

Mountaineering and the Value of Self-Sufficiency*

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to appear in *Climbing and Philosophy*, Stephen E. Schmid (ed), Wiley-Blackwell.

Exceptional human achievement is not just one of the things we value most—it *is* valuable. The history of mountaineering is filled with great achievements—achievements that mark the triumph of the human spirit, the overcoming of challenges few are capable of meeting, the telling of incredible courage and skill. In short, mountaineering gives expression to deep human values—it *is* valuable. Nonetheless, some mountaineering achievements are more valuable—more impressive and admirable—than others. Consider, for example, the following three cases:

(A) In 1953, Hermann Buhl made the first ascent of Nanga Parbat (8125m), the ninth highest mountain in the world, at the time only the third 8000er to be ascended. Buhl set off from his expedition's high camp, expecting his companion to follow. Realizing he was not, Buhl continued alone with minimal equipment, hardly any food or water, and no supplementary oxygen. He reached the summit after 18 hours, having ascended 1300m (in vertical height) of hitherto unexplored ground, soloing free with technical difficulties later confirmed to be around UIAA 6—an exceptionally high standard at the time, even for those climbing at sea-level with ropes and protection. On his descent, he endured a standing bivouac on a small exposed ledge at around 8000m, eventually returning to high camp after a 41-hour tour de force.¹

(B) Suppose, instead, that Buhl's companion, Otto Kempter, did join him and that together they climbed the same route Buhl climbed in A: they ascend the same terrain, overcome the same technical difficulties, and so on.

(C) Imagine that Sherman, a rich ethics professor, buys into a large expedition to climb Everest by the standard South Col route. The expedition, led by well-qualified guides and supported by a team of porters, follows a pre-established course, making extensive use of fixed ropes, pre-stocked camps and supplementary oxygen. Our aspiring ascensionist relies on his guides and porters not just to pave and climb the route but to ensure his safety on it. He eventually stands on Everest's summit (for a happy ending, let's assume he safely returns home).

Most of us would agree that A represents a more impressive and admirable mountaineering achievement than B, and that both A and B are markedly superior to C. Why do we think this—and why should we?

There are likely to be several factors relevant to our evaluations. Here it will be useful to distinguish two dimensions along which the value of a mountaineering achievement can be assessed. One concerns the nature of the route itself—its overall seriousness, as determined by its technical difficulties, boldness, length, remoteness, altitude, objective dangers, and so on. We could call these the “objective” features of the route.² Generally speaking, the more objectively serious a climb is, the greater the mountaineering achievement by those who succeed on it. The second dimension concerns not so much *what* is climbed but the *style in which* it is climbed—or *how* it is climbed. And here, we believe, a central feature that makes some climbs better than others is *self-sufficiency*. In fact, we think that self-sufficiency is a fundamental value of mountaineering itself—something that is both valuable in its own right and adds to the value of any given mountaineering endeavor.

In this paper, we are going to explore and defend the following claim: *other things being equal, the more self-sufficiently a mountaineering objective is achieved,*

the better that achievement. But what is self-sufficiency? Is it always good? Is it a mark of every great mountaineering achievement? Is it something to which every mountaineer should aspire?

1. What is self-sufficiency?

We often speak of *people*—mountaineers, say—as being self-sufficient. But since self-sufficiency is something that is exhibited in peoples' *activities*, when we talk about self-sufficiency here we focus on what mountaineers do and how they do it.

It is common to distinguish different types of mountaineering, or different ways in which mountaineers pursue their objectives. We will take the following to represent three main contrasting styles:

alpine style vs. deploying siege tactics

climbing solo vs. climbing in a team

free climbing vs. aid climbing³

These are of course broad categories that admit more fine-grained distinctions. For example, a mountaineering team could comprise hundreds of members (climbers, doctors, sherpas, porters) or just two people. Furthermore, a single mountaineering expedition might combine elements of each contrasting pair. Although Hermann Buhl climbed the final 1300m of Nanga Parbat in alpine style, solo and free, the expedition up to then deployed siege tactics involving a team of mountaineers climbing both free and with aid. Likewise, a single mountaineer might deploy a mixture of free climbing and aid climbing on a single pitch. So there are various ways in which these different styles might be combined. Nonetheless, the first option in each contrast pair—alpine, solo and free—represents what we commonly regard as the “purist” form of mountaineering. Purity and self-sufficiency are closely connected. Indeed, it is by

pursuing one's mountaineering objectives self-sufficiently that one achieves purity of style; and the more self-sufficiently the objective is achieved, the purer the style of mountaineering. What, though, is it to climb self-sufficiently?

