughout life we take pleasure in our achievements, however modest, but in the public sense, the sense that we want to be recognised. It is this desire for recognition perhaps that weakens with time, though it can be difficult to know if the weakening is really due to age or rather to assuaged hunger. I remember looking up in the seering cold of an Arctic dawn at the first unclimbed mountain I had ever confronted. I was young, and exceedingly motivated to succeed. But was I motivated because I was young, or because this game was new? These days, I still like to bag unclimbed peaks when I get the chance, but I am beginning to wonder about the likelihood of ever quite recapturing the excitement, the exhilaration, the sheer joy, of that first time. Is that because I am older, or because I have been there? How would I feel had I never climbed anything new? Well, the mountaineering world is full of experienced people who have never climbed anything new, and I don't get the impression

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they are all full of angst at the fact. They are older, and if not necessarily wiser then at least more knowing. In youth, things are seen too much in black and white. So and so climbs some untrodden peak, explores some undiscovered country, and is thereby a few rungs further up the ladder. The more experienced realise it was probably largely a matter of luck anyway. When I read *Summit* magazine, I sometimes catch myself becoming irritated at yet another enviable adventure gleefully recounted by the same person as last month. How do they manage to get so much done, these people? Then I recall that the person in question was in the education business, and that their age has made them one of the blessed generation; public servants who were able to retire years early on a full pension. Luck, you see. Something similar applies to most, if not all, achievement. Did the early Everest climbers really represent the best that Britain could produce – out of several tens of millions of people? Of course not. But when the social, educational and financial criteria that I have alluded to were taken into account, organisations like the Royal Geographical Society and the Alpine Club, organisations that determined who should go on these jollies, really had a remarkably limited pool of people to draw on.

Bearing all this in mind, it is not hard to see why there is a sense in which mountaineers believe that mountaineering should not be taken too seriously, just as there is a different sense in which they insist that it should. It should be taken seriously to the extent that it has the power to satisfy profound human needs. And also because it is dangerous. And yet part of that danger is statistical and unavoidable, a servant of fate, and what might be required here is not so much seriousness as acceptance. Hemingway famously remarked that there were only three sports: bullfighting, motor racing and mountaineering, all the rest being mere games. Part of what he meant I think was that in all three the individual, without having anything like the complete information one would like, must make decisions and then accept the consequences. Consequences which may not be to one's liking, of course. A premature appointment with death, for instance. Jumping the queue, as it were. Well; bad luck! As in history generally, 'stuff happens'. Of course mankind can 'do', of course our effort, courage, expertise, matters; but none of this is in itself decisive. Luck, or the lack of it, remains forever at the heart of events. Mountaineering is profound in what it promises, and at times delivers, and yet we should not take our own part in it too seriously. A certain lightness of touch is appropriate. If the process itself is valuable, the level of achievement to which it leads is empty.

It's hard not to feel that the Olympic outlook on sport is pretty much the complete reverse of this. I find it hard to see that beach volleyball,

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say, satisfies any profound human needs – unless we include the voyeuristic desires of men – yet how seriously they all take it! Look down on these ants from windswept heights; some running round and round, others throwing things as far as they can, yet others batting balls backwards and forwards. The less important it is, the more seriously it is taken. As Einstein once enquired of Charlie Chaplin when he was a new boy to the absurdity of public adulation, 'What does it all mean?' And as Chaplin replied, 'nothing'. And yet, if sport is a surrogate for war, whether people generally realize it or not, then we should be grateful. The more sport the better. And in Olympic sport to a greater extent than in war, it is generally clear enough who has won. Mountaineering doesn't so readily oblige. It is not, for example, self-evident that he who has climbed the most mountains deserves the most medals. Perhaps it should be the person who has survived the longest. Or enjoyed it the most. Or most successfully combined their egocentricity with an acknowledgement of the wider perspective.

Consider two iconic figures of the last century – the Manchester plumber Don Whillans and the Edinburgh intellectual Dougal Haston, who famously climbed together on the South-West face of Everest, once the last great problem of world mountaineering. Whillans said that if you die in the mountains that wipes out the standing of all your previous achievements. Haston claimed that the experienced – and by implication expert-mountaineer is the one who has been in a lot of dicey situations and been lucky enough to survive them all. Whillans and Haston both, you notice, chose a philosophy to suit their life and character – as most of us do. Perhaps only the saint and the madman ever really does otherwise. Whillans died in his sleep, arguably of overweight. Haston died in an avalanche, skiing an alpine couloir he knew to be in risky condition. Both moved mountaineering forward with new climbs at home, in the European Alps, and in the greater ranges. So who was the better mountaineer? Well, this is silly. One might as well ask, who was the better philosopher? They were both figures of international standing. Why say more? Mountaineering achievement simply cannot be quantified in the way an Olympic outlook would require.

