

## **Making The Grade**

Why You May be Wrong About What's Right About Chipping

by Bill Ramsey

The Nose, Outer Limits, The Rose and the Vampire, Just Do It. These route names roll off the tongue. Each climb has a place in history, both for what it meant to the sport, but also because it has the characteristics of a climbing “classic.” All are singular lines that tackle stunning features in grand positions. Yet each of these grand climbs also share a trait you many not know about, or if you do you might choose to ignore—each was deliberately chipped to go free.

Most climbers are openly hostile when expressing their opinions about chipping, maintaining a dogmatic disdain, yet hold manufacturing is a practice as old as climbing itself, and it would be an understatement to say that climbers are a bit schizophrenic on the subject. Why?

This essay presents what most climbers consider anathema—a limited defense of chipping. It was excerpted from the new book *Climbing—Philosophy for Everyone: Because It's There*.

Climbing and philosophy intersect with regard to the ethical behavior of climbers. Some of the ethical issues in climbing involve a straightforward extension of more general moral principles. For example, it is wrong to lie about your climbing accomplishments because, more generally, it is wrong to lie. However, other ethical issues involve factors that are unique to climbing and cannot be resolved by invoking broader moral rules. Is it wrong, for example, to place bolts on rappel? Is it cheating to use pre-placed gear on a traditional pitch? For these sorts of questions, broader moral rules do not apply in a straightforward way, and we must work out for ourselves what is right or wrong within the context of climbing.

When doing this, we can tailor a form of practical ethics for climbing. Traditionally, practical ethics has been the search for rational solutions to important problems we confront like climate change. However, practical ethics can be applied to less weighty matters such as rock climbing. While each climber needs to decide for himself which rules to abide by, it doesn't follow that anything goes or that a simple majority opinion is decisive. It is certainly possible for climbers, just like anyone else, to embrace rules that are ill-conceived or that don't really make sense. Thus, by using practical ethics we can ask if certain longstanding rules or attitudes should be revised or even abandoned.

Here I'm going to do this with regard to the issue of hold manufacturing. By applying some of the same strategies that are common to practical ethics, I'll show how popular attitudes about hold manufacturing are unreasonable and out of sync with other common attitudes and practices in rock climbing.

Practical ethics does not require an esoteric formula. Instead, like all good philosophy it simply involves thinking carefully about a topic in a critical and coherent manner. Yet it turns out that people aren't very good at this. Instead, studies reveal that people reason in a manner that is driven by biases, embrace beliefs that are incompatible with other beliefs, fail to think about what their views entail, and endorse fallacious arguments. Consequently, good practical ethics can be both helpful and yet disturbing and iconoclastic, revealing how our ordinary views on a topic we thought we understood are mistaken. Practical ethicists often serve as social critics, challenging conventional assumptions and attitudes. One of the ways they do this is by revealing how some of our commitments conflict with other attitudes we hold. Practical ethicists often upset the applecart of consensus by constructing arguments that expose hidden inconsistencies in our beliefs.

To begin, let's reflect on the nature of the hold-manufacturing controversy. Unlike most debates, this one is not fueled by two equally outspoken camps. With few exceptions, virtually no one openly defends hold manufacturing. In climbing literature there appears to be almost universal consensus that any form of manufacturing is bad. Indeed, even in one of the few defenses of manufacturing, a notorious 1990 essay, the practice is described as "fundamentally terrible" and "degrading."

So given the apparent consensus, in what sense is there a controversy? The controversy exists because despite the open expression of anti-manufacturing sentiments, hold manufacturing occurs on many new routes. In other words, common statements are in conflict with common actions, resulting in a deep incongruity about the way some rock climbs are developed. This odd double standard is often reflected in popular descriptions of various routes.

Take, for example, The Nose as a free climb. It is generally known that, besides the various pin scars that make certain cracks free-climbable, there is a section of the free variation—what is often described as the "Jardine Traverse"—where the holds used by all free climbers have been chiseled into the granite. So, on the one hand, it is widely claimed that routes with manufactured holds are tainted and that manufacturing should never be done. Yet, at the same time, a route that is made possible with manufactured holds is widely regarded as one of the greatest free climbs in the world. And this is true of many routes throughout the globe, in many popular destinations. Le Rose et le Vampire at Buoux, Bronx at Oregon, or The Crew at Rifle, to name just a few, are generally viewed as classics or groundbreaking achievements, even though their existence depends, at least in part, on a style of route preparation that is openly deplored.

What should we make of this? One possibility is that manufacturing holds is indeed always profoundly wrong, and we often just choose to ignore this. But I think a more plausible diagnosis is that, despite the overt indignation over manufacturing, we really aren't clear about what, exactly, is wrong with it. Upon deeper reflection, the popular arguments against manufacturing are unconvincing and don't hold up to

close scrutiny. In other words, the reason manufacturing still occurs is because the condemnation itself is not properly justified. Indeed, if we employ practical ethics with regard to hold manufacturing—that is, if we commit ourselves to careful and consistent reasoning—we wind up with an analysis that suggests, at least in certain circumstances, manufacturing should be regarded as acceptable.

How would such an analysis go? Replicating a common strategy in practical ethics, the first premise would express a general normative principle that most climbers believe about acceptable practices in route development. The second premise would claim that hold manufacturing is a legitimate application of this principle (and thus an anti-manufacturing attitude is in conflict with the accepted principle). The conclusion would be that manufacturing in some circumstances is an acceptable practice. Here is such an argument:

(a) There are circumstances such that, in the preparation of a route, modifying the rock to make it climbable is acceptable.

(b) The set of circumstances in which rock modification is acceptable sometimes includes the manufacturing of holds.

(c) Therefore, the manufacturing of holds is sometimes acceptable.

While (a) might initially strike some as implausible, I think it is easy to show that it is a principle that most climbers embrace. The more controversial premise is (b). Of course, (c) follows directly from (a) and (b), so if you accept those two premises, you need to accept (c).

Before we evaluate premises (a) and (b) we need to clarify a couple of things. First, we should get a little clearer on what is meant by “hold manufacturing.” There is obviously a continuum of different rock alterations that have been described as hold manufacturing, including unintentionally creating holds with pitons, reinforcing existing holds with glue, “comfortizing” holds or aggressive cleaning, and of course, flat-out drilling holds in blank rock. Not much rides on how broad we make this continuum, so let’s stipulate that manufacturing includes deliberately drilling pockets to create climbing holds.

Second, we need to specify the sort of circumstances I have in mind when I claim that manufacturing is acceptable, as I certainly don’t believe it is defensible in every situation. Because so many climbers appear to have a zero-tolerance attitude, we can be fairly conservative while remaining revisionist. It is impossible to give a detailed description of all acceptable manufacturing scenarios, but we don’t need to. Instead, we can describe the prototypical scenario and later worry about how far it is acceptable to stray from that. Let’s say the archetype of acceptable manufacturing involves preparing an unclimbed sport route in a sport-climbing area that has mostly high-quality climbable sections but also segments of blank rock. To link the

climbable sections a limited number of holds are manufactured in the blank sections. That is the paradigm the following argument is intended to defend.

The truth of (a)—rock modification is acceptable—is easy to see once we consider general attitudes about the removal of loose rock by the person who prepares the route. When bolting a route it is almost universally agreed that it is acceptable to remove any loose blocks, crumbly or muddy rock, creaking flakes, and so on. Indeed, the removal of loose rock is generally treated as obligatory. Route equippers who do not remove loose rock, especially on sport climbs, are often chastised. Since the removal of loose rock is clearly an instance of modifying the rock to make it climbable, then modifying the rock to make it climbable is something that practically everyone finds acceptable.

Premise (b)—acceptable rock modification sometimes includes manufacturing holds—by contrast, is something that, as noted, most climbers explicitly reject. Why should anyone accept this premise?

We know that a climbing-specific normative principle embraced by most climbers says it is OK to modify the rock to create a climbable route. The removal of loose rock is one such type of modification, and (b) claims that the manufacturing of holds is another. Someone who rejects (b) has the burden of presenting a compelling reason for thinking that hold manufacturing should not be treated as on a par with removing loose rock. Simply claiming it is wrong, and leaving it at that, won't do. Below are four popular reasons that are commonly given for rejecting (b).

#### Reason 1: Rock Modification is Acceptable Only for Safety Reasons

Attitudes about the removal of loose rock stem in part from the potential danger it presents, and from a broader moral principle that you should not place others in unnecessary risk. The route preparer has an obligation not to expose subsequent climbers to unexpected hazards, and that's why removing loose rock is acceptable. But this justification does not apply to the manufacturing of holds, and thus (it is claimed) (b) is false.

This initially seems like a good reason to treat hold manufacturing as different from removing loose rock. However, two points undermine the relevance of safety. First, not all forms of acceptable removal involve material that is potentially dangerous. Included in (a) is a general attitude that route preparers can and even should remove poor quality, flaky or dirty rock that may not pose any real hazard but that can nevertheless make the climbing unpleasant. A similar attitude applies to dirt, vegetation, lichen and weeds that might be found on holds or in cracks. Route preparers are described as having done a bad job if they leave obviously loose material on the route, even if the material can't really hurt anyone. Consequently, it is widely acknowledged that acceptable modification of the climbing terrain extends beyond safety concerns.

Second, the main choice confronting the route preparer is not between ignoring a potential hazard to others and removing that hazard. After all, if no route is established, the loose rock will pose no real danger. The real choice is between establishing a route (whatever that requires) or simply walking away and establishing no such route. The upshot is that it really can't be claimed that modifying the rock in this way is necessitated by safety concerns, since there are always other options available such as only establishing routes on solid rock.

## Reason 2: Hold Manufacturing Violates Important Environmental Commitments

Most climbers have a perfectly legitimate concern for preserving the natural environment, at least as much as possible. Manufacturing is often described as environmentally unsound because it alters and "disrespects" the rock. Thus, it should not be treated the same as removing loose rock.