Our very rough answer is this: The self-sufficient mountaineer relies primarily on his own ability to move over the climbing medium (be it rock, snow or ice—or, in Scotland, frozen turf); the clothing and equipment he uses is the bare minimum that anyone would need in order to make progress and to survive in the conditions he finds himself. Significantly, then, the more self-sufficiently a mountaineer pursues his mountaineering objectives, the more he relies only on himself—and, by implication, the less he uses, or relies on, additional resources. Inevitably, there are complications—depending on, for instance, what these “additional resources” include. For present purposes, though, some examples should suffice to clarify the basic idea: a team deploying siege tactics uses significantly more resources—fixed ropes and people, for instance—than climbing alpine style; an aided ascent uses pitons, ladders, and the like, that a free ascent does not; and, obviously, when climbing solo one neither involves nor relies upon people besides oneself. The more an ascent approximates the ideals of climbing alpine style, solo and free, the more self-sufficient and pure it is.

As a final part of our preliminary exposition of what self-sufficiency is, it is worth emphasizing a point already implicit—namely, that self-sufficiency comes in degrees: a climber can pursue and achieve his mountaineering objectives *more* or *less* self-sufficiently. Rarely is a significant mountaineering achievement maximally self-sufficient. (Indeed, there is an unsurprising correlation here: the objectively harder the mountaineering route, the less self-sufficiently it tends to be climbed.) Many mountaineering achievements combine a mixture of the above contrast pairs. It's

therefore possible that a single mountaineer exhibits a high degree of self-sufficiency in one respect (by climbing solo, say) but a low degree of self-sufficiency in another respect (if he deploys extensive aid, say). Or an expedition might comprise many members supporting each other but rely on few fixed ropes or no aid. As a result, any assessment of how self-sufficiently a mountaineering objective is achieved can be a complex matter.

2. The value of self-sufficiency

So our main claim is that: other things being equal, the more self-sufficiently a mountaineering objective is achieved, the better that achievement. For ease of presentation, let's call this self-sufficiency thesis (S). We are going to argue for (S) shortly. But we need to first make some preliminary points about (S) itself.

Note firstly that (S) makes an *evaluative* claim, since *better* is an evaluative notion. We can here understand “better” to imply any or all of the following: that one mountaineering achievement can be more impressive, or merit greater admiration, or represent a more worthwhile achievement, than another. Second, to say that one mountaineering achievement is better than another indicates that the better achievement is *good* in some sense, since “better” just means “more good” or “has more value”. We claimed at the beginning of the paper that mountaineering is itself a valuable human activity. But there are also values “internal to” mountaineering—values by which we can compare the value of different mountaineering achievements and assess whether some achievements are better, qua *mountaineering* achievements, than others. (S) claims that self-sufficiency is one of these internal values.⁴ Third, (S) implies not just that some mountaineering achievements are better than others—but that some are better than others *because* they are achieved more self-sufficiently.

The second and third points together imply that there is something good about achieving mountaineering objectives self-sufficiently. It adds to, or enhances, the overall quality of a mountaineering achievement because there is something good about climbing in a self-sufficient way. Let's mark this by saying that self-sufficiency is a *good-making* or *value-enhancing* feature of mountaineering. We now need to explain this.

It is important to emphasize that self-sufficiency is just one good amongst others. Many other things can contribute to the overall value of a mountaineering achievement—including what we earlier called those “objective features” of a route that determine its overall seriousness: technical difficulty, boldness, length, remoteness, altitude, and so on. Thus, even if self-sufficiency is a value-enhancing feature of mountaineering, it is only *one* feature that contributes to a mountaineering achievement's overall quality. Nonetheless, we shall see shortly that self-sufficiency is in fact a rather fundamental value. What, though, is it about self-sufficiency that is good? Why is it good?

