

Guest editorial

Because it is there

When an Englishman, George Leigh Mallory, was repeatedly asked in 1923, during a lecture tour in America, why he wanted to climb Mount Everest, he replied, simply “Because it is there”. In the course of a recent workshop on the phenomenon of Antarctic sub-glacial lakes, best exemplified by the largest known lake which lies under the Russian Vostok station, a similar question was hovering in the air. “Why drill through to the lake?”; one could sense the wish that it would be sufficient, simply to give the “Mallory” answer. Mallory’s reply carries with it the feeling of a “put down,” as if he were saying that he wanted no more questions about his motives for engaging in a venture which needed no further justification. Similarly, many scientists would be tempted to answer with the same asperity. “Don’t question our motives — this is an experiment. We will build hypotheses about what we are likely to find, and then test them by drilling through; but the ultimate justification lies in the fact that Lake Vostok, is there, and is a proper object of human enquiry”.

While that curiosity driven view is perfectly proper, all at the workshop knew that it would not suffice. Scientific accountants would need to be convinced of the “value for money,” and at least 26 nations party to the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty would need to be convinced of the environmental prudence of the exercise. Both the scientific accountants and the protocol parties would be looking to the scientists for positive, “value added” answers as conditions of their support. In making their case, the scientists will be tempted to oversell the virtues of the exercise with potentially damaging consequences for the truthfulness of science. To the extent that this happens, it will be because the Mallory thesis is discounted as being unfashionable, naive, and in these days, unacceptable.

Let us turn the question around. Mallory might have responded to his questioners by asking “Everest is there, give me sufficient reasons why it should not be climbed?”. Similarly, “Lake Vostok is there, are there sufficient reasons why no-one should drill through to the lake, its sediments and the underlying rock?” If those scientific accountants can be satisfied, and the technicians can show means by which drilling will not wreck what the scientists wish to observe, the remaining argument is likely to be of a more philosophical nature. What is the need or otherwise for ultimate places on which, in the case of Everest, humankind does not place its foot or, in the case of Lake Vostok, about which it should not seek to know? While scientists have no superior right to deny this proposition, they are in the best position to argue their cases. In so doing, it is important that they should not seek to deny the Mallory thesis.

It is, after all, their ultimate justification.

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