

Mountains and Metaphysics

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Martin Heidegger, the great twentieth century German thinker, commented that the philosopher should also be a good mountain climber. It was not clear whether this was intended literally or figuratively; it is true metaphorically but also uniquely in the physical sense. When I read this remark, written on a photograph of the philosopher in the Swiss Alps, I was particularly pleased; I have often experienced an affinity between two of my favourite activities, hillwalking and philosophy. There is an apt parallel between the physical action of one and the spiritual activity of the other. Mountaineering offers a suitable analogy especially for metaphysics, which could be defined as philosophy at its widest—the search for an all-embracing vision of the world, from the most radical to the most sublime. The Greek words ‘*meta*’ and ‘*physis*’ convey the quest for a perspective upon reality in its totality, going beneath and beyond the world of visible nature.

Perhaps there is a connection between a love of high places and the predilection for metaphysics. As long as I can remember, I had an urge to get as high as possible (dimensively, not narcotically), just to see what was there. Growing up as a child in Laois, one of the flattest counties in the country—even the accent is flah!—it was important to gain whatever height one could: climbing trees, the garage roof, turf shed or hen house. Not far from our house was a modest elevation, insignificant on the global scale but known locally as ‘Murphy’s Hill’. In summer it was ablaze with scented yellow furze, and it became a favourite place for adventure and exploration. From the summit you could see endlessly far. When my brother and I planted a homemade flag on the top, made from a flour bag and stick, it was as if we had reconquered the Queen’s County.

Moving to Galway I fell in love with the wonderful landscape of the West of Ireland, especially the nearness of sea and mountain together. As a student I became a regular walker with the university hillwalking club; there is not a hill or mountain in the west of Ireland that I have not climbed since then. In 1979, a quarter century ago, having taught for a year at UCG, I spent many summer days in chthonic reverie amid the mountains of Connemara, culminating in a walk of the Twelve Bens in a single day.

One of my favourite climbing areas is North Connemara, both south and north of Killary Harbour. This was the preferred Irish retreat of the eccentric Austrian philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who lived in a cottage at Little Killary. I met the local man who looked after him, Tom Mulkerrin, who showed me a letter sent by Wittgenstein before his final visit. I photographed the letter, which went missing after Tom's death. Addressed 'Kilpatrick House, Redcross, Co. Wicklow', and dated 10. 4. 48, it reads: 'Dear Mr Mulkerrin, I intend to come to Rosro to stay there on Friday the week after next, April 23rd. Please have the cottage ready. I don't know yet what time I shall arrive but I shall try to get there about midday if that's possible. I shall stay in Galway for a night and I'll buy some supplies there, but please get me 2 pints of milk and some eggs. Dr Drury told me that you would help me and look after me, I hope you will. I am looking forward to seeing Rosro again after so many years. Yours sincerely, L. Wittgenstein.' The diet of milk and eggs is of itself uninteresting, but when the philosopher, after many false starts on a manuscript, decided to begin again *ab novo*, if not indeed *ab ovo*, asked Mulkerrin to burn a large bundle of notes, he used them instead as bedding for his hens; what goes around, comes around.

Although Wittgenstein lived across the bay from Mweelrea, the highest mountain in Connacht, he probably never climbed it. To the farmers' annoyance he preferred to walk instead through their finest fields of corn and became known in the locality as 'the corncrake'. Mweelrea is my own favourite mountain in the West. The most exciting approach is by boat across the mouth of the fjord from Little Killary. The ascent from seashore to summit is long and arduous, but most beautiful and rewarding. No matter where one climbs, one leaves behind the flatland of daily life and experience, not necessarily to turn one's back, but rather to attain a new and more complete perspective. One gains an unfamiliar panorama and acquires a novel outlook. The horizon stretches out and extends as one rises, ascending gradually step by step, slowly gaining altitude. You enter a third dimension and attain a bird's eye glance, a synoptic view of the surrounding spectacle. The elevated vantage affords a greater depth of field. The ground plan becomes clear and distinct; you discern the broader features of the landscape, its structure and relief. Contours emerge, the twin patterns of hill and valley become apparent. To quote from the song by Julie Gold, 'from a distance there is harmony, and it echoes through the land.' The vestiges of geological time, hidden at

close range, reveal themselves in the formation of the landscape, recalling millennia of time and bringing to mind even the earth's genesis.