The answer cannot be that climbing self-sufficiently is more likely to contribute to successfully meeting one's mountaineering objective. For climbing self-sufficiently generally makes the objective features of the route more difficult to overcome and so makes the outcome less certain. In addition, it often makes the route more dangerous for the climber. For the more self-sufficient a climber is, the less he can rely on the sorts of resources that would make his climb safer—others to belay him, fixed ropes to descend, aid to pull on, and so on. We might summarize this by saying that climbing in a self-sufficient style is more *committing*: there is typically less guarantee of success or indeed survival, with no easy way back to safety

(sometimes the only way off the mountain, and hence the only means of survival, is a successful ascent of the mountain itself).

We think there are two things about self-sufficiency that make it good, both of which concern the *style* in which a mountaineering objective is achieved. One emerges from the previous point: the committing nature of climbing self-sufficiently makes it more impressive. For by minimizing the resources one uses to achieve one's mountaineering objective—thereby increasing the difficulties and dangers, whilst making success less certain—the greater the achievement when one succeeds. This is closely connected to another core value of mountaineering itself—*adventure*. Mountaineering is, by its very nature, an adventurous activity; this is part of its attraction and value. And since climbing in a self-sufficient style makes one's mountaineering activity more committing and adventurous, it expresses a purer and more valuable example of mountaineering itself.

The second respect in which self-sufficiency is good is this: Let's assume that mountaineering is a valuable activity. It is partially constitutive of the very activity of mountaineering that you achieve your mountaineering objectives exercising your own abilities. For example, you would not be mountaineering (in any meaningful sense) if you are quite literally being hauled up an entire mountain by other people. Achieving your objectives by means of your own mountaineering abilities is exhibiting some degree of self-sufficiency. So, it is partially constitutive of the very activity of mountaineering that a mountaineer achieves his objectives with some degree of self-sufficiency.⁵ Therefore, if mountaineering is a valuable activity, and if part of its value comes from being done in good style (that is, self-sufficiently), self-sufficiency must be a good-making feature of mountaineering.

With this argument for the value of self-sufficiency in place, let's return to (S). In the previous section, we claimed that self-sufficiency comes in degrees: a mountaineering objective can be achieved more or less self-sufficiently. Central to (S) is the idea that the value of a mountaineering achievement can vary in proportion to the degree of self-sufficiency it exhibits. Indeed, if self-sufficiency is a good-making feature, it is also plausible to suppose that its presence adds to or enhances (that is, increases) the overall quality of a mountaineering achievement. For if it is (partially) constitutive of mountaineering that a mountaineer achieves his objectives self-sufficiently, then (other things being equal) the more self-sufficiently a mountaineer achieves his objectives the better that achievement.

Note, though, that (S) claims: *other things being equal*, the more self-sufficiently a mountaineering objective is achieved, the better that achievement. What do we mean by "other things being equal"? We can explain it as follows. Recall from our opening example A that Hermann Buhl climbs Nanga Parbat alpine style, free and solo. In example B, Kempter joins Buhl and they together climb the same route. So in both scenarios the climbers overcome the same objective features of the mountain. That is, they overcome the same technical difficulties, ascend the same terrain in comparable time, encounter similar dangers, and so on. We can thereby hold all these variables constant and say that, in scenarios A and B, other things are indeed equal. The "other things being equal" clause in (S) thus implies that, when comparing the value of different mountaineering achievements, *were all factors pertaining to the route's objective seriousness the same*, then the more self-sufficiently the mountaineering objective is achieved, the better that achievement.

We now have the resources by which to explain why, in our opening examples, A marks a better ascent than B, and why A and B are both better than C.

Part of the explanation for why Hermann's ascent of Nanga Parbat (example A) is better than Sherman's ascent of Everest (example C) lies in the fact that Hermann climbed in a far more self-sufficient way, since he climbed alpine style, solo and free. And since the more self-sufficiently a climber achieves his mountaineering objectives the better the achievement, Hermann's ascent marks a better mountaineering achievement. (This might be only part of the explanation, of course. Indeed, Hermann also surmounted an objectively more serious route than Sherman.)