Respect for the environment is indeed good, but we already accept that our use of the outdoors involves changing the environment in various ways. Trails to the cliffs, bolts in the rock, permanent anchors for rappelling, and the removal of loose rock and flora all involve a widely accepted modification of nature so that we can go climbing. It is hard to see why an environmentally driven concern for the rock would distinguish between the removal of loose rock and removal of solid rock to make something climbable. Moreover, it is hard to see why the removal of lichen, weeds and grass isn't more environmentally dubious than manufacturing, given that it involves killing a living part of nature (notice that, from an environmental perspective, killing a tree is considered more serious than smashing a rock on the ground).

Some agree that we sometimes need to alter nature for our purposes, but insist that there is a continuum and that hold manufacturing is at the extreme end of that continuum, beyond an acceptable level of environmental impact. I have no problem with the idea that there is a continuum of environmental impact, and that there is a line we should not cross. What I reject is the proposed ordering that places manufacturing further down the continuum than other things we find acceptable. In comparison to trails, bolts, chain anchors, chalk and the excavation of loose material, hold manufacturing on blank sections of rock is probably one of the least environmentally impactful aspects of rock climbing. You might be tempted to say that hold manufacturing permanently alters the rock, whereas things like chalk are only temporary. This is unrealistic thinking. Take a hike through Smith Rock, Eldorado Canyon, the Motherlode at the Red, or virtually any other popular cliff with darker rock, and from the trail you will see the obvious chalk on the wall that has been there for the last 20 years, and will continue to be there for several generations. In truth, it is easier to fill in a few drilled pockets than it is to wash all of this "temporary" chalk off the walls.

## Reason 3: Hold Manufacturing Harms Future Generations of Good Climbers

Another argument that initially seems plausible is a forward-looking argument about the future of the sport. Here, it is claimed that by manufacturing holds to make a route possible today, preparers are robbing future generations of currently inconceivable natural lines. Had today's 5.15bs been "chipped down" to mere 5.14s, the Sharmas and Ondras of the world would now have nothing to project.

A number of considerations undermine this reasoning. First, in our description of acceptable manufacturing, we stipulated that proper modification only applies to truly unclimbable rock, such that no future climber could ever climb it. In discussions of this topic, there is a lot of fretting about discerning what is and isn't unclimbable rock. Statements like "Who's to say what is unclimbable?" and "No one really knows what will be possible in the future" are commonplace. Nonsense. While it is indeed true that people are climbing things today that were once described by some as unclimbable, it doesn't follow that unclimbable rock is impossible to detect. Unless you are completely ignorant of physics and human physiology, it is easy to recognize sections of rock that will never be climbed in their current form. If you think it is impossible to recognize truly unclimbable rock, let's make a deal. I'll pick out a 20-foot section of rock on a cliff somewhere and declare it unclimbable. If, in the next 15 years, it is actually climbed in its current form, then I will pay you \$10,000. If it is not climbed in that form, then you must pay me \$10,000. Any takers?

A stronger response to this concern is to recognize that a general acceptance of hold manufacturing will significantly help, rather than hinder, future generations of climbers. At any given point in time, including future points in time, there is a lot more unclimbable rock in the world than just barely climbable rock. Pick whatever grade you think might be the cutting edge for some future generation. 5.17d? Okay, there is a great, great deal more rock out there in the harder-than-5.17d range that could be converted into a 5.17d than there is rock that is naturally 5.17d. So, if your concern is that the future 5.17d climber won't have enough routes to do, then you should endorse a pro-manufacturing attitude. Note, this point applies to any future grade and any future generation. While I'm not suggesting that this is an especially good argument for manufacturing, I am claiming that the concern-for-future-climbers argument is a bad argument for opposing all hold manufacturing.

Finally, this criticism of rock modification is partly grounded in the assumption that it is always done to make the climbing easier—to bring the rock "down" to a lesser climber's ability. In truth, there are lots of climbs where holds have been chipped off a route to make it harder. Here again, rock modification beyond the removal of loose material actually benefits, rather than hinders, the top climbers.

Reason 4: This is a Slippery Slope; Any Acceptance of Manufacturing Will Lead to Abuses

A final argument against manufacturing (one that is also grounded in legitimate concerns) stems from the idea that any sort of tolerance of manufacturing can lead

to all sorts of abuse: the destruction of great, natural, really hard lines, or the modification of existing routes.

The problem with this argument is that it has nothing to do with the issue. Of course, most things done badly are bad. But that has nothing to do with the propriety of the practice done responsibly. Note that few people think the existence of bad bolting entails the need to abolish all bolting. Route preparers who engage in irresponsible and gratuitous manufacturing await the same condemnation as those who engage in irresponsible and gratuitous bolting. Because my argument is a defense of the limited sort of manufacturing described above, the possibility of other kinds of manufacturing is largely irrelevant. Remember that irresponsible manufacturing sometimes occurs now; our current condemnation hasn't prevented it from happening.

These four standard arguments for rejecting (b)—limited chipping is acceptable rock modification—are, upon reflection, not compelling and fail to support a case against manufacturing. The anti-manufacturing attitude does not accord with other things most rock climbers believe, like the acceptability of modifying the rock to make it climbable. Given that those latter beliefs are deeply entrenched, the former attitude should be abandoned. Our conclusion (c), the claim that the manufacturing of holds is sometimes acceptable, is the sensible view. Let me wrap up by considering a couple of other points.

First, isn't there some sense in which a non-natural route is inferior to a completely natural route? Yes, I think that, all else being equal, a purely natural climb is usually better and more appealing. In most outdoor pursuits, the more that is provided by nature, the better. As with snowboard jumps, kayak runs, mountain-bike paths, and so on, a naturally occurring medium in rock climbing is superior to one that is contrived. But it is important to understand the sense in which it is superior. A route with manufactured holds is on a par with one that has, say, poorly positioned bolts or awkward moves or wildly inconsistent difficulties. In all such cases, we do not think the route preparer was being unethical to establish such a route. We just think that the route has some features that detract from its overall quality. This is the attitude that should be applied to routes with reasonably manufactured holds.

My final point is this. No doubt many of you are reading this and getting increasingly angry about my defense of manufacturing. You may be thinking, "Some yahoo is going to use this as a license for chipping holds." But if you reflexively think that manufacturing is always bad, then you haven't been paying attention. Given the deficiencies of the anti-manufacturing outlook, you should instead be considering the possibility that your outlook is more of a bias without proper support. Indeed, given how often an anti-manufacturing attitude is defended by appeals to nothing other than tradition, or that "it just is wrong" (with heavy foot stomping), it resembles other forms of dogmatic thinking.

Consider this: if you are a serious climber who climbs relatively hard sport routes, there is a good chance that you have done a route with at least a few manufactured holds. Moreover, there is also a good chance that despite the manufacturing, climbing the route was gratifying and rewarding. Now what should the appropriate attitude be toward the route preparer, who spent time, money and energy so you could have that experience? Does it really make sense to view the preparer with condemnation and scorn? That seems unappreciative at best, and at worst incoherent. Or is it instead more sensible to recognize that it is sometimes acceptable for preparers to modify the rock so other climbers can have the sort of experience you had? The latter position, I have come to appreciate, seems far more reasonable and philosophically defensible.

Bill Ramsey teaches philosophy at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He has been climbing for 33 years, and while he has never chipped a hold, he has sometimes enjoyed routes on which others have.

#### CHIPPING DICTATION

To preface this critique of Bill Ramsey's manifesto ["Making the Grade," No. 191], I want to say that I applaud and appreciate Bill bringing logic to the often heated and controversial subject of manufacturing climbing routes, specifically "chipping." I have to say I agree with 95 percent of his presentation. However, I have some criticisms of his logical thread as well as what I think is an important distinction that needs to be made regarding "chipping." I place this in quotations because the concept itself needs further exploration ...

Bill states, "Someone who rejects (b) has the burden of proof of presenting a compelling reason for thinking that hold manufacturing should *not* be treated as on par with removing loose rock." The following is such an argument.

If you think about all the ways in which routes are prepared, modified, etc. for a first ascent, all have one thing in common: The rock is dictating whether it can be climbed. In other words, you are climbing (to a large degree) what nature has presented. Cleaning, removal of loose rock, even reinforcing holds that are already there do not guarantee that you will be able to get up a given section of rock. Once you decide to chip, however, the rock is no longer dictating. You are dictating to the rock and literally anything can be climbed. Now, I am not saying that this is necessarily bad. What I am saying is that this form of rock manufacturing needs to have its own category and needs to come under much more scrutiny.

Let's keep in mind that rock climbing is fun for most of us because we can climb the rock on its own terms. When chipping as a form of manufacturing is involved, we are climbing the rock on our terms. Although this may be acceptable in certain limited circumstances, we should recognize this to be the contrivance it is and be very critical and discerning before we do it.

—Lee Sheftel

Carbondale, Colorado

#### CHIPPING: CONSERVATIVE AGENDA

Bill Ramsey's article was a good start at adjusting attitudes about the many chipped routes we all enjoy. It's a fat topic, so understandably he omitted some additional points against chipping:

- 1) Chipped limestone holds polish out more (or faster) than natural holds.
- 2) While some chipped holds go undetected, some are obviously artificial and negatively impact the route's aesthetics.
- 3) Some routes prove climbable (and better) without chipped holds.
- 4) Ramsey says the wealth of blank sections means future generations of 5.17 climbers have plenty of future lines. While that's true worldwide, it's untrue in local areas such as Austin, where most lines have been developed, sometimes via chipping.

5) Ramsey did a good job of showing that most sport routes are heavily manufactured, whether or not they are chipped. However, people still like minimizing the amount of manufacturing. For example, some plants don't need to be removed, and the routes are nicer with them than without them.

