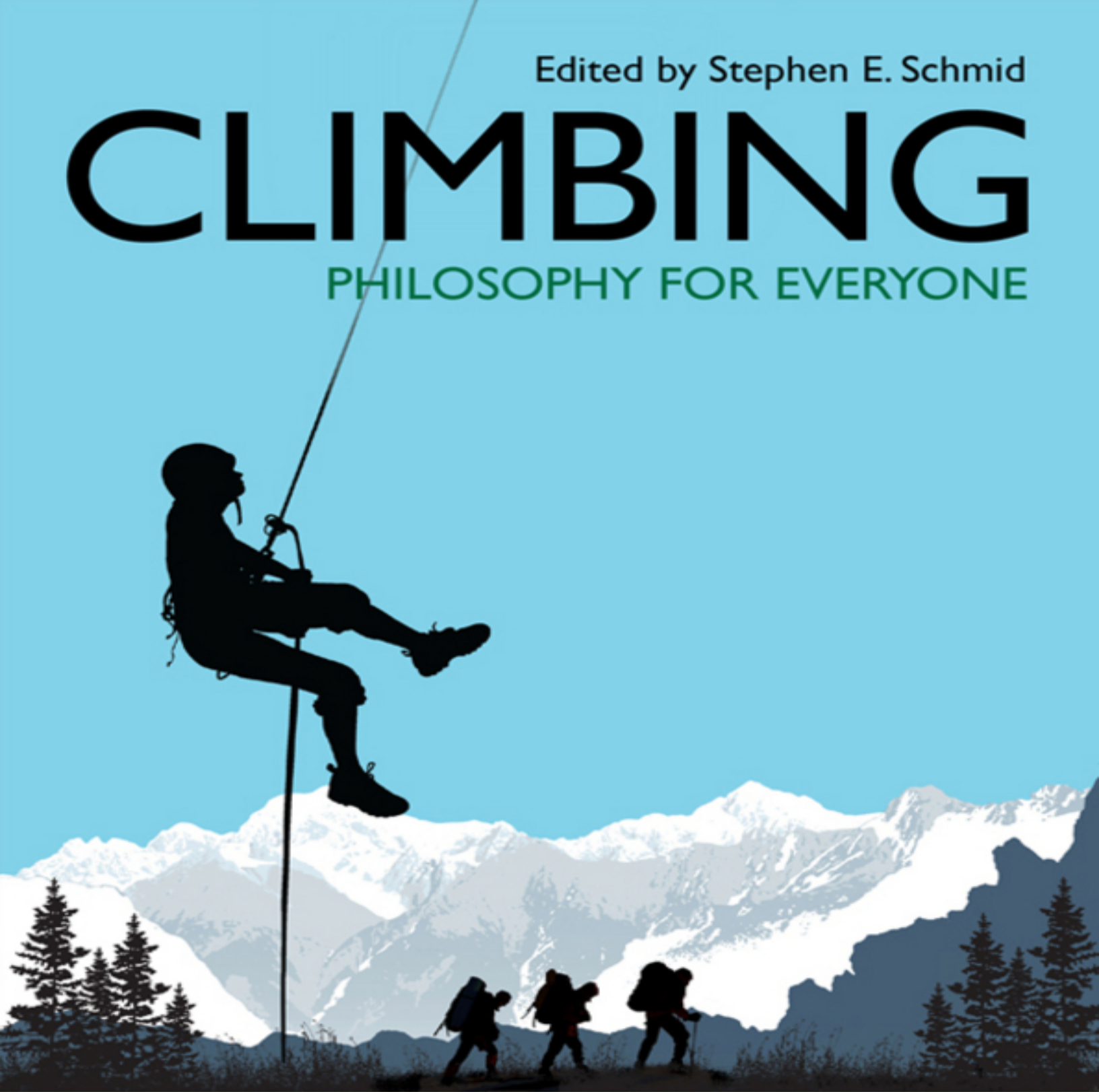


Edited by Stephen E. Schmid

CLIMBING

PHILOSOPHY FOR EVERYONE



Because It's There

Foreword by Hans Florine

Series Editor: Fritz Allhoff



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Hans Florine

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VOLUME EDITOR

STEPHEN E. SCHMID is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Wisconsin-Rock County. His doctoral work was in philosophy of mind and his current research focuses on motivation in sport and education. Schmid has been playing in the mountains and on rock for more than 20 years.