Similarly, A represents a superior ascent to B. We could suppose, for instance, that in scenario B the two climbers belay each other, pull on some pitons and fix ropes for the descent. Hence, Buhl's climb in scenario A displays a greater degree of self-sufficiency than he and Kempter display in B. In that case, Buhl's more self-sufficient climb marks the greater mountaineering achievement. That is *not* to imply that climb B would not have been a great achievement—indeed it could well have been. The point is simply that because A represents a more self-sufficient style of ascent, it marks an even better achievement.

That is our basic account. However, there are complications. We shall preempt a number of likely objections. Responding to them will serve to further clarify—and strengthen the case for—the self-sufficiency thesis itself.

3. Objections

First objection: Our argument for (S) implies not just that self-sufficiency *can be good* but that it is *always* good. Surely though, one might argue, a mountaineer can be *too* self-sufficient—whereby it is implausible to suppose that self-sufficiency is always good. For example, in December 2005 the extremely talented mountaineer Jean-Christophe Lafaille made a solo attempt to climb Makalu (8462m)—hitherto

unclimbed in winter. He established a number of camps, carrying all equipment alone above his advance base at 5300m, without supplementary oxygen and with no other climbers around for support or rescue. On January 27, 2006, he set off 1000m below the summit for the final push. He was never heard of again. Some have suggested that Lafaille's attempt was *foolhardy*.⁶ More generally, it is easy to imagine all sorts of foolhardy mountaineering endeavors, where people choose to climb as self-sufficiently as possible but whose chosen climb outstrips their abilities, and who die as a result. So, the objection goes, self-sufficiency is not always good.

An initial point to note in response is that (S) concerns the value of mountaineering *achievements*. So if the foolhardy climber does not achieve his objective to any significant degree, the objection loses force. The more interesting objection therefore concerns someone who, like Lafaille, does fulfill his objective to some relevant degree—after all, Lafaille got very close to the top—but who dies partly because of pursuing it self-sufficiently.

There are various replies we could make here. Our preferred response is to say that self-sufficiency is always good—and to add that, although the self-sufficiency displayed by a foolhardy climber is *good to some degree in virtue of being self-sufficient*, it may also be *bad to some degree by being foolhardy*. Thus, even if a mountaineer pursues his objective self-sufficiently, the value of his doing so may be *outweighed* by the disvalue of his foolhardiness. Nonetheless, self-sufficiency remains a good. Thus in Lafaille's case, even if (as some have urged) what he did was foolhardy, what he achieved self-sufficiently was indeed impressive and admirable. (We here leave open whether he was foolhardy—or just unlucky.)

Second objection: (S) involves an “other things being equal” clause. When comparing cases like examples A and B, that may be fine. However, how might we compare the respective value of ascents like A with the following?

(D) In 1990, a twenty-strong Soviet team made the first (verified) ascent of the “last great Himalayan problem” Lhotse’s South Face. It deployed siege tactics with six camps. Nonetheless, it was the objectively hardest route then climbed in the Himalayas.

It may seem that our account faces an undesirable dilemma. On the one hand, (S) might appear to imply that, because Buhl’s ascent in A was achieved more self-sufficiently than the Soviet’s ascent in D, it must be better than the hardest Himalayan climb ever achieved. But that seems highly questionable. On the other hand, and to avoid that worry, we seem forced to concede that (S) gives us no way to compare the values of climbs like A and D—or indeed the value of *any* climbs in which other things are *not* equal. If that’s the case, self-sufficiency cannot be as fundamental a value as we are claiming.