Indeed almost all sport routes are manufactured, and then sent using high-tech equipment. For a natural climbing experience, free solo an unclimbed dirty line in bare feet. Until then, enjoy all our manufactured outdoor climbing gyms.

Going forward, attitudes against chipping won't change. Perhaps they shouldn't. They keep developers conservative. For the fun of the sport, chipping should never be an option considered lightly.

—John Hogge  
Austin, Texas

#### POINTLESS LOGIC

My question about Bill Ramsey's article is why? Of course one can find examples of climbs where ethics were treated as situational and so holds were chipped. Some of these climbs are even famous. But to try to justify the act of deliberately chipping holds by equating this decision to other points of style and ethics is just a pointless exercise in logic. Sometimes you just know in your gut that something is wrong. If you decide to do it anyway it's not the end of the world in most cases. One little fake pocket can open a whole new 5.13c. Whatever. It's just something most climbers have a gut feeling about, and I don't see much value in Bill Ramsey's somewhat labored logical justification.

It did not make me angry, though. It made me think, and I'll thank him for that.

—Kristian Solem  
Monrovia, California

*Go to [www.rockandice.com/chipping](http://www.rockandice.com/chipping) to read Sheftel's, Hogge's and Solem's counter-manifestos in their entirety.*

#### TONE DOWN

Jeff Jackson's "Ancient Tonics" article [No. 191] was well-written and informative. However, it struck me as negligent in its lack of emphasis on the profoundly unbalancing and negative effects that some of the addressed herbs can have and the education required to properly use herbs of this stature effectively. While he did recommend seeing an expert before taking these herbs, he did not emphasize the necessity for doing this. I feel that most people will simply come away from this article with one thing in their heads: These herbs are good and I should take them! Our Western culture seems to be guilty of categorizing things as either good or bad for us, and we tend to assume that more "good" is always better than less.

While ginseng in particular is an amazing substance, much caution exists around its use in Chinese medicine. Ginseng's "hot" nature can be very balancing and nourishing for someone who requires that, but it can also be overwhelming for someone who already has a "hot," or yang, constitution. For example, a young American male with a large build, strong personality and sex drive, whose diet is rich in warming foods such as alcohol, coffee and red meat, could suffer serious problems with Chinese ginseng. The problems could be as minor and unpleasant as a red face, night sweating or nocturnal emissions, or they could be as serious as headaches, aggressive behavior and anger outbursts similar to "roid rage."

—Bill Morse  
Portland, Maine

#### THE GUNKS OF CLUNE

Unfortunately it is not so easy for me to get *Rock and Ice* in my current state of irreverent single-mindedness—traveling and climbing in Europe. So, when I got issue 190 and read Russ Clune's piece on *Fat City Direct* I felt I had to say something. In one week I will head home for Thanksgiving. After fattening myself up for a few days I will make a trip to where I learned to climb: the Gunks of Clune lore. I remember being intimidated by *Fat City Direct* when I first learned to climb for the very things that Clune captures so well: "impossibly large and beautifully orange overhangs;" "the infamous '+' suffix," indicating assured sandbagging; and those "notorious pieces of fixed pro in a land full of rusting iron." With some experience under my belt I sent the classic. I remember every nuance that Clune described! For all of those naysayers that will surely argue against Clune's assertion that *Fat City Direct* is the best 5.10 at the Gunks, I am notorious for not remembering any climb, so the fact that I know I climbed it means it

made quite an impression. (I climbed another Gunks “classic,” *Cascading Crystal Kaleidoscope*, on three occasions before remembering that I had been on it).

With Clune’s article as impetus (and beautifully concise beta) I will now most certainly go back and pass judgment again for myself. I am curious to re-experience this one pitch that made such an impact on my now well-traveled climbing consciousness. Whatever the conclusion may be, it felt really good to read about the beauty and someone’s love of a place back “home.” Thank you for adding anticipation to my return journey and reminding me of another climb I will never forget.

—Daniel Trusilo  
Connie der deutsche  
adventure bus, Europe

#### SOUTHEAST ALASKA BIG WALLS?

Legend holds that there are a couple of bolted routes on big walls somewhere in the Misty Fjords National Monument (down on the panhandle in southeast Alaska near Ketchikan). These glacially carved granite walls rise up to 3,000 feet and higher directly from the fjords below. As far as I know, the entire place is unclimbed.

This summer I was working as a zip-line guide in Ketchikan. I lived eight miles out of town so I frequently hitched to pick up supplies. One day I was picked up by an interesting fellow who planned to lead an excursion up one of these so-called bolted lines. He asked if I would like to tag along as part of his team. I told him, “I’m all in.”

A few weeks passed and I hadn’t heard anything of the climb so I e-mailed him to see what he found. He replied that the bolted lines seemed to be a myth after all. If there actually were any long sport routes, nobody knew where. However, he did choose a trad line he thought would go on a wall over a hanging lake in the monument, but the weather turned and the season was over.

I can only hope I’ll get a shot at the fjords next year. I’d be curious to hear from anyone with information about the climbing.

—David Hertel  
Manitou Springs, Colorado

#### DYING IS UNCOOL

Last summer I was fortunate enough to take a trip to New Zealand, where I was able to do some incredible climbing. After noticing that many of the locals were forgoing helmets, my partner and I decided to leave ours in the trunk. Big mistake. On one particularly challenging climb I pumped out and lost it just as I was pulling myself over the edge. With my heel up and my arms failing, my body rotated and I smacked my head against the rock below. I came to a couple of seconds later seeing stars and with the worst headache of my life. I spent the rest of the day concussed and miserable, wishing I hadn’t been too cool for my noggin bopper.

That’s why it’s good to see your writers supporting the use of helmets—and articles such as Duane Raleigh’s review of the Wild Country Rock Light [Field Tested, No. 190]. What really gets my goat, though, is that like many climbers (myself included), *Rock and Ice* seems to talk the talk but not walk the walk. Flipping through the pages of your magazine I’m disappointed to see far fewer photographs of climbers with helmets than without.

Come on, guys, I realize that it can be tough to get the BA pros to put on their hats, but publications like *Rock and Ice* set the standard. Just a few years ago, skiing used to be the same way, but now, thanks largely to magazines like yours, you won’t see any pro bombing a big one without head protection.

Helmets are cool. Dying for the sake of being totally hardcore is not.

—George Halsted  
Boston, MA

### **Response to critics of “Making The Grade”**

#### **Bill Ramsey**

First, I want to thank everyone who took the time to read, think about, and then

comment on my essay. I was quite surprised to hear from so many people, including some very major figures, who agreed with my perspective. I don't think I convinced many people to change their minds; instead, I suspect I made explicit some tacit views that have been simmering below the surface in the climbing world for some time. While I cannot respond to all of the criticisms and commentaries that have been offered, I would like to respond here to the three that *Rock and Ice* have printed online.

Both Lee Sheftel and John Hogge are largely sympathetic with my overall defense of manufacturing. Each one offers sensible suggestions and additions that I would, for the most part, embrace, especially regarding plausible restrictions on any form of hold manufacturing. Hogge, for example, correctly notes that many routes are made worse by poor chipping, and that if one is going to manufacture something, it is better to use as much of what the rock provides as possible. I agree. And Sheftel correctly notes that what we do to the rock should always be done with local ethics and land managers in mind.

One point worth focusing on is Sheftel's claim that I overlook an important way in which chipping or drilling holds is different from other forms of rock modification. According to Sheftel, chipping, unlike gluing or removing loose rock, is the only form of modification where the rock does not constrain what is to be done. As he puts it, "Once you decide to chip, the rock is no longer dictating, you are dictating to the rock and literally anything then can be climbed." Although Sheftel does not think this always makes chipping bad, he does believe that it is an important distinction that demands chipping not to be taken lightly.

I agree with Sheftel's point about the value of working with what the rock gives us. In fact, this ties in with the point made toward the end of my essay, that, all else being equal, a natural route is superior to a manufactured one. In outdoor pursuits, we seek to interact with the world in its natural form, and the contrivance involved in hold manufacturing gets us away from that, just as cutting down trees to create a slope to ski, or carving a trail for a mountain bike to go down. In all of these cases, if the end result had actually come about naturally, that would have been superior to something partially artificial. Still, I believe a man-made ski slope or mountain bike path is often (though not always) better than the alternative when the alternative is no skiing or mountain biking. So too, with human-created holds on certain routes.

At the same time, though, I want to resist a very common sentiment, implied by Sheftel, that practices like reinforcing holds or cleaning loose rock clearly involves the rock "dictating" what is to be done, whereas chipping does not at

all. Take the very common practice of adding epoxy to poor rock to either enhance or reinforce holds. This is actually very common in America and Europe, especially in the upper grades, and it is a practice that is adopted and endorsed even by staunch anti-chipping advocates. Many apparently believe that reinforcing fragile holds is just a matter of using only what nature provides. But it really isn't. If what you are reinforcing is useable only with the addition of artificial epoxy, then nature has *not* provided you with usable holds there. You are altering what is natural to convert a section of unclimbable rock (because it is too fragile) into climbable rock. Sometimes climbers act as though the rock is "telling" us what to do and where to go. In some metaphorical sense, I suppose this is true. But I don't see why one interpretation is better than another. Why isn't a rock face with inadequately loose holds or fragile rock "dictating" to us not to climb there just as much as a rock face with a blank section? Alternatively, if the rock is "telling" us, 'OK, you can climb on these holds but you have to add a bunch of epoxy', then why isn't it also sometimes saying 'OK, you can climb through this section but you have to add some holds'?