Climbing anywhere in Ireland I feel as an eyewitness to an all-embracing sphere of reality and time, of activity past and present: rolling hills traced with miles of stone wall; vast boglands scarred and carved by generations of human habitation and industry; potato ridges in lazy beds, grave reminders of a painful history; deserted cottages and 21st century wind turbines. Forests, lakes and rivers; a tractor in the field, a trawler on the bay.

Hillwalking gives a raw sense of the elements which dominate our existence: land and sky, earth, wind and water. You discern more palpably the patient pace of nature in the annual rhythm of her seasons. One experiences in various ways the concurrence and totality of which we are a part. The moist and fertile scent of humus (whence the word 'human') on a summer day has a potent redolence, an enveloping, sensual intimacy with Mother Earth as she exudes her generosity. One witnesses the nascent moment in the cycle of water, its emanation and return, a timeless exchange between earth and sky. Water oozes beneath the surface, rivulets take volume, a trickle becomes a river as it courses inexorably to the ocean. In its eternal return of the same, nature is a great Heraclitean stream. From coastland peaks one perceives too the different densities and depths of water, hues of green and blue which reveal the shape of the submarine land as it retreats below the shore.

Climbing in many ways mirrors the process of abstraction characteristic of philosophy. To 'abstract' is to 'draw away from'; in climbing you leave things behind at ground level, but discover their wider context, perceiving a thing's individuality in its universal setting. In metaphysics, however, one should never abandon immediate and intimate contact, but simultaneously both grasp reality sensibly and comprehend it intellectually. A philosopher friend of mine, Norris Clarke, has reflected on the connection between mountain walking and metaphysics: 'To look out over the countryside from a high place enables one to see how it all fits together, making a single overall pattern. From down below, streams, valleys, hills, etc. all seem to be doing their own thing somewhat separately, without their interconnections being that visible. From higher up, it becomes clear how they all weave together to form a whole. The higher viewpoint yields the unity. This visual physical experience seems to be a kind of symbol, a foretaste, and acting-out on the physical level, of the inner spiritual synoptic

vision of how all things in the universe somehow fit together to make an integrated meaningful whole. It is a kind of physical practice for doing metaphysics.’ There is good evidence, he suggests, for a ‘natural affinity between metaphysicians and high places.’ Some philosophers may of course prefer the ocean or the vast openness of the plains as the ambience and symbolic element for their philosophic theories; the ideal setting for Derridean deconstruction, Clarke teasingly suggests, would likely be the misty half-gloom of the shifting quick sands.

My love of mountains and hillwalking has brought me to places I would not otherwise have seen; it is an impulse for which I am grateful. Even long afterwards, memories afford intense reminiscence and inspiration. Strongest are my memories of Nepal where I was spellbound by the beauty and expanse of the landscape. I recall in particular, having travelled overnight from Katmandu to Pokhara, the sudden sight of Annapurna as I opened the shutters in the morning; surprisingly near and sparkling in the rising sun, I imagined it pulsed inside my brain. I spent three glorious days walking in its foothills; standing in a clearing along a trail one is encircled by a boundless sphere encompassing the peak of the earth: tiers of paddy fields below, prayer flags fluttering in the wind, farmers in cone-shaped hats steering ox-drawn ploughs—heavenly invocation and human industry. At the roof of the world and the threshold of the skies, it was a panorama that filled my gaze to overflow.

To climb Mount Olympus is a special experience for the philosopher; I have been fortunate to do so nine times—a pagan novena. As the mythical home of gods and goddesses, Olympus was for centuries the focal point of prehistoric Greek culture and mythology. It shaped the orbit of meaning and destiny for generations of Hellenes. Olympian mythology was crucially both the context and counterpoint for philosophy as it struggled into its own. Physically Mount Olympus is impressive; the rugged peak of Mythikas, hewn of rough vertical tubular crags, is aptly called the throne of Zeus. From the summit one takes in the expanse of contorted rock formations, bare above the timberline, stretching out across the valley to the ocean. On one visit the sea began to churn in a sudden storm; we were soon enveloped in a fury of cloud, a cauldron of divine discontent; Olympian deities wreaked their anger, exacting revenge with thunderous rage. Once in a small plane I saw Olympus from above; only the summit was visible through the cloud, presenting an archetypal mythic-religious scene; one imagined the father god upon the throne, thunder bolt in hand. Inspiring too is the vast

Plateau of the Muses below the summit; here the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne still dance and sing upon a meadow of mountain flora, delicate in colour but robust enough to endure the winter snows. To stay overnight in the cabin of the Hellenic Mountaineering Association and watch the sunrise in the company of these young and beautiful virgins is an experience to relish.