However, this objection rests on a misunderstanding of (S)—in particular, the “other things being equal” clause. (S) is not intended to provide a *comprehensive* model by which to establish the *overall* value of a mountaineering achievement (since there are many values besides self-sufficiency relevant to an overall assessment); it claims only that self-sufficiency adds to the overall value of any mountaineering achievement. Thus (S) implies that, were Lhotse’s South Face climbed more self-sufficiently, that would have marked an even better achievement. Hence, although we accept the second horn of the supposed dilemma, we do not regard this as an objection to (S). For given that self-sufficiency is only one mountaineering value, (S) was never intended to supply a comprehensive model by which to tally up all good-

making features of mountaineering achievements and to thereby deliver some conclusion about their overall value. In that respect, (S) is quite a modest thesis. This raises a further issue, though: if self-sufficiency is just one mountaineering value, in what sense is it fundamental? Our answer: By climbing self-sufficiently, one actually makes the mountaineering objective more serious and the objective features of a route more difficult to overcome. For by climbing more self-sufficiently, a climber increases the “subjective difficulty” of the objective features. And since the overall value of a mountaineering achievement depends on the difficulties overcome, by overcoming those difficulties self-sufficiently the resulting achievement is even better. Self-sufficiency thereby functions like a catalyst for other mountaineering values: it enables them to have the value they do and thereby increases the overall value of the achievement.

Third Objection: When asked who reached the summit of Everest first, Hillary and Tenzing have always insisted that they climbed it together and that there is therefore little point to that question—after all, *they* did. Our account, however, seems to imply that a team cannot climb self-sufficiently. Even worse, we are leaving out an especially significant aspect of the mountaineering experience—the valuable experiences that come from being part of a team.

Again, though, this misconstrues our main claim. All we are committed to is that, if Hillary or Tenzing had instead climbed Mount Everest alone, that would have been an even better mountaineering achievement. But we are not denying that teamwork can be an important part of a valuable mountaineering experience—indeed it can be a very rewarding part of it. Nor have we ruled out that a team can climb with a high degree of self-sufficiency. For one thing, as mentioned earlier, it is not strictly

the individual mountaineer who is self-sufficient; rather, self-sufficiency is a feature of the way the mountaineer engages in his mountaineering activities. Thus, if a team engages in the activity of mountaineering in a self-sufficient manner (by climbing alpine style or free, say) one can speak of a self-sufficient team. It might be less self-sufficient than a solo (alpine style and free) ascent. But self-sufficiency comes in degrees; and mountaineering teams can exhibit it to some (often quite a high) degree.

Fourth Objection: It might be claimed that our account implies the following counterintuitive conclusion: that when the competent yet blind climber Erik Weihenmayer summited Mount Everest in 2001, because he relied more heavily on guides than fully-sighted guided clients might, his achievement was *less* impressive than their's.

Here it is again important to see the force of our “other things being equal” clause. (S) does not provide a model by which to compare the value of Weihenmayer's ascent against that of a full-sighted person—since then other things are *not* equal. But if another blind climber summits Mount Everest in better (or worse) style, then that achievement would count as better (or worse) in virtue of being more (or less) self-sufficient. Moreover, our thesis is compatible with valuing Weihenmayer's achievement along dimensions other than self-sufficiency. Indeed, the subjective difficulties facing a blind climber in surmounting the route's objective features are significantly higher than those facing a fully-sighted climber. Thus, Weihenmayer's ascent marks a rather impressive and significant achievement.

Fifth objection: Our account seems to suggest that *every* mountaineer *should* climb *maximally* self-sufficiently. But surely that's implausible—or worse: a dogmatic, even irresponsible, imperative encouraging grave foolhardiness.

Our response is a resounding *no*. First, (S) makes an *evaluative* claim; that is, a claim about the *value* of mountaineering achievements. It is not a *normative* claim about what people *should* do. Second, even if self-sufficiency (as a valuable feature of mountaineering) is *relevant* to how one should try to mountaineer, it doesn't follow from this that every mountaineer should climb maximally self-sufficiently in all circumstances. How self-sufficiently a mountaineer *should* climb depends on many factors, including his abilities and the seriousness of the obstacles facing him. If, when on a climb, a mountaineer is faced with either using aid or dying from a fall, nothing in our account requires him to refrain from using aid. There are, after all, many factors relevant to how one should act in any given circumstance; even if self-sufficiency is one of them, it is not necessarily decisive or overriding.

Sixth objection: Given the response to the last objection, it might seem that our thesis provides little or no basis for assessing how people should go about mountaineering. So what's the point in drawing attention to all these claims about the supposed value of self-sufficiency?