SERIES EDITOR

FRITZ ALLHOFF is an Assistant Professor in the Philosophy Department at Western Michigan University, as well as a Senior Research Fellow at the Australian National University's Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics. In addition to editing the *Philosophy for Everyone* series, Allhoff is the volume editor or co-editor for several titles, including *Wine & Philosophy* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), *Whiskey & Philosophy* (with Marcus P. Adams, Wiley, 2009), and *Food & Philosophy* (with Dave Monroe, Wiley-Blackwell, 2007).

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CLIMBING

PHILOSOPHY FOR EVERYONE

Because It's There

Foreword by Hans Florine

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Chichester, West Sussex,
PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

Editorial Offices

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK
The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19
8SQ, UK

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To Beth

HANS FLORINE

FOREWORD

Climbers often claim, and it is often true, that it is about the journey, not the summit. Similarly, I suggest that the joy in philosophy is about pursuing the answers, not necessarily finding them.

As a professional climber and speaker, I have had the pleasure of interacting with a wide variety of strangers on the topic of climbing. I have fielded philosophical questions from the most ignorant city dwellers to the most experienced climbers: Why climb? Is solo climbing crazy or morally wrong? Is chipping a hold a bad thing to do? Are you scared of heights? How does one rate a climb or what does it mean to rate a climb? In answering these and many other questions, I am offering my considered opinion and, perhaps, am influencing the questioner's thinking on possible "answers." I am rarely providing a definitive answer. If I or anyone had *the* answers, then this book likely would not have been written. It is the posing of intriguing questions that makes philosophy interesting and exceptionally so when applied to the activity of climbing.

What a joy it is to sit back and let these champion philosophers influence our thinking on some of the most interesting philosophical questions in and about climbing. Some of the above mentioned questions and more are discussed with insight from experienced climbers and brilliant thinkers.

For example, here are two challenging issues. I am often asked whether I think people who solo are crazy. I have often responded with the question: "Do you think your father is crazy to climb a ladder in order to clean the rain gutters, or hang Xmas lights?" My follow up is that as a physical event, there is the same comfort level for many

soloists as there would be for your father. This is usually not the end of my answer nor, I believe, is Mr. Agnafors' essay on the topic herein all that he has to say on the subject. Note that Agnafors addresses the *morality* of soloing while I was questioned on the *sanity* of a soloist. Another question I have been asked is whether chipping a ¼ inch hand hold is bad. In my opinion, more information about the specific case is needed to answer the question. I have glued holds on smooth cement walls. I have not glued holds on the smooth granite of El Capitan. Do I think manufacturing holds is okay? You'll need to track me down for tea to find out. In the meantime, Mr. Ramsey's essay on this very subject is a delight to read. Like these two, all the philosopher-climbers in this anthology have deepened my thinking on all the questions I think about and discuss with others.

By reading these essays, I have been further reminded that it is the careful pondering of the questions that is wise and prudent, not vesting in a single answer. It's a joy to be flexible and explore the tangents one follows when remaining open to other ideas. It is no surprise that the same flexibility is immensely useful when facing the challenges one encounters in the very act of climbing.