In contrast to Sheftel's and Hogge's letters, John Joline's response provides a nice illustration of the sort of reactionary impulse that I mentioned toward the end of my essay, an attitude perhaps best described as "I don't need to consider your fancy arguments and reasoning, I just *know* I'm right!!". His on-line letter is almost comical in its foot-stomping demand that readers not think and instead just abide by its prohibitions. Joline would find lots of like-minded friends in various political movements that are growing in popularity. He describes me as "misleading", "stunningly naïve", "disingenuous", "Sophistic", and "simple-minded", while my essay uses "blatantly flawed logic" or "slippery logic" with claims that are "absurd", "outlandish" and "blatantly" or "demonstrably false". I would like to be able respond to his reasons for this unflattering depiction. Unfortunately, I can't because he doesn't really provide any, apparently thinking instead that invective is a substitute for reasoned criticism. What he does offer are some lessons on fallacious thinking. Ironically, his letter is indeed instructive on fallacies – though not in the way he intended:

*Strawman*: Attacking a strawman involves badly mischaracterizing the view you are criticizing to make it easier to refute. Joline does this throughout his letter. For instance, his discussion of "bright lines" implies that my argument is somehow based upon a claim that chipping is acceptable because there is no clear distinction between good and bad route modification. But I said nothing remotely like that. In fact, I claimed just the opposite – that there is a continuum with a demarcation between acceptable and unacceptable practices;

what I denied is that chipping always belongs on the unacceptable end of the spectrum. Joline finds this “appalling”, but offers no reasons and utterly ignores the argument I actually presented.

*Begging The Question:* While all sorts of things are called “question-begging” these days, the original meaning involves a specific sort of fallacy where you presuppose that your position is correct in order to establish that it is correct. A good deal of Joline’s response begs the question against chipping by simply *assuming* it is bad, and then building on that perspective. For instance, Joline tries to argue that chipping is bad because it would represent a downward, negative trend rather than something progressive. But, of course, whether such a trend would be positive or involve “decadence and decline” is the very thing being disputed.

*Appeal to Popular Opinion:* This fallacy is self-explanatory – from the mere fact that a lot of people believe X, it doesn’t follow that X is true. Joline begins his letter by stating “It’s fair to say that a powerful and eloquently-stated anti-chipping consensus has prevailed in the U.S. for many years”. Two points about this: First, as noted above (and as Sheftel recommends) I am increasingly doubting the extent of anti-chipping attitudes. Given the number of supportive comments I received, I am beginning to think that the anti-chipping “consensus” may not be so great, and perhaps more of an artifact of misleading coverage or image-conscious professionals. Second, since I openly and repeatedly acknowledged that the position I was defending was unpopular, it is bizarre to criticize it for its lack of popularity.

What about the Jardine Traverse on the Nose? Joline offers a lengthy criticism of my mention of the free version of Nose and how it involves a section of chipped holds. He notes that various people, such as Lynn Hill, have claimed that the Jardine Traverse may someday go free, and chastises me and *Rock and Ice* for failing to take this into account. Yet his commentary is both confused and ill-informed. It is confused because it has no bearing whatsoever on the point I was making. That point was that the free variation of the Nose is both widely regarded as a classic rock climb and a major achievement, and it also involves chipped holds used by all people who have done it. The observation was that it is inconsistent to maintain that climbs with chipped holds are an abomination and at the same time maintain that a certain climb with chipped holds is one of the greatest climbs in the world. The possibility that such a climb might some day go free without those chipped holds is irrelevant to that observation. It is ill-informed because Joline assumes his own research, which apparently involved reading a passage of Lynn Hill’s book, is beyond what I did. But my claims about the Jardine Traverse weren’t just made up out of thin

air. I contacted a few of the Yosemite “regulars” to get a sense of what the story is with the traverse, and was told that climbers have tried to free climb it without the chipped holds and have failed. One top Yosemite climber told me the chipped holds are “crucial”, but he also thought someone may eventually find a different way. In any event, Joline’s presumption that I failed to look into this is itself based on ignorance, and it is ironic that he criticizes me for not knowing what I am talking about.

Joline and I agree about something – namely, that these issues are worth debating. Actually, we probably agree on a lot more. I get the sense that Joline is passionate about the outdoors and feels a deep bond with the rock – something he sees as “living” and worthy of a very strong defense. I applaud his commitment, and he might be surprised to learn that I feel much the same way. Yet I don’t believe that passion should trump reason, or that, as many people seem to assume (regarding all sorts of topics), it provides a license to ignore the facts. As someone who has climbed for over 3 decades on many classic rock climbs, both in America and abroad, I have come to appreciate the fact that an awful lot of what people climb and enjoy, especially in the higher grades, is not natural. Consequently, it is worth trying to come to terms with this fact, and rethink our outlook on chipping. But rethinking requires *thinking* - something that, fortunately, many other climbers also like to do.

Chipping: Flawed Logic

By John Joline

Hanover, New Hampshire

It's fair to say that a powerful and eloquently-stated anti-chipping consensus has prevailed in the U.S for many years. Chris Sharma's recent comments in *Rock and Ice* can be taken as representative: "Chipping is not OK. It seems to be a thing of the past, not just with Americans, but with the Spanish climbers, too. [I]t's not cool."

Now comes Professor Ramsey to re-stir the pot ["Making the Grade," No. 191]. It's not clear why. More power to him if his aim is simply a troll—i.e., an attempt to elicit from the climbing community an even more solidly-based philosophical foundation for the anti-chipping consensus. But Ramsey's comments come perilously close to being an explicit advocacy of chipping. Therefore, the very few impressionable readers who might now be induced to take up the chisel need to read his piece very closely to recognize some of the misleading, seductive rhetorical devices he uses, as well as the occasional examples of blatantly flawed logic.

Ramsey, as practical ethicist, aims to "expose hidden inconsistencies in our beliefs." In the final analysis, however, his article actually exemplifies the Emersonian dictum that "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds." Ramsey's zeal for consistency is fueled by reliance on a kind of seemingly ironclad, pure rationality which is unsullied by "bias." But what he calls the climbing community's "bias" (or inconsistent logic) is simply a reflection of the fact that most climbers have no problem perceiving directly—without any kind of exhaustive, systematic, formal analysis—that chipping subverts, corrupts, devalues the foundations of the sport (not to mention violating the integrity of what for centuries was, tellingly, reverently, called the "living rock.") Given the highly problematic task of defending the placement of "bright lines" within any realm of continuous phenomena (the continuous realm here being "acts involving altering the rocky environment") most climbers recognize the futility of such a venture.

[Editor's Note: A bright-line rule is a clearly defined rule or standard, generally used in law, composed of objective factors, which leaves little or no room for varying interpretation.]

There is almost no field of human endeavor where a bright line drawn through an (apparent) continuum cannot be deconstructed and exposed as having some degree of inconsistency (and thus of apparent arbitrariness)—especially with the use of slippery logic or outright illogic. For example, philosophy classes use the following classic, outlandish, reductio-ad-absurdum example to expose that sort of manipulative "logic": "Night segues imperceptibly into broad daylight; therefore we are not justified in drawing a distinction between night and day since we can't establish a clear moment when the one definitively becomes the other." Ramsey's implication that a staunch anti-chipping stance is logically inconsistent or "dogmatic" is equally absurd.

Space constraints preclude my addressing numerous points in Ramsey's article here. [Go to [www.rockandice.com/chipping](http://www.rockandice.com/chipping) to read all letters on chipping in their entirety.] But here are three counterpoints to consider:

1) Ramsey's glib dismissal of the slippery slope argument is stunningly naive (or disingenuous). Modern society draws "bright lines" all the time based primarily on an understanding of the terrible potential inherent in many slippery-slope-prone phenomena. Ramsey errs in thinking he can separate out the real-world effects of his arguments from the abstract, pure expression of that argumentation. In truth, however, they are not functionally separate. In the academic's rarified world of exquisite, pure, rational, deductive-logic abstraction, real effects and implications are easy to ignore. But in the real world of human nature, these effects can trump the purity of abstraction and need to be seen as central in defining our values.

2) Ramsey asserts that, "the reason manufacturing still occurs is because the condemnation itself is not properly justified." In a few cases, perhaps. But as a sweeping assertion this is demonstrably false. In human societies all sorts of terrible behavior occurs (from the trivial to the truly criminal) all the time, not because condemnation of these acts is "not properly justified." The behaviors occur because such acts are simply too tempting, too seductive to resist, and people perceive they can get away with them.

(3) The Nose, free, is cited numerous times in the both the main article and accompanying content as a paradigm-case of the supposed upside of chipping. But this outlandish claim is based on a blatantly false, revisionist reading of the history of the Jardine Traverse. Lynn Hill and others (even, evidently, Jardine himself!) thought the traverse could likely/possibly go free in it's original state -- albeit at a much stiffer grade. But now, sadly, we'll never know, will we?

-John Joline

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The letter above, in the R&I print edition, states my case pretty succinctly, but I want to expand on a few of the above remarks here in the online version, as well as add a couple of additional comments. What follows below won't be in the form of a linear argument per se, but consists of several related points on the issue.

(1) LYNN HILL'S FREE ASCENT OF THE NOSE (INCLUDING THE CHIPPED "JARDINE TRAVERSE") (J.T.).

The Nose, free, is mentioned no less than four times by Ramsey and R&I combined. For example:

"The Nose .... only goes free because of a chipped traverse [the Jardine Traverse]." (editorial p 10)

The Nose free "is made possible with manufactured holds [ie, the Jardine Traverse and pin scars] ..."

(Ramsey p 39)

"Although this pitch [the Jardine Traverse] is widely regarded as unfortunate, the Nose would not go free without it..." (photo caption p 41)

First, the two R&I comments are absolutely unsupportable, and R&I errs in making these statements, which seem to reflect a non-comprehension of the history of the events surrounding Jardine Traverse. It's simply false to assert that without Jardine's chipped holds Lynn -- or someone -- could not have freed that section. The JT is free at 12a, a grade which was considered near the ultimate level of difficulty in Jardine's day but is now virtually trivial, with thousands of climbers able to perform at that level. Consider this account by Lynn Hill, from her book "Climbing Free:"

"Looking through a telescope set up in the meadows, [Jardine] noticed a row of holds heading toward another crack system. If he could just span this 35-foot section, he would be able to overcome the first of the major obstacles in freeing the Nose. 'After several days of working on the traverse, I determined that it was a lot harder [than 5.11 -- a grade that was at the upper end of the scale of difficulty in those days]. So I bought a cold chisel,' Jardine told writer Eric Perlman in a Rock and Ice interview in 1995. ... The traverse he manufactured...was 12a. Without chiseling, many climbers, including myself, believe that the traverse may have been possible, but at a much higher grade. ... [Jardine] failed to realize that the spirit of free-climbing is about adapting one's personal capacities to the rock and not the other way around."