It is true that (S), as stated, is an evaluative thesis which does not by itself tell us what mountaineers should do or supply a decision procedure for how to go about mountaineering. Nonetheless, we have argued that self-sufficiently represents an *ideal* constitutive of the very activity of mountaineering. This gives our account some normative traction. For given that mountaineering objectives achieved self-sufficiently generally mark better mountaineering achievements, and given that the

ideals constitutive of an activity (like mountaineering) are things to which those who engage in the activity should aspire, it follows that mountaineers should at least aspire to climb self-sufficiently. Or to put things another way, in order to make the best style of ascent you can, you need to (and in that sense should) climb as self-sufficiently as you can.⁷

4. Concluding remarks

We have argued that self-sufficiency is a valuable feature of mountaineering and that it always adds to the value of a mountaineering achievement. We have also suggested that self-sufficiency underwrites the value of many other aspects of mountaineering; in that respect, it is a rather fundamental value. More provocatively, we have even suggested that self-sufficiency is (partially) constitutive of the very activity (not just the value) of mountaineering. This has the following implication. Consider someone who calls himself a “mountaineer”—but who relies on others, perhaps guides, to short-rope him up significant stretches of a mountain, thereby exhibiting no real mountaineering ability. According to the view we’ve presented, this “mountaineer” does not actually engage in the activity of *mountaineering*—he is not, after all, even minimally self-sufficient. Hence, whatever he achieves in the mountains does not count as a *mountaineering* achievement. It might well be a valuable human achievement in some other respect. But this way of summiting a mountain is no more a *mountaineering* achievement—and hence of no more value *as a mountaineering* achievement—than taking the gondola (or helicopter) to the summit.⁸

* This paper is dedicated to the memory of Alan Matheson (1959–2002), climber and friend. We miss you Al.

¹ See Buhl's über-classic *Nanga Parbat Pilgrimage* (Bâton Wicks Publication, 1998). Buhl actually used the drug Pervitin—aka, crystal meth—in his ascent (it was given to him by the expedition doctor—such drug use was common in mountaineering then). Whether it is easier to onsight-solo grade 6 at 8,000m high on meth or sober is not something we are in a position to evaluate.

² This is not to deny that subjective differences between people can affect how they experience such features. For example, one climber might find a technical section harder than another climber. Even so, what they experience differently are objective features of the route itself.

³ Ascents undertaken with “siege tactics” deploy (a more or less continuous series of) fixed ropes linking a number of camps where food and equipment is stocked. They typically rely on large teams, working in a pyramid system with climbing partnerships leapfrogging one another and returning to lower camps once each successively higher camp is established. Alpine style climbing, in contrast, involves the ascentionists (usually a small team) carrying all their own gear, ascending (and hopefully descending) the route in a single push. Himalayan ascents have traditionally deployed extensive sieging, though alpine techniques are now increasingly applied to the Greater Ranges. We note the following assessment of siege mountaineering: “This is the dinosaur of the climbing game: big and old fashioned, it has long been rumoured to be dying out... However, it is still around and probably will remain so while national interest and media coverage are required to sponsor expeditions” (*The Handbook of Climbing*, p.294, Allen Fyffe & Iain Peter. Pelham Books, 1997). See the Glossary for descriptions of the other styles.

⁴ The claim is of course restricted to mountaineering contexts. We are not saying that self-sufficiency is desirable in all non-mountaineering contexts. One author thinks

that “solo, non–aided” sexual relationships provide good evidence to the contrary; the other author isn’t so sure.

⁵ This may be quite a provocative thesis. Most of what we say is compatible with a more modest claim: that it is partially constitutive of mountaineering *well* that a mountaineer achieves his objectives self–sufficiently. But we’ll stick to the provocative thesis—see §4 for some further implications.

⁶ See Kirkpatrick: <http://www.andy-kirkpatrick.com/stories/view/lafaille/>

⁷ If self–sufficiency represents a mountaineering ideal, this is something that funding bodies should take into account when deciding which expeditions to fund—or at least something that those funding bodies that value the highest forms of mountaineering achievement should take into account. In practice, though, many bodies simply sponsor those expeditions they believe will give them the most media coverage.

⁸ We would like to thank the audience of a research lunch seminar in the Department of Philosophy in Stirling for their comments on an earlier version of the paper.