I have met high-level academics at the climbing gym and at the cliff. I have met accountants, lawyers, advertising agents, supermodels,¹ construction workers, and librarians, all of whom have that obsession with climbing that I have. There is something in climbing that feeds and satisfies a need in many of us. The physical aspect of climbing involves every part of your body, from the tip of your toe to the tip of your finger. You must truly mentally engage with the rock or mountain. You must inventory your strengths and apply what you have to the challenge in front of you. Often times, it is a matter of great consequence if you do not have your complete focus on the task immediately before you. Simply put, you are 100 percent focused on climbing. I call it

physical meditation. You simply can't be thinking about the bills due or the office you must be at Monday morning at 8 a.m. *and* climb at the same time. Climbing is a great mental break from the "other world." You do not need to study any Western or Eastern meditation techniques to enjoy the benefits of climbing.

What is climbing to me? Before climbing came into my life, I was an athlete and a competitor (and I still am). I saw climbing initially as a sport. Quickly, I found one could adventure, explore, and play on wild terrain. It was just darn fantastic Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer-like adventure! I was smitten by climbing. Even in my twenties when my hormones were raging, I would choose a rock climbing outing over a date with a woman.

I loved the athletic movement involved and I loved the incredible places climbing took me. I would never have traveled to the places I've been if I were obsessed with swimming, basketball, or soccer. I went to Europe my first time and lived there some three months without going to a single tourist destination. I was climbing! It was not until my fourth year of visiting France that I made it to the Louvre. I'm known for my speed climbing - heck, I wrote the book on it! Make no mistake, I do not climb more to go fast. Rather, I go fast because I get in more climbing.

In the philosophical world, I will often take the stance of an Ayn Rand Objectivist (though I often take on world troubles personally as a Buddhist). Logical reasoning I often think of, as did Rand, as an unwavering tool one can count on to judge the merits of a philosophical argument and to guide one's actions and beliefs. Yet, some may think that to use logic to argue a position, either ethical or otherwise, in something as ridiculous as climbing may seem more ridiculous than the act of climbing itself. In most people's minds, I'm already guilty of illogical behavior. However, I

can't think of a more rewarding and interesting "illogical" activity to ponder philosophically than climbing.

I have had immensely entertaining conversations about a single gear placement on a 1,000-foot rock route in Patagonia. I have had lengthy discussions about the ethics of rap bolting, chopping, drilling, and chipping the rock. People will try to pin you down on where you stand. They are either looking for a fight or knowledge. I've managed to avoid fights for nearly thirty years. Is climbing a worthy pursuit? Is applying philosophical discussion about climbing a worthy endeavor? At risk of a fight, I'll tell you where I stand on these two questions: Yes and Yes. As you will discover when reading these essays, all the contributors are on "my side." But if you have any doubts about climbing being a worthy activity, I encourage you to read [chapters 2](#) (Charlton), [5](#) (Treanor), [6](#) (Sailors), and [7](#) (Ebert and Robertson).

By reading the following essays, if you are not a climber you might well give it a try. If you are a climber, you will likely find yourself reading statements you have made or at least thoughts you've had about climbing. You might well find you are rethinking how and why you climb. You may find you are a little more flexible on and off the rock. In the end, you may just enjoy climbing a little more.

Speed be with you.^{[2](#)}

NOTES

^{[1](#)} Hans is married to retired supermodel Jacki Adams, who is an accomplished climber herself (see www.jacquelineflorine.com).

^{[2](#)} "Speed" derives from the old English word *spede*, which means success and prosperity.

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Thank you to each of the contributors for your excellent essays, commitment to the journey, and willingness to endure my ceaseless edits. While most of you I know only through email, it has been a pleasure to work with you on this collection. I look forward to talking story over beers after a day of climbing together.

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Finally, thank you to all those readers who share our passion for climbing and philosophy.