Lynn Hill simply played the hand that was dealt to her. If she had chipped those holds herself or spent weeks laboring to widen pin-scars up high, her subsequent ascent would doubtless not be unreservedly celebrated and she would not be virtually (and rightly) revered for it. (In fact that scenario might have been compared, roughly, with a Maestri Cerro Torre compressor fiasco.) But what other choice did she have? Her accomplishment is widely acclaimed \*in spite of\* her having had essentially no choice but to climb the route as it existed at that point in history. We celebrate her accomplishment \*in spite of\* the chipping and pin-scars. But think of how Lynn's feat might have been even more amazing if she had added yet another super-hard pitch to the route (ie, where Jardine had chipped). Plus, consider the incidental, added bonus for her and for Yosemite history if there were absolutely no sort of "asterisk" associated with her, or other free, ascents. Alternatively, had Jardine not manufactured the traverse, maybe not Lynn but another, subsequent climbing superstar would have freed the pitch and the route. In any case, the J.T. was "theft from the future," to use Dave Graham's apt phrase describing chipping in general.

Ramsey's own comments on the Nose come close to those of R&I. Granted, Ramsey, in the above quote -- at this point in his article -- is contrasting manufacturing like the J.T. (supposedly "bad") with the climbing community's celebration of Lynn's ascent (consensus: "good") simply in order to expose what he sees as an inconsistency of logic in the climbing community's response and/or purported value-system. And Ramsey is not responsible for R&I's sidebar statements. However in the context of the rest of his article, his comments about the JT can be read (and, I think, will be read) as an outright justification of manufacturing the J.T., chipping/drilling on La Rose, etc. It's not clear that Ramsey knows the history of the J.T., as described by Hill. But the thrust, the culmination, of his argument (including the \*explicit\* admission that he favors chipping in certain circumstances) coupled with the above quotation on the Nose, free, can leave an impressionable reader with a misunderstanding of climbing history, at the very least; and, worse, a sense that manufacturing holds was a worthy and even necessary act in that history. (Note that Ramsey omits the word "only" -- whether by chance or by a sort of slippery, Sophistic, disingenuousness, one doesn't know.)

## (2) AN OUTRIGHT ADVOCACY OF CHIPPING?

If there is a "crux moment" in Ramsey's argument, it's the section where he says (appallingly, in my view), "What I reject is the proposed ordering that places manufacturing further down the continuum than other things we find acceptable," followed by his urging us to "recognize that a general acceptance of hold manufacturing will significantly help, rather than hinder, future generations of climbers." This is an example of a kind of exceedingly simple-minded and perverse utilitarianism. In fact, it echoes the argument made by another climbing essayist who many years ago [1990] notoriously argued in print, in much the same vein, that chipping is nice because it can create more routes for climbers to do (that appalling essay raised such an international outcry of protest among climbers at every level, including in the world-class echelon, that it's probably safe to say it helped form the powerful anti-chipping consensus that rightly predominates today). Further on, Ramsey then tries to moderate these statements by saying, "I'm not saying that this is an especially good argument for manufacturing ..." and so on. But then he turns around and admits that "my argument is a defense of [a] limited sort of manufacturing..."

Cut to the chase. It's simple. Bottom line: Stick with the consensus. Don't chip. It's a bad thing to do. Respect the line. Yes, you may encounter the occasional case where the exquisitely precise placement of the bright line can be problematic or can seem, according to strict verbal-conceptual logic, inconsistent within that system of logical abstraction. But you almost always know when you are chipping and when you aren't. Wake up. Don't do it.

## (3) SHOULD HOLDS-MANUFACTURING BE SEEN AS COMPARABLE TO PROGRESSIVE TRENDS IN CLIMBING?

A very few climbers may be tempted to see a certain kind of inevitability in chipping, in the sense that many climbing practices, once condemned, are now seen as acceptable. Chalk was frowned upon, then accepted. Spring-loaded camming devices were suspect in some quarters (cheating!) but are now universally embraced. Rap-bolting was an affront to the ground-up tradition, but now has -- in appropriate places and by local consensus -- gone mainstream. There's a somewhat understandable propensity, therefore, to see \*any\* controversial trend (suggested or actual) in climbing in the same way: rejected and resisted, grudgingly allowed, then embraced. But is chipping an example of an ever-upwards, progressive trajectory? Decidedly not. Many events and trends in human history have not followed the "ever-upwards" progressive model at all. Often, a series of positive, progressive events (some of them resisted initially) will follow one another, promisingly, into a sort of Golden Age (technological and/or cultural and/or societal).

But without vigilance, a given historical epoch (for example) can slide (and has often done so -- the slippery slope!) into a period of decadence and decline -- even to the point of embracing some really pernicious, horrible behaviors. Promising, positive evolution, in other words, can give way over time to devolution. This sort of devolution could happen (we hope it won't!) in climbing as well. An acceptance of holds-manufacturing would represent just such a movement into a "downward," negative, devolutionary, trend in the sport.

#### (4) DOES IT MATTER?

Over the years in American climbing discussions, a highly impatient and even rude dismissal of debate about climbing ethics and/or style has sometimes been heard (this seems to be in contrast to traditional British climbing culture, which has long been known for relishing such debates): eg, "Why don't they just shut up and climb!" This impatient and dismissive attitude sometimes takes a more thoughtful form: "Why are you expending valuable time and energy on this relatively trivial subject? How can you be sweating over climbing issue X [here: chipping] when millions of people are hungry or malnourished, climate catastrophe looms, deluded politicians threaten society with insidious policies, etc. There are so many authentically important issues out there -- why sweat over a tiny few cubic centimeters of stone?" My answer: (1) If you choose to spend several hours of your life engaging this climbing issue, in no way does that prevent you from also devoting huge amounts of your time (over weeks, months, years) to larger societal, cultural, and planetary issues. Time expenditure, if we are honest with ourselves, is usually not a strictly zero-sum game. One can do both. (2) There are tens of thousands of people in the world who are highly trained, well-educated, savvy, and professionally (or non-professionally) active and effective in grappling with the very large issues that face humanity. We regular, generic climber-folk (along with millions of other normal, non-specialist citizens) typically do what we can to help out with these issues (letters to the editor, local environmental activism, financial contributions). But there is one area in which we climbers DO have specific expertise, appreciation, deep understanding and responsibility -- and that is the world of rock (meaning our beloved boulders, crags, and mountains). We know (where many others unfortunately don't) that the rock is miraculous (or at least near-miraculous -- in one sense or another, depending on your belief system). We are privileged to know the rock not only in its majestic, scenic, "wide-screen" aspect; but, as importantly, we know rock in its intimate and exquisite "micro" aspects (meaning the individual features which make our passage over it -- our dance with it -- possible). We might even recognize in our wonderful rocks a manifestation of the perfection of the Universe. Yes, it's worth protecting -- both the beautiful rock and also the beautiful integrity of our sporting/"deep play" relation to it. And it falls to us climbers to do that protecting -- with the greatest of reverence, respect, and restraint.

#### A Limited Anti Defense of chipping manifesto

By Lee Sheftel

Carbondale, Colorado

To preface this critique of Bill Ramsey's manifesto, I want to say that I applaud and appreciate Bill's bringing logic to the often heated and controversial subject of manufacturing climbing routes, specifically "chipping". I have to say I agree with perhaps 95% or so of his presentation. Indeed the routes like the Nose are timeless classics, as well as a few of our local routes, like "Living in Fear" that have seen some manufacturing. However, I have some criticisms of his logical thread as well as what I think is an important distinction that needs to be made regarding "chipping". I place this in quotations because the concept itself needs further exploration.

To begin with, let's take a look at Bill's arguments:

Firstly, he states "With few exceptions, virtually no one openly defends hold manufacturing". I do not find this to be true as a number of my friends, who have put up many routes, including myself, hold a view that supports a defense of limited hold manufacturing.

Looking at the beginning of Bill's argument, he states (a) "There are circumstances such that, in the preparation of a route, modifying the rock to make it climbable is acceptable." I accept this statement to be true as I imagine almost all first ascentionists would agree, especially since "modifying" as Bill defines it includes cleaning, brushing, removing loose holds, etc.

He then states (b) "The set of circumstances in which rock modification is acceptable sometimes includes the manufacturing of holds". I think this statement should be modified to say "certain types of manufacturing of holds".

He then finally states: (c) "Therefore, the manufacturing of holds is sometimes acceptable". This is also true as a result of 1 and 2 above; however, the problem lies here in the fact that Bill stipulates regarding (b)

“that manufacturing includes deliberately drilling pockets to create climbing holds” which is essentially the definition of chipping. Further on Bill states “Someone who rejects (b) has the burden of proof of presenting a compelling reason for thinking that hold manufacturing should NOT be treated as on a par with removing loose rock” What he probably should have said is that hold *chipping* should have a compelling argument as *not* on a par with removing loose rock. The following is such a compelling argument:

If you think about all the ways in which routes are prepared, modified, etc. for a first ascent, all have one thing in common- that is that the rock is dictating to a large degree of whether it can be climbed or not. In other words, you are climbing to a large degree what nature has presented to you. Cleaning, removal of loose rock, even reinforcing holds that are already there do not guarantee that you will be able to get up a given section of rock. All, that is, except chipping! Once you decide to chip, the rock is no longer dictating, you are dictating to the rock and literally anything then can be climbed. Now I am not saying that this is necessarily bad. What I am saying is that this form of rock manufacturing needs to have its own category and needs to come under much more scrutiny as to its actions and consequences. I now intend to further examine chipping and its possible and often real consequences.