This is intuitively understood I think by all mountaineers, though not necessarily by those in the media, sports administration and so on who have their own interests. I suspect it will come as a surprise to many mountaineers to learn that the intention to give medals for mountaineering goes back to the Olympic congress of 1894 and that medals have indeed been given, if sporadically and with no very clear rationale, ever since. It is perhaps worth mentioning a couple of examples, to indicate the bizarre, the mistaken, or just the

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plain unfortunate position that this relentless attempt to quantify leads to. The members of the Everest expedition of 1922, the archetypal old school trip if ever there was one, were all awarded medals. The leader of the expedition, Charles Granville Bruce, was a Ghurka officer, a great bull of a man, and apparently worshipped by his men. He went on to become a general, so I suppose he was used to medals. George Mallory, too, one can imagine, might have been pleased. But personally, I would like to know the reaction of Howard Theodore Somervell, doctor and after Everest dedicated medical missionary, also a mountain painter of originality. I would imagine he felt both amusement and bemusement. And then more recently, Reinhold Messner, the first man to climb all 14 of the world's 8,000 metre peaks, and much else besides, was awarded a medal at the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics. But only a silver. Who made that decision I wonder? As Doug Scott has commented, it does rather beg the question as to what a climber has to do to go for gold. Perhaps climb Olympus Mons, without bottled oxygen. Olympus Mons, as you doubtless know, is 82,000 ft high and situated on Mars.

So much for quantification. But in addition, Olympic sport requires the mirror that is other people to make it meaningful. It is not just that winning the 100 metres is egocentric, but that it's a public form of egocentricity. It needs an audience, and preferably some other athletes. Would you run round an Olympic stadium or throw the discus if you were the only person in the world? I can't envisage it. Might you climb a mountain? Certainly. The Olympics today is inconceivable without public accolade, and without TV coverage, whereas mountaineering is still – in 2012 – uneasy about such things. Bill Tilman, a great explorer of the last century, wrote to the effect that every true mountaineer would be dismayed to see anything about mountaineering in the newspapers; how many latter-day enthusiasts have been secretly relieved when some live outdoor climbing spectacular has had to be cancelled because of bad weather? Though admittedly, this may be no more than an instance of the old Chinese proverb: happy is he who sees his friend fall off a roof.

Contemporary rock climbing throws up a lot of bright young things who shoot to stardom before puberty, only to give up the whole game before they've left school because they are no longer getting any better at it. This is perhaps most true of indoor climbing, and that, I think, is telling. There used to be a wicked joke that Boardman climbed Everest whilst still a virgin; but even if he had- and probably someone *has* by now – one could never imagine him giving up. He had too profound an awareness of what mountaineering gave him for that. Whereas one can easily imagine a well heeled

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client on a contemporary commercial expedition to the mountain getting to the summit and thereafter not giving the game another thought, particularly if they had just achieved some unrepeatable 'first' of the sort I have just alluded to.

So I would suggest that the answer to our question is something along the following lines. There have been changes to what mountaineering is over the last 200 years or so. It has become bigger, more socially diverse, and standards of performance have progressed astonishingly. But philosophically, in terms of values, the changes have been less than headline news might suggest. The real change takes place within the mind and experience of each individual. And it is there, in private experience, rather than outwardly, in public achievement, that the value of mountaineering ultimately lies. I hope I have now said enough to demonstrate that there is very little ground on which mountaineering as currently understood sits easily with the Olympic movement. There are styles of rock-climbing, specifically indoor climbing, that may soon be taken into the Olympic fold, and why not? These are aspects of gymnastics after all, and are only really connected to the mountaineering debate by default. Otherwise, much depends on whether one wishes to remain true to historical precedent. I have made my own view clear, I assume. But that's all it is; a view, formed of habit as much as rationale. Others must decide for themselves. Nor, incidentally, should anything I have said be construed as an attack on awards *per se*. The Piolets d'Or for example, world mountaineering's premier award for outstanding achievement, seems recently to have refound it's sense of direction. My impression is that this is largely due to it's being controlled by practising, or at least recently retired, mountaineers. The same is true, up to now, of the BMC. So far, it has been controlled and run by committed practitioners, some of them operating at the highest level, rather than by – well, anyone else. It would be hopelessly narrow-minded to predict that all such initiatives, all such organisations, will prove detrimental to mountaineering, even mountaineering in the traditional sense. But one prediction I am confident of is this: that if mountaineering allows itself to become entangled with the Olympic machine, it will be chewed up and spat out in unrecognisable and, to my taste, ill-flavoured pieces. Mountaineering is a sport, yes, but of a different hue to the Olympic variety. As the dictionary wisely suggests: amusement, diversion-fun.

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