Stephen E. Schmid

STEPHEN E. SCHMID

PHILOSOPHIZING INTO THE VOID

An Introduction to *Climbing - Philosophy for Everyone*



“Because it’s there,” George Mallory is said to have responded to a reporter’s question about why he wanted to climb Mt. Everest.^{[1](#)} Arguably, these are the most famous words in climbing. The reporter, in asking his question, was undoubtedly expressing a common sentiment – why would you participate in this seemingly meaningless, useless, life-threatening pursuit? Surely, there is more you can do with your life than that! Perhaps the enduring allure of Mallory’s answer can be attributed to what it implies more than what it says. In light of attempting Everest, one can discover in Mallory’s answer a call to expand the limits of human possibility and greatness – the answer inspires us to act on our dreams and ascend to great heights; it challenges us to face the unknown void; and it reminds us that there may be

no other reason for our quest than the challenge, adventure, and fun of climbing.

Like climbing, those who venture into the philosophical void will discover similar sentiments and revelations. Contemplating the value of philosophy, Bertrand Russell writes:

Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions . . . but rather for the sake of the questions themselves; because these questions enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our intellectual imagination and diminish the dogmatic assurance which closes the mind against speculation; but above all because, through the greatness of the universe which philosophy contemplates, the mind also is rendered great, and becomes capable of that union with the universe which constitutes its highest good.²

So the philosopher, when asked “Why philosophy?” might find him or herself answering like Mallory: “Because it’s there.”

In the last several decades the connection between philosophy and climbing has become pronounced. This is especially so in the area of ethics, a branch of philosophy that is concerned with defining the principles that should govern our behavior. The seminal essay on climbing ethics is Tejada-Flores’ 1967 “Games Climbers Play,” which originally appeared in the American journal *Ascent* and was later anthologized in a collection of climbing essays. This essay revealed a new way of thinking about climbing. Tejada-Flores showed how the sport of climbing is a collection of different games, each with its own set of rules and playing fields. From the bouldering game to the expedition game, the seven climbing games Tejada-Flores identified provided a means of talking about climbing ethics. Climbing ethically, he writes, “means respecting the set of

rules of the climbing-game that one is playing.”³ With a means of determining ethical climbing, Tejada-Flores equates climbing with style to ethical climbing. A climber with good style deliberately climbs according to the rules of a climbing game. Better style arises when the climber follows a more restrictive, more difficult set of rules to accomplish his climbing game (for example, using trad rules to climb a big wall). Today, this way of framing climbing style and ethics is part of the fabric of climbing discourse and is expressed in everything from climbing magazines to fireside debates. In mapping the terrain for climbing games, Tejada-Flores’ essay did what all good philosophy does – force us to rethink and understand our world anew. Ten years after its initial publication, Ken Wilson wrote that Tejada-Flores’ essay still provided a useful mechanism for understanding climbing.⁴ If the philosophical essays in this volume are any indication, Tejada-Flores’ essay is as influential now as it was more than forty years ago.

In another significant essay published seven years later, Yvon Chouinard and Tom Frost rail against “mad bolters” and warn against the loss of adventure and mystery in the vertical wilderness, as trips once venturing into the unknown become just another routine gym workout.⁵ Their call for individual restraint and responsibility emphasizes that success is defined by how you climb and not what you stand atop. Their call to climb simply with as little impact as possible has become the predominant style and guiding ethic of many climbers.

When reading the essays in this volume, you will notice the measured impact these two early treatises bring to current philosophical discussions of climbing. The essays within acknowledge and pay tribute to these early forays into the philosophical void. At the same time, this anthology traverses new ground, touches on sensitive ethical debates

heard around the camp fire, explores classic philosophical questions, and has fun in the process. Whether budding boulderer or weathered mountaineer, these essays will hopefully help you answer two important questions: “Why climbing?” and “Why philosophy?”

In the second part of this introduction I want to offer you a summit view of this volume and briefly survey the terrain each essay will cover. There are four parts to this book: “Tying In,” “Quest for the Summit,” “Cutting the Rope,” and “Mixed Climbing.” The first three parts focus on a different aspect of climbing or philosophical method, while the topics in the last part are more diverse. In addition to the essays, you will find a glossary of climbing terms at the end of the volume to assist you during your journey.

