

Ethics, Morality and Rockclimbing*

Mark Colyvan

It seems one can't open a climbing magazine these days without encountering a barrage of duty statements such as "It is wrong to retro-bolt" or "It is wrong to bolt a new route too close to a naturally protected route". Such statements are often referred to as examples of ethical debate, however, as we shall see, they are more properly referred to as moral debate. The distinction is not just a pedantic piece of linguistics either, it is, I believe, essential to understanding the true nature of these disputes, and it is the nature of these disputes which I am concerned with in this article.

The distinction between ethics and morality was first brought to my attention in an article by Dr Green called 'The Ethics of Climbing' in *Screamer* 9 (1981). In this article Dr Green explains how 'ethics' derives from the Greek 'ethikos' which pertains to the spirit of the thing in question, so the ethics of climbing are concerned with the spirit of climbing. 'Morality', on the other hand, is derived from the Latin 'moralis' pertaining to right conduct, so a morality is a set of commands, usually used to encapsulate a particular ethic. Dr Green goes on to suggest that just as many Christians' obsession with the ten commandments is symptomatic of a failure by those individuals to grasp the spirit or ethos of Christianity, so too modern rockclimbers' obsession with the morals of climbing signifies a shift in the ethos of climbing. I wish to examine this claim a little more closely.

I believe that the legitimate role of morals is in the teaching of ethics. For example, it would be difficult to teach a child the abstract ethos of "caring for your fellow human being's welfare" without first giving some concrete examples in the form of commands such as "Don't hit other children at school". It is by learning these moral commands

that a child is able to take the abstract step from the particular to the general, or, in the present context, from the morals to the ethic. Once this is achieved, the moral code is no longer necessary. It can be thought of as a step-ladder which is kicked away behind you once you have finished using it (or perhaps a stick thrown off into the bush once you have clipped the first runner with it). A society which still needs a moral code other than for teaching purposes, either consists largely of immature individuals or it has declined into a state in which it has no common ethos binding it. That is, it has become fragmented. Such a society is likely to be also absorbed in moral conflicts, since there is no underlying ethical unity.

This is not to say that the distinction between morals and ethics is always easily made. For example, the ethos of obedience can quite easily be followed by an individual obeying the moral command "Obey the rules". Furthermore, in this case it is not possible to distinguish between individuals who are merely following the moral code and those that have grasped the relevant ethic. Indeed, it would not matter here, since no abstract leap is required to grasp the ethic from the morals. However, in general there is a distinction and it is this distinction that concerns Dr Green.

In the light of Dr Green's distinction there seems no doubt that it is, indeed, morals that climbers are arguing about when they discuss retro-bolting and such, and in fact not ethics. Furthermore, I agree with the good doctor that this preoccupation is symptomatic of a changing ethos, or, more correctly, a lack of a common ethos. This is certainly more evident today than twelve years ago when Dr Green's article was published. Indeed, the climbing scene has almost separated into two factions: *traditional climbers* and *sport climbers*. It may well be that each faction has its own common ethos, or at least is in the process of developing one. The conflict, it seems, arises out of two ar-

*From *T.H.E.* 6, (April 1993), pp. 20–21. Reprinted in *Screamer* 52, (July 1993), pp 3–5, and in *Redpoint* 14, (August 1993), p. 4.

eas: (i) the similarity between the sports pursued by the two groups (indeed they both still go by the name of *rockclimbing*); (ii) the two groups' ability to share common venues such as Mt Arapiles.

The first conflict is about which set of morals (either those of the sport climbers or of the traditional climbers) best represent the ethos of rockclimbing. From the foregoing discussion, it is fairly readily seen that there is in fact no common ethos. I have already suggested that there is good reason to suspect that each have their own separate ethos (or at least they are in the process of evolving ones), in which case we are speaking about two different sports and the conflict reduces to nothing more than an "Australian rules is better than rugby league" type pub debate. Interesting in its own right, I guess, but of no real significance to either code.

The second conflict is a little more serious, just as the proper care of an oval on which football and cricket must coexist is a difficult matter. Unlike the cricket/football problem, though, sport climbers and traditional climbers cannot come to some agreement on a temporal demarcation, as both wish to climb all year around and the removal and replacing of bolts seasonally would not be practical anyway. Perhaps when sport climbing is more fully developed it will not require natural rock venues at all and will be restricted entirely to artificial climbing walls. This would certainly solve the problem, which, at present, is centred around bolting and hold chipping on natural cliffs. I must say, though, that such an outcome looks quite unlikely at this particular point in time.

It may seem that there are other issues at stake here outside of the scope of the ethos of climbing, namely environmental issues, and that these issues may give one group a greater claim to climbing venues. It may be argued that since sport climbers, in general, are more prepared to bolt and to chip holds, they are immature with respect to an environmental ethic. This, however, is an oversimplification, as traditional climbers are also not averse to the odd bolt or a bit of wire-brushing. Perhaps, then, it is a question of degrees, sport climbers being less concerned with the environmental ethic than the traditional climbers. This approach looks promising, however, once again I think it is flawed. It is at least possible that traditional climbers have total disrespect for the environment but their par-

ticular climbing ethic requires certain behaviour, which inadvertently has the effect of seeming like an environmental ethic. Allow me to elaborate.

I think that any formulation of the traditional climber's climbing ethic would involve such phrases as 'natural rock' and the like, where the word 'natural' *mimics* environmental concerns. I also suggest that any formulation of the sport climber's ethic would omit the word 'natural'. Thus the *apparent* interest traditional climbers have with environmental issues is only due to an additional requirement of their climbing ethic. An example, I think, will help to illustrate this point. If a sport climber were to place a number of bolts on a good quality new route, and so long as the bolts were not clipable from a nearby naturally protected route, then I suggest that the traditional climbers would have no disagreement with the sport climber, even though the bolts conflict with the environmental ethic. There would be no disagreement because the bolts do not conflict with the traditional climbers' *climbing* ethic.

From considerations such as these I believe that the constant disagreement within climbing circles over morals *is* symptomatic of an underlying lack of a common ethos in rockclimbing, as Dr Green suggests. Furthermore, the realisation of this should draw attention to the significant issue of how sport climbers and traditional climbers can share common climbing venues. I also believe that the resolution of this dispute lies in coming to some agreement about the demarcation of climbing venues, a process that has apparently already begun. This process may be assisted by environmental considerations in a given area but, as we have seen, environmental considerations cannot be used to give one group of climbers priority globally. Once this is appreciated, it is clear that to continue with the petty name-calling and demands for conformity to a moral code, typical of the so-called "ethical debates" in climbing is to entirely miss the point. It achieves nothing except to intensify the disputes and to deepen the rift between the two groups in question.