Let’s look first at Bill’s four popular reasons that are commonly given for rejecting (b) that modification of the rock sometimes includes the manufacturing of holds: (remember that in and of itself I do not reject this statement, I only partially reject it because chipping is included in his definition). Reasons (1) “Rock Modification is acceptable only for safety reasons, (2) Hold manufacturing violates important environmental commitments and (4) This is a slippery slope; any acceptance of manufacturing will lead to abuses are all rejected by Bill in a very well presented logical fashion. However reason (3) Hold manufacturing harms future generations of good climbers is only partially flawed. This is because as I have argued, chipping holds moves the manufacturing of holds to an entire other level where anything can be climbed. This does, and has, “chipped down” the routes that could have gone free to one’s ability. In Bill’s article, he states “Unless you are completely ignorant of physics and human physiology, it is easy to recognize sections of rock that will never be climbed in their current form”. Well as it turns out I guess many are completely or at least partially ignorant of physics including myself. I will give two examples in my experience. One in which I presented a possible boulder problem to a friend of mine, Tim Fairfield, as a joke! There was this obviously blank section of rock on a large boulder (at least to my limited understanding of the physics of human physiology), very overhung, that I presented to Tim as a future boulder problem-Not!! I honestly thought this section of rock had no usable features and was impossible to climb. A week later while bouldering at this area, Tim announced that he sent my “future” problem which went at V12 or so. I didn’t believe him so he did the problem right in front of me. It was an incredible demonstration of athleticism, strength, ingenuity, flexibility and grace that was beyond my comprehension (at the time my hardest boulder problem was V8). I am sure Bill can find a section of rock that for sure no one would be able to climb in it’s current state as his “challenge” states. However, I have a counter challenge: Let’s sample a dozen routes where chipping is employed in the next year by various climbers at various levels and then see if any of them go free in the next 15 years. If none of them go free then I will pay Bill \$ 10,000. Such a thing has occurred before.

Following are further considerations as to the possible consequences of chipping that Bill has not addressed that I think are extremely important to keep in mind:

1. In land manager’s views, chipping as defined above, is an intolerable practice and is and has been the cause of closing areas to climbing. Certain areas I would agree that it doesn’t matter, but this is a serious consideration in some climbing areas.
2. The elite climbers are greatly admired and emulated by many not so elites. As a result, when the elite climbers chip routes it can easily be viewed as a sanctified process. One such elite climber, who was chipping routes, subsequently got on a 5.12 route and was appalled that the first ascensionist had chipped a pocket in a place where the route obviously went free without it. Now this is not to say that this is a reason to not chip, but rather that the climber who is chipping needs to be clear about the limited circumstance in which he decided to chip.
3. Chipping can and has affected the harming of future generations of future climbers when certain individuals did not adhere to a strict set of rules regarding chipping. While Bill points out that there is a plethora of unclimbed rock throughout the world, there often is not in ones’ home area. Often there are limited resources and there have been many cases where routes are chipped when the route could have gone free and did go free without those chipped holds.

In summary, I agree with Bill that manufacturing of holds can and are defensible in limited circumstances. However, my main point is to make the distinction that chipping is an elevated form of hold manufacturing that needs to be looked at much more critically than the other forms due to the possible and many times real consequences. Certainly I agree with one of Bill's final statements "Indeed, given how often an anti-manufacturing attitude is defended by appeals to nothing other than tradition, or that "it just is wrong, it resembles other forms of dogmatic thinking". To give an analogy in climbing history, at first sport climbing was regarded as blasphemous to climbing tradition and now widely accepted even by some climbers who previously openly and venomously denounced it.

Possible solutions and/or ideas regarding "chipping":

1. Perhaps other local climbers should be consulted prior to the chipping of a hold or holds and have them even check out the section of rock involved. Simply the idea of getting a second opinion.
2. I believe a number of years ago, and perhaps even now, when a route was chipped in Europe and subsequently a climber was able to climb the route without that chipped hold or holds, that climber got to "fill in" the chipped hole and restore it to its original form. This may be a good idea for another reason: it may give a climber pause or further analysis before they chip a section of rock again.
3. If a climber's coalition exists for their area, perhaps consulting with its Board would be a good idea to make sure there isn't some outstanding issue or prohibition in the bylaws of the organization or agreement with authorities on the issue.
4. Prior to chipping, I might ask the strongest climber in my area to get on the route and try to do it free if there is any doubt in my mind whatsoever.
5. If you are going to chip, learn how to do a good job. Often the job is abysmal. This goes for bolting and cleaning a route as well by the way.
6. Maybe in certain areas chipping is simply not a good idea for one or more of the reasons cited and should not be done.

Finally, I have chipped routes in the distant past and in a couple of situations I was not happy about it afterward. However, I have climbed chipped routes many times and often have enjoyed them; but there have been badly chipped routes that I did not enjoy and in fact injured myself on as a result. Let's all keep in mind that rock climbing is fun for most of us because we can climb it on its own terms. When chipping as a form of manufacturing is involved, we are climbing the rock on our terms. Although this may be acceptable in certain limited circumstances, we should recognize this to be the contrivance it is and be very critical and discerning before we do it.

A Good Start

By John Hogge

Austin, Texas

Ramsey's article was a good start at adjusting attitudes about the many chipped routes we all enjoy. It's a fat topic, so understandably he omitted some additional points against chipping:

Chipped limestone holds polish out more than (or faster than) natural holds.

While some chipped holds go undetected, some are obviously artificial and negatively impact the route's aesthetics. Most climbers really enjoy the natural sculptures they see and feel when climbing routes, and dislike cheesy looking drilled pockets. (Hell, if you must, drop the drill and glue on a really cool looking hold. It may pop off one day, but it won't polish out fast.)

Some routes prove climbable (and better) without chipped holds. Symbiosis (5.13c) is a variation (or, uh, non-variation?) of House of Pain (5.13a) at Reimers whereby the climber skips the low drilled pocket.

Several of Austin's top climbers like Symbiosis better than House of Pain. I asked one, "Look, this 'variation' is a cute ethical statement, but is it really worth covering in a new guidebook?" He said, "Yeah, the moves are way more interesting to avoid that pocket."

Ramsey says the wealth of blank sections means future generations of 5.17 climbers have plenty of future lines. That's true world-wide, but untrue in local areas such as Austin where most lines have been developed, sometimes via chipping. Some upper level climbers in Austin feel starved of local challenges. They are left to put up more eliminations such as Symbiosis.

Ramsey did a good job showing that indeed all sport routes are heavily manufactured, whether or not they are chipped. However, people still like minimizing the amount of manufacturing. Using fewer bolts is a

value balanced against other concerns. Some plants don't need to be removed, and the routes are nicer with them than without them.

Some additional points for adjusting-attitude (without necessarily encouraging) chipping are:

All sport routes are manufactured, and then sent using high tech equipment. For a natural climbing experience, free solo an unclimbed dirty line in bare feet. Until then, enjoy all our manufactured outdoor climbing gyms.

Chipping can make the climbing more fun, transforming a huge one-move wonder into something more balanced. I've stabilized holds to preserve the fun the route currently contains, protecting against the unknown aftermath of a broken hold. I've added occasional cheat stones to balance the challenge of starting a route against the rest of its physical challenge. I've not ever chipped, but I keep an open mind about a specific route that might ultimately be more fun and much more travelled, via a future manufactured hold.

Going forward, attitudes against chipping won't change. Perhaps they shouldn't. They keep bolters conservative about the choices they make. For the fun of the sport, chipping should never be an option considered lightly.

Neil's response

<http://infirmofpurpose.wordpress.com/2011/02/02/on-chipping-a-few-thoughts-concerning-practical-ethics-and-climbing/>

## On Chipping: A Few Thoughts Concerning Practical Ethics and Climbing

Posted on [February 2, 2011](#)