Part one, “Tying In: Why Risk Climbing,” addresses what, for many, is the most obvious aspect of climbing – the risk. Both climbing and philosophy are serious business. However, committing a mistake in philosophy won’t kill you. In climbing, even simple mistakes can be life threatening. Given the inherent risks in most climbing games, why risk tying in? What does the risk bring? Given the risks, are we ever justified in tying in? And why do so many non-climbers find the risks inherent in climbing so unacceptable? The authors of this section’s essays address each of these questions in turn.

First to tie in, Kevin Krein examines an apparent paradox in many forms of climbing. For many climbers, their love of climbing results from, among other things, the feeling of freedom it produces. At the same time, climbing can be a very confining, restricting activity. Pinned down by storms in a wind-whipped tent or frozen between delicate moves on a tricky climb is far from our typical notion of liberation. Examining ancient Stoic philosophy, Krein argues that risk and other inherent features of climbing provide a unique opportunity for a climber to experience freedom. The Stoic

conception of freedom arises when one is able to understand and conform to one's environment. The simplicity and limited options inherent in climbing, further limited by its risks, provide the climber with unique opportunities to align his will with the opportunities the mountain affords. At these times, the climber feels free.

Many who have been climbing for a while know someone who has died from a climbing accident, whether the result of their own error or due to uncontrollable events. In the next essay, Paul Charlton considers the risks of climbing against the backdrop of the death of his longtime climbing partner and friend. Since the risks associated with climbing are more present than in daily life, Charlton argues that we must weigh the costs of climbing against its benefits if we are to justify these risks. For some, the rewards - pleasure and personal growth - will outweigh the costs of climbing - from frivolous expenditure of resources to death. Charlton leaves it up to each climber to determine whether the risks of his or her climbing pursuits are worth the rewards.

When answering the question "Why climb?" Joe Fitschen takes a different route than Charlton. Instead of considering how one might justify climbing and its attendant risks, Fitschen proposes a broader explanation. To adequately explain why climbers do what they do, Fitschen suggests we ask a more general question: "Why do people climb?" In phrasing the question this way, Fitschen asks a question about our species and sketches an evolutionary explanation for why we climb. Climbing is in our genes; the urge to climb is as natural as any other human endeavor. The pleasure that many of us naturally feel in exerting ourselves and overcoming vertical challenges only reinforces our evolved dispositions.

In the final essay, Heidi Howkins Lockwood asks why an astronaut's risks are considered acceptable when the risks faced by climbers are seen as unacceptable. Lockwood

notes that many people disapprove of the risks that climbers take, while at the same time approving of equally dangerous activities. Lockwood examines two underlying assumptions motivating this disparity in attitudes about risk takers and their risky activities. The first assumption is that we ought to avoid risk-taking activities that might require a costly or dangerous rescue. The second assumption is that risk taking is unacceptable because the risk taker ignores the possible impact his actions have on family and friends. Building from her own personal experiences on expeditions to the world's highest mountains and drawing from climbing and non-climbing tragedies, Lockwood argues that both of these assumptions fail to justify the disparity in how people treat risk-taking activities. While Lockwood thinks the risks in most climbing activities are acceptable, she argues that taking extreme risks simply for the risk itself is not acceptable.

Part two, "Quest for the Summit: Cultivating the Climber," focuses on the character traits climbing develops and what characteristics are most valuable in the quest for the summit. The first essay starts by continuing the question from the previous section, "Why climb?" Brian Treanor answers this question from an Aristotelian perspective when he argues that climbing helps cultivate important virtues. In particular, he shows how climbing can cultivate the virtues of courage, humility, and respect for nature. While Treanor acknowledges that these are not the only virtues climbing has the potential to cultivate and that not all climbers exhibit these virtues, he thinks developing these virtues is particularly important in our modernized, coddling, and risk-adverse world. Climbing, then, serves a certain practical value - it may help develop the traits and virtues that allow one to flourish and live well in our non-climbing world.