Another memorable vista was from Mount Sinai; rising in the dark at the hostel of the Greek monastery of St Catherine (built on the site of Moses' burning bush), I climbed with hundreds more, and waited with dizzy anticipation. The solar epiphany revealed range upon range of serried mountain peaks, stretching in a shimmer-play of ochre and shade, until the sun quickly regained the day: vast horizons filled with lightsome stillness. As the hordes returned to their buses I remained, in the tranquil company of a mouse with whom I shared my breakfast.

I made another memorable hike at dawn to Masada, the mountain fortress overlooking the Dead Sea. There in 74 AD a thousand Jewish rebels took refuge from the Romans and, rather than surrender, died in a suicide pact. It is a place of gaunt and majestic beauty, still haunted by the sombre reminder of that early ethnic purge. On the other side of the globe, I recall with humour and fascination a hike through the uplands of Western Papua in New Guinea. To get a glimpse into the lifestyle of the Dani, a people whose culture had changed little from the stone age to the middle of the last century, was a revelation of human nature itself. It was the week after Christmas, and I was trekking with a Swedish couple I met on the plane. On New Year's Eve, Ann-Sofie accepted Krister's proposal for marriage; what they did not expect was a threesome on their engagement night. Although at the equator, the altitude brings night temperatures close to freezing point, and the teacher in whose hut we stayed had malaria and needed all the blankets. The place was inhabited by a family of rats, so out of chivalry I allowed myself be persuaded to snuggle up for warmth and protection. Krister and I took turns to ward off the rats with a bamboo cane; it was an erratic night.

There are dangers associated with mountain walking. Plato refers to the 'beautiful dangers' of philosophy; Heidegger speaks of the metaphysical vertigo one may experience as one approaches the boundaries of thought and peers into the abyss. On two occasions I have experienced real fear and terror, of the category 'To be or not to be!' I once got lost in a fog coming off Benbaun in Connemara; in an effort to descend I found myself poised on an outcrop, leaning precariously on a tree which started to

give way. With a Kierkegaardian leap, born more from desperation than faith or courage, I landed on a ledge a couple of metres below, where to my great relief I found safe footing. 'I lifted up mine eyes to the mountains, whence my help hath come.' Last summer in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, instead of taking the easy descent from a twelve-thousand-foot peak, I took what promised to be a more interesting detour. As dusk approached, I had no alternative but to skate six hundred feet down a steep glacier; a foolhardy and unwise escapade, I felt a shivering terror and excitement, a frisson which left a memory which still makes me shudder. On the mountains, as in life, one is a step from eternity.

Mountain climbing can be an arduous exercise requiring effort and exertion. Metaphysics also demands at times mental labour to rise beyond the average, banal appreciation of things. It too has its rewards, moments of illumination, revelation and insight. We transcend the particular to embrace the totality, not abandoning it but viewing it within the whole; we discern a cosmos from the welter of apparent chaos. The physical world is an image of the spiritual; the ecology of nature is a cipher for the greater order of the totality, in which are harmonised the physical and the psychic, the natural and supernatural, the human and divine. This is the ambience and element of our everyday reality, but as Shelley well remarked, 'The mist of familiarity obscures us from the wonder of our being.' For me, one of the best ways to refresh this sense of wonder is to walk the hills, to feel the earth under my feet and experience the rhythm of nature which ultimately we cannot really dominate or control.

As if by some fortuitous ordinance my appointment at UCD was in the then Department of Metaphysics, located on the fifth floor—under God, it was said but, more importantly, above the law (the Faculty, that is, before its migration to Roebuck Castle). Each day I enjoy the view of the Dublin hills, from Three Rock Mountain across to the Hell Fire Club, with an ever-changing pattern of the elements. It is for me a visible reminder that the world has multiple levels and dimensions; it cannot be confined to one, nor should we limit either our vision of reality or of ourselves to any one perspective.