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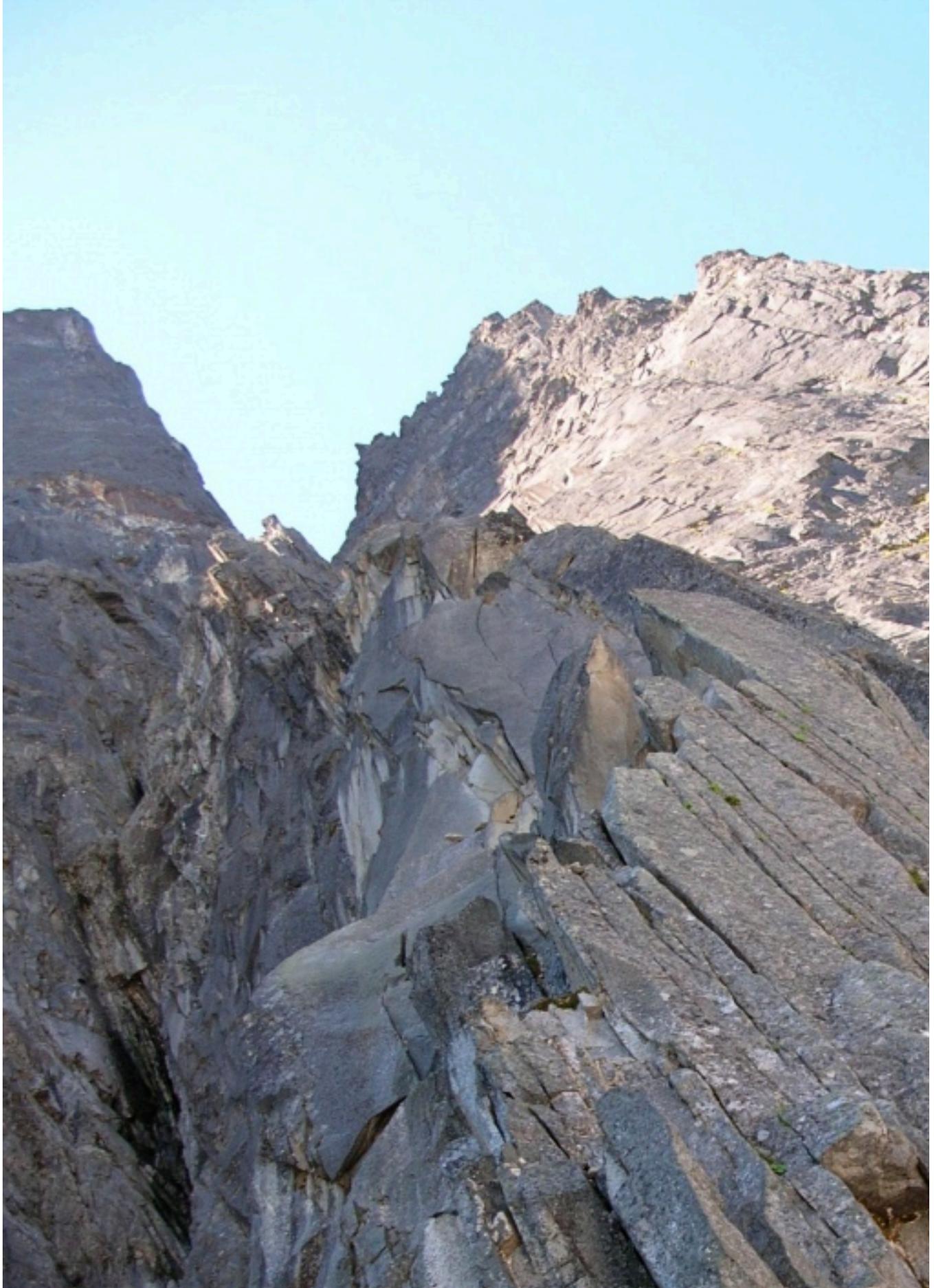
*The following post is both pretentiously pseudo-academic and about climbing. In short, it is unlikely to appeal to anyone.*

The weather in Squamish hasn't been very inspiring lately. Consequently, the amount of time I've spent online reading about the latest controversies in the climbing world has been bordering on unhealthy.

Climbing, it has been [noted](#), is an arbitrary game where the participants make up the rules as they go along.

It's a lot like [Calvinball](#) (and not surprisingly, many climbers are about as emotionally mature as Calvin – myself included). The current controversies and debates are part of the ongoing historical dialogue wherein climbers articulate the ever-changing structure of rules that make it possible to talk meaningfully about climbing. What it actually means to “talk meaningfully” about something as silly as climbing is another question. I imagine that someone with post-structuralist leanings could find plenty to deconstruct within the “play” of the climbing game (PhD theses have been written about more ridiculous things).

Some of the current topics of debate include whether it's acceptable to [place bolts on rappel in the mountains](#), how much [evidence do climbers need to provide to support their claims](#), and what [responsibilities do route developers have to future climbers](#). Of course, these ethical squabbles ignore more inconvenient moral questions such as whether your time and money is best spent climbing mountains instead of helping to feed impoverished children in the developing world (my roommate Seth's opinion on this is [here](#)).



Colin Haley climbing on the North Rib of Mt. Slesse. He's been a diplomatic and articulate critic of rap-bolting on Cerro Torre.

Rather than addressing one of the controversies *du jour* (if the weather doesn't improve, I'll be ranting about rap-bolting soon enough), I thought I'd broach the topic of climbing ethics by discussing an essay called "Hold Manufacturing: Why You May Be Wrong About What's Right" by Bill Ramsey.

I recently discovered the book [Climbing: Philosophy for Everyone](#). It was in the "Philosophy" section at Chapters, nestled amidst books such as [Twilight and Philosophy](#) and [Metallica and Philosophy](#). I'll admit to enjoying the odd book of pop psychology, sociology or physics, but the abundance of books about the philosophy of vampires is something of a sad comment on the state of intellectual affairs in our culture, particularly given that I couldn't find any books on the philosophy of Quine or Kripke. Curmudgeonly misgivings aside, I've been enjoying the essays in [Climbing: Philosophy for Everyone](#). In fact, I'm somewhat astonished by the mere existence of so many contributors with solid credentials in both climbing and philosophy. In particular, Ramsey's contribution regarding the ethics of chipping holds into otherwise unclimbable sections of rock struck me as a cute piece of reasoning that provides a good model for applying practical ethics to climbing related problems. Ramsey argues that the anti-chipping view is untenable and that most of the "overt furor and indignation" is the result of dogmatic bias. Although Ramsey is quite convincing in his support for limited chipping, I tend to think that there's more to the formulation of the rules of climbing than he would have us believe. After giving a quick sketch of Ramsey's argument, I'll survey a few lines of reasoning that could provide plausible rebuttals.



Karina Benavides climbing Monkey Space in Smith Rock, Oregon. Bill Ramsey along with Chris Jones made the first ascent of this route in 1979.

True to the nature of this age of internet experts, the fact that I know next to nothing about moral philosophy is no obstacle to my pontificating about it at length. However, intelligent people have been thinking about these problems for the last few millennia and a remarkable literature on Ethics exists. Most of the half-remembered ideas that follow are borrowed without a shred of academic rigour from smarter people than myself.

What is it that makes something right or wrong? Ramsey writes that “While climbers need to decide for themselves many of the rules they ought to abide by, it doesn’t follow that anything goes or that a simple majority opinion is decisive.” This is a sensible view, and it seems reasonable to extend it to claim that facts of matter must exist with respect to climbing ethics independently of what individual climbers or climbing communities happen to believe (in philosophy jargon, Ramsey is making a meta-ethical claim against subjectivism and social conventionalism which are both forms of moral relativism; some form of moral realism seems to me to be a natural alternative to these views).

Moral relativism is an understandable post-colonial sentiment but it turns out to be incoherent. For example, that slavery was widely accepted in 18th century American society doesn’t mean that it was morally right. Likewise, if a community of climbers takes to bolting next to good cracks, that in itself is not sufficient to make it ethical, even on their own crags. A further problem arises when this community comes into conflict with a staunchly anti-bolting community. If we accept moral relativism then it seems impossible to adjudicate such a dispute.

Consequently, it’s reasonable to conclude that there must be objective moral facts about climbing ethics.

Admittedly, the nature of these seemingly semi-mystical moral truths and our relation to them are difficult questions. I certainly don’t have the answers, although I would suggest that moral truths are perhaps not so different from other abstract entities such as mathematical truths.



A bizarre geological feature of Chamonix granite. The frontpoints of my crampons fit remarkably well into this pocket at the crux of the popular Arete des Cosmiques on the Aiguille du Midi.

Ramsey’s pro-chipping argument is a perfect model for applying practical ethics to climbing. His first premise is that altering a cliff in order to make a climbing route possible is acceptable. This may sound contentious to a non-climber, but the truth is that most climbs require significant alterations to the rock. Even in Squamish where the granite is remarkably solid, first ascensionists often need to clean off loose blocks, crumbling flakes and a great deal of dirt and moss. In fact, failure to do so will generally result in

complaints and the widespread avoidance of the route. Given that the establishment of many of the best rock climbs in the world required cleaning loose rock or drilling bolts, rejecting Ramsey's first premise would mean condemning much of what climbers have traditionally valued.

Ramsey's second premise is that in certain situations, manufacturing holds to create a climbable route constitutes an acceptable alteration of the rock. The kind of situations that Ramsey has in mind are of the following type: "...the preparation of an unclimbed sport route in a sport climbing area that has mostly high-quality climbable sections but also segments of blank rock with no climbable features." As Ramsey notes, this second premise is the one that most climbers "...explicitly and even vehemently reject." He claims that the burden of proof is on the climber who accepts his first premise but rejects his second. If altering a cliff for the purpose of climbing is acceptable, what is it about chipping that makes it unacceptable?

From here, Ramsey's argument is negative: he states that there are four reasons for rejecting his second premise and he seeks to demonstrate that each of these reasons are untenable.

The first reason that he considers is that rock modification is only acceptable for the purposes of safety.

Ramsey has two strong reasons for rejecting this claim. Firstly, we commonly consider it acceptable to remove poor quality or flaky rock that is of no actual danger to anyone. Secondly, the real choice isn't between removing loose rock or leaving a potential hazard. It's between "...establishing a route (and doing whatever that requires) or simply walking away and establishing no such route."

The second reason for rejecting chipping that Ramsey considers is that it "violates important environmental commitments". This is clearly not the case. Drilling a tiny hole in a cliff alters the environment about as much as throwing a pebble. Not to mention that climbers routinely remove moss, lichen and bushes from cliffs. Even the visual impact of a drilled pocket is negligible compared to the trails of chalked holds and bolts at many climbing areas.

The third reason commonly put forward against chipping is that it robs future generations of strong climbers. Personally, I'm rather partial to this consideration and I suspect that there have been a few natural 5.15s and 5.16s chipped into 5.13s and 5.14s simply for the sake of a mention in Climbing Magazine and a few pairs of free shoes. Ramsey's defense is that these aren't the cases he's talking about.

He has stipulated that he's only defending the chipping of otherwise unclimbable rock. This seems reasonable; I don't climb 5.14 (Ramsey, however, climbed 5.14b at age 48!) but I'm pretty sure I know unclimbable rock when I see it. A second response that Ramsey makes is that chipping could potentially benefit future strong climbers. At any grade, there is always more unclimbable rock that could be chipped into a route of that grade than there are naturally occurring routes of the grade. What's more, chipping doesn't always make routes easier; there are numerous cases where routes have been chipped to make them harder (and thereby more newsworthy).