Pam Sailors discusses the value of dangerous sport by examining the approaches and characters of two types of

climbers: summiteers and mountaineers. The difference between the two hinges upon what motivates each type of climber to stand on top of a mountain. The summiteers, she proposes, are motivated to reach the summit at all costs – the value of climbing is found in affirming to oneself one’s ability to accomplish a challenging goal. Mountaineers, on Sailors’ account, are motivated by the climbing itself, where the desire to reach the top of the mountain is secondary to the experience of being on the mountain. As Sailors notes with passages from famous climbers, the motivation to experience the mountain leads to one moving beyond one’s own interests to a sort of spiritual connection with the mountain. Many of the moral failings that have been witnessed in high-altitude expeditions, most notably Everest 1996, Sailors traces to the difference in the motivations of climbers. The desire to summit at all costs may explain why some climbers have failed to offer assistance to ailing climbers, leaving them to die on the mountain. While Sailors’ essay focuses on high-altitude climbing, the basic points of her essay apply equally well to other forms of climbing.

Ebert and Robertson argue that a fundamental value of mountaineering is self-sufficiency, and the more self-sufficiently one climbs, the more laudable the climbing achievement. Using Hermann Buhl’s 1953 solo ascent of Nanga Parbat as their core example, Ebert and Robertson argue that self-sufficient climbing increases the climber’s commitment to the dangers and risks of mountaineering. The less a mountaineer depends on others or technology to assist him in his climbing endeavors, the less guarantee there is for success. It is because the climb is harder or riskier when done self-sufficiently that self-sufficient climbing achievements are more valuable. While Ebert and Robertson’s claim is an evaluative claim, in that it gives one a means for saying which climbing achievements are better

than others, they also think their thesis carries normative weight. The normative claim is that one ought to climb as self-sufficiently as one can, relying on one's own skills and abilities to ascend and descend a mountain, given the objective difficulty of the mountain. They defend their thesis against several criticisms, including the claim that self-sufficiency can lead to foolhardy actions.

Before reading the next essay, you might want to put down your greasy burger and fries. Levey's tasty take on sport climbing as analogous to eating fast food compares two different climbing games and the values each produces. Just as all meals are not the same, all climbing games are not the same. Sport climbing, like a ready meal, is quick and cheap. Trad climbing, Levey proposes, is like haute cuisine: it is slowly executed using expensive ingredients and is more committing. Sport climbers might not like this analogy and its implication that slow food tops fast food. As Levey readily admits, we all eat both. He agrees that a more authentic "dining" experience is had with trad climbing, and trad climbers possess a more authentic climbing style. However, this conclusion does not come out of a fast-food box. To make this final point, Levey uses Hegel's master and slave distinction to argue that trad climbing reflects the situation of the slave, which for Hegel is the more authentic relationship. From this influential distinction, Levey concludes that the trad climbing game is more authentic than its fast-food variant. So, what's for dinner?

Leaving the Western traditions, the final essay in this section shifts to a Zen perspective on climbing. Being in the moment, in the zone, or going with the flow are common experiences in climbing. The capacity for climbing to produce these immersive, Zen-like experiences is one of the lures of climbing. Eric Swan elaborates on many of the Zen-like qualities of climbing. He also demonstrates how the discipline of climbing parallels many of the same trainings

used in Zen philosophy to train the mind toward Nirvana: the physical work involved in climbing or preparing for a climb, the active meditation found while on a route, the problem solving that is intuitive and physical and not logical, and the instruction received from Zen masters. The final section of his essay focuses on two modern climbing masters - Derek Hersey and Chris Sharma - and how their climbing embodies Zen-like mindfulness through the disciplining of mind and body.