The last reason that Ramsey looks at is that if chipping is tolerated, it could lead to abuses. He claims that this is missing the point: "...most things done badly are bad. But that has nothing to do with the propriety of the practice done responsibly." Although I tend to agree with Ramsey, I do think that he is too quick to dismiss this objection. Admittedly, we don't decry all bolts simply because their use is occasionally abused. However, as a society, we're generally content with laws that prohibit children from purchasing guns over the counter, in spite of the fact that we don't tend to think guns themselves are bad if they're used responsibly. Analogies to guns (drugs are another example) are poor however; the consequences of misusing a gun are rather more serious than anything associated with the manufacturing holds.

I hope that I've given Ramsey's defense of limited hold manufacturing a fair treatment. It's certainly a sound and provocative piece of reasoning.

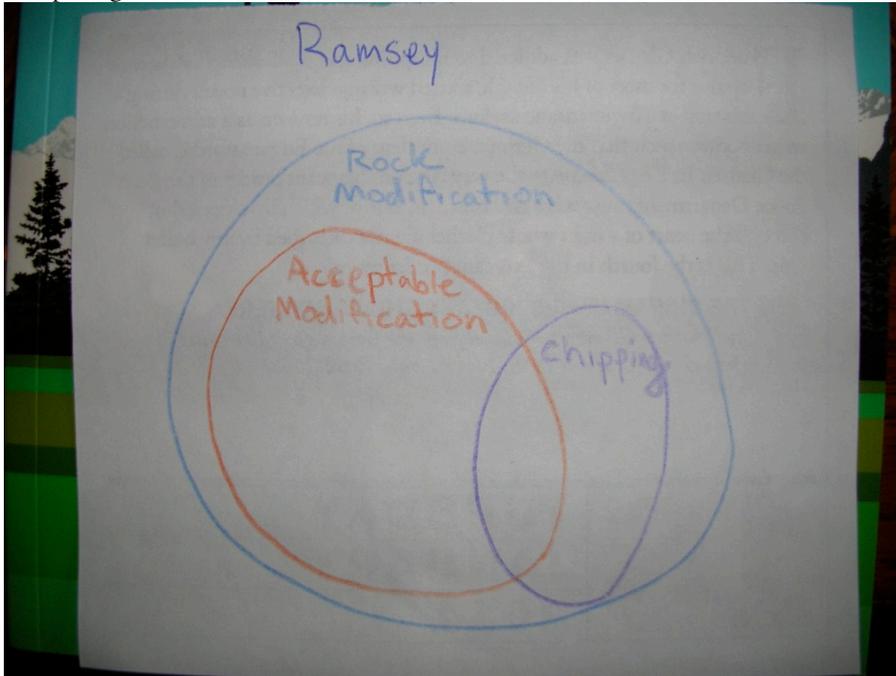
Ramsey writes that "... despite the overt furor and indignation over manufacturing, we really aren't very clear about what, exactly, is wrong with it." I think he has convincingly defended this statement by showing how the most popular anti-chipping arguments are incoherent. However, I feel that he's being slightly disingenuous by dismissing off hand the origins of this "furor and indignation". Surely climbers deserve a little more credit than Ramsey is giving them.

We all have numerous strongly held moral intuitions that we would be hard pressed to defend with a coherent argument. For example, we may say with great certainty that murdering innocent children is abhorrent and yet be unable to give a defense that doesn't reduce to a fundamental belief that human life is intrinsically valuable. I do not mean this to be analogy to chipping holds; I simply wish to point out that if someone were to propose a theory of morality that proceeded validly from apparently sound premises to a conclusion that it is acceptable to murder children, we might see our resulting furor and indignation as a sufficient reason to reject the theory. In fact, this notion is central to the workings of the field of practical

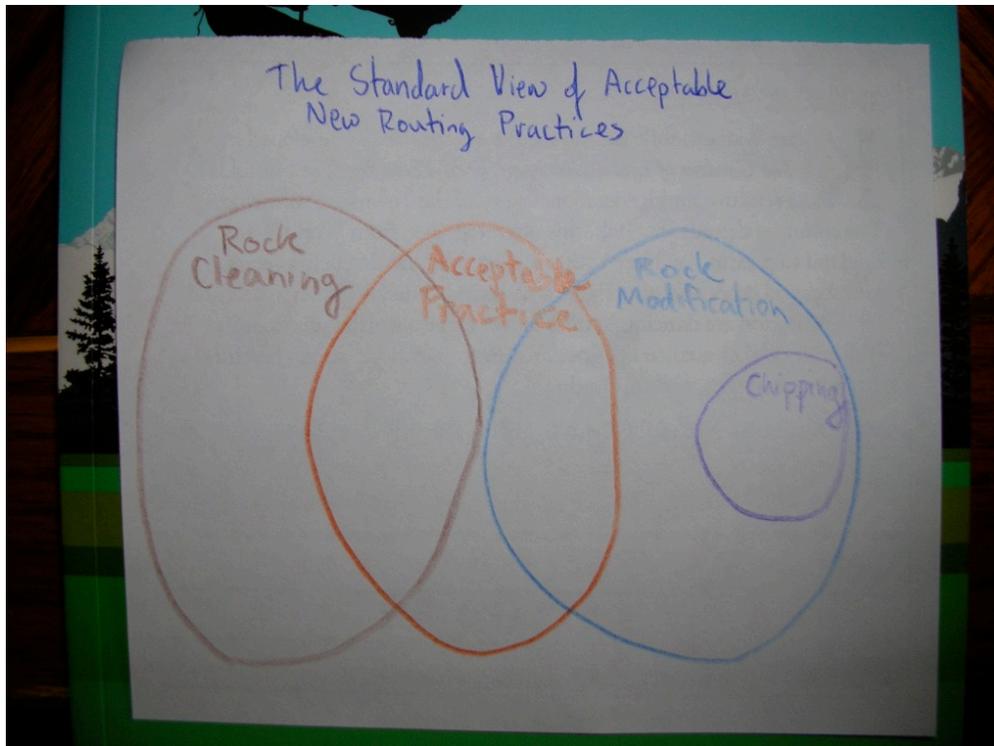
ethics. When someone proposes a theory, a typical response is to dream up a counter-example which satisfies the ethical criteria of the theory while failing to accord with our moral intuitions. (As a side note, how to adjudicate between our philosophical intuitions and apparently sound theories with counter-intuitive consequences is a fascinating problem – particularly in fields like logic and pure math.)

If we are to claim that our anti-chipping intuitions are based on more than mere bias we need to show where Ramsey's argument goes astray. To this end, I'll examine a few options which I hope will show that, at the very least, the problem is more nuanced than Ramsey makes it out to be.

Ramsey claims that cleaning loose blocks from a route and chipping are both instances of rock modification. However, I think that climbers view the cleaning of loose or flaky rock not as modifying, but as exposing.



Sorry, I'm not much of an artist.



Do you think I have too much time on my hands?

On the view represented by the second diagram, Ramsey's argument fails because the instances he gives of acceptable rock modification no longer look like rock modification at all. The instance of rock modification that are considered acceptable might only be those that are done for the purposes of safety. I think this distinction between the concepts of cleaning and modifying helps to explain the difference in attitudes that climbers have towards trundling loose rock versus chipping holds.

This is the type of semantic distinction that philosophers like to make, but they don't mean much if they're not a reflection of the way things are out in the real world. Is cleaning equivalent to exposing the true nature of the cliff while chipping is somehow defaming that same nature? I think this distinction will appear more plausible to climbers who haven't been directly involved in creating a new route. The reality is actually rather messy. While I think that this distinction captures some of what motivates anti-chipping intuitions, in actual fact it's arbitrary.

Another response to Ramsey is to claim that he has failed to consider an unanswerable reason against considering hold manufacturing to be an acceptable form of rock modification. But does such a reason exist?

On the east side of the Cacodemon Boulder in Squamish there's a completely blank wall with a line of pockets drilled into it. This route is outside the scope of Ramsey's argument since it doesn't link natural features; in fact I don't think there's a single natural hold on the route. In my opinion, this route should never have been established (although I still have a great deal of respect for the people responsible for it).

In his conclusion, Ramsey admits that "... all else being equal, a purely natural climb is usually better and more appealing than one with manufactured holds." Ramsey means "better" in a purely aesthetic sense, and I think this captures some of what I object to about the drilled pockets on the Cacodemon. It's not that the route is such an eye-sore (well, the plastic gym holds are a bit ugly). It's that, apart from being a game where the participants stipulate the rules, climbing is a creative pursuit with attending aesthetic considerations.

Climbers commonly make value judgments about the quality of routes. Ramsey admits that manufactured holds generally detract from the value of a climb, but he thinks they do so in a way that's similar to poor bolting or wildly inconsistent difficulties. We generally wouldn't consider a work of art to be so bad that it was wrong to create it unless it promotes hate or pedophilia. Can a climb be so unaesthetic that it should never have been created? This is a difficult question, but if anything qualifies, it would be the drilled

pocket route on the Cacodemon. The vagueness of Ramsey's definition of "limited" chipping admits to something of a [Sorites Paradox](#); it seems like the line between reasonably chipped routes and routes like the one on Cacodemon would be a tough line to draw. Conversely, if Ramsey isn't willing to defend fully chipped routes (as he seems to avoid doing), he ought to give an account of how chipped holds that link natural features are different from ones that don't and how we are to decide how many natural features are required to make chipping acceptable.

As I write this, the weather outside has improved. With the appearance of the sun, ideological squabbles appear somewhat trifling. Nonetheless, climbers take this stuff seriously. My primary intent in writing this rambling essay (aside from passing a rainy day) is to show how I think it's feasible to examine climbing ethics at least semi-rationally. Whereas much of the "debate" surrounding the ever-rotating series of ethical controversies in climbing is little more than insults and dogma, I think it's quite possible to examine things both sensibly and politely. However, with any luck, the weather won't give me occasion to try to do so again for at least a little while.