Part three, "Cutting the Rope: Climbing Ethics," plunges into the realm of moral principles. The first essay stems across the previous section into the ethics debate by examining the ethics of three climbing games arising from the values of climbers in dialogue with their climbing community. Dane Scott takes us on three different climbing excursions, each representing a distinct ethic and value arising within their respective climbing communities. The first trip is to Tuolumne Meadows' classic Bachar-Yerian, where John Bachar's ground-up ethic embodies the Nietzschean values of mastery and commitment. In contrast to this climb, Scott heads next to Smith Rock and the home of sport climbing. Here, Alan Watts and the test-piece To Bolt or Not to Be provide the backdrop for Scott's highlighting of the values of individual liberty and freedom and their relationship to sport climbing. While these two routes and their famous originators were part of a debate about climbing ethics, Scott looks at a young pioneer, Sonnie Trotter, who combines the ethics, style, and values of both traditional and sport climbing games. Scott concludes his tour in Canada at The Path, where Trotter's new route reflects an awareness of the community and traditions which have defined trad and sport climbing. Scott emphasizes that the dialogue between climbers and the larger climbing community helps define and ground the rules or ethics of climbing games.

The next essay ventures into contentious territory. Rock climbers climb routes that have been developed by some other ambitious climber - cracks are cleaned, bolts are placed, and unstable rocks are removed. While most rock climbers find such route preparations acceptable, most of these same individuals would find it unacceptable, if not unethical, to chip holds into the rock to make the route climbable. Why is the manufacturing of holds wrong? William Ramsey examines the justifications surrounding our condemnation of hold manufacturing and finds these justifications lacking. While Ramsey is not suggesting we go out and start chipping holds, he does challenge us to be consistent in our ethical reasoning.

Some consider free solo climbing, that is climbing without protective gear, to be one of the purest forms of climbing. Undoubtedly, it is one of the riskiest climbing activities. Despite the risk or because of it, some of the world's elite climbers have practiced the activity, adding to its allure. Should you free solo? While many would argue that they have a right to do as they wish, it is not clear that an appeal to personal liberty will itself provide an ethical justification for free soloing. Marcus Agnafors looks at several reasons given for free soloing and weighs these reasons on their ethical merits. As Agnafors notes, the question of whether free soloing is morally permissible is a complex question. So, should you free solo? Agnafors' essay will help you answer that question.

The final essay in this section looks at the issue of environmental degradation. If you've been to a popular climbing destination, then you have noticed it - climbers' trails snaking across the terrain, trash littering the trail and campsites, vegetation trampled at the base of a climb, or human excrement oozing from under the rock you decided to sit on for lunch. Climbers negatively impact the environment. What is ironic is that many of us climb in part

to be in nature and to escape the chaos, noise, and pollution of the city. What those climber trails, garbage, and indelible marks on the rocks remind us is that others, many others, have traveled these trails before us. Even low-impact travel in the backcountry is impact. So, when does the impact of any one climber result in degradation of the environment? A single footstep on a lichen-covered rock won't make a notable difference, but with enough foot traffic, rock and vegetation will give way to a trail. Dale Murray's essay examines the challenge of determining when environmental degradation occurs and provides a practical solution to limiting our impact. It may be, Murray suggests, that we have to accept limits on our behavior in the form of climbing quotas, different climbing practices, and maybe self-imposed abstention from certain types of climbing to preserve our climbing habitat.

In part four, "Mixed Climbing: Philosophy on Varied Terrain," we look at a range of philosophical topics related to climbing. Suppose the next time you went to your favorite climbing crag or stepped up to your favorite trad route that there, standing in front of the route, was the person(s) who established the route. You know, the person who first found the line, cleaned it, bolted it, and wrote it down. Now, suppose Joe Routesetter asks you to pay him to climb the route he established. "After all," he says, in response to your surprised look, "I spent weeks and hundreds of dollars putting up this awesome route you are about to enjoy. It's only fair that you compensate me for my efforts!" One of the kinder responses to his demand would be to inform Joe that that's not how it's done around here. But Joe is simply acting on the prevailing norm in capitalistic society - one should be compensated for one's efforts, especially if others are going to benefit from those efforts. This hypothetical case is foreign to the climbing community. It simply is not part of climbing culture. Debora Halbert's essay examines